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I argue that one of the defining features of the sensation novel of the 1860s is its investment in the question of whether it is possible to read and identify bodies through the science of physiognomy. Many sensation novelists manifest their interest in this topic not only in their physiognomic descriptions but also through their portrayal of various threats to bodily legibility, including “naturally” illegible faces, extreme disfigurements, and disguise. In doing so, sensation novelists draw upon ongoing debates in the periodical press and the wider culture about the potential problems of physiognomy.

I contend that some of the most radical sensation novels in regard to physiognomy, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, challenge the way readers think about both real bodies and “realistic” literature by rejecting physiognomy as a dependable tool to read character or distinguish between individuals. By examining more conservative sensation novels, including Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* and Wilkie Collins’s *No Name* and *The Moonstone*, I demonstrate not only the diverse opinions sensation novelists express in regard to physiognomy, but also in respect to one of the science’s underlying assumptions, the belief in essential identity. By analyzing physiognomy and disguise in these novels, it becomes clear that many sensation novels uphold at least some aspects of essential
identity. I assert that sensation novels are most likely to use disguise to reject essentialist beliefs regarding social class and least likely to use disguise to reject essentialist beliefs about race. Although sensation novelists of the ‘60s challenge essentialist beliefs regarding gender by depicting “masculine” women, they prove surprisingly reluctant to extend this critique by presenting female characters who succeed at male disguise. In her 1876 novel *Her Father’s Name*, Marryat draws attention to this problem and depicts a heroine who successfully passes as a man. Although physiognomy falls out of public favor by the 1870s and Marryat’s novel contains many progressive critiques regarding gender, she refuses to totally reject the legibility of the body and essentialist beliefs of identity, demonstrating physiognomy’s continued influence during the 1870s and beyond.
In the article “Physiognomy” (1852), written for the Quarterly Review eight years before the first British sensation novel was published, the writer, critic, and art historian Lady Elizabeth Eastlake asserts that the human face is the only immediate and infallible proof of identity:

[The human countenance is] the great medium of recognition between man and man. The face is not only the appointed badge of distinction and proof of identity, but it is the sole proof which is instantaneous—an evidence not collected by effort, study, or time, but obtained and apprehended in a moment; and that, as often as not, an unprepared moment. […] What else but a power rapid and unerring as this could preserve society from the most bewildering confusions and fatal mistakes! How else, in the similarity of age, size, dress, and habits in thousands of individuals, should one man convince another of what he knows so well—namely, that he is himself! (62-63)

In this article, Eastlake acknowledges the urgent need for a failsafe system of personal identification and recommends the practice of reading and recognizing the human face as the fastest and surest way to this end. In the wake of increased urbanization and mobilization, as the Victorians traded the familiar faces of neighbors for the anonymous crowds of the city streets, they needed a way to process and make sense of “the simultaneous overload and lack of human information” offered by these bustling urban environments (Pearl 10). Eastlake explains that when most Victorians look at a face they depend upon both their ability to recognize and distinguish it from all other faces and upon their physiognomic skill to interpret the meaning of the face’s unique physical features. She observes, “[o]ur faces are our friends or our foes before the tribunal of the world, first identifying us and then giving us a character” (66). While Eastlake expresses some reservations about particular physiognomic methods and warns against judging people prematurely, she ultimately suggests that God has made each human face distinct and legible and that, when used correctly, the powers of recognition and physiognomic assessment can help people navigate their increasingly complex social interactions.
In this dissertation I argue that one of the defining features of the sensation novel of the 1860s is its investment in the question of whether it is indeed possible to read and identify bodies through the science of physiognomy. Many sensation novelists manifest their interest in this topic not only in their physiognomic descriptions but also through their portrayal of various threats to bodily legibility, including “naturally” illegible faces, extreme disfigurements, and disguise. In doing so, sensation novelists draw upon ongoing debates in the periodical press and the wider culture about the potential problems of physiognomy. However, like the writers in the periodical press, sensation novelists diverge in their beliefs regarding this science, with some refuting it, others upholding it, and still others falling somewhere in between.

I contend that some of the most radical sensation novels in regard to physiognomy, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), challenge the way readers think about both real bodies and “realistic” literature. As I discuss in further detail in the chapter summaries that follow, in *Lady Audley’s Secret* Braddon discredits the physiognomic belief that a person’s face and body reflect his or essential identity, particularly social class and morality. Similarly, in *The Woman in White*, Collins problematizes the physiognomic belief in facial distinctiveness and proposes that people put too much stock in their ability to recognize and distinguish between bodies. By rejecting physiognomy as a failsafe means to read character and identify individuals, Braddon and Collins challenge the realist novel’s position of superiority and its mode of physical description and characterization. In effect, sensation novelists take a scientific theory that many people use to navigate their daily lives, and which practically all respectable, canonical authors draw upon to make “realistic” characters, and reject the notion that these characters are, in fact, realistic. Ironically, some of the
earliest and most radical sensation novels offer more realistic depictions of the body than realist novels do, precisely because they reject physiognomy and the legibility of the body.

I also examine sensation novels that take a conservative approach to physiognomy by defending the science despite obvious threats to bodily legibility. In doing so, I demonstrate not only the diverse opinions sensation novelists express in regard to physiognomy, but also in respect to one of the science’s underlying assumptions—the belief in essential identity.

Traditionally, critics of the sensation novel have characterized the genre as representing identity as fluid rather than fixed. For example, in their introduction to *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* (2006), Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina observe, “[a]t the heart of many sensation novels lies the recognition of the fluidity of identity. Rather than embracing essentialist notions of class, gender, race, and religion, the sensation novelists often complicate and at times defy them” (Harison and Fantina xxi). However, by analyzing physiognomy and disguise, it becomes clear that many sensation novels uphold at least some aspects of essential identity. Sensation novelists are most willing to reject the belief that social class is a form of essential identity; however, some novels, such as Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), position even social class as a permanent, biological inheritance that always remains visible on the body’s surfaces. As we shall see in my discussions of Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) and Florence Marryat’s *Her Father’s Name* (1876), sensation novelists are far less likely to refute essentialist beliefs regarding race. Somewhere between their relatively open-minded views regarding social class and closed-minded views regarding race, lies their exploration of essentialist beliefs regarding gender, which varies across time. While sensation novelists of the ‘60s challenge these essentialist views by depicting “masculine” female characters who transgress gender norms, they prove surprisingly reluctant to extend this critique by representing
female characters who successfully pass as men. By the 1870s, however, Marryat draws attention to this omission and crafts a heroine who excels at passing in male disguise.

In selecting the primary texts for this dissertation, I chose to highlight a particular subset of sensation novels with plots that involve disguised bodies. This focus led me to consider the ways in which sensation novelists use disguise to support both progressive and conservative views of physiognomy and bodily legibility. Physiognomists position disguise as a form of intentional deceit: as a way to hide, cover, or alter the “natural” physiognomic features to prevent viewers from either reading a person’s character or identifying an individual successfully. However, in many sensation novels, the “natural” surfaces of the body become complicit in—indeed, an integral part of—characters’ disguises. In some novels, characters’ “natural” physiognomic features actually obscure identity and subtle or dramatic changes to a character’s physical appearance make it difficult to recognize him or her. Such disguises prove particularly disturbing for contemporary readers when the person adopting the disguise hails from a disempowered group—women, the working-classes, colonial subjects—and when the illegibility of the body proves widespread. However, some sensation novelists position the body as an integral part of disguise to reassure their readers that most bodies remain legible. In these novels, one exceptional character has the ability to disguise him- or herself because of certain innate physical traits, but the author suggests that most people lack these features and consequently cannot disguise themselves. In effect, the inborn capacity for disguise functions as yet another type of essential identity, and often figures as an especially rare gift. As a result, readers get to vicariously experience the seemingly subversive pleasures of disguise within an extremely safe and non-threatening context. As we shall see, in both progressive and conservative depictions of disguise, the body becomes a site of power struggle. For the oppressed, disguise sometimes
offers a chance to seize forbidden rights and opportunities, but other characters may employ it to reinforce existing power structures.

**Definition of Key Terms**

The sensation novel, a classification first used to describe Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), was both an intensely popular and widely criticized genre of fiction. It was “sensational” in several senses of the word: it provoked the public’s interest and excitement through dramatic, sensational plots; it drew inspiration from sensational newspaper reports describing recent cases of murder, divorce, and bigamy; it was believed to act directly upon the reader’s nerves, producing physiological sensations, such as accelerated heart rate and sweaty palms; and, because of this, it was famously denounced in 1863 by critic H.L. Mansel for “preaching to the nerves instead of the judgment” (482). Mansel objected to the sensation novel because he believed its shocking, fast-paced plots worked upon the reader’s body rather than upon his or her mind. Indeed, many of Mansel’s contemporaries claimed that readers would become addicted to these “unhealthy” plots, which frequently involve sensational crimes and characters who transgress traditional class and gender norms. While the sensation novel is a hybrid genre that draws upon many earlier forms, including stage melodrama, Gothic fiction, Penny Dreadfuls, and Newgate novels, critics worried about its distinctive cross-class appeal: the sensation novel was not only popular in the working-class home, but also amongst middle-class, female readers.¹

To delineate the importance of physiognomy in the sensation novel genre, first I must explain what I mean by “physiognomy.” For Victorians who believed in physiognomy, both real and fictional bodies were thought of as legible texts that could be read to reveal information

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¹ For more information on the many popular genres that influenced the sensation novel, see *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (2011), edited by Pamela K. Gilbert. Also see my discussion of the influence of stage melodrama on *East Lynne* in Chapter 3.
about an individual’s identity. In fact, Johann Kaspar Lavater, the eighteenth-century pastor who popularized the science in its modern form, described physiognomy as the study of “the original language of nature,” a “divine alphabet” inscribed upon the human exterior by the hand of God (“Lavater” 258). According to Lavater, God crafts each individual’s distinct physical features to reflect his or her unique personality. By examining such physical features as the size of the forehead, the shape of the nose, or the thickness of the lips, Lavater argued, one could gain insight into a person’s intelligence, morality, and character, and detect his or her membership in certain groups, such as a particular social class or race. However, Lavater also conceded that because the human body (and identity) contained such variation, the task of discovering each “letter” of the vast “divine alphabet” and their meanings would be a monumental, multi-generational undertaking. By the nineteenth century, physiognomists participating in this project had published hundreds of manuals that claimed to crack the code of the human form. While most Victorians were aware of the general principles of physiognomy and recognized its obvious appeal, they debated the truth and dependability of this science.

Readers were highly invested in this topic during the 1860s, the decade in which the first sensation novels were published and the genre reached its zenith of popularity. As I explain in Chapter 2, this is because the 1860s was also the last decade in which the periodical press hotly debated the science’s merits and potential, and the final years in which many Victorians relied on physiognomy in their daily lives. However, despite the sensation novel’s investment in the physiognomic debates at this crucial time, and the vast amount of scholarship on the genre’s enduring interest in the body and identity, critics have offered very few observations on the themes of physiognomy and bodily legibility in these novels.
Review of Criticism on Physiognomy in Victorian Literature

The majority of existing scholarship on physiognomy in Victorian literature focuses on the way a small set of canonical authors, particularly Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot, employ physiognomy within their novels. To some extent, it is understandable that critics interested in how novelists employed physiognomy in straightforward ways to enhance their characterization would be drawn to some of the period’s most famous examples of the realist tradition. After all, the realist novel has been celebrated for its complex and nuanced treatment of character, and, during this period, physical description and character were intimately linked: the most “realistic” physical descriptions were those nuanced enough to accurately reflect the character’s complex identity. Moreover, novelists like Dickens and Brontë are well known for their engagement with nineteenth-century pseudosciences like physiognomy and phrenology. Nineteenth-century physiognomists such as Eden Warwick actually cited Dickens’s novels as proof of their physiognomical theories. Dickens himself also famously defended the science in his 1856 article “On the Demeanor of Murderers” describing the notorious poisoner, William Palmer. He asserts, “Nature never writes a bad hand. Her writing, as it may be read in the human countenance, is invariably legible, if we come at all trained to the reading of it” (269). In the case of both Brontë and Dickens, this interest in the correspondence of the inner person and the body manifested itself not only in their fiction, but also in their daily lives. Both authors had their skulls read by eminent phrenologists of the day, and, in her letters describing her experience, Brontë praises the accuracy of the phrenologist and recalls the pleasure of being seen for who she really is (Dames 367).

At its most basic level, scholarship on physiognomy in the Victorian novel confirms the proliferation of physiognomic descriptions within the period’s literature and demonstrates its impact on authors’ characterization. At their best, arguments about an author’s straightforward
use of physiognomy explain how authors use physical characteristics to reveal information they would not otherwise be able to express. Perhaps most famously, in “The Heroine of Irregular Features” (1981) Jeanne Fahenstock surveys a wide range of Victorian texts and concludes that authors conveyed potentially scandalous information about their female characters that decorum forbade them from addressing directly. She observes, “the physiognomical description was a way of suggesting without proclaiming, of imputing intelligence, caprice, and even sexuality to heroines without indecorous explicitness” (326). Some arguments also usefully explain the extent to which not only a character’s physiognomy, but also his or her physiognomic skill, reveals information about morality, intelligence, and maturity. For example, Graeme Tytler argues that in Charlotte and Anne Brontë’s novels a character’s growth as a physiognomist correlates to his or her improvements in these other areas.²

However, in recent years, critics have discussed not only how Victorian novelists enrich their characterization by drawing upon physiognomy, but also the ways in which they qualify their support for the science and caution readers about potential problems with physiognomic assessments. Yet because critics focus on the works of a handful of novelists who continue to use physiognomy in a straightforward manner in many of their character descriptions, the novelists’ critiques of physiognomy are necessarily limited. Novelists like Brontë, Dickens, and Eliot tend to problematize physiognomic judgments not by rejecting the science’s fundamental premise that the body is legible, but by pointing out that it is very difficult to accurately and objectively interpret a person’s physical features.

² See, for example, Tytler’s “Physiognomy and Treatment of Love in Shirley” (2011), “Physiognomy in Anne Brontë’s Fiction” (2012), and “Physiognomy and Identity in Villette” (2013).
Critics such as Nicholas Dames and Tytler argue along these lines that novelists including Brontë and Eliot highlight the difficulty of making objective physiognomic judgments and, in particular, show how beauty and love may affect a person’s ability to read another’s face. In his discussion of Villette, for example, Dames points out that the protagonist Lucy, who is usually a perceptive reader of bodies and character, “is reduced to the most standard novelistic terms” when she first beholds Graham, describing him in “what we might call the traditional dyad of tall and handsome” rather than in more precise physiognomic terms (373). In this and other cases discussed by both Dames and Tytler, it is not that the beautiful face is illegible—typically, the character’s features, analyzed individually and in aggregate, still reveal his or her identity—but the observer, temporarily dazzled by the character’s overwhelming beauty, loses the ability to register and interpret specific details of the character’s physical appearance. Tytler points out that not only beauty, but also love, may impact the observer’s ability to read the beloved’s face. While, in the case of Eliot’s Adam Bede and Philip Wakem, unrequited love sharpens the lover’s perception, rendering these characters more “alert to every detail of, and every change in, the beloved’s face,” in other cases, it may blind the lover to the beloved’s faults (“The Lines and Lights” 37). Tytler observes that Eliot’s novels highlight the subjectivity of the physiognomic judgment and that, oftentimes, it reveals more “about the person behind it” than about the person being read (“The Lines and Lights” 50). Although, unlike Brontë, Eliot’s letters contain skeptical comments about the validity of physiognomy and the narrators of her novels occasionally take jabs at the science, Tytler argues that “there is much in her fiction that is utterly

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affirmative of physiognomy” and that her criticism of the science stems more from her awareness of the problems that may occur when reading the body than from the body’s illegibility itself (“The Lines and Lights” 50).

As other scholars have pointed out, these novels depict not only the perceptive reader disarmed by the beautiful or beloved face, but also universally poor readers who struggle to read any face. Michael Hollington, who has published several articles on physiognomy in Dickens’s work, points out that the author’s early novels such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) contain numerous characters who regularly misinterpret others’ bodies. In these novels, Dickens hypothesizes about why bodies have become so difficult to read: as society moves further and further from its “natural” state, some people wrongly judge a person’s identity based on socially-constructed external signs, such as clothing, rather than on innate physical features. In addition, some people intentionally manipulate their physical appearance to subvert physiognomic readings and deceive others about their character. However, as Hollington points out, Dickens’s novels also tend to include one or more skilled readers who overcome these challenges and successfully interpret even the trickiest faces. In Dickens’s early novels, Cruikshank’s illustrations may even allow the reader to exhibit his or her own superior physiognomic skill, by interpreting the characters’ physical features for themselves, comparing them to characters’ physiognomic descriptions of fellow characters, and making their own judgments about both the characters’ identities and the novels’ skilled and unskilled readers (“Dickens and Cruikshank” 243).

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While most critical analyses of physiognomy in the canonical realist novel highlight the ways in which authors complicate their support of the science by highlighting the many factors that may skew physiognomic judgments, a few critics point out that some of these novels do come closer to rejecting the feasibility of physiognomy and the legibility of the body. For example, Maria Teresa Chialant and Hollington both point out that, although Dickens uses physiognomy in straightforward ways for much of his career, “Dickens’s perception of the relationship between the exterior and the interior of an individual becomes more and more complex in his later work” (Chialant 237). For example, in “The Live Heieroglyphic: Physiologie and Physiognomy in Martin Chuzzlewit” (1993), Hollington explains that this novel presents “a multiplicity of perspectives upon physiognomy, negative and positive,” and pursues not only distinctions “between degrees of fitness and skill in the deciphering of the codes in question” but also “between degrees of legibility and illegibility in the surfaces of human appearance” (61). One interesting feature of Martin Chuzzlewit that Hollington identifies (and that comes up in other Victorian novels as well) is the “illegible type (practically impossible to read, but a type nonetheless)” (65). A character who fits the “illegible type” does have, as Hollington points out, a body that is practically impossible to read—striking a blow to the science of physiognomy and the underlying premise of bodily legibility. However, observant characters quickly identify the illegible type and label the character as a “mystery,” “riddle,”

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5 Some of these attempts are unsuccessful. For example, in “‘Neutral Physiognomy’: The Unreadable Faces of Middlemarch” John Epstein tries to argue that, contrary to Tytler’s analysis of Eliot’s novels, Middlemarch foregrounds the illegible body and that, in particular women with “neutral physiognomies” purposefully present themselves as illegible to the men in the novel, because they realize “how powerfully illegibility can destabilize and intimidate the masculine mind” (132). However, Epstein cannot offer any evidence that Eliot’s female characters control their innate physical features (because they do not), so his analysis necessarily focuses on non-physiognomic signs of their “neutrality” such as their facial expressions and strategic speech acts and silences.
“enigma,” or “sphynx.” Because the observer can identify the person’s body as illegible from the outset, he or she is less likely to trust the person or be led astray.

While critics tend to examine the realist novel rather than the sensation novel when analyzing physiognomy in Victorian literature, scholars do readily acknowledge the centrality of both the body and identity to the sensation novel genre. Following the publication of Winifred Hughes’s *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (1980), an increasing number of literary critics turned their attention to the sensation novel. Much of this criticism, particularly the work of scholars such as D.A. Miller, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Nicholas Daly, focuses on the body in the sensation novel.6 These works explain representations of the body by examining a variety of topics, such as disease, medicine, the nerves, and criminality, as well as the gendered, classed, and raced bodies of the novel’s characters. In addition, this body of criticism explains how contemporary reviewers described these “highly-spiced” and “diseased” texts as deadening the reader’s palette and infecting him or her with dangerous sensations, appetites, and ideas.

Similarly, critics such as Johnathan Loesberg, Patrick Brantlinger, Lyn Pykett, and Jenny Bourne Taylor all cite identity as a key theme of the sensation novel. In one of the earliest articles on this topic, “The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction” (1986), Loesberg studies the influence of the parliamentary debates of the 1850s and ‘60s on the sensation novel’s plot and structure, arguing that “identity and its loss” is a “constant concern” of the sensation

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6 Some particularly influential texts on the body in sensation fiction include: D.A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988), which provides a Foucauldian reading of the novel’s disciplinary function, while discussing the physiological effects of the text’s sensations on both readers and characters; Pamela K. Gilbert’s *Disease Desire and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (1997), which explores the rhetoric of contemporary sensation novel reviews and shows that they position the genre as a diseased and feminized form, particularly in the hands of women writers; and Nicholas Daly’s *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (2004), which analyzes how sensation drama and sensation fiction responded to technological advances that were thought to act upon the nerves. In my own discussions of gendered, classed, and raced bodies, I draw upon the work of many additional critics who examine the body in the sensation novel, including Krista Lysack, Katherine Monteweiler, Helena Michie, Ann Cvetkovich, Andrew Maunder, Lillian Craton, Ronald R. Thomas, and Lillian Nayder.
novel and that, in particular, “sensation novels evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity” (117). Broadening this scope to include gender identity, in *The Sensation Novel: From the Woman in White to The Moonstone* (1994) Pykett points out that “Collins’s sensation novels are seen to focus on the ways in which individual identities are formed within specific cultural codes, most notably those relating to class and gender, and within particular social institutions such as marriage and family” (15). Similarly, in *The ‘Improper’ Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992), Pykett explains the ways in which the sensation novel’s representation of transgressive, masculine women influenced fin de siècle New Woman fiction.

However, despite the centrality of the body and identity in much sensation novel criticism, very few critics have discussed the sensation novel’s representations of the body and identity *within* the context of physiognomy. Most criticism on physiognomy in the British novel omits sensation fiction from consideration, and those few critics who do discuss the sensation novel’s contributions to the physiognomic debates do so only in passing and while discussing a very limited set of texts. Typically, critics interested in physiognomy briefly allude to *Lady Audley’s Secret* and focus on Collins’s œuvre.

As part of the very limited body of criticism on physiognomy in the sensation novel, some scholars point out examples of sensation novel characters whose physiognomies match their personality and behavior. For example, in “The Heroine of Irregular Features,” Fahenstock discusses not only the realist novelists’ straightforward use of physiognomy, but also some of Collins’s heroines from *The Woman in White, No Name*, and *The Law and the Lady* whose features reflect their personality traits. More recently, in “Reading Faces: Physiognomy and the Depiction of the Heroine in the Fiction of Wilkie Collins” (2009), Jessica Cox similarly points
out examples of Collins’s legible heroines, and adds that even some characters with contradictory physiognomies, like No Name’s Magdalen Vanstone, may actually have bodies that at least partially reveal their character. In addition, both Jenny Bourne Taylor’s In the Secret Theatre of the Home (1988) and Lucy Hartley’s Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression (2001) contain a few examples of characters whose misreadings of the body stem from their own mistakes rather than from the body’s inherent illegibility.

It is important to note that sensation novelists continue to draw upon the language of this science in their character descriptions and often depict at least some characters according to standard physiognomic rules, because this demonstrates that, contrary to some contemporary critics, sensation novelists were not simply unaware of physiognomic principles. Contemporary critics assessed novelists’ characters for their physiognomic accuracy and realism, and authors who intentionally broke physiognomic rules risked being cast as amateurs who did not know enough about human appearance and behavior to craft believable characters. However, because sensation novelists establish their knowledge of basic physiognomic principles, in the moments when they do break these conventions we can assume that they do so deliberately.

Yet, while sensation novelists demonstrate that they are aware of physiognomic conventions, their novels are most famous for undermining readers’ expectations through their characters’ physiognomies. In particular, critics hold up Braddon’s Lady Audley (and, less often, Collins’s Lydia Gwilt from Armadale) as prime examples of sensational characters whose

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7 See my discussions of Cox’s specific arguments in Chapters 3 and 6.

8 In Chapter 3, I provide an example of this type of critical response. Initially, reviewers criticized Braddon for creating an “unrealistic” anti-heroine precisely because she broke physiognomic, literary, and gender conventions when crafting her heroine.
physiognomies do not accurately reveal their personalities. These critics rightly point out that a misleading or totally illegible physiognomy shocks readers and allows the author to avoid revealing the character’s ultimate fate too soon—two important goals for the sensation novel, which strives to shock and scandalize readers with tales of domestic crime, mystery, and detection. However, critics often mention these characters and their illegible physiognomies only in passing, without considering the novel’s larger thematic investment in this topic and its social and cultural implications. In addition, because they consider only a few characters from the most famous sensation novels, these scholars do not reveal the diverse opinions regarding physiognomy expressed by sensation novelists.

The Sensation Novel’s Investment in Physiognomy, Disguise, and Detection

The cultural relevance of physiognomy during this period affected much more than sensation novelists’ characterization. Indeed, I argue that many of the genre’s most iconic plot elements and defining themes revolve around the question of whether or not a person’s physical appearance reflects his or her essential identity and whether it is possible to use physiognomy to navigate one’s social interactions. Taking their lead from debates playing out in contemporary periodicals and newspapers, most sensation novels of the 1860s obsessively document the many possible threats to bodily legibility: faces that naturally defied physiognomic rules, disfigurements that permanently altered the appearance of the body and threatened to obscure its (supposed) God-given legibility, and disguises adopted to hide a person’s true identity and subvert physiognomic readings. Many sensation novelists writing in the 1860s also construct

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9 See Laurence Talairach-Vielmas’s *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels* (2007) and Cox’s “Reading Faces: Physiognomy and the Depiction of the Heroine in the Fiction of Wilkie Collins” (2009). I also discuss this further in Chapter 3.
plots involving stolen, mistaken, or assumed identities to imagine and represent the potential consequences of believing the body reveals more than it does.

Sensation novelists even structure their narratives around the process of disguise, deception, and detection. Kathleen Tillotson famously characterizes these texts as “novels with a secret” (quoted in Brantlinger “What is ‘Sensational’” 1). Building upon this observation in “What is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?” (1982), Brantlinger explains that, in these precursors to modern detective fiction, sensation novelists developed “new narrative strategies […] to tantalize the reader by withholding information rather than divulging it” (1-2).10 Because of these narrative decisions, readers remain suspicious of all the characters and events that unfold in the sensation novel’s pages and assume there are hidden truths they must (and will) discover before the novel’s end. Thus, the sensation novel trains readers to anticipate deception and undisclosed truths, but also typically fulfills their desire, at the end of the novel, for revelation and closure.

In addition to these structuring principles, which greatly shape the reader’s experience of the texts, oftentimes the novel’s setting forewarns that many things—including characters’ bodies—are not what they seem. Typically, sensation novels take place in England in the middle- or upper-class home; however, sensation novelists present this setting not as an idyllic domestic haven, but as the backdrop for terrible crimes, violence, and treachery. Indeed, sensation fiction is often referred to as “the domestic Gothic” because it “brings home” in all senses of the phrase the secrets and horrors of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel. As Elizabeth Langland argues in

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10 Most famously, the narrators of sensation novels tend to intentionally withhold key information from the reader, dropping hints about persons and events without fully explaining them. Brantlinger also points out that in many sensation novel plots the amateur detective figure in some ways replaces the narrator as the reader’s source of information and that because he or she gathers information incrementally, it creates an air of mystery and suspense.
“Enclosure Acts: Framing Women’s Bodies in Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*” (2000), just as private spaces become the scenes of amateur detective investigations, so too characters’ (particularly women’s) bodies fall under scrutiny and are often revealed to be hiding secrets regarding their identity (9-11).

Indeed, the very language of detection the sensation novel’s professional and amateur detectives so often employ—they must understand circumstances “cloaked” in mystery, “unmask” villains, and “unveil” the truth—is inextricably linked to the body. These metaphors cast detection as the act of uncovering and viewing the “natural” body, which they position as the primary source of truth. They describe the detective as a man or woman who looks beneath artificial man-made coverings to reveal the truth that inevitably lies beneath them.

The Body as an Epistemophilic Project

In this way, the sensation novel positions the body as an “epistemophilic project”—to borrow a phrase from literary theorist Peter Brooks (*Body Work*). In his fascinating study *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (1993), Brooks argues that “modern narratives appear to produce a semioticization of the body which is matched by a somatization of story: a claim that the body must be a source and a locus of meanings, and that stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significations” (*Body Work* xii). In approaching the body as an epistemophilic project, sensation novelists imbue the fictional bodies in their texts with meaning using both physiognomic signs—like those found in many types of fiction, including, most famously, the realist novel—and more “artificial” techniques drawn from stage melodrama.

I suggest the sensation novel mediates between the realist and melodramatic modes of character description, particularly in its depiction of characters’ physical appearance and the
legibility of their bodies. The realist novel tends to depict characters’ physical appearances and identities through the so-called realistic mode of lengthy, detailed, and nuanced physiognomic descriptions. In contrast, melodrama makes its characters’ bodies and identities legible through so-called artificial means, including exaggerated expressions and gestures; symbolic bodies, injuries, and props; and a few basic physical features that mark characters as one of a handful of recognizable “types.” Sensation novelists borrow from both genres in order to explore the body as an “epistemophilic project.” Along the way, they reinforce their beliefs about the legibility of real bodies by utilizing the “artificial” techniques that made melodramatic bodies meaningful.

Before I explain how the sensation novel mediates between the realist and melodramatic modes of character description, I must provide some background on eighteenth-century stage melodrama and the reasons why it had such an investment in the legibility of fictional bodies. As Brooks explains in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), in early stage melodramas, truth and meaning exist on the surface, particularly the highly-legible surfaces of the human body. Melodrama became a popular type of fringe-theatre in late eighteenth-century London and Paris, when only the official theatres holding government-issued patents were allowed to produce shows that integrated the spoken word (McWilliam 56). Because actors in the unlicensed theatres could not speak, they had to communicate all necessary information about the play’s characters and plot through alternative visual and aural cues. Consequently, the earliest modern melodramas had to rely almost entirely on the appearance of the actors’ bodies, props, and scenery, on the one hand, and the sound of musical cues, on the other, to create meaning for its predominantly working-class audience. In the absence of the spoken word, actors made their bodies meaningful through a variety of other techniques, such as exaggerated facial expressions and gestures,
symbolic bodies, injuries, and objects, and, different forms of bodily labels that proved a character’s identity or his or her relationship to another character.

In order to further help their audience members identify characters, follow the sequence of narrative events, and grasp the moral of these performances, writers of classic melodramas typically limit their cast of characters to a few easily-recognized melodramatic types, including the hero, heroine, and villain, and narrate a familiar storyline, the triumph of good over evil. Brooks explains that the classic eighteenth-century French melodrama presents a Manichean moral vision which pits absolute evil, personified in an aristocratic villain, against absolute virtue, personified in an innocent, working-class heroine (Melodramatic 52). He suggests that the plot of early melodrama centers on a “struggle for recognition of the sign of innocence,” which culminates, at the end of the play, in the discovery and condemnation of the villain’s attempts to subvert the moral order and the public vindication of the heroine (Melodramatic 52). While virtue (again, personified in the heroine) may not be immediately recognized as such by the other characters, the ultimate goal of classic melodrama is to “mak[e] the world morally legible” for its audience (Brooks Melodramatic 42). Even after the monopolies held by the patent-theatres were abolished during the French revolution and stage melodramas began incorporating dialogue, they retained many of the stylized conventions that allowed the melodramatic body to speak volumes without saying a word.

Traditionally, critics have positioned literary sensationalism—particularly its mode of characterization—in opposition to literary realism and as sharing more in common with other popular fiction genres, including melodrama. Contemporary reviews that sought to define (and condemn) sensation fiction disparaged the novels’ characters both because they allegedly lack complexity and because they behave in so-called “unrealistic” or “unbelievable” ways. For
example, in the omnibus review “Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon” (1863), W. Fraser Rae argues that in Lady Audley’s Secret and most of Braddon’s other fiction, “the personages are not like living beings” indicating “how thoroughly ignorant Miss Braddon is of the ways of the world and the motive springs of the heart” (186).\(^\text{11}\) Echoing contemporary reviewers, many twentieth-century critics agree that sensation novels, like the romances and particularly the melodramas that preceded them, prioritize plot over character. Brantlinger argues “the overriding feature of both melodrama and the sensation novel is the subordination of character to plot” (“What is ‘Sensational’” 12), adding “[t]he world of melodrama and of the sensation novel is very much one in which circumstances rule characters, propelling them through the intricate machinations of plot that act like fate” (“What is ‘Sensational’” 13). By dismissing the sensation novel’s characters both in terms of their complexity and their realism, both contemporary and twentieth-century critics may have perpetuated the belief that sensation novels have nothing to offer scholars interested in physiognomy in the Victorian novel.

More recently, some critics have come to question the assumed superiority and established position of literary realism during the 1860s as well as the strict opposition between realism and sensationalism. For example, in “Judged by a Purely Literary Standard: Sensation Fiction, Horizons of Expectation, and the Generic Construction of Victorian Realism” (2006), Richard Nemesvari argues “the sensation fiction controversy served not to oppose a new genre to a preexisting one,” but rather “that the formulation of ‘the sensational’ was an essential, constitutive strategy which reified ‘the realistic’ in ways which had been unachievable before” (Nemesvari 17). In this way, Nemesvari argues, Victorian reviewers both defined the parameters

\(^{11}\) In this review, Rae casts Braddon as a typical or representative sensation novelist, and suggests the same flaws that diminish the quality of her novels can be found in other specimens of the genre.
of literary realism and asserted its superiority by contrasting it to sensationalism (19). In a similar vein, critics such as Dianna Vianza and Devin Zuber dispute the claim that sensation novels prioritize plot to the detriment of character, arguing that, on the contrary, many sensation novels include well-developed characters.12

In constructing their characters, sensation novelists continue to include some form of physiognomic description in order to make a statement about whether or not real bodies reflect a person’s essential identity. Whether their physical descriptions borrow more from the realist novel or melodrama varies from novelist to novelist. Structurally, Collins’s physiognomic descriptions share much in common with those found in realist novels. He supplies lengthy and detailed physical descriptions for most of his major characters and, in some cases, fleshes them out as individuals rather than relying on standard character types. However, in some of his more radical novels, he also uses his physiognomic descriptions to emphasize the subjectivity of the reader and the illegibility of the body. While he typically pacifies critics to some degree by providing a partial explanation for why his characters’ bodies prove indistinguishable or illegible, from a physiognomic standpoint these explanations never go quite far enough to dismiss the troubling questions these illegible bodies raise.

Both Braddon and Wood tend to provide shorter physiognomic descriptions and rely more heavily on the physiognomic types found in melodrama. However, neither author presents the world as “morally legible” as in early melodrama, and both authors’ physiognomic descriptions convey important information about their stance on physiognomy and bodily

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12 See Dianna Vianza’s “Naturalism in Charles Reade’s Experimental Novel, Griffith Gaunt” and Devin Zuber’s “Sweedenborg and the Disintegration of Language in Sheridan Le Fanu’s Sensation Fiction” both published in Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre (2006). In part, the Victorian Sensations collection edited by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina aims to disrupt the belief that sensation fiction is “artistically (and morally) inferior to Victorian realism” and that these novels are “‘plot-driven’ as opposed to ‘character-driven’” (xii).
legibility despite their brevity. Braddon closely adheres to physiognomic types in order to better disprove them and she rejects certain types of essential identity in the process. In contrast, Wood uses her short physical descriptions in straightforward, non-critical ways in order to support the belief in bodily legibility and essential identity; however, even while pursuing this conservative goal, she uses physiognomic types in surprising ways, inviting readers to reconsider their beliefs about morality, social class, and the ideal woman. By the time Marryat writes Her Father’s Name in the mid-1870s, she has already begun to phase out physiognomy (in its traditional form) from her physical descriptions, but nonetheless incorporates racist physiognomic thinking drawn from anthropological and ethnographic sources in her depiction of the half-Brazilian heroine.

Regardless of whether a sensation novelist structures his or her physiognomic descriptions in ways reminiscent of literary realism, melodrama, or a different genre, in the sensation novel physiognomy always has real-world implications rooted in questions of power. While, for Brooks, who is heavily influenced by psychoanalytic criticism, the desire to know the body is always “constructed from sexual desire and curiosity” (Body Work 5), for the Victorians, the desire to know the body springs from a range of different motives. As I discuss in Chapter 2, some individuals simply seek the power to know the truth about the people already in their lives or those who wish to enter it. In particular, people hope to learn about the virtues and vices of potential wives, business partners, or servants before they enter into partnerships with them. As I explain in Chapter 5, the state also attempts to understand entire races by reading and identifying their bodies, and strives to solidify their power over colonized peoples in the process.

Today, we understand that detailed, nuanced physical descriptions that apply physiognomy in straightforward ways—the types of physical descriptions commonly found in the mid-nineteenth-century realist novel—are not inherently superior from an artistic standpoint,
nor do they accurately reflect what real bodies look like and how they function (in the sense that physical appearance does not actually reveal identity). And yet, contemporary critics’ championing of such novels (and specifically, such physical descriptions) as both artistically superior and realistic uncovers the ideological values lurking behind critics’ “artistic” judgments. The yoking of physiognomy and realism promotes a specific worldview, one that implicitly validates the science, its foundational premise of bodily legibility, and its underlying belief in essential identity. On the one hand, the radical sensation novels that reject physiognomy threaten both the realist novel’s superiority and this worldview. On the other hand, sensation novels that take a more conservative stance on physiognomy demonstrate that the sensation novel may reinforce some of the same ideologies as the realist novel.

In addition to their direct engagement with physiognomy, most sensation novelists continue to incorporate the “artificial” or purely fictional means of making the body legible drawn from melodrama. Again, different novels use these techniques in different ways. Some, like *Lady Audley’s Secret*, use them to provide information about characters’ identities to readers, wrap up their mystery plots, and achieve narrative closure without depending on physiognomy. In other novels, authors use these techniques to shape the reader’s experience of the text—specifically, the ease or difficulty with which the reader can read and identify fictional bodies—so that the reader’s experience interpreting fictional bodies mirrors the type of experience the author claims the reader will have in the real world. In some novels, such as *The Woman in White*, novelists use this strategy for progressive ends. Collins echoes the novel’s central message about the body—the observation that people put too much stock in their ability to read, recognize, and identify bodies—by compelling readers to admit they have misread the body of the novel’s villain, Count Fosco. While Fosco’s body appears quite legible and easy to
identify due to both his distinctive physiognomy and the literal inscriptions that mark his flesh, it turns out, at the end of the novel, he has been disguised all along. Using this strategy for more conservative ends in *East Lynne*, Wood reinforces the sense that physiognomy reveals essential identity and that even extreme disfigurement and disguise cannot obscure physiognomic truths, by rendering her heroine’s body hyper-legible through not only physiognomic signs, but also exaggerated expressions and gestures and symbolic disfigurement and disguise. In doing so, she positions the reader of the text as an expert reader of bodies, and casts the many misreadings that occur over the course of the novel as tragedies that could have been easily avoided, if only characters had paid more attention.

Through both physiognomy and the “artificial” or purely fictional techniques of melodrama, sensation novelists engage the reader’s desire to know the body. For the Victorians, an author’s use of physiognomy always has real-world implications. In contrast, melodramatic techniques—again, things like bodily inscriptions, highly exaggerated expressions and gestures, and symbolic objects and bodies—do not have a corollary in the real world. However, although from a purely rational perspective the “artificial” techniques drawn from melodrama should not impact the reader’s beliefs about bodily legibility, sensation novelists nonetheless use them to shape the reader’s experience of the text and support the novel’s stance on the legibility of real bodies.

In the end, just as Victorian authors including sensation novelists wrote stories onto and with the bodies of their fictional characters, so too did much of the Victorian public craft their own narratives—of superiority and inferiority, invisibility and hyper-visibility, truth and deception—onto and with the bodies of real people. Brooks notes that “[s]igning or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a
narrative body” and observes that some of the purely fictional signs authors used to accomplish this task, such as the croix de ma mère of classic melodrama, come to “loo[k] suspiciously like a linguistic signifier” (3). In the same way, the Victorians used Lavater’s “divine alphabet” to read the stories they believed they saw inscribed upon their neighbors’ faces. And as a part of this process of storytelling on and with the body, they looked to literature, including sensation fiction, to corroborate or contradict their master narratives.

**Chapter Summaries**

In Chapter 2, I provide a brief history of physiognomy and present original archival research that draws on a wide range of nineteenth-century newspaper and periodical articles discussing this science. While some historians have overemphasized the Victorians’ acceptance of and belief in physiognomy, I show that the Victorians passionately debated physiognomy’s potential and pitfalls. My archival research shows that the Victorians adopted different approaches for conducting physiognomic assessments, voiced contrary beliefs regarding who was capable of reading the body in this way, and maintained an awareness of physiognomy’s various problems and limitations. While the immediate purpose of this chapter is to provide a historical context for those that follow—for, as we shall see, sensation novelists examine the same flaws in the physiognomic system and threats to bodily legibility that troubled physiognomists and reviewers—I hope my archival research will assist Victorian scholars working on all genres to approach the topic of physiognomy with nuance and complexity.

In Chapter 3, I contend that Lady Audley’s Secret and The Woman in White launch radical critiques of physiognomy and the legibility of the body that challenge readers’ understanding of both real bodies and literary realism. By focusing on characters with illegible or unrecognizable bodies rather than on examples of poor readers, I highlight the types of physiognomic critiques that go beyond what one find in most realist novels and that disrupt the belief that a person’s
physical features indicate essential identity. I argue that in *Lady Audley’s Secret* in the same way that the anti-heroine’s “natural” physical features fail to reveal her immorality and do not change to reflect her crimes, Phoebe Marks’s innate physical features and resemblance to her upper-class mistress conceal her working-class origins. Although Lady Audley points out the possibility of changing one’s physical appearance to convey (false) information about one’s identity with the help of cosmetics and hair dye, such transformations prove unnecessary in *Lady Audley’s Secret* because Lady Audley’s and Phoebe’s innate features already project false information about their morality and social class, respectively.

In my discussion of *The Woman in White*, I analyze Collins’s rejection of another type of body-reading based on the physiognomic principle of facial distinctiveness: the seemingly fundamental ability to recognize the faces of the people one already knows. Like Braddon, Collins depicts two women who share an innate, twin-like resemblance despite their different social classes. When the novel’s villain switches the two women’s bodies and identities, Walter Hartright, the novel’s hero, attempts to establish his sweetheart’s identity through pseudo-legal means. However, Collins suggests that it is Laura’s face that goes on trial and her restored appearance that ultimately proves her identity. Collins uses this storyline to demonstrate how much people (wrongly) depend upon physical appearance as a means of identification. He further emphasizes this point by revealing at the end of the novel that the villain, Count Fosco, has been in disguise the entire time. To disguise himself, Fosco purposefully alters certain aspects of the body (by gaining an enormous amount of weight) and covers other parts of the body (by wearing a wig), and because he conforms to English stereotypes about effeminate Italians, these changes appear all the more convincing. Collins encourages readers to recognize the extent to which they trust in their own ability to read and identify bodies, and admit that, in the case of Count Fosco,
the character they thought they knew so well, their reading abilities have failed them. At the end of this chapter, I argue that many sensation novels borrow a technique from stage melodrama by labeling their characters’ bodies or possessions with a name or other means of identification. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon replaces the “divine alphabet” of physiognomy with actual letters that label characters’ bodies or possessions in order to achieve narrative closure without recourse to physiognomy. In *The Woman in White* Collins argues that even these seemingly straightforward bodily labels cannot be trusted and that readers may never truly know and understand either fictional or real bodies.

While, for some critics, the radical physiognomic critiques laid out in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman White* have come to represent the genre as a whole, I demonstrate that many sensation novels take a much more conservative approach to physiognomy, bodily legibility, and essential identity. Indeed, while many sensation novels dismiss the claim that social class functions as a form of essential identity, in *East Lynne* Wood upholds this belief. In Chapter 4, I argue that Wood considers both the ordinary ways in which British women adorn and partially cover their bodies with clothing, jewelry, and accessories, and the far more sensational ways in which the body’s appearance may be changed through disfigurement and disguise. Although Wood’s novel acknowledges many prospective threats to bodily legibility and dramatizes many moments in which one character misreads another, she ultimately defends the science of physiognomy and the ability of everyday people to read the body correctly.

In the first half of this chapter, I argue that, for Wood, women’s adornment practices have the potential to accentuate the information about a woman’s social class and morality that her physiognomy already reveals. Consequently, she presents women’s clothing and other accoutrements—the types of consumer goods Braddon and Collins suggest may be enlisted in
the service of disguise—as an opportunity to make the body more legible. In the second half of this chapter, I discuss Isabel’s dramatic disfigurement in a train wreck and the disguise she adopts afterwards “to make the change greater” (445). Wood combines disfigurement and disguise to create a worst-case-scenario, only to insist that, despite these drastic changes, certain aspects of Isabel’s identity, particularly her social class, remain legible and cannot be disguised. Moreover, Isabel’s body remains hyper-legible to readers even after all of these sensational changes. To accomplish this, Wood borrows stage melodrama’s exaggerated expressions and gestures to display Isabel’s highly-wrought emotions and its symbolic disfigurements and disguises to convey information about her sexual crimes, fallen social position, and acquisition of additional middle-class morals.

In Chapter 5, I contend that sensation novelists prove even less willing to reject essentialist beliefs regarding race. Although Collins readily dismisses the idea that social class functions as a permanent and intrinsic aspect of identity in The Woman in White, in The Moonstone he reinforces such beliefs regarding race. Indeed, I argue that in The Moonstone Collins presents his readers with a comforting but inaccurate fantasy of British mastery and control, largely achieved through their supposedly superior means of identifying and reading the bodies of Indians. In the first portion of this chapter, I argue that Collins’s novel is set in a fictional version of mid-century London, in which Indians remain hyper-visible to the policing eyes of Englishmen, and can be identified by experts and non-experts alike not only as Indians, but also, more specifically, as the individuals involved in the conspiracy surrounding the Moonstone. In this way, Collins’s fictional London is quite different from the real city, because, at mid-century, there were many dark-skinned people, including Indians, living and working in London. In addition, the British were far less skilled than Collins suggests at identifying
members of various races, let alone at guessing their specific identities. Just as physiognomists claimed that groups that supposedly needed to be controlled—women, the working-classes, colonial subjects—exhibited “inferior” physical features and personality traits, so too does Collins suggest in this novel that such people typically exhibit a higher level of visibility and an ineptitude for disguise. Indeed, in *The Moonstone* it is as if the need to be policed and controlled is built into the very bodies of potentially-rebellious individuals, particularly Indians.

In the second half of this chapter, I analyze the novel’s double standard of disguise. In *The Moonstone*’s dominant narrative, the European Murthwaite—an agent of Empire and ally of the British modeled off of the real British explorer and master of disguise, Richard Burton—easily passes as an Indian in India while enjoying his unquestioned status as a European in England. In contrast, the novel’s primary Indian characters, the unnamed “three Brahmin,” are always visually identifiable as Indians, particularly to Murthwaite, who easily penetrates their disguises. Unlike the gender disguises I discuss in my final chapter, Murthwaite’s racial disguises uphold the status quo: he collects cultural knowledge about the native population in India, teaches the English characters some of this information, including tips on how to read the Oriental body, and demonstrates to them how this information can be used to better police the Indians within their borders and reify existing male colonial power. In a subtle counter-narrative, Collins reluctantly admits that the Indians may be better at reading and disguising the body than the dominant narrative would otherwise suggest. In the end, Collins does reject the novel’s racist double-standard of disguise, but he also largely denies that disempowered groups can use disguise for more subversive ends. In effect, Collins denies the opportunity for widespread disguise by positioning certain physical features as prerequisites for effective racial passing. As a case in point, Collins suggests Murthwaite’s “brown” skin and liminal identity allow him to pass
as an Indian in India, but that because most people do not share Murthwaite’s unique physical features and extensive cultural knowledge, they cannot adopt convincing racial disguises.

In Chapter 6, I focus on Marryat’s *Her Father’s Name* and the ways in which it responds to and updates Collins’s earlier sensation novel, *No Name* (1862). While both novels revolve around heroines who adopt an impressive array of disguises and identities in an attempt to seize opportunities, rights, and freedoms they would normally be denied in patriarchal societies, Marryat’s novel envisions her heroine as far more successful in this endeavor. Significantly, Marryat rejects Collins’s earlier theory that only a few people with exceptional bodies may successfully pass in disguise and launches a progressive critique of essentialist gender norms through her disguised heroine.

In her response to *No Name*, Marryat draws attention to the limitations Collins places on women’s disguises. Although *No Name* disrupts some forms of essential identity—for, like several other sensation novels, *No Name* reveals social class to be a mere performance—Collins continues to uphold essential identity in other ways. Indeed, I contend that Collins suggests the anti-heroine, Magdalen Vanstone, masters the arts of impersonation and disguise because of both her essential identity as a “born actress” and her unique body, which includes “mobile” facial features, a modulated voice, and an indeterminate physiognomy that eludes classification. Collins suggests that because of her essential identity and physical features, Magdalen excels on the professional stage and can adopt disguises in real life more convincingly than most people. However, Collins denies the possibilities of women’s subversive use of disguise in several ways. First, Magdalen’s disguises ultimately fail and she does not achieve her goal of regaining her deceased father’s fortune by subterfuge. By showing that even Magdalen, the born actress with a body designed for disguise, fails in these tasks, Collins suggests that other women, particularly
those without Magdalen’s innate physical features and gift for impersonation, would not be able to succeed if they were to attempt similar feats of transgression. In addition, Collins completely avoids the possibility of Magdalen adopting male disguise. Given the difficulties Magdalen faces within her patriarchal family and society, readers may rightly wonder why this master of disguise never attempts to pass as a man as she pursues her goal—an omission Marryat remedies in her response to the novel.

In *Her Father’s Name*, Marryat goes much further than Collins in highlighting the subversive possibilities of women’s male disguises and gender transgression and launches a progressive critique of essentialist gender norms in the process. However, Marryat remains unwilling to *totally* reject essentialist beliefs, particularly in regard to race, or dismiss the legibility of the body. Although Marryat briefly explores the possibility that race is a social construct, she quickly abandons this line of inquiry and largely reinforces the belief that people inherit their race—a form of biological identity—from their parents. In addition, although Marryat shows Leona passing as both a Spanish woman and a Spanish man, she downplays the importance of Leona’s ethnic disguises, by suggesting that most English people lack a nuanced understanding of racial difference and lump outsiders together as “foreigners” without scrutinizing their physical appearance and behavior.

Marryat is, however, highly invested in Leona’s male disguises. First, she includes a meta-commentary that exposes how fictions—from stage melodrama to the sensation novels so heavily influenced by them—may represent bodies in comforting but ultimately unrealistic ways. While, for Collins, the stage serves as a training ground where women learn to disguise themselves in real life, Marryat highlights the ways in which acting as a male impersonator in a melodrama or burlesque performance differs from passing as a man, precisely because the stage
perpetuates a fantasy in which women’s bodies are highly legible and their “disguises” are easy to identify. In contrast to the stage, Marryat shows that women are able to pass as men in real life regardless of their body type. Indeed, she uses Leona’s male disguises to present a number of progressive critiques of essentialist gender norms: she suggests that gender does not necessarily correspond to sex, that there are a range of masculinities and femininities, that behavior is often assessed through a gendered lens, and that a woman does not need to conform to physical or behavioral ideals of masculinity in order to successfully pass as a man. However, despite her proto-feminist heroine, relatively progressive stance on gender for much of the novel, and celebration of the subversive possibilities of women’s disguise, in a relatively conservative ending, she backpedals on some of her most radical critiques regarding essential identity, the legibility of the body, and gender. In the end, Marryat’s 1876 sensation novel reveals the staying power of physiognomic beliefs regarding essential identity and the legibility of the body rather than telling the story of their demise.
CHAPTER 2
THE PHYSIOGNOMIC DEBATES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

During the nineteenth century, the science of physiognomy encompassed a variety of different, overlapping, and at times contradictory beliefs and practices. However, to begin with a basic definition: to conduct a physiognomic assessment is to examine someone’s physical appearance in order to discover his or her morality, intelligence, or other personality traits. Many Victorians believed that an individual’s physical features or “physiognomy,”—particularly the relatively permanent facial features such as the forehead, eyes, nose, and mouth—had the potential to communicate a wealth of information about a person’s essential identity. While, strictly speaking, physiognomy is the study of the shape, size, color, and placement of facial features, many physiognomists also examined additional parts of the body, temporary facial expressions and gestures, and aspects of self-presentation such as clothing and hairstyle. A combination of these naturally-occurring\(^1\) and self-constructed physical signs also visually marked individuals as members of certain groups, based, for example, on their perceived social class, race, nationality, sex, and gender.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) When physiognomists refer to a person’s “natural” appearance they are usually referencing what Lavater called the “solid,” relatively permanent features of the face (such as the eyes, nose, and mouth) as well as a person’s bone structure. As I will explain later in this chapter, physiognomists and their critics acknowledged, to varying degrees, the extent to which a person had control over his or her appearance and debated whether mutable aspects of appearance such as clothing and hairstyle should be considered when making physiognomic judgments. Some emphasized that civilization required alterations to the natural appearance—for example, by dictating certain fashions or demanding that middle-class individuals conform to notions of respectability. Other physiognomists fear that conniving individuals, aware of physiognomic expectations, will alter or disguise their natural appearance in order to thwart physiognomic judgments. When they speak of “natural” appearance, then, physiognomists invoke the state of a person’s appearance before it has been tampered with by the individual or society. This natural appearance is often figured as an indication of a person’s essential identity.

\(^2\) As the above definition suggests, the word “physiognomy” actually has several linguistic uses. It may refer to the rules and principles that make up the science of “physiognomy.” It may also stand in for the word face or refer to a person’s facial and bodily features.
Review of Criticism on Physiognomy

Although physiognomy has long since been dismissed as a pseudoscience, its cultural significance during the nineteenth century has attracted the notice of scholars from a variety of fields, ranging from art and literature, to anthropology and history, to science and psychology.\(^3\)

The works I draw upon in this chapter are interdisciplinary, but they all relate back to the influence of physiognomy on British literature or the reception, dissemination, and daily use of physiognomic principles in nineteenth-century England. Taken together, these scholars validate the academic study of physiognomy by demonstrating its strong impact on the art, literature, science, and interpersonal communications of the period. However, some scholars of physiognomy overemphasize the extent to which the Victorians accepted, believed in, and employed physiognomy in their daily lives. Literary scholars have been more willing to highlight the ways in which individual authors reject physiognomy, but because their studies often focus on a single author and do not contextualize the author’s views on physiognomy by examining contemporary discussions about the science, they similarly miss the opportunity to highlight the ongoing debates about physiognomy. Rather than treating physiognomy as a set of fixed principles that all Victorians accepted and lived by, I focus on the contemporary debates about various aspects of physiognomy and point out that, from the very beginning, nineteenth-century Britons remained aware of the science’s flaws and the changes to the face and body that could potentially obscure its “natural” legibility.

Most studies on physiognomy emphasize the science’s widespread popularity during the nineteenth century. Indeed, until the late 1980s, the primary purpose of scholarly research on

\(^3\) Although today we consider physiognomy a pseudoscience, critics such as Lucy Hartley have objected to the retrospective differentiation between “sciences” and “pseudosciences” on the grounds that, during the nineteenth-century, such distinctions were not clear (8). Consequently, when I discuss nineteenth-century individuals’ opinions regarding physiognomy, I use the less dismissive word “science.”
physiognomy was to demonstrate the science’s extensive influence on Victorian culture. However, in justifying the importance of their studies, some physiognomy critics overstate the extent to which nineteenth-century Britons embraced the science. For example, in one of the most widely-cited studies of physiognomy, *The Artist as Anthropologist: The Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art* (1989), Mary Cowling claims, “[i]n the Victorian age, physiognomy, or the indication of character through the facial features, and forms of the head and body, was all but universally believed in” (Cowling 9). Cowling’s repeated claims for the public’s nearly universal acceptance of physiognomy, however, leaves her readers with an incomplete and inaccurate picture of Victorian discussions about physiognomy. As we shall see in this chapter, for most Victorians the science of physiognomy was not a unified and consistent set of beliefs and practices to be wholeheartedly accepted or rejected. Nineteenth-century journalists who write about the science debate a range of issues, including the proper methodology and scope of the physiognomic assessment, the source of physiognomic knowledge, and the ways in which the science might be improved in the future. Throughout the century, moreover, physiognomists, journalists, and the public remained aware of the many flaws in the existing physiognomic system.

More recently, in *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2010) Sharrona Pearl acknowledges that there is “no one physiognomy” (2). However, although she mentions that both serious and comic periodicals of the period sometimes question the validity of physiognomy, she prematurely dismisses the contribution these sources make to our understanding of the science (12-13). She concludes, “[a]s a constantly changing and expanding set of ideas with such a large number of practitioners who never formed a community, physiognomy had no real body to criticize” (13). However, despite the absence of a
physiognomic orthodoxy, it is useful to examine nineteenth-century periodical articles and reviews on this topic, because doing so reveals the types of questions and concerns the Victorians consistently raised about physiognomy, showcases the ways in which journalists both supported and criticized the science, and demonstrates that nineteenth-century Britons held diverse opinions regarding both the feasibility of the physiognomic assessment and the truth of bodily legibility.

Some literary critics have begun to highlight the ways in which authors challenge physiognomic principles; however, these studies have not fully explored the multiplicity of opinions regarding physiognomy during the nineteenth century. In *Physiognomy in the European Novel* (1982), a comparative study of nineteenth-century realist novels from England, France, and Germany and one of the only literary studies to survey the works of many different authors, Graeme Tytler acknowledges that some English authors, such as George Eliot, challenge physiognomic principles even as they employ them in their writing (279-281). However, Tytler’s early study sets a precedent for excluding popular fiction from scholarly discussions of physiognomy and the majority of his text catalogues the physical traits that appear in various realist novels (by listing, for example, nineteenth-century heroines with blonde hair). Consequently, Tytler emphasizes the ways the realist novel conforms to physiognomic and literary tradition.4

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4 Tytler largely excludes from his studies the popular fiction of both the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. He does so not because these texts fail to engage in the physiognomic debates—on the contrary, he acknowledges their contributions in passing—but because he believes, as lesser-known works, they do not merit scholarly attention. In “Lavater and the English Novel” (1993), Tytler suggests that, although minor fiction of the 1790s shows some influence of Lavater’s theories regarding the ideal physiognomist, “by reason of their aesthetic limitations, most of those well-nigh forgotten novels [by Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Parsons, Richard Cumberland, John Moore, Agnes Maria Bennet, Charles Lloyd, and Samuel Pratt] will deserve far less of your attention than the better-known ones of the same decade” (178). Similarly, Tytler does not believe the nineteenth-century novelists that have been traditionally overlooked by twentieth-century critics deserve more than a passing mention: “You may also have drawn up a long list of writers that nobody much reads today—Charlotte Yonge,
As I discuss in my Introduction to this dissertation, more recently critics have begun to highlight the ways in which Dickens, Eliot, and Collins problematize existing physiognomic principles, suggesting, contrary to Cowling, that physiognomy was not “all but universally believed in” during the Victorian age. However, most of these critics examine a single author and do not contextualize their analyses by including a detailed discussion of contemporary debates regarding physiognomy. Indeed, because some studies argue that authors simply adhere to wider social trends by becoming more skeptical of physiognomy over time, scholars may inadvertently oversimplify and misrepresent the complex discussions about physiognomy that continue to occur until the 1870s.5

In doing research for this chapter, I examined several of the most influential physiognomy manuals as well as over one-hundred nineteenth-century articles and reviews on the topic of physiognomy in order to get a better sense of the questions and concerns the Victorians had about this science. Far from a niche topic, I found over fifty periodicals that

Elizabeth Gardiner, Frances Trollope, Catherine Gore, Catherine Crowe, Mary Braddon, Letitia Landon, and so on—just to show how abundantly they, too, describe their characters and in what physiognomic detail” (174-175).

5 For example, in “Reading Faces: Physiognomy and the Depiction of the Heroine in the Fiction of Wilkie Collins” (2009), Jessica Cox implies that Collins’s earliest sensation fiction, including The Woman in White, employs physiognomy in straightforward ways, and that, following broader cultural trends, Collins becomes progressively skeptical of physiognomy over time, with his final novels containing the strongest repudiations of the science. While Cox does not identify any of the subversive critiques of physiognomy offered in The Woman in White, she notes, that “[t]owards the end of the century […] faith in Lavater’s theories began to dwindle, and in The Legacy of Cain (1889), Collins’s penultimate novel, the validity of physiognomy is called into question, paralleling this general decline in the popularity of physiognomical theory (117) and that, in his final novel, Blind Love, the descriptions of the central female character indicat[e] that Collins continued to confuse readers with ambiguous descriptions of his heroines, or perhaps even sugge[t] that, at the end of his literary career, he was anxious to dissuade readers from employing the skills of the physiognomist in an attempt to read character” (119). She concludes, “Collins’s engagement with physiognomy in his fiction reflects changing attitudes towards the subject. On occasion, he employs physiognomical knowledge as a conventional literary trope, reflecting the commonly held belief in Lavater’s theories in the mid-nineteenth century. His attempts to deliberately confuse readers through ambiguous physiognomical descriptions reflects the sensation genre’s adoption of physiognomy as a means of undermining readers’ expectations, while his apparent questioning of the validity of the subject in his later novels is representative of society’s declining interest and faith in the pseudo-science” (120).
published articles and reviews on physiognomy between 1790 and 1870. Some were prestigious journals with large readerships, while others were inexpensive magazines that are all but forgotten today. Taken together, they address a full range of target audiences, including both women and men and readers from every social class.

