

The Italian Question, Slavery and Matrimonial Law Reform: The Relevance of the ‘Underdeveloped South’ in *The Woman in White*

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Wilkie Collins (1824-89) is currently largely regarded within scholarly criticism as one of the founders of the sensation novel and more generally as one of the most important precursors of the modern popular fiction. He was also one of the numerous writers of the Victorian period who showed deep fascination with the cultural heritages of Italy. Being a committed Italophile, he made numerous tours to southern Europe beginning with his early travel with his family, and a later tour he undertook with Dickens. In his fictions, he projects not only his profound engagement with Italy’s artistic culture but also his active commitment in representing the radical politics that was leading the nation towards unification during the early and mid- nineteenth century. Collins’s personal affection towards Italy spanned from music, literature, art to the people themselves; it was not confined to the level of mere interest, but it gave him a vital medium that enabled him to question his own national identity as well as addressing the domestic problems that his country faced at home. As Mariaconcetta Costantini has recently put it, “[f]rom the vantage point of a different culture, he could observe the complexity of human nature and underscore, by comparison, many aporias and flaws of his own society, which were more difficult to detect from within.” (178)

Of all his major fictions, no text represents Collins’s engagement with Italy better than *The Woman in White* (1859-60), a text which is deeply committed to the reformist debate that was taking place in Britain during the mid-nineteenth century as well as the revolutions that were shaking Italy at the time. Yet this vital relation between the novel’s historical backdrop and the core domestic narrative of sensation has not been fully explored. It is the purpose of this essay to examine how Collins’s use of the Risorgimento in *The Woman in White*, mediated through the two Italian refugee characters,

becomes an essential component within his construction of the proto-sensation novel. During the course of my argument I will demonstrate how the underlying revolutionary plot of *The Woman in White* operates amid the then emerging debates on the conditions of southern Italy, a discourse that grew out of the process of the nation's unification, which enables Collins to question feudalistic aspects of Britain's legal system that reinforced gender inequality and also allows him to place his arguments within a much wider public debates on human rights that include campaigns on the abolition of American slavery.

Collins, Sensation Fiction, and Matrimonial Law Reform

Sensation fiction from its outset, as well as in its modern critical evaluations, has been read and understood as a genre in which the predominantly patriarchal gender norms of English society were challenged. Collins's fellow sensation novelists Mary Braddon and Ellen Wood both questioned the ideologies that constrained women to their fixed roles as wives and mothers within the domestic sphere. As Lillian Nayder writes, "Collins's sensation novels 'burst out' during the 1850s and 1860s because these were the decades in which Victorians began to debate and reform the laws governing marriage and divorce in England, years in which the reading public became increasingly aware that domestic strife was endemic to their society, and that the victimizations of wives by their husbands was a legally sanctioned phenomenon." (1997: 72)

Drawing on the tradition of the Radcliffean gothic, *The Woman in White* raises questions over Victorian patriarchy not only through Sir Percival Glyde's persecution against Laura but also through occasional allusions to contemporary legal reforms that were intended to secure women's material and physical welfare. Glyde's forced attempt to usurp Laura's property and his physical violence against her may be easily placed within the historical background of the legislative reforms that were taking place during the 1850s and 1860s.¹ Marian's reaction on noticing the bruise on Laura's arm, that "Laura may have to swear to it at some future time," (268) is, according to Harvey Peter Sucksmith, a possible reflection upon the legal reformation regarding marital separation that took place in the 1850s. Sucksmith points out that while Collins's readership of 1859 would not have felt the injustice hinted

as acutely as a decade earlier since part of the reform had taken place by the late 1850s. (614) With regard to the process of obtaining a formal separation, husbands and wives were still unable to provide evidence against each other in civil court until the legislation of the Evidence Amendment Act in 1853. Furthermore women could not appeal for a judicial ruling until 1857 and in cases of cruelty separation could only be approved where the violence was rendered life-threatening or harmful to her physical welfare.

