"This picture always haunted me": Dramatic Adaptations of *The Woman in White*

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Abstract:
This essay investigates how, in the 150 years since the publication of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859-60), dramatic adaptations of this politically charged sensation novel have used it as a vehicle to comment on their own culture. Taking as a point of departure the focus on women's changing legal status in Collins' own stage adaptation of his novel, this essay uncovers shifts in the treatment of female voice and agency through three more recent dramatisations: BBC television versions from the 1980s and 1990s and an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical from 2004-05. These adaptations, when interpreted as products of their specific cultural and historical contexts, demonstrate changing perspectives on the Victorian past and, in their introduction of new forms of violence and trauma into the story, such as domestic rape and child murder, reveal how that past is mined to cathartic effect by contemporary adapters.

Keywords: adaptation, Wilkie Collins, domestic violence, film, musical, sensation novels, Thatcherism, Victorian, *The Woman in White*, marriage law.

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For much of the nineteenth century, married women in England had no legal identity of their own. Unless a legal settlement was drawn up to protect her, everything a bride had – her body included – became the property of her husband. In 1857, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act established the first secular divorce courts in England; divorce for women, however, was possible only under extreme conditions.[1] Two years later, on November 26th, 1859, the first serial installment of Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* debuted in the journal *All the Year Round*. Over the next ten months, Collins constructed a sensational story that drew on anxieties about married women's rights gripping England at the time. Rather than allegorising domestic endangerment through a Gothic or exotic lens, Collins directly exposed the legal situation of his countrywomen, placing the terrorising husband in a contemporary British country house. The novel's plot twists and dynamic characters (especially the memorable villain, Count Fosco) made it ideal for dramatisation, and unauthorised stage productions premiered almost as soon as the serial ended its run (see Sweet 1999: 634).

Adapters, however, soon faced a serious challenge: how were they to maintain the story's suspense and immediacy when the legal situation it hinged on was undergoing rapid change? Collins himself adapted *The Woman in White* for the stage in 1871, and his reinterpretation demonstrates the changes made necessary by shifts in medium and cultural context. In the 150 years since its publication, the novel has been adapted many more times: for the screen, for television, and for the stage, most recently as a lavish musical. Like Collins' stage version before them, these later adaptations reinterpret the social controversies that fuelled the original text and utilise the source material to explore deeply-held concerns of their own times. Some of the issues addressed by Collins have been elided in later versions because they have become irrelevant in the new context; some have been carried over but reconfigured through a contemporary lens; and some issues not found in the source material have been inserted because of their contemporary significance.

While Collins' novel has a central male hero – Walter Hartright, who narrates the text's largest segments – his role is peripheral compared to three women who dominate the story: Marian Halcombe, her half-sister Laura Fairlie, and Anne Catherick. Marian, the penniless, resolute older half-sister, narrates a section of her own and is the most vocal character in Walter's narrative. Both Laura, the wealthy and vulnerable younger half-sister, and Anne, an apparent outsider who exposes the vice corroding the foundations of Marian and Laura's domestic world, could lay claim to the title "The Woman in White". The events of these individual women's lives reflect intense Victorian anxieties about the role of women more generally. Marian arguably represents the 'surplus' or 'redundant' woman, one of a class of independent spinsters whose growing numbers troubled a nuclear-family focused society (see Balée 1992: 197-215). Laura marries a baronet, and her position as Lady Glyde demonstrates all the fragility and danger of the romanticised lady of the house's legal status; her husband Sir Percival marries her solely for money, and the marriage settlement, sanctioned by her apathetic guardian, offers her little protection. Sir Percival's ultimate act of villainy is to imprison Laura in an asylum under Anne's name, literalising the husband's erasure of the wife's legal identity. The mentally disturbed Anne offers further evidence of how male corruption can render the domestic sphere hazardous for women: she appears first as a Cassandra-like

prognosticator of doom, but is eventually revealed to be the illegitimate child of Laura's father.[2]

The novel draws attention to the breakdown of traditional female roles, depicting the enforcement of those roles as dangerous for both men and women. In so doing, it offers a blueprint which subsequent adaptations remodel in complex and sometimes problematic ways. Adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon uses a Darwinian metaphor of genetic adaptation to explain how, through a "process of mutation or adjustment," a narrative "adapts to its new environment and exploits it, and the story lives on, through its 'offspring' – the same and yet not" (Hutcheon 2006: 31, 167). This is a fitting lens to apply to *The Woman in White*, as its first instalment appeared in the same week as Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. This essay traces the mutation of women's agency and voice in the stage and screen offspring of *The Woman in White*, beginning with Collins' play as a template for the changes necessitated by the process of dramatisation, and then moving through three varieties of adaptation from the past three decades: John Bruce's BBC television serial from 1982; Tim Fywell's TV movie, also for the BBC, from 1997, and Andrew Lloyd Webber's 2004-05 West End/Broadway musical. Each adaptation comes from a different environment, demonstrates a distinct agenda, and has unique genre requirements to deal with. In comparing what each one contracts, alters, or expands, my goal is not to debate fidelity or relative merit, but rather to expose how the context and intentions of each production inflects its representation of domestic violence and the balance of power between the genders. The juxtaposition of these texts reveals a pattern: as female characters inevitably shift from mute victims to speaking subjects, adapters find intriguing ways to repurpose the vestigial story elements of female vulnerability and male villainy.

