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Detecting the Self in the Sensation Fiction of Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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Abstract. In many of their sensation novels, Collins and Braddon used the detection process to explore a sense of disorientation and identity anxiety. The art of detection (one that attempts to control, and ultimately understand, the world and one’s own place in it) is dramatically undermined in these novels by the revelation of self-division and incoherence.

“If time, pains and money can do it, I will lay my hand on the thief who took the Moonstone.”

—I had left London, with those words on my lips. I had penetrated the secret which the quicksand had kept from every other living creature. And, on the unanswerable evidence of the paintstain, I had discovered Myself as the Thief. (Wilkie Collins, Moonstone 359)

In many mid-Victorian sensation novels, and perhaps most famously in the excerpt above, a central character experiences a pivotal moment of (self-) revelation, a sudden point of discovery that over-turns everything they thought they knew about themselves and their world. Franklin Blake’s speechless bewilderment and horror on confronting the evidence of his own name in the paint-stained nightshirt, which seemingly identifies him as the perpetrator of the novel’s crime, is echoed throughout the genre and points to the sensation novel’s preoccupation with the themes of knowledge and identity. These dramatic moments—a kind of inversion of the Joycean epiphany⁠—anticipate the postmodern concept of the fragmented self and, at the same time, epitomize Victorian (self-) doubt and emerging ontological uncertainty in the wake of scientific advances and challenges to traditional religious
absolutes. I want to argue that these revelatory experiences foreground the essential nature of the detection process in many sensation novels by Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, that is, the pursuit of self-knowledge. For these characters, Henry James’s famous description of sensation fiction as the “mysteries which are at our own doors” (594) becomes, quite literally, the mysteries of their own lives and identities.

The aim of this essay is thus to examine the ways in which Collins and Braddon used crime, and in particular the detection process, to explore this sense of disorientation and identity anxiety. I will suggest that the act of detection is one that attempts to control and ultimately understand the world and one’s own place in it but that, often in these novels, this very process of control is dramatically undermined by the revelation of self-division and incoherence. I will also examine how this process is inevitably gender determined, by discussing the differences between male and female detection, and suggest that, broadly speaking, there is a sense in which the male detective works to contain crime and preserve the status quo, whereas the female detective effectively disrupts convention.

The detective novel is often perceived to be a conservative genre, which imposes order on chaos by solving, and thus eradicating, crime and ultimately offering a rational explanation for the world and its supposed mysteries. As Albert Hutter has described it, detective fiction details “the transformation of a fragmented and incomplete set of events into a more ordered and complete understanding” (175). In the crime plots of sensation fiction, particularly in novels by Collins and Braddon, the narrative trajectory is similarly toward the containment or expulsion of crime and therefore the threat of disruption to dominant values. However, there is also an evocation of personal disorientation—a threat to individual, cohesive identity—that, once evoked, fails to be completely eradicated by the conservative arc of the narrative and its conventional resolution. In the work of these authors, the apparent capitulation to convention, to dominant values and conservative ideologies, is often incomplete, inadequate, or ambiguous. The novels I discuss in this essay draw on a sense of ontological uncertainty and anxiety regarding identity, which collide with the detective plot’s typical drive toward knowledge and explanation.

In many detective novels of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the figure of the detective customarily solves crimes that are separate from himself or herself. In novels from the Golden Age of detective fiction in the first part of the twentieth century, detectives such as Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and Roderick Alleyn function primarily as objective observers and, whether amateur or professional, generally remain detached from the invested emotional responses generated by the crime. In contrast, sensation novels during the mid-Victorian period present crime and its solution as an intrinsically personal event. In these novels, as in a great deal of later detective fiction, the detection process is a necessary quest, which
must be undertaken to find truth, meaning, and stability in an increasingly uncertain world. However, these investigations are not merely concerned with finding out the truth about others, but more crucially about oneself and one’s place in the world. Unlike later detectives such as Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, these characters do not habitually solve crimes as either an occupation or a hobby. They are only drawn into the detection process by personal motives, and this is particularly the case for female detectives in sensation fiction. Such a distinction, I would argue, points to the sensation novel’s emphasis on individual self-discovery and the way in which crime and detection is often used as both a catalyst and metaphor for a crisis in psychological and social constructions of identity.

