Problem Novels

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Critics have been wont to emphasize the sensation novel’s preoccupation with mystery and detection, with the quarry of dangerous femininity sounded and exposed by the indefatigable detective/hunter. As I discussed in the introduction, the sensation genre so conceived provided the foundation for some of the first and most influential articulations of the productive hypothesis of power in Victorian studies. D. A. Miller, for example, asserts in The Novel and the Police that the very fictional representation of a mystery that must be discovered is in itself an exercise of a disciplinary power: “To the extent that the genre of the novel belongs to the disciplinary field that it portrays, our attention needs to go beyond the policing forces represented in the novel to focus on what Foucault might call the ‘micro-politics’ of novelistic convention” (21). Through readings of

Having then faithfully listened to the great teachers, that you may enter into their Thoughts, you have yet this higher advance to make;—you have to enter into their Hearts. Passion, or “sensation.” I am not afraid of the word; still less of the thing. You have heard many outcries against sensation lately; but, I can tell you, it is not less sensation we want, but more. The ennobling difference between one man and another,—between one animal and another,—is precisely in this, that one feels more than another. If we were sponges, perhaps sensation might not be easily got for us; if we were earth-worms, liable at every instant to be cut in two by the spade, perhaps too much sensation might not be good for us. But being human creatures, IT IS good for us; nay, we are only human in so far as we are sensitive, and our honour is precisely in proportion to our passion.

—John Ruskin, “Of Kings’ Treasuries” (1864)
the sensation novel like Miller’s we have become proficient in uncovering the discursive significance of the sensation novel whose secrets are systematically revealed and luridly detailed—simultaneously titillating with the spectacle of transgression and reassuring with the exercise of disciplinary power over that transgression. Within this framework the detective occupies the position of the disciplinarian, and the possessor of the secret becomes the docile subject described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish.* These analyses are based on the assumption that the reader’s desire lies with the disciplinary gaze that can uncover and render legible the secret crimes.

Whereas I would agree that this model works for a great many sensation narratives, I believe that it fails to explain fully the ways in which other sensation novels engage in the production of subjectivities. As the epigraph from “Of Kings’ Treasuries” suggests, sensationalism is also about willing submission to the text, about agreeing to subject oneself to the “discipline” of reading. Thus, while many sensation plots may be impelled by the reader’s identification with the detective and his or her pursuit of the hidden “truth,” some notable exceptions rely instead on the reader’s investment in the object of that discipline. Without denying the pleasure that comes from occupying the position, alongside the detective, of voyeur and disciplinarian, I focus in this chapter on a very different textual pleasure—a masochistic identification with the hunted, and ultimately disciplined, transgressive subject. The novels that I deal with here, *No Name* and *Armadale,* start with the revelation of a secret that negates from the beginning the sanctity of the domestic sphere and the innocence of its inhabitants. Because the secret is revealed to the reader but not to the detectives within the novel, the reader’s investment becomes aligned with the transgressor, the possessor of the secret.

I argue that this structure invites the reader to occupy, with the protagonist, a masochistic relationship to disciplinary power. And, far from questioning the power of detection, the structure depends upon the inevitability of discipline (and punishment) for the masochistic pleasure of holding a secret. As the narrator informs us in *No Name:*

> Nothing is this world is hidden for ever. The gold which has lain for centuries unsuspected in the ground, reveals itself one day on the surface. Sand turns traitor, and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; water gives back to the tell-tale surface the body that has been
drowned. Fire leaves the confession, in ashes, of the substance consumed in it. Hate breaks the prison-secrecy in the thoughts, through the doorway of the eyes; and Love finds the Judas who betrays it with a kiss. Look where we will, the inevitable law of revelation is one of the laws of nature: the lasting preservation of a secret is a miracle the world has never yet seen. (34)

Given the futility of secret-keeping, the whole plot of *No Name*—describing the attempts of the heroine, Magdalen, through elaborate disguises and deceits to regain her father’s lost fortune—must end in Magdalen’s failure and discovery. Our identification with Magdalen, therefore, must be vexed by our knowledge of her ultimate defeat. Furthermore, the entire plot is colored by the heroine’s own understanding that what she is doing puts her beyond the protection of the law and legitimate friends. She too sees her quest as doomed to failure. As she pronounces to her cohort, the swindler Captain Wragge: “I have lost all care for myself. I have only one end in life now; and the sooner I reach it—and die—the better” (338). Magdalen is rewarded precisely because she “loses all care” for herself, because she mortifies herself, inviting rather than avoiding the pain of punishment.

Similarly, in *Armadale*, not only is the reader privy to all the secrets in the novel, but the hero (one of four Allan Armadales) finds redemption and a new life by relinquishing his power and agency. He gives up his inheritance and his name, assuming the alias Ozias Midwinter in order to become the faithful “dog” of the man who is by birthright his rival. Both Magdalen and Midwinter exercise their agency to engage in complex negotiations with disciplinary power. *No Name* and *Armadale* imagine that the protagonist’s self-realization can be effected, however paradoxically, only through the annihilation of the self.

In imagining this paradoxical self-realization through annihilation these novels participate in a kind of masochistic logic on two levels: first, as a mechanism of narrative logic within the text, when the characters participate in their own subjection, and, second, as a tool for the reader to participate in his or her own subjection by the text. I argue that in inviting the reader to participate in these stories of ambivalent agency, the texts are theorizing themselves and the act of reading as intricately connected to mid-nineteenth-century culture’s emerging social possibilities for individual self-fashioning.

Before considering the historical specificities of Victorian masochistic
reading, however, it will be useful to reflect on masochism as it has been articulated in current critical discussions.

**HOW MASOCHISM WORKS (AND HOW IT DOESN’T)**

Masochism offers a tantalizing framework for critics to theorize subversive agency; as a perverse enactment of the subject’s relationship to power, deconstructing the pleasure/pain binary, masochism seems cunningly seditious. Yet it has proven elusive as a tool of the revolution. Two problems have plagued theoretical annexing of masochism as subversion: the problem of gender and the problem of the “real” vs. the parodic. As we will see, these two are intertwined. John Noyes, in his insightful *The Mastery of Submission* (1997), situates contemporary critical discussions of masochism in the nineteenth-century “invention” of two kinds of masochistic body. As he writes:

The masochist’s body was invented in the late nineteenth century as a machine that could do one of two things, depending on how it was regarded, how it was used, or where it was positioned. It could reduce socially nonproductive aggressivity to an individual pathology, or it could transform social control into sexual pleasure. The one use of the masochist’s body supports the project of socially sanctioned aggression and the various stereotypes society has developed in order to invest cultural identity with aggressivity. The other use of the masochist’s body subverts this project, initiating an unsettling process whereby cultural identity is parodied, masqueraded, and appropriated in the name of pleasure. These two uses initiate all the conflicts surrounding masochism as we understand it today. (9–10)

It is not, I think, too much of an overstatement to say that these two uses of masochism have been gendered for critics and proponents of masochism: the normative, socially sanctioned kind attached to feminine interpellation, the “unsettling” parodic kind attached to masculine perversion.4 Partially this paradox arises as far back as Freud’s “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924), in which he describes the masochistic fantasy as placing “the subject in a characteristically female situation … that is, being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby” (277). In other words, normative, het-
erosexual, female experience constitutes the perverse fantasies of the male masochist. Within this structure, there is no room to imagine a female perversion that might be called masochistic; women are by definition masochists.

Following this logic, feminist literary critics have tended to elide the terms femininity, passivity, and masochism, thereby reading scenes of female suffering as inevitably satisfying some sinister, masculine-identified “gaze.” For example, in *Schools of Sympathy* (1997) Nancy Roberts describes the role of suffering protagonists such as Clarissa and Tess thus:

> The “heroism” or “greatness” of the heroine is measured by means other than her actions. For she can *do*, can *move*, very little. (After all, as victim she is less an actor than one who is acted upon.) Her heroism is measured instead by the pity and sympathy she elicits from others, by the extent to which she *moves* them (us) ... [She] is placed as an icon, the purpose of which is to draw and invite our response. Often she is represented as having little life or character of her own. (6)

Similarly, in *In the Name of Love* (1992) Michelle Massé describes masochism as one of the primary facts of women’s acculturation:

> Masochism is the end result of a long and varyingly successful cultural training. This training leaves its trace upon individual characters and upon the Gothic itself, which broods upon its originating trauma, the denial of autonomy or separation for women, throughout the centuries ... Girls who, seeking recognition and love, learn to forget or deny that they also want independence and agency, grow up to become women who are Gothic heroines. (3)

Even more nuanced arguments about female suffering, like Ann Cvetkovich’s chapter on *East Lynne* in *Mixed Feelings*, tend to erase the agency of victimized heroines. In this way, masochism becomes the big blank of passivity, of status quo, of the lack of radical potential for women.5

Yet even the “good” kind of masochism—parodic, perverse, and subversive—runs into trouble, for the pleasurable pain of the masochistic fantasy, it turns out, is really real pain, and thus, as Noyes says, “Masochism is a continuation of social violence” (14). This is a problem that Slavoj Žižek poses in his 2003 essay “The Masochistic
Social Link,” in which he uses the film *Fight Club* to consider masochism as revolutionary social praxis:

Is then the very idea of the “fight club,” the evening encounters of men who play the game of beating up each other, not the very model of such a false transgression/excitation, of the impotent *passage à l’acte* that bears witness to the failure to intervene effectively in the social body? Does *Fight Club* not stage an exemplary case of the *inherent transgression:* far from effectively undermining the capitalist system, does it not enact the obscene underside of the “normal” capitalist subject? (120)

If masochism perpetuates the forms and the outcomes of social regulation and subjection, how can it also instigate a revolutionary break with oppressive social formations?