1. 1871: Collins' Play

The decade between the appearance of Collins' novel and his revision for the stage in 1871 changed the context of the tale significantly. A proficient dramatist, Collins not only performed simultaneous generic and temporal "transpositions" (Cartmell qtd. Sanders 2006: 20), converting novel to play and bringing the action forward by ten years; he also attempted to adjust for a culturally circulating knowledge of his work. Collins' decision to reveal two of the novel's biggest surprises (Anne

Catherick's parentage and Sir Percival's illegitimacy) in the Prologue is certainly startling, but Matthew Sweet convincingly argues that, given the enormous popularity of the book, it would have been unwise for the play to build all its suspense toward final-act disclosures unlikely to surprise the bulk of the audience (Sweet 1999: 636). Nor, given the difficulty of reproducing first-person close perspective on-stage, would it have suited the medium to keep the multi-narrator, documents-of-the-case format that gave the novel its structure; instead, Collins presents a chronological version of the plot telescoped down to only eight densely-packed scenes. The removal of the changing narrators had a direct effect on the ideology of the text: Marian, whose narration disappears mid-book, is by no means silenced here; and Laura, who never narrates in the novel, gains power and depth through the accession of more dialogue (often conveying important plot information). In fact, the emphasis on female voice and authority in this adaptation surpasses the mere requirements of the dramatic medium.

The alteration of Laura's character is the most notable aspect of this adaptation; removed from "the perceptual framework through which [she is] mediated to the readers of Collins' text […] Laura is freed from the straightjacket of Walter's and Marian's infantilizing narratives about her" (Pykett 2005: 200-201). Although still victimised, Laura is no longer a passive figure but rather an observant and rebellious subject. In his first scene, Sir Percival complains to Fosco: "She coolly asks me – with the marriage settlement actually in the house – to release her from our engagement […] I am deliberately kept out in the dark. I am sacrificed, for all I know, to a new fancy for some other man" (Collins 1871: 7).[3] This "cool" creature is a far cry from the self-sacrificing Laura of the novel, who insists to Marian: "I shall lower myself, indeed, if I gain my release by hiding from him what he has a right to know" (Collins 1999: 164). The future husband's right to know the wife's secrets is no longer accepted.

Even after Laura's return from her honeymoon, her behaviour shows little repression or determined passivity. While in the book Laura suffers long in silence regarding her marriage, in the play she begins on the subject in her first conversation in Act Two. At Marian's reproving "Why are you silent about your married life?", she launches into a mild tirade:

> Will it do if I say I am resigned to my married life? There is no confidence between my husband and me. He is devoured

> by anxieties – money anxieties, I suspect – of which I know nothing. Have I answered your question? Need I say anything more? (Collins 1871: 8)

Not only is the asperity of the final two questions uncharacteristic of the 'original' Laura, it is significant that while the book laments "the dearth of all warmth of feeling, of all close sympathy, between her husband and herself" (Collins 1999: 213), Laura's complaint in the play is of being "shut out from [her] husband's confidence" regarding finances (Collins 1871: 8). This protest foregrounds Collins' critique of the marital inequalities kept in place by mainstream Victorian gender roles and the appalling legal status of married women. While in the book even the good husband, Walter, will only allow Laura a pathetic pretence of involvement in the household's financial concerns, here she claims the right to know about "money anxieties".

Laura of the play also asserts her right to sexual freedom, if only imagined. Collins' novel portrays a married woman who fantasises about another man, but guiltily, sorrowfully: "I know it was wrong, darling – but tell me if I was wrong without any excuse" (Collins 1999: 259). In the play the unhappy marriage is treated with no such reverence. When Marian scolds her for thinking of Walter, Laura exclaims ("passionately" by the stage directions): "Say I must not live! Say I must have a stone in the place of a heart! Don't say I mustn't think of him. You are a woman – you know I must. My thoughts are my own!" (Collins 1871: 8) Again the thematic emphasis returns to property and control. As Laura desires an independent voice in the disposal of her money, so she refuses to submit her thoughts to her husband's dictation.

In all probability, this change in Laura has everything to do with the decade that passed between the original publication and the writing of the play. While Collins set his novel in 1850-51, the date of the opening scene of the play is given as 31 March 1862. Collins is likely to have brought the time setting of his play forward so it would coincide with the years of the novel's first flush of success (the time the public would have associated with the story). And this change would make updating necessary, as theatregoers of the 1870s would have found a depiction of women as helpless in the face of exerted male force less convincing than in the past. In the 1860s rigid concepts of masculinity and femininity were beginning to be

troubled more openly; it was a decade of "extraordinary activity among feminists" (Shanley 1989: 51). While the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 did not accomplish all that was hoped, it was nonetheless a sign of change. By then debate around women's rights issues had altered in an encouraging way: "Now no one […] argued for 'the Divine right of a husband to confiscate his wife's property, or described the family as an institution beyond discussion'" (Holcombe 1983: 169). Were Collins to ignore these shifts in public sentiment, his adaptation would have risked striking a false note when it came to the discussion of financial matters and the relationship between the sexes, two key elements of the story.