Significantly, these archival materials reveal the types of questions Victorians asked about physiognomy: Do the permanent features actually reveal personality, intelligence, and morality? Which aspects of physical appearance should one include in the physiognomic assessment? Is everyone equally capable of making physiognomic judgments? Are physiognomic skills innate or acquired? And how might the science of physiognomy be improved? These articles, reviews, and physiognomy manuals also highlight several fears regarding physiognomy’s reliability: namely, the existence of glaring exceptions to key physiognomic rules, the interpretive problem posed by faces changed by accident or disease, and the possibility that people might intentionally change or disguise their “natural” appearance. As we shall see, the sensation novelists of the 1860s borrow both the rhetoric and content of these

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6 Through my research, I found that all of the following periodicals published articles and reviews on physiognomy between 1790 and 1870: All the Year Round; The Analytical Review; The Art Journal; The Athenaeum; Augustan Review; Bee, or Literary Weekly Intelligencer; Bentley’s Miscellany; La Belle Assemblée; Blackwood’s Magazine; Bow Bells; The British Critic: A New Review; British Lady’s Magazine; Calcutta Journal of Politics and General Literature; Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art; The Cornhill Magazine; The Critical Review; The Dublin University Magazine; The Eclectic Review; The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany; The English Review, or, an Abstract of English and Foreign Literature; The European Magazine (previously The European Magazine and London Review); The Examiner; Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country; Fun; Gentlemen’s Magazine; Golden Hours: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine for Family and General Reading; Hibernia Magazine; Household Words; Imperial Magazine; Kaleidoscope; or, Literary and Scientific Mirror; Lady’s Monthly Museum; The Literary Gazette; Literary Panorama; London Journal; London Society; The Metropolitan Magazine; Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction; Monthly Chronicle; Monthly Magazine, or British Register; The Monthly Register; Monthly Review; Newcastle Magazine; The New Monthly Magazine; New Monthly London Magazine, or Every Man’s Complete Monthly Repository of Knowledge, Instruction and Entertainment; Once a Week; Quarterly Review; Reynold’s Miscellany of Romance, General Literature, Science, and Art; The Rose, the Shamrock, and the Thistle; The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art; Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany; Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine; Tatler; Temple Bar; Town and Country Magazine; The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure; Walker’s Hibernian Magazine, or, Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge; Weekly Entertainer or, Agreeable and Instructive Repository; and Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine. While this is by no means an exhaustive list, I hope it will serve as a useful starting point for other scholars interested in physiognomy.
manuals, articles, and reviews, by focusing many of their sensational plots on the problems that may occur when faces and bodies become illegible or unrecognizable. While some sensation novelists use this material to undermine the science of physiognomy, others reinforce the truth of this science despite the obvious challenges involved in reading the body.

**A Brief History of Physiognomy**

Victorian histories of physiognomy typically situate the science’s origins in ancient Greece. While the formal study of physiognomy may have begun with the famed physician Hippocrates or the renowned mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras, scholars credit Aristotle with the first known treatise on the science, *Physiognomonica* (Tytler 36). For many Victorians, Aristotle’s foundational role in establishing the study of physiognomy both validated the science and confirmed the philosopher’s reputation as a visionary. In the *Dublin University Magazine* article “Phases of Physiognomy” (1866), Pierre LeBas states, “[w]hen it is recollected that there is scarcely a branch of human knowledge, the germ of which is not to be found in the writings of Aristotle, it is not surprising to find that the Stagyrite should have given the first hint of a physiognomical system” (466). In “Essay on Physiognomy” (1829), a writer known only as “E” similarly praises Aristotle’s outline of a physiognomic system that considers individual, national, and comparative physiognomy (204). However, he complains that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century physiognomists “cop[y] too closely” Aristotle’s “sententious, obscure, and indiscriminate” language (204).

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7 Although the Victorians focused on physiognomy’s origins in Greece, Tytler points out the ancient civilizations of Egypt, China, and the Middle East all practiced physiognomy (35).

8 In addition to interpreting individual physiognomy, some physiognomists examine the typical physiognomic traits of whole nations (national physiognomy) and the physical and behavioral resemblance between humans and animals (comparative physiognomy).
The Victorians criticized sixteenth- and seventeenth-century physiognomists not only for their prose, but also for their integration of astrology and magic into physiognomic practice. During this period, physiognomists became associated with chiromancers and metoposcopists, who interpreted the lines on the hands and forehead, respectively, in order to predict future events. In England, Elizabeth I and George II went so far as to ban the use of physiognomy, declaring it a form of charlatanism (Cowling 15). While future generations dismissed most physiognomists from this period, the Italian scholar Giambattista della Porta and the French art theorist and painter Charles Le Brun continued to influence subsequent generations of physiognomists and pathonomists. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century physiognomy manuals and articles frequently republish illustrations from Porta’s most famous work, De humana physiognomonia (1586), which extends the Aristotelian tradition of comparing the physiognomies of human and animals and Le Brun’s illustrations depicting human facial expressions (Tytler 44). Despite these isolated successes, physiognomy’s reputation did not substantially improve until the last decades of the eighteenth century when Johann Kaspar Lavater published his multivolume Essays on Physiognomy (1774-1778).

**Lavater’s Physiognomic System**

Lavater, a Swiss pastor living in Zurich, rehabilitated physiognomy for the modern era when he published the Essays in German between 1774 and 1778 (Graham 562). By 1810, fifty-five editions of the book, including twenty English editions “priced to suit every pocket,” had been published (Cowling 19). As Cowling correctly points out, “[v]irtually all nineteenth-century physiognomists regarded Lavater as the father of the science in its modern form, and most took him as their starting point” (19). Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, Lavater’s Essays remained the most widely cited modern treatise on physiognomy and no later work on the subject garnered as much attention and interest. In “Lavater’s Physiognomy in England” (1961),
John Graham suggests that because the *Essays* was so widely summarized, reviewed, and pirated, “it is difficult to imagine how a literate person of the time could have failed to have some general knowledge of the man and his theories” (562). Thus, even those Victorians who did not study physiognomy manuals would have known the general principles of Lavater’s physiognomic system.

Importantly for the Victorians, Lavater distances physiognomy from the “nonsensical and contemptible system[s] of quackery,” chiromancy and metoposcopy, and redefines the process of physiognomic assessment as a Christian act of goodwill (31). Drawing on the Genesis creation narrative in which God creates man in his own image (*New American Bible*, Gen. 1.27), Lavater suggests that because man is “a copy after a Divine original” (4), it is the physiognomist’s Christian duty to find all that is divine, good, and virtuous in him. By doing so, Lavater argues, the physiognomist will foster a “greater love of and appreciation for self, fellow man, and God” (7-8). Although the Victorians used physiognomy for a variety of secular and self-serving purposes, some did find comfort in the idea that a wise and benevolent God had made the human face and body legible and, in the process, the world simpler to navigate. Indeed, the Miltonic phrase “the human face divine” became practically synonymous with Lavaterian physiognomy and served as a reminder throughout the nineteenth-century of the science’s Christian underpinnings.⁹

Lavater restores physiognomy’s reputation not only by casting it as a pious activity, but also by asserting its status as a science. Lavater declares that, like any other science, physiognomy “may be fixed into a regular system,” reduced to a set of rules, and taught to interested students (75). His *Essays* include taxonomic groupings of various facial and bodily

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⁹ See John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* 3:44 for an earlier reference to the “human face divine.”
features and, borrowing the language of biological classification, he argues that all human faces belong to a particular class, genus, and species (20). However, while Lavater claims to successfully delineate some of these scientific rules—a few of the letters of the “divine alphabet”—he concedes that the science remains in its infancy (8). Although some nineteenth-century writers criticize Lavater for failing to fully develop the scientific system of physiognomy, most respect him for acknowledging his shortcomings and encouraging future scholars to build upon his work.

**Lavater’s Scope, Methodology, and Awareness of the Science’s Potential Pitfalls**

Lavater’s theories regarding the proper scope of the physiognomic assessment serve as a jumping off point for many nineteenth-century debates about this topic. The *Essays* catalogs the various versions of the facial and bodily features, based on proportion, size, shape, contour, color, and other physical characteristics. Each particular variation of the feature in question corresponds to a personality trait or other characteristic. As I discuss further in Chapter 3, Lavater focuses on what he calls the “solid” or “permanent” features of the face, such as the forehead, eyes, nose, mouth, and chin, when making these assessments. Some physical variations, such as eye color, were easy to identify and remember; consequently, the meaning behind them became well known and novelists often employ them in their physiognomic descriptions of characters. For example, in his section on eyes, Lavater observes, “*blue* eyes announce more weakness, a character softer and more effeminate than *hazel* or *black* eyes” (emphasis in original 337). He also catalogs minute physical differences between individuals, noting, for example, the type of angle that forms the inner corner of the eye: “[eyes which] form a lengthened angle, acute, and pointed, toward the nose, pertain […] exclusively to persons either very judicious or very cunning,” however, “if the corner of the eye be obtuse the face has always
something childish [in it]” (338). Unsurprisingly, this level of physiognomic detail rarely appears in Victorian novels since most readers would not have known the meaning of obscure features.

While Lavater recommends physiognomists consider all facial features, particularly those that he identifies as the “solid” features of the face, he claims it is possible to discern a person’s character from a single feature. In Lavater’s words, the human body is always characterized by “harmony and homogenous beauty” (9). In each part of the human body, he asserts, all inner qualities find their outward expression. While Lavater contends that each feature reveals all aspects of a person’s character, he also argues that certain features or portions of the face do a particularly good job of expressing given character traits. He divides the face into three sections, each with a particular specialization: the forehead and eyes indicate intelligence, the cheeks and nose designate morality, and the mouth and chin reveal instinctual passions (10). According to Lavater, intelligence, for example, manifests itself in all features of the face, but becomes most pronounced in the forehead and eyes. The homogenous body, then, contains no features that act as jarring contradictions to the harmony of the whole.

While Lavater maintains that a single feature contains all of the information a physiognomist requires to conduct a complete physiognomic reading of an individual, he encourages readers to take a more holistic approach to physiognomy by examining all of the “natural” facial and bodily features, as well as a range of contextual clues. When assessing the face, for example, he recommends the physiognomist draw upon not only physiognomy, but also the related science of pathognomy, the study of facial expression. In addition to permanent

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10 For a study that focuses on pathognomy, see Lucy Hartley’s Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture (2001). Hartley provides a detailed discussion of scientific and philosophical debates regarding expression, beauty, and the relationship between mind and body. She also traces the impact of physiognomy and pathognomy on the nascent field of psychology.
facial features and temporary facial expressions, Lavater considers the imprint of habitual expressions on the face. He observes, for example, “a graceful impression often repeated, engraves itself on the face, and forms a pleasing portraiture of gracefulfulness at once beautiful and permanent” (119). Lavater also analyzes the physiognomic meaning of the body. Just as he divides the face into distinct regions, so too does he separate the body into an intellectual center (the head), a moral center (the chest and heart), and a center for the passions (the stomach) (139). His Essays includes a discussion of the physiognomic meaning of various body parts, including the hands, breasts, stomach, thighs, and feet. He even instructs his readers to reflect upon self-generated and socially-acquired aspects of physical appearance. For example, he urges them to scrutinize “all the external signs which, in man, directly force themselves on the observer” (11), including “the whole system, bones as well as flesh, figure, color, gait, voice, even smell” (139). Thus, Lavater collects as much information as he can from all available sources before making a physiognomic assessment.

While Lavater believes that all aspects of a person’s external appearance fall within the physiognomist’s purview, he acknowledges (and warns readers) that some physical signs may mislead the viewer. For example, Lavater finds the permanent physical features of the face more reliable than its expression. He argues that, unlike the physiognomist, the pathognomist may mistake a temporary emotion for a permanent state of mind or find himself duped by disguise. He declares, “[the physiognomist] is not to be deceived or misled […] to the eye of Pathognomy, the poor may appear rich; while the Physiognomist only admits him to be so, who is so in fact, although he may appear poor at the moment of decision” (17). Similarly, while Lavater considers contextual clues while making his physiognomic assessments, he notes that some of these may mislead the physiognomist. He explains, “rank, condition, habit, dress and climate” may each
function as “a distinct veil spread over [a man]” (17). Thus, while certain self-constructed aspects of appearance, such as clothing, may assist the physiognomic assessment, Lavater ultimately relies on the solid features to discover the essential identity of the people he observes. This distinction is important because, in both the periodical press and the sensation novel, nineteenth-century Britons worried that mutable aspects of appearance would mislead the physiognomist.

**Diverse and Shifting Beliefs about Physiognomy in the Nineteenth Century**

Throughout the nineteenth century, the British public acknowledged the allure of physiognomy’s alleged benefits and many continued to study the science. Lavater’s *Essays* remained popular in Britain until the 1870s, and a new generation of physiognomists continued to publish manuals and treatises until the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Cowling 19, 39). However, the British disagreed about whether or not they could trust the science of physiognomy, pointed out the many flaws in the physiognomic system, and highlighted the forces that threatened to obscure the body’s “natural” legibility. While this topic certainly held the attention of most Victorians, they debated the science’s validity.

As we have seen, some scholars argue that nearly all Victorians believed in physiognomy, and others assert that the Victorians became increasingly skeptical of the science over time. In reality, physiognomy’s popularity ebbed and flowed until the 1870s. First of all, at any given time, there was no universal consensus about physiognomy’s validity and reliability. While some early nineteenth-century journalists present physiognomic principles as “self-evident truths” that “need as little to be proved as the existence of smell or taste” (Fuseli 108), others confidently proclaim the public’s utter disregard for the science. For example, as early as 1818, one journalist claims that “the study of physiognomy is now almost forgotten” (“On the Study of Physiognomy” 417) and another writing in 1834 suspects physiognomy, phrenology, and
astrology “are regarded as very silly pursuits by nine out of every ten individuals who know what these ologies and onomies mean” (“Physiognomy founded on Physiology” *Monthly Magazine* 105).

Not only did individual opinions about physiognomy vary for most of the century, but also certain events temporarily shifted physiognomy’s overall popularity. Perhaps most notably, physiognomy temporarily lost some public support when George Combe popularized the phrenological theories of Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim in Britain during the 1820s and ‘30s. The science of phrenology, much like physiognomy, was premised on the belief that one could read the exterior of the body to glean information about a person’s identity.11 Some journalists compared physiognomy to phrenology unfavorably, suggesting that the former was less scientific and all but useless when employed on its own. For example, in the *Analyst* (1836) J.L. Levison argues for “the greater importance of Phrenology when compared with Physiognomy” and sets out to prove “that it is only when they are studied together that the latter assumes anything of value” (270). While some Victorians continue to insist physiognomy “will never be anything more than the hand-maid to Phrenology” (“Outlines” 612), others prefer physiognomy from the start or return to it once the downsides of phrenology became clear. For example, H.C.C., writing for *Blackwoods* (1819) promotes a specific type of physiognomy, nasology, by pointing out the limitations of phrenology (159).

As we shall see, physiognomy enjoyed one final burst of popularity during the 1860s, when enthusiasts hoped new technological innovations would bring the long-awaited science of

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11 According to phrenologists, the protrusions and depressions of an individual’s skull indicated whether particular parts of the brain called “organs” were small, average, or large in size, and because each organ was thought to represent a certain psychological trait, the phrenologist would feel the “bumps” on a client’s skull in order to assess the person’s strengths and weaknesses.
physiognomy to its full potential. By the 1870s, physiognomists had not achieved a reliable physiognomic system after all, and the majority of Victorians finally gave up on the science. However, although most Victorians dismissed physiognomy in its traditional form by the 1870s, its theories continued to greatly influence the fields of racial anthropology and criminology into the twentieth century.

Factors that Impacted Nineteenth-Century Attitudes towards Physiognomy

It is not difficult to understand why physiognomy appealed to so many people in nineteenth-century Britain. As the New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal points out in 1822, “short-cuts to a knowledge of mankind are very tempting” (“Physiognomy and Craniology” 121). The prospect of discerning a stranger’s character from a mere glance offered a fast and streamlined means of navigating an increasingly modern, fast-paced world, allowing people to make seemingly informed choices in it. People often consulted the face—that “letter of recommendation written by the hand of God” (“Physiognomy, founded on Physiology” Metropolitan Magazine 110)—when selecting spouses, business partners, household servants, and the like (“Physiognomy,” Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal 56).

The ability to make quick and accurate judgments about whom to marry, befriend, hire, and trust became even more crucial (and difficult) as more Victorians moved to crowded urban environments. As Sally Mitchell explains in Daily Life in Victorian England (1996), in 1801 the majority of British people inhabited farms or villages, but by mid-century more than half the population lived in cities (5). Many Victorians hoped, as Pearl points out, that physiognomy would help them “make sense of the city” (10). In “Phases of Physiognomy” (1866), LeBas describes “[t]he various types [of faces] that are to be seen in the human flood pouring down a populous street” (478). Although LeBas relishes the opportunity to make physiognomic observations in the crowded city streets, at times he becomes overwhelmed and exhausted by the
constant barrage of information. He explains that countless varieties of faces “come dazzling the fancy with their varied forms, until the wearied imagination gives up all aesthetical considerations, and hands the whole over to the intellect, if perchance some classification may be effected among the physiognomical chaos” (479). Lebas’s observations demonstrate the appeal of physiognomy in the modern city, but also point out its inadequacies. Lebas hopes for an improved physiognomic system that would allow him to better sort through and process the hundreds of human forms he encounters on a daily basis.

The Victorians’ experience of other forms of visual technology also impacted their attitudes towards physiognomy. Throughout the century, optical innovations allowed people to view the world in new and exciting ways. In The Victorians and the Visual Imagination (2000), Kate Flint points out that the microscope and telescope dramatically enhanced the power of the human eye, making it possible to view matter that was either so tiny or so far away that it had previously remained invisible (5). In addition, optical inventions such as the magic lantern, kaleidoscope, stereoscope, pseudoscope, and zoetrope became a part of popular culture, as they were developed into public entertainments and marketed as children’s toys (Flint 5). Like these new technologies, which sought to render the invisible visible, physiognomy’s attempt to see and understand the invisible workings of a person’s mind, heart, or soul by examining the body stems from the widely-recognized Victorian drive “towards exposure, towards bringing things to the surface, towards making things available to the eye and hence ready for interpretation” (Flint 8).

However, visual technologies had mixed results on people’s opinions about physiognomy. On the one hand, optical tools empowered the Victorians by supplementing and improving upon their innate visual capabilities. On the other hand, as Flint points out, “these instruments […] served to challenge, at the level of popular perception, the quality of observations made by the
unaided human eye” (5). In other words, the fact that humans had to depend upon such technologies in order to see the body’s cells or the solar system’s stars encouraged people to recognize the limitations of the human eye and their unique subject position as viewers.

By mid-century, the Victorians’ mixed feelings about physiognomy fueled their desire to supplement and enhance the physiognomist’s visual and interpretive skills with the talents of other experts, including the detective, anthropologist, and forensic scientist. London added a detective department to its police force in 1842 (Mitchell ix) and Charles Dickens depicted the first detective of the English novel in 1853. In 1863, Richard Francis Burton and James Hunt founded the Anthropological Society of London, which strove to study man “in all his leading aspects, physical, mental and historical” by means of “patient investigations, careful induction, and the encouragement of all researches tending to establish a de facto science of man” (quoted in Cowling 11). In addition, as early as 1858 Sir William Herschel began to use fingerprinting in order to identify individuals in British India, and during the 1880s Sir Francis Galton popularized this practice in England and argued for its importance to the burgeoning fields of criminology and forensic science. While both real and fictional detectives, anthropologists, and proto-forensic scientists remained aware of physiognomic principles and, in some cases, drew upon them in their work, they also sought to professionalize the task of identifying and understanding people. Importantly, their work was also about consolidating power, as they extended the physiognomic project of reading and interpreting bodies to one of policing and controlling them.

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12 Inspector Bucket of Bleak House (1853) is considered the first fictional detective in the English novel.

13 As Pearl points out in Chapter 6 of About Faces, although Francis Galton received credit for the invention of fingerprinting, he actually used the earlier fingerprint collections and research hypotheses of Sir William Herschel, the chief magistrate of the Hooghly district of Jungipoor India, and Dr. Henry Faulds, the British Surgeon-general of Tsukij Hospital in Toyko, to formulate his fingerprinting system (207). While Herschel implemented an early form of fingerprinting as early as 1858, and Faulds conducted his research throughout the 1870s, Galton did not receive copies of their records or publish his own findings until the late 1880s (207).
Debates Regarding the Physiognomist’s Scope and Methodology

While nearly all physiognomists continued to quote Lavater’s *Essays*, they debated his theories regarding the proper scope of the physiognomic assessment, the best ways to acquire physiognomic skills, and the ultimate future of the science. Many nineteenth-century journalists writing about physiognomy also stressed the potential threats to bodily legibility and the physiognomic system, including “natural” exceptions to physiognomic rules, disfigurement, and disguise. While the science’s shortcomings caused many to doubt, others explained away its flaws and insisted that, in the future, it might be perfected.

While many Victorians believed in the legibility of the body and depended upon the science of physiognomy to help them read and interpret it, they held diverse opinions regarding the proper scope of the physiognomic assessment. First, they had to consider which aspects of physical appearance conveyed physiognomic information, and, having decided that much, they had to ask themselves which of these physical features they should take into account when making their assessments. Journalists reviewing the recently published works of physiognomists for magazines and newspapers provided a variety of different answers to the former question. Some claimed that only the permanent facial features revealed physiognomic information. Others, following Lavater, believed facial expressions, others parts of the body, and self-constructed aspects of appearance such as clothing and hairstyle also provided insights into a person’s character. But even among those practitioners who believed that all of these physical features had the potential to transmit valuable data to the observer, some advocated for a more limited approach to the physiognomic assessment itself.

First, some physiognomists and journalists cautioned their readers to avoid putting too much stock in a person’s facial expression when making a physiognomic assessment. Artful people, they argued, had the ability to control their expression during even the most emotionally
tumultuous ordeal. For example, the author of “Lavater and Physiognomy” (1862) warns that “our faces become masks which less express than hide thought” (259). He explains, “[g]reat powers of concealment are given us; the muscles of the face are in two transverse layers; and whilst the inner may be convulsed with feeling, the outer may be ruled by the will into calmness, or even into smiles” (259). The decision to omit expression from physiognomic assessments, then, often points towards a suspicion that people conceal their actual thoughts and feelings by affecting a different emotional state.

Some physiognomists insisted that people should disregard the body and self-constructed aspects of appearance, such as clothing, when making physiognomic assessments. In *Physiognomy, founded on Physiology* (1834), Alexander Walker actually supports the contention that the body, in its unaltered state, reveals physiognomic information in much the same way as the face. However, the critic who reviews *Physiognomy, founded on Physiology* for the *Metropolitan Magazine* asserts that, in practice, the body “can be little relied on” for physiognomic information (“Physiognomy, founded on Physiology” 108). The *Metropolitan* reviewer argues that the body loses its physiognomic value because, by the time the physiognomist sees it, the body has changed considerably from its “natural” state. The reviewer contends, “the body and limbs are divided between the tailor and the dancing-master, [and] these effective artists make of them what they will” (108). In other words, clothing, carriage, and gait may mask the body’s “natural character” (108), and such altered physiognomic evidence may skew the physiognomist’s judgments. The *Metropolitan* reviewer rejects the physiognomic value of not only the torso and limbs, but also any aspect of physical appearance that an individual or his or her society might alter.
Because they feared these mutable aspects of appearance might mislead them, some physiognomists and critics advocated for a more limited approach to physiognomy that would only consider the permanent features of the face. In an article for *Blackwoods* (1819), H.C.C. cautions readers, “an age of dissimulation compels us to seek for manifestations of the mind less affected by secondary causes, and which, from their determinate nature, cannot be changed by artifice or hypocrisy” (158). By way of example, H.C.C. argues it is far more difficult to disguise the size and shape of one’s nose than to change one’s clothing. Although he jokes about phrenology’s drawbacks—imagining the social repercussions of feeling the bumps on ladies’ and gentlemen’s skulls as they pass by in the street—he postulates that the desire to examine a feature less susceptible to manipulation inspired phrenological research (158).

The practitioners who focused on permanent facial features may be further divided into two groups: those who believed it was possible to glean physiognomic information from a single feature and those who declared a physiognomist had to examine all of the features to draw accurate conclusions. The former approach, based on Lavater’s theory of the body’s homogeneity, informs H.C.C.’s position, as well as Eden Warwick’s in his famous manual *Nasology; or, Hints Towards a Classification of Noses* (1848). Other physiognomists agree with E.B. writing in the *Edinburgh Magazine* that Lavater “errs in bestowing too great a reliance on single features, as the foundation of decision of character” (50). According to E.B. and those like him, a physiognomist could only form an accurate physiognomic assessment if he or she examined the face in its entirety, noting the interplay and overall impression of the facial

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14 Phrenology, which, unlike physiognomy, sought to determine character from measurements of the human skull, was developed by Franz Joseph Gall and popularized in England by George Combe (Pykett 167). This pseudoscience significantly influenced the diagnosis of mental disturbance in the first half of the nineteenth century (Pykett 167), and continued to influence theories of racial hierarchy throughout the Victorian period.
features. Some physiognomists devoted to this method totally dismiss the findings of physiognomists who rely upon a single feature. Thus, even physiognomists who agreed that physiognomic assessments should focus exclusively on the solid, relatively permanent features, disagreed as to how to accomplish this task. Because of these different methodologies, Victorians judged not only faces and bodies, but also the physiognomist’s reading practices.

**Debates Regarding the Capacity for and Acquisition of Physiognomic Skills**

Physiognomists and journalists also asked which people, if any, are qualified to make physiognomic assessments. On one end of the spectrum, some physiognomists declare that “it surpasses the extent of the skill of mortals” to distinguish between natural and accidental physiognomy, so only God has the ability to correctly read and interpret faces (E.B. 50). Typically, however, journalists suggest that at least some people do have the potential to perform physiognomic assessments. In fact, the *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* goes so far as to declare that individuals of all social classes and educational backgrounds share these skills: “[a]ll who have the power of sight and the power of judgment employ them in this manner. The most illiterate are no less proficient in the art of physiognomy than the wisest men” (“Lavater and Physiognomy” 55). Of course, not everyone believed that all people could make physiognomic assessments. As we shall see, some sensation novels insist that not only certain individuals, but also entire races, may lack physiognomic judgment and power.

As part of this debate, writers questioned whether physiognomic skills are innate or acquired. Some writers argued that the ability to read the body is an instinct rather than a learned skill, claiming that God bestows this gift on a handful of chosen people. However, The *Lady’s Monthly Museum* (1802), mocks the notion that “no man can be a physiognomist, unless he receives a knowledge of the science, originally, as a gift from the Deity” (“Physiognomy” 6). Other journalists claimed that physiognomic knowledge is a basic and nearly universal human
instinct and that the correspondence between the mind and body functions as a self-evident truth that requires little or no explanation. The *British Lady’s Magazine* (1817), for example, states “there is an obvious relation between the mind and the turn of the features, so well known [sic] by instinct, that every one [sic] is more or less expert at reading the countenance” (Usher 17).

Still other physiognomists following Lavater agree that all people enjoy some innate physiognomic skill, but can acquire more by studying manuals and frequently observing faces. For example, Le Bas praises M. Lepelletier de la Sarthe’s *Complete Treatise on Physiognomy* for outlining specific rules for novice physiognomists (472).

**Debates Regarding Flaws in the Physiognomic System and the Future of the Science**

Even the journalists who endorsed the physiognomic belief of bodily legibility sometimes doubted the possibility of practicing physiognomy successfully. Their skepticism arose from both the obvious flaws in the physiognomic system and from the science’s lack of development in the wake of Lavater’s *Essays*. Although Lavater anticipates and tries to preempt potential objections to the science of physiognomy, many of these criticisms remain sticking points throughout the nineteenth century.

The public figures and notorious criminals who became well-known exceptions to physiognomic principles led some critics to stress the science’s limited predictive powers. In many well-known cases, an individual’s innate physiognomy belied his or her identity. For example, several periodicals including *Belle Assemblee; or Court and fashionable magazine* (1808) discuss famous examples of beautiful or handsome murderers during this period (“Familiar Letters” 133). In a related vein, Le Bas warns “[e]xperience […] shows that beauty is by no means to be taken as a criterion of virtue” (477). But while most nineteenth-century Britons knew of at least some exceptions to physiognomic rules, physiognomists and some journalists reassured their readers, “[a]s a rule, appearances do not deceive us” (“Noses” 522).
Even Le Bas, who challenges the principle of *kalokagatheia*, argues “[f]requent acts of deception imprint a peculiar cast to the features” (477), which should, theoretically, render repeat offenders immediately identifiable.\(^\text{15}\) Thus, for some Victorians, exceptions to physiognomic rules invalidated the science, because if it did not work in all cases it could not be consistently relied upon. However, others minimized the importance of such exceptions and argued that repeated acts of deception leave telltale marks on the body rendering even these bodies legible.

Some journalists also worried that because accident and disease disfigure certain people’s faces and bodies, physiognomists might confuse “natural” and “accidental” physiognomies. At the beginning of the century, journalists cited Johann Heinrich Samuel Formey’s famous 1775 critique of Lavater in support of this stance. In 1800 the *Edinburgh Magazine* paraphrases Formey’s arguments, noting how he concedes “that the mental character is intimately connected with, and sensibly influenced by, every fiber of the body,” but argues that because “the human frame is liable to innumerable accidents, by which it may be changed in its external appearance, without any correspondent change of the disposition […] it surpasses the extent of the skill of mortals to distinguish the modifications of feature, that are natural from those that may be accidental” (E.B. 50). While Formey and his followers conclude that, because of these difficulties, only God has the power to correctly interpret faces (E.B. 50), as I discuss in Chapter 4, some Victorians easily identified the disfigured countenance and refrained from passing physiognomic judgments on the disfigured individual.

Finally, the Victorians remained wary of various forms of intentional deception and disguise. For those who believed in physiognomy, to intentionally cover, hide, or mask one’s

\(^\text{15}\) As I explain in Chapter 2, the Platonic principle of *kalokagatheia*, states “the morally best [are] the most beautiful, [and] the morally worst [are] the most deformed” (Lavater 99).
“natural” physical appearance was to try to deceive others about one’s moral worth and true identity. On the most basic level, the *British Lady’s Magazine* warns that people attempt to hide their thoughts and feelings by learning to control the muscles and expressions of the face. In the article “On Personal Beauty” (1817), Usher notes, “it becomes a part of education to learn to disguise the countenance” although it “requires a habit from early youth, and the continual practice of hypocrisy, to deceive an intelligent eye” (17). Going a step farther, one might disguise the complexion or color of the face and hair with the help of cosmetics and hair dye. In “Physiognomy” (1802), the *Lady’s Monthly Museum* cynically observes that women wear cosmetics as a form of “mask” in order to hide information that (according to physiognomic theory) the face would normally reveal, such as their temporary emotions, age, health, or social class (7). The sensation novelists of the 1860s take this even further, by depicting women and men who adopt elaborate physical and behavioral disguises in order to pass as members of different social classes, races, and genders.

Aware of physiognomy’s flaws—the obvious exceptions to physiognomic rules, the difficulty of distinguishing “natural” from “accidental” physiognomies, and the fear that deceptive people might manipulate their appearance in order to skew physiognomic assessments in their favor—and confronted with its lack of development during the nineteenth century, writers in the periodical press debated whether the science should be abandoned or improved. Many journalists upheld the correspondence between physical appearance and personality traits, but feared that, because physiognomists had failed to create a reliable physiognomic system, the ability to read faces and bodies remained elusive. As one writer for the *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts* (1862) states, “[n]one will deny that character is expressed in the face and body; the only doubt is as to the possibility of the skill that can read its complex
and intertwined signs with any certainty” (“Lavater and Physiognomy” 259). On the one hand, some journalists cautioned readers to approach physiognomy skeptically or abstain from it altogether. For example, an 1829 Newcastle Magazine writer advises readers to avoid making physiognomic judgments because of the lack of consensus regarding the science: “as it appears from the contrariety of opinions, that its principles are uncertain and its application difficult, will it not be better to avoid a science or art so likely to lead to erroneous judgments and to false applications of respect or contempt?” (“Essay on Physiognomy” 207). On the other hand, some critics advocated for continued physiognomic research. A Bow Bells journalist writing in 1868 argues that the search for a physiognomic system should not be terminated merely because the pursuit has been unsuccessful thus far, claiming that “although it may seem [...] difficult to reduce [physiognomy] to positive principles, yet to reject it altogether, on this account, is indeed a very unphilosophical method of solving the problem” (“Physiognomy and Phrenology” 40).

During the 1860s, many Victorians believed that the scientific advancements of the day would soon either correct and supplement existing physiognomic studies or disprove them altogether. For example, in 1866 the Dublin University Magazine declares that physiognomy “has reached the most critical period of its history” because “[i]t has now come into contact with a scientific age” (474). The magazine predicts, moreover, that physiognomy has reached a crossroad, suggesting that in the next few years “physiognomy will either be cultivated with an ardent, but strictly scientific enthusiasm, as a thing useful to mankind, or will be pronounced illusory, and cast aside to be forgotten among the reveries of the past” (475).

More than any other recent invention, physiognomy enthusiasts hoped the camera would bring the long-awaited physiognomic system to fruition. Since the days of Lavater, physiognomists had bemoaned the inaccuracy of professional portraits and physiognomic
sketches alike. Artistic inaccuracies, they argued, prevented physiognomy from achieving its full potential: physiognomists who attempted to create a physiognomic system based on inaccurate copies and amateurs who tried to teach themselves physiognomy with the assistance of flawed illustrations would inevitably fail. But, as the *Cornhill* optimistically suggests in 1861, many people believed the camera would finally allow physiognomists to systematize and validate their studies, by replacing hand-drawn illustrations with photographs:

> It is to be hoped that the discovery of the photograph will prove to be the dawn of a new day for [the physiognomist]. As the science of chemistry was nothing until a perfect balance was invented, and as the science of physiology was really unknown until the microscope was improved, so it may be that the faithful register of the camera, supplying us with countless numbers of accurate observations will now render that an actual science which has hitherto been only a possible one. (472)

The camera would allow physiognomists to accurately reproduce physiognomic features for the first time. In addition, with the help of this technology, physiognomists could amass a large collection of photographs that encompassed a wide range of physical features much faster. Hypothetically, with a database of accurate photographs, physiognomists could classify both types of features and types of individuals, creating the long-awaited physiognomic system. Thus, despite physiognomy’s obvious inadequacies, some practitioners in the 1860s continued to look to the science’s future with confidence.

For the Victorians, physiognomy was a high-stakes issue and writers sometimes described it in rather sensational terms and evoked the emotions—nervousness, fear, discomfort, surprise—that later became defining aspects of the sensation novel. The Lady Elizabeth Eastlake quote that begins this dissertation provides a mid-century example of this rhetoric, but journalists used this language from the beginning of the century. For example, in “Historical Account of Physiognomy” (1800), E.B. raises the specter of an indecipherable world in which physiognomy does not exist: “[t]o conceive a just idea of the advantages of physiognomy, let us for a moment
suppose that all physiognomical knowledge were totally forgotten among men; what confusion, what uncertainty, what numberless mistakes, would be the consequence?” (52). Similarly, a writer for the Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany (1818) notes that, if physiognomy did not exist, “[w]e should be in danger of marrying an idiot for a wit, and of mistaking a shrew for one possessed of all the benevolence and placidity of an angel” (“On the Study of Physiognomy” 418). The same writer continues, “if such a relation [between the inner and outer man] did not exist, how could we, who cannot penetrate to the essence of bodies, regulate our conduct?” (418). For both of these writers, the science of physiognomy must be reliable because, if this were not the case, society would surely devolve into chaos. The sensation novel of the 1860s takes this chaotic world—full of confusion, uncertainty, the numberless mistakes involved in reading and recognizing bodies, and the specific problems that occur when one does mistake a beautiful fiend for an angel—as its starting point.

As I hope I have made clear in this section, nineteenth-century physiognomic discourse consisted of many debates, covering such topics as the odds of making reliable physiognomic judgments, the best way to go about doing so, the relative access to physiognomic knowledge, the problems that threatened physiognomic assessments, and the best ways to circumvent these problems and improve the science as a whole. During the 1860s, at the height of the sensation novel craze, Victorians were already anxious about physiognomy’s reliability and the body’s (il)legibility. The sensation novel draws upon long-standing discussions of the problems with physiognomy, and heightens cultural fears by emphasizing and more fully exploring the consequences of physiognomy’s deficiencies. However, it is also important to note that some sensation novels excite anxieties over the readability of the body only to calm and contain them by the end of the novel, and some of the genre’s most subversive contributions to the
physiognomic debates, such as “the beautiful fiend” popularized by Braddon in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, actually get incorporated into physiognomic discourse, neutralizing their threat.
CHAPTER 3
THE ILLEGIBLE BODY: PHYSIOGNOMY, FACIAL DISTINCTIVENESS, AND CHARACTER DOUBLES IN LADY AUDLEY’S SECRET AND THE WOMAN IN WHITE

In the previous chapter I argue that in the first half of the nineteenth century the British public debated whether the physical features of the face and body truly revealed a person’s character traits and identity. By the 1860s, physiognomists and the journalists who reviewed their work had pointed out a number of problems with the existing physiognomic system. At this point, some Victorians dismissed the prospect of ever correcting the study of physiognomy, while others hoped that new technologies like the camera would allow practitioners to classify physical features more accurately and systematically, validating the science of physiognomy once and for all.

In this chapter, I examine two of the earliest and most influential sensation novels, Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) and The Woman in White (1860), which, I argue, offer two of the genre’s most radical refutations of both physiognomy and the realist mode of character description. Both novels present characters whose innate physical features prove shockingly illegible and showcase pairs of character doubles that look almost identical. In doing so, Lady Audley’s Secret rejects the physiognomic legibility of morality and social class and The Woman in White undermines the physiognomic belief that all faces are distinct and, consequently, constitute a reliable means of identification. Significantly, Lady Audley’s Secret and The Woman in White unsettle not only contemporary beliefs about the physiognomic legibility of the body, but also the science’s underlying claims about essential identity, particularly in regard to social class. In addition, both novels expose the extent to which various social institutions, including marriage, the family, and the law, rely upon people’s ability to read, classify, and differentiate bodies. By highlighting that bodies may, in fact, be illegible or indistinguishable, they reveal the flaws and
vulnerabilities of prized social institutions and highlight the consequences of their misplaced faith in the body as a proof of identity.

More specifically, in my discussion of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, I explain how Braddon’s portrayal of Lady Audley’s innate features opposes not only the assumed correspondence between beautiful features and morality, but also the physiognomic notion that habitual thoughts, deeds, and facial expressions leave tell-tale signs on the face. In addition, unlike previous critics, I extend my analysis beyond the novel’s anti-heroine: I argue that just as Braddon uses Lady Audley to dispute the physiognomic legibility of morality, so too does she use the maid, Phoebe Marks, to reject the physiognomic legibility of social class. While launching these attacks on physiognomy, Braddon certainly draws attention to the possibility that a woman might alter her physical appearance with beauty products in order to convey false information about her identity; however, no such artificial transformations are necessary in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, because both Lady Audley’s and Phoebe’s innate physical features already project false information about their identities. Thus, in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon discredits the common belief that social class is an essential part of identity, and that a person’s morality and social class become visible on the body’s surfaces. Although there is every indication that Braddon deliberately crafts her characters in such a way as to subvert physiognomic and literary conventions, contemporary reviewers attempt to contain Braddon’s threatening narrative by casting her as an amateur writer who crafts “unrealistic” characters. Later, following a wave of literary imitations, “the beautiful fiend” ironically becomes a recognizable physiognomic and literary type and is incorporated into the very system she was meant to subvert.

In the second half of this chapter, I discuss how, in *The Woman in White*, Collins problematizes the physiognomic belief in facial distinctiveness and disputes the notion that real
or fictional bodies are consistently legible. While existing scholarship on the novel focuses on the way Collins reveals the challenges involved in making an objective and accurate physiognomic assessment, I show the ways in which he uses character doubles to exacerbate the fear that faces and bodies—including those belonging to different social classes—are not always “naturally” and permanently distinguishable. While, unlike Braddon, Collins does offer an excuse for his characters’ uncanny resemblance at the end of the novel, he does not provide an adequate explanation by physiognomic standards. As part of his critique, Collins reveals that social institutions, particularly the law, rely too heavily on the face and body—which prove susceptible to change—as a proof of identity. Because of this misplaced faith, the law may inhibit rather than mete out justice, by stripping away an individual’s name, property, and position, and reconstructing his or her class identity. In effect, Collins observes that if two women from different social classes can look identical, their class identity is not an essential aspect of identity reflected on the surfaces of their bodies, and if social institutions have the power to change or take away a person’s class identity, than it must be constructed rather than innate.

While *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White* are most noteworthy for their radical rejection of the legibility and distinctiveness of real bodies, they also draw upon and respond to stage melodrama’s techniques for rendering fictional bodies legible, particularly the tradition of labeling characters’ bodies (often with a name or initials) to reveal or confirm identity. In *Lady Audley’s Secret* and several subsequent sensation novels, authors replace the figurative letters of the “divine alphabet” of physiognomy with actual letters either printed on characters’ clothing and possessions or inscribed upon their flesh to provide readers with narrative closure in the absence of physiognomically meaningful bodies. By drawing upon this
melodramatic tradition in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon maintains her critiques of physiognomy rather than repudiating them at the novel’s end.¹ In *The Woman in White*, which I focus on in this section, Collins rejects the ability to know and understand fictional bodies, despite seemingly straightforward bodily labels. By suggesting that even fictional bodies may prove difficult to recognize and demonstrating that even characters’ identities may remain shrouded in mystery, Collins underscores the impossibility of reading and understanding real bodies and identities.

Before moving on to my discussion of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White*, I must underscore that the science of physiognomy both relied upon and reinforced a belief in essential identity, and explain how this belief impacted Victorian ideas about the physiognomic legibility of various aspects of identity, including social class. Physiognomists and phrenologists typically rejected the theory of the *tabula rasa* popularized by the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke. Rather than suggest, as Locke did, that each person is born a “blank slate” and is shaped by his or her own life experiences, they argued that people are born with a set identity, which dictates what they can do and who they can become. As Cowling points out, physiognomists and phrenologists “revealed inequality to be a fact of nature and of human nature, overturning the Lockean explanation of human difference in terms of nurture alone” (121). This is not to suggest that physiognomists and their followers believed that people do not change at all, but rather that their capacity for change is extremely limited by their innate gifts and limitations. In the article “Physiognomy” published in the *Quarterly Review*, Eastlake endorses this philosophical position in regard to human intelligence:

> Now we all know that the intellect may be in many particulars improved or the contrary by right or wrong training and application—but, as respects its nature, power, and scope, we all see and feel that it admits of no essential change. All the cant of a thousand

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¹ Most sensation novels include subversive plotlines that are later contained by a conservative ending that reinforces the status quo.
‘friends of humanity’ will never persuade any one, with eyes to see and ears to hear, that the little capacity, under the most favorable circumstances, can become the great one—or the great one, however misused, become the little one (72).

In other words, if we think of one aspect of identity—here, intelligence—as existing upon a spectrum, someone born with little intelligence will always remain on the inferior end of the spectrum, even though hard work and education might slightly improve his or her intelligence and laziness and neglect might degrade it. Because of this underlying philosophical assumption, Eastlake concludes, “[t]he expression, therefore, of the intellect is consistently and naturally placed in those portions of the face which are unchangeable” (72). As I explain in further detail later in this chapter, these so-called permanent, solid, or unchangeable physical features were thought to reflect a person’s essential identity and were particularly important to physiognomic readings of character.

In sensation novels of the early 1860s, the physiognomic legibility of morality and social class, in particular, is often a topic of urgent debate. As we shall see, the novels I discuss in this chapter undermine the belief in the physiognomic legibility of morality and social class, while the novel I discuss in my next chapter upholds it. The idea that each social class in Britain was characterized by a distinct set of physiognomic features and corresponding behavioral traits stems in part from the idea that, from a historic perspective, each class hails from a different race. As Cowling points out, most Victorians agreed that “the ruling classes showed marks of descent from the Norman invaders; that the middle classes had inherited from their Teutonic ancestors not only their fair hair, but the phlegm and stolidity associated with the Saxon temperament; while the lower classes retained much of the aboriginal nature and dark complexion usually attributed to the Celt” (124). Not surprisingly, many of the features associated with the aristocracy were also those associated with virtue and refinement, and many
of the physical traits associated with the working-classes were those associated with immorality and coarseness. Many Victorians believed that a person’s physical appearance would become more beautiful the more virtuously they behaved, and, consequently, “so far as a lower-class person was virtuous, so he approximated to the upper-class physiognomy, and vice versa” (Cowling 163). Significantly, however, according to physiognomic theory, these changes would not be so great as to obscure a person’s essential class identity (Cowling 170). John Ruskin echoes this belief when he states, “a wicked or foolish gentleman is still a gentleman—and an amiable or wise plebian still a plebian” (quoted in Cowling 179). The physiognomic belief that one is born into a particular social class, and that regardless of one’s virtues and successes, that social class will always mark the face and body, assumes an essential class identity that remains visible on the body’s surfaces.

Given its essentialist underpinnings, at first it may come as a surprise that, as Cowling argues, “in the Victorian age, the idea that the different social classes were physiognomically distinguishable was ubiquitous” (121). After all, the Victorians saw evidence of class mobility every day, and, as many critics have pointed out, the sensation novel, in particular, is heavily invested in the thematization of such topics as the loss of class identity, the rise of the

2 While the Victorians viewed the upper-class physiognomy as beautiful and refined, and some agreed that, at least at some earlier point in history, aristocrats’ attractive physiognomies reflected their superior traits and justified their rule, during the nineteenth century, the assumed superiority of aristocrat’s physical features and character was disputed by the middle-class. This is particularly apparent in discussions of men’s faces, in which aristocratic features characterized by delicacy and refinement reflect degeneration, weakness, and effeminacy, and strong, bold middle-class features denote hard work, determination, and usefulness. While this preference for the middle-class type is much more prevalent in discussions of men, in my analysis of East Lynne in Chapter 3, I argue that Wood similarly champions the middle-class woman’s physiognomy and character, while acknowledging the allure of aristocratic features and traits in women.

3 Again, while Cowling is correct that, generally speaking, Victorians who believed in physiognomic principles trust that the more virtuously a woman or man behaved, the more attractive his or her physiognomy would become, because of divergent beliefs regarding the relative merits of the upper- and middle-classes, some argued that the upper-classes did not represent the ideal of beauty.
professional middle-class man, the illegitimate social ascension of the deceitful woman, and the liminality of figures like the detective and servant. However, many Victorian writers continued to uphold the belief that each class is biologically and physiognomically distinct from the others, and that members of a given class possess certain behavioral traits, reflected in their physiognomic features, that determine their relative success or failure. In some novels, for example, an upwardly-mobile middle class professional man may be shown to move up the social ladder within the middle-class or even to marry someone from the aristocracy, but this does not necessarily change his own essential middle-class identity. As the social boundaries between certain groups collapsed, some Victorians relied all the more heavily on pseudosciences like physiognomy, which naturalized social distinctions and offered at least the semblance of ordered, stable, and permanent identities.

In crafting their character doubles, pairs of women who share almost identical appearances despite their different social classes, Braddon and Collins undermine the physiognomic belief that social class is always visible on the body’s surfaces and question the assumption that each class inherits a distinct set of traits. However, surprisingly little scholarship on physically-similar doubles in the sensation novel exists. Critics have long recognized the prevalence of doubling in the plot, character, and structure of the sensation novel, but they have not always acknowledged its historical or thematic importance. For example, in The Maniac in

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Winifred Hughes points out that the plot of most sensation novels emphasizes mistaken, lost, or duplicated identities and “can actually be reduced to the generic principle of doubling” (20). Ultimately, however, Hughes suggests that in the sensation novel this motif has little meaning beyond furnishing the material for melodramatic scenes in which “the unwitting protagonists experience their strange encounters with the empty form of the doppelgänger” (21). However, following the publication of Hughes’ monograph, several critics began to take a more historically-minded approach to character doubles in the sensation novel.

Most notably, Helena Michie and Jenny Bourne Taylor correctly argue that in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White* Braddon and Collins use pairs of female character doubles to demonstrate that women’s identities, including their social class, may change in fairly drastic ways over the course of their lives. In *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (1992), Michie argues that the proliferation of Lady Audley’s multiple identities and character doubles exposes both the female doubling inherent in Victorian marriage and wider social fears regarding female duplicity and doubleness. Specifically, Michie points out that, on the one hand, a woman’s marriage could alter her financial status and social class, as well as her sexual identity, as she moved from virgin, to sexually active wife, to mother. On the other hand, Victorian marriage also demanded a fixed identity by requiring the wife to remain emotionally and sexually faithful to her spouse. Michie concludes that “marriage was supposed simultaneously […] to produce, display, and contain sexual and class doubleness,” but, as readers of this genre know, this does not always occur in the sensation novel (62). As Michie points out, in these stories, legal changes to identity within the institution of marriage on the one hand, and criminal appropriations of identity on the other, appear disturbingly similar (59). Similarly, in *In the Secret Theatre of the Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and*
Nineteenth-Century Psychology (1988), Taylor “prob[es] the links between the confining contemporary constructions of femininity and insanity” by showing how The Woman in White’s Laura, a traditional feminine woman, and Anne, an allegedly insane woman, are two signs of the same coin (11). Taylor argues that Laura’s fulfillment of feminine stereotypes actually facilitates Count Fosco’s plot to label her as an insane woman and that when Fosco reframes the narrative surrounding her body and identity, he can easily pass her off as Anne (99). By showing how women’s identities may be changed by social institutions or other (male) individuals, Michie and Taylor usefully problematize the idea that identities are fixed, permanent, and essential.

In this chapter, I build upon the above criticism by focusing specifically on physically similar doubles and the ways in which they undermine physiognomic principles and the essentialist beliefs that support them. As Brantlinger points out, character doubles “exist mainly on a metaphoric level” in the realist novel, but “are given much more literal expression in romantic fiction, including the sensation novel” (“What is ‘Sensational’” 24). The character pairs I discuss in this chapter are composed of two characters that share an innate physical resemblance, which in some cases has the potential to be strengthened by changes to the face and body. I argue that sensation novelists were particularly interested in this type of character double because it allowed them to suggest that, contrary to physiognomic principles, even “natural,” faces and bodies could not always be read, distinguished from one another, and identified. By

5 Although the sensation novel is extremely interested in physically-similar character doubles, most of the scholarship on nineteenth-century doubles focuses on character foils that look nothing alike. Character foils—which include such famous nineteenth-century pairs as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and the Creature, Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason, and Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—are two characters with opposing physical, psychological, and behavioral traits, which are juxtaposed in order to make the differences between the characters all the more striking. Typically, critics apply a psychoanalytic lens to explain the significance of these character doubles in terms of repression and psychic fragmentation. In these analyses, two or more separate and distinct characters are thought to represent different parts or versions of a single psyche. Drawing on the work of Carl Jung, who posits that a character’s literary double may represent his or her personal “shadow,” these critics read the monstrous double as representing either “the dark aspects of the personality” that the protagonist has repressed and failed to acknowledge or “the road not taken” by the protagonist (quoted in Hallam 17).
asserting that a character could successfully adopt multiple names and identities without her physiognomy giving her away or that two characters with different personalities could look so similar that their identities could be switched, sensation novelists assert that physical appearance is not a reliable proof of identity. In addition, by pairing characters with what conventional wisdom would call very different essential identities, such as two women from different social classes, these novelists interrogated both the belief that social class is a “natural” or biological condition accompanied by a set of inherited traits, and the idea that this class identity is always visible on the body’s surfaces.

**Braddon’s Rejection of Physiognomic Principles in *Lady Audley’s Secret***

The novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* follows the attempts of Robert Audley to unravel the many secrets and multiple identities of the beautiful and charming young woman who has recently married his uncle. The future Lady Audley begins her life as Helen Maldon, the only child of a certifiably insane mother and an alcoholic, largely absent father. She hopes to improve her economic and social situation by marrying a handsome, young dragoon, George Talboys. However, George’s imprudent marriage angers his father, who immediately disinherits him. After the couple exhausts their modest savings, George abandons his wife and their newborn child to seek his fortune in Australia. George admits, “I left my little girl asleep, with her baby in her arms, and with nothing but a few blotted lines to tell her why her faithful husband had deserted her” (59). Upon learning this news, Helen Talboys assumes the name Lucy Graham, and, leaving her child under her father’s care, moves to London to work in a school. Subsequently, she obtains work in the country as a governess. There, she meets the elderly but rich Sir Michael Audley. Positively bewitched by Lucy’s beauty, he proposes, and she accepts. Until the end of the novel, Lady Audley hides the truth about her past from her doting husband. Although she does not have the chance to confess her worst crimes to Sir Michael, she admits to
Robert that she attempted murder on two occasions: first by pushing her recently-returned first-husband, George, down a well, and second, by burning down the public house where Robert, her accuser, and Luke, her blackmailer, slept. According to Lady Audley, the most carefully-guarded “secret of [her] life” (355) is that she has inherited her mother’s insanity, but many feminist critics following Elaine Showalter suggest that her real secret is that she commits these crimes while perfectly sane. At the end of the novel Robert places her in a secluded *maison de santé* under the name Mrs. Taylor, where she remains until her death a few years later.

In this section of the chapter I argue that Braddon’s critique of physiognomy is much more far-reaching than previous critics have suggested. First, it is important to remember that, for contemporary readers, Braddon’s subversive depiction of the anti-heroine called into question not only the legibility of fictional characters, but also the legibility of real human bodies. In my analysis of Lady Audley’s physical appearance and the novel’s rejection of the physiognomic legibility of morality, I point out the ways in which Braddon anticipated and foreclosed readers’ attempts to explain away the shocking incongruence between Lady Audley’s beautiful appearance and criminal behavior. I also suggest that Lady Audley’s physical appearance would have been shocking to contemporary readers because, contrary to physiognomic beliefs regarding habitual thoughts, behaviors, and facial expressions, her body does not change over time to reveal her increasingly immoral and criminal acts. While previous critics have assumed that Braddon’s critique of physiognomy begins and ends with her depiction of Lady Audley, I extend my analysis to the anti-heroine’s maid, Phoebe Marks. Significantly, I argue that Phoebe’s surprisingly aristocratic physiognomy—which is emphasized through her innate

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6 In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter famously argues, “As every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is sane and, moreover, representative” (167).
resemblance to Lady Audley—undermines the very idea that the classes are biologically and physiognomically distinct. I end this section by examining how Braddon’s rejection of key physiognomic principles and challenge to the existing “realist” modes of character description affected critics’ assessments of Braddon, the novel, and its characters.

Most scholars of Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* acknowledge the unsettling incongruity between Lady Audley’s beautiful features and her immoral and criminal deeds. However, the majority of these critics do so without any reference to the science of physiognomy. A few critics, including Jessica Cox and Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, rightfully situate *Lady Audley’s Secret* within contemporary discussions about physiognomy, but because they do so only in passing and without any detailed analysis, they too overlook many of Braddon’s most subversive critiques of this science. It is true that even without a knowledge of physiognomy, readers today can understand on a basic level that Lady Audley is a subversive character: humans are instinctively attracted to what is beautiful, and when a beautiful woman turns out to be immoral or criminal, it reveals the unsuspecting admirer’s naiveté and danger. However, in order to understand the larger cultural implications of Braddon’s novel and the stakes for contemporary readers, Braddon, and the literary establishment, we need to historicize these authorial choices by examining them within the context of physiognomy.

Up to this point, scholars have focused much more on the ways Lady Audley actively constructs her identity as a “lady”—with all of the gender, class, and moral connotations that word implies—than on the novel’s discussion of her innate physiognomic features. It is understandable that critics would be interested in Lady Audley’s strategic use of commodity goods, which she uses to accentuate her aristocratic, feminine appearance. After all, the novel does obsessively catalog the anti-heroine’s clothing, accessories, and other portable property,
including the rustling silks, heavy velvets, rich sables, satin shoes, and sparkling jewels that both adorn Lady Audley’s body and frame our understanding of it. However, in their eagerness to highlight the ways in which *Lady Audley’s Secret* reveals identity to be socially-constructed rather than innate, some critics overstate the extent to which Lady Audley alters her physical appearance and, in the process, they obscure Braddon’s groundbreaking critique of physiognomy.

Notably, some scholars have wrongly suggested that Lady Audley wears cosmetics in order to improve her physical appearance and convincingly look the part of the lady. In doing so, these critics misrepresent one of Braddon’s most subversive refutations of physiognomic thought; for, unlike many of her contemporaries, who explained away exceptions to physiognomic rules by suggesting that their characters’ faces had been disfigured, disguised, or otherwise altered, Braddon suggests her anti-heroine’s innate, unaltered features fail to reveal her personality and morality. In *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women’s Writing* (2008) Krista Lysack claims, “[the fact] that female gentility is a matter of performance is not a secret to the maid who assists Lady Audley by adding false hair or enameling her skin with cosmetics” (63). However, contrary to Lysack’s assertion, Braddon never mentions Phoebe or any other lady’s maid helping Lady Audley improve her appearance in these ways. In the oft-quoted passage from *Lady Audley’s Secret* that does discuss false hair and enameling, Braddon’s narrator simply observes that, generally speaking, lady’s maids know their mistresses’ secrets, including the rather grotesque ways in which some improve their physical appearance. The only other piece of evidence Lysack offers to support this claim is Braddon’s

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7 The passage reads: “Among all privileged spies, a lady’s maid has the highest privileges; it is she who bathes Lady Theresa’s eyes with eau-de-cologne after her ladyship’s quarrel with the colonel; it is she who administers sal-volatile to Miss Fanny when Count Beaudesert of the Blues, has jilted her. She has a hundred methods for finding out her mistress’ secrets. She knows by the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hair-brush, or
reference to Lady Audley’s “penciled eyebrows” (Lysack 63). However, for the Victorians, “penciled eyebrows” could mean not only those brows literally colored in with a pencil, but also, as the OED points out, those brows “delicately marked, streaked, or striped with thin lines” that looked as if they were drawn with a pencil. In Lady Audley Secret, as in other Victorian novels, the key to understanding the author’s use of this phrase is to examine its context: Braddon lists Lady Audley’s “penciled eyebrows” alongside her other innate physiognomic features, which reveals that Braddon uses this feature as further proof of Lady Audley’s natural beauty. Like Lysack, in The Victorian Freak Show (2009) Lillian Craton asserts “Lady Audley’s physicality (associated with her bedroom strewn with cosmetics and clothing) seems like a mask that hides her dark inner being” (132). Not only does Craton inaccurately suggest that Lady Audley’s room is littered with cosmetics, she also defines Lady Audley’s “physicality” without reference to her

chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast—what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain. That well-bred attendant knows how to interpret the most obscure diagnosis of all mental diseases that can afflict her mistress; she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for—when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist—when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living; and she knows other and more sacred secrets than these” (346).

8 The OED defines the adjective “penciled” in the following way: “Inscribed or decorated with, or as with, a pencil (in various senses); delicately marked, streaked, or striped with thin lines (as opposed to blocks) of colour or shading.”

9 It was actually quite common for nineteenth-century authors to praise their heroine’s “penciled brows” alongside their other innate physical features as a testament to their beauty. A Google Books search for “penciled brow” in nineteenth century texts turns up many examples of this figurative meaning of “penciled,” and the context of these quotations quickly reveals that the phrase was often used as a compliment, praising a woman’s natural beauty, rather than as an insult, accusing her of using cosmetics. For example, in the short story the “Sheik’s Revenge,” published in The Ladies Pearl: A Monthly Magazine (Nov. 1842, Vol. 2, No. 5, p.97-106), the anonymous author describes the beautiful heroine thusly: “Whatever was of tenderness reposed in the daughter; her fair brow was finely contrasted with her dark hair, which fell in long, luxuriant tresses over her graceful neck; her fairy feet entwined in gems, flashed when she moved; the flush of innocence spread its crimson bloom over her cheeks, and gave life and expression to her lovely countenance—her hazel eyes beamed from beneath their penciled brows (98). In contrast, when authors use the phrase “penciled brow” to indicate that the woman uses cosmetics, the tone is much more judgmental and negative and the connection to cosmetics is clear. Typically, the author will either depict the woman penciling her brows or list the “penciled brows” amongst other physical features that have been altered by cosmetics, such as rouged lips and cheeks. The novels I discuss in my final chapter, No Name and Her Father’s Name, depict actresses who use pencils to color their brows.
material body. For Craton, Lady Audley’s “physicality” is evoked precisely by those false surfaces used to cover the body—clothing and, supposedly, cosmetics—that function like a mask, hiding the real body and the “dark inner being” underneath. However, what both Lysack and Craton miss is that Lady Audley’s innate physical features already proclaim her femininity and morality to all who look upon her—she has no need for cosmetics, and this is precisely what makes her so frightening.

