

## *Victorian Detective Fiction*

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Between September 1829 and May 1830, seven years before Queen Victoria ascended the throne, 2,906 uniformed constables of the newly established Metropolitan Police force took to the London streets, and their two commissioners established their offices in Scotland Yard; twelve years later, the Detective Department of the Metropolitan Police was formed (Emsley, 216; Tobias, 82–84). As these developments suggest, Victorians were preoccupied with the problem of crime, its prevention, and its detection, and their preoccupation helps to explain the creation and popularity of a new narrative subgenre: detective fiction. Living in what historians and critics have termed an “age of sensation” (Altick, 3), Victorians eagerly followed accounts of thefts, assaults, and murders in the daily press, crimes often reported in lurid detail (Boyle, 3–4). They read highly fictionalized reminiscences of police officers and became armchair detectives themselves as they puzzled through the tales of crime and exposure written by such novelists as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, among the dozens of authors who helped shape the new subgenre.

A hybrid form, Victorian detective fiction typically includes the figure of a sleuth, whether amateur or professional, but it cannot be neatly distinguished from sensation fiction, another product of the Victorian period. Rather, the two subgenres often merge in novels that sensationally expose crimes commit-

ted within respectable, middle-class homes and that reinvent the Gothic tradition by Anglicizing the villainous characters and schemes found in the works of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, giving them a new and disturbing “proximity” to English readers (Hughes, 18).

As one Victorian reviewer advised the aspiring novelist of his day, “Let him only keep an eye on the criminal reports of the daily newspapers, marking the cases which are honored with the special notice of a leading article, and . . . he has the outline of his story not only ready-made, but approved beforehand as of the true sensation cast” (quoted in Altick, 157). Indeed, Victorian writers consistently drew on sensationalized criminal cases in producing their detective fiction, making use of the poisoners Pritchard and Palmer, among other notorious murderers, as Ian Ousby notes: “The Manning case is echoed in *Bleak House*, while the Constance Kent case gave Wilkie Collins several hints for the plot of *The Moonstone*” (81). Victorian detective fiction is indebted to the divorce court (established in 1858) as well as the criminal court, and a number of well-publicized cases of adultery and bigamy inform both Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861–62) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s tales of Sherlock Holmes. Drawing on famous detective figures in addition to notorious criminals and trials, Collins models Sergeant Cuff of *The Moonstone* (1868) on Inspector Jonathan Whicher of the Metropolitan Police, and Dickens models Mr. Bucket of *Bleak House* (1852–53) on Whicher’s colleague, Inspector Charles Frederick Field.

Yet in searching for source materials and prototypes, we should not lose sight of the larger aims of Victorian detective fiction, which takes crime and policing as its theme but uses this theme to investigate a number of broader social issues: the origins and construction of social identity, for example, the integrity and violation of social boundaries, and the status of women. Thus in *The Law and the Lady* (1874), Collins draws on newspaper accounts of the alleged female poisoner, Madeleine Smith, whose 1857 trial for murdering her lover with arsenic ended with a Scottish verdict of “not proven,” yet complicates Smith’s case, using a lady poisoner to examine not only female criminality but also the oppression of women. His plotline hinges on the fact that arsenic was recommended as a beauty treatment for women with flawed complexions, connecting feminine ideals with self-destruction, and revealing the harm that Victorian women were apt to inflict on themselves when they felt unattractive, slighted, or wronged.

As this example suggests, Victorian detective fiction sometimes clouds rather than clarifies the distinction between victim and victimizer. Even more significantly, it blurs the boundary between detection and crime. The most suspicious figures in Victorian detective fiction often prove to be the detectives themselves: Men of working-class origins who intrude into the genteel world

of their social superiors in the course of their investigations, and women from various social classes who cross gender boundaries and assume male prerogatives in their search for truth. Although its ostensive subject is the commission and discovery of specific crimes, Victorian detective fiction is engaged in a much more general and wide-ranging investigation into class and gender relations, and the potential criminality or injustice of the social status quo. Thus, when detective stories employ such forensic techniques as fingerprint technology and crime photography, Ronald R. Thomas observes, their aim is twofold: to examine not only the “individual anatomy” of particular characters but also the “general condition of the body politic itself” (4).