Laura's newfound assertiveness does have one unexpected consequence: a corresponding increase in conservatism in Marian when the sisters play off each other. For instance, when Laura passes on a rumour she has heard that "the count is a Spy," Marian cuts her off with a hand-wringing plaint: "Don't repeat gossip, Laura! Don't listen to scandal!" (Collins 1871: 9) Such moments are the exception for Marian's character, however. If she acts a proscribed feminine script in her interactions with Laura, it must only be for the sake of dramatic contrast; in her dealings with *men* the Marian of the play is as strong and forthright as her book counterpart – sometimes more so. The first act opens with Marian's voice, instructing Walter to "Wait a moment" (Collins 1871: 4). As an imperative delivered by a woman to a man, this line alerts the audience to anticipate a depiction of authoritative women, an expectation fulfilled by Marian's subsequent lines, such as "You have attempted to keep a secret from me. I have discovered your secret!" (Collins 1871: 4) When Sir Percival enters the scene, she asserts her right to read Anne Catherick's letter to Laura before he does – "As Laura's relative and friend, I claim it first!" – and accuses him of encroaching on Laura: "You have no right to force yourself into my sister's confidence. Are we in the slave market at Constantinople? You talk as if Laura Fairlie was yours by right of purchase!" (Collins 1871: 7) Far from denigrating the female sex as in the book, where she often makes belittling comments like "Women can't draw – their minds are too flighty" (Collins 1999: 37), the Marian in the play employs the rhetoric of the contemporary women's rights movement. Her strength and agency carry through to the end; in a scene of conflict with the Count, Marian even orders Walter out of the room because he cannot keep his temper, whereas she can. Interestingly, the play lacks the romantic resolution and conventional

reassertion of patriarchy that closes Collins' novel; Laura and Walter are not married or even engaged at the dénouement. The overall position of women at the final curtain is neither dominant nor submissive, but more ambiguous – a decided improvement from a feminist perspective.

It is valuable to note one more aspect of this play, which connects it to the two more recent versions to be discussed below: rather than being victimised because she is supposed to have inappropriate knowledge she does not in actuality possess, here Anne Catherick does know Sir Percival's secret. The dramatic form changes her essential function in the plot; she no longer merely forebodes woe, but conveys key information through expository dialogue and precipitates the action by presenting a legitimate threat of exposure to Sir Percival. In the Prologue, which takes place in the same year as the main story, she witnesses him entering his parents' marriage in the church register from an ascendant position up in the organ-loft. She expresses "vindictive triumph" at having caught him in the act, and it is her mother rather than Sir Percival who captures and restrains her (Collins 1871: 3). When she escapes the asylum and writes to warn Laura, her letter is lucid and succinct. When they meet, her offer of help is legally based: "If you are living in misery with the villain you have married, I have only to say the word, and the law will take him!" (Collins 1871: 10) Recent adaptations have followed Collins' lead in making Anne's secret knowledge real – perhaps for the motive of suiting a new medium, or perhaps for ideological purposes, as we shall see.

2. 1982: The Mini-Series

One production that does not make such a change, however, is the 1982 BBC version of *The Woman in White*, directed by John Bruce.[4] It is a tenet of adaptation theory that "audiences are more demanding of fidelity when dealing with classics" (Hutcheon 2006: 29), and in this miniseries respect for the source text seems to be the motivating principle. Returning to a serial format (in this case, five hour-long parts), the adapters take far fewer liberties with the plot of the book than Collins himself did. In keeping with the BBC's project in this period – to "valorize at once England's past through pictorial nostalgia and English literature through a faithful replication of their chosen author's dialogue," as Thomas Leitch describes it (Leitch 2007: 172) – the mini-series fleshes out scenes Collins only alluded to but invents very little. As with the 1871 play, the plea for female

empowerment is foregrounded, but the male characters are not weakened in contrast. It is as satisfying to see Laura (played by Jenny Seagrove) drop her wedding ring on her dressing table as she leaves Blackwater Park, believing Sir Percival has agreed to a separation, as it is to see Walter (Daniel Gerroll) knock down Sir Percival's thugs when they accost him on the highway. Airing in April of 1982, just days after the start of the Falklands War, the production offered a reassuring vision of strong, admirable English men and women at a moment when the country was eager to recuperate comfortable values and a self-image of greatness.

One of the chief pleasures of this adaptation is that Marian's force of character is carried through the second part of the story with as much vigour as in the first. Diana Quick, the actress playing Marian, brings a strong presence and liveliness to the role. (She is, of course, not ugly as described in the book, but rather strong-featured and more 'handsome' than beautiful.[5]) Without changing plot events, the film avoids Marian's gradual diminution – so troubling in the novel – by keeping her voice prominent throughout. Many scholars have pinpointed the Count's usurpation of Marian's diary as a sort of mental rape from which she never recovers. As Balée writes: "It might be said that Fosco literally makes a woman of her when he reads her diary" (Balée 1992: 203). But while the moment in this miniseries when Marian finds the Count's writing in her diary is chilling, she quickly recovers from her illness and the Count's intrusion. After Laura's supposed death we see her visiting the grave alone and then going to write to her lawyer – she has not lost the power to act on her own initiative or to tell her own story. The chronological presentation of events reaffirms her continuing agency, since the scenes in which she discovers Laura and rescues her from the asylum are played out in Walter's absence; her triumph is no longer filtered through Walter's eyes.[6]

Another striking element of this miniseries is the complication of the masculine antagonists. Collins invented the Count's admiration of Marian because he felt his master villain "would not be true to nature unless there was some weak point somewhere in his character" (Collins 2006: 652). As Walter observes in his narrative: "The best men are not consistent in good – why should the worst men be consistent in evil?" (Collins 1999: 547) The miniseries repeats this humanisation of Fosco, including the scene (offstage in the book) where he warns Marian that he is aware that she has freed Laura. Alan Badel brings gallantry and warmth to the role of the Count,

though he is none the less menacing for it. Sir Percival, too, is not without his humanising moments; the actor John Shrapnel gives as full a rendering of Sir Percival's weaknesses as his strengths. In the scene where he sends Laura to the asylum without her foreknowledge, his words are firm enough (he tells her "the trap is waiting" – a double-entendre for which screenwriter Ray Jenkins deserves kudos), but his expression is troubled, even regretful. Without deviating from the source plot, the serial manages to convey an inner struggle between self-interest and humanity.