In some cases, even those scholars who do not make the mistake of assuming that Lady Audley wears cosmetics minimize the importance of her physical body in their emphasis on the artificial, constructed nature of her appearance and identity. Like Lysack and Craton, in Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels (2007) Talairach-Vielmas emphasizes Lady Audley’s use of commodities to build up her (false) image and identity: “the fraudulent female character recedes into an overproduction of visual signs aimed at captivating the beholder and foregrounding femininity as a chimerical image […] by associating the Victorian ‘angel’ with the world of commodity culture, Braddon deflates the icon of ideal femininity in order to disclose the artificiality of the nature of woman” (121). However, in making this argument, Talairach-Vielmas incorrectly argues that Lady Audley’s physical features become drained of their meaning because the anti-heroine has constructed a false identity. She concludes, “[b]ecause Lucy Audley does not really exist, the parts of her body the detective analyzes—from her feathery hair to her azure eyes—become empty tropes, dead metaphors which literally signal Helen Talboy’s faked death” (121). First, it is important to note that Lady Audley does exist, as a flesh and blood woman, regardless of the name she uses. Second, although she adopts many names and identities, people react to her beautiful body in the same way each time. Her physical features, from her feathery hair to her azure eyes, do carry
very specific cultural meanings (again, this is what makes her so threatening). Finally, even after Robert, the novel’s amateur detective, convinces himself that Lady Audley is not what she seems and must have been involved in his friend George’s disappearance, he repeatedly doubts this conclusion, even when the evidence seems to confirm it, in large part because he is faced with the image of a beautiful, childish woman who does not seem capable of treachery. Far from becoming a series of empty tropes, Lady Audley’s body continues to influence the opinions of everyone around her.

“The Beautiful Fiend”: Lady Audley and the Physiognomic Legibility of Morality

Within discussions of physiognomy, Lady Audley’s Secret is most famous for its obvious rejection of the Platonic principle of kalokagatheia, which states “the morally best [are] the most beautiful, [and] the morally worst [are] the most deformed” (Lavater 99). Generally speaking, Lady Audley’s beautiful exterior belies her immoral and criminal deeds, and, more specifically, her individual features fail to reveal her personality traits to those who look upon her. For readers aware of basic physiognomic principles, Lady Audley’s “large and liquid blue eyes” (90) denote a passive, flexible character; her “tiny, straight,”(101) and “delicate” (90) nose indicates a mild temperament; her small, rosy lips promise a refined rather than a sensual disposition; and her yellow curls—which, Braddon tells us, “fall about her face like the pale, golden halo you see round the head of a Madonna in an Italian picture”—mark her as a domestic angel (278). In other words, Braddon’s use of physiognomic and literary conventions leads the reader to expect a feminine, childish, angel-in-the-house who is charmingly incapable of acting for herself. However, Braddon famously subverts these expectations by delivering a “beautiful fiend” instead.

Notably, Braddon refuses to offer readers an ideological escape hatch through which they might find their way out of this troubling physiognomic dilemma. While recent critics of the
novel have sometimes faulted Braddon for relying so heavily on physiognomic and literary clichés to describe her anti-heroine’s body, I would argue that she carefully and intentionally conforms to the angel-in-the-house type in her descriptions of Lady Audley’s physical features to thwart her readers’ attempts to make sense of the anti-heroine’s body and behavior within the logic of physiognomy. After all, contemporary readers did just that when presented with Collins’s later beautiful fiend, Lydia Gwilt, whose one physical flaw, red hair, seemed to reassuringly proclaim her moral deviancy. Lady’s Audley’s beauty is perfect and complete, so her immorality and crimes cannot be explained away in this fashion.

By depicting this woman—Helen Maldon, Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham, Lucy Audley—under a variety of names and identities, Braddon also confirms that her anti-heroine’s physical features are interpreted in the same way by different groups of people regardless of her heroine’s social and financial position in society. Whether the anti-heroine is a poor young girl, a happy newlywed, a resigned governess, or the titled wife of a wealthy husband, people remark upon her exquisite beauty and assume that she is exactly what she appears to be: gentle, childish, feminine, and kind. Just as Helen “was a favorite with everyone who knew her” (262), so too does Lucy earn the love, admiration, and praise of “everybody, high and low” because they believe her to be “the sweetest girl that ever lived” (48). Thus, Braddon gives no hint, as Dickens does, in his characterization of Lady Dedlock in Bleak House (1853), that reports of her protagonist’s beauty and reputation are exaggerated because of her social station: readers glimpse Lady Audley’s life before she acquires a title, fine dresses, or jewels, so they understand that she is just as readily admired when she is poor. In addition, readers observe that she is well received throughout her life, so they realize that her beauty and winning ways would persuade

10 Lydia Gwilt is the anti-heroine from Collins’s Armadale (1866).
not only Sir Michael, but almost anyone, that she is a moral person. As we shall see, the fact that Lady Audley worries that she will be recognized as the former Helen Talboys, only underscores the point that the anti-heroine’s physical appearance has not noticeably changed over time despite her crimes.

Significantly, Lady Audley’s face would have shocked Victorian readers not only because, at the beginning of her life, her innate physical features fail to reveal her character, but also because, as time goes on, and she acts in not only immoral but also in downright criminal ways, her thoughts and behaviors leave no visible trace upon the surfaces of her body. Lavater and those who followed him argued that “[f]requent repetitions of the same state of mind impress, upon every part of the countenance, durable traits of deformity or beauty” (Lavater 99). In other words, immoral or criminal thoughts and acts (and the corresponding facial expressions) were believed to permanently mark the face, changing a person’s features over time to reflect the type of person her or she had become. Completely contrary to this principle, by the end of the novel, Lady Audley’s physiognomy still shows no permanent changes.

Indeed, Braddon stresses that, regardless of what Lady Audley feels, thinks, or does, her beauty quickly recovers from any temporary changes and restores itself, almost magically, to its former perfection. The narrator suggests that “[l]ike the birds and flowers,” after a good night’s rest.

11 In his first description of Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, the narrator notes that the anti-heroine’s social station and fashionable dress cause others to speak more highly of her beauty than an objective person would: “She has a fine face—originally of a character that would be rather called very pretty than handsome, but improved into classicality by the acquired expression of her fashionable state. Her figure is elegant, and has the effect of being tall. Not that she is so, but that ‘the most is made,’ as the Honorable Bob Stables has frequently asserted upon oath ‘of all her points.’ The same authority observes that she is perfectly got up; and remarks, in commendation of her hair, especially, that she is the best-groomed woman in the whole stud” (22-23). Another important distinction between Dickens’s Lady Dedlock and Braddon’s Lady Audley is that while the former does behave immorally, she does not commit crimes. While Lady Audley actually attempts murder and successfully commits arson in addition to her moral failings, Lady Dedlock is eventually cleared of the charge of murder lodged against her. Moreover, Dickens’s actual murdereress, the French maid Mademoiselle Hortense, exactly conforms to the physiognomic type of the murderess.
sleep, Lady Audley always “recover[s] her beauty and joyousness in the morning sunshine” (112). Here and throughout the novel, Lady Audley’s appearance is perversely linked with the natural processes of the “birds and flowers,” but the reader understands that, paradoxically, her innate beauty does not obey the laws of nature: other characters and the narrator note that neither “a day in the hot sun” (95) nor a “cold and snowy January morning” (167) disturb Lady Audley’s beauty, and, as we have seen, her features do not change according to the “natural” laws of physiognomy either. Perhaps the most striking example of Lady Audley’s disturbing ability to both regenerate her beauty and dismiss the gravity of her sins, arrives shortly after she commits arson, attempts murder, confesses some of her crimes to Sir Michael, and forfeits her position as his beloved and spoiled spouse. Braddon informs readers that by the morning following her confession, “[a] long night’s rest had brought back the delicate rose-tints of her complexion, and the natural lustre of her blue eyes” (379). As she awaits news of her fate, Lady Audley actually “smile[s] triumphantly as she contemplate[s] the reflection of her beauty” in the mirror and rejoices that “the days were gone in which her enemies could have branded her with white-hot irons” (379). Braddon’s anti-heroine knows that it is only through such a brand, a literal inscription burnt into the flesh, that her body could become permanently marked and her crimes made legible. Contrary to the comforting assurances of physiognomists, Lady Audley’s innate physical appearance does not reveal her immorality nor does it change over time to reflect her repeated crimes.

While Braddon’s critique of physiognomy prevents her from revealing Lady Audley’s personality through her physical features, she does provide an artistic rendition of her body in the form of a portrait, which, she suggests, is more easily interpreted than the original. Although Lady Audley’s actual face and body provide no warning of her latent madness and capacity for
violence, the Pre-Raphaelite portrait does foreshadow her sinister thoughts and deeds. In the portrait, Lady Audley’s childish beauty has been replaced by the dangerous allure of the “beautiful fiend” (107). While Robert repeatedly insists that “[t]he picture is—the picture: and my lady is—my lady” (108), both the narrator and Alicia assert that the portrait accurately reveals hidden aspects of Lady Audley’s physiognomy and personality. Alicia suggests that an inspired painter “is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes” (108). The narrator corroborates this opinion by suggesting that the painter in question has used his astute observational skill to illuminate parts of Lady Audley’s face that remain hidden from the untrained eye and, even then, only become visible under certain lights. The narrator explains, “it was as if you had burned strange-colored fires before my lady’s face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before” (108). The existence of this insightful portrait offers readers the hope that someone, somewhere, does have the ability to accurately read Lady Audley’s face. However, the painter never makes an appearance in the novel, and no other character exhibits the perceptual powers required to successfully read the anti-heroine’s physiognomy.

By the end of the novel, it may seem that Robert removes the threat his aunt poses to both the Victorian household and the nation because he forces her to admit that Helen Talboys and Lucy, Lady Audley are one and the same person; obtains a confession of her crimes; and exiles her to a Belgian maison de santé. However, by the time Robert accomplishes all of this, the

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12 Later, when Lady Audley attempts to convince Sir Michael that Robert is mad, “those hard and cruel lines” from the pre-Raphaelite portrait really do become “plainly visible in the firelight” (299). However, these lines only appear for a single moment and are only visible to the reader. Neither Sir Michael nor any other character witness this brief indication of Lady Audley’s character and affirmation of the portrait.
supposedly inviolable Victorian home has been compromised and Lady Audley has already wrought sizeable damage. As Tabitha Sparks observes, in retrospect, Lady Audley is viewed as a dangerous interloper and “her admission to Sir Michael’s home and heart reeks of forced entry into a once private domain” (27). During Lady Audley’s confession, the narrator denies that Sir Michael “ever really believed in his wife,” because she cannot believe that “an honest man […] is ever really deceived by falsehood” (360). However, all of Sir Michael’s remarks and actions support the opposite conclusion. As Sir Michael himself states, he trusted in the story of his wife’s past “as he had believed in the Gospel” (358) and because he relies on his wife’s physiognomy as an index of her character, he becomes “the dupe of a false face” (367). The novel’s patriarch is so shattered by the truth of his wife’s deception that he cannot bear to hear the entirety of Lady Audley’s confession. Sir Michael declares “I cannot hear any more […] if there is anything more to be told, I cannot hear it” (366). Significantly, even before Lady Audley departs, the patriarch of the family flees Audley Court, never to return. Moreover, as Lysack points out, Braddon ends the novel with Lady Audley’s portrait (and, through the portrait, her continuing presence in Audley Court) rather than Robert’s own story. Consequently, Braddon’s depiction of Lady Audley’s subversive physiognomy not only challenges physiognomic thought, but also allows her anti-heroine to threaten the sacred Victorian institutions of marriage and family and disrupt the narrative of patriarchal authority and dominance.

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“She Looked Quite the Lady”: Phoebe Marks and the Physiognomic Legibility of Social Class

I argue that just as Lady Audley functions as a threatening exception to beliefs regarding the physiognomic legibility of morality, her maid, Phoebe Marks, serves as a disturbing exception to theories regarding the physiognomic legibility of social class. While scholars have pointed out the ways Phoebe could play the part of the lady by imitating her social superiors and altering her “natural” physical appearance with beauty products, they have passed over the physiognomic importance of Phoebe’s innate physical features. Phoebe’s permanent physical features—the very features a physiognomist would find the most trustworthy and expect to indicate a person’s essential identity—do not reveal her working-class origins. In fact, Braddon underscores Phoebe’s surprisingly aristocratic physiognomy by positioning her as a physically-similar double for none other than the beautiful Lady Audley. I contend that, in doing so, Braddon undermines the popular belief that members of the different social classes are biologically and physiognomically distinct.

We know that Braddon was aware of the types of physiognomic markers writers typically used to indicate a character’s working-class status at the time she wrote *Lady Audley’s Secret*, because she employs them in her depiction of other characters in the novel, including Phoebe’s husband, Luke Marks. According to Johann Gottfried Schadow’s nineteenth-century work on national physiognomies, “the low type, to be found among the inferior classes of various countries, is described as rustic and coarse, with typically large nose, mouth, and jaws” (quoted in Cowling 125). Appropriately, the first time readers meet Luke, he is introduced as an ill-mannered, boorish rustic: “a stupid-looking clod-hopper” with shaggy red hair growing “low

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14 Johann Gottfried Schadow, who lived from 1764-1850, was a German sculptor and an influential director of the Berlin Academy.
upon his forehead” (65). He is also “big” and “broad-shouldered” (65), because, like the “stout oxen grazing in the meadows round about the Court” (66), he is built for manual rather than intellectual labor. While his “well-shaped” (65) nose may at first appear promising, its large size expresses Luke’s intractable, domineering personality rather than a more admirable strength of character. His mouth, the feature most closely associated with the appetites, is “coarse in form and animal in expression” (65-66), yet again indicating his low-class status, affiliation with the animal rather than the human, and insatiable desire for money and alcohol. This trend persists throughout the novel, as not only Luke’s mouth but also his face, hands, clothing, and voice are similarly characterized as “coarse” (413, 417, 164). This consistency demonstrates that Braddon was aware of physiognomic and literary conventions regarding the depiction of working-class characters, which, in turn, makes her subversive depiction of Phoebe Marks a deliberate challenge to physiognomy. Unlike Luke, whose social class is revealed in a coarse physical exterior, Phoebe’s lower social class is not legible in the solid, permanent features of her face and body.

Rather than endow Phoebe with a traditional working-class physiognomy, Braddon provides her with an aristocratic one, and this unusual choice becomes all the more apparent and threatening because Phoebe’s physical features specifically resemble those of her social superior and mistress, Lady Audley. The physical resemblance between Lady Audley and Phoebe works on two levels. First, what physiognomists would call the permanent or solid features of the face and body of both women resemble one another. Second, as Lady Audley points out, Phoebe has the ability to further enhance this innate likeness by buying products that will allow her to change the aspects of appearance that are easily altered, like the shade of her hair or the cut and color of her gown.
In the same way that scholars tend to stress the extent to which Lady Audley’s appearance and identity is a calculated performance, they emphasize the ways in which the anti-heroine teaches Phoebe to look and act the part of the lady. For example, in “Marketing Sensation: Lady Audley’s Secret and Consumer Culture” (2000), Katherine Montwieler persuasively argues that Lady Audley’s Secret functions like a subversive conduct manual, which “show[s] poor women how to affect gentility, and once they have accomplished this goal, how to perfect it” (43). Montwieler argues that, in part, this performance is achieved “through the purchase of material possessions” (43). Drawing on the work of Lori Ann Loeb, she explains that some of these possessions, including “creams to whiten the complexion, fringes to improve the coiffure, and corsets to mold the female figure” allowed women to fashion their bodies in the image of the “perfect lady” (quoted in Montwieler 45). Braddon certainly draws attention to these consumer products and their ability to alter a person’s “natural” appearance, when Lady Audley insists to her maid, “[w]hy, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you’d be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe” (95). Braddon also draws attention to the effect of clothing on the perception of a person’s social class. For example, on Phoebe’s wedding day, the former lady’s maid wears “a rustling silk of delicate gray, that had been worn about half a dozen times by her mistress, [and] looked, as the few spectators of the ceremony remarked, quite the lady” (143). Here, expensive, high-quality clothing allows Phoebe to approximate the look of gentility, and strengthens the resemblance between herself and her former mistress.

However, while Braddon does show that working-class women like Phoebe have the ability to imitate their social superiors, and hide, cover, or alter their physical appearance through the use of beauty products and clothing, she also claims something even more subversive. She
reveals that the working-class Phoebe Marks closely resembles her aristocratic mistress even without altering the surfaces of her face and body. Indeed, contrary to long-standing physiognomic principle, Braddon asserts that Lady Audley and Phoebe’s innate and most permanent physical features are very similar, supporting the idea that even the body’s “natural,” unaltered surfaces may fail to reveal social class.

Lady Audley’s aristocratic features are explained not only by her place in the gentry at the time of the novel, but also through her lineage. At first, Lady Audley’s features, including her “fair” complexion (90), “tiny, straight” nose (101), small, “rosy lips” (90), and “delicate,” “fragile” frame (329, 90) may seem to mask not only her immoral acts but also her humble social origins. However, although Lady Audley complains that she suffered the “bitterness of poverty” as a child, her father, although fallen in status and sorely lacking capital, is a gentleman nonetheless (358). Indeed, even as a child, Lady Audley recognizes that, despite her poverty, she has a higher social status than “the coarse rustic children” that surround her (358).

Phoebe’s appearance, on the other hand, cannot be justified in this way. Her “pale face,” “light grey eyes,” “small features,” “compressed lips” and “slim and fragile” figure recall a washed-out version of Lady Audley’s distinctly aristocratic face and body (64-65). In fact, both women have heard others comment on these physical similarities, and Lady Audley readily acknowledges that the only noticeable difference between herself and her servant is Phoebe’s lack of color. Lady Audley tells Phoebe, “you are like me, and your features are very nice; it is only color that you want” (95). Significantly, it is the seemingly immutable, permanent features of the face and body that these women share. While Lady Audley’s aristocratic features may be explained by her father’s status as a gentleman, Phoebe’s similar features completely obscure her working-class origins.
Until now, critics have either failed to acknowledge the innate physical similarities between Lady Audley and Phoebe, or have overlooked the physiognomic significance of their cross-class resemblance in favor of more psychologized readings of Braddon’s character doubling. For example, in her otherwise excellent reading, Montwieler contends that “Phoebe and Helen’s similarity is not even so much physical as temperamental” (57) and that “the two women don’t possess a striking physical likeness” (57). In Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture (1992), Helena Michie readily acknowledges the characters’ physical resemblance, but struggles to determine why Braddon includes these details. First, she hypothesizes that it may be a mere “trace of a previous idea for the plot” that Braddon ultimately abandoned (65). Braddon may very well have debated using the characters’ physical similarities to facilitate a switched identity subplot. However, even if she did toy with this idea and later decide against it, we should not assume that the physical similarity between these two characters serves no function in the final version of the text. Indeed, the fact that Braddon does not drop all references to the characters’ resemblance part way through the novel, but instead continues to provide physical descriptions of them both individually and as a physically-similar pair throughout the entire story suggests the relevance of this detail.15 Michie also offers an alternate interpretation of the Lady Audley/Phoebe double: “[i]t seems equally possible […] that the double without a function is precisely a sign of duplicitous excess: a self-reproduction with no explicit purpose in the economy of the novel, a reproduction, as it were, with no real reproductive function” (65). Here, Michie presents Phoebe—the “double without a function,”—

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15 In other novels, Braddon did drop all reference to not only plot points but to whole characters part way through the story. See, for example, Henry Dunbar (1864): at the beginning of the novel, one subplot involves Dorothea “Dora” Macmahon and Arthur Lovell, two characters who are shown to love each other, and, it is hinted, may marry. However, Braddon abruptly drops Dora from the plot, does away with all reference to the love story, and has the lawyer, Arthur, play a very minor role for the remainder of the novel.
as a mere product of Lady Audley’s “duplicitous excess,” a testament to the extreme strength of Lady Audley’s powers of self-reproduction. Michie’s analysis assigns too much agency to Lady Audley and her “power to replicate herself” in the form of other characters (65). It is a mistake to assess Phoebe’s physical appearance and status as a double solely for what it can tell us about her mistress. Because Phoebe is a working-class character, her physiognomy conveys information that Lady Audley’s alone cannot: it reveals that Braddon’s novel undermines the physiognomic legibility of not only morality, but also social class.

The fact that Braddon endows a servant like Phoebe with what a physiognomist would call the same permanent physical features as her aristocratic mistress is shocking because it was precisely this type of feature that physiognomists believed was the least susceptible to manipulation and therefore the most trustworthy. While physiognomists examined all aspects of physical appearance, they put particular stock in the shape, size, and relative placement of what they called the “solid,” “firm,” or “permanent” physical features, such as the nose, mouth, lips, forehead, and overall skeletal makeup. Lavater, for one, assures readers that “[t]here are many features, or parts of the body, that are not susceptible [to] dissimulation” (83-84). He asks, by way of example, “[w]hat man […] however subtle, would be able to alter the conformation of his bones, according to his pleasure?” (84). While physiognomists conceded that some people might try to deceive others by altering their appearance, they looked to these permanent features as reliable signposts of identity, because, unlike something like hair color, which could be easily transformed with dye, these features seemed harder to change or disguise. Thus, by giving her aristocratic anti-heroine and her working-class maid similar permanent facial features, Braddon is doing much more than showing one’s physiognomy can be successfully disguised or altered by
cosmetics, hair dye, or clothing. She suggests that, contrary to popular belief, in some cases there may be *no* reliable physiognomic information to hide.

Even without a misleading physiognomy, Phoebe and servants like her posed a threat to the Victorian home because of their privileged access to the family’s private spaces and activities. Speaking of Braddon’s ghost stories rather than her sensation novels, in “Spectral Politics: M.E. Braddon and the Spirits of Social Reform” (2000), Eve Lynch observes that her working-class characters are often figured as ghosts and that their “social position in the house was analogous to the spectral apparition that haunted it: like the ghost, the servant was *in* the home but not *of* it” (237). Building upon this reading in “‘I Thought You Was an Evil Spirit’: The Hidden Villain of *Lady Audley’s Secret*” (2008), Elizabeth Lee Steere applies Lynch’s observation to Braddon’s earlier character, Phoebe Marks, who is similarly described in ghostly language as “a very dim and shadowy lady; vague of outline, and faint of coloring” (quoted in Steere 304). Although readers may disagree with Steere’s extreme interpretation of Phoebe as “the true ‘devil’ behind the plot,” she correctly asserts that servants like Phoebe worried readers because “under the pretense of being unseen” they had the opportunity to indulge in “unchecked voyeurism” and occasional blackmail (304).

Phoebe’s aristocratic physiognomy and her resemblance to her mistress render her an even greater threat to the Victorian home, both as a potential assistant to Lady Audley and in her own right. First, the self-interested partnership that exists between the two women always has the potential to extend into new territory because of their physical resemblance. Early on, Phoebe proves that she is a valuable ally to Lady Audley by keeping her secrets and warning her of

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16 Steere contends “[Phoebe] is the true ‘devil’ behind the plot, and Lady Audley is merely her pawn” (304). She argues that Phoebe actually mesmerizes Lady Audley and prompts her to commit the arson at the Castle Inn. In explaining Phoebe’s motives in prompting Lady Audley to commit arson, Steere suggests Phoebe wants to be rid of her violent husband but does not want to run the risk of being accused of murder.
Robert Audley’s comings and goings at the Castle Inn. Phoebe demonstrates that she is willing and able to abet and/or conceal Lady Audley’s crimes when it proves financially beneficial. Thus, although the two characters never actually switch places, the threat that they could do so in order to further Lady Audley’s schemes persists throughout the novel. In addition, as critics like Montwieler have pointed out, Lady Audley teaches Phoebe how to improve her social and financial position by playing and looking the part of the lady, which suggests that if Phoebe were to leave her husband and create a new identity like Lady Audley, she too has the potential to disrupt the Victorian institutions of marriage, family, and home. And, because Phoebe is a working-class woman whose permanent physical features look aristocratic, she stands to make an even more scandalously advantageous match than Lady Audley. Finally, Phoebe’s physiognomy poses a threat to the upper classes, because it challenges their superior position in society. The aristocratic physiognomy of the upper classes, which was thought to reflect their superior morality and intelligence, was used by some to justify their ascendant position in society. By challenging the physiognomic assumption that each class of people had a different type of physiognomy that reflected their inherent, biological inferiority or superiority, Braddon implies that the essentialized justification for social stratification is itself flawed.

Thus, it is important to consider not only the ways in which Lady Audley’s beautiful appearance naturalizes her position as the presiding angel of Audley Court, but also the ways in which Phoebe’s surprisingly aristocratic features and her resemblance to her mistress threaten to dismantle physiognomic beliefs about the legibility of social class and the assumed biological and physiognomic superiority of the upper-classes. Braddon reveals that bodies may be illegible, and that, when they are, even the Victorian home, that ideological center of morality and control, may be at risk. In the end, the very people we think we know best—our spouses, friends, and
employees—sometimes turn out to be “those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors” (James 594), and because their bodies do not reveal their secrets, we invite them inside.

“Not a Woman We Can Believe In”: Critical Reactions to Lady Audley’s Secret

As Galia Ofek points out, Braddon was not the first Victorian author to depict a blue-eyed, golden-haired “she-demon,”17 but she was the first to do so in an extraordinarily popular novel.18 Consequently, for most Victorians, Margaret Oliphant’s claim that Braddon was “the inventor of the fair-haired demon of modern fiction” (7) rang true. Although there is every indication that Braddon deliberately designed her novel to subvert physiognomic and literary conventions, contemporary critics initially dismissed Braddon as an amateur author who had crafted “unrealistic” characters because, in her creation of Lady Audley in particular, she did not uphold popular beliefs about women’s bodies and behavior.

During the first year of Lady Audley’s Secret’s publication, many critics tried to neutralize the threat Lady Audley presents to both physiognomy and the realist literary establishment by casting her as an unbelievable or farfetched character. For example, The Athenaeum suggests, “[s]he is not a woman we can believe in and may ever expect to meet with” (525); The Critic describes her as “a beautiful woman, with an atrocious, devilish disposition,

17 In “Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade” (2006) Galia Ofek argues that Harry Hazleton’s The Woman with the Yellow Hair (1860) “employed the ‘golden-haired domestic goddess’ trope to ridicule and criticize the traditional values of the Victorian bourgeoisie” before Lady Audley’s Secret (104). In 1861 another work entitled The Woman with the Yellow Hair was written by Percy Fitzgerald and published anonymously in the Dublin University Magazine (105). Ofek speculates that Fitzgerald’s text may have been inspired by George Augustus Sala’s The Seven Sons of Mammon, which also features a “she-demon with yellow ringlets” (105).

18 In October 1862, while Lady Audley’s Secret was finishing its first complete serial run in the Sixpenny Magazine, Tinsley Brothers published the novel in volume form. In the first three months of its publication, the novel sold out eight editions (Houston 17). And the novel’s phenomenal success and popularity persisted both in the years immediately following its publication—1863, for example, ushered in at least 3 theatrical adaptations, many parodies and satires, and a second serialization in the London Journal—and throughout the century (Houston 17). In fact, in 1899 the Daily Telegraph named it one of the “100 Best Novels in the World” (Houston 9).
such as none among us has ever met with, or few of us have ever dreamed of”(178); and The Rose, the Shamrock and the Thistle declares that Lady Audley’s escapades are “morbid and unreal,” concluding “such a fair-haired, child-like, petted, virtuous-seeming simpleton, never in nature carried a blight through the green landscape” (82). Significantly, these reviews highlight Lady Audley’s physical appearance and “unfeminine” behavior as key factors that contribute to the protagonist’s supposed implausibility. Similarly, in “Our Sensation Novelists” (1863) W.F. Rae faults Braddon for failing to follow physiognomic conventions in her characterization of Lady Audley, noting that the contradictions of the protagonist’s appearance, gender, and character render the novel both ethically and artistically problematic (354). Thus, many critics minimize the importance of Braddon’s physiognomic critique and uphold physiognomic convention and realist modes of character description by insisting that no real woman would be able to maintain a beautiful appearance, an undisturbed facial expression, and an innocent demeanor while committing egregious crimes. As long as Lady Audley remained a purely fictional threat, Braddon’s critique would be at least partially contained.

While critics initially stressed Lady Audley’s status as an anomaly or exception, the explosion in literary imitations quickly established the beautiful fiend as a recognized physiognomic and literary type. Writing in 1867, Oliphant reflects, “[w]icked women used to be brunettes long ago, now they are the daintiest, softest, prettiest of blond creatures; and this change has been wrought by Lady Audley, and her influence on contemporary novels” (7). By 1871 W.S. Gilbert’s parodic play A Sensation Novel in Three Volumes recognized “the beautiful fiend with the yellow hair and the panther-like movements” (132) as an “accepted type” of sensation fiction (133). In a moment of humorous self-reflection, Rockalda, the play’s send-up of this type, repents her crimes: “I, the beautiful yellow-haired fiend of sensational fiction, have
worked my wicked way through no less than 75 sensation novels! I shudder when I think of the amount of evil I have done!” (135). While Gilbert’s play is certainly hyperbolic, the beautiful fiend had in fact become an established type that figured prominently in many novels. Ironically, Lady Audley had become a part of the very system she was meant to critique.

Collins’s Rejection of Facial Distinctiveness and the Legibility of Fictional Bodies in *The Woman in White*

In *The Woman in White*, Collins does not go quite so far as Braddon in his departure from traditional physiognomic descriptions, but he nonetheless destabilizes the science in a variety of ways. As other scholars have pointed out, although Collins’s three major female characters all have physical appearances that conform to traditional physiognomic beliefs, he does include some characters whose physiognomies fail to reveal their character and identity. In addition, he emphasizes the difficulties of making an unbiased, physiognomic assessment. In this chapter, I supplement existing scholarship on Collins’s engagement with physiognomy by examining two of his critiques of the science that have hitherto gone unnoticed: first, he problematizes the belief in facial distinctiveness, and second, he observes that, in the case of both real and fictional bodies, it may be impossible to penetrate a disguise and to truly know and understand a person’s identity.

More specifically, I argue that in *The Woman in White* Collins rejects not only a person’s ability to consistently read character on the body’s surfaces, but also the physiognomic belief in facial distinctiveness and the powers of recognition and identification. In his doubling of the nearly-identical Laura, Lady Glyde and the penniless “half-wit” Anne Catherick, Collins initially seems to undermine the physiognomic distinctions between the social classes. While he eventually offers at least a partial explanation for the characters’ cross-class resemblance, Collins upholds his larger point that the face is not a reliable means of identification and highlights the
extent to which the law and people in general depend upon their ability to recognize and
correctly identify faces, despite its obvious ability to change. In the final section of this chapter, I
argue that Collins draws upon and subverts stage melodrama’s technique of literally labeling
characters’ bodies in order to identify them. I argue that in his depiction of Laura’s and Fosco’s
bodily labels and the Count’s disguise throughout the novel, Collins underscores the
impossibility of seeing through some disguises and truly knowing and understanding either real
or fictional bodies and identities.

While critics have spent very little time exploring Braddon’s critiques of physiognomy in
Lady Audley’s Secret, they have examined Collins’s use of this pseudoscience in a bit more
detail. Some scholars have considered whether Collins crafts his characters’ faces and bodies to
conform to or depart from standard physiognomic rules. Critics including Fahenstock, Craton,
and Cox have pointed out the ways in which Collins uses physiognomy in straightforward ways
in The Woman in White, suggesting, in particular, that the novel’s heroines, Marian and Laura,
“are not who they are in spite of their bodies, but because of them” (Craton 137). However,
Taylor correctly points out that the novel’s larger-than-life villain, Count Fosco, does not easily
fit into a single physiognomic type and seems to change his appearance over time (123)—a point
I take up and expand upon in my discussion of the Count’s disguise. I would add that, in addition
to Fosco, a few of the novel’s minor characters, such as Professor Pesca, have bodies that
completely contradict the normal rules of physiognomy. Although Pesca has a much smaller role
in the novel than a Lady Audley, a Phoebe, or a Fosco, he nonetheless contributes to Collins’s
critique of physiognomy, because he turns out to be the novel’s most dangerous and powerful
man despite his comically tiny physique.
Collins’s most subversive critiques of physiognomy revolve around the ways in which he, like Braddon, suggests that bodies may be illegible. However, most of the scholarship on Collins’s critical views of physiognomy focuses on the problem of poor readers. This scholarship usefully points out that Collins employs multiple first-person narrators with different subject positions, personalities, and opinions of their fellow characters to highlight the subjectivity of visual appraisal and physiognomic judgments. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, an author may concede that bodies are difficult to read while simultaneously defending the legibility of the body, but in *The Woman in White* Collins’s observations regarding poor readers function as part of his larger discussion of the problems with physiognomy and the illegibility of at least some bodies.

In particular, feminist critics have analyzed the biased physiognomic judgements of the novel’s ostensible hero and most frequent narrator, Walter Hartright. For example, Taylor argues that, at the beginning of the novel, Walter Hartright’s “perceptual universe […] is dominated by a particular naïve interpretation of associationist and physiognomic methods, linked to his problematic social and sexual position” (112). The first time Hartright sees the novel’s “masculine” heroine, Marian Halcombe, he objectifies and sexualizes her. Viewing her at first only from behind, he approves of her “feminine” waist because “it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, [and] it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays” (Collins 33). However, readers soon learn that Marian chooses to dress in this way, not to invite male admiration, but because she rejects traditional gender roles. Similarly, in his description of his love interest and eventual wife, Laura, Walter “manipulates the physiognomic sensation […] by replacing the features with the representation of them” (Taylor 116). Rather than describe Laura’s actual face and body, Walter introduces her to the reader by reminiscing about a sketch
of her physical features that he himself drew years before, in the height of his love and longing. Thus, Taylor demonstrates the ways in which Collins both shows physiognomic readings to be biased and flawed and uses them to reveal more about the person reading the body than about the person being read.

More recently, in *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth Century Culture* (2001), Lucy Hartley continues the discussion of poor readers in *The Woman in White*, although she focuses more on the linguistic and representational problems involved in accurately describing beauty than she does on the characters’ physiognomic biases. Her interpretation of *The Woman in White* and Collins’s other novels centers on the emotional effect of female beauty on male viewers, rather than on the body itself. Hartley’s emphasis on the viewer’s affect usefully highlights the male protagonists’ anxiety over faces that seem illegible and their own (in)ability to read them. For example, Hartley notes that both Walter Hartright and Basil detect, alongside more pleasurable feelings, “something wanting” in the faces of the beautiful women they see. Hartley points out, on the one hand, this “something wanting” could be the legibility of the face. She notes, “it is as if Laura’s face is recalcitrant to interpretation” (130). She posits, on the other hand, that this “something wanting” could be “the articulation of an inability to read the expressions of the face” on the part of the male viewers (135).

Ultimately, however, Hartley’s emphasis on the emotional response of male viewers obscures the actual faces and bodies represented in these texts. Because she is so interested in male affect, Hartley examines not Collins’s overall representations of female bodies and identities but the male protagonist’s perception of them. In her analysis of *The Woman in White*,

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19 Hartley discusses three of Collins’s early novels, including *Basil* (1852), *The Woman in White* (1860), and *No Name* (1862).

20 Basil is the eponymous protagonist of Collins’s second novel, *Basil* (1852).
Hartley positions Laura as “the embodiment of beauty and truth,” who “poses a challenge to the powers of Hartright’s interpretive method” (128). Hartright’s response to this interpretive challenge is to instruct the reader to “[t]hink of her […] as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir” (quoted in Hartley 128). Hartley’s argument actually reproduces the problems of Hartright’s flawed vision, denying Laura’s distinct physical appearance and identity by similarly positioning her as a representative of female beauty and truth. As I argue later in this chapter, it is Laura’s restored physical appearance—distinct from that of all other women, including Anne’s—that proves crucial for the establishment of her identity at the end of the novel.

One final feature of the existing scholarship on physiognomy in The Woman in White is the argument proposed by Cox that Collins’s fiction becomes progressively critical of physiognomy over time. In “Reading Faces: Physiognomy and the Depiction of the Heroine in the Fiction of Wilkie Collins” (2009), Cox asserts that Collins’s fiction becomes more critical of physiognomy over the course of his career, with his penultimate novel, The Legacy of Cain (1889) and his final novel, Blind Love (1890), questioning the validity of the science and “paralleling [the] general decline in the popularity of physiognomical theory” (117). In particular, Cox points out that in these later novels Collins draws attention to the ways in which the face and body change over time, and, consequently, cannot be trusted to reveal identity.21

However, as I demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, in his very first sensation novel

21 For example, in her analysis of The Legacy of Cain, Cox points out, “[t]hrough the changed appearance of Miss Chance, therefore, Collins appears to further dispute the validity of physiognomy by suggesting that it cannot account for changes in appearance caused by the passing of time” (118). Cox concludes, “at the end of his literary career, he was anxious to dissuade readers from employing the skills of the physiognomist in an attempt to read character” (119); “his apparent questioning of the validity of the subject in his later novels is representative of society’s declining interest and faith in the pseudo-science” (120).
Collins already addresses the problems that may occur in reading character and recognizing faces due to changes in physical appearance. In addition, he rejects the physiognomic principle of facial distinctiveness and offers one of the genre’s most radical rejections of the presumed legibility of fictional bodies. We should not assume that Collins’s novels become progressively critical of physiognomy and bodily legibility over time, in part, because, at the beginning of his career, many Victorians were already debating (and dismissing) the merits of physiognomy, and, in part, because, as we shall see in Chapter 5, Collins does not view all bodies—particularly Orientalized ones—as equally legible.

“Twin Sisters of Chance Resemblance”: Identical Faces and the Problem of Recognition and Identification

While, in the first half of this chapter, I discuss how, in Lady Audley’s Secret, Braddon rejects the physiognomic theory that it is possible to read information about a person’s character and identity on the body’s surfaces, in this portion of this chapter I will explain how, in The Woman in White, Collins problematizes the physiognomic belief in facial distinctiveness and the corresponding faith in the powers of facial recognition and identification. According to Lavater, “the most important and most decisive [truth] that can be alleged in favor of our system” (20) is the belief that no two human faces are identical. He proclaims, “[e]very individual in nature differs from every other individual of the same species […] it is impossible to find two, which, placed side by side, and carefully examined, do not represent to the observing eye a sensible difference” (20). For Lavater, the uniqueness of each face and body reflects the individuality of each soul. In other words, because Lavater believes the face to be the physical manifestation of the inner man or woman, and because he trusts that no two individuals share the same mind, spirit, and character, he concludes that each person must have a unique physical appearance.
In many ways, *The Woman in White* seems to respond to both this physiognomic belief in facial distinctiveness and, more specifically, to the Eastlake article “Physiognomy” cited at the beginning of this dissertation, which reinforces these ideas. Like Eastlake, Collins considers whether a person’s face can always be recognized and whether it should serve as proof of a person’s identity. For Eastlake, the face functions as “the appointed badge of distinction and proof of identity”: it verifies an individual’s identity and allows people to distinguish one individual from another. Eastlake never doubts the ability of one person to recognize another’s unique face; indeed, she predicts that were it not for the one “rapid and unerring” power of facial recognition, society would devolve into chaos. While Collins acknowledges the need for and the allure of a “rapid and unerring” system of identification, and highlights the drawbacks of the slow and imperfect legal system in proving a person’s identity, he rejects facial recognition as a failsafe proof of personal identification. Indeed, Collins’s novel revolves around the very eventuality that Eastlake dismisses: the prospect that, contrary to physiognomic theory, faces and bodies are not always visually distinct, and that two people, through no contrivance of their own, might look identical.

Initially, Collins, like Braddon, seems to use the Laura/Anne character double to problematize physiognomic assumptions regarding the innate physical differences between different social classes. At the beginning of the novel, the pretty heiress Laura Fairlie and her working-class double, the “half-wit” Anne Catherick greatly resemble each other, both in their most permanent physical features and in their coloring. During the girls’ childhoods, Laura’s mother, Mrs. Fairlie, meets Anne when the child joins her charity school. Mrs. Fairlie becomes fond of Anne due to her unaccountable resemblance to Laura: she remarks that, while Anne is “not half so pretty” as her own daughter, she is her “living likeness, in her hair, her complexion,
the color of her eyes, and the shape of her face” (65). Years later, the drawing-master Hartright meets both women in quick succession—first, when he assists Anne, the mysterious woman in white, the night she escapes from a nearby insane asylum, and the next day, when he meets his new pupil, Laura—and notices the same uncanny resemblance between them. Walter declares that the second time he sees Anne the physical similarities between the two young women are even more striking. He observes, “[i]n the general outline of the countenance and general proportion of the features—in the color of the hair and in the little nervous uncertainty about the lips—in the height and size of the figure, and the carriage of the head and body, the likeness appeared even more startling than I had ever felt it to be yet” (107). Thus, according to both Mrs. Fairlie and Walter, the girls’ physical similarities stem from both the relatively permanent features of their face, such as the shape and proportion of their features, and the color of their hair, eyes, and skin. Since Collins suggests that Laura and Anne are unrelated strangers for the majority of the novel, passages that describe their almost identical physical appearance initially provoke anxiety over the ability to distinguish the bodies of working-class women from those of their social superiors.

Early in life, Laura and Anne can be distinguished from one another only by the physical manifestations of their different life circumstances, including their mental health, sense of self-worth, and material comforts. While Anne has grown up the mentally-ill child of a mother who does not want her and later lives in an insane asylum, Laura has lived a life of relative ease, comfort, and happiness surrounded by the people she loves. Not surprisingly, then, the expression that adorns Laura’s face, is “the first of its charms” (649), and “the delicate beauty of Miss Fairlie’s complexion, the transparent clearness of her eyes, the smooth purity of her skin, the tender bloom of colour on her lips, were all missing from the worn weary face” of Anne
Catherick (107-108). In fact, after Laura marries Sir Percival Glyde, both she and her husband predict that if she were to become very ill, she would look exactly like Anne Catherick (318,382). Because the details that distinguish Laura and Anne are merely the result of their different familial, social, and financial positions, when Laura’s circumstances change for the worse, their physical appearances become indistinguishable.

This “fatal resemblance” (502) between Laura and Anne is the key to Count Fosco’s plot to switch the women’s names, bodies, and identities. Fosco knows that according to Laura’s marriage settlement and her deceased father’s will, he and Percival will receive a combined total of thirty-thousand pounds upon Laura’s death (702). He also realizes that Percival will remain beholden to him if he silences Anne and Laura, both of whom supposedly have the power to ruin Percival by revealing his greatest secret (702). 22 The Count masterminds a plot that only succeeds because of the women’s nearly identical appearance at this point in the novel: the Count decides to bury Anne in a grave marked with Laura’s name and “return” Laura, under Anne’s name, to the insane asylum from which Anne has escaped. Fosco switches Laura and Anne without their knowledge and against their will, and because they already look so similar, no changes to their physical appearance, besides switching their clothing, is necessary. 23 Much of the narrative focuses on the problems that ensue when two women from different social classes, financial positions, family situations, and mental-health backgrounds are mistaken for one another.

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22 Readers eventually learn that Percival was not authorized to inherit his father’s title and fortune, because his parents were never married. Neither Laura nor Anne actually knows the secret of his illegitimate birth.

23 For the Count’s plan to work, Anne, of course, must die in order to be buried as Laura. After he lures Anne to his apartment under false pretenses, she dies of natural causes one day before he plans to kill her. This is the one weak point in Fosco’s scheme, because, the supposed Laura (actually Anne) dies one day before the real Laura leaves her marital home and arrives in London.
When Laura’s physical appearance becomes identical with Anne’s, she finds herself “socially, morally, legally—dead” (478). Her appearance first begins to change during her traumatic marriage to Sir Percival, and her several month stay in the insane asylum completes the transformation. By the time Laura’s courageous half-sister, Marian, discovers her predicament and facilitates her escape from the madhouse, Laura’s new appearance prevents her from reestablishing her identity. With “her beauty faded,” “her mind clouded,” and the Count’s warning that “Anne” has taken to impersonating the deceased Lady Glyde fresh in the minds of Laura’s uncle and the Limmeridge tenants, no one besides Marian can or will attest to Laura’s identity (479). Later, when the two women run into Walter, the only other person who believes Laura’s assertion of her own identity despite her altered appearance, he confirms that Laura’s traumatic experiences have erased any noticeable physical differences between herself and Anne. He observes that before Laura’s incarceration in the asylum, “no person could for a moment have mistaken [Laura and Anne] one for the other—as has happened often in the instances of twins” but afterwards, with the “profaning marks” of “sorrow and suffering” marring Laura’s face, “I could not say this now” (503). Because Laura’s face and body cannot testify to her identity, and instead conform exactly to the face and body of an alleged madwoman, Laura loses access to not only her childhood home and her guardian’s protection, but also to her title, fortune, and legal rights. Having temporarily lost the ability to affirm her identity through the evidence of her physical features, the remainder of the novel involves Walter’s attempt to prove Laura’s identity through distressingly slow and imperfect pseudo-legal measures.

Throughout the novel, Walter complains that, because he is not rich, he cannot gain legal representation or advice. But rather than circumvent the legal system as he claims, he ultimately reinforces the law’s supremacy by adopting pseudo-legal measures in an attempt to reestablish
Laura’s identity. In the Preamble to the novel, Walter presents the text of *The Woman in White* as a collection of witness testimony meant to prove the truth of Laura’s identity to the reader. Thus, he explains that the reader will hear witness testimony “as the Judge might once have heard it” (3), and that “the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness” (4) in order to “present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect” (4). At the end of the novel, Walter’s legal efforts culminate in a pseudo-trial. To prepare for the trial, he consults the family lawyer and drafts a brief which strategically presents his arguments. He assembles the members of the Fairlie household and the tenants of Limmeridge to hear oral argument on the question of Laura’s identity, calling upon witnesses and submitting exhibits in the form of written evidence to support his argument. After he presents his case, he demands a verdict from the assembled group, which unanimously votes Laura into existence.

Even if Walter’s pseudo-legal measures minimize class prejudice in the sense that they allow him to pursue a criminal case that would have otherwise been beyond his financial means, his pseudo-legal system continues to perpetuate a bias against women. Several feminist critics such as Ann Gaylin, Pamela Perkins, and Mary Donaghy rightly question Walter’s motive in constructing the text, suggesting that *The Woman in White* is an assertion of Walter’s masculinity and rise to power rather than of Laura’s identity. They also correctly argue that Walter tampers with this allegedly straightforward text—editing, reorganizing, and omitting information as he sees fit—and often fails to cede narrative control to the female characters most directly involved in the events at hand.  

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24 For example, in “A Man’s Resolution: Narrative Strategies in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*” (1990), Pamela Perkins and Mary Donaghy argue that Walter’s stated purpose in constructing *The Woman in White* rings hollow, considering his initial description of Laura, which denies her subjectivity and individuality (393). In addition, they point out that Walter never invites Laura to testify on her own behalf and attempts to deny Marian’s
In addition, feminist critics have rightly drawn attention to Walter’s ulterior motives in courting Laura and attempting to reestablish her identity. In *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture and Sensationalism* (1989), Ann Cvetkovich argues that the physical likeness between Anne and Laura reveals that it is not disinterested love inspired by the intrinsic beauty of Laura’s body but rather Laura’s financial and social position that render her attractive to Walter. Cvetkovich explains that because the physical resemblance between Laura and Anne is depicted as an uncanny act of fate, it “enable[s] the more materially determined narrative of Walter’s accession to power to be represented as though it were the product of chance occurrences, uncanny repetitions, and fated events” (25). As Cvetkovich correctly argues, Walter’s socioeconomically motivated choices rather than “the hand of fate” lead to his marriage.

In a similarly skeptical reading of Walter’s role in the narrative and the culminating scene in which Laura’s identity is reestablished, I suggest that Collins undercuts Walter’s position as both legal representative and author of Laura’s identity by once again turning to the primacy of her body. Although Walter claims to prove Laura’s identity with factual evidence and documented proof, Collins suggests that Laura’s restored appearance rather than Walter’s pseudo-legal efforts persuade the crowd of her identity. When Marian, Walter, and Laura first enter the room, before Walter has delivered a word of his argument or submitted one piece of written evidence or witness testimony, Collins informs readers that “[a]ll the persons assembled continued acts of agency throughout the second half of the novel (399). In “The Madwoman Outside the Attic: Eavesdropping and Narrative Agency in *The Woman in White*,” (2001) Ann Gaylin goes even further than Perkins and Donaghy, designating Walter as the novel’s undetected villain: “A third, even more insidious enemy of female narrative agency lurks within the pages of the novel; in retrospect, [Walter] is actually more treacherous [than Sir Percival and Count Fosco] through his seeming alliance with the female characters,” (306-307).

At the end of the novel Walter rises to a position of power and respectability, moving from impoverished drawing master to middle-class husband to upper-class father of the heir of Limmeridge. As Cvetkovich persuasively argues, this transformation, which is achieved through his marriage to Laura, the reestablishment of her identity, and the birth of their child, is the result of his socioeconomically motivated choices rather than “the hand of fate.”
rose from their seats as Marian and I led her in. A perceptible shock of surprise, an audible murmur of interest ran through them at the sight of her face” (721). As if recalling Eastlake’s words, Collins demonstrates that the crowd’s instantaneous recognition of Laura’s face, rather than Walter’s time-consuming pseudo-legal efforts, prove Laura’s identity. Only after the crowd confirms Laura’s identity through their recognition of her face, which has, over time, been restored to its former appearance and expression (650), does Walter begin to read the narrative which is meant to reestablish her identity. Moreover, although Walter has earlier discounted Laura’s ability to reassert her own identity through her restored appearance, Walter himself defers to the proof of recognition when he “raise[s] [Laura] so that she was plainly visible to everyone in the room” before he asks the crowd for its verdict (722).

In “Physiognomy” Eastlake asserts that “[m]ost faces are, strictly speaking, on trial with us—we judge them according to how they wear” (75). In The Woman in White Collins nearly literalizes this concept by placing Laura’s face on trial to prove her identity. For Collins, unlike Eastlake, this notion is quite unsettling. He demonstrates that faces change, sometimes through no fault or desire of our own, and that it is not always easy to distinguish one person from another. Despite these problems, he reveals that people continue to rely upon the face as a trustworthy means of identification.

By the end of the novel, Collins does at least partially pacify critics by providing an explanation for the physical resemblance between Laura and Anne: he reveals that the women are half-sisters. Of course, this explanation does not completely eradicate the sense of unease that arises from their close physical resemblance; after all, the girls look more like identical twins than half-sisters. Eastlake points out that, in exceptional cases when twins of the same sex truly cannot be told apart, their identical appearance perturbs the viewer: “[w]hen […] as in the case
of twins of the same sex, we turn from one to the other with bewilderment and doubt, though this even is rare, the feeling created in our minds, however, lovely the type, is one of dissatisfaction; the birthright of man, that of distinct personal identity, has been invaded” (64). Tellingly, Eastlake conflates one’s distinct physical appearance with one’s distinct personal identity here. Even if Laura and Anne had been twins, contemporary readers would have found their physical similarities disconcerting. Given their different mothers, social classes, mental health, and overall identities, their physical similarities remain perplexing and troubling.

By rejecting the notion that all faces are unique, Collins, like Braddon, positions the home as “a threatening as well as a threatened space” (Wagner 186). First, as we have seen, society’s over-reliance on a person’s unique face as the ultimate proof of his or her identity threatens the integrity of the Victorian home. While in Lady Audley’s Secret the anti-heroine’s unchanging physiognomy provides her access to Sir Michael’s country estate, in The Woman in White, Laura’s altered facial and bodily features, which become almost indistinguishable from Anne’s, throw her identity into question and bar her from both her childhood and marital homes. At the same time, by revealing that Laura and Anne are half-sisters, Collins draws attention to the fact that the sexual dalliances of the women’s shared father, Mr. Philip Fairlie, are what make their physical resemblance possible in the first place. The other factors that facilitate the switched identity plot—Philip Fairlie’s dying wish that Laura marry the morally bankrupt Sir Percival Glyde; his placing Laura under the guardianship of his selfish brother, Frederick Fairlie; Fredrick’s total lack of concern for Laura’s safety and welfare in setting the details of her marriage settlement; and his later inability or unwillingness to acknowledge her identity—are similarly the fault of the two family patriarchs. Thus, rather than guarding the Victorian home and its most sacred inmates, the family patriarchs endanger Laura and nearly destroy the family
legacy. According to Collins, the Victorian home is threatened not only by an over-reliance on the face as a proof of identity, but also by the very patriarchs that are meant to preserve and protect it—a theme that will reemerge in many other sensation novels, including those I discuss in Chapter 6.

“As Plain as Print”: Reading the Bodies of Fictional Characters

As I have argued in this chapter, both *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White* discredit the science of physiognomy and, with it, the belief that actual bodies consistently function like legible texts. In doing so, Braddon and Collins introduce a complicated web of identity problems that must be untangled before the end of the narrative in order to restore order and achieve narrative closure. I argue that, taking a cue from stage melodrama, many sensation novels including *Lady Audley’s Secret* render textual bodies legible by replacing the figurative letters of physiognomy’s “divine alphabet” with literal words—oftentimes, a name—inscribed upon the character’s body, clothing, and possessions. Because characters bodies and the objects closely associated with them are literally labeled, characters are able to read the proof of identity on the body without recourse to physiognomy. In *The Woman in White*, however, Collins questions whether not only real but also fictional bodies are truly knowable, by showing that even these bodily labels, which, on the surface, appear “as plain as print” are open to manipulation and cannot be trusted. In addition, by presenting his villain in disguise throughout the entire novel, Collins questions readers’ ability to penetrate disguises and successfully read and recognize bodies both in life and in fiction.

In a poignant scene from *Lady Audley’s Secret* that has much in common with later sensation novels, Braddon positions Lady’s Audley’s hatbox, a possession closely associated
with her body and labeled with her name, as a pivotal clue to her multiple identities. When Robert begins to suspect that, despite her beautiful exterior, Lady Audley may be capable of treachery, he extends his investigation of her identity beyond the surfaces of her body. With this purpose in mind, he tracks down Lucy Graham’s former employer, Mrs. Vincent, to learn about Lady Audley’s life before her marriage to his uncle. While there, he examines an old bonnet box of Lucy’s, which, judging from the remnants of several railway labels, Lucy used on many of her journeys. Robert notices that one label, less torn than the others, bears the name “Miss Graham,” and dampens it in order to loosen the edges, peel it off, and examine the sticker underneath (257). To his dismay, the second label reads not “Miss Graham,” but “Mrs. George Talboys” (287). This, of course, indicates that Lucy Graham, now his uncle’s wife, and Helen Talboys, George’s allegedly deceased wife, are one and the same person (287).

Throughout the novel, Robert has spoken of his desire to “unmask” Lady Audley. But Lady Audley does not wear a literal mask, nor does she disguise her features. Because Robert can neither discover the truth of Lady Audley’s character and identity by examining her misleading physiognomy nor tear away a literal mask or disguise to expose the “real” woman underneath, he peels away the labels on her hatbox, which, in this scene, stand in as a metonymic replacement for Lady Audley’s body. On the one hand, Braddon makes use of the bodily labels often found in melodrama to conservative ends: Robert can use this evidence to force Lady Audley’s confession, confine her to a single identity, and solve the novel’s mysteries, effectively containing the anti-heroine’s earlier transgressions. On the other hand, Braddon resists the

26 The plots of many sensation novels involve shirts, underclothing, or other items closely associated with the body that are labeled with a character’s name or initials, and in several of these novels, such as *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Henry Dunbar*, and *The Moonstone*, these labels play a central role in the discovery of characters’ multiple identities and/or crimes.
impulse to repudiate her radical criticisms of physiognomy—she insists to the very last that her anti-heroine’s body is, in fact, illegible. While in *Lady Audley’s Secret* Robert easily pieces together the narrative of Lady Audley’s life and multiple identities with the help of bodily labels, in *The Woman in White* Collins suggests this process is not so simple.

In *The Woman and White* Collins demonstrates that while labels attached to or associated with the body offer an enticingly simple answer to the complicated question of identity, they, like a person’s physical appearance, are open to manipulation, and, consequently, cannot be trusted. While in *Lady Audley’s Secret* such labels help Robert link Lady Audley’s disparate identities, in *The Woman in White* they strengthen Count Fosco’s plot to switch the identities of Laura and Anne. Before dropping her off at the madhouse, Fosco instructs one of his female associates to dress Laura in Anne’s clothing while she is drugged and unaware of her surroundings. When Laura awakes in the madhouse for the first time, she discovers that her body has literally been labeled “Anne Catherick”:

The nurse, on the first night in the Asylum, had shown her the marks on each article of her underclothing as it was taken off, and had said, not at all irritably or unkindly, “look at your own name on your own clothes, and don’t worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde. She’s dead and buried, and you’re alive and hearty. Do look at your clothes now! There it is, in good marking ink, and there you will find it on all your old things, which we have kept in the house—Anne Catherick, as plain as print!” (495-496)

Again, we have an image of layers being peeled off the body in order to reveal identity, but, to Laura’s surprise, each layer of clothing proclaims an identity that is not her own. Laura attempts to declare her true identity, but the written word, the name stitched onto each piece of her private underclothing, suggests her assertions are a mere delusion, a symptom of her alleged insanity. The nurse, like many of Collins’s characters, equates the written word with straightforward, objective evidence: Anne’s name, which appears “as plain as print” in “good marking ink” does not invite multiple interpretations. As the lawyer Mr. Kyrle observes later in the narrative,
“[w]hen an English jury has to choose between a plain fact, on the surface, and a long explanation under the surface, it always takes the fact, in preference to the explanation” (514). Collins demonstrates that when it comes to both Laura’s physiognomy and the labels on her clothing, the English are also inclined to believe what they read on the body’s surfaces.

In his depiction of Count Fosco’s appearance, name, and bodily inscriptions, Collins suggests that for both the reader and the fictional detective, the ability to pin down a character’s “real” or essential identity may always remain elusive. Although Fosco’s physical appearance remains consistent throughout the novel, and, in this sense, he is easy to identify, Collins suggests that Fosco’s appearance, particularly his size and weight, may have changed dramatically over the course of his life, and reveals that the novel’s characters and its readers only ever see Fosco in disguise. Several characters notice discrepancies in the Count’s physiognomy, which suggests he has manipulated his appearance. For example, the first time Marian sees the Count, she observes, “[h]is complexion […] has a singular sallow-fairness, so much at variance with the dark-brown color of his hair, that I suspect the hair of being a wig” (246). Similarly, Walter concludes the Count must have changed his appearance and his name since the last time he was in Italy: “[t]he shaven face, which I had pointed out at the Opera, might have been covered by a beard in Pesca's time—his dark brown hair might be a wig—his name was evidently a false one. The accident of time might have helped him as well—his immense corpulence might have come with his later years” (676). Pesca confirms Walter’s suspicion: “he is so altered, or so disguised, that I do not know him […] and] I never knew the name he goes by, to my knowledge, before tonight” (674). Arguably, it is not only “the accident of time” but also Fosco’s deliberate actions that change his physical appearance. For example, characters frequently observe the Count eating sweets and sugar water, but because these
behaviors align with their stereotypes of effeminate Italians, they never consider he may be doing so to intentionally gain weight and alter his physical appearance. The Count’s disguise, moreover, has nothing to do with the crimes he commits during the narrative of *The Woman in White*. Walter speculates Fosco has fled Italy and adopted a disguise to escape the vengeance of an Italian secret society known as the Brotherhood, which wants to assassinate Fosco for spying on the organization and committing unspecified acts of treason. Fosco’s appearance, name, identity, and actions outside of the narrative, however, remain largely unknown.

In one of the final images of *The Woman in White* Collins depicts Fosco’s corpse, totally exposed in its nakedness, but still as illegible as ever. The Count has been stabbed in the heart, and his naked body lies outside a Parisian morgue “unowned, unknown; exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob” (728). Significantly, an inscription on the Count’s body that marks him as a member of the Brotherhood, “a brand deeply burnt in the flesh and stained of a bright blood-red color” (674), has been totally rewritten by the Count’s murderer. Walter observes that the mark has been “entirely obliterated” by “two deep cuts in the shape of the letter T,” which, Walter believes, stands for “traditore,” the Italian word for “traitor” (728-729). Collins introduces this palimpsest in order to underscore the way in which the Count has rewritten his own appearance and identity again and again. Each of the Count’s identities hides another, so even if readers and characters glimpse one, the rest remain illegible. As Susan M. Griffen points out in “The Yellow Mask, the Black Robe, and The Woman in White: Wilkie Collins, Anti-Catholic Discourse, and the Sensation Novel” (2004), Fosco’s final appearance at the novel’s end displays him in yet another disguise. She explains, “[e]ven 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” (68). The fact that readers see the Count’s corpse through the
eyes of Walter Hartright, who peers over the first row of spectators, who themselves look through the “great glass screen that parts the dead from the living at the Morgue” (728) further highlights the actual distance between the reader and the bodies represented in the text.

