

NOBODY'S CHILD  
THE THEME OF ILLEGITIMACY IN THE NOVELS OF  
CHARLES DICKENS, GEORGE ELIOT AND WILKIE COLLINS

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the theme of illegitimacy in the novels of three mid-Victorian novelists, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins. It will seek to identify where and why the figure of the bastard appears in their fiction and to demonstrate how wideranging its forms can be. In particular it will draw attention to the major reworkings of a well-established literary convention achieved by three very different writers. I believe that Dickens, George Eliot and Collins dealt in a currency of illegitimacy which has hitherto gone unrecorded. The convention had been a staple of English literature for centuries before it made its last stand in the Victorian era. Hence my thesis will be the first systematic attempt to assess why the theme reached its zenith in the years between 1850 and 1870, only to become debased currency by the turn of the century. I will consider the extent to which the bastard's perceived social status as a malcontent led to the creation of a range of damaging stereotypes which finally began to be seriously revised and challenged - although never wholly destroyed - in the works of these novelists.

## ABBREVIATIONS

I have done my best to use only the most obvious abbreviations in this thesis. Daniel Deronda, for instance, becomes 'DD' and The Fallen Leaves becomes 'FL' when I am identifying quotations from the primary texts. With regard to journals and periodicals, I have used only standard short forms in common use, such as 'PMLA' for Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.

## A NOTE ON TERMS

I have referred to the bastard as 'he' throughout this thesis solely because it is so often necessary to mention the child and its mother in the same sentence. When this happens, the distinct use of 'he' and 'she' avoids heaps of tangled pronouns. More importantly, although it is the official policy of the National Council for One-Parent Families never to use the term 'illegitimate' (let alone 'bastard') I have decided to employ both. This is because these are the words which ordinary people have used and understood for centuries. In Victorian England embarrassing circumlocutions such as 'the child born in a non-wedlock situation' (which was coined by two American sociologists) would have been quite incomprehensible.

## INTRODUCTION

Chapter One of my thesis is essentially a definition of terms and an overview of the social, cultural and legal history of illegitimacy in England. Although my work is a literary study, its subject matter is of course both historically and sociologically based: therefore I feel that it must benefit from a wider contextualization. The first chapter describes - in necessarily broad terms - the changing social awareness of the subject of illegitimacy, and the parallel responses of the ruling authorities to the phenomenon. It seeks to clarify the theme as it appears in the nineteenth-century novel by providing a brief outline of the ways in which illegitimacy was defined in that period, and also the extent to which the Victorian view of the subject differed from and drew upon the beliefs and prejudices of previous generations. In my opening chapter, I try to ascertain how and why the bastard came to occupy such a central place in nineteenth-century demonology and investigate the reasons why - as well as being written about - illegitimate children were also painted, investigated, spoken about in parliament and generally scrutinised to such an unprecedented extent at this time. The existence of a moral panic underlies the Victorian attitude to the subject, and I have put forward several reasons for why this should be.

The latter part of Chapter One is designed to clarify how, why and to what extent Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins consciously or unconsciously destroyed, developed, adapted and upheld the existing literary stereotypes of the bastard which had evolved since the age of Elizabeth I. The extent to which the novelistic treatment of illegitimacy reflects the cultural milieu of nineteenth-century England is also discussed - that is, I seek to define the specifically 'Victorian' legal, social, sexual and economic concerns which were tapped into. In addition I discuss the possible historical accuracy of the fictional representation of the bastard, and the question of just how accurate the writers in fact wanted (or needed) to be.

Chapter Two focusses upon the first of my chosen authors, Charles Dickens, and covers each of his bastard characters in self-contained chronological sections. I hope that this lay-out will help the reader to develop a sense of how a changing literary landscape gradually enabled Dickens (and George Eliot, and Wilkie Collins) to build up their understanding of the convention's possibilities.

It is clearly possible to trace Dickens's use of illegitimacy as a cypher for the abandonment of parental and filial obligations, and as a microcosm for an apparently imminent wholesale breakdown in social relations. The moral chaos which ensues when parents overlook, abuse or simply fail to protect their children is linked to a more general crisis theory about what can happen to the powerless in a society which is geared to the needs and aspirations of the confident and successful. The personal neglect of the bastard in Dickens parallels society's wholesale neglect of its weakest members. Consequently his bastards suffer on two interrelated levels, firstly as unloved and mistreated individuals and secondly as that part of the mass of the population which is cannon-fodder for the big institutional guns of Victorian society, such as the foundling hospital, the workhouse, the court and the prison. The perennial fate of Dickens's illegitimate characters is metaphorical or literal imprisonment in jails of the mind, spirit or imagination, or in the grim institutions of nineteenth-century England. In his novels, the failure of the parents of an illegitimate child symbolises the essential failure of his culture as a whole.

Chapter Three shows that George Eliot was not primarily concerned with the effects of social ostracism upon the illegitimate in the way that Dickens was, but rather with the psychological adjustment required for the bastard to make sense of his personal and cultural inheritance. Her use of the intruder motif resources a close investigation of the bastard's effect upon society rather than (as with Dickens) an examination of the ways in which society impacts upon the bastard.

George Eliot uses the theme of illegitimacy as a research tool with which to investigate the precariousness of family life. Relationships can

be ruined by dangerous secrets such as bigamy or adultery as well as by desertion or divorce, and she coolly dissects the anatomy of a family - and by implication the society of which it is supposed to be a microcosm - by analysing the impact of such variables upon the constant structure. Her bastards tend to be realistic: they do not inhabit the quasi-metaphysical counterworld in which Dickens's and Collins's seem for the most part to dwell. They are dangerous only because society perceives them to be so, and George Eliot takes great pains to stress how very ordinary most of them are. The bastard is a key player in her unorthodox dramas of family and kinship who busily undermines the conventional sex-roles and stereotypes of her society. He or she raises vital questions, on both a personal and social level, with regard to the gulf between the promptings of natural justice and common sense, and the rulings of society and the law. Above all, the ways in which individual characters react to the bastards with whom they come into contact is the acid test of their moral conscience.

Chapter Four deals with the novels of Wilkie Collins. His unstable narrative voice, his obsessive repetition of important facets of plot and character, and above all his delight in orchestrating and subverting the conventions embraced by his contemporaries emphasise the manner in which his bastards serve notice to quit upon the authority figures of Victorian England.

For Collins illegitimacy is the quintessential family secret which has potentially devastating social, moral and legal consequences. The presence of a bastard always signifies some kind of societal or familial collapse or trauma, while these crises in themselves signify the presence of a bastard. Such weird collapses are paralleled by the mental breakdowns which the bastards undergo as the result of cultural and community pressures.

Wilkie Collins saw the interaction between the bastard - who came to stand for every other kind of outcast - and respectable society as symbolic of the problems encountered by any square peg told to cram itself into a round hole. As a natural misfit, acting the role of a normal person becomes an essential lifeskill for the illegitimate. Like Dickens, he was

interested in the influences of environment and heredity on the bastard. By and large his nature vs. nurture investigations are fairly realistic, with the result that his family-reared bastards tend to do rather well (like George Eliot's), while his outcasts do very badly (like Dickens's).

Chapter Five places the achievements of Dickens, George Eliot and Collins into literary and historical context. By the turn of the century, interest in the theme of illegitimacy had declined considerably, although certain important writers still thought it worth investigating. Through a discussion of late Victorian texts such as Mark Rutherford's Clara Hopgood and Oscar Wilde's A Woman of No Importance and The Importance of Being Earnest, and a comparison of their aims and methods with those of their illustrious predecessors, we can see the kind of fictional bastard which has emerged from my study: the imaginative, undomesticated and unconventional character whose birth makes him the most anti-Victorian of Victorians. To conclude, I look forward to the twentieth century, in order to see how the veins opened up by Dickens, George Eliot and Collins continued through the works of the later Victorians to resource their literary successors.

## CHAPTER 1.

### ILLEGITIMACY IN ENGLAND - A BRIEF SURVEY.

#### i. What is Illegitimacy?

All human societies have rules which govern the procreation of children. These rules are bound up with complex notions about kinship and descent, and in theory at least they exist to protect both the individual and the community. The illegitimate child is, to use Jenny Teichman's definition, 'one whose conception and birth did not take place according to the rules which, in its parents' community, govern reproduction.'<sup>1</sup> Malinowski argues that the 'Principle of Legitimacy' is society's answer to the crucial problem of nurturing the next generation: 'No child shall be brought into the world without a man, and one man, assuming the role of sociological father, that is, a guardian and protector, the male link between a child and the rest of the community.'<sup>2</sup>

Modern writers on the subject of illegitimacy - sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists alike - have stressed that it is impossible to provide any definition of "illegitimacy" as opposed to "legitimacy" which would be of universal relevance, since familial and social structures are so varied. For the purposes of my study, however, the notion of illegitimacy is capable of precise definition. The Victorians knew exactly what a bastard was, and in a sense that certainty is more useful and instructive than our modern sensitivity to the multiplicity of regulations which govern sex and marriage all over the world. In nineteenth-century England the distinction between legitimacy and illegitimacy depended upon a legal marriage being solemnised between a

1. Jenny Teichman, The Meaning of Illegitimacy (Cambridge: Engelhardt Books, 1978), p 54

2. Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Kinship', Encyclopedia Britannica 13, (1929), in Jenny Teichman, Illegitimacy: A Philosophical Examination (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p 89

child's parents before its birth. Malinowski's rule is perfectly applicable: the fatherless Victorian child simply could not become a fully paid-up member of society.

As Jenny Teichman points out, for a racist, 'the child which ought not to have been born' is a half-caste, while for a eugenicist it is the child with a mental or physical handicap. 'The traditional idea in our own society, however, is economic, as it were, so that "a child which ought not to have been born" is ... a child which will have no one to care for it and protect it, an "unwanted child", a child who will become a burden to the state and the taxpayer and, in all probability, a misery to itself; in other words, a child with no legal claim on a breadwinning (male) parent - an illegitimate child.' 3 In nineteenth-century England, when the orthodox cult of the family was celebrated as never before, and the responsibilities and interrelationships of its members were analysed and codified ad infinitum, the heresy of bastardy became a subject of tremendous public concern.

#### ii. The Legal Background to Illegitimacy

What happens to bastards does not happen by chance: it is the direct result of social policy, either official or unofficial. In England, most of the social disabilities associated with illegitimacy stemmed from the medieval *filius nullius* rule, which was rigidly (and notoriously) upheld until 1926. Sir William Blackstone, in his definitive Commentaries on the Laws of England, explains 'the rights and incapacities which appertain to a bastard' thus:

The rights are very few, being only such as he can *acquire*: for he can *inherit* nothing, being looked on as the son of nobody, and sometimes called *filius nullius*, sometimes *filius populi*. Yet he may gain a surname by reputation, though he has none by inheritance ... The incapacity of a bastard consists principally in this, that he cannot be heir to anyone, neither can he have heirs, but of his own body; for being *nullius filius*,

3. Jenny Teichman, Illegitimacy: A Philosophical Examination, p 7

he is therefore kin to nobody, and has no ancestor from whom inheritable blood can be derived ... really any other distinction, but that of not inheriting, which civil policy renders necessary, would, with regard to the innocent offspring of his parents' crimes, be odious, unjust, and cruel to the last degree: and yet the civil law, so boasted of for its equitable decisions, made bastards in some cases incapable even of a gift from their parents ... 4

For hundreds of years, however, the *filius nullius* maxim, which Blackstone felt should only be used to discriminate between the bastard and the legitimate with regard to property rights, was the means by which the bastard became a legal nonentity, and a stranger even to his parents.

### iii. Changing Social Attitudes to Illegitimacy

In The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 Lawrence Stone argues that 'It was not until the thirteenth century that the Church at last managed to take over control of marriage law, to assert at least the principle of monogamous indissoluble marriage, to define and prohibit incest, to punish fornication and adultery, and to get bastards legally excluded from property inheritance.' 5 In spite of the Church's success, however, at least until the sixteenth century, while the illegitimate child had no legal rights, bastardy itself was no disgrace. The dramatic change in the climate of moral opinion which came about in the early modern period seems to have been caused by two main factors: poverty and Puritanism. As poverty became increasingly widespread, and large numbers of the lower classes began to abandon the bastard children they could not afford to support, the Elizabethan authorities made the mother and alleged father legally responsible for the maintenance of an illegitimate child. If the parents were unable to afford it, the burden fell on the parish. The authorities' extreme reluctance to fork out for pauper bastards was primarily motivated by economic considerations, but underpinned by a

4. Sir William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England (Dublin: no publisher, 1771), p 459

5. Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p 30

a sense of Puritan moral outrage. The illegitimacy laws promulgated up to the end of the eighteenth century were meant to ensure that the State was left holding the baby on the fewest possible occasions.

When the moral fervour of the Puritans died down, the authorities went on shaming and illtreating the unmarried mother and her child pour encourager les autres. A gradual conceptualization of illegitimacy was taking place. From being simply an inconvenient fact of life, it rapidly became a knotty socio-economic problem with significant moral overtones. Inevitably sermons on the perils of fornication and adultery were preached on a class basis, since the rich man's bastard was unlikely to be a drain on state resources. Significantly, when the Earl of Castlehaven was executed in 1631, having been found guilty by his fellow peers of crimes 'so heinous and so horrible that a Christian man ought scarce to name them', it was specifically his undermining of the rules of inheritance which really appalled them. As Richard Davenport-Hines has written:

His worst offence against social order was not the sadism with which he treated his wife (whom he held down while she was raped by his catamite), nor his voyeurism, nor even his sexual acts with young pages. His fatal indiscretion was his wish for his favourite youth, Henry Skipwith, rather than his son, to father his daughter-in-law's children, so that Skipwith's descendants would inherit his peerages and land ... [T]o this end the girl was from the age of twelve forced to submit to Skipwith, without however conceiving. This abuse of the hereditary system outraged peers like the Lord Keeper, Lord Coventry of Aylesborough, who admonished Castlehaven that 'having honour and fortune to leave behind you, you would have the impious and spurious offspring of a harlot to inherit' ... 6

Such were the carryings-on among the nobility that the authorities would have been appalled had they been replicated among the lower classes. When he drew up his will in 1721, for instance, among numerous other bastards by various mothers, the Duke of Buckingham mentioned two illegitimate daughters who had been raised by his Duchess alongside their own children. He left the girls in her sole care, warmly remarking that she had 'always been most generously indulgent' towards them. (Stone, Family, Sex and Marriage, p 330)

6. Richard Davenport-Hines, Sex, Death and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain Since the Renaissance (Collins, 1990), p 63

Significantly, however, even among the free and easy upper classes, illegitimacy was worse for daughters than for sons. Lawrence Stone has noted that the bastard sons of the nobility were usually well educated, and appear 'to have suffered no social discrimination in terms of professional career or marriage. As Lord Mulgrave remarked in the House of Lords in 1800, "bastardy is of little comparative consequence to the male children". Illegitimate female children, however, "have to struggle with every disadvantage from their rank in life", since the only career open to a woman of this class was marriage.' (Family, Sex and Marriage p 331) Even so, the illegitimate daughter of Sir Edward Walpole actually succeeded in marrying George III's brother, the Duke of Gloucester. Moreover, when King William IV, then the Duke of Clarence, married Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen in 1811, he was already publicly known to be the proud father of no less than ten children between the ages of seventeen and four by the famous comedy actress Dorothy Jordan. Remarkably, in spite of Adelaide's very straightlaced moral attitudes - Philip Ziegler has called her 'a Victorian before her time' - she was exceptionally generous towards the hordes of Fitzclarence children and grandchildren who habitually racketted around Windsor Castle. 7 A motherly soul who lost her own two daughters in infancy, she was adored by William's grandchildren, who called her "Queeny". Although the King's sons were greedy, vain, talentless and self-seeking to a man, his five vivacious daughters, who all married well, did much to brighten up the court. 'It sounds immoral,' wrote Lady Louisa Percy, 'but the quantity of natural children the King has certainly makes *la cour* pleasanter. They are all, you know, pretty and lively, and make society in a way that real princesses could not.' (Ziegler, William IV, pp 269-270)

Thirty or forty years later, when even the nobility had publicly cleaned up their act, it was well-nigh impossible for a bastard to be socially acceptable. The remarkable art connoisseur and collector John Bowes (1811-1885), who founded the Bowes Museum near Barnard Castle in County Durham, was the illegitimate son of the 10th Earl of Strathmore and a country girl called Mary Millner. The Earl made Mary his wife the day

7. Philip Ziegler, William IV (Collins, 1971), p 156

before he died in 1820, but young John's claim to his father's title was denied. As Martin Gayford has written, Bowes 'found himself in a social no man's land. By his father's will he had inherited vast family estates in County Durham, some of which was over coal seams, which made him an extremely wealthy man (in the early 1870s his income was £100,000 a year). Dutifully, he shouldered the landed gentry's burden of public service, acting as MP for South Durham for 15 years, and occupying various worthy county posts. But, despite this, as far as high society was concerned, he simply didn't exist.' 8

However even before old King William's niece Victoria and her beloved Albert had set an enduring standard of monogamous wedded bliss, respectable society's attitude towards the illegitimate had stiffened considerably. Richard Davenport-Hines has argued persuasively that 'The cause of moral improvement was transformed by the blood and tumbrils of the French Revolution. In Britain the threat of social strife or national ruin became exigent after 1793: the propertied classes felt a new need to assert the primacy of hierarchy and the duty of deference among the lower orders.' (Sex, Death and Punishment p 70) As he notes, 'During the eighteenth century general hospitals started excluding various types of patients from their wards, including maternity cases, children, those with infectious fevers or mental disorders and venereal cases. This was intended to protect the health and moral welfare of other patients: the rejected categories became the responsibility of the poor law authorities, with specialist hospitals opening to treat cases.' (Sex, Death and Punishment p 35) This clinical segregation led to open admissions to foundling hospitals (wherein inconvenient babies could be abandoned for good) for married and unmarried mothers alike, and in 1818 Thomas Bernard declared - not unjustifiably - that the system had 'a direct and uncontrollable tendency to encourage vice and increase the mortality of our species.' (Stone, Family, Sex and Marriage p 403) This discriminatory attitude gradually became more widespread, and as Mary Hopkirk has noted, Muller's Orphan Asylum, founded in 1836, was one of the first of many such

8. Martin Gayford, 'An English Storehouse of Foreign Treasures', Daily Telegraph 10 November 1990

charitable institutions to specifically exclude illegitimate children, even though they were so often the ones in greatest distress, on the grounds that the moral taint which those born in sin naturally inherited from their parents could not be allowed to contaminate the innocent minds of their respectable peers. 9 This may be seen as the prototypical Victorian recoil against a status which undermined the blessed trinity of marriage, money and morality.

During the eighteenth century, the responsibility for supporting an illegitimate child customarily devolved upon both parents. The unmarried mother was encouraged to name the father of her baby (as Molly Seagrim does in Tom Jones) and her word alone was usually enough to ensure that the man in question paid up, married her or went to jail. It was so difficult for a named 'father' of limited means to prove his innocence that many men simply did not bother to stick around for the hearing, as this early nineteenth-century stage ballad indicates:

Tw'as Saturday night, if I recollect right,  
When first I set out from London,  
I tickled a girl, her name it was Sall,  
And she and her brat were quite undone;  
The constable wrath, he took his staff,  
Thro' streets and thro' courts did me harass,  
So for fear of a fray, I took my body away,  
And she saddled her brat on the parish. 10

The Commissioners appointed to overhaul the Elizabethan Poor Laws in the 1830s believed (with reason) that innocent men were being framed by women desperate to obtain financial support, aided and abetted by the local ratepayers. There were also cases in which unmarried mothers were getting more money from affiliation orders than respectable widows. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 reflects the conviction that somehow the man who begets a bastard is less sinful than the woman who gives birth to one,

9. Mary Hopkirk, Nobody Wanted Sam: The Story of the Unwelcomed Child 1530-1948 (John Murray, 1949), p 105

10. 'Blarney's Rambles' in John Holloway and Joan Black (eds), Late English Broadside Ballads (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p 27

and that to treat illegitimate children exactly like legitimate ones would violate the structure of the family. But above and beyond the question of morality, the Commissioners - influenced by the works of Thomas Malthus - were, as U.R.Q. Henriques suggests, 'concerned with the multiplication of an impoverished population'. They sincerely believed that the number of illegitimate births could be substantially reduced if unmarried motherhood was made unprofitable: in other words, that making women solely responsible for their illegitimate offspring would encourage them to say 'no'. 11

The 1834 Act abolished the single mother's right to sue the alleged father of her child for maintenance, and instituted a purposely complex and expensive new system of affiliation actions which were to be dealt with at the Quarter Sessions. Generally speaking, the effect of the new system was to let the father off scot-free, while the mother became solely responsible for the child up to the age of sixteen. If totally destitute, mother and child could both go on parish relief or, if possible, into one of the new Union workhouses. The new affiliation system meant that the parish ratepayers had no real way of recovering the cost of maintaining the mother and child from the alleged father. The bastardy laws of England had been turned upside down. At the same time, the archaic and brutal punishments of whipping the unmarried mother through the streets at the cart's tail or sending her to a House of Correction were abolished. As Pinchbeck and Hewitt suggest, however, this was not necessarily prompted by any humanitarian impulse. 'The cynical might argue, with some justice, that on the one hand the abolition of the old punishments only underlines the greater importance attached to economic sanctions in an increasingly affluent society, and, on the other, that the strength of social ostracism as an equally if not more effective, and certainly less expensive, means of enforcing social discipline had been fully appreciated.' 12 Going 'on the parish' became increasingly shameful, as George Eliot notes in Adam Bede:

11. U.R.Q. Henriques, 'Bastardy and the New Poor Law', Past and Present 37, (July 1967), p 111

12. Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, Children in English Society (2 vols) (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969/1973), Vol 2, pp 590-91

[Hetty] thought of a young woman who had been found against the church wall at Hayslope one Sunday, nearly dead with cold and hunger - a tiny infant in her arms: the woman was rescued and taken to the parish. 'The parish!' You can perhaps hardly understand the effect of that word on a mind like Hetty's, brought up among people who were somewhat hard in their feelings even towards poverty, who lived among the fields, and had little pity for want and rags as a hard inevitable fate such as they sometimes seem in cities, but held them a mark of idleness and vice - and it was idleness and vice that brought burthens on the parish. To Hetty, 'the parish' was next to the prison in obloquy; and to ask anything of strangers - to beg - lay in that same far-off hideous region of intolerable shame that Hetty had all her life thought it impossible she could ever come near. (AB pp 424-425)

It is worth pointing out here that although Adam Bede is set in 1799, Hetty's story is very firmly rooted in the social milieu of the 1830s or 1840s - i.e. during the time of George Eliot's own country girlhood. Hetty's reactions in this paragraph are those of a girl only too well aware of the repercussions of the new Poor Law.

The principle of exclusion from the family unit held fast for the bastard throughout the Victorian era. Considering the premium which was set on the family at that time, to be so obviously lacking in verifiable credentials was a tremendous social handicap. The Victorians' fear of illegitimacy is related to those aspects of human sexuality which their society devoutly wished to cover up, in particular the nightmare of unlicensed sex among the all too fertile working classes. The feelings which the respectable Victorians refused to acknowledge in themselves were projected on to convenient stereotypes in a classic knee-jerk defensive reaction. The quintessential Victorian outcasts were the prostitute, the unmarried mother and the fatherless child, and these figures came to symbolise the shadow-side of the century's emotional and sexual landscape.

Discriminating against the helpless bastard child was much easier when morality could be used to underpin society's deep-seated resentment of him as a financial burden. In his Annual Report of 1846, the Registrar General quoted from a German contribution to population studies published five years earlier, Handbuch der Populationistik:

The great majority of foundlings are illegitimate, which of itself shows how little, as a general rule, the mothers can or will care for these

children ... It is beyond doubt that fewer illegitimate children grow up to maturity; that they get through the world with more trouble; that more of them are poor, and that therefore more of them become criminals. Illegitimacy is in itself an evil to a man; and the State should seek to diminish the number of these births, and carefully enquire to what circumstances any increase is to be ascribed. (Henriques, 'Bastardy and the Poor Law' p 124)

As the child of one of society's economically weakest members, the bastard is clearly deserving of pity and compassion. As the morally tainted offspring of a slut and a rogue, however, he is a danger to society's primary institutions, the law and the family, and as such he deserves to suffer. The moral scapegoating of the bastard is the quintessential example of visiting the sins of the fathers upon their children, as Wilkie Collins pointed out in The Woman in White, yet like AIDS in our own time, illegitimacy in the nineteenth century was saddled with what Simon Watney has described as 'a dismal cargo of appalling connotations.' 13 The infamous Victorian poisoner, William Palmer, had several 'pledges of fortune' to servant girls as well as many legitimate children. He was believed to have done away with at least three of his bastards, but at least he showed no bias: four of his legitimate offspring were murdered as well. The existence of the illegitimate children, Thomas Boyle suggests, was used by the newspapers to smear Palmer, as it implied that the apparently respectable middle-class physician was in fact an arch-hypocrite and 'icon of deceit'. 14

People who were suspected of wishing to undermine the approved moral guidelines of the state were classed as cultural traitors who had to be wiped out, or at the very least interned. The bastard and the fallen woman, the lunatic and the homosexual, were regarded with almost superstitious fear and loathing by conventional society. As Richard Davenport-Hines has remarked apropos this phenomenon, 'Pollution beliefs presuppose that inflexible, impersonal and inevitable punishment will smite transgressors; the very immutability of retribution reinforces the myth

13. Simon Watney in Richard Davenport-Hines, Sex, Death and Punishment p 3

14. Thomas Boyle, Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism (Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), p 80

that there is an equally unchanging standard of behaviour, or an equally rigid code of morals. If punishment is personalised, if the circumstances and motives of the transgressor are considered, then the fantasy of unadulterable moral law, or of timeless, unchanging natural morality is exploded.' (Sex, Death and Punishment pp 4-5)

Throughout the nineteenth century, then, the bastard's mother was expected to prevent her child becoming a burden on the state, at least, as Jenny Teichman remarks, 'until such time as she handed it over to a Foundling Home, or to the workhouse authorities, or until she had it taken away from her, with or without her agreement.' (Meaning of Illegitimacy p 39) In 1844, she regained the right to petition the courts for a maintenance order against the father, although it seems that very few poor women actually did so. Under the terms of the 1872 Bastardy Laws Amendment Act, the upper limit was raised to the sum of five shillings a week. Despite the pathetic inadequacy of this amount, however, Pinchbeck and Hewitt have noted that nearly twenty years later the Kensington authorities estimated that only around 3 per cent of the single mothers they dealt with had ever received a penny in child support. (Children in English Society pp 594-595) However it did seem that the draconian measures of the 1830s had finally become morally unacceptable: the MP sponsoring the bill told the House that it would discourage infanticide, since the mother would now be able to afford to put out the child and get work. It would also make the father once again liable to pay for his pleasure, and it was felt that 'penalties upon the seducer were more likely to discourage immorality than severe and oppressive laws upon the seduced.' Moreover, as U.R.Q. Henriques has pointed out, the Commissioners had been simply unable to show that their policies had reduced the number of illegitimate births as it had been claimed they would. ('Bastardy and the Poor Law', pp 120ff)

In 1874 it was made possible for an illegitimate child to be registered in his father's name if the father agreed to it. Wilkie Collins himself might have done this, since his son by Martha Rudd was born on Christmas Day 1874, but the child was in fact registered as "William Charles Dawson", son of "William Dawson", which left both father and son

undercover. The concept of permanent illegitimacy remained entrenched within the fabric of the legal system long after it had begun to work loose within the consciousness of society. As late as 1893, a Bill 'to alter and amend the Law by Legitimizing Children born before Marriage on the subsequent Marriage of their Parents' was thrown out of Parliament after its first reading.

Bans, restrictions and disabilities encroached upon almost every aspect of the bastard's social life. From the outset he was likely to be handicapped materially, physically, mentally, socially and professionally by the circumstances of his birth. His hold on life was often fragile: infant mortality among illegitimates was always much higher than among legitimates. Indeed, Dr John Brendon Curgenven 'explained before the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1867, in a notable address on "The Waste of Infant Life", that while the death rate of 0-5 year-olds among the "educated and well-to-do" ran at 11 per cent, the equivalent figure among the urban working class ranged from 35 to 55 per cent, and this concealed, even more shockingly, an estimated 60-90 per cent among illegitimates.' 15

In 1913, Francis King MP published a pamphlet called Nullius Filius which dealt with the grave social disabilities of illegitimacy. The public response to his ideas convinced him that social attitudes were changing, and that large sections of the population were now keen to alleviate the bastard's burden. But perhaps it was the Great War which caused the authorities to loosen up about illegitimacy, as they did with regard to so many other subjects. Just as the valuable war work performed by British women between 1914-1918 "earned" them the vote, the number of war babies which pushed up the illegitimate birth rate "earned" them the support of the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (founded in 1918) and eventual legitimation in 1926. As Jenny Teichman notes, official statistics about the rising bastard birth rate, and a death rate

15. Lionel Rose, The Massacre of the Innocents: Infanticide in Britain 1800-1939 (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp 6-7

in 1918 of 186 per thousand live births - more than twice the rate for legitimate babies - were made public, and provided further ammunition for those intent on reform. (Illegitimacy: A Philosophical Examination p 105) It is worth bearing in mind that these shocking statistics recur even today. In January 1990, a research document published in the British Medical Journal revealed a death rate of 3.4 per thousand live births for babies under the age of one born to married parents. For illegitimate infants registered by both parents the death rate was 5.2 per thousand, while for those registered by a lone mother the figure was 7.2 per thousand. The Daily Mail's banner headline to an article about this research was 'Innocents "in peril"'. (Daily Mail 29 January 1990)

The Legitimacy Act of 1926 stated that providing neither of its parents were married to a third party at the time of its birth, the illegitimate child became legitimate if they subsequently married. The child then had the same rights of inheritance as legitimate children, save for titles or the estates attached to them. (The act made no provision whatsoever for adulterine bastards like Percival Glyde in The Woman in White and the Vanstone sisters in No Name: they were not legitimated by their parents' subsequent marriage until 1959.) Since the 1926 Adoption Act stated that the unmarried mother had to agree to give up her child before a legal adoption could take place, in a roundabout way the bastard gained a legal parent at this time too. English law was still perpetuating the fiction that the bastard had no father, but at least his mother was now legally recognised. The illegitimate child was *filius nullius* no more.

Piecemeal legislation designed to mitigate the social problems associated with illegitimacy continued throughout the twentieth century, until the 1987 Legitimacy Act finally stated that in the eyes of the law, there was no appreciable difference between the child born within marriage and the child born outside it. My concern with the legal history of illegitimacy ends, however, with the effective abolition of the *filius nullius* rule which had shaped the English understanding of bastardy for more than six centuries. Technically speaking what it actually meant was that the illegitimate child came into the world with no man obliged to

support it. To the Victorian novelist, however, it symbolised a fascinating moral and social anomaly with outstanding artistic potential. In defiance of both nature and reason, the bastard had neither mother nor father: to all intents and purposes, he was an orphan whose parents were living.

In addition to all their other disadvantages, bastard babies were also far more likely to be aborted, miscarried or killed soon after birth. Secrecy about an illegitimate pregnancy was absolute for once it became common knowledge the mother was almost certain to lose her job, reputation, and most likely, family support. Because the unmarried mother was so severely disadvantaged socially, economically and professionally, illegitimate babies were frequently dumped in baby farms or simply abandoned on the streets. As Lionel Rose has written, 'the story of infanticide is primarily an account of the fate of illegitimate babies.' (Massacre of the Innocents p 10) The baby-farm is a particularly evocative metaphor for the heartlessness of Victorian capitalism, and the appalling Mother Sowler who appears in Wilkie Collins's The Fallen Leaves is an angel of mercy when seen next to women like Margaret Waters, who was hanged for child-murder in 1870, or Amelia Dyer, who looked set to dam the Thames with tiny corpses in the late 1890s. James Walvin has pointed out that the discovery in 1870 of the bodies of no fewer than 276 babies in London alone led to the Infant Life Protection Act of 1872, which stated that all foster mothers were to register with their local authorities and that all such infant deaths were to be investigated. Moreover, to their credit, the authorities realised that the problem centred around the unmarried mother's inability to adequately support her child, and this prompted the Bastardy Laws Amendment Act of 1872, which reinstated the mother's right to demand maintenance for her child from the alleged father. 16 'The motives that could impel a woman to dispose of an unwanted infant [could] only be appreciated against the setting of women's economic and social vulnerability', as Lionel Rose remarks, and this fundamental truth was at last becoming widely recognised. (Massacre of the Innocents p 15)

16. James Walvin, A Child's World: A Social History of English Childhood 1800-1914 (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1982), p 161

In addition to the baby-farmer Mother Sowler, Wilkie Collins also portrayed an abortionist, Doctor Downward (later Le Doux) in Armadale. It is, of course, impossible to calculate how many illegitimate children were aborted during the Victorian era, or indeed how many women died during botched and illegal operations: suffice to say that the figures would have been spinechilling. In 1890, Ethel, the estranged wife of the famous QC Edward Marshall Hall, died in excruciating agony after a criminal abortion performed by the forger, drug-dealer and quack Alfred Laermann. Just twenty-seven years old, Ethel was terrified of the scandal which would ensue if she gave birth to her lover's child. At the inquest it was revealed that Laermann had played the piano while his female assistant sang in order to drown the poor woman's screams. An internal injection of 'corrosive mercurial poison' was administered which finally killed her. Laermann, a chronic morphine addict, was jailed for fifteen years. 17 Among the lower orders, the same horror stories were endlessly repeated. One Victorian doctor, Andrew Wynter, told how callous midwives 'know well what it is to produce a stillbirth, or, in the horrible language of their craft, a "quiet 'un".' In Yorkshire, midwives who could be relied on to produce "stillborn" babies were said to have enviable "Churchyard Luck". (Rose, Massacre of the Innocents p 88) Even today, babies under a year old 'are four times as likely as other age groups to be victims of homicide', while in the middle of the nineteenth century 'the under-ones formed 61 per cent of all homicide victims, at a time when they constituted 2.5-3 per cent of the population.' (Rose, Massacre of the Innocents p1/p8)

Being cut off from the family was the seemingly inevitable consequence of being born illegitimate. In the quintessentially patriarchal and patrilineal society of Victorian England, the child without a father barely existed. He had no right to his father's surname, and no place in anyone's family. He had no right to inherit from his parents, because of course in law, there were no such persons. The social stigma which attached to the unmarried mother and her child increased dramatically during the first half of the nineteenth century. There was still a firm

17. Edward Marjoribanks, Famous Trials of Marshall Hall (1929) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp 67-68

belief in the age-old maxim that 'bad blood will out', and it was widely held that bastards were disproportionately involved in crime. John Donne had remarked on 'The Old Morall reason ... That Bastards inherit wickednesse from theyr parents, and so are in a better way of preferment by having a stocke before hand than those that must build all theyr fortune upon the poore weake stocke of originall sinne.' 18 More than two centuries later, as Virginia Wimperis relates, 'During evidence given before a Select Committee appointed in 1852 to inquire into the treatment of "criminal and destitute juveniles", Matthew Davenport Hill, the Recorder of Birmingham, remarked that "the testimony of inspectors of prisons and of gaolers, and the chaplains of gaols, is uniform to the fact that illegitimate children form a very large class of juvenile criminals."' 19 Even today, the bastard from a broken home is seen by some as a classic sociological misfit: according to the then chairman of the Conservative Party, Kenneth Baker, careless fathers who desert their children contribute to a breakdown in authority and a rising crime-rate. In May 1990 Mr Baker declared that a 'new underclass had developed within British society - epitomised by illegitimacy, crime and self-imposed unemployment.' (Daily Mail 10 May 1990)

The logical extension of the Victorians' gloomy prognosis for illegitimate children was a marked tendency to institutionalise them in workhouses, refuges, asylums and prisons. The "parish boy" Oliver Twist is a profoundly subversive figure: rather than living up to the surname which the workhouse authorities have imposed upon him by ending his days twitching at the end of a rope, he manages to escape the seemingly inevitable consequences of poverty and illegitimacy. There was of course a heated debate between the liberals and the eugenicists as to the reasons behind the disproportionate involvement of illegitimate children in crime.

