

Morbid Taste, Morbid Anatomy and Victorian Sensation Fiction

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Abstract This article examines the role that references to morbid anatomy played in some popular Victorian novels, such as those of Wilkie Collins. Because the allusions to morbid anatomy were closely related to the new type of realism that Victorian popular literature proposed, they participated in the definition of popular literature as vulgar, offensive and dangerous for impressionable young women. As this paper shows, indeed, images of morbid anatomy do not simply highlight and capitalize on the Victorians' morbid fascination with death. Above all, by embodying and recording cultural responses to medical science, they offer insights into definitions of popular literature and popular taste.

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1 Exhibiting the Female Body: from the Aesthetic to the Pornographic

One day, at a quiet early hour, I found myself nearly alone in a certain gallery, wherein one particular picture of pretentious size, set up in the best of light, having a cordon of protection stretched before it, and a cushioned bench duly set in front for the accommodation of worshipping connoisseurs, who, having gazed themselves off their feet, might be fain to complete the business sitting: this picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection.

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat – to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids – must she have

consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscles, that affluence of flesh. [...] she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine. (Lilly 1985, p. 275)

When Charlotte Brontë's heroine, Lucy Snowe, enters the picture gallery in *Villette* (1853) and gazes at the *Cleopatra*, her description of the female character's corporeality – her impressive weight, muscles, spine or flesh – strikingly reveals Lucy's lack of artistic taste. As opposed to the worshipping art connoisseurs, Lucy's almost anatomical gaze reads flesh where art should be read and does not seem to master the codes of consumption here. Her lack of «cultural competence» prevents her from going «beyond the sensible properties [and] identify the specifically stylistic properties of the work» (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 1-7; in Storey 1998, p. 432). Ironically enough, her tasteless depiction of the work of art creates a metadiscourse: Lucy's description counteracts to some extent the «aesthetics of realism» which, according to Peter Brooks, «does not bring the more graphic and detailed report of the naked body» (Brooks 1993, pp. 18-19). For Brooks, indeed, realistic fiction focuses rather on the accessories that «adorn and mask the body» (p. 19) so as to avoid being read as pornographic. Thus, poles apart from this masking of the corporeal body, Lucy's reading of the fleshliness of the female character lays bare the «weight of social repressions [which] affect[ed] representation of the body» in England at the time and which was particularly registered in Victorian fiction. In other words, even if Brontë's heroine's criticism contains moralistic comments (since Lucy Snowe criticizes the laziness of the female character and reads her body solely in terms of the domestic tasks she might perform), her description illuminates the gap between the written body, especially female, always clothed in Victorian novels, and some visual representations of the (female) body that could be seen in public venues throughout the century.

As a matter of fact, characters are often displayed and observed in *Villette*, and the novel is punctuated by a series of spectacles, from exhibited pictures to dramatic performances. For Heather Glen, the world of *Villette* is one «of show and display» which illuminates a «culture of enjoyable spectacle» marked by the 1851 Great Exhibition (Glen 2006, p. 213). Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* is a significant literary example which brings to light the connections and/or tensions between representations of the female body in Victorian literature and the Victorian visual culture. At mid-century in Victorian England, everything seemed to be on display, from manufactured goods to women's bodies. Throughout Brontë's novel, Lucy sees every «object worth seeing», visits «every museum», «every hall» and «galleries, salles, and cabinets» (Lilly 1985, p. 273), actively participating in her visual culture. However, Paul Emmanuel's reaction when

he finds Lucy unchaperoned in front of the painting evinces mid-century constructions of the female viewer/reader and uncovers contemporary morals or fears of immorality. In the 1850s, books such as William Acton's *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects* (1857) or *The Night Side of London* (1857), by James Ewing Ritchie, denounced the prostitute as the epitome of vice and condemned the ostentatious/deviant female body as a source of depravity. 1857 was also the year of the passing of *The Obscene Publication Act*, which enabled the prosecution of authors and publishers selling pornographic material. The act typified the increasing role of the state in the control of sexual behaviour. As Alison Smith explains, the 1850s saw a growing concern for public morality (Smith 1996, p. 62): representations of the body, especially female, were regarded with suspicion and artistic displays of nudity were likely to be considered as obscene. The influence of the evangelical social activists of the 1850s on definitions of art was not inconsequential. Artistic forms, shows or displays of sorts likely to corrupt or deprave the most emotionally susceptible – mainly women and children – were placed under high scrutiny. Debates around what was art and what was pornography emerged. This was particularly the case of «non-art shows» which, in Smith's terms, «played provocatively with the language of high art through tactics of innuendo and arousal» (p. 50). Among them, anatomical waxworks and preparations frequently occupied centrestage: many of them overtly focused on sexuality, showing the ravages of syphilis or the various stages of pregnancy and using a medical discourse and highly ornamented anatomical models (which often wore necklaces, for instance) both to instruct medical professionals and to entertain the lay public.

