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Violating Private Papers: Sensational Epistolarity and Violence in Victorian Detective Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article pairs Francis Paget's satirical invocation of epistolarity in *Lucretia* (1868) with Wilkie Collins's redeployment of this revived narrative mode in the fully-fledged detective plot of *Man and Wife* (1870). While Paget draws on the newly developed sensational potential of epistolary narrative in order to parody current trends in popular fiction in general, Collins takes precisely letters' changing narrative functions as the underpinning structure of a detective novel that doubles up as a critical dissection of Victorian conceptualisations of interconnected forms of violence. Collins's novel hinges on a violation of private papers that metonymically stands in for privacy's violent exposure as a sellable spectacle in popular culture. Throughout sensational detective fiction of the time, in fact, interpolated letters feature both as (at times misleading) clues and as a structuring device that frequently involves violence on more than one level. Often presented only as—violently mistreated—fragments, letters play a multiple narrative role in their various stages of composition, delivery, and potential misuse, with each stage lending itself to new forms of exploitation. These forms of violent misappropriation range from blackmail, extortion, and public exposure in the press to

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physical manifestations of violence in the withholding or forceful appropriation of private papers. Yet as their exposed content serves to reveal titillating secrets to the reader (as a main appeal of sensation fiction), the narrative significance of letters' violation becomes essentially twofold: while describing instances of violence, the very disclosure of these descriptions involves a violation in which even well-meaning detective figures (as well as the reader) become implicated. Violated privacy as a newly pertinent issue at the time can thus be seen to shape nineteenth-century fiction structurally and thematically.

KEY WORDS: violence, privacy, Victorian fiction, epistolarity, Sensationalism, genre

Victorian sensation fiction found a new use for interpolated letters that depended on their violation as private, often secret, sensationally exposed papers. While they doubled as frequently misleading clues and as a structuring device in popular detective plots, their disclosure formed a central thematic concern that added a new dimension to sensation fiction's preoccupation with different forms of violence. Presented often in full, or as all the more revealing fragmentary evidence, letters featured in various stages of composition and delivery, with each stage lending itself to new forms of exploitation or misuse. They could be safely received, and yet be unwelcome, or they might simply arrive too late. They may be lost, purloined, carefully hidden, or widely circulated. At the same time, their exposed content served to reveal sensational secrets to the reader. This twofold interest in letters' narrative functions simultaneously brought back a literary paradigm that had largely gone out of fashion by the time Victorian sensationalism began to take over the book market at mid-century. That violence played such a crucial part

in this revival of a nearly completely outmoded form of fiction made it all the more appropriate and self-reflexive that the revival itself was presented as a structural intrusion. Epistolarity manifested itself as the interpolation of a different narrative form that significantly redirected the narrative situation within a text and, by extension, the development of sensational detective fiction as an emergent genre at the time.

The epistolary novel had, in fact, as good as disappeared by the early nineteenth century. Victorian canonical fiction, it has therefore often been remarked, hardly ever had recourse to this narrative mode. But such generalisations ignore that epistolarity made an intriguing comeback in the sensation novel's recourse to new plots of detection. If letters were frequently introduced as a narrative intrusion, this even more aptly encapsulated a prevailing preoccupation with a newly studied form of violence at the time: the violation of privacy and in particular of private papers. On the level of plot structure, letters and their violation may first and foremost have operated as a set of clues that could, moreover, be crucially misleading within the evolving detective plots. What made the reactivation of epistolarity as an almost entirely outmoded narrative mode particularly significant, however, was the symbolic function of this exposure—of the laying bare—of the private parts of domestic or personal arrangements. Within the sensational detective genre's structural and thematic interest in secrecy and disclosure, this exposure attained a twofold function. On the one hand, it was necessary to detective work; on the other, it was often an essential aspect of the detected crime itself. Condemned as a violation, it might ironically be committed in defence of the violated privacy by well-meaning detective figures. That the reader of sensation fiction did not simply share in, but counted on, just such a spectacle added to this central ambiguity in the Victorians' increasingly prominent presentation of violated privacy as a sellable narrative.

Violence thus works on two levels at once: on an intra-novel, or plot-based, and a larger structural level. The second aspect externalises an epistolary self-reflexivity in which the plot (and, with it, the sensational attraction or selling-point) pivots on violated privacy. It is not merely that in presenting a character's personal papers, the reading process itself is exposed as an intrusion into the private, or simply put, that the act of reading personal letters can itself constitute a violation. Sensation fiction capitalised precisely on the titillations promised by such an exposure. This is what the Victorian connoisseur of sensational writing was speculating on. Yet in the increasingly fashionable detective novels of the time, such readers became confronted with the dilemma that they themselves, as the doubles of the fictional detective figures within the texts, thereby participated in the same form of violation as that on which the villains were shown to trade. Presenting these violated papers in full brought out this dilemma, making their exposure part of the plot itself. In the process, epistolarity was newly deployed as a central narrative mode. On a structural level, moreover, its traditional associations with the eighteenth-century sensibility cults became redirected as well. Parodies of both these popular genres (of sentimental fiction as a legacy of the previous century and of the mid-Victorian sensation novel as a current phenomenon) symptomatically highlighted this development. Before I proceed to analyse in detail the narrative exploitation of violated private papers, I shall therefore first carefully revaluate the larger literary significance of the sensation genre's appropriation and transformation of the epistolary as a narrative paradigm. Francis Paget's satire of popular paradigms of the time in *Lucretia* (1868) provides a revealing point of access to the problematic preoccupation with privacy's violation as a sellable spectacle in Victorian literary culture. Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870) will then serve as an illustrative case study of a fully-fledged detective plot that hinges on a repeated violation of letters.

