

Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*: Providence Against the Evils of Propriety

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The tendency persists to separate the artful storyteller in Collins from the less successful thesis novelist. Like Wells and, to a lesser degree, Lawrence, Collins developed too strong a sense of mission.¹ Beginning with *Man and Wife*, his novels seem encumbered with social protest. Collins's "old-fashioned" opinions, especially the remark that the "primary object of a work of fiction should be to tell a story," are frequently quoted to reduce the skilful storyteller to a mere entertainer.² Storytelling in *The Woman in White* is, of course, superb; but for once the novelist of sensation and suspense utilized his narrative skills to advance an idea important to himself and of consequence nationally: his conviction that the worship of propriety had become, by 1870, one of the besetting evils of Victorian life. In *The Woman in White*, Collins combines his talent for melodrama with just enough of the social critic, even if the Victorian eventually upstages the dissident moralist: the way things happen, the novelist argues, is ultimately determined not by propriety, man's law, but by providence, which may be God's.

Historians explain the strict regulation of acceptable behavior within Victorian society as a middle-class reaction to eighteenth-century laxity. This reform hardened, as the century wore on, into a denial of increasing

¹ Collins's intellect has been underrated ever since Swinburne regretted the "evil day" Collins decided to correct abuses and advocate reforms. See William H. Marshall, *Wilkie Collins* (New York, 1970), p. 17.

² See Collins's "Preface to the Second Edition" in Julian Symons, ed., *The Woman in White* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 32. Most critics have taken their cues from this remark. Clyde K. Hyder insists Collins "belongs among the great story-tellers rather than among the great novelists." Bradford C. Booth recommends Collins to all who "have not lost their appetite for sheer, one might even say, mere story telling." Robert Ashley finds *The Woman in White* a masterpiece judged by standards of melodrama, "the only standards by which it is fair to judge it." Harvey Peter Sucksmith calls it "the greatest melodrama ever written." The present essay is more in line with Ashley's reevaluation of Collins as a "serious novelist," a "rebel who rather subtly attacked the most cheerful foundations of Victorian respectability." See Clyde K. Hyder, "Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*," *PMLA*, 54 (1939), 297-303; Bradford C. Booth, "Wilkie Collins and the Art of Fiction," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 6 (1951), 131-43; Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London, 1951), p. 69; Harvey Peter Sucksmith (ed.), *The Woman in White* (London, 1975), p. xxii; and Robert Ashley, "Wilkie Collins" in George Ford (ed.), *Victorian Fiction: A Second Guide to Research* (New York, 1978), pp. 228-29. All subsequent quotations from *The Woman in White* are from the Penguin edition.

ethical uncertainty.³ What began as moral earnestness produced an age of "observance" rather than "assurance."⁴ Thackeray complained that enforced reticence confined the artist to a small portion of the real world but he knew better than to make an innocent reader blush. The Dickens whose caricatures of Mrs. General and Mr. Podsnap satirized the limited mentality of self-appointed standard-setters wrote *Oliver Twist* without mentioning Nancy's occupation. By comparison with his fellow novelists, Collins mounts a systematic attack. He discredits false principles by dramatizing their deleterious effects. Concealed behind a multiplicity of narrators, Collins invents a fascinating story to undermine his audience's confidence in propriety. He expresses contempt for a society that demanded "the proprieties be observed,"⁵ whatever the cost.

One should not overlook Collins's un-Victorian life-style, particularly the unofficial families by Caroline Graves and Martha Rudd, which caused him to be ostracized socially. Still, the argument of Collins's finest novel transcends personal grievance: it contends that the era's overbearing sense of appropriate behavior harms those who observe the rules as well as those who transgress.

This does not mean that all suffer equally. Characters who are penalized for obeying the social code out of a mistaken sense of morality (Mrs. Clements, Mr. Gilmore, Mrs. Michelson, even poor Laura Fairlie) get off lightly compared to those who follow rules hypocritically (Mrs. Catherick) or hide crimes behind them (Count Fosco). Collins expects readers to divide antagonists who rebel against propriety out of greed and self-interest (Sir Percival Glyde) from unselfish protagonists who do so seeking justice or while trying to fulfill their human potential (Walter Hartright, Marian Halcombe). To convey these distinctions requires sensitive navigating for a novelist supposedly interested only in clear-cut melodramatic events.

The evils of propriety in *The Woman in White* are at least sixfold: concern for propriety obscures more important matters; it provides opportunities for the insincere; it serves as an incentive to secrecy; it is an inhibiting social force that militates against natural enjoyment; it generates major crimes to conceal less serious offenses; and it overtaxes the scrupulous. They must step outside the confines of customary behavior to counteract master criminals who have learned to maneuver within them. In sum, says Collins, propriety is a collective madness whose strictures grow stronger after the rationale behind their inception fades. This generalization is neatly embodied in the white-clad Anne Catherick, who haunts *The Woman in White* as effectively as fog permeates *Bleak House*.

³ See James Laver, *Manners and Morals in the Age of Optimism 1848-1914* (New York, 1966), pp. 40-45; and Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (New York, 1964), pp. 116-17.

⁴ Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London, 1959), p. 465.

⁵ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1957), pp., 394, 397.

Anne's ghostly figure, more palpable than the specter for whom the Ghost's Walk was named, disproves the judgement that powerful symbolic images were beyond Collins's ability.⁶ In the simple-mindedness of Anne's resolve to wear nothing but white, Collins parodies the preoccupation of his age with observing the proprieties. By novel's end, excessive concern for decorum begins to seem more quixotic than Anne's spotless costume. She continues to wear white long after the death of Mrs. Fairlie, whom she hoped to please by doing so. The woman in white is an impressive symbol for the idea that respectability is often ritualistic. Limited comprehension and restrictive wardrobe make Anne's fixation with an unsullied appearance a reflection of the British public's stubborn adherence to narrow moral codes. Her "unusual slowness in acquiring ideas," Mrs. Fairlie once noted, "implies an unusual tenacity in keeping them once they are received into her mind."⁷

Collins examines propriety with the subtle intensity Dickens reserved for litigiousness in *Bleak House*. Even lesser personages are satirized for allowing themselves to become propriety's victims. Walter's diminutive Italian friend, Professor Pesca, prides himself "on being a perfect Englishman in his language, as well as in his dress, manners, and amusements,"⁸ but Sarah Hartright's "insular notions of propriety" are continually in "revolt against Pesca's constitutional contempt for appearances."⁹ Pesca's goal—becoming a proper Englander—is dubious in itself and forever beyond his attainment. When Mr. Gilmore commences his portion of the narrative, he behaves oddly for a lawyer who presumably knows the value of eye-witness testimony. He wonders if it is proper to divulge details of his conduct as family solicitor for the Fairlies. Eliza Michelson, Sir Percival's housekeeper, is so blinded by her preoccupation with the proprieties that she misses the heartless conspiracy unfolding around her.