Collins continues the metaphor of writing upon writing when the Count’s wife, Madame Fosco, literally rewrites her husband’s life in a biography published after his death. Walter mentions that the biography, “throws no light whatever on the name that was really his own or on the secret history of his life: it is almost entirely devoted to the praise of his domestic virtues, the assertion of his rare abilities, and the enumeration of the honors conferred on him” (729). As the Count writes in his confession, “[t]he subject is exhausted: the man—Fosco—is not” (693). The fact that readers have only seen the Count in disguise and under an assumed name makes them question how well they can know Fosco—or any other character—despite the letters, words, and other symbols inscribed upon the body. Indeed, because Collins leads readers to believe they would be able to recognize and identify the Count, only to reveal that they never really knew his “true” physical appearance or understood his “real” identity, readers question their ability to read any real or fictional body with complete confidence.

Although Lady Audley’s Secret and The Woman in White are two of the earliest sensation novels, they offer some of the most radical critiques of the science of physiognomy and the legibility of the body found in the genre. Indeed, these early critiques are more significant and shocking than those found in the novelists’ later works, in part because they openly reject the science at a time when many of their readers had not yet come to these conclusions. As I have argued, Braddon rejects the physiognomic legibility of both morality and social class without providing any explanation for why a lady and her servant look so alike. Collins argues that not only the ability to read character and social class on the body’s surfaces, but also the more
fundamental capacity to recognize faces, is, at best, a very flawed means of identification. He
draws attention to the fact that bodies may change and asserts that, contrary to physiognomic
principle, faces may not always be distinct. Although, unlike Braddon, Collins does provide a
partial explanation for his characters’ physical resemblance, this justification does not
completely explain, from a physiognomic perspective, how two individuals who are so different
could look so alike. Unlike many of the sensation novels that followed *The Woman in White*
(including some of Collins’s own), this text largely rejects the legibility of not only real but also
fictional bodies.

While it is important to acknowledge the extent to which sensation novels such as *Lady
Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White* problematize the science of physiognomy by pointing
out not only the problems that may occur when reading the body, but also the fact that, even
without intentional manipulation or disguise, the body may be illegible or become
unrecognizable, it would be inaccurate to conclude that all sensation novels offer radical
critiques of physiognomy. In my next chapter, I examine Wood’s *East Lynne* for a more
conservative assessment of these issues. While Wood acknowledges, and even sensationalizes,
the many threats to bodily legibility, she concludes that at least some aspects of identity,
including a person’s social class, will always remain legible on the body’s surfaces.
Along with *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) is considered one of the three foundational texts of the sensation novel genre. Wood quickly became famous both at home and abroad for her wildly successful and frequently imitated bestseller. In 1866 a review in *The Times* went so far as to claim *East Lynne* was “universally read,” and by 1909 it had been so widely adapted for the stage that the *Pictorial Leader* asserted that “more millions have witnessed *East Lynne* than have seen any other play that was ever written” (quoted in Maunder Introduction 12). By the end of the nineteenth century, Wood’s publishers had sold half a million copies of this runaway hit.

I argue that, unlike Braddon and Collins, in *East Lynne* Wood defends the science of physiognomy, upholds the legibility of the body, and reinforces essentialist beliefs regarding social class. Interestingly, like Collins and Braddon, Wood acknowledges the myriad threats to bodily legibility that exist in the modern world; indeed, she not only depicts the everyday problems that may occur when one does not understand how to craft one’s dress and overall appearance in socially-intelligible ways, but also sensationalizes, through a dramatic train wreck that completely alters the protagonist’s face and body, the unsettling opportunities to recreate oneself offered by disfigurement and disguise. Ultimately, however, Wood subjects Lady Isabel Vane’s body to the most extreme forms of deformation to prove, beyond a doubt, that the body is legible; for, if the anti-heroine’s identity—particularly her social class—remains visible on the body’s surfaces even after a terrible disfigurement and the adoption of a convincing disguise, it affirms the body’s legibility all the more strongly. While many sensation novels including *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White* reject the idea that social class functions as a form of essential identity, *East Lynne* continues to uphold this belief.
In the first section of this chapter, I argue that Wood maintains that physiognomic features consistently reveal a person’s social class and morality. In taking this stance, Wood clearly defines what physiognomy can do—disclose a person’s essential social class and long-term character—and what it cannot do—predict a person’s behavior in the heat of the moment. Wood proposes, moreover, that it is possible to enhance the body’s “natural” legibility. As we have seen, some sensation novels such as *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White* highlight the ways in which cosmetics, hair dye, wigs, and clothing can be used by “dishonest” people to disguise the body and pretend they are something they are not. However, in the second portion of this chapter, I contend that Wood positions certain socially-acceptable forms of self-adornment, including women’s clothing, jewelry, and other accessories, as a means of enhancing rather than obscuring the body’s legibility. Wood urges her female readers, in particular, to follow the socially-defined codes of dress and construct their appearance in ways that highlight their true social and moral identity. In doing so, she argues, they can reinforce the messages Nature has already inscribed upon their bodies in the form of telling physiognomic features. By revealing the struggles of the novel’s central female characters to dress appropriately and intelligibly, Wood points out that this task is not always easy or intuitive. However, Wood underscores the importance of making the body as legible as possible, by portraying tragic misunderstandings between characters who misread each other’s bodies.

In the two final sections of this chapter, I explore the flip side of physiognomy and “honest” self-adornment, disfigurement and disguise. In doing so, I explain how Wood minimizes even the most extreme threats to bodily legibility in both real and fictional contexts. Significantly, Wood insists that even after a train wreck disfigures Isabel’s face and body and the girl adopts a disguise to further conceal who she is, her physiognomy still reveals some aspects
of her essential identity, including her social class. While Wood suggests that, in the real world, physiognomy and dress are the two primary sources of bodily legibility, she supplements these “realistic” signs of identity with “artificial” ones drawn from melodrama. First, she makes her anti-heroine’s emotions—particularly her suffering when disguised as Madame Vine in the Carlyle household—hyper-visible to readers by employing the exaggerated expressions and gestures of classic stage melodrama. In addition, Wood disfigures Isabel’s face with injuries that physiognomically and symbolically disclose her specific crimes, and has her adopt a disguise that symbolically reveals her reduced social position and acquisition of additional middle-class values. While, in the real world, disfigurement and disguise might obscure a person’s identity, ironically, Wood uses these very mechanisms to render her anti-heroine’s fictional body more legible to readers.

The plot of *East Lynne* involves two interconnected storylines, both of which hinge upon a series of tragic misunderstandings that stem from one character’s inability to read and interpret another character’s body. For Wood, reading the body is always a high-stakes enterprise, and when characters fail to read others’ morals and motives on the body and in their interactions with others, it often leads to irreversible consequences. The first storyline opens as the beautiful and gentle protagonist, Lady Isabel Vane, is officially presented to society. At this exciting time, she meets two men, Sir Francis Levison, a treacherous villain with whom she falls in love, and Mr. Archibald Carlyle, an upstanding middle-class lawyer who earns her respect and admiration, but nothing more. Soon after she meets these men, Isabel’s father, the Lord Mount Severn, dies without paying his debts or providing his daughter with a settlement. Eventually, Isabel marries Carlyle; however, because her husband frequently meets with another woman, Barbara Hare, in secret, she becomes convinced that the two are in love and having an affair. Consumed by
jealousy, Isabel runs away with her former love, Levison, abandoning her husband and three children. After Levison casts her off, she returns to East Lynne, drastically disfigured and disguised, to work as governess to her own children. She largely avoids detection, until she finally reveals her identity to Carlyle and his sister on her deathbed.

In the novel’s second major plotline, the middle-class Barbara Hare falls passionately in love with Archibald Carlyle. When Barbara learns that he has married Lady Isabel Vane, she feels betrayed and devastated, because she believed he would propose to her. Although Barbara’s pride has been wounded, she continues to seek Carlyle’s legal assistance. As West Lynne’s most skilled attorney, Barbara hopes he can save her brother, Richard Hare, who has been wrongly accused of murder, due to misleading evidence. However, Barbara must conduct all of her conversations and meetings with Carlyle in private, because all of West Lynne, including her own father, Justice Hare, believes in Richard’s guilt. Eventually, after his divorce from Isabel, Carlyle takes Barbara as his second wife. Consequently, when Isabel returns to her former home as governess, she must watch her rival, now the exalted wife and mistress of East Lynne, enjoy all of the privileges and affection she has thrown away. To make matters worse, at the end of the novel, Wood reveals that Levison is the true murderer, which exonerates Richard, but only exacerbates Isabel’s misery and despair. Although Isabel dies convinced that God has forgiven her and that she and her family will be reunited in heaven, Carlyle assures Barbara that his love still belongs to her.

While most sensation novelists draw inspiration from classic stage melodrama, perhaps none do so more than Wood in *East Lynne*. Poised between early melodramatic performances and later post-Freudian melodramatic novels, *East Lynne* exists at a mid-point between melodrama’s earlier emphasis on surfaces, and its later attention to depths, in the form of
increasingly psychologized characters and complex moral questions. While *East Lynne* retains classic melodrama’s “recourse to the body as the most important signifier of meanings” (Brooks *Body Works* 64), it also acknowledges the ways in which appearances may be misleading, and cautions that even good characters may commit immoral acts.

Subsequent critics have built upon Brook’s definition of classic melodrama, pointing out subtypes of the genre and mutations that occur to the form over time. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that *East Lynne* is a form of domestic melodrama, which focuses on “tensions within the Victorian middle-class home rather than conflicts between virtuous working-class women and their aristocratic tormentors” (Rosenman 23). It is also a foundational example of maternal melodrama, which, as Cvetkovich explains, typically involves a mother who is separated from her child, loses her social position, watches her child prosper from afar, and, in the end, is partially or totally rehabilitated (*Mixed Feelings* 113). *East Lynne*, then, departs in both content and form from the classic melodrama Brooks describes: Wood writes a melodramatic sensation novel rather than a non-verbal play, she targets a primarily middle-class audience, and she focuses the plot of her novel on the home, motherhood, and middle-class ascendancy. However, what is most important for our purposes, is the way Wood borrows classic stage melodrama’s highly legible fictional bodies, while complicating its overly simplistic moral messages.

As I discuss in greater detail in the final section of this chapter, Wood utilizes many of the tactics seen in classic melodrama to make fictional bodies hyper-legible. However, before moving on, it is important to note that Wood also acknowledges, in a way that traditional melodrama did not, that bodies may be misleading and that interactions between people are not always what they seem. Indeed, the novel’s most tragic misunderstandings occur when
characters misread the types of scenes that would have been invested with a very straightforward meaning and obvious moral message in the context of traditional melodrama. For example, Wood rewrites the traditional murder scene: a witness sees Richard Hare standing over the corpse of George Hallijohn and when Richard spots the witness, he drops his gun next to the murdered man and flees. In traditional melodrama, the witness (and the audience) would be correct to assume that Richard has just murdered George Hallijohn; however, in Wood’s novel Richard is an innocent man who happens upon the corpse, panics when he sees his own gun at the scene of the crime, and flees because he realizes how incriminating the scene must look to the witness. Similarly, Wood rewrites the traditional lover’s meeting: Isabel espies her husband and the pretty Barbara Hare, linked arm-in-arm, strolling through Barbara’s garden in the moonlight after Carlyle has cancelled dinner plans with his wife in order to work on a legal case. However, unbeknownst to Isabel, Carlyle merely keeps watch with Barbara for her brother, the wanted man Richard Hare, to whom Carlyle will provide legal counsel. Thus, while Wood reassures readers by presenting a hyper-legible fictional world, in part by drawing on the conventions of traditional melodrama, she also cautions that when reading an individual’s body and interactions with others, the meaning, while present, may not be immediately obvious.

“He Carries It in His Countenance”: Physiognomy in East Lynne

While critics of East Lynne have produced much scholarship on the novel’s melodramatic elements and depiction of middle-class ascendency, there has been almost no critical attention paid to the novel’s engagement with physiognomy and its assessment of bodily legibility. In East Lynne, physiognomy is presented as an accurate science. While, in some sensation novels, physiognomic descriptions are filtered through the untrained or prejudiced eye of a fellow character, Wood’s descriptions are typically provided by an omniscient narrator and the truth of her observations are upheld throughout the novel. The narrator provides a physiognomic
description each time a character is introduced to the story, and her later references to the
character’s physical appearance remain consistent, usually repeating earlier details. Although
Wood’s physiognomic descriptions tend to be short, even these snippets provide valuable
physiognomic information about the character’s morality and social class.

Although the majority of the novel’s physiognomic descriptions are supplied by the
narrator, Wood also indicates that her characters are aware of physiognomy and sometimes use it
to make judgements about other characters’ morals. For example, Barbara’s brother notes that
Levison, the novel’s villain, is “a deceitful, bad man; and he carries it in his countenance” (406).
Similarly, Archibald Carlyle correctly interprets the noble features of Isabel’s young cousin,
Lord Vane, when he suggests he has “[a] truthful, earnest sprit” while “gazing at his open
countenance” (162). Although Wood’s characters do not always pay attention to other
characters’ physiognomies, she suggests that physical features do reveal a person’s morals.¹

In making the claim for physiognomy’s validity, however, Wood stresses that this science
predicts overall character rather than behavior. In East Lynne, even moral characters temporarily
lose sight of their guiding principles and commit immoral acts; consequently, a noble and
honorable physiognomy indicates a person’s long-term character, but it does not predict how a
person will act in a given moment—particularly if, as so often happens in East Lynne, emotions
run high or circumstances are not what they appear. This distinction becomes most apparent in
the case of Lady Isabel Vane. Isabel’s physiognomy reflects both her status as an aristocrat and
her angelic character: she is “fair,” “delicate,” and “childlike,” with “perfect[ly] contour[ed] […]

¹ Although characters like Richard Hare do read Levison’s physiognomy correctly, the novel’s hero, Archibald
Carlyle, remains painfully oblivious to both Levison’s sinister countenance and his striking resemblance to the
murderer, Thorn. Even at the end of the novel, Carlyle only realizes that Levison and the so-called “Thorn” are the
same man, because other characters inform him of this fact.
exquisite features,” a “rich damask” on her “delicate cheek[s],” and “luxuriant” “dark curls” cascading down the side of her face (49). Unlike Braddon, who famously gives her golden-haired anti- heroine, Lady Audley, very similar physiognomic features in order to subvert readers’ expectations regarding the idealized angel-in-the-house, Wood stresses that Isabel’s beauty genuinely reflects her sound moral principles. Not only does the Lord Mount Severn assure Mr. Carlyle, “[s]he is as good as she is beautiful” (50), but also Wood’s narrator confirms, “[t]he earl was not partial. Lady Isabel was wondrously gifted by nature not only in mind and person, but in heart” (50).

For Wood, physiognomy accurately reveals character, but it cannot predict the moments in which a person will stray from his or her personal ethics. Thus, in a moment of maddening jealousy, Isabel runs away with the duplicitous Levison because she believes her husband is having an affair—a decision she regrets “from the very hour of her departure” (334) precisely because it conflicts with her moral principles and true nature. Similarly, Barbara, who is usually keenly aware of the importance of keeping up appearances, becomes overwhelmed with anger, jealousy, and despair when Archibald surreptitiously marries Lady Isabel. This leads to a rare, socially-unacceptable outburst, in which she reproaches Carlyle for his inappropriate intimacy with her, declares her love for him, and vows to remain unmarried because she “do[es] not love and forget so lightly” (215). Like Isabel, Barbara reflects, “I think I have been mad […] I must have been mad to say what I did” and immediately regrets her actions (214). While physiognomy reveals each woman’s character, it does not predict how she will act when she is overcome by emotion or deceived by misleading circumstances.

While Wood uses physiognomy in largely straightforward ways to reveal long-term character, her decision to distinguish between a woman’s momentary lapses in judgement and
her overall morality is surprisingly progressive. In particular, one might expect Isabel’s physiognomy to indicate even before her fall that she has some characteristics associated with the fallen woman, such as immorality, lasciviousness, or sensuality. Because Wood upholds the truth of physiognomy but refrains from giving Isabel the physiognomic features typically associated with a fallen woman, she underscores that her anti-heroine is truly a good woman who made a terrible, albeit irreversible, mistake. In doing so, Wood presents Isabel’s position as all the more tragic and warns readers that even a moral woman must guard against such temptations.

Indeed, several contemporary reviews of the period indicate that readers recognized that Isabel’s physiognomy reveals her true moral character, although some struggled to reconcile this essential identity with her sexually transgressive behaviors. In the review column “Magazines, Serials, &c.” (Oct. 1861), *John Bull* admires the “sweet, fair, and frail Lady Isabel” despite her fall (652). Other reviewers express a clear preference for Isabel over Barbara, even though Wood ultimately favors and vindicates Barbara. *The Literary Gazette* observes, “[w]hen we leave the married life of Isabel for that of Barbara, we feel that we have left a rarer, sweeter, deeper, nature, for one that is comparatively vulgar and uninteresting” (371). Similarly, the *Saturday Review* confesses that “[a]lthough at the close of the story, the whole of [Carlyle’s] affections are most properly concentrated on his living wife [Barbara], the reader is not sorry to feel permitted to have a slight preference for the dead one” (187). As I discuss in further detail below, some of these reviews assess the women in decidedly class-based language, favoring the “sweet, fair, and frail” Isabel over her “vulgar” middle-class rival. While class-based prejudices certainly influence some reviewers’ preference for Isabel, most acknowledge that she is an essentially virtuous, kind, innocent, and uncalculating woman. In fact, several writers were so convinced of Isabel’s essential goodness that they question the possibility that an angelic woman like her
could fall. Of course, by questioning Wood’s realism on this point, these writers ignore her important observation that an essentially good woman may commit immoral acts.

Wood’s physiognomic descriptions reveal not only her characters’ long-term morals but also their social class. Indeed, she uses her characters’ physiognomy to both mark the social class of individual characters and to naturalize the novel’s dominant narrative of social change, in which the dissolute aristocracy is replaced by a morally superior middle-class. As several critics have discussed, this narrative of social change is most obviously represented through the professional middle-class lawyer, Archibald Carlyle, whose business success and middle-class values allow him to displace both the financially bankrupt Lord Mount Severn and the morally bankrupt Sir Francis Levison. In the first half of the novel, Archibald literally takes the former place of the Lord Mount Severn: he purchases the Lord’s estate *sub rosa*, takes up residence at the Lord’s former property (rather than renting it out for additional income), marries his aristocratic daughter, and publically announces both his marriage to Lady Isabel and his new status “Archibald Carlyle, Esquire, of East Lynne” in the West Lynne newspapers (176).

Similarly, in the second half of the novel, Carlyle is formally voted the better man by the people of West Lynne when he beats Levison in an election for the district’s Member of Parliament. He also provides another law firm with information that leads to Levison’s public arrest for murder on the day of the election. Several critics, including Deborah Wynne, E. Ann Kaplan, and Jeanne B. Elliot argue that this narrative of middle class ascendency positions Carlyle as the ideal middle-class hero, whose “solid, respectable manliness,” rationality, calmness in the midst of crisis, dedication to work, and services to the community make him an “epitome of middle-class

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2 See the anonymous review of *East Lynne* published in the *Literary Gazette* (Oct. 1861), the anonymous review of *East Lynne* published in *John Bull* (Oct. 1861), and the anonymous article “Our Female Sensation Novelists” published in the *Christian Remembrancer* (1864).
values of the time—the very bedrock on which the nation could stand” (Kaplan 87).³ Wynne and Kaplan also extend this reading to include Carlyle’s second wife, Barbara, whom they see as Carlyle’s female counterpart, the ideal middle-class wife and mother.

Although Wood questions and undercuts this narrative in subtle ways, it remains *East Lynne*’s dominant message about social class and the one she reinforces through her characters’ physiognomies.⁴ As Andrew Maunder correctly points out in ““Stepchildren of Nature”: *East Lynne* and the Spectre of Female Degeneracy” (2004), the only article to discuss physiognomy in the novel, the aristocracy’s economic, social, and moral decline is marked by the physical degeneration of several aristocratic bodies (63). Specifically, I would point out that Isabel’s father, the Lord Mount Severn, who was once an industrious, middle-class law student, becomes a profligate gambler and spendthrift once he inherits a relative’s title and enormous fortune. Years of intemperance and sin leave his hair grey and “his expansive brow” “defaced by premature wrinkles” (41). In addition, the habitual facial expressions that accompany this lifestyle leave his “once attractive face” marred by “the pale, unmistakable look of dissipation” (41). Even his feet, which are afflicted with gout, speak to his aristocratic station and self-


⁴ While, on the surface, Wood valorizes the middle-class over the aristocracy, she simultaneously problematizes the above narrative in subtle ways. While her middle-class characters generally have strong moral principles, they do not always act according to those values. Several critics, including John Kucich, Andrew Maunder, and Andrew Mangham, correctly argue that Carlyle, the novel’s ostensible hero and representative of middle-class morality, actually commits many immoral acts over the course of the novel. Most notably, in *The Power of Lies* (1994) Kucich argues that Carlyle represents the dangerous middle-class professional whose “exceptional morality” involves “certain kinds of deceit for certain higher purposes” (175) and actually threatens to erode “the stability that moral power once gave to middle-class culture” and “the traditional moral power of middle-class women” (159-160). I would add that Barbara, the character Wynne and Kaplan identify as Carlyle’s valorized female counterpart, is similarly guilty of immoral deeds. In fact, although Wood outwardly rewards Barbara and punishes Isabel during the second half of the novel, she implicitly condemns Barbara’s earlier transgressions. For example, while speaking of Isabel’s love for her former husband, Wood launches a veiled indictment of Barbara: “I shall be blamed for it, I fear, if I attempt to defend [Isabel]. But it was not exactly the same thing as though she had suffered herself to fall in love with someone else’s husband. No one would defend that” (656).
indulgent lifestyle (41). The Lord’s vices are specifically those of his class, and just as he has “grown old before his time,” the dissipated aristocracy he represents is dying off. Similarly, Sir Francis Levison is constantly characterized by the pale skin and delicate hands that mark his degenerative effeminacy.

Even the beautiful Lady Isabel, who in many ways gains the reader’s sympathy throughout the novel, seems doomed from the start by her aristocratic body. Maunder certainly goes too far when he argues that Isabel is fully morally and physically degenerate, an example of the “wife and mother gone mad with sexual longing” (59). As I have already explained, Isabel remains an essentially moral (albeit flawed) character throughout the novel; she abandons her family due to jealousy and perceived neglect rather than to satisfy her sexual desires, and she immediately regrets this decision. However, Wood does suggest Isabel inherits certain types of physical and moral weaknesses from her parents. Although Isabel’s fair skin, delicate features, and fragility are appropriate to her gender and station and earn her many admirers, they also indicate a dangerous constitutional weakness that nearly kills her in childbirth and constantly leaves her ill and fatigued like her consumptive mother. Similarly, although Isabel is shown to be as an essentially good person, she is predisposed, like her mother, to commit a single “mad act” that she will live to regret.

The novel’s most successful middle-class characters, on the other hand, are often endowed with a more promising physiognomy and strong physical heath. For example, Justice Hare and his daughter Barbara are described by the narrator as having “aquiline” features, which, in addition to being considered very attractive in the Victorian period, indicate that these characters possess the type of personality traits they will need to ascend the social ranks. In his
Eden Warwick describes the characteristics associated with the “aquiline” nose thusly:

Numerous portraits, both in marble and on coins, demonstrate that this Nose was very frequent among the Romans. […] The persevering energy, stern determination and unflinching firmness of the conquerors of the world; their rough, unrefined character, which, notwithstanding the example of Greece, never acquired the polish of that country, all indicate the accuracy of the mental habit attributed to the owner of this Nose. (22-23)

As this portrait suggests, the aquiline nose was thought to reveal an individual’s energy, determination, and perseverance—traits valued by the Victorian middle-class. Of course, these traits are also gendered, and when Wood’s narrator states that Barbara has inherited her father’s “aquiline nose, compressed lips, and pointed chin” (61), she reveals not only the girl’s positive traits, such as her resourcefulness and dedication, but also those traits that would have been viewed as unladylike, such as her willfulness, stubbornness, and independence.

As this excerpt from Naseology suggests, Mr. Hare and Barbara’s physiognomies also reveal that these characters lack the refinement and delicacy of the novel’s aristocrats and its weaker middle-class characters; however, in some ways, this seeming deficiency becomes an additional strength. The novel’s delicate female characters, including Lady Isabel and Barbara’s invalid mother, Mrs. Hare, barely have the strength to live, let alone to run a household. Similarly, the novel’s delicate male characters, including Sir Francis Levison and Barbara’s cowardly brother, Richard “Leafy Dick” Hare, prove effeminate and ineffectual. In East Lynne, delicacy is a liability, and Wood suggests one needs certain kinds of strength in order to be successful, whether one is a man or a woman. Thus, towards the end of the novel, the doctor Mr. Dill declares that Barbara, Carlyle’s second wife, is stronger and healthier than his first: “Mrs. Carlyle has a thoroughly good constitution. […] She is stronger than was Lady Isabel” (583). Although Barbara may not be as refined or delicate as Isabel, her particular brand of middle-class
strength (including its unladylike flaws) is integral to the success of herself, her family, and her class. Thus, Wood naturalizes the political and economic ascension of the middle-class, by suggesting that their social rise is indicative of their biological fitness and superiority.

While Wood champions middle-class ascendency through the rise of the novel’s central middle-class couple, several reviewers balked at the notion of Barbara and Carlyle’s superiority. In particular, reviewers attacked Barbara by highlighting her flaws and exaggerating her inferior social status. Typically, reviewers point out that she is “coarse” and “vulgar,” but some, such as the anonymous author of “Our Female Sensation Novelists” (1864), go even further. The Christian Remembrancer writer attacks Wood for her alleged ignorance of social class and Barbara for what the reviewer sees as her “low”—even working-class—manners and morals:

It is perhaps inevitable that the self-taught and guess-work novelist should jumble ranks and utterly confuse our notion of the social standing of the dramatis personae; and this is especially the case in all Mrs. Wood's writings. Barbara, the second wife, who succeeds Lady Isabel, with her flippancy, her vulgar finery, her outspoken declaration of love, might be supposed to be some milliner’s apprentice, but we believe is really intended to be an English lady (717).

Although Carlyle receives much less opprobrium from critics, occasionally, reviewers question his middle-class superiority as well. After mocking Archibald’s “improbable” good looks, including his “noble” demeanor, a Saturday Review writer points out that the hero of the novel that has charmed all of its female characters (and, presumably, the novel’s female readers) is a mere country attorney:

It is perhaps a little hard to suppress a smile at the thought that, in East Lynne, this king of men is a country attorney. It is odd to reflect that the hero might have charged six-and-eightpence for the conversations with which he charms us. But this is all prejudice. If all these heroes are imaginary, why should not country attorneys have the benefit of a lady’s fancy as well as their neighbors? (187)

Even in Wood’s largely conservative novel, which upholds the truth of physiognomy and the legibility of the body, reviewers attack what they see as her “unrealistic” characters in order to
contain or refute her more controversial gender- and class-based arguments. In crafting Isabel’s physiognomy, she shows that even a good woman may stray from the moral course and proposes that certain idealized feminine traits—delicacy, fragility, dependence, innocence, and ignorance—may not be desirable after all. In championing Barbara, Wood suggests that certain middle-class personality traits, such as knowledge, strength, determination, and resilience, may be appropriate not only in men but also in women. However, some reviewers, including the anonymous writer for the *Christian Remembrancer*, cast Wood’s argument in favor of more active middle-class women as proof of her inability to craft believable characters.

“*What Does it Signify?: Women’s Adornment Practices in East Lynne*”

Debates regarding the body’s legibility necessarily involved not only the question of whether a person’s innate physical features could reveal who they were, but also whether the self-fashioned aspects of appearance helped or hindered the reading of these “natural” signs. Early sensation novels are highly attuned to the self-fashioned aspects of physical appearance, because at the time these novels were written and set, consumer goods that could be used for self-fashioning (such as clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics) were becoming widely available to the middle classes. Most of these novels are set in the 1840s or 50s, when recent social, political, and economic changes began to improve the circumstances of middle-class people and to blur long-standing distinctions between the social classes. At this time, “[p]olitical reforms were extending the franchise and transferring power from landed society to the prospering middle-classes, who were benefiting from the great wealth being generated by industrialization” (Byrd 113). By mid-century, the middle-class was experiencing a major economic boom: between 1850 and 1870, middle-class incomes rose by as much as 100 pounds per person while prices increased by only 16 percent, making it possible for members of the middle-class to purchase an unprecedented amount of consumer goods (Beaujot 6).
Within this context, many sensation novels, such as *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, and *Her Father’s Name* scandalized readers by pointing out the ways in which the self-fashioned aspects of appearance might be used to alter, cover, or disguise the body’s “natural” surfaces, rendering physiognomic readings difficult if not impossible. However, I argue that in *East Lynne* Wood urges readers to educate themselves about the social codes governing dress and encourages them to use this type of self-fashioning to make their identities—particularly their social class and morality—more rather than less legible. In suggesting that dress may be used to enhance and supplement the natural physiognomic legibility of the body, Wood echoes the claims of some nineteenth-century etiquette manuals and fashion guides. For example, in *Dress as a Fine Art* (1854) Mary Philadelphia Merrifield distinguishes between unacceptable means of self-fashioning and “the legitimate means by which the personal appearance may be improved by the study of the art of dress” (14).\(^5\) At the beginning of her fashion manual, she condemns certain types of self-fashioning, including the use of cosmetics, hair pieces, and padding, particularly when they are used to assume a younger age, higher social class, or deceptively healthy appearance. For Merrifield, these forms of self-fashioning are unacceptable both because they “violate the laws of nature” (12) and because they are “adopted with a view to deceive” (13). However, much as Wood will do in *East Lynne*, Merrifield also insists that it is possible to adorn oneself with “perfect honesty and sincerity” while following the socially-defined rules of fashion (11). As we shall see, Wood not only follows Merrifield by defending women who educate themselves in the art of dress and use clothing in non-deceptive

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\(^5\) The copy of *Dress as a Fine Art: With Suggestions on Children’s Dress* that I cite was published in Boston in 1854. However, it appears that Mrs. Merrifield was actually British, and that copies of this book were published in both Britain and America.
ways, but also goes even further, by more explicitly suggesting that dress may be used to enhance the “natural” physiognomic legibility of the body.

Indeed, by positioning dress as an indicator of character, albeit a subordinate and less reliable means than physiognomy, Wood anticipates a more well-known beauty guide, *The Art of Beauty* (1878), which is itself clearly influenced by Merrifield’s earlier publication. In this beauty guide, Mrs. Haweis draws more explicit parallels than Merrifield between the material body and the dress that covers it, suggesting that both reveal character. Haweis observes, “in our age and climate the human body is habitually and completely veiled, the veil assumes an artistic importance second only to the forms that are hidden. In nothing are character and perception so insensibly but inevitably displayed, as in dress, and taste in dress. Dress is the second self, a dumb self, yet a most eloquent expositor of the person” (11). She adds that “[t]here are garments, as there are faces and natures, which have no ‘bar’ in them—nothing which stops with a sudden shock your pleasure in them, nothing that dissatisfies or perplexes you” and argues that, far from being a frivolous pursuit, the study of fashion better prepares a woman to present herself in a pleasing and legible manner to the world. Though, like Merrifield, much of Haweis’s text focuses on how to make the body look more beautiful by following the rules of color and design, she also points out the ways in which clothing may render the body more legible. For, adopting a rhetorical position common in many beauty and fashion guides of the period, Haweis argues that it is a Christian woman’s duty to “respect what God has given her” by keeping her body beautiful, and notes that, when a good woman neglects the appearance of her body “there is

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6 *The Art of Beauty* was first published in London in 1878. Due to the limited availability of the first edition, I cite the second-edition of this book, which was published in London in 1883.
always a discord between her inner and outer self” (14). As we shall see, like Merrifield and Haweis, Wood endorses tasteful, understated, and visually appealing dress. However, more so than these beauty writers, Wood prioritizes dress as a means of making one’s identity more visible. For her, this is not simply a means of making a frivolous or controversial fashion manual more socially acceptable, but rather a real strategy for combatting misreadings of the body.

In making this argument, I build upon Elizabeth Langland’s groundbreaking work *Nobody’s Angels: Middle Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (1995) by showing how *East Lynne* complicates our understanding of the sensation novel’s views of the managerial, middle-class woman and her signifying practices. As Langland correctly argues, the middle-class wife “performed a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived” (8), because “a mid-Victorian man depended on his wife to perform the ideological work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of middle-class status” (9). While Langland is interested in a range of middle-class signifying practices, I focus on one in particular: the social rules governing proper dress. Langland explains that women’s fashions were much more diverse than men’s from the 1840s onwards (34). Drawing on historian Leonore Davidoff’s *The Best Circles* (1973), she notes that women used their knowledge of the highly specific meaning behind “*[e]very cap, bow, streamer, ruffle, fringe, bustle, [and] glove*” (quoted in Langland 34) to signal their own class status and to police the borders of the rising professional middle-class from the vulgar incursions of either the petite bourgeoisie or the working-class.

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7 For more examples of beauty and etiquette manuals that adopt this rhetorical position in order to justify the (sometimes controversial) beauty advice they provide to female readers, see my forthcoming Forum Essay, “The Beautified Body” in the Victorian Review forum on “Bodily States” (2016).
However, while Langland offers many significant and persuasive arguments in *Nobody’s Angels*, she overgeneralizes when she suggests all sensation novels of the 1860s deny women’s important role in solidifying their own and their family’s class status through the above-mentioned signification practices—a claim that, as we shall see, does not apply to *East Lynne*. Specifically, Langland argues that the sensation novel of the 1860s split the figure of the angelic, managerial, middle-class wife into two distinct characters: “one, a passive, dependent, ‘feminine’ angel already reigned in by patriarchal mandates, the other an independent, active rebel who will be curbed in the novel’s end, in part through her desire to please the hero” (234). Langland points out that in *The Woman and White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the hero chooses the passive angel as the ideal wife, and the rebel’s “masculine” (and therefore threatening) qualities, including her managerial skills, are curbed by the end of the novel.8 Indeed, according to Langland, the managerial women must be reinscribed into a passive, largely powerless, traditionally feminine role, which suggests that her signifying practices—to the extent that they are seen as an important means of solidifying her own and her family’s middle-class status—are either stopped or largely denied. Consequently, Langland concludes “[t]he managerial woman who developed in the mid-Victorian household met a grim demise within the formal requirements of sensation fiction, which demanded that the bourgeois housewife be recontained within the ideology of domesticity” (238).

While this type of narrative does play out, at least to some extent, in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *East Lynne* noticeably diverges from this trend. Unlike the novelists

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8 Here, Langland alludes to the fact that in *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright is attracted to the feminine, childish Laura Fairlie rather than to her intelligent, capable half-sister, Marian Halcombe, and that in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), Robert Audley marries the long-suffering Clara Talboys instead of his rambunctious cousin, Alicia Audley.
Langland describes, Wood champions the middle-class household manager, arguing that only she has the ability to manage the signifying practices, including those of dress, that accentuate a woman’s (and her family’s) social class and morality. In addition, because Wood upholds the importance of women’s signifying practices within a sensational plot that depicts many threats to the body’s natural legibility, she underscores the importance of these skills for the rising professional middle-class.

*East Lynne* is not only noteworthy because, when compared to other sensation novels, it expresses different opinions on the role of the managerial woman and the importance of the signifying practices of dress, but also because Wood does not depict the novel’s middle-class women blindly imitating the signifying practices of their social superiors. The classic trickle-down theory of fashion, proposed by Georg Simmel in 1904, suggests that “styles and status symbols emerged from the upper classes and then trickled down to the masses, who imitated them in an attempt to climb up the social ladder” (Chadha and Husband 251). Langland points out that this type of trickle-down influence exists between the aristocracy and the rising, professional middle-class during the Victorian period. She cites the historians Lawrence Stone and Jeanne Stone, who, in *An Open Elite?: England 1540-1880* (1984), argue that, in the nineteenth century, “[i]nstead of resenting [their social superiors], [the middle class] eagerly sought to imitate them, aspiring to gentility by copying the education, manners, and behavior of the gentry” (409). Langland agrees with the Stones’ contention, and concludes that, although “the middling classes did not ape the economic practices of upper class life,” they did “set out to master its signifying practices” because they were “afflicted by status anxiety” (26). Langland rightly acknowledges, however, that the middle-class did not blindly follow *all* of the signifying practices of the aristocracy. I argue that it is precisely this point that Wood emphasizes in *East
Lynne. Wood problematizes not only traditional upper-class signifying practices but also the overly innocent angel-in-the-house figure who knows nothing of how to manipulate her dress to project certain messages about her identity. Because neither the novel’s traditional aristocrats nor the overly angelic Isabel are viable models of self-adornment, the novel’s middle-class women, particularly Barbara Hare, must adapt the existing signifying practices to fit their changing class status and distinctly middle-class brand of morality.

Up to this point, critics have inaccurately suggested that the trickle-down model of fashion applies in a fairly straightforward way to East Lynne, presenting Isabel as a traditional aristocrat who models appropriate signifying practices for the novel’s middle-class characters, such as Barbara. Most notably, in Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction (2000), which, as part of its larger examination of sympathy, discusses adornment practices in East Lynne, Audrey Jaffe positions the aristocratic Isabel as an expert in the signifying practices of dress. Indeed, according to Jaffe, Isabel shows that she knows too much about how to manipulate people’s perceptions through the adornment of her body. Jaffe argues that Isabel exhibits “an undesirable canniness about self-presentation,” and that the novel “condemn[s] her awareness of the codes of self-representation” in part “by associating that awareness with aristocratic indulgence” (102). She contends, moreover, that the middle-class Barbara Hare only succeeds in her efforts at self-adornment because she “observes and imitates Isabel’s manipulation of social codes” which eventually allows her “to manipulate her own self-representation” (102).

Contrary to Jaffe’s claims, I argue that East Lynne depicts the struggles of both the aristocrat Lady Isabel and the middle-class Barbara Hare to fashion their bodies in ways that convey their social class and morals effectively. I contend, moreover, that Wood’s novel rejects
the idea that the novel’s middle-class women learn to master the signifying practices of dress by observing either Isabel or the novel’s more traditional aristocrats. In many ways, Lady Isabel is too naïve, trusting, and guileless—indeed, too much of a feminine angel—to master the signifying practices of dress, let alone to serve as a model for the novel’s middle-class women. Isabel makes the mistake of trying to prioritize her morals over her dress, rather than realizing that, in her society, the two are inextricably linked. In addition, on the one occasion Isabel consciously fashions her appearance in order to express her values and convey a moral lesson to onlookers, she fails in this attempt because she does not obey the established rules of dress. Wood acknowledges that when “honest” forms of self-adornment go awry, they function like an unintentional (but nonetheless misleading) disguise; however, rather than dissuade readers from trusting clothing as a reliable indication of character, she insists that it is every woman’s responsibility to know and follow the socially-accepted rules governing dress.

Women like Barbara Hare, who are members of the rising, professional middle-class, prove more successful than Isabel in mastering these signifying practices, but only after a process of trial and error. Initially, Barbara is tempted to imitate the novel’s more ostentatious aristocrats. However, Wood suggests that such imitations are a mistake, for when Barbara displays the signs of her family’s growing economic prosperity and her own class status by wearing showy, expensive clothing, she makes an immodest display of her body. By the end of the novel, Barbara and the other middle-class women learn to fashion their appearance, not by copying Isabel or the novel’s more traditional aristocrats, but by following a distinctly middle-class set of adornment practices, which foreground the wearer’s morality rather than her wealth.

As the daughter of the Lord Mount Severn, Lady Isabel is expected to display her family’s magnificent wealth and social status through her clothing, jewelry, and accessories, and
to understand the specific social codes of dress that dictate when, where, and how to accomplish this task. However, because Isabel does not receive the typical education of a peer’s daughter, and has not mingled in fashionable upper-class circles, she struggles to adorn her aristocratic body in appropriate, socially-intelligible ways. Her mother (and later her governess, after her mother’s premature death) ensures that Isabel masters many of the accomplishments befitting her station, from playing the piano to speaking French, but she does not teach her the signifying practices of dress, and urges her, instead, to avoid what she see as the typical aristocratic woman’s ostentatious display of finery. She also shields her from the corrupting influence of socially-savvy women who do engage in such practices, such as Isabel’s aunt, Mrs. Vane.

To some extent, Wood approves of this training and its effect on Isabel’s character, because it prioritizes many of the values associated with the middle-class, which are championed by the novel and cherished by Wood herself. In the nineteenth century, members of the middle class “thought of themselves as the moral center of society—a group separate from the drunken, lazy uncouth working class, and the debauched, womanizing aristocracy,” and prided themselves on “[e]mbodying Christian values such as work ethic, self-restraint, and modesty” (Beaujot 5). In accordance with these values, Isabel grows up to be “as little like a fashionable young lady as it was possible to be, partly because she had hitherto been secluded from the great world, partly from the care bestowed upon her training” (50). Rather than adopting the type of extravagant lifestyle decried by the middle-classes, Isabel embraces many of the values they most admire, including honesty, modesty, moderation, and kindness. Indeed, in The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction (1994), John Kucich goes so far as to argue that Isabel has been raised “according to the strictest middle-class disciplinary standards” and that “as a result of her strict training […] Isabel emerges a flower of traditional middle-class morality” (170).
However, while Isabel certainly embraces many middle-class values, she does not receive a complete middle-class education, and her inability to play the role of the middle-class wife when she marries the lawyer Archibald Carlyle proves problematic for Wood. The most obvious problem is that Isabel is not trained in middle-class household management. The novel depicts two types of middle-class household managers, indicating the recent shift in middle-class morality and consumption habits at midcentury when the novel is set. As Ariel Beajot points out in *Victorian Fashion Accessories* (2012), by 1850, “[t]he middle class forsook its earlier ideology of thrift and saving, which was evident in the middling sort at the beginning of the century, and replaced it with consumption” (6). Isabel’s sister-in-law, the spinster Miss Carlyle, reflects the earlier approach to household management, and, consequently, she values frugality, self-denial, and hard work over all else. Miss Carlyle’s brand of strict austerity is on the way out, however, and the novel’s younger women, particularly Barbara Hare, represent the new tendency of middle-class women to adorn not only their homes but also their bodies with consumer goods that reflect their family’s growing economic prosperity. Isabel lacks the knowledge of household management required to seize control of East Lynne from her domineering sister-in-law, and, more importantly for our purposes, she never learns the signifying practices of dress, as Barbara eventually does. Although Isabel’s inability to master the rules of adornment does seem to bring her closer to a feminine ideal—indeed, at the beginning of the novel, it adds to the sense that she a sweet, innocent, angelic woman—Wood suggests that such angels cannot survive on earth. In a society where women’s bodies are constantly on display and read for what they reveal about a woman’s social class and morality, careful attention to dress and an easy fluency in the rules governing it become essential for both individual women and society as a whole.
When the young, unmarried Lady Isabel Vane makes her social debut at the beginning of *East Lynne*, it becomes clear that she does not understand the rules of aristocratic dress. On the night of one of Isabel’s first balls, she has the opportunity to signify her family’s wealth and station in a socially-sanctioned setting by wearing her diamond jewelry. In *Nineteenth Century Fashion* (1992) Penelope Byrde explains that, during the Victorian period, “it was essential for clothing to be appropriate to the person’s station in life, to the occasion and to the time of day. These considerations affected the form of garments, their material, color and decoration” (110). Byrde specifies, “[t]he most decorative of all dresses were required for balls and dances. Very often the distinction lay in the amount of jewelry and ornaments that were worn” (128). However, when Isabel attends the ball, she wears a gold cross and a set of old-fashioned pearl bracelets given to her by her deceased mother rather than her diamonds.

This scene reveals that Isabel does not understand the rules of dress and will suffer negative social consequences because of it. Specifically, by failing to wear the appropriate type and amount of jewelry for this occasion, Isabel allows her motives and morals to be misconstrued by her aunt. When Mrs. Vane asks with incredulity why Isabel has not worn her diamond jewelry to the ball, her niece honestly responds that she took it off before leaving the house because “I did not like to be too fine” and also “I feared it might be thought I had put them on to look fine” (54). Here, Isabel does demonstrate that she is aware of the concept of self-display. In addition, some of Wood’s middle-class readers may have approved of both Isabel’s desire to remove herself from the spotlight and her reluctance to wear diamonds, a stone that some fashion and etiquette writers deemed more appropriate for married woman.9 For Wood,

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9 It would not have been considered unusual for an aristocrat like Isabel to wear diamonds to a ball, but as Byrde explains, “pearls were felt to be more suitable than other precious stones in the matter of jewelry. In 1829 the women’s fashion magazine *Belle Assemblée* complained, ‘Diamonds in the hair at grand evening parties are more general than we wish to see them; as pearls are so much more chaste and appropriate to the young’” (118).
however, Isabel’s explanation also reveals a worrisome naiveté regarding dress. By default, Isabel’s aristocratic body is always already on display. She cannot opt out of others’ scrutiny simply by wearing unpretentious jewelry. Indeed, as nineteenth-century conduct manuals often point out, when a woman’s jewelry (or any other part of her dress) noticeably departs from the prescribed fashions, it actually draws more attention to the wearer. In The Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Etiquette (1877), Eliza Bisbee Duffey warns, “the man who rebels against Fashion is even more open to the imputation of vanity than he who obeys her, because he makes himself conspicuous and practically announces that he is wiser than his kind” (256). Following a similar logic, the cynical Mrs. Vane expects Isabel to know that her body will be on display regardless of what she wears and interprets her niece’s simple jewelry as proof of a moral failing—her niece’s false modesty. She declares, “Ah! I see you mean to set up amongst that class of people who pretend to despise ornaments!” (54). Although Isabel truly is modest, because she disregards the rules of dress her aunt misinterprets her morals and intentions.

This early scene also reveals that Isabel naively believes she will be given the opportunity to explain her sartorial choices to anyone who might object. When Levison breaks Isabel’s simple cross right before she leaves for the ball, she decides to wear the “thin string of gold” without the cross (55). When Mrs. Vane ridicules this decision, Isabel defends her choice: “Why not [...]If people say anything, I can tell them an accident happened to the cross” (55). Of course, the worldly Mrs. Vane realizes that Isabel would never have the chance to explain her jewelry, because no one would directly confront her about it: “If people say anything! [...] They are not likely to ‘say anything,’ but they will deem Lord Mount Severn’s daughter unfortunately short of jewelry” (55). Mrs. Vane’s remark highlights the extent to which people gage a woman’s
economic status (and that of her entire family) through her clothing and accessories. Isabel wrongly believes she can explain the meaning behind her choice of dress, rather than realizing that her body must speak for itself and that others will judge her and her family accordingly. In this scene as well as others, Wood demonstrates that Isabel attempts to use her clothing and accessories to convey her morals to those around her, but that she often fails in this task because she does not know the established rules of dress.

Although Isabel’s modest form of self-display does not satisfy aristocratic women like her aunt, she initially gains approval from the middle-class characters of the novel. In fact, the first time she attends service at the West Lynne church, Isabel unintentionally serves as a model of feminine adornment. Although, again, Isabel does not realize that her body will be on display during the church service, she demonstrates that a true lady can wear understated clothing while still looking lovely and elegant. To the surprise of the novel’s middle-class women, Isabel enters the church wearing a simple white, muslin dress—a style praised for its chaste, modest, and becoming appearance on young, unmarried women by The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine.\(^\text{10}\) On this occasion, when Barbara Hare sees Isabel and her father “quietly” enter the church, and discovers that Isabel “has no silks…no feathers…no anything,” (107), she admits that a woman can look like a lady without such trappings, and that, by comparison, she and the other middle-class women look like “fine jackdaws” (108). For Wood, this is certainly a valuable moral lesson, and one that middle-class conduct books of the time often stressed (Langland 35).

However, on the one occasion that Isabel deliberately styles her appearance to send a moral message to the residents of West Lynne, her ignorance of signifying practices leads

\(^{10}\) In 1863, The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine writes, “Nothing is so becoming to a young face as attendant clouds of white muslin; there is poetry and modesty in its very appearance” (quoted in Byrde 118).
onlookers to misinterpret her clothing and her message. When Isabel first learns that the local organist, Mr. Kane, can barely afford to feed his family, and that he sometimes holds concerts to raise money, she vows not only to attend his concert, but also to encourage the middle-class families of West Lynne to buy tickets for this and future shows. She tries to accomplish this goal by doing two things: first, she publicizes her intention of attending the concert to encourage the middle-class families to follow her example, and second, she adorns her body in the finest fashion for the concert itself, to show her respect for Mr. Kane and to redefine this type of charity concert as an event worth attending by all classes of people. Isabel easily accomplishes her first goal: although the middle-class families of West Lynne typically view Kane’s concerts as below their interest, they attend this particular show because they know the local aristocracy will be there. However, Isabel fails in her second objective and draws much criticism on herself, because she disregards the rules of dress by wearing inappropriate clothing to the concert.

Although readers understand the logic behind Isabel’s clothing, characters judge her according to the traditional rules of dress, and consequently condemn her for an unsuitable display of finery. Isabel sets herself up to censure when she dresses for the concert like “a beauteous queen, a gleaming fairy,” adorning her body in a rich lace dress and sparkling diamonds (119). While this clothing would have been appropriate in some contexts, such as at an aristocratic ball, it is deemed totally unsuitable at the poor man’s concert and draws unseemly attention to Isabel’s body. Isabel explains to her father and readers that she wears her best clothing to Kane’s concert to “show those West Lynne people that I think the poor man’s concert worth going to, and worth dressing for” (119). Readers comprehend that by wearing her finest clothes to the humble concert rather than to a grand ball, Isabel suggests that the hard work and talent of working-class men are more worthy of notice than the lavish lifestyle of the rich. They
also realize that Isabel does not strive to draw the assembly’s attention to her own beauty and wealth, but rather to urge the middle-class patrons to respect the poor within their midst and to support charity events like Kane’s concerts.

However, despite Isabel’s virtuous intentions, her dress does not convey her intended moral lesson to other characters. Instead, her father and the people of West Lynne criticize what seems to be her ostentatious display of wealth. Before she leaves the house, the Lord Mount Severn scolds Isabel for “dress[ing] to please your vanity” (119). Similarly, the middle-class women of West Lynne condemn Isabel for arriving at Kane’s concert in such an outfit. For example, Mrs. Ducie comforts her own plainly dressed girls by whispering, “[t]he poor motherless girl is to be pitied, my dears, […] she has no one to point out to her suitable attire” (122). Isabel is mistaken when she believes that she can change the socially-defined meaning of her attire or the lens through which the people of West Lynne view her aristocratic body. The middle-class concert-goers misinterpret Isabel’s moral message, believing that, as her father suggests, she has dressed in this manner to make a spectacle of herself. They are predisposed to view the aristocratic body, richly dressed and covered in brilliant diamonds, as a form of excessive, aristocratic display. And because she displays her wealth in the wrong place at the wrong time, Isabel comes off as a self-important aristocrat who lacks taste and proper restraint.

Ultimately, Isabel prioritizes her moral values over matters of dress, rather than realizing, as many of the middle-class women of the novel do, that the two are inextricably linked. When Isabel is unexpectedly called away from Kane’s concert to attend her father on his deathbed, her maid, Marvel, implores her to change out of the beautiful gown and diamonds into something more appropriate for the somber occasion. Marvel points out, “[b]ut so very unsuitable, my lady—that rich dress for a night-scene such as this” (130). Overcome by the impending loss of
her father, Isabel angrily rejects the importance of her clothing: “Unsuitable! What does it signify? Who thinks of my dress?” (130). Of course, for the Victorians, dress is never an unimportant afterthought, and, given their famously elaborate mourning garb, following the socially-defined codes of dress is doubly important in the case of death. A woman’s dress is meant to signify and publically display her morals and, in the case of mourning, her grief.

Although Isabel rarely dresses in an ostentatious manner, her sartorial choices at Kane’s concert come to define her image and identity, particularly in the mind of her sister-in-law, Miss Carlyle. After learning of her brother’s secret marriage to Isabel, Miss Carlyle uses Isabel’s aristocratic dress at Kane’s concert to explain why she will not make a suitable wife for Archibald. Speaking of Isabel, she exclaims, “[y]ou remember that child, Mount Severn’s daughter? I think I see her now, coming into the concert-room, in her white robes, and her jewels, and her flowing hair, looking like a young princess in a fairy-tale—all very well for her, for what she is, but not for us” (180). For Miss Carlyle, this image is proof that Isabel is a thorough aristocrat, “a high born beauty, brought up to revel in expense, in jewels, in feasts, in show” (181), and decidedly not an appropriate wife for her middle-class brother. Convinced that Isabel’s extravagant lifestyle will bring her brother to financial ruin, and hurt that he would choose a wife without consulting her, Miss Carlyle takes up residence at East Lynne without the couple’s permission, installs herself as de facto housekeeper, and curbs all of Isabel’s future attempts to buy clothing for herself, and later, for her children.

Throughout her youth and young adulthood, Isabel has struggled with the same question: “What does it signify?” (130). Isabel realizes that others judge the self-fashioned aspects of her appearance, and she tries to broadcast her morals through her dress and jewelry. But, contrary to Jaffe’s claims regarding her mastery of the “social codes of self-representation,” Isabel is often
unsucces

The problem is not, as Jaffe suggests, that Isabel exhibits an “undesirable canniness” for self-display, or even that her morals are more aligned with the values of the aristocracy than those of the middle-class. Instead, Wood suggests that Isabel knows too little about self-representation in a world where women are judged by the appearance of their bodies. According to Wood, the future belongs to middle-class women like Barbara Hare, who can make their social class and morality legible through the adornment of the body.

While Isabel never learns to manipulate the social codes of self-adornment in a way that effectively communicates her morals to other characters, the middle-class Barbara Hare eventually proves equal to the task. Unlike Isabel, Barbara is no sartorially-innocent angel: she fully recognizes that her body is always on display and, from the beginning, she strives to signify her class status through her dress. The problem for Barbara and the novel’s other middle-class women is that the class identity they are supposed to signify through their clothing is itself changing. Wood recognizes that the increased economic and political power of the professional middle-class will allow women to purchase new consumer products, including clothing, jewelry, and accessories. She also fears that these new consumption habits may be accompanied by a loss of traditional middle-class morals. In order to highlight both this problem and its potential solution, Wood dramatizes Barbara’s initial sartorial mistakes and her eventual success at adorning her body. At first, Barbara is tempted to signify her family’s status and prosperity solely through their wealth by out-dressing her social superiors. By the end of the novel, however, Barbara masters the signifying practices of dress, by choosing clothing and accessories that emphasize her class’s superior morality rather than its increased economic power.

Barbara’s first attempt at articulating her class status through her dress is a failure, because she embraces an ostentatious form of self-display that flaunts the middle-class’ growing
wealth and too closely imitates the sartorial choices of the aristocracy. When the middle-class women of West Lynne learn that the Lord Mount Severn and Lady Isabel Vane will attend their local church for the first time, most of them, including Barbara, descend upon the milliner’s shop, ordering expensive clothing because they are “bent on out-dressing Lady Isabel” (106). On Sunday morning, as Carlyle and his austere sister leave the house, they spot Barbara, parading up the street in all her finery: “they saw something looming up the streets, flashing and gleaming in the sun. A pink parasol came first, a pink bonnet and feather came behind it, a grey brocaded dress, and white gloves” (106). Wood introduces Barbara’s showy outfit, not by describing it as it actually rests upon her body, but rather as if each disembodied, larger-than-life piece of clothing were prancing up the street on its own. Conduct manuals of the period advised young women “[n]ever dress very richly or showily in the street. It attracts attention of no enviable kind, and is looked upon as a want of good breeding” (quoted in Byrde 124). Barbara’s decision not only to purchase and wear such an ensemble, but also to walk through the streets wearing it, shows a lack of taste and discretion unbecoming for a middle-class woman.

While Barbara has purchased her clothing with her father’s money—funds earned by the professional middle-class man, Justice Hare—the language of this passage suggests that when middle-class women try to out-do aristocrats by out-dressing them, they risk falling into a form of excessive self-display fundamentally at odds with middle-class morality. Indeed, when Wood describes Barbara’s finery as “flashing and gleaming in the sun,” she recalls the novel’s dandified villain, Sir Francis Levison, whose diamond rings, are repeatedly described as either “flashing” or “gleaming” in the light of the sun or moon. These rings, moreover, quickly become a symbol of Levison’s aristocratic decadence, imprudence, and pride, qualities that middle-class women like Barbara must strive to avoid.
Barbara’s showy church outfit also bears uncomfortable similarities to the clothing worn by the novel’s working-class upstart, Afy Hallijohn, which suggests that middle-class women may inadvertently injure their reputations by dressing above their station. When Miss Carlyle spots Barbara “sailing” through the streets in her Sunday finery, she pronounces her “a little vain idiot” for walking about in “peacock’s plumes” looking “finer than a sunbeam” (106). Barbara’s prodigious pink feather is particularly objectionable: Miss Carlyle “grimly survey[s] it” and declares it “very long,” and Mr. Hare objects to Barbara’s outfit so much that his daughter worries he will sneak behind her during church to cut the feather off her hat (107). Afy Hallijohn’s clothing is, admittedly, even more over the top than Barbara’s, and she is constantly derided for dressing above her station in order to tempt a middle-class man into marriage. And yet, on one occasion, when she is shown “sailing” through the streets, catching the eye of passerby with “about eighteen hundred steel buttons that glittered your sight away,” and a long, white ostrich feather in her hat (667), it does recall Barbara’s embarrassing display from earlier in the novel. Wood suggests that middle-class women jeopardize their respectability when they engage in this type of self-adornment, and that, if they are not careful, they, like Afy, may be construed as presumptuous social-climbers or sexually-transgressive women.

Jaffe argues that this scene is a turning point for Barbara’s methods of self-adornment. According to Jaffe, after Barbara sees Isabel’s elegant and understated dress at church, she realizes her own sartorial mistakes and avoids ostentatious dress in the future. However, while Barbara does admit that Isabel’s dress “is certainly that of a lady” and regrets her own “streaming pink feather” during the West Lynne church service (108), throughout her youth she continues to dress in this manner to suit her vanity. For example, when Barbara pays the wedding visit to the newly-married Carlyles, Isabel’s servants gossip about Barbara’s showy hat: “[h]er
bonnet’s got blue convolulums inside, and a white feather out, as long as Martha’s hearth broom” (202). While Barbara’s clothing does demonstrate her father’s financial prosperity, her excessively decorative clothing and accessories would have been considered in poor taste, and perhaps even unchaste, because they draw needless attention to her maidenly youth and beauty. After Barbara becomes Carlyle’s second wife, she continues to dress in fine clothing, but this method of self-adornment becomes more appropriate, because, at this stage of her life, it signals her status as an unavailable, married woman, and rightly displays her husband’s wealth and social position. Yet, while as Byrd points out, conduct manuals and fashion magazines accepted and even praised the married woman’s decision to wear “more expensive clothes, materials, furs and jewelry” in order to “support and promote her husband” (119), for Wood, there is an even better way for middle-class women to adorn their bodies and accomplish this goal.

While Barbara and many other middle-class women flaunt the growing wealth of the middle-class through expensive clothing that rivals that of the aristocracy, by the end of the novel, they embrace, what is for Wood, a better type of self-adornment that stresses the middle-class’s superior morals rather than its economic power. When Carlyle runs for Member of Parliament, the people of West Lynne, particularly the middle-class women, flock to support him as a candidate. As the rallying cry, “Carlyle and honor for ever [sic]!” suggests, in the minds of the West Lynne townspeople, Carlyle has become one with the middle-class values he

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11 Nineteenth-century fashion magazines and etiquette manuals often stress the importance of dressing appropriately for one’s age and/or marital status. In March 1848, La Belle Assemblée observes, “very young unmarried ladies, whom Fashion will not permit to dress expensively, wear organdy and tarlata, very simply trimmed; while gauze, crepe, satin, tulle and lace, all of the richest description and with splendid garnitures, are adopted by married belles” (quoted in Byrd 117). Similarly, in The Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Etiquette (1877), Duffey remarks, “[f]or an old person to assume the light colors and the simplicity of youth is no more incongruous than for the young to put on the richness of dress and abundant jewelry belonging to advanced life” (260).
supposedly embodies. To vote for Carlyle is to vote for honor; to promote Carlyle is to support middle-class morality.

