

Sensation fiction, gender and identity

The heroine of Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875), Valeria Macallan, is in many ways a typical sensation heroine. She is resilient, independent and determined to get what she wants. What she wants, however, is not to marry rich, hide her bigamous past or inherit a fortune that is rightfully hers, but to prove her husband's innocence. I begin this chapter with an example that emphasises women's complex representation in sensation fiction, and the way that male characters were often secondary to the action of the story, reduced to observing 'high-strung women, full of passion, purpose, and movement'.¹ Valeria is married only a short time before she discovers that her husband was once on trial for the murder of his first wife and that he received the ambiguous verdict 'Not Proven'. Valeria's excessive, selfless devotion to her husband seems to make her the epitome of the good Victorian wife; however, her fidelity is paired with an independent streak, as she determines to prove her husband's innocence despite his protests. When he insists, 'A good wife should know better than to pry into affairs of her husband's', she inwardly retorts, '[h]e was treating me like a child'.² Valeria ignores her husband's wishes and stubbornly gathers evidence; in one instance, she goes so far as to permit a hotel chambermaid to improve her appearance so that she can draw information from her husband's friend and well-known flirt, Major Fitz-David. Valeria records:

[The chambermaid] came back with a box of paints and powders; and I said nothing to check her. I saw, in the glass, my skin take a false fairness, my cheeks a false colour, my eyes a false brightness – and I never shrank from it. No! I let the odious deceit go on; I even admired the extraordinary delicacy and dexterity with which it was all done. (57)

The example of Valeria Macallan gestures to a number of themes characteristic of sensation fiction: false appearances, wilful female characters and cautious men. This chapter will explore these themes, with attention to notions of identity and performance.

After Valeria is transformed, she remarks: 'I seemed in some strange way to have lost my ordinary identity – to have stepped out of my own character' (58). In sensation novels, the ability to 'step out of one's character' is often figured as a particularly feminine act. That is, sensation fiction frequently suggests that women's identities are more fragmented than those of their male counterparts, and that women are more skilled in the art of disguise and performance. Embodying a false identity can reveal possibilities of empowerment for female characters. However, sensation fiction also shows how false female identities are often the result of a desperate need for concealment, a need that lays bare women's precarious social position. The supposed malleability of female identity also affected views of sensational reading. For instance, it was common for Victorian reviewers to conflate sensation heroines with their authors, much to the disadvantage of female novelists. Further, conservative critics often worried that women readers would be unable to separate their own desires from those of sensation heroines: a concern that implied not only a naïve readership but also the uncanny tendency of women to somehow merge with other women, whether fictional or real. This chapter discusses such concerns, as raised by conservative commentators, and considers how sensation authors responded to debates about female (over)identification and reading practices in their novels.

While sensation fiction might be defined, in part, by its aggressive female characters, in contrast, many male characters seem less lively and self-aware. One reviewer complained in 1866 that 'the model husband of modern fiction' was '[a]t best a good-looking, good-tempered, wealthy dolt, who will not even raise a finger to interfere with his wife's crimes if she be criminally disposed'. This, he complained, was 'as unwholesome a type of manhood as could possibly be found towards which to direct the channel of feminine admiration'.³ There exist many characters that fit such a description of the stagnant, easily duped husband: perhaps the best example is Sir Michael Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), who marries a very pretty bigamist. Yet in addition to this model, sensation fiction frequently sees its young male characters, like Walter Hartright from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60) and Robert Audley from *Lady Audley's Secret*, spring into action. In other words, young male figures in these novels must, in the course of the narrative, step up and become men. This narrative of masculine development sees these characters embodying the proper identity of the professional, driven, middle-class gentleman, but it also places them in a position of surveillance that itself disrupts the notion of the home as the man's place of safety.