In several recent articles, John Kucich has suggested that the way around this impasse is to conceive of masochism outside of a Freudian-Lacanian “oedipal” tradition, which, he says, “severely limits cultural and political interpretation” (“Melancholy Magic” 365). He argues instead that relational psychology’s model of a preoedipal and nonsexualized masochism offers a way to explain, in particular, “the central role that masochism played in shaping the ideological structures of Victorian middle-class culture” (365). Kucich’s application of relational psychology offers its most direct challenge to psychoanalytic discussions of masochism, but his work can also be read as part of the current attempts in Victorian scholarship to move beyond Foucault. He calls to account cultural critics who “regard [masochism] as general trope for power relations,” declaring that even these “tend to preserve the oedipal oppositions of dominance and submission—along with the thematics of punishment, forbidden desire, and potentially subversive abjection—that characterize the oedipal narrative” (“Olive Schreiner” 83). As an antidote to these totalizing models, Kucich claims, relational psychology “reimagines many sites of conceptual ordering besides binary hierarchies of power, and it addresses a wide variety of intersubjective conflicts” (83).

Although it is not quite clear how “intersubjective conflicts” might be separated from “hierarchies of power,” Kucich offers a salutary warning to critics of masochism not to fall into the trap of universalizing oedipal logic as either a psychological fact or as a metaphor for social power, but instead to see masochism as participating in and
enabling an array of social interactions. However, in considering Victorian masochistic logic, we should not be too quick to throw the Daddy out with the bathwater, as it were. By dismissing the oedipal component of masochism, we are not just freeing analysis from the “leftover” of a Freudian master narrative, but rather eliding the very real political and social component of the “law of the father” that structured so many Victorian relationships. What I mean is that the mid-nineteenth-century culture, in which the masochist-as-subject position was so widely articulated, was a culture that understood itself as standing in an increasingly vexed relationship to the code of primogeniture and the structuring principles of patrilineal inheritance and as moving toward a social system in which individual agency was mobilized through economic and juridical invocations of the contract.\(^6\)

This is why Gilles Deleuze’s now-classic essay “Coldness and Cruelty” is still important for theorists who wish to account for masochism’s complexities. Deleuze emphatically separates masochism from sadism, aligning masochism with contracts and sadism with institutions. He describes the masochist in this manner:

> We are no longer in the presence of a torturer seizing upon a victim and enjoying her all the more because she is unconsenting and unpersuaded. We are dealing instead with a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes. This is why … the masochist draws up contracts while the sadist abominates them and destroys them. The sadist is in need of institutions, the masochist of contractual relations. (20)

The masochistic contract requires punishment, suffering, and sacrifice, but most important, it demands agency. Passive suffering alone is not enough—one must consent to, contract to suffer.

Thus, Henry Sumner Maine’s articulation—in his 1861 treatise, *Ancient Law*—of the centrality of the contract to modern society sheds light on how masochism might be both politically and socially “real” and also fundamentally connected to the “oedipal fantasy”:

> There are few general propositions concerning the age to which we belong which seem at first to be received with readier concurrence than the assertion that the society of our day is mainly distinguished from that of preceding generations by the largeness of the sphere
which is occupied in it by Contract ... Not many of us are so unob-
servant as not to perceive that in innumerable cases where old law
fixed a man’s position irreversibly at his birth, modern law allows
him to create it for himself by convention. (252)

For Maine the contract replaces primogeniture; the law of the family,
inheritance, and the father’s legacy is supplanted by relationships
forged between individuals and based on mutual obligation. Power
and position are no longer only inherited, but can be mobile.? Relationships
are not fixed, but can be negotiated, insofar as the law of
the father can be circumvented.

This understanding of the contract, moreover, was particularly
pertinent to the Victorians’ exploration of the “Woman Question”
and married women’s property laws. In language very similar to
Maine’s, Frances Power Cobbe argues that granting women the same
rights to contract as men makes sense only in a “modern” (English)
society:

There is no use reverting .... to old Eastern, or classic, or feudal rela-
tions between men and women ... As the ages of force and violence
have passed away, and as more and more room has been left for
the growth of gentler powers, women (especially in England) have
gradually and slowly risen to a higher place. (“Criminals” 125)

And she concludes even more forcefully: “As for civil rights—the
right to hold property, to make contracts, to sue and be sued—no
class, however humble, stupid, and even vicious, has ever been denied
them since serfdom and slavery came to an end” (128). Woman’s
interstitial position between serfdom and civil enfranchisement—her
radically different status as femme sole or femme covert—made her,
perhaps, ideally suited to masochism; however, I would suggest this
is not, as critics like Michelle Massé have argued, because she was
(only) a victim of cultural forces but because she was a subject whose
agency could be exercised to relinquish agency. I don’t mean to
imply that real Victorian women weren’t oppressed by real material
and financial exigencies wherein the “choice” to marry was a often
grim nonchoice, but I do want to assert that the imaginative force of
the masochistic contract meant that portrayals of women’s agency
and women’s suffering meant more than just their oppression. The
“Woman Question” debates that raged throughout the latter decades
of the nineteenth century meant that Woman called into question
the process by which one came to be a subject and what exactly that subjectivity might entail.

Being able to contract means that one has some limited power over one’s subjectivity. In other words, it means that one can, to a certain extent, choose the ways in which one interacts with disciplinary power. The question then is not, can one escape a subordinate relationship to disciplinary authority?—one can’t—but, how does one occupy that subordinate position? Masochism demands, as a precondition, a certain amount of agency that can be exercised in choosing one’s subjection. The exercise of agency, even to suffer or relinquish agency, is, to quote Slavoj Žižek, “its own ontological proof, an immediate index of its own truth” (122). This means that as an active, contracting subject, the masochist engages with disciplinary power, even manipulates it, for his or her desired results. Thus, the masochist becomes, in a way not anticipated by Bentham’s Panopticon, a knowing, albeit disciplined, subject for whom the processes of subject production, regulation, and control are at all times visible, explicit, and even eroticized. The contract is the site of that visibility—the articulation of the subject’s relationship to and under the law.

We might think of the contract, therefore, in terms of Judith Butler’s notion of ambivalent agency. The reiterations of contractual obligation highlight the “temporal paradox” of subjectivity, to understand which, according to Butler, “we must lose the perspective of a subject already formed in order to account for our own becoming. That ‘becoming’ is no simple or continuous affair but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being” (30). Sensationalism was just such an uneasy literary and disciplinary practice, which provided the Victorians with the means to view their own “horizon of social being.” In the following section, I will argue that John Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies theorizes a subject of ambivalent agency, willfully submissive to the discipline of reading.

**SESAME AND LILIES: “ANNIHILATING OUR OWN PERSONALITY”**

You will see that most men’s minds are indeed little better than rough heath wilderness, neglected and stubborn, partly barren, partly overgrown with pestilent brakes, and venomous, wind-sown herbage of evil surmise; that the first thing you have to do
for them, and for yourself, is eagerly and scornfully set fire to this; burn all the jungle into wholesome ash-heaps, and then plough and sow. All the true literary work before you, for life, must begin with obedience to that order, “Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.”

