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The History of Liberal Violence in *The Woman in White*

SOPHIA HSU



IN THE first pages of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60), the novel's hero, Walter Hartright, introduces Professor Pesca, a political exile who initially provides comic relief to a tale of sensational violence. By “doing his utmost to turn himself into an Englishman” (7), Pesca shows deference to his host country and thereby neutralizes the danger that he might otherwise pose as a foreigner. While Pesca disappears from the narrative after this encounter, he returns later in his true garb as a radical nationalist, who inspires “mortal dread” (585) in even the most indomitable character, the villain (and the novel's other Italian character) Count Fosco. The shocking change in Pesca's representation helps situate the novel's critique of English liberalism in the context of the Risorgimento, the mid-century movement for Italian unification contemporaneous with the novel's serialization.¹

In evoking the Risorgimento, *The Woman in White* offers a vantage point from which to re-evaluate England's perception of itself as a liberal sanctuary. In the words of Edward Smith Stanley, Earl of Derby, “to the distressed and persecuted of all the world, England was the land of protection” (Hansard 5 June 1822). But even as Victorian society was “self-consciously liberal,” as Lauren M.E. Goodlad indicates, English liberalism was full of tensions as a moral and political philosophy (*Victorian Literature* x). Though nineteenth-century liberalism most often corresponded with anti-statism and volunteerism, it also referred to the state's responsibility to individual and social welfare, as well as an ethical responsibility to build civic character in its citizens (Goodlad, *Victorian Literature* vii–x). “Since the nineteenth century,” Goodlad writes, “[liberalism] has been variously employed to denote diverse political agendas, a set of capitalist economic ideologies, and a broad cultural investment in promoting freedom” (*Victorian Literature* viii). The numerous and often incompatible goals of liberalism have led critics to view it as a “notoriously elusive notion” (Bellamy 1). This elusiveness continues today; thus, Duncan Bell offers a fluid definition of the concept: what counts as liberalism is what has been “classified as liberal, and recognized as such by other self-proclaimed liberals” (690). To Bell, this elastic understanding of the term “forces us to examine [liberal] traditions as evolving and contested historical phenomena” (690). The call to historicize liberalism and to see it as “evolving,” however, runs counter to the Victorian belief in the myth of stable, eternal English freedom. Many Victorians assumed that

ancient constitutional liberties were the source for the contractual nature of their parliamentary government, tradition of self-governance, and rule of law (Goodlad, *Victorian Literature* 3). But, as Collins illustrates, such self-congratulation and ahistorical thinking were unfounded given the contradictions he exposes via Pesca and Fosco.

These contradictions pertain to the English people's claim to a liberal cosmopolitanism that allegedly distinguishes them as sympathetic and tolerant, open to foreign groups and cultures in an ethical, intellectual, and aesthetic manner. As Amanda Anderson writes, nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism is a "broad concept" (30) that encourages "the need to enact or embody universalism" (31). Similarly, Goodlad and Julia M. Wright define cosmopolitanism as both "an ethics of cross-border relations" and "an ethos borne by specific individuals and groups wherever they go, within or across national borders" (par. 5). *The Woman in White* demonstrates how the Victorians' enactment of cosmopolitanism, exemplified by their welcoming of political exiles such as Pesca, hides their actual intolerance and inhumanity. My argument thus resembles Uday Singh Mehta's discussion of "the inclusionary pretensions of liberal theory and the exclusionary effects of liberal practices" (46). Mehta contends that empire operates as a limit point for liberalism's supposed universality, which should extend freedom, equality, and national self-determination to all people. Because liberalism was fashioned in a European context and, hence, according to Mehta, can only manage difference by recasting it through that lens, liberal justifications for empire rely on a narrative of historical progress that denies non-Europeans the capacity for self-rule (28–36). For Mehta, empire reveals liberalism's exclusions. I add to his claim by showing how these exclusions, while often exposed in an international context, are also domestic in nature.² As Pesca reminds us, English freedom was itself established through exclusionary violence: that of civil war and regicide. After disclosing to Walter his membership in the Brotherhood, a secret society of Italian nationalists, Pesca denounces the English for sneering at Italy's bloody path toward liberation: "It is not for you to say—you Englishmen, who have conquered your freedom so long ago, that you have conveniently forgotten what blood you shed. . . . In the time of your first Charles you might have done us justice; the long luxury of your own freedom has made you incapable of doing us justice now" (Collins 589–90). Referring to the era of Charles I, Pesca explains that English freedom is not an *a priori* mode of existence but an historically contested arrangement between a sovereign body and its body politic. Liberalism, moreover, depends on violence for not only its founding but its continuance—a violence that in the novel is figured as the legal violence women face when denied liberal citizenship.