By placing value on the nuances of Collins' characters to a degree not evident (as we shall see) in later productions, this miniseries reveals a sympathetic overall attitude towards the Victorian age and makes an effort to resist the oversimplifications which necessarily afflict modern attitudes toward earlier periods.[7] However, while the 1982 serial constitutes one filmmaker's revision of one author's representation of his era, the sympathetic treatment of the period in this drama is also a hallmark of its own historical and cultural moment. Many scholars have commented on the influence of Thatcherism on the BBC productions of the 1980s, a decade when, as Cora Kaplan states, "Victorian Values – thrift, family, enterprise – were brought back as the positive ethic of Conservative government" (Kaplan 2007: 5). Hutcheon observes that "'heritage cinema' adaptations flourished in Thatcher's aesthetically and ideologically conservative Britain" (Hutcheon 2006: 143-144). In response to a political climate of nostalgia for the perceived virtues of a departed era, many TV serials echoed the concurrent political attempt to capture the faded glory of the British Empire (as in Granada's *Jewel in the Crown*) and the "permanent, solid values" associated with what Robert Giddings and Keith Selby term a "selective, limited" ideal of "Englishness" (Giddings and Selby 2001: 58-59). The constructed set of values generally associated with the Victorian era in the public mind – described by Simon Joyce as "a confidently triumphant imperialism, a rigid separation of public and private spheres, a repressive sexual morality, and an ascendant hegemony of middle-class values" (Joyce 2002: 4) – were a good fit for Thatcherism, and made Victorian novel adaptations a smart choice for the BBC, for the first time facing serious competition in the costume drama market, to produce at this moment.[8]

More than just speaking to a trend, however, the BBC's choice to adapt *The Woman in White* in particular evinces how the story is again and

again used as a vehicle for cultural catharsis. It is crucial to remember that the value system of Thatcherism gained popularity in response to widespread anxieties about England's perceived decline in strength. As played by Daniel Gerroll – tall, clean-cut, mentally and physically capable, exuding honourableness – Walter Hartright takes on the mantle of the ideal Englishman. Rather than updating Collins' social *critique*, the two trends of this adaptation (towards making the women more active and the villains less unsympathetic) reflect the nostalgic project of the BBC; the oppressive side of Victorianism is seen to be reparable through the action of good hardworking men and women. The ending resembles conservative feminism: rather than going the route of Walter and Laura's ascension to wealth and status, the film is satisfied to end with the recognition of Laura's identity by the people of Limmeridge. However, the sinister tone of what has gone before is not completely undone; the film ends with a look back at the dangers that have been overcome, and what has been lost along the way. The credits begin to roll over a shot of Laura beaming, with outstretched hands, greeting old acquaintances who gather around her. Walter joins her and the shot transfers to a still image of Anne Catherick pointing off-screen, in the moment when she asked the way to London. After the credits end we see one additional brief scene befitting *Mystery!*, the PBS program that aired this adaptation in America: Count Fosco's murdered body swarming with his white mice. Laura has regained her identity, Anne Catherick is not forgotten, and Count Fosco has been brought low – so low that one must feel a thrill of horror at his position. The miniseries depicts the past as a source of excitement, sympathy, and a desirable model of Englishness, while showing its pitfalls (such as women's powerlessness) to be surmountable.

3. 1997: The TV Movie

Where the 1982 BBC/WGBH production sought to present an 'authentic' Wilkie Collins on the screen, the 1997 adaptation by the same companies makes no such attempt. As Lisa Hopkins states, the film "take[s] liberties with the original text to produce [an] emphasis on contemporary [concerns], and it is clearly targeted at those who are not likely to know the original text" (Hopkins 2005: 73). Despite a running time of only two hours, necessitating a lot of compression, the filmmakers manage to insert numerous scenes, themes, and subtexts that do not appear in the book. As

Rachel Malik argues, the result is "strongly modernizing, and reworks key sensation tropes in the light of current definitions and anxieties" (Malik 2006: 189). The time setting of the film is hard to determine, since one scene features a copy Walter has made of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Beata Beatrix' – a painting which was not completed until 1870 – and Marian states that the picture has "always haunted" her. One might potentially set the film around the year of the performance of Collins' play, but the shifts in women's legal status, which Collins seems to have taken into account, are not grappled with here. If anything, the women are in a worse position than in the novel – "the adaptation confirms expectations about the dark underside of a repressive society viewed through a late twentieth-century lens" (Malik 2006: 189). The film passes over the issue of illegitimacy, reinterprets Collins' interest in women's rights from a 1990s perspective, and transforms the novel's concern with property inheritance into an anxiety about genetic inheritance and cycles of violence.

The attempt to compress a serial into a one-shot story event seems to have blocked out the possibility of multiple perspectives. Through voice-over and other devices, the entire film is constructed as a narrative by Marian. The gender politics of the film are drastically reshaped by the choice to focus on a single female narrator, a transformation for which the change in audience must be at least partially responsible. Sanders refers to "the processes of proximation and updating" to describe the moves used by adapters to make older texts relevant or digestible for later audiences (Sanders 2006: 19). In this vein, the centralising of Marian suggests an attempt on the filmmakers' part to offer "a revised point of view from the 'original' […] voicing the silenced and marginalized" (Sanders 2006: 19). Yet the adaptation's apparent feminist agenda is confused by the fact that the source text already sought to speak for the disadvantaged, and by the complications that result from their specific actions of proximation.