—John Ruskin, “Of Kings’ Treasuries” (1865)

The Victorians often characterized reading as unconscious consumption. In language remarkably similar to Foucauldian critiques of power, Victorian debates about the dangers of reading describe malleable readers, highly susceptible to the affective appeals of fiction. As one antisensation critic writes in 1866:

We do not for a moment mean to say that the authors who appear to think that a tale would not be complete unless it contained a bigamy, an elopement, and a murder ... would advise their fair readers to imitate the examples of those extraordinary heroines who they are so fond of depicting, the beautiful women of elegant figure and golden locks, whose fascinating exterior only hides a subtle brain and pitiless heart ... But we do say that it is impossible to cultivate extensively this kind of acquaintance—to have the mind engaged and the feelings interested in the plots and machinations of these ruthless schemers, to be almost unconsciously drawn in the habit of regarding such crimes as being neither very exceptional nor very monstrous,—without having the moral nature degraded. (“Recent Novels” 104)

Here the insidious power of the texts lies in their ability to engage minds and interest feelings without conscious acquiescence on the reader’s part. And, as critics have noted, this expression of sensation fiction’s dangerous potential is connected to the Victorians’ shifting understanding of the mind-body link, whereby excessive mental agitation could instigate physical illness, and vice versa.

Without denying the strength of affective or sensational appeals, however, other articulations of the process of reading challenged the unconsciousness of the reader. For example, in an 1870 article in Tinsley’s Magazine, “The Uses of Fiction,” the unnamed author argues, on the one hand, that the merits of a fictional romance may be best judged by a young girl reader whose “experiences [of romance] ... have rendered her sensitive and appreciative on this one point,” and, on the other hand, that this same young girl reader will be able to judge the merits of her real-life romances because “long before she enter[s] upon these experiences herself, she ha[s] read accounts
of how other people encountered them” (6–7). The author imagines the girl reader both formed by and also acutely critical of her reading experiences.11

In “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” the first of two essays on reading that *Sesame and Lilies* comprises, John Ruskin describes sensationalism as the reader’s willing submission to the discipline of the text. Critical attention to *Sesame and Lilies* has often focused on Ruskin’s delineation of the “separate spheres” for women and men, particularly in the second essay, “Of Queens’ Gardens,” which addresses women readers and their responsibilities. I want to focus primarily on how Ruskin articulates a mode of masochistic self-fashioning through sensational reading, although, as I will demonstrate, Ruskin conceives of that sensational masochism differently for men and women in the two essays.

It is certainly not my intention here to imply that Ruskin was really a champion of the sensation novel. But I do want to suggest that Ruskin’s description of reading as a “harrowing” discipline illustrates how Victorians understood the masochism of reading. Ruskin was critical of popular fiction, precisely because it could engage the reader too much. He argues the point in “Of Queens’ Gardens”:

> With respect to the sore temptation of novel reading, it is not the badness of the novel that we should dread, so much as its over-wrought interest. The weakest romance is not so stupefying as the lower forms of religious exciting literature, and the worst romance is not so corrupting as false history, false philosophy, or false political essays. But the best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called to act. (82–83)

Despite this caution, however, he maintains in “Of Kings’ Treasuries” that “the essence of all vulgarity lies in want of sensation” and that sensation is “the guide and sanctifier of reason itself” (45–46). Moreover, in embracing sensation, he asserts, the reader will become more adverse, not less, to the “monstrous” crimes depicted in sensation novels. As he says:

> In true inbred vulgarity, there is a dreadful callousness, which, in extremity, becomes capable of every sort of bestial habit and crime,
without fear, without pleasure, without horror, and without pity. It is in the blunt hand and the dead heart, in the diseased habit, in the hardened conscience, that men become vulgar; they are forever vulgar, precisely in proportion as they are incapable of sympathy. (46)

As critics like Elizabeth Helsinger have noted, Ruskin exhorts his male readers to aim for a sensitivity to sensation that he represents as ideally feminine: “the ‘tact’ or ‘touch-faculty’ of body and soul: that tact which the Mimosa has in trees, which the pure woman has above all creatures; fineness and fullness of sensation, beyond reason” (46).

Ironically, however, this sensational sensitivity is achieved through rigorous critical analysis of the text, hermeneutic sophistication, and close reading. As the epigraph at the beginning of this section shows, Ruskin imagines that reading rightly involves doing violence to one’s (vulgar) self that one may “clear the ground” for a newer better self. In the opening of the lecture, Ruskin acknowledges that he is addressing an audience committed to education as it leads to “advancement in life” (28)—that is to say, his audience understands social position as contractual rather than fixed, and they imagine that education is a process of self-fashioning whereby one may effect an improvement in one’s social position. Although Ruskin criticizes this kind of crass social climbing, he wholeheartedly endorses the idea that the right kind of reading counts as “an education which, in itself, is an advancement in Life” (28). And it is this education that demands a willingness to sacrifice the self through submission to the text. Ruskin provides his audience with a detailed example of how to do the right kind of close reading with a passage of Milton’s “Lycidas.” He describes the process “of the kind of word-by-word examination of your author” which requires:

watching every accent and expression, and putting ourselves always in the author’s place, annihilating our own personality, and seeking to enter into his, so as to be able assuredly to say, “Thus Milton thought,” not “Thus I thought, in mis-reading Milton.” And by this process you will gradually come to attach less weight to your own “Thus I thought” at other times. You will begin to perceive that what you thought was a matter of no serious importance ... in fact, that unless you are a very singular person, you cannot be said to have any “thoughts” at all; that you have no materials for them, in any
serious matters;—no right to “think,” but only to try to learn more of the facts. (43)

Here Ruskin berates his audience—they have “no right” to think or to claim the “I” of “I thought”—but he also encourages them to participate in the berating, to allow the text to teach them their worthlessness. In other words, what Ruskin theorizes is a contract between the reader and the text in which the reader agrees to acknowledge a stern master.

However, if Ruskin espouses hard discipline for his male readers in “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” he seems to exempt women from this self-immolating obedience in “Of Queens’ Gardens.” He advocates, in fact, that girls choose their own reading materials:

She will find what is good for her; you cannot: for there is just this difference between the making of a girl’s character and a boy’s—you may chisel a boy into shape, as you would a rock, or hammer him into it, if he be of a better kind, as you would a piece of bronze. But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does. (83)

This would seem to suggest that girls, as organic beings, cannot be other than they are. They seem to have no access to the kind of contractual self-fashioning that Ruskin imagines in “Of Kings’ Treasuries.”

But for his girl readers too Ruskin envisions a profound affective relationship with texts, and it is this sensational sympathy that provides the route to masochistic reading for women. Ruskin urges that although Woman doesn’t need scientific or factual knowledge,

it is deeply necessary that she should be taught to enter with her whole personality into the history she reads … to extend the limits of her sympathy with respect to that history which is for ever determined as the moments pass in which she draws her peaceful breath; and to the contemporary calamity, which, were it but rightly mourned by her, would recur no more hereafter. (81)

In entering into the suffering about which she reads, Woman should feel her own responsibility for it. As Ruskin claims, directly addressing his female readers: “There is no suffering, no injustice, no misery, in the earth, but the guilt of it lies with you” (90). Woman’s
masochism comes not through her powerlessness or passivity, but through an assumption of grandiose agency—a refined ability to recognize social injustices and an ownership of the guilt for all the misery caused by those injustices, which occur because women are not committed enough to heed or experience suffering. Thus, the degree of the woman reader’s guilt is a measure of both her feminine virtue and her critical/perceptive faculties—the more guilt and shame she suffers in her reading, the more sensationaly susceptible she shows herself to be, and thus the closer she comes to achieving Ruskin’s queenly ideal. If Ruskin advocates formalist close reading for his men, he argues for politically-motivated cultural criticism for his women.

Critics rarely fail to remark on the difficulty of pinpointing Ruskin’s position in Victorian culture—protean socialism against reactionary authoritarianism, reformist politics and aesthetics against social conservatism, doctrinaire gender ideology against “playfully” ambiguous prose. In *Cultivating Victorians*, David Wayne Thomas argues evocatively that this difficulty stems in part from Ruskin’s own vexed and contradictory attitudes toward individual agency and, moreover, that it is this very self-contradiction that makes Ruskin appeal to critics today, for whom “Ruskin’s contradictions … can now be understood to reflect either his humanity or his heroic engagement with confusions and uncertainties that he has simply inherited from the culture at large” (80–81). While I find Thomas’s account of Ruskin’s contradictions persuasive, I would suggest that *Sesame and Lilies* paints a picture of Ruskin’s understanding of ambivalent agency, rather than his ambivalent understanding of agency. In advocating a kind of willful powerlessness in relation to texts—sensational submission through close, critical analysis—Ruskin not only participates in his own culture’s debates about productive power and critical detachment, but also acknowledges the disavowals to which twenty-first-century critics are liable. In other words, Ruskin’s notion of sensational reading recognizes the critical reader’s affective investments (and the sensational reader’s critical awareness) in a way that criticism today often does not. And although Ruskin probably would not have admitted Collins’s *No Name* and *Armadale* to the company of Milton and the “books of all time” (31), these novels promise their readers very similar kinds of suffering and similar rewards. They encourage the reader to cultivate an expansive, painful sympathy with transgression, which threatens the reader’s comfort, even as it engenders his or her moral superiority.
“You planned this marriage of your own free will,” pursued the captain, with the furtive look and faltering voice of a man ill at ease. “It was your own idea—not mine. I won’t have the responsibility laid on my shoulders—no! …”

“Look at these,” pursued Captain Wragge, holding up the envelopes. “If I turn these to the use for which they have been written, Mrs. Lecount’s master will never receive Mrs. Lecount’s letter. If I tear them up, he will know by tomorrow’s post that you are the woman who visited him in Vauxhall Walk. Say the word! Shall I tear the envelopes up, or shall I put them back in my pocket?” …

She raised her head; she lifted her hand and pointed steadily to the envelopes.