As the Victorian literary detective frequently discovers, the body politic appears to be in a failing state, a condition that some writers attribute to class inequities. “The clergyman said in his sermon, last Sunday evening, that all things were ordered for the best, and we are all put into the stations in life that are properest for us,” Collins’s working-class sleuth observes at the beginning of “The Diary of Anne Rodway,” a story first published in Dickens’s *Household Words* in 1856: “I suppose he was right, being a very clever gentleman who fills the church to crowding; but I think I should have understood him better if I had not been very hungry at the time, in consequence of my own station in life being nothing but Plain Needlewoman” (Collins, “Diary,” 129). A murder mystery investigated—and narrated—by a detective who does not have enough to eat, “The Diary of Anne Rodway” examines the issue of class relations and suggests, initially at least, that feelings of discontent and resentment among impoverished workers are well founded, whatever well-fed clergymen may say to the contrary. By the end of the narrative, however, Collins has largely undermined his political critique, in a conservative turn that characterizes many Victorian detective stories.

Collins’s story centers on the friendship between Anne Rodway and Mary Mallinson, both poor needlewomen, the latter of whom is killed by a blow to the head. At the inquest into Mary’s death, the authorities conclude that she was fatally injured when she fell, exhausted, in a London street, while returning to her lodgings from work. Although the jurors reach a verdict of “Accidental Death,” they hold Mary’s unfeeling and exploitative employers indirectly responsible for it: “They reproved the people where Mary worked for letting her go home alone, without so much as a drop of brandy to support her, after she had fallen into a swoon from exhaustion before their eyes. The coroner added, on his own account, that he thought the reproof was thoroughly deserved” (143). As the physician who first examined Mary tells Anne, “The only ill-usage to which the poor girl was exposed was the neglect she met with in the work-room” (141).

Despite the conclusions reached by these authorities, and her own experience of economic hardship and exploitation, Anne Rodway suspects that her friend was actually murdered, having found “an end of a man’s cravat” clutched in the dying woman’s hand (137). When the police tell her that “they could make no investigations with such a slight clue to guide them” (143), Anne investigates the case herself, tracking down the cravat in a rag and bottle shop, and then identifying the man who wore it on the night that Mary was fatally injured. What she discovers deflects blame for Mary’s death away from her middle-class employers, instead fixing it on brutal men of her own class. Having been beaten by her alcoholic father as a child, Mary is finally killed by one of her father’s former associates, a drunkard who purposely trips her when she gets in his way on the street, and then strikes her down with his fist when she calls him a “brute” (154).

Thanks to the detective work of Anne Rodway, the murderer is identified, convicted, and transported for life, and Mary’s employers are effectually acquitted, a solution that undermines the radical implications of Collins’s investigation into class relations. The fate of the female sleuth serves an equally conservative end. Despite her success as a detective—a role that requires her to cross gender boundaries at times—Anne is forced to hand over the investigation to her fiancé Robert upon his return from America. Told that her “strength and resolution had been too hardly taxed already” (156), Anne is rewarded for her detective efforts with a marriage that elevates her to the middle class but that leaves her an unwaged woman in the private sphere, wholly dependent on her male provider. As Collins constructs his plotline, his heroine simultaneously discovers the identity of Mary’s murderer and finds her own “proper place” as a wife, suppressing her manly capabilities as a detective. Not until the appearance of Catherine L. Pirakis’s *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke* (1894), George R. Sims’s *Dorcas Dene* (1897), and M. McDonnell Bodkin’s *Dora Myrl* (1900) did the female detective receive a more explicit endorsement in Victorian fiction, and even here the lady sleuths often prove subordinate to their husbands or their male colleagues.