By asserting that *The Woman in White* critiques English liberalism, I depart from previous scholars who interpret both the text and sensation fiction primarily in ideological ways. Jonathan Loesberg, for example, influentially links the genre and Collins's novel to anxieties in the late 1850s and '60s

about democratic reform.³ Similarly, D.A. Miller argues that the text is about the disciplining of feminine nervous bodies into masculine liberal subjects (146–91).⁴ More recently, Anna Maria Jones has identified this methodological trend as sensational itself: the critical project of “outing ‘invisible’ power relationships” (7) parallels sensation fiction’s detective plot, wherein characters and readers alike “track the novels’ secrets” (8). Departing from this trend, Jones claims that sensation novels are aware of the subjects they create, thereby making room for an understanding of the genre that views it as a mode of critique rather than ideologically embedded (6, 15–16). In this article, I follow Jones’s lead, but instead of focusing on how sensation fiction constructs a critically engaged subject, I address how it dismantles the ideology upon which these subjects are purportedly built. Recent scholarship on Victorian liberalism demonstrates how it promotes a mode of ethical self-fashioning that culminates in what could be called liberal character.⁵ In particular, the Victorians were preoccupied with the liberal cosmopolitan ideals of detachment and objectivity—ideals we still valorize in critical debate even as we recognize, as they did, the national, racial, and gendered assumptions of those ideals.⁶ Sensation fiction is thus ripe for staging a critique of English liberalism. On the one hand, its prominent use of dialectical doubling, mixed identities, and plot twists undermines the division between domestic and foreign and liberal and illiberal. On the other hand, its relocation of crime within the liberal space of the middle-class home compels the reader to confront the threats lurking within the supposedly safe and familiar.⁷

The Woman in White, in other words, is not idiosyncratic in diagnosing liberalism. As Nathan K. Hensley argues, Collins’s *Armadale* evaluates the concept of liberal abstraction, disclosing how liberalism’s universality dangerously follows an economic logic of human interchangeability and exchange (609–10). Goodlad also writes on abstraction in *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*, attending to the historical abstraction that enables England to obscure its racist past so as to proffer itself as benevolent and liberal (*Victorian Geopolitical* 110–60). Beyond Collins’s oeuvre, sensation novels like Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* similarly disrupt liberal ideology. Emily Steinlight argues that these novels destabilize the notion of the self-possessed liberal individual by demonstrating how it depends on producing a surplus population that upends liberalism’s individuating project (509, 511). In focusing on *The Woman in White*, I join these scholars in illuminating the critical capacity of sensation fiction. Like Albert D. Pionke, I investigate how this novel exposes English liberal contradictions as revealed via the Risorgimento. Although many English people wanted to endorse the Risorgimento due to their desire to support what they believed was a liberal movement, they were aware that supporting Italian unification would mean disavowing their earlier responses to Glasgow Thuggery, Papal aggression, and the Indian Mutiny (Pionke 102). To champion the Italian cause, the

English “had to practice a kind of ideological relativism, balancing politics, trade, class, religion, and race and occluding the conflicts among them” (Pionke 103). Whereas Pionke examines such relativism through the concept of secrecy, highlighting liberalism’s complicity in the lawlessness of secret societies (101–17), I examine how liberalism’s allegedly lawful moral rule aligns it with the violence it outwardly opposes.

By encouraging the formation of ethical and open-minded individuals, England could claim a moral high ground and position itself as the world’s liberal guardian. Such a claim, however, can only be maintained by renouncing the violence that establishes and undergirds liberal governance. England’s liberal image thus stems not from its defence of freedom and self-determination but from its repudiation of its revolutionary history and of the violence continually maintaining the liberal state. Through its dual narratives—one about the Italians’ search for freedom and the other about the defence of the English familial home—*The Woman in White* reconfigures England’s self-conception in order to subvert the story it tells about itself to the rest of the world.

Though Walter famously asserts that *The Woman in White* is about “what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve,” the novel is not as exclusively domestic as this statement implies (5). The tale of Walter’s courtship of Laura Fairlie begins with Pesca, a national and familial outsider. As Walter indicates, Pesca is “the starting-point” of the text, which Walter commences by mentioning what is, at this stage in the novel, Pesca’s ambiguous past. According to Walter, “All I then knew of the history of [Pesca’s] life was . . . that he had left Italy for political reasons (the nature of which he uniformly declined to mention to any one)” (7). Despite crediting Pesca with instigating the narrative’s events, Walter downplays what is later disclosed to be Pesca’s revolutionary ties. In this initial moment, Walter obscures Pesca’s background with a seemingly insignificant parenthetical phrase, domesticating the Italian’s ensuing revelations by labelling the novel a “strange family story” (7).

In attempting to curb the international contours of the novel’s domestic content, Walter exhibits the liberal arrogance typifying British immigration policy. While others interpret Walter’s editorial control over the text as his exercise of male authority,⁸ such authority comes in part from the British people’s belief in their liberal superiority. Walter’s confidence in thinking he can manage the foreign subplot of his domestic tale parallels Britain’s confidence in thinking it could manage the exiles to whom it opened its borders. This confidence was reflected in Britain’s immigration legislation or lack thereof: for most of the century, no laws restricted immigration, regardless of the threat refugees potentially posed.⁹ As Bernard Porter explains, refugees “could involve Britain in all kinds of diplomatic difficulties with her continental neighbors” (6). Yet Britain’s openness was “a source of considerable national pride,” providing “direct proof of [Britons’] superiority, that their

institutions were solid and secure” (Porter 1, 7). Mid-century lawmakers were especially lenient in their treatment of refugees because they trusted that national security would not be affected by porous borders and because their constituents expected such leniency from them (Porter 169).