The opening of public anatomical museums in the nineteenth century, at a time when medical collections became pivotal tools in medical education,¹ attracted many visitors. In London, Antonio Sarti's (1839-50), Reimers's (1852-53) and Dr. Kahn's (1851-72) were amongst the most famous collections to be visited by men and women alike,² whilst some were exclusively reserved for women, such as Madame Caplin's (Bates 2008, p. 11). The collections comprised artificial anatomical models as well as preparations and curiosities of sorts. The recumbent anatomical Venuses, especially the late-eighteenth-century Florentine models, with their flowing hair, were certainly not free of sexual titillation, and wax exhibitions were often promoted in almanacs that included pornographic images, as Pamela Pilbeam argues (Pilbeam 2003, p. 16). As Francesco de Ceglia

1 As A.W. Bates explains, anatomy teachers were expected to own a museum worth more than £500 in the 1820s to be recognized by the College of Surgeons (Bates 2008, p. 5). Bates cites Desmond (1989, pp. 162-163).

2 Kahn's Museum, first opened to men only, opened to women two months later (Bates 2008, p. 10).

contends, the various responses to anatomical collections and representations of corpses throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not unrelated to the change in aesthetics. The morbid aesthetics of the late eighteenth century aligned the corpse, «especially if decomposed and disarticulated», with «the dominance of the wild, [...] thus open[ing] the floodgates of an uncontrolled sexuality». In the nineteenth century, moreover, death would flirt with pornography, «so ‘other’ as to be unmentionable and unrepresentable» (Ceglia 2006, p. 430).³ Furthermore, the collections also displayed the ravages of syphilis and gonorrhoea in rooms sometimes set apart and exclusively restricted to members of the medical profession (Anon. 1851a, p. 474). This was the case of Dr. Kahn’s Anatomical Museum, which opened in London in 1851. Owned by Joseph Kahn, a German «medical doctor» as he called himself, the museum gave rise to heated debate in the medical journal *The Lancet* in the years that followed the opening of the museum. Kahn had been accused of allowing women to all the rooms in the museum, in particular the room containing the models representing the damages of syphilis and gonorrhoea. In June 1854, Kahn replied to the editor of *The Lancet* that «not only is ‘the room for medical men’ in the museum closed on the days that ladies are admitted, but all the models in the other room which could offend the most prudish taste are removed» (Anon. 1854a, p. 654). The following week, a response to Kahn’s answer appeared, the correspondent – «J. Leach, M.D.» – a former lecturer at the museum, arguing that females had indeed been «permitted to inspect the syphilitic models, without distinction of age» (Anon. 1854b, p. 684). In 1857 the passing of the *Obscene Publications Act* offered a legal means of closing Dr. Kahn’s Museum down as the Act condemned «conduct inconsistent with public morals» (Bates 2006, p. 621).

It is in this context that the sensation novel, a popular literary genre of the 1860s, appeared, shocking, like Kahn’s museum, the «most prudish taste». As the name of the genre suggested, this type of popular fiction placed the pleasure of the senses at the heart of the reading experience. As a result, the sensation novel challenged contemporary definitions of art and was frequently condemned for breeding forms of impure taste in the readers. At a time when most art critics, such as John Ruskin, believed in the relationship between art and morality, sensation novelists flouted moral concerns through their improper heroines and subverted the Hegelian belief that art should generate moral betterment. As many critics have already highlighted, the female body played a central part in most sensational plots. Masquerading, displayed on canvasses, diseased or disfigured or even metaphorically unveiled through the investigation, the spectacularised female body of sensation fiction conflicted with Victorian realism.