Female imposture and performance

Sensation fiction is filled with impostors who don false names, appearances and social positions. Jonathan Loesberg, who has identified a persistent concern with identity and its loss in sensation fiction, claims that the sensation novel locates anxieties about identity via its legal and class aspects rather than any psychological aspect.⁴ While class identity may indeed motivate the majority of sensation plots, most novels interrogate a variety of identity categories. Valeria Macallan's notion that a simple change in appearance makes her lose her 'ordinary identity' is striking. It is often, in fact, the disjunction between outward appearance and inward psychology that the sensation novel emphasises as most troubling. The slippage between appearance and reality became such a common trope that in 1863 Henry Mansel claimed that he was 'thrilled with horror' to think that the 'man who shook our hand with a hearty English grasp half an hour ago – the woman whose beauty and grace were the charm of last night . . . how exciting to think that under these pleasing outsides may be concealed some demon in human shape, a Count Fosco or a Lady Audley!'⁵ In contrast, Margaret Oliphant, an author critical of the sensation genre, questioned the assumption that 'a stratum of secret vice underlies the outward seeming of society'. Her neighbours, she writes, 'are very good sort of people, and we believe unfeignedly that our neighbour's neighbours resemble our own'.⁶ Yet it was the very difficulty of knowing one's neighbours that the sensation novel relied upon and exploited. Further, the revelation that a 'demon in human shape' might lie behind a respectable disguise had very different implications for men and women. The portrayal of female imposture was seemingly more threatening as it exposed the ideal of the 'good Victorian wife' as a façade and women's hidden desires as very real.

The sensation novel frequently details how women's familiarity with elaborate clothing and cosmetics make them naturally gifted in the act of imposture. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lucy Audley tells her maid, Phoebe, 'you *are* like me . . . Why, with a bottle of hair-dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I, any day.'⁷ In another servant-mistress switch, Magdalen Vanstone from Collins's *No Name* (1862) asks her maid to dress up like a lady, while she poses as a servant; she reassures her maid that a lady is simply 'a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance'.⁸ And Valeria's transformation in *The Law and the Lady*, despite the overtones of prostitution inherent in her 'false colour' and 'false brightness', allows her to charm Major Fitz-David and to uncover her first important piece of evidence. While Lucy Audley's masquerade as the perfect Victorian wife is threatening,

Valeria's is admittedly less so, and she reveals the way in which Victorian women constantly falsified their appearances, whether for sensational purposes or for everyday interactions. While the scene I began this chapter by quoting registers the ambiguity of Valeria's transformation – the chambermaid who helps her is like a witch, whose 'wicked forefinger' points to the glass when she is finished – Valeria comes to value cosmetic improvements throughout the novel. As the chambermaid claims, 'Ah, what a thing pearl powder is, when one knows how to use it!' (57).

Although the benefits of cosmetic enhancements are somewhat innocuous in Valeria's case, this is only one example of *The Law and the Lady's* larger engagement with female masquerade. The novel exposes the manner in which Victorian femininity itself is a performance. Sara Macallan, Eustace's first wife, died of arsenic poisoning. During the trial, the prosecution argues that Eustace gave Sara the poison in her tea, while the defence – correctly – argues that Sara overdosed on arsenic herself. Arsenic was sometimes used in the Victorian period to improve women's skin and Sara is known to have had 'defects in her complexion' (169). However, the very secrecy of women's enhancements makes it difficult to prove the defence's case, as even Eustace is unable to attest to Sara's use of the poison. The entire trial thus turns on women's falseness:

Does my learned friend actually suppose, that women are in the habit of mentioning the secret artifices and applications by which they improve their personal appearance? Is it in his experience of the sex, that a woman who is eagerly bent on making herself attractive to a man, would tell that man, or tell anybody else who might communicate with him, that the charm by which she hoped to win his heart – say the charm of a pretty complexion – had been artificially acquired by the use of a deadly poison? The bare idea of such a thing is absurd ... From first to last, poor creature, she kept her secret; just as she would have kept her secret, if she had worn false hair, or if she had been indebted to the dentist for her teeth. And there you see her husband, in peril of his life, because a woman acted *like* a woman. (180–1)

The defence thus argues that falseness and secrecy are embedded in normative female behaviour. Sensation novelists relied upon cultural anxieties surrounding the permeability of class distinctions and women's changing social roles in order to create threatening examples of false, upwardly mobile impostors like Lucy Audley and Lydia Gwilt from Collins's *Armada* (1866); nonetheless, many novels also expose, with varying degrees of sympathy, the masquerade that women are encouraged to embrace each day.