Mrs. Michelson sees "no impropriety" in the countess allowing the count into the fever-stricken Miss Halcombe's bedchamber, for Fosco is a married man. The self-righteous clergyman's widow never notices that Fosco's plan to substitute Anne Catherick for Laura Fairlie capitalizes on Marian's illness. Hearing Sir Percival order Laura to spend one night in London with Fosco and his wife on the way to Limmeridge House, Mrs. Michelson cannot object because "the arrangement proposed," which enables the count to effect the substitution, "was so unquestionably the right and the proper one."¹⁰ The housekeeper notices nothing "suspicious" unless "a glaring impropriety" is committed. Thus she complains only after Sir Percival, anxious to isolate his wife, dismisses Laura's maid and appoints the vulgar Margaret Porcher, a mere under-

⁶ Symons grants Collins some of Dickens's talent but asserts that "a powerful symbolic image was beyond him." Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

housemaid, to attend her.¹¹ As Mrs. Michelson contributes her account of events at Blackwater Park, she unwittingly convicts Sir Percival and the count of grossest fraud, yet carefully exonerates Fosco "of any impropriety;"¹² that is, she absolves him of overt impoliteness, the only kind of offense many of the characters in the novel seem conditioned to recognize and resent.

Collins satirizes the good-natured Mrs. Clements as severely as he criticizes Mrs. Michelson because both allow reverence for propriety to obscure more important concerns. Throughout a painful interview with Walter Hartright, Mrs. Clements seems more anxious about Anne's funeral than the questionable circumstances surrounding her death:

"Did you say sir," said the poor woman, removing her handkerchief from her face, and looking up at me for the first time, "did you say that she had been nicely buried? Was it the sort of funeral she might have had if she had really been my own child?"

I assured her that it was. She seemed to take an inexplicable pride in my answer—to find a comfort in it which no other and higher considerations could afford. "It would have broken my heart," she said simply, "if Anne had not been nicely buried—"¹³

Assurances of Anne's proper burial keep Mrs. Clements's heart intact, even though her unfortunate girl was hurried into the grave by persecutors and entombed as someone else. Ironically, interment as Mr. Fairlie's niece involved a more splendid ceremony than Mrs. Clements could have provided. Collins blames her for "inexplicable pride" in knowing appearances were preserved. The specious comfort correct observances bring, the satisfaction of doing things properly, outstrips the solace "higher considerations" should afford. Propriety, it seems, has become a surrogate religion.

Everyone in Collins's novel is tainted by an unreasonable concern for propriety, just as Dickens's characters in *Bleak House* are all prisoners of Chancery and those in *Little Dorrit* become circumlocutionary in their speech. Even thoroughly admirable characters sometimes cater to propriety automatically. Hartright feels it would be improper to wear a disguise while investigating Sir Percival's misdeeds. When Marian reaches London to verify Laura's death, she repairs "to a respectable boarding-house...recommended by Mrs. Vesey's married sister."¹⁴ The house's reputation increases in Marian's eyes because the endorsement comes from a *married* woman.

On the other hand, speaking out against propriety does not guarantee one's admirableness. Although Count Fosco "snaps his big fingers at the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 390.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

laws and conventions of society,"¹⁵ he is not the non-conformist his size, speech, and fondness for unusual pets might indicate. The count's disregard for England's "moral clap-traps" permits him to violate Marian's diary. He then displays, diabolically, a "strict sense of propriety" by instructing his wife to restore the purloined volume to its rightful place.¹⁶ Propriety, however, takes many forms; the renegade who trespasses against one is cowed by others. A self-professedly unconventional Fosco will steal a woman's private thoughts but always respects her person. He will not reach down Fanny's dress to obtain the embossed notes Marian has given her for Mr. Kyrle and Mr. Fairlie.¹⁷ The count returns to Blackwater Park for the countess, whom he sends back to drug the girl and substitute blank pages for the concealed letters.

Collins's satire is double-edged, cutting the British public at the same time that it pierces Fosco. The count knows what the English will (and will not) tolerate: laying hands on a woman's income or her identity is all right, but not her clothes. Cornered by Walter, Fosco absolves the conspiracy against Laura of designs on her modesty. He emphasizes that Lady Glyde's "own clothes were taken away from her at night" in his London house, "and Anne Catherick's were put on her in the morning, with the strictest regard for propriety, by the matronly hands of the good Rubelle."¹⁸ Insisting on the nurse's matronliness, Fosco tries to be as discreet as Marian was when referring to Mrs. Vesey's "married" sister.

Fosco's respect for social taboos against physical contact with the opposite sex does not diminish Collins's argument that propriety is frequently the tool of the insincere and unscrupulous. In *The Woman in White*, where the novelist suggests that society's morals consist mainly of outward forms, scoundrels appeal to propriety more readily than the devil quotes scripture. When Fosco requires Mr. Fairlie's approval to house Lady Glyde overnight in St. John's Wood, he clinches his proposal by observing: "Here is comfort consulted—here are the interests of propriety consulted . . ."¹⁹ Informed by Laura that she loves someone else, Sir Percival Glyde reacts "with perfect delicacy and discretion,"²⁰ while holding her firmly to their engagement. Where Fosco uses propriety wilily, the baronet is crass brutality hiding behind proper appearances. Throughout the final stages of courtship, this fortune-hunter behaves, in Marian's opinion, "with the utmost possible credit to himself . . ."²¹ Propriety abets Fosco and Sir Percival: it furnishes a set of rules easily perverted for dissimulation. Glyde's temporary adherence to prescribed

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

¹⁷ Mr. Fairlie, one of several narrators whose reports contribute to the reconstruction of this episode, twice apologizes for mentioning Fanny's bosom. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 630.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

forms confuses Marian's instinctive estimate of his real nature.

Although the baronet intends to appropriate Laura's money, he requests her guardian-uncle "to treat him on terms of rigid etiquette." He plans to stay at the rectory for the few days he will be on hand before his marriage lest he cause scandal by living beneath the same roof as his prospective bride. Irony borders on *hubris* when Marian insists Sir Percival reside in Limmeridge House during the wedding preparations. In this isolated moorland country, she states in her letter, "we may well claim to be beyond the reach of trivial conventionalities which hamper people in other places."²² When Glyde later tries to bully Laura into going surety for his debts, Marian recognizes herself as the victim of her own respect for propriety. Once Sir Percival is on home ground and drops his mask, Marian regrets having allowed his proper behavior to overrule her impulsive distrust.