“Put them back,” she said.

“Do you mean it?” he asked.

“I mean it.”

—Wilkie Collins, No Name (1862)

No Name possesses a simpler and more intense interest than The Woman in White, but it is a horrible and unnatural interest; the book enchains you, but you detest it while it enchains. The incidents … are cleverly told, but the repulsiveness of the matter disturbs the pleasure of the reader.

—Alexander Smith, Review of No Name (1863)

In this passage from Wilkie Collins’s No Name, the swindler, Captain Wragge, questions the heroine Magdalen’s resolve to go through with her marriage to her cousin (and foresworn enemy) Noel Vanstone. The letters that the captain holds out protect her false identity. They also stand as the visible symbol of Magdalen’s conflicted desires. To order Captain Wragge to destroy the letters would be to release herself from the miserable prospect of using a disguise she hates to marry a man she hates. Yet the marriage to despicable, degenerate Noel Vanstone is the culmination of all of Magdalen’s plotting and efforts; to marry him is to realize her desires. This conversation, like many others in the novel, underscores the fact that it is Magdalen’s power to choose that determines the course of the plot (in both senses of the word). The question-and-answer format of the conversation enacts a verbal contract through which Magdalen reasserts her commitment to masochistic suffering.

This passage highlights precisely the reasons that No Name has been (and still is) problematic for sensation novel readers and critics. First, the novel makes the reader privy to all the secret plotting and machinations, so that the tension of the plot cannot hinge on unrevealed secrets or hidden motives and actions. It demands,
instead, that the reader’s suspenseful pleasure come from experienc-
ing, in minute detail, the execution of a clandestine plot. Second, the protagonist, Magdalen, is neither a heroically noble and pure suffer-
ing heroine nor a demonically conniving and evil villainess. Instead, the novel tries to present her as somewhere in between—a transgres-
sive, guilty heroine, in constant and painful conflict with herself. No Name paradoxically demands a reader who is well disciplined and deviant—one who understands and accepts literary and social conventions, even as he or she is driven by the affective power of the novel to feel at odds with those conventions. Through its manipula-
tion of the tropes of heroine (and villainess), plot, and sympathy, the novel forces the reader to examine individual agency in relation to the mechanisms of disciplinary power.

No Name presents a heroine who is an odd mixture of virtuous feminine ideal and “monstrous” perversion. In the beginning of the novel, for example, Magdalen is used as a foil to highlight the vir-
tues of her elder and more-passive sister, Norah. When the parents’ misdeeds and the daughters’ plight are revealed, the narrator muses, through the governess, Miss Garth:

> Was the promise of the future shining with prophetic light through the surface-shadow of Norah’s reserve; and darkening with pro-
phetic gloom, under the surface-glitter of Magdalen’s bright spirits? If the life of the elder sister was destined henceforth to be the ripen-
ing ground of the undeveloped Good that was in her—was the life of the younger doomed to be the battle-field of mortal conflict with the roused forces of Evil in herself? (147)

The answer, reiterated repeatedly throughout the novel, is a resound-
ing yes. It is not just that Magdalen’s actions are misinterpreted by others in the novel as bad;\(^\text{15}\) she really does think and do evil things. Magdalen is punished for her parents’ wrongs, one might say, but her subsequent plotting earns the punishment she has already unjustly received.\(^\text{16}\)

But if Magdalen is not the ideal heroine—the helpless, virtuous victim of a Gothic plot, like Laura Fairlie in The Woman in White—nei-
ther is she a spectacularly demonized villainess like Lucy Audley in Lady Audley’s Secret. Rather, she is an active agent in her own suffer-
ing. She conspires against her enemies, and she suffers acute moral pangs as a result. She transgresses, even as her “natural delicacy” revolts. She writes to her sister: “Try to forgive me. I have struggled
against myself, till I am worn out in the effort. I am the wretched-est of living creatures ... If you knew what my thoughts are; if you knew how hard I have fought against them, and how horribly they have gone on haunting me in the lonely quiet of the house, you would pity and forgive me” (181). Magdalen’s distress in contemplating her transgression and its attendant punishments is tempered with the imagined payoff for those transgressions. Her pleasure in transgressing comes from imagining having her actions judged by Norah. Notice, Magdalen imagines that Norah’s knowledge of her (evil) thoughts would place Norah in a position to sympathize with rather than despise Magdalen. Likewise, the novel itself imagines a relationship with its reader in which intimate descriptions of the heroine’s transgressions and suffering will place the reader in a similarly sympathetic position, despite the reader’s knowledge/belief that Magdalen’s behavior is wrong, that she is not “good.”

In the preface to the 1862 edition of No Name, Collins describes his narrative strategy this way:

It will be seen that the narrative related in these pages has been constructed on a plan, which differs from the plan followed in my last novel ... The only Secret contained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed, before they take place—my present design being to rouse the reader’s interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about. In trying this new ground, I am not turning my back in doubt on the ground which I have passed over already. My one object in following a new course, is to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction, and to vary the form in which I make my appeal to the reader, as attractively as I can. (5–6)

It is clear here that Collins understands the problem with the “new ground” of No Name: the reversal of reader identification depends on making the transgression “attractive.”

It is equally clear that critics both understood and rejected the project of reversing readers’ sympathies. Margaret Oliphant, for instance, remarks in a review of No Name in Blackwood’s Magazine:

Mr. Wilkie Collins, after the skilful and startling complications of The Woman in White ... has chosen, by way of making his heroine piquant and interesting in his next attempt, to throw her into a career of vulgar
and aimless trickery and wickedness, with which it is impossible to have a shadow of sympathy, but from all the pollutions of which he intends us to believe that she emerges, at the cheap cost of a fever, as pure, as high-minded, and as spotless as the most dazzling white of heroines ... This is a great mistake in art, as well as a falsehood to nature. (“Novels” 170)

Similarly, a reviewer for the Reader comments: “If Magdalen Vanstone could have sacrificed her character without sacrificing the sympathy of an ordinary English reader, it is impossible to say to what heights of sensational grandeur No Name might not have risen” (135). These reviews highlight the readers’ difficulty with the novel: Magdalen is constructed by the text as a sympathetic heroine, but one cannot sympathize with her without also sympathizing with or condoning her “vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness.” If she were not sympathetic, then that trickery and wickedness would not create such a moral stumbling block; Magdalen would merely be a spectacular villainess. However, even if one were to view Magdalen antagonistically (a position not at all encouraged by the text), one’s expectations would still be thwarted because Magdalen doesn’t get punished for her wickedness. There is no comfortable reassertion of law and order at the end of the novel that leaves the villains properly contained (imprisoned in a mental institution, or executed by an agent of a secret Italian society, say) and “the good people all happy and at peace” (Braddon, Lady Audley 447).17

Despite the critics’ insistence on the heroine’s perversity, however, No Name shows that Magdalen’s masochism is deeply imbedded in the rhetoric of ideal femininity. After the revelation of her parents’ secret and her own lost fortune, Magdalen agrees with Mr. Clare to send Frank away for his own good:

“You don’t know me,” she said firmly. “You don’t know what I can suffer for Frank’s sake. He shall never marry me, till I can be what my father said I should be—the making of his fortune. He shall take no burden when he takes me; I promise you that! I’ll be the good angel of Frank’s life.” (167)

In order to be the Angel in the House, one must sacrifice oneself.18 Indeed, this self-immolation in the name of romantic love (and domestic felicity) is practiced not only by Magdalen but also by her mother and her virtuous sister, Norah. As Norah says to her sister:
“The way to happiness is often very hard to find; harder, I almost
think, for women than for men. But if we only try patiently, and try
long enough, we reach it at last—in Heaven, if not on Earth” (311).

