Armadale

Wilkie Collins and the Dark Threads of Life

Edited by Mariaconcetta Costantini
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Wo/Men of Letters: Writing and Identity in Armadale

Wilkie Collins lived in an age of fast developments in communications. By the mid nineteenth century, the reform of the British postal system, the revolution in transportation and the introduction of new media\(^1\) enabled Victorians to exchange messages at a speed hitherto unthinkable. The rise in the number of people involved in letter exchanges (missives, telegraphic dispatches) was met by a massive increase in the circulation of literary messages. As is well known, the Victorian world of ‘letters’ (journalism and literature) was significantly reshaped by economic imperatives and technological innovations, which forced professional writers to meet the exigencies of a mass-orientated market-place. So important was this shift that the Victorian sage, Thomas Carlyle, made this pronouncement, albeit satirically: “The Journalists are now the true Kings and Clergy”\(^2\).

Responses to such changes were ambivalent. The easier access to the communication network generated enthusiasm, as proved by the increasing records of epistolary correspondents and the growth of a semi-literate audience craving for printed productions. But the risks inherent in the ‘march of progress’ did not go unnoticed. Faced as they were by a traumatic process of modernization, the Victorians had to rethink the modalities and scope of information exchanges. The more dependent personal relations were on ‘letter’ circulation and reception, the

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\(^1\) These innovations included the institution of uniform penny postage (1840), the introduction of steam and railway shipping, and the invention of the electric telegraph. Their relevance in Armadale is suggested in the Introduction to the following edition of the novel: Wilkie Collins, Armadale, ed. John Sutherland, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1995, p. viii.

more dangerous they proved for individuals in the event of communicative failure or distortion. Amply recorded in non-fictional writings\(^3\), the new threats posed by communications loomed large in the minds of novelists and were growingly dramatized in their narratives.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere\(^4\), Collins made an extensive use of letters to express the anxieties of his age. On a fictional plane, he represented manifold cases of halted or short-circuited communication, in which the manipulation of messages (forgery, blackmail, stolen correspondence) or their misinterpretation endanger the subject’s (social and psychic) balance. At a structural level, he contributed to revising the tradition of the epistolary novel by embedding a wide range of communicative texts in his works. In contrast with his eighteenth-century predecessors, however, he adopted epistolarity as a “polyphonic” strategy which made his characters’ “several consciousness meet as equals and engage in a dialogue that is in principle unfinalizable”\(^5\).

This strategy is not only evident in the works that established his literary reputation – *The Woman in White* (1859-\(\ldots\))

\(^3\) The mixed feelings aroused by the Victorian flow of information are evident in many review publications. In an 1850 article, for example, Frederick Knight Hunt describes the ‘sensational’ news conveyed by telegraphic dispatches in half-excited half-fearful tones (“Wings of Fire”, *Household Words*, 2, 1850, pp. 241-245).


\(^5\) The idea of “polyphony” is here meant in Bakhtin’s terms as a concept entailing “a dialogic sense of truth” (as opposed to one “form-shaping ideology”) and “a change in the author’s position in the work”. The latter is supposed to “cease to exercise monologic control”, while the characters become “subjects of their own directly signifying discourse”. The quoted passages are from Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 234-239. Bakhtin’s ideas are mainly expounded in his work *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Creative Art*, 1929).
60) and *The Moonstone* (1868) – which are both structured as first-person depositions *enchâssé* in a main narrative frame. It also comes to fore in *Armadale*, a novel consisting of large epistolary sections. Here Collins avails himself of letter-embedding to merge different discourses together and construes human identity as a shifting state which is constantly negotiated. By insisting on the correspondents’ multifocalization, he revises an epistolary tradition that “figures [the letter] as a trope of authenticity and intimacy”\(^6\), and consequently destabilizes monologic notions of truth and identity. To achieve these scopes, Collins adopts different devices: he inserts epistles that expose the ‘constructedness’ of social identity, alternates letter- with journal-writing, parodies the normative rhetoric of feminine epistolarity, and devises forms of interference in transmission which suggest the fragility of all communication.

A further discourse on Victorian ‘letters’ woven in the novel regards the responsibilities and challenges facing the new lettered professionals. A number of his works feature intellectuals who live by their pen or pursue personal objectives by putting their stories in writing. Kucich convincingly identifies these humanistic professionals with a gendered “emergent nineteenth-century social niche very much like [Collins’s] own”: “[his] heroes define a new social and occupational role that resuscitates the connection between melancholia and male genius”\(^7\). Indeed, Collins drew sympathetic portraits of male intellectuals and endowed them with sensibilities that compensate for their shortcomings. More biased, instead, is his characterization of learned women, who fail to achieve a professional status and, especially in his later


novels, become the butt of the author’s heavy irony. While Victorian women writers were competing with their male counterparts in the literary market-place, Collins mostly avoided giving fictional relevance to their professional bids. Enthralled as he was by ‘rebellious’ female intellectualism, he nonetheless represented its demise in his narratives, either through the heroine’s conversion to the Eliotan “common yearnings of womanhood” or, less frequently, through her punishment.

In portraying his wo/men of letters, Collins thus denied autonomy and self-realization to his heroines, but he also delved deeply into the secret wishes and motivations of both parties. Although he granted more fictional space to male figures, he offered clues to the condition of lettered women and connected their gender disparities with problems of integration met by male figures of marginality. This connection is implied by the intellectual contest engaged by the protagonists of Armadale. Their penned words – either fully reported or paraphrased in the novel – give hints at the relational difficulties met by Victorian women or lower-class male autodidacts, at the problems posed by entering a profession, and the consequences this struggle had on their psychic balance and emotional life.

This essay explores the complex significance and functionality of letters in Armadale. The main epistolary documents inserted in the novel bear witness to Collins’s concern with the transmission and interpretation of written messages – two actions which are shown to affect the individual process of self-construction. In contrast with the Victorian enthusiasts for progress, Collins unveiled the dangerous effects of letter exchanges and connoted the evolving network of communications as a maze of mischief, linguistic duplicity and misdirected information. Such effects are attributed also to missives sent

8 The caricature of Mrs Gallilee in Heart and Science (1882-83) is an effective example of Collins’s reservations about women who stubbornly pursue intellectual scopes.
with good intentions, since their performativity changes according to the recipients’ interpretative acts. While examining the variety of functions fulfilled by letter exchanges in Armadale, I will consider the implications of Collins’s revision of the canon, and draw attention to his questioning of gender and psychological categories that were traditionally associated with the epistolary genre. The last section of this essay investigates another issue: the changing role played by Victorian humanistic intellectuals. Their agency as lettered people reinforces the image of an extremely mobile society conveyed at other textual levels – an image of collapsing hierarchies and new relations which inspire mixed feelings of hope and fear, relief and disorientation.

