

JENNY BOURNE TAYLOR

Introduction

Wilkie Collins was a popular and prolific novelist whose career spanned most of the second half of the nineteenth century. It began in 1850, when Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë were at the height of their powers and George Eliot was still to publish a work of fiction, and ended in 1890, as the Victorian novel itself was drawing to a close, in the era of Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling and George Gissing. Collins published more than twenty novels, numerous short stories and perceptive and witty pieces of journalism. He collaborated closely with Dickens during the 1850s and 1860s and was involved with Dickens in dramatic productions as well as adapting his own work for the stage. He was a busy and hard-working professional writer who negotiated a rapidly changing literary marketplace and was able to make use of new forms of publication and distribution of fiction at both national and global levels.

Collins's popularity as a compelling storyteller, a 'master of suspense' who inaugurated the sensation novel and played a key role in shaping detective fiction has remained undiminished. Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical version of *The Woman in White* played to packed audiences in London's West End during 2005, and Sarah Waters's novel *Fingersmith*, which reworks Collins's signature themes of deception and substitution, was shortlisted for both the Man Booker and the Orange prizes in 2003. Meanwhile, in contemporary criticism Collins's reputation has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Although T. S. Eliot praised the intellectual sophistication of Collins's work in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1927, for much of the twentieth century he was seen as Dickens's rather lightweight protégé and dubious companion – an interesting figure in the development of genre fiction, but not really worth sustained academic study. That view started to shift in the 1970s with the publication of William Marshall's *Wilkie Collins* in the Twayne Authors series in 1970 and Norman Page's *The Critical Heritage* volume in 1974, together with several articles exploring

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the complexity of sensation narrative and stressing the radical and subversive elements of Collins's work. The shifts in modern criticism towards popular narrative forms; the growing interest in exploring the relationship between 'high' and 'popular' culture, and the renewed attention to how literary forms interact with the social and intellectual processes that surround and shape them, have all been kind to Collins. During the past twenty-five years, there has been a veritable explosion of interest – not only in monographs and articles devoted both to his work and to sensation fiction, but also in general studies of Victorian literature and culture, where Collins is regarded as a serious writer as much as a popular novelist – as he always hoped he would be.

Indeed, the distinctive features of Collins's work – his exploration of how social identities and relationships are enacted and maintained, his fascination with the unstable boundary between the normal and the deviant, his reworking of Gothic conventions to explore the power relations at work in the Victorian family – have all made it a particularly fruitful subject for many of the key theoretical and critical concerns of the 1980s and 1990s, and these debates continue.¹ Critics have discussed how Collins's multi-voiced, self-reflexive narratives, with their use of testimony, letters and buried writing, their preoccupation with secrecy, illegitimacy, doubling and disguise, themselves dramatise covert or explicit power struggles within Victorian culture. These discussions have formed part of a debate over Collins's ideological significance. The question of whether his writing offers a radical critique of Victorian orthodoxy or reinforces it preoccupied many critics during the 1980s and 1990s, and this debate, too, continues.

However, much of the most fruitful critical work has refused to pin down the novels to a fixed set of meanings, preferring to remain as unsettled as the texts themselves in exploring how Collins's work enacts a complex interplay of subversion and containment, critique and compromise. Collins portrays marriage, for example, as the site of conflict, confusion and intrigue as well as the means of resolution, at a moment in the 1850s and 1860s when marriage was being reassessed as a legal contract, with profound social implications. He represents disturbingly cross-gendered androgynous male and female figures alongside models of conventional masculinity and femininity. His representation of race, and the role that imperialism plays within English society, first discussed in John R. Reed's seminal essay 'English Imperialism and the Unacknowledged Crime of *The Moonstone*' in 1973, has been much debated in relation to contemporary imperialist ideology and concepts of racial difference. Collins also demonstrates how the boundary between sanity and madness is slippery and unstable, and critics have both drawn on psychoanalytic theories to

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explore his representation of double and fractured subjectivities and investigated his use of mid-nineteenth-century debates on asylum reform and contemporary theories of consciousness to dramatise how strangeness exists at the heart of the self.

The essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins* take up many of these questions and develop other areas of interest. Both the popular image of Collins as a writer and the majority of critics have, until recently, focused on the ‘sensation decade’ of the 1860s – on *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, and to a lesser extent *No Name* and *Armada*. In the past few years, however, there has been growing interest in the full span of Collins’s writing, reflected in and generated by the increasing availability of his lesser-known work. The somewhat simplistic image of Collins as a ‘Victorian rebel’, too, has been revised and complicated by what has become the definitive biography, Catherine Peters’s *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (1991), which both investigates Collins’s complicated personal life and traces his intricate web of literary, artistic and theatrical friendships. Collins’s letters have also been published over the last few years, in a two-volume edition in 1999 and a fuller and closely annotated four-volume series in 2005; these provide detailed insights into Collins’s life as a professional writer. The essays here grow out of this widening appeal, and place discussion of the better-known work in a range of historical and critical contexts.

Collins’s shifting identity as a professional writer is investigated by Tim Dolin, Anthea Trodd, Jim Davis and Graham Law, who each take up specific aspects of his multifaceted cultural position. Focusing on the early part of Collins’s career, Tim Dolin places his early work in the setting of the artistic circles in which he grew up and spent much of his twenties. Dolin reads the narrative style that would peak in the 1860s as an interplay of opposition to and assimilation of very different groups and artistic generations. On the one hand, there was that of his father William Collins and his father’s friend and fellow-artist Sir David Wilkie; on the other, the two groups of younger contemporaries, with contrasting views of modern life, that met in the Collins household – the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the group of painters known as ‘The Clique’. Anthea Trodd surveys Collins’s early writing – journalism and shorter pieces as well as the novels – as experiments in genre, identifying the specific elements of narrative voice and point of view that formed the basis of his more complex narratives, particularly his interest in the intensity of perspective created by marginality and social exclusion. She also discusses Collins’s changing relationship with Dickens during the 1850s, and touches on their collaborative theatrical productions – a topic taken up in Jim Davis’s essay on Collins and the

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theatre. Exploring an area of Collins's work that is attracting growing interest, Davis assesses Collins's plays – both successes and failures – and places Collins's own dramatic views and values in the context of the nineteenth-century stage. Collins lived through profound changes in the production and reception of the novel, and in a wide-ranging survey Graham Law analyses his position as a professional writer. From the beginning of his career, Collins aimed to participate in and exploit new trends in publishing and attract new groups of readers, and the ways in which he negotiated the changing forms of the novel through the different stages of his career makes him a fascinating case study in the sociology of literature during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The chapters by John Bowen, Lyn Pykett and Ronald R. Thomas focus on Collins's shaping of the short story, sensation fiction and the detective novel respectively – though all stress how unstable these categories are, and I, too, highlight the disturbing generic uncertainty that pervades Collins's fiction after 1870. Bowen's essay on the shorter fictions dovetails with Trodd's overview, and picks up her point that Collins's early writing is suffused with anxieties over influence and plagiarism. Collins wrote a wide variety of short stories throughout his writing life, and Bowen shows that it is the very marginality of the form itself – with its different narrative voices, its focus on secrecy and detection, and the ambiguous nature of evidence and identity as performance – that makes it a crucible for the sensation novel as much as the detective genre.

Pykett, Thomas and I all place Collins's narrative methods within contemporary social, scientific and psychological contexts, reading them as aspects of his elaborate response to, and treatment of, modern subjectivity and forms of knowledge as much as experiments in genre. Pykett opens her discussion of the sensation novel of the 1860s by highlighting how this hybrid, and implicitly gendered, form was held together by contemporary anxieties about the breaching of cultural and social boundaries. The sensation novel was widely regarded as a morbid symptom of modernity – 'Preaching to the nerves' in one critic's evocative phrase – and Pykett analyses the ways in which *The Woman in White* and *No Name* explore the modern nervous subject, above all in their representation of gender identity. *The Moonstone* 'dramatises a sustained effort of recovering a lost incident' through an intricate process of historical detection and reconstruction, and Thomas analyses the ways in which it becomes the prototypical detective novel by exploiting the emergent field of criminology, setting the novel within the development of forensic science in the mid-nineteenth century. Collins's fiction after the 1870s contains some of his most bizarre and socially explicit writing, and I explore how it also engages with

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contemporary theories of the mind to amplify Collins's preoccupation with mistaken identity, multiple selves, inheritance and the workings of memory. Collins becomes increasingly sceptical towards the ambitions of modern science, but he also continues to use it, and I survey how much of the later fiction exploits the methods and theories it seems to be rejecting.

