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Wilkie Collins's Sensational Babies: Lost Mothers and Victorian Babyhood

TAMARA S. WAGNER



THE VICTORIAN baby, so ubiquitous in nineteenth-century culture and so notoriously sentimentalized and commodified, is a curiously little-studied topic. Revisionist work on the Victorian family and maternity, however, has recently paved the way for its reassessment. Cultural historians have questioned the realities of the doctrine of separate spheres, upending a welter of received notions about the ideologies and practices of domesticity. As Ellen Bayuk Rosenman and Claudia Klaver argue, even as the “model of the domestic ideal as the ground for an ideology of separate spheres was established, . . . it was also being complicated” (2), and “motherhood, too, can—and needs to—be reconceptualised” (11). In their special issue of *Victorian Review* on the Victorian family, Kelly Hager and Talia Schaffer similarly emphasize “that the celebration of heteronormative domesticity associated with the Angel in the House and Ruskin’s domestic queens was always more ideal than actual” (7). Hager and Schaffer draw attention to new cultural directives of the family in the nineteenth century, stressing how flexible and permeable the idea of the family really was. Vicky Simpson expertly explores Wilkie Collins’s “non-normative families,” whereas Dara Rossman Regaignon suggests how actual Victorian parents reacted to the normative child-rearing advice published at the time (32).

Childhood Studies approaches have likewise begun to evince more interest in the different stages of infancy. Sally Shuttleworth’s *The Mind of the Child* (2010) includes fascinating discussions of baby-shows and of scientific experiments involving babies. Rachel Bowlby’s *A Child of One’s Own: Parental Stories* (2013) offers rereadings of canonical fiction by revising the previous “tendency for parental perspectives and presences to be missed or disregarded” (115). There has also been research on the stage baby (Varty) and on the use of young children in advertisements (Brooks 60), but the accounts have hitherto been piecemeal. Most references to Victorian babyhood have taken its sentimentalization for granted, eliding its wide-ranging, multi-faceted evocation in popular culture. Yet the idealized chubby baby of Victorian Christmas cards found its counterpoise in some of the most startling literary representations.

The provocative figure of the sensational baby complicates the widespread idealization of infancy and maternity. Several sensation writers employ babies or their paraphernalia as emblems of innocence that enhance—through

sheer force of contrast—a sensational incursion into the domestic. Babies, however, are also central to mysteries or introduce a potential threat to the family.¹ Collins not only features infants in narratives that play with the baby’s expected sentimentalization; he also makes the mother-child bond an important theme. In challenging its standard representation, he explores this relationship in the context of such controversial issues as illegitimacy, child-stealing, and adoption. In the process, he exposes the precariousness of childcare at a time when blended families were fairly common but there was little to no legal protection for informally adopted or fostered children.² Collins’s novels, therefore, offer a compelling entry point for a re-examination of the ambiguities and contestations that lay underneath the Victorian idealization of babyhood.

Collins creates sensational babies both in a reworking of traditional narratives featuring a largely sentimentalized babyhood and as part of his social criticism of topical issues surrounding infancy and maternity. In his self-conscious portrayal of infants within sensational mystery plots, he challenges normative conceptions of breastfeeding, baby-farming, and adoption in Victorian Britain. His early novel *Hide and Seek* (1854) presents a powerful breastfeeding scene that confronts the reader with the complexities behind such controversial topics as maternal abandonment, substitute mothers, and the fate of illegitimate children, while alerting us to the significance of breastfeeding scenes in Victorian popular culture. In *The Dead Secret* (1857), Collins makes a birth mother’s concealed yearning for her illegitimate child central to a sensational mystery. But while he retains his deliberately startling, deeply sympathetic depiction of the toll that inadvertent abandonment takes on mothers, he increasingly addresses very specific controversies. Thus, *The Fallen Leaves* (1879) similarly charts a biological mother’s desperate search for a lost child, but the novel’s focus is on child-stealing and baby-farming. Collins’s last completed novel, *The Legacy of Cain* (1888), expresses anxieties about adoption by evoking current theories of heredity. Collins alternately utilizes and challenges conventional images of babyhood as he critically negotiates the baby’s shifting functions in popular culture.

COLLINS’S EARLY BABIES:
NEW FOUNDLING NARRATIVES

Collins’s early proto-sensation novel *Hide and Seek, Or The Mystery of Mary Grice* (1854) contains one of the most touching representations of breastfeeding in Victorian fiction. An artist rescues a deaf-and-dumb child from a cruel circus owner. When her backstory is revealed, this girl briefly features, in the account delivered by the circus clown’s wife, as a half-starved infant. Mrs. Peckover recounts going for a walk with her husband and baby when they “see a young woman sitting on the bank, and holding her baby in her arms, just as I had got my baby in mine” (80). The first person pronouns create an identification with the mother that the reader is expected to share. Collins

goes further in having Mrs. Peckover disclose the whispered conversation between the two mothers:

And I whispered to her again, "Why don't you suckle it?" and she whispered to me, "My milk's all dried up." I couldn't wait to hear no more till I'd got her baby at my own breast.