18. John Donne, Problems and Paradoxes in Alison Findlay, 'The World So Swarms With Bastards Now ... The Bastard in Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline Drama', (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1988), p 33

19. Virginia Wimperis, The Unmarried Mother and Her Child (Victor Gollancz, 1960), p 296

The liberals argued that since the existing institutionalised economic, educational and psychological deprivation of the bastard led to his being drawn into patterns of antisocial behaviour, the link between cause and effect could be severed. The eugenicists, on the other hand, believed that bastards were genetically programmed to become the criminal underclass of the next generation. The Reverend Herbert Smith, for instance, saw the average workhouse bastard thus:

[What] are we to expect will be the training of such an unfortunate offspring? If the example of the parents has been so evil, can we anticipate much benefit from their instruction? Humanly speaking there is nothing to be expected but misery and woe, in time and throughout eternity, as the fruits of such profligacy. (Rose, Massacre of the Innocents p 35)

Needless to say, Dickens, Collins and George Eliot were unanimous in their support for the liberal view.

Snubs and insults were everyday occurrences, and strenuous attempts were made to instill a proper sense of shame into the unmarried mother and her child. Their circumstances meant that they were frequently exposed to unfriendly influences designed to create a sense of worthlessness. Emotional deprivation and a deep sense of moral guilt were perhaps the hardest burdens they had to bear.

In the light of the government's recently stated concern for some kind of return to Victorian values - which I take to mean the primacy of the nuclear family and the virtues of thrift and self-help, among other things - linking illegitimate children with crime, self-inflicted poverty and an unwarranted and unhealthy dependency on the state seems to be particularly suggestive of current Conservative (and conservative) social thinking. In October 1990, a White Paper entitled Children Come First was published containing details of a proposed Child Support Agency which, in conjunction with the tax office and the Department of Social Security, will have the power to deduct maintenance payments at source from the wages of errant fathers who fail to support their children. In November 1990, the Secretary of State for Social Security, Tony Newton, addressed the National Council for One-Parent Families on this subject. He declared that single

mothers must name fathers who fail to support their children, even if the men involved threatened violence or rape, or they could lose state benefits. When asked how women in this situation were expected to cope with this kind of intimidation by their ex-partners, Mr Newton replied that the proposed Child Support Agency 'would consider all the circumstances.' (Daily Mail 24 November 1990) In the late 1980s and early 1990s it seems that the renewed emphasis on illegitimacy as a phenomenon which requires official intervention and complex policy decisions is effectively removing the subject from the arena of rational and unbiased public debate and rapidly recategorising it as a clearcut social problem of enormous proportions.

It is hard to see, given the radically disadvantaged situation in which the unmarried mother and her child often found themselves (unhappily seldom together) how their experience of life could have failed to warp their social and personal relationships. A tragic case which was reported in the newspapers in March 1990 reveals the extent to which the stigma of illegitimacy can scar. A French post office worker in his late thirties who was born the illegitimate son of a barmaid made legal history when he sued his mother for damages. The man, who had spent years tracking her down, claimed that she had ruined his life by dumping him with her poor and uncaring relatives when he was just a few months old. Although she had promised to return for him, she had in fact left the area to begin a new life. His unsuccessful monetary claim was purely symbolic, he said. 'All I ever really wanted was to hear my mother say she loved me. I have abandoned hope of that, but I will carry on to see what can be done for all the other children who have suffered like me. I have written to my mother since the end of the hearing but she will not reply.' (Daily Mail 28 March 1990) There is no reason to doubt that the respectable working classes still felt genuine anguish at the stain of illegitimacy well into this century. Clinical symptoms such as those manifested by Sir Percival Glyde in The Woman in White are clearly not the only way that people show their feelings: Virginia Wimperis has written of the numerous tragic cases which have come to light since 1948 of elderly people not daring to claim their old age pensions for fear of revealing the secret of their birth. (Unmarried Mother and Her Child p 309)

iv. Illegitimacy in English Culture and Literature

In 1831, Robert Owen published his famous tract Moral Physiology. 'Its frontispiece was a pathetic engraving showing a young mother covering her face with her hands, as she turns away from her illegitimate baby which she has just abandoned under the statue of the merciful Virgin; it bears the legend, "alas! that it should ever have been born!"' 20

In Victorian England there were quite simply more bastards around than there had ever been before. The huge increase in the number of illegitimate births which took place almost everywhere during the late eighteenth century has been described by Edward Shorter as 'one of the central phenomena of modern demographic history.' 21 Peter Laslett and Karla Oosterveen have noted a high point in England during the 1840s and a mid-century levelling off, while the 1860s and 1870s saw the sharpest fall in the illegitimate birth rate since the time of Cromwell. 22 These trends could not be seen clearly at the time, still less interpreted without prejudice, and allegations of an illegitimate population explosion tell us more about contemporary social attitudes than about the sexual life of the nation. But in 1857 Dr William Acton published England's first proper study of illegitimacy, using the workhouse records of three poor London parishes. 23 Paradoxically, although the bastardy rate had actually peaked, and was about to enter on a steady period of decline, the fifties inaugurated the golden age of the Victorian debate on illegitimacy. The subject was studied by parliamentarians, social reformers, writers and the public alike, with mounting interest and concern. Interestingly, the

20. Peter Gay, The Education of the Senses: The Bourgeois Experience from Victoria to Freud, (OUP, 1984), p 260

21. Edward Shorter, The Making of the Modern Family, (Collins, 1976), p 83

22. Peter Laslett and Karla Oosterveen, 'Long-Term Trends in Bastardy in England, 1561-1960', Population Studies 27, (1973), p 266

23. John R Gillis, 'Servants, Sexual Relations and the Risks of Illegitimacy in London, 1801-1900', in Sex and Class in Women's History, eds Judith L Newton, Mary P Ryan and Judith R Walkowitz (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p 116

writers moved on to other topics long before the bastard's disabilities had been legally rectified: the intellectual debate burnt itself out long before Parliament caught on.

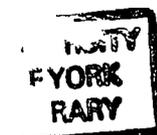
An illegitimate baby is certainly tangible evidence of unlicensed sex: in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, for instance, Pearl is described as the 'living hieroglyphic' of her parents' illicit affair. (SL p 223) If life really is a sexually transmitted disease, then it is not surprising that the idea of syphilis as a providential punishment designed to expose sexual sin ties in very well with many people's feelings about the illegitimate child: i.e. that it was the symbol of its parents' moral turpitude. One eighteenth-century physician declared that 'the *Venerereal Disease* was sent into the World by the Disposition of Providence, either to restrain, as with a Bridle, the unruly Passions of a Sensual Appetite, or as a Scourge to correct the Gratification of them'. (Davenport-Hines, Sex, Death and Punishment, p 6)

When the Victorians identified those women who were "caught out" by their sin and became unmarried mothers, however, they found out much more about sex in society than they really wanted to know. The unmarried mothers of Victorian England were not the women they were expected to be. The research of John Gillis and Judith Walkowitz has shown that the literary stereotypes of the age inadequately represent the real picture. In the novels of the nineteenth century, the fallen woman was usually very young and innocent, cruelly seduced by an upper-class cad, and forced on to the streets in order to support an illegitimate child. This is the 'common story' which Rosanna Spearman merely sketches out for Franklin Blake in Wilkie Collins's The Moonstone, since it is 'told quite often enough in the newspapers.' (M p 227) But Walkowitz argues that illegitimacy was in fact 'a social problem distinct from prostitution ... most unwed mothers were servants who were not prostitutes. Moreover, from the limited historical experience available, unwed mothers were in their early and mid-twenties, hence several years older than newly initiated prostitutes.' 24 Even among those who did not turn to prostitution, the Ruth Hiltons and Hetty Sorrels of nineteenth-century London were vastly outnumbered by 'mature women in respectable domestic employment: women

experienced in the ways of the city, conscious of its risks as well as its opportunities', as Gillis points out. ('Servants and Sexual Relations', p 115) The Acton survey of 1857 confirms that servant illegitimacy was the crux of London's problem.

Most sexual affairs were not inter-class in any case. In 1890, a survey carried out by the Reverend G.P. Merrick, the Chaplain to Millbank Prison, 'revealed that of 16,000 "fallen women" only 700 attributed their initial ruin to "seduction" by a "gentleman". The vast majority of single mothers owed their predicament to one of their own class'. (Rose, Massacre of the Innocents, p 18) This ties in with John Gillis's belief that 'London illegitimacy was primarily, if not exclusively, a problem involving domestic servants', and that overall 'disparate relationships accounted for less than one-quarter of the relationships involving female servants. The greater part of servant illegitimacy was generated by couples apparently well-matched and genuinely betrothed ... By contemporary standards, these were couples with superior marital prospects'. ('Servants and Sexual Relations', p 132) Relatively high economic and social expectations meant that higher-ranking servants tended not to marry until they had achieved some kind of security and status. As Gillis suggests, the paradox inherent in this situation was too much for the average Victorian: 'That great expectations and superior prospects could have led to the gates of the Foundling Hospital seemed inconceivable'. ('Servants and Sexual Relations', p 135) Hence they preferred to see servant illegitimacy as the result of loose morals, and to uphold their cherished stereotypes regardless. In 1871, one of the original women's rescue societies, The Female Mission to the Fallen, opened the very first mother and baby home. As Mary Hopkirk points out, this 'appears to have been quite exceptional, for the hypocrisy of Victorian propriety demanded that if an unmarried mother was to start afresh, she must discard her child. It was impossible for her to retain him and regain her social status'. (Nobody Wanted Sam, p 83) While they lauded the maternal instincts and moral fibre of their

24. Judith R Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State, (CUP, 1980), p 18



women, the Victorians ensured that the price of a place in respectable society for an unmarried mother was a one-way ticket to the orphanage or the baby-farm for her child. This is the story of Magdalen Vanstone's maid, Louisa, in Wilkie Collins's No Name.

Although "illegitimacy" meant something very precise to the Victorians as a term extracted from social reality, as a fictional concept it remained under investigation throughout the period. As a novelistic device its connotations varied according to the writer and his or her moral and artistic purpose, but since society's preoccupation with the illegitimate has been pretty much continuous, the artist has always been able to use the convention to tap into his contemporaries' most primitive - and most sophisticated - hopes and fears. That the fictional forms of bastardy are so diverse must relate to our ability to joke about red-headed milkmen one day, and argue about state benefits for unmarried mothers the next.

Before discussing the various ways in which Dickens, Collins and George Eliot contributed to the debate on illegitimacy through the medium of the novel, it is necessary to provide at least the contour lines of the fictional area they had decided to investigate. As I have traced the history of society's ill-treatment of the bastard from its beginnings in the later years of the Elizabethan era to its peak under Victoria, a brief complementary outline of the bastard in literature would seem to make sense. By and large, the theme has been treated in two different ways, turn and turn about, so as to reflect the moral outlook of the times. Just like the laws we enforce and the social mores we abide by, the literature we create reflects (if sometimes in a distorted mirror) the multifarious totems and taboos of our culture.

In George Eliot's Daniel Deronda the hero discovers in the course of a conversation with his tutor something about the bastard in literature and history which reminds him of his own situation. Yet while he is horrified and ashamed to think that he might be illegitimate, the bastards with whom he is familiar are actually extremely successful. The so-called "nephews" of the Renaissance popes received so many favours from their "uncles" that the term nepotism was coined, while 'having read Shakespeare as well as a

great deal of history, [Deronda] could have talked with the wisdom of a bookish child about men who were born out of wedlock and were held unfortunate in consequence, being under disadvantages which required them to be a sort of heroes if they were to work themselves up to an equal understanding with their legally born brothers'. (DD p 205) Clearly Deronda has not read King Lear or Much Ado About Nothing, for in tragedy and comedy alike, the bastard causes social, familial, religious and political upheaval on a massive scale.

Shakespeare was writing at a time of intense instability, and his work often reflects the idea of the bastard as a potential threat to the status quo. In the bloody revenge dramas of his Jacobean contemporaries, contaminating noble blood with a hybrid strain was one of the prime motivating forces which led to wholesale destruction. Whereas legitimate progeny ensured the survival of the family, the bastard was seen as a misbegotten freak of nature who threatened to destroy it instead. His violent and anarchic behaviour symbolised his parents' dangerous sexuality, and the "bad blood will out" idea led to suicide and murder being seen as the typical acts of a child which should not have been born. Traditionally, fictional and legendary bastards killed their fathers and usurped their thrones to enact a perfect revenge against the careless parents whose actions had disinherited them. The illegitimate were seen as a potentially disruptive social element in an age when England was always, in the words of Carol Z. Wiener, "a poore island" or "a smalle fish": always on the verge of being burned, devoured or otherwise destroyed'. 25 The fund of resentment which would naturally accumulate over the years because of society's punitive attitude towards him provided the bastard with a clear motive for wishing to foul things up. Hence, as Alison Findlay has discovered, a kind of illegitimate conspiracy theory developed, in which unnatural acts such as parricide, incest, adultery, rebellion and regicide which undermine the laws of kinship and society, came to seem almost natural when committed by an outcast bastard. ('Bastard in Elizabethan Drama', p 35)

25. Carol Z Wiener, 'The Beleaguered Isle: A Study of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism', Past and Present 51, (May 1971), p 50

On the other hand, the murder of the bastard himself was often part of a fundamental cleansing process, and a step on the road to regeneration and renewal. If an illegitimate died a savage and violent death, it was a clear sign of the widely-held belief that his life was pretty worthless anyway, and that he should never have been born. In Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, for example, the evil Tamora, the queen of the Goths, extends this belief to a harmless baby. Sending her half-caste child to its father, the slave Aaron, she bids him 'christen it with thy dagger's point'.

In her study of the bastard in Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline drama, Alison Findlay has traced the development of the stock illegitimate character as malcontent, machiavel, tragic hero, fool and natural child. In this period, bastardy and villainy were never coincidental: in fact to be born illegitimate was a prima facie case for being a troublemaker. Yet the outcast nature of the bastard did enable certain dramatists to experiment with the possibility of detaching a virtuous illegitimate character from a corrupt society by revealing the birth secret which sets him apart, as Alison Findlay has suggested. ('Bastard in Elizabethan Drama' p 347) In addition, in the later years of the period which her survey covers, Findlay has shown how the bastard became a somewhat idealised and romanticised figure, a heroic and tragic victim of circumstance who is deserving of pity and honour. Several of these important character facets became part of the illegitimate's fictional heritage.

During the eighteenth century, the theme of the foundling child was treated much less seriously, and the illegitimate were no longer seen as such a grave social threat. Richard Savage's poem The Bastard (1728) sets off in rollicking style, glorying in the freedom and excitement of possessing an unfixed identity:

Blest be the *Bastard's* birth! through wond'rous ways,  
He shines eccentric like a Comet's blaze.  
No sickly fruit of faint compliance he;  
He! stamp'd in nature's mint of extasy!  
He lives to build, not boast, a gen'rous race:  
No tenth transmitter of a foolish face.  
... Born to himself, by no possession led,

In freedom foster'd, and by fortune fed;  
Nor Guides, nor Rules, his sov'reign choice controul,  
His body independant, as his soul.  
Loos'd to the world's wide range - enjoyn'd no aim;  
Prescrib'd no duty, and assign'd no Name:  
Nature's unbounded son, he stands alone,  
His heart unbiass'd, and his mind his own. 26

Though the poem does not continue for long in this light vein, its opening lines have much in common with the attitude displayed by one of the greatest eighteenth-century novelists, Henry Fielding, in his most famous book, Tom Jones. Tom's illegitimacy is the key note of his picaresque, rambling, raffish lifestyle, while the circumstances of his birth are downright funny. In addition, the charming and generous hero is cut off from the sphere of money-grubbing dominated by his legitimate half-brother, Blifil. In the romantic era, the idea of the bastard of a love-child - delicate, beautiful and innocent - began to flourish as the Rousseauesque cult of childhood took hold of the artistic imagination. Yet the pragmatic Jane Austen, one of our most moral writers, saw nothing much in the subject either to praise or blame: her matter-of-fact treatment of Harriet Smith in Emma (1816) indicates that she did not find illegitimacy particularly interesting, even though prudent and imprudent personal relationships were her fictional stock-in-trade. Sir Walter Scott, however, in The Heart of Midlothian, painted a sympathetic portrait of Effie Deans, unjustly condemned to death for disposing of her illegitimate baby.

To the high Victorians, its emphasis on sexuality, class, power, economics, the law and morality gave the theme of illegitimacy extraordinary artistic potential. The difference was, whereas bastardy had been taken seriously before, seriousness had always meant moral condemnation. The Victorians were the first generation of writers to combine liberal attitudes with the moral dimension of earlier times. To them, illegitimacy was the archetypal skeleton in the cupboard which could emerge at any time to herald the doom of a respectable family. It also hinted at the existence of other shameful secrets. The economic dimension

26. Richard Savage, 'The Bastard' in Collected Poems of Richard Savage, Clarence Tracy (ed), (CUP, 1962), pp 88-92, lines 3-8, 13-20

pointed towards a concept of bourgeois bankruptcy which was both literal and figurative, while the moral and sexual elements hinted at basic issues of madness, crime and death. Illegitimacy became a cypher for many other things. In No Name it enables Wilkie Collins to discuss the role of women in society, in Felix Holt it symbolises the dangers of self-deception, and in Oliver Twist it draws attention to the fundamental opposition between natural goodness and worldly ambition. The theme was, of course, red meat to any Victorian writer interested in secrets and secrecy, or appearance and reality, and the gulf between them. And which of them were not concerned with such issues?

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, illegitimacy was not only being treated within a radically new and realistic socio-political framework by novelists like Mark Rutherford and George Moore, but also as a concept which could be adapted to the irreverent comedies of Oscar Wilde. As Jenny Teichman has commented, The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is 'essentially a skit on the theme of the "poor little nameless child". Jack's difficulties all stem from his need to "acquire some new relations as soon as possible, and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is over."' (Illegitimacy: A Philosophical Examination, pp 123-124) Then again, in A Woman of No Importance (1893) the very fact that the fallen woman and unmarried mother Mrs Arbuthnot spouts some vintage woman's shame clap-trap is in itself instructive. I shall refer to these later Victorian works in more detail in my final chapter.

The increasing social importance of illegitimacy in the first half of the Victorian era naturally encouraged a climate of opinion in which the subject would be readily discussed. A fascinating example of the ongoing debate on illegitimacy which has particular relevance to George Eliot occurred in 1853, when the influential literary critic G.H. Lewes reviewed Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth, the first English novel to deal frankly with the subject of unmarried motherhood. While the book was savagely attacked on the grounds of immorality by some of her more conservative contemporaries, Lewes praised Mrs Gaskell's radicalism and saw Ruth's merits clearly.

Given his overall enthusiasm, the violence of Lewes's attack upon one section of the book seems particularly significant.

Lewes found Mrs Gaskell's description of young Leonard's horrified reaction to the discovery of his illegitimate birth overwritten and under-researched. The language he considered 'sheerly impossible. No child would at once realise any such shame, even were it a fact that illegitimacy in actual life *did* bring with it disgrace ... the least reflection will tell Mrs Gaskell that in our day no such brand affects the illegitimate child.' 27 On the one hand then, Mrs Gaskell is so convinced of the dire social consequences of illegitimacy that she feels bound to write a book about it, and on the other, George Lewes categorically denies that any problem exists. Both the author and the critic presumably based their argument upon an honest appraisal of the thoughts and reactions of their contemporaries. The fact that their peers were very different may account for their fundamental disagreement to some extent: whereas Mrs Gaskell mixed with highly respectable and religious Manchester people, Lewes's friends were part of the free-thinking London intelligentsia. These two groups would obviously view the widespread cultural preoccupation with bastardy very differently: one group's tolerance was the other's permissiveness.

Ultimately most people probably agreed with Mrs Gaskell, and since she was involved in one of Dickens's projects regarding the resettlement of fallen women in the colonies, she was speaking with the authoritative voice of practical experience. Given Lewes's personal circumstances, however, one can see why he was so touchy about the subject. When his review was written, his wife Agnes was pregnant with a third child fathered by their best friend Thornton Hunt, who was married with a family of his own. Since their radical circle was committed to the ideal of free love, when Agnes had her first child by Hunt in 1850, Lewes made no complaint, and registered the child as his. Perhaps, as Phyllis Rose suggests, this really was out of 'a sense of communal responsibility, a spirited "no" to

27. G H Lewes, 'Ruth and Villette', Westminster Review 59, (April 1853), p 485

the pedantry of precise acknowledgement'. 28 But while failing to state a child's real father on his birth certificate can be seen as a daring social tactic, it is, of course, a total cover-up. Although Lewes publicly stated that there was no stigma attached to illegitimacy, privately he had ensured that his wife's children would never be penalised for their parents' actions.

In condoning Agnes's adultery and tacitly accepting Leigh Hunt's son as his own, Lewes forfeited his legal right to sue for divorce. This is why he could never marry Marian Evans (George Eliot). It may be in this painful moral grey area that the true source of Lewes's animosity towards Mrs Gaskell's novel lies. The extent to which his attempts to come to terms with his own domestic tangle might have influenced his notions of illegitimacy and the law can never be known, yet Ruth's situation (which Mrs Gaskell portrays as deeply tragic) might well have caused Lewes to fantasise about something so simple. Maybe his analysis of Mrs Gaskell's novel appears ill-judged because it is really an oblique attack upon conventional society, whose values - so antithetical to his own - had forced him to cover up a family secret of which he could not feel ashamed. This seems to be a perfect instance of Matthew Arnold's definition of the acid test for any literary critic, 'What does it mean to me?'

The methods by which Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins wove the theme of illegitimacy into their fiction reveal a great deal about their individual aims and motives. More than anything else, they used the bastard as a warrior in the wars of class, sex, creed and money which were raging within nineteenth-century English society. As Alison Findlay has shown, 'Elizabethan and Jacobean attitudes towards illegitimacy suggest[ed] ways in which a dramatist could exploit popular belief and prejudice about bastardy to create characters who could fulfil a variety of purposes.' ('Bastard in Elizabethan Drama', p 5) In this, the dramatists' technique differed widely from that of the Victorian novelists, who, far from pandering to their readers' ignorant preconceptions, actively sought to subvert and undermine them.

28. Phyllis Rose, Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p 203

I believe that by studying these three authors in particular we can learn something of the more general concerns of their contemporaries with regard to the subject. Therefore, as well as approaching the literary texts in question via an examination of their social, cultural and historic background, we must bear in mind that fictional works are something more than merely "factual" accounts of what was happening (or what was seen to be happening) in contemporary society. Through their representations of the bastard we may see exactly how the theme of illegitimacy functions in the literature and culture of mid-Victorian England, which is the purpose of this thesis.

Representations of such themes were not confined to literary works, of course. As Christopher Wood has pointed out, the narrative paintings of the nineteenth century provide 'a remarkable iconography of the preoccupations of Victorian society ... [they are] documents of how a society saw itself'.<sup>29</sup> Wood remarks that 'Paintings of home and family life are the most common of all Victorian narrative painting. The cosy room, the fireside, the children and the pets would feature in rows of pictures at the Royal Academy every year; small, sentimental, often exquisitely finished, and all extolling the joys of domestic happiness'. (Wood, Victorian Panorama, p 59) Themes such as poverty, seduction, prostitution and illegitimate (foundling) children had to be handled with extreme care. Thankfully, as with the novelists of the era, several painters managed to work round the unspoken artistic rules of their society. The young Frank Holl, for instance, used to scour the East End looking for promising subjects. On one occasion he came across two policemen carrying an abandoned child. Unfortunately Deserted - A Foundling, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874, has been lost. (Wood, Victorian Panorama, p 58)

The innumerable Victorian pictures which show attractive middle-class mothers with delightful newborns and happy older children at play provide a staggering contrast with the realistic paintings of those who were on the

29. Christopher Wood, Victorian Panorama: Paintings of Victorian Life, (1976), (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), p 9

other side of the great cultural divide. In Emma Brownlow's The Christening (1863), five abandoned babies are being rechristened in the chapel of the Foundling Hospital. Each infant is carried by an older child, aged about ten or eleven. The artist's own father, John Brownlow, was himself an inmate, and he actually became the Hospital Secretary in 1849. (Wood, Victorian Panorama, p 69) The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children still owns this remarkable painting. That the foundling hospital was considered to provide an excellent start in life for a friendless child may be seen from G.F. Hicks' 1865 painting The Infant Orphan Election, in which the relatives of various foundlings, armed with placards, canvass members of the Hospital Board in order to get their proteges admitted. (Wood, Victorian Panorama, p 71)

Artistic representations of the fallen woman usually upheld the maxim that seduction led inexorably to ostracism and death. Lynda Nead has shown in an article about Alfred Elmore's 1865 painting On The Brink how 'Home and sexual order were seen as fundamental criteria for social stability - breakdown in family order would lead inevitably to social chaos and collapse. The dominant ideology increasingly located the role of sex within the sphere of home and marriage and correspondingly defined and marginalised those forms of sexuality which were outside it. Elmore's picture must be seen as part of this regulation of sexuality. On the Brink warns that the woman who deviates from the "respectable" prescribed roles of wife and mother and operates outside the protection of the home and family cannot survive'. 30

In 1858, Augustus Leopold Egg, who enjoyed more than one raffish holiday jaunt with Dickens and Wilkie Collins, submitted a set of three related pictures on the theme of seduction to the Royal Academy. As Christopher Wood explains, 'Egg's pictures are exceptional in that they try to narrate a story over a period of years, filling in the details as would a novelist'. (Victorian Panorama, p 141) This is the sequence of events chronicled in Past and Present. 'In the first picture the husband

30. Lynda Nead, 'Seduction, Prostitution, Suicide: *On The Brink* by Alfred Elmore', Art History 5, (1982), p 320

discovers his wife's infidelity; he holds the guilty letter and crushes a miniature of his wife's lover under his foot. The picture abounds with symbols - the apple, the children's house of cards collapsing, the pictures on the wall of the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (labelled "The Fall") and a shipwreck ("The Abandoned"). Once again it was Ruskin in his Academy Notes who had to explain that the second and third pictures both take place at the same moment, five years later, after the death of the father. The children are now alone, and sit sadly at a window, thinking of their lost parents, watching the moon outside; the poor mother, with another baby, is watching the same moon from under the Adelphi arches. Posters on the wall advertise two plays at the Haymarket, Victims and A Cure For Love, and pleasure trips to the wicked capital of Paris'. (Wood, Victorian Panorama, p 141 n.) It is interesting to note that Wilkie Collins uses the distinctive shipwreck metaphor to describe what happens to the Vanstone family of Combe-Raven when their private sex-secret becomes public knowledge.

In nineteenth-century England, people came to accept unprecedented limitations on their sexual freedom which led them to see nonconformists as positive deviants. As Victorian writers, Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins inevitably used the motif of illegitimacy in ways which reflect their specific cultural milieu. Firstly, like so many other Victorian artists - poets, dramatists and painters as well as novelists - they were drawn towards the topic because it was their society's quintessential sex-secret. As such it provided them with a way into the murky, private areas of life which Queen Victoria referred to as *die Schattenseite*. On this "shadow side" lurk the most disturbing elements of human sexuality - passionate jealousy, seduction, treachery, adultery and rape. For centuries people had believed that the bastard had a particularly strong sex-drive because he had been born into a exciting illicit union rather than into a dull marriage bed. In Savage's The Bastard, for instance, the poet contrasts the 'dull domestic heir' unfavourably with the bastard, 'Conceiv'd in rapture, and with fire begot!' (Poems, p 90, lines 37/46) More than a century later, this identification of the illegitimate with the dangerous edge of the human psyche was far from a cause for celebration.

One has only to think of Wilkie Collins's Lydia Gwilt, and the 'sexual sorcery in her smile'. (A p 338)

The concept of genealogy is closely bound up with ideas of identity and origin - it is all about where you came from and why you are here. As Thomas Docherty has written, the bastard is 'an element which does not fit into the social order, having no clear identity, no name; and an element which ... presents a threat to the hermetic household for it is a free floating agent held in check by no clear anterior model of paternal authority'.<sup>31</sup> Knowing one's father simultaneously signifies and places both parent and child: the knowledge automatically confers authority upon the father and legitimacy upon the offspring. But for people unable to trace their own history back even one generation, life can pose severe problems, not the least of which is a lack of self-knowledge and self-awareness. The regimented system of patrilineal inheritance which operated within the ranks of the English aristocracy and gentry meant that a true gentleman always knew not simply his family history, but also his personal place in the scheme of things. He was his father's heir, and it was supposed that he would go on to have sons of his own: hence his place within the social fabric was secured by the binding threads which existed between legitimate ancestors and descendants. To have no such patriarchal line with which to resource one's sense of social and personal identity was to be, in effect, a permanent non-person.

While the Victorian family was seen as a divinely ordained institution designed to alleviate the isolation of the individual, the illegitimate family was in fact characterised by loneliness. As Richard Davenport-Hines has written, 'the middle class of [the] era ... turned to an idyll of the family in self-defence and then defended their precarious idyll by attacking those outside it'. (Sex, Death and Punishment, pp 115-116) The family was seen as a good deed in a naughty world, and children became increasingly important. The unlicensed sexual activity of the unmarried mother and the tainted birth of the illegitimate child came to determine

31. Thomas Docherty, On Modern Authority: The Theory and Condition of Writing 1500 to the Present Day (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987), p 110

their social identities and their low status was classified according to their deviation from a tightly defined concept of the family. Tolerated only because as outsiders in the wrong they served to reassure insiders in the right, the illegitimate were persecuted in order to prevent "the outside" looking like a valid option. Hence the hounding of bastards, lunatics, homosexuals and fallen women which was part and parcel of the cult of the family was also designed to entrench the frontiers of decent society.

The tragic counterpart of the child who cannot know his father is the father who does not know his child. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted, 'There is a sense in which the very notion of paternity is itself, as Stephen Dedalus put it in Ulysses, a "legal fiction", a story requiring imagination, if not faith. A man cannot verify his fatherhood by either sense or reason, after all; that his child is *his* is in a sense a tale he tells himself to explain the child's existence.' 32 Engels believed that the concept of adulterine bastardy disturbs bourgeois society primarily on an economic level - i.e. the fear of expending one's capital to raise another man's child which will then inherit one's property. But equally unsettling is the idea of male redundancy and female anarchy inherent in this sequence of events, which had been around for centuries before Engels's radical reinterpretation. In Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale, for instance, King Leontes falsely believes that his wife Hermione is pregnant by his best friend Polixenes. From this it is but a step to believing that some unknown betrayer is also the father of seven year-old Mamillius. Though the child looks like Leontes, the jealous king cannot trust his own judgement. 'Art thou my calf?' he wonders, and even as he tries to convince himself - stating that Mamillius's small smudged nose is 'said to be a copy out of mine' - Leontes knows that such subjective "proofs" are (in the days before DNA testing at any rate) the only evidence he can ever have. When Leontes' personal conception of himself as a father is destroyed, he sees himself as a puppet-king whose authority has been completely eroded, and whose kingdom is being jeopardised by the spurious

32. Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979), p 5

offspring of his treacherous queen in league with a foreign ruler. He perceives a clear link between his disputed fatherhood and his role as "father" of his country.

The extent to which women could threaten the patriarchal culture through their deviance from accepted sexual norms led to a perceived moral taint inherited from the mother attaching to female illegitimate children in particular. As a skeleton in the closet, illegitimacy opened up a familial counterworld of crime and punishment which was inhabited by adulterers, prostitutes and deformed or misbegotten children. In Great Expectations, for example, Estella is no princess, but a convict's daughter. This is just one instance of the way in which illegitimacy could be linked with ideas of fraud and crime, and most of all with the disturbing notion of things not being what they seem: of the mysterious disparity between the surface and the substance of things. Estella's adoption, which is the direct consequence of her parents' criminality and powerlessness, sets her up as the most fraudulent of Pip's "great expectations". This dichotomy between the private and public spheres of life is also presented in the convention of the bastard as a talented actor or actress - i.e. as a person whose business in life is being other people - which was perfected by Wilkie Collins.