From the start of the film there are suggestive alterations. It is logical enough to place Walter's first encounter with Anne on the road to Limmeridge rather than London (the 2004 musical makes this change too), but it is odd that Anne is, first, quite obviously disturbed, and second, sexualised in a sepulchral way. One feels this Walter would be justified in thinking Anne a prostitute (possibly an undead one) in her clinging, low-cut white gown and pasty makeup. Rather than evoking the slow, innocent Anne of the book, the filmmakers seem to be drawing from folk legends of

White Ladies who haunt rural areas, obsessed with wrongs perpetrated against them – frequently of a sexual nature, such as rape – they suffered in life at the hands of men. It is the viewer's first signal that this adaptation is moving away from realism towards an overt allegory of social evils conveyed through the interplay of representative figures.

At Limmeridge, Marian and Laura are portrayed as "unused to the company of men", as Marian remarks; though they become friendly with Walter, Marian grows protective of Laura from the first hint of his interest in her. When Sir Percival arrives, Walter is not sent away – instead he leaves in disgrace after Margaret Porcher, here a Limmeridge servant, accuses him (on Sir Percival's orders, we later learn) of "trying to make her undress." There is a time jump until after Laura's marriage, when Marian is at Blackwater waiting to meet her. Upon her sister's arrival, Laura refuses to talk to her; as Lisa Hopkins writes, "marriage itself seems to be not a sanctified state, but one of horror, with Laura changed beyond recognition and apparently turned into a Stepford wife *avant la lettre*" (Hopkins 2005: 78). Sir Percival encourages Marian to stay anyway, and the Count (supposedly Sir Percival's cousin) comes to visit. When Laura and Marian finally talk, it is revealed that Sir Percival (who has appeared a perfect gentleman) beats and forces himself on Laura, who finds what she calls "the act" traumatic.[9] Only an hour into the movie, the spectre of rape has appeared three times. Marian, whom Malik describes as an "all-action feminist hero" (Malik 2006: 189), tells Laura: "Never again […]. From this moment on, our endurance ends." Laura asks what they can do, and Marian replies, "We can fight." Yet 'fighting' entails no more than writing a letter to Mr. Gilmore. The women are shown to have no power except through men, so the attempt to "de-repress" the Victorian source has only created a new problem (Hutcheon 2006: 147). The film gives 1997 viewers a feminist heroine they can sympathise with, but places her in a world where she can accomplish almost nothing.

Marian's role in this adaptation is difficult to place, as she is clearly masculinised in her protectiveness of Laura (even from Walter), but simultaneously she is feminised by being ranged against a united front of male villainy. Over the last three decades, much scholarly attention has been given to the elastic partition between gender roles in the novel (see O'Neill 1988, Balée 1992, O'Fallon 1995, and R. Collins 2003). Discussing these complexities, Susan Balée concludes that by the end "the novel's allegiance

(and by extension, the readers') is given to the masculine woman and the sensitive man" (Balée 1992: 209). These words describe this adaptation well, given the physical characteristics of Andrew Lincoln (Walter) and Tara Fitzgerald (Marian). Fitzgerald is attractive but stern and heavy-browed, while Lincoln could be called sensitive-looking; furthermore, he performs no manly shows of physicality such as Gerroll demonstrates in the 1982 film. The idealised Englishman of Thatcherism is no longer in evidence.

Philip O'Neill identifies gender instability as "a major theme" of the novel, stating that:

> The categories of masculine and feminine are insufficient to measure the entire spectrum of sexuality and gender. To credit characters with either uniquely masculine or feminine characteristics is a mere expediency which does not do full justice to a complicated subject. (O'Neill 1988: 119)

In some ways the film seems on board with O'Neill's reading, because gender boundaries are frequently undermined. Marian Halcombe is here transformed into Marian Fairlie, Laura's half-sister on the *father's* side; all three women therefore have the same father, and are figured as carrying on his legacy (on which more later). However, the pose of gender flexibility breaks down in the adaptation's explicit definition of womanhood as a state of vulnerability to the vagaries of men.

The most convenient example of this theme can be found in Ian Richardson, who, oddly enough, plays the role of Frederick Fairlie in both Masterpiece Theater adaptations. Richardson gives a "twinging and cowering" performance in the 1982 production; his character seems truly incapable of lifting himself from his chair, though one gets the impression his weakness is the result of years of hypochondriacal inactivity (Karsten 1985: 16). Fifteen years later, however, Richardson reinterprets the character as a more vigorous older man, whose claims of ill-health are wholly an excuse to avoid dealing with difficulties. By figuring every male as a potential threat, if not always a potent physical one, the adaptation generates a paranoid atmosphere of female helplessness. Even incidental males are threatening; in a scene where Sir Percival's servants corral Anne Catherick at the boathouse, the men laugh as they menace the terrified

woman. Sensitive Walter is accused of being a sexual predator. As Hopkins comments, "at this point we may well begin to wonder whether wickedness is gendered [male]" (Hopkins 2005: 79).

