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The Subtle Art: Poison in Victorian Literature

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THE SUBTLE ART: POISON IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

By

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To Matt, with love and thanks
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ABSTRACT

“The Subtle Art: Poison in Victorian Literature” rethinks how nineteenth-century crime fiction responds to cultural perceptions about the progress of Victorian science. To this end, this project examines how authors use the poisoner—a figure who adapted empiric methodology for murderous ends—in order to explore criminal applications of cutting-edge science. Indeed, poison rapidly became labeled as the “Crime of the Age” precisely because it represented both scientific innovation and the potential for scientific abuse. The duality of poison is evocative of Jacques Derrida’s work on the pharmakon, a Greek word which simultaneously means both “remedy” and “poison.” Derrida’s theory is useful for understanding how the Victorians employed poison in their literary discourses because poison, like the pharmakon, has a slippery hybridity that collapses binary distinctions. In literature, poison acts as disrupting force that reveals deep anxieties about the scope of scientific influence in everyday life.

Derrida, of course, uses the idea of the pharmakon to discuss Western culture’s suspicion of “dangerous” writing. Since “poison” was often used as a metaphor for dangerous texts, this dissertation also uses poisonous works to reexamine the nature of Victorian writing, particularly in relation to generic change. My analysis therefore focuses on critically ignored works from authors such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Ellen Wood in order to reassess these authors’ relationship to science as well as their contributions to generic innovations in crime fiction. Thus, while revealing how authors used the poisoner to challenge the growing power and prestige of nineteenth-century science, my project also provides an alternate history of the development of Victorian crime fiction. For example, my first chapter demonstrates how deeply the male-dominated genre of Newgate fiction was indebted to an earlier tradition of women’s writing by showing how Edward Bulwer’s Lucretia (1846) revises the Romantic writer Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s work Ethel Churchill (1837). Employing similar poisoning figures, these two works engage in a critical dialogue about women, scientific education, and chemistry. Subsequent chapters continue to explore the intersections of science and chemical crimes at moments of generic transformation, revealing that crime fiction is more willing to challenge scientific authority than previously thought.
CHAPTER ONE:

POISON AND THE VICTORIANS

Those subtle poisons which made science crime,
And knowledge a temptation; could we doubt
One moment the great curse upon our world,
We must believe, to find that even good
May thus be turn’d to evil.
—Letitia Elizabeth Landon, The Venetian Bracelet

The poisoner, perhaps more than any other kind of criminal, fascinated the Victorians. In broadsheets, penny dreadfuls, newspapers, poetry, sensation stories, detective series, on the stage and even in realist novels, the Victorians actively consumed narratives about poisoners. The popularity of both real and fictional accounts of this criminal was so great that by mid-century the leading article of The Illustrated Times declared poison to be the “Crime of the Age.” The frequent appearance of these criminals in nineteenth-century texts reflects the Victorians’ belief that they were experiencing a poisoning renaissance. Most Victorians would have identified chemical murders with the intrigues of seventeenth-century Italy or France, not modern Britain; but a number of sensational crimes had convinced the public that poison was reemerging as a favored weapon. This belief was fueled by cryptic reports warning readers that “cases of undetected poisoning are of much more frequent occurrence than is generally supposed.” Even worse, unlike more brutal forms of murder, poison seemed to appeal to the “respectable classes” as well as the poor. Several shocking cases involving unlikely killers—such as middle-class Scottish maidens and independently wealthy doctors—had occurred by mid-century and were confirming fears about poison’s growing popularity.

The Victorians believed that the resurgence of chemical crimes was directly related to changes that were occurring in modern society. Certainly, new technology and advances in chemical production had allowed cheap poisons to flood the market, but the Victorians

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3 “Undetected Poisonings.” The Medical Times and Register. 15 Aug. 1871: 419.
recognized that there was a more complex interrelationship between modernity and poison. Thus, in their attempts to explain the poisoning “epidemic,” critics often found themselves theorizing about not only poison, but also Victorian society:

The crime of murder has prevailed in all ages since the fall of man. In the first instance this was effected by physical violence and the shedding of blood. The advancement of civilization has led to the discovery of other methods of effecting the object—methods less brutal and more diabolical. Murder is not now confined to cases of sudden impulse or ungovernable passion. The modern assassin adapts his expedients to the refinement of the age, bringing to his aid the appliances of science, and often masking deliberate treachery under an assumed pretence of affectionate attentions.4

As the above passage suggests, the Victorians believed that innovations in the realms of science and the expansion of cultural refinement could explain the spate of poisoning crimes. Indeed, poison was so closely tied to images of modern culture that it was thought to be “peculiarly the crime of civilization.”5 While science had given intelligent criminals a powerful new weapon for dispatching their enemies without drawing suspicion, more sophisticated tastes had made poisoning more tempting to the civilized palate. Although poisoning crimes were by no means unique to the nineteenth century, poison was thought to have qualities that made it especially attractive to the Victorian criminal imagination. The poisoner eschewed brutal, unsophisticated force for a form of murder that did not require direct confrontation or leave behind accusatory blood stains. Poisoning required no more violence than the slip of a hand; it “is murder of a quiet, unobtrusive, delicate kind, offending neither eye nor ear; murder that a lady might do with clean hands.”6 The chemical criminal could select their preferred weapon and retreat into the privacy of the home to slip the poison into food, drink, or medicine. Successfully administered, secret poison could mimic the progression of a natural disease, allowing the victim to die without raising suspicion. To the Victorians the poisoner was dangerous, yet elegant; a “civilized” criminal that could easily move within a rapidly modernizing nation. Indeed, the personal qualities that the Victorians most prized seemed to only encourage this terrible crime: “Poisoning (the word crawls from one's pen like a snake) is the prevailing style; it combines the necessities of the time—neatness, despatch, and economy—with the most egregious and unappreciated

5 “The Crime of the Age:” 64.
6 Ibid.
wickedness.” More than any other type of murderer, the Victorians believed that the poisoner represented the refinement, elegance, and sophistication of a civilized age.

As a “civilized criminal” the nineteenth-century poisoner was a product of the technological and social advances occurring during the period, and commentators were quick to equate the poisoner with the degenerative possibilities of modern society: “[w]e don’t know whether the present age may properly be called an age of ‘progress’ or not, but we think there can be no doubt that it is an age of poison.” Labeling the nineteenth century as “an age of poison” certainly calls into question whether or not the period can “be called an age of ‘progress.’” For the Victorians, then, poison was a useful tool for measuring the progress of society and culture; as Ian Burney notes, the “public discourse on poison reached out to broader contemporary concerns, stimulating reflection on the attainments and shortcomings of modern society.” While poison was often used to comment on a variety of social concerns, there was one “shortcoming” of society to which poison was particularly linked: the progress of science. If at “the heyday of Victorian scientific and medical confidence, the progress of science was equated with that of civilization,” then the scientific poisoner considerably questioned whether or not this progress was beneficial. To the Victorians, scientific advancements had transformed poisoning into “a scientific art or profession” which despite the “increased facilities of detection” still provided the criminal with “a means of eluding discovery.” Thus, the connection between science and poison evoked a complex set of fears about the progress of science. This dissertation examines how authors employed the poisoner to investigate the spread, advancement, and increasing power of Victorian science.

This argument is premised on the idea that poison was thought to be the most “scientific” of all crimes. While “the vulgar methods of the knife, the bullet, or the bludgeon” need no special training or preparation, “the [poison] bowl needs for its effective management a scientific precision of plan and a subtlety of execution.” Indeed, in order to “get away with murder” the poisoner needed a reasonable amount of scientific knowledge about poisons and their effects. The ideal poison is colorless, odorless, and tasteless, and the potential murderer needed at least a

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rudimentary knowledge of chemistry in order to choose and dispense their weapon. For example, some poisons, like prussic acid, have a bitter taste, which the clever murderer would mask by slipping them into strongly flavored beverages, such as coffee. In addition, since the best chance of avoiding detection was to administer a chemical combination that would imitate a natural illness, the poisoner needed to be familiar with the diseases of the human body and precise dosing techniques. Arsenic, if given slowly over a period of days, produced symptoms similar to those of infectious diseases like cholera and could easily fool overworked or inattentive medical men. If arsenic was given in one large dose, however, it produced a violent reaction that clearly indicated foul play. As tests for certain poisons became more reliable, poisoners also began to take into account the traces their chemicals left behind in the body. The popularity of particular chemicals, such as strychnine, in the latter half of the century attests to the poisoner’s preference for chemicals which quickly decomposed or could not be forensically identified. The assumption that poison was a scientific crime was so ingrained that even criminals who had received little scientific education, like the artist Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, were still described as employing empirical methodologies. It was widely reported that Wainewright kept “a diary in which he carefully noted the results of his terrible experiments and the methods that he adopted.” In a perverted mimicry of scientific methodology, Wainewright kept detailed records of his poisoning crimes for his future “experiments.”

Although scientifically-minded laypeople poisoned throughout the century, it was a disturbing mid-century trend which cemented the link between poison and science in the Victorian imagination: beginning in the 1850s several professional scientific men, mostly doctors, were accused of poison murders. These cases created a sensation because they touched upon deeply rooted fears about the growing professionalization and specialization of the sciences. As contemporary critics were quick to point out, no one knew more about chemicals and their effects on the body than trained chemists or doctors. These fears were fueled by writers like Dr. John Scoffern, who, in his discussion of the murderous medical man Thomas Palmer, suggested that no one was better situated to commit poisoning crimes than the scientifically educated:

Exceptional cases, doubtless, will continue to occur; and amongst the possible cases, the facilities possessed by medical men for becoming secret poisoners are too obvious for comment. Any substance, however, nauseous, or coloured, may, of course, be administered under the pretence that it is a medicine. Let us hope it will be long ere a member of the honoured profession of physic is arraigned on a similar charge to that which has aroused of late popular apprehension to so high a degree.\(^{15}\)

Despite Scoffern’s hope that much time would pass before another “member of the hounored profession of physic” was charged with poisoning, several more poisoner-doctors were accused of murder before the end of the century. These crimes seemed to confirm public suspicions that scientists were using their specialized knowledge in order to commit crime. Especially after the Arsenic Act of 1851—which placed restrictions on the public access to certain poisons—scientific men were seen as having privileged knowledge and access to dangerous chemicals. Furthermore, the public believed that advancements in chemical science had created more potent and dangerous poisons, and some commentators began to question the “blind” progress of chemical science.

Yet if science was the mechanism enabling criminal poisoning, perhaps it could also furnish a solution to the growing epidemic; indeed, the drive to create accurate tests for poison gave birth to modern forensic science. In *Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination*, Ian Burney investigates the nineteenth-century project of “revealing” the presence of poison through forensic toxicology. Unreliable lab tests for poison made catching and successfully prosecuting criminal poisoners difficult. Using the Foucauldian idea of “discipline” Burney argues that Victorian forensic toxicologists worked under the presumption that poison could only be mastered by making it “visible.” This process was important because “[t]oxicological ‘materialism’ offered refuge from lingering concerns about the shortcomings of circumstantial evidence. Through chemical demonstration, poisoning trials could more closely approximate less-problematic cases of palpable physical violence.”\(^{16}\) Thus, the forensic toxicologist’s ability to reveal the presence of poison to doctors, coroners, and juries became a form of panoptic control that allowed poisoners to be disciplined and controlled.

\(^{15}\) Scoffern, John. *The Philosophy of Common Life: Or, the Science of Health*. London: Ward and Locke, 1857: 131-2. It must be noted that Scoffern is spreading fears about his own profession, as he was also a doctor.

\(^{16}\) Burney, Ian: 82.
Forensic toxicologists, however, faced challenges in their quest for cultural authority. In order to create public confidence in the project of toxicology, poison hunters needed to create “a diffuse set of transformations through which poison might be positioned as, first and foremost, an object of scientific intervention.”\(^\text{17}\) This required scientists to separate poison from its deeply ingrained cultural context, a process Burney describes as “taming poison’s unruly past.”\(^\text{18}\) By working to demythologize poison in their public appearances and writings, toxicologists sought to demystify poison and bring it under the scope of material science—a move that would invest the toxicologist with significant cultural power. As Burney convincingly shows, the toxicologists’ project involved not only disciplining poison through scientific tests, but also through cultural narratives. The scientific community sought to control cultural representations of poison by shifting the emphasis from mythological to more scientific narratives.

Given the judicial importance of toxicology as a revealer of hidden truths, and Burney’s argument that toxicologists tried to change cultural perceptions of poison, one might expect to see toxicological figures, in the form of doctors or chemists, appearing to reveal the presence of poison in Victorian fiction. Significantly, toxicological figures are rarely employed in this manner until very late in the century, and in Victorian literature it is more common to find characters employing science for crime rather than detection. These narrative tropes suggest that up until the very end of the century literature was resistant to the project of toxicology. Burney suggests that this resistance was not entrenched but instead varied by author. Some authors, like Charles Dickens, were “largely sympathetic to the travails of toxicological expertise” and “could use the freedoms of fiction to press the case for toxicology more fervently than could its own representatives.”\(^\text{19}\) Others, such as Wilkie Collins, questioned toxicology’s cultural authority by “testifying to the unfinished work of disciplining poison.”\(^\text{20}\) This dissertation expands Burney’s limited analysis of literature to investigate just how much authors were willing to challenge the triumph of forensics and detection. As the following chapters will reveal, forensic science is often situated as not advanced enough to deal with the evolving practice of poisoning. This

\(^{17}\) Ibid: 45.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid: 175. In Chapter 3 I challenge Burney’s reading of Dickens’ relationship to forensic toxicology. While I do see Dickens’ as being “sympathetic” to the toxicological project, in that he wanted to prevent poisonings and prosecute offenders, I read Dickens as questioning the role of forensic toxicology in this process. Instead, Dickens posits other “sciences,” such as physiognomy, as more important for preventing poisonings.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid: 180.
failure is directly linked to the criminal’s own use of science, as well as the cultural perception of poison as slippery, indeterminate, and invisible.

A Theory of Poison

Despite toxicology’s project of “disciplining” poison, these chemicals had a complex association with both scientific progress and decline that was typical of the ways in which the Victorians symbolically interpreted these deadly chemicals. The necessary act of defining a chemical composition as a “poison” begins to suggest how symbolically complex and unfixed poisons were in nineteenth-century cultural narratives. Indeed, the Victorians recognized that the division between a beneficial medicine and a destructive poison was shifting and indistinct. The eminent Victorian toxicologist Alfred Swaine Taylor wrote “that it is difficult, if not impossible, to comprise in a few words an accurate description of what, in medical language, should be understood by the term ‘poison.’”  

Not only was poison difficult to define, but in many cases a potentially deleterious chemical substance could have valid and beneficial medical applications. Opiates, for example, were a valuable costive as well as one of the most effective Victorian medicines for reducing pain and inducing sleep in addition to being one of the most criminally abused drugs. The duality of Victorian poison is evocative of Jacques Derrida’s work on the pharmakon, a Greek word which simultaneously means both “remedy” and “poison.” In Plato’s Pharmacy, Derrida teases out the overlapping semiotic meanings of the pharmakon, refusing to let its meaning rest in the binary construction of “antidote” or “toxin.” For Derrida, the pharmakon has a slippery hybridity that collapses binary distinctions; or in his words, “[t]his pharmakon, this ‘medicine,’ this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of discourse with all its ambivalence.”

Derrida’s notion of the pharmakon is useful for theorizing how the Victorians employed poison in their literary and cultural discourses because, like the pharmakon, poison was “[a]pprehended as a blend and impurity,” which “acts like an aggressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity and security.” Victorian poison, then, is best defined not by its chemical composition, but by its

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23 Ibid: 128.
power to invade, react with, and transform the body. Yet, as Derrida reminds us, poison not only illustrates how bodies can be corrupted, but it also demonstrates that these bodies were never discrete or stable to begin with: “if the pharmakon is ‘ambivalent,’ it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that link them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.).”

Taking Derrida’s ideas into consideration, it is unsurprising that poison often surfaces in fictional assaults on some of the Victorians’ most cherished binary oppositions—male/female; private/public; innocence/guilt; English/foreign—revealing the internal contradictions of these terms. As a symbol of dangerous hybridity, then, poison not only threatens the purity of the individual body but also breaks into various facets of the social “body,” disrupting seemingly stable cultural constructions. Thus, while authors used poison to add sensation or mystery to their plots, they also used poison’s indeterminacy as a metaphor for larger social instabilities, such as the progress of science. This study, then, is not only informed by Derrida but also by critics such as Mary Poovey, who have explored the “uneven developments” of Victorian ideologies. I read Victorian poison as another tool to show how Victorian ideologies about science and crime “were contested and under construction” and “always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formulations.”

In fiction, the figure of the poisoner shared the disruptive characteristics of their chemical weapons. Again, Derrida’s work in Plato’s Pharmacy becomes a useful tool for interpreting this Victorian symbol for, as he notes, the term pharmakeus, like the pharmakon, has a multiplicity of meanings including “a magician? a sorcerer? even a poisoner?”

For the Victorians, the poisoner (like poison itself) was not a stable referent, but rather an ever-shifting figure that absorbed and reflected pressing social anxieties. The fictional poisoner appears in a number of guises—such as the middle-class wife or the socially mobile doctor—that were of particular Victorian concern, and authors used these various poisonous permutations in order to explore sites of cultural contestation. In addition, since “poison inscribed the bodies of both poisoner and victim with a dangerous sense of receptivity to infiltration,” not only was the identity of the

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24 Ibid: 127.
26 Derrida, Jacques: 117.
poisoner fluid, but the identity of the victim could become unstable as well. Franklin Blake’s fraught relationship to criminal identity in Wilkie Collins’s novel *The Moonstone* illustrates how poison disrupts the production of identity. After Dr. Candy surreptitiously “poisons” Blake with opium, Blake steals the titular diamond in a drug-induced trance. In the novel, Blake’s perception of himself comes into direct conflict with the way other characters—such as Rachel Verinder—view him; during the course of the narrative he has to come to terms with the disturbing notion that he is, in fact, a thief. As *The Moonstone* demonstrates, poisonous texts often deal with fraught issues of identity and personal representation, underscoring how science contributed to the increasing depersonalization and inscrutability of the modern world.

**“Arsenical Literature” and Generic Innovation**

Derrida primarily uses the idea of the *pharmakon* to discuss the nature of writing in Western culture, noting that philosophy has long privileged speech over writing. This philosophical bias is based on the belief that speech offers immediacy and truth, while writing results in confusion, loss of meaning, and an erosion of the memory. Derrida, however, reveals the ideological instability inherent in this mindset when he illustrates that philosophy is just as reliant on writing as it is on speech. As a society built on the tenets of Western philosophy, the Victorians inherited this fraught relationship to writing. While the advances in literacy and printing technologies heralded the progress of society, the Victorians also believed that writing could be “poisonous.” The persistent debates over the supposed “dangers” of reading crime fiction perhaps best illustrate Victorian anxieties about writing. Throughout the century, public interest in so-called “Arsenical literature”—comprised of Newgate, sensation, and detective fictions—was a source of acute concern.

The source of this concern was the notion that the boundaries of literature and other writing, like the *pharmakon*, were fluid. For example, Victorian fiction (and crime literature in particular) often turned to real-life events, such as court cases, for inspiration—a move which blurred the distinctions between fiction and reality. Even worse, the Victorians recognized that

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28 For an extended reading of poison and Blake’s unconscious crime, see chapter 5.
literature not only absorbed influences but could also disseminate (sometimes dangerous) ideas. Again, crime literature was deemed especially worrisome, and the critical outcry against Edward Bulwer’s Newgate novel *Lucretia, or The Children of Night*, is a fine example of Victorian anxieties about the power of literature to corrupt its readers. In Bulwer’s novel (which was inspired by the real-life crimes of Thomas Wainewright) the titular heroine poisons several people, including her husband and niece.\(^{30}\) Lucretia’s imagination is first tempted by poisonous thoughts after she reads a historical text about:

\[ \ldots \] that singular epoch of terror in Italy, when some mysterious disease, varying in a thousand symptoms, baffled all remedy, and long defied all conjecture—a disease attacking chiefly the heads of families, father and husband—rarely women. In one city, seven hundred husbands perished, but not one wife! The disease was poison. \([\ldots]\) Startling were the details given in the work; the anecdotes, the histories, the astonishing craft brought daily to bear on the victim, the wondrous perfidy of the subtle means, the variation of the certain murder—here swift as epilepsy—there slow and wasting as long decline:—the lecture was absorbing; and absorbed in the book Lucretia still was, when she heard Dalibard's voice behind; he was looking over her shoulder.\(^{31}\)

That Lucretia feels a guilty pleasure in reading this passage is evident by her startled and embarrassed reaction when she realizes Dalibard has been watching her read. He cryptically warns her “*Enfan, play not with such weapons,*”\(^ {32}\) but the passage, which details a plan for getting away with murder, nonetheless becomes deeply impressed on her imagination. Years later, Lucretia will reproduce the story of the Italian poisoners when she uses knowledge gleaned from this book to slowly poison her husband. Furthermore, the “revolutionary” aspect of the text, which illustrates that women have freed themselves from domestic tyrant-husbands, further incites Lucretia to commit murder.\(^ {33}\)

Despite Bulwer’s suggestion that certain kinds of literature can become “weapons” in the hands of morally dubious readers, he was shocked and mortified by reviews of *Lucretia* that declared the novel to be a poisonous text. Many critics found *Lucretia* to be “in two senses \([\ldots]\) busy with poison,” since it both dealt with poisoning on a textual level and became a poisonous

\(^{30}\) In the revised versions of the story, Lucretia’s niece survives.


\(^{32}\) Ibid: 196.

\(^{33}\) For an extended reading of this novel, see chapter 2.
influence on a metatexual one. A typical reaction to the novel declared that “the extremely suggestive character and peculiarly dangerous tendency of these works [. . .] has, in many recent instances, been the result of the clear, though indirect, lessons which the literature of the day too amply afford to the weak and the criminal.” Here, the reviewer directly charges Newgate fiction with inspiring real-life crime. Another reviewer noted that a novel reflecting such horrific criminal scenes could not possibly contain enough moralizing to discourage potential criminals:

[. . .] there have been poisoners among us within the last seventeen years, which nobody can doubt; but is such a fact characteristic of the age?—and whether characteristic or not, what useful end can be answered by first feeding the fancy with such ideas and then counteracting their tendency, or attempting to do so, by the profound moral, that if the reader should seek to poison his nearest relatives to get at their property, he may possibly end his days in a madhouse, or find himself chained to a grave stealer in Norfolk Island?

Bulwer was so upset at these negative reviews of *Lucretia* that he responded in a pamphlet entitled “A Word to the Public.” In this text, Bulwer attempts to justify his works by situating them within a long tradition of literary portrayals of crime. Moreover, he argues that since crime is everywhere in real-life, fiction can become a deterrent because it “demonstrate[s] its causes, portray[s] its hideousness, and insist[s] on its inevitable doom.”

In the attacks on *Lucretia* and Bulwer’s response to them, we can see the conception of literature as type of pharmakon which both causes and remedies criminal violence playing out in Victorian culture. As the century progressed and new genres of crime fiction arose, these debates about the nature of literature only became more urgent. This is especially apparent with the rise of sensational literatures at mid-century. Echoing earlier critics, commentators on the sensational genre often labeled this fiction “noxious”—especially since sensation fiction was thought (like poison) to facilitate somatic transformation. Sensation fiction, after all, got its

38 For more on Victorian critical responses to sensation fiction, see Patrick Brantlinger’s *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* or Deborah Wynne’s *The Sensation Novel and the Family Magazine.*
name from the bodily “sensations” experienced by its readers, and critics worried about the other things that could be transmitted through these powerful texts. In a review that outlined the dangers of sensation fiction, Henry Mansel declared the genre to be a “poison” which provoked a dangerous “morbid excitement” in its readers. 40 This morbidity was especially connected to sensation’s domestication of crime: “we feel but a feeble interest in an authentic record of the crimes of a Borgia or Brinvilliers [two historical poisoners]; but we are thrilled to horror, even in fiction, by the thought that such things may be going on around us and among us.” 41 In a defense of the sensation novel, however, George Augustus Sala declares that the genre is important precisely because it does not obscure the reality of domestic problems. Noting that readers find the same sensational material in newspapers, he writes “we men and women who live in the world, and have, many of us, lived pretty hard lives too, want novels about That which Is, and not about That which Was and never Will be.” 42 As Sala suggests, sensation novels played an important role in helping the Victorians to reassess some of their most cherished assumptions about the home and women’s role in society. Indeed, as critics have noted, sensation novels often prompted political and social change—a fact that Victorian authors used to validate the genre’s production and consumption by the nineteenth-century public.

As these reactions to both Newgate and sensation fiction show, the Victorians were continually probing the cultural value of literature. The result is that writing in the nineteenth-century was often situated as pharmakon which could potentially provoke and/or deter crime. As the debates about Newgate and sensation novels show, concerns about the “poisonous” potential of literature often erupted at times of literary innovation. Thus, since the use of “poison” as a metaphor for dangerous texts was so prevalent in Victorian culture, this dissertation also uses poisonous works to reexamine the nature of Victorian writing, particularly in relation to generic change. After all, the pharmakon is a “seduction” that “makes one stray from one’s general, natural, habitual paths and laws,” and in Victorian fiction, the appearance of textual poison almost always signals a straying from generic tradition. 43 Ian Burney has documented this phenomenon within Victorian toxicological writings, illustrating how

40 Mansel, Henry. “Sensation Novels.” The Quarterly Review. 113 (1863): 486; 482.
41 Ibid: 489.
43 Derrida: 70.
sensational discourses bled into “scientific” treatises on the nature of poisons. In Victorian fiction, the poisons and poisoners are often found at sites of literary innovation or generic exploration. Since the poisoned text is notoriously hybrid, this dissertation charts the development of the literary poisoner through the various genres of Victorian literary fiction—such as realistic, Newgate, sensation, and detective fictions—and reexamines some of the ways that contemporary criticism has constructed Victorian genres.

Thus, the chapters that follow are organized not only around the themes of science and crime, but also by time period and genre. My close examination of poison texts begins with Chapter Two, which investigates transgressive femininity and scientific education in Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s Ethel Churchill and Edward Bulwer’s Newgate novel Lucretia; Or, The Children of Night. Both of these novels focus on intelligent, beautiful heroines who eventually employ their scientific knowledge and training to commit poisoning crimes. In examining how education contributes to the formation of the criminal, these novels critique programs of education that encourage women to participate in the “masculine” realm of scientific knowledge. In addition, placing these two novels into a critical conversation reveals the cross-pollination that occurred between Silver Fork fiction—a genre of literature that commonly dealt with the flippant and extravagant lives of the aristocracy—and the early nineteenth-century crime genre Newgate fiction. Although Silver Fork novels are not included in historiographies of crime fiction, an examination of the poisoning in Ethel Churchill suggests that Silver Fork fiction was influential in the development of early Victorian crime literature. Furthermore, Bulwer’s revisioning of Ethel Churchill for his Newgate novel Lucretia demonstrates how deeply this novel was indebted to this female literary tradition of Silver Fork fiction. As many critics have pointed out, Newgate fiction was dominated by male writers and depictions of male criminals, and Lucretia has been presented as a generic oddity because it focuses on the poisoning crimes of the titular heroine. Thus, Bulwer engages in a long tradition of subversive and feminist “poison discourses” that situate poison as a means for female empowerment. An examination of Ethel Churchill and Lucretia not only reveals that Newgate fiction was influenced by traditionally female literary forms, but also demonstrates that both Silver Fork and Newgate fiction were specifically involved in cultural discussions about the relationship between women, science, education, and crime.

Critics have characterized realism’s incorporation of sensational motifs as a largely begrudging move on the part of realistic authors to adapt to new literary tastes. Thus, most critics situate realism’s shift to more sensational modes as occurring only after the popularity of sensation fiction had been firmly established. Chapter Three offers an examination of two short works by realist authors George Eliot and Charles Dickens to show that writers of realism were much more engaged with the formation of sensation fiction than has been previously assumed. Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” and Dickens’s short story “Hunted Down” were both published in 1859—the year of sensation fiction’s conception—and their use of secret, domestic poisoners shows how Eliot and Dickens anticipated some of the major concerns of sensation fiction, such as anxieties about identity and the security of the domestic sphere. Furthermore, these two works feature poisoners who in many ways subvert conventional modes of detection. At mid-century, there were a series of high-profile and sensationalized poisonings committed by seemingly respectable middle-class men and women. These poisoners represented a frightening form of “invisibility” because they appeared “normal” and therefore could not be easily coded as criminal. Close physiognomic readings promised to combat these invisible poisoners, and both “The Lifted Veil” and “Hunted Down” test the efficacy of physiognomic frameworks in identifying these deceptive criminals. While the narrator of “Hunted Down” declares the absolute power of physiognomy to identify the poisoner, the text also suggests how easily disguise and deception can undermine these readings. “The Lifted Veil” reaches a similar conclusion when Latimer’s clairvoyance (which metaphorically represents the power of physiognomy to identify character) fails to protect him from the criminal plots of his wife Bertha.

Chapter Four, “Medical Bluebeards: The Poisoning Doctor and Gothic Medicine in the Sensational Fiction of Ellen Wood” investigates the fraught relationship between sensation fiction and Victorian medicine. This chapter argues that in Wood’s two works, Lord Oakburn’s Daughters and “Mr. Castonel,” she incorporates the medical gothic through the figure of the poisoning doctor. In doing so, she critiques many aspects of mid-century medical science—particularly in relation to women. By structuring her texts around the gothic fairytale “Bluebeard,” Wood underscores the dangers mid-century medicine posed to the Victorian home. In the works of other sensational authors, like Wilkie Collins, doctors poison other men for the sake of complex financial schemes, but the criminal medical men of Wood’s fiction are indeed
Bluebeards who bring their poisons into the home in order to murder their wives. Wood, however, is not just content to point out the problems of the medical field’s relationship to women and the home. Particularly in her later work, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*, Wood features female characters who subvert dangerous or immoral medical practitioners in order to assert their management of the home—a move which both distinguishes her work from other sensational writers and further illuminates her texts’ reaction to medical authority.

The final chapter, “Hypnotic Poison: Forensic Science and Unconscious Crime in Adams’s *The Notting Hill Mystery* and Collins’s *The Moonstone,*” examines the prevalence of poison in early detective fiction. Beginning with an examination of *The Notting Hill Mystery*—a novel by Charles Warren Adams that has a claim to the title of first detective novel in the English language—this chapter illuminates how early detective fiction employed the “unruly” body in order to challenge forensic detection. Modern forensic science has its basis in the standardized body; in other words, forensic scientists work under the assumption that all bodies essentially function in the same way. *The Notting Hill Mystery* and *The Moonstone*, however, employ poison to expose unruly bodies that cannot be accurately “read” by forensic science or medicine. These unruly bodies significantly disrupt these novels’ projects of detection and demonstrate how much early detection fiction questioned the ability of forensic science to deal with the strange and unusual.

**Criminals, Detection, and the Progress of Science**

As the chapter summaries indicate, this project accomplishes its goal of studying the intersections of science, crime, and generic hybridity, in part, by moving the critical focus back onto the *criminal* and away from the detective—a figure that has overwhelmingly dominated both genre studies of Victorian crime fiction and analyses of the interrelationship between nineteenth-century science and crime. Although individual studies of specific crime genres, such as Newgate or sensational fiction, have often focused on the importance of changing criminal representations, when charting the “big picture” of nineteenth-century crime fiction, critics have consistently woven a tale about the emergence and rise of detective fiction. The detective is so “central to the accepted developmental narrative of crime fiction” that much nineteenth-century
criticism uses the term “crime fiction” synonymously for “detective fiction.” The critical importance of the detective in determining generic change is illustrated by the tendency of critics to divide crime fiction into three phases: the pre-detection literature of the early nineteenth-century, the emergent detective stories developing at mid-century, and the legitimization of detective fiction as a popular literary movement that has its epitome in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series. Science, of course, plays a large part in this legitimization of the literary detective, and critics have identified a causal link between the rise of the detective and this figure’s increasing reliance on science or scientific methodology. Thus, the triumph of the detective has also been read as the legitimization of (particularly forensic) science. This approach presents a progressive account of Victorian crime literature, which charts the trajectory of nineteenth-century crime fiction as aimed teleologically towards a scientized detective form.

This way of viewing nineteenth-century crime fiction has resulted in an emphasis on the figure of the detective, who exemplifies “the emergence of the intellectual professions as new repositories of social power.” Following D.A. Miller, who argued for “a radical entanglement between the nature of the novel and the practice of the police” and explored how the novel “systematically participate[s] in a general economy of policing power,” subsequent critics have fleshed-out the detective as the representative figure of disciplinary power. In order to figure the detective as a disciplinary power, many studies have linked the detective and the rise of professional science; even a brief overview of this criticism will demonstrate the predominance of the detective to scholarship on Victorian crime fiction. Ronald R. Thomas’s book *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* examines detective fiction in conjunction with the growth of forensic science and the professionalism of the police. More recently, Heather Worthington’s *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* argues that detective fiction is highly influenced by the medical case study, and her work charts the rise of the disciplinary professional detective figure. Even Maurizio Ascari’s *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction* does not deviate from a focus on the detective; his ‘counter-history’ works more to fill in critical gaps than to provide a truly divergent history of crime fiction. With this persistent focus on the detective, critics have neglected an important aspect of nineteenth-century

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crime fiction: the development of crime and the criminal. As Steven Knight points out, “there are plenty of crime novels . . . without a detective and nearly as many without even a mystery,” but there is “always a crime.” 48 The literary detective’s increasing reliance on science is mirrored by fictional accounts of criminals who are intelligent, sophisticated, professional, and scientifically minded. Yet critics seem to have forgotten that early authors of crime fiction “invented the fine art of detection as a counterpart to the fine art of murder.” 49

This focus on the detective’s relationship with science has occluded how the fictional offender adapted scientific methodology, technology, and knowledge in the commission of crimes. Just as literary detectives (such as Sherlock Holmes) were adapting science in the form of forensics, fingerprinting, and criminal anthropology to deter and solve crime, their antagonists also turned to cutting-edge science to avoid detection. After all, Holmes’ greatest nemesis was Professor Moriarty, and Doyle recognized that in order for an adversary to be truly challenging to Holmes’ extraordinary capabilities, the criminal would have to be endowed with above average scientific aptitude:

[Moriarty] is a man of good birth and excellent education, endowed by Nature with a phenomenal mathematical faculty [. . .] But the man had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers. 50

Note that while Doyle resorts to commonly held beliefs about the origins of criminality—Moriarty’s “hereditary tendencies” to crime—there is also a causal link between Moriarty’s intelligence and his criminal activities. The professor’s “extraordinary mental powers” exacerbate, not abate, his inherited criminality. Of course, Doyle is writing at the end of the century, when the appearance of scientific criminals in fiction had already become commonplace. This dissertation, however, focuses on the development of this association earlier in the century by focusing on the literary figure of the poisoner and how authors link this figure to criminal applications of science.

Crime and the Progress of Science

Science’s association with criminal, occult, or immoral activity was not unique to the Victorians, but has a long tradition in British literature and culture. Several important examples include Geoffrey Chaucer’s “puffers”—scientists who greedily probe Nature’s secrets for material gain—and Christopher Marlowe’s tormented Dr. Faustus.51 Yet most critics agree that the dark potential of science was not crystallized in the popular imagination until Mary Shelley’s nineteenth-century novel Frankenstein.52 Shelley’s tale of a scientist obsessed with his morally dubious project of creating artificial life raised anxieties about the power of the modern laboratory. Although it is usually linked to critical developments in the genres of science fiction or the gothic, the publication of Frankenstein was also an important influence on Victorian crime fiction. Just as Victor Frankenstein gave birth to his monster, his characterization as a criminalized scientist gave birth to a multitude of literary offspring.

There were specific changes occurring in nineteenth-century science that made figures like Victor Frankenstein and his literary descendants possible. After all, if the “increase in the prestige and authority of science” was not “the central intellectual event of the Victorian period,” then Frankensteinian figures would not have been so popular or culturally necessary.53 Very simply, science was the subject of so much anxiety because it was playing an increased role in public life. The Victorians could not ignore science or its effects; it literally enveloped modern life. Scientific and technological innovations had given the Victorians steam-powered trains, the telegraph, photography, typewriter, and electric lighting. Meanwhile, medical improvements like smallpox vaccination, germ theory, and antiseptic sterilization had led to increased life expectancies.

If science had improved the overall health and quality of life in Britain, then why did it come under so much cultural suspicion? The answer lies, in part, in the growing professionalization and specialization of science that occurred during the century. Since the beginning of the period, science had expanded and proliferated at an unprecedented rate. There was a “tidal wave of fresh observational and experimental knowledge” that demanded the

creation of new branches of science, such as seismology and embryology.\textsuperscript{54} As the sciences became more specialized, they also became less accessible to a general audience. At the beginning of the century, most educated laypeople could expect to understand the concepts of even the most cutting-edge science.\textsuperscript{55} But by the second half of the century this was changing, in large part because of the increased professionalization of science. Science soon became the province of specialized experts, who created a tight-knit community of fellow professionals. Trading their heavily jargoned findings in specialty journals, these scientists soon distanced themselves from the general public.\textsuperscript{56}

The mystification of science had a profound effect on the public’s perception of the scientist and his experiments. As Martin Willis notes, “Although the professionalization of science was not simply a regression into earlier modes of operation, it did make equivocal science’s moral and cultural position at the close of the century.”\textsuperscript{57} Part of science’s troubling relationship to morality stemmed from new theories that challenged Judeo-Christian belief systems. Darwin’s work on evolution is the most famous example of this cultural rift, but earlier theories, such as Charles Lyell’s idea of uniformitarianism, which upset the timeline of the Earth’s creation outlined in the Bible, had confronted these issues as well. In addition, many Victorians distrusted science because the laboratory was no longer transparent to the public; instead it had become a site that was shrouded in mystery. This caused many lay-people to begin to question the methods of experimenters, and even to demand regulation of the laboratory. The anti-vivisection debates in the second half of the century are a fine example of negative public feeling towards scientific experimentation that supposedly led to progress. Vivisection was the practice of dissecting live animals in order to study first-hand the processes of life, and many scientists provided no anesthesia or pain alleviation to their subjects. This horrified many Victorians, and vivisection “was increasingly represented as a typical example of the excesses of scientific materialism.”\textsuperscript{58} Many critics of the practice called for greater regulation of vivisection, which was met with varying degrees of resistance by the scientific establishment. Thus, since it was veiled in mystery and hidden from the public eye, fears about Victorian science quickly

\textsuperscript{55} Chappel: 7.
\textsuperscript{56} Willis, Martin. \textit{Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines: Science Fiction and the Culture of Science in the Nineteenth-Century}. Kent, OH: Kent S UP, 2006: 8.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid: 9.
coalesced around the image of the laboratory; in addition to fears about the abuse of scientific subjects, fears also arose that the laboratory was incubating scientific discoveries that would give the scientist unlimited power. In *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins maps these anxieties about science onto his arch-criminal Count Fosco, who celebrates the power science gives to the criminally-minded:

> Chemistry, especially, has always had irresistible attraction for me, from the enormous, the illimitable power which the knowledge of it confers. Chemists, I asset it emphatically, might sway, if they pleased, the destinies of humanity. Let me explain this before I go further. Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body. The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of all potentates—the Chemist.  

As Fosco suggests, the Victorians were beginning to see science as a force that could shift “the destinies of humanity.” Chemistry, in particular, was closely associated with the power of life and death, and seemingly offered a multitude of opportunities to the educated criminal. In many respects, the ways nineteenth-century authors imagined criminal or military applications of chemistry is eerily prescient. In Richard Marsh’s novel *The Beetle*, for instance, the scientist Sydney Atherton has created a type of poison gas bomb that could kill “a hundred thousand men” in an instant. His description of the potential uses for “Atherton’s Magic Vapour” predicts the use of mustard gas in the first World War. For many Victorians, then, Fosco’s assertion that humanity was “at the mercy” of chemists, doctors, and other scientists was all too accurate.

From these misgivings about the progress of science came a line of literary figures that yoked the scientific with the criminal. These figures include both criminal scientists as well as offenders who employ scientific methods and knowledge to commit crimes. When developing their criminal characters, authors were responding to these changing perceptions of scientific fields. In the beginning of the century, for example, fictional poisoners are more likely to be presented as laypeople, albeit with strong scientific understanding. As the century progressed, and science became more specialized (and therefore more inaccessible to the general public)

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literary criminals also became more specialized professionals; this dissertation charts this progress from scientific criminal to criminal scientist. While the former figure embodies fears about the spread of scientific knowledge and the potential employment of science in the commission of everyday crime, the latter represents the perceived corruption, greed, and growing power of scientists.

**The Victorians and Poison**

In the creation of their fictional poisoners, Victorian authors also drew from rich literary and historical traditions that had long been in cultural circulation. The fictional poisoner was an imaginative creation developed out of both cultural mythologies and earlier popularized criminal figures. The central figures of pre-Victorian poison narratives shared characteristics that would have been easily recognizable to a nineteenth-century audience, and the Victorians inherited fictional poisoners which they adapted for their own purposes. In order to position the specific character of the Victorian poisoner within and against these earlier accounts, it is useful to define these traditions. In these narratives, it is possible to identify several of the major themes that will come to dominate tropes of the Victorian poisoner.