The fatherless foundling is a key figure for an author keen to explore the idea of a self which is struggling to escape - or at any rate to expand - the parameters of its allotted place within or outside society. The bastard, like the orphan, is free to experiment in self-created history in a way that those who are bound to living relatives and past generations can never be. It is true that the bastard has no one to vouch for him, but working alone can develop great qualities of stamina and dynamism, as well as a strong instinct for survival. In Elizabethan drama, as Alison Findlay has pointed out, because he has to stand on his own two feet to such an extent, the bastard was often presented as especially cunning and sharp-witted. In the words of John Donne, 'sith Lawes robb them of Succession and civill benefits they should have some thing else equivalent ... so Bastards *de jure* should have better witts and abilities.' (Problems and Paradoxes, in Findlay, 'Bastard in Elizabethan Drama', p 36) Characters

such as Miss Wade, Magdalen Vanstone, Lydia Gwilt, Harold Transome and Tito Melema uphold and intensify this convention. Like the orphan and the fallen woman, the bastard emerges as one of those ominous shrouded figures who stand silhouetted on the horizon of the Victorian consciousness, calling into question the values of those who would exclude them. Yet bastardy could be even worse than orphanage, for in Dickens's words '[not] an orphan in the wide world can be so deserted as the child who is an outcast from a living parent's love.' (DS p 423) Being illegitimate was like turning up for a job interview with neither references nor CV, or going to a party uninvited. Once there, however, the bastard could always try to bluff or gatecrash.

In spite of the apparent incongruity of positing links between illegitimacy and inheritance, the novelists found the economic dimension of the subject irresistible. Surprisingly this proved a very fertile subject. The bastard was conventionally supposed to have nothing to do with money, property, names, titles or anything else that could be inherited or transmitted, but these three writers substantially undermined this rule. The legal system which upheld the status quo became the subject of some of the most withering satire they ever wrote. In Bleak House, for example, the personal story of the illegitimate Esther Summerson is counterpointed by the law in action, which disinherits everyone it can lay its hands on. Names rarely fit, or come to mean the exact opposite of what they appear to signify. Property - which is supposed to come via patrilineal descent - disappears: Richard Carstone is destroyed by his position as a potential beneficiary in the case of Jarndyce vs Jarndyce. Names should be passed on from parent to child, but several characters have either a name missing, a false name or more unhelpful names than they know what to do with. The law inexorably shreds family ties and long-established patterns of descent: Mr Gridley, for instance, becomes just 'the man from Shropshire' in the eyes of the law, which, ironically, jails *him* for contempt. (BH p 268) Selfish Mr Turveydrop, who 'wouldn't let his son have any name, if he could take it from him', symbolises the process of bad parenting which goes on at every level of society in the novel. (BH p 244)

Being illegitimate can lead into the existential and metaphysical question of a person's right to exist at all. In the classic Victorian novel, the main protagonists find time to discuss, and even to philosophise about the major cultural issues of their day. People fall in love, marry, have children, take jobs, inherit fortunes and titles, and generally feel themselves in control of their own destinies, making or marring their own lives at will. But illegitimate characters rarely manage to do this without some degree of nervous exhaustion or psychosomatic trauma. They aspire to the lifestyle of the romantic Victorian hero or heroine, but they consistently fail. The idea of the illegitimate child as one who should never have been born and whose psychopathology thus requires intensive study culminates in Dickens's portrayal of Esther Summerson. As she declares, 'I felt as if I knew it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had never breathed ... I was so confused and shaken, as to be possessed by a belief that it was right, and had been intended, that I should die in my birth; and that it was wrong, and not intended, that I should be then alive.' (BH p 569)

The situations in which illegitimate characters find themselves with regard to the notion of the place they hold in the world (and all that that implies) tells us a great deal about their creators' concerns. In George Eliot's Felix Holt, for example, Transome Court, when we first see it, seems impervious to change. In reality, however, it is threatened by precisely those people who appear to be its guardians: the forceful and dynamic heir, the matriarch who has preserved the property during her son's prolonged absence abroad, and the diligent family lawyer. And these private matters of the great family are not shrouded in impenetrable secrecy as its members suppose: they are in fact common gossip among the lower classes whom they despise. Illegitimacy, with its interrelated secrets of sex, class and economics, is the Achilles heel of the dying aristocracy, because the aristocracy's power - vested in land and property - is dependent upon an unbroken and unchallengeable line of male descent. Early in the novel, a garrulous coachman feels free to tell his passengers, as they drive past the grounds, that 'heir or no heir, Lawyer Jermyn had had his picking out of the estate. Not a door in his big house but was the finest polished oak, all got off the Transome estate. If anybody liked to

believe he paid for it, they were welcome'. With exquisite economy and irony, George Eliot makes it clear that the Transome family - and the system they represent - is in deep trouble. (FH p 83)

The bastard's declassé social position not only allowed the Victorian writer to examine the important aspects of his society's class structure, but also gave him or her access to the sexual and economic dimensions of this crucial theme. The usual pattern is for the bastard's father to be of higher rank than the mother: this is true of Anne Catherick, Madonna Grice, Rosanna Spearman, Hetty Sorrel's child, Joshua Rigg, Maypole Hugh, Alice Marwood and Arthur Clennam. However in the cases of Simple Sally, Esther Summerson and Harold Transome, the mother (who all too successfully covers up her sexual sin and goes on to live a tortured life of stifling sham respectability) is socially superior to the father. In the vast majority of these cases, both the working-class girl who is overpowered by the power, money and status vested in her upper-class seducer and the upper-class woman who falls victim to her passion for a middle-class man come to a very bad end indeed.

The question of parenting looms large in any discussion of the unmarried mother and her child, but the attitude of the father is also of considerable importance. What kind of raising do illegitimate children get, and why? Are their parents necessarily feckless, uncaring or cruel? Why does society prevent potentially good child-rearers such as Lady Dedlock and Emma Farnaby from raising their illegitimate babies? In these novels, problematic parent/child relationships often assume a vital economic, sexual or political dimension: this is most obviously true of Bleak House, Felix Holt and The Fallen Leaves. In Bleak House, for instance, when Caddy Jellyby calls her parents 'asses', the illegitimate Esther Summerson is appalled, and reminds her of her 'duty as a child.' Caddy replies sharply, 'O don't talk of duty as a child, Miss Summerson; where's Ma's duty as a parent? ... You are shocked, I dare say! Very well, so am I shocked too; so we are both shocked, and there's an end of it!' (BH pp 96-97) Given the increasing attention paid to the role and position of each member of the nuclear family in the mid-nineteenth

century, questions like Caddy's tap into a fundamental stratum of Victorian thought.

Literary stereotypes always relate back to the specific cultural and historical context which engendered them. Deliberately simplistic, their existence in mid-nineteenth century England implied that respectable society had isolated and targetted certain sexual scapegoats who symbolised potentially uncontainable elements of human love and sex which most Victorians would rather not have had to face. We know that the writers upheld certain stereotypes of the fallen woman, but they relied heavily on existing bastard stereotypes too. The Jacobean idea of the bastard as a misbegotten freak, for instance, most obviously lingers on in the works of Wilkie Collins: Lydia Gwilt's drug addiction, the physical handicaps of Madonna Grice and Rosanna Spearman and the madness of Anne Catherick provide just a few examples. In this context it may be relevant to note that by the 1860s, conditions such as deafness, blindness, heart damage, spinal meningitis, paralysis of the limbs and softening of the brain (paresis) were all diagnosed as possible symptoms of tertiary syphilis, as Richard Davenport-Hines has noted. (Sex, Death and Punishment, p 18) Again, in Little Dorrit, when the mild-mannered Mr Meagles accuses the illegitimate Miss Wade of lesbianism, he is unconsciously linking the bastard with the idea of sexual perversion. (LD p 379) The traditional conception of the bastard as a "natural" - that is, as one unrecognised by society, but with a strong affinity to nature and the elements - is interestingly handled in the figure of Maypole Hugh in Barnaby Rudge. Hugh's father, Sir John Chester, persists in seeing his illegitimate son as a comic doltish simpleton incapable of rational thought or civilised behaviour. In fact, his animal nature makes the 'handsome satyr' extremely dangerous. The concept of the bastard as a destructive malcontent who attacks the foundations of his society either in order to force an entry or simply to smash things up was well established: the difference was that in the nineteenth century, writers were more ready to assess the extent to which society was itself responsible for his antisocial behaviour.

Sometimes the strength of the pre-existent stereotype is revealed by the writer's insistence on subverting it, as when *Oliver Twist's* legitimate half-brother Monks is the degenerate syphilitic "bastard" who dare not use his father's name. Oliver himself, of course, in spite of being a workhouse brat, exhibits the paradigmatic traits of the love-child of the Romantic era. Yet the essential amorality of the bastard, which had been accepted as plain fact for centuries, continued to exert a considerable hold on the Victorian imagination. George Eliot even recycles the traditional parricide motif, although in *Romola* and *Felix Holt* it is figurative rather than literal. Her conception of bastardy is more brutal and primeval than either Dickens's or Collins's, and she binds into her novels rather un-Victorian echoes of Greek drama and Shakespearean tragedy. Tito Melema for one (who is, of course, supposed to be one of Machiavelli's contemporaries) recognises no law or custom which can prevent him attaining what he sees as his proper place in society. Another such is Collins's Percival Glyde, who acts ruthlessly and decisively against anyone who threatens his security and status.

One of the most interesting points to emerge from Alison Findlay's study of illegitimacy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama is the bastard's habit of engaging in direct speech with the audience. Their many soliloquies suggest that the bastard was seen to have a 'special closeness with the spectators, through a shared viewpoint, on the periphery of the play's events.' ('Bastard in Elizabethan Drama', p 293) It is significant that the bastard's detachment was seen to make him an ideal commentator upon events for the benefit of the onlookers. This way of presenting the bastard's case in a way designed to get the audience on-side crops up in two forms within the Victorian novel. The most famous illegitimate "soliloquy" in English fiction consists in those portions of *Bleak House* narrated by Esther Summerson, who pointedly chooses to share her innermost thoughts and feelings with her readers rather than with her fellow characters. In Wilkie Collins's novels - which were frequently adapted for the stage in any case - illegitimate characters regularly make defiant, rational or emotional appeals for the readers' sympathy. It is more common, however, for the omniscient Victorian narrator to function as the choric figure who comments on the action. Novels in which this

tendency is particularly striking include Bleak House, No Name and Daniel Deronda.

Most of the bastards in Victorian literature have very little in common with their real-life counterparts who were born in the "Bastilles" or workhouses because their parents had never got round to setting a wedding date, or their fathers had decided that they didn't want to know. As a literary convention, illegitimacy often clearly implies an author's social attitudes, but the way in which bastard characters help to structure a fiction is useful only for what it tells us about contemporary standards and values, and not in any social or historical sense. The Victorians occasionally used the bastard to demonstrate what they saw as a social truth, but that this was not their primary purpose may be seen in Collins's No Name. The realistic aspect of the theme is to be found in the story of the maidservant, Louisa, and it is over and done with in just a few pages. The dazzling career of the illegitimate Magdalen Vanstone, which forms the kernel of the novel, has nothing to do with "realism" per se, even though it is of course founded on legal "facts". The twists and turns of the plot are grotesque rather than naturalistic, but there is no sign that Collins wanted them to be any other way.

The biggest difference between the historian's bastard and the novelist's bastard is age. Historians are concerned with the story of the unmarried mother and her child: the adulthood of the real-life bastard can only be guessed at. The writer, on the other hand, wants above all to know how they grow up: his fundamental interest is the ways in which they develop and the underlying reasons which govern this.

As we follow the writers' clues towards unravelling their mysteries of hidden birth and parentage, we are actually retracing our steps to that time when the estranged parents of the illegitimate child were still together. The relationships of Lady Dedlock and Captain Hawdon, Mrs Transome and Mr Jermyn, and Mr Fairlie and Mrs Catherick are present only in lack, yet the discovery of this parentage is crucial for both the reader and the novel's illegitimate child. In a sense, the unfortunate history of the bastard tracks the parents' original sin.

The techniques that Dickens, Collins and George Eliot employed to structure their meanings were dazzlingly varied. Their complex plots undoubtedly tell us a great deal about the nature of their individual enterprises, but the texture of their prose - particularly at junctures which appear to be conscious or unconscious textual stress-points - also impacts directly upon the theme of illegitimacy in a powerful and dramatic manner. In other words, it is necessary to look at precisely *how* they wrote about illegitimacy, and to examine their novels on a level beyond that of the plot alone. We must look at what is said, and what is left unsaid: at the deductions the author seems happy for us to make, and the implications which he or she may subconsciously wish to deny. Is the syntax tortuous or relaxed? Is the prose ambiguous or simple, enigmatic or clear-cut, jerky or smooth? Is the tone ironic or moralistic, passionate or detached, angry or amused? Only by dealing with all these elements of style and tone, and the fictional tools of irony, satire, pathos and humour over and above simple plot or action can we approach an understanding of what bastardy meant for these writers, both as individuals and as representatives of Victorian society. Illegitimacy is both a socio-historical reality, and a metaphor which reveals some of the most important preoccupations of the mid-Victorian novelists. So powerful was their treatment of the theme, in fact, that their literary investigations may well have shaped the consciousness of their fellow Victorians, helping to liberalise the harsh attitudes which had come to dominate contemporary thought on the subject. The illegitimacy motif is one of the most powerful metaphorical statements of the nineteenth-century novelists' critique of their society.

## CHAPTER 2.

### CHARLES DICKENS: THE DRAMA OF THE ABUSED CHILD.

#### i. 'Oliver Twist': The Workhouse Brat

Although the name of Dickens's first child-hero reveals the young writer's awareness of the existence of stereotyped illegitimates, the way in which he subverts them is perhaps a clear acknowledgement of the power and authority of the convention. A surname is attached to the orphan child for ease of identification, and as a bastard born in a workhouse, he is given a name which reflects his perceived inheritance. In the eyes of the authorities, fate has decreed that Oliver will meet his end twitching at the end of a rope. In defiance of all such expectations, however, he proves immune to the processes of socialisation. Fagin's strenuous attempts to make Oliver a useful little criminal are consistently thwarted by the child's inherent predisposition to angelic goodness. Unlike Dickens's other illegitimate characters, the parish-boy is not scarred by the searing traumas consequent upon his birth. Seemingly a classic victim, fragile, innocent and vulnerable, a whole pack of villains are sacrificed so that he may join the middle-class society inhabited by his parents. If Fagin the fence, Nancy the whore, Sikes the murderer and Monks the syphilitic sexual deviant die, then the illegitimate child who cost his mother her life may survive. The eventual fate of the bastard's whipping-boys tells us a great deal about Dickens's understanding of the fictional possibilities of the subject.

Oliver is the result of the tragic love affair between the good and beautiful Agnes Fleming and the unhappily married Edwin Leeford. Although the innocent Oliver is technically Leeford's illegitimate son, the despicable Monks is the real bastard, ideologically speaking. Symbolically, while he does not bear his father's name, he *does* bear the physical signs of sexual overindulgence, being riddled with syphilis. These factors clearly presuppose the existence of a bastard stereotype,

for Dickens is banking on his readers recognising and agreeing to subvert an existing fictional character.

Dickens counterpoints the illicit but somehow honourable relationship of Oliver's parents with an array of warped couplings designed to upset his readers' conventional notions of what constituted a proper relationship - Sikes and Nancy, for instance, Mr Bumble and Mrs Corney, and most of all Leeford and his corrupt wife. But in the eyes of the authorities, the tragic and glamorous tale of Oliver's parents becomes just another version of 'the old story', to use the words of the surgeon who attends Agnes at the birth of her child. Shaking his head, he declares, 'no wedding-ring, I see.' (OT p 47) Within minutes, the baby's transformation and categorisation is complete. From being the result of a star-crossed romance, Oliver suddenly becomes the archetypal pauper bastard, as Dickens makes plain in a passage replete with the gallows humour which dominates the novel:

Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; - it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have fixed his station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes, which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once - a parish child - the orphan of a workhouse - the humble half-starved drudge - to be cuffed and buffeted through the world, - despised by all, and pitied by none. (OT p 47)

Dickens's spirited criticism of the workhouse system was far from popular. Richard Ford, writing in 1839, declared that 'Oliver Twist ... is directed against the poor-law and workhouse system, and in our opinion with much unfairness. The abuses which he ridicules are not only exaggerated, but in nineteen cases out of twenty do not at all exist. Boz so rarely mixes up politics, or panders to vulgar prejudices about serious things, that we regret to see him joining an outcry which is partly factious, partly sentimental, partly interested.'<sup>1</sup> Justin McCarthy, in 1864, declared that 'the Poor Laws had just been improved

1. Richard Ford, Quarterly Review 64, (June 1839), in Philip Collins (ed), Dickens: The Critical Heritage (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p 84

when Oliver Twist exposed the horrors of the workhouse system.' 2 In fact the new legislation had been in force for a good three years when Dickens was writing, which was quite long enough for its flaws to have been shown up. Moreover, just what "improvements" he had in mind, the critic does not say.

Robert Tracy has argued persuasively that Dickens was well into his story (which was being serially published in Bentley's Miscellany) before he decided to make Oliver 'the hero of a conventional melodramatic plot of dispossession' and that the writer's originality consists in his failure to miraculously legitimise Oliver in the end by recovering his mother's marriage lines from a dusty hiding place. 3 Yet Oliver's middle-class social and financial reinstatement seems less than satisfactory. Dickens provides not the haziest sketch of his future life as an independent adult. In the final pages of the novel, when he is referred to as Rose Maylie's 'dead sister's child' or Mr Brownlow's 'adopted child' rather than 'the parish-boy', it seems evasive rather than descriptive, and the circumlocutions ensure that his illegitimate origins remain perilously close to the surface. The family secret is never properly buried. George Cruickshank, who illustrated Oliver Twist, wanted the final plate to be a cosy fireside scene depicting Oliver safely nestling in the bosom of his family, but Dickens insisted on a sombre picture of Rose and her nephew beside Agnes's memorial tablet. Robert Tracy uses this picture to speculate that Oliver may not survive. Agnes's pure white marble monument bears only her name, and hence her family have eradicated any "impurities" which society might have associated with it. The narrator 'hopes' it will be many years before anyone else's name is added to it. Since we know that Agnes's sister Rose has a future as the mother of a large family, who but young Oliver is destined to join his mother? ('The Old Story', p 25)

2. Justin McCarthy, 'Modern Novelists: Charles Dickens', Westminster Review 26 (October 1864), in Collins (ed), Critical Heritage p 573

3. Robert Tracy, "'The Old Story" and Inside Stories: Modish Fictions and Fictional Modes in Oliver Twist', Dickens Studies Annual 17, (1988), p 5

Although Dickens renders some aspects of the illegitimate child's passage through life grimly and comically hyper-realistic, Oliver Twist is a melodrama, and not a "realistic" story. Oliver's illegitimacy taps into and reinforces Dickens's Rousseauesque belief in the nobility and innocence of the child of nature. Oliver thrives in the countryside and shrivels in the city because the countryside is where his legitimate family is based, whereas London is the domain of the criminal gang who wants to bastardise him. When Fagin and Monks come to the Maylies' little cottage looking for the little boy, they symbolically represent the probable destiny of a pauper bastard - that destiny which the author wants us to believe Oliver can escape. Yet the child's Wordsworthian pastoral idyll simply cannot withstand the forces of reality:

Oliver knew, perfectly well, that he was in his own little room; that his books were lying on the table before him; that the sweet air was stirring among the creeping plants outside. And yet he was asleep. Suddenly, the scene changed; the air became close and confined; and he thought, with a glow of terror, that he was in the Jew's house again. There sat the hideous old man, in his accustomed corner, pointing at him, and whispering to another man, with his face averted, who sat beside him ... Oliver awoke with the fear, and started up ... There - there - at the window - close before him - so close, that he could have almost touched him before he started back: with his eyes peering into the room, and meeting his: there stood the Jew! And beside him, white with rage or fear, or both, were the scowling features of the very man who had accosted him in the inn-yard.

It was but an instant, a glance, a flash, before his eyes; and they were gone. But they had recognised him, and he them; and their look was as firmly impressed upon his memory, as if it had been deeply carved in stone, and set before him from his birth. He stood transfixed for a moment; then, leaping from the window into the garden, called loudly for help. (OT pp 309-311)

Oliver's waking nightmare reveals just how difficult it was for Dickens to dramatise his belief that illegitimate children were not born corrupt, when their deprived social circumstances made it virtually certain that they would end up that way. Richard Ford, writing in the Quarterly Review, was extremely hostile to Dickens's thesis, believing that to pretend that patterns of criminal socialisation did not happen was pernicious and potentially misleading for the young, the poor and the ignorant:

The whole tale rivals in improbabilities those stories in which the hero at his birth is cursed by a wicked fairy and protected by a good one; but Oliver himself, to whom all these improbabilities happen, is the most improbable of all. He is represented to be a pattern of modern excellence, guileless himself, and measuring others by his own innocence; delicate and high-minded, affectionate, noble, brave, generous, with the manners of a son of a most distinguished gentleman, not only uncorrupted but incorruptible; less absurd would it be to expect to gather grapes on thorns, to find pearls in dunghills, violets in Drury Lane, or make silk purses out of sows' ears. Boz, in his accurate representation of Noah Claypole, shows that he knows how much easier the evil principle is developed than the good. He draws the certain effects of certain causes. Workhouse boys are not born with original virtue; nor was anyone except Daniel exposed to wild beasts without being eaten up. We are not afraid that the rational portion of Boz's readers may be misled by examples which they know never did and never can exist in reality, and which they presume were invented in order to exaggerate the pathos, and throw by contrast an additional horror on vice: yet the numerical majority of the young, and of the lower orders - (for whom books in shilling Numbers have the appearance of being mainly designed) - judge from feelings, and are fascinated by the brilliant fallacies which reach the head through the heart ... our apprehension is that, in spite of honest intentions, he may be found practically a co-operator with those whose aim is to degrade the national mind - well knowing that in a pure and healthy atmosphere of opinion their own gaudy fictions must wither as soon as blown. His *implied* negation of the inevitable results of evil training has a tendency to countenance their studied sentimentalization of the genus *scamp*. (Quarterly Review in Collins Critical Heritage pp 84-85)

Dickens was so eager to prove that Oliver had no inherited predisposition to crime that he failed to show that circumstances would probably lead to a child in his position being socialised into it in any case. What he wanted to show was that workhouse boys were not born into sin, but as Ford suggests, what he actually showed (with Oliver at any rate) was that they were born peerless. It is a case of his eagerness not allowing him to present a balanced view of the case - that is the story of a child born into the workhouse who was neither a saint like Oliver nor a psychopath like Claypole.

Although Dickens portrays the bastard as morally safe in the pastoral sphere dominated by his family, 'set before him from his birth' is the possibility that his illegitimacy is a moral Achilles heel. In his dream, Oliver's birth secret is symbolically personified by Fagin, who introduces him to a criminal life, and Monks, whose legitimate

status is a constant reminder of the fact that Oliver is the child who should never have been born. For all that the young Dickens desires to convince us that Oliver can shake off his inheritance, the tone of this passage insistently undercuts that message, and although Oliver escapes from Fagin twice, he is always in danger of recapture. The message seems unmistakable: the bastard can never be free of his inheritance. The cycle of imprisonment and escape which dominates his story makes the ending of the novel seemed forced and arbitrary. It is as if Dickens has cut it off at this point in order to convince us that Oliver can have a happy ending, and that if it were taken any further, his story would inevitably end in tragedy.

ii. 'Barnaby Rudge': The Natural Child

Maypole Hugh in Barnaby Rudge symbolises Dickens's belief that bad parenting and irresponsible citizenship are variants of the same antisocial crime. The actions of Sir John Chester MP, 'soft-spoken, delicately made, precise and elegant', (BR p 143) demonstrate a thoughtless contempt for the rules and traditions of both family and society, as he disinherits his two sons and incites a rioting mob to burn down his enemy's house. The gentleman and parliamentarian whose private and public behaviour so grotesquely parodies the basic laws of good government is one of Dickens's most dangerous revolutionary characters. According to John Lucas, Chester is more than merely careless: he hastens the downfall of his order 'by the wilful destruction of lineage', and in disinheriting Edward, his son and heir, because of his "unnatural" choice of bride, Chester wipes out his family. 4 Dickens makes Sir John's destructive capability even clearer with regard to his unacknowledged bastard son, and the guilt engendered by this particularly savage betrayal issues in the form of a nightmare:

He ... had not slept long when he started up and thought that Hugh was at the outer door, calling in a strange voice, very different from

4. John Lucas, The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens's Novels (Methuen, 1970), p 98

his own, to be admitted. The delusion was so strong upon him, and was so full of that vague terror of the night in which such visions have their being, that he rose, and taking his sheathed sword in his hand, opened the door, and looked out upon the staircase, and towards the spot where Hugh had lain asleep; and even spoke to him by name. But all was dark and quiet ... (BR p 280)

When Hugh leads the attack upon the Warren, he is acting under his father's orders, and in the end he is hanged for Chester's crimes. According to convention, he was born to crime in any case, having inherited the bad blood of his murderous gypsy harlot of a mother, but in fact Hugh is trained to it by his genteel and wellbred father. As Sir John remarks:

I fear, I *do* fear exceedingly, that my friend is following fast in the footsteps of his mother. His intimacy with Mr Dennis [the hangman] is very ominous. But I have no doubt he must have come to that end any way. If I lend him a helping hand, the only difference is, that he may, upon the whole, possibly drink a few gallons, or puncheons, or hogsheads, less in this life than he otherwise would. It's no business of mine. It's a matter of very small importance! (BR pp 380-381)

The dichotomy between Chester's casual tone and perfectly measured syntax and his subject matter is reinforced by his subsequent actions, as 'he [takes] another pinch of snuff, and [goes] to bed.' (BR p 381)

In the early stages of the novel, Dickens manages to whip up a considerable amount of sympathy for Hugh in spite of his evil designs on the heroine, Dolly Varden. Although he is variously described by his disapproving contemporaries as 'a dreadful idle vagrant fellow' and a 'poaching rascal', these phrases are humorous rather than disturbing. (BR p 127/p 138) Moreover his character contains semi-legendary and mythical elements which give him a sort of primitive grandeur by association. Dickens may have tried to add an extra dimension of horror to Hugh's harassment of the terrified Dolly by setting the "rape scene" in a classical context, but equally he seems to have felt that portraying Hugh as a 'handsome satyr' or bold 'centaur' somehow lessened the impact of his propensity for sexual violence. (BR p 239/p 670)

One of Chester's smug intellectual witticisms at his son's expense links Hugh with Bruin, the bear in the medieval fable of Reynard the Fox. (BR p 378) Phiz's portrait of the sleeping Hugh depicts a powerfully handsome man who appears to conform to the Rousseauesque idea of the noble savage, in accordance with Dickens's description of 'a young man, of a hale athletic figure, and a giant's strength, whose sunburnt face and swarthy throat, overgrown with jet black hair, might have served a painter for a model.' (BR p 138) With the ability to find 'his way blindfold to any place within a dozen miles' of the Maypole, and an encyclopedic knowledge of animals and plants, Hugh is perfectly suited to living wild in the countryside. (BR p 326) His pleasures are so purely animal that even in the condemned cell he declares that 'To eat, and drink, and go to sleep, as long as I stay here, is all I care for. If there was but a little more sun to bask in, than can find its way into this cursed place, I'd lie in it all day, and not trouble myself to sit or stand up once.' (BR p 669)

The tragic possibilities of Hugh's situation are subtly drawn to the reader's attention when one of Dickens's running mottoes likens him to Orson, the unfortunate hero of a fifteenth-century legend. As a child, Orson was carried off by a bear, which raised him like one of her own cubs. He became the Wild Man of the Forest and the terror of all France, until he was rescued by his brother Valentine. Hugh's story, shorn of all fairy-tale elements, is even more brutal and horrific: he is abandoned rather than kidnapped, his savage mother is human rather than animal, and the best his more fortunate brother can do for him is to provide a decent burial for him after his execution.

Even in the latter stages of Barnaby Rudge, as he 'wallow[s] like some obscene animal, in [his] squalor and wickedness', Hugh can still feel a sense of shame at his own degraded position when he compares himself with the naive and innocent Barnaby, for whom he still feels 'a ferocious friendship'. (BR p 478/p 485) There is still some trace of good in him: at the very height of the riots, while still acting under Chester's orders, he manages to save John Willet from serious injury. (BR p 498) Yet the fairy-tale imagery which clings to him is becoming

ever more blackly and grotesquely comic: when he captures Dolly Varden, Hugh is shown 'starling] into the chaise [at her] like an ogre into his larder.' (BR p 536)

When he hears the news that his son has been condemned to death, John Chester's flippant reaction points to a macabre way - maybe the only way - in which a degraded criminal bastard may leave something of himself to posterity. Unable to inherit or pass on any name, property or fortune, alienated from everyone save an idiot and a dog, Hugh's sole contribution to society is the result of his death. What he has to leave is not bequeathed by him but bespoken by someone else, as Chester comments:

And my friend the centaur goes the way of his mamma! I am not surprised ... The centaur would make a very handsome preparation in Surgeons' Hall, and would benefit science extremely. I hope they have taken care to bespeak him. (BR p 671)

The story of Hugh's mother, with its melodramatic conventions of disguise, revenge, secrecy and seduction, foreshadows the stories of the fallen women Alice Marwood in Dombey and Son and Molly in Great Expectations. Superficially Hugh and Estella would seem to have nothing whatsoever in common, and indeed their characters could not be more different. Yet in fact they are both the children of sexually jealous passionate gypsy women, and in each case the bastard child is used by its alienated and defiant mother to destabilise the patriarchal society. Hugh's mother wants him to concentrate on engineering the downfall of his father alone, but in Estella, the more astute Miss Havisham finds a weapon with which to undermine the security and position of all members of the ruling sex.

Although virtually all Dickens's bastards are tainted by crime either personally or parentally, Hugh is the only one to be judicially murdered. His scaffold speech - by far the longest he gives in the whole of the novel - reveals him to be the true son of his mother. This was only to have been expected, and yet Dickens subverts the conventional idea that the bastard necessarily inherits his bad blood from the maternal side by hanging Hugh for his father's crimes. He may

indeed 'go the way of his mamma', but it is his honoured and respectable father who sets him on that path, as Hugh, 'a savage prophet whom the near approach of Death had filled with inspiration', recognises at last:

What ... should teach me - me, born as I was born, and reared as I have been reared - to hope for any mercy in this hardened, cruel, unrelenting place! ... On that black tree, of which I am the ripened fruit, I do invoke the curse of all its victims, past and present, and to come. (BR p 695)

In thus addressing a great crowd, Hugh is following in the footsteps of both his parents. His mother had made a scaffold speech of her own years before, of course, but we must not overlook the fact that as a parliamentarian, Sir John must also have spent much of his time arguing, debating and trying to convince his listeners of the essential truth of what he was saying. When Hugh speaks, however, Chester is cursed both for his own sake and for his mother's. It seems that when the bastard ultimately has to choose between his maternal and paternal inheritances of shame, crime and vengeance, he instinctively allies himself with his mother as a fellow victim of John Chester, from whom their criminality derived in the first place. In pleading for some generous person to take care of his dog when he is gone, Hugh symbolically links himself with her once more. The animal is adopted by Barnaby Rudge, the only person for whom Hugh has ever felt the slightest degree of kinship, affection or sympathy. As he looks at Barnaby on the scaffold there is 'something kind, and even tender, struggling in his fierce aspect', and his eagerness to shoulder the blame for having thoughtlessly involved the simpleton in the riots contrasts with his total lack of concern for himself. (BR p 695) Their fundamental closeness is deeply symbolic of course, for as Gordon Spence has noted, Barnaby and Hugh 'are, respectively, idiotic and bestial owing to the criminality and irresponsibility of their unknown fathers.'

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5. Gordon Spence, Introduction to Barnaby Rudge, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p 25

iii. 'Dombey and Son': The Fallen Woman

In Dombey and Son the common prostitute Alice Marwood is recognised as a kindred soul by Edith Dombey, who is herself involved in a rather more discreet and elaborate form of concubinage, the Victorian marriage system. The symbolic pairing of these two characters enables Dickens to play around with the conventional stereotype of the degraded fallen woman in a way which reveals its hollowness and artificiality. Alice is sexually betrayed and abandoned by James Carker, who is in turn sexually betrayed and abandoned by Edith. In a sense, she is the avenging image of the powerless outcast Alice, who has been forced out of respectable society by the forces of chance and circumstance, and the class-based law of the social jungle.

The name Alice is derived from an old German word meaning "of noble kind", while Edith is from the old English for "rich" and "warlike". Dickens's interest in given names and their etymology parallels his invention of fantastic and suggestive surnames for the characters in his novels. In Dombey and Son, 'Marwood' and 'Skewton' undermine the promise of the proud forenames Alice and Edith by conjuring up images of women who are crooked or spoiled. The extreme idealisation of saintly Victorian womanhood is grotesquely parodied when Dickens declares that in Alice Marwood - bastard, whore and transported convict - there shines 'a ray of the departed radiance of the fallen angel.' (DS p 572)

When he mentions Alice and Ma Brown, Dickens employs a tone of heavy and pointed sarcasm, below the surface of which lurks a terrible and chilling irony:

Were this miserable mother, and this miserable daughter, only the reduction to their lowest grade, of certain social vices sometimes prevailing higher up? In this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting place? Allowing for great differences of stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among gentle blood at all?

