Plots of Opportunity

Pionke, Albert D.

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Only months after the last vestiges of armed resistance had been put down in India, England found itself uneasily on the fringe of an imperial conflict much closer to home. The Italian state of Piedmont, aided by Napoleon III, declared war on the Austrian Empire and began the lengthy process of reuniting the nation of Italy. This process brought to light an Italian Question that had been simmering in the background of Continental politics for several years. During the Crimean War, Piedmont had advertised its aspirations to European prominence by joining the British and the French in their fight to contain imperial Russia and preserve the balance of power in eastern Europe. Afterwards, Austria had sought unsuccessfully to exclude Piedmont from treaty negotiations, despite the fact that the British-French-Piedmontese side had essentially secured Austria’s eastern border. Two years later, a failed assassination attempt on Napoleon III by the Italian revolutionary Orsini, who was operating from England, prompted Parliamentary debate over the Conspiracy Bill, which would have made such plots against foreign sovereigns punishable under English law. At the same time, as at least one article on the Indian Mutiny in Bentley’s Miscellany, “Oude and the Defence of Lucknow,” demonstrated, France was preparing for a major military campaign, and many in England feared a channel crossing.

However, this historical background only begins to explain why the combined French-Piedmontese invasion of Austrian Venetia in 1859 began a massive outpouring of periodical anxiety in England that lasted for the next eleven years. For English periodical writers, Italian unification raised a host of complex ideological problems, not the least of which was how to reconcile widespread antipathy towards Napoleon III with his involvement in a revolutionary process that many hoped would
A united Italy had the potential to both check the political and military power of France and Austria and arrest the temporal power of the Pope, not to mention provide greater access to the Mediterranean for English shipping. Such hopes had to be carefully managed, however, since actively supporting Italian unification at the expense of the Austrian Empire would place Britain in the uncomfortable position of espousing a policy of separation for others while vehemently opposing such separation within itself, whether in India or Ireland.

Making the situation even more difficult was the presence of numerous secret societies throughout the Italian peninsula. Activated by Napoleon I’s conquest of Italy at the beginning of the century, groups like the Federati, the Guelphi, the Adelphi, the Latini, and especially the Carbonari all strove for an independent Italy under a constitutional government. On the one hand, these associations made Italian independence seem like a dangerous proposition: for the most part, Italian secret societies espoused radical political goals and many appeared suspiciously similar to the newly formed Fenian Brotherhood in Ireland. Moreover, as the Orsini plot demonstrated, these groups were not above employing violence to achieve their goals. On the other hand, many Italian secret societies had been formed on the model of English Freemasonry, and many of their most prominent members, including Garibaldi, were actually Masons as well. However, even Garibaldi was connected with ties of friendship to the Italian radical republican, Giuseppe Mazzini, placing his political opinions in doubt. Mazzini lived as an expatriate in London, where he promulgated the red republican doctrines of his Young Italy movement in English periodicals, generating both sympathy and hostility among their readers while keeping Italian affairs firmly before them. Faced with such a bewildering array of political affiliations, secretive practices, and red republicanism, many Englishmen did not know how they ought to respond to the Italian Question.

This consciousness on the part of English writers of the ideological conflicts inherent in the Italian Question in part aligns the English response to Italian unification with earlier debates over Glasgow Thuggery, Papal aggression and the Indian Mutiny. The issues of class and public assembly so present during the Spinners’ trial resurface in connection to Italian affairs whenever Italy’s poor gather together to vote on the future of unification. Likewise, the question of religion fueling England’s recent history of anti-Catholicism informs some writers’ responses to the Pope’s presence on the Italian peninsula and his increasing advocacy of ultra-montane doctrine. In addition, questions about the Italian race and its fitness for self-government echo English rhetoric surrounding the Indian Mutiny. However, the Italian Question also differs from these earlier problematics in a number of crucial ways. First, one cannot help but notice the sheer number of ideological positions available to English writers seeking to understand unification, or the stress that this cacophony of ideologies places
on any attempt to advance an ideologically “pure” view of Italian affairs. Questions of class were complicated by the presence of Piedmont’s royal family in the drive towards unification; Italians’ almost universal adherence to Catholicism made it difficult to separate them on religious grounds from the Pope, whom they nevertheless wanted to remove from a position of secular authority; the Italian race, for all of its stereotypical emotion, was still European and therefore theoretically suited to self-rule; the question of Italian self-rule remained uncomfortably close to Irish nationalist impulses; and so on. In order to craft a response to the Italian Question, one had to practice a kind of ideological relativism, balancing politics, trade, class, religion, and race and occluding the conflicts among them.

Some of the complexity of these competing ideologies appeared resolved in 1861, when the Italian Parliament assembled at Turin to elect Victor Emmanuel II King of Italy, minus Rome and Venetia. These territorial omissions, combined with the decision to make Italy a constitutional monarchy, reassured most Englishmen that by supporting Italian unification they would no longer be directly fomenting the breakup of the Austrian Empire or the spread of radical democracy. The political terms of the Italian Question shifted from opposing Austria’s occupation of Venetia to spreading limited parliamentary reform throughout Italy, and once supporting the Italian cause meant parliamentary institutions, monarchical authority and national unity, English public opinion grew much less anxious, since Piedmontizing Naples was a lot like Anglicizing Ireland.

However, just because the political terms of the Italian Question had grown more attractive in England did not mean that the issue of secrecy had been similarly resolved. Italy continued to serve as the ideal location for frantic invocations of the figure of the secret society, and English support for a united Italy tacitly embroiled England in this ubiquity of secretive practices. England’s apparent complicity in the continued presence of Italy’s secret societies resulted in a confusion of the rhetoric surrounding the figure of the secret society, with some English periodicals denouncing the influence of groups like the Carbonari and others supporting, for example, Garibaldi’s clandestine military campaigns against the Pope. This lack of ideological consensus over the ubiquitous issue of Italian secrecy provides a useful index of the larger collapse of “ideological purity” that occurred in responses to the Italian Question. A slippage into ideological relativism had already been present in earlier debates over the character of England’s emerging democracy—as my previous chapters have attempted to show—but during this period of Italian unification, such relativism became apparent to an unparalleled degree.

Two literary texts that appeared during the messy resolution of the Italian Question reflect this ideologically compromised subtext in their deployments of the figure of the secret society. Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White, originally published
in 1859–60 during the first period of Italian unification, represents English ambivalence towards implicitly Italian practices of secrecy using many of the same methods we have already seen in *The Moonstone*: allusive dating; repeated instances of doubling; and a secret society whose murderous actions help to restore narrative order. Collins also reinforces the extra-political attractiveness of the figure of the secret society through the character of Count Fosco, an Italian conspirator and arch-villain who nevertheless remains one of the most charismatic figures in the novel. Published in 1870, the same year that Italian unification was finally achieved and that Papal infallibility was declared, Benjamin Disraeli’s *Lothair* offers an explicit reexamination of the figure of the secret society in the context of Italian affairs. The novel presents Italy and England as overflowing with the conspiratorial machinations of an explosion of factual and fictional secret societies, the institutional practices of which allow Disraeli to self-consciously interrogate the figurative role of such organizations in both countries. Ultimately, both texts deploy a rhetoric of secrecy that dialectically tacks between valorization and condemnation, thereby locating the figure of the secret society at the center of England’s conflicted responses to the Italian Question, and, by extension, to the related subjects of nationalism and imperialism more generally.

**I. Red Republicanism and *The Woman in White***

The first two years of Italian unification began the consolidation of the Italian states under the rule of Piedmont’s King Victor Emmanuel II and witnessed the elevation of Garibaldi to heroic status. After a secret meeting held in January of 1859 between Piedmont’s Prime Minister Count Cavour and French Emperor Napoleon III, Austria—then the dominant power in northern Italy—was goaded into war with Franco-Italian troops. Among these soldiers was a small volunteer regiment, the *Cacciatori del Alpi* [Alpine Chasseurs], led by Garibaldi, who proved to be one of the most successful of Italy’s military commanders. Despite Garibaldi’s efforts, however, the Austrians were winning until fighting abruptly ceased on 11 July with the signing of the Villafranca armistice between Austria and France. The terms of this peace, about which they were not consulted, left many Italians feeling betrayed: Austria was to keep Venetia, while the states of Sardinia and Lombardy, both of which had demonstrated a desire to join Piedmont, were made “independent.”

Officially, the state of Piedmont could do nothing against the combined military forces of Austria and France; unofficially, however, Garibaldi embarked on a mission of unification. Gathering together a thousand volunteer troops, popularly known as the Red Shirts, he invaded Sardinia. Once there, he provided military support for a popular rebellion against the island’s illiberal government. The rebellion quickly
succeeded and Sardinia immediately renewed the pledge of allegiance to Piedmont it had extended during the brief war with Austria. From Sardinia, Garibaldi next led his swollen volunteer ranks into the island half of the kingdom of the Two Sicilies and began to support/incite another popular rebellion, this time against the ruling Bourbon government. By late July, he had forced the Bourbons to abandon nearly all of the island of Sicily, which he claimed for Victor Emmanuel. He then moved into the mainland component of the Two Sicilies and quickly gained control of Naples on 7 September 1860. The rest of southern Italy followed and in October a popular election indicated overwhelming support for annexation by Piedmont-Sardinia.