The sudden revelations mentioned at the beginning of this essay are key devices in shaping this narrative of personal discovery. Blake’s relentless detective work, which ultimately reveals the thief to be himself, is paralleled in Braddon’s *Henry Dunbar* (1864), where the heroine’s insistent detection leads to the horror of discovering her father to be the murderer and not the victim as she had assumed. In both novels, characters are confronted with apparent “truths” that overturn everything they thought they knew.

The sense of disorientation and instability that permeates these novels is produced, to a great extent, by the narrative and thematic focus on contradiction and secrecy. Several critics have commented on the way in which secrecy in sensation novels may be seen as emblematic of the middle-class condition. Anthea Trodd, Elaine Showalter, and Elizabeth Rose Gruner have all produced feminist critiques that emphasize the ways in which middle-class women were expected to maintain the secrets of the home. *The Moonstone* (1868), of course, is a central text in this argument, because its entire plot depends on the secrecy of Rachel Verinder and what Collins described in his preface as “the conduct pursued, under a sudden emergency, by a young girl” (28).

As Showalter suggests: “The power of Victorian sensationalism derives [. . .] from its exposure of secrecy as the fundamental and enabling condition of middle-class life” (104). Continuing this theme of class-based concealment, Gruner, with specific reference to *The Moonstone*, comments that Collins’s novel is “motivated by an impulse to secrecy, not to tell, to cover up the family’s complicity in crime” (128). While not denying the validity of both Showalter’s and Gruner’s analyses, I would nevertheless argue that secrecy also functions as an analogue to the crises in personal identity experienced by these characters, as it is often linked to feelings of guilt and shame. Rachel’s resolute silence about her knowledge of the crime has little to do with class loyalty; rather, it is dictated by a very personal sense of intense shame and disgust at her own love for an apparent criminal: “Any other woman living would shrink from the disgrace of touching him! [. . .] Oh, God! I despise myself even more heartily than I despise him!” (Collins, *Moonstone* 403; emphasis in original). Her secrecy is arguably driven more by a conflict in her own individual sense of iden-
tity than by any collective, class-based impulse to protect the interests of the upper-middle-class family unit. Rosanna Spearman’s silence is similarly individualistic, motivated as it is by a self-interested desire, not only to protect the man she misguidedly loves but also to gain power over him. In *Henry Dunbar*, as I shall demonstrate, the heroine’s secrecy over her father’s crime is also motivated by personal desire to protect someone she loves and a correlating desire to conceal her own shame and guilt.

Attitudes toward secrecy in *The Moonstone*, moreover, are never as straightforward as Showalter and Gruner suggest. In a novel characterized by contradictions, it is appropriate that the tensions generated in the narrative are produced in large part by the conflicting drives toward concealment and revelation within the family unit. Thus, while Rachel strives to bury knowledge of the crime, Blake is the chief motivator in attempting to uncover the truth. The contradictions and, by extension, the conflicting loyalties of domesticity are embodied in the figure of Gabriel Betteredge, who continually veers between the positions of one who guards and one who exposes secrets. Betteredge’s determination to protect the interests of the family to whom he is devoted is undermined by his frequent bursts of “detective fever” (160) and further complicated by his confusion as to whether concealment or revelation of the truth will best serve that family.

The indistinct nature of boundaries in *The Moonstone* (between the self and the other, the private and the public, appearance and reality, as well as boundaries relating to class, race, and gender) means that the characters move between opposing roles, creating uncertainty for the reader and a shifting, unstable sense of identity for themselves. Thus, Blake is at once detective and perpetrator of the crime; Rachel is both victim and chief suspect. In the same way, the three Hindus, depending on personal viewpoint, are either victims of the true crime and noble avengers, or ruthless, amoral criminals. The text allows for either interpretation and refuses to privilege one above another: “I expressed my opinion, upon this, that they were a set of murdering thieves. Mr. Murthwaite expressed his opinion that they were a wonderful people. Mr. Franklin, expressing no opinion at all, brought us back to the matter in hand” (109).