That was the first time I suckled little Mary, ma'am. She wasn't a month old then, and oh, so weak and small! such a mite of a baby compared to mine! (81)

This scene alerts us to the variety of breastfeeding scenes in Victorian literature. Before discussing in detail how Collins proceeds to rework founding plots, I shall first situate his emotionally powerful depiction of Mrs. Peckover nursing the starving infant at the roadside amid the changing representation of breastfeeding in fiction.

Breastfeeding was indeed much more commonly depicted than cultural myths of Victorian prudery might lead one to expect. Although it is rarely a main theme, heated debates surrounding breastfeeding frequently work as a characterization device. In 1801, Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* reflected new social pressures that were exerted within fashionable society in the wake of the eighteenth-century cults of sensibility. Instead of placing babies with a wet-nurse in the countryside, as Lady Delacour opts to do after her first children's deaths in the midst of London highlife, wealthy mothers were encouraged to nurse their own babies. Maternal breastfeeding had become fashionable: it was "essentially de rigueur among the privileged by 1750" (Bowers 155n16).³ Lady Delacour's decision reflects the pressure this fashion generated, as she falsely believes that she is suffering from breast cancer. Edgeworth here maps movements in high society, but by the mid-nineteenth century, maternal breastfeeding had become standard practice for middle-class mothers as well. As Collins was writing, a growing number of mothers' magazines promoted the importance of the mother's influence. In its inaugural January 1845 issue, the *British Mothers' Magazine* announced that it was its "first great object . . . to direct attention to the high and important position the mothers of our country hold" (2). The July 1856 issue of the *British Mothers' Journal* featured a typical address by "A husband and father" to "you, nursing mothers of England" to stress again the mothers' exclusive responsibility to nurse this "raw material of a national blessing" (W.A. 161). Wet-nursing continued, but the highly influential Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861) termed it the "domestic theme" most "fraught with vexation and disquietude" (1022). Expressing mainstream arguments, Isabella Mary Beeton suggested wet-nurses only as a resource for mothers who could not nurse themselves, or in the case of maternal death. A nurse needed to be found in case "the mother [were] deprived of the pleasure of rearing her infant" due to "illness, suppression of the milk, accident, or some natural process"

(1022). As long as “a fitting substitute” could be found—and this fittingness was of course rife with controversy, as Shuttleworth has shown (“Demonic Mothers” 38–41)—the infant at least did not need to “suffer, by any needless delay, a physical loss by the deprivation of its natural food” (Beeton 1023). Medical handbooks advised on how to guarantee the nutritional quality of breast milk, regardless of whence it flowed,⁴ while childrearing manuals increasingly cautioned middle-class parents not to hand over their children to hirelings, such as wet nurses or nursemaids (Thaden 46). Popular fiction overall supported this idealization of maternal breastfeeding as an essential aspect of the mother-child bond, while comical references to perpetually nursing mothers show how common the sight was.

From illustrations in bestselling novels to *Punch* cartoons, popular culture played with the comic as well as the sentimental potential of nursing scenes.⁵ A critical look at depictions of breastfeeding in fiction helps us to revise our understanding not only of Victorian conceptualizations of mother- and babyhood but also of the ways in which their sentimental iconography could be redeployed for different effects.⁶ Two contrasting scenes in Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) exemplify the most common literary functions of breastfeeding in Victorian culture. The idealization of cozy nursing as a central part of the domestic ideal is encapsulated in Phiz’s illustration “Changes at Home,” featured in chapter 8, “My Holidays. Especially One Happy Afternoon”: David’s mother is nursing his baby brother as David enters, yet unseen, as if he were stepping back into his happy early childhood.⁷ The same novel also contains the probably most bizarre reference to breastfeeding in Victorian fiction: the Micawber twins. From the moment Mrs. Micawber is introduced “with a baby at her breast” (153), she is with comic regularity depicted as wielding at least one twin currently deriving, in her husband’s characteristic parlance, “their sustenance from Nature’s founts” (250): “This baby was one of twins; and I may remark here that I hardly ever, in all my experience of the family, saw both the twins detached from Mrs. Micawber at the same time. One of them was always taking refreshment” (153). At one point she is found “lying (of course with a twin) under the grate in a swoon” (154). Collins similarly includes comical references to a perpetually nursing mother of fourteen children in *Poor Miss Finch* (1872): “Damp Mrs. Finch, and the baby whose everlasting programme is suction and sleep” (189). But the comic relief generated by repeated tongue-in-cheek references to the “overflowing baby” (12) and its damp mother sits somewhat oddly amid the novel’s lurid description of violence and crime. At one point, a message is written in blood on a toddler’s back. Collins continued to redeploy infants’ incongruous appearance in such sensational scenes, while thereby intriguingly sensationalizing the baby itself.