Like the cultures that came before them, the Victorians were heavily influenced by mythological representations of poisoners. As a society dominated by Christian belief, the Victorians could look to the Biblical Eve as the “original” poisoner of both Adam and mankind. In taking the “poisoned” fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and giving it to Adam, Eve inadvertently brought sin and suffering into the world. Eve is an important figure in nineteenth-century conceptions of poison because she represents the association between poison and forbidden knowledge in addition to demonstrating how individual crimes have larger societal consequences. These themes are also found in another influential tradition: Greek and Roman mythologies. As the son of the Greek god of knowledge, and as a god of medicine himself, Asclepius was associated with poisonous snakes which signifying the dual nature of medicines to both heal and to harm. He certainly represents the link between dangerous chemicals and

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61 The rod of Asclepius, featuring a single snake wound around a staff, is still used a symbol for the medical profession.
knowledge of the body, and begins an association between doctors and poisoning that would become especially prevalent in the nineteenth century.

A figure more explicitly associated with snakes is the legendary half-serpent, half-woman Lamia. In the original Greek, the Lamia is indeed poisonous; enraged at the murder of her own children, she envenoms and devours the sons and daughters of mankind. The poet John Keats’ treatment of the Lamia myth is probably the most famous in nineteenth-century literature, and in his interpretation the Lamia is not a child-killer but a woman trapped in snake’s body. Although well versed in potions and transformative magic, Keats’ Lamia is not an overtly poisonous figure. As we shall see, however, Keats’ version of the Lamia myth is unusual for nineteenth-century Britain. Far more often snake-women (like Sheridan Le Fanu’s Carmilla) will be unambiguously evil. Other figures associated with poison—such as Lucia and Livia, Medea, and Circe—more clearly represent the criminal aspects of poison. All four of these women are mistresses of magical potions and use them for various (and often nefarious) purposes. Again, the duality of the chemicals is highlighted; Medea, for example, uses her arts to help Jason win the Golden Fleece but then uses her occult knowledge to poison the wife who has usurped her.

As symbols of female power, magic, and poison, Medea and Circe were often the favored subjects of Victorian art. The Pre-Raphaelites were particularly attracted by the psychological complexity of these mythological women, as evidenced by John William Waterhouse’s two works Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus and Jason and Medea, as well as Frederick Sandys’ striking painting Medea.

The Victorians inherited a literary tradition that linked poison and women. Indeed, in the nineteenth-century perhaps the most feared (and most sensationalized) criminal was the female poisoner. From the mid-century trial of Madeleine Smith to Florence Maybrick’s 1889 conviction for murder, the Victorian press was dominated by a succession of women accused of murder by poison. While much of the Victorian anxiety about poison centered on domestic poisonings perpetrated by women, historians have shown that female poisoners did not significantly outnumber their male counterparts. But when women did choose to commit murder, poison was often the weapon of choice. This led to a widespread belief that women, by nature, were more prone to the temptations of poison than men:

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Awful as the assertion seems, it is a positive fact that poisoning has a far stronger fascination for women than it has for men. Women, whom we invest with softer hearts and more gentle feelings than the other sex, have more frequently committed this especial crime with an appalling sang-froid, which has without a doubt tended to elude all suspicion.\textsuperscript{63}

As this passage suggests, poisoning was attractive to women for a variety of reasons. First, poison is not as visibly brutal as other forms of murder (such as bludgeoning), making it both easier to hide and more palatable for those with “softer hearts.” Secondly, poison relies on cunning more than strength, making it accessible even to the “weaker sex.” And thirdly, poison is by far the most domestic of crimes, as deadly chemicals are often hidden in food, drink, or medicine. Of course, these stereotypes about female criminals were not a Victorian invention, but stemmed from a long and complex cultural history. As Margaret Hallissy argues, “writers using the image [of the female poisoner] are allusive, highly conscious of their antecedents in mythology and earlier literature, so no work can be seen in isolation from what has gone before.”\textsuperscript{64} The Victorians drew extensively from mythology to help characterize their female poisoners, but they were also more willing to draw inspiration from historical poisoners than their predecessors. Thus, this examination of poisoners will now shift to the historical figures which the Victorians most frequently referenced, often drawing parallels between these criminals and contemporary murderers.

Histories of murder often highlighted the cyclic popularity of poison, and this crime was thought to have gone through several periods where it was especially popular. These poison epochs often coincide with surges in cultural refinement or technological innovation: “Poisoning is not a modern invention; nor is an advanced civilization, or some acquaintance with science, in any degree essential to a perfect familiarity with many of the most potent and malignant poisons.”\textsuperscript{65} Victorian historical accounts of poisonings thus overwhelmingly focus on a few specific clusters of time when Western society was perceived to be particularly advanced or “civilized.” Unsurprisingly, then, the first civilizations to produce cunning poisoners were ancient Greece and Rome. “Poisons and their use were familiar to the ancients” for a variety of purposes, but the use of deadly chemicals as “State poisons” is especially highlighted in

\textsuperscript{63} Fraser, Mrs. Alexander. “A Little About Poisons and Poisoners.” Belgravia. 70.278 (1889): 198-9.
nineteenth century accounts. Socrates’s execution by hemlock is the most well-known example of a chemical being used for a state-sanctioned punishment in ancient times. Later Roman emperors would also use poison for state purposes—often to secure their power through selective murders. Nero’s murder of his step-brother Britannicus is a frequently cited example. Using the services of the “well known sorceress” Locusta, Nero had Britannicus poisoned in order to secure the throne for himself.

The most famous ancient poisoner, however, and the one that became the most mythologized, certainly was Cleopatra. As Piya Pal-Lapinski notes, “Exoticism, luxury, political authority, erotic power, and poison—these all converged in the body of Cleopatra,” and in the nineteenth century this figure became synonymous with a frightening form of female depravity. There are numerous references to Cleopatra in nineteenth-century art and literature, often emphasizing her association with poison. One of the best known is the French artist Alexandre Cabanel’s painting Cleopatra Testing Poisons on Condemned Prisoners, which features a seductive Cleopatra nonchalantly witnessing the death of several men. Cabanel’s interpretation of Cleopatra makes obvious links between sex and poison; indeed, in the nineteenth century poisoning crimes are often found alongside—or believed to be the product of—illicit sexual encounters. A fine example is the trial of Madeleine Smith, a young unmarried woman from a wealthy family who was accused of murdering her lower-class lover Emile L’Angelier. During the trial Smith’s racy letters to L’Angelier were revealed, suggesting that she used her lover to satisfy her sexual urges and then disposed of him when she received a good offer of marriage.

Along with a revitalization of art, science, and technology, the Victorians also viewed sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy as a time when potent forms of murder were revived from the past: “As Italy was the spot where the arts first started from their long sleep into beauty and life, so do we find the noxious art of poisoning adopting the same land as the scene of its resuscitation.” The “art” of the Renaissance, therefore, included a renewal of the “art” of poisoning and the Borgias, Giulia Toffana, and La Spara, were its finest practitioners. Like their Roman predecessors, the Borgias often used poison as a political tool to condense their power, killing enemies that threatened the family’s power and status. Although Cesare Borgia cut a

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66 Ibid.
68 Pal-Lapinski: 44.
terrifying figure, it is the alleged poisonings of his sister Lucretia that particularly fascinated the Victorians. Lucretia’s crimes were never substantiated, but as a beautiful and powerful woman who married (and supposedly murdered) a succession of men, the Victorians had little qualms about linking her to both criminal and immoral sexual activity. Indeed, the Victorians directly connected Lucretia’s alleged incestuous relationship with Cesare to several poisonings that were supposedly undertaken to protect her reputation. A typical description of Lucretia situates her as a femme fatale whose innocent beauty masked a hideously corrupt soul: “Her manners were polished and fascinating in the highest degree; but her conduct was licentious in the extreme, and her imagination teeming with prurient and impure ideas.”

Although some historians, such as Ferdinand Gregorovius, tried to save Lucretia’s reputation and correct the exaggerated history, she nonetheless became synonymous with poisoning crimes, particularly those which had an element of sexual impropriety. Plays, operas, novels, and historical accounts of Lucretia frequently appeared throughout the century; from novels such as Bulwer’s *Lucretia* and Francis Paget’s *Lucretia or the Heroine of the Nineteenth-Century*, which used the myths about Lucretia to characterize their villainesses, to Victor Hugo’s play *Lucrèce Borgia* and the opera it inspired—Gaetano Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia*—Lucretia’s story had become deeply ingrained the Victorian imagination.

Despite the Victorians’ preference for narratives about Lucretia, renaissance Italy spawned several other historically important poisoners. Nineteenth-century commentators agreed that new advancements in science had led to an increase in poison and that by the sixteenth century “alchemy was cultivated as much with the object of discovering venomous drugs as for the philosopher’s stone.” Gulia Toffana and her disciple La Spara are perhaps the historical figures most closely associated with the science of poison through their development of the potent drug *Aqua della Toffana*. Although a few reports suggested far-fetched ingredients, such as “the saliva of a human being driven almost crazy by continuous tickling of the soles of the feet” and “the foam on a rabid dog’s tongue,” the majority of Victorian commentators believed that Toffana relied on a tasteless preparation of crystallized arsenic. The nineteenth-century fascination with identifying the exact chemical composition of historical

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74 The Victorians spelled “Toffana” in a multitude of ways, including “Tofana,” “Tufania,” and “Tophania.”
75 Fraser, Mrs. Alexander: 199; “Poisons and Slow Poisoners: Tophania.” 119.
poisons is significant because the Victorians largely separated poison from its associations with witchcraft and sorcery. Although Victorian fiction often features “lost” poison recipes, which are rediscovered through “occult” sciences like alchemy, even these depictions have a realistic basis grounded in chemistry. Margaret Hallissy argues that before the twentieth century “the image of poison is surrounded by magical and mystery, enshrouded in medical ignorance” but this dissertation shows that poison had been divorced from magic much earlier, and that the nineteenth-century presented both male and female poisoners that relied on empirical science, not sorcery.76

Whatever the composition of Toffania’s creation, both the poison and its method of distribution were highly effective. Toffana and Spara would bottle and dispense these chemicals mixtures under the pretext that they were religious relics, disguising the poisons by labeling it as the Manna of St. Nicholas of Barri. Roman housewives who had tired of their husbands flocked to these two women by the hundreds, and Rome was besieged with a strange epidemic that singled out “the strong, the noble, and the young” men of the city.77 Eventually, government officials penetrated this confederacy of female poisoners and both Toffana and La Spara were executed. The Victorian interest in the crimes of Toffana and La Spara perhaps stem from a series of similar crimes occurring in 1847. In Clavering, a rural town in Essex, several women were charged with poisoning domestic partners or children, ostensibly for the burial club payouts. Like Toffana and La Spara, these women created a network of women eager to alleviate their domestic burdens. Coverage of these murders raised fears that other “sisterhood[s] of domestic poisoners” could have defied detection and murdered scores of unsuspecting family members for personal profit. These crimes, of course, reflect anxieties about women’s access to dangerous knowledge—a topic that is further examined in Chapter two.

Victorian fears about the uncontrollable spreading of poisonous knowledge had its parallel in the historical record. Nineteenth-century accounts about the crimes of Madame Brinvilliers often situate her as a direct inheritor of Toffana’s perfected chemical recipes. Brinvilliers, a Frenchwoman who married into the aristocracy, was thought to be responsible for several deaths. It is through the hands of two men that Brinvilliers learns her art: her lover, Sainte Croix and the Italian chemist Exili, who supposedly was a student of La Spara. With the

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76 Hallissy: xiii.
77 “Poison and Poisoners:” 343.

instigation of Sainte Croix, Brinvilliers poisoned her father and siblings in order to gain control over the family wealth. With the sudden death of her lover, however, Brinvilliers’ crimes were revealed and despite attempts to escape she was eventually arrested and tortured. Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “The Leather Funnel” imagines the gruesome details of her inquisition; yet his narrative remains unsympathetic towards her in spite of the vivid images contrasting her physical fragility against the grisly nature of her water torture. In his treatment of Brinvilliers, Doyle was part of a decided majority, and most reports of her life highlight her villainy:

It seems almost incomprehensible how this monster in woman’s loveliest shape could have deliberately gone on, month after month, administering the fatal mixture interlarded with filial care and hypocritical fondness, until, her patience exhausted, she arrived at the apex of her desire by a double dose.78

Brinvilliers was a “monster in woman’s shape” for several reasons. First, she is consistently described as highly intelligent, a fact that magnified the villainy of her crimes. Secondly, before murdering her family members she tested the efficacy of her poisons on the poor and sick in the guise of a charitable nurse. Demonstrating a total reversal of women’s “natural” role as healers and caretakers, Brinvilliers conjured images of a perverted form of female domesticity. Finally, Brinvilliers’s crimes, like her poisons, seem to defy somatic boundaries. In describing Brinvilliers’s execution, the essayist, Madame de Sévignè, writes:

La Brinvilliers has gone up in smoke . . . Her poor little body was tossed, after the execution into a raging fire, and her ashes scattered to the winds! So that, now, we shall all be inhaling her! And with such evil little spirits up in the air, who knows what poisonous humor may overcome us?79

By coyly pointing out how Brinvilliers’s ashes will spread throughout the city, de Sévignè also suggests that Brinvilliers’s crimes have an infectiousness that will inspire new criminals and new crimes. Indeed, her words were strangely prophetic. Partly in response to Brinvilliers’s crimes, and partly due to rumors about corruption within the aristocracy, Louis XIV initiated the Chambre de Poisons to interrogate potential criminals. His investigators discovered that the court was in the midst of a “poisoning mania”—a topic Robert Browning investigates in his

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78 Fraser: 200.
poem “The Laboratory,” which illustrates the atmosphere of intrigue, jealousy and poison that saturated the seventeenth-century French court.⁸⁰

As this historiography has shown, British commentators often traced poison’s history to foreign, not domestic, sources. The most commonly mentioned historic poisoners are either French or Italian; because of this focus many Victorians characterized poison as a foreign influence or invasion. This led several commentators to assert that “the crime of poisoning, however common it might be or have been in Southern Europe, was foreign to English soil.”⁸¹ Of course, other critics corrected the record by pointing out several cases of English historical poisoners, but the connection between poison and foreignness persisted. It is therefore not unusual to find foreign villains behind many fictional English poisonings, although cases of actual foreign poisoners operating on English soil were nonexistent.⁸² The Victorians, however, were more willing than their predecessors to cast Englishmen and women into the role of poisoner, which was mostly likely a reaction to a trend of characterizing poison as a “civilized” and therefore appropriately “English” form of murder. This willingness to situate poison as an “English” crime follows a larger cultural trend, identified by Martin Weiner, which discouraged bloody, physical crimes on the basis that they were brutish and barbaric. Especially for upper- and middle-class men, violence became stigmatized and “when a ‘respectable’ man killed, then as now, it was usually with a weapon--poison, a gun--which required less directly and sustainedly ‘violent’ action.”⁸³ Thus, although Randa Helfield argues that many sensational narratives moved to diffuse the threat of the domestic poisoner by associating them with “foreignness,” this dissertation demonstrates that this process was not always successful and that, more often than not, these criminals were depicted as home-bred.

The following chapters examine the variety of ways the Victorians adapted these myths and histories into the creation of their own fictional criminals. In many ways, poison became democratized in the nineteenth century, shifting from an exclusively aristocratic crime to one that was equally attractive to the rising middle-classes. Although poison was no longer exclusively “the crime of the rich,” it was quickly becoming the province of a new criminal aristocracy: the

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⁸⁰ “Early Days of the Paris Police.” The Month. 6 (1867): 335.
⁸¹ The Morning Herald. 5 May 1856.
⁸² The only exception of a foreign poisoner being prosecuted in England was Thomas Neill Cream, who was Scottish-born but had emigrated to the Americas. After committing poisonings in Canada and the US, he continued his crime spree in England.
educated and intellectual murderer. Chapter two, “Poisonous Knowledge: Bulwer’s Lucretia and the Revisioning of L.E.L.’s Ethel Churchill” inaugurates this project’s investigation into these changing representations of the poisoner, as Bulwer’s novel Lucretia registers the beginning of a shift away from the aristocratic murderers found in earlier poison texts such as L.E.L.’s Ethel Churchill. Bulwer’s novel maintains, however, the strong association between science and poison that is established in Landon’s text, and both works situate poison crimes as a result of chemical knowledge and education.

84 “Poisoning:” 319.
CHAPTER TWO:

POISONOUS KNOWLEDGE: BULWER’S LUcretia AND THE REVISIONING OF L.E.L.’S ETHEL CHURCHILL

The Specter of the Poisoned Woman; Or, What Letitia Knew

In 1838, the poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon (or L.E.L. to her readers) died in Cape Coast Castle on the western coast of Africa. The early death of an Englishwoman living in the colonies was not an unusual occurrence, but Landon’s death caused a sensation that transcended even her status as a literary celebrity. The Victorian fascination with Landon’s death had much to do with the sudden and mysterious nature of her last moments. On the morning of October the fifteenth, only four months after her marriage, L.E.L.’s servant went to attend her mistress and found the writer’s lifeless body slumped on the floor. Landon’s body reportedly smelled strongly of poison and still clutched in her hand was an empty bottle labeled “Hydrocyanic acid,” a chemical more commonly known as prussic acid or cyanide. Despite her husband’s attempts to revive her, Landon was already close to death and she never regained consciousness. She was buried at night, without fanfare, in the parade grounds of the castle.

Almost as soon as the sad news reached England, questions were raised about the suspicious nature of L.E.L.’s death. Was she the victim of a murder or did she commit suicide? Had her death been natural or just a terrible accident? The inquest (which did not include an autopsy) found that Landon had died either from the effects of a long-standing spasmodic condition or that she had accidentally over-medicated herself in an attempt to stave off a spasmodic attack.\(^85\) Yet in a letter to her mother only days before her death, Landon reported that “I have been perfectly well,—indeed, in some respects better than I have been for many months.”\(^86\) The revelation that L.E.L. had enjoyed good health up until the very moments of her death only fuelled rumors that she was the victim of self-inflicted or homicidal violence. L.E.L. had only recently moved to a remote military post in Africa with her new husband George Maclean, and reports about the cruelty of her new spouse in conjunction with the isolation she

\(^86\) Ibid.: 208.
faced living in a far-flung colony led many of her readers to speculate that her death was a suicide. Other shocking rumors claimed that Maclean’s native mistress, who was displaced upon the arrival of his new wife, had poisoned Landon in a jealous rage. 87

Debate about Landon’s death remained current well into the second half of the century, with general opinion rejecting some of the more outlandish theories of murder and settling instead on the assumption that the poet had committed suicide or died from an accidental overdose. Through a series of reports, the public was informed that the poet had died in miserable loneliness and the poison bottle found by her side became a haunting symbol of her domestic unhappiness. L.E.L.’s readers had long recognized an increasing strain of “sombre and desolate images” in her work, which many connected to a series of public scandals which damaged her personal reputation, caused a broken engagement with John Forster, and even perhaps led to her hasty marriage to George Maclean. 88 Her many literary references to poison in works such as “The Venetian Bracelet”—a poem in which the heroine poisons her romantic rival—took on new significance and in some cases were presented as evidence of a woman fascinated with domestic discord and deadly chemicals. Helen Ashton’s gossipy biography of Landon claims that while writing her Silver Fork novel Ethel Churchill; Or, the Two Brides in 1837 the author had become “obsessed by the idea of poison and actually had by her a bottle of the stuff.” 89 Indeed, although Landon’s work had long been concerned with crime, it seemed that Ethel Churchill, which outlined the dysfunctional marriage of an aristocratic woman who has an eventual mental breakdown and murders two men, demonstrated the culmination of L.E.L.’s preoccupation with “sombre” subjects and poison. In Ethel Churchill, the (anti)heroine Henrietta, Countess Marchmont, manufactures prussic acid in order to poison her unsympathetic husband and faithless lover out of revenge. 90

As the novel makes apparent, it is Henrietta’s education and understanding of scientific processes that enables her to produce the poison. Ironically, although the minute textual detail

87 Ibid.: 217.
88 Ibid.: 299.
90 As some biographers have noted, there were some eerie similarities between Landon’s death and the murder scene in Ethel Churchill. Lady Marchmont commits murder by secreting prussic acid in a cup of coffee. The original accounts of Landon’s death reported that her body was discovered when the maid brought in the morning coffee, but legend soon revised this detail to suggest that L.E.L. had been poisoned by drinking her daily cup. See Howitt, William. Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets. Vol. I. London: R. Bentley, 1847: 158.
describing Henrietta’s distillation of the poison suggests that Landon was in fact “obsessed” with poison and had carefully researched the characteristics of prussic acid for the novel, many accounts of her death (which insisted that she died from an accidental overdose) cited her ignorance of this drug. For example, her early biographer Laman Blanchard questions whether or not Landon “was aware that Hydrocyanic acid meant Prussic acid” and suggests that she might have overdosed out of misinformation about her “medicine’s” true nature. In a similar vein, her long-time London doctor, who had prepared her medicine chest for her voyage to Africa, reported he had never prescribed this chemical to her; implying that the poet would have been completely ignorant about its use. For her contemporaries, then, how much the poet had (or had not) educated herself about poisons was a critical factor in the speculations about the exact nature of her death. If Landon was highly informed about the effects and uses of prussic acid, then her death could not be accidental and must be a suicide. An even more horrifying suggestion was that her knowledge of poisons had perverted her mind and perhaps encouraged her suicide. Using the detailed poisoning scenes found in Ethel Churchill as evidence, a writer for the London Medical Gazette implied that L.E.L.’s death was linked to her researches into poison. Reminding his readers that L.E.L. had died only a year after publishing this novel, the author suggests that her death was caused by “the injurious effects produced in the minds of non-professional persons by the study of the actions of poisonous drugs.” The London Medical Gazette’s claim that the poet died from the corrupting effects of chemical research is presumptive at best, but, ironically, Landon herself explored “the injurious effects produced in the minds of non-professional persons by the study of the actions of poisonous drugs” in Ethel Churchill. In this work, L.E.L. suggests that Henrietta’s scientific and “masculine” education contributes to her mental instability and her poisonings of two men. Landon’s exploration of the “poisonous” effects of knowledge situates her work within early nineteenth-century debates about female education and reading practices. Critics such as Pamela Gilbert and Joan Burstyn have discussed how novel reading practices raised fears about “poisonous” physical invasions in which an unwitting ‘consumer’ gets more than s/he, literally, bargained for;” additionally, the anxiety that “texts [are] potentially deceptive, slippery substances which could affect the reader without the reader's knowledge or consent, like a

91 Blanchard: 229.
92 Ibid.: 223.
“poison” also extended to scientific works. For example, even Jane Marcet, whose *Conversations on Chemistry* was designed to introduce young women to chemical studies, was careful to “[draw] clear boundaries between professional and general appreciation of the discipline” perhaps out of a concern that “professional” knowledge should be carefully regulated. In early editions of Marcet’s work the author is cautious about discussing the effects of chemicals on the body:

*Caroline:* If this is the case, I have certainly been much mistaken in the notion I had formed of chemistry. I own that I thought it was chiefly confined to the knowledge and preparation of medicines.

*Mrs. B.:* That is only a branch of Chemistry which is called Pharmacy, and though the study of it is, no doubt, of great importance to the world at large, it belongs exclusively to professional men, and is the last that I should advise you to pursue.

In a rather uncharacteristic move, “Mrs. B.,” Marcet’s mouthpiece, makes clear to her pupils that studying chemicals’ effect on the body is best left to “professional men.” Since many medicines were also poisonous, Marcet’s hesitance to discuss pharmaceutical applications of chemicals could reflect a fear that this chemical knowledge would be abused or turned to criminal applications. Therefore, this chapter argues that L.E.L.’s artistic use of poison illustrates a reaction to contemporary discussions of female education and suggests that certain forms of knowledge should be restricted. Furthermore, by linking crime to specifically female concerns, this novel also registers changes occurring in early Victorian crime fiction. Indeed, the inclusion of poisoning crimes in a Silver Fork novel like *Ethel Churchill* both reflected the increasing inclusion of crime in early Victorian literature and in turn influenced developments within literary crime genres such as Newgate novels—a type of popular fiction which derived its source material from real-life crimes featured in the infamous Newgate Calendar. Silver Fork novels have not been critically categorized as “crime fiction” and relatively little attention has been paid to their contribution to emergent crime genres, but works such as Landon’s *Ethel Churchill* nonetheless illustrate that Silver Fork texts were deeply involved in shaping early Victorian

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representations of crime. In particular, this text, which frames poison as a symbol of women’s domestic unhappiness, is a landmark example of early Victorian crime fiction that specifically focuses on women’s issues.

The influence of Landon’s Ethel Churchill can perhaps best be seen in the crime writings of her friend Edward Bulwer (later Lord Lytton). Bulwer became infamous as the author of several critically harangued Newgate novels, but he was also the only author to pen a Newgate novel featuring a female (anti)hero.97 This 1846 work, Lucretia; Or the Children of Night, draws heavily from Landon’s Ethel Churchill for its characterization and themes. As Landon’s close friend, Bulwer would not have only read Ethel Churchill, but he would have also been well aware of the debates about Landon’s death which avowed (or denied) that her knowledge of poisons contributed to her death. Like Ethel Churchill, Lucretia shares the earlier novel’s focus on an aristocratic, educated, and socially sophisticated female poisoner who is driven to crime through social constraints and the abuse and neglect of men. In both Landon and Bulwer’s works, then, the discontent of the two women, and their eventual murdering impulses, are linked to their unusual educations and masculine ambitions. As with the legend of Landon’s death, the issue of poison and knowledge in these novels becomes a focal point, and these two works share an interest in how women’s education, particularly in so-binaryed “masculine” realms such as science, can contribute to domestic dissatisfaction and even death. By examining Ethel Churchill and Lucretia together, this chapter illustrates that 1830s and 1840s crime fiction was deeply interested in issues such as female education and women’s domestic situations; in addition, it also reveals that the male-dominated crime genre of Newgate fiction reacted, and was deeply indebted, to a tradition of women’s writing that has yet to be critically acknowledged.

Silver Fork and Newgate Novels

Silver Fork fiction developed slightly earlier than Newgate novels, but the two genres are largely contemporaneous, spanning a period from the 1820s to the end of the 1840s.98 As critics have

97 W. M. Thackeray, of course, included a female criminal as the main protagonist of his novel Catherine, which included many Newgate themes. But, since Thackeray intended the novel to be a parody of the genre, I have not included it in this discussion.

98 Although the earliest novels to be labeled “Newgate” fiction did not appear until the 1830s, Keith Hollingsworth notes that the “Newgate theme” was widely prevalent in 1820s literature, especially since these literatures developed from the old Newgate Calendar.
begun to point out, despite obvious generic differences there was a considerable crosspollination between the two genres. For example, although Silver Fork novels tended to follow the general formula of featuring “the balls, the dinners, the hunts, the teas, the gossip, the electioneering, the opera, the theater, the clubs, the marriage settlements, the love marriages, the fashionable marriages, the gambling, and the dissipation” which characterized the lives of aristocratic characters negotiating the complexities of fashionable life, these novels increasingly featured the “crimes” of the rich—whether these transgressions took the form of social crimes, such as adultery, or legal crimes, such as dueling. 99 Silver Fork fiction’s increasing reliance on crime to spice up plots certainly reflects the growing popularity of Newgate fiction; indeed, as the Silver Fork genre developed in the 1830s, it reacted to the craze for crime fiction by featuring just as many “murders, suicides,” and “mysteries” as it did “dukes, silver-forks,” and “kitchen stuffs.” 100

Silver Fork novels incorporated the tactics of Newgate novels to satiate changing public tastes in literature, but contemporary critics were also quick to point out that the popularity of Newgate novels “was a natural and inevitable reaction of the public mind upon the fashion of the so-called silver-fork school.” Even before Silver Fork novels had begun to widely incorporate crime into their plots, the “vapid and languid insipidity” of the genre had given the public “a morbid appetite in search of strong excitement” which naturally made them turn “to the coarse manners and vulgar crimes of low life” made available by Newgate novels. 101 But the influence of Silver Fork novels on Newgate novels went beyond priming the pump for this emergent genre. Although Newgate novels generally shifted narrative emphasis from “high” to “low” life they retained the Silver Fork emphasis on “aristocratic” characters—criminals who are the long-lost children of peers, or highwaymen who comport themselves with aristocratic flair, often grace the pages of Newgate novels. There is a clearly a continuum between the egotistical Silver Fork dandy and the “dandy, poetical, rosewater thieves” of Newgate fiction. 102 Indeed, April Kendra’s definition of “dandical” Silver Fork novels could easily describe the Newgate novels

*Jack Sheppard* or *Paul Clifford*:

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The dandy novel [. . .] records the adventures of a swaggering male protagonist whose experiences lead him to greater self-awareness and maturity while confirming his sense of superiority. Since the dandy is a man of sophistication, the dandy novel always has an urban setting, for it is only in the metropolis that the hero's powers can be fully displayed and appreciated. The action of the novel is largely episodic and centred on the hero.103

As a character already outside the pale of ordinary experience, the dandy-hero was well fitted to cross boundaries—even the boundaries between “high” and “low” life. As Heather Worthington notes, this boundary crossing often served to highlight double standards in the legal system that harshly punished the poor while turning a blind eye to the transgressions of the rich.104 Thus, the dandy figure’s migration between Newgate and Silver Fork fiction illustrates the overlapping elements of the two genres and cements their shared concern with unfair legal systems and social prejudices.

While the literary influence of the dandy novel on early Victorian crime fiction is easily illustrated, the effect of other forms of Silver Fork fiction on the rise of the Newgate novel has not been critically examined. As Kendra has convincingly shown, Silver Fork fiction can be divided into two distinct sub-genres: the “masculine” dandy novel and the “feminine” society novel. In contrast to “hero-centred” dandy novels written mostly by men, society fiction was primarily produced by women and “includes a large cast of characters whose lives are clearly interdependent, frequent shifts of narrative focus to highlight these different characters (rather than telling the story through the perceptions of a single narrator or central consciousness), and emphasis on family and community relationships.”105 With their emphasis on everyday concerns and familial relationships, society novels present the female experience and prefigure the rise of Victorian domestic realism. Many of these works also explicitly took up contentious issues facing early Victorian women, such as unhappy marriages and even divorce.106

Perhaps because the Newgate genre was dominated by male writers outlining the glories of male criminal-heroes, the links between this crime fiction and feminine literary traditions have been neglected. Yet the inclusion of crime in many society novels highlights this scholarly

105 Kendra: 27.
oversight; in fact, works like Landon’s *Ethel Churchill* describe crimes, including murder, that are just as brutal as any found in Newgate fiction. Thus, this chapter shifts focus away from the masculine dandy novel to investigate how feminine forms of Silver Fork fiction, like society novels, also affected the evolution of Newgate novels. Many Newgate novels shared society fiction’s concern about the effects of crime not just on the individual, but the wider community and increasingly included “a large cast of characters whose lives are clearly interdependent” in order to highlight the interconnectedness of society and illustrate to the middle-classes the necessity for legal and social reform. In addition, as the Newgate form developed in the late 1830s and 1840s, it increasingly became concerned with the effect of crime on women and the domestic sphere. For example, Charles Dickens’s Newgate novel *Oliver Twist*, which began serialization the same year that *Ethel Churchill* was published, examines both crime’s effect on the middle-class family (in the form of Oliver’s parentage and his relationship to the Maylie family) and crime’s looming presence in the domestic lives of poor women (as exemplified by Nancy and Bill’s destructive relationship).

The Newgate novel that perhaps best illustrates the influence of “feminine” society novels is Bulwer’s *Lucretia*, which adapted many of the concerns found in Landon’s earlier society novel *Ethel Churchill*. Bulwer was known for both his Newgate novels and his “dandy” Silver Fork works, but *Lucretia*’s connection to *Ethel Churchill* reveals an interest in women’s issues that also links him to the traditionally female-orientated society novel. But *Ethel Churchill* might not have been such an influence on Bulwer’s work had it not already displayed some of the elements of the emergent Newgate genre. Like Newgate novels, *Ethel Churchill* focuses primarily on the development of its criminal figure and offers a sympathetic psychological portrait of her. Yet, by focusing on a poisoning woman, *Ethel Churchill* brings crime out of the masculine realm and plants it firmly within the domestic sphere. Almost ten years later, *Lucretia* reproduces *Ethel Churchill*’s transgressive act of featuring a female criminal, demonstrating 1840s Newgate fiction’s increasing concern with the influence of crime on social relationships and the family.

Both these works share a concern about crime and the sanctity of the domestic sphere, but Bulwer’s revisioning of *Ethel Churchill* is most clearly demonstrated through the two novels’ shared examination of how education plays a role in the formation of the criminal. An emphasis on education was an appropriate topic for *Ethel Churchill* and *Lucretia*, for both the Newgate
and society genres were critically recognized as having a pedagogical function. Along with outlining the young female protagonist’s education in the culture of aristocratic society and thereby serving as a guidebook for budding socialites, social novels were also seen as a sort of “manual” for the middle-classes to learn about “such matters as [upper-class] clothing and etiquette.” Newgate novels were also deeply implicated in matters of education. Not only did many Newgate novels point to failures in educational systems as a factor in the downfall of their criminal-heroes, but critics also feared that Newgate novels were glamorizing crime and serving as primers for potential criminals. Combining society fiction’s interest in female education with the Newgate genre’s investigation of corrupt pedagogical practices, Ethel Churchill and Lucretia demonstrate the potential dangers of flawed educational systems. In featuring murderers who use their scientific education and training in order to commit crime, the novels place the “proper” role of women’s education under scrutiny. As scientific learning became more widely available in the early part of the century, Landon and Bulwer’s works register a cultural anxiety about the “democratization” of knowledge and the increasing accessibility of scientific education. Challenging Bluestocking feminist programs of female education, Ethel Churchill and Lucretia suggest that scientific education for women does not improve domestic life and can even lead to mental instability and crime.

**Ethel Churchill**

*Ethel Churchill*, L.E.L.’s last novel, was well-received by her critics and has often been labeled as her finest prose work. Most contemporary reviewers of the novel situated the text within a tradition of Silver Fork literature, comparing it favorably to other works within the genre such as Bulwer’s *Pelham*. Like many fashionable novels, *Ethel Churchill* follows the fate and fortunes of the aristocracy, simultaneously glorifying and harshly criticizing the frivolity of “high life.” Set in the 1720s and incorporating historical figures such as Alexander Pope, Lavinia Fenton, and Lady Wortley Montague, *Ethel Churchill* does not strictly adhere to the

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111 Hughes: 329-30.
Silver Fork formula of describing contemporary characters, but it does draw parallels between the aristocracy of the past and the aristocracy of the present. The novel is also unusual because it features a crime (other than the “crime” of adultery) perpetrated by a female character. This inclusion of historic characters and a pair of murders signals *Ethel Churchill*’s response to the growing popularity of the Newgate novel, which often featured crimes committed by historical characters. Yet, by featuring a poisoning woman, *Ethel Churchill* moved murder away from “low” life and male criminals and instead situated it directly in to the domestic sphere.

Long before Bulwer’s *Lucretia*, or the sensational novels of Wilkie Collins and M.E. Braddon, L.E.L. had figured poison as a literary symbol of nineteenth-century domestic discord. After all, the (anti)heroine, Henrietta Marchmont, turns to poisoning crimes out of desperation: she murders her cold and unsympathetic husband after he threatens to expose her infidelity (although she is innocent of his accusations) and kills her potential lover George after he cruelly manipulates her affections. As the novel demonstrates, Henrietta is “mistaken in believing that rank and wealth sufficed to make a happy marriage,” and learns too late “that nothing in marriage can supply the want of affection.” The murders in *Ethel Churchill*, then, combine the generic concerns of both society and Newgate novels. On the one hand, the poisonings violently illustrate the society novel’s critique of arranged aristocratic marriages and emphasize “the necessity of domestic affections and supportive communities;” on the other hand, the novel also incorporates the Newgate device of “invit[ing] sympathy with criminals” by framing Henrietta as a victim of cultural circumstances that necessitated her loveless marriage and kept her from developing these supportive structures.

With these dual concerns, *Ethel Churchill* can be seen as an hybrid text that blends society fiction’s interest in domestic structures and the formation of female characters with the Newgate novel’s interest in the psychological development of criminality. Landon’s novel carefully outlines the psychological formation of its criminal-hero(ine) to both foster sympathy for Henrietta as well as to explain her downward spiral into murder. Although Henrietta’s arranged aristocratic marriage certainly contributes to her psychological breakdown, Landon situates the root of Henrietta’s problems in the unusual education she receives. Orphaned as an

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infant and raised by her uncle Sir Jasper Meredith, Henrietta receives a peculiarly “masculine” education that raises her interests and ambitions above the sphere of domestic duty. Heavily trained in science and taught to despise “feminine” concerns such as love, Henrietta grows to be an intelligent young woman with dreams of worldly success. But, as she discovers, women’s ambitions have very few culturally acceptable outlets beyond marriage and social popularity. Bored and disgusted with the shallowness of upper-class society, Henrietta’s education and intelligence offer her little consolation for her unhappy social and domestic situation. Instead, it enables her to manufacture an escape from her domestic disappointments.\textsuperscript{114} Having been taught chemistry by her uncle, Henrietta has the knowledge and skill to distill the prussic acid that she uses for murder.

Henrietta’s psychological portrait and her use of poison, therefore, are deeply linked to the danger and power of scientific education, and Landon uses Ethel Churchill to probe the “proper” sphere of women’s education—especially in relation to women’s engagement in the scientific realm. Like the Romantic writers of the previous generation, Landon certainly compares “‘good’ science—the detailed and reverent description of the workings of nature—to ‘bad’ science, the hubristic manipulation of the forces of nature to serve man’s private ends,” but she does so specifically in relation to how women (and not male scientists) wield science for “private ends.”\textsuperscript{115} Although her descriptions of science retain gothic elements, Landon moves away from the gothic form and instead incorporates dark and threatening science into a society novel, a move which allows her to examine science within a more domestic setting than had been previously employed in works such as Frankenstein. While Ethel Churchill has its jaded Frankensteinian scientist in the form of Sir Jasper Meredith, the story focuses instead on the effect his scientific teachings have on his adopted daughter Henrietta. The novel is consequently not directly concerned with the progress and limits of experimentation like Frankenstein, but rather is interested in the “democratization” of science—the spreading of scientific education beyond elite male scientists. During a period when feminist writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth were advocating for women’s scientific education by arguing that it could improve women’s lives and intellectual satisfaction, Ethel Churchill suggests that certain forms

\textsuperscript{114} III: 193.

of scientific knowledge are too dangerous for general consumption and that, until cultural gender expectations are reformed, women will receive little benefit from scientific education.

Although Henrietta is not the novel’s titular heroine, she occupies the majority of the narrative and is the novel’s primary character study. Henrietta is orphaned as a child and subsequently raised by her uncle, Sir Jasper Meredith. World-weary and emotionally scarred, Meredith lives as a recluse in his country mansion. In an effort to occupy his mind and time, Meredith has turned to several branches of scientific study, including chemistry. As Landon makes clear, much of Henrietta’s childhood has been spent within the shadow of her uncle’s studies: “I took you, Henrietta, when an infant, from your dying mother's arms. Your cradle was placed in my laboratory; and often have I closed the midnight volume to watch the fitful slumbers of your childhood.”116 Here, the scientific exploits of the laboratory are disturbingly grafted onto domestic scenes of the nursery and childrearing; just as her uncle’s memories of Henrietta’s youth are bound to images of “the midnight volume,” the association between Henrietta and scientific knowledge begins in her infancy. Significantly, Henrietta never grows out of this association. The opening conversation between Meredith and Henrietta occurs in the same laboratory where Henrietta has spent her childhood, and the reader learns that this space has been the setting for much of their familial interactions. Meredith’s laboratory has been situated as the domestic heart of the home and Henrietta’s entire domestic experience has been in an environment saturated in academic and scientific pursuits.

To foreshadow the later distillation of the poison and underscore the danger of this scientific education, Landon incorporates a variety of symbolism into her description of the laboratory. To begin with, the reader is informed that: “It was a large vaulted apartment, and had been once a chapel; but it was now half library, half laboratory.”117 That the hall used to be a “chapel” and now houses scientific apparatuses reflects the nineteenth-century fear that “scientific reading would inculcate a materialistic, godless view of the universe.”118 Indeed, the chamber’s decoration illustrates humanity’s separation from both nature and God: “The arches were formed of black oak, hewn into all the fantastic shapes of Gothic imaginings; in which it was singular to note that all the natural imitations were graceful, while those of humanity were

116 I: 5.
117 I: 10.
hideous. The oak-leaf and the garland mingled grotesquely with the distorted faces, that ever and anon peeped from among their wreaths.”

The careful contrast between the beauty of the “natural” decorative elements and the gruesome human forms on the laboratory’s ceiling suggests both humans’ inherent corruptibility and even implies a form of divine judgment of the “unholy studies” happening in the room below. Here, Landon draws a distinction between science and spirituality, suggesting that scientific and materialist thought corrupts humanity and separates it from nature and divine knowledge.