Debates on women's right to govern their own properties in marriage were still in process during the 1850s. Under the 'doctrine of coverture' wives passed their legal rights over their properties to their husbands on marriage, and were provided instead with the benefit of 'protection' that widows and single women were not able to receive. Reform proceeded gradually through the legislation of the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, which provided women the right to inherit property and independently control their own earned money and property within matrimony, toward the passing of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, by which women finally gained total control over their own properties. Yet during the 1850s attempts to alter the legislation were met with futile outcomes. The Married Women's Property Bill proposed each by Lord Brougham and Sir Erskine Perry were defeated early in the House of Commons in 1857, due to opposition from MPs who retaliated against the feminist ideologies that informed the bill (Foyster, 248), and instead gave way to the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act. Collins's treatment of the property debate in the novel may not directly reflect the conditions of the majority of women since he applies to Laura's case the law of equity that had provided for upper- and middle- class daughters the right to inherit separate properties independent from their spouses in marriage. (Nayder: 1997, 81) As Nayder points out, Collins's critique turns towards the danger that the fairly intended legal settlement drawn up by Vincent Gilmour brings upon Laura's welfare: any possible settlements of her property on the couple's future offspring in the case of Laura's death being ruthlessly rejected by Glyde, the settlement potentially creates the danger of Laura's being coerced into signing any documents beneficial to her husband. (81-2)

In focusing on Victorian debates on female property rights Collins partly gained his inspiration from an early nineteenth century French text. One possible source for the conspiracy plot of the novel has been attributed to

Maurice Mejan's criminal case book, *Recueil des Causes Celebres* (1809), which had included a case in which a widowed aristocrat, a Madame Douhault, was incarcerated into an asylum and was deprived of her identity by her brother for the purpose of confiscating her inherited estates. Mejan's text not only gave Collins the idea of a conspiracy plot of stolen identity and forced incarceration but also of a crime rooted in the old political culture of aristocracy. Nayder writes, "Collins adapts Méjan's account of crime in ancien régime France to his own contemporary purposes. He transforms a story of sibling rivalry on the verge of the French Revolution into a tale of marital oppression in England in the years 1849 and 1850." (1997: 75) Collins's interest in continental politics as a mediator in understanding the domestic issues of his own country can be more fully grasped when we examine the relevance of the political movements that were taking place in Italy at the time.

Collins's Italy and the Emergence of the Southern Question

The Woman in White was serialized during the height of the Italian Risorgimento. Following the notorious Orsini bombing in 1858, the British concern for the cause of Italian unification rose to its peak in the late 1850s. Collins's fellow sensation novelist Mary Braddon would later follow him in addressing the Italian question in her writings of the early 1860s.³ Collins would repeatedly make use of Italian refugee figures in his novels and plays in addition to his numerous references to Italian literature and music.⁴ While a matter of urgent political debate, Italy, in Collins's sensation fiction, is not only introduced as a historical backdrop but is also presented, overwhelmingly, as an entity against which debates concerning English nationhood and the nation's social conditions were often constructed within the Victorian imagination.

Collins's Italy in the novel, mediated through the figures of Professor Pesca and Count Fosco, undergoes a process of racialization through the perspectives of the English characters. In *John Bull's Italian Snakes and Ladders* (2007), Annemarie McAllister demonstrates how the Italians in the Victorian imagination functioned as an antithesis to the construction of English nationality. According to McAllister, the Italians were both sexually and racially stereotyped (often viewed as "a degenerate, animal-like race." (180))

and portrayed from a predominantly middle-class male bourgeois perspective. Indeed, the role that the two Italians in *The Woman in White* plays is one that is strongly tied to the image of physical degeneracy. Pesca is described as possessing an emotional and sentimental disposition which Walter Hartright describes as what an “artificial English restraints” cannot conceal. Fosco too possesses tastes that are to the eyes of Marianne “effeminate.” Collins figuratively attributes to Pesca and Fosco a quality of queerness and oddities in their behaviors, not to mention their short height, due to which Hartright attributes to Pesca the image of an exhibition dwarf.⁵

In *The Woman in White*, the construction of a national identity mediated through the presence of the racial other is furthermore construed within the European geographical axis between north and south: this imagination operates within the mind of Walter when he refers to Pesca’s “warm Southern nature,” (4) and Marian too becomes conscious of “[her] strong, hard, Northern speech.” (219) when she admires Fosco’s linguistic adaptability. However, while such a binary distinction helped to solidify the locus of national identity for the British, the discourse and representation regarding the Italian peninsula was undergoing a rapid renewal throughout the nineteenth century. The period saw the emergence of what would later be known as the Italian southern question, a debate that gave birth to an internal regional division between the advanced north and the underdeveloped south within the Apennine peninsula.⁶