2. Messages from the grave. The structural and symbolic centrality of letters in Armadale is immediately perceivable. The novel opens with a three-chapter section titled Book the First9, which is set in 1832 and offers a retrospective story of the first two generations of Allan Armadales. Told by an omniscient voice which combines a matter-of-fact tone with sensational pitches, this early narrative also consists of a long epistolary text split in sections (Wrentmore/Armadale’s deathbed confession), which are embedded in sequential order in the story of their problematic composition. The confession-letter is specifically addressed to the sender’s son, who is to

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9 For this chapter-order, which reproduces “the first published version of Armadale, as appeared in the Cornhill Magazine” (p. xxxii), see the Penguin edition of Armadale, mentioned in footnote 1. All my quotations from the novel, followed by parenthetical indications of the page numbers, are drawn from this edition. The version published in the “Oxford World’s Classics” series, instead, reproduces the text “of the one-volume ‘illustrated’ edition issued by Smith, Elder in 1869” (Wilkie Collins, Armadale, ed. Catherine Peters, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. xxvii). In this edition, Book One is indicated as Prologue, and the numerical order of Books Two to Five is accordingly modified, while the last two sections of the novel – Book the Last and Epilogue – bear the same titles as in the Penguin edition.
receive it by his father’s lawyers when he is “of an age to understand it” (p. 27). The long deferred act of transmission fulfils a crucial function in the unravelling of the plot. Nineteen years later, the designated receiver, now living in disguise under the name of Ozias Midwinter, reads the document, becomes obsessed with its content and is consequently driven to make dangerous decisions. The letter, in which his father confesses to having murdered his namesake and rival in love (Ingleby/Armadale), warns the son against two people who come to play a crucial role in his sentimental life: the young Allan Armadale (Ingleby’s offspring) with whom Midwinter has just established a bond of friendship, and Lydia Gwilt, the woman he later falls in love with and involves in an unhappy marriage:

Avoid the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage – if the maid is still in [the widow’s] service. And more than all, avoid the man who bears the same name as your own. […] Never let the two Allan Armadales meet in this world: never, never, never! (p. 48).  

Even though he burns the letter immediately after its perusal (p. 107), Midwinter is forever haunted by his father’s admonition, which makes him tragically waver between reason and superstition, rebellion and obedience. An element which sets into motion the intricate story of the youngest generation, this ‘message from the grave’ is also a semantic pivot on which a number of political, philosophical and religious ideas hinge (including controversial views of colonialism, Christian beliefs, determinism, and free-will). There is, however, a third – and less explored – aspect of Wrentmore’s ‘fatal’ letter which deserves notice: the ‘framing’ effects it has on its multiple readers, and the related idea of semantic errancy suggested by its complex process of circulation. Before and after haunting Midwinter, the epistolary confession is read by many undesignated recipients, affects their behaviour, and often inspires a course of action that is at odds with the sender’s wishes. The gap between the letter’s intentionality and performativity is first exposed in the episode of its genesis. During
its composition, Wrentmore’s confession is already perused by ‘readers’ not chosen by the sender and exercises a negative influence on them. Partly read aloud to, and partly overheard by, the dying man’s wife, it stirs up her jealousy and horror, which are later given vent on their son (pp. 42, 89). The other ‘victim’ of the letter is Alexander Neal, a Scotchman who performs the role of writer when Wrentmore is struck by paralysis. While accomplishing his tasks (he first reads aloud the unfinished text and later completes it under Wrentmore’s dictation), Neal is slowly ‘corrupted’ by the missive. The story of passion and revenge he learns, in his double role of substitute writer/receiver, comes to shape his future identity of husband and foster father, since he develops a strong desire for Wrentmore’s wife and an unconscious hatred for her son.

In spite of the central role he is assigned in Book the First, the Scotchman disappears from the scene after completing the letter and acting as Midwinter’s cruel stepfather. His shrinking status proves that he is not a catalyst for the advancement of the main plot. His main functionality is, instead, fulfilled within the sub-plot of the letter’s deviation from its itinerary, a sub-plot that exposes the dangers of communicative texts gone awry.

In ways similar to Poe’s “purloined letter”, on which Derrida founded his theorization of the lettre volant and volée, the confession proves to be an elusive and constantly displaced signifier whose meanings are determined “via its own movements”\(^\text{10}\). Intercepted by Midwinter’s future antagonists, the letter is turned into an instrument of oppression, rather than protection, of its intended recipient, who is the only ‘actor’ on stage long excluded from its perusal. Kept by Wrentmore’s lawyers for almost two decades, it finally reaches Midwinter who after reading it suffers from “a shock of discovery” (p. 87). But new acts of displacement are in store. In a clear infraction

of his father’s prescription, Midwinter shows the letter to Reverend Brock, the protector of the very young man he was entreated to avoid (p. 87). The rector’s ‘intrusion’ results in a new change of the ‘truth’ put onstage by the sender. Brock encourages Midwinter to disbelieve his father’s warning against Allan and to embrace a Providential view of life. He also identifies the “maid” with a young woman in “a red Paisley shawl” he had met (p. 105), and supports Midwinter’s decision to destroy the missive: “Mr Brock pointed to the match-box. In another moment, the confession was in flames” (p. 107).

Later in the novel, the “litterified” text appears again on the scene. Well preserved in the memory of its readers, it alerts Midwinter’s attention to the fatal name of La Grâce de Dieu, the vessel in which he is accidentally cast adrift with Allan, supports his superstitious interpretation of his friend’s dream, and is finally ‘resuscitated’ in a new written form:

Allan pointed to Midwinter with his fork.
‘Apply to my friend, there,’ he said; ‘he has got a much better account of it than I can give you. If you’ll believe me, he took it all down in writing from my own lips; and he made me sign it at the end, as if it was my “last dying speech and confession”, before I went to the gallows. Out with it, old boy – I saw you put it in your pocket-book – out with it!” (p. 140, my italics).