Say, Edith Dombey! And Cleopatra, best of mothers, let us have your testimony! (DS p 579)

These final thumping paralleled sentences ended one of the serial episodes of Dombey and Son on a note of almost hysterical authorial scorn. At this point, only Dickens knows that the massive social gulf between Alice and Edith is entirely consequent upon the circumstances of Alice's birth. They are separated neither by blood nor class: no 'great differences of stuff and texture' exist at all, and they are in fact cut from the same cloth. As Ma Brown declares, Alice 'has been turned away from, and cast out, but she could boast relationship to proud folks too, if she chose. Ah! To proud folks. There's relationship without your clergy and your wedding rings - they may make it, but they can't break it - and my daughter's well related. Show me Mrs Dombey, and I'll show you my Alice's first cousin.' (DS p 921)

Alice returns from the penal colony in Australia at around the same time as Edith returns from her honeymoon in Paris with Paul Dombey. These parallel foreign journeys at first seem to symbolise their subservient sexual status as women in a patriarchal society, although ostensibly Alice's period of enforced suffering is now over, while Edith's is just beginning. In reality, however, while Alice is still haunted by her past yet unable to avenge it, Edith will never submit to either of the men who seek to master her. Dickens braids together the threads of their twinned destinies until Alice's penitent death and Edith's voluntary exile. For Mrs Dombey, her cousin comes to fulfill the function of Dorian Gray's portrait: 'she saw upon her face some traces which she knew were lingering in her own soul, if not yet written on that index'. (DS p 662) The scene in which they meet for the first and only time is blatantly improbable, but Dickens was after more than simple "realism" here. In a similar scene in George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, Gwendolen Harleth proves incapable of Edith's brave feat of imaginative recognition. Although she sees a terrible warning about the possibilities of 'a woman's life' in Lydia Glasher's face, Gwendolen fails to make the connection between the fallen woman's previous sexual humiliation by Henleigh Grandcourt and her own potential suffering. While her overheated imagination has already conjured up a melodramatic vision of unnerving menace, she does not recognise it when it is incarnated in the real-life person of Mrs Glasher. In Dombey and Son,

Alice is as aware of the situation as Edith: maliciously she tells Paul Dombey (who has already been jarred by her likeness to his wife) that 'A woman's anger is pretty much the same here, as in your fine house'. (DS p 819)

Like Edith's, Alice's pride and rage both consume and sustain. Ultimately, however, she has to rely upon her cousin for revenge, only to discover that she has lost the taste for it. Unlike Edith, who tries to keep the truth about her poisoned life from her beloved step-daughter Florence, Alice narrates her history to Harriet Carker, her seducer's sister, of all people. As she does so, she displays a strong sense of dramatic irony:

When I was young and pretty ... my mother, who had not been very mindful of me as a child, found out my merits, and was fond of me, and proud of me. She was covetous and poor, and thought to make a sort of property of me. No great lady ever thought that of a daughter yet, I'm sure, or acted as if she did - it's never done, we all know - and that shows that the only instances of mothers bringing up their daughters wrong, and evil coming of it, are among such miserable folks as us ... What came of that I needn't say. Wretched marriages don't come of such things, in our degree; only wretchedness and ruin. (DS p 847)

The gap behind Alice's words which is hinted at by the line 'What came of that I needn't say' may, I believe, be filled by a history of unimagined sexual degradation which is symbolised by the pornographic pictures which line the walls of James Carker's house. Even as the fallen woman narrates her story, she is telling Edith's in the negative. The reader interprets Alice's more obvious and highly-coloured saga as a version of her cousin's eerily respectable story. At first glance it appears that because of her low birth and social status, Alice suffers a far harsher punishment than her double, whose respectability somehow cloaks her sexual sins, making them appear more shadowy and insubstantial and hence that much more difficult to define. Yet for Alice, although illegitimacy means jail and death, through Harriet Carker she eventually finds some sort of peace. Edith, on the other hand, can see no way out of her terrible life of respectability other than using Carker to make herself an outcast.

Edith's elopement subverts her position as a victim of the Victorian sexual system by enabling her to disgrace both Carker and Dombey. She is, therefore, the avenging image of Alice, who was sexually abused but had no form of redress. Since both women are insidiously attracted to the sensualist Carker, who furnishes his house with erotic pictures and dreams about rape and sexual domination, it becomes crucially important to humiliate him on sexual grounds. (DS p 866) Unconsciously, Carker wants Edith to become another Alice. The fallen woman tells her mother that to Carker, they are merely 'mud, underneath his horse's feet.' (DS p 725) Later in the same chapter, he fantasises about Edith, 'sometimes haughty and repellent at his side, and sometimes down among his horse's feet, fallen and in the dust.' (DS p 735)

By refusing to succumb to Carker's fantasy of 'Sicilian days and sensual rest' (DS p 859) and become his mistress, Edith effectively emasculates him and drives him to suicide. Carker's fatal mistake is to assume that fallen women are necessarily both degraded and powerless. They may indeed be so, if, like Alice Marwood, their personal circumstances (such as poverty or humble birth) dictate that their uncontrolled sexual behaviour makes social ostracism a virtual quid pro quo. On the other hand, there are fallen women like Edith Dombey, whom society has failed to smoke out. The latter group is clearly far more dangerous.

If we turn this idea around, Dickens is delivering a grave condemnation of Victorian society. His contemporaries are making dangerously Carkerish assumptions about the nature of women and their sexuality. Society's received wisdom with regard to illicit sex is as basically faulty as Carker's relative judgements about Edith and Alice, and its sexual system is every bit as warped and exploitative as his. Categorical divisions are dangerous as well as stupid, and those who perceive the moral grey areas of 'this round world of many circles within circles' are far better equipped to evaluate the behaviour of their fellow human beings. The illegitimate Alice may be a criminal and a prostitute, but she has been satisfactorily punished for her

offences. The conventional social deviant is easily spotted and easily disciplined: indeed, in Alice's case, her scandalous birth is the first thing which tells society to keep a watchful eye on her. The Edith Dombey's of the world are far more dangerous, because their illicit behaviour so often goes unremarked.

By branding the bastard from birth a potential troublemaker, society makes it virtually certain that he or she will become one. The radical message implicit within the story of Alice Marwood taps into one of the central themes of the novel, which involves a thorough-going critique of the vicious patriarchalism which leads to certain people being cast aside as human detritus, and encourages Florence Dombey's menacing father to grotesquely "undervalue" her:

[What] was a girl to Dombey and Son! In the capital of the House's name and dignity, such a child was merely a base coin that couldn't be invested - a bad Boy - nothing more. (DS p 51)

If Florence, like Alice, really is in a sense "base-born", perhaps Dickens, like Wilkie Collins, was coming to see that socially constructed femininity was in itself a form of "illegitimacy", especially in economic terms.

#### iv. 'Bleak House': The Child Which Should Never Have Been Born

In Bleak House Dickens produced the greatest investigative portrait of the suffering illegitimate child in the English language, in a novel in which people are obsessed with the weight of the past as represented by controversial family legacies and interrelationships. As Gordon D. Hirsch has noticed, for both Richard Carstone, who is embroiled in the long-running Chancery suit of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce, and for the illegitimate Esther Summerson, 'the actions of ... parents or ancestors are decisive in life, and each spends his life trying to come to terms with the family "legacy", whether literal or figurative.' 6

6. Gordon D Hirsch, 'The Mysteries in *Bleak House*: A Psychoanalytic Study', Dickens Studies Annual 4, (1975), p 146

There is, however, a crucial difference between the ways in which the two young people approach their respective inheritance-related problems. Whereas Richard believes that he can take on and defeat his stagnant family inheritance, Esther is convinced that hers is indelible, and that the best she can hope for is to escape its consequences.

Esther Summerson's childhood is composed entirely of gaps and blanks, of questions unanswered and information withheld. As they grow up, children begin virtually every sentence they utter with how, why, what, where or when, but this direct and easy way of finding things out is not possible for her. She has to deduce things from facts which she gathers on her own behalf: 'I had always rather a noticing way - not a quick way, O no! - a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better.' (BH pp 62-63) This early training in the skills of observation and deduction stands Esther in good stead in later life, when she has to describe the behaviour and characteristics of others for her readers. Like Arthur Clennam in Little Dorrit, Esther has to play detective in her home which is no home. As she recalls, once again going over the negative snippets of information which had slowly accumulated to perplex her:

I had never heard my mama spoken of. I had never heard of my papa either, but I felt more interested about my mama. I had never worn a black frock, that I could recollect. I had never been shown my mama's grave. I had never been told where it was. Yet I had never been taught to pray for any relation but my godmother. (BH p 63)

Then again, there is the mystery of her uncelebrated birthday - 'the most melancholy day at home, in the whole year' - a situation which Esther knows is unique, having overheard the chatter of other girls at school. (BH p 64) When she discovers (from her stern godmother's expression alone) that 'It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!' the ensuing scene - in which the familial and emotional information she has been denied for so long finally floods over her - is the turning point of her life.

The burning questions which Esther previously has not dared to ask burst forth with hysterical force. 'O dear godmother, tell me, pray do tell me, did mama die on my birthday? ... What did I do to her? How did I lose her? Why am I so different from other children, and why is it my fault, dear godmother?' (BH p 64) She is already labouring under an intense burden of guilt, believing that she has harmed or even killed her mother. The truth, as revealed by Miss Barbary, is even more dreadful. The child is guilty not simply because she has harmed her mother, but because they have harmed each other:

Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come - and soon enough - when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can ... orphaned and degraded from the first of these evil anniversaries, [you must] pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written. Forget your mother and leave all other people to forget her who will do her unhappy child the greatest kindness ... Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart. (BH p 65)

The suggestion that any child - let alone one as thoughtful and sensitive as Esther - could wilfully forget her mother after this speech is palpably absurd: indeed Miss Barbary has consciously chosen the precise way to ensure that Esther will never forget her words as long as she lives. She may not fully understand the implications of the speech (i.e. that she is illegitimate, and that a unique moral and sexual taint cleaves to her as a female child by reason of the notorious double standard) but it has nevertheless formally clarified her previously nebulous feelings of worthlessness and hatefulness. 'Imperfect as my understanding of my sorrow was,' she remembers, 'I knew that I had brought no joy, at any time, to anybody's heart, and that I was to no one upon earth what [my doll] was to me.' (BH p 65) As if her birth defect were akin to spina bifida or a hare lip, Esther decides to 'try, as hard as ever I could, *to repair the fault I had been born with* (of which I confessedly felt guilty and yet innocent), and would strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could.' (BH p 65) [My italics]

It is only after Miss Barbary's death that Esther discovers their hidden relationship. Mr Kenge tells her that her godmother was actually her aunt and 'sole relation (in fact that is; for I am bound to observe that in law you had none)'. (BH p 68) Esther's illegitimacy causes people to disown and ignore her. After Miss Barbary's stroke Esther pleads in vain for a sign that her godmother recognises her, but like Bertha Mason in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, the stern face remains 'blank, hating moonstruck.' (Penguin ed, p 107) Mr Kenge's polite legalistic contempt is taken a stage further when he informs the Lord Chancellor that Esther is not related to anyone involved with Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce: Kenge whispers to him, presumably to mention her illegitimacy, and 'His lordship, with his eyes upon his papers, listened, nodded twice or thrice, turned over more leaves, and did not look towards [her] again'. (BH p 79) The male lawyers of the Court of Chancery - which was established to safeguard the rights of helpless widows and children - administer an apparatus which transmits property through the male line and thus props up the patriarchy. As an illegitimate woman, Esther is owed no respect by the law, and she is as surely cut off from the concept of paternal inheritance as a dead person. She can inherit nothing from her father: symbolically Nemo is not only nameless but bankrupt to boot. Esther's inheritance, such as it is, comes solely from the distaff side.

Esther's behaviour-patterns reveal with startling clarity the ways in which the pressures of lovelessness (consequent upon illegitimacy) can affect an attractive and intelligent young woman. She deliberately cripples herself by taking on an overly restrictive social role in obedience to her aunt's opinions, having internalised the belief that only by keeping down her basically evil impulses can she hope to survive on society's terms. The double standard encouraged a climate of opinion in which a female illegitimate's birth seemed to manifest and symbolise her mother's dangerous sexuality. Hence Esther labours under the burden of a perceived immoral taint which stems directly from the fact that she is a woman. Her mother's prodigal sexual feeling had caused intense upheaval, and to prevent any repetition Esther must negate this ominous area of her own nature. She is a potential Lady Dedlock. This is the message which society sends her, and which her own intelligence reinforces. Her early

identification of her own unlovable personality with the absence of her mother shifts significantly with the revelation of her illegitimacy, as she learns that *she* is tainted because of her mother rather than vice versa. Hence her machinations are all calculated to show just how unlike that mother she is. In cutting herself off from her own sexuality to avoid being tarred with the same brush Esther enacts a terrible primal repression. The ways in which Dickens allows the history of her deliberate self-effacement to filter through her narrative are quite brilliant.

Esther attempts to become a fully paid-up member of society by living life second-hand: not only for but through other people. Because she feels that her own life is not worth living - indeed that it should not be lived - she tries to efface her sinful origins in order to create an entirely new identity; a strategy which proves intensely oppressive. Under this new regime, Esther can never afford to be sad, bad or unlovable. Goodness and kindness become not virtues but gambits calculated to win love, while the role of the child-woman which she adopts is supposed to avert the impending doom of her perceived sexual inheritance. The ill-fitting "Dame Durden of Bleak House" persona suppresses any thought of herself as a potentially sexual adult.

The way in which Esther lives her life - firstly as an individual, and secondly as a representative of Victorian womanhood - leads us into an examination of illegitimacy on two different levels. As well as being a potentially disabling psychological condition, it can also be seen as a complex social issue and a central "woman question". Esther becomes trapped in the extremely limited role of the angel of the house. At first sight this does not seem inappropriate: as such she will have a conventional home life and the chance to be a popular and useful member of a busy household. But this is a poor substitute for what she really wants: the chance to be an angel in her own house rather than in somebody else's. She tries always to be busy and industrious on behalf of other people so that she has no time to think or plan for herself, even becoming a helpmeet to Bleak House's omnipotent male narrator by providing a supplement to his story. She becomes a matchmaker for other young couples

in love, a confidante and chaperone rather than a participant in the business of love. Though she is barely two or three years older than Ada, Esther forces herself into a supporting role wherein she may love and be loved without ever falling in love or having anyone fall in love with her. Any romantic or sexual inclination to form a one-to-one bond with a man who wants her to share his life must be neutralised and transmuted into a safe and useful generalised concern for the welfare of an extended family. This is why she makes such strenuous efforts to cover up the growing attraction between herself and Dr Woodcourt.

The secret of Esther's birth is put forward as the reason why she is cut off from so many spheres of life and experience, yet her case is essentially only an exaggeration of the situation which prevails in everyday life. In a sense, the bastard Esther is an Everywoman for Victorian society. Her inability to inherit a name or property; her ambiguous feelings about where she fits into society; her estrangement from the law; the intensely claustrophobic social role which is imposed upon her; her suppressed and denied sexuality: all these points are generally applicable to the status of almost all women in the nineteenth century. What happens to Esther - in the realms of both events and emotions - on account of her illegitimacy is Dickens's metaphor for the daily punishments dealt out to women living under male rules.

Clearly Esther's illegitimacy affects both her perception of her own sexual nature and the way in which she relates to other people. As Crawford Kilian has commented, 'Dickens has created in Esther not a cardboard heroine but a real person trying to turn herself into a cardboard heroine; her search for an identity in such an unpromising direction produces ironically ambiguous results.'<sup>7</sup> Esther prepares a surface as conscientiously as Mrs General in Little Dorrit, but her cover-up is considerably less successful. The frequency with which she takes refuge in tears and apologies, literally dragging her new-minted persona back on to the straight and narrow, reveals that the task she has set herself is

7. Crawford Kilian, 'In Defence of Esther Summerson', Dalhousie Review 54, (Summer 1974), p 319

almost impossible. The very last thing one orders a depressive to do is pull herself together, but this is just what Esther constantly tells herself. Believing that Dr Woodcourt is lost to her, Esther receives John Jarndyce's proposal of marriage with emotions so mixed that she is ashamed of them. Her new and sexless self numbers the many reasons why she should be grateful for the offer, and happy to marry a kindly old man (as she now knows her mother had done before her) but the passionate young spirit which she still has not mastered somehow breaks through:

[Mr Jarndyce's letter] did not hint to me ... that the discovery of my birth gave him no shock. That his generosity rose above my disfigurement, and my inheritance of shame. That the more I stood in need of such fidelity, the more firmly I might trust in him to the last.

But I knew it, I knew it well now ... and I felt that I had but one thing to do. To devote my life to his happiness was to thank him poorly, and what had I wished for the other night but some new means of thanking him?

Still I cried very much ... as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. I was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful; but I cried very much. (BH pp 667-668)

The psychopathology of the illegitimate child has never been better documented than in Bleak House, but until comparatively recently, Dickens received little credit for his achievement. In 1852 Henry Crabb Robinson declared that 'The best thing [in the opening number of Bleak House] is the picture of a desolate condition of a natural child, but she is removed out of it before sympathy is much called out.'<sup>8</sup> G.H. Lewes, writing twenty years later, declared that both Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson were 'monstrous failures'.<sup>9</sup> H.F. Chorley (1853) disparaged the novel's 'exaggerated' characters, arguing that Esther's 'own story [is] of itself romantic enough - the provident beneficence of Mr Jarndyce to her [being] sufficiently unlike Fortune's usual dealings with those born as she was.'

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8. H C Robinson, diary, in Collins, Critical Heritage, pp 273-274

9. G H Lewes, Review of Forster's Life of Dickens, Fortnightly Review 17, (February 1872), in Collins, Critical Heritage, p 574

10. H F Chorley, Athenaeum, 17 September 1853, in Collins, Critical Heritage, p 276

In another contemporary review, George Brimley stated that 'The series of incidents which answers to what in an ordinary novel is called plot, is that connected with the relationship of the heroine (again analogically speaking) to her mother ... not only is this story both meagre and melodramatic ... but it is so unskilfully managed that the daughter is in no way influenced either in character or destiny by her mother's history'.

11 James A. Stothert added his voice to the general outcry. '[As] to Esther Summerson, the angelic, self-forgetting young lady, who notes in her journal every thing that a self-forgetting mind would not note, we have found her a prodigious bore, whom we wish the author had consigned to the store-room the moment she was fairly in possession of her housekeeping keys. The manner in which this lady is made to chronicle her own merits, is a proof how unable Dickens is to enter into the real *depths* of a human mind, and draw a genuine character self-consistent in all its parts.' 12 This persistent misunderstanding of Dickens's aims with regard to his unmarried mother and her child continued for well over a century.

Today, however, most critics have accepted that when he created Esther, the author did know what he was doing. The many irritating habits of thought and narrative technique which have exasperated and repelled so many of Dickens's readers are exasperating and repellent, but they are also very clearly the mannerisms of someone convinced that she should never have been born. Esther's constant evasions and qualifications; her need to produce evidence to back up her opinions; her humble assurance that it is perfectly alright to ignore what she says in any case; her tortured syntax, flecked with parentheses, dashes, convoluted sub-clauses and even unfinished sentences; her coyness and self-deprecation; her reiteration of how much everybody loves her and exactly why they shouldn't; the sublimated anger which flashes out when she mentions any of the hordes of bad parents and neglected children who stream past her throughout the novel: all these factors reveal what Alex Zwerdling has called 'the short- and long-range

11. George Brimley, Spectator 26, 24 September 1853, in Collins, Critical Heritage, p 284

12. J A Stothert, 'Living Novelists', The Rambler, (January 1854), in Collins, Critical Heritage, p 295

effect of a certain kind of adult violence on the mind of a child.' 13 The motive behind what is perhaps her most annoying trick - the habitual reiteration of how much she is loved - has been neatly described by Crawford Kilian. 'What Esther is doing,' he says, 'is compulsively reassuring herself that all is well, that her false self is doing its job of "winning some love". She literally talks herself into the attitudes which her false self ought to hold, quite as if that self were a separate person.' ('In Defence', p 324)

Esther has thoroughly absorbed conventional society's view of the threat to its standards and beliefs which it attributes to the bastard. Her tendency to smooth over any social or familial cracks she perceives is the result of a strong desire to be seen as an agent of reconciliation rather than as a harbinger of destruction. When Esther discovers that Lady Dedlock is her mother, she comes to experience a 'terror of [her]self', knowing that '[her] mere existence as a living creature [is] an unforeseen danger in [her mother's] way.' (BH p 647) The point which emerges from this is not simply that Esther is afraid of herself now, but that she always has been, and only now knows exactly why. 'I was more than ever frightened of myself, thinking ... of the new and terrible meaning of the old words, now moaning in my ear like a surge upon the shore, "Your mother, Esther, was your disgrace, and you are hers"... With them, those words returned, "Pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head." ... I felt as if the blame and shame were all in me, and the visitation had come down.' (BH pp 569-570) Esther sees herself as a bastard in a revenge tragedy: a figure of unholy and destructive power. As she hurries down the Ghost's Walk at Chesney Wold, the sound of her echoing footsteps convinces her 'that there [is] a dreadful truth in the legend' and that she will 'bring calamity upon the stately house.' (BH p 571) As Esther recalls, 'Seized with an augmented terror of myself which turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything'. (BH p 571)

13. Alex Zwerdling, 'Esther Summerson Rehabilitated', *PMLA* 88, (May 1973), p 429

Manifestly terrified by her own dark potential, Esther's admission of her guilty power at this intense moment of emotional crisis is not wiped out by the enforced rationality of that same evening. What she declares then is certainly the truth, but that does not mean that she believes it. 'I saw very well ... that if the sins of the fathers were sometimes visited upon the children, the phrase did not mean what in the morning I had feared it meant. I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers; and that before my Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it.' (BH p 571) Yet when Esther asserts that she sees things more clearly at night than in the morning, we wonder just how clearly she sees at all. Letters have arrived for *Dame Durden* from Bleak House which declare that 'nobody else could manage the keys', and on this basis - that is, on the basis of other people's opinions rather than her own - Esther claims to have recovered from her trauma. We believe her about as much as she believes herself.

Perhaps this terrible self-doubt explains why Esther acquiesces in society's hounding of her mother. During the chase Inspector Bucket, the representative of the law, eloquently praises the cooperative Esther: 'I never seen a young woman in any station of society - and I've seen many elevated ones too - conduct herself like you have conducted yourself ... You're a pattern, you know, that's what you are'. (BH p 857) Virginia Blain has interpreted Esther's participation in the search as the only way in which she can wash away her inherited moral guilt. In 'joining with the patriarchy, the world of men, of male legality and legitimacy' Esther abandons her mother to save her own skin, having accepted Lady Dedlock's view of herself as a potential danger to her husband's social position. Blain sees Lady Dedlock as a scapegoat for illicit female sexuality, and argues that her 'chase and death take on a whole new significance when they are read as part of a purification rite for a whole diseased society.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed the whole tenor of *Bleak House* encourages us to see the same illicit potential in Esther, or at least to recognise the extent to which she sees it in herself. Unlike Hortense the murderess or Jenny the social outcast, however, Esther does not retain her potent female potential for rebellion,

14. Virginia Blain, 'Double Vision and the Double Standard in *Bleak House*', *Literature and Society* 2, (Spring 1985), p 41/p 31

but chooses to collaborate instead. She never quite gets over the horror of seeing herself as the ghost of Chesney Wold.

Esther is by no means keen to find out about her parents. Early in the novel she prevents Guppy chasing up her resemblance to a portrait of Lady Dedlock, seemingly too scared of the possible findings to initiate a search. But questions of origin must be answered, and ultimately Esther embraces the truth about her own identity when she cradles her mother's corpse beside her father's grave. This is the mysterious truth towards which the whole narrative has been building. Lady Dedlock is hidden inside someone else's clothing and behind her husband's name. (Her own surname is never mentioned: all we know is that Esther's aunt had taken the name of Barbary to dissociate herself from her sister.) In case Captain Hawdon's pseudonym, Nemo, is not enough to obliterate him totally, he is buried in an unmarked grave after having played the part of a dead sailor who never came back from the sea. As the illegitimate daughter of these two "nonentities", Esther was raised as "nobody's child", instructed from her earliest years in how to become a permanent non-person.

When Esther's parents are finally united in death and anonymity, they lie together in the graveyard of Tom-All-Along's, which is the source of the terrible disease which disfigures their daughter. Their original lying-together produced an illegitimate child, and their second is the final chapter in that child's life-story. The idea of a final end to the search is implied by the presence of Allan Woodcourt, Esther's future husband, who witnesses the deaths of both of Esther's parents. The young doctor who is to be Esther's future symbolically sets a seal on her past.

The threat which hangs over Esther symbolically emanates from Tom-All-Along's. Jo the crossing-sweeper, who infects Esther with the graveyard sickness, confuses the identities of Esther and her mother. 'The lady there. She's come to get me to go along with her to the berryin ground. I won't go to the berryin ground. I don't like the name on it. She might go a berryin me ... She looks to me the t'other one. It ain't the bonnet, nor yet it ain't the gownd, but she looks to me the t'other one.' (BH pp 485-486) The way in which Jo links Esther and Lady Dedlock

specifically in relation to the graveyard where Nemo is buried underlines the fact that it is from Tom-All-Along's that the parents' sin reaches out to strike down the innocent child.

The terrible disease which kills Jo and disfigures Esther has often been taken to be smallpox, although it is never explicitly identified as such within the pages of Bleak House. The idea of an unnamed "pox" or social disease, however, is extremely suggestive. Esther's scarred face confirms her own suspicions about the passionate sexual union from which she sprang, and by extension also provides evidence about her own true nature. She interprets her disfigurement as the physical evidence of the fundamentally evil nature she has tried to suppress for so long, and reacts as though the old "bad blood will out" idea has suddenly manifested itself on her face. If Dorian Gray had woken up one morning to discover that overnight he had been transformed into a replica of his own terrible portrait, he could not have reacted more strongly than Esther. (Oscar Wilde was, of course, himself a syphilitic: indeed his novel can be read as an allegory of the disease.) It is the internal damage which those scars symbolise rather than the external damage they have done to her face which so appals her. Her pathetic gratitude when Ada declares that she is still the same beloved old "Dame Durden" hints at the intensity of Esther's conviction that her underlying "poxed" self has destroyed her lovable new face. The first symptom of her infection is blindness, which has been frequently linked with the idea of sexual over-indulgence. As Esther comments, speaking of the dreams and visions which plague her during her illness, 'It may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity.' (BH p 544) Since the root cause of her sickness is apparently her inheritance of sexual sin, the 'strange affliction' she mentions may be sexual love itself. Bearing in mind the passionate and intense emotions which revealed themselves during her delirium, it seems that Esther's illness allows her access to thoughts and feelings which are usually fiercely suppressed.

Oliver Twist's half-brother Monks is syphilitic, and his ghastly appearance is the index of both his own degraded sexual nature and his parents' fearful parody of a marriage. Esther believes that her scarred

face tells the same story, but no one else makes any such deduction: they are only sad that her physical beauty has been spoiled. When a murderer takes his victim's face off with a razor or destroys it with acid he acts out a powerful wish to wipe him off the earth completely, rather than merely kill him. When Esther declares that she is *pleased* about her scarring because it covers up her likeness to Lady Dedlock, it underlines her compulsive need to destroy her former self. Clearly she feels trapped either way: her scarring is both a metaphorical and physical signifier for her status as an illegitimate child.

Although Esther consistently tries to make herself fit into society, her fever-dream reveals that ultimately it may be a terrible compact which she should have no part of. The concessions and betrayals which she believes herself capable of may let her into the charmed circle, but in her madness she realises that she has been party to an almost Faust-like bargain:

I am almost afraid to hint at that time in my disorder - it seemed one long night, but I believe there were both nights and days in it - when I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again.  
... Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which *I* was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing? (BH p 544)

Overall, the discourse of Bleak House is deeply ironic. As Fred Kaplan has commented, 'The reconciling dynamic of the novel is the interaction between the narrator's passionate anger at poverty, corruption, and exploitation and the temperate, harmonizing goodness of the voice of the main character ... These personae compliment [sic] and play off each other. Drawing on the stereotypical realities of British Victorian culture, one voice is masculine, aggressively satirical, and prophetically explosive. The other is feminine, passive, innocent, loving, and infinitely gentle. The voices maintain their independence in a marriage of harmonizing opposites.' 15 Esther, the bastard, is the narrator who attempts to synthesise the warring elements within society, while the God-

like male narrator - Dickens himself, perhaps - proceeds to carve up his society and reveal it for the monstrous sham it is. In portraying the bastard as social cement, the author was quite radical: precisely because of her illegitimacy, Esther has a deeply personal desire to solder rather than to fragment.

It may be that Esther never totally irons out her emotional problems, or so the strange unfinished ending to her narrative seems to indicate. The terrible fear she has of knowing the truth about her parents is tragically ironic. Nemo's kindness to Jo and Lady Dedlock's patronage of Rosa reveal that they both had the potential to become excellent parents. In a novel like Bleak House, in which the word "parent" is virtually synonymous with "child-abuser", this is quite something. Then again, John Jarndyce proposes a thesis which would have given many of Dickens's readers a shock when they found out about Lady Dedlock. Apropos Ada he declares, 'I think it must be somewhere written that the virtues of the mothers shall, occasionally, be visited on the children, as well as the sins of the fathers.' (BH p 287) Does Esther's womanly nurturing side stem from her mother after all?

In the closing chapter of Bleak House Ada, who once possessed everything that Esther lacked, is a poor widow keeping house for John Jarndyce. Esther, by contrast, is happily married to Dr Woodcourt, with two daughters and a home of her own. Even so, she covets the one treasure of her friend's life, her little son. 'I call him my Richard!' Esther comments, adding somewhat defensively, 'But he says that he has two mamas, and I am one.' (BH p 934) As an illegitimate child who has done so much to reconcile herself to society, having a son would be the icing on the cake, placing her even more securely within the fabric of the patriarchal system.

In choosing a fallen woman and her bastard child as his major female characters, Dickens did something quite remarkable in Bleak House. For what comes across in spite of (or maybe because of) Esther's self-deception

15. Fred Kaplan, Dickens: A Biography (Sevenoaks, Kent: Sceptre, 1989), pp 300-301

and Lady Dedlock's "freezing mood" is the extent of their social success. Their methods are radically different, of course, but whether through excessive humility or excessive pride, both women manage to confound easy notions of acceptable female behaviour. In parallel scenes, the mother and daughter confront the evidence of their own potentiality for social disruption:

One night, while having her hair undressed, my Lady loses herself in deep thought ... until she sees her own brooding face, in the opposite glass, and a pair of black eyes curiously observing her.

'Be so good as to attend,' says my Lady then, addressing the reflection of Hortense, 'to your business. You can contemplate your beauty at another time.'

'Pardon! It was your Ladyship's beauty.'

'That,' says my Lady, 'you needn't contemplate at all.' (BH p 213)

The rather convoluted syntax of this scene forges a link between the two dark women. Lady Dedlock is identified with a passionate murderess as she sees her own terrible impulses reflected in her maid's face, in the same way that Jane Eyre saw her dangerous potential in the reflection of Bertha Mason. For her part, Esther sees her aunt's perception of her evil nature fulfilled when she looks at her scarred face for the first time after her illness.

Over the past few years, much critical attention has been paid to the significance of Esther's many nicknames - Mother Shipton, Dame Trot, Dame Durden and the like. These names reveal how she is seen as an old woman rather than as a young girl. They simultaneously disguise the potential consequences of her birth and stress her desire to escape them. She can either become a whore or hoyden as her real surname, Hawdon, implies, or she can cut off the sexual path to sin by becoming a premature old maid in somebody else's house. But as an illegitimate person, surely all Esther's names are important, if only for the simple reason that she is not legally entitled to any of them. Her surname, for instance, is simultaneously appropriate and misleading. She recalls how her friends at Bleak House 'said there could be no East wind where Somebody was; they said that wherever Dame Durden went, there was *sunshine* and *summer* air.' [My italics] (BH p 482) Yet she is not really "Summerson" (someone's son) at all but

nobody's child (Nemo's daughter). Mad Miss Flite gives Esther a very suitable name, for 'Fitz-Jarndyce' obliquely indicates not only her illegitimacy, but the high rank of the family to which she is related. Her Christian name is even more interesting. In the Old Testament, the orphaned Hadassah is brought up by her cousin Mordecai. Her original name is changed to the Persian form "Esther" to conceal her Jewish birth. Eventually she enters the king's harem, displacing his queen, Vashti, and saving the Jewish people in the process. Choosing this Biblical name for her illegitimate niece probably gave the rigidly Calvinistic Miss Barbary a great deal of grim satisfaction, since it brings together the relevant notions of distasteful origins and sexual excess. From Dickens's point of view it was singularly appropriate for the heroine of a novel in which he was preoccupied with the twin themes of the scandalous hidden identity and the orphan who eventually makes good. This theme may tie in with John Jarndyce's definition of 'true legitimacy', which he convinces the snobbish Mrs Woodcourt has little to do with the notion of pedigree, and everything to do with 'duty and affection.' (BH p 914) In his dealings with Esther Summerson, I believe Dickens has provided us with a key which decodes some of his most profound thoughts on the subject.

v. 'Little Dorrit': The Imprisoned Revolutionary

Arthur Clennam's illegitimacy secretly underpins his sense of worthlessness and alienation. Throughout Little Dorrit he insidiously undermines some of the most cherished tenets of Victorian cultural orthodoxy, such as self-help, charity and industry: he is the most revolutionary figure in the novel which George Bernard Shaw once described as more seditious than Das Kapital. Clennam and Esther Summerson are first and foremost victims of the patriarchal culture, but paradoxically they are menaced as children by false mothers. As an unloved son, a bankrupt entrepreneur and a rejected lover, Clennam is the isolated figure at the heart of a novel in which people do not come together to work out their problems, but instinctively turn in on themselves to nurse private grudges and grieve alone. The only place where he truly belongs is in a book about not belonging.

Clennam's childhood, boyhood and youth are missing from Little Dorrit because they are missing from his life. The House of Clennam's heir tells the quintessential Victorian paterfamilias Mr Meagles that he is 'a waif and stray' and that all sense of purpose in life 'was extinguished before [he] could sound the words.' (LD p 59) The frequency with which he is identified as "nobody" - various chapters are entitled 'Nobody's Weakness', 'Nobody's State of Mind', 'Nobody's Fault' and 'Nobody's Disappearance' - remind us of Esther Summerson's similarly fragile grip on her sense of self. Just as she once sought to convince herself that she was prematurely old and unmarriageable, so, when he discovers that Little Dorrit loves him, Arthur tries to be 'steady in saying to himself that the time had gone by him, and he was too saddened and old.' (LD p 799) Eventually, however, the mental tranquility which Esther finds with Dr Woodcourt is perfectly paralleled by the peace which Arthur finds with Little Dorrit, who nurses him through jail-fever. 'Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point. Every thing in its perspective led to her innocent figure. He had travelled thousands of miles towards it; previous unquiet hopes and doubts had worked themselves out before it; it was the centre of the interest of his life; it was the termination of everything that was good and pleasant in it; beyond, there was nothing but mere waste and darkened sky.' (LD pp 801-802) Once he has worked out that Amy is the focal point of his moral universe and the answer to all his questions about human relationships, his restless desire to fathom the secrets of his ancestors is stilled forever.

As a public benefactor, as a Merdlesque capitalist and as a dutiful only son, Clennam brings ruin on those he wishes only to help. Little Dorrit contains Dickens's most interesting development of the notion that illegitimacy and property can never go together. Clennam is a speculator who gambles with other people's money, and yet for a man born into the capitalist system, he has an extraordinary fear of money and its consequences. As he tells his mother, 'I have seen so little happiness come of money; it has brought within my knowledge so little peace to this house, or to anyone belonging to it, that it is worth less to me than to another.' (LD p 88) His basic misunderstanding of his position within the

House of Clennam means that in both the private and the public spheres - as both the family's son and heir, and as its business representative, that is - 'every day of indecision and inaction made his inheritance a source of greater anxiety to him.' (LD p 231) He is wholly unequipped to deal with either the straightforward concept of inherited wealth and its related responsibilities, or with another kind of "inheritance" which exists at a far deeper and hitherto unexplored level. Ironically it is when he begins to fear that his parents could have been responsible for the financial ruin of the Dorrit family that he decides to try to uncover the secrets of the past. Unaware of his technical illegitimacy, Clennam's ancestral insecurity shapes itself around what his parents may have done rather than what he is and who they are.