All this fits into what seems to be a goal of the adaptation: to stress the powerless position of women in the Victorian era by making the female characters' situation as bad as possible. Having re-imagined Marian as an 'action hero', the film is forced, in keeping the skeleton of Collins' tale intact, to go to extraordinary lengths to prevent her from acting. This increases the intensity of her struggle for power, but since equilibrium must be maintained, her opposition is correspondingly fiercer. To achieve this, the movie embraces its modern viewpoint, showcasing what a contemporary viewer might find most outrageous about Victorian society. The ideological impulses behind this adaptation are at war with each other – the adapters' goal is as much to engender outrage and emphasise the period's difference from the modern era as to make the story and characters relatable, creating a tension between the film's familiarising and alienating moves. The viewer *must* feel for Laura, who marries one man while in love with another, discovers that he has married her for her money, becomes convinced that he is trying to kill her, and regularly undergoes beatings and marital rape at his hands. Yet her inability to leave him is taken to an extreme; her male supporters (Gilmore, Mr. Fairlie) won't believe a word she says, and men stalk Blackwater Park at night with rifles, happy to fire to prevent her escape. If the audience were to accept this movie as an authentic rendering of the text, and the text as an accurate portrayal of Victorian life (and the gravitas of Masterpiece Theater could convey both impressions) they would believe the position of women to have been even worse than it was.

After applying this modernising treatment to certain sensational elements, especially the exploitation of wives,[10] the film proximates the sensation level of Collins' novel by introducing plot threads that reflect the cultural anxieties of 1997 Britain and America. It is significant to note that the marital rape exemption was not declined in English courts until 1991, and only abolished by statute in 1994. Laura's situation in the film mirrors those of high-profile spousal abuse victims such as Sara Thornton and Kiranjit Ahluwalia, who made headlines in the mid-1990s for killing their attackers after suffering prolonged terror and mistreatment.[11] The filmmakers abandon the plot thread of Sir Percival's illegitimacy, evidently opting not to have to explain the social position of bastards in an era of

primogeniture to modern viewers, and – since they were already engaged in blackening every grey shade of Sir Percival's character – substitute his original secret with another ripped-from-the-headlines crime: child molestation.[12] Though Anne Catherick, his victim, has hidden a will in which Sir Percival's father disinherits him, the audience is never told why he was disinherited and is left to assume it was because of his sexual perversity – *that* being his important secret.

The film brings in another theme, which it is difficult to see the motivation for: a tension between social freedom and genetic destiny. Much is made of the fact that Laura and Marian were innocent before Laura's marriage, because of their isolation in a feminised sphere. When they form relationships, Laura with Sir Percival and Marian (a flirtation only) with Count Fosco, they immediately begin to be imposed upon and taken advantage of. Around this time, Anne Catherick makes another of her random appearances and cautions Marian: "Never, never marry, miss. I travel free, I choose. Can you choose, miss?" The loss of respectability is glamorised as a possible escape from repressive ties. When Marian describes her interview with Anne to Laura, Laura brushes off Marian's mention of Anne's "sadness" with an impassioned: "She is *free!*" Marian asks, "At what cost, Laura?", but Laura responds, "It doesn't matter, Marian! At least she can move on from those who abuse her." In fact, this type of freedom enables one not only to move on, but to fight back, or so the rest of the film implies. After Laura's 'death', Marian is cast into the streets, after being accused of stealing from the Count (his fond "weakness" for Marian does not exist in this adaptation), and this enables her to seek out Walter, similarly disgraced (due to the false assault charge); they set out together to "hurt those who hurt [them]." Marian almost revels in the opportunities presented by her loss of reputation: "They took everything we had. But we are *free*. I want to use that against them."

Yet when she begins to use her disreputable powers, she not only seems to despise herself for it but connects it to her father's act of 'freedom' from social morality: fathering Anne by using Mrs. Catherick, in the movie's phrase, as a "physical resource". Marian has explicit concerns that her behaviour is the result of a perverse inheritance – bad blood. Her one intentional act of retribution is to blackmail the doctor who committed Anne into telling her where the asylum is, by threatening to run out into the waiting room and accuse him of making sexual advances to her. The power

that Marian gains in her loss of reputation is dark, grotesque, and no less a power that must be exercised through men. She is responsible for Sir Percival's death, locking him in the burning church (though a later line indicates she expected him to escape another way). This could indeed be called a 'genetic adaptation'; the gender conflict of the original text has become a case of survival of the fittest. Perhaps Darwin's theories, arriving too late to influence Collins, influenced his adapters.

The ambivalent, uneasy nature of Marian's newfound power makes it relieving but not wholly convincing when, at the end, the three remaining protagonists are safely re-enveloped into the fold of respectability. This is the only adaptation to end as the book does: back at Limmeridge, with Marian holding one of Walter and Laura's children. The point of this moment is not to assure readers that the patriarchal order has been re-established, but that the cycle of violence supposedly begun by Philip Fairlie has at last been broken. Though Marian expresses some fears on this account, the bright, cheerful garden scene seems designed to soothe the unease of an audience familiar with the rhetoric that abused children grow up to be abusers. The Hartright children will have a happy childhood, so perhaps their 'bad blood' will not trouble them or anyone else.

4. 2004: The West End Musical

From child molestation we move on to rape, child murder, and of course, song and dance. Postmodern adaptations, according to Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter, are notable for a "playful and opportunistic treatment of history" (Cartmell and Hunter 2001: 2). Perhaps this explains why the agenda of the most notable adaptation of *The Woman in White* in the first decade of the twenty-first century cannot be labelled as conveniently as the nostalgic 1980s or feminist 1990s versions. Adaptation theorists and neo-Victorianists alike have observed that, in "our postmodern age of cultural recycling," artefacts and practices of other times are frequently appropriated at the adapter's convenience, with more concern for creating a relevant, entertaining product than for enshrining an ultimately unknowable and un-reproducible past (Hutcheon 2006: 3). This conception of the decade's aesthetic is useful in understanding the cultural encounter between Andrew Lloyd Webber and *The Woman in White*.