Within this context, the middle-class women of West Lynne show their support for both Carlyle and the values he represents by emblazoning their bodies with his colors, scarlet and purple. The day of the election, Barbara is said to look “very lovely” “with purple and scarlet flowers, just plucked from the conservatory, in her hair, and a bouquet of scarlet and purple flowers in her bosom” (615). Even Miss Carlyle, that emblem of early nineteenth-century middle-class frugality and simplicity, decides, “[i]t was about the only occasion, in all [her] life, that she had considered it necessary to attire herself magnificently” (588). “In great grandeur” she wears “a brocaded dress, and a scarlet-and-purple bow in front of it, the size of a pumpkin” (588). Of course, under normal circumstances, Miss Carlyle’s oversized bow would be an unacceptably garish accessory, but because she uses it to publically recognize her brother’s moral superiority over his political opponent, Levison, this bodily display becomes not only acceptable, but “necessary.”

Thus, unlike many sensation novelists, Wood highlights the way in which a woman may adorn her body to enhance its natural physiognomic legibility. While Wood disapproves of flashy clothing that draws attention to an unmarried woman’s beauty by making a spectacle of her body and of excessive accessories that sacrifice taste and restraint in the name of parading enormous wealth, she celebrates moments in which women use their dress either to serve the interests of patriarchy, by supporting middle-class men, or to serve the interests of the professional middle-class itself, by using their clothing to help define and promote the class’s superior morality. Ultimately, contrary to Langland, Wood affirms the importance of the middle-class household manager’s signifying practices. Far from merely mimicking aristocratic dress,
the novel’s middle-class women make their bodies legible by wearing clothing that marks their class status by foregrounding what Wood sees as their distinctly middle-class morality.

“Every Part of her Face and Form Was Changed”: Disfigurement and Disguise

While Wood’s novel assures readers that physiognomy reveals long-term character and points out that women can use their dress to further emphasize the natural signs of social class and morality, in the second half of her novel she also explores two potential threats to the body’s legibility, disfigurement and disguise. I point out that, on the one hand, Wood exploits the sensational potential of Isabel’s disfigured and disguised body, playing upon readers’ fears that changes to physical appearance might allow a person to adopt a new identity. I argue that, on the other hand, Wood comforts readers with the assurance that, even in the most extreme case of disfigurement and disguise, the body remains at least partially legible. Indeed, in the final portion of this chapter, I contend that Wood draws on the conventions of classic stage melodrama to imbue Isabel’s injuries and disguise—the very changes to her physical appearance that should make her body harder to read—with additional physiognomic and symbolic meaning, rendering her sexual crime, changed values, and heartfelt repentance, even more legible to readers.

In *East Lynne* Wood plays upon contemporary fears that the face and body, once disfigured in an accident, would no longer be legible. In discussions of disfigurement, physiognomists were generally more concerned with defending the science as a whole rather than asserting that disfigured faces and bodies could be read successfully. In his *Essays*, Lavater admits that not only “the flexible parts” of the face but also “the firm parts, or those capable of sharp outline” could be seriously altered by accident or disease (257). He observes, “how

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12 As I explain in the previous chapter, physiognomists examined all aspects of physical appearance, but they put particular stock in the shape, size, and relative placement of what they called the “firm,” “solid,” or “permanent” physical features, such as the nose, mouth, lips, forehead, and overall skeletal makeup. Thus, Lavater’s concession...
surprisingly may the small pox, during life, disfigure the countenance! How may it destroy, confuse, or render the most decisive traits imperceptible!” (56). Indeed, Lavater acknowledges that when a face becomes disfigured by either accident or disease, changes to the person’s “natural” physiognomy may disrupt or totally prevent accurate physiognomic readings. He continues, it is “possible that pock-marks, pimples, or other accidents, may so indent, swell, or distort a fine outline, [sic] that the true character of the countenance either cannot accurately or not at all be defined” (192). The only consolation he offers his readers, is that it is easy to distinguish between a face deformed by accident and a face deformed by vice. He assures readers, although “[a]ccident has often been affirmed to place inseparable difficulties in the path of physiognomy” nothing “can be more easily discovered than such accidents” (159). He reasons, “[h]ow visible are the distortions occasioned by the small pox! How apparent are the consequences, in general, of wounds, falls, and similar violence!” (159). However, Lavater cannot deny that the disfigured face may be so altered that it eludes the searching eyes of the physiognomist and thwarts any attempt at recognition.

Wood’s readers would have been aware of the many real-life railway accidents that left passengers disfigured, injured, or dead. In The Victorian World Picture (1997) David Newsome points out that, at mid-century, railway accidents that resulted in injury or death were still fairly common (31). Indeed, during a six month period in 1852, The Household Narrative, a monthly supplement to Charles Dickens’s Household Words, reported 113 people killed and an additional 264 people injured on the railways (31). Early in her novel, Wood demonstrates that railway

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that the “firm” parts of the face and body could be dramatically altered by accident and disease points out that, in cases of extreme disfigurement, the body could become largely illegible.
accidents are so frightening because they can happen to anyone at any time. When Miss Carlyle calls upon Barbara Hare to reveal that her brother has secretly married Isabel Vane, she prefaces the news by stating “a heavy misfortune has fallen [sic] us” regarding Archibald (179). Tellingly, Barbara fears that he has been injured in a railway accident. She replies, “[u]pon Archibald! […] Oh! Some accident has happened to him—to the railway train! Perhaps he—he—has got his legs broken!” (179). For Barbara, the idea that Carlyle has been injured in a railway accident is far more probable than the real “misfortune,” his secret marriage to Lady Isabel.

Although, in this early scene, Wood points out that disfigurement, injury, and death on the railways is typically an undeserved tragedy arising from bad luck, the railway accident at the center of *East Lynne*’s plot is figured as a divine judgment against the adulterous Isabel, who has abandoned her husband and their three children in order to run away with Levison. The train wreck, which, readers are told, is one of those “wholesale catastrophes, the memory of which lasts for a lifetime,” is described as an apocalyptic act of divine judgment: “there came a sudden shock and crash as of the day of doom: and engine, carriages, and passengers lay in one confused mass at the foot of a steep embankment” (373). Isabel’s illegitimate child and its nurse die in the wreck, and Isabel barely survives.

Looking at Isabel’s post-crash body from one perspective—the fact that she can no longer be identified by people who know her as the disgraced adulteress, Lady Isabel Vane—highlights the fear that faces and bodies are becoming more difficult to recognize and identify in the modern world. Wood reveals that, after the train accident and three months of excruciating recovery time, “the change that had passed over her […] was little less than death itself: no one could have recognized in the pale, thin, shattered, crippled invalid, she who had been known as Lady Isabel Vane” (376). If Isabel’s drastically altered appearance produced anxiety in readers
who longed to believe in the body’s legibility, this anxiety was only exacerbated by the fact that Isabel’s disfigurement provides her with the opportunity to reinvent herself—an opportunity which she gladly accepts. Even before the accident, Isabel yearns to leave her sullied reputation behind, and begins to do so by adopting a new name, Madame Vine, when she boards the train in Grenoble, for “she had rendered her own too notorious to risk the chance recognition of travelers” (380). Similarly, when she learns that English newspapers have published accounts of her death, she avoids correcting the false reports for, “[s]he longed, none knew with what intense longing, to be unknown, obscure, unrecognized by all” (380). She makes the transformation of her appearance and identity complete, by expunging all associations with her past, adopting an uncomely and disfiguring outfit and inventing a more respectable backstory.

In some ways, Wood scandalizes readers by demonstrating the transgressive potential of Isabel’s disfigurement and disguise, by showing the ways in which she uses her altered physical appearance to enter forbidden spaces and gain illicit power. Isabel’s assumed identity enables her to procure respectable employment as a governess, gain access to the children she has forfeited under the law, and enjoy some financial and emotional freedoms that she was denied as mistress of East Lynne. First, Isabel works as governess to a wealthy family in Europe, a position she would not have been able to secure as a known adulteress. A few months later, she receives the offer to return to East Lynne as governess to her own children. Her disfigurement, disguise, and new identity allow Isabel to enter the very home in which her presence is most forbidden, where even her name cannot be spoken. Isabel gains access to and influence over her children, despite the fact that, as Jane Jordan points out, “Isabel’s infidelity would have cost her custody or even access to her children under the laws of the time” (quoted in Steer 132-133). As their governess, Isabel is able to satisfy the “intense longing” (455) to spend time with her children. And despite
her sins, she gains control over their education, ensuring that, as she puts it, they are “trained to goodness, to morality, to religion” (447).

Indeed, critics such as Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, Dan Bivona, and Anne-Marie Beller agree that although Isabel certainly suffers as a disguised governess at East Lynne, this trying experience should not be read as a mere punishment.13 In “Mimic Sorrows,” Rosenman goes into the most detail about the possibility of Isabel’s pleasure and subversion of class and gender norms as a disguised governess. She argues, “there is no doubt that, disfigured and disguised beyond recognition in the role of governess, she gains certain privileges that she would not otherwise have—and did not have as Lady Isabel Vane” (27). Indeed, as a wage-earner with control over her own income, Isabel can purchase gifts for the children, a freedom she did not always have as the dependent wife of Mr. Carlyle. After all, Isabel brought no dowry to her marriage, and when she tries to make even the smallest purchases with her husband’s earnings, Miss Carlyle castigates her for “the ruinous expense she has entailed upon the family” (216), warning her, that if she does not curtail her expenditures, “[y]ou will be sorry for not listening to me, ma’am, when your husband shall be brought to poverty” (311). In addition to her newfound pecuniary power, Isabel receives “the emotional license” that accompanies the role of governess, learns the unmitigated truth about her son’s deteriorating health, makes recommendations for his care, and watches over both his sickbed and deathbed (Rosenman 28). Thus, in some ways, Isabel’s disfigurement and subsequent disguise provide her with unauthorized freedom and

power. In this sense, rather than sentence the fallen woman to death, Wood gives her anti-heroine a new physical appearance, and with it, a second life.

While Wood certainly plays upon fears of disfigurement and disguise and hints at the potential transgressions that could occur in a situation like Isabel’s, in which family, friends, and acquaintances cannot identify someone they once knew so well, she also takes steps to downplay Isabel’s threat to the status quo. While Isabel does use her altered appearance to enter a forbidden space, that space is her own (former) home. And while she does engage in illicit activities, those activities all stem from her supposedly natural and inexorable desire to mother her children. Even Isabel’s decision to return to East Lynne in the first place, a choice that Wood’s narrator alternately decries and defends, comes off as part of God’s plan, casting Isabel as the obedient, suffering penitent rather than the willful transgressor.

Wood not only downplays Isabel’s transgressions and their consequences, but also insists that, in some ways, Isabel’s body remains legible to other characters. First, it is important to note that, as a governess whose face and body are disfigured and disguised, Isabel does not become an invisible free agent; on the contrary, her appearance and actions continue to be scrutinized by those around her and she is still constrained by a set—albeit a different set—of class-based rules. Some critics have overstated the extent to which Isabel’s fall from privileged lady to obscure governess removes her body and actions from others’ scrutiny and control. For example, in The Female Servant and Sensation Fiction (2013) Elizabeth Steere emphasizes that, as a governess, Isabel is merely playing a role, like any other actress in sensation fiction. She contends that, while playing the role of the governess, Isabel “is less subject to surveillance” (117) and “is able to largely avoid the gaze of others” (126). Similarly, in “Re-Visioning the ‘Vision from a Fairer World Than This,’” (2007) Karen M. Odden suggests that, disguised as Madame Vine, Isabel
can explore her creativity because, during this phase of her life, she enjoys “freedom from external evaluation” (126). Contrary to these claims, Isabel does not merely play the part of the governess; indeed, as I have already explained, Isabel financially supports herself by working as a governess in Europe for several months before she returns to East Lynne. Wood reveals not only the freedoms Isabel gains as a governess to her own children, but also the rights she forfeits. For example, Isabel must submit to Barbara’s orders, attending, the West Lynne church service and the election for M.P., because “no excuse, dared she, the governess, make to remain away” (491). She also chafes at the realization that Barbara, rather than herself, has control over how Isabel’s children are disciplined by the servants or cared for when ill.

In addition to policing Isabel’s actions, the other characters in the novel continue to scrutinize her body. Indeed, the novel constantly depicts characters including Carlyle, Barbara, Miss Carlyle, and the servants examining Madame Vine’s appearance and puzzling over her eccentricities. In fact, the first time she attends church, even “[t]he congregation did not forget to stare at her: what an extraordinary-looking governess Mrs. Carlyle had picked up!” (491). Wood points out that women’s bodies are always under scrutiny, regardless of their class and their position in the family or community. Although Madame Vine’s appearance largely puzzles those who try to read her, they continue to look at her and attempt to read the surfaces of her body.

Significantly, unlike many other sensation novelists, Wood suggests that, even in the case of extreme disfigurement and disguise, physiognomy reveals a character’s essential social class. When any character examines Madame Vine’s physiognomy, he or she unfailingly detects she is a lady, albeit in reduced financial circumstances. For example, Mrs. Latimer, writing to Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle to recommend the governess for their employment, gives a detailed description of Isabel’s unusual physical appearance, but promises “she is a gentlewoman with it all; and looks
one” (italics in original 456). Similarly, the narrator explains that “Barbara could not fail to perceive that [Madame Vine] was a thoroughly refined gentlewoman, far superior to the generality of governesses” (659). Although there are limits to what Isabel’s physiognomy reveals to other characters, the fact that they can still read her social class would have offered some consolation to readers anxious about the legibility of the body and the consequences of disfigurement and disguise. It would have suggested, for example, that a working-class woman would not have been able to replicate Isabel’s disguise and enter the homes of the wealthy middle class, because the truth of her social class would have been written upon her face. It also offers the hope that, even if physiognomy is less legible in the case of disfigurement, some aspects of essential identity cannot be obscured or hidden.

The Hyper-Legible Body in East Lynne

I argue that Wood not only makes her characters’ bodies legible, by insisting on the physiognomic meaning of physical features in the wake of extreme disfigurement and disguise, but also renders her characters’ bodies hyper-legible through purely fictional means by drawing on the conventions of classic stage melodrama, such as highly exaggerated expressions and gestures and symbolic objects like the croix de ma mère. As a part of this larger project, Wood imbues Isabel’s injuries and disguise with additional physiognomic and symbolic meaning in order to emphasize the anti-heroine’s adulterous past, evolving morals, and genuine remorse.

In effect, Wood creates a fictional world in which bodies are far more legible than they would be in reality. While the melodramatic conventions Wood utilizes cannot help readers navigate their social interactions in the real world, they do noticeably alter the East Lynne reading experience and underscore Wood’s message regarding the inherent legibility of the body. After all, from the reader’s perspective, the characters’ bodies are always highly legible, and yet characters consistently fail to read and interpret these bodies correctly. Characters fail to notice
both the “realistic” signs of a character’s identity, such as his or her physiognomy and dress, and the “artificial” signs of identity drawn from stage melodrama. In the end, even these hyper-legible bodies baffle the novel’s startlingly unobservant characters. As a result, Wood casts the misreadings of various characters’ bodies that occur over the course of the novel as tragedies that could be easily avoided: according to Wood, the problem is not that bodies are inherently illegible, but that individuals do not carefully read others’ bodies or take the time to present their own in socially-intelligible ways. In doing so, Wood consoles readers afraid of the seemingly illegible modern world by empowering them: she suggests that if they take the time study others’ faces and adorn their own bodies both honestly and in accordance with society’s rules regarding dress, they have the ability to make the world more legible.

In addition to making her anti-heroine’s body more legible, Wood’s use of melodramatic affects and symbolic disfigurement and disguise also, arguably, positions Isabel as a more sympathetic character. Isabel’s disfigured, disguised, and suffering body, often placed in highly melodramatic situations, functions—to borrow a concept from Martha Stoddard Holmes’s *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (1996)—as a body grounded in affect that, in turn, produces affect in the novel’s readers (3). While Holmes points out that Victorian fiction and non-fiction present the disabled woman’s body and the fallen woman’s body in similar ways (69-70), in Isabel these two bodies actually become one, complicating the reader’s judgments of her: Isabel is both the disfigured woman, an innocent victim more deserving of pity than censure, and the fallen woman, who, according to the social mores of the day, deserves to suffer and even die for her sexual transgressions. As I have already discussed, contemporary reviewers expressed mixed feelings about Isabel’s fall from grace, and, for some, pity did, in fact, outweigh censure. Indeed, Margaret Oliphant condemned the novel in
Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine on precisely these grounds, arguing East Lynne was “false, both to Art and Nature” because it makes the fallen woman sympathetic, pitiable, and more interesting than her “virtuous rival” (“Sensation Novels” 567).

Wood borrows many visual signs from melodrama to make her characters bodies hyper-legible to readers. One of the most notable influences of this genre on East Lynne is Wood’s frequent use of what Cvetkovich terms “melodramatic affects,” the exaggerated facial expressions and bodily gestures that have come to be associated with the highly wrought emotions of melodrama (Mixed Feelings 108). In one illustrative example, Isabel, disguised as Madame Vine, watches at her child’s deathbed, unable to grieve in open sympathy with his father or reassure her son that she repents her sins and loves him dearly. First, she sits “down on her knees, her face buried in the counterpane, a corner of it stuffed into her mouth that it might help to stifle her agony” (649). Afterwards, when the boy, William, finally dies, “she lost all self-control […] [c]rying, sobbing, calling, she flung herself upon him; she clasped him to her; she dashed off her disfiguring glasses; she laid her face upon his” (652). As in classic melodrama, Isabel’s expressions and gestures highlight her motherly grief and pain (as well as her desire to discard her disguise and confess her true identity, through the removal of her glasses).

While these scenes remain highly legible to Wood’s readers, her characters frequently misunderstand the cause or meaning of another character’s exaggerated expressions and gestures. In the above example, other characters, including William, misinterpret Isabel’s wild grief, chalk it up to eccentricity or the memory of her own children’s deaths. According to the rules of early spoken melodrama, what is missing in this scene is a dramatic declaration of Isabel’s identity followed by her child’s recognition of her. Indeed, many stage adaptations of East Lynne, including the famous Elgin Opera House production, added precisely what Wood omits,
both the emotional confession “I am your mother!” and William’s recognition of her, in his
dying word, “Mama” (Alft n.p.). As much as Isabel wants to declare her identity—most
particularly to her dying son, but, to a lesser extent, to everyone in the household—in the novel
she remains silent during the first scene and only allows herself to sob during the second scene
because she is alone. In fact, she never reveals her identity to any of her children and only
discloses it to her former husband and his sister on her own deathbed. *East Lynne*, then, does not,
like early melodramas, win “a victory over repression” (Brooks *Body Works* 41) through the
clear verbalization of identity and the satisfaction of recognition. Despite the fact that Isabel’s
body figuratively screams the truth through her highly exaggerated expressions and gestures,
Isabel cannot guide other characters’ interpretation of her body through a clear articulation of her
identity.

Another visual cue Wood adopts from classic melodrama is the symbolic object, such as
the *croix de ma mère*, worn upon the character’s body. At the beginning of the novel, Isabel
wears a cross necklace given to her by her deceased mother that both initially identifies her as a
moral heroine and foreshadows her fall. In a highly legible interaction between the young Isabel
Vane and her future seducer, Francis Levison, Isabel removes “a golden cross with seven
emeralds” from around her neck, in order to show it to her relatives, Mrs. Vane and Mrs. Levison
(53). Francis, Mrs. Levison’s grandson, also joins the party, and in his attempt to pass the cross
from his grandmother back to Isabel, the cross falls to the floor. He steps on it, breaking it in

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14 “‘Willie!’ cries Lady Isabel to the son she had abandoned eight years before. ‘Don't you know me, Willie? I am
your mother!’ And Willie, struggling to sit up gasps, ‘Mama,’ and promptly dies.”

15 *La croix de ma mère* literally means “the cross of my mother.” Although *la croix de ma mère* of melodrama is
often an actual cross, it does not have to be. Brooks explains it can be any “token affixed to or engraved on the
abandoned orphan which as last enables the establishment of identity” (*Body Works* 3). In this scene, Wood uses it
to establish Isabel’s moral identity and eventual fall rather than her identity as her mother’s child.
two. Although the other characters dismiss the importance of the incident, Isabel feels certain it constitutes “an evil omen” because her mother has instructed her to let the cross “be to me as a talisman” and, in times of distress, “to look at it, and strive to recall what her [mother’s] advice would be,” and to act accordingly (56). Although Isabel has a vague presentiment of evil, the reader can infer the scene’s more specific symbolic meaning: when Isabel and Levison drop the cross with the seven emeralds, it foreshadows their eventual breach of the seventh commandment, “thou shall not commit adultery.” Interestingly, when the narrator describes the cross falling to the ground, she does not specify whose fault it was: “[w]hether [Levison] was awkward, or whether [Isabel’s] hands were full, for she held her gloves, her handkerchief, and had just taken up her mantle, certain it is that it fell” (54). In doing so, Wood hints at the shared and somewhat uncertain moral culpability of various characters (particularly but not exclusively Isabel and Levison) in the events that precipitate Isabel’s fall.

As part of this larger project, Wood imparts additional physiognomic and symbolic information through Isabel’s specific injuries, effectively writing the story of her past sexual transgressions upon her face and body. Wood’s narrator describes Isabel’s altered physical appearance after the train wreck: “[s]he limps slightly as she walks, and stoops, which takes from her former height. A scar extends from her chin above her mouth, completely changing the character of the lower part of her face; some of her teeth are missing, so that she speaks with a lisp” (445). Nineteenth-century physiognomists generally agreed with Lavater that the mouth and chin were “the image of the animal life” (Essays 10), or, in other words, the segment of the face that best revealed an individual’s passions and appetites. For Wood’s readers, most of whom would have been aware of this basic physiognomic principle, the scars that “completely chang[e] the character of the lower part of [Isabel’s] face” would have been a meaningful
acknowledgment of her past sexual crimes: her disfigured mouth and chin visually indicate that she has committed adultery and had a child outside of wedlock. Wood’s characters may view Madame Vine’s deformities as the result of an accident or misfortune, explaining why, despite their knowledge of physiognomy, they do not conclude that Madame Vine’s face reveals her sins. However, as I have already explained, Wood indicates to readers that Isabel’s train accident is no “accident” at all; it is an act of divine judgment. According to Wood, just as God crafted Isabel’s physiognomy at birth, so too does he disfigure it when she acts in defiance of her own moral principles and divine law.¹⁶

Isabel’s injuries also symbolically represent her fallen moral and social status, making her body more legible to readers. The leg injury that “takes from her former height” (445) not only makes her less recognizable because she appears shorter, but also indicates to readers that she has fallen from both her lofty social position and in her own and others’ estimation. Indeed, it suggests she will need to “stoop” moving forward, foreshadowing the way in which she assumes a subordinate social position as governess at East Lynne.

Finally, Isabel’s disguise—which, on the level of character, acts as a form of deception—successfully communicates Isabel’s cautionary tale and her acquisition of several middle-class moral principles to Wood’s readers. The narrator describes Isabel’s new mode of self-adornment:

[S]he wears disfiguring green spectacles, or, as they are called, preservers, going round the eyes, and a broad band of grey velvet coming down low upon her forehead. Her dress, too, is equally disfiguring. Never is she seen in one that fits her person, but into those frightful ‘loose jackets’ which must surely have been invented by someone envious of a pretty shape. As to her bonnet, it would put to shame those masquerading things tilted on

¹⁶ As I have already pointed out, Wood suggests that, in most cases, physical deformities are the result of random chance and are not indicative of any sort of moral failing on the part of the disfigured person. Many physiognomists similarly acknowledged that a face disfigured by accident or disease should not be judged in the same way as a face disfigured through vicious behavior. However, Wood’s novel does problematically joins the two in the person of Lady Isabel, whose disfigurements are simultaneously depicted as the result of a train accident (which results in the injury and death of many innocent passengers) and as a fitting act of divine retribution.
the back of her head, for it actually shaded her face; and she was never seen out of doors without a thick veil.

This disguise indicates the types of moral values Isabel embraces and upholds at the end of the novel. First, by adopting a disguise below rather than above her original station, Isabel enacts humility for her mistakes—a form of mortification that the more vain and haughty characters, including Levison, refuse to adopt. In addition, by covering the parts of her body that remain beautiful—her eyes, her forehead, and her figure—Isabel willingly hides her most attractive features, effectively removing her body from the sexual economy of the novel. In fact, Wood aligns Isabel with the novel’s self-imposed old-maid, when she remarks that Isabel’s new caps, “except that they were simple and fitted closely to the face, nearly rivaled those of Miss Carlyle” (456). Isabel also adopts some of Miss Carlyle’s other attitudes towards dress and morality by the end of the novel, for she avoids spending a great deal of money on her clothing, and does not care if others find her “droll-looking” (471). Indeed, because she not only dresses like a governess, but also works as one, Isabel performs the type of useful household labor valued by Miss Carlyle. In all of these ways, Isabel’s clothing and self-presentation render visible the otherwise invisible principles she adopts: humility, modesty, frugality, hard work, and penitence.

Ultimately, Isabel’s body becomes a surface upon which Wood writes the anti-heroine’s story of suffering, remorse, and changed identity for all potentially-errring female readers to see. Although Isabel never learns to follow socially-acceptable rules governing dress or to convey her morals to her fellow characters, she does become an instructive feminine spectacle for readers. Isabel not only learns her lesson, but also embodies it. And Wood displays the consequences of Isabel’s sins on the surfaces of her body for all to see.

Unlike Lady Audley’s Secret and The Woman in White, Wood’s East Lynne upholds the physiognomic legibility of the body and encourages women to take charge of the self-fashioned
aspects of appearance to make their bodies even more legible. Wood is especially concerned with the legibility of social class and morality (and the way these two aspects of identity are linked), because of contemporary social changes, particularly the rise of the professional middle-class. Wood cautions middle-class male readers to marry within their own sphere, and to select a wife who is not so angelic that she cannot master the signifying practices of dress. In addition, she counsels her middle-class female readers to adorn their bodies in ways that mark their class status while staying true to middle-class morals. Finally, Wood acknowledges that a person’s physiognomy may be disfigured and that adornment may be turned to dishonest ends in the form of disguise, but she takes pains to stress the continued legibility of her protagonist’s body even after it has been disfigured and disguised. Indeed, by presenting readers with a hyper-legible version of characters’ bodies and privileged information about characters’ motives and identities, Wood positions them as master readers of both the novel-as-text and the body-as-text. She encourages them to learn from the novel’s characters, and take care to both read others’ bodies carefully and craft their own in socially-intelligible ways. Ultimately, Wood reassures readers that the problem is not the inherent illegibility of the body, but the people who fail to read and adorn it carefully. In doing so, she empowers readers by insisting they have the ability to make the world more legible.

As we have seen, many sensation novels published in the early 1860s such as *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Woman in White*, and *East Lynne* focus their discussions of essential identity and disguise around the issues of social class and morality. Some of these novels debunk the notion that social class is a form of essential identity by including characters whose physiognomies do not reveal their social class or who successfully adopt class-based disguises. As time goes on, sensation novels such as *The Moonstone*, which I discuss in my next chapter,
extend this discussion of essential identity to race and consider the possibility of ethnic disguises. However, sensation novelists prove far less willing to disrupt theories that position race as a biological inheritance or to use ethnic disguise as a means of complicating these truths.

As I have argued in this chapter, in *East Lynne* Wood contends that *all* bodies are legible and largely remain so even in the face of extreme disfigurement and disguise. In *The Moonstone* Collins argues that only certain types of bodies—particularly those of colonial subjects, such as Indians—are highly legible and easy to identify. Collins, like Wood, constructs a comforting and conservative fantasy regarding bodily legibility, but his fictional world, unlike Wood’s, revolves around a racialized double-standard of visibility and disguise: by merging the sensation novel’s long-standing interest in the melodramatic signs that make fictional bodies easy to identify with the racist anthropological theories of the day, Collins suggests for much of the novel that Indians are much easier to identify and far less capable at disguise than their English or European counterparts.
In this chapter, I discuss Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), a “wild yet domestic” (quoted in Farmer 23) sensation novel heavily invested in issues of imperialism and empire and written in the wake of the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857-'58. While many sensation novelists, including Collins, rejected essentialist beliefs regarding social class, as we shall see, they often took a much more conservative stance regarding race. In *The Moonstone*, Collins reassures his readers by arguing that Indian bodies are easier to see, identify, understand, and control than their English or European counterparts. Like some contemporary racial anthropologists, Collins presents particularly threatening colonial subjects as easily identifiable through their racially-typed bodies. While he continues to provide most of his characters with individualized physiognomic descriptions, the unnamed three Brahmin at the center of *The Moonstone* are described in the broadest racialized terms. In order to anticipate the Brahmins’ plans and movements inside England, the English characters of the novel need to learn not about the Brahmin as individuals, but rather about the Indian character more generally, as it was conceived in the stereotypes of the day. In positioning the three Brahmin as representatives of their race, moreover, Collins implies that the British would be able to police *any* Indians who infiltrated the country just as easily as they do the three Brahmin at the center of the novel.

Similarly to Wood, Collins uses his artistic license to offer readers a comforting fantasy that exaggerates the visibility and legibility of the body—or, in Collins’s case, the visibility and legibility of certain bodies. To begin with, Collins distorts the demographics of mid-century London to present a fictional version of the city in which Indians are hyper-visible and easily policed. More specifically, he presents the three Brahmin as hyper-visible to the policing eyes of
Englishmen, suggests that their dark skin reveals both their race and, in the minds of some characters, their criminality, and stresses that they cannot use disguise to hide their true identity.

As a part of this imperialistic fantasy, Collins promotes a double-standard of disguise, by suggesting that the European Murthwaite, the novel’s proto-ethnographer and expert on India, can successfully pass as a Hindu-Buddhist in India, while emphasizing that the three Brahmin cannot adopt successful disguises in England. When the three high-caste Brahmin disguise themselves as low-caste jugglers, Murthwaite easily discovers their class-based disguise, and afterwards, the English lawyer Bruff similarly reads the Indian chief’s “European costume” as a failed attempt at racial passing. Thus, Collins suggests that the three Brahmin are not only hyper-visible, but are also unable to hide their physical appearance, race, and identity through disguise.

Collins’s depiction of the three Brahmin as hyper-visible and incapable of disguise is far from politically innocent. Indeed, as Homi K. Bhabha argues in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (1984), the British imagine and even attempt to create a class of colonial subjects who imitate the colonizer but, crucially, always remain visually distinct and identifiable. Bhabha defines the colonial mimic as “a reformed, recognizable Other.” (86) a colonial subject who closely imitates the colonizer, but who can never fully embody his identity. As Bhabha points out, “in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (87), and it is precisely this slippage that comforts the British, for an Anglicized colonial subject always remains distinct from his “real” English counterpart. As Bhabha famously puts it, the colonial mimic man, is “almost the same, but not quite” (86), “[a]lmost the same but not white” (italics in original 87). In this way, Bhabha’s mimic man recalls Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “class of interpreters” from his now infamous “Minute on Education in India” (1835). Macaulay called upon the British to educate a “class of interpreters
Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” who could function as liaisons between the English and natives in India, effectively disseminating English principles to the Indian masses (Kinsey 394-395). Thus, the Anglicized colonial mimic would serve the interests of the British Empire rather than those of India, would flatter the colonizer’s pride through his emulation of his dress, language, and values, and, importantly, would perform these tasks without disturbing either the existing racial hierarchy or the comforting notion that racial difference remains visible in even the most sincere mimic’s physical appearance and behavior. As we shall see, for much of The Moonstone Collins promotes the fantasy that all Indians are hyper-visible and easily identifiable “to any intelligent eyes” (343), even when they adopt the language, dress, and manners of Europeans.

Adding to this problematic representation, in The Moonstone, Collins suggests that people who need to be policed and controlled—particularly Indians, but also, to a lesser extent, rebellious members of the working-class and mixed-race individuals—are “naturally” hyper-visible and unable to disguise the physical traits that mark their difference. In much the same way physiognomists rationalized the subjugation of various groups by arguing that their inferior physical features indicated their lower intelligence, morality, and other capabilities, Collins naturalizes the surveillance of potentially disruptive characters by suggesting that the mechanism for such control is built into their very bodies. While, in reality, British officials went to great lengths to collect information on Indians that would help them better identify, understand, and control them, Collins’s depiction of the three Brahmin largely erases these official efforts and policies from the record, by suggesting that Indian bodies “naturally” offer themselves up for inspection and control.
In reality, by this point in time, British officials were instructing actual masters-of-disguise, like Richard Burton, to infiltrate Indian society disguised as natives to collect intelligence that could be used to inform British foreign policy (498). As Thomas McDow explains in “Trafficking in Persianness” (2010), “[British] officials […believed] that Britons thinking like a native would be the only way to gain local knowledge. Thus, donning disguises, a time-tested strategy for gathering illicit knowledge, was elevated to policy” (498). By the time The Moonstone was published, racial passing and disguise had already become a powerful tool used by the British to gather intelligence about colonial populations in order to better control and subdue them.

Occasionally, as part of the novel’s subtle counter-narrative, Collins acknowledges that the novel’s racialized double-standard of disguise is, in fact, a mere fantasy. In these brief moments, he concedes that the three Brahmin may be better at reading and disguising the body than the text would otherwise suggest. However, these moments, like the three Brahmins’ perspectives, remain largely buried in the text.

At the end of the novel, during the scene of the villain Godfrey Ablewhite’s unmasking, Collins finally disproves the racist double-standard of disguise; however, he also largely dismisses the possibility that disguise may be used by Indians (or anyone else) for subversive purposes. Ultimately, Collins suggests that very few people can successfully adopt disguises, particularly for extended periods of time. While Murthwaite proves extremely gifted at disguise, Collins suggests that it is the character’s unique body—particularly his “brown” skin and “lithe” figure—that make this possible. While, within the context of The Moonstone, Collins’s disclaimer about the difficulty of disguise may please twenty-first century readers, because it
dismantles the novel’s racialized double-standard of disguise, it also limits the possibility that disguise may be used for rebellious purposes.

Although The Moonstone has been omitted from most studies that examine physiognomy and the legibility of the body in Collins’s oeuvre, it is important to consider this text alongside more progressive ones, such as The Woman in White. While, in this earlier work, Collins problematizes the belief in physiognomic legibility, suggests that the powers of recognition are not a failsafe means of identification, and highlights the dangers of putting the body on trial as a proof of identity, in this later novel, when the dark-skinned bodies of Indians are at issue, he takes a much more conservative approach to these topics. Unlike Cox, who, in “Reading Faces” (2009) presents Collins’s attitudes towards physiognomy as a linear progression, moving from a position of acceptance to skepticism over time (120), I suggest that his position on physiognomy and bodily legibility vacillates, because, like many Victorians, he does not envision all people as equally threatening or all bodies as equally legible. He is far more conservative when dealing with essentialist beliefs regarding race than those involving social class.

**History of the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857-'58**

Before analyzing the ways in which Collins’s treatment of bodily legibility and disguise in The Moonstone reflects and responds to British prejudices and fears in the wake of the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857-'58, I must describe the Mutiny/Rebellion itself, particularly its causes, extreme violence, and cultural importance. The numerous bloody uprisings of Indian peasants and soldiers that took place primarily in north-central India during 1857-'58 are known, collectively, as either “the Indian Mutiny,” “the Indian Civil Rebellion,” or “the First Indian Civil War of Independence,” depending on one’s historical-political outlook (Brantlinger Rule of
By the mid-nineteenth century, Indians of all castes and from various regions of the subcontinent faced pressure to convert to Christianity and adopt Western ways of life, which greatly strained British-Indian relations. However, the immediate catalyst for the Mutiny/Rebellion was widespread outrage amongst “sepoys,” the Indians soldiers employed by the British East India Company army, over the General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 and the new Lee-Enfield rifle cartridges purchased for use by soldiers in India. The act required all new recruits to swear they would cross the sea for service, an action that, for high-caste Hindus, amounted to ritual pollution and a loss of caste (Hyam 134). Similarly, the new Lee-Enfield rifles utilized cartridges that were rumored to be heavily greased with a mixture of cow and pig fat and that had to be bitten open by the gunman (Hyam 134-135). If these allegations proved true, by biting the cartridges Hindus risked consuming the tallow of the sacred cow, and Muslims risked imbibing the fat of the unclean pig—sins which, in their respective religions, would forfeit their caste and earn them eternal damnation.

The most notorious incident of the Mutiny/Rebellion, and the one that came to stand, in the British imagination at least, as encapsulating Indian treachery, was the massacre at Cawnpore. At the end of June 1857, the Indian leader Nana Sahib, infamously dubbed “the Demon of Cawnpore” by the British press, promised safe passage to Allahbad to a group of British citizens, but, along the way, the escorts “turned guns and sabers on them” (Brantlinger Rule of Darkness 201). The women and children who survived the initial attack were brought back to the bibighar, and, in mid-July, Nana Sahib ordered them to be killed as well. Reportedly, the sepoys under Nana Sahib’s command refused to comply with his orders, so he hired “two

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1 As other critics have done recently, I will refer to these events as “the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion” to maintain a more neutral stance.
Muslim butchers, two Hindu peasants, and one of his personal bodyguards to slaughter the 120 sieged people […] with knives and hatchets” (Tomaiuolo 114). According to contemporary reports, these men then threw the bodies—some dead, others only wounded—into a nearby well (Tomaiuolo 214). In *Britain’s Imperial Century* (1976) Ronald Hyam suggests that when British soldiers arrived at the gruesome scene, “they found the house still littered with underwear and female hair and running in blood” (136). The British press further exaggerated the bloody crime, publishing numerous accounts (which have never been proven) that British women and children at Cawnpore had been raped and tortured before they were murdered. While, as Patrick Brantlinger points out in *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (1990), Cawnpore could reasonably be construed as a retaliatory measure against the British—who, earlier in June 1857, massacred thousands of Indians at Benares and Allahbad—both nineteenth-century and twentieth-century British histories rarely acknowledge this detail (201).

Maddened with rage and indignation, the British responded to accounts of the massacre at Cawnpore with equal depravity and cruelty. As far as the British were concerned, the Indians had raped, tortured, and murdered British women and children, representatives of all that was pure and innocent. With Britain’s most sacred feelings violated and its sense of security betrayed, General James Neill, a Scottish officer for the East India Company, ordered that the rebels’ punishment should be “the heaviest, the most revolting to their feelings, and what they must ever remember” (quoted in Hyam 137). Consequently, Neill ordered “each offender to be forced to clean up a small portion of blood-stains” because such an action would, again, result in eternal damnation according to the mutineers’ religious beliefs (Hyam 137). The British massacred Indians indiscriminately (whether or not they had participated in the mutiny), hanging them, shooting them, and even blowing them from the mouths of canons (Brantlinger *Rule of Darkness*)
Rather than being condemned in the British press, these atrocities were often represented as “excesses of heroism” (Brantlinger *Rule of Darkness* 201).

Following the Mutiny/Rebellion, the British public’s confidence in their nation’s divinely-ordained mission in India had been shaken, and, in the wake of Cawnpore, their attitudes towards Indians altered dramatically. As Brantlinger observes, “[n]o episode in British imperial history raised public excitement to a higher pitch than the Indian Mutiny of 1857” (*Rule of Darkness* 199). When news of the mutiny first broke in Britain, it seemed too horrible to be true. As Hyam explains, despite earlier signs of unrest, there had been a widespread belief “that no danger could ever approach the British in India, that God was on the side of the empire [..] and that everybody loved the British” (138). Indeed, on the day the first mutineers rebelled in Meerut, *The Times* correspondent continued to report of “perfect tranquility pervading the whole of India” (quoted in Hyam 128), and it took weeks before denial turned to acceptance. In the coming weeks, newspapers shifted from minimizing the Mutiny/Rebellion to exaggerating the Indians’ atrocities.

News of the rebellion shook many Victorians to the core, and some, including the parson and novelist Charles Kingsley, struggled to keep faith in God and country as they faced the hitherto unimaginable violence of the Cawnpore massacre. In a letter to his friend John Bullar, Kingsley admits:

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2 The British adopted a drastically different strategy for ruling India in the wake of the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion. The British government, rather than the East India Company, stepped in to govern the country directly. For the rest of the century, there was little discussion of the possibility of Indians ever ruling India themselves. In addition, the army was reorganized, with a decrease in the number of sepoys, a deliberate mixing of the Hindu and Muslim regiments (in order to discourage alliances), and the reassignment of British and Europeans, so they had complete control of the artillery. The civilian population was also disarmed as much as possible. Finally, the religious and social reforms, which had been the order of the day before the Mutiny/Rebellion, were abruptly discontinued (Hyam 141-144, Porter 38).
I can think of nothing but these Indian massacres. The moral problems they involve make me half wild. Night and day the heaven seems black to me, though I never was so prosperous and blest in my life as I am now. I can hardly bear to look at a woman or child—even at my own sometimes. They raise such horrible images, from which I can’t escape. What does it all mean? Christ is King, nevertheless! I tell my people so […] But I want sorely some one [sic] to tell me that he believes it too. (Kingsley Letters and Memoirs 207)

Here, Kingsley reveals the extent to which the gruesome images of Cawnpore haunt his imagination, raising themselves like specters, at the sight of any British woman or child. For Kingsley, in this new world of English vulnerability nothing seems safe or sacred—the victims at Cawnpore could have been any British wives, mothers, or children, including his own. In fact, Kingsley fears that similar acts of violence may, in the future, be perpetuated by Indians against British women and children—perhaps even his own family—on English soil. In another impassioned letter to the same friend, Kingsley demands, “[s]how me what security I have that my wife and my children should not suffer from some unexpected outbreak of devils, what other wives and children have suffered” (207). The violence at Cawnpore and elsewhere raised disturbing “moral problems” for the English parson: reports of these events make him feel “half wild” and he finds himself publically preaching the word of God while privately questioning his faith, all but begging for spiritual reassurance. However, among the “moral problems” Kingsley identifies, he does not articulate the disturbing realization that the supposedly strict dichotomies between the “civilized” English and “savage” Indians were, apparently, not as clear as many had argued. In both letters, Kingsley insists the “moral problems” arise strictly from Indian (as opposed to British) violence. Like many contemporaries, he demonizes the enemy without questioning Britain’s violence against Indians either before or after the Cawnpore massacre.

The Pre-Mutiny Setting of The Moonstone

The Prologue of The Moonstone consists of a short extract from the “Family Papers” written by Arthur Herncastle in 1799, fifty years before the main action of the plot takes place. In
the extract, Arthur first relates the story of a magnificent Hindu diamond called the Moonstone, which is embedded in the forehead of a sacred shrine of Vishnu, locked away in a Hindu temple, and guarded, generation after generation, by three Brahmin priests. Next, Arthur testifies that immediately following the British storming of Seringapatum in India, he witnessed his cousin and fellow soldier, John Herncastle, standing in the very temple where the Moonstone was reputed to be, near the corpses of three Brahmin. From this disturbing sight, he concludes that his cousin has stolen the Moonstone and murdered its three guards, despite the British commanding officer’s order to do everything possible to “prevent plunder and confusion” in the wake of the battle (56).

In the central narrative that follows, Rachel Verinder inherits the diamond on her eighteenth birthday from her recently deceased uncle, John Herncastle, but someone steals the diamond from her bedroom on the same night. Initially, some of the characters suspect that three mysterious Brahmin, who were seen at the house earlier that day, must have stolen the diamond. However, in the end, it is revealed that Rachel’s lover and cousin, Franklin Blake, removed the diamond without knowing it, during an opium-induced bout of sleepwalking, and that, seeing this happen, Rachel’s other cousin, Godfrey Ablewhite, stole the diamond and entrusted it to a money-lender for safe keeping until a time when he could safely sell it. When Godfrey collects the diamond from the money-lender a year later, the three Brahmin murder him and retrieve the diamond. The Epilogue consists of three short narratives relating the Brahmins’ journey back to India, and closes with the novel’s proto-ethnographer, Murthwaite, describing the gem’s restoration to the sacred Hindu shrine.

While Collins publishes *The Moonstone* ten years after the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion, the central events of the narrative take place before it occurs, during the years 1848-1850. By setting
the novel in this earlier period, Collins exploits his own and his readers’ knowledge of later events—events that are still in the unknown, far-off future for the novel’s characters. Most notably, Collins endows Murthwaite with knowledge about the Indian race that seems prescient, given the novel’s pre-Mutiny setting. First, Murthwaite mentions the importance of two Hindu religious principles—the very same principles that the British disregard in the passing of the General Service Enlistment Act and the use of the Lee-Enfield rifle cartridges. First, he remarks to the novel’s hero, Franklin Blake, and the butler, Betteredge, that the three Brahmin must have had a very important reason for crossing the sea, because, by doing so, they have sacrificed their caste (129). Murthwaite points out, moreover, that the sacrifice of caste is an all-important matter for Hindus, informing his friends that, compared to the loss of caste, “the sacrifice of life is nothing at all” (130). Later in the novel, he also mentions that the Hindus condemn anyone who kills, let alone eats, the sacred cow. Indeed, he remarks that, if a Muslim is “even suspected of killing that sacred animal, the cow” in a pious Hindu neighborhood, he is, “as a matter of course, put to death without mercy” (540). By positioning Murthwaite as a highly-informed expert on Indian religions and culture, Collins lends credibility to all of Murthwaite’s opinions regarding the Indian race and the novel’s Indian characters.

This decision has disturbing consequences, for Murthwaite not only demonstrates his knowledge of the religious and cultural principles the British government ignores leading up the Mutiny/Rebellion, but also reinforces post-Mutiny stereotypes of Indians as violent killers. For example, Murthwaite calmly confirms to his English audience, “I think I shall be safer […] among the fiercest fanatics of Central Asia, than [I would be in England] with the Moonstone in my pocket” (356). According to Murthwaite, the Indians are not just a harmless, backwards people, but a race fully capable of chilling acts of violence, particularly when the British threaten
their religious beliefs and sacred relics. Indeed, Murthwaite agrees with Betteredge that while the Indians may appear to fall in line, their “snaky politeness” is an assumed form of servility; they will wait with “the patience of cats” for the best moment to strike with the “ferocity of tigers” (129)—an image, incidentally, that would have been familiar to Collins’s readers, because of its frequent use in Mutiny narratives. Although, as Margery Sabin points out in Dissenters and Mavericks: Writings about India in English, 1765-2000 (2002), the three Brahmin practice “extraordinary restraint and self-discipline” over the course of the novel by only killing one Englishman (99), for readers aware of the atrocities at Cawnpore, Murthwaite’s words sound prophetic of the disasters yet to come.

The England of Collins’s novel, still untouched by the horrors of the Mutiny/Rebellion, dismisses both the gravity of England’s imperial crimes against India and the possibility of violent retribution. Collins represents this pre-Mutiny mindset through several young female characters’ blissful—and dangerous—ignorance regarding both the imperial history of the Moonstone and the violence the three Brahmin are allegedly willing to commit in order to get it back. When the wealthy Rachel Verinder inherits the Moonstone on her eighteenth birthday, neither she nor her cousins, the Miss Ablewhites, know the family story behind the gem. Consequently, when three Brahmin appear at the house hoping to retrieve the diamond, the girls have no knowledge of the stone’s troubling colonial legacy or their own danger. In her vanity

3 Like Queen Victoria, who received the Koh-I-Noor diamond as a “gift” from the young maharaja, Duleep Singh, after the seizure of the Lahore treasury by British forces, Rachel, who is described as “the queen of the day” (121), receives a large diamond with a fraught colonial past as a gift. She and the Miss Ablewhites gawk at the Moonstone in much the same frivolous way women were said to flock to the Koh-i-Noor when it was displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Furthermore, Collins condemns his female character’s frivolity in much the same way the press looked down upon the women for caring about such a superficial object. The much-anticipated Koh-I-Noor “registered more as an emblem of a frivolous, feminized, and Orientalized luxury commodity than as a proper mascot for the ‘Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations’ (Kinsey 392), and “registered not as the next best introduction to British imperial material culture but as a throwback to an eighteenth-century brand of imperial plunder and frivolous diamond consumption” (Kinsey 411).
and excitement, Rachel actually wears the massive jewel on her body, flaunting it for all to see. With Cawnpore still fresh in contemporary readers’ minds, think how naïve and superficial Rachel must look and how grave her danger must seem, as “she stood, innocent of all knowledge of the truth, showing the Indians the Diamond in the bosom of her dress!” (127). Given the rumors of Indians raping women at Cawnpore and the connection, throughout the novel, between Rachel’s diamond and her virginity, for contemporary readers this scene would have been rife with the threat of not only physical but also sexual violence.

Collins juxtaposes this inappropriate, feminized response to the diamond with Murthwaite’s expert knowledge of it. While the young ladies, dazzled by the diamond’s size, beauty, and material value, see it as a personal decoration meant to adorn the body of a single woman, Murthwaite understands the Moonstone’s place in Indian history, its immense spiritual value to practitioners of Hinduism, and the fact it belongs to a whole people rather than to an individual. Murthwaite also knows that the Indians will stop at nothing to retrieve the sacred gem, and he tries to warn Rachel of her danger. He informs her, in the hearing of her cousins, “[a] Hindoo diamond is sometimes part of a Hindoo religion. I know a certain city, and a certain temple in that city, where, dressed as you are now, your life would not be worth five minutes’ purchase” (123). In a response that only could have occurred before the Mutiny/Rebellion, Rachel “was quite delighted to hear of her danger in India” because she is “safe in England” (123), and the Miss Ablewhites “were more delighted still; they dropped their knives and forks with a crash, and burst out together vehemently, ‘O! How interesting!’” (123).

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4 Many critics, particularly those who examine *The Moonstone* through a psychoanalytic lens, argue that the diamond represents Rachel’s virginity. As Heller notes, “Rachel’s loss of her jewel, read by many critics as her virginity, echoes the plunder of the Moonstone, which has originally graced the statue of an ‘inviolate deity’ [citation omitted]… Blake’s searching the drawer in Rachel’s Indian cabinet [on the night of the theft] echoes the eroticized language of empire that Mr. Bruff uses when he claims that Murthwaite, the authority on India, is intent on returning there and ‘penetrating into regions left still unexplored’ [citation omitted’]” (146).
Miss Ablewhites make light of Murthwaite’s warning, because they live in a world where the atrocities of Cawnpore are still unimaginable, and where the prospect of Indians murdering English women in their own country (as the novelist Kingsley feared they would) was more unthinkable still.

On the one hand, we might see Collins’s decision to arm Murthwaite with the very knowledge of Hindu religion and culture that could have been used to avoid the Mutiny/Rebellion as a rewriting of history—in the late 1840s of Collins’s novel, Murthwaite already possesses the type of information Britain needs to govern India more effectively, and he readily communicates this information to all of his British acquaintances. On the other hand, the fact that the British response to Murthwaite’s warnings is varied—including some characters who dismiss his concerns—also seems to indict the British for failing to act in culturally sensitive ways in the years leading up to the Mutiny, given the information they did have regarding Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs. Regardless, Murthwaite’s extensive and seemingly prescient knowledge of Indian religious and cultural practices, lends credibility to harmful British stereotypes in the wake of the Mutiny/Rebellion.

**Review of Criticism on The Moonstone**

Not surprisingly given the novel’s themes, much scholarly criticism on *The Moonstone* focuses on imperialism and the British Empire. Many early assessments of the novel, including John Reed’s “English Imperialism and the Unacknowledged Crime of *The Moonstone*” (1973), celebrate what these critics see as the novel’s anti-imperialist message, while, more recently, in “The Fabulous Imperialist Semiotics of Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*” (1993), Ashish Roy argues the novel is a “prototypical imperialist text exhibiting imperialist rule and a justification of that rule” (676). However, most critics now agree that when one looks at Collins’s use of the frame story, his depiction of the three Brahmin and the mixed-race Ezra Jennings, and the role of
opium in the novel, *The Moonstone* promotes a mix of progressive and conservative sentiments about race, imperialism, and Empire.\(^5\) While I agree that, when taken as a whole, *The Moonstone* indicates the complex, and at time contradictory ways nineteenth-century Britain grappled with its colonial past and present, my focus on the legibility of the body leads me to examine some of the novel’s most conservative and heretofore largely unexplored features.

While there is a wide array of scholarship that assesses the novel’s imperialistic and anti-imperialistic impulses, I am interested, more specifically, in the way the post-Mutiny racial politics between Britain and India inform Collins’s depiction of Indian bodies, English and European characters’ attempts to read them, and any character’s efforts at racial passing and disguise. While no prior critic has focused on issues surrounding the legibility of Indian bodies in *The Moonstone*, a few critics have discussed the legibility of bodies more generally (focusing almost exclusively on the novel’s English or half-English characters), and others have briefly discussed the impact of race on the characters’ attempts at disguise.

Most of the critics who discuss Collins’s depiction of the three Brahmin focuses almost exclusively on the Indians’ morality and spirituality. Many critics argue that Collins’s representation of the three Brahmin is positive and progressive, because he presents them as morally superior and religiously devout when compared to the novel’s English characters. For example, Reed argues that Collins presents the three Brahmin as “heroic” (283), and notes that

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“[t]heir doom [due to the sacrifice of caste] imparts to the priests a noble quality” (285). In “Wilkie Collins’s ‘Little Jewel’: The Meaning of the Moonstone” (1984), Patricia Miller Frick agrees that the three Brahmin are “morally superior” (318) to the novel’s English characters, because they are characterized by their loyalty, persistence, faith, and sincerity (318). Arthur Liebman and Avid H. Galerstein concur in “The Sign of the Moonstone” (1994), that the Brahmin “emerge as the most noble characters in the book, far superior in morality and ethical values than almost all the English characters” (73). From these observations we can take away several valuable points: The Moonstone does not always espouse the blatant racism of many post-Mutiny novels; on the contrary, in some ways, it presents the Indians in a surprisingly positive light, by suggesting they are more noble, ethical, and spiritual than their British counterparts. In addition, the novel problematizes the English characters’ role in the theft of the Moonstone, and, by extension, British rule in India. However, while all of these observations are correct, they do not offer a full and accurate picture of Collins’s complex relationship to imperial issues or his depiction of Indian characters.

A few critics have rightly challenged this overly-rosy view of the novel, by pointing out the ways in which The Moonstone actually reinforces racist stereotypes of the period. For example, in Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic (1992) Tamar Heller labels the novel “unabashedly Orientalist” because it “portrays the conspiratorial Indians as shady and sinister Others” (144-145), and in “Reopening the Mysteries: Colonist Logic and Cultural Difference in The Moonstone and The Horse Latitudes” (1993) Robert Crooks notes in passing that “the most blatantly racist assertions in the novel [including those about the Brahmin] are validated by being put into the mouth of Murthwaite, a traveler and expert on things oriental” (220). In this chapter, I expand upon the ways in which The Moonstone portrays the three
Brahmin in problematic ways. While much criticism on imperialism in the novel has paid only cursory attention to Collins’s Indian characters, or at best, focuses almost entirely on his portrayal of the Indians’ morality or spirituality, I examine additional aspects of their characterization, including Collins’s descriptions of their physical appearance, knowledge of their own and other cultures, and ability to read others’ bodies and disguise their own.

Critics pay much more attention to Collins’s one mixed-race character, the medical man and researcher, Ezra Jennings, in part because, as a fully-developed character, there is more to say about him. Critics have done an excellent job, for example, explaining the ways in which Jennings’s physical appearance, particularly his “Eastern” features and piebald hair, indicate his own mixed-race lineage and symbolize the larger challenge of racial integration.6 They have also debated Jennings’s function in the novel at length, with some critics, like Ronald Thomas, praising Collins for endowing a mixed-race character with the intelligence to conduct cutting-edge scientific experiments, and others, such as Heller, Sabin, and Deirdre David, arguing that Jennings functions as a babu or mimic man. Again, while, in some ways, Collins’s depiction of his mixed-race character proves more progressive than those of his contemporaries, it has its

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6 Nearly all critics who discuss Jennings describe his striking physical appearance and note that his piebald hair in particular reveals his own mixed-race heritage and symbolizes wider struggles involving racial integration. Franklin informs readers that Jennings’ complexion “was of a gipsy darkness,” his “nose presented the fine shape and modelling so often found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom visible among the newer races of the West,” and his hair, “by some freak of Nature, had lost its color in the most startlingly partial and capricious manner,” remaining black in one place, turning white in another, with “the line between the two colors preserving no sort of regularity” (390). As Heller points out, “[t]he physical ‘freak of Nature’ symbolizes the transgression of the boundary between colonizer and colonized that permitted Jennings’ birth” and, while Jennings “blends the identities of the English ‘gentleman’ [citation omitted] and colonial Other” he “nonetheless feels a tension between these origins” (157). In “Detecting Collins’ Diamond: From Serpentstone to Moonstone” (1984), Mark M. Hennelly observes, “the pariah Ezra Jennings, whose physical appearance juxtaposes ‘white’ and ‘black’ and suggests the eternal conflict between [the East and West], personifies the difficulty of achieving [racial] integration” (42). In the more recent “Wilkie Collins’s ‘Secret Dictate’: The Moonstone as a Response to Imperialist Panic” (2006), Vicki Corkran Wiley agrees that “[t]he startling placement of black hair next to white as well as the total absence of gray can be read as a metaphorical concomitance of two cultures—one imperial, one colonial—which must learn to coexist before any successful mixing can occur” (230), but argues that the novel ultimately anticipates such a future and “inculcate [its] readers with an attitude of tolerance and acceptance” (232).
limits. As Heller points out, Jennings speaks to Franklin of “our” colonies, “[which] attests to his desire to identify not with his native mother but with white men—his father and Blake” (158). And although Jennings makes innovative scientific discoveries and proves himself a capable medical man, he always uses his skills to help the English characters. As Heller observes, Jennings becomes “a kind of Friday [the slave from Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe] who serves the upper-class Blake” (159). Sabin similarly identifies him as a “loyal Colonial servant” (227), which distinguishes him from the three Brahmin: “[Jennings] is socially ostracized by the English but […] serves them devotedly and blesses their happiness without resentment. […] Unlike the Brahmins in search of their purloined jewel, Jennings wants nothing more than to serve English prosperity and innocence—and then die” (105). In my discussion of Collins’s Indian characters in The Moonstone, I focus on the three Brahmin rather than on Ezra Jennings, first, because Jennings is never explicitly identified as an Indian character by Collins, and second, because he does not adopt any disguises in the novel.\(^7\)

\(^7\) While some critics may be tempted to draw hasty conclusions regarding Jennings’ racial origins, Collins repeatedly positions Jennings as a man whose life story remains an incomplete and largely buried mystery. It is true that, while Jennings nurses his fatally ill boss, Dr. Candy, he writes down the sick man’s delirious ramblings and constructs a piecemeal narrative of what Candy saw and did on the night the Moonstone was stolen. In order to do so, Jennings must literally fill in the blanks—adding words that Candy has not actually spoken—in order to construct a complete narrative. However, Jennings himself consistently refuses to fill in the blanks of his own story. Not only does he allude to his former life in a British colony and his mother’s race only to drop these topics, but he also references a criminal accusation that continues to haunt him, and a lover he was forced to leave behind, without offering any further details about these important elements of his backstory. Collins even literally and symbolically buries Jennings’ untold story, for, when Jennings’ dies, he insists his journal and book of scientific discoveries be interred in the coffin with his body. Most critics recognize that Collins purposefully avoids revealing Jennings’ specific racial heritage, positioning him instead as the literal product of colonization, a colonial Other whose life remains a series of blanks that are never filled in for the novel’s other characters or its readers. However, despite Collins’s deliberate and repeated silence on the subject of Jennings’ racial background, some critics, like Ronald R. Thomas, do make the mistake of assuming that Jennings must be half-Indian, because of the novel’s wider investment in India and the Mutiny/Rebellion (Thomas 71). At the very least, it is clear that Collins treats Jennings—a half-English character who serves the novel’s English characters despite being harmed by British imperialism—far differently than he does the three Brahmin.
Although a few critics have discussed the legibility of the body in *The Moonstone* at length, they omit Collins’s depiction of the three Brahmin from their studies. Consequently, these critics overlook the ways in which Collins represents brown, Indian bodies quite differently than white, English or half-English bodies in the wake of the Mutiny/Rebellion. For example, in “Representations of the Abnormal Body in *The Moonstone*” (2009), Mark Mossman examines three of the novel’s English and half-English characters, including the domestic servant and former criminal Rosanna Spearman, her outspoken working-class friend Limping Lucy, and the “half-caste” medical man and researcher with an alleged criminal past, Ezra Jennings, while completely ignoring Collins’s depiction of the three Brahmin. Mossman argues that male, able-bodied characters like Franklin Blake and Betteredge try to control the “abnormal” bodies in the text by staring at them, interpreting them, and concluding that the outside surfaces of the body, particularly other characters’ physical eccentricities or impairments, reflect who they are and reveal their alleged madness or criminality. While Mossman’s description of the male characters’ problematic physiognomic judgments of the novel’s “abnormal” bodies is correct, he wrongly praises Collins for his progressive portrayal of “abnormal” bodies. He claims that Collins gives all of his physically-different characters the ability to speak out against their privileged oppressors, disrupt the biased view of their bodies, and claim a unique identity that extends beyond their physical appearance and/or disability.³ While, at least to some extent, this is true of

³ It is true that, as Mossman points out, *The Moonstone* allows some of its (white, English) characters to radically reject the privileged characters’ reading of their bodies, voice their opposition to social oppression, inequities, and prejudices, and proclaim an individualized identity. Perhaps most notably, Limping Lucy adamantly rejects the social restrictions placed on her by her physical disability, social class, and gender. She speaks to her social superior Blake with utter contempt and directly and publically accuses him of driving her friend Rosanna to suicide. On a grander scale, she relishes the prospect of social revolution, predicting, in a conversation with Betteredge, “the day is not far off when the poor will rise against the rich” (248). Lucy even imagines a type of matriarchal utopia, in which she and Rosanna could have lived together, earning money from their needlework, and depending upon each other rather than on men for love, companionship, and sustenance (248). In sum, as Mossman points out, Lucy “rejects her impaired body’s status as a negative, insignificant object to be either pitied or ignored or dismissed as ‘mad’” and “envisions a social space where her body and her self [sic] could be legitimate and have a legitimate
the three characters Mossman discusses, Collins does not follow this pattern in his representation of the three Brahmin.

