

The Yellow Mask, the Black Robe, and the Woman in White: Wilkie Collins, Anti-Catholic Discourse, and the Sensation Novel

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The Yellow Mask, the Black Robe, and the Woman in White: Wilkie Collins, Anti-Catholic Discourse, and the Sensation Novel

Summarizing the Gothic history of sensationalism, Patrick Brantlinger traces a movement from the religious to the secular: “By a kind of metaphoric sleight of hand, the Gothic romance has managed to make secular mystery seem like a version of religious mystery.” By the time of sensationalism, Brantlinger argues, there is “not even a quasi-religious content” (32). Without claiming that sensation novels are, as such, religious, I nonetheless want to suggest that anti-Catholicism can provide those masks, cloaks, and mysteries, ready-made, as it were.¹ One way to achieve the sleight of hand by which the secular takes on a religious aura is by brandishing the narrative vestments and vestiges inherited from the Gothic.

The secularized mysteries of sensationalism re-placed religion in another sense as well. In an 1863 *Quarterly Review* article deploring sensationalism, John Murray complained that “A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher’s office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and doing so principally, we had almost said exclusively, by ‘preaching to the nerves’” instead of to judgment, as preachers should do (252). “To think of pointing a moral by stimulants of this kind,” Murray pronounces, “is like holding a religious service in a gin-palace” (262). While Murray mentions a few sensation novels that deal directly with religious subjects (e.g., Charles Maurice Davies’s *Philip Paternoster: A Tractarian Love Story*), his larger point is that religious discourse informs the sensation novel less as content and more as form. The rhetorical persuasions of the pulpit are now displaced onto the pages of the sensation novel, and,

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counterintuitively, reading is more bodily than listening. These sensational sermons are exercises in repeated—eventually habitual—stimulation, “moulding minds, forming tastes and habits.”

The phrase “preaching to the nerves” not only captures sensationalism’s secularizing of religious rhetorical forms, but also indicates how sensationalism physicalizes ideology. Ann Cvetkovich has argued persuasively that sensationalism’s embodiment of social structures, its naturalizing of representations and their meanings, is importantly political (25).² The techniques of sensationalism underscore narrative’s intimate and intricate dependence upon readerly affect. (“Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened your pulses within you that the rest of her sex has no art to stir. Let the kind, candid blue eyes meet yours, as they met mine, with the one matchless look that we both remember so well. . . . Take as her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy, and she will grow upon you, all the more clearly, as the living woman who dwells in mine,” Walter Hartright famously asserts, instructing Collins’s readers in the uses of sensory memory and association [50].) Individual Victorian reading experiences were, of course, diverse,³ but the majority of those readers who consumed Collins’s narratives would have shared a history of experience with anti-Catholic discourse. Reinforcing a set of polemical Protestant prejudices in their audience and presenting the Papacy as a cultural, political, and economic force in nineteenth-century Britain, fictions that borrow from anti-Catholic discourse play on readers’ fears, arousing their suspense and subsequent speculation. My argument, then, is not simply that the motifs of no-Popery found their way into sensation fiction (although they did), but that sensationalism’s narrative structures, forming and formed by the learned associations of its audience, are borrowed in part from anti-Catholicism.

Wilkie Collins, that most secular and sensational of nineteenth-century writers, is rarely thought of as a novelist of religious polemic. Yet in 1855 and again in 1881, Collins published two fictions that conform closely to the patterns of anti-Catholic narrative: “The Yellow Mask” (appearing first in Dickens’s *Household Words* and then in the 1856 collection *After Dark*) and *The Black Robe* (serialized in the *Sheffield Independent* in England, *Frank Leslie’s Magazine* in the United States, and *Canadian Monthly* in Canada; published in three volumes by Chatto & Windus). Collins’s other writings on religion are sparse: a piece on the Carmelite convent in Cornwall titled “The Nuns of Magwan,” in *Rambles Beyond Railways*; “A Plea for Sunday Reform” for the left-wing *Leader*; a translation of Balzac’s story of priests and nuns, “The Midnight Mass,” published in *Bentley’s Miscellany*; and comments on Rome and “Romanism” in his letters. William Collins, Wilkie’s father, was a Tractarian who despised the Italian Catholicism that he encountered in Rome. He had hoped that Wilkie would attend Oxford and enter the Church—an astonishing instance of misplaced parental ambitions given the relentless unconventionality of his son. Yet, I want to argue that the conventions of religious polemic are at work in what we now perceive as Collins’s fictional innovations, particularly in his strategies for readerly engagement.

Anti-Catholicism, which had been allied to the novel from its eighteenth-century beginnings in the work of Ann Radcliffe and other Gothic writers,⁴ persisted throughout most of the nineteenth century and manifested itself in characteristic fictional form.⁵ Its rhetoric, plots, imagery, and characters would have been familiar to

Collins's popular readership. Harriet Martineau, for one, recognized the formulae: she stopped writing for *Household Words* because of what she perceived as its anti-Catholic bias, manifested specifically in "The Yellow Mask." In a letter to Charles Dickens, Martineau indignantly quoted from an advertisement for an American magazine's reprint of the story: "'the story is ingenious and fraught with considerable interest. The despicable course of 'Father Rocco' pursued so stealthily for the pecuniary benefit of 'holy mother church'; shows what stuff priestcraft is made.'" Martineau, like the American audience at which the advertisement was aimed, recognized standardized language of Protestant polemic—the quotation marks around "holy mother church," the term "priestcraft." She expostulated, "The last thing I am likely to do is to write for an anti-catholic publication; and least of all when it is anti-catholic on the sly" (422).⁶ *Punch*, always astute at spotting genres and types, identifies Collins as the writer of a "No-Popery" in a cartoon from January 1882: Collins is portrayed in Linley Sambourne's caricature "As the Man in White doing Ink-and-Penance for Having Written The *Black Robe*" (Fig. 1). What both the American advertisement and the *Punch* cartoon assume is precisely what Collins himself counted on: a set of audience expectations and recognitions regarding Roman Catholicism.