Victorian sensation fiction generally depicts breastfeeding in order to visualize maternal responsibilities or abandonment.⁸ It is evidence of her lack of interest in mothering that the anti-heroine of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s

Lady Audley's Secret (1862) hands over her baby to a wet nurse a year before she even considers taking up a new name and identity. Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) features a lengthy discourse on maternal involvement, as the new Mrs. Carlyle, Lady Isabel's successor, explains to her governess (Isabel in disguise) why she does not consider her newborn's physical needs her first priority—presenting an alternative prioritization that the text does not endorse (405–10).⁹ Wood enlarges on this issue in her late novel *Court Netherleigh* (1881), in which a fashionable young woman refuses to breastfeed her newborn specifically to annoy her husband and in deliberate defiance of the authority that her own domineering mother assumes. Doctors, midwives, and a spectrum of bystanders all have their say as the infant's needs are discussed in detail, reflecting the portrayal of “the mothers of the day as too lazy or ‘nervous’ or ‘fashionable’ to care for their children” in pediatric texts (Berry 68), even though “the great majority of British infants were breast-fed at home by their mothers” (Fildes 98).¹⁰ A chapter entitled “Perversity” shows Lady Adela fond of the “little wee thing” (Wood 82), but rebelling against a discourse that is asking her to “reform”: “the baby wants its proper food; not that gruel stuff, or milk-and-water, or whatever rubbish it is, that it is being dosed with. And it is not too late for you to reform” (85). When she finally decides to breastfeed after all, it may not be too late for her milk flow (and Wood explicitly engages with opposing arguments about this possibility), but the baby is killed off somewhat inexplicably later in the narrative. It might be that the boy never recovers from his first week of gruel, but Wood can thus have her cake and eat it: she demonstrates the effectiveness of breastfeeding, and her heroine pines over her childless existence.¹¹ It is a brief interlude in a tortuous multi-plot novel in which several wives wreck their marriages. Reluctant breastfeeding functions as a characterization device of a particularly bad wife and mother. Considered in the context of contemporary debates and the impact they had on popular fiction, Collins's representation of breastfeeding emerges as a revealing turning point. The rescued newborn might still reflect babyhood's prevalent sentimentalization, but, more significantly, its subsequent involvement in a mystery plot prepares for breastfeeding's more sensational treatment.

In *Hide and Seek*, in fact, Collins first transforms traditional foundling narratives and their often clichéd depictions of infants. Yet in contrast to the growing focus on the bereaved mother from *The Dead Secret* onward, in *Hide and Seek* Mary Grice dies with her child in her arms, highly reminiscent of *Oliver Twist's* mother in Dickens's 1838 novel. In the same vein, the breastfeeding scene demonstrates how *Hide and Seek* is still rooted within the sentimental and comical cults of Victorian babyhood at the mid-century. As Catherine Peters has pointed out, when “Mrs. Peckover takes the starving infant from its dying mother, and suckles it at her own breast, she ceases to be a comic minor figure borrowed from Dickens, and becomes a heroine” (xvii). More significantly still, Collins concentrates on different forms

of informal adoption that begin with Mrs. Peckover suckling a stranger's baby and culminate in Valentine Blyth's concealment of the child's parentage. Blyth welcomes suspicions that the child is his illegitimate daughter. Such rumours help to obscure her origins and hence might prevent the child from being claimed by relatives. Given Mrs. Peckover's fondness for little Mary, it remains somewhat disturbing how easily she gives her up to middle-class adoptive parents. Little Mary quickly becomes the perfect daughter for her invalid adoptive mother, Blyth's bedridden wife. Still, Mrs. Peckover—Mary's de facto mother for her first ten years—at least remains a regular visitor in the Blyth household.¹²

Highlighting precisely the conflicting emotions of birth and substitute mothers, Collins subsequently reworks the fallen woman/illegitimate offspring dynamic that underpins traditional foundling narratives. Instead of showing how the sins of the parents are visited on the child—or, alternatively, how an orphan has to make his or her own way in the world—and thereby mapping out the new social mobility of Victorian Britain, *The Dead Secret* concentrates on the emotional experience of the working-class birth mother. The novel's main theme is neither the mystery of parentage nor the daring impostor plot, but the intense suffering of a woman forced to give up her baby. Although the resulting imposture—passing off an illegitimate working-class child as the heiress of an old and wealthy family—would in itself have been regarded as an outrageous fraud, the real twist in the narrative rests in the sympathetic representation of maternal love for an illegitimate child.¹³

The Dead Secret gains its emotional power from the birth mother's concealed longings for her baby. Although this focus on maternal love also significantly upends clichéd representations of working-class women (Heller 2), Collins is not really interested in the figure of the fallen woman here. Instead, the narrative interest is divided between speculation on how the now grown-up and newly wed Rosamond will react when she discovers that she is not Captain Treverton's biological child and on how her birth mother, Sarah, will cope with this disclosure. Motherly love, rather than fear of exposure, has moreover perpetuated the mystery. What prevents Sarah from delivering the letter containing her mistress's deathbed confession is her sympathy for the adoptive father:

“Think of poor papa, and try to comfort him!” There, my love—there was the bitterest distress, and the hardest to bear! I, your own mother, standing like a spy, and hearing him say that to the child I dared not own! . . . How could I tell him the Secret? how could I give him the letter, with his wife dead that morning—with nobody but you to comfort him . . . (340)

This compassion for another parent pushes aside other considerations, such as the child's social position or the biological mother's ruined character were she to disclose the secret.