In Sir Percival's "language" and "manners" at Blackwater Park, Marian writes in her diary, "I had observed . . .

a change which convinced me that he had been acting a part throughout the whole period of his probation at Limmeridge House. His elaborate delicacy, his ceremonious politeness, which harmonised so agreeably with Mr. Gilmore's old-fashioned notions, his modesty with Laura, his candour with me, his moderation with Mr. Fairlie—all these were the artifice of a mean, cunning, and brutal man, . . .²³

Propriety, a contrite Marian realizes, puts contrivance before naturalness. Considering Glyde's subsequent bungling, one marvels at his ability, while at Limmeridge House, to make himself all things to all men. With Laura's Italian greyhound, however, Glyde is less successful because the animal, relying on instinct, judges character unerringly. Gilmore recalls that the dog "shrank away from [Sir Percival's] outstretched hand, whined, shivered, and hid itself under a sofa."²⁴

A society always consulting "the interests of propriety," says Collins, promotes its own unhappiness. In the guise of a mystery novelist, the social critic satirizes his contemporaries for ruining their instincts with an unnatural set of rules that makes goodness vulnerable to villainy whenever it cloaks itself in respectability. "English society, Miss Halcombe," states Fosco, "is as often the accomplice as it is the enemy of crime."²⁵ This sophistic utterance is, by anticipation, a speech of self-justification, for the count will make polite society an accomplice in his conspirings; but it is also an indictment from Collins. Unlike Dickens, he is not greatly interested in evil engendered by neglect and irresponsibility.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 209

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

bility. The complicity that fascinates him is England's self-defeating moral smugness, the tragedies caused by excessively narrow regard for received notions of rectitude.

On the surface in *The Woman in White* rules are followed, amenities observed. But the society Collins presents is a hotbed of frustrated desires, including Walter's for Laura, Sir Percival's for legitimacy, and Mrs. Catherick's for greater community acceptance. Beneath the veneer of sociability the characters strive to maintain, complex schemes develop, bitter struggles take place—Sir Percival persecutes Anne Catherick, Walter tracks down Fosco and Glyde. From a preoccupation with polite appearances, Collins implies, stem the Gothic realities repression produces. The persecution of the woman in white takes place during Sir Percival's installment of his new bride at Blackwater Park. The hunt for Fosco and Glyde originates from the modest domicile Walter, Marian, and Laura create for themselves in accord with the best Dickensian models. Tension between tranquil surface ritual and hectic subterfuge pervades the novel. Thus Fosco sips England's social beverage while his wife engages in household espionage. Cruelly polite, he obliges Marian to serve tea while the countess hastens to the inn to drug Fanny, with tea of course.²⁶

To the radical moralist in Collins, sub-surface turmoil makes Victorian society, which appears highly civilized, a modern hell. Hence the numerous allusions to *The Divine Comedy*. The Victorian obsession with regulated behavior, a false sense of what constitutes uprightness, produces the ultimate inversion. As the Dante of this daylight underworld, the novelist pretends that he need put no one to the flames: he merely charts an inferno of his characters' own devising. Since all are seen as traitors to art and nature, Professor Pesca and the "young Misses" he is tutoring are found "down together in the hell of Dante. At the Seventh Circle . . ." ²⁷ Victorians, Collins maintains, are like inhabitants of the seventh circle; they create a hellishly confining environment by denying the natural and condoning the replacement of art with artifice.²⁸ They also unleash monsters like Glyde and Fosco, the latter a magnificent reincarnation of Satan. Dantesque landscapes, especially at Blackwater Park, do more than give added plausibility to the Gothic machinery of Collins' plot; they underscore a moral judgement.

The proliferation of secrets and secret societies is another price England pays in *The Woman in White* for putting too much emphasis on an outwardly proper social order. Unable to develop freely, individuals

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁸ Peter Caracciolo hunts down Collins's allusions to Dante in "Wilkie Collins's 'Divine Comedy': The Use of Dante in *The Woman in White*, *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 25 (1971), 383-404. Pesca's employer, "the golden Papa," epitomizes the denial of the natural in favor of the artificial when he proclaims: "We don't want genius in this country, unless it is accompanied by respectability—and then we are very glad to have it, very glad indeed." Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 41.

warp themselves trying to conform or else express their true selves with circumspection. Several of the English in *The Woman in White*, as well as the foreigner Fosco, depend for present happiness, indeed for survival, on suppressing compromising events in the past. Even Walter and Marian fall into this category when they decide their discovery of an "ominous likeness" between Miss Fairlie and Anne Catherick must be "kept a secret."²⁹ Concealment of Laura's resemblance to Anne is unnecessary unless one fears this apparent coincidence is fate's way of exposing sexual misconduct.

Walter soon has a secret all his own. He confesses his "secret" love for Laura, whom propriety dictates he regard only as his pupil.³⁰ Once Laura returns his love, artist and student become a secret society, an emotional conspiracy. Laura's prior engagement to Sir Percival is like a restraining order, as detrimental to their continued happiness as the undemocratic governments that drove Pesca and his confederates into fugitive organizations. When Marian learns Walter's secret, her regard for propriety forces her to separate the lovers. Ironically, this action earns her a place in a new conspiracy. After Hartright has gone, the sisters have "a secret between them," Laura's love for Walter, which they must endeavor to keep from Sir Percival.

The many secret societies in *The Woman in White* include, in addition to the dreaded Brotherhood, Mrs. Clements and Anne Catherick operating against Sir Percival before his wedding, Sir Percival and Fosco attempting to have Laura dispossessed and Anne committed, and Walter and Marian protecting a shattered Laura while seeking revenge upon Fosco and Glyde. Issues at stake in the English conspiracies are always social, moral, or economic, never political as in Italy. Mrs. Catherick must guard the secret of Sir Percival's illegitimacy as diligently as he does. Her hard-won respectability would vanish with his baronetcy if it became known she conspired to forge his authenticity. The diary in which Marian jots down her misgivings about Fosco and Glyde becomes a record of the secret society she and Laura unwillingly form at Blackwater Park to thwart their male captors. Throughout Marian's account, Collins challenges the propriety of a social and legal system that encourages men to subjugate women. When the count reads Marian's diary, he is once again a counter-espionage agent in the service of tyranny; he tries to break up a secret society in order to preserve masculine superiority at Blackwater Park.

Marian does not counsel Walter to leave Cumberland because of prejudice against an heiress marrying her drawing master.³¹ Like Laura, she easily rises above "social inequalities," mere "matters of rank and station."³² Laura cannot marry Walter because she must not go against a

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³¹ Cumberland seems an ironic name for a county whose remote moors supposedly are unencumbered by conventionality.

³² Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 95.

standing engagement; she will not break her word to Sir Percival or her promise to her father. Her "secret misery" is that she remains trapped between love for Walter, which is natural and good, and her official betrothal to Sir Percival, which symbolizes propriety as artificial restraint.³³

Walter and Laura torture one another out of too strict a respect for propriety. They suffer for permitting arbitrary standards to overrule natural inclinations. The complexity of Collins's plot begins with propriety as a social force that prevents natural enjoyment. Laura anguishes because, as Gilmore observes, "she never broke a promise in her life."³⁴ Hartright behaves correctly during the remainder of his abbreviated stay at Limmeridge House, though his heart is under cruel "restraint." Marian informs him that his excellent "conduct" in trying circumstances makes her his "friend for life." Still, by adhering to the letter of the law, the trio makes its final days together a painful charade. Walter, Laura, and Marian create a hell for themselves: their last evening, on which they try to socialize as usual, becomes, in Walter's words, "a struggle to preserve appearances."³⁵

Collins damns Victorian conceptions of propriety by labeling them predominantly an "insular phenomenon." No other civilized country, he contends, would hobble itself so unwisely. But when dealing with the secret hardships of Walter and Laura, Collins also satirizes England for being as blameworthy in its way as Italy, a country which has served English authors since Shakespeare as a bad example. It is as if Victorian England, thanks to illiberal notions, were as oppressed morally as nineteenth-century Italy was stifled politically. Due to government oppression, the surface of life in Italy appears unbroken. Underneath, however, it teems with revolutionary societies, one of which eventually tracks down Fosco for his treachery.³⁶ Similarly, the British in Collins's novel often set up secret societies, impromptu alliances of two or more persons, to defend themselves or someone important to them against the charge of having sinned against a despotic propriety.