Anthea Trodd has described Little Dorrit as 'a novel in which the hero plays detective in his mother's house, continually asserting his wish to discover the secrets its oppressive, respectable facade conceals.' 16 As Rigaud Blandois wickedly comments, 'there are the devil's own secrets in some families.' (LD p 410) Yet Arthur fails in his quest for the secret of his own birth and existence. Trodd has argued that Dickens 'allowed [Clennam] to rise above the minutiae of domestic secrecy to imaginatively comprehend a family mystery which is emblematic of a fundamentally secretive society.' (Domestic Crime p 88) Other critics have disparaged the essential truth which lies at the heart of the novel. G.K. Chesterton called the hidden codicil to old Mr Clennam's will which makes Little Dorrit an heiress 'a silly document advantageous to the silly Dorrits.' 17 Randolph Splitter has said that the denouement is 'somewhat of a letdown after Arthur's wild suspicions.' 18 Richard Barickman feels that Little Dorrit's 'melodramatic mysteries and ominous prophecies prove as empty and fraudulent as the characters' personal lives ... By the time [the secret is revealed] ... it has lost whatever psychological impact for the characters

16. Anthea Trodd, Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel (Macmillan, 1989), p 87

17. G K Chesterton, Charles Dickens (Methuen, 1906), p 169

18. Randolph Splitter, 'Guilt and the Trappings of Melodrama in Little Dorrit', Dickens Studies Annual 6, (1977), p 132

or thematic impact for the reader it may once have had.' 19 I would like to argue that to ignore the secret's significance for the novel's hero is to risk losing sight of a vital component of Dickens's overriding theme of psychological imprisonment.

As Philip Collins has written, 'many readers were put off by the general "darkness" of the novel, and its sad middle-aged unglamorous hero.' (Critical Heritage p 357) Throughout his life, Arthur Clennam has identified family life with spiritual poverty and emotional repression. The House of Clennam functions properly only in economic terms. 'I am the son of a hard father and mother,' he tells Mr Meagles. 'I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced had no existence. Strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies which were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain for the security of their possessions.' (LD p 59) Mrs Clennam deals in a currency of secret knowledge, and depending on how much her stock of information is worth at any given time, she buys, holds or sells. Arthur witnesses her power as a partner in the House and feels her guilt, but he is unable to fathom its source. He believes that William Dorrit may have been economically defrauded during some past dealings with the Clennams, but this is not so. What has been lost is something much less concrete - something that no one even knows is missing - his own true identity. Clennam is simultaneously trying to uncover the guilt of his parents, while coming to identify his own tendency to economically exploit others. His botched career as a capitalist entrepreneur is the action of a man who does not understand himself, because his origins have been erased. Believing himself to be the heir to the House of Clennam and thus a born capitalist, Arthur becomes involved in speculations and ventures which ruin himself and his partners. He is crippled not so much by the legacy of his impotent father - 'an undecided, irresolute chap, who had everything but his orphan life scared out of him when he was young' - but by that of his wicked and overpowering

19. Richard Barickman, 'The Spiritual Journey of Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam: "A Way Wherein There Is No Ecstasy"', Dickens Studies Annual 7, (1980), p 166

stepmother, who brings him up to be an instrument of revenge, and disastrously shapes his future career (in both senses of the word). (LD p 224)

In telling Mr Meagles that both his parents were hard and unloving, Arthur is tragically mistaken. As well as robbing him of his real mother, Mrs Clennam has seen to it that the child was also to be a stranger to his father, even though they were living under the same roof. '[T]he presence of Arthur [was to be] a daily reproach to his father [as] the absence of Arthur was a daily agony to his mother,' she tells Little Dorrit. (LD p 846) Deliberately she alters the conventional scenario by which the unmarried mother was left holding the baby, and then goes on to destroy the relationship between father and son. 'I have sat with him and his father,' she remembers, 'seeing the weakness of his father yearning to unbend to him; and forcing it back, that the child might work out his release in bondage and hardship.' (LD p 859) Mrs Clennam is convinced that 'the transgressions of the parents are visited on their offspring, and that there was an angry mark upon him at his birth.' (LD p 859) Yet it is only she who sees the small boy's hereditary taint: 'I have seen him, with his mother's face, looking up at me in awe from his little books, and trying to soften me with his mother's ways that hardened me.' (LD p 859) In a similar manner Mrs Clennam convinces herself that depriving Arthur's mother of her baby is a just punishment, even though the poor woman runs mad and dies because of it. Characteristically, she utterly denies having had any personal motive of revenge.

Arthur is in fact the love-child of two gentle, sensitive and artistic orphans who had come together out of desperate loneliness. If he had known this, Dickens suggests, he would not have spent over forty years feeling miserably inadequate because his talents did not lie in the business direction. The hero of Little Dorrit, like the heroine of Bleak House, is the child of unworldly and warmhearted parents stolen by a joyless religious fanatic. He has inherited his parents' deep appreciation of art and beauty as well as their capacity for love. Like his father before him, Arthur's basic feeling towards Mrs Clennam is one of

fear and estrangement, but since he has no knowledge on which to base such a reaction, he feels a terrible sense of guilt.

The case of Arthur Clennam raises questions about just what constitutes masculinity, power and inheritance in a patriarchal society. Unable to earn or achieve these things independently, Clennam unconsciously claims them as his right presumably on the tried and trusted basis of his (supposed) birth and breeding. His guilt and discomfort stem from the unnaturalness of the role. His wicked stepmother and his good angel control his access to his own history, and force him to plod on in a desperately confused and unsuccessful way. If becoming a real man and a whole person depends on vanquishing powerful women in the public arena and then confining them to the domestic front - if to be successful necessitates wresting one's male sense of self from the grip of such all-concealing females - then Arthur Clennam's illegitimacy may be seen to function on two levels. The ultimate paradox of the novel is that in suppressing the hero's secret, the two Mrs Clennams (his mother and his wife) have metaphorically emasculated him. In a sense he is left only half a man: a bastard reject apology for the traditional mid-Victorian colossus, effortlessly bestriding the age.

As Lionel Trilling has noted, in Little Dorrit 'Dickens anticipates one of Freud's ideas ... nothing less bold and inclusive than the essential theory of the neurosis.' 20 This is the idea behind Arthur's (mistaken) suspicion that his mother's paralysis is in some sense psychosomatic - i.e. that she may have imprisoned herself because she feels responsible for the imprisonment of William Dorrit. Symbolically, however, it may be that Mrs Clennam submits to the blackmailing Jeremiah Flintwinch because Arthur's real mother was given over to his brutal twin brother Ephraim. Similarly, her self-imposed incarceration in the Clennam house of nightmares (where Affery Flintwinch is slowly driven out of her mind) parallels the way in which the unofficial Mrs Clennam is terrorised by the thug who had 'speculated unsuccessfully in lunatics, [and] got into difficulty about over-roasting a patient to bring him to reason.' (LD p 852) Since Mrs

20. Lionel Trilling, The Opposing Self (Secker and Warburg, 1955), p 54

Clennam's motto 'Do Not Forget' encourages her to dwell on the sexual sin of Arthur's parents and her own immunity from it, it seems at least possible that likening herself in externals only to Arthur's mother further shores up her sense of the fundamental antithesis between them.

As Elaine Showalter has commented, 'We have been educated to look for patterns of guilt and expiation in Dickens when a hero and a criminal are ... doubled', and somehow, during the course of the novel, Arthur Clennam becomes responsible for the crimes of Rigaud Blandois. 21 Alexander Welsh feels that if these two are doubles, 'the plot of Little Dorrit makes a little more sense [since] the substantially motiveless Rigaud, who is likened to Cain, behaves as if he obeyed motives that logically belonged to the hero.' (Showalter, 'Guilt and Authority', p 32) Rigaud performs Clennam's displaced acts of violence as Hortense performed them for Lady Dedlock, and in the Marshalsea, where he meets Rigaud for the first and only time, Arthur grows increasingly 'afraid of himself' and begins to '[shrink] from the observation of other men'. (LD p 803). When Rigaud speaks contemptuously of the Marshalsea as 'a hospital for imbeciles', the link with Arthur's jail-fever is curiously heightened: this really is a place in which people may go mad. (LD p 818)

Although Rigaud is of mixed foreign blood, he claims to belong to the nobility in order to disguise his obscure and tainted birth. According to the perverse Miss Wade, he is more honest than the rest of society because he honestly admits to being dishonest. (LD p 819) Being rootless ought to be a black mark against him, but Rigaud overturns the convention and manages to undermine the genealogically respectable Clennams by trading in their family secrets. This behaviour underscores the way in which Arthur Clennam himself works towards the humiliation and/or destruction of his own family: the classic manoeuvre of the illegitimate child in a Shakespearean tragedy. Like Esther Summerson, who once saw herself as the ghost of Chesney Wold, Arthur threatens the security of the great house into which he was born.

21. Elaine Showalter, 'Guilt, Authority and the Shadows of *Little Dorrit*', Nineteenth Century Fiction 34, (1979), p 32

The ultimate fall of the House of Clennam is implicitly linked with the suppression of the family secret. Symbolically, Affery Flintwinch attributes the creaks and groans of the house's rotten foundations to the ghost of Arthur's mother, whom she believes at first to have been imprisoned within its walls for many years. 'Who else rustles about [the place], making signals by dropping dust so softly? Who else comes and goes, and marks the walls with long crooked touches when we are all a-bed? Who else holds the door sometimes?' (LD p 854) It is when Little Dorrit and Mrs Clennam are hurrying back to confront Rigaud with the box which contains the codicil and the letters written by Arthur's real mother in her madness, that the house collapses. Directly after the compact of secrecy between the two women is reached, the family home is destroyed. At this point, we should recall the bastard Arthur's prophetic warning that 'unless I can gain some insight into these hidden things ... ruin will come of it.' (LD p 754) Mrs Clennam knows full well that Arthur's compulsive need to know stems from the 'empty place [within] his heart that he has never known the meaning of', and her refusal to give him access to the truth for her own sake is metaphorically analogous to the destruction of the property he was to have inherited. (LD p 860) Although Dickens finally points out that 'The mystery of the noises was out now' and that 'Affery, like greater people, had always been right in her facts, and always wrong in the theories she deduced from them', the reader must feel that on a symbolic level at least, the dreaming Mrs Flintwinch was right all along. (LD p 863)

The hero's story only becomes fully intelligible when related to the other illegitimate information embedded elsewhere in the text - i.e. in the closely interlocking histories of Rigaud, Tattycoram and most importantly, Miss Wade. Her paranoia, like Rigaud's criminality and Tattycoram's jealousy of Pet, is born of the confusion which surrounds her identity. She publishes a document which reveals the orphan bastard to be the scapegoat upon whose head fall all the penalties of a society which values known parentage and unmysterious origins. Her "blank spaces" come to signify the unfixed identity which enables her to adopt the role of the social commentator, truth-teller or prophet set apart. 'The History of a Self-Tormentor' is an active statement of her reasons for wanting revenge on that society. This document, which she has kept locked in the inner

drawer of her bureau awaiting the arrival of Arthur Clennam, for whom it was written, states that the fatherless are the victims of social, economic and moral attacks on an unprecedented scale. It parallels that other suppressed document - the one Arthur should see, but which Little Dorrit keeps from him. Paradoxically, it is Miss Wade who enlightens Arthur about family secrets, and Little Dorrit who wants to keep him in a state of blissful (or not so blissful, as it turns out) ignorance. It formally articulates the anger which the hero can never express because he wants desperately to belong to society, and angry misfits don't usually get in. Miss Wade, on the other hand, can afford to be angry, since she has already worked out what she sees as the parameters of social acceptance.

In a letter to John Forster, Dickens declared that 'In Miss Wade I had an idea ... of making the introduced story so fit into surroundings impossible of separation from the main story, as to make the blood of the book circulate through both.' 23 Fittingly, therefore, she is trapped in a prison of the mind which correlates not only to the Marshalsea, but also to the psychological prisons inhabited by other people within the novel such as Mrs Clennam, William Dorrit, and (of course) Arthur and Tattycoram. As Dickens intended, Miss Wade takes her place among the many characters in Little Dorrit who cannot escape the consequences of their own destructive logic and perverse view of society.

Miss Wade's paranoia may indicate that she has a more highly developed sense of worthlessness than Esther Summerson. She is a brilliant psychological case-study who would categorically deny her paranoia: in her terms society really is out to get her. But it is not enough for her to have reached a psychological plateau alone, and hence she hands her bastard manifesto to Arthur Clennam, seeking to impose upon him her own warped observations of the way life works. She believes that her document is a blueprint for the survival of the identityless person in a society which seems to value clearly defined origins above all else. Perhaps she is a more effective social strategist than Clennam because she knows the truth about herself, while he is kept in the dark.

23. Letter qtd in Carol A Bock, 'Miss Wade and George Silverman: The Forms of Fictional Monologue', Dickens Studies Annual 16, (1987), p 114

In Little Dorrit Arthur and Miss Wade are linked together most obviously in relation to the Meagles family, since he is rejected by Pet and she by Henry Gowan. Whereas Clennam continues to be friendly with the family after Pet's wedding, however, Miss Wade wants to destroy them because they represent the family-based security which she has never had. Clennam and Miss Wade are bound together as illegitimate children at a very profound level, and their apparent unfitness for family life is revealed most clearly in relation to the Meagleses. Pet is the beloved child they would both like to have been, and Tattycoram is the child they were.

Little Dorrit opens in Marseilles, where a group of English travellers which includes Arthur Clennam, Miss Wade, Tattycoram and the Meagles family are quarantined. The illegitimate characters are imprisoned together with the pattern English family to which all three are strangely drawn. Miss Wade stresses the way in which their individual histories may be destined to interlock in the future:

In our course through life we shall meet the people who are coming to meet us, from many strange places and by many strange roads, and what it is set to us to do to them, and what it is set to them to do to us, will all be done. (LD p 63)

From the outset, Dickens suggests that there is some mystery about the way in which 'the handsome young Englishwoman' interacts with other people. She had 'either withdrawn herself from the rest or been avoided by the rest - nobody, herself excepted perhaps, could have quite decided which.' (LD p 60) Even casual physical contact such as shaking hands is studiously avoided, and her first words (addressed to the innocent Mr Meagles, who is of course the illegitimate Arthur's confidant and father substitute) are about prisoners who long to destroy their prisons. Her own imprisonment, however, proves to have been self-imposed. She is her own jailer.

Miss Wade appears to have near-psychic powers of insight into the potentialities of her fellow sufferers from life, Clennam and Tattycoram. It is an integral part of Dickens's moral design that Mr Meagles should ask Clennam to search for Tattycoram when she deserts his family, as it is that

Clennam should call himself Rigaud in order to persuade Miss Wade to see him.

Carol Bock has shown how the dramatic monologue format of Miss Wade's narrative reveals to the reader things which the speaker does not seem to be aware of. ('Forms of Fictional Monologue', passim) Moreover Dickens's treatment of her is so heavily ironic and slanted that he could scarcely expect to elicit much sympathy for her from the reader. Among the running headings to 'The History of a Self-Tormentor' are 'Miseries of a Morbid Breast' and '*Distorted Vision*'. Her very first sentence is calculated to alienate us: when she declares that she has 'the misfortune of not being a fool', the implication is that most people - ourselves included - are fools. (LD p 725) In the same way that Esther Summerson alienated us when we came to see her pain too clearly, so Miss Wade's self-tortured life makes the reader feel too guilty to sympathise with her. Quite brilliantly, Dickens makes us turn away from her exactly as she wants us to. The reader is given first-hand experience of the effect she has on her fellow characters within the novel.

'[T]he effect of [Miss Wade's] narrative', as Carol Bock has written, 'is not simply to deepen our understanding of her personality, though it assuredly does that as well. More importantly, her history is a cautionary tale which dramatises the destructive consequences of imprisoning oneself within the narrow confines of an egocentric vision imposed upon life through a perverse assertion of personal will.' ('Forms of Fictional Monologue', p 116) What we once suspected of Esther Summerson - that is, that someone so grotesquely self-effacing had to be fundamentally self-obsessed - comes back to us when we consider Miss Wade. For despite her morbid egocentricity, she is also fearfully prone to self-effacement. Everything she does is bounced off someone else. Her lightning reactions to imagined insults - 'I left the house that night' - might easily be mistaken for acts of self-assertion, but they are in fact precisely the opposite. Instead of acting on her own initiative, she merely reacts to her perceptions of other people.

Miss Wade reveals so much about the potentially devastating effects of illegitimacy upon the character that she functions as a kind of psychological stand-in for Arthur Clennam in the same way that Rigaud is his criminal whipping-boy. These two characters symbolise the dangerous potentialities of the hero's character which stem from his undetected bastardy. The conviction which Miss Wade clings to like a talisman (that she cannot be taken in by society) is paralleled by the skin which has been artificially cultured to cover Clennam's psychic wounds. He (like Esther Summerson) convinces himself that he is too old and too sad for marriage. The blatant contradictions, falsities and perversities with which Dickens's bastards hedge themselves around positively discourage us from sympathising with them. It is simply too much effort, and consequently the reactions of those outside the novel are paralleled by those of the persons within it. As a child, Miss Wade coveted the love of a school-friend with such manic, single-minded possessiveness that the poor girl backed off in search of air. This, of course, is interpreted as an obscene betrayal. If people show her affection she sees them as patronising, devious and manipulative. In her scheme of things, there is no such thing as unconditional love. As a governess she seems certain to be left in a vulnerable and declass  position, neither properly above nor unmistakably below stairs. Yet in fact her various employers treat her with nothing but kindness and understanding. Everyone tries to include her in the doings of their family and to make her feel part of things, but through immense exertions of her twisted spirit, she manages to push them all away. A well-meaning employer makes the mistake of explaining why she is so concerned about Miss Wade:

It is a difficult topic to enter on; but, from one young woman to another, perhaps - in short, we have been apprehensive that you may allow some family circumstances of which no one can be more innocent than yourself, to prey upon your spirits. If so, let us entreat you not to make them a cause of grief. My husband himself, as is well known, formerly had a very dear sister who was not in law his sister, but who was universally loved and respected -

I saw directly that they had taken me in for the sake of the dead woman, whoever she was, and to have the boast of me and advantage of me ...  
(LD p 730)

The way in which the lady's speech tails off with a dash indicates that Miss Wade's steely contempt has frozen solid the words of comfort as

they rise to her lips. Her attempt to talk to Miss Wade as another woman, or to link her with the illegitimate sister-in-law as a fellow sufferer, or indeed to suggest that she is in the least like any other human being in need of a friend, is doomed from the start. Miss Wade's *modus vivendi* is based on apartheid: complete separation from all other members of the human race. Anything remotely resembling a potential kinship link will be savagely nipped in the bud. This terrible system is one she tries in vain to impose upon Tattycoram.

In making so much of her illegitimate birth, Dickens feels that Miss Wade is falling into the trap of regarding it too conventionally. She makes it easy for society to stigmatise her, because the chip on her shoulder is so obvious. She herself regards her birth as an indelible stigma (like Mrs Clennam) and it is her exaggerated and self-lacerating reactions to this which bring about her social problems, rather than her illegitimacy itself. For what to do in the case of tainted origins, Dickens suggests, take a leaf out of Little Dorrit's book. As Amy writes to Arthur Clennam of Henry Gowan, 'I have sat wondering whether it could be that he has no belief in anybody else, because he has no belief in himself.' (LD p 606) The heroine of the novel is born with a terrible shadow over her life through no fault of her own, but it never crosses her mind to feel guilty about it, or to assume that other people will blame her for what she cannot help. That sort of psychological trap is one which her illegitimate husband also manages to avoid with her constant love and assistance. Miss Wade, on the other hand, does not see the trap for what it is, and actually thinks she has escaped the worst horrors of her invidious situation: 'swollen patronage' masquerading as 'kindness, protection, benevolence, and other fine names.' (LD p 734)

When Miss Wade (who was herself brought up by a false grandmother) adopts Tattycoram, she becomes as vengeful and destructive a surrogate parent as Miss Barbary, Miss Havisham or Mrs Clennam. The difference is, when the bastard herself plays this hellish role, we can see it as part and parcel of a cycle of mental violence and psychic deprivation. Tattycoram is used to enact Miss Wade's symbolic revenge against the Meagleses as the pattern Victorian family from which she has always been excluded. Theirs

is the ordinary but still charmed circle into which she may not be admitted. She is so hypersensitive to the hidden feelings of Clennam and Tattycoram that she can reveal things about them which they did not know themselves. She unnerves Arthur by harping on the ingrained villainy of Rigaud, whom she has employed to spy on the Gowans, so that it seems obvious that if Mrs Clennam is also involved with him, her purpose must also be evil: 'Wrung by her persistence in keeping that dark side of the case before him, of which there was a half-hidden shadow in his own breast, Clennam was silent.' (LD p 721) Tattycoram is terrified by Miss Wade's sinister appearance at her own points of emotional crisis. When she is discovered in a rage against her employers, Tattycoram declares 'I never was like this but twice over in the quarantine yonder; and both times you found me. I am afraid of you ... You seem to come like my own anger, my own malice, my own - whatever it is - I don't know what it is.' (LD p 65) Watching the young girl's passionate struggle to master the complex tangle of her emotions towards the Meagleses, it is as if Miss Wade has stepped outside her own body to observe the turmoil within her own heart. She 'stood with her hand upon her own bosom, looking at [Tattycoram], as one afflicted with a diseased part might curiously watch the dissection and exposition of an analogous case.' (LD p 65) Miss Wade is the fatal incarnation of all the pent-up anger and resentment which Tattycoram feels towards the family which had taken her in, and she distills all that is rotten and antisocial in the girl.

It is noticeable that for all the difference in expression, Mr Meagles allies himself with Mrs Clennam when he claims to occasionally detect 'in this unhappy girl some reflection of what was raging in her mother's heart before ever such a creature as this poor thing was in the world'. (LD p 370) Just two pages later, however, he is forced to admit that he knows absolutely nothing of Tattycoram's parentage, and was thus pulling his deductions out of thin air: 'It was of no use trying reason ... with that vehement panting creature (Heaven knows what her mother's story must have been)'. (LD p 372) In this, Dickens draws attention to the entrenched social assumptions about the female illegitimate with exquisite economy and subtlety.

The Meagleses take it upon themselves to civilise Tattycoram, as though her passionate nature were a sign of incipient madness. Indeed, they talk of her '[breaking] out violently one night' as though she were in need of physical restraint. (LD p 370) Goaded by Miss Wade, Tattycoram's 'passionate sense ... of being at a disadvantage' overmasters her, and she is led to view the Meagles's behaviour towards her as a grotesque perversion of charity and patronage designed solely to reflect credit back on them. The younger woman acknowledges that there is a 'madness' in her 'and [Miss Wade] could raise it whenever she liked. I used to think, when I got into that state, that people were all against me because of my first beginning; and the kinder they were to me, the worse fault I found in them. I made it out that they triumphed above me, and that they wanted to make me envy them, when I know - when I even knew then - that they never thought of such a thing.' (LD p 880) An example of Miss Wade's ability to raise the devils within her protégée like some primitive necromancer occurs in this passage:

You can be, again, a foil to his pretty daughter, a slave to her pleasant wilfulness, and a toy in the house showing the goodness of the family ... You can again be shown to [Mr Meagles's] daughter, Harriet, and kept before her, as a living reminder of her own superiority and her gracious condescension. (LD p 377)

As Mr Meagles comments, once Tattycoram has made up her mind to run away, 'the bolts and bars of the old Bastille couldn't keep her.' (LD p 369) Bearing in mind that to the working classes the word "Bastille" was synonymous with "workhouse", there is a hint in this remark that Tattycoram will no longer permit the Meagleses to confine her in a humiliating position of dependency because of her illegitimate birth. She was, of course, formerly an inmate of Sir Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital, from which the family took her name.

As a "no name" herself, Miss Wade never misses a chance to undercut the naming processes of polite society. She explains to Mr Meagles that her influence over Tattycoram 'is founded in a common cause. What your broken plaything is to birth, I am. She has no name, I have no name. Her wrong is my wrong.' (LD p 379) She takes great pains to impress upon

her protégée that perhaps the most fundamentally evil aspects of her enslavement to the family is the way in which they have renamed her. Mr Meagles explains how it happened to Arthur Clennam:

Why, she was called in the Institution, Harriet Beadle - an arbitrary name, of course. Now Harriet, we changed into Hattey, and then into Tatty, because, as practical people, we thought even a playful name might be a new thing to her, and might have a softening and affectionate kind of effect, don't you see? As to Beadle, that I needn't say was wholly out of the question. If there is anything that is not to be tolerated on any terms, anything that is a type of Jack-in-office insolence and absurdity, anything that represents in coats, waistcoats, and big sticks our English holding on by nonsense after everyone has found it out, it is a beadle ... Whenever I see a beadle in full fig, coming down a street on a Sunday at the head of a Charity school, I am obliged to turn and run away, or I should hit him. The name of beadle being out of the question, and the originator of the Institution for these poor foundlings having been a blessed creature of the name of Coram, we gave that name to Pet's little maid. At one time she was Tatty, and at one time she was Coram, until we got into a way of mixing the two names together, and now she is always Tattycoram. (LD p 57)

Mr Meagles argues that because Tattycoram's original name was a sure sign of her illegitimate birth, imposed upon her by a pack of useless and arrogant Mr Bumbles seeking to glorify themselves, he was justified in renaming her. The family try to make her feel part of things by giving her a teasing nickname, but their well-meant plan misfires when the girl becomes convinced that she is being made fun of. As Mr Meagles tells Arthur Clennam, Tattycoram had told him angrily, 'Why, who didn't [laugh at her name]; and who were we that we should have a right to name her like a dog or a cat?' (LD pp 371-373) It is of course Miss Wade who points out to Tattycoram that anyone can name or rename a bastard like herself, since she has no right to one of her own. Skilfully her alter-ego reminds the orphaned foundling of what will happen if she returns to the Meagles's house. 'You can have your droll name again, playfully pointing you out and setting you apart, as it is right that you should be pointed out and set apart. (Your birth, you know; you must not forget your birth.)' (LD p 377)

So what can Tattycoram do? Mr Meagles's suggestion that she should count up to twenty-five whenever she starts getting overheated is hardly a

long-term solution. Again, Little Dorrit is a role-model. Given a nickname by Arthur Clennam which obliterates "Amy", she correctly interprets this renaming as a sign of love, and feels lucky to have it. The key to society's naming processes is clearly interpretation. Yet people like Mr Meagles, who assume that the Tattycorams of this world will be able to take a joke about their names and all that they imply, simply have no idea of what it is like to feel basically insecure about one's identity and social status. Dickens implicitly warns society about its love of boundaries and borderlines, and its insistence on regimentation and stratification. Discrimination on the grounds of birth is, in Little Dorrit, a metaphor for insulation by class and isolation on moral and sexual grounds. The symbolic products of this system are the alienated figures of Arthur Clennam on the one hand, and Miss Wade on the other. The bastards take jobs for which they are quite unsuited: businessmen, governesses and maidservants alike require a good working knowledge of the economic and social structures of their culture. The way things are going, according to Dickens, society is creating a substratum of misfits unable to reconcile themselves to the established order of things, whose talents, however obscure, will soon be lost forever.

vi. 'Great Expectations': The Orphan Prince and the Bastard Princess

The orphaned hero of Great Expectations bases his entire existence on lies, mistakes and guilt. The snobbish Pip takes it for granted that he and the proud Estella are a fairy-tale prince and princess, but as Harry Stone has argued, in this novel's Cinderella-like scheme of things, the real prince and princess in disguise are honest Joe and humble Biddy. 24 Moreover Pip believes Miss Havisham is the person he has to thank for both Estella and his inheritance, but as the book's tight coil of shocks and revelations begins to unravel, he has to come to terms with the fact that Magwitch is his true benefactor, and that Newgate rather than Satis House is the source of his "great expectations".

24. Harry Stone, 'Fire, Hand and Gate: Dickens's *Great Expectations*', The Kenyon Review 24, (1962), p 678

So far as the plot is concerned, Estella and Pip are linked together at first by the false mother-figure of Miss Havisham and later on by the true father-figure of Magwitch. At first Estella seems to comprehend the situation much more fully than Pip does, for she understands the extent to which Miss Havisham is a sham, while he does not. Later, however, it is Pip who learns the truth about Magwitch, and Estella who remains in ignorance. Their fluctuating levels of understanding are interdependent, Pip's male allocation waxing as Estella's female knowledge wanes. As the novel's legacies, wills and ancestors pile up they tend to reinforce an idea of personal and financial security: but in actual fact the great expectations at the heart of the novel deliver only moral disorientation and emotional entrapment. Both Pip and Estella are destined to see their dreams of wealth and social status crumble and come to nothing. One of Estella's main functions is to make it plain to Pip that they are imprisoned by both the past and the future: 'We have no choice, you and I,' she says, 'but to obey our instructions. We are not free to follow our own devices, you and I.' (GE p 285) These strikingly paralleled sentences with their stiff and repetitive rhetoric ensure that the bastard's warning to the orphan possesses an eerie and unquestionable authority.

When as a child, the orphaned Philip Pirrip renames himself, he engages in the classic pursuit of the fictional orphan, independent self-creation. Through his contact with the illegitimate Estella, however, he learns that having unknown, unremembered or untraceable origins may presuppose another kind of imprisonment. As Joe Gargery says of Wopsle's Hamlet, 'I meantsay, if the ghost of a man's own father cannot be allowed to claim his attention, what can, Sir?' (GE p 242) So far as society is concerned, identity is conferred by paternity. Yet so many of the characters in Great Expectations have unknown or neglectful parents that they are all identityless in some sense, and powerfully conscious of the fact.

In Dickens's novels, when a woman finds out that she is illegitimate, she either develops a bunker mentality, or comes out with all guns blazing.

Estella, however, is never told the truth about her origins, and this is crucially important. Pip, who tells us her story and controls our perceptions of her, leaves her even worse off than Arthur Clennam, for as an adopted child who is cut off from her biological parents, she is simultaneously insecure and ignorant. At least in Little Dorrit although Clennam is forbidden access to the truth about his parentage for his own good, Amy allows him to carry on believing the facts of his story as he has understood them for forty-odd years. Jaggers decides that Estella's roots must be dug up for her own protection, and Pip agrees, believing that knowing Magwitch and Molly to be her parents would be too terrible a burden.

Estella symbolises both the false economic and sexual convictions which Pip thinks of as his Havisham-centred great expectations, and his true Magwitchian paternal and economic inheritance. When Magwitch first meets the young Pip in the churchyard, he is reminded of the little daughter he thinks is dead, and of whom he was 'exceedingly fond'. (GE pp 417-418) Pip inherits the convict's fortune because he is Estella's stand-in. Symbolically he robs her, even while believing he is destined to marry her and thus support her financially. As Shuli Barzilai has written, 'Pip's passion for Estella is overtly forbidden and frustrated because she is above his social station and because of the manner of her upbringing by Miss Havisham. But the passion is truly illicit, out of bounds, because of their secret sibling relationship, because a consummation cannot be convened without incest.' 25 Pip believes Estella to be part of himself in the same way that the orphaned Catherine Earnshaw believes Heathcliff, the "illegitimate" step-brother she loves so passionately, to be part of herself. Through his ragged, guilty and painful contact with the illegitimate Estella, the orphaned Pip comes to understand how his own mind and heart work. He is bound to help 'Estella's father' escape from the police because Magwitch has returned specifically to see Pip himself, who is 'more ... nor any son.' (GE p 436/p 337) '[S]o quick were my thoughts,' Pip remembers, 'that I saw

25. Shuli Barzilai, 'Dickens's *Great Expectations*: The Motive for Moral Masochism', American Imago 42, (Spring 1985), pp 50-51

myself despised by unborn generations - Estella's children, and their children [if I betrayed him].' (GE p 436) One of the novel's most powerful ironies is the extent to which Pip feels criminalised by his contact with Magwitch and humiliated by his working-class family background, while identifying Estella as a potential boost to his social status. In her role as Magwitch's daughter, however, Estella ultimately both shares and crystallises his feelings of guilt and ancestral insecurity.

The exploitation of the innocent Estella begins well before Miss Havisham adopts her. Molly, crazed with sexual jealousy, strangles her rival for Magwitch's affections, and then swears to him that she will murder their daughter also. The primitive quality of her passion is revealed during the trial, when Magwitch is 'vaguely talked of as a man called Abel, out of whom the jealousy arose.' (GE p 418) Thus as a tiny child, Estella's mother uses her as a weapon against her own father. It is of course Miss Havisham who systematically dehumanises her, in order to extend the boundaries of female revenge from the deeply personal to the widely symbolic: nevertheless Estella is sacrificed to a mother's crazed man-hatred twice over. If the birth of an illegitimate child may be taken to symbolise the potentially uncontrollable forces of female passion, in Estella Dickens created the ideal weapon for two women racked with sexual frustration and anguish. The bastard serves the whore and the virgin equally well.

The old argument about birth versus breeding is particularly relevant to Estella's situation. Jaggers gives her to Miss Havisham because he is convinced that she is doomed if he doesn't:

Put the case that he lived in an atmosphere of evil, and that all he saw of children, was, their being generated in great numbers for certain destruction. Put the case that he often saw children solemnly tried at a criminal bar, where they were held up to be seen; put the case that he habitually knew of their being imprisoned, whipped, transported, neglected, cast out, qualified in all ways for the hangman, and growing up to be hanged. Put the case that pretty nigh all the children he saw in his daily business life, he had reason to look upon as so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come into his net - to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, bedevilled somehow ... Put the case, Pip,

that here was one pretty child out of the heap, who could be saved; whom the father believed dead, and dared make no stir about; as to whom, over the mother, the legal adviser had this power: 'I know what you did, and how you did it.' (GE pp 424-425)

According to one of its own spokesmen, the law indiscriminately gobbles up the children of an underclass specifically created by society in order to meet its own quota of victims. These children are not born but generated: they are criminal clones rather than human beings. Jaggers removes Estella on the grounds of environment rather than heredity: if she is merely potential scaffold-fodder, it is not because her parents were criminals who lived together 'over the broomstick'. (GE p 405) Society expects (and virtually ensures) that its criminal element will be degraded and immoral, and it is content for them to be so, if this maintains the status quo. According to Jaggers, a child chosen at random from this heap of abandoned humanity and brought up in different circumstances can escape its criminal destiny. Pip basically agrees with him, although he cherishes an uneasy belief that this civilised veneer is not necessarily permanent. When he sees the strangler Molly's compulsive jerky finger movements, Pip begins to harbour fears for Estella: 'I looked at those hands, I looked at those eyes, I looked at that flowing hair; and I compared them with other hands, other eyes, other hair, that I knew of, and with what those might be after twenty years of a brutal husband and a stormy life.' (GE p 403) Like *Oliver Twist*, the illegitimate child is removed from the contamination of London's criminal classes, and transplanted into the countryside. In this case, however, it seems that Estella's bad blood may have survived her uprooting.