The Dead Secret maps out the baby's changing role within sensation fiction. Sarah's eventual disclosure of Mrs. Treverton's plot to pass off her maid's newborn as her own baby establishes an emphatic alignment between illegitimate offspring and a happy couple's much-expected first baby: Rosamond's own child. This parallelism yokes together the mothers' confinement while appealing to readers' maternal feelings (or, alternatively, to the general cultural celebration of such feelings). Rosamond listens to the narrative of her origins with her "own child sleeping on [her] bosom all the time" (333). The new mother's head is "bent down over her child; her tears . . . dropping slowly, one by one, on the bosom of his little white dress" (322), while all that is heard in the hushed room is "the light breathing of the child as he lay asleep in his mother's arms" (328). These heavily sentimental evocations engender sympathy with all mothers, biological and adoptive. The novel culminates in a crescendo of forgiveness that even extends to the late Mrs. Treverton because of her unfulfilled longing for "one little blessing, that was always hoped for, and that never came—the same, if you please, as the blessing in the long white frock, with the plump delicate face and the tiny arms" (324). The newborn in Rosamond's arms stands in for the babies in the past: the baby Mrs. Treverton could not conceive and the baby Sarah bore.

This conflation of babies reinforces and thereby reworks the earlier, sadly ironic scene in which Sarah volunteers as nurse when Rosamond gives birth prematurely. Rosamond decks out the sleeping newborn with ribbons. Displaying the baby with "his mother's smart little lace cap . . . hitched comically on one side of his head," she admits that she "can't help treating [her] baby . . . just as [she] used to treat [her] doll when [she] was a little girl" (111). Meanwhile, her own mother, unrecognized, attempts to purloin one of her daughter's ribbons as a keepsake (115). Up to this moment, Sarah seems primarily troubled by fear that the hidden letter may be found, yet during her heart-rending term as her daughter's hired nurse, attention shifts more specifically to maternal loss and the power of the maternal bond. In retrospect, Sarah speaks of the pain and secret pleasures of Rosamond's first five years:

I often lifted you into your little cot, my love, and wished you good-night. . . . You used to say you liked your nurse better than you liked me, but you never told me so fretfully; and you always put your laughing lips up to mine whenever I asked you for a kiss! (348)

This painful memory of a missed closeness calls up fears that were troubling Victorian middle-class households. In an ironic twist, the servant stealing

into the nursery is herself the biological mother. This inversion gives a different perspective on middle-class mothers' underlying fear that their children might prefer the nurse.

What renders *The Dead Secret* such a provocative exploration of Victorian motherhood is the focus on the working-class mother of an illegitimate infant. The powerful emotions of a woman who gives up her child are sympathetically detailed, pushing aside any class-based rescue narrative. Collins here successfully both challenges prevailing concepts of illegitimacy and maternal abandonment and, as part of his social criticism, lays bare representations of middle-class rescue, often through informal adoption. Despite the atmosphere of general forgiveness at the end of the novel, in the prehistory, Mrs. Treverton does not really long for the sentimentalized "blessing in the long white frock" (324). Instead, she believes she needs a child to retain her husband's love. Similarly, she endeavours to keep the child away from her birth mother not out of jealousy but to prevent accidental exposure by the servant's display of maternal feelings: "My mistress was afraid of my betraying myself and betraying her if I was much in the nursery. . . . None of the other women-servants were so often stopped from playing with you and kissing you, Rosamond, as I was" (347-48). Such cold prudence sharply contrasts with the birth mother's hidden despair. Although Collins subsequently glosses over Mrs. Treverton's motivation, her emphatically selfish adoption of her maid's child stands exposed as an appropriation that is tantamount to child-stealing. The novel's main focus—and its most powerful representation of mother-child bonds—firmly rests on the birth mother. Collins returns to this theme in *The Fallen Leaves*, this time creating a strong-willed mother who continues to search for her stolen newborn for over sixteen years. Simultaneously, Collins moves away from the set pieces of sentimentalized Victorian babyhood that help him to ensure readerly sympathy for the lost mother in *The Dead Secret* to expose instead networks of child-stealing and baby-farming. His shifting representation of lost babies demonstrates how sensation fiction reconfigures the narrative and symbolic significance of infancy in Victorian culture.

CHILD-STEALING AND BABY-FARMING:
THE FALLEN LEAVES

The Fallen Leaves places the mother-child bond in opposition to ruthless speculation in a society that endorses material values. Yet maternal love is also an overpowering passion that achieves almost monomaniacal tendencies in the deprived mother. Collins's endorsement of this powerful passion is indeed considerably ambiguous. Provocatively, motherly love operates as a sensationalized driving force. Yet Collins's unusual narrative use of baby-farming also needs to be understood within the controversies surrounding a notorious practice that was generally linked to maternal abandonment while it was also increasingly criticized for literalizing babies' commodification.