If the chamber’s carvings are described as “grotesque,” the same could be said of Meredith’s scientific collections. Meredith has amassed a collection of exotic specimens which are crowded into display cases; yet unlike the carvings on the ceiling, the representation of Meredith’s “natural” specimens are anything but “graceful”: “Here was a grisly crocodile, its teeth white and sharp as when they glistened in the waters of the Nile; there, a massy serpent, knotted into huge and hideous contortions; while myriads of small snakes, lizards, and disgusting insects, were stored around.” As specimens in a biological collection, the pursuit of science has turned these once beautiful natural forms into stuffed and artificial exhibits—revealing Landon’s construction of science as artificial and unnatural. Metaphorically, these specimens also mirror the condition of Henrietta’s mind which, like the taxidermized animals, has been warped and deformed from its natural state. The association between reptiles and poison also gestures towards the prussic acid that Henrietta will later manufacture in this room, but these “disgusting” exhibits also endow Meredith with a reputation for eccentricity and even sorcery. The “care” that Meredith puts into organizing his exotic collections gives him “among his neighbours, the reputation of a magician, though they were but the sickly fancies of a heart ill at ease, that mocked itself in its pursuits.” While moving away from description of Meredith’s scientific experiments as “occult,” Landon does affirm that these academic obsessions are “sickly fancies” that only lead to sterile and nonproductive knowledge.

The result of Henrietta’s upbringing in this strange environment is that she has a sophisticated intellect yet is ill-equipped to deal with the world outside of her uncle’s laboratory:

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119 1: 8
120 1:11
121 1:10
122 1:10-11
She knew more of the world than most women of her years; for her converse had been chiefly with her uncle, a man of remarkable endowments: and she had read an infinite variety of books—read them, too, with that quick perception which seizes motive and meaning with intuitive accuracy. Such, however, inevitably is half knowledge; and theory that lacks the correction of practice, is as the soul without the body. The passage’s emphasis on the phrase “the soul without the body” further underscores the novel’s theme that science divorces humanity from spiritual knowledge. Henrietta’s “half knowledge” of the world is particularly highlighted in relation to her dealings with more “feminine” spheres of life. When it comes to traditional “female” preoccupations such as “the science of society” or “la haute science de la coquetterie” Henrietta is both a fabulous success and a spectacular failure. Although noted for her beauty and worshipped by fashionable society, it is also the superficiality of social relationships and her miscalculation of her lover George that drives Henrietta to madness. By depicting society and coquetry as forms of “science” that women must master, Landon contrasts Henrietta’s accomplishments in sciences such as chemistry to forms of knowledge that would have better served her role as a wife and fashionable hostess.

The clash between “female” and “male” intellectual spheres becomes more exacerbated as the novel develops. Indeed, there is the strong suggestion that Henrietta’s great flaw is the conflict between her sharp, masculine intellect and her feminine sensibilities. Throughout the novel, Henrietta is depicted as a mixture of feminine and masculine parts; an example of this occurs in her first physical description which compares her, not to other women, but to her uncle:

On a low cushion beside sat his niece, at once a likeness and a contrast. Their resemblance was striking,—there was the identical outline,—though age had lost the glowing tints of youth. Both had the same mass of black hair, the high intellectual forehead, the strongly marked brow, the slightly aquiline nose; but, above all, there was the same expression, an inward and melancholy look, whenever their features were in repose. It was a similitude that every year would increase, for it was the similitude of character.

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123 I: 8.  
124 II: 124; 237.  
125 I: 13-4.
Contrary to Landon’s declaration that the two “are once a likeness and contrast,” the passage only describes the close physical similarity between uncle and niece. Henrietta and Meredith are situated here as doubles; despite the difference in gender and age, they share a strong physical and intellectual resemblance. Indeed, the physical similarity appears to derive in large part from “the similitude of character” existing between the two. As Landon hints, this resemblance derives in large part from Henrietta’s unconventional upbringing. Instead of receiving feminine guidance, Henrietta has been raised to be a rational, intellectual companion for her uncle. “From her cradle” Meredith has discouraged “feminine” sensibilities, and has instead impressed upon Henrietta his own jaded philosophies on topics such as “the folly of love.”

Despite Henrietta’s vow to her uncle that she “is too quick-sighted for the delusions of love,” she droops within her loveless marriage and yearns for an affectionate relationship.127 It is this yearning for an intellectual and emotional equal that leads Henrietta to her disastrous flirtation with George. Thus, Henrietta’s “downfall” is the internal conflict between her rational intellect and emotional sensibilities which has its apex in Henrietta’s murderous madness; her insanity is symbolic of the loss of her rational mind and the triumph of irrational emotion.

Landon’s privileging of sensibility over rationality is contrary to Anne Mellor’s argument that “women Romantic writers tended to celebrate [. . .] the workings of the rational mind,” and located this rationality in “the female as well as the male body.”128 Indeed, subsequent critics such as Glennis Stephenson have noted that Landon’s works seemingly confirm a biologically essentialist model of womanhood:

In her life Landon may often seem to come close to epitomising Wollstonecraft's revolutionary new woman, but in her poetry she quite explicitly rejects Wollstonecraft's revisionary definitions, and instead propounds a view of women that draws more upon the earlier construction of female gender as identical with sensibility, the very view that Wollstonecraft so passionately denounced in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. For L.E.L., love, erotic passion, feelings—these are the principles that rule women's lives.129

Stephenson’s thesis is generally applicable to Ethel Churchill, for “love, erotic passion, and feelings” do overcome Henrietta’s intellectual reasoning. But it is important to note that

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126 I: 2.
127 I: 3.
Henrietta’s erudition confirms that Landon believes that women are capable of highly rationalistic learning. Yet, although the novel affirms the growing nineteenth-century feminist argument that women were intellectually equal to men, it also is hesitant to endorse scientific education for women, suggesting that this training would not enhance women’s lives and could even lead to abuse of “dangerous” knowledge.

This conflict between sensibility and rationality situates Ethel Churchill within contemporary debates about the nature of women’s education, especially in relation to fields such as science. By the 1830s, chemical education for upper- and middle-class women was still relatively rare, but the educational disparity between men and women was beginning to change. Mary Wollstonecraft famously advocated for women’s education in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and subsequent writers, such as Maria Edgeworth, also advocated for an inclusion of science in the course of women’s education:

A girl who runs through a course of natural history, learns something about chemistry, has been taught something of botany, and who knows but just enough of these to make her fancy that she is well informed, is in a miserable situation, in danger of becoming ridiculous, and insupportably tiresome to men of sense and science. (214)

It is important to note that, like Wollstonecraft, a central piece of Edgeworth’s argument for female scientific education is that eligible men will eventually find the artistic and showy “accomplishments” of women “ tiresome.” If women want to attract and keep the interest of men (and thus attain domestic happiness) they must be educated. Landon opposes this argument in Ethel Churchill by creating men who are uninterested in the intellectual accomplishments of their wives and lovers. Lord Marchmont is obviously insecure about his wife’s superior mental capabilities, and although Henrietta’s wit contributes to her success in “society,” it does not guarantee her personal happiness. Similarly, Henrietta’s “lover” George, who claims to be fascinated with her sharp mind, finds her intellect intimidating and mocks her by having his secretary write philosophical love letters to her. Henrietta’s wit merely buys her a place in society, where she is “flattered, admired, and courted, but not loved.”130 Even the novel’s intellectual men, like the talented author Walter Maynard (who Henrietta has secretly loved throughout the novel), are not attracted to their intellectual equals but prefer sweet, “pure” domestic women like Ethel. Instead of domestic happiness hinging on the quality or rigor of

130 II: 319.
women’s education, Ethel Churchill suggests that women’s mental superiority only reinforces unhappiness by privileging the head over the heart. In Landon’s formulation, feminine sensibility must and always will be a part of the female experience, and a materialist scientific education that emphasizes rationality over sensibility poisons domestic happiness.

To further emphasize the problematic nature of Henrietta’s education, Landon compares it to the very different pedagogical system that her friend Ethel Churchill experiences. Although as well-born, rich, and beautiful as Henrietta, Ethel is neither socially or intellectually ambitious. Instead, as a sweet, passive, and morally upright young woman, she is a clear precursor for the Victorian domestic goddess. Like Henrietta, she is “the darling […] of an aged relative,” but L.E.L. makes clear that the two girls’ “training had been widely different.” Henrietta, for example, has been educated in her uncle’s dreary laboratory, but “Ethel’s life had been spent in the flower garden; and it was as if the sweetness and joyousness of the summer's sunny children had infused themselves into the being of their youthful companion.”

Retaining the comparison between “graceful” nature and artificial science that she had developed in the description of Meredith’s laboratory, here Landon contrasts Ethel and Henrietta’s knowledge of nature: while Ethel has experienced the wonders of nature first-hand, Henrietta has learned natural history from her uncle’s dead and garish specimens. There is a similar difference between their formal studies, and Ethel “had read little beyond her grandmother's cherished volumes of which a [sic] herbal was the study, and the Cassandra of Madame Scudori the recreation.” Compared to Henrietta’s vast knowledge of chemicals and the body, Ethel has concentrated on a domestic education of tending plants and crafting herbal remedies for the home. Appropriately, although Ethel must go through her own trials, she is the only female character to have the traditional “happy ending” of domestic felicity.

For Henrietta, who has placed her masculine ambitions over her emotional needs, there can be no “happy ending.” With the death of her uncle, Henrietta’s rationality is finally overwhelmed by her emotional turmoil. Heretofore, Meredith had acted as a conduit for Henrietta’s emotional needs: much of the first and second volumes of the novel are Henrietta’s letters to her uncle, where she shares her experiences, thoughts, and dreams for the future. When her husband ignores Henrietta’s premonition that her uncle is ill and flippantly prevents her from

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131 I: 37.
132 Ibid.
attending his last moments, she finally realizes that “she hated her husband.” Henrietta is sent to Meredith Place by her husband in order to secure the money and estates, but she instead turns to her intellectual inheritance—her uncle’s laboratory—for revenge. In these passages, Landon again underscores Henrietta’s scientific training, reminding her readers that “from her childhood she had been accustomed to watch, and often aid, in her uncle’s chemical experiments: she was, therefore, not at a loss, as a complete novice in the science would have been.” In a mockery of the domestic duties of cooking and baking that Henrietta has been taught to despise, she constantly refers to one of her uncle’s “huge volume[s]” of chemistry for her poison “recipe.” Far more deftly than she could have read a cookbook, Henrietta is able to comprehend the complicated scientific process necessary to create the prussic acid. What follows is a highly scientific description of the poison-making that Landon must have carefully researched. After the almond kernels have been “crushed together, and placed to simmer over the furnace” Henrietta makes certain to protect herself from the noxious fumes by using “a glass mask, and some strongly aromatic vinegar.” Once Henrietta has finished placing the newly distilled prussic acid into vials, she locks them in “a small casket” and places “the little key on a chain that she always wore of her uncle’s hair” which she wears near “her heart.” By placing the key on a chain of Meredith’s hair, Landon symbolically connects the poison to Meredith’s tutoring of Henrietta; the chain represents the links that join Meredith and Henrietta to knowledge and poison. The hair chain also signifies Henrietta’s distorted domestic relationships and upbringing—instead of wearing tokens of love near “her heart” she hangs the “key” to her poisonous knowledge. Henrietta’s use of poison is now figuratively bound to images of her childhood and her uncle, thus confirming that Henrietta’s crimes are directly related to her childhood education.

Although the chemistry of poison making is accurately represented, as in the original description of the laboratory, Landon again relies on the gothic to set the eerie tone and heighten the narrative tension:

Henrietta kept wandering to and fro like a disturbed spirit; now watching the shelves, covered with dusty volumes, now gazing on the different articles, scattered in the same

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133 II: 320.  
134 II: 326.  
135 II: 327.  
136 II: 326.  
137 II: 328-9.
confusion as when Sir Jasper last used his laboratory. On a small table, drawn close to
his arm-chair, lay opened a large book, which Henrietta stopped, every now and then, in
her troubled walk, to read. “It may easily be done!” muttered she; and her fine features
set with an expression of stern determination.\textsuperscript{138}

What Henrietta is reading, of course, is an ancient and “celebrated treatise on poisons, written in
the fifteenth century.”\textsuperscript{139} Her disturbed state of mind is clear from her “wandering to and fro”
and reflected in the “scattered” state of the room. Yet this time Landon extends her use of the
gothic beyond the description of the library by figuring Henrietta herself as supernatural; L.E.L.
begins this process by describing Henrietta in the passage above as a “spirit” and the relationship
between Henrietta and the supernatural only becomes more pronounced when she ventures out
into the foggy night to collect the bitter almonds she needs to produce her poison:

\begin{quote}
Any one who had seen her, might have been pardoned for believing, from that hour, in
supernatural appearances. Her tall figure was wrapped in a loose white robe, and her
long black hair hung down to her waist, already glistening with raindrops. The moonlight
fell directly on her face, whose features seemed rigid as those of a statue, while the
paleness was that of a corpse; but the large gleaming eyes, so passionate and so wild,
belonged to life—life, racked by that mental agony, life, and human life, only knows.\textsuperscript{140}
\end{quote}

Here, Henrietta figuratively becomes a living “corpse” that will leave death in her wake; and
indeed, the sensibility that Henrietta has long denied is reanimated into a monstrous form of
revenge and madness that will lead her to commit murder. Like the vengeful Medea, Henrietta
too is one of “the sorceresses of old, bending over herb and drug, to form their potent spells” and
to carry out their plans for vengeance.\textsuperscript{141} Unsurprisingly, the process of transforming Henrietta
into a supernatural monster is fully realized on the night she murders her husband:

\begin{quote}
There were no ornaments on the neck and arms; indeed, Lady Marchmont had used up
the principal of hers to form the curious head-dress of the picture. The hair was formed
into one thick braid, which went round and round the head: amid the folds of this was
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[138] II: 324.
\item[139] Ibid.
\item[140] II: 326.
\item[141] II: 328.
\end{footnotes}
wound a serpent of precious stones, whose head, formed of rubies and diamonds, rose out of the knot behind, and made a sort of crest.\textsuperscript{142}

Dressed in an elaborate costume for a party, Landon presents Henrietta as a living Lamia—a woman who is half-human and half poisonous snake. The Lamia’s association with poison certainly reflects the nature of Henrietta’s future crimes and hearkens back to the images of the grotesque snakes found in her uncle’s laboratory, but the bejeweled snake’s position on Henrietta’s head—the seat of her rationality—also suggests that Henrietta’s mind has been figuratively poisoned. Indeed, Henrietta’s murder of her husband and lover mark the moment in which she loses her rationality (and her humanity) and becomes insane. By transforming a scientifically educated woman into a supernatural creature, L.E.L. suggests that the confluence of science and femininity is strange, unnatural, and dangerous. Fully transformed into a Lamia and pushed to the brink of her emotional capacity, the educated woman is now a monster capable of murder.

Henrietta’s transformation into a figurative Lamia is not the only place in the novel where Landon emphasizes the “strangeness” and “unnaturalness” of women participating in masculine spheres. In \textit{Ethel Churchill} the only other female character associated with masculine activities, such as science and literature, is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu—and like Henrietta she also suffers a hard fate. As Landon notes, the historical Lady Mary has long been credited with introducing and promoting the practice of small-pox inoculation to England; as a young woman Montague was scarred by the disease, which also caused the death of her brother, and she was determined to establish this life saving practice in England. Yet despite this humanitarian association with inoculation, Landon downplays Montagu’s medical contribution in favor of depicting Lady Mary as cold and morally bankrupt. Landon’s Lady Mary, while “[c]lever—beautiful—with every advantage of nature and fortune,” also has “a fearful deficiency in all higher feeling and nobler motive.”\textsuperscript{143} L.E.L. uses Lady Mary to help demonstrate some “grave, sad lessons” about the “vain search” for “pleasure.” She writes: “I do not know a moral picture more degrading than the weakness which, for years, made her shrink from the sight of a looking-glass; nor any thing more disconsolate than her long residence, during her advanced life, in a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[142] III: 173.
\item[143] III: 325.
\end{footnotes}
Here, Landon links Lady Mary’s facial disfigurement to moral deficiency in order to suggest that “the weakness” which caused Wortley Montagu to “shrink from the sight of a looking-glass” was not small-pox but rather a disfiguring sexually transmitted disease, such as syphilis. In rewriting Montagu’s history in this way, Landon not only downplays her scientific and humanitarian contribution, but she also suggests that Lady Mary’s disfigurement—traditionally accepted as her motive for promoting smallpox inoculation—was actually a cover for moral and sexual depravity. As many of her contemporary critics noted, with this depiction of Lady Mary Landon was taking quite a bit of poetic license, but this portrayal nonetheless serves to hammer-home Landon’s point: that women engaging in scientific pursuits are monstrous and unnatural.\footnote{144}{III: 325.}

Despite Henrietta’s crimes and her association with monstrous science, Landon still presents her as a figure of sympathy—or, at least, contemporary readers of Ethel Churchill found her to be a sympathetic character. In comparing Henrietta to her husband, the critic for the Athenaeum wrote that the “Countess of Marchmont, whose character of a gay, beautiful leader of fashionable life, full of wit, and with a recklessness of manner which fails to hide even from herself the pangs of a too sensitive heart—stands in admirable contrast with the stiff, pompous, and self-conceited nothingness of her lord and master.”\footnote{146}{“[Rev. of ] Ethel Churchill.” The Athenaeum. 518 (1837): 713.} Similarly, one of L.E.L.’s Victorian biographers wrote of Lord Marchmont’s death: “We leave him after this, without regret, to his fate; sympathy is alike unnecessary and impossible.”\footnote{147}{Sheppard: 117.} In situating Lord Marchmont as the villain (who “deserved” his fate) and Henrietta as a figure of sympathy, Ethel Churchill draws from the Newgate tradition of encouraging audience identification with and empathy for the criminal-hero. To a large extent, Landon gains sympathy for Henrietta by making her a victim of a flawed educational system and social constraints; like many Newgate heroes, she is “exhibited as a symptom of social evil” rather than as an inherently evil character.\footnote{148}{Hollingsworth: 14.} Similarly, Landon borrows from the Newgate tradition with her carefully drawn psychological portrait of Henrietta—a tactic which further encourages the reader’s identification with the Countess Marchmont and serves as a justification of her crimes. Finally, Henrietta’s downward spiral into madness, which finally subsides into a “hopeless,” “miserable,” yet “gentle” form of mental
disease, provides both an appropriately horrific punishment for the poisoner while also sympathetically maintaining her image as a gifted and beautiful woman broken on the wheel of an uncaring world.149

Although Ethel Churchill draws heavily from the Newgate genre, the novel escaped the harsh criticism usually lobbed at this type of crime fiction. There are probably several reasons the novel did not come under the same sort of scrutiny as works by Bulwer and Ainsworth; most importantly is Landon’s avoidance of any “low” criminal figures or scenes. As Keith Hollingsworth notes, the Newgate novel is a “school defined by its contemporary critics,” and a “novel with a background of upper- or middle-class life” was not usually “damned with the accusing name [of Newgate novel].”150 The reviewers of Ethel Churchill also felt that novel’s moral purpose—“to show that fame, wealth, station, fashion, and all the seeming desiderata of life, very frequently contribute to our misery, and are always as nothing compared with the domestic affections”—was clearly delineated.151 In addition, Landon’s focus on women’s issues, particularly the role of science in female education, had not yet become an avowed Newgate theme. Yet, with the publication of Bulwer’s Lucretia in 1846, the nature of science and women’s education would become a central issue of one of the most critically maligned Newgate novels ever published.

Lucretia; Or, the Children of Night

The relationship between L.E.L. and Bulwer, and her influence on his work, are complex. Having first met when they were both young writers, Landon and Bulwer mutually encouraged each other’s work—both privately and publically. Landon, for example, includes a favorable portrait of both Bulwer and his wife Rosina in her 1831 society novel Romance and Reality. The same year, she also wrote a very flattering account of Bulwer in New Monthly Magazine’s series on “Living Literary Characters.” In the piece, Landon not only defends Bulwer’s works against his critics, but she labels Bulwer as “the first-rate talent of our time” and compares him favorably

149 III: 327.
150 Hollingsworth: 14; 15.
to Byron and Wordsworth. Bulwer was eager to repay the favor. In a review of *Romance and Reality*, Bulwer applauded her prose but also famously revealed his early admiration for Landon’s poetry:

The author of these volumes is a lady of remarkable genius. We remember well when she first appeared before the public in the pages of “The Literary Gazette.” [. . .] At that time, poetry was not yet out of fashion, at least with us of the cloister; and there was always, in the Reading Room of the Union, a rush every Saturday afternoon for “The Literary Gazette,” and an impatient anxiety to hasten at once to that corner of the sheet which contained the three magical letters of “L.E.L.”

Although Bulwer’s review is certainly calculated to increase sales of the novel, its anecdotal portrayal of Landon’s work also reads as genuinely heartfelt. Since L.E.L.’s literary career was well-established before Bulwer had become a professional writer, this passage also confirms that Bulwer was interested in and inspired by Landon’s work.

Unfortunately, for both Landon and Bulwer, this exchange of flattering portraits did not go unnoticed. Soon after Bulwer’s review, *The Age* published the following “skit:"

‘N. Child of love and Muse of Passion
Pretty Letty—that is you.
L.E.L. Ned, in all you lead the fashion,
Neddy mine, indeed you do.’

*The Age’s* skit implies a subtext to Landon and Bulwer’s exchange that went far beyond mutual career boosting; the “Pretty Letty” and the “Neddy mine” suggest an intimate, rather than professional, relationship. Although there is no reliable evidence to dispute the platonic nature of L.E.L. and Bulwer’s friendship, their interactions nevertheless sparked salacious speculation. Throughout her career, Landon endured a series of scandalous rumors which linked her sexually to both Bulwer and several other men, including other literary figures such as William Jerdan and William Maginn. It was perhaps enough for the gossips that L.E.L. “was certainly in the habit of visiting Bulwer and Rosina [his wife] at home, and was observed to be somewhat...

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flirtatious in her manner,” but the rumors were stoked by a much more “reliable” source.¹⁵⁶ Always eager to blame her husband for any indiscretion, Rosina Bulwer accused Landon of “intriguing with my infamous husband.”¹⁵⁷

Whether or not Bulwer was sexually involved with Landon is uncertain, but it is clear that the two writers remained friends even in the face of damaging rumors. When Landon’s engagement to John Forster was broken off, Bulwer supported L.E.L. and even attempted to reconcile the pair. Although this romantic project failed, Bulwer was ready to facilitate Landon’s next engagement and gave away the poet at her wedding to George Maclean. According to one account of Bulwer’s life, he was so moved at her wedding feast that during a toast he accidentally called her his “‘daughter’ in allusion to the part he had borne at the marriage ceremony” and then, overcome with emotion, he “rushed home with tears in his eyes, shut himself in his cabinet, and wrote persistently till the gray dawn crept through the window-shutters.”¹⁵⁸ Bulwer was also one of the last of Landon’s English friends to see her alive, and when he received news of her death, “the friend of her youth and young womanhood hastened to raise a subscription, which he himself headed with a generous amount, to support her widowed, poverty-stricken, and desolate mother.”¹⁵⁹ Unsurprisingly, Bulwer and Landon’s relationship both during their lives and after their deaths has been characterized as “constant, sensible, and sincere.”¹⁶⁰

Although there is no direct evidence that Bulwer had Ethel Churchill in mind when he began writing *Lucretia*, his familiarity with both Landon’s life and works speaks to the similarities between the two novels and *Lucretia’s* repeated use of motifs and themes from the earlier novel. For instance, the characterization of Bulwer’s eponymous heroine is highly reminiscent of Landon’s Countess Marchmont: at the opening of the novel *Lucretia* is a highly intelligent, socially ambitious, upper-class woman being raised in relative isolation by her aristocratic uncle, Sir Miles St. John. *Lucretia* is Sir Miles’s presumed heir, and she is being groomed to inherit the vast estate of Laughton. Yet, despite the similarities in the two anti-heroines, the plot of *Lucretia* is Bulwer’s own: *Lucretia* becomes surreptitiously engaged to

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¹⁵⁶ Leighton: 53.
¹⁵⁹ Ibid.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
William Mainwaring—a young man decidedly lower on the social scale than his fiancée. The engagement is soon discovered by her uncle, who expels her from his home and disinherits her. Abandoned by Mainwaring, who prefers her half-sister, Lucretia rashly marries her morally corrupt tutor Oliver Dallibard. He brings her to France, and Lucretia barely escapes his attempts to poison her by arranging for his political assassination. She returns to England, marries again, and has a son. Once again, Lucretia is tricked into a bad marriage and dispatches her second husband with poison—but not before he hides her son from her. Years later, Lucretia masterminds a plot to regain her lost fortune with the help of her stepson Gabriel Varney. Together, they search for her lost son and plot to poison the relatives (Helen and her cousin Pervical) that stand in the way of her lost inheritance.

The plot differences between the two novels are, in part, attributable to Bulwer’s reliance on the Newgate tactic of fictionalizing the biographies of real-life criminals; in the case of *Lucretia*, he draws from the life of the early nineteenth-century poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright in order to present a realistic psychological portrait of the criminal mind. Although *Ethel Churchill* is also interested in the mental development of its murdering heroine, Bulwer utilizes the Newgate form to more deeply focus on the psychological formation of criminality; for example, by using the Newgate template Bulwer does not have to provide a parallel narrative (as in the case of *Ethel Churchill*) to his crime story and can focus exclusively on the downfall of his heroine. Yet, in his in-depth portrayal of criminal psychology, Bulwer retains one element also central to *Ethel Churchill*: the role of education in forming and enabling the criminal. Bulwer himself was very vocal in declaring education to be his object of study in *Lucretia*. In the “Preface” to the 1853 edition of the novel, Bulwer wrote that “the moral design” of *Lucretia* was to demonstrate the effects of “evil [. . .] early circumstance and training.”¹⁶¹ Again, in a letter to John Forster, Bulwer insisted that it was through [Lucretia and Varney’s] *cultivation* that I thought to trace the phenomena of their crimes.”¹⁶² Bulwer’s emphasis on the word “cultivation” is important here; for like the Countess Marchmont in *Ethel Churchill*, *Lucretia* features a formally educated criminal who draws from her classical training in order to commit murder.


As Lynn Pykett notes, the Newgate novel displays an “inappropriate hybridity, or mixing together of what would be better kept separate;” in particular, this genre challenged Victorian notions of “keeping the different classes of society separate.” Thus, Lucretia’s mixing of high-brow education with low-brow criminality becomes a focal point for the novel’s social commentary, as Bulwer was writing during a time in which the public believed that education refined the mind and alleviated crime. The majority of Newgate novels, like Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, confirm Victorian assumptions about the redemptive power of education (and the corrupting influence of informal education) by featuring uneducated criminals who informally pick up their trade in jail or on the streets from other delinquents, but Bulwer moves away from Fagin’s squalid London “school” for young orphaned pickpockets and instead draws from the society novel tradition in order to create a genteel criminal who derives her criminal knowledge from her formal tutoring. This was a radical departure from the standard, especially given Victorian reformer’s assertions that women, in particular, benefitted from the civilizing effects of formal education:

> Education, whether we use the word in its narrowest or widest sense [...] appears to exercise a most powerful influence on woman—a more powerful influence than might at first sight be supposed. To it she owes all that is valuable in her character; without it her wifely and maternal qualifications are of a very low order. It cannot be without significance that our criminal woman are all uneducated, untrained women.  

Bulwer challenges these beliefs by illustrating how women’s education can become a contributing factor to the heroine’s criminal downfall; thus, it is this focus on female education which reveals Bulwer’s incorporation of Silver Fork concerns into the Newgate novel. *Lucretia* maintains a very similar approach to education as *Ethel Churchill*; for example, Bulwer carefully situates a “masculine” scientific education—rather than a more traditional “feminine” education—as the corrupting force in his novel. *Lucretia*’s “inappropriate hybridity” is that it improperly mingles scientific erudition with female education, a move which allows the novel to participate in debates about the role and nature of female education by combining the society novel’s concerns about female education with Newgate literature’s interest in crime. Like

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163 Pykett 29-30; 32.
Henrietta, Lucretia, too, is “poisoned” by her childhood education and her scientific knowledge of deadly chemicals.

It is with this educational theme that we can most productively trace the influence of Landon’s work both on Bulwer’s novel and on crime fiction in general. Bulwer spends considerable time early in the novel outlining Lucretia’s unusually sharp intellect and her advanced education. Like Landon’s Countess Marchmont, from her early childhood “a superior mind developed itself in the young Lucretia” and her “quickness defied even that numbing ordeal” of being “set methodically to study.”

Raised in a bachelor’s home, the young Lucretia (like her predecessor Henrietta) had limited exposure to other children; instead, her early social experiences resulted from the “unquestioned and unnoticed freedom” to mix with her uncle’s guests, where “she listened to the conversation around her, and formed her own conclusions unchecked.” Bulwer hints that this early exposure to adult conversation was not beneficial to the formation of Lucretia’s character. Despite the gallantry and gentility of Sir Miles’s guests, Bulwer warns that “[i]t has a great influence upon a child, whether for good or for evil, to mix early and habitually with those grown up.” Indeed, although Sir Miles’s associates avoid “all allusions, for which the prudent matron would send her girls out of the room,” their gossip, which privileged wealth, inheritance, and station over “quiet goodness,” encourages Lucretia to value only those traits which lead to money, influence, or grandeur.

Thus, by the time Olivier Dalibard begins tutoring Lucretia at age sixteen, she has already developed some questionable characteristics, such as her propensity for slyness and calculation. Dalibard’s training, while helping Lucretia to conquer some of her shortcomings, also confirms her sense of intellectual superiority and encourages her to adopt a morally questionable view of the world. Like the conversations she heard in her youth, Dalibard also emphasizes the importance of ambition, power, and wealth. This nurturing of Lucretia’s flaws is not accomplished by accident. Dalibard obviously has some ulterior motives driving his education of Lucretia:

If the Provençal had taken more than common pains with his young pupil, the pains were not solely disinterested. In plunging her mind amidst that profound corruption which

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165 58.
166 58.
167 58.
168 59.
belongs only to intellect cultivated in scorn of good, and in suppression of heart, he had his own views to serve. He watched the age when the passions ripen; and he grasped at the fruit which his training sought to mature.\textsuperscript{169}

This passage serves two purposes. First, it makes clear that Lucretia has received an education premised solely on logical, materialist calculation and formed to discourage generous moral impulses. Additionally, by emphasizing words such as “corruption” and “ripe[ning] passion,” Bulwer also reveals Dalibard’s sexual motivations for instructing Lucretia. Cold, worldly, and calculating, Dalibard’s goal is to shape Lucretia into an intellectually sympathetic mate who will aid in his political schemes and bring into the marriage a large fortune. While working to awaken Lucretia’s intellectual promise, the crafty Dalibard has also been trying to awaken his pupil’s budding sexuality. As a sign of an already too-worldly nature, Lucretia recognizes and (at least initially) foils Dalibard’s sexual designs; but by linking sexual desire specifically to Lucretia’s education, Bulwer nonetheless suggests that her training has been deeply corrupted and that she has been exposed to all sorts of knowledge usually forbidden to young women.

Part of the “forbidden” aspect of Lucretia’s education is the “masculine” nature of the “studies which her erudite tutor opened to a grasping and inquisitive mind.”\textsuperscript{170} Like Ethel Churchill, Lucretia makes a distinction between what are properly “female” and “male” spheres of learning. Instead of exclusively learning “what ladies generally know—French and Italian, and such like,” Lucretia has been exposed to an educational regimen more fit for a man than a future wife and mother.\textsuperscript{171} As Laura Ciolkowski notes, “like an eldest son heir to the wealth and position of the St. John family, Lucretia is provided with all the trappings of masculine power”\textsuperscript{172}—including an education seemingly designed for a politically ambitious young man:

\begin{quote}
I saw, or fancied I saw, in you a mind congenial to my own—a mind above the frivolities of your sex—a mind, in short, with the grasp and energy of a man’s. You were then but a child; you are scarcely yet a woman; yet have I not given to your intellect the strong food on which the statesmen of Florence fed their pupil-princes; or the noble Jesuits, the noble men who were destined to extend the secret empire of the imperishable Loyola?\textsuperscript{173}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{169} 60.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} 50; 30.
\textsuperscript{173} 30.
This description of Lucretia’s education is illuminating both because it confirms that her mind is like “a man’s” and that she has had the same training as powerful and politically “great” men, such as the “statesmen of Florence” and “the noble Jesuits.” Significantly, both the Jesuits and the Florentine statesmen are rather suspect role-models for young women. In addition to the general “Victorian paranoia about Jesuitism,” nineteenth-century writers characterized the Jesuits as revolutionary, greedy, predatory and conniving.\textsuperscript{174} Italian Renaissance statesmen, too, were presented as hungry for power and obsessed with promoting their familial interests—characteristics which certainly went against socially prescribed images of Victorian women as gentle, charitable, and selfless. Indeed, when later contemplating the death of her niece, Lucretia’s early “adopt[ion] of the Machiavelism of ancient statecraft as a rule admissible in private life” allows her to coldly justify the murder as merely “the removal of a barrier between her aim and her end.”\textsuperscript{175} Having assumed the role of an adoptive mother towards the doomed Helen, Lucretia’s crime becomes a complete perversion of her femininity, which has been enabled through the “male” logic she so prizes. As with the Countess Marchmont, Lucretia has also been taught to despise traditionally female concerns of love and nurturing (the so-called “frivolities of [her] sex”) in favor of masculine ambitions.

Just as Lucretia identifies Dalibard’s sexual motivations and secret intentions, she also realizes—to an extent—that her education has been a form of corruption or poison. Although she deeply values her superior intellect, Lucretia also has some serious misgivings about the nature of her training. In speaking to Dalibard, Lucretia admits that:

“You gave me the taste for knowledge rare in my sex, I own,” answered Lucretia, with a slight tone of regret in her voice; “and in the knowledge you have communicated I felt a charm that, at times, seems to me to be only fatal. You have confounded in my mind evil and good, or, rather you have left both good and evil as dead ashes, as the dust and cinder of a crucible. Of late, I wish that my tutor had been a village priest.”\textsuperscript{176}

A number of shallowly submerged concerns are raised by this passage; first, Bulwer affirms that there is a causal link between Lucretia’s academic pursuits and her moral corruption and he foreshadows the eventual “fatal” criminal applications of this education. The confusion Lucretia feels—particularly about the distinction between good and evil—reveals that her purely

\textsuperscript{175} 335.
\textsuperscript{176} 30-1.
intellectual approach to the world has left her morally bereft. Lucretia even begins to “wish” that, like her sister, she had received a more spiritual and properly “feminine” education at the hands of the “village priest.” The references to scientific implements, such as the “crucible” of the passage, reveal that Lucretia’s education has been scientific in nature and opposes this education to the moral guidance she would have received from the local clergyman. Therefore, like Landon, Bulwer also differentiates scientific education from religion, suggesting that the two are incompatible and that science erodes spirituality and morality.

To illustrate the full impact of Lucretia’s “masculine” studies, Bulwer demonstrates that they have not only had a significant impact on her mental formation—situating her more as a cunning and politically savvy man than a gentle, domestic woman—but also her physical formation. In keeping with Victorian ideas about physiognomy, Lucretia’s outer appearance mirrors her inherent characteristics and masculine mind; her body becomes a site where we can “read” the internal conflict between competing feminine and masculine traits. In descriptions that are highly evocative of Landon’s portrayal of Henrietta’s appearance, Bulwer reveals Lucretia to be a strange, and eerily seductive, blend of masculine and feminine physical traits. He begins with illustrating her body as perfectly feminine—“a figure more perfect never served for model to a sculptor”—yet with one flaw: the hand.\textsuperscript{177} Lucretia has “more the hand of a man than a woman; the shape had a man's nervous distinctness, the veins swelled like sinews, the joints of the fingers were marked and prominent. In that hand, it almost seemed as if the iron force of the character betrayed itself.”\textsuperscript{178} Instead of the soft, white, and delicate hands of a young aristocratic woman, Lucretia’s strong, sinewy hands bespeak her tremendous mental power. As Bulwer suggests, these are the hands of a scholar, not the hands of a properly idle young woman—a point which further confirms Lucretia’s intellectual training and mental power.

Despite this one flaw, Lucretia still has “the form of Agrippina;” but she also has the “head of Augustus.” Thus, the reader must turn to a description of Lucretia’s face in order to fully grasp the conflict between her masculine and feminine physical traits. For example, Lucretia’s hair, which is worn “clustered in profuse curls over the forehead” still cannot “conceal a slight line or wrinkle between the brows; and this line, rare in women at any age, rare even in

\textsuperscript{177} 70.
\textsuperscript{178} 71.
men at hers, gave an expression at once of thought and sternness to the whole face.” Here, Bulwer suggests that Lucretia’s hair, a symbol of her womanhood, cannot disguise the physical markings of her manly “thought[fullness] and sternness.” Therefore, throughout the text, Lucretia is presented as an inherent contradiction: she has a feminine body and sensibility but a masculine mind and ambition. In the words of Laura Ciolkowski, Lucretia “is a problem subject whose feminine beauty codes her as a woman but whose disdain for the protected field of the home and whose desire for power in the public sphere of politics codes her as a man.” As with the Countess Marchmont, the irreconcilability of this opposition between the masculine and feminine aspects of Lucretia’s character prefigures the heroine’s ultimate descent into madness.

While Lucretia’s “masculine” education has given her a taste for power and influence, it is particularly her scientific training that facilitates her crimes. As the allusions to science in descriptions of Lucretia’s education indicate, a large part of her tutoring has been dedicated to the fields of science and medicine. Although Bulwer is not as explicit as Landon in illustrating the extent of his heroine’s knowledge of science, in Lucretia he makes several allusions to the titular character’s vast scientific capacities. For example, in her attempt to prognosticate her uncle’s death—which she believes will allow her to marry Mainwaring—Lucretia is able to effortlessly interpret medical texts:

Moon and Starbeam, ye love what lovers read by the lamp in the loneliness. No love-ditty this; no yet holier lesson to patience, and moral to hope. What hast thou, young girl, strong in health, and rich in years, with the lore of the leech,—with prognostics, and symptoms, and diseases? She is tracing with hard eyes the signs that precede the grim enemy, in his most sudden approach—the habits that invite him, the warnings that he gives. He whose wealth shall make her free, has twice had the visiting shock,—he starves not, he lives free! She closes the volume, and, musing, metes him out the hours and days he has to live. Shrink back, ye rays! The love is disenhallowed: while the hand was on the rose, the thought was on the charnel.

It is important to note that in this passage Bulwer couches Lucretia’s examination of a medical text within the typically romantic device of a young woman musing about her lover in the moonlight. The romance of the scene is perverted, however, when the young woman engages in

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179 71.
180 Ciolkowski: 81.
181 82
the morally dubious task of predicting the death of her guardian. At the same time Bulwer demonstrates Lucretia’s superior scientific training, he also opposes this knowledge to more feminine concerns of love and romance.

Much later in the novel, after her marriage to Dalibard, her tutor-turned-husband completes his scientific education of Lucretia by introducing her to “experiments in chemistry,” his avowed “favorite study.” Finding his wife engrossed in reading a book of historical poisonings, Dalibard suggests that “it might be amusing to a chemist to learn exactly what were the compounds of those ancient poisons.” A short time after this conversation, the reader is informed that “Lucretia stood by her husband’s side” in his secret attic laboratory. Though Bulwer chooses not to show the scene of Lucretia and Dalibard together in the laboratory, the reader does learn that a short time after this event a rich relative of Dalibard’s mysteriously dies. Subsequent references to Lucretia’s use of poison even further illuminate the nature of Dalibard’s teachings. After her husband’s death, for example, Lucretia retains a manuscript entitled “Philosophical and Chemical Inquiries into the Nature and Materials of the Poisons in Use between the 14th and 16th Centuries” which she later uses as a guidebook for mixing her poisons. The deadly chemical recipes found within this volume certainly require a certain amount of medical and chemical skill to create and successfully administer, as the poisons are designed to act as “counterfeits of natural disease.” These chemical mixtures:

[. . .] aimed at creating, by artificial means, the maladies that might seem the most commonly incidental to our human infirmities;—fever, in especial, in all its gradations, from the slow and wasting to the rapid and devouring; here, too, for more immediate purposes, were the ingredients to strike the heart, produce the aneurism, or destroy at once, by the sudden spasms of the angina pectoris; here were the prescriptions which teach to simulate the effects of passion and emotion, which send the blood to the brain, call the laugh from delirium, bid the surgeon moralize on the connexion between mind and matter, and warn his listeners of the peril of all abrupt shocks upon the nerves. [. . .]

Eschewing the revealing minerals, and concocted only from vegetable venoms which

\begin{itemize}
\item[182] 193
\item[183] 197
\item[184] 197
\item[185] 218
\item[186] 179
\end{itemize}
defy all posthumous examination, and prove the impotence of tests, the science of Murder promised impunity from law.\textsuperscript{187}

The reader has already been introduced to Lucretia’s skill in interpreting medical texts, which is confirmed by Bulwer’s use of medical terms such as “aneurism” or “angina pectoris.” This passage reveals that Dalibard’s education of Lucretia includes teaching his wife how to carefully mix and combine chemicals in order to kill without detection. In addition, by “defy[ing] all posthumous examination” this knowledge is situated as more specialized and powerful than ordinary medical or chemical training. In the scenes where Lucretia poisons Helen, Bulwer carefully outlines how she methodically murders her unsuspecting niece through slowly and expertly adulterating her medicine. That Helen’s strange illness baffles her physician attests to Lucretia’s scientific training in poison.