At the same time Victor Emmanuel and Count Cavour signed a treaty ceding Savoy and the city of Nice, Garibaldi’s birthplace, to France in order to prevent French troops from marching in to “restore order” to the peninsula. Not surprisingly, Garibaldi was displeased that others were reducing the size of Italy while he was enlarging it, and so there was a brief time when it seemed as if he might retain control of the southern peninsula himself and march on Rome, despite the fact that Napoleon III was pressing Piedmontese leaders to make the Pope interim head of the Italian state. Since Rome was supported almost entirely by French troops, this plan would have made Napoleon III the de facto leader of Italy. However, Victor Emmanuel solved both problems by marching an Italian army through the Papal States in order to personally secure Garibaldi’s allegiance to the throne. This act added not only the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies but also much of the Romagna to the now greatly enlarged state of Piedmont, leaving only Rome and its immediate surroundings in the hands of the Pope.

This quick succession of plot and counter-plot in Italy made many English periodical writers very uncomfortable. Most of them supported a united Italy in principle—Italy not only made political sense as a check to France, it also emotionally appealed to the many well-to-do Englishmen who had traveled to the peninsula while on their Grand Tour—but were not as enthusiastic about the practices required for unification. The role of France in the whole process remained very troublesome for a number of writers. As one article stated, “we cannot, and we dare not, overlook the fact that France is arming to the teeth, ready by sea or land for some new aggressive design” (“France and Central Italy,” 252). Napoleon III was often portrayed in the English press as a schemer who was not above manipulating his allies for his own advantage, as he had done to the Piedmontese at Villafranca. Moreover, his newly enlarged army and navy made his political acumen all the more dangerous, since he could attack those who did not agree to his policies.

Among those policies particularly unattractive in England was his attempt to make the Pope the ruler of a united Italy. Not only would this move elevate Napoleon, it would also increase the temporal authority of the Papacy, a fear very much alive in
England since the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy there in 1850. As one Blackwood's writer remarked, “The history of modern Europe sufficiently shows the incompatibility of papal and priestly domination with civil rights and political progress” (“Italy: Her Nationality or Dependence,” 356), and a later article agreed, asserting that “the two characters of Catholic priest and civil magistrate ought not to be combined in the same person” (“The Papal Government,” 396). The figure of Jesuitism, never very far away in English anti-Catholic rhetoric, also appeared several times in support of this opposition to Papal rule in Italy. More might have been made of this evocation of the figure of Jesuit rule, had not Victor Emmanuel’s march through Romagna demonstrated the Italians’ shared desire to reduce the Pope’s temporal authority.

Despite such promising displays of liberal sentiment by the Piedmontese leadership, a number of English writers recognized that they could not legitimately support Italy’s designs on Lombardy and Venetia without violating Britain’s own imperial policy. Most recently demonstrated by Britain’s military suppression of the Indian Mutiny, this policy might also be seen in a less dramatic form anywhere in the Empire. It was approvingly summarized and related to the Italian Question by one writer for the Edinburgh Review in the following terms:

> Of all the sovereigns now filling a throne, Queen Victoria is undoubtedly the ruler of the largest number of subject races, alien populations, and discordant tongues. . . . But above and around them all stands that majestic edifice, raised by the valour and authority of England, which connects these scattered dependencies with one great Whole infinitely more powerful, more civilized, and more free than any separate fragment could be; and it is to the subordination of national or provincial independence that the true citizenship of these realms owes its existence. . . . [I]t is the glory of England to have constituted such an empire, and to govern it, in the main, on just and tolerant principles, as long as her imperial rights are not assailed; when they are assailed, the people of England have never shown much forbearance in the defence of them. Such being the fact, it is utterly repugnant to the first principles of our own policy, and to every page in our history, to lend encouragement to that separation of nationalities from other empires which we fiercely resist when it threatens our own. (“Austria, France, and Italy,” 564–65)

Ireland provided an especially sensitive illustration of imperial policy in action, and a number of writers recognized clear parallels between England’s possession of its western neighbor and Austria’s occupation of northeast Italy. One Blackwood’s author compared the role of Napoleon III in the unification process to “our own O’Connell, in his notorious addresses to Irish mobs” (“Italy: Her Nationality or Dependence,”
352), and another writer went so far as to describe Ireland as England’s Lombardy (“Austrian Italy,” 307). Despite this imperial outlook, however, English writers were quick to dismiss one instance of empire building—France’s annexation of Nice and Savoy—as flagrant coercion and an excellent example of the abuses to which universal suffrage could be susceptible: “We have nothing to say in favour of the farce of universal suffrage, such as we have seen it in Savoy and Nice; nor could we, in full recognition of the Ionian Islands, of India, and of Ireland some years ago, easily maintain that the government of a country ought always to depend upon the popular voice” (“The Sicilian Game,” 552). For this author, as for many others, guardianship, whether democratic or aristocratic, was the only appropriate way to govern a colony.

This support in England for various forms of guardianship made those who advocated radical republican principles for Italy even worse than Napoleon and the Pope. The most prominent figure in Italy’s republican movement was Giuseppe Mazzini, expatriate revolutionary and leader of the Young Italy Movement. Founded by Mazzini in 1831, Young Italy was guided by three central principles: Republicanism, or radical democracy; Unitarianism, or the eventual unification of all of Italy, including Venetia and Rome; and Independence, or the complete elimination of international interference in Italy’s domestic policy. These principles were expanded upon on the organization’s flag, which bore the words Liberty, Equality, Humanity, Unity, and Independence, and internally enforced via the oath of alliance and secrecy required of its members. For many in England, Mazzini’s principles and practices in Young Italy far too closely resembled the radical republicanism of the French Revolution, not to mention the increasingly dangerous separatist movement at work in Ireland. Moreover, there was a brief moment—when Mazzini’s longtime friend, Garibaldi, still held control of southern Italy—during which it appeared as if these principles and practices would be actualized in an Italian state.

Several English writers responded to this ultra-democratic possibility by representing Mazzini’s red republicanism using the figure of the secret society. Mazzini himself was described in the English press as the “apostle of revolution and conspiracy” and “the very genius of conspiracy” (“The Sicilian Game,” 553; “The Italian Question,” 246). His republican followers were similarly disparaged as “that most deadly of Italian difficulties, the party of systematic and reckless revolution ... a secret and yet avowed party of miscalled patriots, but rather of unscrupulous murderers, who take Sicilian Vespers and the massacre of Saint Bartholomew for their historic models” (“Italy: Her Nationality or Dependence,” 364). Despite their efforts to keep alive “the lamp of liberal aspirations” following the failure of the 1848 revolutions, the fact that they had done so “clandestinely” made their intentions open to question (“The Italian Question,” 255). Another article described them as “passionate, prejudiced
and unjust,” and went on to criticize their divisive potential at a time of crisis: “The jealousies, impatience, and violence of these men produce a division in the ranks of Italian patriots regrettable in any case, and which might become dangerous if the march of events were likely to be less rapid; and, despite the sympathy which may be felt for them personally, it is absolutely necessary that the government should neither permit its plans to be interfered with, nor its authority to be set at naught, by them” (“The Situation of the Moment in Italy,” 489). For some Englishmen, no action seemed beyond the reach of these radical conspirators, and one writer even implicated Mazzini and Orsini in a plot to make 80 “Brothers” in Milan swear an oath that they would carry out a conspiracy to assassinate an unnamed number of Austrian army officers (“Italy: Her Nationality or Dependence,” 364–65).

Mazzini and the republicans were also represented using the more specific figure of the Carbonari. Paying Mazzini a backhanded compliment for his role in the revolutions of 1848, one writer observed,

Mazzini was powerful in 1848 for the best of reasons: he had done immense services, greater than those of any other man, in keeping alive the torch of liberal ideas in a period of desolation and gloom. . . . When, therefore, the great movement came overnight . . . enthusiastic confidence was elicited for the prophetic nature of the man, whose hierophantic breathings, communicated at midnight meetings in the mystic conclaves of Carbonari lodges, had quickened the generous devotion of youth, had buoyed up with fevered assurance the despondency of maturer years, had been sufficient to make noble lives seek voluntary martyrdom, in obedience to whispered bidding (“The Italian Question,” 246)

Only a page later, the same author accounted for the decline in such hierophantic “Mazzinianism” by declaring that political action in Italy no longer required “the mummeries of Carbonari lodges” (247). Mazzini’s secretive political practices had thus become obsolete in a liberal modern state such as Piedmont, despite the fact that these practices had been successful at securing “generous devotion” and even “voluntary martyrdom”; one suspects that the real danger of Mazzinian secrecy was its familiar attraction for those in England who were already inclined to valorize groups like the Masons. This kind of attitude towards the republicans was widespread and reflected the same ambivalence toward secret societies that had surfaced in the Glasgow spinners’ trial and the more recent debate over English Catholicism.