Transcribed by Midwinter and signed by the dreamer, the narrative of the dream insistently evokes Wrentmore’s missive (Allan compares it with the confession of a crime) and, like its Gothic model, haunts the lives of the new generation. By rewriting it into a new text sacredly preserved in his “pocket-

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11 The pun letter/litter is intriguingly applied to Collins’s fiction by Kirstin Johnson. Her essay, which does not consider Armadale, aims to prove that the author’s revision of a traditional Gothic device, the fragmented manuscript, is an attempt to rescue both Gothic and the sensation novel “from the metaphorical dust-bin” of low-brow literature. Cf. Kirstin Johnson, “When ‘Letter’ Becomes ‘Litter’: The (De)construction of the Message from Ann Radcliffe to Wilkie Collins”, Anglophonia/Caliban, 15 (2004), pp. 153-162.
book”, Midwinter appropriates the frightful narrative bequeathed by his father and momentarily yields to the temptation of playing a role in it.

But the successive ‘reshapings’ of the confession challenge the Gothic and biblical messages of curse and revenge. In his deathbed letter, Midwinter’s spiritual ‘father’, Mr Brock, mentions the fatal text again as a “common ground” on which he can meet his ‘foster son’ to convince him to abandon the “fatalistic conviction” inherited by his biological father: “If danger ever threatens Allan, you, whose father took his father’s life – YOU, and no other, may be the man whom the providence of God has appointed to save him” (pp. 512-514). By rewriting Wrentmore’s legacy from a Providential perspective, the rector gives further evidence of the letter’s semantic openness—a notion applicable to all the primary-genre texts interpolated in the novel12. As well as to pointing to new axiologies (such as the Christian ethos of self-sacrifice which opposes the Old Testament code of revenge), the second deathbed letter suggests the possibility of endless metamorphoses of the text. Not surprisingly, Brock’s letter undergoes a further process of rewriting by Lydia Gwilt. First “shaken to the soul” (p. 514) by the sender’s apparent guessing at her murderous intentions, the heroine appropriates the epistolary text at the end of Book the Last, and inscribes in it her own farewell message:

12 In a Note to the text, Collins conveys a relativistic view of the Dream (and of its narrative), by inviting his readers “to interpret it” freely “by the natural or the supernatural theory, as the being of their own minds may incline them” (Appendix, p. 678). While questioning the idea of hermeneutic closure, this authorial statement confirms the relevance of an underlying discourse on the instability of written communication, whose proliferation of meanings depends on the contractual relations established within the space of transference. For the definition of primary ‘simple’ genres (letters, diaries, anecdotes and jokes) as distinct from secondary ‘complex’ ones (novels, dramas, scientific papers), see Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres”, in Modern Genre Theory, ed. David Duff, Harlow, Pearson Education, 2000, pp. 82-97.
One of them was the letter which had come to him from Mr Brock’s death-bed. She turned over the two sheets of note-paper on which the rector had written the words that had now come true – and found the last page of the last sheet a blank. On that page she wrote her farewell words, kneeling at her husband’s side (p. 665).

What she adds to Brock’s letter is a double confession of her wickedness and her love for Midwinter, two conflicting drives which had condemned her to being an “[un]happy woman” (p. 666). At first reading, this third epistola ex morte addressed to Midwinter seems to strengthen the Christian worldview conveyed by Brock’s missive. In line with the New Testament ethos, Lydia gives a penitential connotation to her suicide: “The one atonement I can make for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death” (p. 666). Her conscience-stricken attitude is apparently confirmed by the omniscient narrator who reports her (oral) address to the divinity: “‘Oh, God, forgive me!’ she said. ‘Oh, Christ, bear witness that I have suffered!’” (p. 666).

There is, however, a discrepancy between the enchâssé letter and the narrative frame. First of all, it is interesting to notice that the only religious reference is found in the narrator’s (supposedly) faithful report, while the suicide’s written message offers a lay interpretation of her guilt (she regrets her life of wickedness because it was an obstacle to her love story). In the Epilogue, moreover, Lydia is not clearly assigned the role of a reformed character. “[F]orgiven” by “the two men whom she has injured”, she is nonetheless buried into a nameless grave (p. 672) and thus symbolically prevented from offering an exemplum. A further element of perplexity is the ironic juxtaposition of Lydia’s and Mrs Oldershaw’s ‘conversions’. While the heroine is erased from the world, her diabolic correspondent fashions for herself a penitential identity which brings her material benefit. The ease with which Mrs Oldershaw delivers a hypocritical sermon on her “experience among dilapidated women, profusely illustrated in the pious and penitential style” (p. 675) casts a shadow on the sincerity of all sudden conversions, including Lydia’s.
Most likely chosen “to deflect moral criticism of the novel”\textsuperscript{13}, the pious sentiments exhibited by Miss Gwilt in the conclusion are at odds with her elusive characterization, which has never stopped to puzzle Collins’s readers. Only partly interpretable in the light of Christian morality, her sacrifice acquires no stable meaning but rather introduces another element of novelty that complicates the idea of her affective and psychic unbalance. As we will see, Lydia is a metamorphic figure that participates in most of the novel’s letter exchanges and accordingly changes her roles. That of reformed sinner is only one of the many parts she comes to play through her writing. But the ultimate meaning of her self-construction is that of emphasizing the dynamism of all communication acts which, like her multiple identities, are always ‘in the making’. In the same way as she strives to create her role of penitent, she refashions the first two ‘letters from the grave’ she happens to ‘intercept’ into a third destabilizing text which alters the ideological content of both hypotexts (respectively, their fatalistic and providential creeds) without conveying a clearly defined alternative.

3. Epistolary corruptors: forgers, manipulators, murderers. All addressed to the same recipient, the three confessions are differentiated by their perlocutionary effects. Unlike the versions penned by the two elderly men, who wish to convert Midwinter to their beliefs, Lydia’s text frees the addressee from most responsibilities. The only request she makes is to be forgotten “in the love of a better woman” (p. 665) – a gentle entreaty which is quite different from the fathers’ behavioural prescriptions. Even though she cheats her husband during their married life, Lydia makes a radical change of conduct before killing herself, since she chooses not to control him from the grave.