In a move similar to what Landon accomplishes in \textit{Ethel Churchill}, Bulwer uses Lucretia’s misguided education as a tactic to build sympathy for her character. As was typical for Newgate novels, \textit{Lucretia} presents its heroine as a sympathetic character and underscores the social inequities that motivated her crimes. Bulwer begins to demonstrate the rigid class and gender codes that control Lucretia’s life through an anecdote about her mother, Sir Miles’s sister Mrs. Clavering. Having first married to please her family, Bulwer ironically mentions that when “Mrs. Clavering married again” she was “under the mistaken notion that she had the right to choose for herself.”\textsuperscript{188} This second marriage to a country doctor caused a permanent estrangement between Lucretia’s mother and her uncle, who did not approve of her choice. Bulwer goes on to add that: “[t]hose who ventured to suggest that Mrs. Clavering, as a widow, was a free agent, were regarded with suspicion. It was the time French principles were just beginning to be held in horror, especially in the provinces, and when everything that encroached upon the rights and prejudices of the high-born was called ‘a French principle.’”\textsuperscript{189} The rhetoric of this passage is important to note, as it suggests that the right for women to choose their mates is a dangerous and revolutionary idea that for the sake of “Englishness” should be promptly squelched. From her childhood, Lucretia learns that her destiny is to a large degree dependent on

\textsuperscript{187} Bulwer, Edward. \textit{Lucretia; Or, the Children of Night}. 2 vols. Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1846: 179. There are some differences between the first volume of \textit{Lucretia} and subsequent volumes printed during or after 1853, mainly relating to the ending. In the first edition, Lucretia successfully kills the innocent Helen, but public outcry caused Bulwer to revise this ending and extract some passages (especially those which outlined Lucretia’s criminal plotting in detail) which could be construed as providing guidance to would-be criminals.

\textsuperscript{188} 47.

\textsuperscript{189} 48.
the will and caprice of men—particularly her uncle. After all, Lucretia is highly aware that while she was adopted by her maternal uncle, her half-sister Susan, the product of their mother’s second marriage, is not even allowed to visit at Laughton.

Unlike Landon’s Countess Marchmont, who for a time maintains a belief that she can find fulfillment in “society,” Lucretia is barely of age before she realizes that her ambitions can have very few “proper” outlets. For example, when her cousin and suitor Charles Vernon teases that Lucretia could find her “empire” in London she responds: “You forget that I am not a man. Man, indeed, may hope for an empire. It is something to be a Pitt, or even a Warren Hastings.” When he suggests that “[a] woman has an empire more undisputed than Mr. Pitt's, and more pitiless than that of Governor Hastings” she tersely replies that “[a] woman's empire over gauze and ribbons, over tea-tables and drums, over fops and coquettes, is not worth a journey from Laughton to London.”

Lucretia knows that only through a man—either a husband or son—can she have access to the power that she desires. Yet, as Bulwer suggests, Lucretia’s fate could have been different. If she had found a “happy and well-placed love” with a strong and sympathetic mate, then “her ambition might have had legitimate vents.” Thus, Helen Small is correct in asserting that Lucretia gives its heroine “a capacity for criminal cunning which it denounces as masculine and, ultimately, monstrous, yet it insists on making a bid for sympathy by alluding sentimentally to the woman she would have been if not for the loss of her first lover and the corrupting tutorship of Oliver Dalibard.”

Lucretia, of course, is doomed not to marry a man who will soften her heart and productively funnel her talents; instead, under emotional duress, she makes the false move of wedding Dalibard. Again, Bulwer attempts to gain sympathy for his heroine through placing her into circumstances where she has little power or choice. Dalibard has found a wealthy widow who will better serve his political ambitions than his wife, and begins to poison Lucretia. Her only way to escape death is to arrange for his political assassination. As one reviewer writes, at this point in the novel “my sympathy, at least, now passes to Lucretia. Demon against demon, a young she-demon ought to be preferred to the middle-aged demon of the other sex who has

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190 75-6
191 61.
perverted, betrayed, and ruined her.”

But, as the reviewer goes onto note, “it is a very serious defect in the artistic composition of the novel, viewed as a work of art, that our sympathy is permitted at this point to rest so strongly with [Dalibard’s] executioners.” Indeed, as the novel progressed, many readers found it more and more difficult to sustain empathy for Lucretia’s character. Lucretia next turns to crime when she uses the knowledge she gleaned from Dalibard to poison her second husband. Again, Bulwer highlights the inequality and powerlessness of Lucretia’s position. Having discovered that her second husband, Braddell, is small-minded, hypocritical, and deceitful, Lucretia initially tries to separate from her husband by fleeing the home with their son. But, Braddell discovers her hiding place and “there was no resisting the power which all civilised laws give to the rights of husband and father.” Perhaps the word “civilized” should be read ironically here, as Bulwer is referring to the laws which gave husbands exclusive child custody and the right to enforce cohabitation—even when the man was corrupt and cruel. Legally, at least, Lucretia is powerless against her husband and must return to his home, and she experiences first-hand the unfair cultural and legal codes that dictate women’s lives.

Although some readers could perhaps have maintained sympathy for Lucretia when she murders Braddell to secure her freedom, many readers could not sustain empathy for her once she embarks on her plan to poison the innocent young Helen in order to secure the estates of Laughton for her son. Even though Lucretia purportedly has a “maternal” reason for plotting to murder Helen, her desire to live vicariously through her son’s newly gained power also signals the “masculine” motivations of her actions and seriously clouds the novel’s sympathetic approach to Lucretia’s character. Indeed, by the time that Lucretia poisons Helen she has become increasingly masculinized; for example, in a previously quoted passage, Lucretia’s poisons “prove the impotence of [toxicological] tests” and situate her as a femme fatale capable of intellectually castrating medical men and scientists alike. The death of her son further confirms Lucretia’s strange blend of masculine and feminine parts: unaware that the vagrant Beck is her lost son, Lucretia uses a specially made ring that has a secret poisoned barb in order to murder Beck. The feminine appearance of the ring, and its masculine ability to penetrate and

194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
inject poison, becomes a synecdoche for Lucretia’s own destructive and unnatural combination of masculinity and femininity.

By adopting masculine ambitions and using a figurative poisoned “phallus” to commit murder, Lucretia can no longer simply be a victim of social circumstances that underprivileged women; instead, she has become an active masculinized villain and murderer of an innocent. Helen Small is correct in her suggestion that this “lurch[ing] between subjective, sympathetic rendering of her emotional conflicts, and distanced condemnation of an irredeemable criminality” reveals “Bulwer-Lytton's own uncertainty about the degree of sympathy that could be afforded to Lucretia, seriously undermines his novel's coherence.”\textsuperscript{196} Bulwer attempts to rectify this incoherence with Lucretia’s discovery that she has accidentally poisoned her own son and her descent into madness. Yet, even in the final description of the insane Lucretia as “a grisly, squalid, ferocious mockery of a human being” Bulwer cannot help adding that the evil murderess has become an “experiment” for her mad-doctors, who treat her as “a subject to be dealt with unscrupulously in that living dissection-hall.”\textsuperscript{197} To the end, Lucretia still remains a “victim” of unfair and exploitative circumstances.

As we have seen, despite Bulwer’s move to recast Lucretia as an unsympathetic villain in the last third of the novel, the issue of sympathy toward her character remains unresolved. Moreover, empathy for Lucretia is at the crux of critical reception to \textit{Lucretia} and the labeling of the novel as “Newgate” fiction. Critics warned that Newgate fiction often displayed an inappropriate amount of sympathy for its criminals, and they worried that excessive empathy for fictional criminals could make audiences identify too strongly with the characters. Thus, unlike \textit{Ethel Churchill}, reviewers of \textit{Lucretia} were unconvinced that a “useful end” could be derived from a work that went about “feeding the fancy” with ideas of murder only to attempt to counteract the damage with the weak “moral, that if the reader should seek to poison his nearest relatives to get at their property, he may possibly end his days in a madhouse, or find himself chained to a grave stealer in Norfolk Island?”\textsuperscript{198} As this review of \textit{Lucretia} indicates, it was particularly when crime narratives were “decorated by the false lustre which the imagination of a romance writer can throw over things in themselves the most disgusting, that the details of offenses of this kind become first endurable, then interesting and exciting, and in the end too

\textsuperscript{196} 149; 154.
\textsuperscript{197} 491; 492.
\textsuperscript{198} “[Rev. of] \textit{Lucretia.}” \textit{Westminster and Quarterly Review.} 46.2 (1847): 618.
frequently suggestive of crime to the ill-regulated minds of weak and unprincipled readers.”

As this passage demonstrates, some Victorians believed that admiration for criminal characters could excite certain readers into emulating these fictional criminals and even reproducing their crimes.

Ironically, even though Bulwer’s avowed purpose in writing *Lucretia* was to demonstrate the danger of certain types of educational systems, his critics charged him with writing one of many “convenient hand-books of poisoning, for the guidance and instruction of the public.”

In fact, the *London Medical Gazette* was so concerned about *Lucretia’s* impact on the public that it dedicated several articles to warning medical practitioners about the dangers of such literature. These articles declared that works like *Lucretia* actually taught potential criminals how to commit murder and were directly responsible for “occasioning the late frightful increase of assassinations by poison.” The particular problem with *Lucretia* is that the novel was too scientific and too inventive with its criminal schemes; or, in the words of the *London Medical Gazette*, this novel “is deserving of censure for having recalled to the notice of men facts which should have been allowed to slumber in oblivion.”

Thus, just like *Lucretia*, these critiques of the novel are participating in the Victorian debate about the nature of education and who should have access to potentially “dangerous” forms of knowledge. In the eyes of *London Medical Gazette*, *Lucretia* is a symptom of a much larger trend in society that allows non-specialists access to science. In addition to faulting the novel, the articles also take offense at other avenues for disseminating knowledge, such as open scientific lecturers:

> We regret to say, that the Gallery in question has not been by any means the only place in which mixed London audiences have recently been indoctrinated in the elements of toxicology. Scarcely twelve months have elapsed since we were present at a comprehensive popular lecture on chemistry, in which the entire detail of the nature and powers of hydrocyanic acid was practically imparted by an able chemist to a large concourse of ladies and non-professional gentlemen.

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200 Ibid.
201 191.
202 243.
This passage’s emphasis on “mixed” audiences of “ladies and non-professional gentlemen” reveals exactly who the *London Medical Gazette* feared would criminally benefit from this knowledge. Thus, the *London Medical Gazette* comes to the same conclusion as Bulwer does in *Lucretia*: certain populations should be barred from learning dangerous forms of scientific knowledge. This article goes on to declare “that scientific men should exercise the most conscientious vigilance in guarding against the promulgation of destructive knowledge among the community at large.” Only doctors, the journal claimed, could protect the public from dangerous, “poisonous,” reading materials.

Bulwer was so mortified at these reactions to *Lucretia* that he eventually rewrote the ending to accommodate public taste. In the 1853 edition, Helen no longer dies at the hands of Lucretia but lives to marry her distant cousin and becomes mistress of Laughton. Bulwer was also so scarred by the outcry against *Lucretia* that he never again ventured into Newgate territory, turning his literary interests to more critically acceptable forms of fiction. Bulwer felt that the reaction against *Lucretia* was unfair—and in many ways he was right. After all, he had drawn from an earlier (and acceptable) literary tradition for his approach to crime and education, even if the Newgate form allowed him to more violently demonstrate the consequences of suspect education than what Landon could offer in her society novel. What these strong reactions to Bulwer’s novel demonstrate is that between the publication of *Ethel Churchill* and *Lucretia* the culture had changed. The increase in poisoning crimes—which was to reach “epidemic” levels in the 1850s and 1860s—was beginning to draw serious public attention. In particular, Bulwer’s focus on the female criminal who poisons husbands and dependents within the home was touching an area of the Victorian psyche that was growing increasingly sensitive. As we shall see in the next chapter, the issue of domestic poisoning exploded in the next few decades, largely defining the Victorian image of the poisoner.
CHAPTER THREE:

PHYSIOGNOMY, SENSATION, AND THE “INVISIBLE” POISONER IN DICKENS’S “HUNTED DOWN’ AND ELIOT’S “THE LIFTED VEIL.”

Beginning in 1856 with the trial of William Palmer, Britain experienced a wave of high-profile poisoning cases that lasted for almost a decade. In response to this surge the Illustrated Times noted that “there are fashions in crime as in everything else” and suggested that mid-century England was experiencing a poisoning fad. The Illustrated Times was not alone in its assessment. Following quickly after William Palmer’s conviction were the murder trials of Madeleine Smith (1857), Thomas Smethurst (1859), and Edward Pritchard (1865)—a succession of crimes which certainly led to the perception that poisonings were reaching epidemic levels. Fueling growing fears about the increase in poisoning crimes were highly sensationalized accounts of these trials that received extensive coverage in Victorian newspapers and periodicals. As a result of this reporting, each one of the aforementioned trials received wide-spread attention that reflects the mingled horror and fascination that poisoning crimes inspired. For example, thousands gathered outside the courtroom to hear the Madeleine Smith verdict and up to fifty thousand onlookers attended Palmer’s hanging. Although the poisoning “epidemic” abated after the mid-1860s, the public retained its taste for these cases and poisoning deaths ensured good sales of papers and periodicals through the end of the century, as evidenced by the interest in the Adelaide Bartlett (1886) and Florence Maybrick (1889) inquests.

Although the number of poisoning cases occurring at mid-century in part accounts for the public interest garnered by accused poisoners like Smith or Palmer, these cases were particularly fascinating because they presented a “new” type of criminal: the middle-class murderer. Palmer, Smith, Smethurst, and Pritchard all came from solidly middle-class backgrounds and, in the case of the men, were all educated professionals. Their involvement in these crimes proved that deviance was not the exclusive purview of the lower and working classes, but was present even in “genteel” society. Thus, despite ample evidence that “poisoning was primarily a crime of the

204 “Crime of the Age.” Illustrated Times. 36(1856): 64.
poor and underprivileged,” it was the high profile trials of middle- or upper-class women which captured the Victorian imagination and inspired fear in the masses.\textsuperscript{206} Even worse, all of these cases involved defendants who did not fit the usual criminal “types.” Instead of being dirty, deformed, or brutish, accused poisoners like Pritchard were described as “handsome and gentlemanly” while others like Palmer had “peculiarly fascinating manners.”\textsuperscript{207} Outwardly, at least, there was nothing in their appearance or manners that bespoke the criminality and violence simmering under the surface. Law enforcement, judges, juries, and the press often were dumbfounded at the seemingly normal appearance of the men and women accused of poisoning crimes, and news reports made the most of the cultural “invisibility” of poisoners. Madeleine Smith, for instance, was described as having a “keen and animated expression and healthful complexion,” and attire that was clean, elegant and modest.\textsuperscript{208} Summing up her appearance, one reporter admitted that “[a]lltogether she had a most attractive appearance, and her very aspect and demeanor seemed to advocate her cause.”\textsuperscript{209} As these examples demonstrate, “[n]ewspaper accounts of the Victorian courtroom reinforced the idea of the inscrutable poisoner, and suggested to readers that the external appearances of suspects were unreliable guides to their true actions.”\textsuperscript{210} To counteract the growing public concern that secret poisoners were circulating freely in society, the practices of phrenology and physiognomy were often employed to identify physical features which distinguished criminal tendencies. Despite articles such as “Palmer’s Head,” which provided a phrenological post-mortem of the “extreme predominance of secretiveness,” the “utter want of conscientiousness,” and the “defect in the higher reflective powers” visible in Palmer’s features, the cultural trope of the invisible poisoner became even more entrenched.\textsuperscript{211} By mid-century, then, the poisoner had become emblematic of deception, disguise, and unstable identity; these murderers undermined the use of physiognomy in criminals.

\textsuperscript{208} \textit{Times}. 2 July 1857: 9.A.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{210} Burney, Ian: 16.
\textsuperscript{211} “Palmer’s Head.” \textit{The Medical World}. 1.2 (1857): 34.
The poisoner’s subversion of traditional modes of identifying and recognizing criminality marks a wider cultural shift occurring during the 1850s and 1860s. In fiction, this shift manifests in the development of the sensational genre—a new type of literature, first introduced with Wilkie Collins’s 1859 novel *The Woman in White*, that is often obsessed with unstable identity and transgressive criminality within the middle-classes. But the links between the development of sensation fiction and mid-century poison go beyond shared cultural concerns. Several Victorian authors, such as Collins, found direct inspiration in these poisoning trials. John Sutherland identifies the Palmer trial as “the one which Wilkie Collins credits with inspiring him to write *The Woman in White*,” and he argues that the narrative structure of the novel was inspired by the extensive use of circumstantial evidence used to prove Palmer’s guilt. Irene Tucker also explores the implications of the trial on the first sensational novel, finding that the fraught issues of identity and bodily integrity in the text are directly linked to the cultural unease about somatic literacy raised by the inability of toxicologists to locate poison in John Cook’s murdered body. The sensation genre’s employment of deadly chemicals, however, was not limited to Collins’s fiction. As Piya Pal-Lapinski points out, “poison was, of course, one of the preoccupations of Victorian sensation fiction” and many other authors also relied on the trope of the poisoner to explore domestic crime within the middle classes. This chapter argues that George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” (1859) and Charles Dickens’s “Hunted Down” (1859) anticipate the rise of sensation fiction by both employing poisoning tropes and drawing from the cases of real-life poisoners to examine many of the same issues—such as crime, secrecy, identity, and disguise—that informed Collins’s texts.

In arguing that these short stories by Eliot and Dickens—authors primarily known for their contributions to Victorian realism—are sensational in nature, this chapter looks to broaden our understanding of the cross-pollination that took place between these two disparate genres. For the Victorians, at least, “realism” and “sensation” were generally thought to be mutually

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212 Sutherland, John. “Wilkie Collins and the Origins of the Sensational Novel.” *Wilkie Collins to the Forefront: Some Reassessments*. Ed. Nelson C. Smith and Reginald Charles Terry. New York: AMS P, 1995: 86. For more on how the Palmer case affected the structure of *The Woman in White*, please see chapter 4. In addition, the Palmer case and other poisoning cases (such as the Madeleine Smith trial) influenced some of Collins’s other works, including *The Law and the Lady* and *Armadale*.


exclusive terms. In his autobiography, for instance, Anthony Trollope wrote that there “is a great division made” between “sensational novels and anti-sensational” and that “the novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic.”

Even though Trollope believed that the best novels had the characteristics of both genres, he admitted that these works were rarely viewed as hybrids. This division between realist and sensational works has been carried into contemporary scholarship. Although Eliot’s works feature sensational motifs such as murder and adultery, critics have rarely investigated the influence of this emergent genre on her novels. While critics have been more open to exploring the relationship between Dickens and sensation, there has been little consensus about his participation in the genre. Most critics would probably agree with Marlene Tromp that Dickens is a “forefather of sensation” because his early works of crime and mystery paved the way for later novelists like Collins; but they cannot seem to agree precisely when Dickens began producing works that can be termed “sensational.”

Some critics, like Diana C. Archibald, have argued that Dickens was working within the sensation genre as early as his 1837 novel *Oliver Twist*, while others draw from contemporary reviews of his works to suggest that Dickens, always sensitive to changing public tastes, began writing sensation only after it became popular in the 1860s. By focusing on works that Eliot and Dickens wrote in 1859—sensation’s moment of conception—this chapter aims to demonstrate that these two authors did, in fact, contribute to the development of the sensational genre. “The Lifted Veil” and “Hunted Down” rely on the sensational trope of the domestic poisoner in order to explore how middle-class crime was threatening the safety and purity of the domestic sphere; but through their use of disguise and deception, these poisoners also evoke a “crisis” in representations of criminality that were central to development of sensation fiction. As Lillian Craton recognizes, “For Collins and other sensation writers, crime and detection plots raise an important question: can we assess individual character from a face or body? Victorian social science and criminology (sometimes calling upon the practices of phrenology and physiognomy) worked hard to show that we can, and while the sensation genre demonstrates the strength of that impulse, it raises questions about the real possibility for such

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assessments.” Like other sensational works, Eliot’s and Dickens’s texts also investigate the “real possibility” that personal character can be read in the face or bone structure through their incorporation of physiognomic frameworks; yet both works also incorporate the sensational idea that the concept of transparent identity is flawed and subject to subversion. This chapter begins by examining how Dickens’s “Hunted Down” presents physiognomy as a legitimate science capable of recognizing even the most slippery of criminals—the poisoner—while it also suggests that disguise and deception can undermine the validity of these readings. In “The Lifted Veil” Eliot is even less willing than Dickens to promote the practice or depend on physiognomy to reveal the invisibility of the poisoner. Eliot explores the concept of physiognomy through the clairvoyance of her narrator, Latimer, and his ability to read the thoughts of those around him. What Latimer discovers is that there is rarely a similitude between appearance and character and more often than not a person’s exterior characteristics do not reflect their inner desires and motivations. Yet, even with Latimer’s supernatural omniscience, he has difficulty “reading” his wife Bertha—the poisoner of the text. In order to combat her invisibility Eliot draws from the physiognomy of real-life poisoners for her delineation of Bertha’s appearance. Again, however, Eliot finds this science insufficient and instead she relies on mythological and historical representations of the female poisoner to characterize Bertha and help reveal her murderous propensities.

“Hunted Down”

In his famous essay “Pen, Pencil, and Poison,” Oscar Wilde reminded the Victorian public of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a man who was “not merely a poet and a painter and an art-critic, an antiquarian, and a writer of prose, an amateur of beautiful things, and a dilettante of things delightful, but also a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in this or any age.” Perhaps the most famous Victorian poisoner to never be prosecuted for murder, Wainewright interested not only Wilde but earlier authors such as Edward Bulwer and Charles Dickens. As mentioned in the previous chapter,

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Wainewright is the inspiration for Gabriel Varney in Bulwer’s novel *Lucretia; or the Children of the Night*, but he is also the pattern for several of Dickens’s villains, including Jonas Chuzzlewit and, more famously, the character of Slinkton in his short story “Hunted Down.” Dickens’s fascination with Wainewright probably began during his 1839 tour of Newgate Gaol, which he took with Hablot Browne and W.C. Macready. Unexpectedly, the three prison tourists encountered Wainewright, who was then awaiting his transportation to Australia. As John Forster records it, the Dickens was surprised by Macready’s exclamation of “My God! there’s Wainewright!” and “In the shabby-genteel creature, with sandy disordered hair and dirty moustache, who turned quickly round with a defiant stare at our entrance, looking at once mean and fierce, and quite capable of the cowardly murders he had committed, Macready had been horrified to recognise a man familiarly known to him at former years, and at whose table he had dined.”

From Dickens’s perspective, Wainewright, who was then convicted of fraud and awaiting transportation, may certainly have looked “quite capable of the cowardly murders he committed,” but many other commentators found it harder to reconcile Wainewright’s appearance with his guilt. Thomas de Quincey, who had met Wainewright on several occasions, wrote that “[i]t is remarkable also by the contrast which existed in this case between the murderer's dandy appearance and the terrific purposes with which he was always dallying.”

As De Quincey’s account demonstrates, Wainewright’s highly polished appearance challenged the conventional belief that a criminal’s corrupted moral nature would be reflected in an ugly, brutally strong, deformed, or sinister-looking body. Victorian stereotypes about criminality and appearance lead to a great deal of variation in physical descriptions of Wainewright, and impressions of him post-conviction highlight ominous qualities not found in earlier accounts of his appearance. William Carew Hazlitt notes this trend, writing:

> I have heard his expression depicted as “at once reflective and fascinating, and his eyes stealthy in their glances,” but I have also met with accounts which appeared to me to demonstrate the man’s thorough power and not unfrequent [sic] custom of looking people

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While Hazlitt attempts to correct accounts that exaggerated the sinister qualities of Wainewright’s appearance, later in the same essay even he feels compelled to point out that Wainewright’s large head is a physiognomic trait of known murderers.\footnote{Ibid.} Hazlitt’s attempts to expose blatantly revisionist descriptions of Wainewright while also confirming the criminality inherent in the poisoner’s appearance reflects the problem murderers like Wainewright posed to Victorian physiognomy. Wainewright’s seemingly “normal” appearance and his reputation as a charming gentleman challenged Victorian stereotypes of criminal “types” and caused public unease about the increasing prevalence of respectable, middle-class murderers.

Dickens himself was much invested in debates about the accuracy of physiognomy—especially in relation to certain types of criminals, like poisoners, who were thought to be particularly inscrutable. Years after he met Wainewright, Dickens was drawn into contemporary discussions about the William Palmer poisoning trial. Disturbed by accounts of Palmer which emphasized that “his countenance was entirely devoid of that forbidding expression which we are taught to look for in murderers,” Dickens wrote an essay entitled “The Demeanour of Murderers” for \textit{Household Words}.\footnote{Palmer, William. \textit{The Illustrated Life and Career of William Palmer of Rugeley}. London: Ward and Lock, 1856: 114.} In this essay, Dickens firmly asserts the effectiveness of physiognomy in determining guilt and denies that Palmer’s is an exceptional case:

\begin{quote}
In passing, we will express an opinion that Nature never writes a bad hand. Her writing, as it may be read in the human countenance, is invariably legible, if we come at all trained to the reading of it. Some little weighing and comparing are necessary. It is not enough in turning our eyes on the demon in the Dock, to say he has a fresh color, or a high head, or a bluff manner, or what not, and therefore he does not look like a murderer, and we are surprised and shaken. The physiognomy and conformation of the Poisoner whose trial occasions these remarks, were exactly in accordance with his deeds; and every guilty consciousness he had gone on storing up in his mind, had set its mark upon him.\footnote{Dickens, Charles. “The Demeanour of Murderers.” \textit{Household Words}. 13.325(1856): 505.}
\end{quote}
With training and an objective frame of mind, Dickens suggests that anyone can identify even the most collected and polished of criminals. Yet, despite his strong assertion that Palmer’s manner and appearance clearly point to his guilt, Dickens provides rather unsatisfying evidence for this claim. Instead of a careful physiognomic dissection of Palmer’s features, Dickens rests his argument on two main points: first, that Palmer did seem restless at certain points in the trial, and second, that Palmer’s manner in the courtroom was very similar to that of John Thurtell, an earlier convicted murderer. Although Dickens appears confident in his claims, “[b]eneath the loud denunciations of the poisoner's performativity reside anxieties about the social function and ethical significance of role-playing.”226 Palmer’s ability to act the part of the gentleman, and the press’s confused reaction to this performance, disturb Dickens, who grapples (rather unsuccessfully) to reveal the criminality and guilty conscience underneath the poisoner’s polished demeanor.

These same unresolved tensions are present in “Hunted Down,” a short story based on the crimes of Wainewright which appeared three years after this essay. Just as in “The Demeanour of Murderers,” the narrator of “Hunted Down” claims the absolute power of physiognomy to identify criminals; yet, paradoxically, “Hunted Down” presents the difficulty relying on these visual epistemologies of criminal guilt. Although the story privileges the practice of physiognomy, it also celebrates the effectiveness of disguise in subverting those same visual codes. Furthermore, Dickens’s struggle with criminal physiognomy in “Hunted Down” reveals changes occurring in mid-nineteenth-century fiction and anticipates the rise of sensation fiction. Just as Slinkton’s outward appearance as a genteel clergyman-in-training belies his monstrous nature, sensation fiction revealed the extraordinary, criminal, and forbidden underneath the carefully polished veneer of middle-class life. As Lyn Pykett terms it, sensation fiction participated in a form of “reverse physiognomy” which highlighted the disturbing idea “that dark secrets lurk in the most innocent of faces and in the most respectable-looking people.”227 By demonstrating how physiognomy can be subverted, “Hunted Down” raises questions about the legitimacy of this “science” and demonstrates the author’s participation in the development of sensational devices and themes.

Dickens opens “Hunted Down” by invoking competing visual metaphors of “disguise” and “authenticity” through imagery of the theatre. The narrator, a life insurance officer named Mr. Sampson, presents his story as one of the “Romances of the real world” and thus immediately situates his readers as the audience of a play and emphasizes their role as “viewers” of the action. He establishes his narrative authority by highlighting his age and arguing that since he has “come home from the Play” he can better “recall the scenes of the Drama upon which the curtain has fallen, free from the glare, bewilderment, and bustle of the Theatre.”

Here, Sampson characterizes the theatre of life as a site of deception and “bewilderment” that he (through his experience and acquired wisdom) will truthfully interpret for his readers. If Sampson’s world is a stage, then it follows that all the men and women in his story will be players; and, indeed, the images of costuming and acting associated with the theatre foreshadow the use of disguise and deception that occur in the story. Having evoked the themes of watching and visual interpretation, Sampson then transitions into a sermon on the importance and accuracy of physiognomy:

There is nothing truer than physiognomy, taken in connection with manner. The art of reading that book of which Eternal Wisdom obliges every human creature to present his or her own page with the individual character written on it, is a difficult one, perhaps, and is little studied. It may require some natural aptitude, and it must require (for everything does) some patience and some pains.

If all the people of the world are actors, then Sampson argues that physiognomy can be used to see through their costumes and assumed roles; he situates physiognomy as a form of science that endows its practitioners with the power to read character despite disguise or deception. Sampson’s monologue echoes Dickens’s earlier position in “The Demeanour of Murderers” that Nature’s writing “may be read in the human countenance” but only “if we come at all trained to the reading of it.” As in “The Demeanour of Murderers,” Dickens emphasizes that training is the key to successful physiognomic readings. The problem with identifying criminals, then, is not that physiognomy is flawed, but (as Sampson complains) that not enough people have seriously undertaken the task of correctly learning the practice:

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[...] that numbers of people accept a few stock commonplace expressions of the face as the whole list of characteristics, and neither seek nor know the refinements that are truest,—that You, for instance, give a great deal of time and attention to the reading of music, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Hebrew, if you please, and do not qualify yourself to read the face of the master or mistress looking over your shoulder teaching it to you,—I assume to be five hundred times more probable than improbable.  

By contrasting his specialized abilities with his nameless and faceless audience (the “You” of the passage), Sampson obviously situates himself as an authority on physiognomic knowledge; in addition, by characterizing his readers as students, Sampson also designates himself as their educator. In the previous passage, Sampson has already established that the study of physiognomy—the reading of the “book” of “Eternal Wisdom”—is a form of scientific study; here he suggests that the reader-scholar must supplement academic subjects like “Greek” or “Latin” with the study of physiognomy. Like the “master or mistress” of the passage, Sampson places himself into the role of a teacher who will “[look] over the shoulder” of his readers and guide them into correct readings of the faces he puts before them. Dickens, therefore, weaves a specific pedagogical function into the fabric of the story and “Hunted Down” seems, in part, to have been conceived as a complement to “The Demeanour of Murderers.” As in the earlier article, “Hunted Down” also privileges physiognomy and attempts to offer some specific identifying features of the poisoner; yet, despite its assertion to the contrary, the short story reveals the same underlying ambivalence about the effectiveness of physiognomic tools as its predecessor.  

This ambivalence is evident from the very first “lesson” that Sampson presents to his student-readers, which is that the success of physiognomic practice relies primarily on strategies of visual interpretation. Sampson warns his readers that only visual analysis can be relied upon to accurately interpret character, declaring that his methods faltered when he allowed suspicious people “to come nearer to me and explain themselves away.”  

In order to protect himself from these mistakes, Sampson has a “thick plate-glass” partition erected so that he “could see through it what passed in the outer office, without hearing a word.” As a scientific practitioner of physiognomy Sampson attempts to observe people dispassionately, as if they were subjects in a

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230 333-4.  
231 334.
controlled experiment. Yet, as Jennifer Ruth acknowledges, despite Sampson’s efforts to “observ[e] clients as if they were mounted on a microscope slide,” his efforts are often “inadequate” and “insufficient.”²³² For example, by admitting his past misinterpretations and describing his preventative strategies to avoid contamination of the visual, Sampson acknowledges the power of deceptive speech and assumed mannerisms. As we shall see, this acknowledgment forms the crux of the story’s conflict: physiognomy is presented as a legitimate and effective science that nonetheless has the potential to be subverted through deception and disguise.

If Sampson presents “Hunted Down,” as a test case for physiognomy, then Slinkton is its avowed subject. As previously noted, Dickens based Slinkton, not on the more contemporary poisoner William Palmer, but rather on the early nineteenth-century murderer and forger Wainewright. By the time Dickens wrote “Hunted Down,” the story of Wainewright’s notorious murder of his niece was well known—as was Wainewright’s flamboyant appearance. In one of his essays, Wainewright vainly employs the majestic pronoun to describe the “diamond rings on our fingers, the antique cameos in our breast-pins, our cambric pocket-handkerchief breathing forth Attargul, our pale lemon-coloured kid gloves.”²³³ As his own description demonstrates, Wainewright was an unabashed dandy who was especially remembered for his dark hair, which was worn “rather long over the ears and generally dressed and curled across the temples with studied care and parted down the middle.”²³⁴ Dickens’s Slinkton retains his model’s unique hairstyle, but little else:

He was about forty or so, dark, exceedingly well dressed in black,—being in mourning,—and the hand he extended with a polite air, had a particularly well-fitting black-kid glove upon it. His hair, which was elaborately brushed and oiled, was parted straight up the middle; and he presented this parting to the clerk exactly (to my thinking) as if he had said, in so many words: “you must take me, if you please, my friend, just as I show myself. Come straight up here, follow the gravel path, keep off the grass. I allow no trespassing.”²³⁵

²³³ Wainewright: 74.
²³⁵ 335.
Although Slinkton shares Wainewright’s devotion to being well dressed, Wainewright’s “outward man and foppish évaporé manner are not copied in Slinkton.” For example, Dickens transforms Wainewright’s ostentatious “yellow-kid” glove into Slinkton’s demure and “particularly well-fitting black-kid glove” in “Hunted Down.” Instead of presenting his villain in the rather suspect role of the dandy aspiring to aristocratic tastes, Dickens chooses instead to give Slinkton the raiment of a clergyman, a move which indicates that Dickens is purposefully situating him in the professional middle-class in order to explore fears about these types of criminals emerging at mid-century. Furthermore, “Dickens has made his poisoner the uncle rather than the brother-in-law of the young female victims in order to render his crime a violation of a closer familial trust.”

Situating Slinkton within the middle class and highlighting his role as a domestic villain emphasize his deviousness; but it also demonstrates how Dickens anticipated the sensational genre’s concern with immorality and crime within the middle-class domestic sphere.

Indeed, Slinkton’s hair-part—his “gravel path” as the author puts it—becomes the touchstone for Slinkton’s character because it simultaneously represents his conformance to middle-class conventions and illustrates how implicitly people will accept this conformity. Sampson initially finds the hair-part off-putting precisely because it requires others to “follow the gravel path” and accept Slinkton as he presents himself—as the governing metaphor for Slinkton’s character it represents the control he wishes to exert over his appearance and the unfair advantage this polished image gives him over potential victims. In addition, Slinkton’s hair-part is also the only physiognomic indicator of his criminality that Sampson can identify:

I took his face to pieces in my mind, like a watch, and examined it in detail. I could not say much against any of his features separately; I could say even less against them when they were put together. 'Then is it not monstrous,' I asked myself, 'that because a man happens to part his hair straight up the middle of his head, I should permit myself to suspect, and even to detest him?'

Although Sampson methodically breaks down the separate aspects of Slinkton’s physiognomy “like a watch,” his reliance on this “science” cannot account for his instictual distrust of the

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clergyman-in-training. Unable, even after careful scientific examination of Slinkton’s face and head, to account for this distrust, Sampson’s struggle suggests the difficulty of performing physiognomic readings—so much so that Sampson, not Slinkton, becomes “monstrous” for doubting the clergyman-in-training’s honesty. Sampson maintains, however, that “[a]n observer of men who finds himself steadily repelled by some apparently trifling thing in a stranger is right to give it great weight” because “[a] very little key will open a very heavy door.”\(^\text{239}\) Although Sampson insists that one tiny feature can illuminate the entire scope of person’s character, his reliance on only one physical attribute to reveal the hidden criminality of Slinkton’s personality is unconvincing. Just as Dickens fails to generate a convincing analysis of the real-life poisoner William Palmer’s visage in “The Demeanour of Murderers,” Sampson’s examination of Slinkton seems to have little factual basis. This reading is supported by the ending of story, when Slinkton is confronted with his crimes by the amateur detective Meltham. Once the poisoner realizes he has no avenue for escape he “put his hand to his head, tore out some hair, and flung it to the ground […] I noticed at the same time, that a singular change took place in the figure of the man,—as if it collapsed within his clothes, and they consequently became ill-shapen and ill-fitting.”\(^\text{240}\) This passage suggests that the “smooth walk” on the top of Slinkton’s head is not a sign of his criminality, but rather a part of his “disguise.” Without it, he undergoes a somatic transformation and is literally no longer capable of physically filling his mock-clergyman’s clothing. The part—the only clue Sampson has to explain his physiognomic reading—is therefore only an aspect of Slinkton’s costume, not a decisive indication of his evil nature.

The problematic nature of Sampson’s physiognomic analysis displays how easily disguise and manners can be used to subvert these kinds of readings. After all, Sampson remains fooled by Slinkton through much of the story; Slinkton is able to confuse Sampson in part because the former has sophisticated social manners and the chameleonic ability to ingratiate himself with a variety of different people. Sampson especially doubts his own physiognomic prowess when he watched Slinkton’s “talk at dinner, and observed how readily other men responded to it, and with what a graceful instinct he adapted his subjects to the knowledge and habits of those he talked with.”\(^\text{241}\) It is not until Meltham directly informs Sampson that the clergyman-in-training poisoned his niece for the insurance money that the narrator has definitive

\(^{239}\) 241.  
\(^{240}\) 358.  
\(^{241}\) 340.
proof of Slinkton’s evil character. Yet, although Meltham’s spying allows for the story to conveniently expose Slinkton’s guilt, the amateur detective’s use of disguise further highlights the fallibility of physiognomic practices. In order to gather evidence against Slinkton, Meltham moves across the hall from the poisoner and poses as Mr. Beckwith, “a man with all the appearances of the worst kind of drunkard, very far advanced upon his shameful way to death.” As Beckwith, Meltham proves even more adept at deception and disguise than Slinkton; for example, he even displays the “panting, shaking, and red-eyed” symptoms of alcohol abuse. Although Meltham uses disguise only to combat criminal activity, as his completely convincing act as a poor drunkard demonstrates, visual clues can undermine the reading of character and subvert the tenents of physiognomy.

In addition to calling the efficacy of physiognomy into question, Meltham’s reliance on disguise—the same tactic Slinkton uses to commit crime—creates an uneasy similarity between the detective-figure and the criminal. For example, Meltham disguises himself as an elderly invalid in order to follow and whisk the surviving niece away from her poisonous uncle. Just like Slinkton, Meltham keeps Miss Niner under constant supervision and control; he manipulates his position as a weak and harmless old man so that he can become her “shadow” without drawing undue attention. Similarly, Slinkton’s role as a “gentle, watchful, and self-possessed” uncle allows him to poison his niece without raising her suspicion. Although the text justifies Meltham’s actions and labels his work as “a sacred duty,” his reliance on “criminal” tactics of disguise creates some ambiguity about Miss Niner’s escape. Miss Niner’s reluctance to leave her uncle and Sampson’s admission that “if the little carriage had been less near to us, I doubt if I could have got her away” characterize the scene as a half-rescue, half-abduction. Similarly, during the story’s sensation denouement of Slinkton’s guilt, the poisoner attempts to close the moral gap between himself and the amateur detective. After hearing how Meltham deciphered and stole his journal, Slinkton exclaims “Then you are a thief!”—a statement which points out the criminal tactics that Meltham uses in the furtherance of honorable goals. Meltham’s use of these suspect tactics perhaps explains his fate at the end of the story; especially since his death

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243 353.
244 359.
245 349.
246 358.
“is not the ending we expect.” Although Jennifer Ruth claims that Dickens kills off Meltham to preserve his “self-sacrificing” professionalism, I argue that Meltham’s use of the “criminal” tactics of deception and disguise makes it impossible for him to return to main-stream middle-class society. The taint of criminality is so strong that having participated in the criminal world, Meltham cannot be allowed to transition back into a normal life (thus risking the contamination of the middle-class) and therefore must be sacrificed at the end of the story.

Sampson’s physiognomic “lessons” to the reader partially unravel when these uncomfortable similarities are drawn between Slinkton and Meltham; but Sampson’s position as a deceptive narrator also draws his reliability into question. Throughout the story, Sampson keeps vital clues from the reader, preferring instead to wait to reveal the intricacies of Slinkton’s guilt until the end of the story. For example, Sampson cryptically hints that Meltham visits him early in the narrative, but he does not reveal the extent of his participation in Meltham’s project until the end of his tale. Because of Sampson’s narrative deception, he (like Meltham) “takes on a shady, perhaps even criminal look reminiscent of the old idea that a detective must be in secret sympathy with criminals in order to catch them.” By acting as an unreliable narrator, Sampson himself (like both Slinkton and Meltham) takes up a form of disguise intended to deceive the reader. Furthermore, as Philip Alllingham notes, because “Dickens challenges his reader to construct meaning out of apparent unmeaning and to usurp the role of the narrator,” “Hunted Down’s” narrative style reflects the rise of sensation fiction. Influenced from the first-hand testimonials of sensational court cases, sensation fiction began mirroring this technique through an emphasis on first-person narration, which added drama and mystery to the narrative and allowed the reader the “realistic” sensation of watching the drama unfold in real time. Therefore, through his deception, the narrator of “Hunted Down” invites the reader to construct their own meaning and challenge the physiognomic lessons offered by Sampson.