The Woman in White manipulates this assuredness in its early depiction of Pesca, who seemingly reinforces the presumed innocuousness of British immigration policy: his small stature and alleged innocence play into British fantasies of foreign containment. Before Pesca reveals he is an operative for the Brotherhood, the text describes him as “the smallest human being,” who appears so beholden to “the country which had afforded him an asylum” that the English never entertain the possibility that he might pose a threat to their nation (7). In calling England an “asylum,” the novel ostensibly reflects Maura O’Connor’s idea that nineteenth-century English writers used Italy to frame their home as a liberal sanctuary. O’Connor writes, “England’s national purpose and identity were increasingly circumscribed by its sense of duty and moral obligation to effect positive changes on the European continent and its willingness to inspire liberal reforms on the Italian peninsula” (77). Some Italians even affirmed England’s self-conception as a model of the liberal state; moderate Italian liberals were especially impressed that England seemed able to “reconcile freedom and popular participation without subverting the social order” (Isabella 129). England provided a national model that, by mid-century, proved more palatable to many Italians than the republicanism offered by radicals like Giuseppe Mazzini, an early Risorgimento leader who sought to democratize Italy.¹⁰ A “harmless” exile, Pesca, at first, upholds the narrative that England is not only secured by open borders but also an example for Italy to follow, demonstrating his obsequiousness to his host country by endeavouring to “become an Englishman” (8).

Yet the political asylum Britain offers Pesca proves less than liberal when compared to the asylum in the domestic plot: the psychiatric hospital from which Anne Catherick, the mad woman in white, escapes and in which Laura is subsequently imprisoned. These hospitals protect the social body by committing those whom the state considers dangerous. The notion of the medical asylum disrupts the sense of freedom that the political usage of the word implies. In linking these notions, the novel anticipates Ranjana Khanna’s work wherein she shows how political asylum, like mental asylum, is less about freedom and humanitarianism than about “the rights of institutions over living bodies” (477). Khanna argues that the concept of asylum favours the institution granting asylum over the person seeking it; the mental asylum “has the right to detain or release [patients], in the name of preventing violence and exercising guardianship” (477–78) just as the nation has the right to “let live or make die . . . to make an exception in its decision not to extradite the asylum seeker” (474). The idea of asylum “underscores forms of hostility at the heart of hospitality,” exposing how the threat of violence haunts the discourses of home, liberty, and safety (Khanna 479). In

The Woman in White, the double use of asylum hints at the novel's critique of the Victorian state as an institution that depends on yet disavows violence. This critique, though, can only take place after Collins sets the stage for a more general critique of English liberalism and cosmopolitanism.

The text begins its critique of English liberalism by illustrating how those characters who most identify as cosmopolitan are also the most intolerant. Frederick Fairlie, Laura's uncle, best personifies this contradiction. Given his aesthetic sensitivities, Fairlie supposedly exemplifies the cosmopolitan tenet of intercultural exchange.¹¹ His art collection includes pieces from Britain's imperial holdings ("gaily tinted chintz" and "Indian matting" [38–39]) and continental allies ("Dresden china" and "Rembrandt etchings" [42]). Notably, he owns one of Raphael's paintings of Madonna and Child, a relic of Italy's cultural prime (39). During the Risorgimento, Italian patriots capitalized on Italy's cultural history to construct a shared national identity in order to garner enthusiasm for unification (Grew 211–29). Fairlie's ownership of Raphael's art outwardly aligns him with the Risorgimento's cultural inflections. His pretensions, however, undermine his cosmopolitanism, marking his artistic worldliness as superficial. Despite boasting that "so much of my early life has been passed abroad, that I have quite cast my insular skin," he undercuts his claim to a robust cosmopolitanism through his hypochondria (40–41). His obsession with his health even extends to his personification of Fosco as "a walking-West-Indian-epidemic" (358). To Gabrielle Ceraldi, Mr. Fairlie's sickliness suggests that the English have become complacent in their superiority, a complacency that has prevented the English from proving their dominance abroad (185–86). While Ceraldi contends *The Woman in White* offers imperial conquest as a resolution to this complacency (176, 188–89), I assert the novel is more concerned with exposing the contradictions within English liberalism than with maintaining the nation's global ascendancy. Fairlie's claim to a cosmopolitan aesthetic in which he admires Italian art from afar cannot erase his xenophobia. In satirizing his cosmopolitan affectations, the novel negates what in its opening treatment of Pesca could be viewed as its affirmation of liberal inclusivity.