According to George Bernard Shaw, 'the notion that [Pip] could ever have been happy with Estella: indeed that anyone could ever have been happy with Estella, is positively unpleasant.' (Foreword to *Great Expectations*, 1937) But Dickens does not make it at all clear that Pip either wants or expects to be happy with her. About the most he says is that while Pip is thoroughly miserable with Estella, things are even worse without her. Their first meeting as children when they play cards together sets the tone for all that is to come: as Pip recalls, 'I played the game to an end with Estella, and she beggared me.' (GE p 91) His association with Estella is a

constant humiliation: perhaps she is a replacement for the equally angry and loveless Mrs Joe, who will continue to punish Pip for the crime of being born. As Harry Stone suggests, 'Pip, in his self-wounding yearning for her, is yearning, as always, for a self-projected and self-defeating mirage. Estella possesses only the externals of ladyhood; in reality she is a blighted creature who mirrors Pip's own blight. Estella is a "lady" in the same ironic sense that Pip is a "gentleman" - both have been "made"; both have been fashioned impiously as instruments of revenge ... both see their sinning shapers die for their sins; both must suffer for their own assent in those sins and must be reborn.' ('Fire, Hand and Gate', pp 677-678)

In her influential article 'Sensational Novels' (1862), Margaret Oliphant contrasted Great Expectations with Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White, stigmatising the former as 'a very ineffective and colourless work', while praising the latter's ability to 'call forth the most original and startling impressions upon the mind of the reader. The lesson to be read therefrom is one so profoundly improving that it might form the moral of any Good-child story. Mr Dickens is the careless, clever boy who could do it twice as well, but won't take pains. Mr Wilkie Collins is the steady fellow, who pegs at his lesson like a hero, and wins the prize over the other's head.' Mrs Oliphant sees the characterisation of Estella as a particular weakness. 'Estella grows up everything she ought not to grow up, but breaks nobody's heart but Pip's, so far as there is any evidence, and instead of carrying out the benevolent intentions of her benefactress, only fulfills a vulgar fate by marrying a man without any heart to be broken, and being miserable herself instead. Here there is the most perfect contrast to the subtle successes of The Woman in White.' 26

I believe that Mrs Oliphant has entirely misread Estella, who is, of course, deliberately punishing herself by marrying Bentley Drummle. Her behaviour patterns once again run parallel to Pip's: Pip, who was physically abused as a child, turns to Estella for mental cruelty, while

26. Margaret Oliphant, 'Sensational Novels', Blackwood's Magazine 91, (May 1862), in Collins, Critical Heritage, p 442/p 440

Estella marries a brutal wife-beater after a mentally tortured childhood. Both the cancelled ending of Great Expectations and the substituted chapter 59 reveal two people who have both changed and softened considerably through their rough experiences of life. When they meet again at last after long years of separation, the orphan and the bastard have both learned to recognise their own suffering selves reflected in each other.

Esther Summerson and Estella Havisham, Dickens's most important illegitimate female characters, used to be wildly unpopular with his critics. Their intriguing, diametrically opposed social tactics led to the former being vilified as a sickly hypocrite, and the latter as a destructive bitch. However modern feminist and Freudian readings of Bleak House and Great Expectations have uncovered an Esther and an Estella who were certainly not ill-judged or mistaken characterisations on Dickens's part, for underlying the strange and off-putting behaviour of both women is a common sense of unworthiness and inadequacy. Everyman's Dictionary of Proper Names states that 'Estella' is a Latin form of the Persian 'Esther' which Dickens himself invented in 1861. 27 It is suggested that the name was chosen because it was night and the stars were out when Jaggers first brought the child to Miss Havisham, and of course for Pip Estella is always a symbolically unattainable ideal. Beyond these meanings, however, I believe that Dickens intended to draw a parallel between the effects of illegitimacy upon two sensitive characters, who on the surface of things appear to be so radically different.

As Esther Summerson grows up, her aunt's mournful pronouncements reinforce the sense of worthlessness which clings to the illegitimate child. She is as good as told that she is a bastard when Miss Barbary declares, 'Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers ... pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written.' (BH p 65) Similarly Estella is quite well aware that she was no more born to wealth and social prestige than was Pip, the blacksmith's boy she scorns for calling the knaves 'Jacks' when they first

27. Leslie Dunkling and William Gosling (eds), Everyman's Dictionary of Proper Names, (J M Dent and Sons Ltd, 1983)

play cards together. (GE p 90) In a sense the orphan's dead parents are more real than the bastard's living ones.

In Bleak House Miss Barbary had deliberately raised her niece in a manner virtually guaranteed to make her unlovable and incapable of giving love. The loveless woman's evil design symbolically punishes her sister, who had been loved too much, through her child. However unlikely in real life, Dickens ensures that the adult Esther is given what the young Esther never had - her birthright of love. As a love-child, the child of loving parents, her blood proves stronger than her breeding. Unlike Miss Barbary, however, Miss Havisham declares that she has brought Estella up specifically in order to be loved:

'Love her, love her, love her! ... If she tears your heart to pieces - and as it gets older and stronger, it will tear deeper - love her, love her, love her! ... Hear me, Pip! I adopted her to be loved. I bred her and educated her, to be loved. I developed her into what she is, that she might be loved. Love her!'

She said the word often enough, and there could be no doubt that she meant to say it; but if the often repeated word had been hate instead of love - despair - revenge - dire death - it could not have sounded from her lips more like a curse.

'I'll tell you,' said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, 'what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter - as I did!'  
(GE p 261)

But lovelessness is the essential condition of the adopted child in Dickens's novels. Dickens frequently uncovers the presence of evil in the poisoned relationship of an adult and a child. Arthur Clennam is also the victim of the wicked stepmother regime, in which an embittered - even psychotic - childless woman uses an illegitimate child as an anti-male weapon. The fact that these children are surrogates encapsulates the basic fraudulence of the assumed relationship.

The extent to which illegitimate children were traditionally identified with their mothers accounts for the fact that they were generally seen as a possible source of inconvenience for men. Bastards usually spelled trouble in one of two ways, both of which were potentially economically disastrous: an unfaithful wife could foist a spurious child on

her husband, or a canny single girl could trap a hapless acquaintance into having to pay child support. But in Dickens's fiction, powerful unmarried (or at any rate childless) man-hating women contrive to annex the weapons of their weaker and more sinful sisters in order to menace the patriarchal society. In the wrong hands, the illegitimate child is as dangerous as a grenade with the pin taken out. In Little Dorrit Miss Wade actually solders together her own steely virginity and the powerful scandal which surrounds her birth, and manages to exploit herself in this way. There is an interesting postscript to this dark theme towards the end of Great Expectations, when Pip, by now a self-confessed 'old bachelor', forms an intense relationship with his namesake, the small son of Bidley and Joe. 'Bidley,' he declares, 'you must give Pip to me, one of these days; or lend him at all events.' But Bidley explicitly forbids this Havisham-like attempt to adopt a child whose parents are still both living. Quietly but firmly she insists, 'No, no ... you must marry.' (GE p 490) Dickens refuses to allow the abuse or misuse of yet another innocent child by an emotionally scarred adult who has been inadequately parented himself.

In the character of Estella, Dickens sought to weld together the two major elements of the bastard's psyche which he believed he had uncovered in the behavioural patterns of Esther Summerson and Miss Wade, who became actively involved in the development of their own personal philosophies of illegitimacy. This was not obsessive repetition, but controlled artistic evolution. By 1861, Dickens had dealt with five bastards. For Oliver Twist, illegitimacy is a virtual badge of honour. Maypole Hugh is so downtrodden and degraded that rational assessment of his situation was quite beyond him. Alice Marwood is so far down the social scale that the concept of alienation on the grounds of birth alone could never have been her primary concern, not with the stigmas of criminality and prostitution clinging to her too. Arthur Clennam is on a tremendous guilt-trip, unaware of his illegitimacy at all. But when we consider the characteristics of Esther Summerson and Miss Wade, we can see that Estella resembles them both.

When he created his first bastard heroine, Madonna Grice, in 1854, Wilkie Collins laid down almost all of the elements he later used to

develop his other illegitimate characters. Dickens did it the other way round, taking on and recreating the work he had already done. The fact that Estella was his last experiment might be taken to indicate that he had gone as far as he was prepared to go: equally I think it could be argued that she proved to him that the problem had no real fictional solution.

Esther Summerson's feelings of unworthiness affect her in a peculiarly female way. As she tries to find a niche for herself within society she adopts exaggeratedly "feminine" housewifely roles, and seems to have been successfully co-opted into judging herself as conventional society judges all women. She feels unworthy to be Allan Woodcourt's wife because of her dubious social background, and she thus gives way to the conservative point of view tacitly expressed by Woodcourt's mother. Estella, by contrast, judges herself as a person rather than as a pattern of Victorian womanhood, and she genuinely feels that it is her personality which makes her unfit to marry a decent man. They are subject to the same social insecurities, but Estella does not believe in her own power to change her destiny as Esther does. She feels totally unable to 'win some love to [her]self': when she tells Pip that she cannot love, she also indicates that she should not be. This statement is thus an absolute rejection of Miss Havisham's teaching, for Estella's most important lesson was that she was born to be adored:

'Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in, I have no doubt,' said Estella, 'and, of course, if it ceased to beat I should cease to be. But you know what I mean. I have no softness there, no - sympathy - sentiment - nonsense.' (GE p 259)

However as she speaks, Estella gradually modifies her description of the feelings of the human heart until it is in line with Miss Havisham's orthodox teaching: she still thinks of the heart as a site of physical rather than emotional weakness. It is curious that the proud Estella should be so much less confident about her capacity to feel and deserve love than the humble Esther.

The explicit parallels between Esther's experiences and Estella's may make one wonder why, when their circumstances are so similar, they actually turn out so differently. The fact that Esther's parents were a society

beauty and an army officer while Estella's were a thief and a murderess is not significant: what matters so far as "inheritance" goes is that both daughters ought to inherit their mothers' capacity to feel and inspire devotion. They know equally little about them. Dickens is not saying that Esther is humble because she knows about her illegitimacy, and that Estella is proud because she doesn't. Estella is proud in spite of her ignorance about her parents, not because of it. Neither is he suggesting that bastardy handicaps people in one of two ways, and that there are the Miss Wades on the one hand, and the Esthers on the other. Neither extreme pride nor extreme humility are healthy states of mind. We may feel that Estella understands why she behaves as she does rather better than Esther, but because Great Expectations is Pip's narrative rather than her own she cannot reveal the extent of her self-knowledge to the reader as Esther does. Even Miss Wade gets to tell her own story, but the powerful Estella is denied this right. Essentially, of course, Estella behaves like Miss Wade, but feels like Esther Summerson, and thus Dickens indicates his firm belief that aggression and effacement are two equally damaging aspects of the same original trauma.

#### vii. Conclusion: The Drama of the Abused Child

In his Child's History of England (1851-53), Dickens reveals a marked distaste for one of England's most popular kings, Charles II, whom he compares unfavourably with Oliver Cromwell on political grounds and with an alley-cat as regards morals. Yet while he cannot find a good word to say about the Merry Monarch, Dickens shows much sympathy for the most famous of his ten illegitimate children, James, Duke of Monmouth, who was executed in 1688 after an abortive rebellion against his uncle, King James II. Most historians have seen Monmouth as an arrogant young thug, but to Dickens he is 'the unfortunate favourite of the people ... a showy graceful man, with many popular qualities.' (CHE p 520) This anger at the careless parent and pity for the disinherited child fits in well with the overall tenor of his fictional contribution to the debate on illegitimacy.

In Nicholas Nickleby (1837-38), the bastard sons of the gentry are packed off to Dotheboys Hall in Yorkshire to be conveniently forgotten about by their families. According to the depraved headmaster Wackford Squeers, all his pupils 'are under the same parental and affectionate treatment. Mrs Squeers and myself are a mother and father to every one of 'em.' (NN p 117) The pathetic, ugly, sickly boys imprisoned at Dotheboys are treated in the same way most of Dickens's bastards are treated: handed over by their parents or spirited away from them to be brought up in desperate physical and/or moral squalor.

All of Dickens's novels demonstrate to a greater or lesser extent a belief in the principle of legitimacy. The moral and social chaos which ensues when his fictional parents abuse, neglect or forget about their offspring is particularly clearly documented in his dealings with illegitimate children. For Dickens, bastards and orphans were similarly marked out for misfortune: anchored to nothing and no one, they were the flotsam of society. But the illegitimate had an additional problem from which the orphan was immune: a perceived hereditary taint. It is in his struggles with this central issue that Dickens's major contribution to the debate on illegitimacy consists.

According to Dickens, when bastards are brought up in shockingly deprived circumstances as part and parcel of a virtual social strategy, they inevitably become a menace both to themselves and to society. Consistently subjected to violent public disapprobation, left in extreme poverty, and callously exploited by their superiors, they cannot help it. In real life, only a fundamental shift in middle-class public opinion could shift the ingrained stigma which attached to the illegitimate child, and that would be a long time coming. From the beginning, however, Dickens insisted that in order for Victorian England to become a truly civilised society, attitudes would have to change. In Oliver Twist, the eminently respectable Mr Brownlow puts Dickens's case succinctly. When the evil Monks calls Oliver a 'bastard child', Brownlow replies that 'The term you use ... is a reproach to those who long since passed beyond the feeble censure of the world. It reflects disgrace on no one living, except you

who use it.' (OT p 457) The only ones to blame, if blame *must* be apportioned, are the careless parents: *never* the child.

In his fiction Dickens put forward various possible solutions to the problem of how a bastard could avoid his manifest destiny, even though this seemed to be a subject in which his Victorian contemporaries were deeply uninterested. Basically it is impossible to believe that people abused as horrifically as his bastards were abused could ever really escape their fate. Yet Dickens couldn't bear this: hence, in defiance of logic, at least half of them prove to be capable of loving and being loved. He believed that for those born in shame, like women who had been seduced and forced into prostitution, the terrible sense of personal worthlessness which society expected them to feel could lead to a near-fatal sense of alienation, and a desire to destroy not only themselves, but also the bastions of that society which had condemned them. The problem was to intercept and head off the malevolent forces of poverty, ignorance, neglect, vice, crime and prostitution - not to mention the insidious cultural framework of the law, religion, morality and the patriarchy - before the people at the bottom of the pile became irretrievably brutalised and degraded.

The bottom line is that if an illegitimate child is forced to fulfill society's expectations of the bastard, he becomes a Hugh, or she becomes an Alice. But Dickens consistently tries to prevent this. His first solution is naively simplistic: if bastards become criminals when they get older, they must be prevented from growing up. But the *Oliver Twist* method will only work once. With his next two characters, Dickens could see no way out, his problem being that he was still persisting with the belief that the truth must be made public. Bleak House marks his dramatic discovery of the liberating powers of abduction, adoption and concealment. Hiding Esther's birth secret does not free her, but in a sense it frees him from the obligation to make her a criminal. Yet neither Esther nor Arthur has the dangerous criminal background which would thoroughly vindicate handing them over to Miss Barbary and Mrs Clennam for the same reasons that Estella was given to Miss Havisham. In Bleak House and Little Dorrit, the illegitimate protagonists suffer precisely because they are handed over to

new and respectable parents. Their own were guilty only of loving not wisely, but too well.

Dickens's next trick is sheer blind ignorance: in the opinion of those who love them, Arthur Clennam and Estella Havisham cannot bear the weight of their own birth secrets. In Estella's case, however, the reintroduction of the bad blood motif is extremely significant, because it seems to justify Jaggers's decision to give her up for adoption. I have sketched this outline very roughly, but it should be clear that Dickens's individual experiments with the theme of illegitimacy are closely linked together. What he writes out of himself in one novel is refined and repeated in the next: each novel adds something new to the reader's understanding of his understanding of the subject. Plainly Dickens's evolving programme of social survival tactics for bastards is not to be taken literally, but rather interpreted thematically.

The basic relationship in Dickens's novels is that between parent and child, and the theme of illegitimate origins distorts and refocusses our perception of how this relationship works in his fiction. Illegitimacy is his keynote for the crisis in family relations which automatically ensues when there is a basic and symbolic uncertainty about the strength of the bond between the parent (usually the father) and the child. Lesley Garner has described how conservative society has always had only one model for the Happy Family. 'Mr and Mrs Bun the Baker were not a Happy Family until joined by Master Bun the Baker's Son and Miss Bun the Baker's Daughter. Out of [the old card game] ... have come all our expectations of what a Happy Family must be; a paired set of adults reproducing a matching set of children, confined in one small square space.' 28 Yet really very few Victorian heroes and heroines were actually born into a nuclear family, and Dickens in particular tended to break down the classic structure.

In his last completed novel Our Mutual Friend, the pauper bastard Sloppy is rescued from the workhouse by Betty Higden, and raised as her own

27. Lesley Garner, 'Happy Families Never Were On The Cards', Daily Telegraph 27 June 1990, p 15

child. Betty is nearly eighty years old, and has outlived all her large family save a baby great-grandson who dies during the course of the novel. She is desperately poor and ignorant, but of all Dickens's bastards, Sloppy - the 'Natural', whose illegitimacy is compounded by his idiocy, and who seems destined for the social scrap-heap with no questions asked - has by far the best upbringing. Betty is an antidote to the stream of appalling foster-mothers who terrorise the unfortunate illegitimates in their care. On one level, her fear and hatred of the workhouse symbolises the truly clear-sighted and sympathetic human being's moral revulsion for a system which trades in misery. Her reward is Sloppy's unquestioning devotion. Her "son" adores her so much that he turns down the Boffins' offer to look after him in their comfortable middle-class home. Knowing that he will never leave her voluntarily, and realising that she can no longer support him financially, Betty runs away from home so that he will go to the Boffins. Her abandonment of him is her supreme sacrifice, and she dies on the open road. It is no accident that this unequivocally good mother-figure is powerless and poverty-stricken, and that the state offers her no helping hand when she cannot manage alone: it is an example of the terrible contradictions inherent in a system which tolerates the victimisation of the illegitimate poor because they are a drain on state resources, but ignores those who volunteer to shoulder their share of the community's burden.

Freud called one of his psychoanalytic case studies 'A Child is Being Beaten', and this might well be the subtitle of many of the works in the Dickens canon. Oliver, Esther, Arthur and Estella have all lost potentially loving parents, and are abused by surrogates who have assumed parental rights to which they are not entitled. (Fagin, of course, is to Oliver what Miss Havisham is to Estella.) Because no one has an obligation to protect the bastard, of all children he is the most vulnerable to abuse. Even when a decent surrogate family takes on a neglected child like Oliver Twist, it proves unable to offer adequate protection from the evil forces of the past. But in fact it is not so much the lack of a conventional family which poses the greatest threat to a child's happiness and security, as the rigid social expectations which inculcate a sense of shame and apartness. Relationships which are only

unorthodox are made to seem false and hateful: this is one of the areas in which Dickens was most interested. Despite the ill-effects suffered by some of his most important characters as a result of being brought up outside a traditional family unit (by a wicked stepmother for instance), Dickens was not condemning unconventional relationships per se. In fact he was thereby insinuating that a still more unconventional family structure - comprised of a single parent, say, or of two unmarried parents - would in fact be in the child's best interests. His fundamental belief in the principle of legitimacy boiled down to a conviction that every child needed someone to love it. The social circumstances of the carer were of precious little importance.

Legal institutions - best personified by the Court of Chancery in Bleak House - are analogous to the bastardising parents of Dickens's novels. The courts rule on technicalities to do with the structures of family life, and tend to smash it up pretty much as neglectful fathers do in real life. Dickens's bastards suffer on two interrelated levels, first as unloved and neglected children, and secondly as adults who are grist to the terrible social mills of foundling hospital, workhouse, prison, street and law. The neglect of the bastard parallels the neglect of society's weakest members as a whole.

It is noticeable that Dickens's bastards try very hard to form links with other people and to seek out human relationships, whereas Wilkie Collins's do the exact opposite and act the role of someone completely different. Apparently Dickens's illegitimates recognise their own psychological weaknesses and try to "normalise" themselves by becoming part of the family they have never had, while Collins's do not bother about *becoming* normal, just looking or seeming that way. They are angrier and more radical than any of Dickens's bastards save Miss Wade. Dickens would like us to believe that true goodness survives in the illegitimate despite their position as unloved children and social victims. This fantasy is upheld with Oliver, Esther and Arthur, and even to some extent with Hugh and Alice. With Miss Wade and Estella, however, the truth comes out. Esther and Arthur are not immune from suffering because of their awful joyless childhoods. Yet equally neither becomes harsh or judgemental: in

fact they are especially kind and sensitive characters. The violence inflicted upon them in childhood does not encourage them to be similarly violent to other people. But lurking ominously behind them is Estella, the adult Arthur and Esther should have become; Estella, whose harshness shocks even Miss Havisham in the end. 'But to be proud and hard to *me!* ... Estella, Estella, Estella, to be proud and hard to *me!*' (GE p 323) She is even more of a victim than they, for Dickens allows her no miraculous escape from the grinding cycle of emotional deprivation. In giving her to Miss Havisham, Jaggers unknowingly substituted one form of poverty for another.

Underneath it all, if we scrape off the accumulated layers of emotional scar tissue which cover up their sense of not belonging, Dickens's most important illegitimates want to love, to nurture and to be married. This longing for emotional "normality" or "maturity" stems from their crippling and terrible childhood experiences, and as such is of major psychological and thematic importance. Yet Alice's sexual degradation is paralleled by Esther's avoidance of sex and Estella's desire to sexually humiliate men: in each case the bastard's behaviour patterns are defined and shaped by the dominant female stereotypes of Victorian society. The traditional denouement of the Victorian novel (which we tend to associate strongly with Dickens) - in which the twin blessings of money and marriage fall to the lot of the hero and heroine - rarely occurs when his main protagonists are illegitimate.

The history of bastardy has always been the history of society's reactions to the unmarried mother and her child. Yet for centuries the bastards of English literature had been adults rather than infants or children. Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth* reflected her society's view of illegitimacy as a social evil, but publicised a far more liberal and sympathetic attitude towards "the old story" by making the birth of the illegitimate Leonard the cause of a moral renaissance for his mother instead of a moral tragedy. In centering her argument on the behaviour of the mother rather than the child, Mrs Gaskell significantly altered the main focus of the theme, and profoundly influenced other writers. Other famous bastardy novels of the 1850s - most notably Wilkie Collins's *The Dead Secret* (1857)

and George Eliot's Adam Bede (1859) - reflect the way in which she had shifted the narrative's centre of attention. Dickens, of course, had been writing about illegitimate characters for fifteen years or so by the time Ruth was published, and was not affected by the book to the same extent. His concern had always been, and was to remain, for the child rather than for its mother, or rather for the adult who had once been the child.

During the 1860s, the dominant position of the mother in stories about illegitimacy gave way as novelists began to see that the bastard himself could afford them access to psychological and economic areas of the Victorian culture, in addition to the social and sexual areas which seemed to have been annexed by the fallen woman who had given birth to him. The child was therefore a more useful, multi-purpose character than his parent. The Siamese-twinning figures of the unmarried mother and her child were gradually prised apart, so that the fallen woman and the bastard became individuals rather than a two-headed monster as before. Hence the fallen women of the 1870s and 1880s were not necessarily unmarried mothers, as they had usually been before.

The same things happen over and over again to Dickens's illegitimate characters. All are imprisoned, metaphorically or literally, in jails of the mind, spirit or imagination, or in the foundling hospitals, workhouses and prisons of Victorian England. All are subject to physical and/or emotional punishment, so much so that our overall perception of Dickens's bastards is of human suffering on a blood-curdling scale. Technically, Oliver, Esther and Arthur - maybe even Estella - are given happy endings, but this is in spite of the drift of the plot and the realism of Dickens's portrayal. Physical illnesses - especially those which are accompanied by terrifying dreams and hallucinations - are common. Of her poem Fever 103, Sylvia Plath declared, '[It] is about two kinds of fire - the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify.' When Esther Summerson comes down with a raging fever, her dreams and visions are unnaturally vivid and frightening. Arthur Clennam on the other hand undergoes the 'despondency of low, slow fever'. (LD p 823) And yet in his delirium, Arthur dreams of Little Dorrit, and she telepathically picks up on this. This dream clearly differs significantly from Esther's terrible

nightmare about simultaneously belonging and not belonging to society. Technically jail-fever, of course, Clennam's prison is largely of his own devising. Alice Marwood's feverishness is linked to her unbalanced desire for revenge on James Carker: significantly, when she finally collapses, she is nursed back to emotional (if not physical) health by his sister Harriet. Hugh's feverishness is the result of delirium tremens, and symbolises his inability to withstand vice and temptation. Symbolically, Estella never gets ill at all: instead Pip undergoes her allocation of physical and psychological suffering.

All Dickens's bastards possess a potentially lethal parental inheritance. Estella and Hugh have murdering mothers and careless fathers, but whereas Hugh's parents degrade him and ensure that he stays degraded, Estella's case is complicated by her adoption. Alice's mother exploits her as a commodity, and leads her to her ruin. Oliver, Esther and Arthur have parents either too weak, too ignorant, too absent or too dead to prevent their victimisation. The bastard's ill-treatment is on a class basis, of course, like everything else: the type of abuse meted out varies with social circumstances. Estella escapes the straightforward brutality meted out to the working-class Oliver, Hugh, Alice and Tattycoram, and falls victim to the more sinister form of corruption which affects the middle-class bastards like Esther, Arthur and Miss Wade. However, while the disabilities associated with illegitimacy do not affect everyone equally, being the illegitimate offspring of wealthy or socially influential people means only that your suffering will take a different form, not that you will escape it altogether. Dickens tried hard to cover all the class angles: Oliver is a gently bred child brought up in a low-class setting, while Estella is a guttersnipe brought up among the gentry.

The treatment meted out to Dickens's bastards is one of the ways in which he sought to reveal institutional rigidity and its insensitivity to the needs of the individual. There is an important sense in which his bastards are caught up in (and quite frequently horrifically mangled by) the machinery of the Victorian state. This manifests itself for Oliver as the workhouse; for Hugh, the attitude of his MP father; for Alice, the judiciary; for Esther, the law and Chesney Wold; for Arthur, the Marshalsea

and the Circumlocution Office; for Miss Wade, the respectable relatives upon whom she was dependent; for Tattycoram, the foundling hospital after which she was named; and for Estella, the mills of society which Jiggers perceives to grind exceeding small. Dickens has various theories about how social evils spread, but it is rarely the fault of the bastard per se. He has plenty of irredeemable characters who seem to have been born into sin, such as Uriah Heep, Daniel Quilp and Ralph Nickleby, but not one of them is illegitimate. When Dickens's bastards go to the bad, they do so solely because of social pressures, and never because of an inherited predisposition to evil.

In Oliver Twist Dickens wanted to dramatise this in a positive way, by having a child apparently born to be socialised into criminality saved by respectable society. But this really does not work, because his theory is based on respectable society actually ensuring that the bastard child *does* suffer. Alice and Hugh, his next two bastards, are no more than minor characters, because he is concerned to show that such people are inevitably destroyed by society, and this clearly cannot happen to a novel's hero or heroine. Arthur and Esther, however, can be an abused bastard hero and heroine respectively because they suffer from the private middle-class psychological effects of bastardy, unlike their working-class criminal forebears who could not be redeemed within the scope of a novel. Similarly, because Estella follows in the footsteps of Miss Havisham rather than her mother Molly, becoming the murderess of Pip's hopes and dreams rather than of Pip himself, Dickens holds out the possibility of her being a redeemable middle-class Esther rather than a doomed working-class Alice after all. In choosing to marry the brutal Bentley Drummle, however, it seems that Estella is drawn to the physical rather than emotional bullying which goes on among those at the very bottom of the social scale. The fact that circumstances ensure that the social survival of the bastard is, like virtually everything else, largely dependent upon class, reveals a deep conviction on the part of the writer that the bastard counterworld was truly analogous to respectable society. In both spheres, social pressures and penalties affect the poor far more than the rich.

Dickens's first three bastards, Oliver, Hugh and Alice, uphold three basic cliches of illegitimacy: the tender love-child, the alcoholic and degraded savage, and the sexually tainted and criminalised female. Yet they are far from being merely the conventional pasteboard figures that this reliance on the old stereotypes suggests. In this context, G.K. Chesterton's view of Dickens's use of illegitimacy and other secrets seems particularly interesting. In puzzling over the subterranean mysteries which lurk below the surface of Dickens's greatest novels, Chesterton came to feel that the author himself was unaware of what was really important: hence the obvious narrative secrets of illegitimacy, crime and death which constitute plot denouements are a severe let-down. 'The secrecy is sensational; the secret is tame', he complained. 'The surface of the thing seems more awful than the core. It seems almost as if these grisly figures, Mrs Chadband and Mrs Clennam, Miss Havisham and Miss Flite, Nemo and Sally Brass, were keeping something back from the author as well as from the reader. When the book closes we do not know their real secret. They soothe the optimistic Dickens with something less terrible than the truth.' (Charles Dickens p 171) However I would argue strongly that illegitimacy was a theme which allowed Dickens to radically undermine the moral foundations of his society. The 'real secret' of those characters who know about illegitimacy may be that the legitimate world is not much different from its hidden counterworld after all.

In Hard Times there is a fascinating description of the alternative family structures evolved by the Sleary circus troupe:

There were two or three handsome young women among them, with their two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine little children, who did the fairy business when required. The father of one of the families was in the habit of balancing the father of another of the families on the top of a great pole; the father of a third family often made a pyramid of both those fathers, with Master Kidderminster for the apex, and himself for the base; all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing. All the mothers could (and did) dance, upon the slack wire and the tight rope, and perform rapid acts on bareback steeds; none of them were at all particular in respect of showing their legs; and one of them, alone in a Greek chariot, drove six in hand into every town they came to. They all assumed to be mighty rakish and knowing, they were not very tidy in their private dresses, they were not at all orderly in their domestic

arrangements, and the combined literature of the whole company would have produced but a poor letter on any subject. Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving, often of as much respect, and always of as much generous construction, as the everyday virtues of any class of people in the world. (HT p 77)

This tribal kinship network of (literally) interlocking families is in a sense a bastard community structure. The members of this disreputable nomadic group transgress most of the demands of regular society: that the nuclear family with a father at its head is ideal; that women should be modestly tucked away at home; that that home should be settled and stable; and that it is the duty of the good businessman to help himself, if necessary by indulging in a little "sharp practice" upon occasion. This motley band of outcasts have formed an alliance whereby they are all outcasts together: maybe, therefore, in their own terms, they are no longer outcasts after all.

## CHAPTER 3.

### GEORGE ELIOT: THE PROBLEMS OF PARENTING.

#### i. 'Adam Bede': Infanticide, Kinship and Community

George Eliot's first novel was resourced by two powerful earlier fictions, Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850) and Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth (1853), but she spiritedly overthrew these texts and undermined her predecessors. Hawthorne and Gaskell had produced liberal fictions which condemned society's harsh treatment of the illegitimate mother and child, but George Eliot homes in upon the individual's inability to make peace with society rather than the antithetical convention. The villagers of Hayslope are united by a sense of shared values which gives them a high degree of cultural and psychological security, and in an "honour and shame" society, the fear of gossip deters more potential wrongdoers than the fear of the magistrate. The village thought-police - the Rachel Poysers and the Lisbeth Bedes who articulate the cherished beliefs of their society - are useful community members, for if certain breaches of good neighbourliness are nipped in the bud unofficially, the law can be kept out of it. When Hetty Sorrel leaves the village when she discovers she is pregnant, she rejects a complex network of kinship and neighbourliness which protects the individual as well as the community.

George Eliot is harsh with Hetty, but more for her conventionalism than for her waywardness. The author's private life meant that she could not seek public approval for a sympathetic portrait of a fallen woman published under her own name. Boldly, therefore, she set out to arouse compassion for one who need never have fallen in the first place. The simple country girl would be the perfect wife for the squire, as George Eliot ironically stresses:

Hetty laid her small plots, and imagined her little scenes of cunning blandishment, as she walked along by the hedgerow on honest Adam's arm, quite as well as if she had been an elegantly clad coquette alone in her boudoir. For if a country beauty in clumsy shoes be only shallow-hearted enough, it is astonishing how closely her mental processes may resemble those of a lady in society and crinoline, who applies her refined intellect

to the problem of committing indiscretions without compromising herself. (AB p 365)

In a discussion of Silas Marner, Q. D. Leavis mentions an 'insulation by class' which 'destroys the powers of imaginative sympathy in everyone.'