3 Francesco de Ceglia cites Gorer (1965).

As Pamela Gilbert argues, «Realism comes to be understood as a genre which constructs itself on the basis of difference from the popular, and thus, as a genre which relies on framing the body in more careful, more nuanced and less spec(tac)ular ways» (Gilbert 1997, p. 93). Poles apart from mainstream realistic fiction, sensation fiction not only exhibited the female body, but played as well with its boundaries by transgressing the space of the (female) reader, acting on its nerves just as it often violated the bodies of its characters. As this article will show, sensation novelists played with representations of the body in ways that were reminiscent of contemporary medical shows and exhibitions. Defined as «curiosities of literature» (Anon. 1868c, p. 235), sensation novels frequently placed in the margins of the texts medical curiosities which functioned as tell-tale devices, laying bare the mechanisms of the detective narrative and recurrently suggesting images of the body opened, dissected and exhibited. By examining Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1866), a sensation novel which was particularly compared to a freak show, I will argue that motifs related to the world of anatomy, which often pass unnoticed, might however explain why the sensation novel was condemned as aesthetically impure.

2 The «Unknown Public» and the Issue of Literary Taste

Throughout their literary careers, both Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, Victorian writers involved in the sensation genre, were concerned with the new reading masses and the need to educate the taste of the reading public. Wilkie Collins's essay, «The Unknown Public», written in 1858 for *Household Words* and reprinted in 1863 in *My Miscellanies*, which deals with the penny-novel journals, shows how mass consumption raised a concern for taste among the Victorian intellectual élites. The «mysterious publications» which Collins notices are sold in «fruit-shops, in oyster-shops, in lollypop-shops» among other types of goods, and they are indiscriminately consumed for lack of guidance (Collins 1858, p. 217). Tellingly, Collins ranges the publications on the tree of the «literary family» (p. 217), penny-novel journals being «a branch of literature» (p. 218) or a «new species of literary production» (p. 217). The «classified» «specimens» (p. 218) are compared to «lad[s]» or «infant[s]» (p. 217) and identifiable through their «insist[ance] on being looked at by everybody» (p. 217). Low mass culture is not only associated with display but also placed alongside an evolutionary scale, readers evolving through time as Collins concludes at the end of his essay:

Meanwhile, it is perhaps hardly too much to say that the future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad. It is probably

a question of time only. The largest audience for periodical literature, in this age of periodicals, must obey the universal law of progress, and must, sooner or later, learn to discriminate. (p. 222)

Collins's analysis of a public who «reads for its amusement more than for its information» (p. 218) interweaves therefore literary aesthetic categories with social categories. The kind of subject-matters tackled by such publications, moreover, typifies the readers' lack of cultural competence: the stories are hackneyed and repetitive, many of them simply duplicated from one publication to the next. But Collins is also particularly taken aback by the readers' correspondence to the editor, many of their letters dealing with physical ailments from how to dye hair, artificially restore complexion and get rid of corns to cures from grey hair, warts or worms. Thus, to the vulgar showiness of the publications is added an indecent exhibition of the readers' own bodies.

That ways of presenting, writing, looking at or displaying the body could be linked to aesthetic considerations is also obvious in Dickens's record of a journey to the Paris morgue. In one of the articles of *The Uncommercial Traveller* published in 1863, Dickens stressed the public's lack of training when looking at the «objects» on display. The scene describes a custodian who advises the crowd to entertain themselves «with the other curiosities» (Dickens 1863, p. 277) whilst a freshly brought corpse is being prepared for exhibition. The cadavers are constructed as objects to be looked at and aligned with museum exhibits. Furthermore, Dickens compares the visitors' mere thirst for sensations with «looking at waxwork without a catalogue»:

There was a wolfish stare at the object, in which homicidal white-lead worker shone conspicuous. And there was a much more general, purposeless, vacant staring at it - like looking at waxwork, without a catalogue, and not knowing what to make of it. (p. 278)

Dickens's association of the corpses with artificial wax models is telling. Although waxworks could encapsulate objects as different as characters ranging from models of royals, natural wonders, celebrated criminals, and even stock characters typically found in waxwork exhibitions and fairs, the reference to waxwork here aims rather at the type of waxworks found in the teaching cabinets in medical schools and medical museums. The description of the public's untrained gaze at the naked body on display suggests that their gazing at the corpse is pure entertainment and therefore potentially vulgar and typical of low mass culture, exactly like Collins's description of the public's inability to discriminate among types of publications. Originally published in *All the Year Round* on May 16, 1863, the article is reminiscent of Dickens's description of Miss Havisham in *Great*

Expectations (1861), which also used the pivotal motif of the waxwork to define the villainess whom Pip compares to «some ghastly wax-work at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state» (Cardwell 1994, p. 57) in a scene which enhances Pip's scopic desire. In Dickens's novel the motif of the waxwork betokens Pip's refusal to acknowledge the reality of Miss Havisham's corpse-like appearance, her body shrunk to skin and bone («It was not in the first moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed», p. 57). Wax displaces and replaces the gruesome body, therefore, whilst Miss Havisham's wax-like and virginal corpse highlights the female character's (vain) attempt at arresting physical decomposition and counteracting time and death. The wax model thus typifies the narrative's interplay with anxieties related to time and bodily decay, particularly that of the female body, more especially so when Miss Havisham wishes to be laid upon the table when dead, with people coming and looking at her – «the complete realisation of the ghastly waxwork at the fair» (p. 83).