Uncovering a secret, Walter learns, can be tantamount to signing someone's death warrant. In Hartright's pursuit of Glyde and Fosco, this is justifiable, for Walter is simultaneously the enemy of secrecy and the foe of an exaggerated propriety. He confounds these interrelated social ills by bringing everything to light. Laura's voluntary declaration to Sir Percival about her secret love is, by contrast, closer to suicide. Having determined to end "this miserable concealment," she tells Sir Percival she will marry him but without love because her heart is committed elsewhere. Instead of demanding her freedom, Laura puts herself

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁶ An early tip-off to Fosco's vulnerability is his extraordinary interest in learning whether any "Italian gentlemen" are settled in the vicinity of Blackwater Park. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

under Glyde's control and turns her upcoming marriage into a heartless affair for all parties. As Laura seals her fate, Collins remarks that she proceeds with "perfect propriety."³⁷ Marian adds that Laura's "own noble conduct has been the hidden enemy, throughout, of all the hopes she had trusted to it."³⁸

After Laura's honeymoon winter in Rome, propriety inspires new acts of secrecy, a rearrangement of existing conspiracies. Marian was formerly "the chosen depository" of Laura's "closest secrets."³⁹ Now, details of Laura's unhappy married life must be kept even from Marian. Just as propriety forbids Marian to ask about marital matters, Laura's marriage restricts her from inquiring about Walter. Between the half-sisters a double constraint forms. The most ironic reversal involves Sir Percival. Before Laura's confession, she and Marian keep a secret from him. After his marriage, when Anne Catherick threatens to expose him, he tries desperately to conceal his secret from them. Collins's point throughout *The Woman in White* is that overly restrictive moral codes, like bad politics in Italy, make for secrets and secret societies.

Sir Percival's "Secret"—the fact of his illegitimacy—is the only one Collins regularly capitalizes. The would-be baronet enters a forgery in the marriage register of Old Welmingham Church for the same reason he subsequently mistreats Anne Catherick and abuses his wife. Glyde wants to suppress the impropriety his father committed by neglecting to marry his mother. But he can never legitimize himself decisively as the rightful son and heir. Although his cruelty and foul temper tell against him, he is more of a martyr to propriety than Laura is.

Glyde was a victim before he became a criminal. Had he not tampered with the marriage records, England's inheritance laws and the prevailing social prejudice against bastards would have declared him peniless. The baronet finally burns to death trying to cover up his original felony in the same vestry where he perpetrated it. An offended morality, it appears, exacts a hellish revenge. In Collins's sarcastic epitaph for Sir Percival, scorn for the criminal does not conceal a criticism of society for having produced this tormented soul and his futile sense of propriety: Glyde, the novelist exclaims, committed a forgery that "made an honest woman of his mother after she was dead in her grave!"⁴⁰

Were the proprieties abstractions personified, they could be imagined pursuing Collins's characters like a Victorian version of the Furies. No one is driven more furiously than Sir Percival. Yet even the seemingly faultless Marian Halcombe, who charms Fosco, feels herself hindered by propriety. Trapped in the limited sphere society prescribes as woman's role, she is the perpetual prisoner of her femininity. Marian laments not having a male's physical capabilities, his freedom of speech and action. On the day preceding Laura's arrival at Blackwater Park, an impatient Marian complains:

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 552.

If I only had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival's best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the rising sun—a long hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours, like the famous highwayman's ride to York. Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must respect the housekeeper's opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way.⁴¹

Condemned to a woman's alliterative plight ("patience, propriety, and petticoats"), Marian has less of an arena for her talents than Fosco. She personifies Collins's contention that Victorian women, often the greatest sticklers for convention, were always the greatest losers by it.⁴²

On only one occasion does Marian have opportunity to defy convention. Realizing that the count and Sir Percival are preparing to engage in conspiratorial conversation, she crouches down on the roof of the verandah and eavesdrops like a man. To defeat Glyde and the count, Marian, like Walter, must step outside customary procedures, which offer the innocent little protection and less chance for redress. She attempts to hit back at the proprieties frustrating her but is punished for her audacity. Satirically, Collins elevates propriety into an elemental principle: the heavens open to reprimand Marian for overstepping the role imposed upon her sex. It rains during the discussion on the verandah, and Marian returns to her room wet and chilled. She suffers the fate typically reserved for nineteenth-century ladies who get soaked: a bout with fever. Fosco then utilizes her illness to invoke a quarantine that removes her from Laura's side.

Fosco and Hartright are ultimately locked in a struggle not just against each other but against propriety. The count has dispossessed Laura of her rightful place and Walter must undeceive a society that thinks nothing is wrong. Although Collins invests the count with wit and charm, he expects readers to recognize Walter as the true foe of excessive propriety and reject the calculated perversion of such enmity, which is Fosco. Collins never depicts his corpulent villain as a sincere opponent of social constraints.⁴³ Instead, he portrays him as a criminal mastermind who uses propriety against itself. Fosco is yet another form which the evils that beset an overly proper society can take. He behaves improperly without fostering the slightest suspicion in the public mind. His conspiracy against Laura succeeds for a time because no crime appears to

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-21.

⁴² Women wrote most of the new books of etiquette which contained rules for decorous conduct. See Maurice J. Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude* (London, 1965), p. 139.

⁴³ U.C. Knoepfelmacher typifies the prevalent reading of Collins's "asocial energies." He insists Collins's "trademark" is the "sympathetic treatment" of villains. "The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and *The Woman in White*" in Jerome H. Buckley (ed.), *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, *Harvard English Studies* 6 (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 361.

have been committed. But the indignities heaped upon the count at novel's end show that Collins allows the moral order to demand from his finest creation the severest penalty.

Doubtless, Fosco is deputized to express Collins's contempt for the stolidity of Victorian England. "I say what other people only think," the outspoken Fosco boasts; "when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath."⁴⁴ The count supplies a key to the novelist's satiric intentions. In *The Woman in White* Collins tells the truth about propriety and the evils it causes. When Fosco's actions are measured against this manifesto, however, they expose his falseness. In a double sense, the count is the biggest hypocrite in the novel.