The chapters by Carolyn Dever, John Kucich, Lillian Nayder and Kate Flint approach Collins's work in the light of current critical approaches to sexuality, gender, race and disability. Both Dever and Kucich draw on modern psychoanalytic theory in their respective discussions of Collins's treatment of the marriage plot and male melancholia, and develop the growing critical interest in Collins's intriguing representation of same-sex bonds and masculinity. Collins's domesticated Gothic is put to its most devastating use in his critique of the position of women within marriage, and Dever argues that his critique goes deeper than attacking legal abuses – that in addressing the various meanings of 'marriage' itself, Collins unsettles the presumption that it must be based on a heterosexual union. While the novel form demands marriage as a means of narrative closure, the conventional couple is offset by a third figure whose relationship to the hero or heroine constitutes the primary bond, Dever argues in her discussion of *The Woman in White*, *Armada* and *Man and Wife*. Collins's same-sex couples, she suggests, 'walk a fine line between affective convention and erotic transgression'. The other side of Collins's much discussed dissection of femininity is his depiction of the identity crisis facing Victorian men, and in his discussion of melancholia and masculinity in *Basil*, *The Woman in White*, *Armada* and *The Moonstone* Kucich explores how the split in Collins's fiction between melancholic and self-aggrandising masculinity expresses wider social transformations and cultural shifts in gender norms.

Nayder and Flint discuss the ways in which Collins questions the seemingly natural boundaries of race and physical ability. Nayder examines Collins's ambiguous depiction of racial difference in the light of the political events and controversies that affected British imperial policy in the mid-nineteenth century. She looks at how Collins sets the domestic against the colonised and yet also challenges this opposition, both in *The Moonstone* – Collins's most explicit depiction of colonial expropriation – and in early novels such as *Antonina*, and the play *Black and White*. Nayder concludes by noting the arbitrariness of skin colour as the marker of identity in *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins's most sustained depiction of blindness, which Flint examines in her discussion of difference and disability. Stressing how Collins used various forms of sensory deprivation to encourage his readers to reflect on knowledge based on 'the evidence of the senses', Flint investigates the ways in which Collins both undercuts the boundaries of

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‘normality’ while always refracting physical disability through the prism of social and gender identities.

These essays illustrate the extraordinary range of approaches that can be brought to bear on Collins’s work. His influence on twentieth-century culture is too diffuse to be easily pinned down, and in the final chapter Rachel Malik stresses the continuities between mid-nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural forms in her survey of the reworking of Collins’s plots in early film, twentieth-century television, the pastiches of Victorian fiction by James Wilson and Sarah Waters, and the recent musical version of *The Woman in White*. Malik notes the ways in which Collins’s preoccupation with substitution and secret lives can be rewritten in the light of our own anxieties and preoccupations, and as these essays show, it is in dramatising the concerns and anxieties of his own time that Wilkie Collins speaks so closely to our own.

NOTE

1. For a detailed overview of Collins criticism, see Lillian Nayder ‘Wilkie Collins Studies: 1983–1999’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 28 (1999), 257–329.

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Collins's career and the visual arts

When *Basil: A Story of Modern Life* was published in November 1852, the name of its author, W. Wilkie Collins, was familiar to a handful of readers and reviewers of his only two other works: a biography of his father, the late distinguished painter and Fellow of the Royal Academy, William Collins (1848); and a historical romance, *Antonina* (1850), which showed, among other signs of promise, that the RA's son had inherited 'a painter's eye for description'.¹ Understandably, then, when reviewers were faced with the unenviable job of reviewing *Basil* alongside William Makepeace Thackeray's great historical novel, *The History of Henry Esmond* (published in the same month), many of them seized on what they knew about Collins's family background to draw an analogy between fiction and the fine arts. As *Bentley's Miscellany* put it at the end of 1852:

There is the same difference between them as between a picture by Hogarth and a picture by Fuseli. We had well nigh named in the place of [Collins] one of the great painters, whose names are borne by the author of *Basil* [Collins was named after his godfather, the renowned genre painter, Sir David Wilkie]. But in truth the writer of that work ought to have been called Mr. Salvator Fuseli. There is nothing either of Wilkie or Collins about it. (CH, p. 45)

This reviewer was impressed by *Basil*, but could not subdue a note of alarm at the faintly republican, or at any rate foreign, undertones in its 'intensity': its 'passionate love and deep vindictive hatred' (CH, p. 46). 'It is of the Godwin school of fiction,' he remarked meaningfully, wondering, too, at Collins's audacious relocation of the 'violent spasmodic action' of cheap lower-class magazine fiction to the ordinary everyday middle-class neighbourhoods of a society in 'an advanced stage of civilization' (CH, p. 46). There is 'something artist-like', the reviewer concluded, keeping up the analogy, even in *Basil*'s 'apparent want of art'. But not *English* artist-like: if Thackeray embodied in literature the vigour and true feeling of the English school – the tradition of anecdotal and sentimental moral subject painting descended

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from Hogarth – Collins’s first venture into a story of modern-day England was too wildly Romantic and weirdly surrealistic, too much like Salvator Rosa and Henry Fuseli, to be the work of the father’s son – or the godfather’s godson.

The argument for the un-Englishness of Collins’s art would not prove prophetic. The 1860s sensation novel, of which *Basil* was the most significant precursor, succeeded precisely because it was *so* English, trading in the secrets lying in wait behind the façade of respectable English reserve and propriety. In a long ‘Letter of Dedication’ to *Basil*, moreover (and again ten years later in the Preface to *No Name* in 1862), Collins went out of his way to explain and justify what he was trying to do in language that might almost have been used to debate Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art* (1769–90), still the bible of academic English art practice in 1852. Only by being true to the Actual, Collins contended, echoing John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (1843–60), would ‘the genuineness and value of the Ideal [be] sure to spring out of it’. Few critics of *Basil* agreed. ‘Mr. Collins, as the son of an eminent painter, should know that the proper office of Art is to elevate and purify in pleasing’, the *Athenaeum* retorted.² ‘It matters not whether the artist hold the pencil or the pen,’ intoned the *Westminster Review* in October 1853 (under the anonymous editorship of Marian Evans (George Eliot)):

the same great rules apply to both. He may simply copy nature as he sees it, and then the spectator has the pleasure proportioned to the beauty of the scene copied. He may give a noble, spirit-stirring scene . . . He may take the higher moral ground . . . or, like Hogarth, read a lesson to the idle and the dissipated. He may also paint scenes of cruelty and sensuality so gross that his picture will be turned to the wall. (CH, pp. 52–3)

Collins’s appeal to the visual arts in his ‘Letter of Dedication’ was calculated to raise these very questions of morality and ‘truth to nature’. His aim was to defend the novel’s extreme ‘realism’ – founded in the aesthetics of popular working-class radicalism and likely to be found thoroughly debased – in language (the *Westminster Review* noted) of ‘no small pretension’ (CH, p. 53). On the face of it, Collins seems to be borrowing the cultural authority of the artistic establishment, where such questions were central to definitions of high art. But there is more to it than that. The ‘Letter’ was, rather, an opportunity to declare his seriousness of purpose by associating himself not with advances in the novel (there was no authoritative aesthetics of fiction to which he could appeal: the novel was attacked and defended in terms generally borrowed from the moralised aesthetics of high culture) but with the most advanced thinking in London art circles. Collins’s model was not only Ruskin,