Sensationalised Epistolarity: A Fragmented Mode at the Mid-Century

When Francis Paget, Church of England clergyman and writer primarily of didactic fiction, set out to satirise popular narrative paradigms, he symptomatically wrote a novel in letters that showcases the two sides of epistolarity as a resumed literary phenomenon at the time: *Lucretia; Or, the Heroine of the Nineteenth Century* (1868) consists of "a Correspondence, Sensational and Sentimental," as an additional subtitle highlights. Paget's novel is composed chiefly of letters by an heiress named Lucky who reinvents herself in line with the novels she reads, deciding that her name "must be short for 'Lucretia' of course" (6). She is duped by a cowman who calls himself Marmion de Mowbray when he "commit[s] to writing for [Lucretia's] inspection, the tale of [his] misfortunes" (56). His interpolated, fraudulent account of nobility in disguise builds on a common sensational plot-device that is already inverted in Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1863), an immensely popular sensation novel that Lucretia reads and models her life on, not realising the irony of her misreading.

In Braddon's novel, Aurora marries her father's groom, returns after their divorce, and keeps the truth about her missing year a secret, which induces her ex-husband to blackmail her. This plot starts off Lucretia on books from the circulating library. Paget's recourse to intertextual references thus has a deeply didactic function. In a double irony, Lucretia certainly does not get it. Her letters continue to detail her disappointment that "things could be sensational in more ways than one" and that "all that has befallen [her] has been sensational in the wrong way, —in the wrongest, cruellest, most vexatious way imaginable!" (86). The "refined and delicate distresses" that may be recounted with "melancholy pleasure" turn into "utterly unpoetical" adventures that are only "vexatious

and alarming" (112). Although her search for the desirable "ordeals of a Heroine's life" (9) involves various painful incidents, they fail to realise their expected narrative functions. Instead, Lucretia's letters become records of the desire and, subsequently, the failure to write sensationally. What is the most important to note is that by setting a differently revived culture of letters in the foreground of a novel-length parody, Paget articulates anxieties about the spectacle made of personal emotions in Victorian popular culture.[1]

Traditional epistolary fiction, we need to remember, had become so firmly identified with the discourses of sensibility and sentimentality of the past that its reactivation within a different genre offered a narrative mode to "re-present" emotion. Simultaneously, the exposure of private papers constituted an essential part of the sensation novel's "spectacle of intimacy": a "thrusting outward of an inward turning, the eruption of family life into the light of unrelenting public discussion" (Chase and Levenson 12). The consequently twofold association of letters with an outpouring of feelings did more than transpose cults of sensibility into literary sensationalism, however. Epistolary writing instead came to provide a way to "contain" emotional excesses in both senses of the word. It was a way to include their description, while safely confining their most extreme forms within an outmoded format. In that parody can be understood as a natural development in the lifecycle of any genre, this makes *Lucretia* a revealing point of access into the discussion of a significant genre development.

Paget's impressionable young woman reader may be firmly in the tradition of heroines who consume too much fiction,[2] yet in concentrating on

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[1] "Lucretia" recalls not only the legendary figure, best-remembered from Shakespeare's works, and discussed in Richardson's seminal epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740), but also Bulwer Lytton's *Lucretia; Or, the Children of Night* (1846).

[2] This tradition extended from Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) and Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (published posthumously in 1818), to Braddon's own self-reflexive thematisation of

self-presentation through letters, he also pinpoints the appropriation of outmoded paradigms by popular sensational writing. Paget was not the only Victorian writer to remark intriguing connections between eighteenth-century novels of sentiment or sensibility and the productions of the current sensation craze. Their affinities involved more than simply an updating of specific formulae. The potentially scandalous intimacy of personal epistolary exchange invited a sensational treatment, while reminding readers of the emotional excesses described in the sentimental novels that still formed a staple of circulating and private libraries, as Lucretia's reading suggests. Indeed, she reads widely—and, therefore, it is implied, wildly—anything of an "inflammable" nature, nearly setting the house on fire when she falls asleep over Jane Eyre's rescue of Mr Rochester from his burning bed in Charlotte Brontë's novel (22). Such sweeping inclusions of a range of reading material were standard in parodies of sensation-seeking readers. An anonymous reviewer in the *Athenaeum* described Paget's attack on popular reading as the "combination of a ludicrously sensational plot with a ludicrously sentimental heroine" (528). Paget's recourse to the once intensely fashionable "novel in letters," however, fulfils two parallel functions. It connects what he sees as popular fiction's most risible aspects to already much criticised paradigms and it highlights what had become the chief function of letters in popular fiction by the mid-century: the containment of emotional excesses in characters' letters. As Paget's choice of this narrative format satirises sensational adaptations of the traditional novel of letters, it casts a different light on continuities as well as changes in the presentation of personal feelings for public consumption.

In mid-century sensation fiction, letters are of interest for what they

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sensation writers and readers in *The Doctor's Wife* (1864).

expose as well as for the ways in which they are themselves laid bare. In an intricately structured parallelism of different forms of violence, their methods of conveyance and reception can be as sensational as the conveyed messages themselves. A note written in blood is pinned to the umbrella carried by a visitor to an insane asylum in Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* (1864), for example. In Braddon's most famous sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), fragments of the villainess's damnatory telegram fall into the grate of a fireplace instead of being burnt to be retrieved by the amateur detective. The piecing together of a suicide note concealed in the rubbish in Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875), or hidden in the quicksand in *The Moonstone* (1868), a novel that moreover opens up with a letter written in eighteenth-century India, provides vital clues to the novels' central mysteries. This tantalising list of examples not only comprises some of the most sensationalised messages in Victorian fiction. It testifies to epistolarity's continued structural as well as thematic significance. And what is of central interest for the new association of letters with violence is that when sensational detective novels turn the misuse of various kinds of "papers," including personal and official letters, private notes, or memoranda, into the main plot, traditional epistolary fiction's most recognisable formulae become redirected.