These two examples show how displays and readings of the body in the Victorian era crisscrossed with aesthetic considerations. The compulsive and barely literate readers who read for amusement rather than instruction, just like the lack of training of viewers in Dickens's description of the Morgue, explain why the sensation novel raised so many sharp criticisms in the 1860s. The narratives displayed female bodies which were passively consumed by their readership whilst the detective narratives invited readers to uncover the secrets of the female characters as in a morbid striptease. Thus, sensation novels appealed to readers in the same way as freak shows or medical collections: they promised readers to show them what lay beneath the skirts or skin of some of their heroines and villainesses, strongly relying on medical diagnosis to access the truth. The highly popular novels were inspired, as reviews noted, by «highly-spiced police reports instead of politics» (Stephen 1869, p. 722). Thus, critics denounced «the false taste which made the whole interest of a book turn upon mere horrors of blood and crime and the gallows» (p. 723) or the «perverted and vitiated taste» of periodical or magazine readers (Anon. 1863, p. 262), just like the taste of their writers, as the following reviewer highlights after the publication of Collins's *Basil* in 1853: «We must, therefore, doubt the taste as well as the judgment of the writer» (Anon. 1853, p. 372). The idea that Collins deliberately adapted his novels to the taste of his public – or even «pandered» to the public's distasteful desires, as a reviewer noted – lies at the root of many a criticism: «There can be no doubt that Mr. Collins has studied the tastes of his public, and in certain instances has pleased them – we will not say pandered to them – with great success» (Anon. 1872a, p. 282).

Unsurprisingly, the metaphors that were used in many of the reviews denouncing the sensation novelists' appeal to the public's baser instincts

compared literary creativity with the display of diseased specimens, recalling once again the Victorian visual culture and the shows promising to unveil the mysteries of the body. In the following excerpt, the sensation novelist reveals the diseases of society:

We are in a period of diseased invention, and the coming phase of it may be palsy. Mr. Collins belongs to the class of professing satirists who are eager to lay bare the «blotches and blains» which fester beneath the skin and taint the blood of humanity. ([H.F. Chorley] 1866, p. 733)

The sensation novelist was regularly compared with some kind of anatomist «lay[ing] bare» the «bones» of society, while the reviewer suggests here that the novelist should instead cover such less attractive aspects of life:

[...] one is rather curious about the quality of mind that can produce such wonderfully intricate skeletons of stories without the power of more completely hiding the dry bones with the better-known and more attractive covering that we see in the life about us. (Anon. 1872b, pp. 158-159)

The remark highlights how mainstream Victorian realist fiction veiled more than it exposed bodies whilst sensation novels, on the contrary, invited readers to metaphorically lift up the clothes or even strip the skin of the characters. The medical vocabulary which peppers the reviews filters as well in the use of the term «morbidity». The «morbid improbability» of novels like *Armada* (Anon. 1868b, pp. 881-882) or the «morbid analysis of mere sensation» (Anon. 1860, p. 210) turn narratives into so many bodies subjected to a medical gaze. In «The Morals of Literature», published in 1864, Frances Power Cobbe reflects upon the ethics of modes of writing and the writer's duty when «expos[ing] to the public» his characters (Cobbe 1864, p. 124). As she deals with biographies and the «violations of the sanctities of the inner life» (p. 124), corporeal metaphors proliferate: images of opening and violation of the «heart» or of «the soul's secrets», «injur[ies] done by such a literature [...] like a blow on a woman's face» (p. 125) define sensational literary works. Writers are compared to medical professionals, able with their «pen [to] tear open all the wounds, expose all the diseases of humanity» (p. 130). What Cobbe's metaphors denounce, above all, is the realism of this type of literature: «Men first fall into the delusion that all that is real is a subject of art, and that nothing is real except the ugly and the mean» (p. 131). Cobbe's remark betrays her period's views on the links between morality and aesthetics, suggesting an almost Hegelian position here in the way in which beauty and ugliness intermingle with moral concerns. Sensational realism is therefore aligned with exposure, exhibition and opening, terms which are reminiscent of the world of anatomy and surgical skill. The «ugly and the mean» are,