\textsuperscript{13} John Sutherland, Notes to Armadale, p. 709, note 7.
Her act of liberation is at odds with the manipulative scopes pursued by most correspondents in *Armadale*. If we consider the wide range of epistles embedded or mentioned in the novel, we will notice that the stories of the three generations of Armadales are punctuated by letters exchanges that exercise a negative influence on the characters’ relations. Most recurrent are forms of epistolary manoeuvring that endanger the affective bonds between parents and children. Apart from the deathbed confessions already mentioned, Collins devises a long list of letters that question the sincerity of parental intentions, have corrupting effects on the offspring, and threaten the latter’s safety.

The plot of rivalry and murder involving the elder generation of Armadales, for example, is consequent on an epistolary scheme hatched by Wrentmore’s mother and Mr Blanchard, “an old friend and an old admirer of hers” (p. 29). Driven by the “recollection of her girlish attachment” (p. 29), the woman writes to her former lover to make inquiries about his daughter, whom she considers a suitable match for her son. She is soon rewarded for her efforts. Wrentmore falls in love with the miniature of the young woman enclosed in her father’s letter of reply, and plans to leave for Madeira where the Blanchards have established their home. But his prospective love story suddenly turns into a tragedy. Instead of fulfilling his mother’s dream, the young man experiences a nightmare. Miss Blanchard becomes an object of contention between him and Ingleby, marries the latter in secrecy, and triggers the anger of her ‘intended’ fiancé, who ends up killing his rival.

A catalyst for destructive passions, the correspondence between the two parents not only shatters the young people’s prospects of happiness. It also corrupts their epistolary integrity, since it forces them to become letter manipulators themselves. Once they have fallen in love with each other, Ingleby and Miss Blanchard devise different tricks to cheat the elder correspondents. Disguised as Wrentmore, Ingleby takes advantage of the “infirmity of sight” of Mr Blanchard. He invents replies from Blanchard’s friend and, together with his lover, suppresses
the missive the old man sends to ask for Wrentmore’s mother’s consent to their marriage (pp. 33-34). Their most serious act of manipulation, however, is the forgery of the letter of consent. The solution found by Ingleby is that of having the missive “fabricated” by “an orphan girl of barely twelve years old, a marvel of precocious ability, whom Miss Blanchard had taken a romantic fancy to befriend, and whom she had brought away with her from England to be trained as a maid” (p. 34). The corruption of the young orphan, who later proves to be Lydia Gwilt, symbolically mirrors the acts performed by the elder manipulators. Exploited by Miss Blanchard, who “refuse[s] to take an active share in the fraud” (p. 34), Lydia starts her criminal career with an infraction that was considered a major offence. Her forgery results in her social stigmatization as “innately deceitful” (p. 35) – a taint that haunts her adult life.

Yet, the Armadales are not the only epistolary manipulators featuring in the novel. Other characters are involved in forms of deceptive writing that question the authenticity of family and friendship bonds. One of them is Mr Brock, whose letters influence the lives of the young Armadales. Although he wishes to protect Midwinter and Allan from external dangers, Brock curbs the young men’s freedom of thought and action. When he destroys an unkind letter sent to Allan by an uncle (p. 74), for example, he exceeds his role of guardian, since he prevents the addressee from gaining full awareness of his family situation. Later in the novel, he engages in an obsessive correspondence with Midwinter, whom he warns against the suspicious identity of Miss Gwilt. But the immediate effects produced by his epistles are pernicious. While giving wise suggestions, Brock unwillingly becomes an instrument of the skilful Mrs Oldershaw, who dupes him into believing that her housemaid is the real Lydia. The wrong details of the woman’s face provided by Brock serve as the premise for Midwinter’s unhappiness. In comparing the governess’ face with the written description of the impostor, the recipient is struck by Lydia’s beauty and, “like a man lost”, falls in love with her on the spot (p. 279). The letter also persuades him to stay at Thorpe-Ambrose in the role of
Allan’s friend, a role later reversed into that of rival\textsuperscript{14}.

If the misdirecting effects of Brock’s letters are unintentional, other schemers deliberately use correspondence to intrude into the lives of their families and acquaintances. This is the case of Mrs Milroy, the bed-ridden tenant of the Thorpe-Ambrose cottage, who devises an epistolary plot to drive Lydia out of her house. The first step she takes in this direction is that of carefully examining the reference letter provided by her employee “to find an assailable place [...] on the subject of the governess’ character” (p. 316). Her hermeneutic efforts are rewarded at first. The woman spots a weakness in the scheme devised by the governess and her accomplice since she discovers a mystery concerning Lydia’s reference. In taking the following steps, however, the woman adopts the same deceitful conduct of the two impostors. By means of her nurse, whom she bribes to act as a spy, she intercepts and reads a letter addressed to Lydia which confirms her suspicions (pp. 318-322). She later tricks the naive Allan into acting as her private eye and, by means of a skilfully prepared epistolary trap, involves him in a counter-plot of false communication and detection. Her manipulation of the written texts and of the young “messenger” (p. 333) finally forces Lydia to depart. But the scope thus achieved brings havoc to her family. Consumed by mad jealousy, Mrs Milroy is not rescued from a physical and mental decline which seems to accelerate after this episode. In breaking the rules of communication, moreover, she exercises a corrupting influence on her family members (her husband, daughter and prospective son-in-law). The problems they face in the successive episodes are the consequences of the roles they are forced to play in her counter-plot which strengthens, rather than weakens, the position of their antagonists.

\textsuperscript{14} With proleptic irony, Collins emphasizes Midwinter’s assumption that the letter strengthens his friendly bond with Allan: “‘But for this morsel of paper,’ he thought, ‘my life might have been one long sorrow to me, and my father’s crime might have parted us for ever!’” (p. 280, my italics).
An intriguing study in psychopathology, Mrs Milroy is the victim of a society highly concerned about appearance. Deprived of her beauty and unable to cope with her loss, she is herself a faker, or rather a parody of it, since she vainly strives to look attractive through prosthetics15. Her characterization not only calls attention to the difficult position of an invalid, a physically stigmatized ‘other’, whose conduct is offered some pitiful justifications: “Is there an excuse for Mrs Milroy? Let the story of her life answer the question” (p. 312). It also establishes symbolic links between epistolary and cosmetic artifices, linguistic and visual constructs, identity and writing. Although she is struggling against an impostor, Mrs Milroy is doomed to frustration because she is herself a ‘false character’. Too selfish to consider the well-being of others, she bears evidence of an emotional disorder and a lack of scruples which make her an untrustworthy correspondent and, for this very reason, a self-delusive creature vainly aspiring to social and affective recognition.