Through this uneven depiction of English cosmopolitanism, *The Woman in White* subverts England's presumed global supremacy, dismantling the belief that the nation's liberal principles of universalism, ethical humanism, and rule of law make it the most moral country in the world. This subversion first occurs through Fosco, who diagnoses English chauvinism in his discussion with Marian Halcombe about the difference between England and China. Though Fosco likewise identifies as cosmopolitan, this identity does not imbue him with the moral absolutism with which it imbues Walter and Fairlie; instead, it instills in him a moral relativism that disrupts the authority that the English characters claim. Fosco maintains that he has encountered "so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled . . . to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong" (237). In response, Marian articulates

a certainty about England's moral aptitude only an Englishwoman could express: "Surely we have one unquestionable virtue in England. . . . The Chinese authorities kill thousands of innocent people, on the most frivolous pretexts. We, in England, are free from all guilt of that kind" (237–38). For Marian, the English are "free" from arbitrary violence because of due process. Their legal system, to which even the monarch is subject, has been, since Magna Carta, a hallmark of English liberal pride.¹² But Fosco retorts: "John Bull . . . is the quickest old gentleman at finding out the faults that are his neighbours', and the slowest old gentleman at finding out the faults that are his own" (238). Unlike Marian, Fosco evaluates England without bias because of his foreignness. Therefore, he explains how the English are morally ambiguous: their laws paradoxically reward the criminal over the virtuous. As he illustrates, crime pays in England: the "spendthrift" who manipulates his friends' sympathy successfully borrows money, whereas the honest man is imprisoned in a workhouse; and the dressmaker who "falls under temptation, and steals" is relieved of hunger, whereas her upright counterpart dies from starvation (238, 239). Through these examples, Fosco illuminates the naïveté of the English people's faith in the morality of their laws. This naïveté is reflected in the novel's formal structure as a legal trial that affirms the law's ability to protect individuals despite Walter admitting the law is "the pre-engaged servant of the long purse" (5).¹³ Fosco and Marian's exchange reveals that, for all their liberal pretensions, the English still fall prey to blinding nationalist passions—the same passions the English accuse the Italians of in their quest for unification. As Pesca later tells Walter, remarking on the hypocrisy of English moralism, "It is not for you to say—you Englishmen, who have . . . conveniently forgotten what blood you shed . . . how far the worst of all exasperations may, or may not, carry the maddened men of an enslaved nation" (589–90). Like the Italians, the English are also "maddened," yet the guise of law and the veil of history prevent them from recognizing their madness as such.

The character of Fosco demonstrates that the risk the exile presents is found not in his or her international entanglements but in how he or she exposes the internal ruptures challenging England's liberal prowess. Even while the text suggests that Fosco is a threat to national security—he is an Italian nationalist and a French or Austrian spy—his continental activities, at least in the context of the novel, have no effect on English safety. Collins concludes the plot about Fosco's betrayal of the Risorgimento by eliminating him in Paris via an assassin presumably associated with the Brotherhood. As a result, England is not directly involved in Fosco's international predicaments; he dies neither by an Englishman's hand nor on English soil. By distancing English national safety from the Italian's espionage, the novel seems to collude again with popular ideas about the surety of English borders. Fosco's assassination abroad alludes to the 1858 attempt by Italian radical Felice Orsini to kill Napoleon III in Paris. While this attempt motivated

Parliament to consider the Conspiracy to Murder Bill, which would have made assassination attempts against foreign sovereigns punishable under English law, the bill was unpopular given England's commitment to liberal policies and did not pass (Porter 176–90). Moreover, even if such attempts were devised in England, they seemingly did not interfere with domestic politics (Porter 33–45). The text thus does not locate the danger Fosco presents to England in his work as a spy. Rather, the danger he represents lies in his capacity to challenge English liberal rhetoric, a capacity his foreignness affords him by granting him a detached perspective that aligns with the English cosmopolitan value of critical objectivity.¹⁴ In exemplifying this value, Fosco proves its portability and the limitations of English claims to cosmopolitanism. Consequently, he revises the relationship between foreign and domestic by complicating the danger the foreign embodies: the foreign is dangerous because it is similar, not different, and in that similarity exposes the contradictions within liberalism itself.

Since the threat Fosco poses stems from his personification of an ostensibly English ideal, the text illustrates how the English characters try to invalidate his critique by casting him as an exotic other, turning him into a violent despot or comic figure. The first method is most evident in the fears surrounding his association with secret societies and foreign intrigue—an association linking him to violence and revolutionary terror.¹⁵ However, Fosco never explicitly exhibits violence on the page; other characters merely suspect him of it.¹⁶ Nonetheless, he is superficially the novel's more frightening Italian: while Pesca is small, Fosco is “immensely fat” (220); while Pesca is humorous, Fosco has an “unmistakable mental firmness and power” (222); and while Pesca is a republican, Fosco supports “the rights of the aristocracy” (641). But by novel's end, Pesca is revealed to be as dangerous as Fosco and Fosco, at times, as absurd as Pesca appears. Despite fearing Fosco, Marian and Laura also ridicule him, reducing his remarks about England and China to “glib cynicism” in order to delegitimize his critique of English moralism (240). This minimization corresponds with Marian's comments about his peculiar deportment. While she describes Fosco as “a man who could tame anything” (219), she additionally notes he is “as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us” (222). Blurring the division between the Italians, the text demonstrates how the English utilize contradictory methods of exoticization to justify their nation's sense of superiority. England's attempts to consolidate its liberal politics against a foreign enemy, however, prove to be ineffectual, as Fosco and Pesca defy any endeavour to fix them as adversaries or fools.