The origin of the southern question can be traced back to the eighteenth century, as Nelson Moe demonstrates in his study *Views from Vesuvius*. Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), as Moe points out, marks one of the earliest stages of the process in which a discourse that sought to establish a view of southern Italy as an inferior and retarded region emerged. (23-5) In posing the thesis that the general disposition of the people is largely determined by the climate of the region which they inhabit, Montesquieu had provided an account of an internal division existing between Italy and northern parts of Europe before proceeding to discuss the binary division between Europe and South/East Asia.⁷ In his earlier study on the topic, Moe has further demonstrated how the dualistic vision of Italy in which both the imagery of backwardness and that of the picturesque merged was generated by the commitment of both the southern Italian and northern European writers from the mid eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth centuries. However, the

regional presence of the south did not emerge as a problem in the consciousness of the central and northern Italians until the process of nationalist movement for unification had commenced. (2001: 120-22)

It was after the 1860s that the southern question took a concrete shape both in the form of racial discourse and debates on economic conditions. According to Silvana Patriarca, data that would later in the century help the development of the idea of the existence of two different races within the Italian peninsula was collected through the national statistics conducted by the northern state during the 1860s. (79-87) Furthermore, in *Views from Vesuvius* Moe discusses the period 1848-1860 as a time that saw the emergence of a new understanding of the Italian south as distinct from the northern region in association with ideas of cultural barbarism and political despotism. This ideological framework resulted primarily from anti-Bourbon sentiments proclaimed in the writings of Ernest Renan, Trinchela, and William Gladstone, the latter of whom was known for his influential report on Naples. The segregation of southern Italy in terms of its social structure and economy emerged after the mid-1870s following Pasquale Villari's "Southern letters" published in the Rome newspaper *L'Opinion* as John Dickie has pointed out in *Darkest Italy* (53-82). The feudal governance by the French Bourbon regime was one major factor that had emerged through the decades preceding the Risorgimento as the primary cause of the retarded economic conditions of southern Italy. According to Marta Petrusiewicz, the reign of King Ferdinand saw the emergence of this issue through the monarch's modernizing aspirations that "encouraged industry, commerce and innovation, and attempted a fiscal reform." (29) Petrusiewicz argues that Ferdinand's consultation with the intellectuals had discovered the evils of feudalism that had been, as it emerged, the harbor for "the formation of a land market." (30)

The impact that such attitudes to southern Italy formed over the mid-decades of the nineteenth century brought upon British writings were considerable. The geographical boundary that distinguished the Italians as Europeans in contrast to the Africans who resided on the southern side of the Mediterranean Sea could be easily blurred in the contemporary Victorian imagination. George Lewes in his 1861 article "Uncivilised Man" implied that the proximity between the southern Italians and the Africans had resulted in the presence of savageness within the supposedly civilized nature of the

Europeans:

The fatiguing and universal mendicancy of Africa, where kings and chieftains demand baksheesh on all sorts of pretexts, and where no one will even direct you on your way without a “present,” is little less than what the traveller meets with throughout the Neapolitan dominions. It is not only the beggars who beg, —every one knows the impudent mendicancy of the police, custom house officers, and functionaries of various kinds. (39)

In his discussion of Collins’s novel, Ceraldi quotes Lewes’s article as an instance of how the strategy of differentiating the English from the non-English by collapsing the racial differences that exist within the latter was shared by Collins’s contemporaries at the time.

In a later article published in *All the Year Round*, Collins reveals his awareness of the discourses on the Italian question that were proliferating in contemporary journals. Although not directly representing the southern region, the portrayal of Rome in his “Dead-Lock in Italy” (December, 1866) not only suggests a similarity with Lewes’s method in associating the southern Italians with laziness and mendicancy,⁸ but also purports to draw connections between the people’s character and the political climate that generates it. Subtitled “A Letter from an Englishman in Rome, to an Italian in London,” the English narrator relates to the Italian exile, presumably one who is hopeful for emancipation of the Papal States, his impressions of Rome. While the narrator’s attention focuses on Rome, Collins creates in the narrator’s mind a homogeneous southern district in which the lack of northern diligence is felt: “Advance through Tuscany, and go on to Rome, and I hardly know which would surprise and disgust you most—the absolute laziness of the official people in working the line, or the absolute submission of the passengers under the most inexcusable and the most unnecessary delays.” (513)⁹ In this article, Collins’s narrator goes further in attributing the character formation of men of Rome to Papal governance, establishing a link between such a political climate and the national character, by arguing that the long Papal dominion had informed the mindset of the people. The primary reason that the narrator gives for his own speculation of there being very little prospect of successful

revolution in the Papal States is what he construes as “the enormous religious influence at the Pope’s and priests’ disposal”: the narrator writes, “...here, in his central stronghold, the priest’s immovable composure has its old foundation, to this day, in the priest’s consciousness of his power. Here the political tyranny that he administers—the infamous misgovernment that he permits—has alienated you, and thousands of men like you.” (AYR, 511)