Another aspect emphasized by Mrs Milroy’s agency is the incremental production of dangerous letters she activates. One of these missives is sent by Lydia’s reference in defence of the governess’ innocence. Artfully constructed and made public, it becomes a generator of other mystifying texts which turn the impostor into a heroine and her accusers into vicious slanderers:

The letter has been shown publicly, and had immensely strengthened Miss Gwilt’s position. She is now considered to be quite a heroine. The Thorpe-Ambrose Mercury has got a leading article about her, comparing her to Joan of Arc. It is considered probable that she will be referred to in the sermon next Sunday (pp. 355-356).

15 The woman, ruthlessly described as a “wreck horrible to behold”, makes desperate efforts to conceal the sight of it by wearing a wig, cosmetics and delicately laced clothes (pp. 311-323). On the psycho-social implications of the Victorian cosmetic market-place see Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, “Madame Rachel’s Enamel: Fatal Secrets of Victorian Sensational Mirrors”, Wilkie Collins Society Journal, 6 (2003), pp. 3-18.
The bitter irony of the quotation, which includes a journalistic article and a sermon among the rehabilitating texts, is undeniable. What Collins exposes here are the results of a double mistake made by Mrs Milroy. In addition to breaking the epistolary contract (she infringes the rule of authenticity by cheating Allan with her letters), the woman undervalues the aleatoriness of the communicative network since she starts a hazardous process of text-production which unexpectedly strengthens her antagonists. The hatred she inspires through her defaming campaign is paid for by her family members. To take her revenge and divide the loathed daughter of the house (Eleanor) from her equally loathed lover (Allan), Lydia tries her hand at a new epistolary form: an anonymous letter to the Major, which denounces the improper conduct of the young couple. In imitation of Mrs Milroy’s “unscrupulous ingenuity” (p. 332), she carefully sets her epistolary trap and without hesitation uses her recipient to “smooth[-] the way for [herself]” (pp. 462, 496).

The climactic episode in which Collins combines epistolary manoeuvring and aleatoriness is the one in which Lydia finds the letters from her former lover, the Cuban Captain Manuel. The woman re-reads one of the fatal epistles which had once convinced her to kill her first husband (pp. 444-445) and interprets its words as spurs to carry out a new murderous plan. In the changed context, however, the lethal\textsuperscript{16} letter inspires a different course of action (to kill Allan and personate his widow) which has unforeseen consequences for all the people involved. Once again, Collins underscores the virtual nature of communication. While the main parties are the same, the effects of the written signifier are completely altered. The letter has escaped the sender’s intentionality and, like an autonomous

\textsuperscript{16} The letter is lethal both metaphorically and literally. Lydia herself explains that her failing resolution to kill her first husband had been revived by the message (p. 444); and it is most likely that she had received the poison in a letter from Manuel, as surmised by James Bashwood (p. 529).
being, is transmitting new messages which Lydia mistakes for her own desires: “Yes; there the letter has been waiting for me in my box, to serve a purpose never thought of by the villain who wrote it. [...] there it has been, waiting and lurking for me through all the changes in my life, till it has come to be like my case at last” (pp. 445-446). Through Lydia’s statement, the author parodies the eighteenth-century conventions of the epistolary novel of seduction, since the female victim aims to appropriate and reshape her seducer’s message (“it has come to be like my case at last”). Like many women writers who rejected “the tale of seduction and betrayal – at the end of the eighteenth century”¹⁷, Collins depicted his heroine’s efforts to escape a fixed victim-role and become an agent of mischief herself, as proved by her later involvement of Manuel in her new criminal scheme. Unlike his female predecessors, however, Collins takes a further step in the process of generic revision since he configures the letter as an autonomous being “waiting and lurking” in the box. As Lydia herself implies, the written signifier is an independent entity which is ultimately uncontrollable. In the same way as it escaped its sender’s control, it baffles the aspirations of the recipient, whom it encourages to embark on an enterprise that proves to be delusive and aleatory¹⁸.

4. Mother Jezebel at work. Together with the epistolary novel of seduction, Collins revised other traditional sub-genres in which the construction of femininity was directly associated with letter-writing. One of them was the conduct book, a form that had gained popularity after Richardson: “women writers,


¹⁸ Indeed, the murder of Allan on board the Dorothea fails for reasons that are wholly unforeseeable (if not implausible), like the repentance of the mate of the criminal crew and the arrival of a Hungarian merchant that saves Armadale’s life (pp. 601-603).
disguised as aunts, mothers, elderly friends, used the letter form for conduct books offering friendly advice ‘in unadorned phrases’ 19. In the mid nineteenth century, conduct manuals like Eliza Leslie’s *Behaviour Book* (1859) were still widely read. Their behavioural prescriptions set the standards of propriety for young women, who were warned, among other things, against the dangers of engaging in indecorous correspondence. In *Armadale*, Collins deconstructs the models of feminine epistololarity on which this form hinged. The whole correspondence between Maria Oldershaw and Lydia is a parody of the relations established by conduct book writers with their intended readership, and an exposure of the constructedness of female identity within a highly normative society.

Most of the letters which constitute the epistolary sections of *Armadale* are exchanged between Miss Gwilt and Mrs Oldershaw, her cunning ‘foster’ mother. The elderly woman, who plays an important part in Lydia’s early life 20, makes her appearance on the scene in the role of epistolary adviser of the thirty-five-year-old protagonist. In a mock reproduction of the parent-child role-play staged in conduct books, Mrs Oldershaw guides Lydia through a maze of conflicting emotions by prescribing a matter-of-fact attitude meant to temper the latter’s sentimental excess. The parodied maternal function she fulfils is signalled by the variety of contradictory names used by her correspondent, who alternatively addresses her as “Old Wretch” (p. 161), “Mother Oldershaw” (pp. 162, 166, 214, 215, 286, 287), “Dear Old Love” (p. 165), “Mrs Jezebel” (p. 166), “My Poor Old Dear” (p. 213), “Mamma Oldershaw” (p. 282). Many of these names also appear in Lydia’s journal entries (including the variation “Mother Jezebel”), are used by the omniscient narrator, and appropriated by the elderly woman in some episto-

19 Zaczek, *Censored Sentiments*, cit., p. 15.
20 As we learn at the end of Book the Fourth, Maria Oldershaw and her husband were a couple of quacks who had adopted the beautiful orphan Lydia as a child, used her to attract potential customers, and finally given her up to the wealthy Blanchards (p. 521).
lary self-references (at p. 164, for instance, she calls herself “mother Oldershaw”).