Similarly, the lawyer, in revealing the secret of the parents’ trans-
gression to Miss Garth, remarks of Mrs. Vanstone:

Having once resolved to sacrifice her life to the man she loved; hav-
ing quieted her conscience by persuading herself ... that she was “his
wife in the sight of Heaven”; she set herself from the first to accom-
plish the one foremost purpose of so living with him, in the world’s
eye, and never to raise the suspicion that she was not his lawful
wife. The women are few indeed, who cannot resolve firmly, scheme
patiently, and act promptly, where the dearest interests of their lives
are concerned. (130)

If all good women are masochists, this passage seems to imply, it is
not because they are passive, but rather because they are tirelessly
active plotters and secret-keepers. Given interests dear enough,
women are capable of almost anything. This certainly is not an idea
original to Collins. Indeed, the popular press was rife with stories of
real women like Madeline Smith committing “crimes of passion.” In
1842, conduct-book maven Sarah Stickney Ellis assured the “Daugh-
ters of England” that “to love, is woman’s nature ... to be beloved, is
her reward,” even as she warned them that

all women ... who have committed those frightful crimes which stain
the page of history—all have acted from impulse, and by far the
greater number have acted under the influence of misplaced affec-
tion. It is, indeed, appalling to contemplate the extent of ruin and of
wretchedness to which woman may be carried by the force of her
own impetuous and unregulated feelings. (15–16)

In other words, woman’s virtue and woman’s vice stem from the
same thing, her innate “nature”—a nature, it should be noted, that
is far from essentially passive, but rather overburdened with active
passions and impulses.

The difference, then, between a good woman and a bad one lies in
the regulation of that nature, in her sensitivity to her conscience and
the censure of others, in her capacity to feel shame—in other words,
in her susceptibility to internalized, interpellated discipline. In rheto-
ric very similar to Ruskin’s version of Woman’s guilt in “Of Queens’
Gardens,” Henry Mayhew writes in *Criminal Prisons of London* (1862) of the difference between virtuous and criminal women:

The most striking peculiarity of the women located in the London prisons is that of utter and imperturbable shamelessness. Those who are accustomed to the company of modest women, and have learnt at once to know and respect the extreme sensitiveness of the female character to praise or blame, as well as its acute dread of being detected in the slightest impropriety of conduct, or in the circumstances of the least unbecoming the sex, and have occasionally seen the blood leap in an instant into the cheeks, till the whole countenance has come to be suffused with a deep crimson flush of modest misgiving, and lighted up with all the glowing grace of innocence itself … can hardly comprehend how so violent a change as that which strikes us first of all in the brazen and callous things we see congregated within the female prisons, can possibly have been wrought in the feminine character. (465–66)

Here, ironically, shame and guilt become the markers not of malfeasance but of innocence. In this paradox of the innocent woman’s shame, the structure of the masochistic heroine becomes clear: she feels the “acute dread of being detected” in any transgression, yet she must—for whatever reasons are concurrent with the internal logic of the text—act against her own pure impulses. Thus, the masochistic heroine’s plot depends upon her suspension between desiring to achieve her ends and dreading the consequences of her means. The suspense of *No Name* rests precisely on this circular logic, in which the suffering of shame is both the mark of innocence and the impetus for transgression, and transgression results in the suffering of intense shame.

How then does the reader’s identification with *No Name*’s active, masochistic heroine work? What is the “law” set in effect by the act of reading? Magdalen is not the murderous femme fatale we love to hate, but a “lovable” heroine whose sins cause us pain, just as they pain her, and whose punishment we both dread and expect, just as she dreads and expects it. In the novel, the reader’s suspense is produced (and painfully sustained) by frozen scenes of anticipation, like the one quoted earlier in this chapter, that contemplate the still-imminent punishment that Magdalen (again and again) agrees to bring upon herself. In one of her first uses of her power to suffer, Magdalen insists, despite repeated pleas from her sister and her
friends not to, on seeing the letter from her uncle that gives the final refusal of the sisters’ claim to any of the inheritance:

“May I see it?”

Mr. Pendril hesitated, and looked uneasily from Magdalen to Miss Garth, and from Miss Garth back to Magdalen.

“Pray oblige me by not pressing your request,” he said. “It is surely enough that you know the result of the instructions. Why should you agitate yourself to no purpose by reading them? They are expressed so cruelly; they show such abominable want of feeling, that I really cannot prevail upon myself to let you see them.”

“I am sensible of your kindness, Mr. Pendril, in wishing to spare me pain. But I can bear pain; I promise to distress nobody. Will you excuse me if I repeat my request?”

She held out her hand—the soft, white, virgin hand that had touched nothing to soil it or harden it yet. (153)

This scene works on two levels—addressing both Magdalen’s and the reader’s masochism. Just as Magdalen reaffirms her commitment to read the letter, so too the reader must decide to continue reading and continue entering into Magdalen’s pain.

The exchange between Pendril and Magdalen, like the one between Magdalen and Captain Wragge, enacts the ceremony of the verbal contract described by Henry Maine in *Ancient Law*: “Now, if we reflect for a moment, we shall see that this obligation to put the promise interrogatively … by effectually breaking the tenor of the conversation, prevents the attention from wandering over a dangerous pledge” (273). For the reader this scene invokes the contract in that it highlights precisely the “dangerous pledge” we make if we agree to identify with Magdalen—that we will be forced to experience over and over her assertion of the choice to suffer—and it reaffirms that we are willing to identify with her anyway. The passage provides the reader with the pain/pleasure of an intensely suspenseful and overwrought scene in which Magdalen’s will and capacity to suffer is showcased (“I can bear pain”).

The danger to which Pendril draws Magdalen’s attention (and which she accepts nonetheless) is that the letter is an object capable of polluting her “soft, white, virgin hand.” Note, however, that Collins eschews rape imagery; the thing we see foremost is not penetration, but a grasping hand:
Line by line ... Magdalen read those atrocious sentences through, from beginning to end. The other persons assembled in the room, all eagerly looking at her together, saw the dress rising and falling faster and faster over her bosom—saw the hand in which she lightly held the manuscript at the outset, close unconsciously on the paper, and crush it, as she advanced nearer and nearer to the end. (155–56)

For Magdalen, reading her uncle’s letter means laying claim to an instrument of the law that exerts control over her and her sister, and deriving satisfaction from the pain it produces.

The uncle’s letter, in fact, becomes emblematic throughout the novel of Magdalen’s erotic pleasure in pain: she puts a copy of it, along with a copy of her father’s will and a lock of her lover’s hair, in a white silk purse which she carries in her bosom, taking it out at key moments to reemphasize the emotional stakes of her plot. Clearly, the law and sexual desire here become intermingled in Magdalen’s subjectivity. The purse stands unsubtly for enclosed and pure female sexuality, yet the purse is already penetrated by the mechanisms of the law (the will, the uncle’s letter) and by the sexualized symbol of her love for Frank (the lock of hair). Furthermore, the objects together symbolize her own state of suspense: the will, perhaps, represents her responsibility for her father’s death, or the inherited taint of his bigamy; the letter represents the punishment she will incur by scheming against her uncle; the lock of hair represents her ultimate reward for having suffered. As Deleuze writes: “Formally speaking, masochism is a state of waiting … The masochist waits for pleasure as something that is bound to be late, and expected pain as the condition that will finally ensure (both physically and morally) the advent of pleasure” (71).

It is interesting to note that Magdalen’s pleasure and pain are produced through her manipulation of the purse and its relics. In a later scene we see how the suspension between her conflicting desires (be a bad girl and win her money back, or be a good girl and quit plotting against her cousin) is figured in the purse. She contemplates her ability to use her sexuality to control Noel Vanstone in this manner:

“I can twist any man alive round my finger;” she thought, with a smile of superb triumph ... She shrank from following that thought to its end, with a sudden horror of herself: she drew back from the glass, shuddering, and put her hands over her face ... Her eager
fingers snatched the little white silk bag from its hiding place in her bosom; her lips devoured it with silent kisses ... The tears gushed into her eyes. She passionately dried them, restored the bag to its place. (306)

“Triumph” in her power to do evil is transformed into horror and self-loathing, which is then immediately transformed into abject pleasure in sinning and suffering for Frank; Magdalen embraces with “eager fingers” and “devouring” lips her (to quote Mrs. Oliphant) “course of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness.” It is this suspension between conflicting desires (pain and pleasure) that drives the plot of No Name.