indeed, what the literary critics decry, pointing out characters with «so much deformity», such as Lady Audley, «the lovely woman with the fishy extremities» (Dallas 1862, p. 8). Moral difformity is visible, material, and as tangible as a natural curiosity or a medical exhibit, as when Wilkie Collins's Lydia Gwilt is compared to «a waxwork figure displayed from time to time in every conceivable sort of garish light» (Anon. 1866, pp. 726-727), recalling the anatomical Venuses whose body parts could be lifted so as to reveal inner organs. The medical realism of sensation novels, it appears, turned sensational characters into medical specimens exhibited in anatomical collections, their characterization betraying the writer's lack of good taste:

in his most horrible moments [...] [Wilkie Collins] is never otherwise than entertaining, except when he commits a breach of good-taste. [...] Moral deformity is as much a matter of growth, organisation, and permanence as is physical deformity (Anon. 1880, pp. 627-628).

The comparison of sensation fiction with the field of medicine, surgery or anatomy was developed further by many reviews which defined sensation novels as «surgical» or «medical novel[s]» (Anon. 1872a, pp. 282-283), as in the case of *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), for instance, or *Heart and Science* (1883). As reviewers noted, the latter contained «a good deal of science», especially in the «physiological part» of the narrative, «the manuscript having been submitted to an eminent London surgeon» (Cook 1883, p. 538), and aligned the writers with physicians:

Most of the writers who find fault with the institutions of their country - with its legal, medical and theological doctrines and practices - have remedies to propose for all the ills they discover; but Wilkie Collins contents himself generally with pointing out the evils that exist, leaving to others the work of devising the cure. In this respect he presents a marked contrast to Charles Reade, who prescribes minutely for everything from tight lacing to the treatment of the insane, teaches the doctors how to deal with sprains, and defines the changes that should be made in the statutes. (Stewart 1878 in Page 1974, pp. 226-227)

It is significant that, although many of the criticisms denounced the mechanical constructions of the plot and the stereotyped characters, the issue of taste was more often than not related to the medical realism of the narratives and to the display of characters compared to medical curiosities by reviewers. In fact, the links between the medical field and the (female) body which sensation novels constantly foregrounded constructed a typically «modern» reading experience which clashed with the issue of bourgeois taste: sensation novels lay bare the «epistemophilic» urge to know the body of the woman, in Peter Brooks's words, constructing the female body as the archetypal object of desire (Brooks 1993, p. 65).

For Lawrence Rothfield, the use of clinical discourse by novelists

emerged with the publication of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1857. As he argues, Flaubert's novel constructed «the relation of self to body as a medical one» (Rothfield 1992, p. xiii). This clinical mode of representation (the appearance of illness as an «integrated aspect of narrative») defines realistic description as «an almost microscopic precision about the material conditions of the body» (pp. 5, 7). With their detective plots and investigations, sensation novelists thus created narratives that played upon the tension between the visible and the invisible, reading the symptoms on the surface of the body and tracing them «back to the interiority of the body» (p. 95), as when the secrets of Lady Audley are related to hereditary insanity, for instance. In other words, the plots «dragg[ed] the invisible into the real of the visible» (p. 95), recalling the anatomists' search for the seats of diseases/truth. The influence of French fiction on Victorian sensation fiction was obvious in the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and many references to characters reading French novels, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, or having a French education, such as Franklin Blake in Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), gave a taste of licentiousness, immorality or flightiness to the sensational characters.⁴ But the characters were also associated with French medicine, as in Collins's *Armada*, where an abortionist and later quack psychiatrist has bought the name and diploma from a French doctor. Dr. Le Doux's enterprise may to some extent be reminiscent of that of the «German doctor», Dr. Kahn, in London. The latter was eventually accused of selling quack remedies for venereal diseases, Kahn collaborating with the company Perry and Co., known for offering cures for such diseases (Bates 2006, p. 620), and his models illustrating the progress of sexually-transmitted diseases had been imported from France.⁵ The debate around Kahn's quackery was still

4 Mary Elizabeth Braddon was well read and travelled extensively throughout her life, fuelling her fiction with manifold influences. She could read and write in French, had a subscription to the French circulating library Rolandi in London, read French journals, such as the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and loved French literature from Balzac and Zola to Flaubert, Maupassant or Dumas. Balzac particularly marked several of her novels, such as *Birds of Prey* (1867) and its sequel, *Charlotte's Inheritance* (1868), in which a poisoner reads Balzac. Her 1891 novel *Gerard* was also based upon Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin*. Her novels of the 1880s were more significantly branded by the influence of French naturalism. The recurrent theme of alcohol and the figures of drunkards, as in *The Cloven Foot* (1879) or *The Golden Calf* (1883), typify Braddon's reliance on naturalistic themes and motifs. Shifting from Balzac and Flaubert (as exemplified by *The Doctor's Wife*, 1864, a reworking of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), to Zolaesque characters, Braddon followed the literary trends of the era, adapting French characters to English society and often featuring degenerate English gentlemen.