Fig. 1. *Punch* 82 (1882): 22.

Such trained audience reactions would have been particularly useful to a writer of sensation fiction, so named in part because of its insistent manipulation of readerly emotions. This essay looks at the functions of anti-Catholicism in two little-known Collins fictions and describes briefly the way that he reworks its standard elements in his most-read novel, *The Woman in White*. I suggest that in creating the genre of sensation fiction, Collins turns to what are already well-worn formulae. Tamar Heller's *Dead Secrets* has shown how much Collins's major works owe to the "female gothic" tradition that he draws on and distances himself from. Building on that insight, my study reads these three fictions as participating in and revising genres of anti-Catholicism. The yellow masks and black robes—the clichéd images that Henry James characterizes elsewhere as a "Scarlet Woman" who is "dressed out terribly in a table-cloth, and holds in her hands the drawing-room candlesticks" (*Essays* 862)⁷—are transformed in Collins's brilliant creation of a woman in white.

Woman in white, black robe, yellow mask. With the exception of *The Wreck of the Golden Mary*, a Dickens Christmas tale to which Collins contributed, Collins never again used a color in a title. Primarily what the colors point to is that these texts are in some sense costume dramas. All three garments—dress, robe, and mask—serve as identifying covers: signals that the figure is both in disguise and playing a standard role. For example, "black robe" stands for "Jesuit"; the book's first edition stressed the narrative's use of associative iconography by filling the cover frame with a stylized black robe marked with the words "The Black Robe." Two *Punch* cartoons for 1850 and 1851 display the polemical uses of costume, showing as well how the character types of anti-Catholic discourse had become near-folkloric (Figs. 2 and 3). Foregrounded in Collins's titles, then, is his debt to generic plots and characters.

In his 1863 critique Murray explains (and complains about) how such visual cues position sensation novels as interchangeable commodities.⁸ In the railway stalls, consumers are enticed by book covers showing

A pale young lady in a white dress, with a dagger in her hand, evidently prepared for some desperate deed; or a couple of ruffians engaged in a deadly struggle; or a Red Indian in his war-paint; or, if the plot turns on smooth instead of violent villainy, *a priest persuading a dying man to sign a paper*; or a disappointed heir burning a will; or a treacherous lover telling his flattering tale to some deluded maid or wife. The exigencies of railway traveling do not allow much time for examining the merits of a book before purchasing it; and the keepers of bookstalls as well as refreshment-rooms, find an advantage in offering their customers something hot and strong, something that may catch the eye of the hurried passenger, and promise temporary excitement to relieve the dullness of the journey. (253 emphasis mine)

In other words, the packaging of these goods relies on a now-familiar mechanism of consumer commodification: immediately recognizable "branding," here by means of genre-specific depictions (think of the studies of dime novels by Bill Brown and romance fiction by Janice Radway). Genre is made visible. The reader knows what she is buying. At the same time, of course, variation must ensure that this is not a prod-



Fig. 2. *Punch* 19 (1850): 193. Stock characters and costumes.



Fig. 3. *Punch* 20 (1851): 139. Stock characters and costumes.

uct previously purchased. (In the preface to the 1860 edition of *The Woman in White*, Collins himself maintained that the “two main elements in the attraction of all stories” are “the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise” [646].) The secular sermon that is the sensation novel is, finally, a matter of economics; as Murray puts it, “No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of his [the sensation novelist’s] world, beyond the market-law of demand and supply” (252).

The specific market uses of anti-Catholic discourse are suggested by the way it informs Collins’s travel piece “The Nuns of Magwan.” *Rambles from Railways* is, as its title implies, a trip back in time, away from modern technology and timetables, exploring “one of the remotest and most interesting corners of our old English soil” (2). Cornwall, with its “primitive population” and ancient legends, is at once an exoticized destination and the space of England’s past. Collins begins his visit to Magwan among the churchyard graves, proceeding to the “ancient” manor house, now converted to a convent, in which a group of twenty Carmelite nuns are immured. Cloistered nuns, and in particular the Carmelite order, held a particular fascination for nineteenth-century Protestants. Paintings like Charles Allston Collins’s *Convent Thoughts* and John Everett Millais’s *The Vale of Rest* portrayed the cloistered nun cryptically as a figure of sublimated passion, clausturation, and death (Casteras). And in both Benjamin Disraeli’s *Lothair* and Henry James’s *The American*, the female character who turns away from life and marriage to the death-in-life of the convent does so by joining the Carmelites.