Fosco's complexity raises the question of how aware the novel is of his portrayal. Is the novel ultimately conservative, given how it masks the incongruities it unveils by killing Fosco and classifying him as the antagonist? Or is the novel self-consciously villainizing Fosco in order to show how the villainization of foreigners serves to bolster English claims to being a liberal

nation? Though many critics have taken the former view,¹⁷ I take the latter considering what I interpret as Fosco's cognizance of the Italian stereotype he embodies. He is both an opera-singing clown, belting Figaro's aria from *The Barber of Seville*, and an evil count with seemingly telepathic powers and "unfathomable gray eyes" (221). Able to embody both sides of the stereotype, Fosco exploits or resists convention when doing so is advantageous. He highlights this manipulation in a scene with Sir Percival Glyde, Laura's husband, who tries to coerce his wife into signing away her property. As Lisa Surridge clarifies, Glyde does not need Laura's signature to access her fortune; the money is already his, given the terms of her marriage settlement (155–58). Glyde's deception, then, is a gratuitous use of force that amplifies the legal violence already enacted upon Laura, who, as dictated by the law of coverture, surrenders her rights to her husband.¹⁸ Surprisingly, Fosco sides with Laura and decries Glyde's excessive trickery; he thus appears more just than the Englishman in this moment. Aware that "we Italians are all wily and suspicious by nature, in the estimation of the good John Bull," Fosco highlights the stereotype's construction before sympathizing with Laura's position (Collins 245). He hence reveals England's contradictory attitudes toward the foreigner. The English, according to their historical narrative of liberal development, should be more progressive than the Italians, who have devolved because of their decadent history, but Fosco undercuts this narrative by expressing more sympathy than does Glyde.¹⁹ To Fosco, performances of liberality are "moral clap-traps," which "have an excellent effect in England" (604). Yet he tells Walter to "keep them for yourself and your own countrymen," as the foreigner can see through the charade and play it more convincingly (604). Defying and embodying the stereotype, Fosco prevents the English from judging him and elevating their nation as a liberal model.

Fosco's critique of liberalism makes room for Pesca's reappearance and consequently sets the stage for *The Woman in White's* more pointed examination of liberal violence. Whereas Fosco reveals England's inconsistent politics, Pesca reveals how these inconsistencies are not exceptions to so much as constitutive features of English liberalism. Pesca's speech (cited above) illustrates how such dismantling occurs. In asserting that "you Englishmen . . . have conquered your freedom," Pesca emphasizes freedom's construction, thereby challenging the myth that England has always been free. The Whig interpretation of history is primarily responsible for this myth. As J. W. Burrow explains, Whig historiography "detect[s] in English history the continuous presence, sometimes manifest, sometimes rather distressingly occult, of an abiding spirit of liberty" (3). Thomas Babington Macaulay's popular *History of England* (1848) exemplifies this tradition, locating in the 1688–89 Glorious Revolution a "vindication of ancient rights" (396). Macaulay claims England's revolution was unlike any other country's insofar as "we never lost what others are wildly and blindly seeking to regain" (398). In calling 1688 a "preserving revolution" that affirmed English

liberties, Macaulay assumes the constancy of English autonomy (398). Pesca, however, topples this confidence by divulging how political freedom was “conquered” during “the time of your first Charles.” Insisting on this earlier seventeenth-century moment as the beginning of English liberty, Pesca subverts Macaulay’s assertion about England’s perpetual freedom and disrupts the narrative that the English like to tell about their superiority.

By relating the English Civil War to the Risorgimento, Pesca emphasizes not only the historical invention of English freedom but also the violence that made it possible. Whig history conceals the violence often accompanying political change—a concealment Edward Adams maintains is part of a cultural form he identifies as liberal epic. As Adams argues, epic’s valorization of war continues in modern times. While modern epics may not venerate bloodlust in the same way as classical epics, “war epic survived and flourished . . . because liberalism . . . cannot let go of the first great drama of heroic killing” (Adams 7). Liberal epics admit to the need for domination, even as they obscure that need by justifying it in the name of freedom and abstracting its graphic details (Adams 5). This abstraction is most apparent in the Victorians’ conception of their so-called bloodless Glorious Revolution, a conception Macaulay was largely held accountable for spreading.²⁰ Although Macaulay and others celebrated the ideal of a peaceful shift to liberal rule in 1688, the Glorious Revolution was anything but bloodless.²¹ Indeed, the causes of the revolution can be found forty years earlier in the Civil War, which culminated in Charles I’s bloody head—a war in which the Parliamentarians similarly exploited the pacific legend of Magna Carta to justify their rebellion.²² The English, Pesca says, “have conveniently forgotten what blood [they] shed,” and he reproaches them for being “incapable of doing us justice now.” As Pesca makes clear, the violence that helped give birth to English liberalism is no different than that which now accompanies the campaign for Italian nationalism.