Even periodical writers otherwise friendly to Mazzini and the republican cause had to admit that “the politicians of Europe . . . have been accustomed to connect the ideas of unbridled licence, Red Republicanism, Carbonarism, societies of assassination and brigandage, with the very name of a popular movement in Italy” (Lushington,
“The Crisis of Italian Freedom,” 60). The popular movement was further linked with the Carbonari in “Papers on the Italian Question,” an article in The North British Review that connected Orsini’s failed assassination attempt on Napoleon III with the Carbonari and hence with Mazzini and the republican cause.

This association of Mazzini and Young Italy with “the mummeries of Carbonari lodges” was calculated to generate as much hostility as possible towards the radical republican element of Italian unification by drawing on the fearsome reputation of the actual Carbonari. Founded in 1809 in Capua as a form of resistance to Bonapartism, this largely middle-class secret society claimed an institutional ancestry dating back to mutual-aid societies of charcoal burners in medieval Germany. Their radical nineteenth-century reputation was based, however, on their involvement in European revolutionary movements of the 1820s and 1830s. With lodges in France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Russia, the Carbonari became a potent political force at this time, lending their support to the constitutional insurrections in Spain and Naples in 1820 and 1821, the independence movement in Greece in 1821, and the Decembrist rising against Tsar Nicholas II in Russia in 1825. Along with many other clandestine organizations, the Carbonari also participated in the European revolutions of 1830 and, to a lesser extent, those of 1848 as well. In the Italian states, membership probably exceeded two hundred thousand men, and, according to Italian historians Shepard Clough and Salvatore Saladino, “between 1820 and 1831, the Carbonari and kindred conspiratorial organizations held the main stage in Italy’s struggle for political freedom” (28). Mazzini actually joined the society in 1827, but left four years later disappointed with their lack of results. Later in 1831 he founded Young Italy, which eventually absorbed what was left of the Italian Carbonari, thereby cementing its ties in many people’s minds with the figure of the secret society.

However, despite this factual basis for connecting Italian unity with the figure of the secret society, these English invocations of the Carbonari did not generate even the level of uneasy agreement over the Italian Question that past invocations of Thuggism and Jesuitism had over trade unionism and English Catholicism. There certainly were those who used the factual and figurative presence of Italian secret societies to “to show how little the Italians are fitted for free institutions, and how greatly corrupt governments are the natural product of decaying nationalities” (“Italy: Her Nationality or Dependence,” 350), but their opinions were countered by numerous others. Some of these more sympathetic individuals made sure to dissociate Italian unity from radical politics. As one author for the Westminster Review wrote,

It is a most pleasing circumstance to see the interest taken by England in the struggles of Italy against temporal and spiritual oppression . . . for, in our opinion, this struggle is . . . one of the most important as regards the civilization and progress
of the world. It is the war of the future against the past. It only fights for existence, for liberty, for the right of speech and action. She promulgates no wild theories, the constitutional banner is held aloft by a chivalrous monarch, heir to the oldest reigning house in Europe, surrounded by counselors belonging to the highest aristocracy, whose private wealth and station warrant them against all suspicion of entertaining ultra-democratic opinions. ("The Organization of Italy," 219)

Others expressed their support for Italian unity by absolving Garibaldi of his past connections to the Young Italy movement while including him among the ranks of such modern military heroes as Havelock and Clive. Still others supplied money, munitions and even themselves to Garibaldi’s volunteer regiments. It is in this outpouring of support for Garibaldi that one can most clearly see the ideological relativism at work in England’s response to the Italian Question. By absolving or ignoring the secretive and borderline unlawful facets of Garibaldi’s campaign for a united Italy, English writers (not to mention English volunteer fighters) actively placed themselves in an ideologically conflicted position. Not only were they advocating a revolutionary cause strikingly similar to the brutally repressed revolt in India and the fight for nationalism in Ireland, thereby going against England’s imperial policy of colonial guardianship, they were also supporting the use of secretive practices that they claimed to denounce. This inconsistency was rationalized using a doctrine of progress, constitutional monarchy and the natural rights of a European race, reinforced by invocations of the figure of the secret society, but the fact remained uncomfortably clear that England could not claim ideological high ground for its involvement in Italian affairs.

First published in *All the Year Round* between November 1859 and August 1860, the period of Garibaldi’s activity in Sardinia and the island of Sicily, Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* deftly propels its readers through the ideological gauntlet of the Italian Question. Collins’s novel is best remembered as the progenitor of the sensation fiction craze of the 1860s and 1870s, and his incorporation of elements of the 1856 Rugeley murder and the story of the Marquise de Drouhault from Maurice Méjan’s *Recueil des causes célèbres* in his own narrative certainly justifies this sensational status. However, the sensationalism of *The Woman in White* extends beyond just poison and wrongful imprisonment to the self-conscious manipulation of readers’ confusion over Italian affairs. Collins quite deliberately invokes the subject of Italy and then methodologically duplicates the ideological relativism surrounding that subject by constructing his own novel around a framework of transitive equivalencies, whereby individual instances of doubling lead to a network of similarities among characters, the reader, and the historical subtext of Italian unification. By alternating between political and extra-political registers of value, Collins offers Walter
and Fosco, Walter and England, and Walter and the reader as credible doubles for one another; as the common element of pairings, Walter serves a transitive function that implies further doubling—i.e., Fosco and England, Fosco and the reader. When read in the context of the Italian Question these implied equivalencies and their connection to common practices of secrecy reinterrogate England's ideologically confused support for Italian unification.

Collins's original audience would have been prepared to read *The Woman in White* in light of the Italian Question for a number of reasons. Not only was Italy the hottest topic of public debate since the Indian Mutiny, it was also a prominent subject in the novel's original place of publication, *All the Year Round*. Beginning in June 1859, the journal ran a series of sympathetic articles on Italian affairs that roundly denounced Austria's occupation of northern Italy as the illiberal domination of a people clearly capable of governing themselves. The articles directly related the Italians' fitness for self-government to their European racial ancestry, an ancestry they shared with the Irish, who nevertheless remained England's colonial subjects. Already in Collins's place of publication, then, one can recognize an incipient conflict between racial ideology and imperial ideology that Collins would evoke again with Walter's trip to the Central American jungle. Readers would also have been moved to think of Italy by Collins's careful choice of dates. Set in 1849–1851, *The Woman in White* takes place during the years following the European revolutions of 1848 and leading up to the Great Exhibition, years in which foreign immigration brought increased numbers of both Italian revolutionaries and Austrian spies to England. The former were largely welcomed as the persecuted advocates of liberal sentiment, despite their past practices of secrecy, whereas the similarly secretive behavior of the latter made them anathema in respectable English society. These two groups are embodied in the novel by the diminutive Professor Pesca, who “had left Italy for political reasons (the nature of which he uniformly declined to mention to any one)” (35), and who now teaches Italian to the English, and by Count Fosco, whose curiosity about “Italian gentlemen” living in England, official foreign correspondence and Vienna address quickly identify him as an agent of the Austrian government (245).

Within this self-consciously allusive Italian context, Collins constructs a narrative whose form works against itself to faithfully dramatize the confusion of ideologies this context would have invoked for his readers. The novel begins with a brief Preamble that explains how a pseudo-legal method of multiple narrators will be used to tell the story. Although written by what appears to be a standard Victorian omniscient narrator, the Preamble is actually the work of the novel’s hero, Walter Hartright, who admits parenthetically that he is “the writer of these introductory lines” (33), but then downplays his own central role in both the story and its compilation, referring to himself in the third person as only one of a succession of narrators. He also
neglects to mention his own financial and social interest in the narrative’s apparent objectivity, obscuring his own rise from drawing master to father of the future Lord of Limmeridge House behind the impersonal declaration that “This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and what a Man’s resolution can achieve” (33). As a narrator, Walter uses this strategy of legal self-effacement in order to set up an implied binary opposition between the forces of law, order and moral uprightness, represented by himself, and the opposing forces of lawlessness, disorder and immoral activities, represented primarily by Count Fosco and secondarily by Percival Glyde. This strategy allows Walter to assume the moral and political authority of an idealized legal system even as he denounces the actual Court of Justice as “the pre-arranged servant of the long purse” (33).

However, the majority of the novel works against Walter’s monological intentions by breaking down the facile binary of the Preamble through the use of doubling. More specifically, Walter and Fosco/Glyde are brought together by their similar practices of secrecy. As a narrator, Walter departs from the rubric of presenting “the story always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect” and allowing the relevant narrators to “relate their own experience, word for word” numerous times (33): he changes the names of all the participants, informing the reader of this alteration only once, immediately after the inquest at Sir Percival’s death, and justifying his concealment out of concern for Laura (563); he also abstracts, and one can presume alters, the accounts of Marian and Laura (435), Mrs. Clements (479) and Professor Pesca (594). His conduct is strikingly similar that of Fosco and Glyde, both of whom also take egregious liberties with the documents of others—opening and altering Marion’s letters, reading and appending her diary, and altering the parish register. In other words, all three characters strive to reveal one part of the truth while concealing others and secreting this very process of concealment.