For Wilkie Collins, the Carmelite convent provides “a romance which we may still study, of a mystery which is of our own time” (144). Sounding like Nathaniel Hawthorne in the preface to *The Marble Faun* (“Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers need Ruin to make them grow” [3]), Collins seeks a means of infusing the present with mystery and finds it in the aura of ancient Rome: “Even to this little hidden nook, even to this quiet bower of Nature’s building, that vigilant and indestructible Papal religion, which defies alike hidden conspiracy and open persecution, has stretched its stealthy and far-spreading influence. Even in this remote corner of the remote west of England, among the homely cottages of a few Cornish peasants, the imperial Christianity of Rome has set up its sanctuary in triumph—a sanctuary not thrown open to dazzle and awe the beholder, but veiled in deep mystery behind gates that only open, like the fatal gates of the grace, to receive, but never to dismiss again to the world without” (144). This brief characterization of Roman Catholicism indicates its usefulness for sensationalism. With the phrase “Papal religion,” Collins seeks to trigger the British Protestant paranoia that sees Catholic conspiracies everywhere.⁹

Like the Italian secret society that tracks Count Fosco across England and France, the Papacy represents an international power that is, importantly for Collins’s writerly strategies, both omnipresent *and* secret, thus inviting investigation. The sanctuary at Magwan, like the convent and the confessional in anti-Catholic polemic, provides a space for the audience’s “knowing” projection, allowing for the participatory reading that was to become so essential to sensation fiction, especially in its serial form. Collins’s emphasis throughout “The Nuns of Magwan” is on the nuns’ hidden status, on how their faces, forms, and even voices are concealed from the outside world. Dwelling on the nuns’ burial grounds and funeral rites, Collins

analogizes the secrecy of convent life to that of the grave: “This is all—all of the lives, all of the deaths of the sisterhood at Lanhearne that we can ever know! The remainder must be conjecture. We have but the bare stern outline that has been already drawn—who shall venture, even in imagination, to colour and complete the picture which it darkly, yet plainly, indicates?” (149). Although Collins continues to argue that we should not attempt to imagine, and consequently to judge, the emotions of the nuns, his repeated use of rhetorical questions invites just such speculation. That is, his audience’s familiarity with the forms of anti-Catholicism allows it to “colour and complete” the picture that the dark outlines of Roman Catholicism “plainly indicat[e].”

“The Yellow Mask” also depends upon Collins’s audience’s recognition of standard formulae: “of what stuff priestcraft is made,” as the story’s American publishers promised. “The Yellow Mask” tells of a poor, virtuous Italian maid, Nanina, who is accompanied through the streets of Pisa by her big, ugly, mongrel dog, the comically named Scaramuccia. Nanina becomes the beloved of a wealthy Pisan nobleman, Fabio d’Ascoli. Interfering with their love is Father Rocco, a priest convinced that a large part of the d’Ascoli fortune rightfully belongs to the Church. When we first meet Father Rocco, he is using a mirror to spy on Nanina and Fabio; later he manages to separate the lovers, secreting the young girl in a house where she is watched continually. Father Rocco’s power comes not just from his secret network of operatives but also from the fact that he has trained his young parishioners in obedience. As part of his plan to enrich the Church, the priest manages to marry Fabio off to his niece. When she dies unexpectedly, Father Rocco’s plotting becomes more elaborate: among his machinations are the manufacture of the ghostly “Yellow Mask,” a figure dressed in the yellow fabric that decorated Fabio’s first wife’s apartments and whose mask conceals what looks to be the face of her corpse. In short, the priest attempts to scare the superstitious Fabio into submission to his will. The scheme fails, Father Rocco disappears, and Nanina and Fabio happily marry.

The standard features of this story—the priest who plots to “return” riches to the Church through a combination of trickery and guilt, a Catholic system of spies, religious training in unquestioning obedience, the beloved young woman held incommunicado, the living corpse, the alliance of Roman Catholicism and superstition—are mitigated here by the relative mildness of Catholicism’s crimes. Unlike the sinister Jesuits who glide throughout much anti-Catholic fiction, this Italian priest is presented as generally virtuous and fair-minded, though willing to practice deception, not to mention enlisting the aid of a scheming, mercenary female prostitute in what he sees as the Church’s best interests.

While Collins relies on Protestant preconceptions in this story, he is not yet “preaching to the nerves” of his audience. If, in Margaret Oliphant’s famous characterization of the woman in white’s hand, “Few readers will be able to resist the mysterious thrill of this sudden touch. The sensation is distinct and indisputable. The silent woman lays her hand upon our shoulder as well as upon that of Mr Walter Hartright” (118), the sight of the yellow mask raises scarcely a shudder.¹⁰ “The Yellow Mask,” set “about a century ago” in “the ancient city of Pisa” and narrated with an arch irony, positions its readers at a historical and cultural distance. The comic tone

that Collins flirts with throughout the narrative can be seen in the lengthy description of the nearly insurmountable problem of finding thirty virtuous young women to serve as shepherdesses at the fancy-dress ball at which the Yellow Mask eventually appears. And that terrifying vision is, we should remember, clad, not unlike Henry James's tablecloth-shrouded Scarlet Woman, in the bedroom curtains (setting the style for Margaret Mitchell's Scarlett O'Hara). Indeed, when he republished the story in *After Dark*, a collection in which each tale is introduced by a framing story of origination, Collins attributed it to a wizened Italian professor who is writing, Casaubon-like, an unfinished multivolume work on "The Vital Principle." Amidst the papers and books that overflow the professor's study, is a mangy stuffed dog—Scaramuccia had been lovingly preserved by his mistress, and it is his history that turns out to be the tale of "The Yellow Mask." With this frame, Collins glances slyly at the hoary props that sustain his tale. Like the character from *commedia del arte* for whom he is named, Scaramuccia is a stock comic character whose exploits are knowingly expected by his audience.