“Hunted Down” records a moment of cultural transformation, when Victorian society was grappling with the anxieties about a “new” kind of murderer infiltrating the middle-class domestic sphere. The story registers a deep desire to read character and motivation through

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visual signs (and therefore make the “invisible” poisoner visible), but it also reveals the difficulty of doing these kinds of physiognomic readings in a world of disguise and deception. This tension, of course, reflects changing attitudes towards modernity and the mysteries of urban life that preoccupied sensation fiction; the hero and criminal’s shared use of disguise demonstrates that “Hunted Down” is concerned with the increasing instability of identity that haunted the Victorians at mid-century. The short story’s fraught portrayal of physiognomy reveals a culture beginning to deeply question this science even while it still clung to the hope that physiognomy could illuminate character and predict criminality.

“The Lifted Veil”

Like Dickens, Eliot was also deeply interested in the sciences of phrenology and physiognomy. In 1844 she famously had a phrenological cast made of her head by James Deville, and she was in contact with George Combe, one of the leading Victorian proponents of phrenology, in the early 1850s. Like Eliot’s other scientific interests, her knowledge of physiognomy frequently filtered into her writings. Critics have long noted that Eliot’s descriptions of character are often couched within physiognomic frameworks of reference; for example, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot writes that Tom Tulliver is a “lad with light-brown hair, cheeks of cream and roses, full lips, indeterminate nose and eyebrows—a physiognomy in which it seems impossible to discern anything but the generic character of boyhood.” Yet, scholars have also recognized a shift in Eliot’s attitude towards physiognomy occurring after mid-century; Eliot’s development as a writer and her exposure to cutting-edge science by her partner George Henry Lewes seems to cause her early enthusiasm for physiognomy to be replaced with a more ambivalent attitude towards the practice. Indeed, Eliot’s modified approach to physiognomy can be especially found in her later works, such as her 1871 novel *Middlemarch*, which “expresses misgivings not only

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about wrong physiognomic readings but about the very ideological grounding, and epistemological implications, of physiognomy.”

Although *Middlemarch* certainly tests the legitimacy of physiognomy, Eliot engaged with these issues in a much earlier work: her 1859 short story “The Lifted Veil.” Published only a month before Dickens’s “Hunted Down,” Eliot’s story also tests the limitations of physiognomy (and practices which stand in for physiognomy, such as Latimer’s clairvoyance) through its sensational storyline. But, if “Hunted Down” reflects the Victorian yearning for transparent physiognomic knowledge, then “The Lifted Veil” deeply questions this desire. In the story, the narrator Latimer is given complete access to people’s thoughts—in other words, his clairvoyance makes the dream of physiognomy a reality—but to his horror Latimer discovers that this complete knowledge of other people’s inner lives makes human interaction meaningless and hollow. Worse yet, Latimer’s insight allows him to see “all the intermediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap.” Therefore, while “Hunted Down” persists in promoting physiognomy (despite its apparent flaws), Latimer’s predicament suggests that physiognomy’s promise of absolute knowledge is something to be feared, not cultivated.

In the short story, Latimer’s only respite from his torturous clairvoyance is the enigmatic Bertha, the woman whom he woos and eventually marries. For Latimer, Bertha is a much needed “oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge” and he spends much of the first chapter trying to divine her thoughts and feelings. Even after Bertha’s mind is exposed to Latimer, his powers eventually weaken and her thoughts sink back into darkness once more. Bertha, then, becomes the target of the short story’s physiognomic project, as Latimer’s energies (and his reader’s) are almost wholly consumed with his attempts to “interpret” Bertha. Significantly, like Slinkton, Bertha is also a potential poisoner and her presence in the text reflects Eliot’s use of sensational motifs and her engagement with the anxieties probed by the emergent genre. Bertha’s plot is exposed during a macabre experiment in which her maid, Mrs. Archer, is reanimated long enough to climactically disclose the plot to poison Latimer:

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255 26.
“You mean to poison your husband . . . the poison is in the black cabinet . . . I got it for you . . . you laughed at me, and told lies about me behind my back, to make me disgusting . . . because you were jealous . . . are you sorry . . . now?”

Unlike Slinkton, whose crimes can be traced by human detectives, only the quasi-supernatural resurrection of Mrs. Archer can reveal Bertha’s crime. Bertha’s position as particularly “invisible” reflects Victorian beliefs about the poisoning woman, as this type of criminal was supposed to be particularly adept at remaining undetectable within the home. For example, the minute physical descriptions of real-life female poisoners in sensational journalism was not merely for voyeuristic entertainment, but was a part of an existing cultural drive to recognize and physiognomically identify the potential poisoner. Bertha’s physical resemblance to real-life poisoners such as Madeleine Smith reflects Eliot’s reliance on this set of cultural physiognomic markers; yet Bertha’s position as a middle-class poisoning woman make her especially immune to these types of physiognomic readings. Eliot instead must draw heavily from historic and mythological traditions of the poisoning woman in order to foreshadow and ultimately “reveal” Bertha’s criminal nature. An examination of Bertha in “The Lifted Veil” therefore reveals Eliot’s misgivings towards physiognomy while also illuminating how she anticipated the sensational genre that came directly after its publication.

Although the majority of high-profile poisoning cases of the 1850s and 1860s involved men, poisoning was nevertheless thought to be a specifically female crime. George Robb states that during the period, fifty-five percent of women who killed their spouses used poison.257 Even though these percentages add up to relatively few murders overall, especially when compared to the number of murders committed by men, poisonings by women became a cause for great alarm. With cultural archetypes of poisoning women already in place, poisoning quickly became considered a “feminine” crime.258 Women were associated with poison for many reasons: it was easy for them to acquire and use, it did not require the brute strength of other forms of murder, and, most importantly, it was in keeping with the cultural perception of women’s deceptive natures. These views are illustrated in an 1865 article in St. James Magazine:

256 65.
258 Ibid. Circe, Eve, Cleopatra, and Lucrezia Borgia are perhaps the most recognizable archetypes of poisoning women.
Poisoning has ever been the favoured scheme of woman’s murder practice, and for some obvious reason. It needs no strength of hand, no unwavering presence of mind, face to face with your victim; it makes no noise, spills no blood, is quiet, undemonstrative; and as far as murder can be, is elegant.\textsuperscript{259}

Victorian women were experts at concealing their bodies, sexual desires, and emotions, and poison fit neatly into pre-established views on women’s deceptive potential. Most women would have been reasonably familiar with poison from their positions in the household and using poison was an everyday occurrence in many British homes. Poisons were needed for keeping the home free of vermin, potentially poisonous opiates were medically administered, and arsenic was even used as a cosmetic to clear problem complexions.\textsuperscript{260} Since household vermin infestations, nursing, and beauty regimens were feminine concerns, women were regularly in contact with poisons.

Perhaps because it was identified with women, poison was particularly vexing to the Victorians due to the ease in which it could enter into the domestic sphere. Seventy-five percent of poisoning trials dealt with the murder of family members, usually spouses.\textsuperscript{261} While most poisoning trials involved members of the lower-classes of society, the most sensational and horrifying trials implicated a middle- or even upper-class woman in the crime. The Madeleine Smith trial inspired the \textit{Times} to label poisonings as a “domestic institution” and professed shock “with the continual recurrence of attempts by women against the lives of husbands, paramours, and children.”\textsuperscript{262} The female criminal was particularly heinous because she subverted the Victorian image of a woman as caregiver, cook, and nurse; she violated the sanctity of the domestic sphere by poisoning the very food that was supposed to sustain her family. Reflecting this anxiety, media accounts of poisonings often took on the characteristics of a domestic drama, with the scene of the crime, including the layout of the house and its furnishings, often eclipsing

\textsuperscript{259} Scoffern, Dr. J. “Secret Poisoning and Medical Etiquette.” \textit{St. James Magazine}. 14 (1865): 117.

\textsuperscript{260} Periodicals such as \textit{Blackwood’s} and \textit{Chamber’s} published articles that discussed the cosmetic uses of arsenic. Cosmetic use was often cited as the reason for purchasing arsenic in murder trials, perhaps most famously in the Madeleine Smith trial. See Altick, Richard. \textit{Victorian Studies in Scarlet} New York: Norton & Co., 1970 (183-4) for a more in-depth review of the case and Pal-Lapinski, Piya “Chemical Seductions: Hybridity and Toxicology.” \textit{The Exotic Woman in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction and Culture} for an overview on the use of arsenic as a cosmetic.

\textsuperscript{261} Burney: 21.

\textsuperscript{262} \textit{Times}. 10 July 1857: 9.A.
the actual act of murder.\textsuperscript{263} These violent crimes proved that the Victorian family was an imperfect institution and challenged the conventional view of women as the “angels of the household.”

The struggles of Victorian women for more agency both outside and inside the home also factored into society’s fascination with poison, as the public began to fear women that would look to poison for more control over their households. Indicative of this, one writer for the \textit{Times} admitted that “[friendly arsenic] has always been ready [. . .] to rid the impatient wife of a tiresome husband, or a thrifty housewife of parents, or relations, who have become a burden.”\textsuperscript{264} In over ninety percent of cases involving spousal murder, the accused was the husband, and the crime violent; yet the “relatively few cases of wives murdering husbands” by poison caused much “greater alarm.”\textsuperscript{265} Since the vast popularity of female-perpetrated poisoning trials radically misrepresented the number of actual poisoning murders, it is possible that the sensationalism of these crimes in the press was in part a backlash against the changing social and legal position of women during this period.\textsuperscript{266} Certainly “some women found it [poison] empowering because it allowed them to manipulate male fears,” whether they ever used poison or not.\textsuperscript{267} If “to analyze the idea of poison as a woman’s weapon is to examine a variety of misogynistic notions” then the parliamentary debates for the Arsenic Act of 1851 provide a fertile ground for exploration.\textsuperscript{268} During these debates it was proposed that in order to lower the occurrence of poisoning crime, a complete ban on selling poisons to women should be included in the bill. Judith Knelman argues that the husband poisonings of the late 1840’s were primarily responsible for the amendment to the bill. While “child murder was less easy to turn a blind eye to . . . the murder of adult males was even more alarming, especially to adult males.”\textsuperscript{269} The proposal was hotly contested and finally dropped, but fears about women’s increased mobility and access to the world outside the home are certainly reflected in the debate.

\textsuperscript{263} Burney: 25.  
\textsuperscript{264} \textit{Times}. 10 July 1857: 9.A.  
\textsuperscript{265} Robb: 176-7.  
\textsuperscript{266} For example, the Matrimonial Causes Act passed in 1857 made divorces easier to obtain, which allowed more women the opportunity to leave abusive relationships.  
\textsuperscript{267} Robb: 186.  
These cultural fears about the poisoning woman and her ability to infiltrate even the most sacred of Victorian spaces—the domestic sphere—led to an obsession with the appearance of these criminals. The presumption, of course, was that cataloguing the physical characteristics of these poisoners would make them easier to identify and root out of the home. By the end of the 1890s, Cesare Lombroso would declare that female poisoners were masculine-looking with heavy jaws and downy beards, but the mid-century middle-class poisoner was provocingly feminine. Madeleine Smith, a twenty-one year old woman from a respectable upper middle-class family in Glasgow, Scotland, is a fine example of a feminine and beautiful suspected poisoner.

Madeleine was accused of poisoning her lower-class lover Emile L’Angelier’s hot cocoa in order to secure a more financially advantageous marriage with another man. The evidence against her was circumstantial, and the jury eventually set her free with the ambiguous Scottish verdict of “Not Proven.” The high coverage garnered by the case was in part attributed to the “beauty of the accused, her refinement of manner and appearance, and her imperturbable resolution with which she faced the terrible dangers in which she was placed,” and news coverage often included minute descriptions of Madeleine and her outfits. The huge interest in Smith’s appearance illuminates the growing fear of “invisible” female poisoners who hid behind masks of respectability and poisoned from within the home. Unsurprisingly, a trial which featured a beautiful villainess who exposed the dark side of Victorian domesticity became an inspiration for later sensation fiction. For example, Wilkie Collins drew from the case for both Armadale and The Law and The Lady; yet, as this chapter argues, the author who most closely engaged with the specifics of Madeleine’s physiognomy was George Eliot. Using cultural markers of criminality drawn from the Madeleine Smith case to construct Bertha, Eliot reveals the Victorian impulse to make the female poisoner “visible” by defining qualities and images that became cultural indications of her secrecy and aberrant behavior.

From her letters, it is clear that Eliot, like her contemporaries, was aware of the Madeleine Smith case and the sensation it caused in Victorian society. Yet it may be because of a particular letter, in which Eliot makes a rather dismissive remark about Smith, that the impact

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272 Lydia Gwilt in Armadale is based loosely on Madeleine Smith, as is the trial of Eustace Macallan in The Lady and the Lady.
of this case on “The Lifted Veil” has not received adequate critical attention. John Blackwood, Eliot’s publisher, wrote a letter in which he affirmed his belief in Madeleine’s innocence, and to which a skeptical Eliot replied:273

I think Madeleine Smith one of the least fascinating of murderesses, and since she is acquitted it is a pity Palmer is not alive to marry her and be the victim of her second experiment in cosmetics—which is too likely to come one day or other.274

Eliot’s assessment of Smith as “the least fascinating of murderesses” does not imply that she did not recognize the cultural significance of the case or that she would refrain from writing a similar character. Rather, it demonstrates that Eliot thought Smith guilty and unimaginative, and it also demonstrates that Eliot was familiar with other poisoning cases. Alongside Smith, she mentions William Palmer, a Staffordshire doctor executed in 1856 for serially poisoning several family members and acquaintances. Significantly, Eliot sees Smith as incorrigible—like Palmer she had poisoned and would poison again. This view more closely coincides with her partner George Henry Lewes’ judgment of Smith: “I cannot feel the slightest approach to sympathy with her. I see absolutely no trace of goodness in her. From first to last she is utterly bad.”275 Certainly these responses should not receive the critical dismissal of inspiring mere “ennui” in Eliot and Lewes, for they display the prevalence of poisoning cases in their everyday conversation.276

In addition, “The Lifted Veil” is clearly influenced by the stereotypes and broad cultural opinions that comprised a large part of poison trial reporting. In many respects Bertha Grant’s character mirrors the news reports of Madeleine Smith, and inspires the same anxieties in the text that other poisoning women did in the larger culture. There are several striking similarities between the newspaper descriptions of Smith and Bertha. The Times paints Smith as having a “slight form, with features sharp and prominent, and restless and sparkling eyes.”277 Bertha is also a “slight figure” with “features [that] were sharp, the pale grey eyes once acute, restless, and


274 GEL II: 362.

275 GEL II: 363.


The slight figures, sharp features, and restless eyes of the two women seem to form a physiognomic stereotype of the poisoning woman that readers of these sensational cases would have recognized. In addition, Latimer’s characterization of Bertha as a “cruel,” “pitiless” woman with a “barren soul” coincides with Lewes’ description of Smith as having “no trace of goodness in her;” which again suggests a connection between the construction of Bertha and the media accounts of Smith. In addition, the similarities between newspaper reports of Madeleine Smith and Bertha further connect “The Lifted Veil” to the emerging sensational genre, as newspaper reporting of crime was highly influential on the creation of the sensation genre:

The development of the sensation novel was also complexly interlinked with the development of sensational newspaper journalism, particularly with the vogue for lurid reporting of divorce cases following the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, and of trials concerning domestic murder and domestic crime in general. Sensational narratives of actual murders were the staple daily reading diet of Victorians of all social classes, and the plots of many sensation novels were directly indebted to specific details and situations from actual cases as reported in particular newspapers.

Eliot, like the sensational authors, relied on real crimes to help nuance her characters and plotlines. Like Collins’s and M.E. Braddon’s fictions, “The Lifted Veil” sets up a domestic secret that must be exposed and neutralized. Therefore, Jenny Uglow was correct in asserting that “In its concern with secrets and doubleness and with the fierce-hearted anger of a murderous wife, [The Lifted Veil] also resembles the new sensation novels with which Mary Braddon and her followers were about to flood the book-stalls.” Eliot’s combination of the high profile crime of poisoning with gothic and sensational elements shows that “The Lifted Veil” anticipates emergent sensation fiction and provides another link to the transition between these two genres.

Despite Eliot’s close adherence to Smith’s appearance for her description of Bertha, “The Lifted Veil” does not simply rely on physiognomic clues to characterize Bertha as a poisoner. Instead, Eliot also couches descriptions of Bertha within references to historic or mythological poisoners. From her first appearance in the text, Bertha is associated with these histrio-cultural codes. Dressed in “green-leaves,” her image evokes both a dangerous plant and the destructive

278 16.
279 29.
280 Pyckett: 54.
power of Eve. Bertha appears in green leaves on three occasions in the novel: the first meeting with Latimer, their wedding, in which she dons “white silk and pale-green leaves” and at the moment of asking to hire a new maid, when she wears “green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress.” All three of these occasions are significant to the plot because they signal a shift in the narrative; however, they also mark periods of time when Bertha is particularly powerful. Bertha’s jewelry, of which she is fond, also connects her to these cultural codes of poisoning and secrecy. In one of Latimer’s visions, he sees her wearing “a great emerald brooch” of a “studded serpent with diamond eyes” that lies on her breast “like a familiar demon.” Snake jewelry was highly popular and, although snakes were traditionally associated with poison, treachery, and bad luck, during this time they also came to represent eternal love. Therefore, Bertha could ostensibly wear her jewelry under the guise of love, while simultaneously concealing her poisoning nature. The snake motif of Bertha’s jewelry is also suggestive of the mythic snake woman, the lamia, who poisons her male consorts. Gemstones also held symbolic value, and Bertha hiding the opal ring Latimer gives her for a birthday present takes on greater significance when contextualized in jewelry symbolism. As a symbol of truth, opal was thought to be able to detect poison by turning pale in its presence. While Bertha wearing the opal ring out of sight on a long chain proves titillating to Latimer, she is unconsciously hiding the object that could reveal her deceptive, poisonous personality.

Ian Burney argues that the Victorians inherit their fascination with poison in part from classical and Renaissance sources. Nineteenth-century readers were indeed interested in historical poisoners, especially when they were women. A two part article entitled “The Poisoners of the Seventeenth Century,” first published in Bentley’s Miscellany in 1837, is a good representation of the Victorian taste in historical murderesses. This article focuses exclusively on the tawdry details of the lives of two upper class Renaissance women poisoners, linking both their taste in poison to secrets and their generally immoral lifestyles. That Eliot drew from these sources of cultural knowledge is evident from the numerous associations between Bertha and historical female poisoners. These associations usually occur when Latimer is seeing the future,

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282 45; 29.
283 29; 53.
284 The royal family helped to spark the trend of snake jewelry when Prince Albert gave Victoria a snake-themed engagement ring. Queen Victoria’s ring is more easily identifiable with eternal love than Bertha’s jewelry. A snake with its own tail in its mouth, Victoria’s ring clearly symbolized eternity and everlasting love, whereas the description of Bertha’s jewelry is vague enough to allow for both interpretations.
which further adds a layer of ill-foreboding to Bertha’s character. During one of Latimer’s previsions, in which he first glimpses Bertha’s true nature, her figure shares the scene with a medallion that has a “dying Cleopatra in the centre.” The scene on the medallion specifically links Cleopatra with poison through her well-known suicide by snake bite. In legend Cleopatra tricks Marc Antony into committing suicide. In the same moment Latimer sees the Cleopatra medallion in his vision (and later in reality), he intuits Bertha’s thoughts: “Madman, idiot! Why don’t you kill yourself then?” When her partner will not kill himself, Bertha, like Cleopatra, is apparently willing to take matters into her own hands, and this link with Cleopatra again indicates her pathological personality.

More significantly, Bertha is also connected with Lucrezia Borgia, a member of a prominent Renaissance Italian family who is often depicted as a beautiful serial poisoner of husbands and rivals. When Latimer first gazes at a portrait of Borgia, he has a visceral reaction to the image:

This morning I had been looking at Giorgione’s picture of the cruel-eyed woman, said to be a likeness of Lucrezia Borgia. I had stood long alone before it, fascinated by the terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face, till I felt a strange poisoned sensation, as if I had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects.

Borgia, like Bertha, fascinates Latimer; yet, he instinctually recognizes the effect of her strangely menacing portrait. When Bertha joins Latimer for a walk shortly after he views the painting, he feels that “a strange intoxicating numbness passed over me, like the continuance or climax of the sensation I was still feeling from the gaze of Lucrezia Borgia.” Here, Bertha is directly linked with Borgia, and is able to inspire the same feelings as her powerful historical predecessor. As Pal-Lapinski points out, “Lucrezia’s poisonous pervasiveness” had “an emasculating effect” on the feminized Latimer, signaling the dangerous transgressive possibilities inherent in poison.

As these references to mythological and historical poisoners demonstrate, Eliot was unwilling to rely solely on physiognomic stereotypes of the female poisoner to characterize Bertha—a move which indicates Eliot’s changing attitudes to and growing distrust of
physiognomy. These shifting attitudes are apparent in the text when Latimer recounts a childhood encounter with the physiognomist Mr. Letherall, who examines his head in “an exploratory, suspicious manner” in order to point out the “deficiency” of his mental abilities.\textsuperscript{291} Although Letherall’s reading of Latimer correctly recognizes the young man’s natural weakness for science, the physiognomist’s information is used to justify a rigid system of re-education for Latimer. Indeed, Latimer attributes a large part of his childhood unhappiness to the influence of Letherall’s educational program, demonstrating how the science can be manipulated and misapplied. In addition, the text consistently draws a distinction between a character’s outer appearance and the “inner” life that Latimer glimpses through his clairvoyance. For example, Bertha demonstrates the same facile social skills as Slinkton, and Latimer records her social success:

She was really pitiable to have such a husband, and so all the world thought. A graceful, brilliant woman, like Bertha, who smiled on morning callers, made a figure in ball-rooms, and was capable of that light repartee which, from such a woman, is accepted as wit, was secure of carrying off all sympathy from a husband who was sickly, abstracted, and, as some suspected, crack-brained.\textsuperscript{292}

Bertha’s ability to effortlessly navigate social relationships—as well as society’s misconstrued assessment of Latimer—demonstrates the ways in which physiognomy and manner can be misinterpreted. What society takes for “wit” and “light repartee,” Latimer knows is actually Bertha’s “petty artifice and mere negation.”\textsuperscript{293}

Therefore, instead of relying on the suspect science of physiognomy to gain insight in character and personality, Eliot endows Latimer with his strange “gift” of clairvoyance. Yet even Latimer’s insight into the thoughts of others is not foolproof in protecting him from the machinations of Bertha. Indeed, despite Latimer’s omniscient powers, secrets are a prominent theme in “The Lifted Veil,” especially since the marriage of Bertha and Latimer is placed into a context of oscillating power dynamics where power is equated with secrecy. For example, once Latimer gains unmediated access to Bertha’s thoughts, their relationship alters considerably:

Our positions were reversed. Before marriage she had completely mastered my imagination, for she was a secret to me; and I created the unknown thought before which

\textsuperscript{291}6.\textsuperscript{292}50.\textsuperscript{293}49.
I trembled as if it were hers. But now that her world was laid open to me, now that I was compelled to share the privacy of her motives, to follow all the petty devices that preceded her words and acts, she found herself powerless with me, except to produce in me the chill shudder of repulsion—powerless, because I could be acted on by no lever within her reach.  

Bertha is clever enough to detect that her husband has unusual mental capabilities, and chafes under his constant scrutiny. Later in the story, however, Bertha is also able to sense when Latimer’s powers eventually weaken, taking advantage of this reprieve by plotting his death.

Bertha’s ability to circumvent Latimer’s ruthless omniscience suggests just how closely the figure of the poisoning woman was tied to images of secrecy. Indeed, there was a deep cultural fear that secret poisonings (especially those committed by women) were far more widespread than the relatively small number of cases suggested. Reflecting on the invisibility of these crimes and criminals, one commentator even declared that “the activity of this unseen foe cannot be measured. We can only hope that healing science will be a match for destroying science, when it is backed by intelligent law, though the difficulty of making law intelligent is often discouraging.”

Despite the fact that Latimer (at least for a time) is privy to Bertha’s every thought and has “seen round the narrow room of that woman’s soul,” his clairvoyance does not ultimately reveal Bertha’s murder plot. Instead, it takes the strange and macabre blood-transfusion—and the testimony of another suspect woman—to finally expose Bertha’s criminality. If Latimer’s powers of omniscience are a metaphoric extension of physiognomy (as Beryl Gray claims) then his failure to accurately read Bertha’s intentions demonstrates the powerlessness of physiognomy against the secretive poisoner. “The Lifted Veil” suggests, then, that this “unseen foe” is so deceptive and so clever that any form of insight—including clairvoyance—is insufficient to identify them or predict their criminal activities.

Early in “The Lifted Veil,” Latimer recounts his childhood blindness, when his affectionate mother kept him “on her knee from morning till night.” Instead of associating his eye complaint with darkness or fear, Latimer describes this period of childhood as the happiest years of his life. This early blindness is, of course, contrasted to Latimer’s later torturous

294 50.
295 “Poison and Cremation.” The Speaker. 17 (1898): 476.
296 49.
297 See’s Gray’s article “Pseudoscience and George Eliot’s ‘The Lifted Veil.’”
298 4.
clairvoyance, suggesting that blindness to—or perhaps ignorance of—the real motivations, characters, and thoughts of others is the preferred mode of existence. Therefore, ‘The Lifted Veil’ goes much further in its critique of physiognomy than Dickens’s short story “Hunted Down.” While Dickens’s work reflects a culture still eager to believe in the efficacy of physiognomy, Eliot’s “jeu de melancholie” reveals psychological horror of illuminating the darkest corners of the domestic sphere. Both works, however, use the sensational figure of the domestic, middle-class poisoner in order to test their theories about this science—a move which reveals that Eliot and Dickens were active participants in the creation of the sensational genre.

299 GEL III: 41.
CHAPTER FOUR:

MEDICAL BLUEBEARDS: GOTHIC MEDICINE AND THE POISONING DOCTOR IN THE FICTION OF ELLEN WOOD

In “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” Sherlock Holmes cryptically remarks to Watson that “When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge. Palmer and Pritchard were among the heads of their profession.”

Many of Sherlock’s late century readers would have implicitly agreed with his assumptions about doctors who “go wrong.” By 1883, when “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” was published, the British public had endured a series of high-profile criminal scandals involving doctors which spanned a period of fifty years. Throughout the nineteenth-century—from the body-snatching outrages of the 1820s, which linked prominent medical schools to illegal corpse theft, to the fin de siècle speculation that Jack the Ripper was a surgeon—medical professionals were persistently associated with sensational crimes. The link between medicine and crime was especially apparent at mid-century, when an “epidemic” of poisoning doctors shocked the nation. The criminals that Holmes refers to, William Palmer and Edward Pritchard, were just two of a surprising large fraternity of medical men who used their specialized knowledge of chemicals to commit murder. Like the other medical poisoners of the Victorian period, their trials were so widely followed that they became household names and cultural symbols for the abuses of medical knowledge and power. Although the profession successfully weathered these scandals and increased its influence and prestige throughout the century, the Victorians nevertheless employed the figure of the poisoning doctor in their literature to challenge and explore this growth.

The poisoning doctor cases at mid-century coincided with the rise of sensation fiction, and authors working within this genre quickly incorporated this criminal figure into their works. Sensational authors took a deep interest in how outside social issues influenced the domestic sphere, often using their texts to explore the wide-ranging effects of cultural movements. Since one of the major social and scientific advancements of the nineteenth-century was the rise and professionalization of the medical field, it is unsurprising that the medical arts feature

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prominently in sensation fiction. Critics have begun to recognize the ubiquity of medical tropes in this genre, particularly in relation to how authors employed sensational devices to address abuses they perceived within the medical field.\footnote{Critics have also long recognized the links between Victorian psychology and sensation fiction. See Jenny Bourne Taylor’s *In the Secret Theatre of the Home* for more information.} For example, Mary Braddon’s *Lady Audley* is placed forcibly in an asylum by a doctor who seems to recognize her sanity. Charles Reade’s *The Woman Hater* points out the injustice of denying medical education to women, while *Hard Cash* explores the issue of wrongful confinement in mental asylums; like Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Hard Cash* was written shortly after the “lunacy panic” of the 1850’s raised fears that sane persons were being imprisoned in mad-houses against their wills.\footnote{For more on Reade’s critiques of the medical field, see Kristine Swenson’s *Medical Women and Victorian Fiction*, David Finkelstein’s “A Woman Hater and Women Healers: John Blackwood, Charles Reade, and the Victorian Women’s Medical Movement,” and Peter Melville Logan’s “Imitations of Insanity and Victorian Medical Aesthetics.” For Braddon’s incorporation of the “lunacy panic in her novel, see See Jill L. Matus’s “Disclosure as ‘Cover-up’: The Disclosure of Madness in *Lady Audley’s Secret.*”} Sensational authors like Reade thus transformed the most representative figure of medical practice—the doctor—into fictional villains in order to highlight disturbing medical developments.

The criminalization of doctors in these works reflects the ongoing sensational trend of featuring villains who were middle- or upper-class, intelligent, cunning, and had an aptitude for science. According to John Sutherland, this move reflected mid-century fears that criminals “were becoming cleverer—geniuses in some cases.”\footnote{Sutherland, John. “Wilkie Collins and the Origins of the Sensational Novel.” *Wilkie Collins to the Forefront: Some Reassessments*. Ed. Nelson C. Smith and Reginald Charles Terry. New York: AMS P, 1995: 76.} Sensational novelists responded to these cultural anxieties by creating “a line of anti-heroes which begins with Fosco—who discourses with scientists on equal terms—and leads to that strange contradiction, the academically distinguished arch criminal like ‘Professor’ Moriarty or ‘Doctor’ Nikola.”\footnote{Ibid.} As this chapter will show, “the academically distinguished” offender often manifests as a poisoning doctor in sensational works because this figure perhaps best fused the “long premeditation, duplicity, and superior intellect” that characterized this criminal trope.\footnote{Throughout this chapter, I will use masculine pronouns when referring to medical professionals. This decision is based on several considerations: Sutherland’s “arch-criminal” is implicitly male; most doctors during the Victorian period were male; all convicted or suspected poisoning doctors during the period were men; and all the poisoning doctors in Wood’s fiction are male. I should also point out that fictional female doctors are an exception to the conclusions about sensational doctors that I draw in this chapter.} As Sutherland points out, there were strong links between sensational villains and poisoning doctors; for example, Count Fosco is not only as well-versed in poisons and medical knowledge as a doctor, but he also appears in *The
*Woman in White*—a text whose narrative style was highly influenced by the trial of the aforementioned Dr. William Palmer.

While Sutherland is correct in emphasizing the importance of the intelligent arch-criminal in the development of sensation fiction, he is mistaken in his assumption that this nineteenth-century trope “begins with Fosco.” He bases this supposition on the fact that “before 1850 the liaison between erudition and low crime would have seemed freakish.” This fusion certainly was “freakish,” but this figure nonetheless did appear in works before mid-century in the form of the gothic mad-doctor/scientist. Beginning with Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein (who was himself a revision of Faust) nineteenth-century authors employed the trope of the intelligent criminal within the “medical” or “clinical” gothic tradition. Although no scholar has yet undertaken the task of extensively defining the medical gothic, the term has been used to broadly describe works which explore the human costs of medical progress—particularly in relation to experimentation or medical innovation—and the clash between a romantic and materialist world view. Meegan Kennedy notes that “these novels thrive on the energy produced by revealing a secret history, and the unexpected presence of a repressed Other—the monstrous in medicine, the curious in the clinic, the romance in realism.” In concrete terms, this gothic form typically reimagines traditional gothic tropes in modern scientific settings, transforming the moldering castle and dank dungeon into the laboratory or grafting supposedly “low” criminality onto the socially or academically elite. Oftentimes, the medical gothic is found at the intersection between occult and materialist science and highlights the dangers of successfully harnessing these combined powers.

As a gothic form that responds to scientific innovations, the medical gothic is particularly sensitive to new theories, and cutting-edge science often becomes the focus of its critique of nineteenth-century medicine. Due to the resurgence of the gothic in the latter part of the century, most Victorian scholars have focused a critical examination of the medical gothic on late-century texts, including Robert Louis Stephenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. This approach, however, leaves a considerable gap

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306 Ibid.
307 In addition, the previous chapters also outline how intelligent characters were employing scientific knowledge and methodologies to commit crime.
309 Laurence Talairach-Vielmas discusses this briefly in *Wilkie Collins, Medicine, and the Gothic*: 21.
between the publication of Shelley’s work and these fin de siècle texts. Several critics, such as Tabitha Sparks, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, and Meegan Kennedy have begun to fill in this critical oversight, and sensation fiction, in particular, has been positioned as a rich site for exploring Victorian literature’s ongoing engagement with the medical gothic. This chapter argues that the medical poisoner best illustrates the breadth of sensation fiction’s incorporation of the medical gothic because this figure most visibly represented the abuses of the medical establishment. Building on the foundations of earlier gothic doctor-villains, several sensational works fictionalize real cases of poisoning doctors in order to critique the vast changes occurring within the medical field. As a result, sensational authors like Collins “capitalized on the ambiguous status of practitioners” in order to refigure the doctor as the modern gothic villain.\textsuperscript{310} An examination of the poisoning doctor in sensation fiction, then, illustrates the extent to which sensation fiction engaged with medical issues through its assimilation of this particular gothic trope.

To exemplify just how fully the medical gothic was woven into the narrative fabric of sensation fiction, this chapter examines the works of an author who is not currently known for her engagement with medical issues: Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood.\textsuperscript{311} In fact, despite the regular appearance of doctors, illness, and injury in Wood’s texts (and the author’s own struggles with a debilitating spinal affliction), critics have given relatively little attention to medical issues in her works.\textsuperscript{312} This scholarly oversight is especially surprising given the tendency for critics to focus on sensation fiction’s rather antagonistic relationship to medicine, for Wood devotes considerable space within her texts to outlining the dangers of Victorian medicine. Throughout her body of work, Wood consistently engages with contentious medical issues; from her first novel Danesbury House, which features a drunken nurse and the near-fatal overdose of an infant, to medical malpractice in Oswald Cray, Wood often relies on medical mistreatment to sensationalize her novels. Wood’s most direct engagement with medical abuses, however, appears in her 1857 sensational novella Mr. Castonel and her 1864 full-length work Lord Oakburn’s Daughters. In both of these works, Wood employs the figure which most immediately represented medical abuse at mid-century—the poisoning doctor—to explore the

\textsuperscript{310} Talairach-Vielmas, Laurence: 8-9.
\textsuperscript{311} Various critics have written about the criminal doctor in the works of Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Charles Reade.
\textsuperscript{312} The exception is Anne-Marie Beller’s “Suffering Angels: Death and Femininity in Ellen Wood’s Fiction;” but while this article touches on the issues of illness, the medical profession is not explicitly analyzed.
medical professions’ rise to power and prominence.\(^{313}\) At the time Wood was writing these texts, criminal cases involving medical men were dominating Victorian headlines; newspaper and periodical writers often gothicized their accounts of medical poisoners in order to explore the necessity of medical regulation. Conversely, Wood draws from these real cases of criminal doctors in order to investigate the harmful potential of misused medical power and sensationalize the tradition of the medical gothic. In addition, as serial murderers of women, Wood’s medical poisoners evoke the gothic villain of the fairy tale “Bluebeard.” Her reliance on this gothic fairytale structures these texts and further reveals Wood’s adoption of gothic tropes.\(^{314}\) Exploring these gothic traditions in Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters reveals how Wood both reflects broad Victorian anxieties about medicine and suggests ways to remedy medical abuse.

While villainous doctors appear throughout sensation texts, it is the medical practitioners in Wilkie Collins’s novels which have come under the greatest critical scrutiny. Perhaps this is because Collins’s novels so often feature suspect medical men: like Hard Cash and Lady Audley’s Secret, The Woman in White also features a wrongful incarceration in an asylum; Armadale is haunted by the plotting of Dr. Downward; and Collins’s later work Heart and Science critiques the heartless Dr. Benjulia’s scientific practice of vivisection.\(^{315}\) Recognizing that Collins was writing at a historical moment that saw the increased professionalism of medicine, Tabitha Sparks writes:

Thus, by way of the representational currency that is Collins's most sustained achievement, his novels map not only controversies in Victorian culture but their evolution. In this vein, the representation of doctors in the Collins canon encapsulates medicine’s fraught rise to authority. Collins attests to the emergent mindset that fostered scientifically based medicine, and that both marginalized and elevated the work of the

\(^{313}\) Between the publication of Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters, Wood published The Earl’s Heirs (1860) exclusively in America. The Earl’s Heirs is a shorter version of the later Lord Oakburn’s Daughters that also features a poisoning doctor, and there are some slight variations between the two texts (for example, Carlton is called Carlyon in the earlier work). Despite Wood’s claim that “the plot of the story has been to a very great extent rearranged and much enlarged” and “the entire work rewritten from beginning to end” she merely expands, and does not revise The Earl’s Heir’s story line for Lord Oakburn’s Daughters; therefore, I have not included a separate analysis of this transitional work in this chapter (I: iv).

\(^{314}\) Several studies have established the gothic nature of the Bluebeard fairy tale. In particular, see The Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and its Progeny by Heta Pyrhönen and Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic by Anne Williams.

\(^{315}\) For more on Collins’s novelistic reactions to medical and scientific practices, see Helen Small’s Love’s Madness, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas’ Wilkie Collins, Medicine, and the Gothic, and Tabitha Sparks The Doctor in the Victorian Novel.
doctor, conferring a considerable power that would increasingly be interpreted as suspicious and even sinister.\textsuperscript{316} Both Talairach-Vielmas and Sparks see Collins’s representation of doctors as a reaction to the changing dynamics of mid-century medical professionalism. Although neither of these critics engages with Collins’s last novel, \textit{Blind Love}, the poisoning doctor in this work perhaps best exemplifies “the conflict between moral vision of the world and a dispassionate, scientific one,” that both critics claim is at work throughout Collins’s oeuvre.\textsuperscript{317} In \textit{Blind Love}, the doctor Vimpany, a “member of the English College of Surgeons,” induces Lord Harry Norland to fake his own death in order to perpetrate a life-insurance fraud.\textsuperscript{318} In a plot that has obvious similarities to \textit{The Woman in White}, Vimpany procures a sickly patient named Oxbye who bears a striking resemblance to Lord Harry, and then poisons the man in order to pass his body off as the nobleman’s. In the novel, poor Oxbye’s body becomes merely a commodity used to procure insurance money. As Vimpany tells the doomed man, “You are not Oxbye, you are a case; it is not a man, it is a piece of machinery that is out of order.”\textsuperscript{319} Vimpany’s emphasis that the patient (“it”) is not a human being, but only a machine, speaks to a dangerous permutation of scientific detachment that views all patients as “cases” instead of individuals. Vimpany’s depersonalized view of Oxbye shows how scientific detachment can be perverted into a world view that sees patients as only subjects for furthering medical knowledge, or worse, commodities for personal enrichment.\textsuperscript{320}

These analyses of Collins’s work provide a useful starting point for examining Wood’s texts because there are distinct similarities between Wood’s configurations of doctors and those of other sensational writers. Like Collins, Wood is clearly reacting to cultural movements which gave doctors more social and professional authority, and she shares Collins’s concern that professional detachment can erode into a form of scientific objectivity that commodifies human bodies. Wood’s poisoning doctors, however, tend to pose a greater threat to domesticity than do Collins’s villains. Instead of focusing on how doctors turn bodies into commodities within the public marketplace, Wood focuses on how medical men control and abuse bodies within the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{317} Ibid; 89.
\item \textsuperscript{319} Ibid: 405.
\item \textsuperscript{320} Benjulia’s treatment of Carmina in \textit{Heart and Science}, of course, best exemplifies the scientist’s subordination of a patient’s health for medical progress.
\end{itemize}
domestic sphere. Tellingly, while Collins’s poisoning doctors plot to poison male strangers in order to promote complex financial schemes, Wood’s medical men employ their clinical detachment in order to murder their wives and children within the supposed safety of the home. If Victorian “domesticity” was considered to be “the only haven from the trials of the heartless economic world” then situating these types of murders within domestic spaces suggests not only that the private sphere was becoming less isolated, but also that the modern depersonalization of the public world was intruding into the home. Wood suggests that the vehicle for this depersonalization was the Victorian doctor—a figure who regularly traversed the two spheres and brought his public authority into the private realm of the home. If “Wood essentially utilizes the conventions of domestic realism but also employs seemingly anti-realistic devices rooted in the Gothic in order to convey a darker vision of the home—a place of secrets, lies and cruelties of all kinds,” then in Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters Wood uses the Gothicized medical poisoner to show that the corruption within the domestic sphere was not always a home-grown cancer, but often was an infection derived from the outside world.