In his portrait of Anne Rodway, a working-class sleuth who exposes the brutality of those in her own walk of life, Collins presents a variation on what was becoming a standard motif in Victorian detective fiction—the confrontation between the lowly policeman and his transgressive social superiors, particularly genteel women, the so-called “angels of the house,” who sometimes prove to be female fiends. As Anthea Trodd observes, depictions of domestic crime in Victorian fiction invest the “semi-servile” policeman with “unusual authority” over the ladies and gentlemen whose homes he enters and whose actions he scrutinizes (6), enabling writers to examine class differences and the interrelation of class and gender identities, to dramatize the threat posed to social order

by class mobility, to scrutinize ideals of feminine behavior, and to test the boundary separating the private from the public sphere.

Dickens's representation of Mr. Bucket in *Bleak House* clearly illustrates this range of interests and concerns. First appearing as a "sharp-eyed" detective officer (363), later as "a very respectable old gentleman"—a physician "with grey hair" (403)—and even later as an amateur singer and musician (731–732), Bucket adopts a host of disguises in the novel, masquerading as a family man and a private friend when he is, in fact, engaged in an official and public cause. Slipping in and out of roles, Bucket actively constructs and reconstructs his social identity. Establishing an "intimacy" with those he hopes will prove useful to his investigations (363), employing his wife as a spy, and making his home into a "prison" for his criminal lodger (796), Bucket collapses the cherished distinction between private and public life, challenging the Victorian ideal of the morally pure domestic haven.

A man of humble social origins, Bucket makes himself at home among the English gentry as well as the impoverished residuum of London, moving from the slums of Tom-all-Alone's to Chesney Wold, Sir Leicester's landed estate. Eroding class barriers, he claims that "every person should have their rights according to justice" (363). More often than not, Bucket works for affluent solicitors and baronets, and he persecutes the homeless crossing sweeper Jo, forcing him to leave the shelter that Mr. Jarndyce provides for him at Bleak House. Yet the detective officer retains his class allegiances and seems animated by class resentment on occasion. Although a murder is committed in the novel, Bucket appears less concerned with apprehending the working-class Frenchwoman who commits the crime than he is with investigating the gentlewoman whom she once served. Rather than concentrating his powers of surveillance on the lady's maid, Mademoiselle Hortense, Mr. Bucket focuses on Lady Dedlock, investigating her sexual past, and helping to discover the love affair that preceded her marriage to Sir Leicester and that produced an illegitimate daughter.

Hired by the baronet to find and save the suicidal Lady Dedlock after her sexual fall is brought to light, Bucket loses track of the wayward woman long enough to ensure her death. To Anthea Trodd, this surprising failure on the part of a seemingly omniscient detective points to the limits imposed on such figures by their class origins: Bucket proves unable to fully understand and outwit a member of the gentry. "He can see and oversee society's derelicts," Trodd argues, "but Lady Dedlock remains invisible to him" (33). More subtly, however, Bucket's failure to save Lady Dedlock suggests his antipathy toward his social superiors while also signifying his patriarchal function in the novel: what Laurie Langbauer sees as Bucket's "control of women's supposed errancy," and his desire to keep wayward women "in train" (153). In this regard, Bucket resembles the generality of Victorian literary detectives, who assume "that

women [are] inherently the more criminal sex” when they investigate a case (Trodd, 96). As Sherlock Holmes warns Dr. Watson in *The Sign of the Four* (1890), “Women are never to be entirely trusted—not the best of them” (70): “The most winning woman I ever knew was hanged for poisoning three little children for their insurance-money” (15–16).

Indeed, the detectives of Victorian fiction are sometimes misogynistic figures set on exposing the criminal failings of female nature, pursuing investigations that serve to rehabilitate their own imperiled manhood and shore up conventional gender boundaries. Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* provides a case in point. At the outset of Braddon’s story, her hero, Robert Audley, is an effeminate gentleman too indolent to practice law; he prefers reading French novels to hunting, and eats toast and marmalade rather than beef. But once he assumes the role of amateur sleuth and begins to investigate the young, second wife of his uncle, Sir Michael Audley, Robert learns to become a “real” man at the same time that he uncovers the “hellish power” (274) of a seemingly angelic woman. Exposing the crimes of Lady Audley—a bigamist, an arsonist, and a would-be murderess—Robert generalizes from her case. With “a shiver of horror, . . . he remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since that day upon which Eve was created to be Adam’s companion and help-meet in the garden of Eden” (273–274).