5 «The progress of gonorrhoea and syphilis is beautifully exhibited in a series of excellent models, taken from cases in the Hôpital des Vénéériens and Val de Grace» (Anon. 1851b, p. 496). Note here the adverb «beautifully» in an article which praises Kahn's collection. This kind of aesthetic comment vanished as early as in 1854. The models were then deemed «objectionable» (Anon. 1854c, p. 89) or «disgusting», as mentioned above (Anon. 1857, p. 175).

intense in the 1860s and therefore likely to inspire sensational narratives (see Anon. 1868a). As we shall now see, *Armadale*, set in 1851, capitalizes on many of the motifs typically associated with «morbid taste» in the years that preceded the passing of the 1857 *Obscene Publication Act* and is one of the sensation novels which most hints at medical collections and post-mortem examinations.

3 «So disgusting and immoral» : From Dr. Kahn's Anatomical Museum to Docteur Le Doux's Sanatorium

When Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* appeared in 1866, one of the reviews compared the author to the showman Richardson whose famous travelling show exhibited freaks and exotic creatures at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The review focuses on taste and compares the sensation novel to food and disease, both the eating metaphor and the trope of the epidemic/endemic disease suggesting the contamination and «violation of the domestic body» (Gilbert 1997, p. 4), as Pamela Gilbert contends.

There is no accounting for tastes, blubber for the Esquimaux, half-hatched eggs for the Chinese, and Sensational novels for the English. Everything must now be sensational. Professor Kingsley sensationalized History, and Mr. Wilkie Collins daily life. One set of writers wear the sensational buskin, another the sensational sock. Just as in the Middle Ages people were afflicted by the Dancing Mania and Lycanthropy, sometimes barking like dogs, and sometimes mewing like cats, so now we have a Sensational Mania. Just, too, as those diseases always occurred in seasons of dearth and poverty, and attacked only the poor, so does the Sensational Mania in Literature burst out only in times of mental poverty, and afflict only the most poverty-stricken minds. From an epidemic, however, it has lately changed into an endemic. Its virus is spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume. (Anon. 1866b, p. 269)

The review articulates the connection between social and mental poverty, moral corruption resulting from the reader's lack of taste and collapsing thereby social differences between readers. However, if the first part of the review has often been analysed, the second part is significant in the way in which it compares the sensation novel to Richardson's menagerie and its characters to exhibited creatures:

When Richardson, the showman, went about with his menagerie he had a big black baboon, whose habits were so filthy, and whose behaviour

was so disgusting, that respectable people constantly remonstrated with him for exhibiting such an animal. Richardson's answer invariably was, «Bless you, if it wasn't for that big black baboon I should be ruined; it attracts all the young girls in the country». Now bigamy has been Miss Braddon's big black baboon, with which she has attracted all the young girls in the country. And now Mr. Wilkie Collins has set a big black baboon on his own account. His big black baboon is Miss Gwilt, a bigamist, thief, goal-bird, forgeress, murderess, and suicide. This beats all Miss Braddon's big black baboons put together. [...] But besides the big black baboon there are a number of small baboons and monkeys, for by no stretch of language can they be called human creatures. The most prominent are a hag, who paints and enamels women's faces, and a doctor, whose services, when we are first introduced to him, are apparently principally required by painted women. Lying, cheating, intriguing, and dreaming strange dreams are the characteristics of these animals. (pp. 269-270)