Betteredge repeatedly leaps to incorrect conclusions through his unreasoning trust in the Verinder family (and implicitly, his reliance on a hierarchical
social order) and his consequent distrust of anyone or anything outside his personal experience. Thus, when Blake advances a theory that implicates the Hindus in the theft of the moonstone, Betteredge responds predictably: “This certainly seemed to be the only rational explanation” (117). It is “rational” to the old servant because it locates crime elsewhere, onto the other; his reasoning relies on conventional assumptions about class and race. Later, Sergeant Cuff illustrates similar assumptions about gender through his suspicions of Rachel and Rosanna, which also fail to explain the true nature of the crime. By undermining Victorian confidence in a clear binary distinction between self and other, Collins’s novel evokes a sense of vulnerability, where accepted beliefs and values give way to a disturbing plurality of perspectives. What shakes Blake’s sense of his own cohesive identity is the catastrophic discovery that he, seemingly, is the other. Throughout the novel, Blake is persistently linked with otherness: He is feminized through his lack of a proper “masculine” role; he is linked with non-Englishness because of his European education. With the discovery of his part in the theft, Blake seems to be stigmatized as the ultimate other in Victorian society—the criminal.

In this way, the detection process in *The Moonstone* embodies the sense of ontological doubt and crisis of traditional absolutes that was emerging during the mid-nineteenth century. Blake’s confrontation with his own plurality and otherness thematizes, on a personal level, a wider cultural uncertainty that Collins emphasizes through a challenge to rationality. Thus, what is most disturbing about the “evidence” of the paint stain is that it seems “unanswerable,” as does Rachel’s later revelation that she witnessed the crime. Rachel is led into reading the evidence falsely through an acceptance of empirical evidence, that of her own senses. Belief in appearances, in the “reality” of what one actually sees, is not necessarily synonymous with the truth. Appearance and reality in Collins’s work rarely correspond.

The lack of congruity between semblance and actuality, which exists to varying degrees in most of the characters and incidents in *The Moonstone*, reaches its apotheosis in the figure of Ezra Jennings. In his physical appearance alone, the doctor’s assistant embodies contradiction:

Judging him by his figure and his movements, he was still young. Judging him by his face, and comparing him with Betteredge, he looked the elder of the two. [. . .] Add to this a quantity of thick closely-curling hair, which by some freak of Nature, had lost its colour in the most startlingly partial and capricious manner. Over the top of his head it was still of the deep black which was its natural colour. Round the sides of his head—without the slightest gradation of grey to break the force of the extraordinary contrast—it had turned completely white. (371)

The contradictions personified by Jennings go beyond appearance to include gender: “Physiology says [. . .] that some men are born with female constitutions—and I am one of them!” (422). Perhaps because of these contradictions, Jennings is the most successful of the various amateur detectives in *The
Moonstone. His ability to solve the mystery, which leaves Blake, Bruff, Cuff, and Betteredge baffled, is linked to his capacity to bridge the opposing ideologies of intuition and reason, represented respectively by his emotional “female constitution” and his “male” position as a scientist. The doctor’s assistant, with his ambiguous positioning between male and female, between age and youth, between black and white, ultimately symbolizes balance, unlike Blake, whose psychological multiplicity is represented in terms of chaotic disjunction: “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” (76–77). Indeed, the fragmented nature of Blake’s identity remains, as Jenny Bourne Taylor has pointed out, “an unresolved question: what is Blake’s ‘self?’” (177).

At the beginning of his own narrative, Blake rejects Betteredge’s reading of his character as one “in a state of perpetual contradiction”: “The picture presented of me [. . .] is (as I think) a little over-drawn. He has [. . .] persuaded himself that he actually saw those French, German, and Italian sides to my character” (340). After his detection leads to the startling revelation that he is responsible for taking the diamond, Blake’s perception of his own cohesive identity is thrown into question, and his act of assembling the various testimonies, which compose the narratives of The Moonstone, can be seen as an attempt to impose some kind of unity and coherence on events, and by extension, upon his own sense of self. However, Blake’s narrative is embedded within multiple competing narratives, and the reader, finally, has no way of knowing with any certainty which narrative (if any) represents Blake’s true self.