When Lloyd Webber publicly requested suggestions for a new musical, a British citizen recommended adapting Wilkie Collins' suspense

masterpiece (Lloyd Webber 2005). One can only wonder how that fan of the novel felt about the resulting show, which ran for a year and a half in London, starting in 2004, and for three months on Broadway, starting in 2005. There are obvious reasons why the text would have appealed to Webber; his greatest success, after all, was a classic adaptation of Gaston Leroux' *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1909-1910), containing plenty of sensational elements. The *Woman in White* musical treats the nineteenth century as a vast prop and costume room to rummage in, and one element it borrows is the Victorian fascination with high-tech stage effects. The sets, rather than being built, were projected from the rear onto a screen behind the actors – and the first and last projected images were a spinning zoetrope, a precursor of the "magic lantern" projection device popular in the 1860s (Dale 2005). In staging his own play, "Collins rejected the possibility of using spectacular stage mechanics [… to depict] the death of Sir Percival in a burning church," but almost 150 years later, the 'sensation scene' of Sir Percival's death garnered more attention than any other element of the 2004 production (Sweet 1999: 635). A train seems to rush from behind the actors and out towards the audience, leaving Sir Percival's dead body on the stage and causing gasps of amazement from viewers.

A collaborative effort, the musical had almost as many contributors as *The Woman in White* has narrators: Lloyd Webber composed the music, David Zippel the lyrics, Charlotte Jones the book, and many others helped shape the production (including Michael Ball, who reinvented the role of Fosco after Michael Crawford became ill and left the show).[13] Plot-wise, the beginning and middle roughly follow the pattern of the book, with the exception of a significant change made to the character's relationship dynamics – the addition of a love triangle. Marian Halcombe, whom every other adaptation makes even stronger and more independent than in the source, can here be found singing longing odes to Walter Hartright. Also, by giving Marian sexual desire and banishing Countess Fosco to non-existence, the musical opens up the possibility that Marian may at least consider the Count's offer of an extramarital relationship and rules-free life on the continent "that would be well mis-spent". These alterations can best be explained as a concession to the tropes of the musical theatre genre, which incline toward the melodramatic and broadly comic. The up- and down-turns in the characters' emotions seem designed to provide motives for different kinds of songs – songs of blissful love, disappointment, anger,

regret, fulfilment, etc. It seems that, as previous adaptations cherry-picked history for social issues to repurpose, this version appropriates from Collins' character arcs only those elements best suited to the new medium, filling in the gaps with conventional plot material.

A striking example of this method of forcing the story around the desired emotion arises when Walter and Laura blame Marian for separating them, suggesting that Laura could have broken her engagement and married Walter had Marian only allowed her. Since Marian's motivation for sending Walter away is neither family pride nor a belief in honouring promises but rather jealousy, this change characterises her as petty, while making Laura weak. Marian is later forced to abase herself in order to regain Walter's trust, serenading him with the line: "I am overcome with shame." So, while on the one hand Marian's agency is increased, as she seeks Walter out to make amends, pursues justice for Laura, and 'seduces' Fosco for just long enough to extract the location of Anne's asylum, her development is, on the other hand, both contingent on male response and troublingly incomplete. Although this is the only adaptation to give her, so to speak, a sex life, it is also the adaptation that leaves Marian the most unsatisfied at the end, when Laura and Walter leave the stage after renewing their love and Marian remains to sadly close the scene, lacking both the upright man and the forthright life she desires.

Though the musical scales back on most of Collins' social commentary, however, it is not without its own agenda. The creators seem to have taken notes from the 1997 movie's introduction of up-to-date sensational elements. It would indeed be hard to argue that the scene in the musical where Anne Catherick is rounded up at the boathouse by Sir Percival and his henchman was not inspired by the BBC film, especially since Anne cries out "Curse you, Lady Glyde!" in both. (In the book Laura and Marian have no idea that Anne has been recaptured.) The musical follows the movie in compounding Sir Percival's villainy, though Count Fosco here is played mostly for laughs.[14] The Victorian anxiety about inheritance, diminished in the film, is completely omitted in the musical; Sir Percival's one and only secret is his abuse of Anne. This takes a different form than in the movie, however. When Laura is reclaimed from the asylum, she bounces back with remarkable brio, and the three protagonists journey to Limmeridge, where Mr. Fairlie reveals Anne's parentage. They decide that to defeat Sir Percival they must now force his secret out of him,

and Laura declares: "I have a plan!" Pretending to be Anne's ghost, she tricks him into confessing – though, curiously, much of the exposition in the duet comes from her: "You beat me and you raped me! And then you drowned my child!" Nonetheless, this revelation has one obvious benefit, namely that of surprise: fans of the book will not have seen it coming.

Of all the musical's alterations and movements of proximation, the elevation of Sir Percival to primary villain and the fact that his villainy takes the form of domestic violence (he beats Laura, too, in addition to raping Anne and killing his own child) reveal the most about contemporary cultural anxieties. In the book, Sir Percival loses primacy as the antagonist as soon as he can no longer claim Laura as his wife, because the threat he poses to the women derives wholly from his *legal* position of dominance. Perhaps these insertions of violence suggest aspects in which the source text "does not […] manage to transcend its time and place of creation" (Hutcheon 2006: 154). The fact that this postmodern production takes away all emphasis on legal power demonstrates how the movement Collins began in his own adaptation – of heightening the personal drama and downplaying the women's vulnerability, to reflect a decade of change – completed its trajectory over the next 150 years. Any power that a husband wields over his wife, beyond the physical, is now treated as an empty threat.