The interest here is that the reviewer's comparison of the characters with exotic animals brings to light key motifs of the narrative. Lydia Gwilt, as the novel's big black baboon, is accompanied by other «animals», Mrs. Oldershaw, the beautician shaped after Rachel Levison, and Dr. Downward (alias Le Doux), an abortionist and later quack psychiatrist. Prostitution and abortion – the novel's explicit references to the world of sexuality – are pointed out. The ape metaphors, together with the image of the show, construct the sensation novel as a freak show displaying exotic creatures. To images of poverty, corruption and immorality are therefore added hints at foreignness and, perhaps, degeneration. But more significantly still, the review highlights the way in which Collins anchors the detective plot within a culture of exhibition which becomes central to the investigation. *Armada* is set in 1851, at the time of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, and the characters even visit the exhibition. As a whole, like in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, bodies are frequently on display, many of them performing, from Lydia Gwilt, a born actress, displayed as a child by a traveling quack doctor, «as a living example of the excellence of his washes and hair-oils» (Sutherland 1995, p. 520) to characters specialised in cosmetics, such as Mrs. Oldershaw, or others hiding their identity or diseases under layers of make-up. The number of characters subjected to the medical gaze, moreover, constructs the novel as a vitrine of exhibited patients, not much unlike the reviewer's baboons. At the opening of the novel, Allan Armadale is dying of syphilis and his body holds secrets which only the medical professional is able to «penetrate» (p. 311), his gaze seeing through the flesh:

He lay helpless on a mattress supported by a stretcher; his hair long and disordered under a black skull-cap; his eyes wide open, rolling to

and fro ceaselessly anxious; the rest of his face as void of all expression of the character within him, and the thought within him, as if he had been dead. The leaden blank of his face met every question as to his age, his rank, his temper, and his looks which that face might once have answered, in impenetrable silence. Nothing spoke for him now but the shock that had struck him with the death-in-life of Paralysis. The doctor's eye questioned his lower limbs, and Death-in-life answered, *I am here*. The doctor's eye, rising attentively by way of his hands and arms, questioned upward and upward to the muscles around his mouth, and Death-in-Life answered, *I am coming*. (p. 13)

The focus on what lies inside the body and which holds the truth about the body turns the latter into a territory awaiting investigation and anticipates the whole play upon poison on which the narrative hinges. Indeed, the poison plots soon conjure up scenes of post-mortem examinations and hint at anatomical dissection, the latter promising access to the truth beneath layers of make-up. References to the body dissected and exhibited appear as significant landmarks in the narrative as when Dr. Hawbury offers to show Allan Armadale his «curious cases» at home – pickled specimens – and Armadale hears about the ship on which his father was murdered, or when Dr. Le Doux, the abortionist turned into a quack psychiatrist, welcomes Lydia Gwilt to plot the murder of Allan Armadale and takes her to his office where «shapeless dead creatures of a dull white colour float[ing] in yellow liquid» (p. 588), as emblems of medical authority, are on display on shelves.

As argued above, in Victorian Britain, the politics of viewing often went hand-in-hand with the issue of taste. This was particularly the case when viewers were invited to gaze at the displayed corpses in the Morgue in Paris, as Charles Dickens underlined, or at preserved body parts dried or suspended in alcohol in medical museums as the former lecturer at Kahn's museum suggested. The references to such collections in sensation novels is in keeping with the type of realism that this popular genre offered – much more graphic than mainstream realism and inviting readers to unveil the secrets of the (female) character's bodies. The embedded motifs referring to the material culture of medicine functioned thus as so many tell-tale motifs illuminating the impropriety of novels regarded as culturally unrefined and unfit for young and impressionable women.

It is therefore not surprising that the last part of Collins's novel, which takes place in Le Doux's medical establishment for nervous patients, should hinge upon allusions to autopsies. While Gwilt had so far used domestic poisons, inspired by contemporary criminal cases of female poisoners (although medical witnesses' opinions differed as to the poison she had used to kill her first husband), the last part of the narrative yokes together the use of poisons and the medical field. Le Doux advises Gwilt to use his miraculous poison to get rid of Allan Armadale, mentioning the

legal autopsies generally practised on corpses in cases of suspected poisoning, as the one practised on Gwilt's first husband (p. 527).⁶

Our Stout Friend by himself, is a most harmless and useful medicine. He is freely dispensed every day to tens of thousands of patients all over the civilized world. He has made no romantic appearances in courts of law; he has excited no breathless interest in novels; he has played no terrifying part on the stage. There he is, an innocent, inoffensive creature, who troubles nobody with the responsibility of locking him up! *But* bring him into contact with something else – introduce him to the acquaintance of a certain common mineral Substance, of a universally accessible kind, broken into fragments; provide yourself with (say) six doses of our Stout Friend, and pour those doses consecutively on the fragments I have mentioned, at intervals of not less than five minutes. Quantities of little bubbles will rise at every pouring; collect the gas in those bubbles, and convey it into a closed chamber – and let Samson himself be in that closed chamber, our Stout Friend will kill him in half-an-hour! Will kill him slowly, without his seeing anything, without his smelling anything, without his feeling anything but sleepiness. Will kill him and tell the whole College of Surgeons nothing, if they examine him after death, but that he died of apoplexy or congestion of the lungs! What do you think of *that*, my dear lady, in the way of mystery and romance? Is our harmless Stout Friend as interesting *now* as if he rejoiced in the terrible popular fame of the Arsenic and the Strychnine which I keep locked up there? (p. 642)