Braddon’s Henry Dunbar, like The Moonstone, hinges on a case of mistaken identity regarding the perpetrator of the novel’s crime, which leads to a crisis in identity for the detective figure, Margaret Wilmot. As with other female detectives of sensation fiction, Margaret embarks on her investigation to uncover a personal history; she is motivated to solve a mystery that deeply affects her own life. This restriction of the female detective to the personal or private realm provides an interesting contrast to her contemporary male counterpart. The Victorian professional male detective, although increasingly also involved with the private sphere, is nevertheless an official figure with public standing. Collins’s Sergeant Cuff and Dickens’s Inspector Bucket, although they penetrate the secrets of the domestic space, remain distanced from the problems they investigate. The male “amateur,” who, like the female detective, is concerned with the private sphere of the home, tends to “police” the family; for example, Robert Audley in Lady Audley’s Secret (1862), whose detective work is concerned with the containment of the deviant female.

The male detective’s aim is not only to discover and punish the crimes that erupt from the female energies of such women as Lady Audley, or Lydia Gwilt in Collins’s Armadale, but also to contain them. Whereas male detectives strive to maintain the status quo of middle-class family life and the conservative
gender roles it reinforces, the female detective tends to disturb tradition. Often, she is demanding change and insisting on her equal right to knowledge and participation. This tendency to disrupt convention is principally due to the inherent contradiction of her position. As Chris Willis has suggested: “The Victorian detective-heroine presents an anomaly: as a detective she works to uphold the existing social framework, but as an assertive woman she threatens it. Whether amateur or professional, she steps out of the home to invade the strictly male domain of the law” (1).

Through the narrative of female detection, therefore, ambiguities are exposed that demonstrate the conflicting expectations of appropriate feminine behavior. Margaret’s attempts to save her father (a murderer) from police arrest typify the female predicament of divided duty. Trodd states of the episode that it “exposed […] the rival claims to authority of the domestic and the public spheres” (42), and, put another way, it could also be said to illustrate the conflict between the law of society and the law of the father. The subversive implications of such a conflict lie in the suggestion that the two are not always analogous—a proposition that runs counter to the dominant notion of the Victorian family as a microcosm of the wider society. As Steven Mintz points out, “it is the father who stands as the symbol of public and external conceptions of authority and who serves as the chief authority figure within the home” (61). Hence, the paradox that Braddon constructs is one whereby the authoritative figure of the father transgresses the laws of which he is the representative and upholder. The ensuing narrative highlights how this paradox renders problematic the heroine’s sense of a cohesive identity, in terms of her negotiation of prescriptions of appropriate femininity and through her divided sense of duty.

Margaret’s position in the detection process is interesting, for it is shaped both by her gender and by her relationship to the murderer. Initially, Margaret’s role is imbued with a contradiction that problematizes perceptions of appropriate female behavior. That is, her independent action to personally prove the guilt of her father’s murderer leads Margaret outside of the sanctioned feminine role, yet at the same time, this “transgressive” behavior is motivated by entirely proper feminine traits, duty and love for the father. Even when Wilmot’s guilt becomes apparent, Margaret’s suitor, Clement Austin, can express horror at the crime while simultaneously endorsing the
“womanly” qualities he recognizes in his fiancée’s actions, even when she deliberately misleads a police officer: “I knew [...] that, in all the blackness of his guilt, Margaret Wilmot would cling to her father as truly, as tenderly as she had clung to him in those early days [...]” (356, emphasis added).

Margaret’s role as a detective is also rendered more complex by her misconception of the true nature of the crime. While she believes her father to be the victim, Margaret is content to enlist the help of Austin and, to some extent, allow him to take charge of their amateur investigation. When she discovers the truth, however, Margaret is forced to rely entirely on her own resources and, in effect, changes sides, becoming the “antidetective,” frantically concealing the clues and deceiving Austin and Carter, her erstwhile allies.