Hyper-connoted as a loose woman and a treacherous parent by the biblical reference, “Mother Jezebel”\(^{21}\) strives to fashion the identity of her ‘daughter’ through letters. Her deceitful motives are confirmed by the pragmatic attitude she exhibits in her professional life. A beautician who uses cosmetics to change women’s look, Mrs Oldershaw tries to fashion Lydia’s identity in the same way as she constructs her customers’ ‘false’ appearance\(^{22}\). In both actions, moreover, she is prompted by pecuniary interests. If the Ladies’ Toilette Repository in Pimlico is her source of income, the marriage scheme she devises for Lydia is also dictated by economic reasons, as confirmed by her consistent use of a businesslike language\(^{23}\).

Lydia is gradually won by Mrs Oldershaw’s arguments and comes to play an important part in the “logistical plotting and planning”\(^{24}\) of her mercenary marriage with Allan. Her active participation has been highlighted by scholars, who have read the two women’s correspondence as an example of Victorian practices of gender construction. Less attention, however, has been paid to the protagonist’s resistance to the epistolary plot. In her early and last letters to Mrs Oldershaw, Lydia strives to escape the process of identity-making triggered by her corre-

\(^{21}\) See Kings I and II.

\(^{22}\) On the double role she performs in the commodification of women (through cosmetics and letters), see Talairach-Vielmas, “Madame Rachel’s Enamel”, cit.

\(^{23}\) Apart from using “the business letter-paper” of her shop in the first letter – an expedient adopted to “save the post” (p. 159) –, the woman recurrently alternates expressions of sham love with pragmatic instructions and statements, such as “Shall we leave off our fencing-match and come to serious matters now?” (p. 167) or “Consider the money I have already advanced, and the interests we both have at stake” (p. 289).

respondent and, in so doing, questions the bourgeois ethos that was at the basis of conduct manuals.

The first six letters she exchanges with the beautician (three received by, and three sent to, the latter) bear witness to her rejection of a role that is being enforced on her. An initial clue is offered by her disdainful response to the idea of luring Allan into marriage – an idea that is unmistakably shown to be Mrs Oldershaw’s. “If you had any real regard for anybody but your wicked old self, you would know that the bare idea of marrying again (after what I have gone through) is an idea that makes my flesh creep” (pp. 161-162). While accusing the elderly woman of selfishness, Lydia claims respect for her feelings and asserts her right to live a life of her choice – a life of retreat and cultivation of the mind: “I am very comfortable in this lodging. There are lovely flowers in the garden, and the birds wake me in the morning delightfully. I have hired a reasonably good piano” (p. 162). The postscript to the same letter underscores her rebellion against a society that has commodified women as consumable objects of desire, made and sold in the marriage market-place: “Keep your odious powders and paints and washes for the spotted shoulders of your customers; not one of them shall touch my skin, I promise you” (p. 162).

In the following letters the two correspondents engage in a battle of wits in which Mrs Oldershaw is finally successful. After boasting of having a thick skin (“Why waste your sparkling wit, my love, on your own impenetrable Oldershaw?” p. 163), the elderly woman coldly proceeds to explain the details of her plot. Lydia’s answers betray her indecision. She first pens an aggressive reply (“devote yourself to your proper business”, p. 163), but later writes a second missive to accept the part tailored for her. The last remnants of her rebellion are found in the violent words that close her letter: “I want a husband to vex, or a child to beat, or something of that sort. Do you ever like to see the summer insects kill themselves in the candle? I do, sometimes” (p. 166). The sufferings of other creatures she fantasizes about are projections of her own frustration at adopting a course of action she loathes. Forced by
social disparities to enter again the world of interpersonal relations, Lydia shows her ability to fake feelings and wear appropriate masks if need be.

The next epistolary sections of the novel emphasize her performative skills. A consummate actress in her relationships with Mrs Oldershaw and her pawns, she also proves to have a clever mind and a split-second timing in adapting their plan to changing circumstances. But her letters also include ironic comments on the worth of such protean abilities. The most intriguing of them is a paradoxical remark about the elusiveness of her identity. “I have proved not to be myself” (pp. 283-284) she muses, while referring to the alibi that a letter by Major Milroy’s mother has by chance granted her. Inserted as it is in an epistolary plot, the letter that confirms her fake identity (by giving evidence of her ‘not being herself’) reveals the artificiality of all the parts she has accepted to play.

A way out of this maze of delusions is provided by Midwinter. Infected by his passionate love, Lydia breaks the criminal contract with Mrs Oldershaw, marries the strange young man and follows him to Naples. Her decision to start a new life is significantly marked by her abandonment of epistolarity in favour of journal writing. The shift takes place in the middle of a very long letter to her accomplice. After confessing her conflicting feelings, Lydia hints at a secret concerning Midwinter’s name but, instead of revealing it, decides to consult her diary: “Wait a little, till I have asked my diary whether I can safely tell you?” (p. 423). The long sequence of journal entries is followed by the short “Conclusion of Miss Gwilt’s Letter to Mrs Oldershaw” (p. 453), in which she confirms her will to withdraw from the epistolary plot. The diary is here personified as a friendly adviser who helps her make her decision: “Well, I have asked; and my Diary says, ‘Don’t tell her!’ Under these circumstances, I close my letter – with my best excuses for leaving you in the dark” (p. 453).

The interpolation of the diary is a clue that deserves scrutiny. Why does Collins use prosopopeia to emphasize its advising function? Why does he lay so much stress on the shift from
letter- to journal-writing? Does the exchange of primary texts substantiate a problem of identity? And if so, what exactly are its implications? To answer these questions, we should consider the content of all the excerpts from Lydia’s journal embedded in the novel. The first diarial section describes her elaboration of a new ‘dishonest’ plot (to personate Allan’s widow) which seems to echo Mrs Oldershaw’s early suggestion that a husband ‘might die’ (p. 160). But the fact that she conceals it from her correspondent proves her wish to escape the role of apprentice she had previously embodied.