This adaptation works on three interconnected levels. First, letters figure as clues, as circumstantial evidence, as a means of blackmail, and as enclosed first-person accounts of the transgressive or criminal. Second, this redeployment of a specific narrative mode within a newly emergent popular genre (the detective novel) conveniently doubles up as a means of criticising Victorian society. Epistolary exchange and its disruption create a metaphorical vehicle for an exploration of emotion and its expression in a society defined by technological innovations, social and geographical mobility. In this, the epistolary mode's revival trades on new means and perceptions of personal

communication in the age of the telegraph, the Penny Post, and the moral ambiguities underpinning this exposure. Third, the renewed interest in epistolarity as a narrative mode thereby engenders reflections on literary and cultural shifts that are measured against changing attitudes to the composition, reception, and disclosure of personal letters.

A reviewing of critics' work, both of traditional scholarship on the "novel in letters" and of recent reassessments, only additionally underscores the need to consider anew the intertextual as well as larger cultural significance of epistolarity's revival. In drawing "the apparent demise of the epistolary novel" in the nineteenth century (Bray 27) into question, the centrality of interpolated letters in Victorian fiction, in fact, prompts us to reconsider both the cultural history of the epistolary novel and the ambiguous treatment of private papers in popular writing more generally. In her seminal discussion of epistolarity, Janet Gurkin Altman has already stressed the need to "bridge the gap between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel studies by investigating more thoroughly the evolutionary or dialectical relations obtaining between the two" (195). The received history of the "novel in letters" nevertheless tends to tell us almost exclusively of its roots in ancient culture, its emergence as a subgenre in the seventeenth century, its rise in the eighteenth in what is symptomatically termed its "pre-Richardsonian" manifestations (Singer 40), its heyday in Samuel Richardson's works, and its demise with the fiction of sensibility of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With Jane Austen's parodic juvenilia and her rewriting of the manuscript *Elinor and Marianne* (1796) as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), the occasional epistolary novel is said to have become reduced to "an anachronistic throwback" (Altman 195). Similarly, late-eighteenth-century Gothic regularly pivots on rediscovered letters or diaries, anticipating later plots of detection in a topos that is already exposed in *Northanger Abbey*, originally written in the 1790s:

Catherine Moreland loses sleep over faded papers that turn out to be an old washing-bill (1168). As a distinctive genre, the epistolary novel might have looked so much like a dead end by the 1820s that critics have referred to the "ghost of epistolarity in the nineteenth-century novel" (Beebee 166).

The various manifestations of this haunting "residual material" (to borrow from Raymond Williams) have received more attention in discussions of nineteenth-century communication technologies. Alexander Welsh has pointed out that the "information revolution" that took place in the course of the century's second half ensured that "every political and economic institution of the time was touched by the Post Office and the telegraph, and so, for better and worse, was private life" (52). Post Office scandals brought to the forefront issues of privacy, secrecy, and confidentiality. As accounts of the postal service's cultural history have amply pointed out, the democratising functions of public exposure promised a way to break through official secrecy, while they also constituted a violation of private space (Vincent 1-9). Popular fiction unsurprisingly made the most of the new cultural narratives such controversies generated. Sensational villains from Count Fosco in Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) onwards regularly penetrate the secrets of their victims by forcefully appropriating their personal letters, diaries, or pocketbooks. The extended replication of the villainess's diary in Collins's *Armadale* (1866), for example, is at once a particularly titillating exposure of a criminal mind and a violation of privacy approved in the name of (notably amateur) detective work. Numerous of Braddon's novels entirely depend on the inadvertent self-revelation of various villainous characters (whether traditional seducers or plotting criminal masterminds) in their writing. Interpretative reading as the driving force of a narrative of detection even

becomes the main theme in *Dead Sea Fruit* (1868).[3] Emergent technologies, meanwhile, helped sensationalise traditional processes of transmission.[4] Conversely, the message carried by hand could suggest a suspicious avoidance of standardised postal services. In short, the meaning of letter-writing altogether changed as the options created by new technologies refined its cultural significance. Partly extended to incorporate other forms of communication, partly defined against them, the letter came to fulfil variegated functions in Victorian culture.[5]

Concern with topical issues of privacy and its violation alone of course does not fully explain the sensation novel's revival of the epistolary mode. While a psychoanalytical reading may well suggest a unifying interest in emotion and specifically in disturbing emotional experience, much more importantly, the main reason was a structural or formal fascination with fragmentariness. This fragmentariness was at once a manifestation of and a further impetus for this structural recourse to fragmentary representation. Both eighteenth-century sentimental fiction and nineteenth-century sensation

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[3] Prefiguring such violations of private papers, Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) depicts the husband's forceful prising open of the drawer containing the heroine's diary. The novel not only features the interpolated diary, but also contains a framing letter that promises an intensely personal disclosure that involves the posting of this diary. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) can be seen as the culmination of an ongoing diversification of the epistolary novel: it juxtaposes telegrams, phonograph records, diary entries, as well as letters to construct a plot premised on the dangers of circulation. On the autopsy of autobiography that drives the representation of the writer as a narrative of detection in Braddon's *Dead Sea Fruit* (1868) see Wagner, 15ff.

[4] The introduction of the electric telegraph provided a pool of narrative strategies, images, and metaphors for emotional experience in which the "human nervous system was understood to be analogous to and influenced by systems of rapid communication and transportation such as the train and telegraph" (Thrailkill 366).