With his diatribe, Pesca revises the story of England’s past by revealing liberalism’s violent origins. His outburst additionally provides a new understanding of the present by showing how the continuation of English freedom remains dependent on violent exclusions. This understanding is predicated on the implicit parallels between the Brotherhood and liberalism. As Pesca explains, “The object of the Brotherhood . . . is, briefly, the object of other political societies of the same sort—the destruction of tyranny, and the assertion of the rights of the people” (589). By pursuing freedom and self-determination, the Brotherhood operates as an analog of English liberalism, even as it serves as a fictional representation of the secret societies that promoted Italian nationhood. While some English periodicals criticized these societies for their use of violence and clandestine practices to achieve political ends, others supported these societies—such as Mazzini’s Young Italy—and Mazzini himself became popular with the English middle class due to his use of domestic rhetoric to encourage sympathy for

the Risorgimento.²³ Ostensibly, these connections between English ideals and Italian nationalism were forged on a shared commitment to political freedom. This commitment unfortunately had a downside. As the novel illustrates, to guarantee freedom, Victorian society often relied on the intrusive methods it repudiated.

In short, the Brotherhood exposes liberalism's underbelly. The group wants to emancipate Italy and thereby transform it into a version of the liberal state. However, in pursuit of this goal, the Brotherhood is willing to make individuals expendable. To them, "So long as a man's life is useful, or even harmless only, he has the right to enjoy it. But, if his life inflicts injury on the well-being of his fellow-men . . . it is not only no crime but a positive merit to deprive him of it" (589). The Brotherhood protects individuals as long as they do not threaten the group's goal of unifying Italy. If they do, an assassin is dispatched to strike the final blow. While this doctrine may appear excessively cruel, the threat of death by which the Brotherhood governs its members echoes John Stuart Mill's assertion about the restrictions to freedom in liberal society. Mill states, "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (14). English liberalism—or at least this version of it, famously termed negative liberty—and the Brotherhood both endorse a qualified form of autonomy despite, or rather because of, their pledges to defend it. While the passive construction of Mill's statement obfuscates who is authorized to delimit freedom, the entity it implies is the liberal state, which, since Magna Carta, has been granted the legitimate use of violence to protect liberty. As the Great Charter asserts, akin to Mill, "No free man shall be taken or imprisoned or dispossessed or outlawed or exiled or in any way ruined . . . except by the lawful judgements of his peers or by the law of the land" (qtd. in Turner 71–72). Rule of law sanctions state violence, though this violence is rarely recognized as such. As Jacques Derrida explains, "law is always an authorized force" and is only meaningful when contrasted against "the violence that one always judges unjust" (233). Law, moreover, relies on violence for its founding and preservation. According to Derrida, two kinds of violence circumscribe law: "the founding violence, the one that institutes and posits law" and "the violence that preserves . . . the permanence and enforceability of law" (264). These types of violence fold into one another: "[the preserving violence] belongs to the structure of fundamental violence in that it calls for the repetition of itself and founds what ought to be preserved" (272). The revolutionary violence of the founding moment becomes the conservative, continuous violence of preservation so as to secure the order the revolution installed. Mill's acknowledgment, then, that the state can restrict an individual's actions in order to guard freedom reveals how the liberal state is akin to the Brotherhood. By acknowledging the state's power to constrain liberty, English liberalism resembles the Brotherhood's more lethal constraint of

those who jeopardize the organization's goals. Even as the assassination of political traitors is not equivalent to the suspension of political liberty, the difference between these acts is temporal rather than essential. The former occurs before the establishment of a legitimate state, but once the Italian state is created, the Brotherhood's violence, under Derrida's conception, would be legitimized in terms of this successful founding (270–71). The Brotherhood's principled killing, in other words, will be in retrospect a legal form of violence in the shape of accepted executions. Once justified, such killing will fall along the same spectrum of the authorized violence the Victorian state inflicts on its own people.

Just as Pesca reveals the hidden configuration of violence behind England's liberal history, Fosco reveals a similar configuration undergirding the familial space, where liberty, as domestic privacy, appears most secure. While, in the novel's foreign plot, freedom ostensibly depends on Italian unification, in the domestic plot, freedom resides in the private home's purported independence from law. As Walter indicates in the preamble, a judge has never presided over the domestic crime the novel unveils (5). The novel, though, as noted above, takes the shape of a trial. Law thus permeates the domestic space and, in fact, enables Walter's assertion of privacy. The right to be free from interference is what Mill claims is essential to liberal society. This right, however, depends on disenfranchising women, forcing them to relinquish their legal identities to their husbands so as to affirm the liberties preserved, implicitly, for men. The violence that Pesca claims was constitutive of English freedom, therefore, did not occur in a single historical moment; instead, it transformed and embedded itself in the structure of the private home. In the nineteenth century, liberal violence now targets not only those who seemingly threaten the security of the state from without (immigrants like Pesca and Fosco) or those pathologized and criminalized figures who seemingly threaten the national body from within (madwomen like Anne or political dissidents like Charles I and the Royalists); it also targets those English women who—because of their roles in representing and preserving the domestic hearth—are considered most likely to threaten male privilege at home.