Tearing off pasteboards is never one of Fosco's accomplishments. He is the novel's staunchest proponent of duplicity. His plan to improve his own fortunes along with Sir Percival's requires the substitution of Anne Catherick for Laura Fairlie in a conspiracy designed to install appearances in place of reality, the mask for the true face. Fosco's ingenuity turns propriety back upon itself in that, despite the cruelty of the deed, everything will still seem to be in proper place: a disturbed Anne (really Lady Glyde) is to be restored to the asylum, while a more easily intimidated Laura (actually Anne) replaces her.

Despite Anne's fatal heart attack and Laura's escape from confinement, polite society, hesitant to challenge appearances, remains thoroughly deceived. As Walter bitterly complains: "In the eye of reason and law, in the estimation of relatives and friends, according to every received formality of civilized society," Laura is considered dead and "buried," while the real Laura is supposedly Anne Catherick, a deluded imposter.⁴⁵ Fosco's brilliant plot secures the cooperation of society, which resolutely endorses his crime. Propriety—"every received formality of civilized society"—becomes Walter's enemy because, having been taken in by Fosco, it condones Anne's death and Laura's expulsion. It is Walter who must dissolve a conspiracy that sets "all the rest of the world" against the real Lady Glyde.

Fosco's plot against Anne and Laura is a crime against the integrity of the individual. Personal freedom is the asset Collins believes is threatened most in any society overly concerned with propriety. It is also the political idea least welcome to the Austrian and Neapolitan despots for whom Fosco toils.⁴⁶ Although the count styles himself the opponent of "moral clap-traps," individual liberty and self-determination are ideals this expert at counter-revolutionary espionage always labors against. Whether infiltrating the Brotherhood in Italy or dipping into the mail

⁴⁴ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 259.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

⁴⁶ For Fosco's probable employers consult the footnote for p. 582 in Sucksmith's edition, p. 624.

bag to intercept Marian's letters at Blackwater Park, Fosco is more than an agent of suppression: he is the enemy of its enemies.

Consequently, the harshest judgement in the novel descends upon the count. Not only does the Brotherhood have him assassinated but his corpse is treated disrespectfully as a public spectacle in "the terrible dead-house of Paris—the Morgue."⁴⁷ Secretive, conspiratorial, Fosco is subjected to complete exposure. With a dagger wound over the heart and the letter "T" for traitor carved into his arm, the count "lay, unowned, unknown, exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob!"⁴⁸ His enormous naked body, an improper sight for English eyes, is a carnival attraction to the French. The alleged foe of England's moral humbuggery would not strip Lady Glyde of her costume but readily took her name. Now he is deprived of clothes *and* identity. He is revealed as a foe of brotherhood, a false friend of the freedom and openness he pretended to favor. Hartright's final glimpse of the count recalls Dante's view of Satan at the nethermost point in hell, reserved for traitors.⁴⁹

Madame Fosco, writing her husband's biography, "throws no light whatever...on the secret history of his life."⁵⁰ The biography of Count Fosco espouses secrecy over revelation. Even after death, Fosco's secret life remains a secret because he is for keeping sensitive material suppressed. Collins suggests that propriety and reactionary politics in the nineteenth century have much in common. Madame Fosco wants to disseminate the illusion that the count "died a martyr to his cause." Actually, he was more skilled at making martyrs. Hartright's narrative frustrates Madame Fosco's hagiography. It separates those who suffer unfairly at the hands of propriety from those who use propriety to cause misery for others. Since *The Woman in White* tells the truth about the count, its publication is another defeat for him.

As Hartright's name suggests, Collins believes that the individual who has confidence in his integrity must determine the permissible by consulting the interests of his own heart. Admittedly, as the count claims, there are "many different sorts of virtue . . . here in England, there is one virtue. And there, in China, there is another virtue."⁵¹ But the wise man mistrusts Pharisaic social conventions wherever found, and tries to perceive, instead, the moral designs Collins, like Dickens, naively believes can still be found working themselves out in human events.

In contrast to Fosco, Hartright starts by doing instinctively what seems natural. After suffering several reversals, he can be said to have become the butt of propriety. By leaving Laura to Sir Percival, he makes himself a victim of the rules she foolishly respects. Eventually, Walter must ven-

⁴⁷ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 644.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 643.

⁴⁹ Caracciolo, "Wilkie Collins's 'Divine Comedy,' p. 397. Collins called Fosco "a clever Devil" in "How I Write My Books: Related in a Letter to a Friend," *The Globe* (26 November 1887), reprinted in Sucksmith, p. 596.

⁵⁰ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 644.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

ture beyond the acceptable procedure in order to reinstate Laura and obtain revenge on the social system that has deprived and mistreated them both. The count professes no love for conventions yet gives the appearance of staying always within them. Walter is compelled to behave in a manner society considers improper if he is to set things right.

Hartright's problems with propriety begin simultaneously with the novel. On the road to London, in the middle of the night, he is tapped on the shoulder by "a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments."⁵² Walter must overcome the suspicion that he is being solicited by a prostitute. His mind supplies no explanations but his instincts, as a man of integrity, are impeccable. Walter is not misled by "the perplexingly strange circumstances." Since he does not know "What sort of woman she was," it is to his credit not to have "misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place."⁵³ The woman in white asks for trust as well as help. Regardless of what propriety might dictate, Walter becomes involved. "The loneliness and helplessness of the woman," he says, "touched me. The *natural impulse* [italics added] to assist her and to spare her got the better of the judgement, the caution, the worldly tact, which an older, wiser, and colder man might have summoned to help him in this strange emergency."⁵⁴

This is how the melodramatic realism Collins learned from Dickens usually works: an extraordinary incident drives home a highly charged ethical or social observation suited for use in more mundane circumstances. Through a "strange emergency" the sensation novelist scores his moral point. He submits his thesis that "natural impulse," which society squelches in the "older, wiser, and colder" of its members, is superior to "judgement," "caution," and "worldly tact," all of which are propriety's accoutrements.

Abetting Anne's escape, Walter performs an act of compassion. He helps to free someone from unlawful restraint. After less than fifty pages, he is already the enemy of propriety. In a country where, according to Collins, all are unduly constrained, Hartright interferes with a longstanding infringement of an innocent woman's freedom. Opposing the laws and institutions responsible for this instance of unnecessary confinement denigrates, by implication, all other forms of needless restriction. What Walter does here by inclination, he sticks to later from conviction. Not surprisingly in so proper a country, the incident at first leaves an inexperienced Hartright "distressed by an uneasy sense of having done wrong."⁵⁵

The first three women Hartright encounters seduce him away from propriety. Marian Halcombe, an admirably outspoken violator of "female

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

propriety" in her conversation,⁵⁶ is the second improper woman Walter succumbs to in as many days.⁵⁷ When Marian conducts Walter to the summer-house, he commits still another offense by falling in love with Laura: "Yes! let me acknowledge that on the first day I let the charm of her presence lure me from the recollection of myself and my position."⁵⁸ As a mere drawing-master, Hartright's status in a class-conscious society is degrading. Walter is "admitted among beautiful and captivating women much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them."⁵⁹ By marrying Laura and redressing the injustice society has done her, Walter also reasserts his individuality and recovers his masculinity.