Although baby-farming was a derogatory term to describe a range of largely unregulated childcare facilities that involved “a mixed lot of individuals who might run the gamut from abusive to nurturing” (Nelson 151), scandals regularly drew attention to child abuse, from neglect to deliberate infanticide. The press featured baby-farmers as monsters who were paid to dispose of unwanted infants, although court cases revealed that many of the parents were ignorant of their children’s fate (Homrighaus 351). Some women handed over their babies knowing they would be killed; others believed they were doing the best for them. Similarly, some baby-farmers made money by taking in too many children, did not adequately care for them, and hence were indirectly responsible for their deaths; others sold or murdered them, often hiding their bodies. In the 1860s, medical journals—with the *British Medical Journal* at the forefront—became actively involved in a campaign against baby-farms that resulted in the Infant Life Protection Act of 1872. The act stipulated that such facilities had to be monitored, although actual regulation was difficult to enforce. Medical texts, moreover, blurred the issue by lumping together the “proprietresses of lying-in establishments and midwives as well as child care providers, . . . associating all three with criminal practices” (Homrighaus 357). The exposure and execution of notorious baby-farmers—convicted of murdering hundreds of infants in their care—were widely publicized and sensationally reported at the time; such large-scale and systematic infanticide generated the most gruesome images of the Victorian baby.

Collins’s *The Fallen Leaves* was conceived in the wake of the act and the publicity surrounding baby-farmers convicted of infanticide, including Charlotte Winsor in 1866 and Margaret Waters in 1870.¹⁴ Making a baby-farmer central to the plot, Collins exposes her services not only as part of a larger network of crime but also as a financial speculation. By contrast, most references to baby-farming in the fiction of the time focus either on infanticide or, alternatively, on the impact this system had on the children who survived it.¹⁵ Sensation fiction primarily utilizes baby-farms to show what dangers they breed for society,¹⁶ while it was not until George Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894) that attention was drawn to the dilemma of working-class mothers. Demonstrating the entanglement of baby-farming with adoption, childminding, and wet-nursing, Moore’s novel shows how the young servant Esther is tricked into leaving her illegitimate baby with a baby-farmer while she works as a live-in wet nurse.¹⁷ Collins both exposes how a baby-farmer operates and sympathetically describes how her acceptance of a stolen baby affects the bereaved mother.

Collins’s representation of the lost child’s mother as “a woman whose whole nature was maternal, who was nothing if not a mother[,] and who had lived through sixteen years of barren life, in the hopeless anticipation of recovering her lost child” (74) dramatizes the impact of such practices on the bourgeois home while presenting baby-farming as an outgrowth

of finance capitalism. The press regularly stressed the gruesome capitalist logic that underpinned baby-farming. The proceedings of the 1871 Select Committee on the Protection of Infant Life termed it a “nefarious trade” (qtd. in Hunt 80). Baby-farming “seemed to suggest vividly the collapse of any notion of personal value distinct from market value,” while the growing outrage expressed “a tension symptomatic of the period’s ambivalence towards capitalism” (Hunt 80). Collins explicitly renders baby-farming metonymic of financial speculation’s pervasiveness. The novel’s villain, the successful speculator Mr. Farnaby, simply considers his betrayal of mother and child as his first speculation: porter in a stationer’s business, he gets his master’s daughter pregnant, and then, to bring on their marriage and because they “mustn’t have a love-child in the way of [their] prospects in life” (16), he snatches the newborn and hands it to Mother Sowler, a baby-farmer. It is a cold-blooded calculation: “What was to come (after he had got rid of the child) had been carefully considered by him . . . : ‘Emma’s husband-that-is-to-be’—he had reasoned it out—‘will be the first person Emma wants to see, when the loss of the baby has upset the house’” (16–17). During the transaction, he uses an assumed name, as the baby-farmer rightly suspects: “False names are commoner than true ones, in my line of life” (8). She also expects him to abandon the child even as he promises to visit regularly: “She looked hard at him, and expressed the whole value she set on that assurance in four words, ‘Of course you will!’” (16). The word “value” here is ominous. When the money runs out (possibly earlier), she sells the baby to “a cadger” for five-and-sixpence (133). Mother Sowler’s later claim that she kept the baby as long as possible is probably as false as the adoption story she makes up: “Being too poor to keep the little dear myself, I placed it under the care of a good lady, who adopted it” (132). Instead, it is a matter of buying and selling—exposing the slippery distinctions between baby-farming and adoption at the time. James Greenwood’s chapter on this “scandalous traffic in baby flesh and blood” in *The Seven Curses of London* (1869) influentially exposed how proprietors of “the modern and murderous institution known as ‘baby-farming’” operated through advertisements of so-called Child-Adopters (22).

The baby-farming system forms part of a criminal underworld that reflects the workings of capitalist society. Mrs. Sowler is a type, described later by a policeman as a well-known character, a “go-between,” “an inveterate drunkard, and worse” (229). Introduced as “a middle-aged woman in frowsy garments; tall and stout, sly and sullen,” she is altogether an “uncongenial-looking person” (7). She reappears as a “gaunt, dirty, savage old woman” (116), who presents herself as a “much-injured woman, who was deceived into taking charge of the infant child” (163). Once the child turns up again as the prostitute Simple Sally, Collins makes the indictment of baby-farming more explicit: “Mrs. Sowler’s occupation at the time was the occupation of a ‘baby-farmer,’” with “many other deserted children pining under her charge” (170). Sally’s fate vividly illustrates how the baby-farming/

adoption network is imbricated in the buying and selling of bodies beyond commissioned infanticide. Now nearly sixteen, Sally remembers being sold several times. When the novel's hero, Goldenheart, takes her home with him, we are prompted to read his impulsive and emphatically innocent action as a child-rescue narrative despite the fact that Sally falls in love with him and that they ultimately marry. This trajectory, however, is subordinated to the powerful narrative of maternal loss that both frames and drives the novel. The mother's desperate search for the lost baby becomes a sensational detective plot, while the individual tragedy functions as a vehicle to explore pressing social issues, including most prominently among them baby-farming and child prostitution.