This more nuanced notion of masquerade exposes the need for women to constantly perform their identities, often under strained circumstances. For

instance, in Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), the cold Olivia Arundel, a latter-day Edith Dombey, marries the dull John Marchmont in order to escape her monotonous life as a rector's daughter. 'O my God!' she exclaims early in the novel, 'is the lot of other women never to be mine? Am I never to be loved and admired; never to be sought and chosen? Is my life to be all of one dull, grey, colourless monotony [?].'⁹ Olivia never reveals her desires publicly; to those around her, she appears 'grave, reserved, dignified' (83). Braddon emphasises that Olivia, despite her unhappiness with her social limitations, is 'patiently employed in the strict performance of her duty' (83). It is a performance that she insists in enacting but it is one that is exhausting and debilitating. After her husband's early death, Olivia remains under male control. She becomes the puppet of Paul Marchmont, a man whose own acts of imposture are characterised by the narrator as 'diabolical artifice' (291). Under Paul's influence, and encouraged by her self-inflicted performance of duty, Olivia becomes 'a human automaton' who is left 'malleable to his skilful hands' (397, 405). Though Braddon offers some sympathy for this character, the narrative consistently presents authenticity and candidness as desirable qualities for both men and women, and so Olivia's behaviour, despite her vulnerability, emerges as anti-social. The example of Olivia reveals that the performance of femininity has its limitations. While Valeria's performance is exciting and allows her to influence others, Olivia's performance necessitates a painful suppression of feelings and desires.

Despite her resistance to sensational narratives, Margaret Oliphant wrote a sensation novel, *Salem Chapel* (1863), which details a similarly pained performance of femininity. Rachel Hilyard (actually Rachel Mildmay) lives in hiding from her abusive husband and under an assumed name. Midway through the novel, she shoots, and nearly murders, her husband. When describing her mysterious past to her minister, Arthur Vincent, Rachel gestures to the way in which she has reinvented herself: 'Some people die two or three times in a lifetime, Mr. Vincent. There is a real transmigration of souls, of bodies, or both if you please. This is my third life I am going through at present.'¹⁰ Rachel does not don a dramatic disguise for her 'third life', but simply performs the part of the reserved, quiet and respectable woman. She is largely secluded in her home and her disguise, if it may be called that, is invisibility. In crafting Rachel, Oliphant seems to have drawn on Collins's depiction of the spectre-like Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White*, who is 'a thin, dark, eager shadow'.¹¹ While Rachel's existence makes Vincent feel 'how insignificant are the circumstances of life', Rachel's sister-in-law, Lady Western, responds, 'I think, when I see her, oh, how important [circumstances] are! and that I'd rather die than live so' (64). Rachel thus warns Lady Western of the precariousness of women's circumstances and she stands as a reminder of women's social vulnerability.

This, too, is a theme prevalent in Collins's *The Woman in White*. In a highly sensational example of 'the transmigration of souls, of bodies', Laura Glyde's money-hungry husband switches her with the deceased Anne Catherick, a woman who looks suspiciously like Laura. In an argument that would also be applicable for Olivia or Rachel, Tamar Heller argues that Anne 'embodies the social invisibility that renders women blank pages to be inscribed by men'.¹² Yet many sensation heroines inscribe these 'blank pages' themselves. The sensation novel thus details how acts of imposture can be empowering performances of self-creation on the one hand, and acts of violent erasure on the other. These performances suggest a complex and sometimes contradictory understanding of what it means to enact womanhood.

Sensational reading and overidentification

Sensation fiction's transgressive female characters not only registered contemporary anxieties about what it meant to be a woman, they also prompted debates about the relationship between fictional characters and real women. Frequently, conservative reviewers worried about how naïve female readers would respond to the world around them after reading sensation fiction. One reviewer insisted that husbands and fathers should 'scrutinize the parcel that arrives from Mudie's' since 'young ladies are led to contrast the actual with the ideal we see worked out in popular romance'.¹³ Francis Paget, in the afterword to his satirical sensation novel, *Lucretia* (1868), expressed unease about the 'kind of follies, scrapes, and difficulties' into which a girl might fall 'who should take the sensational novel as her guide in the common-place events of everyday life'.¹⁴ These writers express concerns that young women reading sensation fiction would become dissatisfied with the commonplace world around them and that they would be unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. The sensation novel thus risked carrying its female readers away: they not only read of worlds curiously like their own, they somehow inhabited these texts. Implied in such anxieties about sensational reading was the notion that women readers would in fact *become* the characters they read about.