The most vocal critic of this system of domestic violence is Fosco, who, again because of his detached perspective, unveils the hypocrisies underlying English domesticity.²⁴ Though he remarks toward the novel's end that "England is the land of domestic happiness" (614), this truism masks the legal, economic, and political domination of women that English marriage sanctions. As Fosco remarks, marriage in England is about property, not affection, since when a woman marries the poor man she loves, "one half your friends pity, and the other half blame you. And, now, on the contrary, you sell yourself for gold to a man you don't care for; and all your friends rejoice over you" (239). Although the domestic ideal may value romantic feeling, the real impetus for marriage is money. Recognizing this transaction,

however, would mean admitting that marriage is “the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains” (239). To Fosco, English marriage requires the “self-immolat[ion]” of the woman on “the altar of [the man’s] life” (628). While he realizes the English disapprove of his relationship with his wife, particularly her “devotion of herself to the fulfilment of [his] boldest wishes,” he reminds them that he not only married one of their own but also was married in England; hence, his marriage reflects English values (628). The law of coverture turns the wife’s sacrifice into a legal expectation: “The very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing” (Blackstone 442). Fosco’s wife meets this expectation fully. As he notes, the English wife must “love, honour, and obey [her husband]. That is exactly what my wife has done” (Collins 628). The faults the English find in Fosco’s marriage are entrenched in their own concept of marriage. Once more, Fosco plays the critic, deconstructing the exploitative treatment of women by taking England’s own laws regarding coverture to the extreme so as to reveal their limitations.

Like the violence that establishes English liberal governance, women’s exploitation constitutes the liberal political order. As Carole Pateman explains, liberalism hinges on male dominance even though liberalism casts itself against patriarchal rule. Pateman shows how the emergence of the modern social contract, wherein political power belongs to everyone, does not replace patriarchy, wherein political and paternal powers coincide. Rather, patriarchy changes shape: by disentangling paternal from political rights, the social contract makes “masculine right over women . . . non-political” (Pateman 90). In a contractual society, a private realm arises that depoliticizes the actions that occur in that realm and those people—women and children—who are said to belong there. The domestic sphere thus enables the public sphere to emerge as the area where liberal, presumably male, subjects coexist. Elaborating on Pateman’s argument, Wendy Brown clarifies how liberalism pivots on women’s oppression, elucidating how the liberal ideal of individual equality is “premised upon . . . differentiation from women” (153). Men’s ability to “do what one desires” relies on perceiving women as intrinsically tied to “caretaking and labor in the household” (Brown 154). Women’s inability to be free because of their seemingly natural place in the home makes possible the voluntarist freedoms men possess.

The Woman in White depicts this masculinist bias in the conflict over Laura’s marriage settlement. While a marriage settlement could enable rich women to retain control over their property, Mr. Fairlie’s failure to create a suitable settlement for Laura exposes liberalism’s misogyny. Given his debts, Glyde demands all of Laura’s money. Mr. Gilmore, the Fairlie family’s solicitor, attempts to convince her uncle to oppose this request. Fairlie, however, unwilling to act in Laura’s best interest as her guardian, capitulates to Glyde.

Though Fairlie inadvertently chooses Glyde's welfare over Laura's, Gilmore's appeal to her "just rights" suggests that what is at stake here is the issue of married women's property (160). At the time of the novel's publication, debates about married women's property were linked to debates about divorce law reform and wife abuse, topics that, as Surridge and Marlene Tromp illustrate, sensation fiction helped expose. But while Surridge and Tromp focus on *The Woman in White's* role in challenging class assumptions about physical violence (Surridge 132–63; Tromp 69–102), I focus on the figurative violence of women's dispossession that sustains liberalism. Fairlie's inaction favours Glyde, as did the English legal system more generally. Additionally, since Fairlie claims Gilmore's appeal to Laura's rights implies the lawyer "hate[s] rank and family," Fairlie evokes the common argument that allowing married women to own property would undo the family (161). As Alexander Beresford-Hope declares, changing the law would lead to "the breaking down of the distinguishing characteristics of Englishmen—the love of home, the purity of husband and wife, and the union of one family" (Hansard 14 May 1857). Yet this fear of familial collapse hides the deeper fear that giving married women property rights would diminish men's rights. For Edward Sudgen, Lord St. Leonards, such rights would potentially "give a wife all the distinct rights of citizenship," which, at this point in the century, belonged solely to white upper- and middle-class men (Hansard 25 May 1857). Collins's text reverses these fears: the Fairlie family's dissolution and Glyde's potential disenfranchisement result from Laura's disinheritance. *The Woman in White*, therefore, illuminates how women's legal sacrifice destroys the liberties it presumably preserves—liberties the English haughtily proffer as evidence of their moral superiority.