As many critics have shown, during the nineteenth-century doctors gained a larger command over women’s health, particularly in the fields of gynecology and obstetrics. The ascendance of the doctor’s power was not uncontested: cultural wrangling over medical innovations such as man-midwives suggests a resistance on the part of women to male professional control. In Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters, Wood uses the trope of the poisoning doctor to particularly tap into anxieties about the relationship between medical professionals and women. Despite widely-held Victorian fears that doctors were poisoning random patients, Wood recognized that real-life poisoning doctors were far more likely to murder domestic partners than strangers. In Wood’s fiction, criminal doctors invade idyllic country towns and insinuate themselves into genteel homes—all while using their medical authority to gain access to and murder their female victims. The presence of these death-dealing

322 It should be noted that most sensation authors used the poisoning wife and mother to comment on this cultural shift. Wood, however, does not feature a single poisoning woman in her works. See Chapter Two and Three for more on the poisoning woman.
325 Moscuccu: 42-74.
doctors in the domestic sphere certainly critiques the increased presence of medical men in the Victorian home and the challenge they presented to women’s authority and power. As John Kucich points out, Wood “was concerned with [. . .] the threat professionals posed to the moral power of women, particularly within the private sphere,” and her novels place women’s moral authority directly against medical authority. In positioning female morality as antithetical to certain medical practices, Wood’s “acute narratives allowed readers a glimpse of the ethical issues that haunted the shadowy recesses of medical science.” It was precisely because Wood employed “the spectres of ethical issues” that she was able “to enter into the male arena of science through the use of popular fiction.” Despite critical assessments of Wood that demonstrate her social conservatism, Wood highlights the necessity of women’s carefully managing their domestic health practitioners. As we shall see, in order to defend the home against perverted medical influence, Wood instructs her female readers to have a more active and progressive role in choosing and overseeing medical practitioners. Particularly after the passage of the Contagious Disease acts, which starkly demonstrated the state-sanctioned power that the medical profession held over certain classes of Victorian women, Wood features her heroines defying medical authority in order to assert their domestic rights. In typical medical gothic fiction, the heroine is usually powerless against the superior power of her medical adversary. Indeed, as this chapter argues, by both positioning medical abuse as a direct threat to the home and allowing her heroines to resist medical authority Wood’s sensational fiction makes a unique contribution to the tradition of the medical gothic. By grafting her works on the gothic fairytale “Bluebeard” and drawing connections between the wife-killing villain and her poisoning doctor-husbands, Wood not only positions the medical field in relation to a medieval brutality, but also introduces the medical gothic into the Victorian home. Thus, Wood’s treatment of the poisoning doctor places her work into a larger literary conversation about the medical field that transcends the sensation genre.

The Poisoning Doctors of the Victorian Period

328 Ibid: 286.
329 For example, in Shelley’s Frankenstein Victor’s new wife Elizabeth is murdered by the monster; while in Collins’s Heart and Science, Carmina is at the mercy of Dr. Benjulia.
Like other Victorian commentators, Wood was concerned with how the “patient and physician—these, the closest and most sacred relations of domestic and civil life, are said to have been violated by the drugged draught.” In Wood’s works, the “drugged draught” becomes a potent gothic symbol for the suspect relationship between doctors and pharmaceuticals. Many Victorians worried that the medical practitioner’s relationship to drugs gave them unprecedented opportunities to murder by poison. As one commentator noted:

Give a medical man motives for getting rid of his patient, and it is clear that he had the man at his mercy. Without a metaphor, your medical man can always poison you if he chooses; and unless he is very clumsy—unless he fails to calculate the effect of the negative symptoms, he can poison you without detection.

After all, “what [is] more easy” for a doctor “than to make up poison into two pills—some powerful poison that acts suddenly?” The spate of doctors who were tried for poisoning in the nineteenth-century only fueled fears about medical men’s ability to “get away with murder.”

Before moving into a closer examination of how Wood incorporated the poisoning doctor into her critique of the medical profession, it is useful to briefly consider the material from which she drew inspiration; namely, the real-life criminal doctors of the Victorian period. The increased prestige of the profession certainly had a direct relationship to the amount of public attention directed at poisoning doctor trials, as the public began to worry about how these professionals were applying their specialized knowledge. Based on the spate of doctor-defendants in poisoning cases, the public concern seems valid. The list of poisoning doctors is long, and includes William Palmer (1856), Thomas Smethurst (1859), Edward Pritchard (1865), Alfred Warder (1866), George Lamson (1882), Thomas Neill Cream (1892), and George Chapman (1903). This overview of poisoning doctors, however, will primarily focus on those doctors

331 “Poison in the Prescription.” Leader. 6.300 (1855): 1224.
332 Ibid.
333 This list only includes poisoning doctors who were British or who killed in Britain (Cream had spent much of his life in America, although he was Scottish by birth; George Chapman was a Polish émigré who lived and killed in Britain). There were several more American and Continental doctors who poisoned in the nineteenth-century, such as J. Milton Bowers, who aren’t included on this list although their trials and executions were heavily reported on in the British press.
whose trials occurred around or before Wood wrote *Mr. Castonel* and *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*: such as William Palmer and Thomas Smethurst.334

The first poisoning doctor to receive widespread public attention was William Palmer, a surgeon from Staffordshire.335 Palmer was the second son of an upwardly mobile and prosperous Rugeley lumberman who left his children and widow relatively well-off; at his death William was bequeathed a small fortune of £7,000. Each of the Palmer sons were placed into professions deemed appropriate for members of the rising middle-class, such as the law, the church, and in the case of William, the medical profession. At eighteen, William was apprenticed to a provincial surgeon and in 1846 he went to London to complete his course of study at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. Victorian medical students were often stereotyped as extravagant, and Palmer’s behavior only upheld this commonly held belief. By the time he began living in London, Palmer had already developed a taste for rich living; reports of his time in London detail his champagne parties, his lavish spending habits, and his interest in gambling. Along with his financial carelessness, William was also somewhat careless of his public character and quickly gained a reputation as a womanizer and seducer. Despite these character flaws, William was successful in wooing the heiress Annie Brookes, who was the illegitimate daughter of the late Captain Brookes and his maid.

After managing to take his degree, Palmer returned to Rugeley with his new wife and set up his medical practice. The practice proved to be sporadic, and it is clear that he quickly abandoned any medical ambitions in favor of breeding, managing, and betting on race horses. Most Victorian commentators directly linked Palmer’s betting habits to his eventual murders, and certainly his gambling strained his finances. Throughout Palmer’s adult life, quite a few financially burdensome relatives, such as his aged mother-in-law and several illegitimate children, mysteriously died. This pattern of mysterious deaths continued with the passing of Palmer’s wife, who died in 1854, and that of his brother, Walter, who died a year later. Palmer had insured the life of both his wife and brother in the amount of £13,000 each. Yet it was not until early in 1856 and the strange death of his business partner John Parsons Cook that Palmer was finally investigated for murder. Cook had profited from a winning streak, and shortly thereafter sickened and died while being assiduously attended and medicated by his friend

334 Edward Pritchard’s trial occurred in 1865, directly after the publication of *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*.
335 The following account of Palmer’s life and trial are derived from *The Illustrated and Unabridged The Times Report of the Trial of William Palmer, for Poisoning John Parsons Cook, at Rugeley.*
Palmer. After Cook’s death, his winnings were discovered to be missing, which sparked an investigation into his death. Palmer soon became the prime suspect, and in the course of investigating Cook’s murder, damning evidence came to light about Palmer’s debts and the mysterious deaths of Anne and Walter.

The inquest for Cook’s death was held in late 1855 and Palmer charged with his murder. The attention surrounding the case was so great that Palmer’s lawyers were successfully able to argue for a change in venue (the first in English history), and an act of Parliament was passed in order to move the trial to London. Newspapers heavily reported on the case and some of these sensationalized reports even conjectured that Palmer had murdered as many as seventeen people. As was typical with sensational trials, spectators flocked the courthouse; even the social elite of day, including members of Parliament and a Continental prince, attended the proceedings. When Palmer was found guilty of the crime, as many as fifty thousand people attended his hanging.

Cultural commentary on the Palmer case both reflected sensational discourses about the dangers lurking within the home while also situating Palmer as a gothic villain. “The Condemned Cell,” an 1859 article about the poisoning case, reflects this trend. The anonymous author writes that: “This monster’s career shows what a hell of crime may be festering and seething beneath a life, if not of moral decencies, yet of conventional decorum which is tolerated by the habits of the world.” This passage underscores the sensational anxieties about seemingly “conventional” criminals, but the language of the piece, particularly the author’s use of “monster,” “hell,” “festering” and “seething,” is also suggestive of gothic tropes. This passage marks a rhetorical shift in the piece that signals the use of increasingly vivid and dark language to describe Palmer:

His moral nature is obliterated. Pity, remorse, and natural feeling is extinct—the man becomes a living corpse—he is simply possessed. He acts mechanically, and at the will of something beyond and above him. He goes on heaping murder upon murder; and all in the dullest, coldest, and most unflinching way. He mixes the poisoned draught, and

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337 According to the *Times,* attendees included Prince Edward of Saxe Weimar, Earl Grey, the Earl of Derby, the Marquis of Anglesea, Lord Lucan, Lord Denbigh, and the Lords Lennox.
338 Burney: 144.
sits calm, impassive, and collected by his victim's bed, watching his agonies with scarcely the interest of curiosity. People may talk of PALMER'S secret feelings—we believe that he had absolutely none. He was and is a mere cadaver.  

While the executed Palmer is literally a cadaver at the time of this article’s publication, the author suggests that Palmer was symbolically deadened long before he mounted the scaffold. This author imagines that the doctor was some sort of moral zombie who murders without compunction. He is a killing automaton, or a “living corpse”—an image evocative of gothic undead monsters such as vampires and mummies. Unable perhaps, to reconcile Palmer’s position as a gentlemanly doctor with his crimes, “The Condemned Cell” resorts to labeling Palmer as an animated, yet morally empty, gothic monstrosity.

As in the Palmer case, many details from Thomas Smethurst’s trial smacked of the gothic. While Palmer’s life and death were thoroughly recorded, much of Smethurst’s life remains a mystery. Like Palmer, Smethurst was a medical man; he was a licensee of the London Apothecaries Hall and held a Doctor of Medicine degree from Erlangen University. Although his degree from Erlangen qualified Smethurst to practice as a physician, most historians of the case agree that the degree was probably purchased instead of earned—which would have made it difficult for Smethurst to practice as a main-stream physician. Indeed, Smethurst worked as a general practitioner and later became a proponent of hydropathy, authoring a book entitled Hydropathia and operating a hydropathy facility in Ramsgate for many years.

Smethurst’s troubles began in 1858, while he was living in a boarding house at Bayswater. At the time, Smethurst had been retired from his medical practice for six years and had recently returned from living on the Continent. He had married a woman twenty-years older than himself when still quite a young man, and his marriage was childless. While living at Bayswater, Smethurst became friendly with a fellow lodger, Isabella Bankes. Bankes was in her early forties and apparently responded warmly to Smethurst’s advances—the landlady evicted Bankes for improper conduct with the doctor. The eviction did not end the relationship and on

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340 Ibid: emphasis in original.
342 Many nineteenth-century German universities offered medical degrees for a price. See M. Jeanne Peterson’s The Medical Profession in Mid-Century London for more information.
December 9th, 1858, Smethurst left his wife at the boardinghouse and bigamously married Bankes. They moved to Richmond and began living together as husband and wife.

Unfortunately for the couple, the honeymoon period did not last long. At the beginning of April the new Mrs. Smethurst began suffering from a recurring illness which resembled dysentery. Although doctors were called in, her disease progressed and her health continued to decline. She made a will on May 1st, bequeathing her entire property to her new husband and died two days later. The doctors attending her were suspicious about the cause of death and refused to sign the death certificate. The autopsy confirmed that the cause of death was suspicious and also revealed that Bankes was in the early stages of pregnancy. Smethurst was promptly arrested and sent to Newgate to await his trial at the Old Bailey.

The trial was a scandalous affair, not only because of the salacious details of Smethurst’s bigamy, but also because the evidence at the trial was significantly bungled by the prosecution witnesses. The most famous “poison hunter” of the Victorian period, Dr. Alfred Swaine Taylor, initially testified at the inquest that he had discovered traces of antimony and arsenic in only one sample taken from Bankes’s body. But by the time of the trial, Taylor was forced to admit that his testing apparatus was contaminated and that he could find no definitive proof that poison was present in the second Mrs. Smethurst’s body. Despite the lack of forensic evidence, Smethurst was still convicted of the crime. There was an immediate outcry, and the Home Secretary eventually had the case reviewed by the eminent doctor Sir Benjamin Collins Brodie. Brodie determined that the evidence at the trial did not conclusively prove Smethurst’s guilt and the condemned man was granted a pardon.

Despite the pardon, many observers of the trial maintained a belief in Smethurst’s guilt, theorizing that the doctor had used some new poisoning technique or chemical to subvert forensic testing. Indeed, to many, Smethurst’s poison was a gothic weapon with a magical invisibility that allowed it to baffle toxicological science. Yet the poison is not the only element of the Smethurst case that is reminiscent of the gothic. In many ways, Bankes’ story—her late marriage to wealthy doctor, illness, and subsequent mysterious death—seemed ripped from the pages of an eighteenth-century gothic novel. In addition, like the Palmer case, commentators were fascinated by gruesome aspects of Bakes’ death because:

[ . . .] it implied cool and deliberate experimentalising in poison, upon a person whom the prisoner professed to love, who loved him, and who was with him, hour by hour, while he
administered the means of torture, and she died slowly, hour by hour, under that torture, done with such cruel hypocrisy that through all the moments of the nights and days of that month in wretchedness, he had to maintain the profession of love, with such demoniacal art that through them all he could meet the observations of ordinary practitioners; and, not satisfied with that danger, he invited the presence of gentleman believed to possess more than ordinary skill.  

Instead of illustrating him as a warm, caring, and concerned husband, this passage suggests that Smethurst is a ghoulish and calculating gothic criminal who manipulates his position as husband-doctor to carry out murder. Again, the language of the passage, particularly the use of the words “torture,” “cruel hypocrisy,” “wretchedness,” and “demoniacal,” are evocative of the gothic and highlight the disparate power dynamic between Smethurst and his victim. Like Palmer, Smethurst is situated as a cunning gothic villain who makes a mockery of the sacred institution of marriage and uses his medical expertise to commit murder.

Both the Palmer and Smethurst trials raised similar concerns about doctors; particularly the fear that medical men were employing their professional knowledge and training in order to perpetrate crimes. Indeed, one of the most obvious problems of the Victorian medical profession was the troubling relationship between doctors and their drugs. In Britain today, doctors prescribe medications but are removed from the dispensing process; this regulation both ensures that mistakes in the dosage can be caught by the pharmacist, but it also prevents doctors from abusing or overextending their power. In the Victorian period, however, no such system for regulating prescriptions existed. All doctors under the rank of physician (such as general practitioners) usually dispensed their own medications, leading, as the Victorians feared, to opportunities for abuse.  

As the number of poisoning doctors grew, it came to be accepted that “the Victorian medical man, when he turned to murder, regularly favored poison over pointed, edged, weighted, or ballistic tools.”  

Indeed, only a small minority of Victorian doctors who murdered used weapons other than poison, confirming the public’s belief that doctors were using their medical expertise in order to kill. Certainly news reports of the trials of poisoning doctors emphasized the men’s links to the medical profession. For example, although Palmer and

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344 George Eliot famously explores this issue in Middlemarch. The surgeon Lydgate, who is interested in medical reform, refuses to dispense his own medications.
345 Altick: 151.
Smethurst had both given up practicing medicine at the time of their trials, they were continuously referred to as “Dr.” in the press. The link between these criminals and the medical profession was becoming so entrenched that medical journals attempted to disassociate them from the profession: “There may be some consolation, however, to those who follow out their Profession to its legitimate objects, in the reflection that both [Palmer and Smethurst] had long wandered from the ordinary paths of Medical life. Palmer took so early to the turf that he can scarcely be said to have practised; and Smethurst diverged into Hydropathy.” The Smethurst case was particularly damaging to the profession because of the corrupted evidence. Not only did the evidentiary problems shake trust in forensic science, but since the cause of death was never satisfactorily determined, it also suggested that doctors were finding ways to outsmart the celebrated poison hunters.

Drawing from cultural narratives that were already situating poisoning doctors as gothic villains, Wood creates two texts—Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters—that fuse the medical gothic with the sensational genre. Although the Victorians fretted about doctors poisoning their clientele for personal aggrandizement, both the Palmer and Smethurst trials showed that doctors were far more likely to poison those close to them: siblings, in-laws, children, and (most commonly) sexual partners. Wood particularly focuses on the threat the criminal doctor posed to the domestic sphere in order to explore the “intrusions” of medicine into the home. As Tamara Wagner points out, “Drawing on a medical understanding [. . .] sensation novelists represented poisoning in the Victorian home as a particularly revealing part of the genre’s rupture of middle-class ideologies of domesticity.” Wood, who according to contemporary critics was “familiar with medical lore,” illustrates the threat medicine posed to “middle-class ideologies of domesticity” by fictionalizing Palmer and Smethurst and situating their deadly experiments in the Victorian home.

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346 Ibid.: 153.
**Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters**

Written before she commenced her career as a novelist, *Mr. Castonel* is one of Wood’s early short works; it first appeared in *Bentley’s Magazine* in 1857, was posthumously re-published in *The Argosy* in 1895, and was even released as a monograph under the title *Gervase Castonel; Or, the Six Gray Powders*. The novella relates the story of a young doctor, the titular Mr. Castonel, who moves to the village of Ebury and begins treating patients as a general practitioner. Despite his contemptuous treatment of the town apothecary and the rumors about his connection to Lavinia, a mysterious woman who follows him to Ebury, Mr. Castonel manages to gain favor in the town. Having garnered a successful practice, he soon begins wooing the town beauties, Caroline Hall, Ellen Leicester, and Frances Chavasse. He marries them one by one, and each dies of strange convulsions about six months after their marriages. Suspicions that Mr. Castonel is a poisoner come to a head after the deaths of his third wife and a local infant (supposed to be his illegitimate child), and a formal investigation is launched. Before Castonel can be brought up for charges, however, he is found dead in the home of the mysterious Lavinia. Lavinia claims to have married Mr. Castonel before he moved to Ebury, and explains that he accidentally poisoned himself while trying to murder her.

Wood’s 1864 novel *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* shares a number of important similarities with *Mr. Castonel*. Like the earlier novella, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* is also a variant on the Bluebeard tale, focusing on the uxoricide committed by Dr. Lewis Carlton. This crime opens the novel and continues to haunt the narrative; the dead wife’s fate is relayed through dreams and “buried” writing that, true to the Bluebeard tale, are excavated by the murder’s subsequent spouse. Although *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* retains themes from the fairytale, as a sensational novel it adheres more closely to the conventions of realism, and therefore some of the more unbelievable aspects of *Mr. Castonel* (such as the novella’s pile of murdered bodies, which is significantly reduced to just one corpse in the later work) are discarded. Nevertheless, Wood composes a novel that, like her earlier shorter work, offers a powerful critique of the medical profession. The novel immediately foregrounds the dangers Victorian medicine can pose to women by introducing the untimely death and medical mystery that will haunt the narrative. The novel deals with two seemingly separate mysteries: the suspicious death of a young mother, Mrs.

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Crane, and equally suspicious disappearance of Clarice Chesney, the daughter of Lord Oakburn. The story opens with the arrival of a young, beautiful, and pregnant woman calling herself “Mrs. Crane” to the rural town of South Wennock. Mrs. Crane immediately goes into labor, and (to the surprise of her landlady) insists upon the attendance of the newest medical practitioner in town, Mr. Carlton. Carlton, however, is out of town, and Dr. Stephen Grey instead safely delivers her baby. Shortly after the birth, Mrs. Crane sends her baby away with the mysterious Mrs. Smith and continues to convalesce under the care of Grey. Once Carlton returns, Mrs. Crane insists that he take over her case; but before Carlton can officially begin caring for her she dies from poisoning. During the ensuing inquest, Carlton claims that a medicine prepared by Dr. Grey smelled strongly of prussic acid and hints that Grey made a mistake in the preparation of the prescription. Despite Carlton’s evidence, Grey is officially cleared during the inquest; the people of South Wennock, however, continue to suspect Grey and he is driven out of town (despite this setback Grey moves to London and prospers so much in his new practice that he is knighted). Just as the inquest failed to identify the murderer of Mrs. Crane, it also failed to establish her real identity or the location of her infant; nameless and without family or friends to claim her, “Mrs. Crane” is buried in the local cemetery and, for a time, forgotten by South Wennock. Carlton, however, is reminded of her death by the periodic visits of a misshapen and ghostly man who accuses him of murdering her by poison. Despite the frightening apparition, Carlton remains in the town and eventually elopes with Laura Chesney, the daughter of the aristocratic, albeit poor, Lord Oakburn. The rest of the novel follows the fate of the Oakburn family, particularly focusing on the disappearance of Clarice, who changed her name and went into service as a governess so as not to be a financial burden on her family. Her fate remains a mystery until Laura, jealous and suspicious of her husband’s fidelity, goes into his laboratory and searches through a secret safe. She discovers a letter that reveals that Carlton had secretly married Clarice (although at the time he was not aware of her real identity). Jane’s servant Judith, who accidentally saw Carlton adulterate Clarice’s medicine, finally tells her story and admits that she has been “haunting” Carlton by dressing as the ghostly man. With the evidence mounting against him, Carlton admits that he murdered his first wife in order to marry Laura.

As the short summaries of these works suggest, *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* is certainly a revisioning of the earlier *Mr. Castonel*; both works share a number of important similarities—
particularly in their similar treatment of Bluebeard motifs. The repetitive cycle of marriage and murder, the domestic secrets and forbidden spaces all signal that these texts are reinterpretations of the “Bluebeard” myth set in the middle-class Victorian home. In the most widely circulated version of this Märchen, the rich and powerful Bluebeard murders a long line of successive wives who disobey him by opening a forbidden closet (which holds the corpses of all his previous wife-victims). By mid-century, most Victorian readers would have been familiar with “Bluebeard,” as the story was included in the widely published Perrault’s Fairy Tales. With the rise of sensation fiction at the end of the 1850s, Wood’s use of “Bluebeard”—a fairy tale which highlights the dangers of domestic secrets—is especially timely. Like the surviving wife in the “Bluebeard” fairy tale, sensation fiction is primarily concerned with revealing the skeletons in (particularly middle-class) closets. In Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters, Wood explores how much mid-century medical science is complicit in putting those skeletons in those closets. In the tale, it is Bluebeard’s “house with the secret room” which most fully symbolizes “the structure of [masculine] power that engenders the action within this social world,” and in these two texts, Wood refigures Bluebeard’s “bloody closet” into the home-laboratory. Unsurprisingly, the labs in Wood’s works are set in dark, lonely cellars, evoking images of gothic dungeons. It is here, in these gothic spaces and amongst the tools of their profession, that the deadly doctors hide the relics of their crimes—small vials of deadly grey powder or incriminating letters—within “dummy drawers” or iron safes. In yoking the laboratory, a symbol of progressive modern medicine, to the bloody closet, Wood effectively links science to a medieval form of brutality. In addition, if the secret room symbolizes masculine power, then Wood defines the laboratory as representative of a specifically masculine form of barbarity. The setting of the lab within the home only further underscores the danger

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351 It was common for Wood to recycle plots from earlier works into her novels.
352 In this version of the tale, the rich and powerful Bluebeard requests to marry one of two sisters. Despite his strange appearance and the mysterious disappearance of his previous wives, the younger sister agrees to marry him. Shortly after the marriage, Bluebeard announces that the needs to leave his castle on business. He leaves his young wife in full charge of the home, with the caveat that she not open a certain small closet. Once her husband is gone, Bluebeard’s wife cannot contain her curiosity and opens the closet, only to find the bodies of all of Bluebeard’s previous wives (who also disobeyed him by looking into the closet). In her horror, she drops the key, which becomes stained with blood. Upon Bluebeard’s return, he demands the key and discovers the condemning stain. He sentences his wife to death, but her brothers appear just in time to save her by cutting off Bluebeard’s head.
353 Wilkie Collins’s novel The Woman in White, which began serialization in 1859, is generally accepted to be the first sensation novel.
354 Williams: 41.
that masculine science poses to the domestic sphere. The specter haunting these homes is not the blood-soaked bodies of past wives, but the deadly potential of a powerful and masculine science.

Critics have shown that sensation authors were intensely interested in the control the medical establishment was exerting over Victorian women’s lives, and in these two works Wood is clearly concerned about science’s potential to subjugate women. She explores this sinister potential by associating Castonel and Carlton with both contemporary poisoning doctors and specific Victorian anxieties about the medical profession. By situating her sensational villains as medical Bluebeards, then, Wood not only helps to inaugurate sensation fiction’s concern with domestic discord but also explores the potential danger of medicine’s increased influence in the home. The following sections examine how Wood situates her doctors as gothic villains as well as investigating Wood’s unusual figuration of the gothic heroine.

The Gothic Villains: Drs. Castonel and Carlton

Both Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn's Daughters mimic real-life poisoning cases in their emphasis on the symbolic danger medicine can pose to the home. Wood contemporizes this fairy tale both through its middle-class setting and through its incorporation of themes from the Palmer and Smethurst cases—particularly in regards to the murderer’s misuse of his professional knowledge and power. Like Palmer and Smethurst, Castonel and Carlton are both husbands and doctors who have the double responsibility of protecting their wives from harm; by murdering helpless women and infants, they violate both their “natural” role as protectors and their professional duty to preserve life. Wood makes it clear that both doctors employ their medical knowledge in order to get away with murder. For example, Castonel’s chemical training (like Smethurst’s) allows him to employ chemicals which circumvent forensic identification: “Mr. Ailsa took up the empty glass, and with Mr. Rice examined the few drops left at the bottom. Not at first did they detect the nature of the poison; it was indeed rare and subtle, leaving, where it should be imbibed, but little trace after death.” As this passage makes clear, even when two

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356 Wood, Ellen. “Mr. Castonel.” Rpt. in Ashley and Other Stories. London: MacMillian & Co, 1901: 421. All subsequent references are to this edition, which is based on the 1895 version of the text republished in The Argosy after Wood’s death. There are some minor textual variants from the 1857 edition of the tale, such as the change in
other medical men—Mr. Ailsa and Mr. Rice—are purposefully looking for the poison Castonel employs, they have difficulty identifying it. Indeed, the rarity and invisibility of Castonel’s poison gives it an almost magical and gothic quality; the chemical imbues Castonel with an almost illimitable power over the life and death of his wives.

The incorporation of the poisoning doctor into the structure of the Bluebeard myth allows Wood to transform the medical man into a gothic villain that challenges the progress of mid-century medical science. Wood accomplishes this transformation, in part, by aligning brutality with scientific knowledge when she transforms the cutlass wielding Bluebeard into a refined killer who uses his chemical expertise to murder all three wives with a “subtle and deadly” poison. At first glance, Wood’s decision to transform her Bluebeards into medical poisoners may seem to humanize or “soften” her villains. After all, poison has a long-standing reputation for being less violent and more humane than other forms of death (such as Bluebeard’s throat-cutting). The Victorian suicide’s overwhelming preference for opiates confirms this chemical’s reputation for providing a relatively painless mode of self-destruction, but it also suggests that other varieties of poison were not so gentle. Indeed, other common poisons, such as arsenic, caused excruciating pain: “Imagine stomach pains so sharp that it seems like rats are gnawing at your insides. The pain is accompanied by a thirst almost impossible to quench, with loss of bowel control and violent vomiting and retching.” While poisoning is not as gory or barbaric as slitting throats, Wood clearly equates the effects of the doctor’s chemicals with a brutal death. In Mr. Castonel, the type of poison used is never established, but each wife dies in torturous spasms, “writhing on the bed in awful agony, screaming and flinging [their] arms about.” Castonel’s other victims, his bastard child and Gaffer Shipley, have similar reactions to his powders: “[Gaffer] can’t hold hisself still on the bed for screeching. And the babby’s a dying and screeching.” In the later novel, Clarice, who has been poisoned with prussic acid, gives “an awful cry of alarm and agony” before lapsing into convulsions and finally death.

the apothecary’s name from “Winninton” to “Winnington” in the later version. However, since the variations are minor, I have chosen to cite the more widely available 1895 version of the story.

357 Ibid.
358 The move on the part of modern societies to adopt lethal injection over other forms of execution, such as hanging, shooting, decapitation, or electrocution, supports this view.
360 403.
361 360.
362 98.
These victim’s tortured screams and uncontrollable writhing definitively mark their deaths as not only painful, but brutal. Wood thus positions Castonel and Carlton as a modernized (and not less brutal) version of their fairy-tale counterpart, highlighting the destructive potential of their modern “medicines.”

While the women’s painful deaths most readily testify to the masculine brutality of medical science, the extent to which these Bluebeards have biophysical control over their wives’ reproduction further emphasizes the threat male science poses to female patients. In her reading of Bluebeard motifs in Collins’s novels, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas notes that use of this fairytale “displays a picture of women’s lives in marriage as endless repetition, as sterile and oppressive reproduction.”363 Certainly Talairach-Vielmas’s analysis holds true in Mr. Castonel, for each wife becomes not only a repetition of the one that comes before her, but also because each marriage ends in reproductive sterility and death. In Mr. Castonel, the doctor-husband’s threat to the female realm of reproduction is revealed by the unusual timing of each of his wives’ deaths. Six months after their marriages, all three wives are struck by a mysterious ailment that brings them close to death. Each seems well on the way to recovery when they relapse into fatal convulsions. The first attacks are significant, not only because they point to the fact that Castonel is repeatedly poisoning his wives, but also because each one apparently results in a miscarriage: the “nature” of Ellen’s first attack “was such as to destroy the hope that had sprung up in her heart,” while Frances’s “symptoms were the same as those which had attacked Mr. Castonel's first and second wives, destroying prospects of an heir.”364 Significantly, Castonel becomes murderous when each of his wives nears her third trimester, suggesting that each murder is a reaction to a rapidly approaching birth. Many Victorian poisons had reputations for being abortifacients and, while it would be tempting to label the women’s deaths as failed abortion attempts, it is clear that Castonel supplies the fatal dose after each miscarriage—indicating that he first intends to terminate the pregnancy before he takes the women’s lives. Although Wood does not fully explain Castonel’s motivations for the abortions, she makes clear that each wife suffers and experiences the sorrow and pain of losing her fetus before her death.

Castonel’s manipulation of his wives’ reproduction, then, reveals his actions to be not only murderous but also specifically misogynistic. Wood frames his repeated cycle of marriage

363 Talairach-Vielmas: 162.
364 339; 390 italics mine.
and murder as a symbolic struggle for the sexual conquest and control of his wives’ bodies, and Castonel becomes a (albeit monstrous) symbol for the increased control doctors in Victorian culture were exerting over women’s bodies. Even before the Contagious Disease Acts were passed in 1864, mid-century doctors were increasing the power they had over Victorian women’s health. Mary Poovey identifies the 1840s and 1850s as a time when doctors began “reducing all women to a socially undifferentiated, reproductive body” which “foregrounded the biological difference between man and woman in such a way as to authorize male-dominated medical expertise.” Many scholars have documented the medicalization of midwifery in the nineteenth-century and have outlined how male physicians actively sought to replace “untrained” female midwives. By mid-century, “it was widely accepted that keeping up a practice without any midwifery was impossible,” and doctors (particularly rural general practitioners) were jealously guarding this lucrative practice from interlopers. One of the central arguments doctors used to justify their monopolization of obstetric practices was their superior scientific training. Using a doctor for the birthing process was promoted as a safer and more sanitary option than relying on traditional midwives. In Mr. Castonel, however, Wood challenges this argument by presenting a doctor who perverts his scientific knowledge, not only to murder his wives, but also to murder his own unborn offspring. Science is not used to provide safe deliveries, but to ensure the death of the fetus—and its mother.

The danger corrupt medical men pose to women is further emphasized by the sexual predations of Castonel and Carlton. Fear about doctors using their scientific skills or authority to molest or rape female patients was a prevalent cultural anxiety throughout the Victorian period, and the increased authority of nineteenth-century doctors was directly linked to fears about sexual misuses of power. The mid-century link between doctors and illicit sex is apparent in Mr. Castonel, and Wood paints Castonel as a manipulative womanizer who takes advantage of his access to private homes in order to seduce his victims. Throughout the novella, Castonel is referred to as a “general admirer” of women and, indeed, his list of sexual conquests is long. While married to all three Ebury women, Castonel continues to visit Lavinia (his legal wife) at

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365 For Wood’s reaction to the CD acts, see my discussion of Lord Oakburn’s Daughters below.
367 For example, see Moscucci.
368 59.
369 302.
night; nor is his interest in women limited to the middle-class ladies of Ebury. The Rector sarcastically remarks that “amongst the poor” Castonel is more warmly welcomed by the daughters than the parents.”370 The Castonel housekeeper voices similar concerns, when she admits both that Castonel “is out much in an evening” and that the old apothecary Mr. Winnington never “had these evening calls upon his time.”371 More direct evidence of Castonel’s infidelities comes in the form of the lower-class Mary Shipley’s bastard child; after much prevaricating Mary finally admits that Castonel is the father. Similarly, in Lord Oakburn’s Daughters Carlton not only woos Laura while his first wife is alive and pregnant, he commits several infidelities during his marriage. The two doctors, of course, gain access to all their paramours through their profession; as doctors, they are allowed the freedom to enter a variety of homes (even at unusual hours) without suspicion. Their sexual exploits not only confirm fears about doctors’ insatiable sexual appetites, but also suggest that doctors were perhaps given too much freedom in their access to the private sphere. Like the gothic villains that they are modeled upon, Carlton’s and Castonel’s threaten both the lives and sexual purity of the women around them.

In Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters Wood completes Carlton and Castonel transformation into gothic villains by endowing them with a detached, medical mindset. Even though “most doctors before 1850 [. . .] simply did not observe or think scientifically” this had begun to change by the time Wood was writing.372 Advances in scientific medical education and the incorporation of more technology to perform examinations all helped to foster a medical practitioner’s new mindset of clinical detachment. But viewing humans as organic machines whose parts could be individually examined and treated led to cultural anxiety about doctors’ relationship to their patients. For example, the feminist Francis Cobbe expressed concern that too many medical men were entering the profession, not from “the motive of pure Humanity,” but from “Scientific interest” alone.373 The problem Cobbe identifies with the latter motive is that it degrades the doctor-patient relationship: the “patient is to a doctor what a rock is to a geologist, or a flower to a botanist—the much coveted subject of his studies.”374 Even if a man enters the

370 305.
371 345.
374 Ibid.: 302.
medical profession from benevolent motives, the work requires such “great callousness” that “a year in his profession would suffice to blot from the mind all beauty of the world, and to spoil the charm and sanctity of the sweetest mysteries of human nature.”

Cobbe’s fear is that medical training can create a perverted scientific world view that devalues individual human life. She declares that each patient has a right to know their doctor’s moral qualifications just as they have the right to know their scientific qualifications. For Cobbe, only religious feeling can combat the dehumanizing process of medical training; if it is lacking, then a murderous physician like “a Pritchard or a La Pommeray—handsome and gentlemanly” has “as a doctor, unparalleled facilities for the commission and concealment of crime.”

Despite the many rebuttals of Cobbe’s argument (mostly written by medical men) her views were by no means singular. An earlier commentator anticipates Cobbe’s point that the man of science must have either religious or deep philanthropic feelings:

Man can co-operate in the laws of the CREATOR, which give life; he can carry out the secondary laws which destroy life; and if unguided by a sense of religious responsibility he will use the destruction at his pleasure. There is, as we observed lately, one other influence to paralyse crime—it is affection. The babe is at the mercy of its mother, who can stifle it at any moment; the son can poison his father; the wife her husband; the physician his patient. It is natural instinct which makes us feel terror at the idea of death—anxiety to preserve the life of our fellow creatures.

As the poisoning doctors of the nineteenth-century proved again and again, these commentator’s fears were not unfounded. Displaying little concern for the sanctity of human life or their professional obligations, and dehumanized by their cold scientific thinking, criminal doctors seemed to pose a serious threat to Victorian society.

A hallmark of the medical gothic is an anxiety that scientific training causes doctors to be divorced from common human emotion; in Mr. Castonel and Lord Oakburn’s Daughters Wood highlights the moral deficiencies of her fictional doctors and their unfeeling approach to their patient-victims. Indeed, it seems that Wood has created precisely the type of doctor that commentators such as Cobbe feared—one devoid of religious belief or normal human emotion.

375 Ibid.: 304.
376 Ibid.: 306.
377 The Monthly Review printed several rebuttals, as did The Medical News, The Student’s Journal and Hospital Gazette, and The Spectator.
378 “Poison in the Prescription.” Leader. 6.300 (1855): 1224, emphasis in original.
For example, Castonel is variously described as “impenetrable” or “unfathomable;” he has a “passionless face” and his emotions are always “so completely under control.” This description of Castonel is eerily evocative of the ways in which the Victorian press characterized poisoning doctors like William Palmer. Palmer was always described as some variant of “cool, cautious, and sober,” and even during his trial, he retained his “self-possession,” “constant coolness,” “profound composure,” and “perfect equanimity.” Like Palmer, Castonel seems to have become a gothic “living corpse” with “no natural human feeling” left. Similarly, although in her later work Wood lessens the degree of the medical poisoner’s villainy (Carlton only murders one woman, while Castonel’s body count is significantly higher), she still highlights Carlton’s moral deficiency: “Perhaps few men living were more inclined by nature to transgress social laws than was Mr. Carlton. He had been lax on his notions of morality all his life; he was lax still.” Similarly, Wood directly ties Carlton’s ambivalent morality to his upbringing and his lack of female guidance:

His father, who was in the same profession as himself, a surgeon, in large practice in a populous but not desirable quarter of London, lying eastward, had been rather given to sins and recklessness himself, and no good example had ever been placed before the boy, Lewis. Had his mother lived, as he remarked to Captain Chesney, things would have been widely different.

Here, Wood creates a chain of moral delinquency that is linked from father to son and is connected through ties both of blood and profession. Not only has Carlton inherited his father’s “sins,” but he has also inherited a profession that provides the mindset and opportunity to commit those sins. Thus, Carlton’s moral ambivalence leads to a disturbing worldview that hierarchically categorizes human life into a continuum of value. In describing the events surrounding his wife Clarice’s death, Carlton declares:

I never knew her but as Clarice Beauchamp; I never knew that she had claim to a higher position in life than that of governess. She was always utterly silent to me on the subject of her family and connections, and I assumed she was an orphan.

379 378
381 “The Condemned Cell:” 506.
382 II: 313.
383 I: 72.
384 III: 313.
The implication, of course, is that had Carlton known that Clarice was not an orphaned and friendless governess, but the daughter of an aristocratic family, he would not have viewed her as “disposable.” While this certainly is a commentary on the precarious position of governesses in Victorian society, it also reveals a dangerous precedent for a medical man: that some lives are worth more than others. Carlton is able to murder without compunction due to both his stunted morality and a medical mindset that hierarchically “values” patients.

**Gothic Heroines**

In “Bluebeard” the machinations of the gothic villain are circumvented by “the curious heroine” who discovers her husband’s crimes and arranges for her brothers to chop off her husband’s head. The curious wife is central to the resolution of the original fairytale because she represents the drive to discover the secrets of the home; only through exposure can Bluebeard finally be brought to justice for his murders. Thus, although the tale highlights the dangers of female curiosity, that curiosity is also integral to “outing” Bluebeard and bringing him to justice. In her interpretations of the Bluebeard tale, Wood revises the role of the curious heroine. Initially, in the earlier work *Mr. Castonel*, Wood completely dispenses with the curious heroine. Although Castonel’s wives are aware of their predecessors—and their mysterious deaths—not a single one probes deeply into her husband’s secrets. Lavinia survives, not because she solves the mysterious deaths, but because she accidentally catches a glimpse of Castonel dosing her wine in a mirror and tricks him into drinking his own poison. The failure of these women to discover Castonel’s secrets suggests just how powerful medical authority had become by mid-century. Each time doubts are raised regarding the women’s deaths, Castonel answers that the cases are “perfectly satisfactory to medical men.” The danger, Wood suggests, is not only that the Castonel wives will not question their husband, but that (even if they did challenge him) they cannot effectively contest his scientific authority. As wives and patients, Castonel has more power over women than Bluebeard could ever dream of, and Wood purposefully dispenses with

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385 Although the three wives in *Mr. Castonel* do not commit the “sin” of curiosity, it should also be pointed out that none of them are completely “innocent.” All three of the doctor’s wives commits a serious moral “sin;” Frances is unforgivably vain, while both Caroline and Ellen defy parental authority to marry Castonel.

386 339.

387 The only person who does challenge Castonel’s scientific authority is Mr. Ailsa, another doctor who returns to Ebury towards the end of the novella.
the “curious heroine” of the original fairy tale in order to highlight the power and influence of medical authority at mid-century.

Yet by the time she began writing *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*, the medical world had changed. The passage of the Contagious Disease acts had powerfully demonstrated the medical profession’s growing power over women. This chapter suggests that the reemergence of the curious heroine in Wood’s later work is a direct response to increasing cultural concern about the medical profession’s relationship to women. While still highlighting anxieties about medical science, Wood also offers a model of female domestic management that counteracts the dangers of the gothic medical villain. She does this by not only incorporating the curious heroine back into her modern version of Bluebeard, but also by presenting this figure in a variety of forms. At different points in the novel, Laura Carlton, Lady Oakburn, and Lady Jane are all positioned in the role of the curious heroine. Their efforts are responsible for exposing Carlton’s crime as well as the medical misdeeds of other doctors. In the case of Lady Oakburn and Jane, their insistence on having information and participating in the masculine world of medicine is a specifically feminist act that allows them to reestablish their moral superiority and domestic power.