The discourse surrounding the sensation novel thus took for granted an uncanny ability for women to merge with other women. Margaret Oliphant remarked that in these novels an 'eagerness of physical sensation ... is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them ... as the portrait of their own state of mind'.¹⁵ What Oliphant describes is more than the experience of feeling sympathy for a character; instead, the notion that a woman could locate her 'own state of mind' in the mind of the sensation heroine, that she could read of others' experiences as though they

were her own, suggests a process of overidentification. Overidentification and overinvolvement are terms used by film theorists to describe women's traditional relationship to film in Western culture, which is marked by passivity and proximity, rather than distance. The female viewer, more than the male, was thought to give in to the fascinations of the cinematic image, to view the cinematic spectacle with a pleasure that was somehow more intense. As Mary Ann Doane describes, 'there is a certain naiveté attached to women in relation to systems of signification – a tendency to deny the processes of representation, to collapse the opposition between the sign (the image) and the real'.¹⁶ This process is comparable to how women supposedly related to sensation fiction; yet with both twentieth-century cinema and the Victorian sensation novel, the notion of female naiveté and overidentification was not taken for granted by all cultural commentators. In fact, the ability for women to merge with other women was detailed, and problematised, in sensation novels themselves.

The earliest sensation novels exploited this trope: again, *Lady Audley's Secret* relies on the physical similarities between Lucy Audley and her maid, and in *The Woman in White*, Laura Glyde looks so much like Anne Catherick that Sir Percival and Count Fosco can successfully place her in an asylum as Anne. Laura, wearing Anne's clothing and marked with Anne's name, almost becomes Anne. The nurse in the asylum tells her, 'Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don't worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde. She's dead and buried' (436). Anne and Laura seem to meld into a single body: Walter finds that the 'outward changes wrought by the suffering and the terror of the past had fearfully, almost hopelessly, strengthened the fatal resemblance between Anne Catherick and [Laura]' (442). While Laura's experience in the asylum is terrifying, Anne's falsified death is an even more violent act undertaken by the novel's male characters. Anne is simply a placeholder for Laura's body and identity as her name is covered by Laura's even in the moment of her death. Though the novel devotes more attention to the recovery of Laura's identity, it also reveals how the social and psychological identities of these two women are both so fragile that they merge strangely into one being. This process of overidentification is not marked as liberating but as violent and frightening.

Many novels explicitly comment on women's reading practices and the process of identification. Perhaps the most overt engagement with women's sensational reading is Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), a rewriting of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). The novel was an attempt by Braddon to move away from popular sensational fare to something more literary; yet, in doing so, she critiques the sensation novel and sensational reading extensively and the novel is, perhaps ironically, her most

sustained commentary on the genre and its effects on women readers. At the centre of the novel is Isabel Gilbert, the novel-hungry, daydreaming heroine who regrettably marries a commonplace country doctor, a man utterly unsuited to her romantic tastes. Isabel 'wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine, – unhappy perhaps, and dying early. She had an especial desire to die early, by consumption, with a hectic flush and unnatural luster in her eyes.'¹⁷ She imagines herself to be a heroine from the novels of Dickens or the Brontës, such as Edith Dombey or Jane Eyre: 'Oh, to have been Jane Eyre, and to roam away on the cold moorland and starve, – wouldn't *that* have been delicious!' (98). Isabel is thus the embodiment of the kind of woman that many critics worried about: she is carried away by her books, and feels the ordinariness of the real world to be unsatisfying and dull compared to her fictional world. Further, the girl's masochistic, suicidal tendencies betray her fantasies as dangerous, rather than simply light-hearted, romantic desires. Braddon plays with Isabel's expectations, as well as those of the reader, by not allowing her heroine a romantic early death, but instead permitting her to live a long, commonplace life, as the men around her die dramatically. Isabel ends the novel, transformed from 'a sentimental girl into a good and noble woman', and, after a botched affair and the death of her husband, she learns valuable lessons about reading and fantasy (402–3).