In Britain articles that emphasized the uniqueness of the southern peninsula in terms of its political corruption started to appear by 1850. In “Two Letters to the Earl of Aberdeen, on the State Prosecutions of the Neapolitan Government,” (1851) Gladstone reports on what he saw as the “incessant, systematic, deliberate, violation of the law by the Power appointed to watch over and maintain it,” (8) and on the complete corruption of the judiciary. In the second part, Gladstone further made detailed comments on the influence of the Catholic Church in Naples. Gladstone’s indictment of juristic corruption and Papal despotism was followed by series of articles that portrayed the Mezzogiorno as a region where a culture of lawlessness permeated through society not only in governmental institutions but also in the reactionary organizations that sought retaliation against the established regime. In his 1850 article “Spy Police” in *Household Words* Henry Wreford, not only reported on the “continental despotism” in the form of full-scale espionage operating in Italy by contrasting it with the British police force which he argues to be “solely employed in bringing crime to justice” (611) but also alleged such governance systems to be a particular product of the Italian peninsula.¹⁰ Wreford complained:

There is no country in Europe, where the low, secret vices, as opposed to those of a bolder, opener, and more ferocious character, exist so strongly as in the South of Italy. There, the result of that timidity and want of faith in what is good, and just, and true, which has been engendered by intrigue, is practiced in its most comprehensive sense. The Secret Police system is one of the very many causes of this. (613)

A year later in an article co-written with Henry Morley titled “Neapolitan State Prisoners” Wreford continued in exposing the corruption of the state institutions, commenting that “a hint at dangerous opinions, from the lips of a

rogue, will drag an honest man out of his bed.” (236)

Numerous articles that dealt with the Italian question, particularly those that articulated the condition of the south, came out in the earlier numbers of *All the Year Round* in 1859, with which Collins may well have been familiar. These would also focus on the repressed conditions of the northern states of Italy, stressing their antagonism against Austria. The writer of “Austria” (June, 18) wrote, “[h]atred of the Austrian has become an hereditary passion in the Lombardo-Venetian breast,” (176) and articles such as “Piedmont” (July, 16) and “North-Italian Character” in *All the Year Round* presented Austrian imperialism as, in the words of Lillian Nayder, “[r]apacious, insolent, destructive, and lawless.” (1993: 2)¹¹ By creating the image of the northern Italians as subjected to a despotic Austrian power, these articles appealed to a popular British sympathy that was grounded upon their identity as a liberal nation.

American Slavery and the Extended Refugee Category within Britain in the 1850s

During the mid-nineteenth century, the southern question was not only a debate which was discussed in relation to Italy but also to the United States. The wake of the American Civil war saw the discourse on slavery abolitionism become a centre of attention in British literary periodicals.¹² American slave narratives gained wide popularity in Britain, and a wide variety of novels and other media of 1850s came to be largely influenced by the rhetoric of the abolition movement in debating the conditions of England. Suggesting the relevance of the domestic debates on American slavery in Britain to the rise of sensation fiction during this period, Susan Balée notes the impact that the American Civil War had brought upon the working-class readership of the genre that were familiar with the degenerate conditions of the London slums, rendering them sympathetic towards the American slaves. (128) In her argument Balée refers to the much-quoted article by Margaret Oliphant, who contextualized the term ‘sensation’ within a much broader perspective to include a range of political issues, not only national but transnational, that had captivated the public imagination:

On the other side of the Atlantic, a race blasée and lost in universal ennui has bethought itself of the grandest expedient for procuring a new sensation; and albeit we follow at a humble distance, we too begin to feel the need of a supply of new shocks and wonders. Those fell Merrimacs and Monitors, stealing forth with a certain devilish invulnerability and composure upon the human ships and men to be made fire and carnage of, are excitement too high pitched for comfort; but it is only natural that art and literature should, in an age which has turned to be one of events, attempt a kindred depth of effect and shock of incident (“Sensation Novels,” 564-5)

The issue was a sensitive one for the conservatives within Britain. Pointing out that “the emergence of an organized trades union movement and vigorous campaigns for an extension of the franchise” was an indicator for the growing prospect for democratization in England during the 1860s, Nicholas Rance has argued that the conservatives saw within the American south a “rebel[lion] against democracy.” (xiii) Those tied to aristocratic sentiments such as Charles Kingsley were often inclined to support and sympathize with the south. (Waller, 558)