[5] Although Welsh chiefly discusses how technological advancements created a social and geographical mobility that provided the preconditions for blackmail as "an opportunity afforded to everyone by communication of knowledge at a distance" (58), in linking together the "experience of communication by letter or telegraph" as equally inviting to be reproduced as narrative (55), he also underscores an essential continuity between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictional uses of letters. On the 1844 Post Office scandal see Welsh 54; Vincent 1. It constituted a decisive momentum for conceptualisations of and cultural discourses on the role of the national postal service.

novels evoked fragments (such as extracts from letters) to suggest either authenticity and immediacy or, alternatively, the unreliability of any form of documentation. The sensibility cult of the late-eighteenth century self-consciously invested in the inadequacy of language to convey strong feelings, whereby textual interruptions—often indicated by dashes, asterisks, and meandering narratives, as well as a fragmentation accomplished through missing chapters, torn sentences, or mutilated letters—forced the reader to respond to emotion more directly (Todd 6). As sensation fiction explored the experience and evocation of sensory experience, it resorted to similar methods to feature the points-of-view of emotionally distraught or manipulative writers. Such embedded letters were certainly more than yet another fragmentary account or a reference to earlier genres. They provided intensely emotional, sensationalised first-person accounts of distress, transgression, or crime. These accounts were thereby safely framed or "contained."

A shuttling between containment and exposure consequently formed the two-pronged impulse of sensational detective novels that emerged at the tail end of the sensation craze. As they put more emphasis on the disclosure of crimes than on their intrinsically sensational effects alone, they induced readers to participate in investigatory methods. Thus, Collins's first fully-fledged detective novel, *The Moonstone*, comprises retrospectively commissioned accounts of the titular diamond's disappearance because "the whole story ought, in the interests of truth, to be placed on record in writing" (21). The reader is "asked to take nothing on hearsay, and to be treated in all respects like a Judge on the bench" (197). Margaret Schramm has convincingly argued that this arrangement literalises the fictional trope of the letter as a substitution for a legal trial, a device that already underpins such a classic epistolary novel as Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). In both novels, personal accounts are substituted for depicted trial-scenes. This narrative device turns on an author's

or editor's explanation "why his or her tale could not be heard in a court of law or why the protagonists were seeking literary recognition rather than a judicial remedy" (Schramm 11). The disclosure is not really public, but instead aims to create the impression that the reader shares knowledge of an essentially private affair. This is a titillating structure both in eighteenth-century sentimental fiction and the Victorian sensation novel, yet it also creates a major ambiguity when public trials are replaced by an exacting of personal revenge or a private concealment of the culprits in an attempt to avoid scandal. As Schramm notes, "the *telos* of the plot is generated by its very dissimilarity to a trial; the conception of law as foil in turn liberates fiction to pursue its own idea of justice" (12). In the process, detective-figures become implicated in violations that are all too similar, if not identical, to the transgressions they seek to police. They appropriate private letters, read them out loud, hand them around, turn them into evidence, or use them to blackmail the villains. It is not only that catching a criminal can become a mere matter of outwitting the opponents. Amateur detectives are invested with a subversive currency of their own as they spy on potential victims or innocent bystanders for, presumably, their own good or protection.

The similarity between the methods employed by plotting villains and counterplotting victims hence engenders moral ambiguities that become central to the use of violence as a theme. A particularly parodic episode in Paget's novel brings this out clearly: Lucretia becomes inadvertently involved with the gang of thieves led by the cowman (the self-styled Marmion), but is given the means to dodge the resulting moral opprobrium through the strategic use of blackmail. She does so with the full sanction of her best advisors, who include a boorish cousin who is really a sagacious, down-to-earth lawyer. A "scrap of paper, charred at one end" is said to contain "a terrible tale of inhuman cruelty and nefarious robbery" that implicates a

titled lady who has snubbed Lucretia (219). This tale has nothing to do with the rest of the narrative and is moreover never revealed. Nor is Lucretia at all interested in it. The reader's own interest in sensational revelations likewise needs to be frustrated. In fact, what Paget targets is both the doubtful aesthetic merit of contrived plots revolving on mysterious letters and their potentially demoralising effects on the sensational reader. It is an important part of this exposure that Lucretia is never punished by the law for abetting crime. Nor is she in any way self-conscious about her triumphant use of blackmail to re-establish her position in society. By the end of what had quickly come to be known as "the sensational sixties," such plot-contrivances were not just parodied (as in Paget's *Lucretia*). They came to be addressed as an increasingly vexing issue. Featuring various amateur detectives working largely at cross-purposes and for different agendas, Collins's *Man and Wife* offers an illustrative example of the resulting reworkings. Read in conjunction with parodies like Paget's *Lucretia*, it draws new attention to the intertextual interchanges that characterised the formation of Victorian popular culture.

"[T]he ominous word, '*Private*'": Spilling Out Personal Affairs in *Man and Wife*

Given the impact the 1860s had on popular writing, it is hardly surprising that the end of the decade saw a range of reactions to the sensation phenomenon. Wilkie Collins began his much deplored move into "novels with a mission," while further developing the sensational novel of detection. Although it is impossible to divide Collins's extensive oeuvre or the formation of detective fiction into neat demarcations, *Man and Wife* rewrites already typified sensational narrative devices through a fascinatingly complex reworking of earlier fashionable formats. When its serialisation began at the

close of the "sensational sixties," Collins was experimenting with new narrative modes, self-critically engaging with the moral ambiguities for which the sensation genre had become notorious.[6] While deliberately targeting established formulae, the novel depicts differently motivated would-be detectives making a market of emotional distress contained in personal epistolary exchanges. As the repeated tracing, analysis, and abuse of a variously violated "morsel of crumpled paper" (135) are undertaken both by the novel's villains and by those who seek to defeat them, these paralleled forms of violation link together the novel's "double" or twofold mission: a dual criticism of glorified muscularity and institutionalised marital violence. This combination of two seemingly unrelated topical issues is usually seen as rendering the novel bifurcated and thus aesthetically flawed. Epitomised by the abuse of a personal letter, however, this pairing of different acts of violation instead intricately structures the novel.