Walter's campaign against propriety retaliates against everything that drove him from Laura's side and then permitted her to be refused her proper place. Hartright's targets include Mr. Fairlie, polite society in and around Limmeridge House, and England's legal system, none of which was able to separate criminal activity from correct appearances. At a tremendous cost in time and effort, Walter turns back the clock to the day on which Anne Catherick was buried as Laura Fairlie. Threats he utters before Laura's attorney are realized one by one:

That house shall open again to receive her in the presence of every soul who followed the false funeral to the grave—that lie shall be publicly erased from the tombstone by the authority of the head of the family, and those two men shall answer for their crime to ME.⁶⁰

When Walter makes good on these boasts, he shoves propriety down the throats of those who thought they were its deputies.

Unfortunately, the ceremonial reinstatement Walter insists upon seems remarkably joyless and cold-blooded. Hartright's offensive against propriety is, paradoxically, a ruthless setting straight. Mr. Fairlie must preside or face a lawsuit. A letter is sent to all the tenants who attended the false funeral "summoning them" to Laura's resurrection.⁶¹ On the day itself, when Walter opens "the proceedings," he is exacting legal satisfaction unavailable to Laura in a court of law. Fosco and Glyde—the first a fugitive on the continent, the second already dead—are convicted *in absentia* by a jury of Mr. Fairlie's tenants. Propriety itself is put on trial for poor judgement. The final rite is the procession to the churchyard, where a "throng" of tenants and villagers "see the false inscription struck off the tombstone with their own eyes."⁶²

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ The woman in white accosts Walter early the same day on which he later travels to his new post at Limmeridge House. The next morning, at breakfast, he encounters Marian.

⁵⁸ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 465-66.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 636.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 639.

The extent to which Hartright has been propriety's victim is matched by the remorselessness with which he fights back. Walter does the detective work the police never undertook. He also uncovers a long-standing forgery and unearths a traitor the Brotherhood has sought for years. Finally, he secures evidence from all of the witnesses to the conspiracy and assembles Collins's novel. Unless one gives Walter credit for this broad scope of activity, he comes dangerously close, during the reinstatement ceremony, to forfeiting the reader's sympathies. From the moment Hartright binds himself to the task of regaining Laura's identity, he falls into the grip of a monomania as severe as Mrs. Catherick's. He, too, is one of propriety's martyrs and slaves.

Of all the prisoners of propriety in Collins's novel, Mrs. Catherick serves the stiffest sentence, a psychological confinement as well as geographical restraint. Anne's mother is the woman in black, with "black silk gown," "black net cap," "iron-grey hair. . . in heavy bands," and "slate-coloured mittens."⁶³ Next to her, Dickens's Mrs. Clennam, another instance of self-incarceration, sparkles. If Anne symbolizes the foolishness of a society trying always to be spotless, Mrs. Catherick, in penitential black, stands for the kind of death-in-life one can be reduced to by the struggle to regain respectability. Whenever Mrs. Catherick runs to the window so the passing clergyman will bow to her, she constitutes a chilling reminder of what can happen to the unfairly accused if they insist too strenuously on total reparation.⁶⁴

Mrs. Catherick is a disturbing presence because her determination to recover her reputation could be misinterpreted as a parody of Walter's efforts to vindicate Laura. She can even be seen as a caricature of Miss Fairlie, for, like Laura, she wants her former self back:

I came here a wronged woman—I came here robbed of my character and determined to claim it back. I've been years and years about it—and I have claimed it back. I have matched the respectable people fairly and openly on their own ground. If they say anything against me now they must say it in secret—they can't say it, they daren't say it, openly. . . *The clergyman bows to me.*⁶⁵

Mrs. Catherick's resolve to stay in the community where she appeared to fall from grace is a satirical comment on the value of trying to appease the respectable world. It makes its strongest parodic remark on Sir

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

⁶⁴ Reviewing "Sensation Novels" for *Blackwood's Magazine*, Mrs. Oliphant, missing Collins's antipathy for the proprieties, failed to understand Laura's resolution to marry Sir Percival. She also found Mrs. Catherick's extortion of bows from the clergyman disagreeable when, of course, it is highly pertinent. See Norman Page (ed.), *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1974), pp. 120-21.

⁶⁵ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 507.

Percival's determination to establish his legitimacy. Like Sir Percival but not Walter and Laura, Mrs. Catherick struggles to hold onto a place to which she is not entitled. After victory at the reinstatement ceremony, Walter and Laura wisely leave Limmeridge House. For Mrs. Catherick, retreat from Welmingham would be a defeat. Although she was not unfaithful to Catherick with Sir Percival, her conception of Philip Fairlie's child is the well-kept secret from which the novel's complexities originate. Those still anxious to calumniate Mrs. Catherick not only must do so "in secret" but have to use the wrong secret. Her only real crime—assisting Glyde to insert a forgery in the marriage register—is not the act she does penance for.

In steady pursuit of propriety, Mrs. Catherick behaves as if she were superior to providence. Her determination to "claim. . .back" her character even if "years and years" are required, amounts to a design imposed upon life. Having subdued the clergyman, she prepares to extort a bow from his wife. Walter has a prospectus too, the tripartite plan for retribution announced to Mr. Kyrle. Only Walter's design enjoys Collins's support because it apparently ties in with the program of a judicial providence. Walter's work as a detective in Laura's service designates him a cooperative agent or avenging angel employed by higher powers.⁶⁶

Propriety, Collins maintains, is one of society's short-sighted laws, no better than much of its written legislation; providence is related to it as a corrective. Whether flouting propriety or bending it to a purpose, Fosco stands in the way of providence. Like Mrs. Catherick, he tries to coerce events to happen his way. When he learns of the "sickly likeness" Anne bears to Laura, a discovery that alarmed Hartright, he is delighted, believing that life is playing into his hands. Conspirators are satanic villains for Collins because they presume to usurp providence's role. They want to direct rather than serve. Fosco assures Sir Percival that they soon "shall pay" the latter's bills and "find Anne Catherick."⁶⁷ He never suspects that current happenings, which he connects solely with things to come, are also the working out of actions begun long ago.

The "fatal resemblance"⁶⁸ Fosco seizes on between Anne and Laura is the final phase, Collins insists, in the unfolding of a providential plan. Providence finally catches up with Fosco's treachery and Sir Percival's fraud. In addition to subverting the Victorian reader's confidence in the proprieties—indeed, in order to effect the subversion—Collins emphasizes the superiority of providence as a regulatory force. When the count ridicules as "infernal humbug" the notion that "Crimes cause their own detection,"⁶⁹ he tempts fate. Although Collins originally botched the

⁶⁶ Ian Ousby does not include Walter prominently in his survey of detectives who are heaven's agents. *Bloodhounds of Heaven* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).