The characters are also brought together by their synonymous practices of active deception. Walter’s deceit is confined to the novel’s third Epoch, in which he conceals himself, Marian and Laura in the East End of London, devising for each of them “an assumed name” and a place in an “assumed relationship” (433). Taking the two floors above a small newsvendor’s shop, he masquerades as Marion and Laura’s brother, ironically deploying the illusion of familial ties in much the same way as Sir Percival, who also lives under what the law would consider an assumed name as a result of the assumed marital relationship between his parents. Walter’s assumed identity also mirrors that of Count Fosco, who, as a former member of the Brotherhood—an Italian secret society—now working for the Austrian government as a spy on Italian revolutionaries in England, must also shed his real name and be prepared to flee England at the first potential sign of recognition from his former associates (598). Walter also doubles Fosco during his “secret inquiries and investig-
gations” into the conspiracy to defraud Laura of her identity (453), self-consciously manipulating Mrs. Vesey (457), Mrs. Clements (479), and Mr. Wansborogh (528)—much as Fosco does—in an attempt to discover “the Secret” behind Sir Percival’s behavior. Knowing that the revelation of this investigation would delay him at the inquest, and perhaps call into question his own actions during the vestry fire, Walter also keeps this information to himself not only during the inquiry into the circumstances of Sir Percival’s death (543), but also during the final revelation of the conspiracy to the tenants at Limmeridge House (638).

In thus representing Walter and Fosco as doubles for one another, the novel complicates the initial question of moral authority raised by the Preamble’s invocation of an ideal Court of Justice. Walter retains his role as hero, to be sure, since even though his methods may be questionable, his motive of saving Marion and Laura remains recognizable “good,” not to mention appropriately “manly.” Likewise, as the primary threat to Marion and Laura, Fosco never ceases to play the villain; however, his evident similarities to Walter, combined with his own force of character, make his villainy intensely attractive. Marian herself is not immune to Fosco’s charismatic effect, referring to him as “that illustrious foreigner” (225), and admitting to “a strange, half-willing, half-unwilling liking for the Count” (246) after the space of only a few days. Once she knows him better, her response is even more intense: “His eyes seemed to reach my inmost soul through the thickening obscurity of the twilight. His voice trembled along every nerve in my body, and turned me hot and cold alternatively” (310). Marian’s uneasy attraction to the Count stems in part from her recognition that “He looks like a man who could tame anything” (239). However, she also admits to some of his many other endearing qualities, including his resemblance to Napoleon I, his command of the English language, his fondness for his pet animals, and his capacity to talk, “when anything happens to rouse him, with a daring independence of thought, a knowledge of books in every language, and an experience of society in half the capitals of Europe, which would make him the prominent personage of any assembly in the civilized world” (243). Even Walter is forced to admire “the horrible freshness and cheerfulness and vitality of the man” (587), as well as his artistic behavior at the opera (589–90), and his “extraordinary mixture of prompt decision, far-sighted cunning, and mountebank bravado” and “prodigious strength of his character, even in its most trivial aspect” when confronted on the night of his departure (611, 613).

The secretive/deceptive practices that bring Walter and Fosco together also begin to hint that the ideal of familial order on which the remaining moral force of Walter’s narrative is based may be coming apart. Walter’s claim to justice rests on his protection of Marion and Laura, and he frequently invokes Laura as the justification for his secretive behavior. When he sets up house with the sisters, for example, he does
so in order to protect the mentally shattered Laura from readmission to the asylum; likewise, when he twice declines to reveal his reasons for being at the scene of Sir Percival’s death, he justifying his reticence using Laura. The first of these actions introduces dishonesty into the domestic sphere, thus inaugurating an implicit connection between domesticity and duplicity that is further strengthened by his “innocent deception” concerning Laura’s worthless sketches, which he pretends to sell in order to make her feel productive and bind her more closely to the “assumed” domestic relationship that he and Marian have created (499–500).21 In other words, he claims to tell his story so that Laura can regain her true name and true relationship to him and to her family, but in so doing he reveals the extent to which family names and relationships can be aligned with practices of deception. His second more public act of concealment introduces yet another complication for the ideal of domesticity underlying Walter’s narrative by placing the family and the domestic sphere in direct conflict with the rule of law.

Once one recognizes that the novel also represents Walter as a double for imperial England, these domestic complications take on a more political character that resonates with the contemporary conundrum of Italian unification. It is significant that Walter’s aptitude for secrecy does not appear until he returns to England from an expedition to Central America. Several critics have noted the pivotal role of this journey and have offered compelling explanations for how a trip to the New World jungle helps to “make a man” of Walter.22 In thus connecting secrecy, manliness and imperialism, however, the novel raises a number of troubling questions about England’s relationship to its colonies: 1) why is English manliness only to be found among and learned from the “subject races”; 2) why does that manliness depend upon secretive practices; and 3) how can the English continue to justify their colonial presence if, rather than imparting the benefits of civilization they are instead taking morally questionable behaviors back to England in order to outfox other residents of the urban jungle?23 The Woman in White does not attempt to answer these questions, but by asking them it does raise new problems with England’s overseas “civilizing” missions.

In a perceptive study of the “agents of empire” at work in Collins’s text, Lillian Nayder provides a historically sensitive argument connecting the novel’s subtle questioning of imperial ideology with England’s response to the Italian Question. According to Nayder, Walter’s transformation from a “gentlemanlike young man” (151) to a “gentleman” (540) capable of being mistaken for Sir Percival Glyde (534) is the result of his attempt to develop the Central American jungle into a civilized place: “Stressing the ‘primeval’ condition of the natives encountered by the Englishman, Collins justifies Hartright’s presence in Central America; defining his hero against this racial other, he empowers him. Collins transforms the English servant into a gentleman by means of his contact with the savages” (1). However, if these
very savages have something to teach Walter about how to be a man, then their supposedly “natural” inferiority to the English begins to look somewhat arbitrary, much as the Italians’ inferiority to Austrians was seen to be by the authors of the four aforementioned articles in *All the Year Round*.

For Nayder, the lack of “ideological purity” in Walter’s civilizing mission is further undermined by its similarity to Count Fosco’s reverse colonization of England. She interprets this similarity as a challenge to the project of imperialism, whether practiced among the Central American savages by England or among the comparatively civilized Italians by Austria. However, in the context of England’s ideologically conflicted response to the Italian Question, one can take her argument even further: Collins’s novel not only challenges Austria’s right to occupy northern Italy, it also contravenes English attempts to wholeheartedly oppose that occupation, since not only is England doing the same thing overseas (and in Ireland), but England’s criteria for judging between savages and civilized persons rests in part on an ethos of manliness already compromised by its own secretiveness.

Such problematic reflections on the Italian Question are only exacerbated by the novel’s commitment to subtly implicating the reader as yet another double of Walter. Their relationship grows especially close in the Third Epoch, when Walter determines to expose Sir Percival’s “Secret.” His avowed reluctance to do so until his other options have been exhausted allows him to appeal to his readers’ distaste towards secretive practices, even as he forces them to accept the necessity of his obsession with secrets.24 Once he begins his investigation, Walter carefully secures the reader as his trusted accomplice, seeming to rely on readers’ judgment, for example, through his growing fondness for interrogative narrative. For instance, after his interview with Mrs. Catherick, Walter asks himself and the reader a series of questions:

Was it possible that appearances in this case had pointed one way while the truth lay all the while unsuspected in another direction? Could Mrs. Catherick’s assertion, that she was the victim of a dreadful mistake, by any possibility be true? Or, assuming it to be false, could the conclusion which associated Sir Percival with her guilt have been founded in some inconceivable error? Had Sir Percival, by any chance, courted the suspicion that was wrong for the sake of diverting from himself some other suspicion that was right? (492)25

Walter also elicits readerly participation in the story by affectively describing his own emotions so as to reproduce them in sympathetic readers; from his admitted red herring that Sir Percival might be Anne’s father to his final discovery of the duplicate register (488–530), Walter makes the reader a sensational partner to his heart palpitations (488, 529), base despair (523), and giddy elation (529). However, it is
in a brief moment of remembered tenderness that Walter employs his most direct strategy of naming the reader his friend (500).

He repeats all of these techniques during his final contest with the Count. Once again, he asserts that he has little choice in the matter, having been forced by Glyde’s untimely death to confront his co-conspirator (570). He also draws readers into the story by questioning them at key moments, such as when he receives Marian’s telegram urging him to return to London (562), when he finally discovers Anne’s patrilineal relationship to Laura (574), and when he decides to allow the Count to depart from England (611). In addition, while on Fosco’s trail he continues to meticulously record his own emotional reactions: breathless anxiety (562), confusion (591), and fevered impatience (603). As if to establish the purity of his motives, Walter also takes two brief emotional detours into marital bliss (581–82, 602), tacitly reminding readers of the friendly intimacy that he shares with them.