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but the reformist young painters who rejected the rigid orthodoxies of the Academy. These painters fell into two groups. One was a group of older artists, led by William Powell Frith and Augustus Egg, and known as 'The Clique'. They had formed in the early 1840s to set up a venue for young artists in opposition to the Academy. Emphatically populist and democratic – they believed their work should be judged by nonartists, for example – they were committed to elevating the status of genre painting over history painting: that is, anecdotal narrative pictures of everyday-life subjects (in the tradition of Wilkie or Collins) over paintings of grand historical scenes, or incidents from the Bible or classical mythology. These mild heretics were soon overshadowed by a second, more controversial, clique, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, led by William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the prodigy of the Academy Schools, John Everett Millais, with their creed of 'truth to Nature' and their adherence to the aesthetic values of the early Renaissance. Both groups were implacably opposed to each other's principles and practices, yet in the late 1840s and early 1850s they all met together at 38 Blandford Square, where Collins lived with his mother, Harriet, and his brother, Charles Allston Collins (Charley), a close associate of the Pre-Raphaelites. Over the next few years, as each group pursued its different aims, they both began to think seriously about 'the aesthetic problem for the age': the problem, identified by Martin Meisel, of having to reconcile the new glamour of a booming modern society with the old glamour of high art. Meisel continues:

the Victorian artist, working for a comprehensive audience, had a double injunction laid upon him. He found himself between an appetite for reality and a requirement for signification. Specification, individuation, autonomy of detail, and the look and feel of the thing itself pulled one way; while placement in a larger meaningful pattern, appealing to the moral sense and the understanding, pulled another.³

This was the very problem that Collins faced with *Basil*: how to find a 'larger meaningful pattern' for the representation of modern life beyond the prevailing mode of sentimental moral realism linking the mainstream middle-class novel before 1850 to the tradition of popular everyday-life subject painting still dominant under Sir Edwin Landseer and the descendants of William Hogarth. Collins was not alone in rejecting that particular strain of Wilkie and Collins that runs through Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Thackeray. But he was unique among the generation of novelists coming to prominence in the dramatically changed and changing social and economic conditions of the 1850s and 1860s – Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, Charles Kingsley, George Eliot and George Meredith. He had an unusual degree of mobility between what were, in practice, relatively

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distinct cultural networks – the London art world, the Dickens circle and its overlapping journalistic and literary circles, and the London theatrical scene – as well as an unusual degree of mobility between generally remote social classes. This multiple mobility allowed Collins to draw upon a much wider range of experiences of, and responses to, modernity than many of his English contemporaries.

Collins's life fell into three distinct phases which reflect that mobility: the years from his birth until 1851 when he lived 'very much in the society of artists' (*BCI*, 53); his triumphant middle years as a journalist and novelist (between 1851, when he met Dickens, and 1870, the year of Dickens's death); and the last two decades of his life, in which he strove to make a name for himself in the theatre. Most short accounts of Collins's life lay the stress on the middle period, because, even now, when his critical reputation is higher than ever before, he is chiefly remembered for the work of a single decade: the 1860s, when he wrote *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*. But Collins's early years in the art world were vital in laying the foundations for his successes – and failures – in the literary, journalistic and theatrical worlds. Because this phase is often passed over quickly, therefore, and because more detailed accounts of Collins's relationship with Dickens and experience in the theatre are given elsewhere in this volume, the following pages offer an interpretation of his working life framed, so to speak, by his early life among painters struggling to find an adequate expressive form for the experience of modernity.

William Wilkie Collins was born on 8 January 1824 into a relatively comfortable and happy family life. His father had struggled early in his career to establish himself as a painter. But through a combination of hard work, the tireless cultivation of rich and powerful patrons, and careful management of money, William Collins had reached a position of relative eminence by the 1830s and 1840s. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy, and left an estate of £11,000 when he died of heart disease at the age of only 58 in 1847. The young Wilkie grew up surrounded by many of the leading figures in late Romantic literary and art circles. His mother was a cousin of the Scottish painter Alexander Geddes, and his aunt, Margaret Carpenter, was a well-known portrait painter. John Constable, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Ruskin, and many others visited the family in a succession of houses in and around Marylebone and Hampstead. Collins attended day and boarding schools, where he never felt at ease, doubtless in part because he hated sports, was clumsy and, most of all, was an unusual-looking person. Even as an adult he was short (five foot three in his top-boots), with noticeably small, delicate hands and feet; and top-heavy – he had a large triangular head with an imposing bulge on his forehead