That violence is shown to be acted out on and through paper, however, is intriguingly counteracted by a self-conscious revival of the traditional sentimental association with epistolarity. The violation of private papers, in fact, threatens to mark out letter-writing altogether as a dangerous form of communication. But what is likewise exposed and successfully disrupted—one could say, critically violated—are specific mid-Victorian ideologies. Repeatedly, good letter writers are associated with the sensibilities of a "byegone time" (57) in contrast to those suffering from the "muscular education" (191) of the day. This creates an additional twist in the involvement of letters with different forms of violence. The lost letter as a convenient plot-device in sensational detective fiction becomes counterpoised by an endorsement of a literary

[6] While Collins had played with sensational effects ever since his first "Story of Modern Life," *Basil* (1852), and influentially established the sensation genre with *The Woman in White* (1860), detective elements were to permeate his subsequent fiction from *The Moonstone* (1868) onwards. His turn to "mission novels" was in part a reaction to criticism of sensational writing.

culture that is seen to be under threat. A much abused letter saves the case of more than one disputed marriage. It does so both because it is a precisely dated record and because it spells out intimate secrets that cannot be articulated otherwise. The "good" and overtly sensitive characters thus again and again assert that what they cannot say they "might write" and this may "[s]pare [them] the distress of speaking" (164) even if it means that their correspondent reads the letter while standing in front of them. In this, they have the upper hand over protagonists formed by a "muscular education" that disables them from even understanding, to say nothing of expressing, "one of the refinements of feeling" (191). The result is a triangulation of reactions and counter-reactions to developments at the book market: current criticism of established sensational formulae becomes self-consciously addressed in sensational detective fiction. It is worked out through a retrieval of old-fashioned sensibility through its association with traditional, sentimental epistolary fiction. This experiment with popular genres, past and present, hence also doubles as a suitable container for Collins's criticism of contemporary society.

A brief look at the novel's structure illustrates how it gleans the most from a policing of private epistolary exchange through enforced disclosure. In a crucial incident early on in the main plot, Lady Lundie discovers that her stepdaughter's governess has run away, leaving a short note that conceals more than it reveals. Having for a while suspected (rightly, it turns out) Anne Silvester of having an affair because "[s]he posts her own letters [and] has lately been excessively insolent to Me [Lady Lundie]" (91), the latter energetically sets out to conduct her inquiries "on the same admirably exhaustive system which is pursued, in cases of disappearance, by the police" (110). Her old-fashioned brother-in-law, Sir Patrick, needs to remind her "that this is a free country," and that she has therefore "no claim whatever to investigate Miss Silvester's proceedings, after she has left [Lady Lundie's] house" (110).

That the fashionable widow declares herself "morally responsible" (110) to hunt down a poor dependent chiefly serves to underline social hypocrisies. Yet strikingly similar investigations are taken up more genuinely for the escaped woman's good or protection. His contempt for Lady Lundie's proceedings notwithstanding, Sir Patrick soon initiates an even more systematic search. He does so at the request of Anne's former pupil, his niece Blanche, who considers Anne more her sister than her governess because of their mothers' friendship and—and this is crucial within the novel's rewriting of various narrative paradigms—exchange of sentimental vows in the frame-story.

Built on this otherwise straightforward plot of detection, the novel's intricate structure duplicates the repeated "re-presentation" of private papers. "The Story" is introduced by a staggered prehistory. The "Prologue" itself consists of two parts. The first frame-story opens up with an emotionally charged scene. It combines a retrospective framework with a sensational way of propelling the reader into medias res. Set "between thirty and forty years ago," it describes two girls, another Blanche and Anne, "crying bitterly" as they say farewell (10). As Blanche, mother of the Blanche of the present-day plot, goes out to India as a governess, the two school-friends exchange "promises to meet— . . . 'vows' we called them, in the dear old times" (10), as Anne Silvester's mother and namesake recalls. This doubling of mothers and daughters, however, does more than suggest how romantic friendship is generally spurned or ridiculed in contemporary society or how it may transcend social and cultural changes across generations. The inconsistent marriage laws of Victorian Britain eerily haunt both Anne Silvesters, fulfilling a foreboding the elder expresses on her deathbed in the prologue's second part. It sees her deserted by her scheming husband and briefly reunited with her friend twenty-four years after their separation. The older Anne's marriage has been declared void: according to Irish marriage laws, the Catholic priest who

conducted the ceremony could not have married her as bride and groom were not both Catholic at the time. This discovery sets her "husband" free to marry into high society to advance his career.

In a much more tortuous stringing together of legal loopholes, the younger Anne is tricked by the vagaries of the Scottish marriage laws. As the novel's title promises, these slippery, easily manipulated laws are the main object of Collins's criticism, the novel's mission no.1, as it were. Collins makes sure the point is forced home by doubling the victims. There are no other parallels in this repetition: "Here (though with other motives, and under other circumstances) was the mother's irregular marriage in Ireland, on the point of being followed by the daughter's irregular marriage in Scotland!" (86-87). With yet another of the uncanny coincidences that can mar Collins's late novels, the son of the lawyer who finds the flaw in the Irish marriage speculates on the ease with which marriages can be made in Scotland. Geoffrey Delamayn has been brutalised by his "muscular education" as one of the new men of the age. To expose this brutalisation is mission no.2.