Magdalen’s plot to marry Noel Vanstone succeeds at the end of the fourth book, with the narrator’s grim declaration: “It was done. The awful words which speak from earth to Heaven were pronounced. The children of the two dead brothers—inheritors of the implacable enmity which had parted their parents—were Man and Wife” (511). Arguably, this is the point at which the reader’s relationship to the novel becomes most painful, and the effort to sustain the masochistic contract with the text most difficult. The remaining four books and three “Between the Scenes” interludes seem to eke out a bleak denouement in which Magdalen’s fate is more and more thoroughly sealed. As Captain Wragge tells his wife: “She has gone her way ... Cry your cry out—I don’t deny she’s worth crying for” (513). Though Magdalen is still alive, the novel’s “prophetic gloom” seems to have been realized. She has lost her purity, her chance to repent before it is too late, her connections to friends and family, which might have “saved her from herself.” In the remaining chapters, Magdalen loses even the money for which she has sacrificed everything else when her husband writes her out of his will and then dies moments later. She gives up her position as a lady, and her last few hundred pounds, when she trades places with her servant to go in search of a Secret Trust that might allow her to contest the last-minute will. While searching for the Trust, she is caught and thus gives up any claim she had to the law’s protection. Furthermore, throughout the course of her plotting, she has ruined her health, so that when she runs away from her employer’s house with the police in pursuit, she succumbs to a life-threatening fever.

The reader’s painful suspense here is no longer tied so much to the tension of Magdalen’s conflicted desires and the increasingly faint chance of her redemption, as in the premarriage scenes. Now
it depends instead on a familiarity with novelistic conventions and the inevitability of punishment equal to (or, as is more likely in Victorian fiction, exceeding) the crime. Fallen women, no matter how sympathetically rendered or how ultimately repentant, rarely come to good ends. (Lady Isabel Vane in *East Lynne*, Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, or Edith Dombey in *Dombey and Son* are just a few examples; without any trouble, one could think of ten more.) We might anticipate, therefore, a deathbed scene of confession and forgiveness with Norah, but not a happy ending for Magdalen. To continue reading after the marriage is merely to confirm what we already know and dread will happen. In this way, the reader is punished for his or her contractual agreement with the novel.

Of course, this isn’t how *No Name* ends. In the last two chapters Magdalen gets all the good things that she is too wicked to deserve: the return to family and friends, her lost eighty thousand pounds, her health, and even the love of a man much superior to her original lover, Frank. What does this reward mean for the novel? One might be tempted to assume that it signifies some kind of rebirth on the heroine’s part. This is the narrator’s assertion: “So, she made the last sacrifice of the old perversity and the old pride. So, she entered on the new and nobler life” (737). Mrs. Oliphant didn’t find this moral renaissance convincing, and given the final resolution of the novel, neither should we. Nor should we view the end of Magdalen’s suffering as the end of her masochism. Rather than leaving behind her old perversity, Magdalen’s new happiness depends on her reassertion of it.

Here again we see the significance of Magdalen’s white silk purse. In Kirke we have an amalgamation of the dead father (for whom she mistakes Kirke in the delirium of her fever) and the object of desire, Frank. But we also have the third portion of her collection of fetishes. Kirke represents disciplinary authority as well—the threat of punishment. Before Magdalen can enter into the contractual relationship of marriage with Kirke, she must make another kind of contractual alliance with him: she must confess her sins and invite his judgment, as evidenced by her statement to him: “Oh don’t encourage me in my own miserable weakness! Help me to tell the truth—*force* me to tell it, for my own sake if not for yours!” (728). Thus, the final reward for the heroine is realized only through the reiterated threat of disciplinary authority in the figure of Kirke rejecting her for her transgressions. That he does not reject her does not eliminate the threat of punishment. And, remember, it is the
visibility of this punitive discipline that is crucial for the masochist’s pleasure in the last scene:

The next instant, she was folded in his arms, and was shedding delicious tears of joy, with her face hidden on his bosom.

“Do I deserve my happiness?” she murmured, asking the one question at last. “Oh, I know how the poor narrow people who have never felt and never suffered, would answer me, if I asked them what I ask you. If they knew my story, they would forget all the provocation, and only remember the offence—they would fasten on my sin, and pass all my suffering by. But you are not one of them?” (740)

Here Magdalen has the last word on her subjectivity. She asks, “Do I deserve my happiness?” And she answers (implicitly), “Yes, because I have felt and suffered.”

No Name demands, in the final scene as much as anywhere else in the novel, that the mechanisms of disciplinary power be visible; it is only through their visibility, after all, that one can linger over them and derive erotic pleasure from them, as the text invites the reader to do. In the final scene of the novel Magdalen’s passionate tears in her moments of abject humiliation are converted to “delicious tears of joy.” The masturbatory “silent kisses” with which she has formerly “devoured” her white silk purse are transformed into sexual union in the form of a verbal and nonverbal contract between her and Kirke:

> “Tell me the truth!” she repeated.
> “With my own lips?”
> “Yes!” she answered eagerly. “Say what you think of me, with your own lips.”
> He stooped, and kissed her. (741)

We have been asked throughout to identify with Magdalen in her transgressions, to invest our desire in her secret-keeping. In the end, she is rewarded (as are we) not in spite of, but because of, those transgressions.

The moral of the story is not that disciplinary power doesn’t work, but that it works very well indeed. Here the subject of the Panopticon, having internalized his or her position of “compulsory visibility,” uses that position to perform “sinful actions” and to experience the erotic pleasure of the punishment attendant thereon. Furthermore, in eroticizing the disciplinary scene, masochism produces a “doubling-
back” effect by which the “compulsory visibility” of the Panopticon is
turned in on itself. Paradoxically, the novel makes tangible the success-
ful machinations of disciplinary power—a power that, theoretically,
is only effective insofar as it is intangible. No Name displays, through
Magdalen, the production of a subject who is able, if not to escape, at
least to examine and manipulate the machinery of her interpellation.
Likewise, the novel allows the reader, through his or her identification
with the masochistic heroine, to participate willingly in the pro-
cess of his or her own subjection to the discipline of reading.

ARMADALE: “THE PAIN WHICH MIXES
ITSELF WITH ALL PLEASURE”

“If we are to be parted again, it must be his doing or yours—not mine. The dog’s mas-
ter has whistled,” said this strange man, with a momentary outburst of the hidden
passion in him, and a sudden springing of angry tears in his wild brown eyes: “and
it’s hard, sir, to blame the dog, when the dog comes.”

—Wilkie Collins, Armadale (1866)

Like No Name, Armadale imagines that agency is realized only when
the subject “has lost all care” for itself. In Armadale, even more than
in No Name, it becomes clear why the “oedipal logic” of masoch-
ism cannot be abandoned. In the novel, access to the father’s name
becomes synonymous with ownership of the father’s sin, and the
hero must struggle throughout the narrative to erase the grim inheri-
tance attached to his name. The novel begins with the first (in order
of appearance) of four Allan Armadales dictating his confession of
murder as he lies paralyzed and dying from an undisclosed illness
(presumably syphilis) contracted during a vicious life in Barbados,
where he has finally married a mulatto woman and produced an
heir, the second Allan Armadale, then an infant. He confesses that he
inherited his name when the father of the original Allan Armadale
(number three in order of appearance) disowned his son. Possessed
of a new name and property in Barbados and England, Armadale
prepares for an arranged marriage with an English heiress, only to
find that the disinherited Armadale has swooped in and eloped with
his betrothed (with the help of a scheming young servant girl, Lydia
Gwilt, who will return later as the novel’s murderous villainess),
thereby securing for himself British lands and bride. In a fit of rage,
the first Armadale murders his rival, but not before that rival has
impregnated his stolen bride, who later gives birth to Allan Armadale number four (who will, of course, later inherit those estates to which his father aspired). Thus, a rivalry and a murder founded on inherited British and colonial wealth and sexual jealousy constitute the basis for all subsequent action in the novel. The words of the dying father are as follows:

“I, going down to my grave, with my crime unpunished and unatonned, see what no guiltless mind can discern … I see the vices which have contaminated the father’s name, descending, and disgracing the child’s. I look in on myself—and I see My Crime, ripening again for the future … and descending, in inherited contamination of Evil, from me to my son.” (54–55)

Donald E. Hall notes that for a novel that offers up the force of patriarchal power in pursuit criminal femininity for its narrative suspense, *Armadale* features a singularly inept set of manly detectives and a singularly “desensationalized” villainess in Lydia Gwilt (166). I would argue, however, that this is because most of the suspense in *Armadale* resides not in the villainess’s plotting, but in the heroes’ attempts to escape patriarchal power—in the murderer’s son’s vacillation between conflicting desires either to adhere to the father’s dying wish and assume hereditary responsibility for the crime, or to repudiate the father by maintaining his alias, Ozias Midwinter, and sacrificing himself to repay his debt of gratitude to the other junior Allan Armadale, whom he calls his “master.” Consider Midwinter’s conflicting drives: the command of the father to “be ungrateful, be unforgiving; be all that is most repellant to your own gentler nature, rather than live under the same roof, and breathe the same air with [Allan Armadale]” (56), as opposed to the mandates of his own self-immolating love and gratitude for Allan:

“I do love him! It will come out of me—I can’t keep it back. I love the very ground he treads on! I would give my life—yes, the life that is precious to me now, because his kindness has made it a happy one—I tell you I would give my life—.” (122)

The novel describes this dilemma over and over as Midwinter’s “constant struggle”: “Mercilessly in earnest, his superstition pointed to him to go while the time was his own. Mercilessly in earnest, his love for Allan held him back” (324).
Thus *Armadale* offers a version of “moral masochism,” in which the morally superior, ethically sound position is the masochistic one. And this moral logic, in turn, demands that the novel itself reject the narrative structure of the bildungsroman, for if Midwinter attains his majority, he forfeits the redemption of his love for Allan. Midwinter’s pleasure in his relationship with Allan, therefore, is always predicated on the pain of his self-annihilation. He is able to be Allan’s friend only because he has abandoned his real identity and lived as a gypsy vagabond, but the social inferiority of his alias makes him “unfit” to be Allan’s friend. For instance, when Allan has entrusted him with the stewardship of his estates, Midwinter says to Allan’s mentor, Decimus Brock:

“It is needless to tell you how I felt this new instance of Allan’s kindness. The first pleasure of hearing from his own lips that I had deserved the strongest proof he could give of his confidence in me, was soon dashed by the pain which mixes itself with all pleasure—at least all that I have ever known. Never has my past life seemed so dreary to look back on as it seems now, when I feel how entirely it has unfitted me to take the place of all others that I should like to occupy in my friend’s service.” (188–89)

In fact, Midwinter, being smarter and more careful than Allan, is undoubtedly better suited to manage his affairs than Allan himself. Moreover, Allan’s own irregular upbringing, alone with his mother (who was disowned by her family for her elopement with Allan’s father) and without the benefits of a “gentleman’s education,” means that Midwinter’s inferiority stems as much from his “sensitive self-tormenting nature” as it does from any real inequality (233).

The complex means by which the novel enlists our identification with this perverse hero depend, I would argue, on two things: first that Allan is not sympathetic, and second that Midwinter is. As the British Gentleman, Lord of the Manor, and manly subject upon whose meaty shoulders the inherited rights of property should naturally fall, Allan is too stupid, hearty, and psychologically shallow to offer the reader an “in.” As the racially Other, the passionate and effeminate and mysterious social outcast, Midwinter presents psychological depth, via an extended first-person confession that offers the reader sympathetic purchase. Allan Armadale has no narrative space in the novel to explain himself or to tell his story to the reader: there are no instances of a sustained first-person narration by Allan,
in letter or journal, with which Collins so often presents his protagonists’ interiority. Instead Allan is always filtered through the perceptions of the narrator or the other characters, all of whom are more sensitive to the nuances of language than he. Conversely, Midwinter does have a first-person narrative, and he uses it precisely to avoid reproducing his father’s sadism, to reinvent himself through his masochism, as a new man, without reference to his “father’s influence.”

In his confession (made to Mr. Brock to alleviate Brock’s suspicions, so that Midwinter may be allowed to stay with Allan) Midwinter admits, first, to his hereditary guilt by allowing Mr. Brock to read the deathbed letter. This guilt is easily disposed of by Brock when he tells Midwinter: “I have no wish to treat you otherwise than justly and kindly ... Do me justice on my side, and believe that I am incapable of cruelly holding you responsible for your father’s crime” (103). However, in the second half of his confession Midwinter recounts not his guilt, but his suffering. Furthermore, he differentiates between the suffering he has experienced unwillingly, helplessly (as a third party), under the sadistic logic of his father’s inheritance, and the suffering he willingly accepts as part of a contract and as the means to escape his father’s legacy. Because his mother and stepfather knew the secret of his father’s crime, he has been subjected to punishment from his earliest memory, which he reveals to Brock:

“[My parents] were both well aware that the shameful secret which they would fain have kept from every living creature, was a secret which would one day be revealed to me ... and there was I, an ill-conditioned brat, with my mother’s Negro blood in my face, and my murdering father’s passions in my heart ... I don’t wonder at the horsewhip now, or the shabby clothes, or the bread and water in the lumber room. Natural penalties all of them, sir, which the child was beginning to pay already for the father’s sin.” (105–6)²¹

Yet we are clearly not meant to believe that he should be punished for his father’s crime. Brock, hearing Midwinter’s narrative, has already asserted that he won’t blame Midwinter for his parents’ sins. And the structure of the text—with Brock as stand-in for the reader, “hearing” the confession—invites the conclusion that we too should be incapable of that cruelty.

Even as we reject the injustice Midwinter has suffered from his parents, his schoolteacher and classmates, and the school watchdog who “left his mark” on Midwinter’s body along with “his master’s
marks” (106), the confessional narrative carries us from the righteous indignation of Mr. Brock to the masochistic thrill of Midwinter’s assuming the dog’s role for himself. After leaving the school, Midwinter is “adopted” by a gypsy who, in his own words, gives Midwinter “a new father, a new family, and a new name. I’ll be your father; I’ll let you have the dogs for your brothers; and if you promise to be very careful of it, I’ll give you my own name into the bargain” (107). Midwinter further explains that afterward

“the dogs and I lived together, ate and drank, and slept together ... Many is the beating we three took together; many is the hard day’s dancing we did together; many is the night we have slept together, and whimpered together, on the cold hillside. I’m not trying to distress you, sir; I’m only telling you the truth. The life with all its hardships was a life that fitted me, and the half-bred gipsy who gave me his name, ruffian as he was, was a ruffian I liked.” (107)

Brock’s astonishment at Midwinter’s affection for the “man who beat [him]” shows that he cannot enter into the masochistic economy in which Midwinter operates, but as Midwinter says to him: “Didn’t I just tell you now, sir, that I have lived with the dogs? and did you ever hear of a dog who liked his master the worse for beating him?” (107). The difference between the beatings he receives from his stepfather and the schoolmaster and the ones he receives from his adopted father is, of course, that he agrees to the latter. He contracts with the gypsy to assume his new identity as one of his dogs. Perhaps we cannot appreciate the relationship between Midwinter and his cruel gipsy master, but by the time Midwinter has entered the “present” of the novel, he is not the gypsy’s dog, but Allan’s, and that relationship we are invited to endorse wholeheartedly. After all, as we have seen, it is this relationship that saves Midwinter—literally, in that Allan nurses him back to health when he suffers from a brain fever, and spiritually, in that it is his debt to Allan that allows him to rise above his father’s sordid legacy:

“Say if you like, that the inheritance of my father’s heathen belief in Fate is one of the inheritances he has left to me. I won’t dispute it; I won’t deny that all through yesterday his superstition was my superstition. The night came before I could find my way to calmer and brighter thoughts. But I did find my way ... Do you know what helped me? ... My love for Allan Armadale.” (120)
Thus, *Armadale* plays out Midwinter’s life-and-death struggle to maintain his precarious, ecstatic/painful love-relationship with Allan and to guard against the “aggressive return” of his superstitions and his father’s murderously violent legacy.

Ironically, that aggressive patriarchal return is embodied in the figure of the novel’s villainess. The beautiful and deceitful Lydia Gwilt is the only surviving actor from the original conflict between the senior Armadales—the servant who forged letters to facilitate her mistress’s elopement with the “wrong” (and soon-to-be murdered) Armadale. Lydia Gwilt figures as a threat not only to Allan and Midwinter’s relationship but also to the stability of the narrative itself. Her introduction into the novel’s world forces perverse allegiances to shift internally (among characters) and externally (between character and reader) when, midway through the third book and for the entirety of the fourth book, the reader’s access to the plot comes almost exclusively through Lydia Gwilt’s letters and diary. Through her diary we learn that she has discovered a way to inherit Allan’s property in three easy steps: first, by marrying Midwinter (under his real name); second, by seeing to it that Allan dies conveniently far from home; and, third, by returning to Thorpe-Ambrose as Allan’s widow (presumably with Midwinter also disposed of). This scheme is necessary to her very material well-being, as she herself states: “It is the salvation of me. A name that can’t be assailed, a station that can’t be assailed, to hide myself from my past life!” (540). Yet it fills her with horror because she has learned to love Midwinter and desire a “real” marriage with him. Thus we get simultaneous pictures of her as evil adventuress and suffering victim.