On the other hand, British abolitionists were not only intent on conjoining their arguments with their petition for the improvement of the living standard of the working class of London, but also with that of the matrimonial conditions of women. (Balée, 130) Hiram Fuller, mentioning with sarcasm the idea that the moral validity of slavery depended upon each specific circumstances, listed Victorian wives as cases where “liberty to make contracts” were being deprived:

...consider the constrained, not to say servile condition which the conjugal relation, the bondage of matrimony, imposes upon the better half of humanity—the domestic and political slavery to which the wives of all Christendom are subjected by laws which they have no hand, either in framing or in executing. By the statute laws of slavery-hating England, a man may beat his wife, so that it be not immoderately. If he has forced her to loathe his companionship, she is forbidden to leave him; and if she fly, the law will force her back into his arms. Her person, her fortune, are her

husband's property in the harshest sense of the word ("Negroes and Slavery in the United States,"193)

Description of the plight of the Victorian women, such as Fuller's, would very much have resonated among the readership sympathizing with Laura Fairlie in her victimized state at Blackwater Park. The reformist rhetoric that is shared by Collins and his many contemporaries who resented women's subordinate conditions in the 1850s was one which was mediated through political debates that had crossed over the Atlantic.

Sensation fiction's contemporaneity with the Abolition movement is clearly significant with regard to Collins's novel when considering the fact that Britain's moral obligation to protect refugees was not only confined to European activists but was also extended towards liberated African slaves during the period. The concept of the refugee category in Britain was being further strengthened during the 1850s with a renewed attention towards the African refugees from America, following the legislation of the American Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that banned any assistance in the liberation of slaves. Britain's moral superiority was being imagined at this time through the role of "leading the poor slave out of slavery and leading the rest of the world into a more civilized mode of production." (Fisch, 28) According to Caroline Shaw, this however took place as a convenient cover-up of Britain's complex and rather embarrassing conduct during the first half of the nineteenth century. In her study, Shaw points out, firstly, that Britain came to be obliged to rescue African fugitives from the illegal slave trade that continued after 1815 despite diplomatic efforts to ban it through negotiations with the newly restored reactionary continental powers, and secondly how Britain came to be entitled to liberate the Africans that had fought on its side during the American War of Independence. (241-5)¹³ As part of Britain's imperial policies, the liberated slaves were sent to west Africa in order to take part in the project of forming a civilized community of Sierra Leone. However, due to unwelcoming incidents such as the outbreak in natural diseases which killed many local government officials, and the re-enslavement of the liberated Africans by the adjacent local tribes, the British government took the decision of transporting the former slaves to the West Indies as contractual labourers, a policy that was heavily deplored by philanthropists at home.

Against this historical backdrop, the British campaigners for the abolition of the American Fugitive Slave Act compared with ardency what they regarded as American despotism with the political climate in revolutionary Europe. Shaw states that “[a]gitation on behalf of American fugitive slaves seemed like a logical extension of the activities of European refugee supporters.” (246) Contemporary discourses on the Italian question would also attempt to arouse sympathy by arbitrarily resorting to the image of slavery. The image of Italy as a nation enslaved to both Austria and France was a popular and common one among Victorians and was widely depicted in journalistic and literary articles. The Italian question would therefore be often described via the language of American slavery.¹⁴ In addition, the American case would provide the British with a regional dichotomy between north and south that would correspond with the idea of progress struggling against economic and political retardation.

The United States had generated its own southern question through the nineteenth century as its domestic dispute over slavery emerged as it strove to achieve the aim of national unification. The abolitionist’s negative view of the southern states was generated once it became clear that the system was oppressing not only the slaves but also the white population. Don H. Doyle writes, “[s]lavery...was the social foundation for an aristocracy whose power over slaves and over the entire society corrupted American ideals of equality and democracy. Beneath the slaveholding aristocracy, the South’s critics saw a mass of ‘poor whites’ oppressed by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of opportunity.” (75) Although America’s conditions for unification differed from Italy in many structural terms, within both countries the south came to be viewed by the north as a retarded region due to political climate founded on their feudal and aristocratic modes of governance.