In the process, the classic tale of stolen or swapped infants becomes reconfigured within a modern financial plot. Mrs. Farnaby collects pictures that all depict "different aspects of the same subject—infants parted from their parents by desertion or robbery" (62) in classic myths and Bible stories. A concealed "baby's long linen frock and cap, turned yellow by the lapse of time" are "treasured relics" (64) in a room that is as startling as Mrs. Farnaby's own appearance: the habitual "expression of suffering in [her eyes]—long, unsoled suffering . . . so despairing and so dreadful" (46) is at times "transfigured . . . with the divine beauty of maternal love" (68). Any sentimental potential, however, is immediately qualified by motherly love's exploitation for profit. Mrs. Farnaby's unremitting search for her stolen baby is punctuated by impostures that show how sordid speculations on missing children involve all strata of society. As Jenny Bourne Taylor has suggested, "here the fairy-tale device of the 'stolen child' is used to mock its own complacent expectations even as it fulfils them" (233). Even more fascinatingly, Collins redeploys the birthmark motif of traditional foundling stories by drawing on Victorian evolutionary theories: the baby has inherited her mother's webbed feet. Having had a dream in which Goldenheart brings her "lost child" (71) to her, Mrs. Farnaby discloses this "deformity" in case he accidentally meets the girl. Testifying to Collins's ambiguous use of such preternatural coincidences, Goldenheart rescues Sally, but only sees her bare feet the very moment when an exposed imposture drives Mrs. Farnaby to suicide. Her violent death adds a sensational spin to the reunion, depriving the scene of the expected cathartic effect.

Collins combines dream theories, evolutionary science, an impostor plot, and sensationalized self-poisoning to rework a foundling tale while indicting baby-farming. Ultimately, however, the social realities of Victorian Britain rupture this reconfiguration of the lost-child narrative. Collins thereby additionally highlights the irredeemable costs of a money-driven society, and yet the mother's death also constitutes a partial cop-out. At the mere hint that the lost baby might have turned into "a poor girl in the streets," Mrs. Farnaby reacts with "stern reproach": "I have not waited all these miserable years for such a horrible end as that" (168–69). Sally's lack of interest in her mother

is equally chilling, although understandable: “How can she be so fond of me, without knowing anything about me for all those years?” (210). This complicates the maternal bond. Mrs. Farnaby’s belief in a reunion is proven right, yet the grown-up child’s emotional distance mars its fulfillment.

Although Collins generally—from *Hide and Seek* to *The Legacy of Cain*—presents adoption in a positive light, *The Fallen Leaves* displays a peculiarly ambiguous position toward birth and substitute parents. The Farnabys’ adopted child adds to the novel’s multifaceted exploration of the maternal bond. Mr. Farnaby has adopted his wife’s orphaned niece Regina in a futile attempt to recompense the bereaved mother with this “ready-made daughter” (65). Contrary to his calculations, the failed recompense boosts his wife’s intense longing for her biological child: “Adopting [Regina] is a mere phrase. It doesn’t alter facts; it doesn’t make her Mr. Farnaby’s child of mine, does it?” (60). Yet even if the narrative thereby establishes the birth mother’s prerogative, suggesting that motherly love is something almost preternatural, this bond remains one-sided. The “last beat of the heart” might be “a beat of joy” (213), and yet the mother never has to face the reality of her daughter’s sad “story of her past life” (159). Believing her dream has come true, she dies clasping her daughter’s webbed foot. The mother’s death at the moment of their reunion may be a melodramatic narrative twist, but the contemporary reader would also have recognized it as a merciful release: the dying woman does not have to accept her child’s history as a prostitute. As Collins combines social criticism and a self-reflexive reworking of traditional foundling tales, the elusive figure of the stolen baby haunts the narrative. It exemplifies both the powerful significance of babyhood in Victorian culture and its transformation in sensation fiction.

SENSATIONALIZING ADOPTION:

THE LEGACY OF CAIN

Collins’s *The Legacy of Cain* offers a critical exposé of the everyday difficulties of adoption at a time when there were no legal regulations for any of the several informal fostering situations that occurred in so many different forms in the Victorian family. Nineteenth-century fiction references a wide variety of adoptive situations, showing both how widespread these practices were and how useful they could be for fiction involving inheritance disputes or orphan figures. Several novels, however, specifically tackle adoption itself. *The Legacy of Cain* belongs to this subgenre of the “Victorian Adoption Novel” (Nelson 161–66).¹⁸ While Collins indisputably and deliberately sensationalizes the adoption process, capitalizing on the narrative potential of an adopted child’s often mysterious identity and conflicted inheritance, he simultaneously focuses on the mundane realities, the everyday difficulties, of a family that adopts. In conclusion, I shall explore how Collins uses an ambiguously sensationalized adopted baby as part of his fictional investigation of heredity.