The key to Wood’s vision of proactive medical management is choice. In the Victorian period, women were “frequently the target of general practitioners' attention and concern” because they “were left to judge and make decisions” about the family’s medical care.388 In most areas of the country, doctors faced competition from other medical men, chemists, traditional healers, or quacks. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, patients had the power of choice and many viewed their medical practitioners as employees, rather than authority figures.389 Around mid-century, however, this mindset began to change and by the *fin de siècle* medical men were “the new priesthood, ministering to the physical and psychic needs of patients.”390 In both *Mr. Castonel* and *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*, Wood registers the shifting power dynamic between doctors and patients, and she is especially concerned that the doctor’s increased role in the home was an erosion of female management and domestic authority.

Wood’s strategy to combat the erosion of female authority in regards to the medical profession is to urge her readers to think critically about how and why they choose their medical men. Wood positions women as the guardians of the morality and health of the home, and her works take on

388 Peterson: 129.
389 Ibid. 134.
390 Ibid. 285.
the pedagogical task of “teaching” her readers how to successfully negotiate the (potentially dangerous) world of medicine.

From the very beginning of Mr. Castonel Wood highlights the importance of women responsibly choosing their medical attendants. She begins this process by focusing on the tension Mr. Castonel’s arrival brings to Ebury. At the opening of the story, Mr. Winnington, the apothecary, is the only source of medical advice in the town. Although Winnington is a practical and able practitioner, the town immediately flocks to the new doctor, Castonel. Castonel’s chief attraction seems to be his reputation as a “fashionable doctor;” the town is enamored with his “stylish cab with a tiger behind it” and his flashy zinc-plated sign. Unlike Winnington, who gives his patients unfiltered professional advice, Mr. Castonel purposely sets out to gain clients by appealing to their petty vanities and prejudices. The new doctor’s initial consultation with Mrs. Major Acres demonstrates his underhanded method of obtaining new clients:

He sympathized so feelingly with her ailments; but assured her that in a little time, under his treatment, she would not have a symptom left. That horrid Winnington, she confided to him, had told her she wanted nothing but walking and fasting. Oh, as to Winnington, Mr. Castonel rejoined, with a contemptuous curl of his wire-drawn, impenetrable lips, what could be expected of an apothecary? He (Mr. Castonel) hoped soon to leave no patients to his mercy.

The passage has a clear satirical tone; although Winnington has given good advice to his gouty and obese patient, Mrs. Major Acres’s vanity was insulted by the apothecary’s direct discussion of her weight. Not only does this passage reveal Mrs. Acres’s ridiculous conceit, but it also reveals Castonel’s skillful manipulation of his client. As Mrs. Acres is at the head of Ebury’s fashionable society and its most inveterate gossip, the rest of the town is quickly convinced to follow her lead. The story repeatedly states that there is more than enough work in the growing town for two medical men, but Castonel is not satisfied with his share. Greedy for a lucrative practice, he makes good on his threat to leave no patients to Winnington. Through a combination of artful manners and flashy persona, within “six months not a patient remained with Mr. Winnington,” even though “in reality” Castonel is “less skilled than” his rival. The danger inherent in Castonel’s monopolization of Ebury’s medical practice is, of course, that it

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391 296.
392 297.
393 298.
allows him to undertake his illegal and immoral activities without interference. Indeed, Wood uses the return of a medical rival, Mr. Ailsa, to highlight this fact. Having heard of the friendless Mary Shipley’s seduction (at the hands of Castonel) Ailsa “declares that, had he been in Ebury at the time, he should have taken it upon himself to bring Mr. Castonel to the justices for it.”

Thus, Ailsa functions as an important policing agent in the text; in addition to discovering the identity of Mary Shipley’s seducer, Ailsa is also the doctor that finally identifies the rare poison that Castonel uses to murder his wives. Clearly, Wood emphasizes the value of professional rivalry and the importance of patients choosing their medical attendants for reasons other than fashion or novelty.

Like Mr. Castonel, Lord Oakburn’s Daughters also begins by highlighting the importance of making wise medical decisions. The novel opens with Mrs. Crane’s (Clarice Chesney’s) insistence on her parturition being attended by South Wennock’s newest practitioner—Mr. Carlton—and the fatal results of this choice. Clarice’s death frames the narrative structure of the novel, emphasizing the danger certain doctors pose to naïve and trusting women; yet Lord Oakburn’s Daughters also features women who successfully challenge suspect medical authority. In the novel, Wood remodels the “curious heroine” into women who refuse to be kept in ignorance by medical men and assert their own rights as patients and domestic managers. In the characters of Lady Eliza Oakburn and Lady Jane Chesney the reader is shown a model of Victorian womanhood that both takes an active role in making medical decisions and continues to conform to the requirements of proper feminine behavior.

One of the most significant scenes for this process is another moment of birth and death: Lady Eliza Oakburn’s recovery from the birth of her son and the almost simultaneous death of her husband from gout. Lady Oakburn clashes with her doctors when they impress upon her their medical paternalism; the doctors make decisions for the “good” of Lady Oakburn without fully informing her about the realities of the case. As Lord Oakburn colorfully points out, it is all in a doctor’s “day’s work to go about deceiving people […] telling them they are getting their sea-legs on again, while all the while you know before the eight bells strike they’ll be gone down to Davy Jones’s locker.”

His words quickly become prophetic: the doctors ban together in

^394 388.
^395 II: 218-19.
order to keep the “delicate” Lady Oakburn from knowing that her husband is dying. Despite remonstrance from Lady Jane, the doctors refuse to enlighten Lady Oakburn:

“Is it right to keep it from the countess?” asked Jane, her tone, as she put the question, betraying that she though it was wrong. Dr. James heaved up his physicianly hands and eyes. “Right to keep it from her, Lady Jane! I would not for the world allow it to reach her ladyship in her present state of health; we don't know what the consequences might be. My reputation is at stake, my lady.”

As Wood makes apparent, the doctor’s decision to keep the countess in ignorance of her husband’s terminal condition is in a large degree based on his desire to preserve his reputation, and he ignores the “moral” guidance provided by Jane. Even worse, Dr. James’s deceit goes beyond simply hiding the truth; he actively lies to Lady Oakburn and convinces her that the count was “taking a renewed lease on life.”

Lady Oakburn’s fears that she will be kept from a final meeting with her husband are realized: the doctors are successful in their ruse long enough to prevent a last interview between the husband and wife. Suspicious that she is being misled, the countess leaves her bed to discover that Lord Oakburn expired only moments before. Contrary to the doctor’s warning that the news will be disabling, Lady Oakburn resumes active management of the home—which includes the dismissal of the treacherous Dr. James. The triumphant scene is worth quoting at length:

She had done it, as she did most things, in a quiet lady-like manner, but one entirely firm and uncompromising. Dr. James had by stratagem, by untruth, prevented a last interview between her and her husband, and she felt that she could not regard him with feelings unallied to vexation and anger: it was better therefore that they should part. Dr. James urged that what he had done, he had one for the best, out of concern for her ladyship's welfare. That, her ladyship did not doubt, she answered; but she could not forget or forgive the way in which it had been accomplished: in her judgment, Dr. James should have imparted to her the truth of her husband's state, and then urged prudence upon her. It was the deceit she could not forgive, or—in short—countenance.

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396 II: 227-8.
397 II: 222.
This passage is revealing in several ways. First, it underscores why Dr. James’s paternalistic approach to medicine is flawed and presents a more morally responsible model for medicine (he “should have imparted to her the truth”) that privileges the informed family. Second, by emphasizing the “stratagem,” “untruth,” and “deceit” inherent in the doctor’s practice, Wood challenges medicine’s purported “professionalism.” By lying to Lady Oakburn in order to protect his reputation, Dr. James reveals that he is not a disinterested professional working primarily for the good of his patient, but rather that his self-interest outweighs his patient’s wishes. Finally, Wood offers her female readers a template for actively managing their health care without compromising their femininity. She demonstrates that a “firm and uncompromising” management of the home can be achieved while maintaining feminine and “lady-like” behavior.

That Wood intends for Lady Oakburn’s behavior to be a model for other women is apparent from a subsequent scene between her daughter-in-law, Jane, and Dr. Carlton. While Jane’s ward Lucy is on a visit to her sister Laura Carlton’s home, she begins to feel ill. In fact, Lucy has contracted a dangerous fever that has been sweeping the town, and Carlton quickly recognizes the symptoms of the disease—yet he keeps Lucy at his home rather than sending her back to Jane. This move is prompted by Carlton’s desire to “bring Lucy through the illness himself,” thus ingratiating himself with his sister-in-law. Lady Jane has had an aversion to Carlton ever since one of her prophetic dreams suggested that the doctor was involved in the disappearance of her sister Clarice. Trusting to her intuition and suspicious about his actions, Lady Jane makes inquiries and a competing doctor admits that “he saw no reason why [Lucy] should not have been taken home at first.”

Jane immediately realizes that Carlton must have ulterior motives; prompted by her fears and schooled by Lady Oakburn’s experience with Dr. James, Jane takes firm control of the situation. Despite Lucy’s confinement within Carlton’s house, Jane insists on her sister being attended by Dr. Grey. When Carlton angrily protests, Jane “put[s] him down with calm self-possession:”

“Sir, it is true that my sister is your wife; but I beg you not to forget that I am Lady Jane Chesney, and that a certain amount of respect is due to me, even in your house. I do

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399 III: 113.
400 III: 108.
believe you to be as efficient as Mr. Grey; that your skill is equal to his; but that is not the question. He is my medical attendant, and I would prefer that he take the case.”

Just like Lady Oakburn, Jane takes a firm, yet calm, approach to dealing with Carlton. Through this strategy Jane is successful in her request, and gains control over the medical situation. Jane’s success in establishing Dr. Grey as Lucy’s doctor may not just be a moral victory, and Wood hints that Jane may have unwittingly saved Lucy’s life by taking her out of Carlton’s care. Indeed, at this point in the novel the reader has a legitimate reason to wonder (as Judith does) if Carlton is keeping Lucy “to poison her on her sick bed” in order to get revenge against the Chesney family for refusing to accept him as a son-in-law. Cryptically, while recovering from her illness, Lucy experiences symptoms of poisoning, including “a hot disagreeable sensation in [her] throat.” Another doctor notices that Carlton has been dosing Lucy with “two small white papers” filled with powder and instructs the young woman not to take any more medications from Carlton. Although Wood does not get more explicit in her suggestion that Carlton may be poisoning Lucy, it seems clear that Jane was wise to follow her intuition and insist that Lucy be attended by Dr. Grey.

To further underscore that medical care is an appropriate sphere for female management (while other forms of “management” are not), Wood compares the beneficial “interference” of Lady Oakburn and Jane to the “prying” of Laura. In the novel, Laura most closely adheres to the pattern of the curious heroine found in “Bluebeard” because it is she who finds the incriminating letter locked in Carlton’s safe. Angered by her belief that Carlton is committing adultery, Laura obtains a skeleton key and sneaks into her husband’s laboratory in order to rifle through his safe. One of the “morals” affixed to “Bluebeard” in Perrault’s version of the fairy tale warns wives to do their duty and not infringe upon their husband’s privacy:

Ladies, you should never pry,—
You’ll repent it by and by!
‘Tis the silliest of sins;
Trouble in a trice begins.
There are, surely—more’s the woe!—
Lots of things you need not know.

401 III: 108.
403 III: 155.
Come, forswear it now and here—
Joy so brief, that costs so dear!\(^{404}\)

In many ways, Wood reproduces this moral lesson in *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters*. The narrator repeatedly emphasizes that Laura is participating in “improper” behavior by snooping into her husband’s secrets: “Laura! Laura Carlton! what are you about to do? To pry into your husband's private affairs, into things which he deems it fit and right to keep from you? Take you care; secrets sought out dishonourably, rarely benefit the seeker.”\(^{405}\) Laura’s spying ultimately leads to the arrest and imprisonment of her husband for Clarice’s poisoning; an outcome that, while necessary to the resolution of the plot, Laura still must be “forgiven” for. Thus, while Laura’s subversion of her husband’s authority is positioned as improper behavior, Lady Oakburn and Lady Jane’s subversion of medical authority is situated as necessary. A major difference between Laura and these other two heroines is, of course, that Laura acts surreptitiously while Eliza and Jane do not. Nevertheless, this comparison makes clear that, while disobedience towards one’s husband is wrong, disobedience towards one’s medical man may be beneficial and that women should not hesitate to assert themselves when necessary.

While showing how Wood used the poisoning doctor to critique Victorian medicine’s increasing influence in the home, this chapter is also mindful that “a negative view of medicalization” can occlude differing representations of doctors “since it defines all forms of power as equally bad and equivalent in operation.”\(^{406}\) This analysis of Wood’s work would be remiss if it suggested that this author views the whole of the medical profession with skepticism; to the contrary, doctors are often shown in her novels to be necessary collaborators in maintaining the happiness and health of the home. Here, the emphasis on collaboration is paramount. Both the ladies Oakburn and Jane rely on Sir Stephen Grey for their medical care, and a “close and lasting friendship” exists between the women and their doctor.\(^{407}\) In several scenes Wood depicts Sir Stephen rightfully overruling the behaviors of the two women, particularly in regards to the “coddling” of the young heir. Yet it is precisely because Sir Stephen is practical, honest, and willing to work with his patients that the two women bow to his


\(^{405}\) III: 175-6


\(^{407}\) II: 299.
authority. Therefore, despite the negative view of the medical profession that Wood’s use of the poisoning doctor implies, she also constructs an ideal patient-doctor relationship built on trust and mutual consideration.

**Conclusion**

Through Wood’s use of the poisoning doctor we can see the coalescence of several mid-century concerns about the place of Victorian doctors in the home. Indeed, Wood references many cultural prejudices about doctors—their privileging of science over morality, their links to illicit sex, and their increased control over the reproductive process—in the creation of Castonel and Carlton. But it is her tactic of transforming her doctors into medical Bluebeards that allows Wood to most effectively critique the practice of Victorian medicine—especially in terms of the Victorian home. To combat the intrusions of dangerous medicine into the domestic sphere, Wood empowers her heroines to question and even override medical authority figures. Thus, while scholars have argued that Wood’s heroines “are at the mercies and whims of unscrupulous, complacent, predatory men” and that “transgressive, excessive female figures are usually condemned,” this reading of *Lord Oakburn’s Daughters* and *Mr. Castonel* questions this critical assumption. Even though the majority of critics view Wood’s sensationalism as more “conservative” than her peers’ work, we have seen that Wood is just as willing to question medical authority as more “subversive” authors such as Wilkie Collins. In doing so, this chapter has shown just how deeply sensation fiction was intertwined in cultural representations of the medical profession. Indeed, through sensation fiction’s incorporation of the medical gothic, it appears that the genre, in part, defined itself as a participant in medical reform. For Wood, it is medicine’s increasing power over women and home that prompts her to reassess the boundaries of feminine management and encourage her readers to more closely regulate their medical practitioners.

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408 Liggins. Emma and Andrew Maunder: 151.
CHAPTER FIVE:

HYPNOTIC POISON: FORENSIC SCIENCE AND UNCONSCIOUS CRIME IN ADAMS’S THE NOTTING HILL MYSTERY AND COLLINS’S THE MOONSTONE

It is striking that many examples of detective fiction—a genre built upon rational scientific deduction and the revelation of “truth”—often feature the mysterious and unpredictable effects of drugs and poisons. The strange effects of chemicals particularly arise in early detective fiction; for example, opiates, confused identities, and altered states of mind are central to the plot and popularity of Wilkie Collins’s 1868 novel The Moonstone. In this work, Franklin Blake must prove that he did not mean to steal the titular diamond, although he undoubtedly did so while in an opium-induced trance. Most scholars of Victorian crime fiction regard The Moonstone as the first English detective novel, but the primacy of poisons and chemicals in Collins’s novel is mirrored by an earlier claimant to this title: Charles Warren Adams’s The Notting Hill Mystery. Julian Symons first brought attention to this work’s place in the historiography of detective fiction by proclaiming that “there is no doubt that the first detective novel, preceding Collins and Gaboriau, was The Notting Hill Mystery.” This novel, serialized in Once a Week from 1862-3, shares many similarities with the later Moonstone, including a complex crime and confusion about criminal intent, a professional detective, its structure of

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410 The novel was originally published under the pseudonym “Charles Felix” and William Buckler first identified the identity of the author as Adams in PMLA in 1952. Yet somehow Buckler’s identification of Adams slipped through the scholarly cracks and critics generally continued to believe that the author was unidentified. Recently, Paul Collins claimed that he had discovered that Charles Warren Adams was the real identity of the Charles Felix. Collins is mistaken, of course, that the identity of the author was not previously established, but he does offer more conclusive proof than Buckler that Adams actually is the pseudonymous author. Based on both Collins and Buckler’s scholarship I also conclude that Felix is most likely Adams, and have named him as the author of The Notting Hill Mystery in this chapter. The identification of Adams as the author of The Notting Hill Mystery is significant because Adams was a trained lawyer—a fact which undoubtedly shaped the structure of the text and the style of the writing. See Buckler’s article “Once a Week Under Samuel Lucas, 1859-65.” PMLA. 67.7 (1952): 924-941 or Paul Collins’ “Before Hercule or Sherlock, There Was Ralph.” The New York Times Book Review. 7 Jan 2011: BR23.

interwoven, multi-vocal, documentary narratives, and its use of altered states of mind in the commission of crime. In *The Notting Hill Mystery*, however, bodies are altered not only through poisons but also mesmerism; and, unlike *The Moonstone*, the crimes in this novel are never fully explained or resolved. The evidence presented by Ralph Henderson, the detective and “editor” of the collected narratives, suggests that two women, twins Gertrude Bolton Anderton and Rosalie (who also has claims to several other names, including Catherine Bolton and Charlotte Brown), are both poisoned by the mesmerist Baron R**, ostensibly so he can inherit both the vast family fortune and large sums of life assurance money. The Baron R** becomes the “hypnotic poisoner” of Gertrude Anderton by manipulating the strong mesmeric link between her and her “lost” twin, Rosalie, who was stolen by gypsies as a baby. The Baron is the only one who realizes the true kinship between the two women and marries Rosalie to gain a stake in the family inheritance. According to Henderson, the Baron then doses Rosalie with antimony, which causes both her and Gertrude to sicken simultaneously. Mrs. Anderton’s weaker constitution causes her to die first, and the Baron later dispatches his wife by putting her in a mesmeric trance (which mimics somnambulism) and forcing her to drink poison.

Despite the fact that *The Notting Hill Mystery* employs the narrative strategies of later detective fiction and was published five years before *The Moonstone*, most scholars have been slow to recognize it as the first British detective novel or to even include it in discussions of early detective fiction. As this chapter argues, one of the main reasons for *The Notting Hill Mystery*’s exclusion from the historiography of detective novels is the novel’s subversion of forensic science—a move which seems antithetical to the ideological foundations of detective fiction. In fact, according to Ronald Thomas, the later *The Moonstone* achieves the distinction of being “the first and best of modern English detective novels” precisely because “it is the first novel of any kind to demonstrate in a compelling way the emergence of the modern field of forensic science and its growing importance to a new science called criminology.” Thomas’s argument not only asserts that *The Moonstone* took part in legitimizing the emergent field of forensics, but it also downplays the contribution of novels which challenge forensic authority—such as *The Notting Hill Mystery*—from the historiography of detective fiction. Excluding works such as *The Notting Hill Mystery* from studies of the development of detective fiction is problematic.

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412 Both Symons and Richardson (and some contemporary reviewers) note Adams’s indebtedness to Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* for the narrative structure of *The Notting Hill Mystery*.

however, because it limits our understanding of how the Victorians responded to, and even resisted, the rise of forensic science. Thus, in examining how *The Notting Hill Mystery* challenges the legitimacy of forensic science, this chapter also works to resituate this novel within the scholarly account of the development of the detective novel. Indeed, the fact that *The Notting Hill Mystery* provides a theory of the crime that relies on the almost magical mesmeric transmission of poison, which cannot be forensically confirmed, suggests that detective fiction is deeply imbued with “the anxiety that generic purity is unattainable; that the supposedly rational genre [. . .] is everywhere contaminated by the supernatural, occult, or irrational; that the epistemological principles and investigative procedures that define detective fiction’s characteristic modality are deeply implicated in what the genre insists on condescendingly treating as ‘rubbish.’”414 Instead of being built solely on the analytic foundations of forensic science, novels like *The Notting Hill Mystery* show that the rise of detective fiction is equally indebted to an inclusion of the strange and unpredictable drawn from a tradition of gothic irrationality rather than realist rationality.

At the heart of *The Notting Hill Mystery*’s subversion of forensic science are unruly and unpredictable bodies that challenge modern science’s ability to interpret and understand them. The novel is filled with ill, uncontrollable, and deformed bodies which constantly undermine Henderson’s use of modern forensic science and detection practices. For example, even the premise of the mystery—the murder of Mrs. Anderton—cannot be satisfactorily established because no poison was found in Mrs. Anderton’s body, despite the fact that she displayed every symptom of acute antimonial poisoning. The novel’s inclusion of unruly bodies like Mrs. Anderton’s significantly disrupts the work of the detective because “[a]t the center of virtually every detective story is a body upon which the literary detective focuses his gaze and employs his unique interpretive powers.”415 The detective’s goal is to use his skilled and specialized knowledge to “read” the history of the crime from the various bodies—of victim, witness, or suspect—that he encounters. In order for him to effectively use his detective skills these bodies must react according to a set of predetermined rules. Significantly, Victorian medicine had already codified a set of rules for diagnosis and treatment based on the idea of a standardized body. In “one of the most momentous turning-points in medical history,” doctors shifted away

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415 Thomas: 2.
from humoral-based medicine to anatomical or standardized medicine. This new form of medical practice resulted from observations gleaned from autopsies and dissection; it posited that all bodies are essentially similar and that disease results from abnormalities within individuals. Diagnostic practices and treatments could therefore be standardized and one set of rules would suffice for all bodies—rendering medicine both more scientific and more consistent. For the purposes of criminal detection, the standardized and stable body allowed for the invention of new technologies, such as fingerprinting and photographic mug-shots, which relied on the stability of bodies over time. The detective then, drew from these new ideas about the body in order to effectively analyze the bodies that he or she encountered. The problem in The Notting Hill Mystery is that Henderson’s theory of the crime is only as stable as the bodies he is responsible for “reading,” which is to say, not very stable at all. The Notting Hill Mystery, then, raises questions about what happens when an unruly body refuses to be “read,” or if the project of “reading” the body is subverted by processes (such as mesmeric poison) that leave no identifiable traces.

Unruly bodies are not only important for understanding how The Notting Hill Mystery subverts forensic science but also for understanding this work’s legacy to later detective fiction. After all, The Moonstone also features the unruly body of Franklin Blake, who unconsciously steals the titular diamond while in an opium-fueled hypnotic trance. Just as the poisons in The Notting Hill Mystery draw attention to the strange bodies of Rosalie and Mrs. Anderton, the opiates in The Moonstone demonstrate the unexpected ways that seemingly “normal” bodies can behave. While The Moonstone does not offer as strong a critique of forensic science as The Notting Hill Mystery, Collins’s novel also probes the limitations of forensic detection. Although Ezra Jennings’s “experiment,” which reproduces Blake’s somnambular wanderings, has been hailed as evidence of Collins’s sanctioning of forensic technologies, this chapter complicates the assumption that science could completely “read the secret truth of the past in the bodies of the victims and perpetrators of crime.” As we shall see, the experiment only reveals a relatively small part of the puzzle; in addition, the evidence that this experiment reveals is corroborated through very unscientific methods, such as personal testimony. Blake’s unruly body not only

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417 Ibid.
418 Thomas: 3.
results in the theft of the precious gem, but it also complicates the scientific methods meant to contain and interpret it. Thus, this chapter will focus on the subversion of forensic science in *The Notting Hill Mystery* and *The Moonstone* to demonstrate how deeply the foundations of detective fiction are involved in an investigation, rather than a legitimization, of forensic science.

Both *The Notting Hill Mystery* and *The Moonstone* pose a challenge to forensics by featuring unruly bodies which particularly mystify the detective figure’s project of assigning “innocence” or “guilt.” In these two novels, poisoned bodies are not necessarily victimized bodies; instead, these bodies become implicated in the crime, signaling a shift in the ways that authors employed poison in crime narratives. As we have seen in the previous chapters, before the 1860s victims of poisonings are presented as the innocent prey of corrupted criminals; these murderers’ use of poison reflects their already corrupted morality and fallen natures. After mid-century, however, poisoned bodies are increasing associated with crime, suggesting that the act of being poisoned is as corrupting as actually committing murder. As in *The Notting Hill Mystery* and *The Moonstone*, the line between victim and criminal becomes severely occluded and suspicion falls upon the innocent as well as the guilty. In critical discussions of *The Moonstone*, scholars have attributed this occlusion to Collins’s use of oriental opium as the vehicle for Blake’s hypnotic crime. According to these readings, opium’s close association with the Indian colonies (and therefore the “criminal” Indians who steal the diamond) causes Blake’s use of the poison to situate him as “othered” and suspect.419 While these colonial readings of the poison in *The Moonstone* certainly have merit, similar theories cannot explain the hypnotic crimes in *The Notting Hill Mystery*, nor can they alone account for the wider shift in the crime literature of the 1860s. Instead, other cultural changes also need to be considered, such as the Arsenic Act’s (1851) criminalization of purchasing poison and the growing stigma attached to poisoning crimes. In addition, as we have seen in Chapter Three, the 1850s and 1860s saw several high-profiling cases featuring “respectable” defendants, such as William Palmer (1856), Madeleine Smith (1857), Thomas Smethurst (1859), and Edward Pritchard (1865), which proved to the Victorian public that poison was no longer just the weapon of the poor or the foreign. Poison had infiltrated all ranks of English society, crossing the boundaries of class, gender, and race. More than ever, poison was thought to have the power of dissolving boundaries, and it was

419 See Lillian Nayder’s discussion of imperialism in Collins fiction in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*. 
a small step to believe that poison could even confound the supposedly stable categories of “innocence” and “guilt.”

The unresolved death of Charles Bravo in 1876 reflects the changing attitudes towards poison that occurred in the 1850s and 1860s. Bravo had slowly died from poison, and during the three days that he lingered between life and death he refused to say who poisoned him, or how he was poisoned. Despite the inquest’s focus on Mrs. Bravo and the disaffected housekeeper for the murder of Bravo, much suspicion was thrown on Bravo himself. Theories that he committed suicide, or accidentally dosed himself with the poison that was meant for his wife, demonstrate the degree to which his body became a site to read shifting beliefs in his innocence or guilt. In the end, the inquest could not determine if Bravo had been murdered at all. Forensic science could establish that antimony was in Bravo’s body, but no science could reveal who gave Bravo the poison. Only Bravo’s own testimony, which he persistently withheld, could have cleared up the mystery. Therefore, due to these changing cultural attitudes towards poisoning crimes and the increasing difficulty parsing out “guilty” from “innocent” bodies, poison became a useful tool for testing the limitations of law and detection. Novelists such as Adams and Collins translate these issues into their novels through the unruly bodies of their victim-criminals. These bodies, which significantly confuse the novels’ project of detection, challenge the stability of guilt or innocence and test the legitimacy and efficacy of forensic science. I begin this analysis with a reading of *The Notting Hill Mystery* which, like the Bravo case, demonstrates that even if forensic science can identify a poisoned body, it cannot reveal the guilt or innocence of this body.

*The Notting Hill Mystery*

The project of detection in *The Notting Hill Mystery* involves a series of interconnected questions: Was Mrs. Anderton poisoned? If so, why is there no trace of poison in her body? Is Rosalie her long-lost twin sister and is her mysterious poisoning death somehow connected to Mrs. Anderton’s murder? As this series of questions indicates, the novel’s mysteries are deeply implicated in issues of the body. Indeed, the main obstacle that the detective-figure Henderson

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encounters is how to explain the apparently weird and abnormal behavior of the two potential victims’ bodies. At every turn, these bodies defy attempts to forensically translate their actions into an understandable form of somatic literacy. The failure of forensics to satisfactorily solve the mysteries of the case causes Henderson to turn to alternative forms of science in order to make sense of the crimes. The novel’s reliance on these occult forms of science, such as mesmerism, to fill in the gaps left by “legitimate” scientific techniques illustrates how The Notting Hill Mystery challenges the rise of nineteenth-century forensics. Due to the strange “sympathy” between the two sisters, bodies in the novel intermingle in dangerous and unexpected ways. As we have seen, in the nineteenth century forensic science was deeply invested in discovering stable markers of individual human bodies. Yet, as the novel demonstrates through the bodies of the twins, the success of forensically cataloguing individuals becomes difficult—even impossible—if presented with unruly bodies which do not act in accordance to “normal” scientific expectations.

While unruly bodies confuse the project of detection in several ways, the failure of forensic science in the novel is most spectacularly demonstrated through the issue of criminal intent. According to Henderson’s theory of the crime, Rosalie’s body is the conduit for the poison that kills her twin sister; yet Henderson’s silence about Rosalie’s implication in the crime demonstrates that, although forensic science may be able to point to a guilty body, it could not enter the mind of the accused in order to determine intent. The importance of determining criminal intent in Victorian culture has been shown by critics such as Lisa Rodensky, and in poisoning cases especially the intent of the accused party was paramount for determining a guilty verdict.422 As the preeminent Victorian toxicologist Alfred Swaine Taylor noted, “it would seem that the proof of the crime of poisoning should rest upon the intention with which the substance is administered and on the effects produced, or on satisfactory evidence that it is capable either of destroying life or of causing injury to health.”423 Since Rosalie is the only character who does not have a voice in the novel, the reader is never granted a “window” into Rosalie’s inner thoughts, feelings, and motivations, and it becomes difficult to accurately “read” her involvement in the case. As Rosalie’s case shows, The Notting Hill Mystery demonstrates that

the problem with privileging documentation in the form of forensic evidence over first-person testimony is that the question of criminal intent becomes occluded. The growing mid-century preference for documentary evidence over first-person testimonies can often result in confusion about criminal intent, since forensic science can only prove what bodies have done, but not what the mind has thought. This novel therefore participates in what Peter Thoms calls early detective fiction’s “extensive critique of narrative patterns and the compulsions that generate them.”\textsuperscript{424} Thoms argues that the detective’s generation of narrative is an egoistic practice, which serves to satisfy “a desire to control others.”\textsuperscript{425} When the bodies being subjected to this narratological control, however, are presented as slippery, ambiguous, and blurred (as they are in \textit{The Notting Hill Mystery}) the detective’s project becomes significantly more difficult.

The origin of the Bolton sisters’ unruly bodies is found in the condition of their birth and familial history. The first “piece of evidence” presented to the reader is a letter from the twins’ mother, Lady Bolton, which relates the sensational news that her husband, Sir Edward, has followed Mr. H. to the Continent in order to challenge him to a duel. The motivations for the duel remain a mystery, but the texts hint that the cause is directly related to Lady Bolton. She writes to her aunt that her husband’s departure “was all my own fault, for I ought to have told him everything long ago, though indeed, indeed, I never cared for him, and I do love dear Edward so dearly. I was afraid . . .”\textsuperscript{426} Certainly, this passage seems to indicate that Lady Bolton’s “secret” is somehow sexual in nature, and that her husband has gone to reclaim her honor. He fails at this task, however, and the shock of his death sends Lady Bolton into early labor. Both of the Bolton parents, then, are tainted with scandal: Lady Bolton has a secret from her past, and Sir Edward participates in the illegal practice of dueling.\textsuperscript{427} This passage is saturated in Victorian presumptions about reproductive compatibility, and nineteenth-century readers would have expected that the parents’ excitable temperaments would have been passed down to their children. As Henderson notes, it is clear that the twins share the familial sensitivity: “Both Sir Edward and [Lady Bolton] appear to have been of a nervous temperament, and the effects of these combined influences is shown in the highly nervous and susceptible


\textsuperscript{425} Thoms: 2.


\textsuperscript{427} Of course, as an aristocratic practice, dueling was not viewed as negatively as other forms of murder; however, by the Victorian period it was illegal and highly discouraged.
organization of the orphan girls." This inherited tendency to nervousness is further illustrated in the doubling of Lady Bolton and Gertrude’s names; the second Gertrude is symbolically fated to reproduce her mother’s excitability and sensitivity. Thus, the Bolton infants quickly become characterized by the circumstances of their birth; as products of overly excitable parents—and born early due to their mother’s emotional crisis—the twins are situated as unusual and highly sensitive.

The sensibility of the twins most obviously manifests in the strange spiritual “sympathy” that connects their bodies. It was not unusual for the Victorians to comment upon the supposed sympathy between twins, and cases of twins who “although at a considerable distance from each other,” experienced “the same malady at the same time, and ran precisely the same course” were not unheard of. In *The Notting Hill Mystery*, the sympathy of the twins is described as “even more physical than mental” indicating that their connection is primarily somatic, rather than psychological or spiritual. Illness particularly demonstrates their sympathetic link, for “every little ailment that affects the one is immediately felt by the other also,” and both girls are “sadly nervous” as well. The communicability of emotional excess from the parental bodies to the bodies of the girls (and their sympathetic reactions to each other’s ailments) suggests that the twins have a dangerous susceptibility to outside influences. Their bodies are not presented as separate entities, but as strangely and mysteriously linked. Even after Rosalie is stolen by gypsies, the somatic tie between the girls seems to continue. Gertrude is “subject from time to time to fits of illness to which it is often difficult to assign any sufficient cause, and which after a while disappear as strangely as they arose;” while Rosalie also “sometimes felt ill, and did not know why.” Even across vast distances, the girls remained physically linked to one another. The novel therefore constructs their bodies as permeable and connected, and not as discrete and independent—a move which upsets the foundations of both modern medicine and forensic practices.

Once adults, the corporeal connection between the two sisters is also revealed by their mesmeric compatibility. After Mrs. Anderton’s relatives object to the impropriety of the Baron

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428 556.
430 483.
431 Ibid.
432 485; 49.
working directly on her, he brings in Rosalie to act as a conduit for his mesmeric powers. Mrs. Anderton appears to improve even more rapidly once Rosalie is introduced, and she seems to recognize that there is a strange link that ties her body to that of the Baron’s assistant:

Between these very different persons, however, if we credit the enclosed letters, such a “sympathy” sprang up as would, on all ordinary hypotheses, be perfectly unaccountable. Mrs. Anderton could feel—or imagined that she felt—the approach of Mademoiselle Rosalie even before she entered the room; the mere touch of her hand seemed to afford immediate benefit, and within a very few weeks she became perfectly convalescent, and stronger than she had ever been before.⁴³³

Again, the women’s bodies are presented as interconnected; not only can Rosalie’s presence heal Mrs. Anderton, but they seem to have an awareness of each other’s physical presence, as indicated by Mrs. Anderton’s insistence that she can recognize Rosalie’s approach before she sees her. Yet, Henderson describes this sympathetic link as “perfectly unaccountable” to “ordinary” medical theories—a fact which further indicates the unique circumstances of the twins’ connection and their bodies’ ability to defy medical expectation. This tie between the women challenges the idea of the discrete body, and begins to fray at the edges of Henderson’s project to separately identify and “read” the bodies of specific individuals. The twins’ individuality is called into question here, for when unstable bodies overlap so much, individuals seemingly have little control over their corporeal functions.

The spiritual and physical communicability between the twins, as the novel shows, proves problematic for the detective process—especially because their bodies are particularly sensitive to mesmerism. Many nineteenth-century experts in hypnotism asserted that the percentage of the population who could be induced into the trance state was small, and the amount of people predisposed to hypnotic suggestion was even smaller. To assuage public fears, many proponents of mesmerism were “anxious to emphasise” that susceptible people “are rare, instead of representative.”⁴³⁴ A major factor in determining susceptibility was the nervous constitution of the proposed subject; the more sensitive the person, the more likely they would be a good subject. The novel positions Gertrude and Rosalie as ideal subjects due to their sensitive “sympathetic link.” Their innate ability to feel each other’s physical ailments seems to also open

them up to the manipulations of the mesmerist. In addition, nervous or hysterical patients were also thought to be more inclined to respond to hypnotic treatment; both Mr. and Mrs. Anderton are labeled as “nervous” and have a predilection for trying the newest and most fashionable “cures” their fortune can afford. While taking the water-cure at Malvern “where the science seems particularly in vogue,” they first experiment with mesmerism. While Mr. Anderton does not feel any benefits, Mrs. Anderton becomes an enthusiastic endorser of its curative properties:

On Mr. Anderton the only result seems to have been the inducing of such a state of irritation as might not unreasonably have been expected from so nervously excitable a temperament, in presence of the “manipulations” to which the votaries of mesmerism are subjected. In the case of Mrs. Anderton, however, the result was, or was supposed to be, different. Whether from some natural cause that, at the time, escaped attention, or whether solely from that force of imagination from which such surprising results are often found to arise, I cannot of course say; but it is certain that some short time after the mesmeric "séances" had commenced, a decided though slight improvement was perceptible.

The direct contrast of the different experiences of the husband and wife illustrates that it is Mrs. Anderton alone who is sensitive to the manipulations of the mesmerist. Although Henderson is reticent to believe in the legitimacy of her reaction, he also admits that he “cannot of course say” whether or not her improvement was “a force of [her] imagination” alone. Henderson’s inability to discount the effects of mesmerism leaves open that possibility that Mrs. Anderton’s body is not “normal” but rather highly sensitive and unique.

Along with their hypersensitivity to mesmerism, the twins’ bodies are also highly reactive to certain chemicals—particularly the poison antimony. Ian Burney writes about a different form of somatic communication that occurred in poisoning trials, when he highlights the trope of the “testifying corpse” that was made to “speak” and reveal its secrets through forensic testing. In order for toxicological tests to be used for evidentiary purposes, these processes needed to have consistent results; thus, toxicological theories were deeply informed by the nineteenth-century medical profession’s general acceptance of the “paradigm of anatomical

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435 487.
436 488.
medicine” which posited that “all bodies are fundamentally like one another.” To a large extent, the idea that all bodies are inherently similar allowed for modern forensic sciences—like toxicology—to develop and obtain legitimacy. The Notting Hill Mystery, however, challenges the paradigm of anatomical medicine by illustrating that some poisons affect bodies in radically different ways. The chemical supposedly used to kill Gertrude Anderton is antimony (also known as tartar emetic), and her list of symptoms adheres exactly to medical descriptions of antimonial poisoning: “nausea, vomiting, tendency to diarrhoea, profuse perspiration, and general debility. Pulse low, 100. Spirits depressed. Burning pain in stomach—abdomen tender on pressure. Tongue discoloured.” Adams directly mentions the preeminent British toxicologist, Alfred Swaine Taylor’s, famous book on poisons, and it appears he derives the symptoms of the women directly from this work. Taylor writes that, typically, symptoms of tartar emetic overdose are “a violent burning pain the epigastric region, followed by nausea, vomiting, profuse diarrhoea and syncope. The pulse is small and rapid, sometimes imperceptible; the skin cold, and covered with a clammy perspiration; and the respiration painful.” Based on Adams’s close adherence to Taylor’s widely respected text, it seems that the question of Mrs. Anderton’s poisoning is an easy one to resolve, yet antimony was considered to be a relatively safe medicine during the period. An emetic, it was commonly used for purgation and was highly valued by Victorian doctors, many of whom would have agreed that “we possess no remedies which are so safe and so effectual as [. . .] small doses of tartar emetic.” As Alfred Swaine Taylor notes, criminal poisonings by tartar emetic were “rare,” because the drug usually had to be given in large amounts to be fatal. However, some people are more sensitive to the drug than others, and Taylor admits that “the quantity actually required to destroy life is unknown.”

Individual sensitivity to antimony is highlighted in The Notting Hill Mystery, and the novel shows that, far from being consistent and standardized, bodies can be unpredictable. Before commencing his criminal plans, the Baron tests his theory about the connection between the two sisters by “accidentally” dosing Rosalie with antimony. Rosalie, and also Gertrude, have

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439 526.
442 Taylor, Alfred Swaine. 1848 ed.: 177.
a severe reaction to the drug. The doctor who attends Rosalie is rather mystified about her reaction:

I cannot account for the violent action of so small a quantity. I have frequently administered much larger doses in cases of inflammation of the lungs without ill effect. Two grains is by no means an unusual dose when intended to act as an emetic; but the action of antimony varies greatly with different constitutions."

Both Rosalie and Gertrude have constitutions that do not react normally to the chemical, and they disrupt the medical establishment’s expectations. The twins’ unusual allergy to the drug is another example of the novel’s characterization of bodies as unruly and uncontrollable. The human body’s variability suggests that forensic techniques, which rely upon bodies that can consistently “speak” to systematic scientific processes, can be subverted. Highly aware that a body can only be medically labeled as “poisoned” if it shows forensic traces of poison, the Baron utilizes “unruly” bodies that cannot be accurately analyzed by this science. The powerful psychic and somatic “sympathy” between the two sisters reveals a dangerous breach of the discrete physical boundaries of the body that form the bedrock of anatomical medicine; the novel presents these boundaries as ambiguous, and open to criminal manipulation.