Unlike arsenic or strychnine, therefore, Le Doux's chemical substance will deceive the anatomist's gaze. The motif of poison thus discreetly introduces the world of dissection into the narrative, offering us an image of the body seen from inside – a body opened and examined by medical professionals and subjected to the medical gaze. Although the word «dissection» never appears, as in the case of Gwilt's husband in which the dissecting activity remains concealed under the term «examination of the body» (p. 530),⁷ «Our Stout Friend» works in tandem with the specimens exhibited in Le Doux's office, building up a Gothic network linked with medical research. Despite Le Doux's claims that his sanatorium proposes a modern and gentle treatment of its inmates, his specimens evoke the high number of dissections performed on insane patients in the eighteenth

6 From the thirteenth century autopsies were ordered in legal proceedings when death from poison was suspected (Reiser 1981, p. 11).

7 As Elizabeth Hurren explains, the word «dissection» long remained concealed behind that of «anatomical examination» (Hurren 2012, p. 28).

century and throughout the nineteenth century, Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) in France conducting around 250 «openings» to prove the absence of lesion and justify his moral treatment.⁸ The rise of autopsies with the work of Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828) and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1766-1832) or François-Joseph Victor Broussais (1772-1838), all looking for the seats of diseases (see Gall, Spurzheim 1812, vol. 2 ; Broussais 1828), shows how Collins's novels found their source of inspiration in medical research and the development of mental physiology. In addition, modelled on Charles Reade's Dr. Sampson in *Hard Cash*, and compared, like Sampson, to William Harvey (1578-1657) and Edward Jenner (1749-1823), who respectively discovered the circulation of blood and the vaccination against smallpox, both practising many dissections, Le Doux claims he can not only prove Allan Armadale mad («to assert that he exhibited symptoms of mental alienation after your marriage») but also incurable - which would demand an autopsy: «I can certify his brain to have been affected by one of those mysterious disorders, eminently incurable, eminently fatal, in relation to which medical science is still in the dark» (Sutherland 1995, p. 634).

When Gwilt eventually uses «Our Stout Friend» to poison Armadale, she realizes Armadale and Midwinter have changed rooms. She rescues Midwinter and commits suicide, inhaling the toxic air. As Le Doux had foretold, the medical diagnosis is mistaken, and the conclusion that Gwilt died of apoplexy suggests that an autopsy has certainly been practised on the villainess's corpse. As this example shows, therefore, the introduction of drugs as a criminal weapon in narratives such as *Armadale* goes beyond mere references to celebrated cases of female poisoners. Poisons take readers into the world of dissection and anatomical research, showing the body that beauty specialists model and shape through the looking-glass: opened up to the gaze of doctors, subjected to their blades, the body, as anatomical object, participates in the construction of horror. However, it refuses to deliver its secrets - the villains' poisons remaining undetectable. Lydia Gwilt, whose smooth appearances never betray her criminal nature, remains a sealed body - an intriguing corpse.

Looking at such sometimes marginal references to the world of anatomy and images of the body dissected may thus enable critics to understand why the sensation novel was not solely condemned on the grounds of its mechanical plots and use of repetition - matching therefore the common belief that popular genres, from the rise of the Gothic as a popular genre, perverted the «tastes» of the (feminine) public (see Townshend, Wright 2014, p. 55). The study of references or allusions to the world of anatomy in novels such as *Armadale* lays bare the corporeality of the

8 Pinel will eventually discover lesions, leading him to believe some of his patients were incurable (Goldstein 2001, p. 90).

body on which sensation fiction capitalized and which was denounced by critics on account of its «morbid taste». Like the anatomical gaze of Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe, the sensation genre's stress on bodies subverted bourgeois literary taste, explaining why the «surgical» novels were condemned, just as women were regularly forbidden entry to medical museums. The «nakedness of truth», as Lady Blessington put it when she first entered the Specola museum in Florence and saw the displayed anatomical Venuses and «the disgusting details of the animal economy in all its hideous and appalling nakedness and truth» (Blessington 1839, p. 215), were as much shocking to the Victorians as popular fiction promising to uncover the secrets and bodies of the Victorian angels of the house.

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