Unlike the half-mocking Gothic tale of "The Yellow Mask," *The Black Robe* is both an astute psychological study and Collins's most sustained attack on the Catholic Church. Like *After Dark* and *The Woman in White*, *The Black Robe* is a documentary narrative, incorporating manuscripts (diaries, letters, etc.) supposedly by several hands. The good and evil sides of "The Yellow Mask"'s Father Rocco are divided in this later novel. We get not one but two Jesuits—two Black Robes: the sincere young Father Penrose (who nonetheless falsely presents himself as the layman "Arthur Penrose") and the cynical older Father Benwell, both of whom disguise their affiliations and intentions, a combination familiar to Victorian readers from, among other sources, Frances Trollope's anti-Catholic *Father Eustace, a Tale of the Jesuits*. Collins's narrative revolves around the conflict between Stella Eyrecourt and Father Benwell for, in her case, the love and, in his, the fortune of Lewis Romaine—the characters' names hinting at their stereotypical narrative functions. "Would the priest or the woman win the day?" Collins's narrator asks (124). Would Romaine be a faithful husband and father or would he "restore" his riches to the Catholic Church? Finally, at the behest of the Jesuit Superior, Romaine renounces his wife and enters the Catholic clergy. He becomes a powerful, indeed "fanatical," preacher and an ambitious rising star in the Church hierarchy—a favorite of the Pope and selected for a cardinalship. However, he falls ill and, dying, realizes the wrongness of his retreat into the Catholic priesthood. He speaks three last "sacred" words: "Wife and Child" (446)—Collins countering Christ's last words of renunciation and what Protestants saw as Catholic preoccupation with the Four Last Things (Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell).¹¹ Deathbed scenes in anti-Catholic fiction inevitably stage struggles over inheritance (church or family?) and test the truth of religion (the Protestant confident acceptance of death or terrified Catholic uncertainty?).¹² Recognizing at last the "unnatural" wasted life of celibacy, Romaine affirms normative Victorian domesticity.

The Black Robe can, in fact, be read as one of a specific group of sensational fictions published during the 1860s–1880s that depicted a triangulated relationship between husband, wife, and priest. Writers like Eliza Lynn Linton, Robert Buchanan, and Emma Worboise describe Anglican clergymen who have become so entranced

with High Church Ritualism that they are in danger of crossing over, with their spell-bound flocks, to Rome. These novels become a site for discussion of the contemporary state of marriage in Britain.¹³ Like these fictions, *The Black Robe* attacks Catholic celibacy as deeply misogynist, as antipathetic to domesticity and family. Father Benwell cynically remarks that he has learned all about women in the confessional, a claim that would have resonated for Collins's readers. The British public, clergy, and Parliament had reacted vociferously to the attempted reintroduction of auricular confession as a Church of England practice in the 1860s and 1870s, a scandal that peaked with the publication of a secret manual for confessors, *The Priest in Absolution*, in 1866 and 1870. In her study of Victorian women as "confessional subjects," Susan Bernstein quotes W. J. Brockman's mid-nineteenth-century *Letter to the Women of England on the Confessional*: "I know not another reptile in all animal nature so filthy, so much to be shunned and loathed, and *dreaded by females*, both married and single, as a Roman Catholic priest or bishop who practices the degrading and demoralizing office of Auricular Confession" (41). Father Benwell's disgust for women marks him as just such a reptile: "I felt grateful to the famous Council which definitely forbade the priests of the Catholic Church to marry," Father Benwell muses. "We might otherwise have been morally enervated by the weakness which *degrades* Romaine—and priests might have become instruments in the hands of women" (133–34 emphasis mine).

Operative in what Collins sees as Catholic misogyny is also what he depicts as the homosocial, indeed, at times homoerotic, relations between men that comprise the Church hierarchy. The traditional Protestant critique of Catholic celibacy as fostering "unnatural" sexual attachments was intensified in nineteenth-century Britain by the seemingly "Papist" Oxford movement in the 1840s and Ritualism in the 1860s and 1870s—both of which proved attractive to the nation's elite young men. "Un-English and unmanly," these religious practices were thought to foster a hothouse homosexuality foreign to real Englishmen.¹⁴ What Collins represents in *The Black Robe* is the Jesuit Provincial's cynical manipulation of such a system—his scheme to have the innocent but desirable Penrose attach Romaine to himself and thus Catholicism. "Why do you want him so much—when you have got Me?" Stella asks vainly regarding Penrose (260), the intimate who addresses Romaine as "my more than friend—my brother in love—!" (312).

"UnEnglish" too is the "Retreat" to which Father Benwell sends Romaine to separate him from his wife. Like the convent at Magwan, the Retreat is represented as a foreign enclave hidden in Protestant England. Entering this deliberately unassuming building, protected by a "high brick wall," "The convert privileged to pass the gate left Protestant England outside, and found himself, as it were, in a new country" (335). Again, Collins echoes the polemical rhetoric of the day. In 1870, a Parliamentary Inquiry into Catholic "Conventual and Monastic Institutions" was instituted. Charles Newdegate, the inquiry's primary sponsor, argued that inspections of these Catholic clerical enclaves were necessary because "There is a growing feeling that the Conventual and Monastic Institutions are being treated by the House of Commons as if they were exempt jurisdictions, subject to Papal Authority, but . . . exempt from the authority of Parliament" (qtd. in Arnstein 146). Newdegate had pro-

posed such an inquiry repeatedly in the past, arguing that, by making themselves not only immune but actually invisible to English law, convents constituted foreign sovereign territories situated within Great Britain. By 1870, his colleagues agreed that these imported, extrajudicial institutions needed to come under government control.