First, even in the relatively progressive cases Mossman analyzes in which physically-different characters speak out against their oppressors or prove unlikely heroes, Collins promotes a fantasy in which potentially dangerous people can be easily identified and tracked because of their atypical physical appearance. Although the novel does not strictly uphold the physiognomic principle of *kalokagathia*—after all, the novel’s villain, Godfrey Ablewhite, is a handsome, white Englishman—Collins does mark all of his rebellious or threatening characters with physical traits that render them visually conspicuous, which allows other characters to police their actions with greater ease. This is true of all the characters Mossman discusses: Rosanna’s deformed shoulder makes her easy to identify when she sneaks into town the day after the theft, Lucy’s thumping crutch provides a constant visual and auditory warning of her approach, and Ezra’s face proves so unforgettable that someone eventually recognizes him in every town in which he tries to reinvent himself. As I discuss in detail later in this chapter, this is even more so the case for the three Brahmin. Collins naturalizes British surveillance and control of potentially-dangerous groups by giving all of his threatening and/or rebellious characters bodies that announce both their essential difference and their seemingly-intrinsic need to be policed.

While Mossman correctly points out that Lucy, Rossana, and Ezra are “defined primarily by the surface[s] of [their] bod[ies], specifically by [their] bod[ies] physical difference” (488) and that, for all of these characters, “the inner person is inseparably linked to [the] outer exterior” (489), he fails to recognize that the three Brahmins’ dark skin functions as another type of status and power” (490). However, the three Brahmin are not afforded the same opportunities as their English and half-English counterparts.
physical difference that similarly defines who they are in the minds of the novel’s characters. In doing so, Mossman also overlooks the fact that Collins denies the three Brahmin both the individualized identities and the opportunity to speak out against contemporary prejudices that he affords to the novel’s English and half-English characters. Indeed, while Collins individualizes and empowers the English Lucy and Rosanna and even the “half-caste” Ezra Jennings—providing each of them with a distinct physical appearance, name, backstory, personality quirks, and response to their oppressors—he does not extend the same courtesy to the three Brahmin. As we shall see, Collins not only makes the three Brahmin hyper-visible and easy to identify, but also denies them any sort of individuality or subjectivity. Contrary to Mossman, Collins does not provide all of his physically-different characters with complex identities; on the contrary, he presents the three Brahmin as mere representatives of the Indian race.

In an argument that suffers from similar problems and omissions, in “The Moonstone, Detective Fiction, and Forensic Science” (2006), Ronald R. Thomas argues that “[t]he reason that The Moonstone might qualify, as [T.S.] Eliot claimed it did, as the first and best of modern English detective novels is that it is the first novel of any kind to demonstrate in a compelling way the emergence of the modern field of forensic science” by using science to read the body of the accused criminal (67). Like Mossman, Thomas focuses on reading a white, English body—this time, that of the novel’s hero, Franklin Blake—without considering how the novel treats the so-called scientific attempts to read the bodies of the three Brahmin, who, incidentally, are accused of the theft long before Blake. In reality, Jennings’s “bold experiment” at the end of the novel, which Thomas celebrates for its early integration of forensic technique and scientific thinking, reproduces many of the same prejudices as Murthwaite’s anthropological observations. Although Thomas argues that Jennings’s experiment proves Blake’s innocence, it actually
exposes (however inadvertently) the biases inherent in these allegedly objective analyses of the body-as-text and the body-as-evidence.

Thomas’s argument centers on Jennings’s “bold experiment” at the end of the novel, in which the medical man and researcher strives to vindicate the novel’s hero, Franklin Blake, by proving that it is scientifically possible that he removed the Moonstone from his cousin Rachel’s room on the night of her eighteenth birthday party and hid the diamond somewhere in the house without his own knowledge. Jennings hypothesizes that Dr. Candy, a guest at the party, drugged Blake with opium, and that, in a drug-induced bout of sleepwalking, Blake took the diamond to protect his cousin from the Indians, whom he believed would try to steal the diamond that night. Jennings’s “bold experiment” is to recreate, as closely as possible, the circumstances of that night, to drug Blake with another large dose of opium, and to invite several of Blake’s friends (in the capacity of witnesses) to watch the proceedings and see whether, under the influence of the drug and with the Moonstone on his mind, Blake sleepwalks into Rachel’s room, takes the replica of the diamond, and deposits it for safekeeping somewhere in the house. Ultimately, Jennings’s experiment proves Blake’s innocence to the assembled witnesses, but the experiment does not reveal what happened to the diamond, because Blake falls into a deep sleep, merely dropping the diamond in plain sight on the floor, before he does anything with it. Summarizing this experiment, Thomas asserts “the body of the most unlikely (and very English) suspect is made into a theatre of scientific observation that tells its own story to the medical expert and to the gathered community. […] Franklin Blake’s body tells the tale that no witness, not even himself, could tell” (68). He claims that Jennings’s experiment succeeds, where Detective Sergeant Cuff’s earlier investigation has failed, because it “is sanctioned by a science that focuses on the body of the suspect as a text to be read” (67), concluding “the remarkable
achievement of the novel is to convince Blake (and us) to approve of this bold experiment as an
acceptable practice and to submit to the sanctions of science for determining our guilt or
innocence” (74).

While I agree that *The Moonstone* presents the criminal body as a text that can and should
be read by the scientific expert and dramatizes numerous attempts to read it, I suggest that
Thomas downplays the biases and flaws of Jennings’s “scientific” experiment and overlooks the
ways in which characters judge white, English bodies quite differently than brown, Indian
bodies. Although Thomas attempts to separate the “scientific” strains of early forensics (such as
the belief that scientific experts could read and interpret the criminal body like a text) from its
more “pseudoscientific” strains (such as the theory that criminals resembled the “lower” races,
because both hailed from inferior stock), the two are, of course, inextricably linked and grounded
in well-established physiognomic and phrenological theory. Because Thomas focuses
exclusively on Jennings’s attempt to read the body of the white, English hero through the lens of
early forensic science, he fails to provide a complete picture of the types of allegedly criminal
bodies under surveillance in the novel, the circumstances under which characters read those

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9 While Thomas does acknowledge that early forensic science was influenced by pseudosciences such as
physiognomy and phrenology, and that nineteenth-century criminal typologies were highly politicized and
racialized, he ultimately tries to differentiate between the “scientific” and “pseudoscientific” qualities of early
forensics and argue that *The Moonstone*’s owes much more to the former. Thomas explains, “[w]hile *The
Moonstone* evinces some of these racist representations of the Indians […] its more significant debt to early
forensic science is in its invention of the criminal body as a text that can be read only by the scientific expert” (73).
However, the “scientific” and “pseudoscientific” strains of early forensics are inextricably linked here; one simply
cannot separate the novel’s positioning of the criminal’s body as a text to be read by the scientific expert from the
novel’s racist ideologies. After all, the long-standing physiognomic and phrenological theories that influence early
forensics insist that the criminal’s body proclaims his or her guilt or innocence to experts that know how to read it—
this idea is not new or unique to forensic science. In addition, physiognomic and phrenological theories suggest that
members of the so-called criminal class and members of “inferior” races share many physical features and
undesirable traits for a variety of circular reasons: because English criminals supposedly hail from an “inferior” and
“dark” Celtic race, because racial Others are supposedly more likely to commit crimes, and because both criminals
and racial Others supposedly spring from inferior, less developed, or degenerate stock. Significantly, early forensic
science inherits many of these prejudices.
bodies, and the contemporary racial prejudices that affect Collins’s representations of them. In the end, Ezra’s “scientific” lens proves just as flawed and subjective as Murthwaite’s anthropological judgments of the Indians. Indeed, because it is possible to read Jennings’s experiment, as Thomas does, as a triumph of early forensic science—as proof, in other words, that it is possible to read the body of the criminal in a precise and objective way—Jennings’s experiment becomes doubly dangerous, both because the researcher’s biases prove so insidious and because the experiment’s results seem to bolster Murthwaite’s similar attempt to read Indian bodies through the “scientific” lens of racial anthropology.

Notably, Franklin’s experience participating in Jennings’s experiment differs from the three Brahmins’ experience of being observed in their daily lives in several important ways. First, Franklin knowingly and voluntarily consents to have others observe his body and its movements and judge both his character and his guilt or innocence accordingly. In doing so, Blake seems to support the idea that the body is a text that can and should be read in order to solve the novel’s crimes. However, while Thomas claims that Blake’s body “tells its own story” and “tells the tale that no witness could tell” (68), his body does not simply offer up facts or provide an incontrovertible narrative of the crime; instead, like all material evidence, it is subject to the interpretation of its readers. Unlike the three Brahmin, Blake only displays his body before an audience biased in his favor. The experiment is not conducted by an objective, impartial scientist, but instead by Jennings, a man who performs the experiment as a favor to Blake, both as a grateful friend—for Blake is one of the only characters in the novel to accept Jennings despite his startling physical appearance and dubious past—and as a kindred spirit—for Jennings, like Blake, is a falsely accused man separated from the woman he loves because he cannot prove his innocence. In addition, unlike a public trial attended by jurors who know
nothing of the accused, Jennings’s experiment takes place behind the closed doors of the
Verinder estate in front of Blake’s closest family and friends, all of whom believe in Blake’s
innocence before the experiment begins.

Unsurprisingly, then, when the experiment seems to work, everyone immediately accepts
Blake’s innocence as a proven, scientific fact. For example, none of the characters point out that,
as critic Ross C. Murfin suggests in “The Art of Representation” (1982), Jennings may have
misinterpreted Dr. Candy’s ramblings and constructed an inaccurate narrative of past events
(654). Similarly, no one expresses a doubt as to whether Blake’s conscious or subconscious
actions are influenced by Jennings’s theories (for, before the experiment begins, Jennings tells
Blake what he expects he will do while under the influence of opium, and explains that, if he
does do these things, it is safe to assume that he acted the same way on the night of the theft,
proving his innocence). None of the readers of Blake’s body propose such objections, because
none of them approach this experiment in an impartial, unbiased manner—in other words, in an
ostensibly scientific way. Instead, they look to the text of Blake’s body to read the tale they have
already superimposed onto it—the story of Blake’s innocence—and they look to science to
sanction and legitimize that story.

If Ezra Jennings’s experiment functions as a model of early forensic science and its
attempts to read the body of the criminal, then it demonstrates the field’s potential flaws rather
than its ability to determine objective truths. And if, as Thomas suggests, the novel positions
Blake’s willing participation in and endorsement of the experiment as a model of compliance—a
model Collins encourages readers to imitate, by similarly offering their bodies up to the scientific
gaze—we must understand that here the “scientific” gaze is inflected by contemporary racist
ideology and its purportedly objective lens does not view all bodies equally.\textsuperscript{10} Just as the novel endorses Jennings’s assessment of Blake’s body through the lens of early forensic science, it affirms Murthwaite’s ability to read Indian bodies through the lens of racial anthropology.

**The History of Fingerprinting in India**

British officials working in India after the Mutiny/Rebellion sought a surefire way to distinguish one Indian from another and to identify Indian criminal offenders in the local courts. In accordance with the highly racist ideology of the time, British officials complained that they required a system of identification that went beyond physiognomy or anthropometric measurements, because Indians all looked the same and shared nearly identical physical features. In the wake of the Mutiny/Rebellion, British officials had also become convinced that Indians were bound to commit crimes, making a reliable system of personal identification absolutely necessary for their criminal justice system. Major Ferris of the Indian Staff Corps expresses many of these views when, in 1892, he reflects upon his twenty-three year career in the service, including eighteen years working for the Political Department of the Bombay Government (Galton 150). Ferris explains that, throughout his tenure in the Indian Staff Corps, “the great need of an official system of identification has been constantly forced on my mind” because “[t]he uniformity in the color of hair, eyes, and complexion of the Indian races renders identification far from easy” and the Indians’ “natural taste for litigation” and their innate

\textsuperscript{10} If Blake submits to the scientific gaze, he does so as a mere charade, in much the same way Lady Verinder submits to the gaze of the professional detective, Sergeant Cuff, who assures her that her rooms must be searched along with everyone else’s as “a mere formality” (168) in order to render the servants more compliant when it comes time to have their own rooms searched. Indeed, comparing the two scenes, Cuff’s method is actually more democratic, for though he claims the search of everyone’s rooms is “a mere formality,” he actually expects to find either the diamond or proof of its sale in the room of Lady Verinder’s daughter, Rachel. Of course, the consequences for Rachel—if this scenario had actually come to pass—would have been minimal, for the diamond is her legal property. The presence of the detective’s policing eye, like the scientist’s or anthropologist’s gaze in other scenes, holds more serious consequences for the novel’s disempowered characters.
propensity for dishonesty have led to numerous court cases that officials cannot easily resolve (quoted in Galton 150-151).

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that the first step towards a more reliable system of identification—a system that remained invested in reading the body, but that focused on a person’s fingerprints rather than on his or her physiognomy—was taken by a British official, Sir William Herschel, the chief magistrate of the Hooghly district of Jungipoor, India, in 1858, the year the Mutiny/Rebellion ended (Pearl 206). In 1858, Herschel started using handprints on the backs of contracts as a way of reinforcing the natives’ signatures (Pearl 206). He then streamlined this process, by taking prints of the middle and fore fingers rather than of the entire hand (Pearl 206). Eventually, he amassed quite a collection of prints, and noticed that they could be compared for the purposes of identification (Pearl 206). However, it was not until the late 1880s and early 1890s, when Sir Francis Galton began publishing on the process of fingerprinting, that the system was adopted in England and became a well-known means of personal identification (Pearl 206-207).

At the time Collins published *The Moonstone*, therefore, the British felt there was a great need for a system of identification that could be used to police Indian bodies, but, at this early stage in the history of fingerprinting, no such technology was well known, let alone readily available, in England. Collins recognizes Britain’s desire for some sort of full-proof system that

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11 In his 1892 *Finger Prints* Galton positions fingerprinting as the long-desired alternative to a physiognomic or anthropometric means of identification. He continues to point out that such a system is needed in India, but, by this point in time, he suggests that it is needed at least as much, if not more, in other British colonies, for the same reasons. He writes, “In India and in many of our Colonies the absence of satisfactory means for identifying persons of other races is seriously felt…their features are not readily distinguished by Europeans; and in too many cases they are characterized by a strange amount of litigiousness, wiliness, and unveracity (Galton *Finger Prints* 149). He concludes, “Whatever difficulty may be felt in the identification of Hindoos, is experienced in at least equal degree in that of the Chinese residents in our Colonies and Settlements, who to European eyes are still more alike than the Hindoos, and in whose names there is still less variety” (Galton *Finger Prints* 151).
would allow them to see, identify, and police the foreigners in their midst, but he cannot imagine a viable alternative to physiognomy with applications in the real world. Instead, he presents his readers with a comforting, imperialistic fantasy, by reimagining the racial demographics of London and imparting, to its English citizens, an ability they did not actually have—the power to immediately identify a person’s race and identity through clues gleaned through their physical appearance, dress, and behavior.

“Three Mahogany-Colored Indians”: The Fantasy of Indian Hypervisibility and Identifiability

I argue that *The Moonstone* presents its readers with an imperialistic fantasy, in which Indians are hyper-visible to the policing eyes of Englishmen, and can be identified by experts and non-experts alike not only as Indians, but also, more specifically, as the individuals involved in the conspiracy surrounding the Moonstone. In crafting this fantasy and depicting the three Brahmin, Collins is influenced by contemporary writings on racial anthropology and criminology, which, increasingly during this period, place an emphasis on the “group” or “type” rather than on the individual. As the century progressed, racial anthropologists and criminologists (who were themselves greatly influenced by earlier physiognomic texts) became

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12 Of course, since their inception, sensation novels have always been interested in the extent to which a character does or does not conform to a given physiognomic type, such as the “aristocratic woman” or “working-class man.” However, in earlier texts, novelists tend to be interested not only in the ways a character conforms to an established type, but also the ways in which he or she departs from it. So, for example, a reader might observe that a character has been marked as a working-class woman through her pug nose, thick lips, and coarse features, while simultaneously noting that her broad forehead indicates a surprisingly high level of intelligence. While, in many ways, this character conforms to the working-class woman type, we also learn something about her as a unique individual—for a working class woman, she is incredibly smart. This may lead us, moreover, to ask a number of questions about the characters’ backstory and future plans: Who were her parents? Has she received any formal education? Who are her allies? What are her personal goals? Does she tend to use her intelligence to help herself, to help others, or to make trouble? How will her intelligence play a role in the plot? If the novelist chooses to answer some or all of these questions over the course of the narrative, moreover, it further adds to the character’s individuality and subjectivity.
interested in using technological advances, particularly within the field of photography, not to assess individuals, but rather to better define existing racial and criminal types.\(^\text{13}\)

In *The Moonstone*, Collins follows the growing cultural trend of describing Britain’s racial “inferiors” *exclusively* through the accepted physical and behavioral traits of the *race*, rather than through the unique ways an individual conforms to or departs from the established type. Like Sir Francis Galton’s later work on composite photography, Collins’s depiction of the three Brahmin from India is not meant to convey a story about three unique individuals, but rather to provide information about essential “Indian” characteristics, in order to make Indians easier to identify, understand, and control. Indeed, throughout *The Moonstone* the three Brahmin remain a dark-skinned trio of nameless Indians, devoid of specific physical traits and identities. Rather than distinguish between the Brahmin by providing them with individual physiognomic descriptions (as Collins does for all his other major characters), he typically describes them collectively as a single unit, a group of three as united in appearance as they are in purpose. The novel contains very few physical descriptions of the Brahmin, and those that it does contain

\(^{13}\) Perhaps the best example of this approach is Sir Francis Galton’s composite photography, which he introduced in 1878 as a form of “photographic-physiognomic synthesis” (Pearl 202). Galton set out to make a composite photograph that would “capture the essential identifying features of [each] classificatory type” (Pearl 202). To do this, he collected numerous photographs of a particular type, such as the violent criminal, and placed the photographs, one on top of the other, on a single photographic plate. The physical features that showed up the most prominently in the final, composite image, Galton concluded, were the “essential identifying features”—the physical traits one could use to define and identify the type. Notably, Galton’s composite photography is totally uninterested in the unique physical or behavioral traits of the individual. The lighter, less obvious marks and outlines that appeared in the final composite image—in other words, the faint traces of various individuals’ unique deviations from the norm—were dismissed by Galton as mere “unimportant details” (quoted in Pearl 202). Indeed, although Galton relied on the photographs of individual subjects to create the final composite image, he did all that he could to minimize the individuality of the photographic subjects during the process. For example, in 1877, Galton asked the Director General of Prisons, Sir Edmund DuCane, to present him with photographs of the inmates, divided into three groups according to crime, with all of the inmates’ names removed (Pearl 202-203). Pearl correctly identifies the troubling implications of Galton’s research methods: “[n]amelessness was a research principle for Galton, who did not want to attach any unequalizing depth or personality to a given subject…By removing [the names of photographic subjects], Galton in many ways removed the humanity and subjectivity from those he studied” (202-203).
merely emphasize their dark skin, slim bodies, and light tread. The “three mahogany-colored Indians” are simply “brown” or “dark” with “feet lighter than [an Englishman’s]” (103).

Even the proto-ethnographer Murthwaite, the one character who frequently interacts with Indians in India and has one-on-one interactions with the three Brahmin involved in the conspiracy in England, cannot distinctly recall each of the three Brahmins’ faces. While travelling in India at the end of the novel, Murthwaite does “recognize[e] the man [the chief of the three Brahmin] to whom [he] had spoken in England, when the Indians appeared on the terrace of Lady Verinder’s house,” but, significantly, he merely assumes that “the other two who had been his companions on that occasion, were no doubt his companions also on this” (541). Although, on multiple occasions, he has acted as translator between the English police and detective authorities and the two Brahmin who do not speak English, Murthwaite does not recognize their faces. Here, as elsewhere, these “other two” Indians are completely devoid of individual identities.

In fact, even the chief, who in this scene appears to be singled out as somehow more memorable or distinct than his compatriots, only stands out to the English and European characters because he seems more Anglicized (or, what is more likely given the chief’s subversive mission to recover the Moonstone, he performs a more Anglicized identity in front of the other characters). The English characters dub the apparent leader of the group, “the chief,” because, like Bhabha’s mimic man, he speaks fluent English, has impeccable manners, and is fairly knowledgeable about English customs. However, the English characters still paint the chief’s physiognomy in broad, stereotypical strokes that positions him as a representative of his race rather than as an individual. For example, the butler Betteredge mentions his “coffee-colored face” (128), the lawyer Bruff remarks upon his “swarthy complexion” and “long lithe
figure” (343), and Bruff’s clerk notes that his complexion is “dark” (343). In addition, despite the fact that the chief speaks English, none of the characters ever learn or use his name, further denying his subjectivity. Ultimately, as Crooks points out, the three Brahmin at the center of The Moonstone’s plot are simply “the latest edition of a centuries-old succession of indistinguishable threesomes” (220). The three Brahmin are, in effect, interchangeable both amongst themselves and amongst past generations of Indians who have guarded the Moonstone—they function as mere representatives of their race.

Given the three Brahmins’ lack of physical differentiation, both amongst each other and amongst other Indians, it may at first seem surprising that Collins’s novel would suggest that these three men could be identified successfully not only as Indians, but also, more specifically, as the three individuals sworn to recover the Moonstone. After all, if the novel claims that the three Brahmin all look alike, and that, in addition, they look just like all the other Indians living and working in London, how would the English and European characters be able to tell the Indians apart?

To create a fantasy, in which Englishmen become the master readers of that mysterious text, the Oriental body, first Collins reimagines the city of London as a place where very few dark-skinned people live, rendering any and all dark-skinned people hyper-visible by default. Next, Collins largely erases the presence in London of any dark-skinned people who are not Indian—people, for example, from the West Indies, Africa, or America. Indeed, with the exception of the “brown” European Murthwaite, and, perhaps, the mixed-race Ezra Jennings, there are no dark-skinned characters who are not Indians even in cosmopolitan London. Finally,

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14 Ezra Jennings’ father was an Englishman and his mother was a native of one of England’s colonies. Although Collins never reveals which of the colonies Jennings’s mother is from, several critics assume Ezra Jennings is half Indian.
Collins greatly minimizes the number of Indians living, working, and travelling in England during the late 1840s and early 1850s when the novel is set, and suggests that those Indians who are present all participate in the recovery of the lost Hindu diamond. Consequently, to a large extent, to have dark skin in this novel is to be Indian, and to be Indian, is to have a hand in the conspiracy of the Moonstone. Whenever a character sees a “dark face” he or she assumes that face belongs to an Indian—and, within the logic of the novel, this is usually a safe assumption to make. In addition, every time a character spots an Indian, he or she concludes that the man must be one of the three Brahmin actively tracking down the Moonstone or, at the very least, a co-conspirator helping the Brahmin recover the sacred gem. Again, the novel upholds this conclusion: Collins does not include any Indian character, even in a minor role, who is not involved in the conspiracy. Thus, in *The Moonstone*, dark skin functions as a noticeable (and immediately suspicious) bodily marker that indicates Indianness and (at least in the minds of many of the novel’s characters) criminality.

While the London of Collins’s novel is populated by remarkably few dark-skinned people, and those that do appear are automatically assumed to be part of the Indian conspiracy, in reality a fair number of dark-skinned people, including Indians, lived, worked, and travelled in Britain during the mid-nineteenth century. Unfortunately, precise statistics on the “black” population living in nineteenth-century Britain do not exist. British records pertaining

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15 The one exception is the disguised Godfrey Ablewhite, who paints his face brown. I discuss this exception at the end of my analysis of *The Moonstone*.

16 I follow scholars such as Peter Fryer and Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina by using the catch-all term “black” here to describe a segment of the British population that hailed from, among other places, Africa, America, the Caribbean, and India. When I discuss the three Brahmin from *The Moonstone*, I use the word “brown” because that is the terminology Collins uses.
specifically to this population became scarce after the late 1830s (following the abolition of the slave trade in Britain and its colonies). We do have some information about the black population in the late-eighteenth century, when its numbers were at its highest point until after WWII. In *Black London: Life before Emancipation* (1995) Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina points out that, in 1768, [the English abolitionist, Granville] Sharp estimated that 20,000 black servants lived in London out of a total population of 676,250, and scholars have largely confirmed this assessment, suggesting that the actual number was probably between 10,000 and 30,000 (5). In other words, during this period, black servants alone made up approximately 1.5 to 4.5 percent of the total population of London. While most black people living in London at the time would have been servants, in addition, there were many sailors, students, and refugees (Gerzina 6), and even a few enclaves of prosperous, independent black professionals who worked, for example, as musicians or shopkeepers (Gerzina 23-24).

While scholars agree that the black population in Britain decreased during the nineteenth century, critics such as Peter Fryer and Gerzina, have begun to correct the misconception that there were few black people in Britain during the Victorian period, and have asserted that, on the contrary, “many thousands of black people […] remained in England after the abolition of the slave trade” (Gerzina 203-204). 17 Both Fryer and Gerzina highlight the stories of individual black people living and traveling in Britain during the Victorian period, working in diverse fields from politics and medicine to publishing and circus performance. Some of their anecdotal evidence even suggests that, despite the overall drop in their numbers and their absence from official records, black Londoners maintained a highly visible presence during the mid-Victorian

period. For example, Gerzina points out that, “[e]ven as late as 1852 [African American abolitionist lecturer, writer, and historian William Wells] Brown noticed that one could encounter a dozen black college students in an hour’s walk in central London” (203).

Although the overall black population of Britain decreased during the nineteenth century, the Indian segment of that population actually increased during this period. In “Excluding and Including ‘Natives of India’: Early Nineteenth-Century British-Indian Race Relations in Britain” (2007), Michael Herbert Fisher explains that Indians had been coming to England since the East India Company was established in 1600, and that, by the mid-nineteenth century, “at least forty thousand people designated natives of India had made this voyage to Britain” (Fisher 305). Most of these Indians were either Lascar sailors or servants travelling between Britain and India, but, in addition, Indian diplomats, scholars, soldiers, officials, tourists, businessmen, students, and the wives and mixed-race children of Britons travelled or settled in Britain during this period (Fisher 304). In fact, by mid-century, several thousand seamen and servants were arriving every year, and, unsurprisingly, their presence was especially noticeable in port cities like London and Liverpool (Fisher 304). While many sailors only remained until the next sailing season, hundreds decided to permanently relocate to Britain (Fisher 307). As was the case with other segments of the black population, male natives of India often married white, working-class women, which, again, complicated efforts to present the concepts of “Britishness” and “Indianness” as if they were in strict opposition, and frustrated attempts to categorize people based on their nationality, race, and physical appearance (Fisher 305).

For our purposes, the exact number of natives from Africa, the West Indies, America, India, and elsewhere is less important than the fact that thousands of dark-skinned people were, in fact, living in and travelling through Britain at mid-century, and this population was
particularly prevalent in port cities like London. Contrary to Collins’s representation of London during the years 1848-50, in reality there would have been a diverse group of dark-skinned people who hailed from many different nations, including many—possibly several thousand—natives of India. Consequently, dark-skinned people would not have been as visually remarkable and conspicuous as they are in Collins’s novel.

Just as Collins rewrites the demographics of mid-century London, he also exaggerates the average Englishperson’s knowledge of Indians’ appearance, in order to promote the fantasy that their race (and, according to the racist stereotypes of the novel, their identity) is simple to read and identify. It is not only the expert on India, Murthwaite, the well-travelled Franklin Blake, and the professional lawyer Bruff who can easily and correctly identify the race of the novel’s Indians. In addition, when the chief adopts a European disguise, all of Bruff’s law office employees, including the lowly clerks, note that he is “so dark in the complexion” and consequently must be “an Indian, or something of that sort” despite his clothing and ability to speak fluent English (342). In reality, as Fisher points out, “[e]ven at the height of British colonial conquest across India, relatively few Britons in Britain had knowledge of how to identify an actual person from India. Indeed, Indians in Britain during this period typically expressed surprised bemusement about how naïve and uninformed most Britons were about them” (305). In fact, even when Indians emphasized their ethnic identity by additional visual cues such as customary clothing, their race was not necessarily obvious. For example, in 1840 Hirjeebhoy Merwangee and Jehangeer Nowrojee, two cousins from Bombay who visited London wearing traditional Parsi garb, wrote that “[i]t was amusing to hear one [Briton] call us Chinese, they are Turks says another; no they are Spanish vociferates a third” (quoted in Fisher 305). Contrary to the claims of contemporary physiognomists and racial anthropologists, then, it was
not an easy and straightforward task to identify a person’s race based on his or her physical appearance.

Further undermining the physiognomic and anthropological claim that a person’s physical appearance clearly revealed his or her race and ethnicity, both Indians and other foreigners successfully passed in Britain throughout the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, in order to accrue social and financial benefits. Fisher notes that Lascar sailors and other East Indians sometimes tried to prove that they were British in order to apply for jobs offering higher pay that were only available to legal Britons under the Navigation Act (308). In addition, many of the East Indian men who chose to permanently relocate to Britain blended into the general population because they “usually adopted European names, language, and dress and/or Christianity” and those who belonged to the working-classes often married white, British women (Fisher 305).

Members of other races also passed as East Indians in Britain, and, interestingly, the “proof” of their race was often thought to rest almost exclusively on their physical appearance and language skills. Until 1833, the British East India Company was legally responsible for paying the return-fare of any native of India who had sailed on an English vessel to Britain. Consequently, if a foreigner from one of these ships could successfully pass as a native of India, he could receive free passage to India and free maintenance while on board the ship. In order to determine whether potential applicants were truly natives of India, the British East India Company set up the Lascar Committee, but because the Committee’s members often trusted their own eyes and ears—asking first, “Does the applicant look like a native of East India?” and

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18 In 1833, the British East India Company’s character to trade in Asia was suspended for the twenty year period of 1834-54. As a result, Parliament ended the Company’s obligation to maintain Indians who stayed in Britain or to pay their passage back to India (Fisher 313).
second “Does the applicant *sound* like a native of East India?”—it was quite possible for natives of other lands to take advantage of this system. Indeed, in some cases, they even did so in the face of contrary documentary evidence. For example, John Tobin, who “entered his ship’s books on the voyage from India to Britain as a native Brazilian” claimed he was actually “Asiatic” upon arriving in London, and “therefore legally entitled to maintenance and free passage to India” (Fisher 311). Convinced by his “Oriental” appearance and his ability to speak “the English and Hindoo languages,” and ignoring the ship’s records, which stated that Tobin was a native of Brazil, the Lascar Committee not only granted Tobin’s petition, but also denied the Company’s outraged appeal of the decision.

While Collins clearly misrepresents the demographics of London and the average Englishperson’s ability to correctly identify the race of the novel’s Indians, the question remains: if the Indians are always hyper-visible in London, how do they successfully manage to steal the Moonstone and return it to India without getting caught? The three Brahmin quickly learn that in London their brown skin renders them hyper-visible and immediately suspect.19 Because they cannot hide this aspect of their physical appearance through disguise, entering public spaces in their quest to retrieve the Moonstone proves quite challenging. To circumvent this problem, the three Brahmin actually use English prejudices to their advantage, by enlisting the services of the very people who are *not* hyper-visible and suspected of crimes in Collins’s London: white, respectable-looking Englishmen.

While Murthwaite assures the English characters that the Indians’ network of contacts in England is “a very trumpery affair […] including the services, when needed, of that shady sort of

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19 Indeed, immediately following the theft of the Moonstone from the Verinder estate, the three Brahmin are arrested and later held on trumped-up charges, largely because they are Indians who lack the power and connections of a wealthy English family like the Verinders.
Englishman, who lives in the byways of foreign life in London [...and] the secret sympathy of such few men of their own country [living in the city]” (349), the three Brahmin actually receive assistance from several respectable-looking Englishmen over the course of the novel. For example, a white Englishman helps the Indians lure first Godfrey Ablewhite and later Septimus Luker to a London address under false pretenses in order to search them for clues. In his description of these events, Collins refers to the Englishman again and again as “a most respectable-looking gentleman” (261-264). At the end of the novel, the three Brahmin also hire a white man who dresses as a mechanic to identify, follow, and report back on the whereabouts of the man who collects the diamond at the bank. Notably, Collins mentions that after the novel’s crimes take place, the authorities obtain leads to track the three Brahmin, but both the “respectable-looking gentleman” and the mechanic disappear without a trace. Indeed, the British trace the three Brahmins’ movements across all of England and, at the end of the novel, the British authorities in India plan to board the Brahmins’ getaway ship, the Bewley Castle, and apprehend the Indians the moment the ship docks in Bombay (537). The three Brahmin only escape the British authorities because they disembark the Bewley Castle mid-journey in the middle of the ocean. Thus, their eventual success does not disprove the novel’s larger narrative of the Indians’ hyper-visibility; indeed, Collins upholds this fantasy to the very end.

“Looking Under the Smooth Outer Surface of Him”: The Double-Standard of Disguise

According to Collins, just as all bodies are not equally visible and legible, so too all people are not equally capable of adopting a disguise to hide their true identity. Indeed, as part of the novel’s larger fantasy regarding the hypervisibility of Indian bodies, The Moonstone presents a double standard of disguise. While the European Murthwaite passes as a Hindu-Brahmin in India without any native Indians discovering him, the three Brahmin cannot, it seems, adopt
caste- and race-based disguises while searching for the Moonstone in England without Murthwaite and the novel’s Englishmen exposing them.

In this way, *The Moonstone* anticipates Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901), whose Irish protagonist and master of disguise “passes for ‘native’ in a way that no Indian in the book is able to pass for white” (McClintock 69). As Anne McClintock persuasively argues in *Imperial Leather* (1995), Kipling’s *Kim* “offers a rich example of mimicry and cross-dressing as a technique not of colonial subversion, but of surveillance” (69). In his oft-quoted Introduction to the novel (1989), Edward Said points out, moreover, that Kipling presents a fantasy of Western knowledge and power, both by suggesting that for Westerners in India, it is possible “to do everything, be anything, go anywhere with impunity” (42) and by using Kim’s knowledge of Indian culture to “have and enjoy India in a way that even imperialism never dreamed of” (italics in original 36).

Lilian Nadyer is the one critic who has begun to point out the similar double standard of disguise presented by Collins in *The Moonstone*. In “Collins and Empire” (2006), Nayder highlights the troubling implications of the novel’s double-standard of disguise, arguing that Murthwaite’s ability to pass as an Indian illustrates not only his “affinity for Indian culture,” but also, more problematically, “his superiority over those who mistake him for one of their own” (149). She rightly concludes that Murthwaite’s “ability to avoid […] exposure reveals Collins’s investment in empire” (149).

I agree with and will expand upon many of Nayder’s observations regarding the novel’s dominant narrative promoting the double standard of disguise, although I also diverge from her interpretation in several important ways. First, moving beyond Nayder, I not only point out that there is a double-standard of disguise in the novel, but also discuss precisely how Collins
constructs it. I argue that Collins models Murthwaite off of the real-life explorer and ethnographer Richard Burton, but that he also departs from the historical record in multiple ways, in an effort to depoliticize Murthwaite’s intelligence-gathering efforts in India. Despite the novel’s insistence that Murthwaite travels through India for mere pleasure, he uses the information he gathers while in disguise to help the British identify, understand, and control Indians in England. While the dominant narrative insists that Indians cannot adopt disguises or read bodies as skillfully as their English or European counterparts, I argue, unlike Nayder or any other critic, that Collins includes a very subtle counter-narrative that concedes, however reluctantly, that this double-standard may, in fact, be a mere fantasy. Unsurprisingly, Collins deemphasizes and buries this counter-narrative because of its disturbing implications. In the end, Collins reaches a compromise on the matter of disguise, first by grounding the capacity for disguise in the material body, and second, by denying that most people possess the necessary physical features to make passing possible. I contend, contrary to Nayder, that Collins emphasizes Murthwaite’s “brown,” “European” body in order to cast him as an exception to the rule—as a man whose unique body provides him the very rare opportunity to adopt convincing disguises. Ultimately, Collins suggests that most people—whether they are English, European, Indian, or something else entirely—cannot successfully adopt disguises. In doing so, he rejects the novel’s racialized double-standard of disguise, but also limits the possibility that disempowered groups, including Indians, might implement disguise for more subversive ends.

Unquestionably, Murthwaite is the novel’s master of racial passing and disguise. With the help of his racially-ambiguous “brown” skin and his ever-increasing knowledge of Indian languages and culture, he lives and travels in India for months at a time, successfully passing as a “Hindoo-Buddhist” without raising the suspicion of any natives (540). At the end of the novel,
he even ingratiates himself with “certain Hindoos of the higher caste,” who afford him a privileged vantage point to watch the grand ceremony in which the three returned Brahmin restore the Moonstone to its sacred Indian shrine (540-541). In many ways, Murthwaite’s impressive racial disguises recall the real-life exploits of the famed English explorer and ethnographer Richard Burton. However, in his depiction of Murthwaite, Collins also rewrites Burton’s experience in several important ways: he casts Murthwaite unambiguously as an adventurer-hero, presents his motivations to pass as an Indian in much more benign terms, and downplays the social repercussions of racial passing. In doing so, Collins valorizes Murthwaite’s imperialistic disguises and minimizes England’s role in the strategic and highly politicized collection of data on colonial populations.

Unlike Burton and other nineteenth-century explorers who adopted racial disguises, Murthwaite suffers none of the negative backlash for his controversial exploits. Collins presents Murthwaite as “the celebrated Indian traveler […] who, at risk of his life, had penetrated in disguise where no European had ever set foot before” (122-123). In other words, Murthwaite’s disguises demonstrate his courage and ingenuity. There is no hint that his racial passing reveals an illicit desire to live like the Other or compromises his “true” European identity. While explorers like Burton attempted to cast themselves in much the same terms as Collins does Murthwaite—as an adventurer-hero who proves his intelligence and bravery by adopting risky racial and religious disguises in territories forbidden to white, Christian men—in reality, many Victorians expressed discomfort in, and even condemnation of, explorers’ ability to “go Native.” Indeed, Burton’s successful attempts at racial passing earned him the epithet “the White Nigger” amongst his mess-hall mates in India, and his personal and his professional reputation was severely tarnished after news broke of his undercover work spying on Indian men in homosexual
brothels (McDow 496). In contrast, Murthwaite is “celebrated” as an “eminent public character” (122-123) and “worshippers” flock to meet the eccentric “hero” (347).

Indeed, Collins carefully presents Murthwaite as a thrill-seeking adventurer rather than as an agent of empire with a set political agenda. While, at the beginning of his career, Burton worked for the British East India Company army and infiltrated Indian society in disguise under official orders to collect information about the locals that could be used to inform British policy (McDow 497), Collins stresses that Murthwaite’s travels spring from an innocent desire to escape the boredom of domestic life. When Collins describes Murthwaite’s travels, he casts him as a restless, harmless wanderer without a set political purpose or even an itinerary. For example, when readers first meet the European traveler, they learn he has been staying in England, but has grown weary of “the humdrum life among the people in our parts” and “long[s] to go back and wander off on the tramp again in the wild places of the East” (122-123). Similarly, at the end of the novel, readers learn that Murthwaite has been “wandering” in central Asia, has “drifted back to the scene of some of [his] past adventures” in northern India, and has finally, “found [himself] in a certain district or province (but little known to Europeans) called Kattiawar” (emphasis added 539). In other words, Murthwaite happens to serendipitously appear in all the right places at all the right times to collect the information the British need both to monitor and control Indians in England and to bring closure to the mystery of the Moonstone.

While Murthwaite does not act under official orders or undertake a mission to collect specific data for the British government, in practice, he does use the information he gathers while travelling through India in disguise to benefit the novel’s British characters and to help police the three Brahmin attempting to steal the Moonstone. During the course of the novel, Murthwaite readily assists Franklin Blake, the inept Superintendent Seagrave of the local police force,
several unnamed prison authorities, and the famed detective Sergeant Cuff of Scotland Yard, in their search for the diamond and in their dealings with the Indians. For example, when the local police arrest and hold the three Brahmin on trumped up charges, Blake asks Murthwaite to assist the prison guards in their investigation. Murthwaite gladly provides the prison authorities “the benefit of his knowledge of the [Hindustani] language, in dealing with those two, out of the three Indians, who knew nothing of English” (153). Similarly, when the prison guards intercept a letter addressed to the Indians, Murthwaite reads and translates the letter for them, confirming everyone’s suspicion that the Indians hope to steal the Moonstone (353). On the same occasion, Murthwaite also takes the liberty of copying the Indians’ private correspondence into his personal memorandum book, and later produces it for his English acquaintance, the lawyer Mr. Bruff, in order to help him better understand the Indians’ network, motives for stealing the diamond, and future plans (353). Thus, Murthwaite uses his knowledge of the Hindustani language and Indian culture to both aid the British authorities in their official investigation of the theft and to assist his English friends in their private attempts to police the three Brahmins’ whereabouts and anticipate their future plans to retrieve the diamond. Throughout, Collins conveniently sidesteps England’s own role in hiring men like Burton to pass in disguise and collect information about colonial populations in order to better control them.

Although Murthwaite passes amongst the natives of India with ease, when the three high-caste Brahmin try to pass themselves off as low-caste “jugglers” or “conjurers” who have come to perform tricks for the ladies of the Verinder household during Rachel’s eighteenth birthday celebration, Murthwaite, immediately penetrates their disguise. In this scene, Collins does not focus on how Murthwaite has accomplished this feat—by explaining, for example, which aspects of the Indians’ appearance and performance reveal their disguise or their true caste and
profession. Instead, he emphasizes that the proto-ethnographer’s knowledge of Indian culture allows him to help his British friends better see and police Oriental bodies in England.

Throughout this scene, Murthwaite functions as the type of expert Edward Said famously describes in *Orientalism* (1973), a specialist who studies colonial populations, helps educate a British (or European) audience about these foreigners by demystifying their actions, contributes to the collective body of knowledge about the East, and ultimately helps the British (and other European powers) better subdue and govern their colonial subjects. In his discussion of the British politician and former Prime Minister Arthur James Balfour, Said explains that many nineteenth and early-twentieth century imperialists argued that Britain would gain supremacy over its colonies through a systematic knowledge of each colony’s culture rather than “principally with military or economic power” (40). In keeping with this idea, Collins presents Murthwaite as a more seasoned expert on Indian culture than the Indians themselves, and suggests that his ethnographic knowledge is the key to reading and mastering the Oriental body. Murthwaite confidently declares to Blake and Betteredge, “those three Indians are no more jugglers than you and I are,” and asserts they have merely performed “a very bad and clumsy imitation” of Indian juggling (129). Murthwaite can easily detect this “clumsy imitation,” because, as a European who has travelled undercover in India, he “knows what juggling really is” (129). Here, Murthwaite implies that, unlike him, the Brahmin do not know what juggling really is, despite the fact that it is a part of Indian culture rather than his own. Because Murthwaite is so knowledgeable about Indian culture, he is able to discover that the three men are not low-caste jugglers and that they are high-caste Brahmin.

Also in keeping with Said’s theory, Collins uses militarized language to depict Murthwaite’s conversation with the Indians as a stealthy ambush, in which the Indians, caught
off guard, are threatened by the traveler’s dangerous knowledge of their language and culture rather than by traditional weaponry. Betteredge reports on the confrontation: “[Murthwaite] came quietly behind the jugglers, and spoke to them on a sudden in the language of their own country. If he had pricked them with a bayonet, I doubt if the Indians could have started and turned on him with a more tigerish quickness” (127). In keeping with Said’s theories regarding British imperialism, Murthwaite’s knowledge of the Indians’ culture, rather than a sword or a gun, forces the three Brahmin to temporarily abandon their scheme and vacate the premises. Murthwaite’s knowledge is less messy and loud than a military skirmish—only a few words pass between Murthwaite and the Brahmin before Murthwaite “withdrew as quietly as he had approached” (128)—but this “civilized” approach to cultural domination and surveillance is as effective (if not more so) than the literal prick of a bayonet. Murthwaite quietly demonstrates his superior understanding of the Hindustani language, the Hindu religion, and the caste system, and shows how this knowledge can be used to police and control Indians in Britain.

In the same way that Murthwaite discovers the three Brahmins’ juggler disguise, the Englishman Bruff ascertains the Indian chief’s so-called “European disguise.” This scene showcases the Indian’s supposedly inferior ability to pass as a member of another race and adopt ethnic disguises, first by drawing clear parallels between Murthwaite and the Indian chief and then by suggesting that, unlike Murthwaite, the Indian chief fails in his deception. Like Murthwaite, the Indian chief is a highly-educated man who has thoroughly researched the culture he wishes to enter: he speaks politely and articulately in English, wears European clothing, understands the manner in which he should comport himself in English business meetings, and even knows his interlocutor’s idiosyncrasies, including Bruff’s desire to keep his meetings brief and to the point. However, whereas Murthwaite disguised as a Hindu-Buddhist in India,
“passe[s] muster with the people readily” for months at a time (540), the Indian chief cannot successfully pass as a European for even one short meeting in Bruff’s law office.

Mr. Bruff uses the “European disguise” episode to present himself, and by extension other Englishmen, as master readers who possess the ability to read the Oriental body. When the Indian chief enters the law offices wearing European clothing, Bruff immediately senses not only that he is an Indian, but also that he is one of the three Brahmin involved in the conspiracy of the Moonstone, and, even more particularly, that he is the chief of the group. Bruff reports, “the moment my mysterious client was shown in, I felt an inner conviction that I was in the presence of one of the three Indians—probably the chief” (343), and, after further reflection, he states even more confidently, that the man was “no other unquestionably, than the chief of the three Indians” (331).

Bruff presents his first act of reading the chief’s body—identifying the man’s race despite his European costume—as a simple and straightforward task that any observant Englishman might accomplish. Bruff observes, “[h]e was carefully dressed in European costume. But his swarthy complexion, his long lithe figure, and his grave and graceful politeness of manner, were enough to betray his Oriental origin to any intelligent eyes that looked at him” (343). However, Bruff cannot explain his second task of reading the chief’s body—identifying the man as the chief Brahmin associated with the conspiracy of the Moonstone—in any logical, factual manner. After all, Bruff has never seen the chief before this moment, so he cannot be said to recognize him. Instead, Bruff claims that this seemingly unaccountable ability to correctly identify the man as the Indian chief stems from a mysterious “inner conviction” born of intuition. In some ways, this scene recalls The Woman in White, in which Marian and Walter intuitively sense Laura’s identity despite her altered physical appearance and resemblance to Anne—it is not that these
characters recognize Laura, but that their love for her equips them with a mysterious intuition more accurate than sight. However, while this first type of intuition founded on one person’s love for another has no widespread social implications, the second type of intuition founded on a person’s race certainly does. Apparently, Bruff’s “inner conviction” stems merely from his identity as an Englishmen, or, at best, from his status as a skilled reader of the Oriental body. Indeed, Bruff implies that his abilities may be widespread, when he points out that even the servile and vulgar pawnbroker, Septimus Luker, “instantly identif[ies] his visitor with the chief of the three Indians,” “[i]n spite of his European disguise” when the chief visits his shop (345).

For his third and final act of reading the chief’s body, Bruff attempts to interpret his visitor’s facial expressions and movements in order to determine his thoughts, feelings, and future plans. Again, the lawyer stresses that the chief has taken steps to make his body as illegible as possible. He explains that the chief tries to control his facial expressions to avoid giving away any information. Bruff observes, “[h]is face, voice, and manner—while I was in his company—were under such perfect control that they set all scrutiny at defiance” (345). However, Bruff again presents himself as a master reader who rises to the interpretive challenge of reading the Oriental body. Bruff asserts that although the chief tries to hide his thoughts, he eventually slips, offering the lawyer “one chance” to “loo[k] under the smooth outer surface of him” (345). Bruff notes that throughout the conversation, the chief appears uninterested, but that he “looked [him] straight in the face […] for the first time” when he mentions “the time at which it was customary to permit the earliest repayment, on the part of the debtor, of money that had

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20 Unlike Bruff, Luker does see the Indian chief once before the man approaches his shop in “European disguise.” Consequently, it is possible that Luker could merely recognize the chief’s face and body rather than intuitively sense his identity. Nevertheless, Bruff’s inclusion of this detail directly after his own interaction with the Indian chief adds to the sense that other Englishmen share his ability to read the Oriental body.
been advanced as a loan” (345). After this interaction, the lawyer congratulates himself for successfully reading the chief’s body and discovering the true purpose of his visit.

**The Counter-Narrative: Exposing the Novel’s Imperialistic Fantasies**

*The Moonstone* encourages readers to feel secure in Britain’s ability to identify the bodies of Indians and to police their movements. While, as in many of Collins’s other works, multiple narrators tell the story of *The Moonstone*, in this novel the narrators are all British or European. Most of them—Betteredge, Blake, Bruff, Murthwaite—are also men who, for various reasons and to varying degrees, espouse prejudices against Indians in general and/or believe the three Brahmin stole the Moonstone. The perspective of the novel’s Indians is one of the novel’s buried stories: not only does Collins deny the three Brahmin a chance to narrate any of the tale, he also reports and translates most of their dialogue second- or third-hand or omits it altogether. Indisputably, Collins spends more time describing scenes in which British or European characters successfully read or disguise the body than he does depicting moments in which the three Brahmin outsmart the British or evade detection. However, *The Moonstone* also contains a subtle counter-narrative, in which Collins acknowledges, however reluctantly, that parts of the novel’s imperialistic worldview may be a fantasy. While Collins never admits that he has misrepresented the black (and specifically Indian) population of London in order to exaggerate the Indians’ visibility in England, he does concede that the three Brahmin may be better at reading and disguising the body than the dominant narrative suggests and acknowledge that the English may not be master readers of the Oriental body after all. Because this counter-narrative, like the three Brahmins’ perspectives, remains largely buried in the text, it has received no critical attention up to this point.

While Collins dramatizes Murthwaite’s exposure of the three Brahmins’ juggler disguise at Rachel Verinder’s birthday party, he also hints, albeit in passing, that the Indians’ disguise
may be more effective than this scene would otherwise suggest. First, it is important to remember that when the three high-caste Brahmin disguise themselves as low-caste jugglers, none of the English characters immediately penetrate their disguise. For example, the first major character to see them, the English butler Betteredge, fully believes the ruse. He spots “three mahogany-colored Indians, in white linen frocks and trousers” carrying “small hand-drums slung in front of them” on the Verinder family grounds, and, based on their appearance and the props they carry, he pronounces them “strolling conjurers” or “jugglers” (69). The Indian chief, who speaks fluent English, flatters Betteredge into trusting that his superior observational skills have led him to the correct conclusion, for, as Betteredge explains, the chief “informed me that my judgment was right” (69). Similarly, when the Indians reappear at Rachel’s eighteenth birthday party, all of the English characters unaware of the history of the Moonstone believe the three Indians really are low-caste jugglers who have appeared to entertain the ladies of the house (127). Finally and most importantly—although Collins only mentions this detail in passing—the narrator informs readers that the three Brahmin have successfully passed as low-caste jugglers for several weeks, in the interim between their first and second appearance at the Verinder house. Indeed, during this period, “the jugglers remained in and about the town plying their trade” without being discovered by any of their English patrons (105). Here, the three Brahmins’ success derives from the English characters ignorance of Indian culture rather than on the Indians’ exceptional bodies or skill at disguise. However, Collins does acknowledge, however fleetingly, that the three Brahmin may be able to adopt disguises under certain conditions.

Similarly, while critics like Nayder take Bruff’s account of the Indian chief’s “European disguise” at face-value and conclude that the chief has indeed attempted and failed to pass as a European (“Collins and Empire” 149), we should ask the questions: “Was the chief actually
trying to pass as a European in the first place?” and “How successful of a reader is Bruff?” It is true that the chief adorns himself in European clothing when he visits both Bruff’s law offices and Luker’s shop. However, while Bruff labels this sartorial choice a deceitful “European disguise” (346) and argues that the chief wishes to pass as a European in order to conceal his “Oriental origins” and true identity, the chief may have adopted this clothing for different reasons. For example, like many actual Indians living in Britain at the time, the chief may have chosen to dress in relatively familiar, European garb (just as he adopts a tone and manner that appeal to the lawyer’s sensibilities) not to pass as a European but to lower Bruff’s defenses and make him more willing to discuss business. Alternatively, the chief may have adopted this outfit in order to distract Bruff from his real mission: to find out when Godfrey will meet Luker to collect the diamond. Just as the chief flatters Betteredge earlier in the novel, assuring him that “his judgment is correct” when the butler (incorrectly) identifies the Indians as a group of low-caste jugglers, here, the chief’s “disguise” provides Bruff the opportunity to congratulate himself on his superior detective skills—at the very moment in which he unwittingly discloses the information the chief needs to retrieve the Moonstone.

In the same way, although Bruff’s account stresses his skills as a master reader and emphasizes what he discovers about the chief (his race, identity, and the one piece of information that interests him), it deemphasizes Bruff’s major blunder—his disclosure that debtors pay their debts and recover their pledged items exactly one year after the date of the initial transaction—and his inability to understand why the chief needs this information and how he will put it to use. Indeed, at the end of the interview, Bruff puzzles over these very details: “What did it mean? My own unaided ingenuity […] proved quite unequal to grapple with the difficulty” (346). The lawyer only understands the significance of what he has seen and heard after Murthwaite
interprets the events and walks Bruff through their meaning. Thus, while much of the European disguise scene emphasizes the superior reading skills of Englishmen like Bruff, this is more a function of the narrative point-of-view, than it is evidence that Englishmen are, in fact, highly skilled readers of the Oriental body.

Finally, in the scenes leading up to Godfrey’s unmasking, Collins reveals both that the white English villain fails to adopt a successful racial disguise and that the three Brahmin are more perceptive readers of the English body than the dominant narrative otherwise suggests. When Godfrey Ablewhite returns to the bank in Lombard Street to collect the Moonstone and pay his debt to Mr. Luker, he adopts a disguise to avoid being recognized by the three Brahmin or his own family, friends, and acquaintances. For this disguise, Godfrey paints his skin black, adheres a bushy, black beard to his chin and the sides of his face, and swaps his usual gentlemanly garb for the pilot coat, round hat, and other accoutrements of a sailor (505-506). Presumably, Godfrey strives to pass as a Lascar sailor, one of the many Indian seamen working for the British East India Company at the time. Certainly, Lascar sailors would have been a common sight both in the streets surrounding the House of the East India Company (in the vicinity where Godfrey spends the night and is murdered by the Indians) and near the Tower Wharf (where Godfrey buys his passage on a steamboat and plans to set sail with the diamond).21

Significantly, when Franklin and Bruff notice the dark-skinned sailor at the bank, they immediately dismiss the possibility that he is one of three Brahmin in disguise, and they even stop short of identifying him as an Indian. Franklin quickly notices certain aspects of Godfrey’s

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21 As Reed first observed, “Ablewhite dies at the hands of the vengeful Indians in the near vicinity of Lime and Leadenhall streets where the House of the East India Company stood in 1849. Symbolically, the Moonstone departs from the same neighborhood through which the riches of the East flowed into England” (Reed 288).
physical appearance—aspects that he cannot hide, even under layers of black paint—that hint at his Anglo-Saxon heritage and prove he cannot be one of the three Brahmin. As he examines Godfrey’s appearance, Franklin asks himself, “Could this be one of them [the three Brahmin] in disguise?” but instantly he rejects the idea: “Impossible! The man was taller than any of the Indians; and his face, where it was not hidden by a bushy black beard, was twice the breadth of any of their faces at least” (505-506). Tellingly, throughout the description of subsequent events, neither Blake, Bruff, Sergeant Cuff, nor any other character refers to Godfrey as an “Indian” or “Lascar” despite their willingness to label nearly every other dark-skinned character in the novel as an “Indian” with complete confidence. Instead, because something about his disguise is not quite convincing, they simply refer to him as “the sailor” throughout this part of the narrative.

One might rightly wonder why Godfrey chooses to disguise himself as a Lascar sailor given the racial politics of London, particularly as Collins presents them in the novel. After all, Godfrey knows that in order to avoid being murdered by the Indians and to profit from his theft of the Moonstone he must collect the diamond at the bank and leave England, not only without being recognized, but also without drawing undue attention to himself. Of all the possible disguises Godfrey could have chosen, the one he selects is the least likely to help him blend in and avoid detection given the novel’s fantasy of the Indians’ hyper-visibility. While Franklin does not go so far as to label Godfrey an Indian, he does immediately notice his dark skin. After scanning the crowded bank for the three Brahmin and confirming their absence, his eyes rest upon the dark-skinned sailor, and both he and Bruff suspect that he may be a member of the Indians’ underground network of sympathizers and accomplices, perhaps even “a spy employed by the Indians” (512), precisely because of his dark skin.
While Godfrey’s disguise succeeds in one regard, by preventing his friends, family, and acquaintances from recognizing him at the bank, we can infer that, unlike the English gentlemen, the three Brahmin see through Godfrey’s disguise and correctly identify him. In disguising himself as a Lascar sailor, Godfrey assumes the physical appearance and identity of a man totally unlike himself. Consequently, when Franklin and Bruff scrutinize his disguised face, neither of them has the faintest suspicion that the dark-skinned sailor is actually the man they know as the white, Christian philanthropist, Godfrey Ablewhite. Unlike the English characters, the three Brahmin have already discovered that Godfrey stole the Moonstone from the Verinder house, pledged it to Luker for a loan of ready-cash, and must either come to the bank himself or send someone in his stead to pay his debt and retrieve the stone. Up to this point, the three Brahmin have refrained from injuring or killing any of the English characters, including those who possess their sacred gem. However, when the three Brahmin break into Godfrey’s room at the Wheel of Fortune Inn, they not only retrieve their diamond, but also suffocate Godfrey before they depart. Given the Brahmins’ proven reluctance to commit violence, we can assume that they know the dark-skinned sailor is no innocent go-between, but rather Godfrey himself. Because they see through his disguise, they murder Godfrey in a knowing act of retribution.

At the end of *The Moonstone*, Collins endorses neither the dominant narrative’s double-standard of disguise nor the counter-narrative’s more subtle commentary on the Indians’ actual ability to read and disguise bodies. Instead, he proposes that the majority of people, whatever their race, ethnicity, or nationality, cannot adopt successful disguises. In part, he does this by suggesting that the physical appearance of the material body determines an individual’s aptitude for disguise. In accordance with this theory, Collins emphasizes that Murthwaite’s unique body—specifically his “brown” skin and “lithe” figure—makes his racial disguises possible.
While some contemporary readers may have attributed Murthwaite’s ability to adopt racial disguises and pass as an Indian to his supposedly superior Western intelligence, or assumed that the novel’s Englishmen share these skills for the same reasons, Collins actually suggests Murthwaite’s unique body and liminal identity make his disguises possible. At dinner parties, Murthwaite stands out from the rest of the novel’s characters as a “long, lean, wiry, brown” European (122), and, significantly, his skin color and size help him pass as a Hindu-Buddhist in India. Murthwaite explains to his English friends, “I am lean enough and brown enough to make it no easy matter to detect my European origin” when dressed as a “Hindoo-Boodhist” (540). At the same time, Murthwaite’s body is not so brown and lean that the English characters mistake him for an Indian in England. The fact that Murthwaite repeatedly refers to himself as “European” also raises the question of whether he originally hails from England or from continental Europe, and, at the very least, indicates his unwillingness to define his identity through a single nationality. It is precisely the liminal aspects of Murthwaite’s appearance and identity—aspects that the white, Englishmen in the novel do not share—that lay the groundwork for Murthwaite to cross literal geographic boundaries in successful racial disguises.