Other metamorphoses occurs in the journal entries which constitute Chapter XIV of Book the Fourth and the whole Book the Fifth (Chapters I-III). In the fourth Book, Lydia describes her growing love for Midwinter and her self-hatred for having to cheat him. Her aspiration to regain an authentic identity comes fully to the fore in the concluding entry, in which the announcement that she will put an end to the diary is related to the prospect of leading a happy married life: “I close and lock this book, never to write in it, never to open it again. I have won the great victory; I have trampled my own wickedness under foot. I am innocent; I am happy again” (p. 514).

Against all expectations, the journal is started again in Book the Fifth to express the misery of her foundering marriage. The three chapters of the Book attest to her disappointment at her husband’s coldness, her resurgent hatred for Allan, and her unravelling of the old plot hatched at the latter’s expenses. With oscillating emotions, Lydia confesses her most secret wishes and fears, struggles against the temptation of destroying her reformed self, but finally yields to the lure of self-annihilation. The diary is definitely closed when she gives up all hopes in her marriage and plunges into an abyss of criminality from which she will not return. Resumed after her failure to embody the role of ‘happy wife’, the journal offers her a second chance for self-analysis, which is followed by the decision to play another clear role: that of unredeemed criminal. This transformation is better understood if we consider the opening and closing paragraphs of the fifth Book:
WOMEN OF LETTERS: WRITING AND IDENTITY IN «ARMADALE»

[...]

Why have I broken my resolution? Why have I gone back to this secret friend of my wretchedest and wickedest hours? Because I am more friendless than ever. [...]

My misery is a woman’s misery and it will speak – here, rather than nowhere; to my second self, in this book, if I have no one else to hear me (p. 545).

I have reached the last morsel of space left on the last page; and whether I like it or not, I must close the book this time for good and all, when I close it to-night.

Good-by, my old friend and companion of many a miserable day!

Having nothing else to be fond of, I half suspect myself of having been unreasonably fond of you.

What a fool I am! (p. 612).

In the first quotation, the writer hails her paper friend as her “second self”, a guide she consults at moments of crisis to see more clearly into herself. The second quotation, in which she parts from her ‘double’ forever, contains two interesting clues: the symbolic link between the end of the paper and the silencing of her voice, and the admission of having “been unreasonably fond of [her secret self]”. Both statements configure journal writing as a vehicle for self-exploration, a liberating means through which a marginalized figure can momentarily gain self-assurance and assert her right to a voice (the “will” to speak mentioned in the first excerpt).

If it is true that Lydia is defeated in her social aspirations, it is also true that she enjoys some freedom in ‘conversing’ with her diary – an act that sheds light onto her identity problems. Tormented but never “unreliable”25, her journal-writing is the most authentic form of communication provided in the novel. As Grass points out, Lydia’s diary “is not a deliberate attempt to invent for public eyes a narrative of a complete and coherent identity. But it is an attempt to impose order upon disorder”26.


26 Sean Grass, The Self in the Cell. Narrating the Victorian Prisoner, New
By searching a guide in herself (i.e. in her diary), Lydia rejects the authority of a normative sub-genre (the parodied conduct book) which denied autonomy to young women. From a generic viewpoint, moreover, her writing challenges the association of women’s writing with the love-letter tradition, “perhaps the most tenacious of gender-genre connections in the history of literature”\textsuperscript{27}. Whereas she receives love letters from men (such as the “charming letter” she gets from Midwinter, p. 438), she seldom dares to express authentic feelings in her correspondence. The only form she relies on is the autobiographical writing of the diary\textsuperscript{28}. But the emotions she entrusts to it exceed the limits of female sentimentality, since she alternates romantic feelings with violent, unladylike passions springing from the dark recesses of her psyche.

5. Lettered professionals: the new Victorian intelligentsia. The implications of Lydia’s writing are clarified by a consideration of the narratorial role she performs. As the novel’s main intradiegetic voice, she is assigned the function of completing, and sometimes providing a different version of, the story told by the omniscient narrator, who seldom penetrates the façade of all the masks she wears. In addition to revealing the “mitigating circumstances” of her crimes and her potentially redeeming qualities\textsuperscript{29}, her writing fulfils a metaliterary function since it brings into focus some perplexing issues faced by the author. While he was experimenting with the sensation novel, a


\textsuperscript{28} The substitute function of the diary, as a self-orientated means of communication, is confirmed by a journal entry in which the expression of her tormented love is introduced by a typical epistolary address: “Poor dear Midwinter! Yes, ‘dear’” (p. 434).

generic hybrid perceived as a feminine phenomenon, Collins had to cope with the Victorian anxieties concerning *écriture féminine*30, with the aesthetic and moral reservations about the spreading language of excess, and with his own ambiguous place in the literary market-place (as Heller explains, he was a successful male professional associated with a feminized form)31. In these matters, Lydia acts as a vehicle for the author’s reservations and provocative remarks. Her diary, for instance, offers a symbolic illustration of the difficulties met by women writers in gaining professional recognition. Highly sensational in its language and psychologically insightful, the journal is the structural pivot of the novel, but the fact that it is inserted in the omniscient narrator’s text deflates its subversive potential. In the same way as her name is erased from her grave, Lydia is finally denied an authorial status: her ‘improper’ story is appropriated and controlled by the ‘proper’ (male) narrator, whose editing function attaches pathologized connotations to the female desires expressed in her “book” (p. 612). This control is exercised through a number of strategies, including the suspicion of insanity aroused by her connection with the Sanatorium, and the emergence of male voices (the narrator’s and Pedgift Senior’s) which conclude her story from their own perspectives.

Another element which configures Lydia as a novelist manqué is the symbolic nature of her agon with Midwinter. Although she indicates his disaffection as the main reason for their matrimonial crisis, it is against his journalistic “hateful writing” (p. 547) that she gives vent to her rage. Her frustration at being downgraded in Midwinter’s interests leads her to resume her journal and to express in its pages her hatred for “the whole tribe of authors” (p. 547). A record of exciting


memories, the “book” is also a creative enterprise through which she challenges the male writing of her husband and proposes herself as an alternative writer. The failure of her aspirations\(^{32}\) does not cancel the relevance of the writing space she is granted. Through her pen and her ventriloquized voice, Collins entered the Victorian debate on gender disparities and explored some contradictions inherent in the social differentiation between female and male intellectuals.