Amelia B. Edwards is another sensation novelist who focused on the position of the female reader of sensation fiction; in novels such as *Hand and Glove* (1858) and *Barbara's History* (1864), she shows that reading passionately and uncritically can be damaging, especially for inexperienced female readers. An early sensation novel, *Hand and Glove*, details how Marguerite Delahaye's fascination with her town's new minister, Xavier Hamel, causes her to turn to fictional models that are misleading. Like Isabel Gilbert, who imagines her lover Lansdell to be 'the hero of a story-book' (214), Marguerite sees Hamel as 'a hero of romance'.¹⁸ Furthermore, Edwards links the seductive Hamel to seductive reading. While Marguerite's English companion encourages her to read novels by Dickens, Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott, Hamel offers Marguerite 'the early productions of George Sand'. This, the narrator claims, is 'a class of literature which, however admirable in its way, deals too largely with feeling to be quite healthy reading for the inexperienced and the young' (112). Further, Hamel urges Marguerite to surrender herself to the world of the novel, insisting, 'the author should hold you captive, and the people of his book should become your own familiar friends. A novel is then an ideal world, which, while it lasts, seems no less real than our own' (107). Yet, as in *The Doctor's Wife*, such submissive reading has its risks. Edwards thus links dangerous men and dangerous books, emphasising the similar feelings that both could

evoke, and she encourages her reader to maintain the critical distance that Marguerite seems incapable of maintaining herself.

She continues to disapprove of women's overidentification in her most popular novel, *Barbara's History* (1864), by juxtaposing the affective, fantasy-prone heroine with her more pragmatic aunt, who chides her for following sensational scripts. The young heroine, Barbara, leaves her husband suddenly when she thinks he is a bigamist. She escapes to the Continent with her maid, takes on an assumed name and gives birth to a child, presumably out of wedlock. Yet, months later, Barbara and the reader learn that her husband was not in fact previously married. Her aunt, who discovers her in Italy, chastises Barbara, telling her, 'you acted like a fool, and ran away. I dare say you thought it very fine, and heroic, and dramatic, and all that sort of thing. Nobody else did.'¹⁹ Aunt Shandyshaft's humour deflates the sensational scenario and Edwards shows the dangers in allowing sensational scripts to dictate real life circumstances, especially for vulnerable women.

Sensation novels, then, do not deny the possibility of women identifying with sensational characters. Yet many writers, like Braddon and Edwards, urge their female readers to abandon naïve and uncritical reading practices. Abandoning oneself to the world of the novel comes dangerously close to losing one's identity in the manner of Anne Catherick or Laura Glyde. Laura's realisation that she is in Anne's clothing and covered with Anne's name may be regarded as a model for dangerous reading practices, in which the female reader is consumed by the story. In turn, a positive model of female imposture, where women may, like Valeria, 'step out of their own character', but be able to step back in, may offer a positive model of controlled female readership.

Masculinity and the villain-finder

While female sensation characters were donning disguises, escaping from asylums and running off to the Continent, what, we might ask, occupied the male characters of these novels? Just as female figures in sensation fiction are often opposing types – the wicked sensation heroine versus the innocent, wronged woman – male characters, too, were often opposites. On the one hand sits the easily duped husband, who is unaware of his wife's evil behaviour. George Gilbert, the commonplace country doctor who marries Isabel, the would-be consumptive in *The Doctor's Wife*, is a typical example of this figure. Isabel wants to marry a man like Henry Esmond or James Steerforth, but instead George is 'the very incarnation of homely, healthy comeliness, the archetype of honest youth and simple English manhood' (64). Furthermore, he is completely oblivious to her desire for Roland Lansdell. The gullible

husband had become such a common trope that, by 1869, Florence Wilford, in her novel *Nigel Bartram's Ideal*, could have one of her characters position himself against this model. The titular character, Nigel, insists to his wife, 'I am not the model husband of a sensation novel, a poor blind tool in the hands of less scrupulous people.'²⁰

On the other hand, and in contrast to this static figure, is the sensation villain, who may attempt to seduce, imprison or rob the sensation heroine. This figure is perhaps best represented by the captivating Count Fosco from Collins's *The Woman in White*, who conspires, with Sir Percival Glyde, to steal Laura's inheritance. Many of Collins's disreputable men are intriguingly complex figures who push the boundaries of appropriate masculinity, such as the half-man, half-machine that is Miserrimus Dexter in *The Law and the Lady* and Laura Fairlie's selfish and disengaged uncle, Mr Fairlie, who claims to be 'nothing but a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man'.²¹ These melodramatic men are sensation versions of the gothic villain who imprisons his victim in remote a European castle and takes advantage of her naïveté and vulnerability.