If *The Black Robe* reflects the religious and political controversies of its time, it also reveals how far Collins had come as a writer since “The Yellow Mask.”¹⁵ The haunting of Fabio by his wife’s ghost in the earlier fiction is reworked in *The Black Robe* into Romaine’s persecution by a mysterious voice blaming him as an “assassin” for his killing of a man in a duel. Collins moves beyond the crude, preliminary manipulation of Fabio’s guilt in “The Yellow Mask” and depicts the slow breaking down and remaking of Romaine’s sanity: Father Benwell “wound his way deeper and deeper into Romaine’s mind, with the delicate ingenuity of penetration, of which the practice of years had made him master” (351).¹⁶ The Jesuit’s infamous ability to control minds, depicted in novels ranging from Trollope’s *Father Eustace* to Eugene Sue’s *Wandering Jew*, is detailed step by step, helping to structure Collins’s plot. Here Collins’s personal interest in the mesmerism that finds its way into novels like *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* is expressed through the machinations of “the Catholic system [that] . . . showed to perfection its masterly knowledge of the weakness of human nature, and its inexhaustible dexterity in adapting the means to the end” (336–37).¹⁷ In an 1854 letter regarding the Immaculate Conception, Collins describes what he saw as the readiness of Catholics to abandon their individual judgment and give themselves over to priestly control: “Does any Papist make use of his reason when he lets his Church give him his religion? Does not his Church expressly tell him he must give up his reason, and accept mysteries which outrage it, implicitly as matters of faith. Does not every good Papist who will not let his butcher, baker, wife, or children, rob him of one particle of his common sense if he can help it, voluntarily hand that common sense over altogether to the keeping of his Priest whenever his Priest asks for it?” (1:130).

The Collins character who most intrigued his nineteenth-century readers wields just such a priestly power¹⁸—*The Woman in White*’s Count Fosco, whose wife obeys him unquestioningly, who overrides Percival’s every personal judgment, and who mesmerizes even the independent Marion: “They are the most unfathomable gray eyes I ever saw: and they have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them, which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel” (221). Margaret Oliphant’s description of Fosco underscores the racial and nationalist assumptions that Collins’s readership brought to the tale: “No villain of the century, so far as we are aware, comes within a hundred miles of him: he is more real, more genuine, more *Italian* even, in his fatness and size, in his love of pets and pastry, than the whole array of conventional Italian villains, elegant and subtle, whom we are accustomed to meet in literature” (566–67). Fosco spells out those assumptions to Marion, “You know the character which is given to my countrymen by the English? We Italians are all wily and suspicious by nature, in the estimation of the good John Bull” (245). Written in 1859, when Neapolitan exiles were flocking to London, and set in 1851, when the Great Exhibition seemed to have provided the perfect pretext for spies to enter the country, *The*

Woman in White was guaranteed an audience who knew what to expect from such foreigners (Peters 215; Sutherland ix).

Fosco himself lightly suggests, "I am a Jesuit, if you please to think so—a splitter of straws—a man of trifles and crotchets and scruples" (246), but the catalogue of Jesuitical characteristics that Collins's audience would recognize is less benign: a learned member of a secret society, clever at disguise, part of an international system of spies based in Rome, confessor-like in his knowledge of others' secret sins and failings, engaged in a voluminous foreign correspondence even as he intercepts others' missives, an Italian with ties to France. Fosco walks with the Jesuit's silent tread, and looks with his penetrating, mesmerizing stare. He even shares a trait commonly attributed to Catholic priests and nuns—a childlike greed for sweets—a trope that typically points to thwarted sexuality. And of course there is the eminently jesuitical plot he concocts: a marriage triangle, a contested inheritance, a kidnapping, blackmail, a deathbed defrauding of a fortune. Laura's warning about the man who has come between her and her husband—"Do not make an enemy of Count Fosco!"—reverberates with the frightened cries of heroines whose homes and marriages are invaded by priests: "God help me!" Stella Eyrecourt cries, "the priest has gotten between us already!" (274).

The story of Anne Catherick's and then Laura Fairlie's enforced immurement in and subsequent escape from an institution echoed popular nineteenth-century tales of escaped nuns, especially given the resemblance between their white clothing and a nun's habit and veil, and the frequent analogy that Protestant polemicists made between convents and lunatic asylums. ("If lunatic asylums are bound to admit a Government inspector, why should a nunnery, which is but another sort of lunatic asylum, be left altogether uncared for and unwatched?" asked a *Morning Advertiser* editorial [qtd. in Arnstein 135].) Escaped nuns were much on the English mind in the 1860s, a period in which seventy-one convents were founded in Great Britain, which saw hundreds of petitions calling for government inspection of convents, and, in 1869, a spectacular legal case regarding convent life, *Saurin v. Star*. All of these events led to Newdegate's success in finally passing the Convent Inspections Act.¹⁹