⁶⁷ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 355.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

novel's time-table, it is surely providence that arranges for Anne's weak heart to give out in London on 25 July 1850, before Lady Glyde, who is to be thrust into the asylum in her place, leaves Blackwater Park.⁷⁰

As Hartright discerns his own role in an awesome unraveling, he seems more perceptive than Fosco, yet remains humbler. Walter gradually recognizes in providence a fearful but just administrator of mankind's affairs. He had more reason to than the average reader. Providence brings Walter out on the London road when Anne needs help, leads him to Cumberland and Laura, keeps him safe during the semi-suicidal expedition to South America, reunites him with Laura at the grave in which she is supposedly buried, and bestows Limmeridge House upon his son. These incidents are not sops Collins tosses his readers.⁷¹ Instead, they are the work of a novelist who thinks detective stories highly civilized: successful investigation of a crime indicates the enormous amount of good still in the world. Like Dickens, who was also sharply critical of society at any given moment, Collins respects the long-range ability of the life process to redeem the deserving and rid itself of malefactors. The woman in white enters Walter's life "like a fatality;"⁷² she serves as fate's messenger. Anne's white-clad figure, primarily a symbol of the futility of society's excessive concern for propriety, becomes for Walter a sign of the superintendence of fate.

Early in the novel, Hartright suspects that he is "linked already to a chain of events which even [his] approaching departure from Cumberland would be powerless to snap asunder— . . ." He finds consolation in this awareness: "Poignant as it was, the sense of suffering caused by the miserable end of my brief, presumptuous love seemed to be blunted and deadened by the still stronger sense of something obscurely impending, something invisibly threatening, that time was holding over our heads."⁷³ Only Walter and Marian develop a sense of this "chain of events" and consciously become agents of disclosure.

By mid-novel Marian begins to share Walter's sense of providence as primary disposer. She feels "the ominous future coming close, chilling [her] with an unutterable awe, forcing on [her] the conviction of an unseen design in the long series of complications which had fastened round" Hartright, Laura, and herself.⁷⁴ She thinks of Laura's absent suitor and adopts his beliefs: ". . . I too began to doubt whether we were

⁷⁰ The reviewer for *The Times* (October, 1860) objected that Collins miscounted the days his novel covers by an entire fortnight. Lady Glyde, he explained, could not have left Blackwater Park before August 9 or 10, which would make providence dilatory. Collins immediately corrected the error. See Collins, *Woman in White*, pp. 102-03.

⁷¹ Marshall thinks they are. *Wilkie Collins*, p. 64. Of similar opinion is A. Brooker Thro in "An Approach to Melodramatic Fiction: Goodness and Energy in the Novels of Dickens, Collins and Reade," *Genre*, 11 (1978), pp. 359-74.

⁷² Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 97.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

not advancing blindfold to an appointed and inevitable end.”⁷⁵ In one of the more curious conversion scenes in Victorian fiction, Marian, already an apostate from the proprieties, surrenders herself to providence. She becomes Walter’s ally philosophically, just as she will be his accomplice actively. Although Walter and Marian step outside established methods for detecting crime, they never go contrary to the “unseen design” which they help to make visible because each finds it unerring and just.

Once Walter resolves to “win the way back” to Laura’s rightful place, he embraces all that has already happened to him as a preparation for his mission: “From thousands of miles away—through forest and wilderness, where companions stronger than I had fallen by my side, . . . the hand that leads men on the dark road to the future had led me to that time.”⁷⁶ A subsequent passage, where Walter recounts his reunion with Laura at her mother’s grave, also employs a tone suited to Victorian melodramas. The “hand that leads men on” specifically becomes God’s. Having failed to gain restoration to Limmeridge House, Laura insists on a final look at her mother’s grave. This brings the sisters to the spot while Walter, recently returned from South America, is also paying a last farewell at what he assumes is Laura’s sepulchre. “I believe in my soul,” Walter writes, “that the hand of God was pointing their way back to them . . .”⁷⁷ To be an extension of God’s hand is an ambitious undertaking most moderns find too onerous but which the proponents of propriety compel Walter to assume.

Collins remains fundamentally Victorian because of his reluctance to forego larger frames of reference. He needs providence in *The Woman in White*, as does Walter, to frustrate villainy. Just as providence’s hidden designs keep in check the chaotic implications of the irresponsible world Dickens condemned in novels like *Bleak House*, they counterbalance the less rigorously proper world Collins desires. Life only opens out for Hartright and Laura to the extent it closes in on Fosco and Glyde. Openness is Collins’s modern-sounding corrective for overmuch propriety, but providence is his hedge against anarchy. Compared to a sexual revolutionary like Lawrence or a confirmed deviant like Walter in *My Secret Life*, Collins was no amoralist. He was not undermining the convention of order’s eventual victory even as he used it.⁷⁸ On the contrary, he appears cautiously subversive, a rebel within bounds, who demands openness but wants order preserved.

Playing providence off against propriety furnishes *The Woman in White* with a structural polarity, the kind of antithesis found in the modern novel of ideas where, for example, conflicting claims of passion

⁷⁵ Walter and Marian both use “doubt” in the obsolete sense of “suspect” or “dread.”

⁷⁶ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 435.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

⁷⁸ Knoepfelmacher treats Collins as an “amoralist.” “Counterworld of Victorian Fiction,” pp. 353, 368–69.

and reason may suggest that life is run according to divers laws.⁷⁹ But Collins, in setting up his competitive doctrines, is not intimating that the nature of things is basically unsound. Instead, he employs a settled belief (in providence) to gain support for a new state of mind (his stand against the proprieties).⁸⁰ He uses providence to guarantee no moral disasters will result from debunking rigid social codes. Nevertheless, when Collins strikes at social constraint, he hastens the arrival of a world without rules.

To interpret events differently than Walter does, to see a battle of wits determining the outcome where Hartright discerns the aid of providence, makes the novel's only overall perspective as limited and unreliable as Mrs. Michelson's.⁸¹ Before the woman in white appeared, Walter was no ardent believer in the directing hand of God; nor was Marian, who takes his admittedly platitudinous ideas for her own. If Walter is undependable, so is Marian. *The Woman in White* recounts the incidents that induced both of these sensible individuals to see through propriety to the higher law Collins argues it obscures. When Collins genuflected to providence, no matter how stagily, he was as serious as Carlyle or Tennyson but even less persuasive than Dickens, whose success in *A Tale of Two Cities* as a delineator of time's handiwork he may have been trying to surpass.⁸² If one cites Hartright's patronym as evidence, Collins seems to share Dickens's confidence that the Kingdom of Heaven is within; it cannot be created, as supporters of propriety believe, through discipline imposed from without. Yet the conservative satirist in both men could only subscribe to progress because each also trusted in providence as a moral force, built into the nature of things, to safeguard against the permanent triumph of evil and error.