Assumptions about the inherent criminality and fallenness of women underlie the inquiry launched by Collins’s Sergeant Cuff just as they guide those of Inspector Bucket and Robert Audley, although Collins questions stereotypes of female errancy much more vigorously than either Dickens or Braddon do. In *The Moonstone*, Collins tells the story of a sacred Hindu diamond that is looted from the treasury of the sultan Tippoo during the British Siege of Seringapatam in 1799. John Herncastle brings the gem back home to England, bequeathing it to his niece, Rachel Verinder, who receives it on her eighteenth birthday, 21 June 1848. That night, it disappears from her rooms at the family’s Yorkshire estate, and Sergeant Cuff is called in from Scotland Yard to investigate. His suspicion soon falls on Rachel herself, whom he believes has stolen her own diamond to pay off debts, acting in collusion with Rosanna Spearman, a housemaid with a criminal past. “Miss Verinder has been in secret possession of the Moonstone from first to last,” Cuff informs Rachel’s mother, Lady Verinder, “and she has taken Rosanna Spearman into her confidence, because she has calculated on our suspecting Rosanna Spearman of the theft. There is the whole case in a nutshell” (173).

As events prove, however, the celebrated Cuff is entirely mistaken in his judgment. Undermining Cuff’s suspicions, Collins identifies the housemaid Rosanna as the better sleuth of the two. In gathering together the family’s dirty linen for wash day—a job that suggests why domestic servants make particu-

larly good detectives in Victorian fiction—Rosanna discovers an incriminating stain on the nightclothes of the gentleman whom Rachel loves: her cousin Franklin Blake. Blake rather than Rachel has taken the diamond from her rooms, we learn. But he has done so under the influence of laudanum, an opiate secretly administered to him by a medical man to prove a point; thus he is unaware of his theft. Furthermore, Blake took the Moonstone to protect Rachel and her property—because he was fearful of the three Hindu priests who had followed the diamond from India to England in order to reclaim it, and who appear at the Verinder estate on Rachel’s birthday. With Blake “guiltless, morally speaking, of the theft” (441), the most culpable figure in the novel proves to be a third cousin, Godfrey Ablewhite, to whom Blake handed the Moonstone for safekeeping while in his opium trance. A philanthropist who lives a double life, embezzling trust funds and keeping a mistress in an expensive suburban villa, Ablewhite chooses not to deposit the diamond in his father’s bank, as Blake requested, instead arranging to have it cut into separate stones and sold to pay off his debts. Before Ablewhite can do so, he is caught and murdered by the three Hindus, who regain their gem intact and restore it to an Indian shrine in the province of Kattiawar.

Understood as an investigation into Victorian social relations, *The Moonstone* dispels sexual stereotypes by acquitting Rosanna and Rachel of the charges leveled against them while also revealing the class inequities that divide the housemaid from the young lady of the house. As Rosanna puts it, “Young ladies may behave in a manner which would cost a servant her place” (363). Although Rosanna, like Rachel, loves Franklin Blake, her affection for the gentleman is perceived as “‘monstrous’” by the Verinders’ steward, Gabriel Betteredge, and by his daughter Penelope, a lady’s maid (185), and it goes completely unrecognized by Blake himself. Misconstruing Rosanna’s behavior, he only learns of her love from her suicide note, which expresses her affection for Blake as well as her class resentment, a feeling more fully articulated by her friend Lucy Yolland, who considers the gentleman a “murderer” and looks ahead to “the day . . . when the poor will rise against the rich” (226–227).