Through its Italian and domestic plots, *The Woman in White* shows how English liberalism's intimate relation with violence undermines England's self-conception as the world's guarantor of freedom. The contradictions challenging England's role as a liberal model are related to the contradictions subverting its image as a domestic haven. Each instance requires an external perspective to expose the contradictions, as the distance afforded to the novel's Italian expatriates allows them to view English society anew. Yet, as the novel illustrates in its depiction of Pesca and Fosco, the English deflect these assessments by projecting them onto immigrants. My reading of how the novel manipulates the foreign/domestic boundary to uncover the fault lines that fissure English liberalism reframes the predominant understanding of sensation fiction as a genre that endorses and affirms hegemonic ideology. While most Victorian readers and modern scholars assert that the sense of scandal associated with the genre derives from its depiction of sensational crimes, it may also stem from its critique of English liberalism—a critique aimed, ultimately, at the heart of England: the domestic home. To divert this critique, many Victorian critics tried to delegitimize sensation fiction by treating it as inane or foreign. Margaret Oliphant, for example,

describes sensation writers as “second rate” (188), while Henry Mansel calls the trend “impure” and “silly” (51). These silly stories, however, are dangerous. As Mansel writes, they are “indications of a wide-spread corruption” (33), one that Oliphant avers originates in France. Though she acknowledges that “a singular change has passed upon our light literature,” she claims that the “corruption which has so fatally injured the French school of fiction has, it has been our boast, scrupulously kept away from ours” (173). Just as many critics too quickly rejected sensation fiction as un-English, so too do the English characters of *The Woman in White* fail to see the merit of the Italian exiles’ thoroughgoing critique of English liberalism. Collins’s novel thus reminds readers of the formative role that violence played in the formation of the modern liberal state and the ways in which this violence continues to function in the domestic sphere of the home, curtailing the liberties of women.

Notes

- 1 Serialized from 26 November 1859 to 25 August 1860, *The Woman in White* was published at the height of Italian nationalism. Though efforts to unify Italy failed in 1848–49, efforts were renewed in April 1859, and unification was completed in 1870. See Riall 1–36 for an overview of the Risorgimento.
- 2 Since the novel grounds its critique in an Anglo-Italian context, I use “international” rather than “imperial” to describe this transnational dynamic. See Goodlad and Wright, who define “international” as referring to transnational dynamics that are irreducible to an imperial world order (par. 2).
- 3 See also Daly 26–54, which furthers Loesberg’s argument explaining how *The Woman in White* assuages fears of democracy by claiming the democratic mass can be tamed.
- 4 For examples of readings influenced by Miller, see Heller 110–41 and Cvetkovich 71–96.
- 5 See, for example, Anderson; Goodlad, *Victorian Literature*.
- 6 See Anderson 9–33 on the connection among critique, detachment, and cosmopolitanism in the nineteenth century and today.
- 7 Numerous critics have interpreted the sensation novel as a genre that domesticates crime. See, for example, Hughes 43–44.
- 8 See, for example, Heller 110–41, esp. 115.
- 9 The 1793 Aliens Act was repealed in 1826. From 1848–50, another Aliens Act was passed but never implemented. Thus, for most of the century, no statute was enacted to limit immigration (Porter 3–4).
- 10 See Riall 15–31 and 117–46 for more on radical republicanism and moderate liberalism during the Risorgimento.
- 11 See Anderson 63–65 on cosmopolitanism’s association with intercultural exchange.
- 12 Chapter 39 of Magna Carta established that the law binds even the king (Turner 71–73). This check on royal power has been mythologized as part of England’s narrative about its liberal destiny since at least the seventeenth century (Turner 145–82).
- 13 The preamble states that the novel appears as a series of eyewitness accounts for which the reader serves as judge (5–6).
- 14 See n6.

- 15 See Collins 589–92, 595 for scenes wherein characters connect secret societies and violence. See also Pionke, esp. xxviii–xxix, for the dangerous radicalism associated with secret societies and Lamouria for the novel’s reconceptualization of revolutionary politics.
- 16 Fosco does, however, exhibit violence to the page when he writes in Marian’s diary (343–44). In accordance with my argument, this violence could be read as an attempt to recapture discursive authority from the English.
- 17 For critics who view Fosco as a conservative force, see, for example, Miller 146–91 and Heller 110–41, though they focus on the novel’s deployment of gender rather than its commentary on English liberalism.
- 18 See Shanley 8–9 for more on coverture.
- 19 See Burrow for the English tradition of viewing history in terms of liberal progress. See Patriarca 20–50 for how Italians and their supporters viewed the Risorgimento as a chance for Italy to regain its past greatness.
- 20 See Pincus 5 for Macaulay’s role in spreading the myth of the “bloodless” Glorious Revolution. See also Adams 156–63 for Macaulay’s obfuscation of historical violence.
- 21 See Pincus 254–77 for violence during the Glorious Revolution.
- 22 Like the Glorious Revolution, Magna Carta is also proffered as a moment that peacefully upheld English freedom. In actuality, civil wars preceded and succeeded the charter (Turner 52–79).
- 23 See Pionke 101–31 for English ambivalence toward Italian secret societies and Bonfiglio 289–94 for Mazzini’s domestic rhetoric.
- 24 My claim that Fosco is a critic of domestic violence does not negate the abuse he inflicts on his wife (see Tromp 83–88). Rather, in my reading, his abuse would reflect his critique of English domesticity, a critique that does not excuse his actions. Moreover, I use the term “domestic violence” capaciously to link the legal violence women experience to the physical violence most commonly associated with the term. Advocates for women’s rights demonstrated how these issues were related, calling “wife beating . . . a symptom of women’s legal nonexistence” (SurrIDGE 48).

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