In *The Notting Hill Mystery* bodies are so unstable that Henderson has difficulty even ascribing to them labels such as “innocent,” “victim,” “criminal,” and “guilty.” In the case of Gertrude Anderton, the detective’s goal is to determine whether or not she is a victim of murder. In the case of Rosalie, however, the problem of identity is much more complicated. Just listing the aliases of the lost twin—Rosalie, Angelina Fitz Eustace, the “Little Wonder,” Charlotte Brown, Lotty, Catherine Bolton, and Madame R**—gives a striking visual representation of the confusion that attends her character in *The Notting Hill Mystery*. Indeed, the instability of the narrative to situate “guilt” is directly related to the failure of the text to confidently assess the character of this twin. Is she a gypsy-child or the lost heir to an English fortune? Is she an earnest and hard-working performer, or a drunk and sexually fallen charlatan? And, most importantly: is she a murderess, the willing accessory to the Baron’s schemes or, like Mrs. Anderton, is she a victim of his criminal machinations? Contemporary critics displayed discomfort with the fact that these questions of identity were never satisfactorily resolved in the novel. A repeated criticism of the book was that the characters were not well outlined or fully

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443 513.
developed; one reviewer wrote that “though numerous names are introduced, the magnetic influence of life-like character and a well-considered sequence of events are alike wanting.” As we shall see, the text gives varying answers to these questions and reveals the difficulties of ascribing stable identity to unruly bodies.

A significant portion of time in the novel is devoted to unraveling the “identity” of Rosalie—both in regards to her personal historical “identity” and her “identity” as a criminal or victim. Through the use of documentation and evidence, Henderson is able to confidently declare that Rosalie is the lost daughter of the Bolton family. Rosalie is Catherine Bolton, but even with her “identity” established, the true nature of her “character” remains a mystery. Ronald Thomas argues that in the nineteenth-century, Victorian culture shifted from a focus on “character” to the modern obsession with somatically-grounded “identity;” he identifies the detective as “the popular-culture figure most explicitly engaged in negotiating this transaction and monitoring this transformation.”

Certainly Henderson, as the detective figure in the text, admirably performs this task of assessing Rosalie’s familial identity; yet, the successful establishment of her identity as a “criminal” or “victim” relies on the detective’s ability to “read” her body effectively. Therefore, one reason why Rosalie remains an unstable fixture in the text, even after her name and rank are established, is because of her unruly body. Samuel Lyndon Gladden writes that in the novels of Wilkie Collins, “conflicts in identity—alienation—derive from readings and misreadings of the body.” In The Notting Hill Mystery we can see a continuation of the mid-century sensation novel’s concern with identity politics and the body.

Ascribing an identity to Rosalie as either a “criminal” or “victim” is significantly confused by the constellation of cultural codes or assumptions about criminality which become attached to representations of her body. The first of these is Rosalie’s association with gypsies, who “functioned in British cultural symbolism as the perennial ‘other.’” As an infant Rosalie is stolen by a band of gypsies, ostensibly because “her quick intelligence, and lithe, active figure, [would] make her only too valuable an acquisition to the band.” That the gypsies identify with and value the physical aspects of Rosalie’s body suggests that she is situated as othered even

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445 Thomas: 11.
448 485.
before her kidnapping. Indeed, Rosalie’s “dark, gipsy-like complexion and black eyes and hair” are presented as a “remarkable contrast” to her sister’s fairness. Rosalie’s association with the gypsies certainly codes her as a criminal, particularly because gypsies were linked in the English imagination with “primitive desires, lawlessness, mystery, cunning, sexual excess, godlessness, and savagery.” The link between gypsies and criminality is demonstrated in the novel through their enslavement of Rosalie and her forced exhibition in circuses. She is eventually sold to another suspect figure—Signor Leopoldo—for five pounds.

Although Rosalie can be perceived as an innocent victim of gypsy theft and enforced slavery, the continuance of her stage work after parting with the gypsy band presents a challenge to the recuperation of her character. Rosalie first performs in a travelling circus as the “Little Wonder” titillating audiences with her tight-rope act. Any form of stage work, of course, would have also brought with it the taint of “exposure” and prostitution. Rosalie seems to have been a particularly valuable performer because of her “beautiful figure” which, one can assume, was displayed by skimpy costumes during her act. Along with her potentially scandalous performances, Rosalie also partakes in another vice associated with the theatre: alcohol. Rosalie’s dependence on alcohol is first exposed in the statement of her friend, the dancing-girl Julie. Julie admits that Rosalie drank brandy, but protests that she did it only for medicinal purposes:

She had bad headaches. When she was in that way, physic was no good, only brandy. Brandy took away the headaches. She used to drink brandy sometimes, but not like our ladies. I never saw her the worse for liquor. Her headaches were not from drinking. Certainly not.

Although Julie claims to defend Rosalie’s use of alcohol, her emphasis on Rosalie’s consumption of brandy acts as a form of apophasis—Julie seems only to confirm Rosalie’s dependence on drinking by denying that she is a drunk. Due to injuries from a bad fall (which Julie proclaims was not due to her drinking), Rosalie transitions away from the tight-rope into working at a music-hall as part of a variety show that included dancing, singing, and comedic acts. Significantly, her main contribution to the show is to act as a “subject” for a faked mesmeric demonstration. Not only do Rosalie’s performances at the music-hall associate her with the

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449 484; 489.  
450 Nord: 3.  
451 493.
suspect arena of the theatre and public spectacle, but they also call into question whether or not she is legitimately mesmerized by the Baron. Although Rosalie claims to Julie that the Baron’s powers are real, it is clear that Rosalie keeps “performing” even after beginning to work with him. For example, she is willing to act the part of the Baron’s mysterious foreign assistant by lying about her ability to speak English—although it becomes apparent later that she is actually fluent in the language.452

Henderson’s various pieces of evidence suggest rather confidently that Rosalie’s “true” familial identity is that of the lost twin Catherine Bolton. Yet, due to her suspect past with gypsies and the theatre, the “identity” that Henderson has a more difficult time assigning to Rosalie is that of “victim” or “criminal.” While Henderson repeatedly mentions that Rosalie is afraid of the Baron and works hard to please him, significantly she is the only character in the novel who an eye-witness sees handling poison. Even if Rosalie was hypnotically influenced, her association with poison raises doubts about her participation in the crime. In the nineteenth-century, there were few weapons more closely associated with premeditation and intent than poison, particularly in the case of slow, or repeated, poisonings. The decisive acts of planning, purchasing, concealing, and dispensing the poison to the victim, all confirmed to the Victorian public that these types of crimes were carefully and willfully executed. In the eyes of nineteenth-century legal opinion, “of all species of deaths, that by poison has been considered as the most detestable, because it can, of all others, be least prevented by manhood or forethought. It is a deliberate act, necessarily implying malice, however great the provocation may have been.”453 Victorian legal commentators were also quick to point out that, historically, English law had categorized poisoning as a particularly heinous offense. Due to the deliberate and secretive nature of poisoning, “this specific form of crime was made high treason by express statute in the 23rd year of Henry VIII, 1532, and the punishment was to be boiled to death.”454 Poisoning was not considered treason in the nineteenth-century legal code, but it had still not completely shed its reputation as one of the most “revolting” and “atrocious” forms of murder.455

The main stumbling block for assessing Rosalie’s culpability in the crime, then, is the narrative structure of the novel. Adams presents a collection of documentary evidence from

452 491.
454 “Mary Blandy, for the Murder of her Father in 1752.” *Dublin University Magazine*. 74 (1869):56.
455 Ibid.
diaries, letters, personal statements, maps, and medical records, which purports to present an accurate and scientific review of events. By the time Adams was writing *The Notting Hill Mystery*, the use of this narrative structure was in its infancy. Several reviewers of the novel noted its unusual form, and one critic even went so far as to accuse Adams of an “anxiety to reproduce some of the mannerisms of ‘The Woman in White.’” Indeed, as Maurice Richardson notes, “[i]t might conceivably have been written as a pastiche of "The Woman in White" herself. It follows Wilkie Collins' use of the multi-narrational form, but it imparts a streamlined brevity that is more in keeping with [the twentieth] century than the last.” The structure of the novel, then, reflects the general trend of the fiction of the 1860s to use this form of narration, which limited the audience’s insight into individual characters. In *The Crime in Mind: Criminal Responsibility and the Victorian Novel*, Lisa Rodensky argues that nineteenth-century fiction directly participated in raising and testing questions about criminal intent through the use of omniscient narrators. Using Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* as an example text, Rodensky writes that the omniscient narration allows the audience an insight into Oliver’s thoughts and feelings, proving that he is truly “innocent” of any crime or immoral action, even if he was an accessory to pickpocketing and housebreaking. However, the new mid-century genre of sensation fiction broke away from the use of omniscient narration to explore other ways of constructing meaning in the text. The use of a documentary and multi-vocal narration style was highly influenced by journalistic and legal narratives. Alexander Welsh argues that in the nineteenth-century, documentary evidence that could “speak for itself” was privileged over eyewitness, first-person testimony; he additionally notes that the mid-century literary impetus to move away from omniscient narration mimics this legal trend.

In *The Notting Hill Mystery* every major character in the novel, save Rosalie, is allowed to speak through these various mediums of narration—but Rosalie’s voice is excluded from all these documents and neither her voice nor her inner thoughts are made privy to the reader. Therefore, without the crucial component of Rosalie’s experience of the events, her implication in the “crimes” of the novel can never be satisfactorily resolved and remain a mystery. Thus,

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456 The first critically recognized use of the form is Wilkie Collins’ 1859 novel *The Woman in White*.
459 Rodensky, Lisa: 35.
460 Ibid.
Henderson’s difficulty in constructing a logical story of the crime is due both to the lack of forensic evidence as well as the narrative structure which silences Rosalie. Some critics attributed this latter failure to Adams’s lack of mastery; for example, the reviewer for The Athenaeum wrote that in his eagerness to employ Wilkie Collins’s narrative strategy, “Mr. Felix has lost sight of his master's finer artistic qualities.” This critic added that “a lawyer, accustomed to the labour of building up a story from statements and admissions hidden in a mass of ill-arranged and incongruous papers, may find in the author’s pages the vague outline of a story that artistic manipulation might convert into a readable novel; but to less acute and less laborious readers, ‘The Notting Hill Mystery’ will prove an inexplicable tangle of words, and nothing more.” While this reviewer certainly has some valid criticisms, I want to suggest that the narrative “failure” in *The Notting Hill Mystery* is not a failure at all. Instead, by silencing Rosalie the novel draws attention to her importance in solving the crime and starkly demonstrates the value of first-person testimony; Rosalie’s silence does not result in her erasure from the text, but rather serves to highlight her absence. Perhaps these absences and silences are what caused another critic to rave about the realism of the story; after all, real life rarely affords the coincidences, beyond-the- grave revelations, abundance of forensic evidence, and tidy crime scenes that characterize more “successful” detective novels. Through this narrative silence and the novel’s reliance on unruly, unreadable bodies *The Notting Hill Mystery* demonstrates the shortcomings of a forensic methodology that attempts to parse out questions of criminal intent.

*The Moonstone*

The mystery of the Moonstone’s disappearance is also the story of a body: Franklin Blake’s body and its strange reaction to opium. In *The Moonstone* poison does not create unruly bodies; rather it draws attention to the strangeness and unpredictability of seemingly “normal” bodies. In her discussion of disability and difference in the works of Collins, Kate Flint writes that the author “seems fascinated not so much by the difference of the disabled, but their similarity to the able-bodied;” my analysis builds on Flint’s observations in order to investigate how Collins is fascinated not only by the similarity of abnormal to normal bodies, but also by the inherent

462 “[Rev. of] *The Notting Hill Mystery.*” *The Athenaeum*: 520.
strangeness in superficially “normal” bodies. As we shall see, the strangeness of these bodies clouds the novel’s project of discovering “truth” and reveals some of the limitations of forensic technologies which rely on the stability of the human body. *The Moonstone*, however, does not go as far in its critique of forensic science as *The Notting Hill Mystery*, in part because Collins’s novel makes a more effective use of its narrative structure to buttress the scientific evidence discovered by Jennings. Unlike Rosalie, Blake has the chance to narrate his own experience and confirm Jennings’s hypothesis and the unruliness of his own body.

As several critics have shown, *The Moonstone* develops an opposition between visually normal and freakish bodies; abnormal bodies in particular attract the attention of the detective figures who attempt to “read” them for signs of guilt. Although Blake’s body eventually becomes the focus of the investigation, other unruly bodies—which heavily populate the text—are a major component of the mystery and through their strangeness and illegibility distract the project of detection. As Casey Cothran points out, “just as their bodies are disruptive to the narratives of normalcy embraced by Collins’s fictional characters and by his living readers, the consequences of disabled characters’ action prove powerfully disruptive to the social spheres in which they move.” For example, Rosanna Spearman, who has “one shoulder bigger than the other” quickly becomes a target for Sergeant Cuff’s investigation in part because her deformed body marks her as “othered” and potentially criminal. Intent on protecting Blake from suspicion, she allows the detective and the members of the household (and perhaps the socially-conditioned reader) to suspect her involvement in the theft. Although guilty of concealing evidence and prolonging the solution of the crime, Rosanna nonetheless defies Cuff’s interpretation of her body and her guilt. Indeed, it is particularly Rosanna’s words (in the form of a letter) and not her body which initially reveals Blake’s participation in the theft of the Moonstone.

In their separate discussions of disability in *The Moonstone*, both Cothran and Mark Mossman situate Franklin Blake’s body as “normalized” and use him as a point of comparison

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for the strange bodies that populate the text.\textsuperscript{467} Certainly, opposed to more visibly aberrant bodies such as Rosanna Spearman’s or Limping Lucy’s, Blake’s body does seem to represent physical normalcy; after all, his body does not show any outward signs of disability or deformity. Yet Blake’s body is linked to the novel’s mystery precisely because it does not react to opium in a normal or expected way, which causes him to steal the diamond in a drug-induced haze. Although Blake’s body is not strange in the same way as Rosanna’s body, the novel still presents it as abnormal and unruly. A striking instance of this occurs during the first and only meeting between Blake and Limping Lucy. Described as having the “horrid drawback” of leanness and a lame foot, “Limping” Lucy is primarily characterized by her abnormal and disabled body.\textsuperscript{468} Yet face-to-face with Blake, Lucy is able to shift the reader’s gaze from her own deformed body to that of Blake’s. She accomplishes this feat by staring at Blake “as if [he] was an object of mingled interest and horror, which it quite fascinated her to see.”\textsuperscript{469} He “inspired her with the strongest emotions of abhorrence and disgust,” and Blake attempts in vain to “direct Limping Lucy’s attention to some less revolting image than [his] face.”\textsuperscript{470} Here, Collins upsets expectation by presenting Blake, not Lucy, as monstrous. Playing with the idea of the freakish body, Collins situates Blake’s body as abnormal and horrifying—hinting toward the hidden strangeness of Blake’s body and upsetting cultural expectations about able and disabled bodies. Indeed, during this scene Lucy’s disabled body is the vehicle for the delivery of Rosanna’s letter, which frees Rosanna from blame but instead implicates Blake’s seemingly “normal” body in the theft of the diamond.

Lucy’s own condition as a social outsider may endow her with the ability to more accurately read strangeness in other bodies, but she is not the only character who recognizes the eccentricity of Blake’s body. In the opening narrative of the novel, Gabriel Betteredge’s initial description of Blake also destabilizes his body and situates it as unpredictable:

While he was speaking, I was looking at him, and trying to see something of the boy I remembered, in the man before me. The man put me out. Look as I might, I could see no more of his boy’s rosy cheeks than of his boy’s trim little jacket [. . .] To make matters worse, he had promised to be tall, and had not kept his promise. He was neat, and slim,

\textsuperscript{468} 201.
\textsuperscript{469} 317.
\textsuperscript{470} 317.
and well made; but he wasn’t by an inch or two up to the middle height. In short, he baffled me altogether. The years that had passed had left nothing of his old self, except the bright, straightforward look in his eyes.\textsuperscript{471}

The unfamiliarity of Blake’s adult body and Betteredge’s strong reaction to its appearance (“the man put me out”) positions Blake’s body as subversive and an object for close examination. The complete absence of the formerly prominent aspects of Blake’s appearance, such as the disappearance of the rosy cheeks, suggests that his body has defied (and will continue to defy) expectation. Even though Betteredge describes a body that is “average” on point of height and weight, Blake’s radically changed adult appearance confirms that his body is unpredictable and does not conform to the usual “rules” that govern other bodies. Furthermore, the fact that Blake “had not kept his promise” to be tall hints that there is something almost deceptive about his body’s transformation, as if his younger body had “lied” about its potential. Blake’s physical alteration is so abrupt that it partially unsettles and “baffle[s]” Betteredge, who only relaxes once he sees the familiar “straightforward” look in Blake’s eyes. Furthermore, the unpredictability of Blake’s body is mirrored by the volatility of his character, which is constantly displaying “puzzling shifts and transformations.”\textsuperscript{472}

Blake has grown up outside of England, variously moving from country to country and absorbing different atmospheres and cultures. “As a consequence of” Blake’s nomadic education, “he had come back with so many different sides to his character, all more or less jarring with each other, that he seemed to pass his life in a state of perpetual contradiction with himself.”\textsuperscript{473} Just as Blake’s body is positioned as different and strange, so too is his character. Blake is not the typical Englishman; in fact, his personality presents itself as an amalgamation of so many different philosophies and nationalities that he is in effect a chameleon. The strangeness of his chameleonic character is displayed during Rachel’s fateful birthday party, when he “terrified the company” with his almost schizophrenic shifts in conversation.\textsuperscript{474}

In \textit{The Moonstone}, the theme of “strangeness” symbolically coalesces in the image of the Shivering Sands, “that site of all that is hidden and buried.”\textsuperscript{475} The shivering of the Sands is a naturally occurring but weird phenomenon that exposes the permeability and fragility of the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{471} 52.
\bibitem{472} 67.
\bibitem{473} 67.
\bibitem{474} 92.
\end{thebibliography}
apparently stable sand; underneath the surface lurks a deadly quicksand that draws in anything placed upon its surface. Because Rosanna’s commits suicide on the Sands and uses it to hide her narrative of the crime, critics have often situated the Sands as a symbolic parallel for Rosanna’s own strange and weird body. For example, Tamar Heller reads the Sands “an image of the female body” and positions Blake’s unearthng of Rosanna’s letter as a phallic act of penetration. But Blake’s body, too, is implicated in the weirdness of the Sands. After all, his retrieval of Rosanna’s letter is accompanied by the discovery of his own nightshirt—a piece of evidence which reveals the strangeness underneath the surface of his, not Rosanna’s, body. Just as the “glittering” and “golden brightness” of the Sands, “hid[es] the horror of its false brown face under a passing smile,” Blake’s body also has effectively hidden the secret of his crime underneath an apparently normal surface. The Sands, then, are not just a metaphor for Rosanna’s body, but also represent the novel’s fascination with the difference between superficial appearance and reality of all bodies.

Rosanna mentions that the Shivering Sands appear to have “hundreds” of bodies “struggling to get to the surface,” and in The Moonstone there seems to be an unending supply of bodies waiting to reveal their strangeness. Rachel, for example, has a body which frequently escapes her control. When she sees Blake again after a long separation, she approaches him “as if under some influence independent of her own will.” Like Rosanna, her unusual body and her strange reaction to the theft of the diamond convince the detective that she is somehow implicated in its disappearance. Lady Verinder, her mother, also has a body that is uncontrollable: she explains to Miss Clack that “For more than two years I have been suffering under an insidious form of heart disease, which, without any symptoms to alarm me, has, by little and little, fatally broken me down. I may live for some months, or I may die before another day has passed over my head.” Lady Verinder’s statement that her illness has been developing without her knowledge reveals the ability of her body to mask even the most deadly of conditions. Furthermore, the fact that she could die at any moment suggests the unpredictability of even “normal” bodies. Illness also disrupts the normalcy of Dr. Candy’s body, which provides a critical clue in solving Blake’s involvement in the theft of the diamond. In a fever-

476 Heller: 149.
477 321.
478 354.
479 232.
induced delirium, Candy repeats a key set of phrases to Jennings, who then fills in the missing words like a puzzle. Defying his conscious mind, Candy’s feverish body reveals his secret and speaks the “truth” of its actions.

Candy’s revelation of his secret while in an altered mental and physical state mirrors Blake’s theft of the diamond under the influence of opium. As we have established, going into the night that the diamond is stolen both Blake’s body and character are already coded as unpredictable; Blake’s unexpected reaction to the surreptitious dose of laudanum only confirms that Collins is situating his body as unruly. For example, the twenty-five minims of laudanum that Dr. Candy gives Blake was a typical dose for an adult male and cannot account for his strange reaction to the drug. Yet, opium was also notorious for revealing the unique constitutions of its users, and Jennings explains to Blake “there are probably no two men in existence on whom the drug acts in the exactly same way.”

Jennings therefore proposes that Blake’s unusual reaction to the drug resulted from his nervous reaction to abruptly ceasing smoking combined with the dose of opium. Blake’s somnambulism was caused both by the opium as well as his uniquely severe symptoms from nicotine withdrawal; a fact which shows Blake’s body as capable of strange and unusual reactions. Despite the complex conditions of Blake’s trance, Jennings postulates that if he can faithfully recreate the environmental and psychological conditions of the night that the theft occurred, then Franklin’s body will react in precisely the same way it did before—thus revealing new information about the lost diamond.

Jennings’s experiment is the most literal way science is applied to the detection of crime in The Moonstone, and Thomas argues both that the experiment is founded on cutting edge nineteenth-century theories and that it demonstrates the efficacy of scientific methods in solving crime. In the “Preface” to the first edition of The Moonstone, Collins himself explained that he had carefully researched the premise of the experiment, and had consulted both “books” and “living authorities” on the matter, and he cites the names of two prominent scientists—William Benjamin Carpenter and John Elliotson—within the pages of the novel. Perhaps Collins felt the need to include this information because he expected that some of his readers would share Betteredge’s and Bruff’s view that the experiment is “hocus-pocus” or “a piece of trickery akin

480 433.
481 67.
482 3.
to the trickery of mesmerism, clairvoyance, and the like.” The misgivings of Betteredge and Bruff do have some merit, for, despite Thomas’s argument that Jennings’s experiment proves the legitimacy of forensic science, it is only half successful. While Jennings does prove that Blake unconsciously took the diamond while in an opium trance, Blake falls asleep in the middle of his hypnotic reenactment. While this relieves Blake from any “guilt” in his theft of the diamond, it also means that what he does with the gem after he takes it from Rachel’s room remains a mystery.

The partial failure of the experiment is due to several causes. First, despite Jennings’s “rigorously scientific” attempts to put the house in the exact condition of the previous year and his careful recording of Blake’s withdrawal symptoms, he nevertheless fails to reproduce the exact circumstances of Blake’s original somnambulism. Labianca and Reeves point out the many problems with the experiment, including the “increased dosage of laudanum” that Jennings gives to Blake and the fact that the poison “is administered in water rather than in a brandy-water mixture identical in concentration to the mixture used in the first sleepwalk incident.” Jennings himself admits that the inherent flaw of the experiment was the “downright impossibility” of fully replicating the “physical and moral conditions of last year,” and he blames the failure of the experiment on his increasing the dose of opium from twenty-five to forty minims. While the imperfect replication of the previous year’s conditions can perhaps account for the abrupt ending of the experiment, Jennings’s theory is also undermined by the fact that Blake’s body has been consistently characterized as unruly and unstable. In order for Jennings’s theory to work (and for the reader to trust the experiment) Blake’s body cannot be a variable; in other words, even after the passage of time, Blake’s body must be viewed as relatively stable. Jennings’s theory was not without scientific foundation, as many emergent branches of forensic science at the time, such as the practice of fingerprinting, assumed that bodies were stable over time. But, as his body’s symbolic connection to the Shivering Sands and Betteredge’s description of the remarkable changes that Blake’s body has undergone since childhood demonstrate, his body can be described as anything but consistent. Indeed, Jennings’s narrative confirms the changeability of Blake’s body, as he is reacting somewhat differently to the

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483 417; 411.
484 Thomas: 67.
cessation of smoking than he did the previous year. Jennings is ultimately forced “to prescribe for him” in order to ensure that Blake can take part in the experiment. The partial failure of the experiment only further demonstrates how Blake’s unruly body refuses to conform to medical or scientific expectation, a fact that undermines the foundations of the forensic science employed in the text. The experiment, therefore, does not forensically establish that Blake took the gem (that is already revealed by Rachel and Rosanna’s testimony) or how the Moonstone gets to London. Instead, it only serves to confirm a small part of the mystery: that Blake took the diamond while in an unconscious state.

Of course, establishing that Blake is not really guilty of his crime is the main point of the narrative. Unlike many detective stories, the novel does not end with the tidy restoration of the stolen object to its owner, and the three Indians are successful in their quest to regain the lost gem. Significantly, their success is due to their very unscientific methods of tracking the diamond, such as their use of clairvoyance. The Indians’ use of supernatural techniques is demonstrated early in the novel, when Betteredge’s daughter Penelope sees the Indians use an English boy to predict the diamond’s future movements:

The little chap unwillingly held out his hand. Upon that, the Indian took a bottle from his bosom, and poured out of it some black stuff, like ink, into the palm of the boy’s hand. The Indian—first touching the boy’s head, and making signs over it in the air—then said “Look.” The boy became quite stiff, and stood like a statue, looking into the ink in the hollow of his hand. The strange passes that the Indian makes over the boy, the child’s subsequent trance and his accurate answers about the diamond clearly mark these activities as supernatural. The Indians are not relying on scientific methods for tracking the gem, but rather are evoking the supernatural realm to discover the diamond’s whereabouts. The Indians’ later successful theft of the stone attests to the success of their methods. Yet this scene is also strongly suggestive of Blake’s unconscious consumption of opium and his trance-like theft of the diamond. For example, Penelope is disturbed by the Indians’ treatment of the English boy and suspects that he is being held captive and forced to do things against his will; like Blake, the boy is fair and small and he rather unwillingly lets the strange “black stuff” act upon him. His forced use of the “ink” and his

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486 418.
487 43.
subsequent trance mirrors Blake’s later unconscious consumption of the opium and his hypnotic theft of the diamond. Furthermore, after the Indians visit the Verinder home, Betteredge finds “a small bottle, containing some sweet-smelling liquor, as black as ink” that the jugglers leave behind.\textsuperscript{488} Betteredge’s description of the mysterious substance gives some insight into its true nature, for opium was also noted for its dark color, its thick, sticky texture, and its sweet smell. Thus these parallels between the Indian’s supernatural use of opium and Blake’s later hypnotic trance strongly suggest that Collins situates opium as having the power to induce supernatural trances, hypnotic states, and somnambulism. The poison-induced trance also reveals the strangeness inherent in the seemingly normal body of the boy and foreshadows opium’s unexpected effect on Blake’s body. The power of chemicals to provoke unexpected reactions in “normal” bodies further complicates the efficacy of using logical and scientific forms of detection to unravel \textit{The Moonstone}’s mysteries.

Far from establishing forensic science as the most legitimate form of detective inquiry, \textit{The Moonstone} positions it instead as a useful, but incomplete, method for detection. Instead, forensic science must be accompanied by other methods, such as first person testimony, to fully establish the story of the crime and account for the unpredictability of the human body. Unlike \textit{The Notting Hill Mystery}, Collins does assert that certain scientific practices could perhaps assess criminal intent by demonstrating how Jennings’s experiment reveals the hidden motivations of Blake’s unconscious; however, it is also important to note that the narrative structure of the novel also goes a long way to complement the findings of Jennings’s experiment. For example, Blake’s first-person narratives, as well as the accounts of other characters such as Betteredge, clearly establish him as a reliable narrator and “hero” of the novel, thus making his avowed ignorance of his part in the crime plausible.\textsuperscript{489} Furthermore, it is not until Mr. Luker gives his testimony and recounts Ablewhite’s story that the mystery of the stone’s disappearance is finally solved. Therefore, Sue Lonoff is correct in stating that “Collins's truth—which in context involves the unravelling of a mystery or crime, accompanied by a full disclosure of the perpetrators' motives and methods—emerges from cumulative voices. The reader is to learn

\textsuperscript{488} 72.
\textsuperscript{489} There are conflicting theories about the function of the narrative structure in \textit{The Moonstone}. Some critics, like Lilian Nayder, believe that the conflicting narratives open up possibilities for alternate interpretation. D.A. Miller, however, argues that, despite these contradictions, the novel provides a monological account of the crime. While acknowledging that Nayder’s thesis has merit, in this case I agree with Miller that the novel gives the appearance of multiplicity while actually presenting a story of the crime that most readers will inherently accept. See Miller’s \textit{The Novel and the Police} and Nayder’s \textit{Unequal Partners: Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Victorian Authorship}. 

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what happened through a series of accounts that gradually enlighten him. If false clues or erring accounts mislead, subsequent voices will correct the record and reveal ‘one complete series of
events.’ Forensic detection plays a part in this process, but it does not override the
importance of storytelling and narrative creation—the work of human witnesses—to the solution of the crime.

Jennings’s experiment on Blake is the most memorable application of science in the
novel, but it is not the only reference to scientific experimentation in the work. Quite early in the
novel, Betteredge describes the horrors of scientific dissection by painting images of a frog
“walking around without his head” and other cruelties done in the name of learning “nasty science.” He criticizes young enthusiasts who “catch newts, and beetles, and spiders, and
frogs, and come home and stick pins through the miserable wretches, or cut them up, without a
 pang of remorse.” Betteredge’s account of scientific experimentation characterizes these
practices as suspect, and they certainly reflect Collins’s ongoing concerns about nineteenth-
century science. As he demonstrates in works such as Heart and Science, Collins is particularly
concerned with scientific practices that remove the humanity from science. While The
Moonstone is not explicitly concerned with the cruelty of scientific experiments, it is deeply
concerned with maintaining the human element—in the form of personal narratives and first-
person testimonies—even in scientifically-grounded forensic detection. The human element can
be admittedly unreliable, but so can forensic science that cannot negotiate the complexities of the
human body. Through the unruly bodies in the text, particularly Franklin Blake’s, The
Moonstone illustrates the limitations of forensics and demonstrates that early detective fiction
was willing, and even eager, to probe the science of detection.

490 Lonoff, Sue. “Multiple Narratives and Relative Truths: A Study of ‘The Ring and the Book,’ The Woman in
491 74.
492 Ibid.
CONCLUSION:

‘THE POISONER OF THE FUTURE’

In many ways, the 1889 trial of Florence Maybrick marked the end of the Victorian obsession with the domestic poisoner. Florence was a young and attractive American heiress who was accused of murdering James Maybrick, her much older British husband, by dosing him with arsenic extracted from fly-paper. Supposedly, Florence murdered her husband after she discovered his insolvency and infidelity (and shortly after embarking on her own extra-marital affair). Like many of its legal predecessors, the Maybrick trial revealed the secret and illicit activities of the parties involved—from James’s long standing “understanding” with his mistress (by whom he had five illegitimate children) to Florence’s supposed dalliances with James’s business associate Alfred Brierley—and thus shone a light into the dark recesses of middle-class Victorian marriage. The prosecution made the most of Florence’s suspect morality by suggesting that she poisoned James in order to pursue her affair unimpeded. Working against this powerful argument was Florence’s defense, which countered that she had used the arsenic for cosmetic purposes and that the small amount of poison found in James’s body postmortem (one-tenth of a grain) could be attributed to any number of causes: from the drugs which his doctors had given the dying man to his habit of taking arsenic-laced “tonics” as an aphrodisiac. Contrary to the expectations of many, Florence was declared guilty of the crime and sentenced to death. Immediately after the verdict, the public began to agitate for her release, and tens of thousands of people signed petitions in her favor; she ultimately received a reprieve from the death penalty but spent fifteen years in prison.

As the public outcry against her verdict demonstrates, many people were disturbed by the outcome of the trial because Florence’s defense had presented several scientific and medical witnesses who seemingly confirmed her version of events. Among her expert witnesses were Dr. Rawdon Macnamara, “one of the greatest living authorities on poison” and a physician at Dublin Lock Hospital, as well as the Home office’s own specialist, Dr. Charles Meynott Tidy—both of whom declared that the arsenic found in James’s body was most likely not fatal and probably

was self-administered. Unsurprisingly, given the scientific evidence, many onlookers believed Florence would be acquitted until Justice Stephen’s over twelve hour-long summation of the case, in which he stated “that he was very reluctant to deal with these scientific matters of which he knew nothing” and directed the jury to instead focus on the “horrible and incredible thought” that Florence had planned “the death of her husband in order that she might be left at liberty to follow her own degraded vices.” By instructing the jury to disregard the scientific facts of the case, Justice Stephen took the evidence out of the realm of science and instead firmly situated Florence’s guilt solely in her suspect morality. Like so many earlier poisoning cases—especially those involving women—morality won out over science and Florence’s adultery was enough to convict her of murder.

Yet the tide of public opinion was changing, and subsequent Victorian defendants would be convicted primarily on scientific—not moral—evidence. Thus, despite Justice Stephen’s rejection of the scientific testimony, the public’s persistent belief in Florence’s innocence belies a growing faith in forensic science and toxicology. Over the whole fifteen-year period of her incarceration, groups such as The Women’s International Maybrick Society kept calling for her release; often these groups (as well as the intermittent articles which appeared in American and British periodicals) proclaimed Maybrick’s innocence by citing the medical evidence of the case. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century the public apparently had widely accepted the legitimacy of toxicological tests for common poisons. Along with this growing faith in toxicological accuracy came the belief that new innovations in forensic science were “the chief safeguard of the public” because they dissuaded potential criminals from committing poisoning crimes. For example, two years after the Maybrick case, an article by Sir S. Squire Sprigge entitled “The Poisoning of the Future” outlined the scientific tests available for poison, speculated that poisoning crimes would continue to decrease, and declared that “the poisoner of the future will not be a very dreadful person” primarily because “the poisoner is usually the sort of man who values his own skin.” The only way future poisoners could murder without impunity, the article suggested, would be if they brought “the older methods of poisoning to

495 Robb, 61; MacDougall, 549.
497 Ibid: 55; 47.
perfection by the exhibition of subtler drugs” or if they employed “the results of recent biological research.”

The literature of the fin de siècle seems to agree with Sprigge that poisoning with arsenic or antimony had become a “crude” enterprise. As toxicological tests became more reliable for commonplace chemicals, later century authors had to increasingly branch out with the creativity of their poison plots. This process usually took one of two forms: either authors had their criminals reviving the “lost” poison recipes of the Borgias, as in the case of Wilkie Collins’s novels The Haunted Hotel (1878) or Jezebel’s Daughter (1880), or their murderers use increasingly obscure methods, such as Dr. Roylott and his trained Indian snake in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” (1892). As the latter example indicates, as the century progressed fictional poisons became more and more exotic. Certainly some poisons, such as opiates, had always been linked to the colonies, but many other deadly chemicals, such as digitalis or atropine, were native to England. Yet, fuelled by xenophobic fears about “reverse colonization,” later century poison texts more often featured exotic chemicals and colonial criminals than their earlier counterparts. In line with social Darwinist prejudices against colonized peoples, the exotic criminals in these works use particularly coarse chemical weapons. Case in point is the stunted and grotesque Tonga from Doyle’s The Sign of Four, whose simplistic, yet poisonous, thorn weapon mirrors his depiction as an uncivilized brute. While the Indian villain in Charles Warren Adams’s Ram Dass has more sophisticated poisons, like Tonga he is described as “dishonest,” “diabolically cruel” and “free from all moral or religious scruples.” As colonial poisoners like Tonga and Ram Dass began to dominate fin de siècle literature, the elegant, educated, scientific, and British poisoner began to lose cultural relevance. After all, in an uncertain world that seemed to be growing larger by the day, exotic poisons streaming in from the far corners of the world seemed more of an immediate threat than the familiar home-grown chemicals most Victorians had in their medicine chests.

Thus, from a combination of factors—namely the increased efficacy of toxicological testing and the growing fears about urbanization, degeneration, and the colonies—the anxieties of the culture had shifted and the domestic poisoner was no longer the criminal du jour. Yet, even the exotic poisoners did not garner the same level of popularity as their predecessors; after

498 Ibid.: 47.
499 Ibid.: 46.
all, they were usually one-note melodramatic villains and did not have the charisma of earlier poisoners like Collins’s Count Fosco. But there was a new form of criminal who did have the charisma, as well as some of the other characteristics, of the earlier popular poisoners: Jack the Ripper. Like the poisoner, Jack was mysterious, invisible, and apparently intelligent; unlike the poisoner, he was brutal, bloody, and very public about his murders. It is generally agreed that the Ripper murdered five women during the course of about three months in 1888 (“The Autumn of Terror”), and his legacy has outlasted and overshadowed many other prolific Victorian criminals. Indeed, even Florence’s saga of poisoning and adultery could only briefly distract the public attention away from the Ripper and, once her sentence was commuted, he once again made the front pages—even almost a year after his killing spree ended. The reason why the Ripper’s crimes so strongly resonated with the Victorian public is because, like other popular criminal figures before him, the Ripper’s crimes linked him to the pressing social and cultural concerns of the day. As Judith Walkowitz explains it, “the degraded social setting, the mysterious circumstances, the grisly mutilations, the ominous figure of Jack the Ripper, and the ‘deviant’ lives of his victims combined to make the dark media fantasy of the Ripper murders.” The Ripper touched a nerve with the Victorian public precisely because he was not a “domestic” killer; instead, he was the epitome of the urban or “stranger” murderer. Like the poisoners before him, it was speculated that Jack was an educated man—perhaps even a doctor or surgeon—and his crimes magnified fears that (even good) society was degenerating. Moving unseen through the urban bowels of Whitechapel, the Ripper brought attention to the decay and perceived deterioration that was occurring right in the heart of “civilized” England.

Thus, the Ripper has remained the primary criminal icon of the Victorian period because he represents the dangers of urban life and the depersonalization of the modern world—in other words, his crimes not only resonated during the nineteenth century but still have cultural relevance in the twenty first. This is not to suggest, however, that the poisoner has been forgotten; on the contrary, the poisoner has become a lasting symbol of Victorian crime, especially for contemporary artists, writers, and musicians who conjure the image of the poisoner as a symbol for the dark side of Victorian life. Case in point are the numerous reincarnations of

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501 Most Ripper experts include only five murders (the canonical five) in Jack’s repertoire of murder. Of course, the Victorians did not have the benefit of hindsight, so for several years after the 1888 “Autumn of Terror” there was widespread speculation about the Ripper’s return each time a woman was slashed in Whitechapel.
poisons and the poisoner in Neo-Victorian, Steampunk, or Neo-Gothic art. The Slow Poisoner, for example, is a “one man surrealist rock and roll band” out of San Francisco who evokes “rural paranoia and cosmic horror” through his songs about “swamp women, creeping fungi, exotic diseases, headless chickens, and witches in the woods.”\footnote{Goldfarb, Andrew. “About.” 24 May 2012. http://www.theslowpoisoner.com/about.html.} True to its Neo-Victorian roots, the name of the band is derived from the chapter entitled “The Slow Poisoners” from Charles Mackay’s \textit{1848 Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds}.\footnote{Ibid.} Madame Talbot draws from a similar artistic tradition for her “Victorian and Gothic Lowbrow” posters and multimedia art.\footnote{Talbot, Ashleigh. “Who we are at Madame Talbot’s.” 24 May 2012. http://www.madametalbot.com/9about.htm} Among her creations are posters featuring skeletons and poison as well as Victorian-style multimedia “framed curious” made from authentic poison bottles and labels. Like The Slow Poisoner, she uses gothic images of Victorian life in order to explore the ongoing cultural legacies of the nineteenth century.

The most mainstream representation of Victorian poison and poisoners, however, is Andrew Motion’s 2000 Neo-Victorian work \textit{Wainewright the Poisoner: the Confession of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright}. Motion, a former poet laureate of the United Kingdom, wrote the work as an “experimental biography.” In it, Motion takes on the voice and persona of Wainewright, writing the text in a novelistic first-person style, yet carefully footnoting his inexhaustible research into Wainewright’s life. As with so many Victorian poison texts, including earlier works fictionalizing Wainewright’s life like Bulwer’s \textit{Lucretia} or Dickens’s “Hunted Down,” Motion uses the figure of the poisoner as a way to test the limits and possibilities of genre-crossing. \textit{Wainewright the Poisoner} is not purely a novel, nor is it exactly a biography; rather, it is a hybrid work that (like earlier Victorian works) uses Wainewright’s status as an artist and a poisoner to explore the issues of aesthetics, crime, and genre. Like the reactions to earlier innovating crime fiction, Motion’s criminal-biography inspired mixed criticism. While John Carey, of \textit{The Sunday Times}, described the work as “brilliantly innovative, gripping,” and “intricately researched,” Jonathan Bate called it a “broken-backed compromise.”\footnote{Moss, Stephen. “Wainewright the Poisoner by Andrew Motion.” \textit{The Guardian}. 24 May 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/mar/01/andrewmotion.}

Whether or not the work will go down as a success, \textit{Wainewright the Poisoner} demonstrates why the Victorians used the poisoner as a representational figure for their age. In
Motion’s hands, Wainewright (like the fictional poisoners of the nineteenth century) is intelligent, witty, sensitive, artistic, as well as intensely selfish, greedy, judgmental, and snobbish. As Motion subtly points out, Wainewright’s Janus-like nature is like the two-sides of the period: the Victorian age was one of both great progress and great inequity. The Ripper was too brutal to encapsulate this duality, but the poisoner (as the Victorians recognized) simultaneously represents the great successes and failures of the period. Thus, even though the Ripper may be better known in the twenty first century, Motion’s work shows that the poisoner has become an enduring symbol for the great complexity that defined the Victorian age.
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