Collins does not endorse Lucy’s call for revolution or hold Blake directly responsible for Rosanna’s suicide, but he traces the crimes perpetrated in his novel to the English upper classes and to the privileges enjoyed by men. Incriminating Godfrey Ablewhite, Collins exonerates Franklin Blake of the theft of the Moonstone, yet he leaves us with the uncomfortable suspicion that Blake has injured Rosanna and Rachel alike: that Blake has driven the housemaid to suicide through his indifference toward his social inferiors, and has violated the gentlewoman he loves and eventually marries in the very process of protecting her—by appropriating the precious jewel that symbolizes Rachel’s virginity in the view of many Collins critics. Comparing Blake’s efforts to pro-

tect Rachel from a seduction or a rape, Collins points to the criminality of the sexual status quo and the laws governing Victorian marriage, which rob women of their legal identity and property, and encourage men to “marry . . . for [their] own selfish and mercenary ends” (318). Stipulating that wives were guarded or “covered” by their husbands, the common law doctrine of coverture denied married women legal autonomy and property rights, and it enables the male characters in *The Moonstone* to treat Rachel’s desire for independence as an unfortunate “defect” in her character (87) rather than as a valid response to gender inequities.

In *The Moonstone*, Collins draws a parallel between Rachel’s angry resistance to male protection and control and that of the Indians to imperial rule and exploitation. Writing a decade after the Indian Mutiny (1857–58) revealed that Hindus and Muslims were profoundly dissatisfied with the British Raj and capable of violent insurrection against it, Collins begins his detective novel by constructing a colonial crime scene in which the Indians are victims of British rapacity and violence. Set fifty years before the main narrative, Collins’s Prologue depicts British troops looting a Muslim treasury after they storm Seringapatam, and identifies John Herncastle as a thief and murderer. To gain possession of the Moonstone, set in the handle of a dagger, Herncastle kills the three Hindu priests guarding it. As a second English officer recalls, “The dying Indian sank to his knees, pointed to the dagger in Herncastle’s hand, and said, in his native language:—‘The Moonstone will have its vengeance yet on you and yours!’” (37).

Opening his novel with a call for Indian retribution against the British, Collins identifies Herncastle’s imperial crime as the origin of all those that follow. Referring to Herncastle as “the Honorable John” (66), the nickname of the East India Company, Collins broadens his indictment, offering a critique of imperialism that extends beyond the actions of one particular officer to incriminate the policies and practices of the British empire as a whole in the years leading up to the Indian Mutiny. Although the English characters in the novel are apt to forget that “the Indians . . . originally owned the jewel” (72), Collins reminds us of this fact in his Epilogue, by restoring the Moonstone to what he suggests is its rightful place in an Indian shrine. The English may view the Moonstone as a “fortune of war” (68) or as “a marketable commodity” (512), but it is finally seen “in the forehead of the deity” (526), a gleaming and sacred Hindu gem.

As *The Moonstone* makes clear, Victorian detective fiction investigates imperial relations as well as class and gender relations, although its sleuths often uncover the innate criminality of the so-called “subject races” rather than the guilt of British imperialists. Like *The Moonstone*, Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four* centers on a stolen treasure of Eastern jewels and connects a murder committed

in England to crimes perpetrated in India years before. More anxious than Collins to defend the empire, however, Conan Doyle highlights the savagery of the Indians rather than the British, and represents forms of violence that are pointedly un-English. As Holmes observes, “The case . . . breaks fresh ground in the annals of crime in this country—though parallel cases suggest themselves from India and, if my memory serves me, from Senegambia” (41).

Recalling Collins’s detective novel, Conan Doyle’s story hinges on the greed of an English officer, Major Sholto, who retrieves a hidden treasure stolen by another Englishman, Jonathan Small, and three Indian confederates during the Indian Mutiny. Incarcerated in the Adaman Island prison where Sholto commands the guard, Small confides in him and his friend Captain Morstan on the understanding that the two officers are to share the treasure with the English convict and his Indian confederates. After Sholto betrays them and returns to England, Small escapes there. Before he can exact his revenge, Sholto dies, but Small recovers the treasure with the help of Tonga, a faithful yet fierce aboriginal. During the police pursuit that leads to his capture, however, Small dumps the treasure into the Thames rather than “give it up to those who have never earned it” (96).