If convent stories are echoed in *The Woman in White*'s confinement plot, they may also provide a less obvious structural model for the novel's sensationalism. From the beginning, what has most compelled *The Woman in White*'s audience is its narrative construction: "As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now," Walter Hartright announces (5). Collins claimed to be the first to write a novel in which the narrative is presented by a series of documents by diverse hands from which the reader constructs the full story. Victorian critics, however, were quick to point out precedents (*Wuthering Heights* is a favorite example), and later scholars have followed suit, tracing the sensation novel's architectonics to trial records and newspaper reports. Anti-Catholic literature, specifically the renegades' tales told by escaped nuns and former priests that proliferated in Victorian America and Great Britain, suggests another compelling model. The most famous of these narratives was Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery*, an international bestseller first published in 1836 and never since out of print, but Monk's is only one of many such tales. These "factual" accounts are narratively constructed so

as to confirm their status as evidence. The renegade is granted a privileged position as participatory witness—"I alone am escaped to tell you"—in books that stress the incontrovertibility of first-person experience and narration, claims to truth-telling echoed in Walter Hartright's insistence that "No circumstance of importance, from the beginning to the end of the disclosure, shall be related on hearsay evidence" (5). Escaped nuns' narratives are framed by and interspersed with authenticating documentation of multiple kinds and by diverse hands: affidavits, signed letters of introduction, confirmatory accounts, excerpts from newspaper reports, footnotes, maps, drawings.²⁰ The publishers of Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* assert that "the labor of seeing so many individuals, collecting such a mass of facts and testimony, and putting it together *correctly* . . . mak[e this narrative] . . . complete and unanswerable" (264). (Visible in these structures is, of course, the interpenetration of the Gothic—sensation fiction's other point of origin—and the anti-Catholic.) When Wilkie Collins includes "The Narrative of the Doctor" and "The Narrative of the Tombstone" in *The Woman in White* (indeed, when he frames the story of *The Black Robe* with an "eye-witness" account, an unfinished diary, and an order for a wedding dress), he draws on the popular generic forms of anti-Catholic discourse and on a readership who had learned from them how to assemble and judge a story.

The cultural training in anti-Catholic characters, plots, and narrative structures shared by *The Woman in White*'s audience had been heightened by specific historical events at mid-century. Yet the patterns of anti-Catholic polemic that undergird *The Woman in White* do not make it an anti-Catholic fiction. Unlike *The Black Robe* or even the playful "Yellow Mask," Collins's greatest sensation novel is markedly secular. Symptomatic is the fact that, while a church contains the novel's long-kept secret and serves as the primary scene of violence and punishment, it is only the vestry that is of importance; the mystery uncovered there is legal and moral rather than religious. (Henry James alluded to such secularism when, after calling Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon "our modern Euripides and Shakespeare," he explained that in the sensation novel "The play is a tragedy, not in virtue of an avenging deity, but in virtue of a preventive system of law" ["Miss Braddon" 123]). In neither visit to the church does Walter Hartright encounter a clergyman, only the lay clerk along with a row of empty vestments, described in the *All-the-Year-Round* and three-volume versions of the novel as a "bundle of limp drapery and wanting nothing but legs under them to suggest the idea of a cluster of neglected curates who had committed suicide, by companionably hanging themselves all together" (695).²¹ Like these priestly shrouds, the church itself, "an ancient, weather-beaten building, with heavy buttresses at its sides"—dating back, no doubt, to pre-Reformation England—figures the role of "Romanism" in the novel (506). Surrounded by an abandoned village, "worm-eaten" and "crumbling," littered with scraps of "old wood carvings from the pulpit, and panels from the chancel, and images from the organ loft," the building is, in effect, a ruin (508–509). In contrast to the organic cultural meaning that John Ruskin read in ancient Catholic cathedrals, this shrine is reduced to fragments that foster associative affect, not theology.

My point is not that the Catholic Church serves as a mere setting—*The Woman in White* is not, like Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia, Or Old Foes with New Faces*, an al-

legory for contemporary society set in antiquity. Instead, as in Collins's ruined church, the structures of anti-Catholicism allow sensationalism to intermix ancient forms and contemporary scandals. It is precisely this mixture that readers of sensation novels have, from the beginning, seen as constitutive of the genre, faulting or praising these fictions' claim to reveal the dark truths behind the facade of the ordinary. As the archbishop of York complained, "They want to persuade people that in almost every one of the well-ordered houses of their neighbours there [is] a skeleton shut up in some cupboard." Murray defined "proximity" as "one great element of sensation" (255). Describing what is "sensational" about the "sensation novel," Brantlinger states, "peace masks violence; innocent appearances cloak evil intentions; reality itself functions as a mystery until the sudden revelation of guilt which is always lurking in the shadows" (41).

The discourse of anti-Catholic polemic readily served the sensation novelist's technique of balancing the known and the unknown, inviting the reader's forward plot projection, providing recognizable figures of mystery, clothing them in typifying disguises. Jenny Bourne Taylor contends that:

Sensation fiction certainly shared a common pool of narrative tropes, but these were not stable, they drew on and broke down distinct methods of generating strangeness within familiarity, of creating the sense of a weird and different world within the ordinary, everyday one. . . . And it was through these intricate interactions that its appeal to sensation, to "nerves," had both such psychological resonance and social complexity, providing it with the means that enabled it to explore "those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors" by bringing into play the possibilities offered by its central narrative feature—*secrecy* and *disguise*. (7)

Summarizing Collins's career for *Temple Bar* in 1890, Edmund Yates captures the balancing act between the expected and the unexpected, the realistic and the outrageous, that is sensationalism. Characterizing Collins as a "manufacturer of plots," Yates explains, "Nobody imagines the misfortunes of *Poor Miss Finch*, and her blue-complexioned lover, the masquerades of Magdalen Vanstone, the machinations of the Romish Church in *The Black Robe*, the remarkable coincidences of *Hide and Seek*, or the melodramatic farrago of *The Frozen Deep*, to be precisely scenes from real life. But, truth being stranger than fiction, possibly they might be" (274–75).