Lydia’s characterization as a ‘lettered’ woman is confirmed by many textual signals. Educated at foreign schools and endowed with refined tastes, she provides a number of meta-artistic remarks, ranging from her hatred of Allan’s illiteracy (p. 557) to theatrical comments (p. 213), from her dislike of “the commonplace rubbish of the circulating libraries” (p. 491) to her questioning of Manichean characterization in novels (p. 559). All the letters she writes (her missives as well as her self-directed diary) configure her as a “dialectical image” – a figure that fits the definition of “lettered woman” given by Thomas Beebe in the wake of Walter Benjamin’s ideas:

She is a site of cultural contestation which moves in many directions at once: between the two meanings of _lettré_ – the more literal one of being identified with and even imprisoned by her letters, and the figurative one of educated; between the active and passive implications of the verb; and between self-actualizing autobiography and restrictive ventriloquism or prohibition\(^{33}\).

Lydia’s struggle for an intellectual identity is mirrored by the efforts for professional recognition made by Midwinter within an ostracizing milieu. A mixed-blood vagrant living at the margins of Victorian society, the young man appears from

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\(^{32}\) In shaping her unsuccessful destiny as competitor of the “industrious journalist” (p. 547), Collins was reflecting the Victorian reality of unequal opportunities for the sexes, but also manifesting his own unease about women professionals.

the very beginning as a man of ‘letters’. In addition to a “written testimonial” that proves his false identity (p. 60), he carries with him two volumes of tragedies with which he identifies34 and entertains a special relation with all books, which are described as “the generous friends who met me without suspicion” (p. 96). Self-taught in languages and literature, he is also versed in letter-writing as proved by his sustained correspondence with Brock. In the second half of the novel, moreover, his ‘lettered’ status is reinforced. After accepting a job as foreign correspondent, he laboriously makes his career, gets promoted, and accepts a new position that puts an end to his marriage:

The proprietors of the newspaper had received from the editor so favorable a report of his correspondence from Naples that they had determined on advancing him to a place of greater responsibility and greater emolument at Turin (p. 577).

It ended in Midwinter’s letting me persuade him that I was old enough to take care of myself on the journey to England, and that he owed it to the newspaper people [...] not to leave Turin just as he was established there. [...] I believe he was glad to get rid of me (p. 578).

Midwinter’s rising status is confirmed, in the conclusion, by the hint at a career in literature he might start (p. 676). Described as a future potential, this new career is nonetheless indicative of a rapid change that was taking place at the time: the emergence of a new caste of literati by profession. Trans-class, internationalized and heterogeneous35, this caste included marginal figures like Midwinter, which were offered unprecedented opportunities for self-development. In analyzing their profes-

34 “[t]he Plays of Sophocles, in the original Greek, and the Faust of Goethe, in the original German” (p. 60).
35 On the evolution of the European intelligentsia see, among others, Christophe Charles (Les Intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle, Paris, Seuil, 1996), who also examines the enslaving effects of the commercialization of journalism.
sional bids, Collins mentions the price they had to pay for their success and the deontological challenges met daily. Quite caustic, for example, are his comments on the “young Buccaneers of Literature” (p. 530), the journalists who rewrite the reports pleading for Lydia’s innocence in the wake of her trial for murder. Their articles are manipulative ‘letters’ sent to influence public opinion, which epitomize the risks of linguistic distortion in a society that was more and more dependent on mass-communication. In the case of Midwinter, Collins underscores the young man’s readiness to sacrifice his marriage and comply with the requests of his employers, whom Lydia polemically calls “slave-owners” (p. 552).

Different though they are from the obstacles placed in Lydia’s way, these hardships suggest that the two intellectual mates/competitors have a common difficult path through life. Quite exceptional, as “a marriage of intellectuals”36, their union exposes the contradictions of a fast-changing society, which both fostered and curbed the aspirations of ‘lettered’ outsiders to self-realization.

The innovative role played by Midwinter and his wife is highlighted by contrast with the illiteracy of the other young couple portrayed in the novel. Both slow over artistic occupations (he dislikes books and she lacks musical skills), Allan Armadale and Eleanor Milroy exhibit an uncultivated mind which turns them into foils of the two protagonists. Their correspondence, in particular, proves such deficiencies. While Allan ruins his reputation by misreading and miswriting his letters37, Neelie is parodied as a coquettish, insincere young woman, who fashions her identity with the same care with which she manufactures her scented missives “fragrant to smell


37 In his epistolary relation with Mr Darce, for example, he is ridiculed as a poor correspondent unaware of his limits, who boasts about his writing skills: “‘I wonder where my knack of writing comes from?’” (p. 193).
and beautiful to see” (p. 228). By underscoring the intellectual inadequacy of Allan and Neelie, Collins casts a shadow on the righteousness of the dominant ideologies they incarnate as an apparently ideal (white) bourgeois couple. Their parodied characterization suggests the author’s awareness of the changing structures of his society. Exactly like the fast-evolving network of communications, the modernization of professionalism was affecting the Victorian perception of class, race, and gender categories. The immediate result was the fluidization of identities and the dawning of a new future in which intellectual hybrids might aspire to full social recognition.

The idea of professional mobility is reinforced, in the Epilogue, by the structural prominence given to Pedgift Senior’s letter. In writing to his son, the lawyer not only supplies information about the latest events, but comments on the metamorphic nature of their age which is “eminently favourable to the growth of all roguery” (p. 673). The biting wit he displays, when referring to questionable upstarts like Doctor Le Doux and Mrs Oldershaw, acquires a contradictory meaning in the light of his own social position. An intellectual and a master of epistolary writing, Pedgift belongs to the same caste as the two hybrid protagonists. Like Midwinter, he patronizingly instructs Allan in the course of action to adopt. He also admires Lydia’s writing skills and complainingly refers to the gender limitations she faces: “‘What a lawyer she would have made,’ he exclaimed, fervently, ‘if she had only been a man!’” (p. 363). By entrusting to Pedgift Senior an ambiguous moral message, Collins laid more stress on the volatility of social identities. A rising professional who thrives on writing and interpretation, the lawyer exposes some aporias of a world increasingly ‘invaded’ by letters, a world that was still unable to cope with the ethical riddles posed by such proliferation.