Just as Blake’s discovery of his own name in the paint-stained nightshirt confronts him with a “self” he cannot recognize, Margaret’s encounter with her “dead” father evokes a temporary paralysis of selfhood, followed by a forced reconstruction of her personal identity. Braddon emphasizes this paralysis at the textual level by an abrupt dislocation of the narrative, which reflects the dislocation of Margaret’s identity:

“Mr. Dunbar!” cried Margaret, in a clear, resolute voice; “awake! it is I, Margaret Wilmot, the daughter of the man who was murdered in the grove near Winchester!”

The man lifted his head, and looked at her. Even the fire seemed roused by the sound of her voice! for a little jet of vivid light leapt up out of the smouldering logs, and lighted the scared face of the banker. (240)

The ensuing encounter between father and daughter is not described. At this point of imminent discovery, the narrative is suspended and the viewpoint shifts abruptly to Austin, waiting outside the house for his fiancée. As in The Moonstone, the thematic emphasis on secrecy and misapprehension provokes a crisis in the main characters’ understanding of their own and each others’ identities. Thus, when Margaret refuses to confide her discovery to Austin, he is unable to understand her sudden transformation from a gentle, affectionate girl to the unstable, transgressive woman she becomes with the knowledge of Wilmot’s guilt.

The detection process has destabilized Margaret, in terms of her sense of her own identity and in her social relations to others. Such a destabilization would seem to dramatically highlight the incompatibility of the detective role with conventionally constructed femininity: for whereas the detective figure is expected to display cool rationalism and detached intellect, at the climax of Margaret’s investigation, she gives way to “feminine” frailty and emotionality. Lucy Sussex suggests that this type of debilitation is characteristic of “early Victorian female detectives of the heroine ilk (whose sleuthing success is usually followed by physical or mental breakdowns, from which they emerge suitably chastised for their ‘unwomanliness’ and ready to marry the hero)” (61). Arguably, these displays of feminine weakness following an incursion
into the male realm operate to stabilize the disordered gender roles that the female detective has generated. By submitting to emotional collapse at this crucial moment, the female detective protects her “womanly” credentials, which thus allows her to retain the position of heroine. Braddon’s text adopts similar strategies but resists the complete retreat into dominant stereotypes that Sussex implies. Although Margaret’s successful detective work has confronted her with a debilitating knowledge about her father (and thus, herself), Braddon undercuts Margaret’s “weakness” by inflecting it with connotations of strength of mind and purpose. The doctor, brought in by Austin to treat Margaret, comments:

“If she were an ordinary person, she would cry, and the relief of tears would have a most advantageous effect upon her mind. Our patient is by no means an ordinary person. She has a very strong will.” “Margaret has a strong will!” exclaimed Clement, with a look of surprise; “why, she is gentleness itself.” “Very likely; but she has a will of iron, nevertheless.” (250)

Not only does Margaret reject such signs of femininity as crying or swooning but also refuses to confide in her fiancé or allow him to provide comfort or aid. On finding Margaret after her inexplicable flight from the supposed Henry Dunbar’s house, Austin is “startled by the blank whiteness of her face, the fixed stare of her dilated eyes” (245); “his gaze was fascinated by the girl’s awful pallor, and the strange expression of her eyes,” which later he describes as being “still fixed in the same deathlike stare” (245–46). The images of “whiteness,” “pallor,” and the “deathlike stare” arguably represent a figurative death, the demise, or at least suspension, of Margaret’s identity as a devoted, loving daughter. Moreover, like Laura Fairlie in Collins’s *The Woman in White*, Margaret is significantly linked with whiteness and blankness, indicative not only of an erasure of identity but more generally, the absence of an independent social identity for the Victorian woman. It is thus appropriate that, whereas Blake suffers a threat to his sense of self in a direct manner, Margaret’s crisis is evoked through the detection of her father’s true and assumed identities. Because Victorian female identity was defined and shaped by women’s relationships to men (as daughters, sisters, wives), Margaret’s sense of herself is dependent on the fixed, stable identity of her father. However, Margaret’s act of detection reveals that Joseph Wilmot no longer “exists”: He is neither dead (as officially believed) nor really “alive” in the sense of existing in the world under his own name and identity. By stealing an identity that is not his, Wilmot has, in effect, rendered his daughter “nameless,” particularly as Margaret also discovers that the name she has borne all her life—Wentworth—is actually an assumed one. The detective quest, in this respect, becomes a search for origins and self-knowledge.