Collins's last completed novel negotiates theories of phrenology, mesmerism, and evolution to test out whether nurture or nature will triumph when a murderess's baby is brought up as a minister's daughter. The novel explores the various complications of adoption, including the jealousy of the minister's wife when she produces a "baby-rival" for "the adopted child" (31). That Mrs. Gracedieu is a cold-hearted, selfish woman with "a singularly narrow and slanting forehead" as well as a "flashing shifting expression in her eyes" (30) complicates the evocation of phrenological readings and in particular the representation of heredity in the novel. Ultimately, inherited criminality is debunked when the minister's biological child attempts to murder her adopted sister. In fact, even as the reader is kept in suspense as to which of the minister's daughters—Helena or Eunice—is the adopted child, her innocence has, in fact, already been established at her first appearance in the narrative: "a little girl (an infant, I should say), who had passed her first year's birthday by a few months" (5). A prison governor weeps over this innocent:

Whether I was reminded of the bygone days when my sons were infants on my knee, listening to the ticking of my watch—or whether the friendless position of the poor little creature . . . moved me . . . —I am not able to say. This only I know: my heart ached for the child while she was laughing and listening; and something fell from me on the watch which I don't deny might have been a tear. (6)

Collins here repeats the strategy he uses in *The Dead Secret* in evoking the shared experience of parental love. Gender inversion renders the extension of this identification to the reader more forceful. A male character is reminded of his male children by an infant girl, who is thereby even more emphatically defined as just another baby, regardless of its class, gender, or parentage. Simultaneously, this weeping parent's occupation imbues the situation with a lurid sensationalism.

The incongruity of the baby in prison boosts the scene's sensationalism, even as we are prompted to read it as a rescue narrative. The prisoner's last request is that the minister adopt her child: "The one way to my better nature—if I have a better nature—is through that poor babe. Save her from the workhouse! . . . Save my child!" (12). But if motherly love is the remorseless murderess's only redeeming characteristic, the maternal bond's influence on the child is to be dreaded. The narrative turns upon the sensationalization of this maternal legacy. The governor might hopefully suggest that surely, the "purifying influences [of] a clergyman's household" and "every advantage that education can offer her" will erase any "poisonous hereditary taint" (20–21). The appearance of the mother's ghost when the

girl is in her teens, however, suggests that such a reading is too simplistic. When Helena maliciously steals her sister's boyfriend, Eunice—unaware that she is adopted—is tempted by a ghost to commit murder. Although it might be a hallucination caused by a sleeping draft, this plausible explanation fails when the ghost talks of her execution. Still, Eunice conquers this preternatural influence and marries her weak, though fond, lover, whereas in an almost sardonically ironic twist, Helen ends up in prison for attempted murder. The adoptive father falls into a pitiful dotage, brought on by the stress of concealing Eunice's parentage. This sustained ambiguity about adoption notwithstanding, in depicting the disarming infant "peacefully and prettily asleep under the horrid shelter of the condemned cell" (31), Collins perfects the sensation novel's appropriation of the iconographic Victorian baby.

The Victorian literary baby is a versatile figure, and its peculiar narrative functions in sensation fiction urge us to reconsider its multifaceted iconography. In portraying the unappeasable yearning of the mothers of lost children, Collins admittedly exploits sentimental cults of motherhood, while his ambiguous representations of maternal bonds act as a good reminder of how complex, permeable, and flexible this idealization is, and how it can usefully be evoked in social criticism: to indict prevailing attitudes toward illegitimacy, working-class mothers, the victims of baby-farming, bereavement, or barrenness. Yet Collins also exposes the potentially misleading simplification of such a sentimentalization. Even sympathetically presented rescued infants might import danger. Adoption is not a closure or resolution, but the beginning of a wide range of daily difficulties as well as of possible mysteries. Challenging normative concepts of babyhood's literary functions, Collins may at times utilize sentimentalized images, but always in order to deploy them as social criticism or as part of a larger rewriting.

The sensationalized baby usefully expresses social problems or ideological impasses, while it forms a significant feature in self-conscious rewritings of conventional narratives. Representations of such topical issues as baby-farming, child-stealing, and failed or difficult adoption produce the reverse image of the baby as an emblem of sentimentalized domesticity. In fact, if the infant victim is an easily sentimentalized cliché, the sensationalized baby jolts readers' expectations. In Collins's early fiction, illegitimate newborns feature as emblems of social injustice, while he reworks traditional foundling tales and impostor narratives. The baby in prison, in Collins's last finished novel, completes his negotiation of a redeployed sentimental iconography and a sensationalization of infancy, as the reader is prompted to look for signs of inherited traits, even as this concept comes under criticism. As Collins's fictional babies upend normative conceptualizations, a close look at his narrative intervention in the popular portrayal of babies also alerts us to the need to reconsider still-persisting associations surrounding the literary representation of infancy.