I would argue that both versions are temptingly sympathetic, although for different reasons. In her character as Allan’s nemesis Lydia is not very nice, but she is witty and funny. Her descriptions of her prey are brutal, but they only repeat with added emphasis and irony what has already been said about Allan by the narrator and other characters. Here is her assessment of Allan: “He is a rattled-pated young fool—one of those noisy, rosy, light-haired, good-tempered men, whom I particularly detest” (343). Compare this to the narrator’s slightly more indulgent introductory description: “His temperament, it could not be denied, was heedless to the last degree: he acted recklessly on his first impulses, and rushed blindfold at all his conclusions” (61–62). These are the very qualities—the “merciless gaiety of spirit” and the “ignorant self-possession and … pitiless repose” (156)—that tempt even Midwinter (under the “noisome”
influence of his father) to make Allan suffer by revealing his true identity.

Yet Lydia is also like Midwinter in her struggle to reject that sadism and to reinvent herself through her suffering. In her character as victim she exercises an appeal for the reader, like Midwinter’s, based on her ability to confess her sins and articulate her suffering. The first-person narrative of her journal becomes, at least temporarily, less about her plotting against Allan and more about her being at war with herself, torn between her desire to plot against Allan and her desire to forfeit her schemes and to be punished and thereby redeemed. In some ways this articulation of her suffering and sins, and her desire for punishment/absolution, work exactly like Midwinter’s confession to Brock—that is, they facilitate the reader’s identification with a flawed or suspicious, but suffering, character. Yet unlike Midwinter’s confession, or Magdalen’s to Captain Kirke in *No Name*, Lydia’s diary ultimately fails to authorize her redemption. She cannot rise from the ashes of her past, as Midwinter does, to become someone’s grateful “dog,” although she comes very close:

I was within a hair’s breadth of turning traitor to myself. I was on the very point of crying out to him, “Lies! all lies! I’m a fiend in human shape! Marry the wretchedest creature that prowls the streets, and you will marry a better woman than me!” … I wish I had been born an animal. My beauty might have been of some use to me then—it might have got me a good master. (594)

Lydia’s bid for redemption fails for a number of reasons, most important of which is that for her to assume a masochistic position in the novel, she needs to contract an alliance with a master and protector—a role for which she fails to secure Midwinter’s cooperation, though he does marry her. Midwinter’s choices have already been laid out for him prior to his involvement with Lydia: choose the happiness of submission to Allan, or choose to relinquish that relationship by accepting his father’s murderous legacy. Clearly, to accept the father’s legacy is wrong according to the moral logic of the novel. Therefore, to accept mastery over Lydia is to remove himself from his morally superior role as masochist and to assume the role of sadist. As Lydia writes in her journal: “I could bear it if I loved him less dearly than I do. I could conquer the misery of our estrangement if he only showed the change in him as brutally as other men would
show it. But this never has happened—never will happen. It is not in his nature to inflict suffering on others” (659).

The transformation that Lydia attempts—from sadistic mistress to submissive wife—fails, I would argue, precisely because Midwinter refuses to abandon his submissive relationship to Allan. This love triangle is expressed unequivocally in Lydia’s journal: “What maddens me, is to see, as I do see plainly, that Midwinter finds in Armadale’s company … a refuge from me” (669). Lydia is forced by Midwinter’s declining interest in being her master, by Allan’s constitutionally annoying personality, by “chance” circumstances, to resume her position as villainess, and this in turn allows Midwinter to consolidate his position as masochist by sacrificing himself to save Allan.

In the final showdown at the sanitarium—to which Lydia has lured Allan that she might poison him in his sleep, and to which Midwinter fortuitously finds his way in time to interfere—we see a brief moment of Lydia’s success; she has, it seems, finally forced Midwinter to be her “master”:

Mr. Bashwood stole panic-stricken to her side. “Go in there!” he whispered, trying to draw her towards the folding doors which led into the next room. “For God’s sake be quick! He’ll kill you!”

She put the old man back with her hand. She looked at him with a sudden irradiation of her blank face. She answered him with lips that struggled slowly into a frightful smile.

“Let him kill me,” she said.

As the words passed her lips, [Midwinter] sprang forward from the wall, with a cry that rang through the house. The frenzy of a maddened man flashed at her from his glassy eyes, and clutched at her in his threatening hands. He came on till he was within arm’s length of her—and suddenly stood still. The black flush died out of his face in the instant when he stopped. His eyelids fell, his out-stretched hands wavered, and sank hopeless. He dropped, as the dead drop. He lay as the dead lie, in the arms of the wife who had denied him. (758)

Coitus interruptus. The masochistic scenario begins, and then falls through, because Midwinter falters in the instant of meting out punishment, the prospect of which has called an “irradiated” flush to Lydia’s face. But she gets no satisfaction: Midwinter’s whole body suffers from erectile dysfunction.

The climax of the novel reads like a French farce of masochists—with everyone running up and down stairs, in and out of
bedrooms, falling all over themselves to make sacrifices, to suffer, and thereby to be redeemed. Midwinter, suspecting (after his wife’s betrayal) some violence against Allan, switches bedrooms with him so that he can lie patiently and wait to intercept the violence: “The one safeguard in his friend’s interests that Midwinter could set up, was the safeguard of changing the rooms—the one policy he could follow, come what might of it, was the policy of waiting for events” (798). And of course Midwinter’s plan works; he is able to sacrifice himself for Allan. Lydia mistakenly poisons him, leaving Allan snoring in his usual state of “pitiless repose” in the other room. Then, when Lydia discovers her mistake, she is able, at last, to achieve her masochistic role. She rescues Midwinter from the poisoned air in his bedroom and then enters the fatal room herself so that Midwinter might find happiness without her: “She bent over him, and gave him her farewell kiss. ‘Live, my angel, live!’ she murmured tenderly, with her lips just touching his. ‘All your life is before you—a happy life and an honoured life, if you are freed from me!’” (806).

With the brief disruption of heterosexual union dismissed, the novel allows its perverse hero, and with him its perverse readers, to reap the rewards of his masochistic suffering. Armadale ends with Allan and Midwinter together on the eve of Allan’s wedding to his own superfluous (and mostly absent) bride.23 This marriage may be imminent, but we don’t see it; instead, we see an intimate, passionate exchange between the “dog” and his “master” that confirms their mutual commitment to one another:

[Allan] began, in his bluntly straightforward way. “Let’s say something now, Midwinter, about your [future]. You have promised me, I know, that if you take to Literature, it shan’t part us, and that if you go on a sea voyage, you will remember when you come back that my house is your home. But this is the last chance we have of being together in our old way; and I own I should like to know—” His voice faltered, and his eyes moistened a little. He left the sentence unfinished.

Midwinter took his hand and helped him, as he had often helped him to the words that he wanted, in bygone time.

“You would like to know, Allan,” he said, “that I shall not bring an aching heart with me to your wedding-day? If you will let me go back for a moment to the past, I think I can satisfy you ... Out of the horror and the misery of that night you know of, has come the silencing of a doubt which once made my life miserable with
groundless anxiety about you and about myself. No clouds, raised by my superstition, will ever come between us again … Does this help to satisfy you that I, too, am standing hopefully on the brink of a new life, and that while we live, brother, your love and mine shall never be divided again?” (814–15)

This passage, though lengthy, is important because, like so many others in both Armadale and No Name, it depends for its force on the repetition of “dangerous pledges.” Allan begins by making his demands: “Let’s say something now … about your future.” He reiterates the terms of their contract (that Midwinter won’t let any outside interests separate them). And Midwinter responds that he “shall not bring an aching heart to [Allan’s] wedding,” that “no clouds … will ever come between [them] again,” and that their “love … shall never be divided again.” Thus, the conclusion returns to the in-process nature of the masochistic fantasy: the renewal of vows, the restaging of commitment to the contract.

In a sense, the disclaimer in the preface to No Name, that “the only Secret contained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume” (5), might be addressed to critics who scrutinize Victorian culture for the sensational revelations of hidden power. In place of the “mystery” of discipline to be unraveled, No Name and Armadale offer treatises on discipline. They remind us that to pick up a novel and read is to consent to submit to its affective power and to collaborate in the production of our selves as disciplined subjects. Yet they also remind us that despite our submission to the novel, the discipline of novel-reading does not necessarily produce a “docile” reader. If Collins’s novels explore the possibilities for perverse attachments to discipline, however, Anthony Trollope’s fiction written and published during the same years as No Name and Armadale imagines the reader’s submission as a complex negotiation between critique and disavowal whereby the reader’s attachments to sensationalism enable the novel to do the work of producing belief, and encouraging investment, in the system of heterosexual exchange.