Yet perhaps the most significant development in male characterisation in the sensation genre is a third type: the amateur detective. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert Audley disrupts his leisured existence to right the wrongs done to Sir Michael Audley and George Talboys, and, no less significantly, to commit Lucy Audley to an insane asylum. In another well-known example, from *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright must support his wife Laura and her sister Marian with his artwork, while attempting to help Laura reclaim her identity and inheritance. E. S. Dallas claimed that sensation fiction was structured around the dynamic between the 'villain and a villain-finder': 'The villain is the hero, and the villain-finder is set like a sleuth hound on his path.'²² The narratives of these 'villain-finders' amount to more than simply an interplay between villain and sleuth, however: they are narratives of manhood and professionalisation. Robert and Walter's stories end with them married to suitable heroines and employed in professions that allow them to support their wives and families. Their adoption of the role of the detective is the first step in this narrative of masculine progression. Playing detective, then, offers these characters tools that are vital to personal and professional fulfilment.

Like the female impostor or double, the male detective has a complex relationship to notions of identity. These characters are positioned in opposition to sensation villains, who are typically characters whose hidden past or previous identity needs to be unearthed. They are thus excavators of identity: they are also the figures who decide what constitutes a 'true' identity or a performance. Dallas suggests that the 'acuteness of the villain-finder is

preternatural. He sees a hand you cannot see, he hears a voice you cannot hear.’²³ These figures are watchers – they are attuned, in particular, to the feminine art of masquerade. The amateur detective often sits in contrast to the outmoded style of masculinity typified by the gullible, unknowing husband; the sensation hero, the husband of the future, these novels imply, must be watchful, self-aware and attuned to the demands and desires of women.

The hero of Ellen Wood’s *St Martin’s Eve* (1866) is a latter-day Robert Audley. Frederick St John is watchful of the woman, Charlotte Carleton, who hopes to marry his half-brother, and he is instrumental in committing her to an asylum. Although a reviewer of the novel claimed that ‘[n]o amateur detective or briefless barrister is set in motion to trace out [Charlotte’s] crime and bring her to justice’, Frederick is the epitome of the amateur detective.²⁴ Early in the novel, Charlotte marries Frederick’s cousin George and she is later responsible for the death of her stepson, Benja, who dramatically burns to death. In addition to murder, Charlotte’s social crimes are manifold: she does not love her stepson as she does her own son; she is passionate, angry and thus unwomanly; and, after the death of her husband and both of her children, she hopes to marry Isaac St John, Frederick’s brother and the recipient of George’s fortune. Even without knowing her murderous tendencies, Frederick senses that Charlotte is mad and he hopes to keep her from his family’s money. Frederick begins the novel as an idle man without real aim or occupation. In fact, the reader is first introduced to him when he is arrested for unpaid debts and reprimanded by his more responsible brother. Frederick’s role as detective thus changes the course of his future as it not only offers him a useful pastime, but allows him to protect his brother’s – and his own – personal happiness and financial stability.

When Charlotte enters their home as a guest, Frederick watches her closely: ‘As to Frederick, he was apparently leading a very idle life: but in point of fact he was silently busy as ever was a London detective. He was watching Mrs. Carleton. He had been watching her closely, not seeming to do it . . . now three weeks ago, or more, and he persuaded himself that he detected signs of incipient madness.’ Frederick seems to possess the preternatural abilities that E. S. Dallas finds characteristic of the amateur detective, as he is the only character who can see how much Charlotte hates her romantic rival, Georgina Beauclerc. He sees the wild look that Charlotte gives Georgina when she passes by, and the narrator notes, ‘it all passed in a moment and was imperceptible to general, unsuspecting observation: but Frederick was *watching*’.²⁵ His watching comes with recompense: Charlotte is finally locked away in a mental institution and Frederick will one day inherit his brother’s money and estate. He uncovers the supposed madness lying under Charlotte’s respectable façade and is rewarded with a happy marriage and a hopeful