Pesca’s ‘Secret Society’ and the ‘Sublime’ Alliance between Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde

At the end of *The Woman in White*, Professor Pesca dramatically reveals to Walter his true identity, which he has maintained hidden under the assumed role as one of the multitude of displaced Italian exiles residing in London. Pesca’s address to Walter is a mixture of complicated political sentiments: not

only does he expose himself as a 'voluntary exile,' differentiating himself from other political refugees exiled by force from Continental reactionary governments, but also speaks, rather on behalf of thousands of his fellow displaced countrymen, reminding Hartright, rather scornfully, of England's own nation's revolutionary past:

It is not for you to say –you Englishmen, who have conquered your freedom so long ago, that you have conveniently forgotten what blood you shed, and what extremities you proceeded to in the conquering – it is not for you to say how far the worst of all exasperations may, or may not, carry the maddened men of an enslaved nation. The iron that has entered into our souls has gone too deep for you to find it. (535)

The surprising revelation of Pesca's membership of an anonymous brotherhood marks a pivotal moment in the novel, disrupting Hartright's assumption that Pesca is a harmless republican refugee and sets off the speculation that he might be after all one among the dangerous revolutionary terrorists :

Considering the subject only as a reader of newspapers, cases recurred to my memory, both in London and in Paris of foreigners found stabbed in the streets, whose assassins could never be traced—of bodies and parts of bodies thrown into the Thames and the Seine, by hands that could never be discovered—of deaths by secret violence which could only accounted for in one way. (527)

Yet while this sensational revelation is one that brings upon the readers' minds notorious terrorist activities by refugees (such as the Orsini bombing) and evokes the widespread anxieties over Britain's established asylum policy of the time,¹⁵ Pesca's association with the 'secret society,' most commonly associated with the Carbonari, gained historical significance on the eve of Garibaldi's conquest of southern Italy.¹⁶

Critics' inclination to relate the Carbonari with Pesca's mysterious brotherhood comes as a natural assumption taking into account Collins's personal acquaintance with Gabriel Rossetti, although Pesca's similarities to

the more recent revolutionary activist Giuseppe Mazzini have also been repeatedly pointed out.¹⁷ Hartright assumes the duration of Pesca's settlement to span over several decades, possibly since the 1820s. His occupation as teacher of languages is one that was undertaken by many of Rossetti's generation. Being one of the first of the major wave of Italian refugees to arrive in Britain in the early 1820s, Rossetti, unlike the majority of exiles of the same generation who were cautious about further commitment to their political causes, remained politically active in London, creating a network that would maintain correspondence with the continental nations. (Brand, 32) Although we are not told Pesca's exact origins within Italy,¹⁸ Collins suggests that he is in a similar political position as those members of the southern Italian activists who had taken part in the radical activities of secret societies.

The formation of the Carbonari and numerous other secret societies took place in southern Italy during the early decades of the nineteenth century, the period of both Napoleon I's governance and the following restoration of the Bourbon regime. As critics such as John Rath and Anthony Galt have demonstrated, the ultimate aim of the Carbonari was to create a republican nation by means of disposing of the ancient regime despite the diversities in political aims that coexisted within the organization. (Rath, 367-8; Galt, 785-6) Many critical accounts have attributed the cause for the proliferation of secret societies in Italy to the distinct conditions of the southern peninsula, typically to the effects of its long Bourbon rule. The reference to the Italian brotherhood would have registered with the British imagination as the product of despotism and lawlessness. The anonymous writer of the article "Italian Parties" printed in *The Leader* (September, 1856) described the Carbonari as "[having spread] from Naples over the peninsula," and "[was] sworn to a crusade against the rule of the Popedom." (853)

Fosco's mysterious activities as a counter-revolutionary spy have sparked suggestions from critics that he may well be operating on behalf of Austria. Yet, in light of the historical context in which the Carbonari originated, it is equally possible to suppose, as A. D. Hutter has solely pointed out (218), that he was sentimentally in tune with the French Republic, drastically betraying the society's initial retaliation against Napoleon I's governance and the Bourbon restoration that followed the Vienna congress. As Lanya Lamouria points out, the novel's time span exactly covers the period of 1849-1852 when

reactionary policies were being imposed upon both France and Italy by Napoleon III, of whom Fosco would have been also a likely accomplice. (306-7) (Fosco's engagement with the Rubelles also suggests that he is in league with the French.) Despite the ambiguity that Collins retains with regard to Fosco's identity and political background, the solidity of Fosco's aristocratic tastes is maintained throughout the novel. Madame Fosco, according to Walter, describes her deceased husband's life as "one long assertion of the rights of the aristocracy and the sacred principles of Order." (567)