This is an important point for Collins, because it qualifies and revises the novel’s earlier stance on the double-standard of disguise, by suggesting that most people cannot adopt disguises or pass as a member of another race. However, in her analysis of disguise in *The Moonstone*, Nayder misrepresents Murthwaite’s physical appearance and nationality and overlooks this crucial point in the process. In “Collins and Empire” Nayder presents Murthwaite as a white, English traveler, and ignores the fact that Collins marks him as an exception to the general rule regarding racial passing and disguise. Specifically, Nayder repeatedly refers to Murthwaite as an “English traveler” (147) and the novel’s “English expert on India” (149), despite the fact that
Murthwaite self-identifies as “European.” In addition, although Collins consistently refers to Murthwaite’s “brown” skin, Nayder argues, “Murthwaite easily crosses racial boundaries, making his own whiteness invisible and transcending categorization” (149). Contrary to Nayder’s claims, Murthwaite’s unique body allows him to adopt convincing racial disguises and constitutes an important part of Collins’s larger argument that most people cannot pass as something they are not.

Collins most obviously refutes the novel’s double-standard of disguise during a famous final scene that has received much critical attention, in which Sergeant Cuff locates the disguised corpse of the recently-murdered villain, Godfrey Ablewhite, and unmasks him as the true villain of the novel. Up to this point, it seems as if The Moonstone will reinforce the nineteenth-century physiognomic connection between dark skin and criminality in its depiction of Godfrey’s disguise. After all, before Cuff unmasks Godfrey, the English characters’ prejudices seem to be confirmed: here, again, is a dark-skinned man, whom they suspected was a spy in the employ of the Indians, and who, it turns out, did, in fact, come to the bank to collect the stolen gem from Luker. And Collins certainly highlights the characters’ prejudices, considering the detective and other characters only identify and track Godfrey as the thief who stole, pledged, and collected the Moonstone once his criminality is highlighted by the alteration of his skin color.

However, in the scene of Godfrey’s unmasking, Collins actually rejects the association of dark skin and criminality, including its troubling racial implications. When Sergeant Cuff finds the thief’s corpse (for the Brahmin have already murdered Godfrey by this point), Godfrey’s face

22 Not only Indians and other racial others, but also the working classes and criminals were thought by many physiognomists to be physically darker than their innocent counterparts. Indeed, the physiognomic theories that racial others, working-class men and women, and criminals all had darker complexions is no coincidence—it supported the idea that these groups were biologically inferior, rationalized their subjugation, and assured white, middle and upper-class men and women that these groups could be easily identified and policed.
is still painted black and his body is covered in the clothing of a sailor. However, Cuff realizes this must be a disguise, because “[h]e traced with his finger a thin line of livid white, running backwards from the dead man’s forehead, between the swarthy complexion and the slightly-disturbed black hair” (520). Here Collins creates a literal fissure between Godfrey’s two physical appearances and identities, which, at first, appears to divide the Lascar sailor who supposedly stole the Moonstone, and Godfrey Ablewhite, the white Christian philanthropist. Cuff unmasks the corpse, literally washing away the deceptive outer surface—“his complexion” (521)—to reveal Godfrey’s white face underneath. The fissure, it turns out, does not divide the dark-skinned Lascar sailor and the white Christian philanthropist, but rather, the two sides of the villain Godfrey’s double life, “[t]he side turned up to the public view” and “[t]he side kept hidden from general notice” (525). It turns out that Godfrey has committed forgery and fraud by stealing from a trust fund placed in his care; lived as a man of pleasure with his ill-gotten gains, keeping “a villa in the suburbs which was not taken in his own name […] with a lady in the villa, who was not taken in his own name, either” (525); and stolen his cousin’s diamond in a desperate attempt to acquire the necessary funds to avoid arrest and conceal his past crimes. Notably, Godfrey commits all of these crimes, not in disguise, but in his own proud British image—which, as Ian Duncan correctly notes, conforms to “the classical type of Anglo-Saxon fairness” (306).

Most scholars praise Collins for his acknowledgment of white, British, imperial guilt in this scene. For example, Reed, Hennelly, and Nayder agree that “Collins uses [Godfrey’s] disguise and unmasking to criticize the ploy used by his own characters, who blame the Indians
for the crime the English have themselves committed” (Nayder Unequal Partners 187).23 As Reed observes, “with the disclosure of the dead Ablewhite’s identity” “[t]he mask of respectability is torn from the British Empire” (Reed 285). While Collins certainly complicates the imperialistic narrative of English innocence and Indian guilt in this scene, as Sabin correctly points out, this ending also has its limitations. Arguably, Collins displaces all British imperial guilt onto the novel’s villain, while letting the “good” English characters continues their lives without considering the ways in which they benefit from Britain’s past and present imperial policies.

Similarly, the scene of Godfrey’s unmasking limits both the damage and the possibilities offered by disguise. On the one hand, this prominent scene does the important work of dismantling the novel’s racialized double-standard of disguise once and for all—for even if the reader has missed Collins’s more subtle rejections of this imperialistic fantasy, here, the white Englishman clearly fails in his apparent attempts to pass as an Indian. On the other hand, Collins’s belief that the capacity for disguise is firmly rooted in the body imposes troubling limitations on its more subversive uses. Ultimately, Collins argues that the body dictates not only who a person is, but also who he or she can become. Murthwaite possesses the sensational ability to pass as something he is not, but the explorer’s unique body makes his racial disguises possible—most people, Collins argues, do not share this ability. While it is possible, in an against-the-grain reading of the novel, to argue that the three Brahmin can pass in select contexts, their success still depends on their audience’s cultural ignorance. Collins largely buries the Brahmins’ successful attempts to read others bodies or disguise their own through his

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23 See Reed’s “English Imperialism and the Unacknowledged Crime of The Moonstone” (285), Hennelly’s “Detecting Collins’ Diamond: From Serpentstone to Moonstone” (41), Nayder’s Unequal Partners (187) and Nayder’s “Collins and Empire (149).
structuring of the novel and he denies the possibility that entire disempowered groups, including Indians, could implement disguise to subvert colonial power.

In Chapter 6, I discuss Collins’s *No Name* and Florence Marryat’s *Her Father’s Name*, to show how Marryat reworks Collins’s earlier conceptualization of disguise. In *No Name*, as in *The Moonstone*, Collins insists the capacity for disguise is firmly rooted in the material body. In this novel, the female protagonist attempts to harness the powers of disguise to much more subversive ends than Murthwaite, by seizing forbidden rights and privileges within her patriarchal family and society. However, even in this seemingly more progressive novel, Collins denies the subversive potential for disguise: first, he suggests that other women would not be able to disguise themselves and transgress social norms as Magdalen does, because they lack the necessary physical features and the innate talent for impersonation and disguise; and second, he demonstrates that even Magdalen, who is born with a body designed for disguise, fails to achieve her goals by subterfuge. The majority of this final chapter focuses on *Her Father Name*, Marryat’s rewriting of *No Name*. By the mid-1870s, after physiognomy’s fall from public favor, Marryat envisions a heroine who succeeds at male disguise, transgresses gender norms, and achieves her goals—and she suggests, unlike Collins, that it is possible for other women to do the same. However, despite Marryat’s more progressive stance on essential identity and disguise when it comes to gender, she continues to grapple with these issues in regard to race.
CHAPTER 6
AFTER PHYSIOGNOMY: BIOLOGICAL INHERITANCE AND GENDER DISGUISE IN MARRYAT’S HER FATHER’S NAME

By the mid-1870s, when Florence Marryat publishes *Her Father’s Name*, the British public had largely abandoned physiognomy, at least in its traditional form.\(^1\) Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, physiognomy itself does not play a prominent role in Marryat’s novel. Significantly, however, even after physiognomy’s decline in both the sensation novel and in the wider culture, its underlying assumptions continue to influence the genre and the way the British conceptualize the relationship between the body and identity.

For the remainder of the century, the Victorians continued to ask a variety of questions about the relationship between the body and identity that had their foundation in physiognomic thinking: Which aspects of our identity, if any, are essential and biologically determined? How much of our appearance and personality do we inherit from our parents? Do we inherit certain racialized physical features and/or a racial identity from our ancestors? Do we inherit certain “masculine” or “feminine” features and/or a gender identity based on our sex? Is it possible to read information about a person’s identity—particularly his or her membership in certain biologically-determined groups—on the surfaces of the body? Are groups such as race and gender socially-constructed categories of identity? Is it necessary to change one’s physical appearance in order to change one’s identity?

In this chapter I focus on *Her Father’s Name*, a sensation novel published in 1876 that takes up all of these questions. But first, I want to discuss Collins’s *No Name* (1862), in order to

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\(^1\) As I explained in Chapter 2, physiognomy continues to influence the fields of racial anthropology and criminology throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Therefore, even after the British public dismisses physiognomy as a pseudoscience, some physiognomic ideas, particularly those about racial and criminal types, continue to play a prominent role in both the fictional and non-fictional writing of the period and impact the ways people think about the body and identity.
point out the ways in which Marryat responds to and revises this earlier and better-known sensation novel. At the beginning of *No Name*, the “born actress” Magdalen Vanstone and her well-behaved sister Norah learn that their prosperous upper-class family and their own identities within it are not what they seem. In the wake of their parents’ sudden death, they learn that they are, in fact, illegitimate, and that, while their father meant to provide for them in his will, this document was nullified a few months before his death, on the day he married their mother. Left to the mercy of their surviving male relatives, who inherit their father’s fortune in the absence of an updated will, Magdalen and Norah are left nameless and penniless. While Norah stoically accepts her fate and finds respectable but tedious work as a governess, Magdalen defies convention by adopting a series of disguises and false identities in order to regain her father’s fortune by subterfuge.

Over the course of the novel, Magdalen plays an impressive range of roles on the professional stage, while off it she disguises herself as a middle-aged governess, a young woman named Miss Bygrave, and a servant. Although Magdalen’s physical transformations and impersonations on the stage delight and surprise her rapt audience, and she exhibits a considerable amount of skill in adopting her disguises in daily life, ultimately, all of her disguises and plans fail. Broken by sickness and disappointment, Magdalen’s seemingly limitless health and strength finally wear out. The landlady nearly evicts the feverish girl from her decrepit apartment, planning to throw her on the mercy of the hospital or the workhouse. However, at the last minute, a kind-hearted sea captain intervenes, nurses Magdalen back to health, and eventually marries her. Collins can only rehabilitate Magdalen once he neutralizes the threat she poses by obliterating her strength and showing her using her “arts” in a proper feminine way—attracting a desirable husband.
This process of disguise and revelation plays out much differently in *Her Father’s Name*. Like Collins’s Magdalen Vanstone, Marryat’s Leona Lacoste is a “born actress” who learns startling information about her father’s past and her own identity upon her parent’s untimely death. After her father commits suicide, she learns from his blackmailer that he is the Englishman “George Evans” rather than the Frenchman “George Lacoste,” that, years ago, he fled England because he was charged with the murder of his uncle’s clerk, Abraham Anson, and that he lived the remainder of his life (and all of Leona’s) in a secluded Brazilian village not by choice but to avoid detection. The indomitable Leona vows to investigate the murder charges and clear her father’s name. She travels from Brazil to America to England, and, along the way, works as a male impersonator on the professional stage and adopts a huge range of disguises and identities in her everyday life. Indeed, Leona disguises practically every aspect of her identity, including her social class, profession, age, race, and gender. Marryat highlights Leona’s male disguises in particular, drawing attention to the fact that in *No Name* Magdalen somewhat inexplicably restricts herself to female roles and identities despite her apparent skill at disguise, her commitment to regaining her father’s fortune by any means necessary, and the limitations of her sex within patriarchal society. Marryat emphasizes the practical advantages of Leona’s male disguise, illustrating that Leona’s assumption of male identity allows her to circumvent many of the problems Magdalen faces while providing her access to certain spaces and opportunities typically denied to women. She also uses Leona’s male disguises to launch a surprisingly progressive critique of essentialist theories of gender. In the end, Leona’s disguises succeed on multiple levels, for she not only passes as an array of different types of people without getting caught, but also achieves the titular goal, to clear her father’s name of murder.
Thus, while the two novels share a similar set of plot features and themes, Collins and Marryat deploy them in very different ways. Contrasting *No Name* and *Her Father’s Name* allows us to examine both the ways in which physiognomy, in its traditional form, becomes less relevant and the ways in which its underlying assumptions and questions continue to shape sensation fiction and engage readers into the 1870s. While Marryat does not use physiognomy in the traditional sense (or at least uses it far less than most sensation novelists of the 1860s), her heroine’s body remains highly legible and meaningful. As we shall see, Marryat’s descriptions of Leona tend to stress how certain physical traits situate her within gendered, racialized, or familial categories rather than reveal her individualized personality traits. Marryat also adopts the familiar plot feature of disguise in order to explore the issue of gender identity.

In responding to *No Name*, Marryat updates Collins’s discussion of several aspects of biological inheritance. Both Magdalen and Leona are born into families whose stock appears to be degenerating or dying off altogether. Yet despite their relatives’ physically and/or morally degenerate tendencies, Magdalen and Leona boast seemingly limitless amounts of health, strength, energy, and vitality. While, on some level, Collins seems to admire his heroine’s tenacity, he acknowledges that, for women, the ability to survive in unladylike conditions is often seen as a perversity rather than a strength. While a woman’s “masculinity,” strength, and vitality could be cast as signs of degeneracy or atavism—particularly in the 1880s and ‘90s as some writers responded to the figure of the New Woman and shifting gender roles with increasing vitriol—Marryat unequivocally celebrates these traits in Leona.² Writing in the mid-1870s in the wake of non-fiction texts advocating new standards of beauty, dress, and education

² Marryat herself depicts a frightening, atavistic anti-heroine in her most famous novel, *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897).
for women but before the backlash against the New Woman has reached its zenith, Marryat celebrates in Leona the very qualities that, in Magdalen and later heroines, prove a liability.

Whereas Collins presents Magdalen as a genetic anomaly, who looks and acts nothing like her parents, Marryat suggests Leona does resemble her parents and questions whether, along with these physical features, she inherits certain personality traits. Leona seems to inherit racially-specific physical features from both her Brazilian mother and her English father. Although Marryat briefly considers the possibility that Leona naturalizes her so-called racial identity, she quickly abandons this line of thinking and instead presents race as a biological inheritance. Similarly, although Marryat depicts her heroine adopting successful ethnic disguises, she minimizes their importance by suggesting that the novel’s English characters lack the cultural knowledge to properly scrutinize them. Rather than analyzing the authenticity of her disguise, they simply accept her as a generic “foreigner.”

In addition to features that seem to specifically mark Leona’s mixed-race identity, she inherits many physical traits that mark her as the daughter of George Evans. For Leona, this close physical resemblance functions as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it exposes the heroine’s relationship to her father, a revelation that occasionally thwarts her undercover investigation and, as long as the murder remains unsolved, threatens to associate her with her father’s alleged criminality. On the other hand, when Leona interacts with people who knew and loved George Evans it assists her amateur detective efforts in significant ways. Although this narrative of family resemblance problematizes Leona’s agency in ways that contradict some of the novel’s proto-feminist moments, Marryat makes clear that Leona does not inherit her father’s weakness and that, in solving the mystery as an amateur detective, she achieves what he never could.
Leona’s face and body also reveals her mix of “masculine” and “feminine” personality traits and behaviors, but Marryat more readily repudiates essentialist beliefs regarding gender than she does those of race. While her conception of gender identity is by no means entirely liberated, Marryat does depict a powerful heroine who employs male disguise for subversive ends. I argue that Marryat uses Leona’s two male disguises to reject not only the naturalness of gender but also to complicate contemporary discussions of masculinity and femininity. She celebrates a heroine with a mix of “masculine” and “feminine” traits by allowing her to perform masculinity just as well as a man, and stressing that she does not reveal her biological sex despite her continued exhibition of “feminine” traits while in male disguise. In addition, she refutes Collins’s assertion in *No Name* and *The Moonstone* that only a handful of people with exceptional bodies may adopt disguise, arguing, instead, that Leona’s ability to seize forbidden rights, privileges, and opportunities through male disguise could be replicated by any number of women. However, while, for the majority of the novel, Marryat uses Leona to launch a proto-feminist attack on essentialist definitions of gender, to some extent, she backs away from this radical intervention at the end of the novel, by having Leona argue for the superiority of dominant English masculinity over effeminate foreign masculinities.

In the end, Marryat espouses mixed opinions about the legibility of the body and essential identity. Notably, she rejects the essentialist notion that a woman is born with a fixed set of “feminine” personality traits and argues that there exists a multiplicity of masculinities and femininities. Although her stance on race is far more conservative than her views of gender, she does consider the possibility that “race” is a social construct rather than a biological inheritance. Finally, she dismisses the idea that if one inherits a parent’s physical features, one necessarily inherits his or her strengths and weaknesses as well. However, despite her forward-looking
views, Marryat does not completely repudiate the claim that certain aspects of essential identity (particularly race) manifest themselves on the surfaces of the body. Like many of her predecessors, at the end of the novel, she cannot resist the temptation to restore order by partially reinforcing the legibility of the body and reestablishing traditional gender roles.

**Degeneracy in No Name and Her Father’s Name**

In responding to Collins’s 1862 sensation novel *No Name*, Marryat takes up many of the same issues and themes surrounding biological inheritance and updates them for an audience of the 1870s. *No Name* and *Her Father’s Name* share a common starting point: both Magdalen and Leona are strong and healthy “born actresses” who hail from degenerate families. However, Marryat noticeably departs from Collins’s earlier text in her depiction of the heroine’s body and identity. In *No Name*, Collins draws on traditional physiognomic discourse in his description of Magdalen’s body and stresses that his heroine’s essential identity as a “born actress” and unique physical appearance—particularly her “flexible” facial features and indeterminate physiognomy—make it possible for her to excel on the stage and adopt some disguises in everyday life. Although physiognomy had fallen out of favor by the time Marryat writes *Her Father’s Name*, it continues to influence anthropological studies, travel narratives, and fiction, particularly in regard to race. Reflecting this change, Marryat largely omits the physiognomic rhetoric that shapes Collins’s physical descriptions in favor of highly racialized language that stresses Leona’s group affiliations—racial, gendered, and familial—rather than her individualized personality traits. Although Leona’s physical appearance does accurately reveal her racial, gendered, and familial identities—upholding, to some extent, the belief that the body may reveal a person’s essential identity—Marryat also explores the possibility that some facets of Leona’s identity, particularly her gender, may be self-constructed and naturalized rather than inherited. In addition, Marryat downplays the physical aspects of the “born actress” identity, and
suggests that Leona’s success on the stage and in disguise may derive from her observations of
different types of people rather than from her unique body.

Both No Name and Her Father’s Name question how much a woman’s inherited physical
and behavioral traits impact her identity. By populating their novels with families that include
multiple physically and morally degenerate characters, Collins and Marryat to some extent
reinforce the belief that declining families may pass down degenerate traits to their children.
Although the height of cultural fears regarding widespread degeneration in Britain did not occur
until the 1880s and 90s, as William Greenslade points out in Degeneration, Culture, and the
Novel, 1880-1940 (1994), “[t]he crucial intellectual component of ideas of inherited and
transmitted pathology can be traced back to the influential mid-nineteenth-century school of
French psychiatry” (16). Most notably, as Greenslade explains, the French psychiatrist Benedict
Augustin Morel argued that, on the individual level, the “disease” of degeneration “produced
three categories of symptoms: physical deformity, perversion of the organism[,] and disturbance
of the emotional faculties,” which could be transmitted through the generations, becoming
progressively worse over time (16). In addition, Morel warned that these trends could become
widespread due to contributing environmental factors and, consequently, entire races or
civilizations “could progress or decline over time” (quoted in Greenslade 16).

Both Collins and Marryat emphasize that, as the family patriarchs, Mr. Vanstone and
Monsieur Lacoste are entrusted with their daughters’ well-being, but their own morally
degenerate behaviors jeopardize their children’s future. In Victorian Sensation Fiction (2009),
Andrew Radford points out that “[f]raught relations between father and son, as in Collins’s Basil
(1852) and Hide and Seek (1854) become one of the most outlandish reactive components of the
[sensation] genre, as it documents the degeneration of the mid-Victorian patriarch into a ruthless
and volatile domestic despot” (82). But, in a variation on this theme, *No Name* and *Her Father’s Name* depict Victorian patriarchs who fail their daughters rather than their sons. In addition, while these novels arguably do depict the degeneration of the Victorian patriarch, these fathers fail their daughters not through intentional cruelty and neglect, but rather because of their immoral sexual pasts, weakness, and/or cowardice, coupled with their untimely deaths. In both *No Name* and *Her Father’s Name*, the heroine’s health, strength, and resilience become necessities of survival in a degenerating world, marked, in particular, by failed father figures.

Not only the family patriarchs, but also many of the male and female children of the Vanstone and Evans families exhibit signs of degeneracy. Most memorably, Magdalen’s cousin, Noel Vanstone, whose textual analogue is none other than his housekeeper’s slimy pet toad—a “hideous little reptile sitting placid on his rock throne” (226)—is so physically and morally degenerate that he brings to mind a less evolved species of amphibian. As I discuss in greater detail later in the chapter, Marryat recalls Collins’s descriptions of Noel’s unhealthy, weak, and feminized body, as well as his selfish and inactive behavior, in her portrayal of Leona’s supposed cousin (and actual half-sister) Lucilla Evans. However, Lucilla remains a more sympathetic character not only because she lacks Noel’s heartlessness, but also because, for at least some of the other characters, the physical and moral signs of Lucilla’s degeneracy—pallor, weakness, and inactivity—are more acceptable in a woman than in a man.

Although physical and moral degeneration runs rampant in both their own families and the wider culture, against all odds, the heroines of *No Name* and *Her Father’s Name* do not inherit these traits. Magdalen and Leona both enjoy remarkable health, strength, and vitality—in short, unlike their fathers, they have the ability to adapt and survive. Indeed, the heroines *must* act for themselves, because not only their father figures, but also their other male relatives and
patriarchal institutions like the law, consistently fail to provide them with protection and financial security. While both No Name and Her Father’s Name demonstrate the precarious position of women within patriarchal society and depict heroines who adopt disguises in an attempt to seize forbidden rights and privileges, Collins and Marryat depict their heroine’s bodies and disguises in very different ways. Collins presents Magdalen’s body as exceptionally equipped for disguise, and yet even she fails to pass successfully and achieve her goals. As in The Moonstone, Collins denies the possibility for widespread disguise, by suggesting, this time, that women without Magdalen’s specific facial features would be even less successful if they were to adopt similar disguises to fight back against patriarchal family members or society. In contrast, Marryat, leaves open the possibility that any woman can assume a male disguise and seize the rights and privileges society denies her as a woman.

“One of Those Caprices of Nature”: Magdalen’s Indeterminate Physiognomy and the Body of the “Born Actress”

In No Name, Collins suggests that his heroine’s physical appearance and seemingly inexhaustible strength cannot be explained by the normal rules of heredity. Even before Magdalen learns that she and her sister are “Nobody’s Children” (109) and have no legal right to inherit their father’s name or fortune, her unaccountable physiognomy shows that Nature has withheld her expected genetic inheritance, in the form of her parents’ physical features. Collins begins his description of Magdalen’s physiognomy by stating that her features apparently spring from nowhere, for “[b]y one of those caprices of Nature, which science leaves still unexplained” she resembles neither her mother nor her father (8). “How,” Collins asks, “had she come by her hair? How had she come by her eyes?” (8). This broken link in the genetic chain extends to other aspects of Magdalen’s body as well. For, unlike her physically degenerate sister, Norah, and her parents who die prematurely, the tall, “perfectly developed” Magdalen enjoys “overflowing
physical health” which “strengthen[s] every muscle” and “brace[s] every nerve” (9). Magdalen’s unique physical appearance facilitates her attempts to pass as a stranger amongst male relatives because they cannot immediately identify her as a Vanstone, and her “matchless strength and health” (9) sustain her through a host of brazen deceptions and crushing disappointments.

Unlike anyone else in her family, Magdalen is a “born actress” and Collins emphasizes that this is an essentialized part of her identity reflected on the surfaces of her body. Victorian drama critics and fiction writers alike used this term to praise an actress’s seemingly natural abilities on the stage. While some used the term to describe an actress who was so talented that it seemed as if she were born to act, for others, including Collins, the concept of the “born actress” actually implied a biological predisposition for acting and impersonation. In keeping with this belief, Collins introduces Magdalen to the reader through a long physiognomic description which indicates, in various ways, that she is a born actress long before she sets foot on the stage.

Although, in “No Name: Embodying the Sensation Heroine” (1992), Melynda Huskey points out the difficulty of reading Magdalen’s physiognomy because, as she explains, her “face works on a principle of contradiction and contrast; what one feature claims, another denies or mitigates” (7), in this one respect—proclaiming her identity as a “born actress”—Magdalen’s features remain consistent. Readers learn that Magdalen has a “plastic, ever-changing face” rendered striking “by its extraordinary mobility” (8). In addition to her mobile features, Magdalen’s eyes “possess the rare […] merit of interpreting the finest gradations of thought, the gentlest changes of feeling, the deepest trouble of passion, with a subtle transparency of expression” (8). Magdalen’s uncle echoes the narrator’s assertion that she has a “flexible face,” and adds that she has a “manageable voice,” both of which “fit a woman for character-parts and disguises on the stage” (190).
Even Magdalen’s otherwise puzzling physiognomic features, which refuse to coalesce and present the reader with a clear picture of the “type” of woman Magdalen is, facilitate her adoption of a wide range of roles. Taken in isolation, some of Magdalen’s features do offer straightforward physiognomic information. For example, Collins informs readers that Magdalen’s “mouth was too large and firm” (8) and her “chin [was] too square and massive for her sex and age” (8). In accordance with physiognomic principles, these features reveal that Magdalen can be stubborn and willful—“unfeminine” traits that do, it turns out, make up an important part of her personality, and inform her decision to seek revenge against the male heirs who inherit her father’s fortune. However, when taken together, her physical features seem contradictory and do not clearly fit together to form an easily recognizable physiognomic type. For example, how can the reader reconcile Magdalen’s masculine mouth, which is “too large and firm” with her lips, which have “the true feminine delicacy of form” (8)? Huskey notes “it actually seems to be two different faces, flung together without regard for appropriateness” (7). Indeed, Magdalen’s disparate features seem drawn from not just two, but many different types of faces. While Magdalen’s face may “fail of performance in the most startling manner,” in the sense that her discordant features, drawn from diverse and unknown sources, in some ways circumvent the reader’s physiognomic, literary, and aesthetic expectations, this same face excels at performance both on the professional stage and disguised in everyday life precisely because it eludes classification.

Given Magdalen’s innate gifts for impersonation and disguise, it may come as a surprise that she never tries to pass as a man. Surprisingly, the heroine never even mentions the possibility of adopting a male disguise to regain her father’s fortune. Indeed, Collins only addresses this rather inexplicable omission once, when Captain Wragge dismisses male disguise
as the purview of the “average adventuress” one reads about in the newspapers. Wragge declares, “my ex-pupil is not to be confounded, for one moment, with the average adventuress […] she is capable of going a long way beyond the limit of dressing herself like a man, and imitating a man's voice and manner” (207). Collins upholds Wragge’s assertion that Magdalen’s disguises far surpass those of the average woman; however, nothing in the novel supports the contention that gender disguises are less impressive and effective than the disguises Magdalen assumes. Indeed, given the many ways in which *No Name* highlights gender inequality, male disguise sometimes seems like an obvious solution for a woman in Magdalen’s situation. In responding to *No Name*, Marryat draws attention to Collins’s reluctance to depict women successfully passing as men by stressing Leona’s impressive male disguises and the practical advantages she gains from them.

**“Do Not My Features Speak For Themselves?”: Signs of Racial, Familial, and Gender Identity on Leona’s Body**

While Marryat does not use physiognomy in the traditional sense (or at least uses it far less than most sensation novelists of the 1860s), her heroine’s body remains highly legible and meaningful. As we shall see, Marryat’s descriptions of Leona tend to stress how certain physical traits situate Leona within racial, familial, or gender categories. So, for example, Leona’s chestnut-colored hair does not mark her as a traditional or deviant heroine or inform readers about her specific personality traits as it would have in the 1860s; instead, it reveals information about her mixed-race lineage and familial relationships. When the narrator introduces Leona, she observes, “the first thing about her that struck anyone familiar with the characteristics of her country people as strange, was that her hair, instead of being black, was of a deep chestnut color, and her eyes a rich brown” (3). Marryat suggests that anyone familiar with the “Brazilian type” would understand that Leona’s chestnut hair and brown eyes indicate her half-European
parentage. Later in the novel, these physical features also disclose to her father’s family, friends, and acquaintances that she is George Evans’s daughter. Thus, characters still look to Leona’s body to discover information about who she is, but they are more interested in placing her within certain broad, socially-constructed identity categories than in doing a nuanced physiognomic reading of her body and identity.3

Unlike Collins, who offers no explanation for Magdalen’s marked physical and behavioral differences from her parents, Marryat carefully explains how Leona came to acquire her physical and behavioral traits by inheriting certain features and traits from her mother or father, growing up in “the wilds of Brazil,” and naturalizing some (false) beliefs about who she is. For Marryat, Leona’s race—construed in the novel as a biological identity, literally the “blood” she inherits from her parents—determines much of her physical appearance and behavior. However, while Marryat presents race as a biological inheritance during almost all of the novel’s scenes, she briefly challenges this notion by showing that Leona’s false beliefs about her racial identity similarly influence her thinking and behavior, suggesting that this so-called natural or biological aspect of identity may, in fact, be naturalized. Marryat quickly abandons

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3 As we have seen, sensation novelists traditionally craft their characters’ physiognomies to mark their status in certain groups. However, sensation novelists of the 1860s tend to provide physiognomic descriptions that include information about a character’s group affiliations and his or her individualized personality traits. For example, we know from Braddon’s physiognomic description of Luke Marks that he hails from the working-classes, but also that he is an obstinate and greedy man with an insatiable desire for money and alcohol. Similarly, Barbara Hare’s physiognomy reveals her status as a middle-class woman, but also her willfulness and determination. In contrast, Marryat’s physical descriptions label certain features as “European” or Brazilian, “masculine” or “feminine,” or as similar to those of George Evans, without relying on the specific physiognomic meaning behind each feature to convey meaning. Her physical descriptions place Leona within certain broad identity categories without breaking down those types into more detail. So, for example, Leona’s physical appearance reveals that she is George Evans’s daughter, but to discover her more individualized personality traits, such as her loyalty, readers must examine her dialogue and actions.
this line of thinking when it comes to race, but takes her critique of essential identity much further in her discussion of gender.

In most of the novel’s scenes, Marryat presents race as a biological identity and all of her characters believe that they inherit their racialized physical features and “blood” from their parents. As many characters remark over the course of the novel, Leona inherits her father’s auburn hair and brown eyes. Marryat observes that, besides these features, “her appearance did not so much differ from that of other women in the South” (3). Using the type of language found in contemporary travel narratives, Marryat describes the features Leona presumably inherits from her Brazilian mother (who died when Leona was still an infant), including “a dark creamy complexion and skin under which her warm blood played as it chose” and a certain expression of the eye that resembles “that of a spotted panther in repose” (3). Leona respects the memory of the mother she never knew, but her biggest source of pride and identity stems from the “European blood” she inherits from her beloved father (8).

Interestingly, Marryat suggests that Brazilian “blood” may strengthen or invigorate degenerating English stock, explaining why Leona proves superior to her father on so many levels. Although Leona’s filial devotion prevents her from noting, let alone condemning, her father’s many faults, Marryat casts him as a cowardly, weak, and physically degenerate man. Marryat implies that Leona’s mixed-race lineage may explain her health, strength, and vitality. After describing the novel’s villain, “a Portuguese [man] of the lowest stamp” with an “almost repulsive” appearance, Marryat observes, “[i]t is not generally known, perhaps, that the Brazilian is to the Portuguese what the American is to the English, and that the race becomes much more energetic and refined from mixture with Indian blood” (10). Marryat does not go so far as to suggest that Brazilians are actually superior to the English—on the contrary, she casts Leona’s
mother as a “weak, indolent” woman with an “exacting southern nature” (32)—but she does suggest that Leona’s mixed-race lineage may be better than her father’s “pure” (and degenerate) English “blood.”

Supplementing her stance that race functions as a form of essential, inherited identity, Marryat perpetuates the common racist belief that the hot, wild, and sultry climates of “foreign” lands impacts a person’s appearance, behavior, and identity. Her Father’s Name opens in the wilds of Brazil “in the very heart of the forest” (3) in “the most sequestered and least conspicuous town” (1) outside of Rio de Janeiro. In a quasi-ethnographic opening that noticeably departs from the style of the remainder of the novel, Marryat describes the beautiful, untamed landscape of Brazil: she lists and describes various tropical plants and flowers and waxes poetic on such features as the country’s “dazzling sunlight” and “carpet of living green” (1-3).

From her accounts of the landscape, Marryat moves seamlessly to descriptions of her heroine’s body and identity. Marryat suggests that Leona’s upbringing in Brazil further enhances the racialized features and traits she inherits from her mother. For example, after describing her voluptuous figure, she remarks that Leona’s “appearance was due to the clime in which she had been bred” (4), as if the Brazilian woman’s hypersexualized and eroticized body were a natural product of the landscape and climate.

Marryat complicates the standard narrative of race as a biological identity by demonstrating the ways in which Leona’s racial identity may be naturalized rather than inherited. Leona’s father raises his daughter to believe that he is the Frenchman George Lacoste rather than

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4 In his review of Her Father’s Name for The Academy (1877), George Saintsbury writes, “Mrs. Ross Church has gone to Brazil for the opening scenes of her new book, and a very elaborate picture of Brazilian scenery she presents us with, a picture which serves as background to a young woman of fabulous beauty” but concludes, “[i]t is rather odd that, after all this elaborate scene-painting in the beginning, we are never treated again to a single piece of description” (6).
the Englishman (and accused murderer) George Evans. Interestingly, Leona’s (false) beliefs regarding her half-French lineage influence her identity, including her willingness to transgress gender norms and her racial allegiances and prejudices. Leona states that her “European blood” fills her with pride (8), and that, in times of crisis, it provides her with much-needed strength (25). For example, after her father commits suicide, she assures the doctor, who expresses concern for her mental and emotional state, “I shall not faint, doctor, I have too much European blood in me for that” (25). In other words, Leona believes that by inheriting her father’s European, specifically French, blood, she becomes, from a biological perspective, more capable of facing crises with fortitude.

Leona also strongly identifies with the French historical figure Joan of Arc and harbors prejudices against the English. In fact, the first time readers hear Leona speak, she stands alone in the forest acting the part of Joan of Arc, extolling French heroism and condemning English cowardice. Speaking in character, she declares, “I propose to lead your army, sire, on to victory, to throw myself into the breach made by your late defeat, to go forward at the head of your troops, and to show these base and cowardly Englishmen the spirit of a woman of France, that they may begin to fear the men!” (5). It makes sense that Leona would identify with a heroic French woman who takes on male roles, adopts disguises, fights in battle, and succeeds where men have failed. In this way, Marryat contextualizes Leona’s gender transgressions not only through the South American mythology of the Amazon but also through the French tales of Joan of Arc. However, what is interesting about this scene—which seems innocuous enough at the time, since Leona’s father has not yet revealed his true nationality and identity to his daughter or the reader—is that Leona identifies with the French against the English despite her biological race. This antagonism, acted out in the character of Joan, reflects Leona’s actual deep-seated
prejudice against the English. While discussions of Leona’s “European features” and “European blood” may obscure the differences between the French and the English, Leona’s acting the part of Joan of Arc reveals that she views these two peoples very differently. Leona naturalizes her supposed French lineage, suggesting that it largely defines who she is, only to learn afterwards that she is, in fact, half-English.

While Marryat sets up a very interesting predicament here—one that, if taken to its limits, has the potential to reveal the ways in which race is a naturalized set of socially-constructed ideas rather than a biological inheritance—she does not fully explore the implications of Leona’s false beliefs regarding her father’s nationality and the English “blood” she inherits from him. While Leona does successfully pass as a member of different ethnic groups over the course of the novel, Marryat downplays the importance of these disguises. Marryat highlights that her English characters lack a nuanced understanding of different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures, and that without this knowledge they cannot successfully read the bodies of “foreigners” or penetrate racial disguises—a point that Collins makes much more reluctantly in The Moonstone. In the same way Collins minimizes the importance of the three Brahmin passing as Indian jugglers for several weeks in England, Marryat downplays the significance of Leona’s ethnic disguises, by suggesting that the English characters accept her as a generic “foreigner” without scrutinizing her appearance and behavior. In this way, she preserves the possibility that race may be a biological inheritance reflected upon the body’s surfaces. Leona’s success at racial disguise does not challenge the notion that there are intrinsic physical and behavioral differences between members of different races; it merely demonstrates that the English are poor readers when it comes to this aspect of essential identity.
Marryat considers not only how Leona’s inheritance of her father’s physical features reveals her “European blood” but also how it threatens to mark her as the daughter of a criminal. Leona fears that her father’s former acquaintances who believe he murdered Abraham Anson will recognize her as his daughter. For example, she declines to work for the theatre manager, John Rouse, because he mentions that she reminds him of his old acquaintance, George Evans, and later, when she overhears Rouse discussing the murder charges against her father, she faints in agitation. Rouse frightens Leona because he can successfully read the aspects of her identity she tries to hide. As a theatre manager who casts actors and actresses, he must hire applicants who conform to different theatrical (and physiognomic) types and, presumably, his professional familiarity with these types allows him to successfully identify Leona’s race, a feat none of the other English characters can accomplish. Although Leona passes as a Spanish woman and a Spanish man in front of the novel’s other characters, Rouse immediately recognizes that she cannot be Valera’s Spanish sister (as she claims to be, at one point, for propriety’s sake) or “a pure Brazilian” because of her hair color (98). He observes, “[y]ou never saw a pure Brazilian with chestnut-colored hair” and concludes, “she has Brazilian blood in her, but it’s mixed with European” (98-99).

When Rouse adds that Leona reminds him of his old acquaintance, George Evans, she panics that he may not only uncover her false identity but also discover her real one. From a practical standpoint, such a revelation threatens to disrupt Leona’s undercover investigation of the murder. In addition, as long as the crime remains unsolved, Leona’s resemblance to her father visually marks her as the daughter of a criminal—an association, within the context of fears regarding inherited criminal traits and degeneration, that threatens to besmirch her own name and identity. While, in these ways, Leona’s resemblance to her father proves an
impediment, as I discuss later in the chapter, it also produces some benefits. As we shall see, some characters who have positive memories of George Evans—as a kind master, brother, or lover—trust Leona and provide her with vital information during her investigation precisely because she resembles their loved one.

Marryat explains Leona’s distinctive mix of “masculine” and “feminine” physical features, transgressive, non-feminine behaviors, and threatening sexuality through the Amazon woman warrior tradition. Although the stories of Amazons originated in the ancient Greek writings of Homer, Herodotus, Strabo, and Diodorus Siclus, during the Age of Discovery explorers such as Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci claimed to encounter tribes of tall, strong, masculine warrior women in the uncivilized “new worlds” of the Americas (Klarer 8). Later, nineteenth-century explorers such as Richard Burton continued to draw on this mythology by describing the so-called Amazons they encountered in Africa (Adams 1). As Maeve E. Adams explains in “The Amazon Warrior Woman and the De/Construction of Gendered Imperial Authority in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Literature” (2010), “[r]epresentations of the Amazon do not consistently or strictly adhere to the ways in which colonial ideology divided up the world into the powerful (white men) and the powerless (everyone else)” (3). Although some nineteenth-century ethnographic and literary depictions of the Amazon endorse colonialism by demonstrating that she “need[s] saving from [her] incivility,” other “[r]epresentations of her extraordinary powers (martial and sexual) appear to offer an implicit critique of the assumptions about gender and race that underwrite colonial ideology” (Adams 3). In casting Leona as an Amazonian woman, Marryat anticipates some of the New Woman fiction of the 1880s and 90s, which, as Adams points out, often invoked the
In keeping with the mythology of the Amazon warrior woman, Marryat introduces Leona by emphasizing both her South American lineage and the striking combination of masculine and feminine features that make up her impressive body. Like the Amazon, Leona has some “masculine” physical features: she is “very tall for her sex, five feet seven inches at least in stature, and her limbs [are] perfectly moulded in proportion to her height” (3). While Leona’s height, broad shoulders, and slight moustache—for, much like Collins’s Marian Halcombe, she had “the softest, faintest, most delicate down that ever existed on a woman’s mouth” crowning her upper lip (3)—mark her masculinity, like the traditional Amazon, she also exhibits distinctly feminine features. Marryat describes Leona’s “full firm breasts and rounded limbs and lofty carriage,” explaining that an outsider might “suppose she had attained the full term of womanhood” rather than her mere seventeen years. However, like the traditional Amazon, whose “sexual prowess is figured as part of her extraordinary and indomitable political and martial power” (Adams 8), Leona’s voluptuous body is coded as dangerous and decidedly off-limits. Indeed, even the masculine facial hair crowning her feminine lips “only served to make the lip look more curved and scornful,” as if to dissuade men from making a sexual advance. In the event any man did try to insult or assault her, Marryat assures us Leona would prevail. She wears “[a] bright hued Mexican scarf tied round her waist” that carries “a loaded pistol on one side and a long knife on the other,” and she readily uses these weapons to protect herself (4). While Marryat clearly situates Leona’s race as a part of her essential identity, she leaves her gender more open to interpretation. Although Leona’s physical features conform to the Amazon type,
Marryat declines to clarify whether her personality traits reflect an essential aspect of her identity or stem from the heroine’s life experiences.

Marryat uses Leona’s half-Brazilian lineage and upbringing in South America to excuse and explain her heroine’s gender transgressions. For some of Marryat’s more conservative English readers, it might seem unthinkable for a proper English girl to act as Leona does. However, given British racial prejudices, it makes sense that a girl who grew up in the “uncivilized” lands of Brazil would proclaim her independence from men and dismiss the rules of propriety. Still, Marryat suggests the English have something to learn from Leona, for while some readers might balk at the disguise-wearing, pistol-wilding heroine, she usefully exposes and challenges the restrictive gender roles that govern daily life in England.

Identity as Performance: Theoretical Background on Gender Identity

To help construct my analysis of Marryat’s examination of gender and performance in Her Father’s Name and to appreciate both the strengths and limitations of Marryat’s critiques, I will summarize a few key arguments from two influential twentieth-century gender and sexuality theorists, Joan Riviere and Judith Butler. In her groundbreaking essay “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929), the British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere begins to question essentialist notions of gender identity by arguing that women assume and set aside their femininity like a mask. In particular, she suggests that masculine women “may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men” (91). To illustrate her point, Riviere discusses the case of a brilliant female academic, who, despite her intellectual proficiency, sought affirmation from father figures after every public speaking engagement and adopted traditional female behaviors, including flirtation, when interacting with these men. Applying a psychoanalytic lens to this case, Riviere concludes that the woman’s professional success in a male-dominated field “signified an exhibition of herself in possession of the father’s penis,
having castrated him” (93). Following this display, the woman “was seized by horrible dread of the retribution the father would then exact,” and consequently “propitiate[d] the avenger” by “offer[ing] herself to him sexually” (93). According to Riviere, “[t]he aim of the compulsion was not merely to secure reassurance by evoking friendly feelings towards her in the man; it was chiefly to make sure of safety by masquerading as guiltless and innocent” (94). In other words, Riviere suggests that masculine women adopt the “mask” of womanliness to conciliate powerful men and downplay their own gender transgressions. For Riviere, the assumption of this mask is, above all, a means of survival: it is an anxiety-ridden performance within a potentially hostile environment.

In the above example and in her later assertion in the same essay that there is no difference between “genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’” (94), Riviere seems to reject the supposedly natural link between biological sex and gender: she suggests that “femininity” may be a set of artificial practices that a woman knowingly and strategically adopts to conform to cultural ideals of womanhood rather than a set of innate predilections and behaviors inextricably linked to her biological sex. However, other parts of “Womanliness as Masquerade” suggest that Riviere has not completely rejected essentialist notions of gender identity. First, following many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexologists and psychologists, Riviere conflates masculine women and homosexual women, linking gender to sexuality, if not to sex. In addition, while speaking of the female academic (a heterosexual with reported homosexual fantasies, a type Riviere distinguishes from “the most completely homosexual woman” who would presumably act on her desires), Riviere discusses the “capacity for womanliness” as if it were an intrinsic, biological condition: “[t]he capacity for womanliness was there in this woman [the academic]—and one might even say it exists in the most completely
homosexual woman—but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment” (94). Here, Riviere speaks of the capacity for womanliness as something that resides within all women, including the most “masculine” of the sex, the homosexual woman. She does not, moreover, discuss whether seemingly feminine, heterosexual women may view their gender with similar detachment as a mere masquerade, nor whether men share in woman’s “capacity for womanliness.” Thus, while Riviere questions essentialist notions of gender identity, she does not consistently dismiss the validity of these ideas.

Building on Riviere’s analysis in her own trailblazing works Gender Trouble (1990), Bodies that Matter (1993), and Undoing Gender (2004), Judith Butler presents both gender and sex as performative, that is, as “a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer” (Bodies 234). In other words, Butler emphasizes that sex and gender are not biological conditions that exist within the material body; instead, she asserts that they are discursive concepts that impact the body and identity and create the socially recognizable subject. In her early work, Butler is more interested in gender performativity, the way bodies and identities are shaped through discourse, than in gender performance, the way individuals knowingly embody and perform gender traits and norms. In fact, she rejects Riviere’s conceit of the mask because, she argues, there is no subject that exists before or apart from one’s gender identity. In Bodies That Matter Butler does point out that “[t]he practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining” (231) and she acknowledges that some forms of self-aware gender performance, particularly drag, may be used for disruptive, subversive ends. For example, she recognizes that drag “serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane
impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure” (231). However, she also cautions that “exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality” will not necessarily lead to subversion unless the norms themselves are questioned or rejected in the process (231).

Taking a surprisingly progressive stance on gender for a writer of the 1870s, Marryat uses Leona’s first male disguise and fabricated identity as the Spanish youth Leon d’Acosta to reject the essentialist belief that one’s biological sex determines one’s gender identity and to complicate contemporary discussions of masculinity and femininity. In her firm rejection of this assumed correspondence, Marryat anticipates some twentieth-century gender theorists, such as Butler. Overall, however, Marryat’s conception of gender has more in common with Riviere’s theory of gender performance than Butler’s theory of gender performativity. For Marryat, the set of physical attributes, speech patterns, gestures, and behaviors associated with femininity and masculinity can be adopted or discarded like a mask or costume. Indeed, she forges this link between gender and performance by casting a “born actress” and professional male impersonator as her heroine. Marryat shows that, in practice, men may embrace some “feminine” traits and women may exhibit some “masculine” qualities, and that a wide array of factors, including an individual’s age, race, upbringing, and personality, may affect his or her gender identity.

“One Woman Can’t Fill Every Part”: The Fantasy of Physiognomic Legibility and Failed Female Disguise on the Professional Stage

In a meta-commentary on the sensation novel’s use of melodramatic techniques to make fictional bodies legible, Marryat demonstrates that fictional bodies—in this case, the bodies of actors on the stage, but also the bodies of characters in some sensation novels—may reinforce the belief that there is a physiognomic correspondence between the inner and outer person, suggest that women cannot convincingly adopt male disguises, and assure viewers or readers that
the authorities can easily police and control potentially rebellious individuals. While, in *No Name* the stage functions as a training ground in which actresses can hone their abilities at impersonation and costume and later use these skills to disguise themselves in everyday life, in *Her Father’s Name* Marryat highlights the ways in which acting on the stage differs from passing in disguise in daily life, precisely because the stage perpetuates a fantasy in which women’s bodies remain highly legible and their male disguises become easy to identify. First, on the stage, a woman’s body strictly limits the types of roles she can play, because she must always conform to the dominant understanding of what the “type” looks like. Second, male impersonators on the conventional Victorian stage must highlight their femininity and sexuality, so that, by definition, the successful male impersonator is one who fails to convincingly pass as a man and whose “real” identity as a woman always remains legible to audience members. Unlike Wood’s *East Lynne* or Collins’s *No Name* and *The Moonstone*—sensation novels that promote such fantasies—*Her Father’s Name* draws attention to the ways in which fictional representations of the body may fail to reflect reality. By depicting a heroine who successfully adopts a wide range of convincing disguises off the stage, Marryat opens up the possibility that, in real life if not in the theatre, women may adopt convincing male disguises and seize forbidden rights and privileges in the process.

Marryat diverges from Collins’s representation of the stage by focusing on the stock company system, and, in doing so, she highlights that acting managers sought actors and actresses whose bodies conformed to the ideal conception of certain character types. While, in *No Name*, the novelty of Magdalen’s stage performances arises from the fact that she is “a young lady at home” performing dramatically different character parts in quick succession, Leona and her colleagues at the Memphis Theatre each specialize in a particular “line of business” and
consequently play the same type of character part over and over. As Michael Booth explains in *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (1991), stock companies, which were common during the first half of the nineteenth century and gradually tapered off in popularity as the century progressed (129), allowed actors to "cope with a great number of parts through specializing in certain stock character types repeated from play to play" (126). Under this system, each actor or actress would specialize in a particular "line of business" such as the lead, ingénue, or comic old woman, and would be hired to play that particular "line" or part in every play the company produced.

Marryat suggests that under the stock company system a woman’s body qualifies her to play certain roles, and, because she has a single body, “[o]ne woman can’t fill every part” (83). In the first scene that takes place at the Memphis, Marryat makes this point by lambasting a middle-aged woman who auditions for a part without recognizing the ways in which her aging body limits the types of roles she can play on the stage. It quickly becomes clear that, although she has acted in private theatricals, the unnamed applicant knows nothing of the professional stage, let alone the stock company system in particular. When Benjamin Burrage, the actor-manager of the Memphis, asks, “What’s your line, ma’am?” the woman does not even understand what the question means (83). To make matters worse, when she finally realizes that Burrage expects her to list the type of parts she can play, she naively offers to play any part that needs to be filled. While the woman hopes to appear flexible in front of her prospective manager, this approach backfires, because, from Burrage’s perspective, what she proposes to do is patently impossible. “How could you [play any part] I wished you?” he demands, “[o]ne woman can’t fill every part” (83). Significantly, Burrage suggests this observation applies to *all* actresses: even a highly skilled woman in the prime of her youth and beauty can only play the roles that match her physical appearance. In the case of this particular applicant, whose body has begun to show
noticeable signs of age, even fewer professional opportunities remain available. Burrage glances over the “tall thin antiquated female” whose “drooping” curls “scarcely served to hide the crows’ feet about her eyes” (82). After a summary glance at her face and body, Burrage concludes, “[y]ou’re five and thirty if you’re a day. What the devil do you expect one to do with you at that time of life? [...] You wouldn’t find a place open in my theatre for you unless you meant to go in for comic old woman” (83). Only an amateur who knew nothing of the realities of the professional stage, Marryat suggests, would believe she could play any role despite the specificities and limitations of her body. On the stage, if not in real life, bodies must conform to the viewer’s expectations.

However, while the actress’s body had to conform to audience expectations, in the case of the male impersonator, looking the part was not the same as looking like a man. When Burrage holds auditions for the role of Captain of the Guard in the company’s production of *Semiramis*, he does not seek out a young male actor, but instead searches for a young, sexually attractive woman who is also tall enough to play male parts. When his assistant despairs that, although many applicants come to the audition, there are “none tall enough or handsome enough,” to meet the manager’s specifications, Burrage reiterates his demands: “I will have five foot seven!” and “It’s no good sending in any dumpy ones” (81). Burrage hires Leona to play the Captain of the Guard (and, after she proves herself in this role, to play “all of the male parts that could be adequately represented by a woman”) precisely because her body meets his requirements: her tall stature and broad shoulders physically equip her for male roles, while her beautiful face, voluptuous figure, and shapely legs reassuringly emphasize her femininity (87). In effect, Burrage and actor-managers like him intentionally sought out actresses who would look, not like a man, but like a woman playing male parts.
In her depiction of Leona’s work as a male impersonator on the professional stage, Marryat highlights the ways mid-century burlesques and melodramas contained the subversive possibilities of theatrical cross-dressing, particularly through their feminized and sexualized presentation of the male impersonator’s body. When women played male parts on the stage, particularly in the type of burlesques and melodramas that make up Leona’s professional career, they emphasized rather than downplayed their femininity and sexuality. In fact, for male audience members, one of the main attractions of the male impersonator was her risqué costumes: fitted styles and tight fabrics showed the contours of a woman’s figure, and breeches actually uncovered—sometimes to the very skin, and at the very least to flesh-colored tights—parts of a woman’s body that usually remained buried under layers of fabric. As Kerry Powell points out in *Women and the Victorian Theatre* (1997), the “tights, cinched waists, and ornately trimmed knickers” of male impersonators “called attention to their femininity and transcribed their sexuality into the realm of male desire” (27). These costumes often displayed women’s feet, ankles, calves, knees, and even thighs, at a time when women’s legs, a highly fetishized part of the body, played a starring role in pornography (Davis 112).

Thus, when Leona portrays the Captain of the Guard, she does not wear the type of sturdy metal armor that would truly protect a man in battle. Instead, she wears a distinctly feminine costume that exhibits her body and sexuality. She describes the splendid costume to Valera: “[i]t will dazzle your eyes only to look at me—all gold and silver scales, with a blue velvet petticoat and white and scarlet feathers in my casque” (86). In this description of her costume and the effect she imagines it will have on male audience members, Leona is poised to threaten her viewers not by taking on male roles, but by dazzling them with her gleaming costume and enticing sexuality. By providing Leona with a gorgeous costume composed of mermaid-like
scales, a highly unrealistic “blue velvet petticoat” that showcases rather than covers her legs, and a jauntily decorated helmet, Burrage, like other Victorian actor-managers, neutralizes the threat of the male impersonator by highlighting her womanhood.

Consequently, while Leona’s impressive male impersonations do threaten to reveal that masculinity is a mere performance—a collection of easily imitated speech patterns, expressions, gestures, and behaviors that can be produced on the stage by a woman as easily as by a man—within the context of the burlesque or melodrama, this apparent threat to essentialized gender categories gets minimized or even denied. After all, by the time Leona becomes a famous male impersonator, her name and reputation precede each of her performances: the theatre promotes its shows by promising impressive feats of male impersonation by Leona d’Acosta (Leona’s stage name) and audience members attend the show expecting to see a woman playing male parts. Once Leona appears on stage, her scantily clad body confirms and reminds audience members of what they already know: that she is a woman. Significantly, these burlesques and melodramas advance the comforting illusion that women cannot successfully pass as men, because audience members can easily identify male impersonators as women. Indeed, male audience members experience not only the titillation of viewing fetishized female body parts, but also the self-assurance that comes from seeing through a woman’s male “disguise.”

Of course, Leona’s impressive male impersonations do raise an important question: if gender is an essential aspect of identity, how can a woman possibly perform the supposedly innate signs of masculinity? Even the relatively conservative male impersonations of 1870s burlesque and melodrama, which, as we have seen, tended to reinforce comforting notions of the legibility of the body and the impossibility of successful female disguise, troubled some critics. Reflecting on this period, Powell notes that “cross-dressed performances caused some uneasiness
on the part of critics who reflected upon the implications of what they saw” (27). For example, in a review of J. Palgrave Simpson and H. C. Merivale’s play *All for Her* (1875), critic William Archer observes, “in point of taste, a woman masquerading as a man is always questionable” (quoted in Powell 28).

By the 1890s, when male impersonators dared to more realistically look like men by altering their costumes in ways that obscured their femininity, reviewers condemned both the actresses and their performances with greater vehemence. In his review of the 1894 all-female production of *As You Like It*, in which actresses strove to convincingly look and act like men, Archer declares that the women have gone too far. Because they have abandoned the strictures of earlier male impersonators who, Archer observes, mainly confined themselves to “beardless” roles and entertained male audience members through “the comprehensible attraction of burlesque,” he pans the performance as “ugly,” “uncomely,” “grotesque,” and “painful”—entirely lacking in artistic merit (quoted in Powell 29). Similarly, in a review of Sarah Bernhardt’s portrayal of Hamlet at the Adelphi Theatre in 1899, *The Era* asserts, “[i]t is only the unsexed woman […] the woman who, physically and physiologically, approaches nearly to the masculine—the monstrosity in short—who can deceive us as to her gender on the stage” (quoted in Powell 30). As these later reviews suggest, when women did convincingly pass as men on the stage, they disturbed some drama critics by illustrating that the physical and behavioral signs of woman’s difference from man were socially-constructed rather than innate. Although Marryat, writing in the 1870s, stresses the actor-manager’s containment strategies rather than the subversive potential of the stage, she does use her heroine’s disguises in everyday life to launch similar challenges to essentialist beliefs regarding gender.
“I Never Saw a Man’s Part Better Filled by a Woman”: Leona’s Male Disguises

Over the course of Her Father’s Name, Leona not only disguises her social class and profession like the anti-heroines of early novels like East Lynne and No Name, and her race like Murthwaite and the three Brahmin from The Moonstone, but also her gender. While, from the beginning, the sensation novel showcases masculine women who transgress traditional gender norms, and chip away at essentialist notions of identity through these characters’ “masculine” actions, many sensation novelists of the 1860s stop short of depicting female characters that adopt successful male disguises. While masculine women demonstrate that women can exhibit some “masculine” traits and perform certain tasks as well as men, their status as women living in patriarchal societies often limits them. In contrast, the female character who successfully passes as a man challenges the notion that there is any essential, intrinsic difference between men and women and enjoys increased mobility and freedom because others perceive her as a man.

By 1876 when Marryat publishes Her Father’s Name, women enjoyed more rights than they had in the 1860s: Britain passed the first Married Women’s Property Act, Oxford and Cambridge founded several women’s colleges, and dress reformers began to criticize certain fashions because they restricted women’s movements and damaged their health. While the women’s rights movement was still in a very early stage at this time and many women had not yet begun to feel the effects of these changes, this intellectual climate of political, educational, and health reforms seems to inspire Marryat. She responds to Collins’s No Name as well as other sensation novels of the 1860s that omit gender-based disguise from consideration, by depicting a

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5 Leona adopts the following names and identities over the course of the novel: Leon d’Acosta, a Spanish young man; Donna Anita Silvano, an older Spanish woman; Elena d’Acosta, Valera’s sister and a famous male impersonator; Don Christobal Valera, Leona’s male friend and Spanish Correspondent to the Evans and Troubridge firm; and Miss Jane Gibson, a middle-aged female companion to Lucilla.
heroine who excels in male disguise and by disrupting essentialist notions of gender identity in the process. Ultimately, she suggests that categories of gender identity that label people as either “masculine” or “feminine” prove overly simplistic and fail to account for the variety of personality traits, interests, and talents shared by both men and women.  

For Leona, adopting a male disguise does not entail dramatically changing either her physical appearance or her personality and behavior. As we have seen, Leona possess a mix of “masculine” and “feminine” physical features. Similarly, she exhibits a variety of so-called masculine and feminine traits. When Leona adopts male disguises, it is not so much her behavior, but rather the gendered lens through which people assess it, that changes. When Leona presents herself as a woman, she seems unmistakably “masculine” because of all the ways she transgresses gender norms. After all, long before Leona adopts a male disguise, she has already travelled in the woods by herself, bluntly stated her opinions, and warded off threats of male violence with her trusty bowie knife and pistol. Similarly, when she presents herself as a man her “feminine” qualities—which were always a part of her personality, but seemed few and far between when she presented herself as a woman—suddenly become more noticeable. In this way, Marryat shows that disguise may accentuate rather than conceal parts of a person’s identity—not on a merely symbolic level, as we saw in *East Lynne*, but because it forces characters and readers alike to assess the body and identity through a different set of assumptions and expectations. This process reveals, moreover, how much the stereotypes we use to

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6 Most British women did not receive access to higher education, for example, until the twentieth century. In *Educating Women*, Laura Morgan Green notes, “access to higher education directly altered the lives of a very small minority of women in England in the nineteenth century [… ] by 1900, according to Carol Dyhouse, women made up only 16 percent of students in institutions of higher education in Great Britain [citation omitted]. However, despite the fact that these early reforms only materially affected a small segment of the population, and disproportionally assisted members of the professional and leisured classes, they nonetheless influenced the thinking of writers like Marryat, who imagined new possibilities for women in their fiction.
understand other people render parts of their complex identity immediately obvious, while obscuring other aspects of it.