These two agendas and main plots converge in the carefully dated, but otherwise badly written, brutal letter Geoffrey writes to the second Anne Silvester minutes before their arranged meeting. Their foiled elopement explodes a number of narrative clichés. Anne's dilemma does not just repeat her mother's victimisation by the law. Hunting her down is a violation of privacy practised by numerous, differently motivated amateur detectives. For Lady Lundie, the story of "the late governess" (145) is over once she is forced to call off the search. Sir Patrick's investigations are defined against professional detective or police work:

> I have no other motive [apart from Blanche's interests]. However numerous my weaknesses may be, ambition to

> distinguish myself as a detective policeman is not one of them. The case, from the police point of view, is by no means a lost case. I drop it, nevertheless, for Blanche's sake. (299)

Self-interest drives investigations that are not warranted by the law. Lady Lundie may enjoy pursuing the governess on the same system as the police; Sir Patrick abandons the case when it turns out to be bad for Blanche's nerves. This is only after he has had the "police . . . entirely at his disposal—and the best men . . . selected for the purpose" (281). As if she had committed a crime, Anne's description is circulated and "all her movements carefully watched till further notice" (281). A series of chapters are entitled "Followed," "Lost," and "Traced" until she is reported to have "giv[en] the telegraph the slip" (290). In this, she is more successful than most fictional runaways in the age of the telegraph (Welsh 58). But it is only when continued investigations do more harm than good to his niece that Sir Patrick questions his right to pursue the former governess: although it "seems hard to drop Miss Silvester when she is in trouble . . . we can't help her against her own will" (298). He nonetheless keeps rereading her farewell letter to Blanche, puzzling over the secret behind her flight and endeavouring to deduct the motive: "He read it, short as it was, a second time, and a third. If it meant anything, it meant that the motive at the bottom of Anne's flight, was to accomplish the sacrifice of herself to the happiness of Blanche. She had parted for life from his niece, for his niece's sake! What did this mean?" (296). After "push[ing] Anne's letter across the breakfast-table" (297) for others to read, Sir Patrick then pockets the letter. With this symbolic act, he wishes to indicate that the case is closed.

The resumed pursuit therefore all the more emphatically sets the violation of privacy in the foreground. This is the most crucial element in the novel's appropriation of epistolarity as a means to address the problematic

issues of the exposure or publication—the making public—of private matters. Interestingly, it is here that readers' identification with the amateur detectives is short-circuited. Far from sharing Sir Patrick's speculations, the attentive reader knows that Anne is pregnant with Geoffrey's child—that he has "got the girl into a scrape" (102), as he puts it—and that she is holding him to a promise of marriage. The chapter "The Plan" already indicates that their elopement is going to go wrong. Its collapse turns upon the special circumstances of a letter's composition and delivery. It is necessary briefly to review this complicated plot structure here. Called to his father's deathbed by a telegram, Geoffrey has time only to "scribbl[e] a few lines" (106). In delivering this letter, Blanche's fiancé, Arnold Brinkworth, announces himself as Anne's husband to keep up appearances at the inn in which she is waiting for Geoffrey. This public declaration may possibly be construed into a marriage ceremony according to the laws of Victorian Scotland. Uncertain about the precise implications, Anne goes into hiding, consults lawyers on the issue (who give contradictory advice), and begins a letter to Arnold to warn him not to enter into a hasty marriage with Blanche before the possibility of his "marriage" to herself has not been officially disproved. She is taken ill in the middle of writing the letter, giving birth to a stillborn child. That much depends on this letter underscores the centrality of epistolarity for the novel's structure and theme, while accentuating Anne's attachment to Blanche. Its very intensity is an inheritance of their mothers and hence also of a more openly sentimental age. Replicating the melodrama of the farewell scene with which the novel opens, Anne strives to complete the letter: "If I can only live long enough to write the letter!" (324). This letter is simultaneously "to authorise [Arnold] to refer the matter to a competent and trustworthy friend, known to them both" (324). Ironically, Arnold, Blanche, and Sir Patrick have already been freely handing around earlier letters.

As the mystery these amateur detectives aim to solve is not a mystery that can keep the reader in suspense, this effectively undercuts any identification. Instead, a sense of ominous inevitability envelops the unfolding of events. Discoveries are belated, letters delayed or mislaid, and to top it all, Arnold and Blanche marry earlier than planned, precisely in order to distract Blanche from the loss of her friend. Forwarded as an enclosure to Sir Patrick, Anne's belated warning becomes one of two two-part epistolary exchanges that circulate in the narrative. The variously (mis-)interpreted warning letter replicates and ultimately helps to counteract the impact of the stolen letter that proves Anne's "marriage" to Geoffrey. This correspondence itself consists of two letters written on consecutive sheets of paper: Anne's three-page account of Geoffrey's promises of marriage and his brief "scribble" in reply on the fourth page. This exchange has the power to bind the correspondents together in marriage. As such, it becomes a prize for otherwise very differently motivated would-be detectives. Connecting otherwise disparate plots, this two-part letter achieves a threefold narrative interest: it retells established plots, including the aborted elopement plot; it asserts the underestimated power of paper by proving Anne's marriage (to Geoffrey, not Arnold); it reveals significant factors about the correspondents and those who read letters not meant for them.

This is also why it is so important (as well as ironic) that this repeatedly referenced exchange is revealed through the eyes of the most self-interested amateur detective: Bishopriggs, a former clerk who works as a waiter at the inn where Arnold delivers the letter. Externalising the violation of this intimate exchange, the reader's eyes follow that of the waiter:

> Mr Bishopriggs paused. His commentary on the correspondence, so far, was simple enough. "Hot words (in ink) from the leddy

> to the gentleman!" He ran his eye over the second letter, on the fourth page of the paper; and added cynically, "A trifle caulder (in pencil) from the gentleman to the leddy! The way o' the warld, sirs!" (154)

Bishopriggs' running commentary accentuates the violation of private papers by foregrounding the way in which such a disclosure makes a spectacle—and a market—of personal exchanges. As a further testimony to Geoffrey's marked lack of sensitivity, even the money-minded waiter notices the inadequacy of the pencilled reply to the lady's "[h]ot words." This is despite the fact that Geoffrey, to the best of his abilities, has been trying to "say something spooney to quiet her'" (106). Arnold's advice may not have been of much help there, but it adds what becomes the correspondence's most significant part: "let Miss Silvester see for herself that you have no time to make it longer. The train starts in less than half an hour. Put the time" (106). The reply's "spooney" part consists of Geoffrey's signature as "Your loving husband," and the footnote proves that this occurs *before* Arnold announces himself as Anne's husband at the inn: "'August 14th, 4 p.m. In a mortal hurry. Train starts at 4:30.' There it ended!" (154-55). Underscoring the power of seemingly insignificant scraps of papers, it is the initial violent thrusting away and theft of the letter that preserve it.