This intimacy allows Walter to subtly initiate readers into the aesthetic pleasures of secrecy. The motivation to read on that Walter’s repeated questioning and affective emotionalism fosters ultimately relies on the revelation of secrets: readers are teased by “the secret” of Sir Percival’s illegitimacy, and this initial secret prepares them to uncover the darker secrets of Pesca and Fosco’s membership in the Brotherhood. Walter reveals this organization just enough to titillate readers with what they do not know and then refuses to divulge any more (595–98), making them into the group’s willing but ignorant accomplices. In this way, the novel maneuvers readers into the same position as English supporters of Italian unification and exposes them to the same ideological conflicts brought on by the figurative presence of Italian secret societies. Such a narrative strategy coerces readers into proving the insufficiency of middle-class England’s politico-juridical attitude towards secretive practices. Reflecting back on his unlikely victory over the Glyde-Fosco conspiracy, Walter notes that he never could have succeeded had he remained within the confines of English law (640).

This reflection, together with the novel’s network of transitive equivalencies, gives credence to Fosco’s assertions concerning morality and criminality, which appear in their most doctrinal form in the 17 June entry of Marian’s diary. While allowing his tame mice to crawl over his body in a manner that suggests to Marian “hideous ideas of men dying in prison with the crawling creatures of the dungeon preying on them undisturbed” (253), Fosco engages her and Laura in a conversation that ranges widely over criminality, morality and the interrelation of the two. According to the Count, crime and its detection represents a trial of skill between the police on one side, and the individual on the other. When the criminal is a brutal, ignorant fool, the police in nine cases out of ten win. When the criminal is a resolute, educated, highly-intelligent man, the police in nine cases
out of ten lose. If the police win, you generally hear all about it. If the police lose, you generally hear nothing. And on this tottering foundation you build up your comfortable moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection! Yes—all the crime that you know of. And what of the rest? (256)

The conversation quickly turns from the moral relativism revealed by England's approach to crime to the ideological relativism evident not only in differences between various nations' definition of virtue, but also in the moral inconsistency practiced in England, a topic with resonant undertones of the contemporary Italian Question. “Mr John Bull,” says Fosco, sanctions all kinds of ideologically conflicting behavior at home, including the confinement of “Mr Honesty” in a workhouse as reward for his frugality, the relief of “Mr Scoundrel” as a reward for his criminal confinement in prison, and the sale of respectable women in marriage as a reward for their femininity (256–57). Such domestic inconsistencies make English attempts to pronounce judgment on foreign affairs open to critique. The fact that Walter’s secretive behavior actually exemplifies Fosco’s theories of moral and ideological relativism in action only adds force to Fosco’s later dismissal of Walter’s, and by extension England’s, assertion of moral authority as mere “moral clap-traps” (609).

Even in death Fosco continues to unsettle English notions of law and morality while invoking the figure of the secret society and the Italian Question. Proving his own theory of crime, the Count actually escapes England without so much as a whisper of police pursuit. Instead, he is caught and murdered in France by the vengeful machinations of the Brotherhood. Walter invites the reader to see this as an instance of Providential justice at work, but one cannot help noticing that this act of Providence was set in motion, as Fosco recognizes, by Walter’s “treachery” (608) to the Brotherhood’s own vow of secrecy. Furthermore, Fosco’s death is a clear allusion to the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Napoleon III by Orsini in 1858. Fosco is frequently compared to Napoleon I, whom Louis Napoleon tried desperately to emulate, making the Count an effective surrogate for Napoleon III. At the same time, the fearful reputation of the Brotherhood makes it an ideal stand-in for the Carbonari, which was linked through Orsini to the attempt on the life of Napoleon III. This unsuccessful attempt produced months of legislation and periodical condemnation in England, but its fictional success is presented as perfectly acceptable and even morally appropriate. This leaves readers in a double bind: either they agree with Walter and applaud the Count’s death, thereby tacitly endorsing the “wild justice” of secret societies; or they condemn Walter’s murderous treachery, thus accepting the Count’s doctrine of crime. Either way, the novel forces readers to identify with someone whose practices of secrecy call into question the very ideal “Court of Justice” constructed by middle-class England’s political mores.
II. Italian Union and Disraeli’s *Lothair*

The years immediately following the publication of *The Woman in White* put to rest any remaining fears in England that Italy would unite as a radical republic. However, this is not to imply either that Italy lost its allure among the reading public or that the figure of the secret society disappeared from discussions of the Italian Question. Indeed, public interest in Italian affairs remained strong even after the Italian Parliament declared Victor Emmanuel II King of the constitutional monarchy of Italy on 14 March 1861. At the same time, brigandage in southern Italy, the continued presence of radical republicans, and Rome’s aggressive stance against unification and for papal infallibility—with charges of Jesuitism resulting in both cases—ensured that the figure of the secret society would retain its rhetorical prominence. Garibaldi also helped to secure continued English interest in Italian unification by participating in the 1866 conflict with Austria that saw Italy gain control of Venetia and leading attacks by semi-secret volunteer armies on Papal forces in the Romagna in 1862 and 1867. The second of these attacks nearly succeeded before it was driven back by French troops on 3 November at Mentana.26 Napoleon III kept the Pope in control of Rome for three more years, then, in September 1870, pulled out all of his troops, thereby allowing Italian forces to take possession of the city on 2 October 1870. Public elections overwhelmingly supported this turn of events, with 89 of every 90 votes being cast in favor of annexation and the subsequent unification of the Italian peninsula.

Most of the elements of England’s early rhetorical confusion surrounding Italian unification remained in use during these later events as well. Garibaldi continued to inspire English Protestants to support the Italian cause, especially once he renounced his connection to Mazzini by surrendering southern Italy to Victor Emmanuel II. His repeated attacks on Papal forces in Rome using volunteer troops only added to the fervor of hero-worship that surrounded his name in England.27 At the same time that Garibaldi’s star continued to ascend, Louis Napoleon’s fell precipitously, with numerous periodical writers voicing their continued distrust of his involvement in Italian affairs: W. C. Cartwright, in an article for *The Fortnightly Review*, summed up public sentiment when he observed, “The sympathies so freely professed in the abstract by English politicians for Italy struggling to constitute herself as a State have been interwoven with more or less mistrust in the process that has been pursued towards that end, and in the probable action upon the infant State of that auxiliary influence [France] which served as the means of helping Italy into existence” (Cartwright, “The Policy of Italy,” 641).28
Napoleon III was particularly suspect because of his support for the Pope in the 1860s. During this time, anti-Popery was on the rise again in England in response to a number of Anglo and Roman Catholic initiatives, including the growing influence of ritualism in High Church circles, the publication in 1864 of Pius IX’s *Syllabus of Errors*, which denounced liberal ideas about God, and the ultra-montane movement, which sought, and ultimately succeeded in procuring in 1870, a declaration of Papal infallibility. These anti-Catholic sentiments frequently influenced the ways in which English Protestants responded to the Italian Question, prompting many of them to support unification largely because it would diminish the temporal authority of the Papacy.

However, the subject of Popery inevitably led back to one of the main problems with supporting unification: England’s own imperial relationship with Ireland. This relationship could be connected to the Italian Question in one of two ways: either, England’s relations with Ireland were analogous to those of Piedmont with Naples—a liberalizing role of progressive leadership—and therefore the unification of Italy ought to be supported because it was similar to the unification of Great Britain; or, the calls for independence made by republicans in Ireland were analogous to those made by Italian partisans in Lombardy, Venetia and Rome, in which case supporting Italian unification might expose the imperial hypocrisy of England’s continued possession of Ireland. The question of Ireland grew only more vexing to English readers as the decade progressed, with the nadir of Anglo-Irish relations occurring in 1867, when members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood staged an unsuccessful revolution and killed a dozen Londoners in an unrelated prison break attempt at Clerkenwell prison. Irish Roman Catholics also secretly enlisted both money and men to support the Pope’s occupation of Rome, a direct violation of the Foreign Enlistment Act, and an indirect challenge to the soon-to-be disestablished Irish Church. This increasing militancy by Irish nationalists further complicated the Italian Question by making it impossible to forget that any response to Italian unification would have imperial repercussions at home.