In this context Collins's choice of a former Carbonari now turned reactionary spy for Sir Percival's accomplice in his conspiracy can be understood as his attempt to conjoin two reactionary and feudalist men in alliance. Attaching himself to Sir Percival Glyde, in what he considers as a "sublime" friendship, Fosco asserts his own aristocratic identity and his conservative values. In constructing the narrative of sensation, Collins maintains the relationship between Count Fosco and Sir Percival as more than a conspiratorial relation based upon material need; it is also founded upon common values and characteristics reminiscent of the ancien regime. Not only is he capable of emotionally sharing with Percival the pains of the state of destitution produced by his economic mismanagement but also regards their relationship as something sacred, a similar stance that Pesca takes towards Hartright. Remaining ambiguous with regard to his commitment as a continental spy, Fosco, with his reactionary political views, becomes a devoted agent aiding Percival's persecution against the angel of the house, simultaneously bringing in to the English domestic space the latently barbaric cultures of the underdeveloped south.

Conclusion

In this essay I have demonstrated that thematic relevance of the Italian revolution that Collins uses as backdrop to his tale of sensation, in which he raises questions over domestic laws that were being debated in Victorian England. In *The Woman in White* Collins's Italian characters are introduced not only as racial others but as also as vital mediums in order to question national systems that were in urgent need of reform. Through the figures of Count Fosco and Professor Pesca, Collins creates not only familiar images of

radical political refugees but also engages with the Italian southern question, which was increasingly revealing to Britain and the rest of Europe what D. A. Miller has termed the “political adolescence of Italy” (187) at the end of the 1850s. Equating marriage with slavery, Collins expands the logical category of contemporary debates on refugeedom toward the realm of liberated slaves in America, another country that was coping with domestic division between the north and the south. By placing the Italian migrants in the historical context of their recent revolutionary past, Collins introduces the supposedly backward conditions of that country both in economic and political terms to his domestic tale of sensation.

Notes

1 Lillian Nayder, in *Wilkie Collins* (1997), provides a detailed account of how Collins’s novel (and sensation fiction in general) responded to the mid-nineteenth century debates marriage law reform. See Nayder (1997), pp. 71-74; pp. 147-149.

2 The very first critic to establish the relevance of Mejan’s text to Collins’s novel is Clyde Hyder. Hyder’s 1939 essay raises the possibility that Hall Caine might have noticed this since he writes in *My Story* (1909) that “[Collins had come] upon an old French trial ..., turning upon a question of substitution of persons, and so it struck him that a substitution effected by help of a lunatic asylum would afford a good central idea.” (329)

3 McAllister here explains the complexity that surrounds the post-colonialist analysis of the representations of the Italians in English literature. Arguing that “the Italians were seen as the inherent possessors of more cultural capital than the English, and were positioned as aspiring to emulate English constitutional monarchy in a flattering way,” she simultaneously points out that “aspects of their representation certainly echo the colonial tropes of childishness, savagery and amorality, and the need to establish domination and to construct rivals as inferior or degenerate was just as powerful, if not more so, in such a relationship.” (28)

4 Collins’s other Italian exilic characters include the Abbè in *Basil* (1852), Professor Tizzi in *The Yellow Mask* (1855), Augusto Baccani in *Heart and Science* (1883), and Dominic in *Rank and Riches* (1883).

5 Hartright’s passing remark on the nineteenth century ‘freak shows’ is one that foregrounds his racial bias. According to Matthew Sweet nineteenth century exhibitions presented figures such as Caroline Crachami and Mohammed Baux, commonly known as the ‘Sicilian Fairy’ and ‘the Indian Dwarf’ as well as many other European dwarves.

(655-56) Marlene Tromp contends that during the Victorian period freakery constituted a particular racial category within the minds of contemporaries. According to Tromp, “[d]warves were often perceived to be a particularly *racialized* group, in spite of the fact that ‘dwarf’ was an umbrella term that encompassed three categories of small people.” (160) Freakery in the Victorian period was thus one element of cultural imagery that was used in order to construct a sense of a normative English identity. Furthermore Nadja Durbach argues that “these exhibitions configured racial Otherness as freakish bodily difference, thus naturalizing the white British body.” (82)

6 In the case of Collins’s *Italians*, Ceraldi argues that “[t]o be Italian, in this novel, is to be a racialized other who has far more in common with gypsies and Creoles than with pure, white Englishmen.” (181) In one sense, as Ceraldi claims by citing Frederick Fairlie’s racially-prejudiced description of Count Fosco as a “walking-West-Indian- epidemic,” Collins’s construction of his English characters’ prejudice towards the European foreigners is one that is ready to imagine a “dichotomization of England and the rest of the world.” (182)