Geoffrey's reply, moreover, enrages Anne not only because of its brevity, but because of the violation implied in its delivery by Arnold, which has put her own open letter "[i]n the hands of another man!" (128). This is only the beginning of a series of violations with serious consequences that go beyond just private space's rupture. Bishopriggs surreptitiously pockets the "morsel of crumpled paper" (135) and endorses it with "a brief dated statement of the circumstances under which he found it" in case of a potential

reward (155). As Sir Patrick later remarks, the former clerk has rightly identified a valuable piece of paper: "'I always suspected that lost letter to be an important document,' he said—'or Bishopriggs would never have stolen it'" (396). Anne finally retrieves her letter from Bishopriggs to stop him from "mak[ing] a market of [her] private affairs" (414) in a chapter ironically entitled "Anne Wins a Victory." The irony is that in attesting that Geoffrey's "marriage" to Anne preceded Arnold's, the retrieved letter may acquit Arnold of bigamy, but it also makes Anne Geoffrey's wife. Despite the fact that Sir Patrick is a retired lawyer and moreover ought to be acting on his niece's behalf, this consequence is so harrowing given Geoffrey's apparent hatred of Anne that the old lawyer encourages her to destroy the letter instead of carrying out her sacrifice for Blanche's sake.

The most striking irony, however, remains the exposure of the intrinsically transgressive motivations and methods of the various detective-figures. Bishopriggs' speculation on a "profitable disposal of the correspondence" (357) aligns a corrupt former clerk with professional detectives and lawyers simultaneously condemns detective work as a cashing in on private affairs and, by implication, questions the standard proceedings of sensational detective fiction itself. Although Bishopriggs' violation of private papers is the moment the reader finally gets to see both parts of the letter, the accompanying speculations on "what, being intairpreted, may a' this mean" (sic) (155) are depicted as a threat, not a shared process of investigation. Since there is no mystery for the reader to decipher, there is no identification with this amateur detective. Bishopriggs' subsequent machinations tellingly span a spectrum of white-collar crimes that revolve on "hush-money" (358). Having recognised Geoffrey's name in a newspaper account of his projected marriage to the wealthy widow Mrs Glenarm, he identifies an additional market for the paper he holds. In "the double character of her 'Well-Wisher', and her 'True

Friend,'" he proceeds "to startle her by anonymous warnings, conveyed through the post, and claiming her answer through the advertising channel of a newspaper" (362). The anonymous "friend" operates as an extreme version of "well-wishing," yet variously interested and self-interested amateur detectives.

Reading other people's letters remains a contested issue. Two paralleled disputes on the "delicacy" of disclosing private papers explicitly articulate concerns with privacy and confidentiality. Anne's warning letter arrives "directed to 'Arnold Brinkworth,' Esq., care of Lady Lundie" (375). Notwithstanding that it is "specially protected by a seal," Lady Lundie suggests that Sir Patrick should "consider it [his] duty to open that letter" (375). Their heated discussion spells out the facile invocation of "moral" concerns. Sir Patrick can only smile satirically at the declaration that Lady Lundie has "Arnold's moral welfare" at heart (375). It is therefore with a particularly pointed irony that soon thereafter Sir Patrick dismisses Arnold's culpable preservation of secrets as "the most misplaced act of delicacy I ever heard of in my life!" (395). While Arnold remembers Geoffrey's binding message to Anne, he has failed to apprise himself of the content of Anne's three-page letter: he "might have read it if [he] had liked" but did not "[o]ut of delicacy" (396). Somewhat incongruously, given Sir Patrick preceding containment of Lady Lundie's urge to prise into private affairs, his "carefully-trained temper was not proof against this," and he denounces this "misplaced act of delicacy" (396) because it interferes with investigations that have now become personally important to him.

Additionally asserting the power of letter-writing, Anne's belated warning to Arnold has had the effect of radically changing the old lawyer's attitude to the appropriation of personal papers. This two-part letter consists of Anne's explanation and Arnold's frantic appeal to Sir Patrick to sort out this

"terrible mess" (377). The reception of this sensational epistle needs to be quoted at some length:

> Judged by externals only, it was a letter of an unusually perplexing—possibly also of an unusually interesting—kind. Arnold was one of the last persons in the world whom any of his friends would have suspected of being a lengthy correspondent. Here, nevertheless, was a letter from him, of three times the customary bulk and weight—and, apparently, of more than common importance, in the matter of news, besides. At the top, the envelope was marked "*Immediate*." And at one side (also underlined) was the ominous word, "*Private*." (377)

Such lingering over the letter's external characteristics does more than evoke narrative tension. It draws attention to its tangibility, its unusual bulk, and the effects of the explicit markers of urgency and secrecy. "*Private*" is an ominous word. The reader again has the advantage over Sir Patrick in already knowing what Anne has to say. More space can therefore be dedicated to the delineation of his carefully tracked sensations. If Arnold's share is a literally distracted composition, characterised by a "total absence of arrangement [and a] total absence of reserve" (379), Anne's enclosed explanation impresses Sir Patrick: "Sir Patrick put the letter down, with unfeigned respect for the woman who had written it" (384). Hitherto promoting a sense of privacy bordering on indifference, he comes under an influence that "seemed to communicate itself to the old lawyer through the medium of her letter" (384). A markedly old-fashioned, sentimental tradition of letter-writing thereafter runs counter to the appropriation of a legally binding "morsel" of crumpled paper that constitutes a mockery of epistolary fiction's association with

romance, courtship, and personal emotional involvement: what Geoffrey terms "something spooney."