In some ways, secret Irish revolutionary activity only strengthened the rhetorical connection between Ireland and Italy, which continued to be represented in England as a land literally honeycombed by secret societies. Even though his influence was waning, Mazzini remained an important object of criticism for English writers deeply suspicious of his republican doctrines. In fact one rare Mazzini supporter, C. E. Maurice, complained that “Hackneyed traditions, wildly improbable stories, have gathered round his name, till every trace of the real man is lost in the conventional stage-conspirator” (54). The figure of the secret society also surfaced in discussions of Italian brigandage (1862–63), a southern Italian resistance movement spearheaded by those still loyal to the Bourbons but practiced by a wide range of peasants,
mendicants, criminals and others disaffected with Piedmont’s recent acquisition of the Two Sicilies. One Blackwood’s author characterized this resistance as “Terrorism,” a sentiment whose “wide diffusion . . . throughout the nation” allowed Italy’s numerous “secret societies” to take “root in the land” (“Italian Brigandage,” 576). The continued presence of these societies made supporting the Italian Question an ideologically risky proposition. The English remained firmly opposed to secret societies in general and to revolutionary secret societies in particular, especially given the activities of such organizations in Ireland. However, by approving of events in Italy, English writers found themselves tacitly taking sides with these very societies, thereby aligning their political opinions with practices of secrecy they otherwise denounced.

On 2 May 1870, only months before the Italian Question would be answered by the fait accompli of Italy united and the furor over ultra-montanism would reach its peak with Rome’s declaration of infallibility, Longman’s issued the first edition of Benjamin Disraeli’s highly topical Lothair. Like Collins, Disraeli incorporates the conflict of ideologies surrounding the Italian Question into his novel, which is set between August 1866 and August 1868, the period of Garibaldi’s final assault on Rome. Also like Collins, Disraeli simultaneously presents domesticity—here a figure for England’s official policy of noninterference—as a way to escape the contradictions of the public sphere and reveals the extent to which the domestic realm is implicated in these same contradictions. However, unlike The Woman in White, Lothair explicitly foregrounds these issues and their relationship to Italian unification: the climactic scenes of the novel occur in Italy during the failed attack on Mentana, and Lothair, the story’s impressionable title character, actually equips and fights with Garibaldi’s forces.

Lothair also features an unprecedented array of factual and fictional secret societies, including, but not limited to, the Carbonari, the Jesuits, the Fenians, the Atheists, the Illuminati, the Freemasons, the Mary Anne societies, and even something called the Standing Committee of the Holy Alliance of Peoples. Including these organizations allows Disraeli to interrogate the productive functions of the figure of the secret society more thoroughly in Lothair than he or anyone else had in any of the other texts already discussed in this book. As a result of this attention, the figure of the secret society assumes a central role in the novel, binding together Italian unification, Irish nationalism and Roman Catholicism into a sticky web of conflicting ideologies. In order to move among these strands, Lothair is forced to abandon ideological purity and exercise the same ideological relativism that was historically required of English respondents to the Italian Question. Eventually, he tries to retreat from such relativism by abandoning the public sphere altogether and getting married; however, Disraeli does not let him off so easily. Domesticity turns out to be yet another strand in the web formed by the figure of the secret society. In thus com-
pletely enmeshing Lothair in the conflict of ideologies brought on by the Italian Question, Disraeli offers a trenchant critique of English refusals to acknowledge that, even in the semi-sacred realm of private life, any claims of ideological purity—and therefore of natural superiority over the Austrians, the Irish, or even the ultra-montane Roman Catholics—are dangerously compromised by England’s pervasive rhetoric of secrecy and tacit reliance on the figure of the secret society.

In addition to its meticulous attention to the figure of the secret society as it relates to the Italian Question, Disraeli’s *Lothair* has another quality that sets it apart from the other novels discussed earlier: it is largely unread today except by dedicated literary biographers. Such a lack of critical regard dates back to the novel’s first reviews, most of which ranged from emphatically negative to openly hostile. *The Quarterly Review*, for instance, described it as “lively and amusing,” but “a failure,” “unnatural” and “a vast maze of verbiage” (“Mr Disraeli’s *Lothair*,” 83–84), while the review in *Macmillan’s* vituperatively concluded, “A single conscientious perusal (without skipping) of ‘Lothair,’ would be a credible feat: few will voluntarily attempt a second” (“Lothair,” 159).

There is no record of the number of times individual readers attempted a “conscientious perusal” of *Lothair*, but it is important to note that, despite its poor reviews, the novel was an international bestseller. In Britain, the original edition of 2000 copies disappeared from store shelves almost immediately, and by 6 May Thomas Longman could write to Disraeli that he would have to print a sixth thousand just to keep pace with demand. Before the novel was ten days old, nearly 7000 copies had been sold in England alone, and arrangements were already underway for a cheap Australian edition. In the United States the novel sold even faster. Mssrs Appleton’s initial printing of 25,000 sold out in three days; by the end of October over 80,000 copies of *Lothair* had been purchased by American readers. In the absence of critical attention, such overwhelming popular support is significant because it suggests that Disraeli’s fictional study of the figure of the secret society and the Italian Question had the opportunity to influence the public’s response to current events. In other words, even though it is now among the many forgotten texts of the Victorian period, during this time of ideological crisis it enjoyed a prominent place in the public consciousness.

For the benefit of modern readers unfamiliar with *Lothair*, I will provide a brief summary of the novel to help ground my analysis of its connection to the Italian Question and to the figure of the secret society. The novel’s title character is an immensely wealthy orphan, based loosely on the third Marquess of Bute, who is about to come of age and take full control of his property. Lothair’s wealth had heretofore been held in trust by his two guardians, a Scotch Presbyterian uncle, Lord Cullodan, with whom Lothair had dwelt in relative isolation prior to the beginning of the story, and
a Catholic convert, Cardinal Grandison, whom he had never met. Lothair’s incipient riches and ducal title make him the object of three competing conspiratorial groups: the Anglicans, the Roman Catholics, and the radical republicans. Each group is represented in the text by a woman—Lady Corisande (Anglicans), Clare Arundel (Catholics), and Theodora Campion (Radicals)—and each woman attempts to woo Lothair into her camp. After unsuccessfully proposing marriage to Lady Corisande and nearly joining the Roman Catholic Church at the behest of Clare Arundel, Lothair ultimately follows “the divine Theodora” to Italy, where he pledges himself and his wealth to Garibaldi’s 1867 invasion of the Romagna. At the fictionalized battle of Mentana, Theodora is killed and Lothair is seriously wounded by France’s last-minute entry into the fray. He convalesces under the care of Clare Arundel in Rome, where he becomes the dupe of a plot to make it appear as if he has converted to Catholicism. Narrowly escaping from pursuing Monsignori, he finds asylum with an acquaintance of Theodora whom he had met in England, one Mr. Phoebus, a dandy and an aesthete who combines doctrines of Aryan superiority with artistic bohemianism. Phoebus drops Lothair in Syria, where he meets the ecumenical Paraclete, who supplements the racial doctrines of Phoebus with some of his own and reassures Lothair that there are multiple true religions. Lothair then returns to England, dispels the rumors of his conversion, marries Lady Corisande, and becomes a respectable Anglican duke.

As this summary indicates, Lothair faces the same three options as English respondents to the Italian Question. He can choose to support Italian unification by following Theodora to Italy, or he can elect to oppose Italian unification by joining Clare Arundel among the Roman Catholic faithful, or he can adopt a neutral position by marrying Lady Corisande and retreating into private life. Unfortunately for Lothair, none of these options remains free from ideological conflict. The additional factors of Irish nationalism, widespread practices of Jesuitism and a domestic sphere rife with secrecy and political intrigue make any choice at best a compromise among necessary evils and at worst a specimen of ideological relativism.

Irish nationalism is mentioned in several places during the course of the text, each time appearing as a dangerous political possibility connected to the same kind of revolutionary goals motivating Italian unification. One of Cardinal Grandison’s agents, Monsignore Catesby, introduces the Irish quite early in the novel. While being debriefed by his ecclesiastical superior, Catesby connects militant unrest in Ireland to the American Civil War—another conflict that sorely tested England’s neutrality—and to a possible loss of power for the papacy:

Now that the civil war in America is over, the Irish soldiery are resolved to employ their experience and their weapons in their own land; but they have no thought for
Lothair actually meets some of those tending towards “lawless liberalism” when he stumbles into a Fenian meeting in London. Disguised under a plea for subscriptions to a Roman Catholic chapel and school, these members of “the vast and extending organization of the brotherhood” mistake Lothair for a spy and threaten to kill him before he is rescued by a mysterious stranger bearing a paper whose mark cows even the Fenian leader (112–15). Lothair’s rescuer turns out to be a former comrade-in-arms with Garibaldi and a leading figure in a fictional secret society called the Standing Committee of the Holy Alliance of Peoples. This group of “extreme Republicans” is also involved in a plot to liberate Ireland, and has gotten so far as to arrange for American assistance as Catesby had feared.41

The Standing Committee problematizes unqualified support for Italian unification in two ways. First, the group provides a direct link between Irish nationalism and Italian affairs, since in addition to contemplating aid for the Fenians, they also strive towards the liberation of Italy and the overthrow of Papal power in Rome. This link between Ireland and Italy makes any alliance with Theodora ideologically compromised for someone who, like Lothair, wishes to keep Great Britain united. Second, the Standing Committee also serves as a reminder that Italian unification remains bound up with Italian secrecy, and that in working for the former sympathetic Englishmen implicitly support the latter. This implication is made more obvious by the iconic status of Theodora, who is herself the living embodiment of “Mary-Anne,” another fictional secret society based in France and Italy and dedicated to Italian unity. This cause is also supported by the super-secret Madre Natura, another creation of Disraeli, who describes it in the following terms at the beginning of Chapter LIV:

The Madre Natura is the oldest, the most powerful, and the most occult of the secret societies of Italy. Its mythic origin reaches the era of paganism, and it is not impossible that it may have been founded by some of the despoiled professors of the ancient faith. As time advanced, the brotherhood assumed many outward forms, according to the spirit of the age: sometimes they were freemasons, sometimes they were soldiers, sometimes artists, sometimes men of letters. But whether their external representation were a lodge, a commandery, a studio, or an academy, their inward purpose was ever the same; and that was to cherish the memory, and, if possible, to secure the restoration, of the Roman republic, and to
These rather abstruse goals help to illuminate the ideological bind such secret societies produced for English men and women committed to Italian unification. On the one hand, Madre Natura is rendered attractive to an English audience by its protean connections with Freemasonry, its opposition to the “Semitic invasion” of Roman Catholicism and its non-democratic aspirations to empire. On the other hand, the group remains suspect because of its secrecy, its lack of Christian affiliations and its potential for generating revolutionary unrest. Yet, as Lothair discovers, one cannot strive for Italian unification without granting to secret societies like the Standing Committee of the Holy Alliance of Peoples, Mary Anne, and Madre Natura a degree of acceptance by virtue of their involvement in the same struggle.

This formidable trio of secret societies is opposed in the novel by the equally imposing organization of the Roman Catholic Church, which also works to prevent Italian unification. Cardinal Grandison, Monsignore Catesby, Clare Arundel and numerous others all work tirelessly to thwart Italian nationalists’ designs on Rome. This is, in fact, the reason that Catesby has returned to England in the first place:

The Monsignore had made another visit to Paris on his intended return to Rome, but in consequence of some secret intelligence which he had acquired in the French capital had thought fit to return to England to consult with the Cardinal. There seemed to be no doubt that the revolutionary party in Italy, assured by the withdrawal of the French troops from Rome, were again stirring. There seemed also little doubt that London was the centre of preparation, though the project and the projectors were involved in much mystery. “They want money,” said the Monsignore; “that we know, and that is now our best chance. The Aspromonte expedition drained their private resources; and as for further aid, that is out of the question; the galantuomo is bankrupt.” (73)

On the one hand, this opposition by the novel’s Roman Catholic characters to the activity of “the revolutionary party” made in the name of a sovereign, the Pope, who had ruled over the territory in question, Rome, for approximately fifteen hundred years agrees with English policies of anti-radicalism and support for traditional monarchs. On the other hand, the prodigious and secret efforts of such dedicated individuals make the Catholic Church in Lothair appear to be entirely composed of the most Jesuitical Jesuits ever to hatch a Popish plot. Unfortunately, Lothair cannot have one hand without the other, and so he is forced to choose between the equally compromised options of working for or against the Church in Rome.
By the time one has followed Lothair on his topical grand tour through Italian independence movements and Roman Catholic conversion attempts, one is almost persuaded by the novel’s assertion that all of European politics boils down to “the Church against the secret societies. They are the only two strong things in Europe, and will survive kings, emperors, or parliaments” (250). However, this simple and extreme division of European affairs leaves Lothair little room for matrimonial neutrality. In fact, the domestic sphere in Lothair is not isolated at all from the novel’s explicitly political topics. Mrs. Putney Giles, the wife of Lothair’s solicitor, with her facility for bringing together “a medley” of “priests and philosophers, legitimists and carbonari” (43), is certainly the most visible sign that English domesticity does not stand apart from revolutionary politics. With her “principle mission . . . to destroy the Papacy and to secure Italian unity” (35), she is even explicitly connected with both Mazzini and Garibaldi: “It was rumored that the brooding brow of Mazzini had been observed in her rooms, and there was no sort of question that she had thrown herself in ecstatic idolatry at the feet of the hero of Caprera” (35).

However, Mrs. Putney Giles is not alone: Lady Corisande and the text’s other staunch Anglicans also employ their domestic connections to match the Jesuitical Grandison plot-for-plot in their attempt to win over Lothair. If the Catholics circulate a “deftly drawn-up announcement which had been deeply planned” implying Lothair’s incipient adoption of the Catholic faith at a mass held at the parish’s Anglican cathedral, whose Bishop must preach at Muriel chapel and would therefore be “not present to guard it from the fiery dragon” (209), then the Anglicans are not above joining forces with the Italian revolutionaries to frustrate their designs:

“You mistake,” said Theodora quietly, when Lady Corisande had finished. “I am much interested in what you tell me. I should deplore our friend falling under the influence of the Romish priesthood.”

“And yet there is danger of it,” said Lady Corisande, “more than danger,” she added in a low but earnest voice. “You do not know what a conspiracy is going on, and has been going for months to effect this end. I tremble.” (215)

A similar doubling of Catholic and Anglican plotting occurs later in the novel when, after weeks of convalescent surveillance, Lothair agrees to support Clare Arundel at an unspecified, but suspicious, celebration at the Jesuit church of St. George of Cappadocia. His agreement elicits the following reaction from two of the novel’s Popish plotters:

In the evening reception, Monsignore Catesby approached Father Coleman. “It is done,” he said, with a look of saintly triumph. “It is done at last. He will not only
be present, but he will support her. There are yet eight-and-forty hours to elapse. Can anything happen to defeat us? It would seem not; yet when so much is at stake, one is fearful. He must never be out of our sight; not a human being must approach him.”

“I think we can manage that,” said Father Coleman. (312)

Catesby and Coleman are meant to appear reprehensible in their desire to isolate Lothair from the outside world, and yet their plans merely replicate the strategy already practiced by Lothair’s Scottish guardian while he was a child, studiously segregating the boy from Grandison and from most signs of society. After this mass with Clare Arundel, Lothair despairs upon reading a newspaper article both declaring that he supported the Pope’s forces during Garibaldi’s failed assault on Rome and imputing that his participation in the celebration at the Jesuit church of St. George signals his firm allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. He recognizes for the first time the extent to which his enforced conversion has been striven for by his Catholic acquaintances: “That seemed only a petty plot in London, and he had since sometimes smiled when he remembered how it had been baffled. Shallow apprehension! The petty plot was only part of a great and unceasing conspiracy, and the obscure and inferior agencies which he had been rash enough to deride had consummated their commanded purpose in the eyes of all Europe, and with the aid of the great powers of the world” (321). He escapes again through the combined efforts of Anglican friends in Rome and Italian revolutionaries and sails away to Palestine with Mr. Phoebus, who subjects Lothair to his own attempt at an enforced conversion on the way. As the irate reviewer for *Macmillan’s* noted, it is often difficult to see significant differences among the novel’s many conspirators. This similitude suggests that, although supposedly neutral, England is deeply involved in the “mighty struggle between the Church and the secret societies” (258), and that this involvement makes it an uneasy double for both sides.

Disraeli thus places the novel’s English Protestants in an ideologically conflicted position. On the matter of secretive practices, Lothair’s Anglican faithful duplicate those performed by Grandison, Catesby and the entire Roman Catholic contingent in order to oppose them on matters of religion. This opposition allies them with the Continental secret societies, who also work against the Pope, but do so primarily on the basis of the political principles of nationalism and radical republicanism. These principles lead the Standing Committee of the Holy Alliance of Peoples, for example, to also strive for the independence of Ireland, a goal that places them in conflict with England and the Papacy, who are thus brought together on a politico-religious issue of significance to the sovereignty of both parties. As individual representatives of English policy, therefore, Lothair’s Protestant friends find them-
selves simultaneously allied with, in opposition to, and practical doubles of both the Church and the secret societies.

Even as he explores the ideological conflicts inherent in Lothair’s three choices by, among other things, exposing their common reliance on the figure of the secret society, Disraeli also subjects that figure to penetrating analysis. As evidenced above, the relationship between the Church and the secret societies is repeatedly represented in the text as a “mighty struggle,” even a “death struggle” (258), and one of the most important weapons for both sides is the figure of the secret society. The principle secret societies in the text—the Standing Committee of the Holy Alliance of Peoples, Mary-Anne, and Madre Natura—deploy this figure positively to convince themselves and others of their influence and potential for action. Large bodies of unseen followers provide reference points for enlisting the aid of others in their supposedly already well-supported enterprise: The Standing Committee, for example, uses this strategy to try to enlist the aid of Lothair’s rescuer, the General, in an Irish rebellion (56), and this same technique surfaces again during a meeting between the General and Colonel Mirandola regarding Italian unification (158). During the original meeting between The Standing Committee and the General, past risings (Polish, Greek, Romanian, German—all unsuccessful) are also invoked as a source of solidarity for the group of multinational revolutionaries (57). This same meeting also provides an example of a third positive use to which the figure of the secret society is put, the invocation of a specific society in order to generate revolutionary consensus:

“[W]e always drink one toast, General, before we separate. It is to one whom you love, and whom you have served well. Fill glasses, brethren, and now ‘To MARY-ANNE.’”