1 In Adam Bede, while Hetty cannot see any reason why Captain Donnithorne might not wish to marry her, Arthur believes that 'No gentleman, out of a ballad, could marry a farmer's niece.' (AB p 84)

As Jenny Newman has pointed out, 'seduction operates somewhere between courtship and rape'. 2 Yet Adam Bede refuses to accept the existence of a moral grey area in which Hetty might be responsible for her own sexuality:

It's his doing ... if there's been any crime, it's at his door, not at hers. He taught her to deceive - he deceived me first. Let 'em put him on his trial - let him stand in court beside her, and I'll tell 'em how he got hold of her heart, and 'ticed her t'evil, and then lied to me. 'Is he to go free while they lay all the punishment on her ... so weak and young?' (AB p 455)

In Adam's eyes, Hetty's illegitimate pregnancy - and even her infanticide - become evidence of innocence and helplessness rather than sexual passion and selfishness. While his eagerness to emphasise Hetty's childishness draws attention to the basic uncertainties which can underlie such apparent confidence, George Eliot's readers are often in sympathy with her too. In fact it is a mark of the author's skill that she can make us respond to Hetty as Hetty never responds to anyone else. As Jennifer Uglow has written, '[Hetty] not only denies killing her child but refuses to admit, against all the outward evidence, that she ever gave birth to a baby. The depiction of a woman cut off behind a wall of shock and suffering ... has an uncanny resemblance to modern psychological accounts of victims of sexual assault or violence.' 3 Paradoxically, the more

1. Q D Leavis, Introduction to Silas Marner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p 37

2. Jenny Newman (ed), The Faber Book of Seductions (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988), p ix

3. Jennifer Uglow, George Eliot (Virago, 1987), pp 107-108

wilfully isolated Hetty seems, the more George Eliot's readers come to sympathise with her. In her dangerous naivete, she refuses to recognise her kinship links with the community which has nurtured her. She is totally dislocated, with no sense of heredity or continuity to bind her to anything or anyone else. Social customs and mores are nothing to her: family rules and ways of doing things are simply inconsequential irritations. Sorrel is clearly one of those plants 'that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flower-pot, and they blossom none the worse. Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her and never cared to be reminded of it again.' (AB p 199)

Paradoxically, however, Hetty has fully absorbed the Hayslope sense of morality. '[T]he thought that the eyes of her aunt and uncle would be upon her, gave her the self-command which often accompanies a great dread. For Hetty looked out from her secret misery towards the possibility of their ever knowing what had happened, as the sick and weary prisoner might think of the possible pillory. They would think her conduct shameful; and shame was torture. That was poor little Hetty's conscience.' (AB p 382) She suffers the horrors of criminal imprisonment and public disgrace for her sexual frailty long before she has committed any crime. Perhaps we are to see Hetty's psychological imprisonment in terms of her entrapment by Arthur Donnithorne, a symbol of masculine power and authority, after all.

Until the very end of the novel Hetty obstinately deflects Dinah's attempt to reach her through religion, Adam's through marriage, and the Poysers' through family obligation. The climactic chapters of Adam Bede are recorded with a kind of dread. Hetty's suffering is out of all proportion to the sexual offence she has committed, but she is directly responsible for the form it takes. The crux of the story is her symbolic transmutation of a private sin into a public scandal, and the way in which her crime of infanticide jeopardises the security of a whole community.

It would be unfair to expect the Poysers to love Hetty as much as their own small children, but even her grandfather discriminates against her. '[He was always] more indifferent to Hetty than to his son's

children. Her mother's fortune had been spent by that good-for-nothing Sorrel, and Hetty had Sorrel's blood in her veins.' (AB p 383) Just as Hetty's mother was economically and socially victimised by her wastrel husband, so the sins of her father are taken to have rubbed off on Hetty herself. Hetty's Sorrel strain - her paternal inheritance - practically delegitimises her in the opinion of her mother's kin, and she is made the scapegoat for Sorrel's dissipation of hard and respectably earned Poyser capital.

Grandfather Poyser's attitude draws attention to the ambiguity of Hetty's position and her surname shows that she is a weed in the carefully tended village garden. Her fertility is deeply ironic: she detests small children and young animals, and has a positive aversion to the idea of mothering. Most of all Hetty dislikes her cousin Charlotte, to whom Arthur takes such a fancy: 'little tiresome Totty, that was made such a pet of by every one, and that Hetty could see no interest in at all' is 'a day-long plague.' (AB p 186/p 192) Significantly Totty understands Hetty's feelings perfectly: when Hetty tries to put her to bed, the little girl slaps her hard and goes to Dinah instead. As Mason Harris has commented, in a novel which emphasises so strongly the themes of kinship and community, Hetty is a problematic figure, 'thematically at the centre of the novel, but psychologically isolated by her narcissism from all the other characters.'<sup>4</sup> While the villagers of Hayslope in general (and Arthur and Adam in particular) are initiated 'into a new state' (AB p 471), Hetty appears to learn nothing. Everyone else's hopes and beliefs are muddied, shifted and forced to realign, and with the village in chaos, conventional responses cease to be applicable. Yet Hetty cannot totally ignore the appeal of the helpless child which she abandons, even though in order to survive on her terms she must get rid of it. Thus her words to Dinah in the prison cell hint at an unbidden but developing notion of herself as a suffering human being with an increasingly hard and uncomfortable sense of her rights and responsibilities towards other people:

4. Mason Harris, 'Infanticide and Respectability: Hetty Sorrel as Abandoned Child in *Adam Bede*', English Studies in Canada 9, (June 1983), p 179

I don't know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it - it was like a heavy weight hanging round my neck; and yet its crying went through me, and I daredn't look at its little hands and face. (AB p 499)

Hetty's unnamed, unsexed bastard is the pivot of the story. In George Eliot's later fiction bastards grow up and get to make moral points of their own, but Hetty's baby only ever reflects back on its parents and the essential sterility of their relationship. George Eliot cares about Hetty's sin against society, not her crime against her child. While the radical urban Methodism of Dinah Morris (which was presented as a potential threat to the peace of the village) brings only calm and consolation, Hetty's fall causes both Adam Bede and Rachel Poyser to doubt the existence of a just God. (AB p 460/p 467) As time passes, the fissures in the Hayslope community gape wide as 'the bitter waters spread.'

When Hetty refuses to tell the authorities who she is or where she comes from after her arrest, she is sentencing herself. As Mason Harris points out, 'in Hetty's kinship-oriented world to have neither place nor name is to be dead.' ('Infanticide and Respectability', p 188) Like her uncle, she knows that ostracism is the only appropriate response: Hetty is cast out for attacking her own family. Mr Poyser offers Hetty the financial support to which, as his dependent orphan niece, she has a right, but nothing more. 'I'm willing to pay any money as is wanted towards trying to bring her off ... but I'll not go nigh her, nor ever see her again, by my own will.' (AB p 459) This abandonment of Hetty parallels her abandonment of the child. The threat posed by the bastard does not - indeed can not - emerge until Hetty has destroyed her baby and replaced it, for she is the threshold figure who calls into question the criteria by which she is judged, rather than her illegitimate child.

It is Dinah Morris (Rachel Poyser's niece, and Hetty's perfect counterpart) who reconciles Hetty with the community she has fallen out of. Their scene in the condemned cell works particularly well when set against a historical backdrop. Poems, songs and legends have always drawn upon the story of the seduced maiden, her illegitimate child, and the tragedy of infanticide. Particularly relevant to Hetty's story are the "hanging ballads", which were titillating accounts of brutal murders and executions

seen by the government as useful long-term reminders to the rabble that crime could never pay. The ballads offered a highly stereotyped version of the crime and 'last dying speech' of the felon of the day, and their mediation of mainstream notions of "making a good end" reveal how the authorities tried to pass on their ideas about crime and punishment to their social inferiors. The willingness of the condemned person to play the star role in the drama was of paramount importance. "Making a good end" meant more than simply dying bravely, for the criminal was encouraged to reintegrate with the moral community he or she had previously rejected, and most felons did opt into a theatrical set-piece scripted by the authorities which, in the words of J.A. Sharpe, 'legitimised not only the punishment being suffered by the individual ... but also the whole structure of secular and religious authority.' 5 In Adam Bede Hetty Sorrel (who has been given very little direct speech during the course of the novel) delivers a lengthy and detailed confession to Dinah Morris, and a cathartic 'last dying speech' to Adam Bede who is the symbolic representative of the community she has offended:

When the sad eyes met - when Hetty and Adam looked at each other, she felt the change in him too, and it seemed to strike her with fresh fear. It was the first time she had seen any being whose face seemed to reflect the change in herself: Adam was a new image of the dreadful past and the dreadful present. She trembled more as she looked at him.

'Speak to him, Hetty,' Dinah said, 'tell him what is in your heart.'

Hetty obeyed her, like a little child.

'Adam ... I'm very sorry ... I behaved very wrong to you ... will you forgive me ... ?'

Adam answered with a half-sob: 'Yes, I forgive thee, Hetty: I forgave thee long ago.'

... Hetty made an involuntary move towards him; some of the love that she had once lived in the midst of was come near her again. She kept hold of Dinah's hand, but she went to Adam and said, timidly,

'Will you kiss me again, Adam, for all I've been so wicked?'

Adam took the blanched wasted hand she put out to him and they gave each other the solemn unspeakable kiss of a life-long parting.

(AB p 505-506)

Attended by her religious counsellor, Hetty takes responsibility for her crime against society when she sees the community's suffering reflected

5. J A Sharpe, '*Last Dying Speeches: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth Century England*', Past and Present 107, (1985), p 155

in Adam's face. The 'change in herself' which had begun with her unwilling feelings for the baby enables her to recognise human suffering - for which she is directly responsible - when she sees it.

George Eliot wrote that the 'germ of Adam Bede was an anecdote told me by my Methodist Aunt Samuel ... she had visited a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess ... had stayed with her praying, through the night ... [until] the poor creature at last broke out into tears, and confessed her crime. My Aunt afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution, and she described to me the great respect with which this ministry of hers was regarded by the official people about the gaol.' 6 An 1802 pamphlet which describes the case of Mary Voce makes fascinating reading. Not only does George Eliot take on the liberal fictions of her immediate predecessors Hawthorne and Gaskell, she also rewrites the historical record:

[A]fter condemnation, though in the most agonising distress, she remained as hardened and impenitent as ever, persisting in denying her own guilt, (and as she afterwards told us) determined to destroy herself if possible; it is evident that all the anguish she experienced on Friday was merely worldly sorrow; but very early on Saturday morning her conscience was truly awakened, and she declared she was *now* convinced that Hell must be her portion, unless she both confessed her guilt and obtained her pardon through Jesus Christ. 7

Henry Taft, the author of this broadsheet, was interested in the edifying results of the Methodists' intervention rather than in the causes of the crime or the tactics used by Mary Voce's delegation from God. George Eliot instead describes the social and psychological variables rather than the religious aspects of a hideous constant, the 'deliberately-inflicted sudden death.' (AB p 507) She may have been working with first-rate source material (an eyewitness account) but her first experiment with the theme of illegitimacy was not reportage but fiction.

6. George Eliot, *Journal*, 30 November 1858, Appendix I in Adam Bede (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p 585

7. 'An Account of the Experience and HAPPY Death of Mary Voce', Appendix II in Adam Bede, p 589

Although the story of the squire and the village maiden is semi-legendary rather than purely realistic, Hetty's seduction results in a hallmark infanticide complete with concealed pregnancy. The Saturday Review was appalled by George Eliot's delicate portrayal of Hetty's condition. 'The author of Adam Bede has given in his adhesion to a very curious practice that is now becoming common among novelists, and it is a practice that we consider most objectionable. It is that of dating and discussing the several stages that precede the birth of a child. We seem to be threatened with a literature of pregnancy ... Hetty's feelings and changes are indicated with a punctual sequence that makes the account of her misfortunes read like the rough notes of a man-midwife's conversations with a bride. This is intolerable.' 8 The reviewer (still unaware that "George Eliot" is in fact a woman) is particularly horrified by the thought that a man is discussing this wholly female subject. The same reviewer also took exception to the theme of seduction and illegitimacy per se. 'Of course, every one knows that every sin under heaven is committed freely in agricultural villages, and if any one chooses to insist that pretty dairymaids are in danger of being seduced, he at least keeps within the bounds of fact. But that is no reason why a picture of village character and village humour should be made so painful as it is by the introduction into the foreground of the startling horrors of rustic reality. We do not expect that we are to pass from the discreet love of a well-to-do carpenter to child-murder and executions, and the shock which the author inflicts on us seems as superfluous as it is arbitrary.' (Saturday Review in Carroll, Critical Heritage, p 75)

In challenging George Eliot's right to investigate certain muffled areas of female sexuality this anonymous conservative critic set his face against the awesome Dickens. In a letter to George Eliot, the maestro (who was keen to get her to write for his periodical All The Year Round) declared not only his unconditional support for her aims and methods, but a transparently genuine pleasure in her brave decision to approach a subject in which he had been interested for so long:

8. The Saturday Review 7, 26 February 1859, in David Carroll (ed), George Eliot: The Critical Heritage (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p 76

The conception of Hetty's character is so extraordinarily subtle and true, that I laid the book down fifty times, to shut my eyes and think about it. I know nothing so skilful, determined and uncompromising ... And that part of the book which follows Hetty's trial (and which I have observed to be not as widely understood as the rest), affected me far more than any other, and exalted my sympathy with the writer to its utmost height. 9

Ultimately it is not Hetty's rejection of her baby which concerns George Eliot, but Hayslope's rejection of Hetty. Her primary interest was neither Hetty's pathetic inadequacy as a parent nor the tragic fate of her helpless baby (as Dickens's perhaps would have been) but in what happens to a community when it bastardises one of its members. In making Hetty a murderess as well as a sexual sinner, George Eliot undermines her own radicalism, and Hetty's transportation and death testify to the enduring strength of Victorian sexual conventions. Symbolically, however, just as Hester Prynne's illegitimate story is discovered in the male-dominated customs-house, Hester Sorrel's lies at the heart of a novel called Adam Bede, from where it too reaches out to absorb all the reader's most powerful sympathies.

ii. 'Romola': Adoption, Rejection and Parricide

George Eliot does not make it explicit that Baldassarre Calvo's adopted son Tito is illegitimate, but his enactment of her intruder motif makes it highly likely. The fact that we possess only the haziest details about Tito's early life allows us to sketch in a notional "illegitimacy" which is partly literal and partly metaphoric. In any case, whether he is a real bastard or merely a crypto-bastard, Tito's behaviour towards his nurturing foster-father in the old man's hour of need proves to be, as for Eppie Marner, the determining act of his life. The source for the Tito/Baldassarre relationship was the story of a 'noble vengeance' which George Eliot heard in Germany in 1855. This is her recollection of the anecdote:

9. Charles Dickens, letter to George Eliot 10 July 1859, in Carroll, Critical Heritage, p 85

A man of wealth in Rome adopted a poor boy he had found in the street. This boy turned out to be a great villain and having previously entered the church managed by a series of acts to possess himself of a legal title to his benefactor's property, and finally ordered him to quit his own house, telling him he was no longer master. The outraged man killed the villain on the spot. He was imprisoned, tried, and condemned for the murder. When in prison he refused to have a confessor. He said, 'I wish to go to Hell, for he is there, and I want to follow out my revenge.' 10

'Five hundred ducats!' exclaims Bardo di Bardi when Tito shows him the jewels he has come to Florence to sell. 'Ah, more than a man's ransom!' (R p 117) But Tito has been seduced by the possibilities of the big city, and rather than bankrolling an expedition to rescue Baldassarre from prison, he uses the money from the sale of the jewels to set himself up in Florence. This decision requires a perverse act of faith - a willingness to believe that the old man is either dead or an untraceable prisoner:

Tito ... had chosen his colour in the game, and had given an inevitable bent to his wishes. He had made it impossible that he should not from henceforth desire it to be the truth that his father was dead; impossible that he should not be tempted to baseness rather than that the precise facts of his conduct should not remain for ever concealed. (R p 151)

Tito is not evil because his moral decisions have evil consequences. Actions and intentions do not always - or even often - coincide, but this is the kind of paradox he will never bother to get to grips with. As George Eliot subjects his motives and actions to a steady flow of insistent moral and psychological analysis, the reader's understanding of Tito intensifies as the misinterpretations of his character by people within the novel proliferate.

Important cultural expectations are undermined by Tito's betrayal of Baldassarre. Society has traditionally assumed that fathers abandon bastards because they are less than ideal heirs, whereas legitimate sons ensure a kind of immortality for the father because through them his name

10. George Eliot, 'Commonplace Book', in Gordon S Haight, George Eliot: A Biography (OUP, 1968), p 352

and property will live on. As Walter Pater wrote in Marius the Epicurean, 'through the survival of their children, happy parents are able to think calmly, and with a very practical affection, of a world in which they are to have no direct share'. (Macmillan ed, 1921, Vol 2, pp 221-222) Bastards, like daughters, would seem to be superfluous, if a line can only be replicated through a legitimate son. In this case, however, the father does not make the bastard tick: he is symbolically displaced from the centre of his son's existence, and left genealogically bankrupt. Moreover Tito's notions of what he needs to be successful in Florence - charm, money, brains and independence - are disturbingly conventional. Like Harold Transome, because Tito never realises that his illegitimacy is assumed to be a social handicap, to all intents and purposes it isn't. Throughout Felix Holt and Romola the illegitimate protagonists resemble those cartoon characters who only plummet to the ground when they look down and realise that they've run out of cliff.

Remembering Malinowski's Principle of Legitimacy, which stressed the belief that every child should have a father-figure, it seems that in raising an abandoned child of a different nationality Baldassarre Calvo has performed a great public service, sociologically speaking. He has 'rescued a little boy from a life of beggary, filth and cruel wrong ... reared him tenderly [and been] to him a father.' (R p 148) In taking it upon himself to create a space for the favoured child within the community, Baldassarre prevents Tito becoming either a threat or a burden to society. But he is no altruist: he only expects Tito to pay him back in the shifting and incalculable currency of love and gratitude rather than hard cash. Tito, however, is dissatisfied with the exchange rate, and resents the filial obligations which now threaten his freedom of movement. Hence he decides to clear his account by opting into a new society where he can make his way without Baldassarre. As soon as he arrives in Florence, therefore, Tito begins to forge social relationships which depend on Baldassarre remaining a prisoner in a strange land - a permanent non-person, socially speaking. Tito thinks he can recreate himself as he enters the city of the Renaissance, but prevailing ideas about filial duty mean that he is a dead man if his treachery comes to light. As a result the relative positions of father and son become thoroughly polarized.

Romola would have no plot, of course, if Baldassarre did not turn up in Florence alive. When Tito is forced to disclaim him, borrowing 'from the terrible usurer Falsehood', he little dreams that the loan will mount with the years 'till he belonged to the usurer, body and soul.' (R p 425) This phrase evokes the image of an errant son in hock for the sins he has committed against his father. It is just one example of the way in which George Eliot brings out the economic and social betrayal of the father which undermines everything that men have sons for.

Tito's symbolic denial of their relationship unhinges his father's mind and destabilizes the old man's perceptions of the past. Three times Tito ritually spurns Baldassarre as St. Peter denied the Christ, in locations loaded with religious significance - on the steps of the cathedral, at an intimate late supper and in a lowly barn. The incantatory curse of the rejected father with its matched pairs of rhythmically balanced clauses echoes the characteristic parallelism of Hebrew poetry. Baldassarre is presented as the God of the Old Testament denouncing a blasphemy:

I saved you - I nurtured you - I loved you. You forsook me - you robbed me - you denied me. You have made the world bitterness to me; but there is a draught of sweetness left - *that you shall know agony.*  
(R p 379)

When Tito waives his special relationship with his father he allies himself with the Antichrist as a criminally disobedient son. For Auguste Comte, whose positivist ideas profoundly influenced George Eliot, 'the love a child feels for a parent ... is the first step away from the natural egotism of the human heart, and it is the easiest step since the parent is in some way a shadow of the child's self, although a being at the same time distinctly different.' 11 From both a religious and a humanist standpoint, therefore, Tito's behaviour is morally unacceptable.

11. Auguste Comte in Felicia Bonaparte, The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1979), p 73

'Our deeds are like children that are born to us,' writes George Eliot, 'they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled, but deeds never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness.' (R p 219) Children may be strangled, she says, and as well as Baldassarre Calvo, Matthew Jermyn, in her next book Felix Holt, tries to prove this point. Her comment is specifically aimed at Tito, however, who has always felt that 'the sin that's hidden's half-forgiven.' (R p 361) In time, though, he begins to wince at the inevitable squeeze of ongoing events. Because Tito 'care[s] so much for the pleasures that could only come to him through the good opinion of his fellow-men ... he [comes to wish] he had never risked ignominy by shrinking from what his fellow-men called obligations.' (R p 219) At last he understands that his abandonment of Baldassarre was ultimately to the bad, if only because others perceive it that way. Convinced that everyone is out to get what they want but that most are too cowardly to admit it, Tito realises that their exasperating hypocrisy ties his hands by making his actions morally unacceptable. The thief of Baldassarre's identity is not the least bit sorry that he stole, but terribly sorry that he might go to jail.

Tito's brilliantly successful career as a political agent is perfectly in tune with his personal philosophy of enlightened self-interest. He learns very early that it is important to be charming and lovable because if one behaves unpleasantly, people will not allow themselves to be exploited. George Eliot declared in a letter to her friend R. H. Hutton that she wanted to show that Tito's behaviour was environmentally influenced, and that she had attempted to trace 'the relation of the Florentine political life to the development of [his] nature.' (Carroll, Critical Heritage, p 206) Yet one of the main reasons for Tito's success is the similarity between the beautiful, sunny and treacherous stranger and the city he wants to conquer. Tito feels immediately at home because in Florence life is lived to the moment. In the midst of internecine strife and predatory foreign invasions no one has the time or the inclination to develop long-term commitments to people or to causes. Relationships entered into in order to get a job done are much easier to wriggle out of than those which involve ravelled notions about duty and affection. When

Tito dons his 'garment of fear' - which is as much a habit of mind as a suit of chain-mail - it is not because he is afraid of a politically motivated assassination attempt, but because there is a knife-wielding maniac out to avenge a ritual parricide. Tito's detachment from 'normal' morality pre-dates his arrival in Florence, and that this has something to do with the circumstances of his birth is clear from the barber Nello's comment about the typical Greek, who would 'make a stepping-stone of his father's corpse.' (R p 82)

Tito's bastardy relates to his role as the novel's catalyst figure. He turns up in Florence, as Harold Transome does in Treby, wanting to be his own master - indeed imagining himself to be so - but vulnerable in the way only George Eliot's egotists can be, pitifully ignorant of what all his yesterdays have determined for him. Romola's actions provide a gloss on her husband's behaviour, as she acknowledges the truth of Savonarola's admonition when she is thinking of leaving Tito. 'You are turning your back on the lot that has been appointed for you - you are going to choose another. But can man or woman choose duties? No more than they can choose their birthplace or their father and mother.' (R p 430) Unlike Romola, Tito never realises that as a son, a husband and a father, he has numerous responsibilities. For all that he seems to be such an influential figure, Tito leaves very little trace when he dies because he has failed to weave enough strong threads to anchor himself to anything or anybody. There is no ragged hole in the fabric of life to show where he has been torn out.

The 'dreadful vitality of deeds' (R p 219) and the unimagined power of Tito's past is spectacularly dramatized in the scene at Bernardo Rucellai's palace during which Baldassarre denounces his son before the assembled grandees of Florence. Forced to disguise himself in order to get into the palace, Baldassarre is in the invidious position usually occupied by the bastard. In Collins's No Name, which was exactly contemporaneous with Romola, the illegitimate Magdalen Vanstone is forced to dress up as a servant as part of her plan to re-establish her social identity: here Baldassarre Calvo masquerades as a poor scholar in order to expose his bastard son.

Baldassarre's crucial loss of memory when questioned about his relations with Tito, like Silas Marner's catalepsy, makes him vulnerable. Memory is very important to George Eliot: it is the faculty which Baldassarre loses and Tito never has. As Felicia Bonaparte writes, 'from the day he arrives in Florence, Baldassarre, who is not only [Tito's] father but his symbolic past, becomes immediately remote to his imagination.' (Triptych and the Cross, p 112) Despite Baldassarre's failure to expose him, the bastard's thoughts crystallise into the purest malevolence. The old man's words to the host recall Jesus's words to his disciples at the Last Supper: 'Messer Bernardo Rucellai, I wish you and your honourable friends to know in what sort of company you are sitting. There is a traitor among you.' (R p 421) When Baldassarre claims a Christ-like righteousness, Tito is left to play the unredeemable sinner. He 'had never yet done an act of murderous cruelty even to the smallest animal that could utter a cry, but [now] he would have been capable of treading the breath from the smiling child for the sake of his own safety.' (R p 422) Tito is maimed by his attempt to shake off his paternal burden, as Baldassarre comes to personify a hideous violation of human beliefs and expectations which must be covered up at all costs. As the only 'smiling children' in the novel are his own Lillo and Ninna, Tito reveals a willingness to destroy the promise of his future rather than yield to the stifling past.

Although Baldassarre symbolises Tito's past, unlike most fathers, he can tell only the legitimised post-adoption story, and knows nothing of Tito's earliest origins. Neither do we, of course, and there is a considerable amount of confusion about Tito's ancestry which is never satisfactorily resolved. The fact that Tito has absolutely no sense of filial duty may not be entirely his fault. We cannot know what scars his early family tragedies have left. Operating in a world which values personal, and above all familial, relationships, Tito charmingly sets himself up in direct opposition to the dominant expectations of his cultural milieu. In doing so he becomes a fifth-columnist within Florentine society - so often the most powerful revolutionary figure of all.

The basic problem is that Baldassarre wants to shape Tito's future conduct and opinions and Tito wants to go it alone, but circumstances dictate that the two men are unable to slug it out as fathers and sons usually do. Their symbolic and inevitable struggle is complicated by an economic betrayal - the sale of Baldassarre's jewels - which foreshadows Matthew Jermyn's economic betrayal of Harold Transome. The great scene in which Baldassarre murders his son in fact casts a long shadow over the showdown to come in Felix Holt:

Baldassarre ... has seen a white object coming along the ... stream. Could that be any fortunate chance for *him*? He looked and looked until the object gathered form: then he leaned forward with a start as he sat among the rank green stems, and his eyes seemed to be filled with a new light. Yet he only watched - motionless. Something was being brought to him.

The next instant a man's body was cast violently on the grass two yards from him and he started forward like a panther, clutching the velvet tunic as he fell forward on the body and flashed a look in the man's face.

Dead - was he dead? The eyes were rigid. But no, it could not be - Justice had brought him ... Baldassarre did not feel feeble in that moment. He knew just what he could do. He got his large fingers within the neck of the tunic and held them there, kneeling on one knee beside the body and watching the face. There was a fierce hope in his heart, but it was mixed with trembling. In his eyes there was only fierceness: all the slow-burning remnant of life seemed to have leaped into flame.

Rigid - rigid still. Those eyes with the half-fallen lids were locked against vengeance. *Could it be that he was dead?* There was nothing to measure the time: it seemed long enough for hope to freeze into despair.

Surely at last the eyelids were quivering: the eyes were no longer rigid. There was a vibrating light in them: they opened wide.

'Ah, yes! You see me - you know me!'

Tito knew him; but he did not know whether it was life or death that had brought him into the presence of his injured father. It might be death - and death might mean this chill gloom with the face of the hideous past hanging over him forever.

But now Baldassarre's only dread was, lest the young limbs should escape him. He pressed his knuckles against the round throat, and knelt upon the chest with all the force of his aged frame. Let death come now!

Again he kept his watch on the face. And when the eyes were rigid again, he dared not trust them. He would never lose his hold till someone came and found them. Justice would send some witness, and then he, Baldassarre, would declare that he had killed this traitor, to whom he had once been a father. They would perhaps believe him now, and then he would be content with the struggle of justice on earth - then he would desire to die with his hold on this body and follow the traitor to hell that he might clutch him there. (R pp 637-639)

George Eliot's visual imagination has produced in this image of the entwined bodies of the father and son something which can be seen as a devastating parody of a brilliant work of Florentine Renaissance art, Michelangelo's Pieta. Like the suffering Madonna, Baldassarre cradles the apparently lifeless body of his son, knowing that if there is any justice he will have cheated death, as he is destined for another fate. The way in which this scene feeds into George Eliot's next novel is quite startling. The twin climaxes reflect back into each other, mopping up all the available light: it is impossible to believe that George Eliot did not have the Romola scene in her mind's eye when she worked out the climax of Felix Holt. The name of the game is the hatred of fathers and sons, and illegitimacy is once again 'x' the unknown factor.

In Romola and Felix Holt circumstances are such that the conflict is (unusually) delayed. In addition, due to the real or perceived weakness of Baldassarre and Mr Transome, neither son has had his pre-eminence seriously questioned. Circumstances of birth and upbringing have prevented the primal battle coming to a head. There are several marked resemblances between the conflict scenes of the two novels. The sons are feeling especially pleased with themselves immediately before their unbalanced fathers attack. Each confrontation takes place in a political context: Tito has escaped from his enraged enemies, and Harold is among the Loamshire gentry he wants to impress. Both fathers enact Francis Bacon's belief that revenge is a kind of wild justice: Baldassarre kills Tito because Tito had left him to die, and Jermyn engineers Harold's social destruction because Harold was out to destroy him. In Romola the river is a very potent symbol: in Felix Holt it is a large mirror. There are two attempted stranglings, Baldassarre's and Jermyn's. In her Journal for May 16 1863 George Eliot wrote 'Finished Part III. Killed Tito in great excitement.' 13 Yet Harold's coup de grace, written three years later, reveals that on reflection, Romola hadn't quite clinched things. A spot of domestic violence was child's play in fifteenth-century Florence, but in nineteenth-century North Loamshire matters had to be brought to a less dramatic - and perhaps more fully imagined - conclusion. Once again the

13. Quoted in Andrew Sanders, Notes to Romola (Penguin, 1980), p 734

novel's consummation involves the assertion of a fatherhood which the son wants to deny. Unlike Tito, however, Harold will not be allowed to do so.

In Romola the bonds between parents and children, and husbands and wives are as flimsy as those between political allies. While Tito is not the only character unable to maintain his personal relationships, his presence exacerbates existing tensions between Bardo di Bardi and his daughter Romola. His absence, on the other hand, is helpful, for it allows Romola to provide for Tessa and her children the constant love and protection which Tito has been too lazy to supply. Tito's failed relationships are symbolised by Baldassarre's jewel and Romola's wedding ring. Felicia Bonaparte has noted that these rings 'represent a relationship to two of the three closest possible ties, to parent and to spouse, and therefore, as the family is the paradigm of the whole, a relationship to the past and the present human community.' (Triptych and the Cross, p 89) The third close tie (to one's child) is ringless because Tito's marriage to Tessa is only a carnival joke: in any case, his feelings for mother and children are virtually identical. Tessa, Lillo and Minna provide him with the uncomplicated love and approval necessary to uphold the attractive self-image which, like Arthur Donnithorne and Harold Transome, Tito needs to sustain himself:

No guile was needed towards Tessa: she was too ignorant and too innocent to suspect him of anything. And the little voices calling him 'Babbo' were very sweet in his ears for the short while that he heard them. When he thought of leaving Florence, he never thought of leaving Tessa and the little ones behind. He was very fond of these round-cheeked, wide-eyed human things that clung about him and knew no evil of him. (R pp 503-504)

Tito loves his children because they show him the Tito he most wants to see - 'that bright, gentle-humoured Tito who woke up under the Loggia de' Cerchi on a Lenten morning five years before, not having yet given any hostages to deceit.' (R p503) Romola and Baldassarre, on the other hand, are ruthlessly marginalised for showing Tito a side of himself which he would like to repudiate. The way in which Tito uses other people as mirrors which reflect back images of himself reveals the extent of his

self-obsession: equally it points to a fundamental lack of confidence underlying all his bravado.

Romola's women are most capable of sustaining difficult or unusual personal connections, even though the heroine herself stands at the centre of a web of severed and blighted relationships. Romola's mother is dead, her brother and father die unhappy and unfulfilled, her godfather is executed, her religious mentor is burned to death and her husband is murdered by her father-in-law. The number of fathers and father-substitutes who come to a sticky end during the course of the novel is remarkable, but Romola manages to replace her shattered family ties. Over and above her filial and marital obligations she willingly accepts responsibility for weak and friendless people who have no claim to her time and trouble. It seems curious that she does so by becoming a stand-in *father* to Tessa's children.

When Niccolo Machiavelli declares that women are involved in alternative systems of judgement, he reminds us that the novel's heroine does not see things conventionally. Romola consciously legitimises the illegitimate. Monna Brigida reports Machiavelli's speech:

[It] was no use for the Signoria to make rules for us women, because we were cleverer than all the painters, and architects, and doctors of logic in the world, for we could make black look white, and yellow look pink, and crooked look straight, and, if anything was forbidden, we could find a new name for it ... (R p 178)

Romola 'finds a new name' for encouraging vice when she becomes the protector of Tito's mistress and illegitimate children. When Tito, a burden on society as a child, leaves society burdened with his children when he dies, his childless widow follows Baldassarre's example, and poaches the unwanted bastards for herself. Felicia Bonaparte has stated that 'As the character who has been from the beginning Tito's antithesis and touchstone, Romola has been time and again called on to redeem the world from the moral chaos that follows in Tito's wake.' (Triptych and the Cross, p 244) Yet more important than Romola's propensity to rename is George Eliot's. Machiavelli's words amount to a bastard manifesto: after 1863 the illegitimate was found many new names. In The Mill on the Floss

she had written, 'the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.' And the unhappiest illegitimates too, perhaps?

iii. 'Felix Holt': Heirship, the Law and Economics

Though the plot of Felix Holt is very complex, its outcome depends upon past events beyond the scope of the novel as it stands. The motives underlying the entail of the Transome estates, the sexual affair of Mrs Transome and Matthew Jermyn, the histories of Denner, Durfey and 'mad old Tommy Trounsem', Harold's mysterious sojourn in the East - all these elements present only in lack help to undermine our faith in the stability and completeness of a text often criticised for its laboured and weighty legalism. George Eliot saw the living activity of the dead past as a minefield for the unwary and the ignorant, and the operation of the law in Felix Holt dramatises this intense conviction. Illegitimacy and inheritance are the mainsprings of a plot which compares with the best and worst of the sensation novel genre.

Harold Transome's claim to his estate is secure providing a male descendant of Thomas Transome, who had sold his birthright to Harold's branch of the family, remains alive. By 1832 his tenure is conditional upon the survival of the decrepit bill-sticker Tommy Trounsem. When Tommy is killed in the Treby riot, the estate reverts to the Bycliffe heiress, Esther Lyon. The tortuous and protracted legal processes which ultimately invalidate Harold's claim and uphold Esther's form the bedrock of George Eliot's investigation of the no-man's-land between legal theory and legal practice.