future. Yet Wood, despite her reputation as a conservative sensationalist, leaves the reader feeling somewhat uneasy about her hero's motives and motivations. In a review of Wood's earlier *East Lynne* (1861), Margaret Oliphant remarked that it is the adulterous heroine, Isabel Carlyle, 'alone in whom the reader feels any interest', rather than the innocent Barbara Hare.²⁶ Again, in *St Martin's Eve*, reviewers remarked with surprise that Wood sympathised with her immoral heroine: 'Mrs Wood stands by her heroine . . . she speaks of her in terms of pity, and even modified approval.'²⁷ While the reader is encouraged to delight in the happy ending afforded to Frederick and the other characters, the narrator's sympathy for Charlotte seems a blemish on an otherwise happy ending. This ambiguity also suggests that the line between the amateur detective and the sensational villain, both of whom dictate the futures of the female characters and protect their own interests in doing so, may be rather thin.

Margaret Oliphant's *Salem Chapel* documents male watching and detection with a similar ambiguity. In this instance, it is the hero himself who questions what he has learned and gained through his detection. With Arthur Vincent, Oliphant complicates the easy progression from amateur detective to productive, happy member of society. Arthur arrives in the quiet town of Carlingford as the new dissenting minister and his sensational detection gets in the way of his sacred duties. Initially, he embodies fully the role of sensation sleuth: he rushes off to despatch telegraphs and races around the country on trains. Yet his detection does not pause on 'the day of rest' during which he is 'rushing wildly along distant railways' (236). Sensational watching thus interrupts Arthur's carefully planned existence:

To think that this day, with all its strange encounters and unexpected incidents, was Sunday, as he suddenly remembered it to be – that this morning he had preached, and this evening had to preach again, completed in Vincent's mind the utter chaos and disturbance of ordinary life. It struck him dumb to remember that by-and-by he must again ascend the pulpit, and go through all his duties. Was he an imposter, doing all this mechanically? (331)

Arthur's encounters with female and male impostors – Rachel Mildmay, posing as Rachel Hilyard, and her husband, Colonel Mildmay, posing as Herbert Fordham – lead him into a world of confusion and chaos. Ordinary life is no longer understandable or without disturbance, and Arthur, the young idealistic minister, even questions whether *he* is in fact an imposter. Though Arthur, like most villain-finders, ends the novel happily, poised to marry Rachel's daughter, his sensational detection disturbs his tranquil world. He leaves the ministry and the novel's happy conclusion cannot entirely clear away the sense of 'the utter chaos and disturbance of ordinary

life'. While detection does indeed make a man of Arthur, robbing him of his naïveté and innocence, in this case, it comes at a cost.

With its emphasis on gender identity and performance, the sensation novel thus exposes contemporary gender norms, as well as the machinations and expectations of the Victorian novel. Narratives of personal and professional progress, even those of the villain-finder, are put into question because they are mimed so convincingly by villains and impostors. The impostors with whom Arthur is thrown into contact destabilise his former sense of the world, leaving him to ask, 'which was the criminal? which was the innocent?' He is thrown into a 'wild confusion of sin and sorrow, of dreadful human complications, [and] misconceptions' (305). The sensation novel's playful engagement with human complications and misconceptions, however, made it an ideal form in which to disrupt gender conventions and challenge stable notions of identity. While women's seeming predilection for imposture leads to innovative representations of female desire and identity formation, the need for male watchfulness, even in the family home, gestures to fissures in masculinity and domestic security.

NOTES

1. E. S. Dallas, review of *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Times* (18 November 1862), 4.
2. Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford University Press, 1992), 54. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.
3. Unsigned, 'Novels Past and Present', *Saturday Review* (14 April 1866), 439.
4. Jonathan Loesberg, 'The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction', *Representations* 13 (1986), 115–38 (117).
5. Mansel, 489.
6. ON, 259–60.
7. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. David Skilton (Oxford University Press, 2008), 58.
8. Wilkie Collins, *No Name*, ed. Mark Ford (London: Penguin, 1994), 503.
9. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *John Marchmont's Legacy*, ed. Norman Page and Tori Saski (Oxford University Press, 1999), 68–9. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.
10. Margaret Oliphant, *Salem Chapel* (New York: Virago Press, 1986), 93. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.
11. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford University Press, 1996), 11. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.
12. Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 112.
13. Unsigned, 'Art VII', *Christian Remembrancer* 46 (1863), 208–36 (234).
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