Margaret’s “blankness,” then, is not only suggestive of her position as a woman in Victorian society, that is, as a cipher; she is also “blank” because she can no longer properly be defined in relation to men. Not only has she lost her father but the guilty knowledge of his crime separates her from her fiancé.
as well. Such a position naturally causes Margaret distress and confusion, but in one sense, her “blankness” may be read as liberating, as an opportunity to “write” her own story. As Heidi Johnson has suggested, “the ‘sensational’ daughter of the Victorian detective plot proffers a paradigm for the transformation […] into selfhood” (256). Whereas Margaret begins the novel defined as a daughter and ends it defined as a wife, during the period of her “blankness” and her adoption of the role of detective, Margaret is autonomous.

Throughout the novel, Margaret moves through a series of names (Wentworth, Wilmot, Betty the housemaid, Wilson, Austin), suggesting the unstable and fluid nature of identity. The act of detection aims to contain this fluidity yet, at the same time, is the catalyst for exposing it. That is, by embarking on her detective quest, the “wholeness” of Margaret’s identity is gradually exposed as an illusion with each successive discovery she makes. In the early parts, she is Margaret Wentworth, devoted daughter of James Wentworth, the assumed name under which Wilmot is living. The events surrounding the supposed murder of her father induce Margaret to investigate her family’s past and lead to the discovery of his (and thus, her) true name, which she finds written on her father’s old transportation documents. Accordingly, the revelation of Wilmot’s true identity consists of his daughter learning, simultaneously, both his name and his criminal nature. The female detective’s inherent tendency to disruption thus leads directly to an exposure of the fallibility of the father. At the end of the novel, after Wilmot’s death, Margaret has become Mrs. Austin and “a new existence has begun for her as wife and mother” (371). The conventional ending, with Margaret safely returned to a “proper” feminine role, may be read as an attempt to reinscribe appropriate gender norms following the temporary disruption caused by Wilmot’s crime and Margaret’s foray into the field of amateur detection. However, just as The Moonstone fails to offer the reader a definitive version of Blake’s “self,” preferring to leave him embedded within multiple narratives, Margaret is similarly elusive in the final pages of Henry Dunbar. “Covered” by Clement Austin’s name and his narration, Margaret recedes from our view, her voice and independent identity lost to us.

Although Margaret “performs” different identities in Henry Dunbar, her definitive identity is as a daughter, in a novel that is principally concerned with the effects of a father’s crime on daughters. Johnson, with reference to mid- and late-Victorian novels of crime and detection, has noted the “frequently recapitulated scenario of the daughter who detects to discover the secret of her father’s death or, conversely, whose detection reveals his culpability” (256). Such plots, Johnson suggests, offer an archetype for the negotiation of female desire and autonomy: “What the female sleuth seeks is the secret of the father’s power, as her act of detection demystifies his primacy and allows her to reinaugurate through her own agency a process of psychosexual growth arrested by her protracted attachment to the father” (256). Although the nominal victim in Henry Dunbar is the rich banker, Braddon’s
narrative is influenced most directly by the daughters of the two men, whose positions throughout the plot are interchanged in a similar manner to that of their fathers. Margaret suffers grief for the loss of a father, unaware that he is, in fact, alive. Laura Dunbar, by contrast, has truly lost a father but believes that he has been newly restored to her.

Both Margaret and Laura adhere closely to contemporary ideals of femininity and embody the role of the self-sacrificing, devoted daughter. Laura desires to be “a loving companion, a ministering angel” (138), while Margaret believes her father “to be the noblest and most gifted of men,” for whom “it was no grief to her to toil” (14). Interestingly, it is this very embodiment of the ideal that leads to Margaret embarking on the role of detective, through which gender norms are threatened. Only with Wilmot’s death at the end of the novel can conventional gender relations be re-established, through Margaret’s assimilation as “wife and mother” (371). Appropriately, this resolution is only made possible by Austin’s reclamation of the role of detective. Unable to find Margaret, who has exiled herself with her criminal father, Austin employs the methods of the sleuth, tracking her down through a stationer’s mark: “Could it be really possible that in this sheet of paper I had found a clue which would help me to trace my lost love?” (362). That the final piece of detective work is carried out by the male hero, motivated by a desire to locate and marry the erstwhile female detective, would seem to signify the end of Margaret’s autonomy and the reinstatement of conservative gender values.