Known and unknown, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Understanding the nature of anti-Catholic rhetoric allows us to recognize how this productive tension is both central to sensationalism's marketing success and generative of the epistemological uncertainty that Brantlinger, among others, sees as foundational to the genre. For modern, nineteenth-century Protestants in Britain and America, the Catholic Church was positioned as the uncanny.²² The teleology of Protestant history meant that "Romanism" was the primitivism that Protestantism left behind. But, maddeningly, the Church of Rome refused to be bypassed, refused to die. Within nineteenth-century polemical narrative, the Catholic is often analogized to the Jew—stubborn and unregenerate. What makes this (failed) story of religious progress particularly problem-

atic is the fact that Protestantism needs to be able to trace its authority and authenticity back to Catholicism. This imperfectly repressed scene of origination makes Romanists what Catherine Sinclair, in her virulently anti-Catholic novel of 1852 *Beatrice*, calls “the unknown relative.”

Winifred Hughes’s comment on the role of masks in sensation fiction is suggestive here: “In sensation fiction masks are rarely stripped off to reveal an inner truth, for the mask is both the transformed expression of the ‘true’ self and the means of disclosing its incoherence. In the process, identity itself emerges as a set of elements that are actively constructed within a dominant framework of social interests, perceptions, and values. These novels thus focused on the ambiguity of social and psychological codes to insinuate that seeming, too, is not always what it seems to be” (8).²³ Behind the yellow mask lies another—in this case a death mask. Wearing that death mask is the woman, once known as Teresa, now calling herself Brigida, with a hidden, disreputable past about which we never learn the details. Father Benwell presents himself as a lowly clergyman, “elderly, fat, and cheerful” (42), rather than revealing his true rank as the provincial of the Society of Jesus. He instructs Father Penrose, a Jesuit of lower rank, to appear as the layman Arthur Penrose. “Arthur Penrose”’s secular clothing covers his black robe, which itself cloaks the fundamentally decent man who is Arthur Penrose. Marion suspects Fosco of wearing a wig, and it turns out that his most distinctive—and unsettling—physical attribute, his size, is itself a mask, a fat suit.²⁴ Even when he is displayed naked at the novel’s end, he remains disguised: viewed through “a glass screen,” Fosco has the costume of “a French artisan” hung above him, and the mark of the Brotherhood that he bears has been “obliterated” by a covering wound (the letter “T” for traitor)—this writing on the body vividly figuring Collins’s authorial work (640). Epistemological ambiguity is imaged in these visible layers of “seeming.”

But is the fact that the Woman in White and Count Fosco have secret identities ever really a secret? Recognizing that these two creations wear, among their other costumes, those of the stock polemical characters of nun and priest helps us to go a step further than Taylor. It is a *signaled* secrecy, an *advertised* disguise that are operative in sensationalism’s readerly engagement, as when Count Fosco teases, “I am a Jesuit if you choose to think so” (246). Writing in the *North British Review* in February 1863, Alexander Smith characterized the experience of reading Collins: “If a young lady goes into the garden a moment before dinner, you know that some one is waiting for her behind the laurels. If two people talk together in a room in a hot summer day, and one raises the window a little, you know that a third is crouching on the gravel below, listening to every word, and who will be prepared to act upon it at the proper time” (141). Smith deplored the feverish excitement, “the passion of curiosity,” that Collins, “the master of mystery,” incites in his audience, but his description of the charged engagement of readers who rapidly turned the pages of *The Woman in White* is relevant here. Like the lurid covers that entice purchasers at railway stalls, robes and masks, *when recognized as such*, awake audience expectations—expectations based on prior experience—and direct reading modes. The figures and stories of anti-Catholic discourse, easily discerned by experienced Victorian readers, serve Collins well in developing his sensationalist style.

As so often, *Punch* gets it right in Sambourne's depiction of Collins in a *transparent* disguise (Fig. 1), costumed absurdly for a role in a way that signals precisely that he is costumed. He is, ludicrously, a man (beard pointedly intact) dressed up in a bedsheet and a woman's bowed cap, adopting a distinctly feminine stance (notice the little-girl position of his slipper-shod feet). Surrounded by emblems of his fictions (the moonstone, the athlete and suppliant female of *Man and Wife*, stacked books and floor covering marked with other titles), Collins holds a "Roman candle." His penitent's robe, along with his abashed stance, are clearly put on for the occasion. Is he being put to bed early for his naughtiness? Is his guise a corrective humiliation meted out by an angry Catholic confessor? Is he ineptly veiling his identity to escape punishment? In any case, Collins's repentance is nothing if not superficial (not even "skin deep"), for we are told that he does "Ink-And-Penance" for writing *The Black Robe*—that is, his penance for writing is writing. The implication is that he will give *Punch*'s readership more of the same, that he will add to the stacks of books that surround him.