By repeatedly identifying the "good" characters with able letter-writers and associating the destruction or misuse of letters with the villains, the novel pushes the revival of epistolary paradigms further. It asserts the importance of letters for literary culture and, by extension, for a much-needed redirection of an increasingly brutalised, violent society. As a sentimental tradition, epistolary fiction is therefore all the more in need of recuperation. Sir Patrick's supportive letter to Anne is sentimentally carried in the bosom of her dress, foreshadowing their marriage at the end of the novel—a resolution that reinstates the moral superiority of "a gentleman of the byegone time" with a club-foot and knee-breeches who "carried his lameness, as he carried his years, gaily" (57-58). There could not be a more pointed contrast to Geoffrey, a typical "modern gentleman," "young and florid, tall and strong" (60), who not only "hated letter-writing" (250), but whose level of literacy sheds an embarrassing light on modern university education: "challenge Geoffrey to write a sentence of decent English—and see if his courage doesn't fail him there" (178). The chapter "Geoffrey as a Letter-Writer" pokes fun at him sweating over a promised letter to Anne: "To write? or not to write? That was the question, with Geoffrey" (172).

Letter-writing functions as a moral indicator, as does its misuse. Mrs Glenarm's reaction to the announcement that Geoffrey is already married is symptomatically first given in full and then summed up as "[t]his outbreak of hysterical nonsense" (546). Conversely, Anne's letters impress Sir Patrick, Arnold's show his naivety and growing confusion, Blanche's her affectionate nature, Sir Patrick's his old-fashioned chivalry, Lady Lundie's her hypocritical use of moral platitudes, and Geoffrey's are either a "Spartan composition" (176) or consist of "a string of clumsy excuses" (200). That he subsequently

demands to see his wife's letters, moreover, both evinces a heightened awareness of the power of papers and prefigures his final act of violence: her murder with the assistance of a housekeeper he blackmails after having read—in yet another violation of private papers—her confession of having murdered her abusive husband. Her case provides an additional dimension to the criticism of marriage laws, another instance of blackmail, and a *deus-ex-machina* device. It is poetic justice that the blackmailed old woman turns upon Geoffrey, who at the same time suffers a seizure brought on by an exhausting footrace. Modern "muscular education" has clearly had morally and physically detrimental effects.

As *Man and Wife* resorts to the violation of papers as a structuring device as well as an important theme, it reassesses the narrative potential and problems of privacy's exposure as sensational spectacle, while crucially complicating the representation of detective work. To accentuate the self-reflexive revision of seemingly dated and newly fashionable narrative paradigms, the old-fashioned romance between the old man and the abused former governess simultaneously revives clichés associated with "byegone" values of what is conceived as a more sentimental age, with values of an outmoded sensibility that are well worth preserving. It is no coincidence that this is also the age of epistolary fiction's heyday. Its sentimental evaluation is thus revived as well. Sir Patrick's chivalrous correspondence literally becomes something to hold on to: practically imprisoned by her husband, Anne "toy[s] nervously with something hidden (possibly Sir Patrick's letter) in the bosom of her dress" (575). Where Paget simply highlights affinities to expose fashionable fiction, past and present, Collins reacts with intricate genre experiments. A reconsideration of sensation fiction's fascination with variously violated, private papers thereby also offers a new look at a novel that may at first sight seem bifurcated, even lopsided. Its epistolary elements bring

together criticism of current norms and laws regulating—or failing to regulate—significantly interconnected forms of violence. The violation of papers thereby functions at once as a metonymy for violence's sensationalisation as the selling-point of the emergent detective genre and as a means of criticism in tackling otherwise unconnected cultural anxieties.

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侵害私人信件：奇情書信文體與維多利亞時期偵探小說裡的暴力

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摘　要

本文將同時討論佛朗西斯佩吉特在 Lucretia (1868) 一書中對書信文體的諷刺，及威爾基柯林斯將此復甦的敘事手法改用於其最具偵探情節的小說 *Man and Wife* (1870)。佩吉特為了嘲諷當時大眾文學流行的潮流，而在作品裡故意諧擬體現書信文體最常出現的煽情潛能；另一方面，柯林斯則將小說中信件的新敘事功能作為偵探小說的基礎結構，而這部偵探小說又同時成為批判維多利亞時期裡各種互為關聯的暴力形式的批判性剖析。柯林斯小說中的關鍵在於私人信件的暴力曝光，這種曝光象徵個人隱私的曝光成為通俗文化中一種可販性的商品。事實上，在當時所有的煽情偵探小說中，被竄改的信件同時是線索（或是誤導的線索），也是一種包含不止單一層次暴力的結構性敘事工具。通常信件會以被暴力虐用過的片段呈現，它在書寫，信件往返，潛在虐用等不同階段中扮演一個多重敘事角色，在每一個階段中，都有新的不同剝削方式呈現。這些暴力性的信件濫用形式包括黑函、勒索、在媒體公開曝光，或是據為己有、強制占用等的實際暴力行為。但是因為信件中揭露的內容皆是令讀者心癢難耐、急

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於一窺究竟的秘密（這同時也是煽情小說的主要賣點），因此，信件暴力具有兩層重要的敘事意義：信件描述暴力事件，但揭露這種暴力本身就是一種暴力，就算是善意的偵探（甚或讀者）也變成共謀。隱私權的侵害作為一個當時新興的、切身的議題，在結構上及主題上形塑了十九世紀小說。

關鍵詞：暴力、隱私、維多利亞時期小說、書信體、煽情、文類