Instead of focusing on the criminality of Jonathan Small, Conan Doyle distinguishes the Englishman’s relatively civilized behavior from what he represents as the much deeper depravity of the natives, foregrounding the “savage instincts” of Tonga, the Adaman Islander, who unnecessarily kills Major Sholto’s son with his blowpipe and poisoned darts, much to Small’s disgust: “I give you my word on the book that I never raised hand against Mr. Sholto,” he assures Holmes. “It was that little hell-hound, Tonga, who shot one of his cursed darts into him. I had no part in it, sir. I was as grieved as if it had been my blood-relation” (89). As Holmes tells Watson, the members of Tonga’s aboriginal race are “naturally hideous,” “so intractable and fierce . . . that all the efforts of the British officials have failed to win them over in any degree. They have always been a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone-headed clubs, or shooting them with their poisoned arrows. These massacres are invariably concluded by a cannibal feast” (68–69). When Holmes and Watson finally see the cannibal, shortly before they kill him in self-defense, they are struck by the “bestiality and cruelty” that “deeply mark” his features (86–87). Set apart from his Muslim confederates as well as from the primitive Tonga, Small explains to Holmes that the Sikhs forced him into league with them at knifepoint during the mutiny; although he helped them trap the merchant Achmet, he did not himself strike a single blow.

Acknowledging his debt to *The Moonstone* at the same time that he reworks its representation of empire and crime, Conan Doyle includes a character named Abel White in *The Sign of the Four*, a kindly indigo planter who is

slaughtered by the Indian mutineers. These “black devils” make the colony “a perfect hell,” murdering civilian Englishmen and cutting Englishwomen “into ribbons” (97–98). Transforming Collins’s English villain into a martyr of sorts, and identifying natives rather than Englishmen as the enemies of the women, Conan Doyle reinforces racist stereotypes of Indian lawlessness and treachery, defending the empire against its critics and implicitly justifying British rule.

At a time in which European and American rivals were challenging Britain’s imperial supremacy, Victorians found Conan Doyle’s detective hero particularly reassuring. Not only could Holmes track down and exterminate savage invaders; he could protect defenseless women from persecution and expose class transgressions. The remarkable popularity of Sherlock Holmes is largely due to the conservatism that informs his fictional adventures—stories that defend the status quo at home as well as in the colonies. In a subgenre in which working-class detectives often threaten to subvert traditional class relations, Holmes is a gentleman who defines himself against vulgar and incompetent upstarts from Scotland Yard. A hero of the 1890s, the decade in which the “New Woman” first appeared in English fiction, advocating women’s rights and refusing to marry, Holmes helps to revive an ailing patriarchy and keep women in their place. Impervious to female wiles, he acts as a responsible and reassuring father figure to the helpless young women who appear at his door, seeking his aid and protection.

Long considered a suspect literary subgenre by scholars and critics—a lowbrow form associated with the even more disreputable subgenre of sensation fiction—Victorian detective fiction has found its advocates in recent years, thanks largely to changes in the field of literary studies and in our understanding of literary value. Immensely popular among Victorians, the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, Grant Allen, and Arthur Morrison reached a circulation of 500,000 readers in the *Strand Magazine*, first published in 1891. Yet the very popularity of these stories was used against them when critics evaluated their artistic worth. Since the 1980s, however, critical interest in popular culture, modes of literary production, and the process of literary canonization has led to a reappraisal of Victorian detective fiction. The detective novels of Dickens, Collins, and other Victorian writers are now used by critics to illustrate the theories of deconstruction, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, the process of gender construction, and the principles of modern surveillance first described by French historian Michel Foucault. Perhaps most importantly, critics now see that Victorian detective fiction can help them to uncover the often hidden workings of the culture that produced it, illuminating the social anxieties, ideologies, and political aims that characterize the period.

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