5. Conclusion

As all four adaptations prove, however, the family is decidedly not "an institution beyond discussion" (Holcombe 1983: 169), and issues of family and domestic violence continue to resonate strongly in British and American culture, in ever-changing forms. The threat of what could be going on behind closed doors in comfortable domestic circles continues to preoccupy our society, as it troubled the Victorians in 1859. Collins' goal of being 'true to nature' was, in that regard, insightfully carried out. Though the adaptations of his work vary in ideology and in their attitude towards the period they draw from, they all demonstrate – in the choice of *The Woman in White* as a source, and in the uses they make of it – the relatability of the human story at its centre.

The twentieth- and twenty-first century adaptations shed light on "the curious appropriation of the Victorian for disparate political and cultural agendas in the present" (Kaplan 2007: 5). As a text that addresses outdated legal conditions yet retains its cultural capital, *The Woman in*

White becomes an ideal vehicle for current political messages or societal anxieties. In each new version, these anxieties manifest themselves in some new form of violence, one that literally represents a specific crime preoccupying the contemporary society (such as the confinement of women in 1859, or child sexual abuse in 1997) while also standing in for broader concerns about gender and family relationships. Like the Rossetti painting which "always haunted" the Marian of Tim Fywell's 1997 film adaptation, *The Woman in White* seems to haunt popular culture – as a cry for justice which has not lost its power, though the specific conditions it spoke out of have mutated through the passage of time.

Notes

1. Women had to prove their husbands guilty of "aggravated adultery," which involved physical cruelty, incest, bestiality or bigamy. For more on this Act and its ramifications, see Pykett 2005: 42.
2. In looking at the social issues represented through these characters, I have thus far used somewhat reductive terms. Yet while the novel engages with the question of "what it means to be a man or a woman in a particular kind of society at a particular historic moment," the characters are more or less complex individuals, not mere allegorical types (Pykett 2005: 124).
3. As the text of the play is extremely difficult to find in its original form, all citations refer to the page numbering of the online edition.
4. This essay will not attempt to cover film and TV adaptations of *The Woman in White* previous to 1982, none of which are available for public consumption. For more on earlier versions see Malik 2006: 186 and Pykett 2005: 196-200.
5. It is odd to note, however, that Quick had just finished playing the role of the glamorous, attractive Julia Flyte in the celebrated *Brideshead Revisited* miniseries of 1981. *The Woman in White*'s 1982 TV audience, having seen her romanced by Jeremy Irons mere months before, may have wondered why she was not presented as viable competition to the fragile and unfortunately-coiffed Jenny Seagrove here.
6. Despite promising in the introduction that "when [Walter's] experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator; and his task will be continued […] by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge", we are forced to rely on Walter's second-hand account of the finding of Laura in the asylum (Collins 1999: 9). While one can

understand that Collins would not want to spoil the sensation scene of Walter seeing Laura alive at her own grave, it seems a shame Marian's narration of her discovery was not inserted after that point.

7. As John McGowan reminds us, "the Victorians as a group characterized by certain shared features do not exist except insofar as they are produced in that similarity by a discourse that has aims on its audience" (qtd. in Joyce 2002: 4).
8. The ITV network, for instance, had a major success in 1981 with *Brideshead Revisited*.
9. The choice of actress to play Laura may even have contributed to the sense of her fragility, as Justine Waddell was known around this time for playing vulnerable Victorian maidens, within the space of two years acting Laura Fairlie, Tess Durbeyfield, and Molly Gibson.
10. This film depicts the discovery of Laura in the asylum more sensationally than the others, showing a lurid setting where Laura has been transformed into a near-catatonic haunted figure. This is in keeping with the adaptation's emphasis on female fragility. None of the versions treat wrongful confinement in private asylums as a broad social concern. Collin's own critique of this practice has been addressed at great length elsewhere; for instance, see Pykett's chapter on 'Madness and its Treatment' (Pykett 2005: 149-154).
11. Thornton's 1990 life sentence for murder was overturned in 1996, when a re-trail found her guilty of manslaughter; Ahluwalia was released from prison in 1992 after serving three years of a life sentence, her murder conviction having been changed to manslaughter. Fywell's film seems to reflect both the popular fascination with these cases and, potentially, cultural anxiety surrounding this newfound legal sympathy for women acting out against violent husbands.
12. A search in the LexisNexis international newspaper database for articles with the keywords 'child' and 'sexual abuse' published in 1997 resulted in over twenty-five hundred hits; a comparative search for 1982 turned up only sixty-seven hits. It is also notable that cop shows like *Law & Order*, barometers of cultural anxiety, had a striking number of episodes centering on sexual abuse and child endangerment in the late 1990s, with the producers eventually initiating a spin-off series *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* in 1999. These series could be described as the equivalent of sensation fiction for our time.
13. Collins' 1871 production, which he directed, had to replace its original Fosco on account of illness as well. The role was, bizarrely enough, taken over by the actor who had been playing Walter Hartright (see Sweet 1999: 637).
14. This may be because high-camp villains who revel in their perfidy provide a composer and lyricist irresistible opportunities for show-stopping numbers.

(Most Disney villains have one; Fosco has two.) However, this interpretation of the character may also be evidence that, even if we no longer hold the prejudice that corpulent people are invariably jolly and kindhearted – Collins wrote that he made Fosco fat "in opposition to the recognized type of villain" – today's culture still associates bulk with humour (see Sweet 1999:648).

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