Although Leona’s behavior does not dramatically change when she passes as a man, because other characters believe her to be a man she gains new advantages, freedoms, and opportunities. By adopting her first male disguise as the Spanish youth Leon d’Acosta, Leona leaves her hometown in rural Brazil, obtains passage aboard a steamer bound for America, and lives aboard the ship for several weeks without facing any of the problems Magdalen does when she runs away from home. In *No Name*, Magdalen only accepts the morally questionable assistance of her con-artist uncle, Captain Wragge, out of desperation and necessity. Wragge informs Magdalen that her relatives have drafted a handbill detailing her physical appearance and have hired a private detective to circulate this physical description at the hotels, train stations, and theatre (158). With this detailed physical description circulating in “pitiless print” (156), Magdalen fears that passerby might identify her undisguised face and body. However, she cannot seek privacy and shelter, as a man might do in similar circumstances, because, as a young woman traveling alone, she cannot obtain reputable lodgings. As Wragge points out, there are plenty of “excellent hotels for single gentlemen” in York, but “[t]he very worst hotels in the world for handsome young ladies, who present themselves alone at the door, without male escort, without a maid in attendance, and without a single article of luggage” (159). Thus, Magdalen takes her “first fatal step downwards” (179) by accepting Wragge’s assistance in procuring lodgings not because of a sudden and drastic moral lapse, but because she is a woman travelling alone and, without the outward trappings of familial and class identity (a male relative, a maid), she cannot answer the deceptively simple question “Where are you to sleep?” (160) on her first night away from home.
In contrast, Leona avoids detection, obtains lodgings and passage aboard a steamer, and circumvents the typical limitations of a woman traveling alone by adopting her first male disguise. Although Leona’s friend, Don Christobal Valera, and the local male authorities search “the nearest villages and towns through which…[she] must have passed in order to leave home,” “not a scrap of information was to be gained” (48) because all of the potential witnesses try to recall a woman rather than a man conforming to Leona’s physical description. Because no one notices the “young man driving a mule”—Leona in disguise—she moves with perfect freedom through the very public spaces where search parties seek her out. Once on board the steamer, she travels to America without facing criticism or opposition from any of the men on board the ship, except for her jealous friend Valera, the one man to whom she eventually reveals her identity.

Similarly, Leona’s second male disguise, which she adopts for several months, allows her to conduct an undercover investigation regarding Anson’s murder. For this disguise, Leona passes as her own friend, Don Christobal Valera, as the Spanish Correspondent in the English mercantile firm Evans and Troubridge for two to three months. While her sex would normally prevent her from acquiring such a position, she proves herself entirely capable of completing the required translation work, for she speaks fluent Spanish, English, French, and Portuguese. Leona seizes the opportunity to pass as the Spanish Correspondent because Henry Evans, the only surviving partner of the firm and brother of the deceased George Evans, invites Valera to live in his home during his stay in England. From this inside position, Leona hopes to investigate her

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7 Earlier in the novel, the real Valera, who works for an affiliated New York firm, Upjohn and Halliday, receives a formal letter of introduction and instructions to travel to the English firm in order to oversee the firms’ business negotiations with “certain Spanish houses” (141). Before he can leave for New York for London, however, Valera catches an almost fatal illness and he requires several months of bedrest to recover. Unbeknownst to Valera, Leona takes his letter of introduction and presents herself as the Spanish Correspondent during this interim.
father’s past and her uncle’s supposed role in the murder. Again, male disguise helps Leona achieve her goals, for her detective efforts succeed and she clears her father’s name.

While, for Leona, male disguise functions as a means to an end, for Marryat, it provides an opportunity to reject the automatic correspondence between sex and gender identity, complicate and blend the categories of “masculinity” and “femininity,” and expose the gendered lens through which people assess bodies. Marryat’s critiques regarding gender become particularly apparent during Leona’s first male disguise aboard the steamer. By showing that the supposed young man, Leon d’Acosta, can exhibit some “feminine” behaviors and still be accepted and even admired by his male compatriots aboard the ship, Marryat reveals that masculinity is not necessarily opposed to femininity, and that, in fact, men should embrace some positive feminine traits. In one important scene, Leona challenges a male passenger named Guzman to a duel, wins the duel by shooting her adversary first, and reacts to her victory with “womanly” anxiety rather than conventional male bravado. Marryat observes, “[a]ll the woman had come back to her in the idea she might have killed her antagonist” (59). Leona grows “deadly pale” (59) and “shak[es] like an aspen leaf” (60) at the thought she may have “done irredeemable harm” to her opponent (60). Once she realizes that Guzman has survived the gunshot, Leona cries, asks his forgiveness, and cares for him during his recovery (60-62). Valera, jealous of her attentions towards another man, accuses her of jeopardizing her disguise by acting like a woman: “Do you want the whole lot of them to know that you’re a woman? [...] [Y]ou betray yourself with every word you speak [...] this romantic interest about the man you were resolved [...] to meet, is ridiculous—foolishly and absurdly feminine, and if you do not show a little more reason in the matter, your sex will become apparent to the whole company” (60-61). Marryat points out that Valera speaks from a position of anger and jealousy rather than of
genuine concern, and, significantly, his prediction that Leona will accidently reveal her biological sex by acting like a stereotypical woman proves completely unfounded.

Despite engaging in some traditional feminine behaviors, Leona does not reveal her biological sex. The other men on board the ship define manhood more broadly and inclusively than Valera, and simply accept as unremarkable the fact that the young man Leon exhibits a mix of masculine and feminine traits. First, they assess Leon’s gendered behaviors according to other aspects of his identity, particularly his ethnicity and age. Consequently, if on any level Leon’s emotional outburst and apparent distress seem surprising given his supposed sex, these behaviors can be explained by his foreign effeminacy and apparent youth. In other words, Leon exhibits an acceptable variation of manliness given his nationality and age. But Marryat goes even further than this by suggesting that even dominant forms of masculinity should accommodate and incorporate qualities that have been traditionally marked as feminine. When Guzman—a manly man, in the traditional sense—notices Leon’s distress, he holds out his hand in friendship, and remarks, “[g]ood lad, […] I admire a steady aim and an unflinching nerve, but I like a tender heart better” (60). For Guzman and the other men, Leon exhibits admirable qualities—sympathy, kindness, a respect for human life—that may be found not only in women but also in men. According to Marryat, then, “masculinity” is not directly tied to a person’s biological sex, nor is it a homogeneous, rigid category that expresses a fixed set of behaviors separate and distinct from those expressed by “femininity.” Instead, she suggests there exists a whole range of masculinities influenced by an individual’s disposition, life experiences and the other aspects of his identity, and that these various masculinities actually draw upon and borrow from the personality traits traditionally associated with women.
Critics of *Her Father’s Name*, like some of the novel’s characters, have been too quick to label some of Leona’s behaviors as proof of her essential womanly identity, when they are, instead, either the direct result of her changed life circumstances or a strategic “masquerade of femininity.” These critical analyses tend to focus on the scene described above, in which Leona exhibits so-called womanly behaviors after nearly killing Guzman in the duel and/or on Leona’s supposed womanly and sympathetic aversion to violence. For example, in “Sensation Fiction and the New Woman” (2013) Greta Depledge contends that Leona’s “feminine sensibilities remain close to the surface of her barely concealed identity” throughout her time in male disguise, and that her “retreat to feminine sensibilities” after the duel earns her sympathy because it proves “her adoption of male attributes does not extend to her being at ease with killing” (198).

Similarly, in *The Victorian Freak Show* (2009), Lillian E. Craton argues that Leona noticeably diverges from earlier sensation heroines such as Lady Audley by eschewing violence and thereby gaining the reader’s sympathy. In her chapter on masculine women in the sensation novel, Craton differentiates between “adulterous or violent characters” who garner so much disapproval that they cannot function as role models and masculine women who, she claims, are physically but not morally transgressive, and consequently earn readers’ sympathy.

However, the masculine women that populate sensation novels are often physically *and* morally transgressive; indeed, they challenge and rework contemporary ideas about the types of behaviors in which moral women should be allowed to engage. Leona, for one, is both a masculine woman and an occasionally violent character: she carries weapons, proudly proclaims that she will protect herself if anyone threatens her safety, warns the malevolent blackmailer who drove her father to suicide that she will kill him if he approaches her, and shoots and nearly kills Guzman. The difference between *Her Father’s Name* and some earlier sensation novels is not
that the heroine eschews violence, but that, in Marryat’s text, the violent woman can remain a sympathetic character. More clearly than its sensational predecessors, *Her Father’s Name* frames certain acts of violence as a form of self-defense rather than as a crime and advocates for a woman’s right to defend herself.

I would argue, moreover, that although Leona’s respect for human life does earn her admiration after the duel, her actions are less a product of her innate “womanly” disposition, and more a recent development due to her newfound knowledge about her father’s past and its potential implications for her own identity. While at the beginning of the novel, Leona defends herself and those she loves by brandishing weapons and threatening violence, once she learns that her father died without clearing his name of murder charges in England, she becomes more wary of her own acts of violence and how they might affect her father’s legacy and her own reputation. When we consider this secret detail of her family history and Leona’s own determination to disprove the charges against her father, her distress at the thought of killing Guzman, even within the relatively honorable and fair context of a duel, takes on a new meaning. After all, she does not want anyone else to believe that a murderer’s blood runs through her veins, giving credence to the accusations against her father. In addition, because certain details in her father’s story give Leona cause to doubt him, she desperately wants to convince herself that she is neither the daughter of a criminal nor a criminal herself. Consequently, Leona’s “womanly” behaviors in the wake of the duel must not be read as a reflection of her permanent gender identity, but instead in terms of her evolving psychology and complex life circumstances.

In failing to consider Leona’s specific family history in assessing her choices, critics replicate the inaccurate judgments of some of the novel’s characters. Throughout the novel, Marryat shows that Valera misinterprets Leona’s feelings and behavior because he tries to
understand them through the lens of common stereotypes of women rather than by considering Leona’s personal motivations and history. In particular, he constantly assumes that when Leona seems sad, she must be pining for another man, and when she appears frightened, she must be falling prey to a host of silly feminine fears. For example, when they reach New York, Valera jealously assumes “each sigh or downcast look” must be proof of Leona’s romantic longing for Guzman, when, in reality, she despairs for her father (65). Similarly, when Leona declares that she will turn down the opportunity to join a Boston acting troupe because, unbeknownst to Valera, she has learned that the theatre manager, Rouse, knew her father in England and recognizes a resemblance in her face, Valera assumes it must be “the distance, the uncertainty, the strange life that frightens you” or “the thought of our separation” that decides her against the trip (77). Although Leona rejects this sentimental narrative “with no small degree of irritation” (77), Valera circulates the story anyway. Against Leona’s wishes and without her knowledge, he informs Rouse that she must decline his job offer for precisely these reasons.

In a move that anticipates Riviere’s central argument in “Femininity as Masquerade,” Marryat also suggests that Leona performs a dramatic and exaggerated form of femininity for Valera in order to placate him and avoid criticism during her time in male disguise. When Valera observes Leona interacting with other men aboard the ship, he notes “the woman was a born actress” and he could see “how much she enjoyed keeping up the little mystification” (47). However, Valera soon becomes fiercely jealous over Leona’s familiarities with other men. In order to reassure him that it is all an act—to convince him that she retains the womanly qualities he longs for and has wearied of the necessity of passing as a man—Leona repeatedly performs melodramatic versions of feminine weakness, exhaustion, and helplessness behind closed doors. For example, in a typical scene, in which Valera has become increasingly frustrated over Leona’s
male disguise, the moment the two of them enter Leona’s private cabin, “she staggered, reeled, and finally fell over the traveling-case that stood upon the threshold. Christobal’s illusion vanished—he had his arms around her in a moment” (62). Marryat invites readers to view this scene as a conscious performance on Leona’s part rather than as a show of genuine feminine weakness in several ways: first, Leona does not typically conform to these particular feminine stereotypes and does seem to genuinely enjoy passing as a man; second, the exaggerated expressions, gestures, and actions in these scenes come off as stilted and artificial to readers, because they have already seen Leona’s superior acting abilities; and, most importantly, at this point in the narrative, readers have already witnessed Leona easily dupe Valera by temporarily performing the part of the obedient, loving woman in order to get what she wants in the long-term.\(^8\) Thus, while Leona embraces a mix of both masculine and feminine behaviors, some of her feminine traits, like her masculine ones, may be a self-conscious performance.

Significantly, Marryat updates Collins’s earlier conceptualization of disguise, as an innate capacity belonging to a small, select group of individuals because of their exceptional bodies. In earlier sensation novels such as Collins’s *No Name* and *The Moonstone* few people can adopt disguise. Moreover, characters like Magdalen and Murthwaite who do successfully pass as members of different groups can only do so because their “natural” physical features facilitate

\(^8\) In one of Valera’s few truly dishonorable moments, he attempts to coerce Leona into marriage with him by forcing her to choose between marriage and an even worse alternative. After the death of Leona’s father, Valera approaches the village patriarchs, the padre and commandant, and proposes Leona live with his domineering mother, Don Josefa. Valera knows that Leona would hate to live with his mother, because her “independent spirit would chafe at any coercion on the part of another woman” (40). He also fully recognizes that “by mentioning the matter to the commandant and padre, [he had] attempted to assume a certain amount of coercion with Leona” (40). In doing this, Valera hopes to make marriage “the watchword of liberty instead of bondage in her eyes” by offering her the chance to marry him and travel outside the “narrow limits of her native town” to New York (40). Leona, being much smarter than Valera, immediately discovers and resents his plan. Rather than confronting him about it, however, she temporarily lulls him into a sense of false confidence in order to escape the town before he, the padre, or the commandant can stop her. Leona promises to think over his proposal, “charm[s] her listener” by calling him by the familiar pet name “Tobalito,” and allows him to kiss her goodbye, without expressing the slightest anger (39). However, Marryat reveals that Leona “resented [Valera’s actions] far more strongly than she had shown,” and merely hides her rage and performs feminine compliance in order to escape the town without interference (40).
disguise by becoming a part of it. In Magdalen’s case, her indeterminate physiognomy prevents viewers from easily classifying her face, and her “mobile” features seem to change, in a protean fashion, to allow her to convincingly portray many different types of faces. Similarly, Murthwaite’s ambiguous “brown” skin allows him to pass as an Indian in India but to look sufficiently European in England. At first, it may appear that Marryat will follow this trend. After all, like Murthwaite, Leona’s physical features seem to mark her status as a liminal figure: she is both “masculine” and “feminine,” English and Brazilian, and her body reflects this mixed identity. Since Marryat focuses on Leona’s success at male disguise, one might also argue that Leona’s “masculine” features help her pass as a man. However, Leona’s physical features do not allow her to seamlessly move between masculine and feminine identities; instead, her varied features, and through them her mixed identity, always remain visually apparent, marking her, simultaneously, as both an insider and outsider, whether she presents herself as a man or a woman. Leona’s face is composed of distinctly “feminine” and “masculine” features rather than androgynous ones. While androgynous features might have allowed Leona to present herself as a woman or man in much the same way Murthwaite’s brown skin permits him to pass as an Indian or European, Leona’s “masculine” features stand out when she presents herself as a woman and her “feminine” features become more apparent when she disguises herself as a man.

In a departure from Collins, Marryat argues that the physical body does not determine one’s capacity for disguise, and, consequently, she extends the possibility of disguise to a wider group of people. Despite Leona’s obvious physical (and behavioral) departure from popular notions of ideal manhood while in disguise, she successfully passes as a man. Leona’s disguises ultimately succeed where Magdalen’s fail, not because her physical features change, chameleon-like, to suit her different disguises, but because, Marryat suggests, people recognize the physical
and behavioral diversity amongst men and women. Because Leona’s success is less predicated on her exceptional body than Magdalen’s, Marryat offers more hope than Collins that not only her heroine, but also many other women, could transgress gender norms and seize additional opportunities and freedoms by assuming male disguise.

When she adopts a male disguise, Leona makes few alterations to her physical appearance. For her first disguise, she simply dons “a loosely-made white suit of clothes” (45) that used to belong to her father (46) and “a broad leaf hat, worn well over [her] brows” (45). With her womanly figure disguised by this baggy clothing and her face partially covered by her hat, Leona also chops off her long, chestnut hair, figuratively shedding her femininity without remorse. As with her first male disguise, when Leona passes as Valera she does very little to alter her physical appearance; she merely wears “fashionable new habiliments” and cuts her hair short to suit her supposed sex (147). Notably, Leona never utilizes her knowledge of stage cosmetics to make more drastic alterations to her physical appearance when passing as a man, by darkening her complexion, attaching a prosthetic nose, or gluing whiskers to her chin, for example. Instead, she simply assumes male attire and cuts her hair.

During Leona’s time disguised as Valera, Marryat depicts many characters assessing the heroine’s physical appearance and behavior for its adherence to and departure from dominant English masculinity. In these scenes, Marryat shows several English men scrutinizing Leona’s “natural” facial and bodily features. At first, it may seem that Leona’s more “masculine” features will assist her disguise. The English doctor, Tom Hastings, admits, for example, that the young Valera is “taller than I am, and broader into the bargain” (145). However, because Hastings and several of the other English men who frequent Henry Evans’s home feel threatened by Valera (because the women they hope to marry find him attractive), they also point out his more
feminine features, in order to embarrass him in front of the ladies and call attention to what they see as his inferior brand of effeminate, foreign masculinity. For example, they point out that Valera has “got a pretty face” and “delicately […] chiseled” features, which are not “generally considered desirable in a man” (139). Although, as a woman, Leona’s faint moustache marks her masculinity, as Valera, the men view this scanty facial hair—“the merest down upon his upper lip” (139)—as proof of Valera’s youth and effeminacy. In their eyes, he is “fat,” “soft,” and “useless” (144-145).

Although the English men scorn Leona’s “feminine” physical features, she forces them to begrudgingly admit her masculine prowess by demonstrating her mastery of the tests of both English and “foreign” masculinity. Based on Valera’s physical appearance and supposed nationality, Hastings concludes Valera is just “[a] fat Spaniard tinkling a guitar. I bet the fellow can neither smoke, ride, nor play a game at billiards” (144). His friend, Sir Sydney Marchant agrees, “None of these d—d foreigners ever can [succeed at these tasks] […] and this one is a mere boy” (144). Hoping to discredit Valera’s claim to masculinity even further, Hastings insists, “[a] mere boy? He looks more like a woman stuck into boy’s clothes to me” (145). Undeterred by these insults, Leona proceeds to best Hastings, Marchant, and their other friend, Captain Rivers, at all of their proposed tests of English masculinity. For example, Hastings remarks to Valera, “I do not suppose the Don is likely to care for pyramids […] [s]o thoroughly English a game would have few charms for a foreigner” (145). Leona saucily responds, “I will show you how we play [in New York],” and, picking up the cue stick, “ma[kes] a stroke that put all that had gone before it to shame” (145). When, much to the chagrin of Hastings, Marchant, and Rivers, the ladies applaud and praise Valera’s superior skill, the men insist it was mere luck, and Leona “play[s] a still better stroke than the first” to prove them wrong (145). In addition, Leona
boasts of the masculine skills she acquired while living a rugged life in the wilds of Brazil: she rides bare-back, lassos wild horses and cattle, and “know[s] not only how and when to use [a broadsword], but on whom [to use it]!” (146). Lizzie Vereker, Rivers’ sweetheart, remarks to her lover: “[t]hat beats anything you have ever done” (146). The narrator confirms, “[b]efore they parted that night, the supposed Don Valera had proved to the gentlemen assembled in the Evans’ house that he could not only smoke and play a game of billiards, but hold his own with the very best of them there” (147). Leona’s mere assertion that she is a man convinces the other guests of her apparent biological sex and her “masculine” behaviors prove that she is not only a man, but also sufficiently masculine.

It is true that some literary critics doubt the efficacy of Leona’s male disguises and cast the Englishmen’s disparaging comments as proof of their knowledge of her biological sex. In her published conference paper, “‘More like a woman stuck into boy’s clothes’: Sexual deviance in Florence Marryat’s Her Father’s Name” Catherine Pope argues that Leona’s male disguises fail to persuade any of her fellow characters that she is, in fact, a man.⁹ Specifically, Pope argues that when Leona tries to pass herself off as Valera, Dr. Hastings’s “repeated references to Leona’s womanly shape reveal that he sees through her disguise” and that because “[e]veryone apart from Lucilla comments on Leona’s womanliness” all of the characters must, consequently, know she is a woman and “collude in her artifice” (4). However, contrary to Pope’s claims, Leona’s noticeably “feminine” features, and other characters’ comments about them do not prove that anyone detects Leona’s disguise. While the Englishmen claim that Valera looks and acts like an effeminate foreigner, a boy, and even a woman in order to discredit his masculinity and deny his

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⁹ While I would not normally cite a conference paper, I make an exception here because Catherine Pope is the foremost scholar on Florence Marryat and, as I have explained, there is very little published criticism on Her Father’s Name.
status as a sexual competitor in the marriage market, Marryat stresses that no one truly doubts his sex. For example, after the disguised Leona leaves and the real Valera arrives at the Evans’ household, Henry Evans remarks, “[i]t is strange […] that I never had any doubts about [the false Valera] from the beginning. I am generally considered ‘cute’ enough in business matters, but he completely took me in” (256). Mrs. Evans agrees, “[t]he only thing that ever struck me about him as strange was his extreme youth. He professed to be two-and-twenty, but he did not look more than eighteen” (254).

Significantly, Leona’s fictional success traveling in male disguise through Brazil, America, and England was not without its real-life precedents. Like Leona, many actual American and British women passed as men during the nineteenth century despite their noticeably feminine physical features and without adopting elaborate disguises. Because of limited historical records, we cannot know the exact number of women who cross-dressed as men during this period. In Britain, cross-dressing was not in itself an illegal and punishable offence. Although some court cases involving the charge of buggery provide evidence of male crossdressing, these cases do not afford similar information on female cross-dressers because of the nature of the offense.  

More information exists about American women who cross-dressed

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10 Women could not be charged with “buggery” or sodomy, although, occasionally, male cross-dressers were charged with this offense. In the famous Boulton and Park Case of 1871, Thomas Ernest Boulton and Fredrick William Park, two well-known cross-dressers who dressed in drag both on and off the stage, were charged “with conspiring and inciting persons to commit an unnatural offence.” However, because the prosecution could not provide evidence that the couple had committed sodomy, and because they could not argue that wearing women’s clothing for the purposes of theatrical entertainment was a crime in and of itself, the men went free. As Laurence Senelick points out in “Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-Century Stage” (1993), the men’s theatrical roles as female cross-dressers were an integral part of their defense: “Time and again, the defense attorneys elicited from witnesses, including Boulton’s doting mother, the facts that he performed widely in amateur theatricals as a woman; that his intimacy with [Park] resulted from a mutual interest in dramatics; that references in letter to their ‘matrimonial squabbles’ referred to the plays that they acted in; that the numerous photographs of Boulton in drag were made for distribution to his adorning public; that wearing these ‘costumes’ on the street was a harmless if tasteless lark” (86). While cross-dressing on the stage was a permissible form of entertainment, on the streets it could be taken as a dangerous form of subversion or perversion.
during this period, in part because some municipal and state laws explicitly outlawed cross-dressing or disguise and often applied to women as well as men. As Claire Sears points out in *Arresting Dress* (2015), in the United States, “[b]etween 1848 and 1900 thirty-four cities in twenty-one states passed prohibitions against cross-dressing, typically “as part of broader prohibitions against public indecency” (3). In addition to these municipal laws, California and New York passed state-wide laws “that criminalized public ‘disguise’ or ‘masquerade’ for the purpose of avoiding identification” (4). In addition to legal records, medical records from the American Civil War provide insight into women’s attempts to pass as men. Reportedly, hundreds of American women disguised as men fought for both the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War, and their biological sex remained undiscovered until their injuries or death necessitated a medical examination of their bodies (Bullough and Bullough 158). Presumably, many more disguised women who survived the war without injury were never exposed.

Despite the rather scanty historical records, reports of individuals who cross-dressed prove that women did pass as men during this period and gained additional opportunities, rights, and freedoms by doing so. Perhaps most famously, Dr. James Barry successfully passed as a man for decades, opening educational and professional doors that would have remained shut if she had presented herself as a woman. In 1812, Barry graduated from the Edinburgh Medical College fifty years before British women could obtain such a degree (Heilmann 84). In 1813 she joined the British Army, and, over the course of her storied career, she worked as a medical officer in Jamaica, Saint Helena, Barbados, Antigua, Malta, Corfu, the Crimea, and Montreal (Bullough and Bullough 161). As Bullough and Bullough explain in *Cross Dressing, Sex, and
Gender (1993), after returning to England for her retirement, Barry continued to live as a man, and her biological sex was not discovered until her death in 1865 (161).¹¹

Significantly, women did not need to look “masculine” in order to successfully pass as men during the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Indeed, British and American women with petite frames, “feminine” facial features, and high-pitched voices frequently passed as men. For example, although Barry “did not fit the standard masculine image, being described as a peppery little figure with dyed red hair, a high-pitched voice, and tiny white hands,” who, as a member of the British Army, “looked absurd in the full-dress uniform with cockaded hat and huge sword,” her biological sex was not discovered until her death (Bullough and Bullough 161). Similarly, Mary Anderson, who was born in Scotland circa 1840, presented herself as Murray Hall, for a short time in Edinburgh and for over thirty years in America. Although “[s]he was slight, not particularly masculine in build, and had a squeaky voice,” she accumulated considerable wealth, became active in Tammany Hall politics, and married twice (Bullough and Bullough 161). The American Babe Bean, who was only “five feet two inches tall and weighed about a hundred pounds” began passing as a man in 1898 in order to go to the Philippines during the Spanish American War and maintained her male identity until her death in 1936 (Bullough and Bullough 158-159). In the case of Albert F, a British woman who had been living and working as a married man for years, discovery only came about in 1916 when she was drafted to fight in World War I. When a doctor for the Medical Examining Board discovered her biological sex, the recruiting sergeant was questioned as to why he had not realized that Albert, “a slightly

¹¹ Not only highly educated and financially successful women like Barry, but also those of the working-class, passed themselves off as men in order to obtain economic advantages. Indeed, the Victorian writer and diarist Arthur Munby suggests that many British women workers passed as men in order to earn a competitive wage, particularly towards the end of the century when factory legislation pushed women back into more traditional “female” spheres of work (Heilmann 84).
built, fair-haired, and smooth-faced conscript, with a soft and gentle voice” was a woman. The sergeant defended himself by pointing out that many male recruits “have effeminate voices” and that “when a great many men are being dealt with […] individual characteristics are passed without comment” (quoted in Bullough and Bullough 162).

Thus, contrary to Pope, we cannot assume that because characters notice a disguised woman’s “feminine” physical features that they necessarily believe she is a woman. Instead, as the above testimony and Her Father’s Name suggest, a woman with “feminine” features, a petite stature, or a high-pitched voice could pass as a man precisely because most people realize that whatever ideals of masculinity and femininity dominate a given culture, actual men and women exhibit a range of different masculinities and femininities. While Leona and the real women discussed above may not have conformed to ideals of dominant English or American masculinity, they nonetheless convincingly passed as men for long periods of time while avoiding detection, because people recognize that, in practice, men look, sound, and act in a variety of ways.

Marryat promotes progressive beliefs regarding gender identity as long as Leona remains in male disguise by suggesting that a person’s biological sex does not necessarily dictate his or her gender identity, pointing out that there exists a wide range of masculinities and femininities, and exposing the extent to which people judge others’ behavior through a lens of gendered expectations and assumptions. She also argues that a woman can pass as a man regardless of her physical appearance, even if she exhibits some “feminine” behaviors. However, it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which Marryat qualifies or retracts some of her most radical critiques regarding the legibility of the body, essential identity, and gender at the end of the novel.
Marryat’s Conservative Ending: The Persistence of Essential Identity, Bodily Legibility and Traditional Gender Roles

First, Marryat seems unwilling to totally reject the idea that each person inherits an essential identity that manifests itself on the surfaces of the body. While she uses Leona’s male disguises to demonstrate that her heroine does not fit into rigid, socially-defined categories of gender, Marryat does not totally dismiss the possibility that Leona’s mix of “masculine” and “feminine” physical features reflect her essential (but admittedly complex) gender identity. To an even greater extent, Marryat upholds essentialist beliefs regarding race. Although she briefly explores the ways in which Leona naturalizes her supposed French lineage, she ultimately suggests that Leona inherits her mother’s Brazilian “blood” and her father’s English “blood,” providing her with a mixed-race identity that impacts her physical appearance and behavior.

In addition, Marryat affirms the body’s ability to disclose familial identity and, in some troubling ways, suggests that Leona’s success as a detective depends upon her physical resemblance to George Evans and her identity as his daughter. In his review of Her Father’s Name for The Academy (1877), George Saintsbury complains that Marryat makes it too easy for Leona to clear her father’s name and solve the mystery of Anson’s murder. Comparing Marryat’s novel to No Name, Saintsbury points out that whereas “Mr. Wilkie Collins embroils his mysteries and plagues his characters,” in Her Father’s Name “everybody tells Leona everything she wishes to know in a charmingly obliging and communicative manner” (6). In updating Collins’s novel, Marryat presents a much more triumphant heroine who proves herself a capable amateur detective. However, she also suggests that Leona easily solves the mystery and does so more effectively than anyone else ever could precisely because she is her father’s daughter. It is Leona’s physical resemblance to her father—a biological inheritance Collins’s Magdalen does not share—that acts as the figurative key during Leona’s detective operations, opening doors that
would have remained locked for any other person. In affirming the importance of the biological aspects of Leona’s identity and by suggesting her physical resemblance to her father manifests itself so strongly that even her disguises and impersonations cannot hide their relationship, Marryat affirms the truth-telling capabilities of the body and pushes back against the notion of identity as mere performance. In addition, by suggesting that Leona’s father acts through his daughter, she diminishes the heroine’s agency in troubling ways.

As Saintsbury correctly points out, in *No Name* Collins “plagues” his heroine with seemingly insurmountable difficulties in her quest to regain her father’s fortune. By the end of the novel, Magdalen has disguised herself as a servant named Louisa and accepted a position in her uncle the Admiral Bartram’s home, in order to locate a Secret Trust that serves as an amendment to her deceased husband’s will. Although her disguise gains her access to the Admiral’s large house, and the hundreds of cabinets, drawers, and other potential hiding places it contains, Magdalen cannot search any of these locked compartments for the Trust because she does not have the necessary keys. While aimlessly wandering about the grounds one day all but having given up hope, Magdalen discovers an ancient, rusted key that she believes may open some of the locks at St. Crux. Hoping to find additional keys, she searches the monastic ruins on her uncle’s property. It seems fitting that, in fighting against ancient institutions and outdated laws, Magdalen searches for a set of old, mouldering keys, “crusted thick with rust and dirt” amongst the ruins of church and domestic bliss (540). Although she finds six keys, tries all of them in every lock in the West wing of the house, and starts to do the same in the East wing, none of the keys leads her to the Trust. Eventually, she learns the location of the Trust by watching her uncle remove it from its hiding place while he sleepwalks, and she afterwards steals
his keys, returns to the spot, and starts to read the amendment. However, a servant discovers the
theft before she can read the entire document and this enterprise too ends in failure.

In contrast to Magdalen’s numerous challenges, setbacks, and defeats, Leona easily
discovers the information she needs to solve the mystery of Anson’s murder and clear her
father’s name. While reviewers like Saintsbury criticized this aspect of *Her Father’s Name* by
suggesting it stemmed from Marryat’s inferior artistic talent, including her inability to
strategically delay narrative events in order to create suspense, Marryat actually seems to depart
from Collins deliberately. In direct opposition to Magdalen’s experience in *No Name*, characters
provide Leona not only with important information but also with literal keys to unlock drawers
containing evidence that advances her investigation. Marryat rewrites Magdalen’s challenges as
Leona’s successes, but, in doing so, she also detracts from her heroine’s agency.

Leona’s resemblance to her father consciously or unconsciously recalls George Evans to
the memory of those who knew him, and this leads them to speak of George, letting secrets about
the past drop from their unguarded lips. For example, when Leona first enters Henry Evans’s
home disguised as the Spanish Correspondent Valera, she questions whether Henry is the man
she believes him to be. However, the housekeeper, Mrs. Raymond, unintentionally confirms that
he is Leona’s uncle, by revealing that Henry had a brother named George who was “wild” and
very handsome in his youth, but who left for “foreign parts” under unmentionable circumstances
(159). Afterwards, Mrs. Raymond reflects, “I don’t know what set me talking of [Master George]
so, I’m sure […] unless it is that you remind me of him, sir” (159). She explains that on several
occasions “I’ve stood and looked at your face” and “wondered how it was you brought poor
Master George so powerfully to my mind,” deciding it must be “something in your smile, and the
color of your hair” (159). Afterwards, when Leona poses a series of pointed questions about
Lucilla and her parents, Mrs. Raymond again reveals secret information about the past and blames the accidental revelation on the Spanish Correspondent’s resemblance to George Evans. She frets, “I oughtn’t to have said as much as I have, I daresay […] but you drew it out of me somehow before I knew where I was; and you remind me so strong-like of poor master George that I hardly seem to remember a word that’s gone from me” (161).

While Leona’s male disguise renders the physical similarities between herself and her father more striking, Marryat stresses that Leona’s biological features, rather than her male attire, serve as the primary source of the resemblance. Later, when disguised as the middle-aged, working-class woman, Miss Gibson, an “idiot” named Bill Levitt, who has not been in his right mind since the murder, mistakenly believes the supposed Miss Gibson is George Evans disguised as a woman. Pulling at Leona’s skirts, he asserts, “[w]hy, you are Mr. George […] Why do you try to hide yourself under this?” (235). Although Bill’s family members and Leona dismiss his observations as the incoherent ramblings of a “natural,” he actually reveals that George Evans did not commit the murder and that Bill’s father did. Speaking to Leona as if she were George, Bill insists, “I didn’t do it […] He didn’t do it […] Why have you come back here? Do you mean to tell of father?” (234). Although Bill initially shows no interest in speaking to the supposed Miss Gibson, once he sees her face he speaks to her as if she were George Evans.

Most importantly, at the end of the novel, Rebecca Levitt, George Evans’s former lover and Lucilla’s mother, reveals that George did not commit the murder and provides Leona with a legally binding and properly witnessed confession left by the true murderer, her father, precisely because Leona looks like George Evans. When Leona first attempts to speak with Mrs. Levitt she will not see her; in fact, Leona only gains entrance to her bedchamber, where the emaciated woman lies on the brink of death, because she claims to bring news of George Evans. Part way
through their conversation, Leona tears away her disguise and reveals that she is not the servant Miss Gibson but rather George Evans’s daughter, Leona. Now, in her own person, Leona looks even more like her father than she does in disguise. Indeed, in this scene more than in any other, Marryat stresses that not only Leona’s coloring but also many of her facial features resemble those of George Evans. When Leona reveals her true identity, Mrs. Levitt “gazed at her for a few moments almost in alarm, then seizing her face between her two hands, she gazed at her features as though she could never look at them sufficiently. ‘His eyes,’ she exclaimed with a hysterical gasp, ‘his mouth, his brow! Oh, my George, my George, my George!’” (298). She continues, “You are so like him—so very, very like him! It seems almost as if the days of my girlhood had come back again, and he was sitting by my side and talking to me […] I might doubt your tongue—I cannot doubt your eyes!” (301). Because Leona’s features testify to her identity as George Evans’s daughter, and because George himself seems to implore his former lover to do the right thing by himself and his child by speaking through Leona’s features, Rebecca provides Leona with a key to her writing desk which contains “a full confession of the crime, written and witnessed in a regular clerk-like form” (306). Unlike Magdalen, who searches for crusty ancient keys and tries them in hundreds of locks to no avail, Leona freely receives the necessary key and all-important legal document from Mrs. Levitt.

In a somewhat troubling turn, Leona’s father seems to act through Leona in this scene, making her success as an amateur detective possible. Mrs. Levitt admits, “had you not come, with your father’s face and your father’s smile, to remind me that I owe him a duty before I go to meet him again,” “I should have gone down into my grave” without showing anyone the confession, because “[t]o revive it might have afforded satisfaction to the Evans family, but it would have injured my child, and shed irretrievable ignominy on my dead father” (306). By
positioning Leona as a conduit or stand-in for her father, and by emphasizing the importance of her physical features (over which Leona has no control), Marryat seems to diminish her heroine’s agency, minimize the role of her impersonations and disguise in solving the mystery, and at least partially credit Leona’s father for her success. However, although Leona does inherit her father’s features, she does not inherit his weakness, cowardice, and many other flaws. Leona’s bravery, persistence, intelligence, and daring disguises allow her to achieve what her father never could. In this way, at least, Marryat severs the assumed link between inherited features and inherited personality traits. Although Leona looks like her father, she does not act like him—and this is the reason she can solve the mystery.

Finally, while, for the majority of the novel, Marryat uses her disguised heroine to reject some essentialist theories of gender, at the end of the novel she pushes back against many of her own transgressive statements. In a striking turn of events, Marryat has Leona, the very woman who transgresses gender norms with impunity for hundreds of page transitions, reaffirm the superiority of traditional English masculinity by orchestrating a marriage between Lucilla and Dr. Tom Hastings. In *The Victorian Freak Show* Craton overlooks Leona’s troubling role as matchmaker, and, even more surprisingly, presents Lucilla’s marriage as the culmination of the novel’s progressive goals, by casting Hastings as the model husband, a “sensitive, gentle man,” who embraces both “masculine” and “feminine” traits. Specifically, Craton contends that after the false Valera disappears, Lucilla “directs her attention towards a sensitive, gentle man [Hastings] whose appeal she had previously overlooked,” and that, with the couple’s engagement, “*Her Father’s Name* celebrates a masculinity that is mediated through feminine values” (157-158). However, contrary to Craton’s reading, the novel does not support a more “feminine” form of masculinity through Lucilla’s engagement to the doctor. Instead, Hastings serves as a prime
example of traditional, patriarchal masculinity at its very worst, for he abuses his medical authority over his patient, Lucilla. Moreover, Leona, disguised as Lucilla’s female companion, arranges the match in order to heal Lucilla’s broken heart and expiate her own guilt. Far from articulating her support for men who possess the balance of feminine and masculine traits she herself exhibits while disguised as a man, at the end of the novel Leona praises the superiority of more traditional English men like Hastings.

Contrary to Craton’s portrayal of him, Hastings does not represent an ideal blend of masculine and feminine traits. Instead, he uses his privileged position as a medical expert to pursue an inappropriate relationship with his patient. When Marryat first introduces Dr. Hastings, she informs readers that Lucilla has a “distaste” for her doctor because, unbeknownst to her parents, “Dr. Hastings was too attentive, and […] his attentions bore a deeper meaning than mere interest in his patient” (138). Hastings uses his position to stay close to Lucilla, even accompanying the family on a grand tour of Europe. Whenever Lucilla objects to being seen by or left alone with Dr. Hastings, her complaints strike others as “strange” as well as ungrateful, considering the doctor “had really benefited her health and was so constantly attentive to her” (137-138). Indeed, because Lucilla is a spoiled, coddled only-child used to getting her own way, other characters readily dismiss her legitimate complaints against the doctor as the unfounded prejudices of a petulant young woman.

Dr. Hastings also uses his medical authority and influence over Lucilla’s parents to control her movements and interactions with other men.12 Once Hastings realizes that Lucilla has fallen in love with Valera, he does everything in his power to separate them. For example, one

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12 Hastings control of his patient (and eventual fiancée) anticipates the actions of the physician-husband, John, in Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s 1892 short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.”
night Lucilla has a fit of hysterics because she witnesses Valera kiss another woman as part of a
charade. After the fit, the doctor sends Lucilla’s mother away under a false pretext in order to
threaten the girl in private: “[m]y dear madam […] will you go and fetch a glass of wine, and
leave Lucilla alone with me? I must forbid her talking or being talked to for a few minutes”
(183). The moment Mrs. Evans leaves the room, Hastings’ alleged medical concerns—that
Lucilla should not speak or be spoken to for the sake of her health—disappear, and he warns that
if Lucilla does not stop “this nonsense” (i.e., her affection for Valera) he will inform her father of
her inappropriate attachment to a young man far below her social and financial position.
Although Hastings knows that the fit stems from love and jealousy, he informs her father that it
results from overstimulation and her weak constitution. He recommends Henry send Lucilla to
the seaside because “[n]othing but fatigue and heat, joined to a little excitement” has caused the
fit, adding that, in general, Lucilla “has no strength for dissipation” (190). Henry worries that
Lucilla will object to a vacation at the seaside, but Hastings summons his full medical authority
in defense of his plan: “I should think she would hardly be so unreasonable as to risk her health
by refusing to take my advice” (190). In other words, Hastings presents himself as a logical,
disinterested doctor, conceals his deeply personal and unethical motives for removing Lucilla
from Valera’s company, and preemptively discredits any objection to the plan Lucilla might
raise. Only a silly, irrational woman, he argues, would follow her own whims instead of obeying
her doctor’s orders.

Thus, Lucilla has not, as Craton claims, previously overlooked Dr. Hastings as a potential
suitor; on the contrary, she has actively avoided his attentions because they bespeak his
inappropriate romantic interest in her. Eventually, Hastings’ plan fails, Lucilla becomes all but
engaged to the supposed Valera, and Leona—unable to formerly accept the proposal or marry
Lucilla—simply disappears, causing her jilted lover much heartache. Although Craton suggests that, after Valera leaves, Lucilla finally notices Hastings and decides to marry him because of his supposed sensitivity and gentleness, she actually continues to dislike him (now more than ever, because of his attempted interference in her love affair). When Leona returns to the Evans’s household, this time disguised as Miss Gibson, the newly-hired companion for Lucilla, she realizes for the first time that her deceptions have seriously hurt Lucilla. In what is arguably Leona’s one unethical act in the novel, she resolves, “if by any means in my power I can further [Hastings’ and Lucilla’s relationship], so as to efface the remembrance of the other, I shall not feel quite so guilty about [my disguise and relationship with Lucilla] as I do now” (284). In the guise of the trusted companion, Leona arranges meetings between Hastings and Lucilla—initially against the girl’s will—and convinces her that Hastings is a worthy and even desirable husband.

Although, as we have seen, Marryat uses Leona’s male disguises to explore an alternative form of masculinity that draws upon both “feminine” and “masculine” traits, she uses this same character to deny the validity of these more flexible gender categories and to reinforce the superiority of traditional men and “masculine” traits. While Marryat continues to accept the masculine woman, she withdraws, or at least qualifies, her support for the “feminine” man. From an evolutionary perspective, the “masculine” woman—with her superior health, strength, and intelligence—might improve the stock or, at the very least, live a useful life, but an effeminate man, Marryat argues, does not make a desirable husband.

In her capacity as matchmaker, Leona does not merely want to cure Lucilla of an impossible infatuation; significantly, she also hopes the “manly” Hastings will correct Lucilla’s taste for effeminate men like Valera. Leona reflects, “Dr. Hastings is just the sort of bluff, manly
fellow […] to knock all the nonsense out of poor Lucy’s head that I so unwittingly put into it” (284). When Lucilla describes her defalcated lover to her companion, Leona dismisses his potential as a desirable suitor precisely because of his more feminine qualities: “[d]ear me, miss! That seems more like the description of a young lady than a gentleman to me […] I am afraid the young gentleman you speak of couldn’t have been much good out of a drawing room” (269). In contrast, she praises the doctor’s more traditional masculinity. She observes to Lucilla, “I don’t fancy I should hold [Valera] of much account beside a gentleman like Dr. Hastings […] I noticed what a fine, strong, manly gentleman he is” (269). Although she herself performed a more “feminine” type of masculinity, Leona proposes a much narrower definition of what a man (and a husband) should be when she speaks to Lucilla. She insists, “[a] man should be broad and lusty, and tanned by the weather; and have good strong limbs to protect himself and others with” (269). Leona’s ideal man has a decidedly “masculine” body and, from a biological perspective, has most likely inherited desirable genes: he is strong, healthy, vigorous, energetic, tall, and broad-shouldered. He has not squandered his genetic inheritance, but has made use of it, and his experience out in the world reveals itself in his tanned, weathered skin. According to Leona, such a man makes a desirable husband, because he can be of use in traditional ways by offering a woman assistance and protection.13

This leads us to consider Leona’s own engagement and prospective marriage to Valera: does she marry a patriarchal, controlling man like Hastings or a reformed lover who has learned to accept his wife’s “masculine” qualities and embrace some “feminine” traits of his own? Does

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13 Does Leona mean what she says to Lucilla? At the very least, we know that these sentiments are consistent with one of her earlier statements on the matter. When Leona first notices that Lucilla fancies her, and recalls how “all the girls fell in love with me on the stage when I appeared as a boy” (147-148), she treats such women with contempt. “Bah, the fools! How short-sighted they must be” (148), she mutters to herself. According to Leona, a woman mindful of the future would not allow herself to fall in love with a useless, effeminate boy, but would instead seek out a strong, dependable man.
she achieve a surprisingly progressive marriage between equals or succumb to the marital form of “slavery” (19) she has so long resisted? For Depledge, the answer is unambiguous. In “Sensation Fiction and the New Woman” she contends, “[i]t is clear that Leona enters her marriage with her independence and autonomy firmly established, not only in her own eyes but in the eyes of the man she marries” (199). However, Marryat actually leaves the end of Leona’s story much more ambiguous: first, by ending with the couple’s engagement, without any insight into their actual married life, and second, by neither confirming nor denying that Valera has changed his patriarchal, controlling tendencies.

On the one hand, the novel offers an extremely progressive vision of Leona’s plans for the future—and not only for the reasons Depledge identifies. By the end of the novel, Leona has succeeded on multiple levels: she has duped countless characters with her disguises, completed a successful investigation and cleared her father’s name of murder charges, and earned a place in her uncle’s respectable and wealthy English family. On the day she obtains proof of both her father’s innocence and her own legitimacy (which she had come to question), she dramatically reveals her undisguised body and claims the right to call herself “Miss Leona Evans” by commanding one of the Evans’s servants to publically announce her entrance into the family drawing room in front of a group of startled guests (318). Significantly, however, Leona does not merely accede to the expected social and familial position of “Miss Leona Evans,” but opts, instead, to determine her own name, identity, and future. While Leona has technically cleared her father’s name of criminal charges and reaffirmed her own identity in the process, during the course of her investigations she has uncovered disturbing truths about the man she once admired above all else: he had an affair with a working-class woman, fathered a child (Lucilla) out of wedlock, threatened to abandon his lover and their child without making amends, accumulated
large debts through drinking and gambling, fled to Brazil rather than face the murder charges levied against him, and attempted to appease his despicable blackmailer by offering Leona as a bride in return for his silence (307, 15). Consequently, after firmly establishing her right to call herself Leona Evans, she opts, instead, to create a new identity for herself, complete with a new (marital) name and a homeland of her own choosing.

Both figuratively and literally, Leona plans to distance herself from her father, his family, and his homeland—and the strictly gendered society in which he lived. After announcing her engagement, Leona rejects her uncle’s invitation to remain in London and spend time with the Evans family. She informs him, “Oh no, uncle [we do not plan to live in London]; at least not yet. Do not forget that I have been brought up in the free woods, or the atmosphere of the stage, and the close air and cramped manners of your great city stifle me. I feel as if I could not breathe in London, nor move, nor speak” (322). Leona feels more at home in the “free woods” of Brazil, where she roams with her bowie knife and pistol, and on the American stage, where she plays masculine roles and reinvents herself on a nightly basis, than in England, where, as a woman, she forfeits so many freedoms. Instead of residing in London with her family, Leona declares her intention to live with Valera in New York—a city she envisions as a type of utopia, where people avoid not only inflexible gender roles, but also rigid forms of racial classification. Thus, although she shares her father’s features, Leona ultimately refuses to be defined by his past.

In addition, Leona’s vision of her future married life is surprisingly egalitarian for the 1870s. Leona informs her uncle that, despite her marriage and generous dowry, she fully intends to return to the stage. Leona’s decision to pursue her career as a professional actress even after

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14 Earlier in the novel, Leona characterizes New York as a “cosmopolitan” city, where people “ignore nationality and look only to the individual” (66).
her marriage may have surprised some contemporary readers, because most nineteenth-century novels that involve actress-heroines end with the woman abandoning her career (Powell 18-19) and most biographies, diaries, and first-hand accounts of real Victorian actresses explain that, after her marriage, an actress either relinquishes her career or struggles to balance her personal and professional life (Powell 19-21). Unlike the typical Victorian actress, Leona declares that she and her fiancé will “return to New York, and pursue our former avocations,” which, for Leona, means returning to the stage, and, for Valera, means returning to Halliday and Upjohn. This also means that Valera will not be able to advance his career by serving as the Spanish Correspondent for Troubridge and Evans, a career opportunity he previously viewed as a promotion (322).

On the other hand, however, Marryat complicates this optimistic reading of the novel’s ending by choosing not to reveal whether Valera has truly changed. Undoubtedly, Valera loves Leona and even values some of her more “masculine” and “wild” qualities. However, Marryat provides several unsettling indications that Valera will at least attempt to use his status as Leona’s husband to control and restrict her actions. Although Craton does not discuss Leona’s engagement or prospective future, she does point out that Valera is “a relic of an older Spanish order of colonial paternalism and patriarchal masculinity” (153). Valera attempts to coerce Leona into marriage earlier in the novel by forcibly removing all of her more desirable alternatives. He also repeatedly bemoans the fact that he does not wield the legal authority of a husband over her, which would allow him to restrict her actions. In particular, he admits that, if he were her husband, he would not allow her to act male parts on the stage or go about in disguise. While one could argue that Valera has changed his patriarchal ways by the end of the novel, Marryat’s final image of Valera problematizes such a reading. When Leona surprises Valera by announcing their engagement (for this is the first time he hears of it), Marryat informs
readers that Leona “stretched forth her hand” towards Valera’s “and felt it clasped as in a vice between his own” (321). Does this ominous description suggest Valera will try to control the actions of his future wife, locking her down, refusing to let her go? Marryat provides no additional insight into Valera’s mindset post-engagement. In the remaining two pages of text, she does not describe Valera nor provide him with any additional dialogue.

In spite of the conservative aspects of Marryat’s ending, it is important to point out that *Her Father’s Name* celebrates a “masculine” woman who proves herself a master of disguise and detection in a way that *No Name*’s Magdalen Vanstone never does. Writing in the early 1860s, Collins cannot openly celebrate Magdalen’s strength, health, and perseverance. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Collins defends his heroine by reminding readers of “[a]ll the higher impulses of her nature, which had never, from first to last, let her err with impunity” (598), and, as this assertion suggests, Magdalen’s story has been riddled with self-doubt, desperation, and regret.

Collins delivers a heroine who is destined to shock readers with all she can achieve, but the tone of the novel when presenting its heroine is far from celebratory or triumphant. The narrator casts Magdalen’s abundant health, strength, and intelligence as dangerous, threatening qualities when found in a woman, because they enable her “perverse” resolution to act for herself and pursue the justice denied her by male relatives and the law. Collins angered some contemporary critics by not only allowing Magdalen to survive her numerous attempts at disguise and deception, but by providing her with the rewards typically reserved for the most respectable literary heroines: a kind husband, a large fortune, and renewed communications with her respectable family members. However, it is only when Magdalen’s seemingly limitless strength and health run out—when she is “struck […] prostrate, mind and body alike” by fever and fatigue (578), when the slightest physical exertion, such as sitting up in a chair, becomes a challenge (580), when
speaking with her caretaker and future husband becomes “the great daily event of her life” (593)—that Collins can forgive and reward Magdalen.

By the mid-1870s, when Marryat publishes *Her Father’s Name*, it becomes more possible to celebrate a strong, active heroine who not only adopts a series of disguises and false identities, but also transgresses gender norms both as a “masculine” woman and while disguised as a man. As reformers challenged traditional ideals of feminine beauty and dress, it became more acceptable, and even desirable, for a woman to cultivate a healthy and physically strong appearance. In 1877, a year after the publication of *Her Father’s Name*, the American Eliza Bisbee Duffey publishes *The Ladies and Gentlemen’s Etiquette*, a guide to manners and dress that highlights changing attitudes regarding female beauty. Duffey’s ideal beauty is a woman who, like Leona, possess health, strength, and vigor: “[i]t is a false taste which looks upon a fragile form and a pale and delicate complexion as requisites for beauty. The strength and buoyancy and vigor of youth, the full and rounded curves of form and features, the clear complexion [...] tinted with the rosy flush of health—these constitute the true beauty which all should seek” (226). Similarly, British publications advocating dress reform such as Roxy A. Caplin’s *Health and Beauty in Woman and her Clothing* (1864), Luke Limner’s *Madre Natura Versus the Moloch of Fashion* (1874), and Mrs. Haweis’s *The Art of Beauty* (1878), warn of fashions like the corset and crinoline that distort the natural form of the female body and advocate for fashions that will preserve a woman’s health and allow her to breathe and move more freely. Although these ideas had only begun to gain support during the 1870s, they indicate that, at and around the time of the publication of *Her Father’s Name*, more people were beginning to celebrate a form of “natural” female beauty, that prioritized strength, health, and vigor rather than the traditional ideal of pale, weak, and delicate womanhood.
Thus, *Her Father’s Name* demonstrates how the sensation novel both evolved with the times and remained entrenched in the past. Although, by the mid-1870s Marryat no longer incorporates physiognomy to the same extent as earlier sensation novelists, explores the subversive possibilities of women’s disguises, and launches a relatively progressive critique of some essentialist views regarding gender, she refuses to completely dismiss physiognomy’s underlying assumptions of essential identity and the legibility of the body, particularly regarding race, but also, to some extent, regarding male effeminacy. Like many sensation novelists before her, she contains many of the heroine’s transgressions and the novel’s most radical statements regarding gender with a conservative ending. Although, in her portrayal of male impersonators on the stage, Marryat highlights the ways in which fictional representations of bodies may skew our understanding of how readable and knowable bodies truly are, she struggles between the impulse to challenge physiognomic ideas and the desire to reinforce them.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have argued that the physiognomic debates that culminated in the 1860s greatly influenced and were influenced by the sensation novels published in the same decade. For scholars who study physiognomy in the nineteenth-century British novel, this genre offers not only some of the earliest radical rejections of the science, but also a full range of opinions regarding essential identity and the legibility of the body. While many cultural studies scholars have pointed out some of the debates that shape the sensation novel’s content and themes—particularly its interest in gender, class, and race—I am the first to explore the impact of cultural debates surrounding physiognomy and the legibility of the body. And yet, as my dissertation has shown, all of these debates are interconnected, for sensation novelists use physiognomy, disfigurement, and disguise both to explore whether gender, class, and race are innate states of being or socially-constructed performances, and to consider how these facets of identity shape people’s experience of the world.

The sensation novel’s decline in popularity coincides with physiognomy’s fall from public favor. While, in her landmark study The Maniac in the Cellar Hughes claims “the true sensation genre” existed primarily in the 1860s, later scholars have correctly pointed out that writers continued to publish sensation novels into the ‘70s, ‘80s, and beyond. However, sensation novels from this later period did not garner the same level of critical interest or grab readers’ attention in the way those of the 1860s did. Later sensation novels continue to employ what had become the novel’s characteristic plots features—not only transgressive female characters and shocking crimes, but also many physiognomic concerns such as disfigurement, disguise, and stolen, mistaken, and false identities—after physiognomy itself had lost much of its former cultural relevance. For those sensation novelists who merely incorporated these plot
features out of habit because they were working within the sensational mode, these plot features most likely struck readers as familiar and clichéd—the very opposite of their initial impact, when they shocked readers of the 1860s. However, as we have seen, at least some later sensation novelists, including Marryat in *Her Father’s Name*, continued to stay relevant by using these plot features to explore new cultural debates, such as the bourgeoing fight for women’s rights.

Indeed, it is quite possible that within certain contexts sensation novels dealing with these physiognomic plot features and themes remained very relevant. In particular, future scholars may be interested in examining physiognomy and its influence within sensation novels published in the British colonies during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, such as those I discuss below. After all, during this period, anthropological writings that continued to incorporate and draw upon physiognomic theories greatly influenced ideas about race and identity. By examining colonial texts from this period, scholars might find both repudiations and reinforcements of such theories.

For example, scholars might turn their attention to *Utu: A Story of Love, Hate and Revenge* (1894), published by the feminist activist and journalist Margaret Bullock in New Zealand. Bullock’s *Utu* involves a range of gender-, class-, and race-based disguises, as well as a shocking scene, in which the protagonist suffers a series of emotional blows and drinks a potion meant to kill her, but instead emerges, greatly disfigured, to seek revenge on her would-be murderer. Recalling our discussions of *The Moonstone* and *Her Father’s Name* in different ways, the protagonist of *Utu* is a mixed-race character who uses her brown skin and unusual physical appearance to ingratiate herself with the Maori people of New Zealand while traveling in male disguise on a European expedition. However, in *Utu*, the protagonist’s success with the natives of New Zealand depends not only upon her appearance, but also upon her genuine respect for
ancient Maori customs—a trait that none of the (doomed) European explorers, including her disguised would-be murderer, share.

Scholars might also be interested in Jamaican writer Herbert G. DeLisser’s rather sensational novel, *The White Witch of Rosehall* (1928). Although no characters in *The White Witch* successfully disguise their bodies and identities, the protagonist, Robert, poses as a working-class bookkeeper at the beginning of the novel and the villainess Annie Palmer rides in the garb of a man and dresses in all black to express her dominance throughout the novel. Like Lady Audley, Mrs. Palmer is an enchantingly beautiful (and tiny, frail) woman, and, because of her appearance, Robert initially cannot believe her capable of the murder and other acts of violence she commits. *The White Witch* imagines the possibility of both women and black men seizing power (and the novel presents this eventuality as a frightening prospect). Like *Utu*, *The White Witch* presents the body, mind, and identity as both changeable and permeable. Robert’s “Englishness” gradually wears away in the West Indies and Annie uses a Haitian form of witchcraft and mesmerism to enter into other people’s minds and send a vampiric spirit to suck the blood and health of another character.

Today, looking back on our participation in eugenics and the horrors of the Holocaust, we possess concrete evidence of the types of atrocities that can stem from physiognomic thinking. In particular, more people appreciate the dangers of believing that the body reveals identity and that some bodies and identities are objectively superior to others. While, sadly, nineteenth-century physiognomic beliefs continue to influence many of our cultural stereotypes, the vast majority of people now rightly reject physiognomy as a pseudoscience.

And yet, despite our rejection of the idea that the physical body reveals a person’s essential identity, in many way, we continue to cling to the ever-persistent desire to know others through
the body. Indeed, we still read the body for signs of identity and, at times, we use these signs (accurate or not) to police, control, exclude, and harm certain groups of people. For example, in November 2015 former Florida governor and presidential hopeful Jeb Bush declared on the campaign trail that the United States should welcome only certain types of Syrian Refugees, including orphans, Christians, and “people that clearly aren’t going to be terrorists” (ABC News Video). When an ABC News Reporter asked Bush how the government would differentiate between Christian and non-Christian refugees, he responded, “[y]ou’re a Christian. I mean, you can prove you’re a Christian,” adding “I think you can prove it—if you can’t prove it, then, you know, you err on the side of caution” (ABC News Video). How would Bush prove the refugees’ religions? By their names, their bodies, their language, their place of birth, their knowledge of Christianity, their knowledge of other religions? Any method he might propose is little better than the nineteenth-century Lascar Committee’s flawed criteria for successfully identifying Indians. Bush’s claim that it is possible to accurately distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian puzzled many reporters and pundits, particularly because unlike some other aspects of identity, which some continue to explain in biological terms, people generally accept that one’s religious affiliation can change at any time, if a person adopts a faith for the first time, converts, or stops practicing religion altogether.

The ways in which we choose to adorn our bodies similarly express identity and put certain groups in danger. In January 2016 in Marseilles, France, a fifteen-year old student attacked his Jewish teacher with a butcher knife, claiming to be inspired by the Islamic State. Following the attack, Zvi Ammar, the leader of Marseille’s 60,000 person Jewish community, proposed that it might be best if local Jewish men temporarily stopped wearing the yarmulke, because it visually marked them as members of the Jewish community and, consequently, as potential targets for
future violence. Understandably, this suggestion was met with mixed responses from the local and international Jewish community, as its members struggle to balance the desire to express their identity on the surfaces of the body with their need to hide their identity from certain people in order to preserve their safety.

In 1801, the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* published this defense of physiognomy:

“So far shalt thou go and no farther;” all fears of petulant or noxious abuse of the science must necessarily vanish. […] [W]hat danger can be apprehended from physiognomy? Its verdicts will be shifted from face to face; and there will always be outlets or atoning lines sufficiently wide or soothing in the fatal angles of condemned classes of faces, to let each individual culprit escape, or stand absolved before his own tribunal. (123)

Today, the argument that humans and their justice systems will inevitably judge individuals on their own merits and without prejudice rings naïve not only in terms of physiognomy but also in terms of the stereotypes that persist in our own culture.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Lennox graduated from the University of Florida’s English PhD program in 2016. She studies Victorian literature and her primary research interests include the relationship between the mind, the body, and identity; nineteenth-century science and pseudoscience; and popular fiction genres. Her work has appeared in *Victorian Review* and the *Victorians Institute Journal’s Digital Annex*. 