The caricature models as well the workings of anti-Catholic discourse in Collins's sensational writing. Caricature is an art form intimately tied to its audience's knowledge—a fact well-known to anyone who has ever shown *Punch* to a group of bewildered college freshman or, for that matter, puzzled over a Victorian political cartoon herself. Sambourne's wit is wholly dependent upon its viewers' history as experienced readers not only of *Punch* but also of Collins's own narratives.²⁵

In fact, Wilkie Collins did not again take up the props and plots of anti-Catholic polemic, a tradition that was considerably weakened by the end of the century. Nonetheless, in a formulaic early fiction, a genre-defining novel at the height of his career, and one of his late didactic fictions, Collins made pragmatic use of habits both clerical and readerly. Anti-Catholic discourse offered Collins narrative forms (the multiple, evidentiary narratives of the renegade's tale), plot patterns (female escape from an institution), recognizable character types (the Jesuit), and iconography (a woman in white). It afforded him as well an audience already schooled in the participatory reading strategies so definitive of sensationalism. The open secrets of "Romanism" provided a configuration conducive to the play between known and unknown that mark both sensation fiction's epistemology and its marketability. Part of what made this new mode of writing and reading so "hot and strong" was that it borrowed from an old recipe in brewing the latest news. Sensation fiction was, as Murray says, "refreshment"—a reanimation of both traditional forms and the well-trained palates of its consumers.

ENDNOTES

1. While religious content is obviously not a generic requirement of sensationalism, there are sensation novels that center on religion; for example, Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt*, as well as those by Buchanan, Linton, and Worboise mentioned below. Although they are not speaking about polemical anti-Catholic literature, Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder interestingly suggest that "America's most shocking fiction may in fact be women's *religious* novels" (123).

2. See also Loesberg and Miller for important discussions of the ideologies of sensationalism.
3. For example, see Altick's (in *Common Reader*), Brantlinger's, and Flint's explorations of the differences that class and gender make in reading.
4. On the anti-Catholicism of the eighteenth-century Gothic, see Tarr.
5. On anti-Catholicism and nineteenth-century fiction, see Franchot, Griffin, Maison, and Wolff.
6. Martineau's indignation was further fueled by the fact that she had had a story of her own, "The Missionary," turned down by Dickens for *Household Words* on the grounds that it presented a Jesuit priest positively. "I have had little hope of 'Household Words' since the proprietors refused to print a historical fact (otherwise approved of) on the ground that the hero was a Jesuit: and now that they follow up this suppression of an honourable truth by the insertion of a dishonouring fiction (or fact,—no matter which) they can expect no support from advocates of religious liberty or lovers of fair-play: and so fond are English people of fair-play, that if they knew this fact, you would soon find your course in this matter ruinous to your publication" (422). Martineau's 1861–1862 novella "Sister Anna's Probation" depicts Catholicism less positively. Perhaps Martineau's most famous statement on Roman Catholicism was her critique of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* as anti-Catholic.
7. James's quip comes from a review of Benjamin Disraeli's *Lothair*. Given Disraeli's positive depictions of Roman Catholicism in his earlier novels, *Lothair* provides another surprising example of anti-Catholic fiction's pervasiveness.
8. On sensation novels themselves, and the sensations associated with them, as constructed commodities, see Cvetkovich.
9. On nineteenth-century British anti-Catholicism, see Arnstein, Best, Griffin, Norman, Paz, and Wolffe.
10. Swinburne, however, found "The Yellow Mask" an "admirable story" (263).
11. For another depiction of this Catholic meditative practice as a rejection of life, love, and domesticity, see Mary Ward's *Helbeck of Bannisdale*.
12. See, for example, Catherine Sinclair's *Beatrice*.
13. I am referring to Linton's *Under Which Lord?*, Buchanan's *Foxglove Manor*, and Worboise's *Overdale; or, The Story of a Pervert: A Tale for the Times*. See Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism*.
14. On the perceived connection between Romanism and homosexuality, see Hanson and Hilliard.
15. In making this statement, I dispute the standard chronology that sees Collins's writing as going only downhill after *The Moonstone*. Swinburne is probably the first and the most famous critic to make this claim: "What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition? / Some demon whispered—'Wilkie! Have a mission'" (qtd. in Peters 313). While *The Black Robe* cannot be ranked with the masterpieces of the 1860s, it is an interesting psychological study that sold well in three countries (Peters 398).
16. There are other aspects to this novel that I slight here, including an earlier secret marriage on Stella's part and her eventual marriage to her first love, a missionary exile and rescue for Penrose, etc.
17. On Collins and mesmerism, see especially Taylor.
18. For nineteenth-century reactions to Fosco, see the reviews of *The Woman in White* collected in Page.
19. For the fullest discussion of these events, see Arnstein.
20. See Griffin, "Awful"; and Franchot.
21. On Dickens's revisions, see John Sutherland's note to the Oxford edition of *The Woman in White* (Collins 695). He notes that Kathleen Tillotson argued that Collins revised to avoid the similarity to Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*.
22. On the role of the uncanny in sensationalism, see Taylor.
23. See also Peters on "The Yellow Mask": "The characteristic device of a mask concealing a face which

is in fact another mask, behind which lurks the face of the wrong woman, has the suggestive quality of layered deceit which intrigued him, and which was to be more fully developed in the novels he wrote in the 1860s" (150). For the *Dublin University Magazine*, this layering of masks and types represented a weakness in Collins's writing: "Sir Percival Glyde is made up of, at least, two utterly different beings: a two-fronted mask on top of a stage-cloak" (Review 105).

24. The clergy are not the only ones who conceal their pasts in Collins's novel: everyone from Stella's mother, who paints over her age and illness in order to sustain her social position, to Stella herself, who conceals a prior marriage.
25. On *Punch* and anti-Catholicism, see Altick's *Punch*.

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