Notes

- 1 Examples include the victim of attempted infanticide in Braddon's *The Trail of the Serpent* (1860), "a baby's little worsted shoe" in *Lady Audley's Secret* (Braddon 30), and the illegitimate infant's death in Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), as well as strategically placed sentimentalized babies in Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt* (1869) and Eliza Linton's *Sowing the Wind* (1867).
- 2 Although the Victorians generally, if not always consistently, spoke of adopting orphans or relatives, there were no laws governing the adoption of minors until 1926.
- 3 Stone speculates that maternal breastfeeding became increasingly popular in the eighteenth century, which led mothers to love their children in a more "exclusive, monopolistic" way (112). Scholars of the eighteenth-century sensibility cults have documented how this quickly became a fashion. Compare Barker-Benfield on "the revival of breastfeeding among the fashionable" (160) and Bowers on breastfeeding as "the ultimate indicator of maternal virtue" (142). Shuttleworth suggests that "from the end of the eighteenth century, breast-feeding had been ideologically designated as a middle-class duty" ("Demonic Mothers" 38).
- 4 Chavasse stressed "the importance . . . of keeping the child *entirely* to the breast for the first three or four months" and urged, "Remember there is no *real* substitute for a mother's milk" (25). Although he cautions that a "hireling, let her be ever so well inclined, can never have the affection and unceasing assiduity of a mother," once "it be ascertained, *past all doubt*, that a mother cannot suckle her child, then . . . a healthy wet-nurse should be procured. . . . Never bring up a baby, then, if you can possibly avoid it, on *artificial* food" (26–27).
- 5 Some of the more hilarious examples from *Punch* include the spoof advice column "Notes on Nursing" (5 January 1861), signed "A. Clown," which suggests tossing the infant and deliberately provoking it to tears. "Lord Brougham on Wet-Nurses," by contrast, critiques political statements on the difficulties of women employed in factories to breastfeed their children and the resulting abuse of soothing syrups or gin.
- 6 Whereas wet-nursing is a well-researched topic within Victorian Studies (Shuttleworth, "Demonic Mothers"; Klimaszewski, "Examining"; Berry ch. 2), comparatively little attention has been accorded to the depiction of maternal breastfeeding.
- 7 There are two ways of reading the illustration. On the one hand, David has been replaced by his brother; on the other hand, he is observing—and longing to return to—a scene from his own happy infancy. His later identification with his mother's dead baby, "hushed forever on her bosom" (104), strengthens the second reading. The illustration can be seen at: <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/phiz/dc/8.html>.
- 8 Similarly, in Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856), premature weaning results in fatal infant doping. But while weaning is obliquely mentioned in Yonge's didactic novel, breastfeeding is pushed into the foreground with marked explicitness in sensation fiction.
- 9 As Shuttleworth rightly points out, "the text is not willing to endorse [one mother's] assertion of wifely duty over the physical claims of maternity" ("Demonic Mothers" 48). I explore Wood's sensationalization of childrearing discourses in detail elsewhere (Wagner *passim*).
- 10 As Berry discusses, "pediatric texts argued vociferously for maternal breastfeeding. . . . Doctorly lamentations continued to appear in handbooks and manuals, even though it is unlikely that many English women—of any class—routinely employed wet nurses in this period" (68).

- 11 In stressing the importance of maternal breastfeeding, Chavasse sums up prevailing arguments about “delicate ladies”: “Many delicate ladies do suckle their infants with advantage, not only to their offspring, but to themselves” (26).
- 12 Her continued involvement in Mary’s life is in sharp contrast to Polly’s much-discussed summary dismissal in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848). See Klimaszewski, “Contested” 138; Shuttleworth, *Mind* 112.
- 13 Such maternal love was a topical issue. Gaskell’s *Ruth*, with its sensitive portrayal of a needlewoman who raises her illegitimate son while posing as a widow, was published in 1853.
- 14 For a discussion of these well-documented cases, see Homrighaus.
- 15 The best-known fictional baby-farmer is Dickens’s Mrs. Mann in *Oliver Twist*. An orphan born at the workhouse, Oliver is “‘farmed,’ or, in other words, [he is] dispatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day” (6). In Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852), Guster “was farmed or contracted for during her growing time by an amiable benefactor of his species resident at Tooting, and cannot fail to have been developed under the most favourable circumstances, [but who] ‘has fits’—which the parish can’t account for” (129). Dickens wrote these scenes—as well as a series of articles in *The Examiner*—in response to the Tooting scandal of 1849.
- 16 Braddon’s *The Trail of the Serpent* tracks the contrasting upbringing of twins after one is thrown into the river as a newborn and rescued to be raised by the parish. The action is set in Sloperton-upon-the-Sloshy, alerting the reader that Dickens was rewriting Braddon’s foundling narrative in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).
- 17 When Esther hears of such infants’ early deaths, she reclaims her child. Moore conceived the novel as a retelling of George Eliot’s depiction of infanticide in *Adam Bede* (1859): a “true moulding” of the subject “would be Hetty living to save her child” (qtd. Regan viii).
- 18 Nelson also lists *The Dead Secret* as well as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Yonge’s *Hopes and Fears* (1859), Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861), and Craik’s *King Arthur* (1886), among others.

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