If they had been inspired by the grape nothing could be more animated and even excited than all their countenances suddenly became. The cheer might have been heard in the coffee-room, as they expressed, in the phrases of many languages, the never-failing and never-flagging enthusiasm invoked by the toast to their mistress. (57–58)

Over the course of the text, Mary-Anne is joined in this role by Garibaldi (159, 255), and, after Garibaldi’s arrest, by Madre Natura (262–64, 272–73). In each case, the particular figure serves as a talisman against the overwhelming odds facing the revolutionaries, and as a fetish around which these disciples of liberty can join together.

The results of these positive strategies are mixed, at best. Among those who are already members of the secret societies, they work admirably, as the unified toast to Mary-Anne demonstrates. They also may succeed in recruiting a small number
of impressionable followers like Lothair to the revolutionary cause, and even in precipitating the 1867 attack on Rome. However, as the General recognizes in relation to the possibilities of an Irish rebellion, at least, these strategies may hide a lack of readiness among the revolutionaries; after rescuing Lothair from the Fenian meeting, the General tells him, “I have just returned from Ireland, where I thought I would go and see what they really are after. No business is in them. Their treason is a fairy tale, and their sedition a child talking in its sleep” (115).

More problematic, though, is that these positive and relatively public invocations of the figure of the secret society often succeed in generating as much or more fear among opponents as unity within the revolution. The activities of the Mary-Anne societies prompts anxious preparations in the Church (248–49), whereas the revolutionary rhetoric of Garibaldi persuades France to consider returning to Italy: as the General tells Lothair, “All our danger is from France. The Italian troops will never cross the frontier to attack us, rest assured of that. . . . And it is most difficult, almost impossible, for the French to return. There would never have been an idea of such a step, if there had been a little more discretion at Florence, less of those manifestoes and speeches from balconies” (255). Ultimately, France does return, joining with the Papacy to crush the 1867 attack on Rome by the forces of Garibaldi and the secret societies.

At the same time that the revolutionaries are generating consensus among themselves and inadvertently among their enemies by positively deploying the figure of the secret society, the Church is fostering unity of a different sort through its own negative invocation of the same trope. Put simply, the Church simultaneously lumps together and stigmatizes all of its opponents by labeling them Atheists. Thus, Catesby, Grandison and other Catholic clergy progressively label the Fenians as Atheists (48–49), the Italian revolutionaries as Atheists (73, 238), and the Freemasons and other secret societies as Atheists (401). This figure of “the Atheists” successfully robs individual groups of their own revolutionary message and unites the faithful against them. Lady St. Jerome, for example, responds to this figure first with fear—“Where are we to look for aid,’ exclaimed Lady St. Jerome, ‘against the assassins and atheists?” (48–49)—and later with ardent faith: “It is the Atheists alone, I fear, who are now carrying everything before them, and against whom there is no rampart, except the rock of St. Peter” (65). Even Lothair is convinced at first, ironically confiding to Theodora, the living emblem of the Mary-Anne societies, “There is no doubt the Atheists are bolder, are more completely organized, both as to intellectual and even physical force, than ever was known. I have that from the highest authority” (153).

The figure of Atheism also allows the Church to justify its own (often unpopular) practices. Grandison, for example, explains that Papal troops are needed in Rome not to subdue the populace, but to control the many Atheists who have infiltrated the city:
"I really believe," said the Cardinal, “that a more religious, a more happy and con-
tented people than the Roman never existed. They could all be kept in order with
the police of one of your counties. True it is the Holy Father is obliged to garrison
the city with twelve thousand men of all arms, but not against the Romans, not
against his own subjects. It is the Secret Societies of Atheism who have established
their lodges in this city, entirely consisting of foreigners, that render these lamen-
table precautions necessary. They will not rest until they have extirpated the reli-
gious principle from the soul of man, and until they have reduced him to the
condition of wild beasts. But they will fail, as they did the other day, as Sennecherib
failed. These men may conquer Zouaves and Cuirassiers, but they cannot fight
against Saint Michael and all the Angels. They may do mischief, they may aggravate
and prolong the misery of man, but they are doomed to entire and eternal failure.”

The Cardinal characterizes infallibility, too, as an essential step against the forces
of Atheism, “a demonstration of power on the part of the Holy Father, which no
conqueror from Sesostris to Napoleon has ever equalled” (401). Given the defeat
of the revolutionary attack on Rome and the almost-certain passage of the doctrine
of Papal Infallibility by the end of Lothair, it seems clear that the Church’s strategy
of negatively deploying the figure of the secret society is highly effective.

III. Conclusions

Disraeli’s novel undoubtedly offers the nineteenth century’s most detailed fictional analy-
sis of the figure of the secret society and its relationship to representative politics. As
such, it represents the apogee of the rhetoric of conspiracy with which I have con-
cerned myself throughout this book. In fact, the rhetoric of Atheism deployed so effec-
tively by the Roman Catholic Church in Lothair matches very closely the ways in which
the figure of the secret society was opportunistically invoked by English propagandists
during the trial of the Glasgow spinners, the debate over Catholic emancipation, the
Tractarian controversy, the uproar over “Papal aggression” and the Indian Mutiny—all
events Disraeli had observed from his unique vantage as a Member of Parliament
and former Prime Minister. Faced with a politically radical challenge to its own patri-
archal authority, the Church wages a war of words that rhetorically disarms its oppo-
onents of their revolutionary potential by using their own secretive practices against
them. From nationalists, they are transformed into Atheists, just as the spinners had
been made into Thugs, the Catholics Jesuits, and the Indians mutinous conspirators.
In his own reductive portrayal of Irish nationalism, Disraeli even offers an apparently less self-conscious continuation of the kind of conflict of ideologies brought to light in these previous moments of democratic stress by the invocation of the figure of the secret society. Presented primarily as a foil for Italian unification, Irish nationalism is carefully excluded from the reader’s sympathy in a number of ways. First, Fenian conspirators nearly attack the novel’s title character after they discover him listening to them preach sedition. Second, the General, who is presented throughout the text as a selfless hero willing to sacrifice his own life for the righteous cause of Italian union, judges them childish. Third, even the Church disdains to have anything to do with them, branding them parochial Atheists who cannot think beyond the local concerns of their island. This narrative attempt to dismiss Irish nationalism obscures the fact that Irish nationalists were acting on the same principle of securing self-government for an oppressed people as their Italian counterparts. Similar to the ways in which denunciations of the Glasgow spinners as Thugs or the Tractarians as Jesuits ring hollow in the face of congruities between trade unions and Parliament, or between reserve and gentlemanly self-fashioning, so the dismissive representation of Irish nationalists as Fenians in Disraeli’s text is undermined by their essential identity with the more positively valenced conspiratorial groups. The only way that the Fenians substantially differ from the other secret societies in Lothair is that they are Irish, suggesting that the novel’s disapprobation may, itself, be an example of political propaganda.

In addition to showing in unparalleled detail the ways in which invocations of the figure of the secret society had been deployed up to 1870 to misrepresent collective political action as the work of a conspiracy, Lothair also provides evidence that the significance of such invocations was beginning to change. In part, this change was due to the fact that the sheer flexibility of the figure had begun to interfere with its political utility. By 1870 accusations of conspiracy had been made so many times and in so many different contexts that they had lost their rhetorical edge; if conspiracy was so widespread, then it hardly seemed so damning to be labeled a conspirator. In addition, the growing internationalism of England’s rhetoric of conspiracy since mid-century had begun to weaken the connection between the figure of the secret society and the predominantly domestic issue of political representation.43 The very profusion of Continental secret societies in Lothair that so irritated some of its early reviewers is, itself, a product and an indication of this rhetorical dilution.44

The overwhelmingly political connotations of the figure of the secret society were also beginning to be displaced by an increasingly prominent association between secrecy and domesticity.45 Enabled by the growing importance of “home,” as documented in John Tosh’s “The making of masculinities” and “New Men?,” this association had
begun to raise troubling questions about the supposedly separate “private sphere.” Lothair’s inability to escape the signs of his past support for Italian unification, either by sailing away with the radical aesthete, Mr. Phoebus, or by spiritually solemnizing his relationship to Lady Corisande and the Anglican Church, makes perspicuous the crucial collapse of secrecy and privacy these questions implied. Furthermore, by depicting this collapse of categories in the context of marriage, Disraeli suggests that the distinction between the analogous categories of secret society/conspiracy and private family may be just as porous. In so doing, Lothair suggests that the key problematic of the larger Victorian rhetoric of secrecy of which it is a constituent element may no longer be only whether or not working-class, Roman Catholic, mutinous Indian and revolutionary Italian (and Irish) practices of secrecy uncomfortably resemble those of respectable middle and upper-class Englishmen, but whether such similarities implicate the supposedly separate sphere of domesticity itself as just another form of middle- and upper-class secrecy.