In both The Moonstone and Henry Dunbar, the resolutions are ostensibly conventional in that crime is eradicated, evil is punished, and good is rewarded. Such a trajectory is common to many sensation novels, perhaps most familiarly in Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret, where the removal of the trespassing “other”—in this case, the transgressive woman—restores the apparent domestic harmony and “leaves the good people all happy and at peace” (447). However, this acquiescence to dominant values is often rendered ambiguous, either by the intimation of parody, or simply by the failure of the conventional ending to wholly eradicate the sense of psychological crisis and anomalousness previously generated. Such ambiguity in the apparently conservative closure is arguably an inevitable generic feature of the detective plot, as Warren Chernaik suggests: “[T]here is always a residue of unease at the end of most novels of crime and detection. [. . .] Guilt can never be entirely dissipated, the criminal Other never cordoned off, the potential for the sudden eruption of that which is most feared brought wholly under control” (106–07). Indeed, Collins seems to acknowledge this in The Moonstone, with a postscript that constitutes an avoidance of resolution and a recognition of the text’s openness: “So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time” (526). As Peter Thoms comments of this conclusion, “[r]ather than ‘ending’ the work, those final interrogative words postpone closure” (159).
Such instances point to a peculiarly modern concept of the self and a growing recognition of the inadequacy of traditional paradigms. As Ronald R. Thomas has suggested: “Because it stakes out and enforces the limits of individual autonomy [...] Victorian detective fiction is at once critical of and collaborative with the nineteenth-century novel’s fundamental achievements, providing as it does a potent set of discourses and techniques for identifying the individual in the modern world” (170). In the novels examined here, detection leads to the protagonists’ confrontation with a disturbing plurality of self, which encodes a threat to identity for both the male and female detective. Nevertheless, this threat is modified by the gender of the sleuth because of a difference in the emphasis of the detection. For the male it is often linked with a maturation process and socialization into an appropriate masculine role. Many critics, for example, have read the detective quests of Blake and Audley as a process whereby they can be properly “masculinized.” Conversely, Victorian female detectives usually begin from a point of properly socialized femininity, but step out of this approved role to assume one that threatens dominant definitions of “innate” gender traits. These early female detectives offer, as Sally Munt has argued, “a strategy of disruption adjunctive to and moderating of the genre’s conventional masculinity” (5). For the amateur detectives of sensation fiction, whether male or female, the detection process is an inherently personal journey and one that ultimately generates more questions than answers.

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Keywords: Braddon, Mary Elizabeth; Collins, Wilkie; detection and identity; sensation fiction

NOTES

1. Joyce’s specific use of the term epiphany, as a sudden, dramatic, and startling moment of revelation, is first outlined in Stephen Hero: “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (216). In sensation fiction, I argue, characters experience a similarly sudden revelation, but in these cases, the moment is one of horror rather than elation, of mental paralysis rather than enlightenment.

2. There are, of course, exceptions to this trend. An obvious example would be Dorothy L. Sayers’s detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. Not only does Wimsey investigate the crimes in Strong Poison and Gaudy Night chiefly through personal attachment to Harriet Vane but also habitually succumbs to nervous exhaustion akin to mental breakdown after most of his cases.

3. I refer here to Jennings’s piebald hair but, as some critics have pointed out, the contrasts of black and white in the description of Jennings’s appearance, together with his “gypsy complexion,” also imply racial miscegenation, which Tamar Heller ties in with the critique of imperialism in The Moonstone.

4. The truth of the mystery is that Joseph Wilmot has murdered the rich banker, Henry Dunbar, who wronged him twenty years previously. Wilmot then steals his
identity and embarks on a daring imposture. Wilmot’s daughter, Margaret, initially believes her father to have been murdered by Dunbar and embarks on a detective quest to bring him to justice, ignorant of the fact that the man she is pursuing is really her own father.

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