7 In Book 14 Chapter 2 of the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu presents his view of Southern Europe as a more morally retarded region compared with the northern parts, where he writes, “[y]ou will find in the northern climates peoples who have few vices, enough virtues, and much sincerity and frankness. As you move toward the countries of the south, you will believe you have moved away from morality itself.” (234)

8 In his article, Lewes continues to write on the custom of beggary: “[w]e have been asked per *la botiglia* by a man wearing the Government uniform upon no better pretext than that urged by the laziest lazzarone.” (39).

9 “Dead Lock in Italy” may have been written in response to Aurelio Saffi’s essay “Southern Italy: Its Condition and Prospects” which came out in 1863. In this article, Saffi had defended the natural disposition of the southern Italians and attributed the cause of the south’s underdevelopment to the previous despotic rule by the French “[N]otwithstanding so many advantages of nature and intellect,” he wrote, “several among the provinces of Southern Italy are in a painful state of misery and degradation. The most obvious and popular explanation of the fact is Bourbon despotism, and this explanation is undoubtedly the true one.” (227)

10 Articles in *Household Words* dealing with the conditions of Naples had variety of responses. “Neapolitan State Prisoners” a section co-written by Henry Morley and Henry Wreford in a serial article “Chips” (Nov 29, 1851) reports on the corrupt Neapolitan judiciary that commits prosecutions without trial. Grenville Murray’s “The Roving Englishmen: Beautiful Naples” (May 28, 1853) on the other hand dwelt upon the festive aspect of Naples refuting Gladstone’s “inadequate idea of the horrors of a Neapolitan prison.” (303) Periodical articles of the 1850s were,

however, not only stressing the corrupt spy network of the southern regions but also reporting on similar practices in the regions controlled by Austria. The July issue of Dickens's Monthly periodical *Household Narrative of Current Events* in 1851 contained an article which commented on the numerous arrests that took place in Verona of people of rank who were suspected of commitment to the unification movement. (190) Collins's own "The Black Mirror," published in *Household Words* in 1856 gives an account of how the narrator received interrogation by the police regarding his personal details.

11 Positing a post-colonialist reading of the novel, Nayder in her essay contends that in these articles the Italians "[were] treated as a subject race by the Austrian imperialists." (2)

12 Notable among these were "Opinion on American Affairs" (*Macmillan's Magazine*, 1861) by Thomas Hughes, "The Merrimac and the Monitor" (*Quarterly Review*, 1862) by James Fergusson, and "The American Conflict" (*North British Review*, 1862) by W. R. Greg. (Balée, 131-32)

13 Hakim Adi demonstrates how the influx of African fugitives was facilitated by the British defeat in the colonial disputes in Northern America, where many slaves fought for the loyalists upholding Imperial causes. Adi further points out that much of the black population in the 18th century consisted of those anti-slavery activists who had been liberated from their former masters within Britain. (147)

14 *Tate's Edinburgh Magazine* mentioned how Giovanni Ruffini's *Lorenzo Benoni* was branded as the "'Uncle Tom's Cabin' of the Italian Question." (683)

15 The memories of the Orsini Bombing, an incident which was caused by Felice Orsini who intended to assassinate Napoleon III and was carried out on 14th January 1858 was still lingering in the minds of the British readership when Collins's novel commenced its serialization.

16 Clyde H. Hyder was the earliest to identify Pesca and Fosco's "Brotherhood" with the Carbonari. (303)

17 In *Dante and the Victorians*, Alison Milbank argues that Collins attempts to represent the mixed feelings of the Victorians toward Mazzini by allotting his characteristics and mannerisms to the two Italians in his novel. Milbank points out that Fosco's habit of keeping pet animals and birds and Pesca's penchant of calling his friends "my good dears" are both derived from Mazzini. (75)

18 Hartright notes in his narrative that Pesca previously taught at the University of Padua before having been exiled. The University of Padua in the midst of the 1848 revolution was a victim to a succession of revolts in the northern regions of Italy. Due to an uprising from the students the university was forced to close down from early 1848 to 1850. Newspapers and periodicals reported on the revolt, and the university would have recurred to the minds of the British people as an image of a retaliating force

against the Austrian regime. Collins had also cast Professor Tizzi in the role of a university professor at Padua in *The Yellow Mask*.

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