When Collins celebrates the opposition between providence and propriety in order to put down the latter, he limits his effectiveness as a disinterested novelist of ideas. To moderns he appears trapped between conviction and convention. His belief in individual choice and human freedom jars against a Victorian conception of order that threatens to abnegate both.⁸³ At the same time that Collins enumerates the problems propriety causes, he claims that providence's "terrible" and "unerring" power, exercising constant supervision, renders society's strictures

⁷⁹ For an example, see the epigraph that states the themes for Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (London, 1928).

⁸⁰ Houghton finds the Victorian era one of transition from settled beliefs to a new state of mind that was forced to see life in terms of "the conflicting claims of incompatible doctrines." *Victorian Frame of Mind*, p. 18.

⁸¹ Winifred Hughes replaces the struggle between good and evil that Walter chronicles with a trial of skill. She also argues that Reade and Collins, unlike Dickens, wrote morally ambiguous sensation novels. *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 138-45.

⁸² Ousby concludes that Collins's use of providential patterns rests on no firm intellectual foundation and merely serves to link him with lesser writers of the age. *Bloodhounds of Heaven*, p. 127.

⁸³ John R. Reed indicates the widespread popularity of providence as a novelist's helper in *Victorian Conventions* (Athens, Ohio, 1975), pp. 132-37.

superfluous. A mixture of Victorian and modern, the argument of the plot in *The Woman in White* performs a twofold function: from one point of view it reveals propriety as the root of all the problems that develop; from another, it shows that everything happens the way it does to demonstrate the power of providence. Glyde burns to death as a victim of propriety and a defrauder whom fate is punishing. Since the same sensational incidents are utilized to demote propriety persuasively and praise providence less convincingly, one cannot hail the modern in Collins and explain away the Victorian. In *The Woman in White* the novelist strives for a compound statement, of which one half holds up better than the other.

Collins's need for a larger framework to circumscribe the more permissive society he advocates implies a longing to be Victorian and anti-Victorian simultaneously. This attitude is not peculiar to Collins among nineteenth and twentieth-century authors who can intuit correctly the price of new freedoms. Collins's uneasiness seems responsible for the perturbing diction of determination and restraint whenever he or his characters talk about providence. Events in *The Woman in White* forge a "chain" men are "powerless to snap asunder," complications fasten round the major characters, Marian feels she is "advancing blindfold" towards a day of judgement.⁸⁴ The "sense of something obscurely impending" alleviates Walter's disappointments but sounds dreadful, even malign. Walter and Marian learn to further long-range programs rather than kowtow to man-made rules. For the good at heart, if they are also intelligent and far-sighted, fate and freedom coincide. Walter, Laura, and Marian are still prisoners, however, not of social forms but of life's designs, even though they are uncertain of the predetermined future until it arrives and work out their hunches suspensefully, as the reader does with his.

Had the proprieties been less stringent at Varneck Hall, the liaison between Philip Fairlie and the eventual Mrs. Catherick—a "thoughtless wrong" but hardly a calculated conspiracy—might not have spawned more serious crime. To complete the list of the evils of propriety, Collins emphasizes that overly vigilant moral codes make it inevitable that minor transgressions, especially sexual ones, lead to—or get covered up by—graver offenses. This is Collins's unique interpretation of a "Scripture denunciation" which also intrigued Dickens and George Eliot. Walter uses it to sum up the novel: "the sins of the father shall be visited on the children,"⁸⁵ who will have to bear consequences graver than the crime, as the half-sisters do, or go even further to avoid them, which is the course Glyde chooses.

Mainstays of the Gothic abound in *The Woman in White* as they do

⁸⁴ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 305.

⁸⁵ See *Exodus*, 34:7. Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 575.

throughout Dickens.⁸⁶ Unlike Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe, however, Collins makes a melodramatic plot carry moral arguments so that he can speak out against propriety and illustrate his confidence in providence as a superior court of justice, the higher propriety. As happens regularly in Dickens, points made by sensational events of high entertainment value are those of a perceptive social critic. Collins's friendly rivalry in this regard alarmed Dickens as no other competing Victorian novelist's disapproval could because, by putting sensation and melodrama to use as vehicles for social criticism, the protegee threatened to make the master's medium his own.

Like *Bleak House*, *The Woman in White* can be read as a social fable: an exciting mystery expressing a moral truth. Lady Dedlock's struggles to conceal her past parallel society's determination to ignore its sins. Tolerating slums and failing to rehabilitate their inhabitants, Dickens implies, is as reprehensible as a mother forsaking her child. Similarly, Laura's loss of position and Walter's fight to recover it stand for the threats to individual liberty Collins detected throughout Europe in the 1850s. Suppression of an individual's freedom, he demonstrates, can be accomplished by societal conventions as easily as by government decree. In either case, it is like denying Lady Glyde the right to be herself. One must remember that Laura Fairlie, an heiress who dresses "unpretendingly" in "plain white muslin"⁸⁷ is also a woman in white: she is Collins's imperiled symbol for what should be the inviolability of the individual.

According to Aldous Huxley, congenital novelists, born storytellers, are inferior to novelists of ideas who deplore "the mere business of telling a story" and go beyond it to examine different "attitudes toward life."⁸⁸ Collins's fondness for intricate plot goes against the modern trend. The new stance, as formulated by E. M. Forster, was to regret having to tell stories at all. But *The Woman in White* accomplishes its business as a first-rate story while comparing the different approaches its characters adopt towards life: the culpable indifference and withdrawal of Mr. Fairlie, Fosco's hypocritical flouting of conventional morality, Mrs. Catherick's slavish subservience to propriety, and the emerging sense Marian and Walter form of themselves as agents of a firm but just providential order.

Never a cerebration in Huxley's exacting fashion, the Victorian novel, even a popular melodrama like *The Woman in White*, is rarely without a preoccupying idea. Congenital storytellers like Dickens and Collins had no aversion to serious thought. The readability of their novels, extra-

⁸⁶ These include the question of Sir Percival's legitimacy, Jacob's mistaken vision of Anne Catherick as the ghost of Mrs. Fairlie, the use of doubles, allegations of madness against Anne, and the attempts to confine first her and then Laura in an asylum.

⁸⁷ Collins, *Woman in White*, p. 80.

⁸⁸ Grover Smith (ed.), *Letters of Aldous Huxley* (London, 1969), p. 228.

ordinary in terms of events yet often highly edifying in didactic intent, helped transmit criticisms of life. Collins's best novel deserves recognition as one of the better Victorian critiques of Victorianism. It belongs in the select company of Victorian novels built around controlling ideas. *Martin Chuzzlewit* can be called *Selfishness* and *Dombey and Son* renamed *Pride*. The titles of several Trollope novels could be changed to *Passion Against Prudence*. Thackeray's most famous novel is practically named *Vanity*. *The Woman in White* ought to be rechristened *Propriety*. An even better subtitle, using Jane Austen's titulary method, would pit the traditional Victorian in Collins against the more interesting subversive moralist: *Providence Versus the Evils of Propriety*.

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