The law presents itself as a cultural manual which enables society to clarify the limits of acceptable human behaviour but because society is changing all the time, new laws are constantly needed, and old ones have to be repealed. The law distinguishes between the bastard and the legitimate by validating wills, granting divorces and upholding contracts. The legal maxim *pater est quem nuptiae demonstrant*, for instance, which

states that a married woman's husband is assumed to be the father of her child, is supposed to uphold the institutions of marriage and the family, yet it actually enables Mrs Transome and Jermyn to cover up the sexual and economic fraud they have committed against her husband. Able to prohibit or sanction all human connections, business and personal, public and private, in Felix Holt the law becomes a metaphor for ugly and distorted relationships, and a precise, elaborate language used to formally articulate human hatred and mistrust. Litigation only goes to show that two adversaries have failed to solve their differences privately, and are settling their dispute in a recognised and highly ritualistic manner. In an 1866 review of Felix Holt G.S. Venables commented that 'The law supplies to modern novels the place of that supernatural machinery which was once thought indispensable in epic composition. Like the gods of Olympus, or the Destiny of later times, some entail or settlement operates in its relentless course, impenetrable, inexorable, and sovereignly unjust.' 14 The weight of the past is made tangible by documentary evidence (i.e. wills and contracts.) The law, and particularly those areas of it which relate to marriage, illegitimacy, and inheritance, is the arena in which the sexual power-struggle can be most clearly regulated and resolved.

A century before the main action of the novel begins, the 'dissolute Thomas [Transome] who played his Esau part' (FH p 388) displaced himself by selling his inheritance to his cousin Durfey. His descendants are deprived of their grand old surname and have to use the debased 'Trounsem' like the bastardised Durbeyfield D'Urbervilles. The inheritance passes to the 'lawyer-cousin', and naturally 'the possession of the estate by the Durfey-Transomes was owing to law-tricks.' (FH p 317) Worldly Harold Transome seems to be the 'original old Durfey's' true heir, for as Matthew Jermyn remarks, he has 'inherited a deuced faculty for business,' (FH p 286) but the lawyer (who should clarify, but who delights in confusion) is in fact hinting at the extreme if unsuspected precariousness of his boss's position. By referring to him as one of 'the people named Transome', Jermyn implies that both on a personal level and as the representative of

14. G S Venables, Edinburgh Review 124 (October 1866), in Carroll, Critical Heritage, p 280

the Durfey-Transomes, Harold is less secure than he supposes. (FH p 286)

As far as the plot goes, Jermyn finally exposes Harold as his illegitimate son to avoid being prosecuted for embezzlement. With regard to the narrative, however, Jermyn's revelation is the ultimate truth around which the whole story has been structured, and the revelation towards which everything has been building. The servant of the Transome family has destabilised their privileged position within the patriarchal culture by creaming off the estate profits and by sleeping with his boss's wife. Yet he justifies his subversive conduct by transferring the blame: 'if it came to a question of right and wrong instead of law, the least justifiable things he had ever done had been done on behalf of the Transomes.' (FH p 317) The law is the medium used by the enemies to express their hatred. Harold takes on an expert practitioner of the profession in which 'much that is noxious may be done without disgrace.' (FH p 316) Tensions between fathers and sons are often exacerbated by the use or misuse of the legal or economic power vested in the father, but in Felix Holt matters are complicated by a master/servant relationship which gives the son the advantage. Hence Jermyn tries to circumvent Harold's authority by resorting to blackmail. Eventually their counterpointed manoeuvrings become thoroughly ritualised:

M: Check to your queen!

N: Nay, your own king is bare,  
And moving so, you give yourself checkmate. (FH p 439)

When Jermyn realises that the law is not merely a personal instrument of repression he substitutes one form of authority for another by revealing that he is Harold's father:

Jermyn walked quickly and quietly close up to him. The two men were of the same height, and before Harold looked round Jermyn's voice was saying, close to his ear, not in a whisper, but in a hard, incisive, disrespectful and yet not loud tone -

'Mr Transome, I must speak to you in private.'

The sound jarred through Harold with a(n insufferable) sensation ... He started and looked round into Jermyn's eyes. For an instant, which seemed long, there was no sound between them, but only angry hatred gathering in the two faces. Harold felt himself going to crush this insolence: Jermyn felt that he had words within him that were fangs to clutch this obstinate strength, and wring forth the blood and compel

submission. And Jermyn's impulse was the more urgent. He said, in a tone that was rather lower, but yet harder and more biting -

'You will repent else - for your mother's sake.'

At that sound, quick as a leaping flame, Harold had struck Jermyn across the face with his whip. The brim of the hat had been a defence. Jermyn, a powerful man, had instantly thrust out his hand and clutched Harold hard by the clothes just below the throat, pushing him slightly so as to make him stagger.

By this time everybody's attention had been called to this end of the room, but both Jermyn and Harold were beyond being arrested by any consciousness of spectators.

'Let me go, you scoundrel!' said Harold, fiercely, 'or I'll be the death of you.'

'Do,' said Jermyn, in a grating voice; '*I am your father*'.

In the thrust by which Harold had been made to stagger backward a little the two men had got very near the long mirror. They were both white; both had anger and hatred in their faces; the hands of both were upraised. As Harold heard the last terrible words he started at a leaping throb that went through him, and in the start turned his eyes away from Jermyn's face. He turned them on the same face in the glass with his own beside it, and saw the hated fatherhood reasserted.

The young strong man reeled with a sick faintness. But in the same moment Jermyn released his hold, and Harold felt himself supported by the arm. It was Sir Maximus Debarry who had taken hold of him.

'Leave the room, sir!' the baronet said to Jermyn, in a voice of imperious scorn. 'This is a meeting of gentlemen.'

'Come, Harold,' he said, in the old friendly voice, 'come away with me.' (FH pp 580-581)

The spare tautness of George Eliot's prose at this textual stress-point suits the manner in which Harold's illegitimacy is so brutally exposed. The primal conflict is projected like a silent film. Each dramatic moment is accompanied by a pungent scrap of dialogue which forms a convenient subtitle as the intersected visual images unfold frame by frame: Jermyn's search for Harold, the confrontation, the whipping, the strangling, the declaration, and the recognition. Having squirrelled away Harold's secret amid the complexities of the novel as a whole for so long, the way in which George Eliot finally confronts him (and us) with the truth is painfully sudden. Harold is daydreaming of 'impress[ing] himself favourably, or at least powerfully, on the minds of [his] neighbours,' when he is socially destroyed in front of the very people he had wanted to impress. (FH p 581) According to Sir Maximus, there is nothing mutually exclusive about the categories of "gentleman" and "bastard": this is quite radical stuff. However, these kind words are perhaps as hard to swallow

as a formal ostracism for a proud man like Harold who had thought himself destined to be a great one.

The confrontation between father and son naturally centres on the mother. Harold has no words to express his rage at Jermyn's abrogation of the right to protect Mrs Transome. Although he has pleasantly but firmly relegated his mother and her relentlessly female concerns to his emotional pending tray, Harold has never forfeited first place in her affections. But he has been looking for a rival in the wrong place because Mr Transome, the conventional embodiment of property and descent, is only a senile old man. Harold identifies Jermyn as his enemy within weeks of his arrival in Loamshire, but he thinks the lawyer's fraud is economic. Hence their struggle over the birth secret is off-balance because only one of them knows the facts. Unconsciously Harold works towards his own delegitimation, functioning as both Jermyn's agent and victim. George Eliot contemplates his actions with pity and terror:

At present, looking back on that day at Treby, it seems to me that the sadde[st] illusion lay with Harold Transome, who was trusting in his own skill to shape the success of his own morrows, ignorant of what many yesterdays had determined for him beforehand. (FH p 277)

Because Harold does not know who his father is, he does not understand himself. His parental knowledge is only misinformation. In fact, Harold, Jermyn and Mrs Transome are three of a kind, worldly, selfish and passionate, but certainly not prepared to let their passions compromise them. Harold's affair with the slave who gives him a son parallels Jermyn's affair with Mrs Transome. The class of the woman involved does not matter: in either case, she cannot speak out against the man who has sexually entrapped her. Harold's slave presumably spoke only the English which he taught her, while Mrs Transome is unable to denounce Jermyn for her own sake. Once a woman becomes the mother of an illegitimate child, she is in the power of her seducer. Harold oppresses and exploits little Harry's helpless mother by sex, race and class, but in spite of Arabella's birth, breeding, status as the de facto head of the Transome family and position as a married woman, she too is wholly in the power of her seducer. Women, George Eliot argues, are always losers at this sort of sexual

double-dealing: only men can get away with it. The dynamics of the sexual power-struggle were to be investigated still further in the relationship of Henleigh Grandcourt and Lydia Glasher in Daniel Deronda.

Poetic justice demands that Jermyn's Achilles heel should be his Transome connection. Bitterly he realises that 'Harold, precisely Harold Transome, [has] turned out to be the probable instrument of a visitation which would be bad luck, not justice.' (FH p 317) Yet for George Eliot, this *is* justice. Jermyn's hubris brings about his downfall as his patronising attitude towards Mrs Transome makes Harold desire to humble him. Although fatherhood in Felix Holt means precedent, power and property, Harold cannot cope with these privileges as vested in Matthew Jermyn. His objections may be couched in social and economic terms, but his reasons for hating Jermyn remain resolutely psychosexual. To his mother he declares in disgust:

O, Jermyn be hanged! It seems to me that if Durfey hadn't died and made room for me, Jermyn would have ended by coming to live here, and you would have had to keep the lodge and open the gate for his carriage. But I shall pay him off - mortgages and all by-and-by. I'll owe him nothing - not even a curse. (FH p 193)

In trying to wriggle free of his sonship Harold imprisons himself within the confines of a bastard inheritance. His illegitimacy raises questions about all his family obligations: when his small son rushes out to greet him, Harold 'just touche[s] the boy's head', and orders his servant to 'Take the child away.' (FH p 582) As Rufus Lyon tells him, 'One soweth and another reapeth.' Used to living life on his own terms, Harold can hardly believe that his destiny is not entirely within his personal control.

Neither Harold nor the reader is aware of his illegitimacy for nine-tenths of the novel: he has none of the qualms of Daniel Deronda, who thinks he's a bastard, but isn't. I am inclined to believe, however, that many Victorians would not have been too surprised to learn the truth. Harold's role as the outsider whose invasion of an established society has

very serious consequences is a classic bastard signifier, and throughout the novel George Eliot drops enigmatic hints:

[Mr Jermyn possessed] white, fat, but beautifully-shaped hands, which he was in the habit of rubbing gently on his entrance into a room, [and which] gave him very much the air of a lady's physician. Harold remembered with some amusement his uncle's dislike of those conspicuous hands; but as his own were soft and dimpled, and as he too was given to the innocent practice of rubbing those members, his suspicions were not yet deepened. (FH p 113)

In the light of Harold's sexual exploits with exotic Eastern slaves and Jermyn's dark doings nearer home, these soft hands - delicate enough to be highly intimate with the ladies, but disquietingly reminiscent of monkeys' paws - are quite repulsive. Harold's resemblance to the father he despises is just one of the many powerful ironies of kinship and affiliation to be found in George Eliot's novels: Adam Bede, for instance, is the image of his father, Thias, whom he despised. In Felix Holt, Harold's behaviour is more often than not carelessly charming, but he possesses a virulent sexist streak which links him with Jermyn. Moreover, like so many Victorian bastards, Harold is an actor. The mysterious Pasha becomes a perfect English gentleman about as politically consistent as the mercurial Tito Melema.

As an undetected bastard in possession of an important estate Harold's position is inherently subversive. He is the illegitimate seed which infiltrates Transome Court and germinates there. As a woman, George Eliot was able to tackle the concept of the cuckolded and redundant male in a controlled and oblique manner which provides an excellent reference point for the anguished instability of Strindberg's The Father. Surprised to meet the family lawyer, the flustered Mr Transome stutters: 'Mr Jermyn? - why - why - where is Mrs Transome?' (FH p 521) As Peter Coveney comments, George Eliot makes it clear 'that among the "ravelled threads" of Mr Transome's past lay memories of discovering his wife about the house with Jermyn.' 15 Engels argued that the fear of a bastard being nurtured to maturity by a duped husband in order to inherit his property is the

15. Peter Coveney, Notes to Felix Holt (Penguin, 1972), p 673

lynchpin upholding the institution of marriage within a capitalist society. The treachery of the female involved - in this case Arabella Transome - is a subject drowning in psychological secrets and anxieties. Her sexual enslavement is inextricably bound up with Jermyn's economic attack on Mr Transome. '[I]n her inmost soul [she knew] that those relations which had sealed her lips on Jermyn's conduct in business matters, had been with him a ground for presuming that he should have impunity in any lax dealing into which circumstances had led him.' (FH p 202) In the following passage George Eliot combines an indictment of Mrs Transome's maternal failure with a revelation of her suppressed and unconscious leaning towards the subversive. She is an illegitimate mother to Durfey, as well as to Harold:

[T]here had grown up ... a hungry desire, like a black poisonous plant feeding in the sunlight, - the desire that her first, rickety, ugly, imbecile child should die, and leave room for her darling, of whom she could be proud ... [She] clung to the belief that somehow the possession of this son [Harold] was the best thing she lived for; to believe otherwise would have made her memory too ghastly a companion. (FH pp 97-98)

Despite her warped personal relationships, the proud matriarch always claims to be highly conventional: a true representative of her race. Important questions about class allegiance tap into the ideas of inheritance found in this novel in the same way that Eppie Marner's rejection of her "natural" father, the upper-class Godfrey Cass, is based on her close identification with the working-class people she has lived with all her life:

I wasn't brought up to be a lady, and I can't turn my mind to it. I like the working-folks, and their victuals, and their ways. And ... I'm promised to marry a working-man, as'll live with father, and help me to take care of him. (SM p 234)

With heavy irony George Eliot draws attention to Arabella's Lingon connection, and the way she - like Eppie - judges people on a class basis: she who dilutes the Transome blood with Jermyn's! She is greatly offended by Harold's decision to stand as a Radical parliamentary candidate. 'It seems to me that a man owes something to his birth and station, and has no right to take up this notion or the other, just as it suits his fancy; still less to work at the overthrow of his class.' (FH p 116) This is just one of many cunning anticipatory ironies which George Eliot wove into

the fabric of Harold's story to enliven her analysis of blood succession and descent in landed society.

Although Harold's basic ignorance of his heritage leaves him open to error, the extent to which he in fact obeys the dictates of his "natural" station is subtly emphasised. Aware that he is depriving Esther Lyon of her rightful inheritance, he concludes that legitimacy is not fixed and stable but related to the suitability of the candidates:

Nobody off the stage could be sentimental about these things, or pretend to shed tears of joy because an estate was handed over from a gentleman to a mendicant sailor with a wooden leg. (FH p447)

Harold's capacity for massaging the appearance of his illegal or morally questionable behaviour is a trait clearly inherited from Jermyn. He sees marriage to Esther Lyon as 'a possibility that would unite the two claims - his own, which he felt to be the rational, and Esther's, which apparently was the legal claim.' (FH p 454) The facts of the case are presented quite conventionally, but really the convention is reversed. In this instance it is not the female who will be placed or validated by the contract, but the male. As Jennifer Uglow has pointed out, 'Eliot uses men's attitude towards women as an index of the brutality which informs a patriarchal society structured on class and capital ... Harold's personal [decision to marry Esther] reflects his radical politics - the attempt of a morally bankrupt and illegitimate aristocracy to wed the common people, the new heirs to power.' (George Eliot, pp 187-188)

In theory the law is an impartial agent of human reconciliation, but in practice it often widens rather than solders society's breaches. It is a system of rewards and punishments, and its formula is confrontational - ie. X versus Y. Compromises can be reached only by excluding the law and settling out of court. There is no other way of reaching a conclusion which does not leave someone the loser, as Esther Lyon realises:

It seemed that almost everything in her day-dreams ... must be found at Transome Court. But now that fancy was becoming real, Esther ... found herself arrested and painfully grasped by the means through which the ladyhood was to be obtained. To her inexperience ... the dispossession

hanging over those who actually held, and had expected always to hold, the wealth and position which was suddenly announced to be rightfully hers, made a picture ... in which she was compelled to gaze on the degrading hard experience of other human beings, and on a humiliating loss which was the obverse of her own proud gain. (FH p 474)

The word 'arrested' underlines the way in which the law in action distresses and frightens Esther, who is apparently its favourite. Hence it is no surprise that when the law tries to redefine her as the Bycliffe heiress, she deliberately snubs it. In rejecting her nominal legal identity and confirming Harold's possession of the estate, Esther institutes an alternative system of inheritance more outrageous than the sale of Thomas Transome's birthright. The time-honoured rule of primogeniture is scrapped by an orphaned girl in league with a bastard. Having come into her inheritance via a process 'as natural - that is to say, as legally-natural - as any in the world,' (FH p 471) Esther gives the whole system a good shake-up, as she has every right to do. As George Eliot says, tongue in cheek, 'There will be queens in spite of Salic or other laws,' (FH p 160) and like the famous Christina, they cause immense problems when they choose to abdicate. Esther cannot simply throw Harold out of Transome Court and wash her hands of him because she has a legal right to do so: the law is not a romantic, formless distillation of truth and wisdom whose origins are lost in the mists of time, but a hard-edged man-made system ninety per cent concerned with maintaining the status quo.

Harold Transome's illegitimacy encourages the reader to consider the other bastard relationships of Felix Holt. The bonds forged between Felix Holt and Job Tudge, Mr Transome and little Harry, and Rufus and Esther Lyon (none of which is based on a blood-tie) are in stark contrast to the loveless and parasitic relationships of Mrs Transome and her emotionally stunted family. For over thirty years Mrs Transome's gloomy feelings of powerlessness and remorse have been exacerbated by her co-conspirator's inability to experience any comparable emotion. Jermyn's immunity from suffering is presented in terms of his low birth: 'moral vulgarity,' we are told, 'cleaved to him like a hereditary taint.' (FH p 202) Mrs Transome, with her Lingon blood, is of course marked out for sorrow and misfortune: as her maid Denner remarks, 'I know people have feelings according to their

birth and station. And you always took things to heart, madam, beyond anybody else.' (FH p 487) In George Eliot's scheme of things, however, nemesis (in the shape of their son) ultimately overtakes them both.

Like Daniel Deronda's Lydia Glasher, Arabella Transome is a bastard-bearer with ambivalent feelings about a dead legitimate child. Mrs Transome is 'Hecuba-like', and Mrs Glasher is a Medusa. Mrs Transome is menaced by Jermyn as Mrs Glasher is by Grandcourt, on economic grounds, and by the risk to the security of themselves and their children. But in Felix Holt illegitimacy is a censored subject, whereas it is fully discussed in Daniel Deronda. Mrs Transome does not mention her son's birth even to his father, while Lydia Glasher displays her bastards to Gwendolen, Lush and Grandcourt, daring them (and George Eliot's readers) to protest. The fact that Lydia's subversion has been detected, unlike Mrs Transome's, means that she can operate on the very fringes of society, as she has no good name to lose.

Mrs Transome dupes her sad husband into paying for her lover's bastard and illwishes his own son to 'leave room for' the interloper. It is as if she knows that the soil of Transome Court cannot nourish a sickly legitimate seedling as well as a vigorous bastard sprig. Not even Jermyn contemplates anything so radical as the permanent eradication of Mr Transome's line. When Jermyn and Mrs Transome are destroyed by their sexual sin, Harold is revealed as George Eliot's darkest incarnation of the bastard, and Henry James's glib description of him as the 'well-born, cold-blooded and moneyed Liberal, who divides the hero-ship with Felix' seems quite ludicrous. 16

In Felix Holt illegitimacy resources George Eliot's investigation of the intruder motif much as it did in Romola, and lends support to her belief in the law of invariable consequences: that our sins will find us out. There is a particular irony in the fact that Jermyn himself reveals Harold's parentage, when the fact had been carefully covered up for thirty

16. Henry James, Literary Criticism, Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (eds), (New York: Library of America, 1984), p 910

years. He believes that the revelation will be worse for Harold than for him, but Sir Maximus Debarry fulfills the same function in Felix Holt as Sir Hugo Mallinger in Daniel Deronda, stressing the innocence of the child. Moreover the convention enabled her to force sin and crime into the same arena, as Mrs Transome's adultery facilitates Jermyn's embezzlement, which in turn brings on the revelation of the original sin. The delicacy of this novel's relationship network makes her sense of society as a complicated tracery of affiliations and inheritance both impressive and thoroughly memorable.

iv. 'Middlemarch': The Insecurity of Inheritance and the Impotence of the Law

George Eliot's dissection of the overlapping business and personal relationships of Middlemarch's professional men reveals the powerful interdependent trivialities of provincial life. Yet while she interweaves the public and private concerns of the clerics, the doctors, the politicians and the money-men, she leaves us wondering about the lawyers. Both of Middlemarch's accredited legal representatives, Standish and Hawley, are effectively marginalised. Whereas the religious, medical, political and financial townsmen take an active part in Middlemarch life, (as well as in the life of the novel) the lawyers are unable to find a place in the sun. Moreover, as various unqualified Middlemarchers have a go at 'lawing', either formally or informally, the lawyers' claim to be the true interpreters and administrators of the legal process is significantly undermined.

The law in Middlemarch is symbolised by the wills of Peter Featherstone and Edward Casaubon, and both documents are based on the deliberate inclusion or exclusion of an illegitimate (or quasi-illegitimate) character. Casaubon's testament declares that his widow, Dorothea, must not marry his distant cousin Will Ladislaw, the interloper whose mysterious foreign birth and position as a defrauded and disinherited child enables him to fulfil, at least partially, the role of the fictional

bastard. Featherstone's will, which specifically benefits his 'sideslip of a son' Joshua Rigg, encapsulates his desire to offend, frustrate and disappoint as many of his relations as possible: a symbol of personal power while he lives, and endless trouble for everybody else when he dies. (MM p 446) Refusing to trust the professionals whose help he requires to activate his malice, Featherstone has two wills drawn up by different solicitors, either of which he may then invoke or suppress. His attempt to make the law completely responsive to his wishes in spite of its essentially fixed nature is, however, misdirected, unrealistic and unsuccessful. Once again the bastard lives to thwart the best-laid plans of his careless father.

On the night of his death Featherstone decides that he wants to leave £10,000 to Fred Vincy and the Stone Court estate to Joshua Rigg. Clearly this is a whim rather than a will. Featherstone tries to get Mary Garth to burn the second will, which leaves everything to Rigg. The scrupulously honest Mary insists that he should summon a solicitor. This, of course, is precisely what he will not do:

Lawyer? What do I want with the lawyer? Nobody shall know - I say, nobody shall know. I shall do as I like. (MM p 352)

However Mary remains obstinate, and Featherstone's last wish is thwarted. Joshua Rigg gets the lot. Featherstone has made the frog-faced Rigg his heir because leaving his property to a hitherto unknown bastard perfectly expresses the utter contempt he has for the rest of his family. Rigg is the embodiment of his father's malice: a child born to blight the happiness of other members of his family. Featherstone's displacement of the legitimate from the sphere of inheritance they have always dominated is an exquisite cultural insult, and when Joshua Rigg takes the name of Featherstone, the status of those who are legitimately entitled to it is significantly undermined. To cut someone out of a will is the quintessential bourgeois gesture of extreme displeasure, presupposing as it does that the money or property in question belongs to the disapproving rather than the disapproved of. Viewed from this angle - the Waule angle, so to speak - Featherstone's will is illegitimate, and his

relatives are doing no more than they should to persuade him to uphold the supremacy of legitimate kinship and descent. The Waules have done nothing to warrant being disinherited - though they have done nothing positive either. Hence it is with grim satisfaction that the insulted relatives watch the dissolution of the old man's plans after his death, for of course in willing Stone Court to the least likely person, Featherstone wills it to the man least likely to value it. While the old man was able to ensure that Rigg's irregular birth proved no bar to his inheritance, he had no way of similarly overriding his son's psychological alienation from it:

[E]very one had expected that Mr Rigg Featherstone would have clung to [Stone Court] as to the Garden of Eden. That was what old Peter himself had expected; having often, in imagination, looked up through the sods above him, and, unobstructed by perspective, seen his frog-faced legatee enjoying the fine old place to the perpetual surprise and disappointment of other survivors.

But how little we know what would make paradise for our neighbours! We judge from our own desires, and our neighbours themselves are not always open enough ever to throw out a hint of theirs. (MM pp 563-564)

Even on his deathbed, when he decided to alter his will, Featherstone seemed to realise what a confusing and contradictory process it could be, and ultimately future events undermine the spirit of his last wishes. The Victorian convention of inheritance is turned on its head when the bastard Rigg sells his property to the banker Bulstrode and sets himself up as a money-lender. Offered a priceless opportunity to distance himself from his tainted past by opting into landed society, Rigg inexplicably refuses to be grateful for it. As Caleb Garth remarks, it is ironic that Bulstrode should get his hands on Stone Court: 'the old man hated him, and never would bank with him.' (MM p 446) In leaving Stone Court to the person most alienated from what it symbolises, Featherstone allows his son to undermine the will of the father.

In calling Book Five of Middlemarch - which deals at length with the twin wills - 'The Dead Hand', George Eliot once again pokes fun at the law. The Statute of Mortmain (1736) was designed to prevent the Church of England purchasing further landed estates, by stating that existing Church property was technically held in the "dead hand" of a corporation. It was

felt that this clause evened things out a little, since ordinary landowners had to pay death duties from which the Church was of course exempt. This laying on of the "dead hand" in the sphere of inheritance is red meat to George Eliot, who is more than willing to question the criteria by which Featherstone and Casaubon construct their own punitive legal rulings.

As for the law in Middlemarch as a whole, George Eliot never once acknowledges its ability to function safely and effectively. Throughout the novel the law is manifestly out of touch with the moral and cultural questions it is supposed to settle. When, for instance, Dr Wrench's negligence almost causes the death of his son Fred, Mayor Vincy is led to declare with great bitterness, 'I'll tell you what, Wrench, this is beyond a joke ... There are some things that ought to be actionable and are not so - that's my opinion.' (MM p 295) The law is consistently presented as an authority which fails: a bastard structure and a fool's guide. Its effectiveness is in inverse proportion to its volume, for although there are few lawyers in Middlemarch, there are many wills and much law. George Eliot laughs at it and puns with it, in the naming of Will Ladislaw, the would-be lawyer who overthrows the will of Edward Casaubon, and Madame Laure, the murderess who gets away with it.

It is via Joshua Rigg's stepfather, John Raffles, that Middlemarch discovers that Nicholas Bulstrode made his money by scrambling over the backs of his dead wife's next-of-kin. Her grandson, Will Ladislaw, is morally if not legally the rightful heir, and his surname serves to highlight the ironies of his situation - the inheritor of the will but not the law, the spirit rather than the letter. His powerlessness, and the law's inability to touch Bulstrode, cut the generous landlady Mrs Dollop to the quick. The shocked reaction of an ordinary person to the apparently cruel impartiality of the law is captured perfectly in her speech. The common law has been exposed as hostile to all the customs of genealogy, and in the case of Will Ladislaw, it is working to undermine the whole structure of patrilineal inheritance:

Look you there now! ... I thank the Lord he took my children to Himself, if that's all the Law can do for the motherless. Then by that, it's o' no use who your father and mother is ... [Yet] it's well known

there's always two sides, if no more; else who'd go to law, I should like to know? It's a poor tale, with all the law as there is up and down, if it's no use proving whose child you are. (MM p 776)

George Eliot's examinations of illegitimacy and the law coalesce in the stories of Joshua Rigg and Nicholas Bulstrode. Like Ladislav's, the banker's own origins are suspicious. The Middlemarchers do not like strangers, and as a man not born in the town, Bulstrode is felt to have done very well for himself in marrying Harriet Vincy. Featherstone, who hates him, starts up a legal process - albeit indirectly and unknowingly - which culminates in the banker's ruin. Notions of social and even professional "illegitimacy" surface when the respectable church-going banker is disgraced, and Rigg, a debased banker or money-lender, flourishes both socially and economically.

Although Bulstrode "kills" Sarah Dunkirk (Will Ladislav's mother) by falsely announcing her death and speeds up the demise of the alcoholic Raffles by plying him with brandy, there is 'no handle for the law' in these crimes. Logically, therefore, he need not fear being trapped or exposed by legal measures. He is instead brought down by the lawless, in the persons of Rigg and Raffles, a bastard and a blackmailer.

At first it seems that Rigg has done Bulstrode a favour by selling him Stone Court. However the scent of his step-son's new wealth attracts Raffles as carrion attracts the vulture, and so he arrives in Middlemarch, and catches up with Bulstrode. As W.J. Harvey comments, 'the corrupt past incarnates itself in the figure of Raffles, who appears on the scene as an indirect consequence of Featherstone's death.' 17 The missing link is, of course, the bastard Rigg, and George Eliot emphasises how those persons society likes to look down on can shape the destinies of the rest of us. She draws attention to the existence of low people by whose interference, however little we may like it, the course of the world is very much determined. It would be as well, certainly, if we could help to reduce their number, and something might perhaps be done by not lightly giving

17. W J Harvey, Introduction to Middlemarch (Penguin, 1965), p 11

occasion to their existence. Socially speaking, Joshua Rigg would have been generally pronounced a superfluity. But those who like Peter Featherstone never had a copy of themselves demanded, are the very last to wait for such a request either in prose or verse ... [Mr Rigg is] a frog-faced male, desirable, surely, to no order of intelligent beings. Especially when he is suddenly brought into evidence to frustrate other people's expectations - the very lowest aspect in which a social superfluity can present himself.' (MM p 448)

I am not suggesting that George Eliot had a closet interest in eugenics because she mockingly declares that we shouldn't produce bastard children if we can't face the possible consequences. But her warning to those who sire bastards "lightly" reflects her implacable hatred of careless fathers and the incalculable consequences of thoughtless sexual sin. We all know that the disgraceful have a powerful effect on the respectable: after all, how would the respectable know that they were respectable without the disgraceful to refer to? In a sense the bastard is the arbiter of the lives of the legitimate because he calls into question the criteria by which he is judged. Why is this human being superfluous? Because he has put a few respectable noses out of joint? It is dangerous to pay much attention to phrases which require riders such as 'socially speaking' and 'generally pronounced': thus George Eliot slips the stiletto between our ribs. If we can control the numbers of 'low people' desperate to cause us trouble, then we have only ourselves to blame for their continuing presence. If they can be culled, but we choose not to do it, then we become responsible for them. From the legitimate comes the illegitimate, and it is (according to George Eliot) high time society realised that the bastard is not an alien life-form, but an aspect of ourselves which we would much rather not face. The birth of a single frog-faced bastard to old Peter Featherstone becomes paradigmatic of the thousands of petty, spiteful actions which go on all the time, adding up to a massive diminution in our resources of human sympathy. George Eliot deftly parodies Dorothea Brooke's 'incalculably diffusive' good effect on those around her, for just like the 'growing good of the world', the growing bad of the world is also 'dependent on unhistoric acts.' (MM p 896) It's just as well that Middlemarch's bastard strain peters out in the

economic thickets of the city, while Dorothes goes on to produce a fine son by Will Ladislav, who will inherit Mr Brooke's estate.

v. 'Daniel Deronda': The Bastard in English Society and on the World Stage

While the possible influence of Adam Bede and Middlemarch on Tolstoy's Anna Karenina has been critically discussed, no link with Daniel Deronda has been suggested as far as I know. 18 As both novels were published in 1876, neither Tolstoy nor George Eliot had access to the other's text while working on their own. But even if the resemblance between Anna and Lydia Glasher merely shows that the two writers dipped into the same pool of cultural resources, their characters still repay close examination. Anna and Lydia elope with younger men to escape from their moribund marriages, lose a beloved son in the process, and have children by their lovers who cannot replace the lost heirs. Anna does not love Vronsky's daughter as she loves Karenin's son Sergei:

Everything about her baby was sweet, but for some reason she did not grip the heart. On her first-born, although he was the child of a man she did not love, had been concentrated all the love which had never found satisfaction ... Besides, in her little girl everything was still in the future, while Seriozha was now almost a personality, and a beloved one, already struggling with thoughts and feelings of his own. 19

Whereas Sergei is a focus and a touchstone for his mother in her steadily disintegrating moral universe, the memory of her abandoned son torments Mrs Glasher. '[T]he one spot which spoiled her vision of her new pleasant world, was the sense that she had left her three-year-old boy, who died two years afterwards, and whose first tones saying "mamma" retained a difference from those of the children who came after.' (DD p 386) Her

18. Edwina Jannie Blumberg, 'Tolstoy and the English Novel: A Note on Middlemarch and Anna Karenina', Slavic Review 30, (1971), pp 561-569; also W Gareth Jones, 'George Eliot's Adam Bede and Tolstoy's Conception of Anna Karenina', Modern Language Review 61, (1966), pp 473-481

19. Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina (trans. Rosemary Edmonds), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p 567

vision has become distorted by an image of an unfit mother and a nameless deserted child. Like Anna Karenina's failed substitute for Sergei, Lydia Glasher's inadequate second child is a girl, and just as Sergei falls ill, so Lydia's abandoned child dies at about the time of his half-sister Josephine's birth. The legitimate male does not survive displacement by a bastard female.

Lydia Glasher is the only persistent bastard-bearer to be found in any of the novels in this study. The unexplained 'difference' which she senses in the speech of her first child - the one whose place within society was assured - reflects his unique legitimacy. Her preoccupation with the rights of Grandcourt's youngest child relates to the fact that at five years of age, little Henleigh exactly replicates her dead son. Yet her abandoned child will remain lost no matter how many other offspring she raises in her role of the perfect mother. The almost mystical uniqueness of the firstborn is a recurring theme in Daniel Deronda. Gwendolen Harleth and Deronda are the isolated eldest children of Mrs Davilow and the Princess Halm-Eberstein, both of whom produce large second families. Of Gwendolen's half-sisters, as George Eliot coolly remarks, 'from Alice in her sixteenth year to Isabel in her tenth, hardly anything could be said on a first view, but that they were girlish, and that their black dresses were getting shabby.' (DD p 54) The Meyrick family consists of a son and three daughters like the Glasher/Grandcourt brood, and thus provides another reflection of Agnes Lewes's children by Thornton Leigh Hunt. These complex and resonant family structures form an important element of George Eliot's unorthodox domestic vision.

The chapter in which Gwendolen Harleth first encounters Lydia Glasher is headed by a particularly resonant epigraph:

I will not clothe myself in wreck-wear gems  
Sawed from cramped finger-bones of women drowned;  
Feel chilly vaporous hands of ireful ghosts  
Clutching my necklace, trick my maiden breast  
With orphan's heritage. Let your dead love  
Marry its dead. (DD p 181)

While this fragment suggests that the heroine has empowered herself through a courageous act of moral renunciation, it also reveals the tendency to self-aggrandisement which Gwendolen displayed as Hermione in a tableau from The Winter's Tale. Hermione was falsely accused of adultery and bastard-bearing by her jealous husband, and Gwendolen's willingness to play the martyred innocent on stage does not square with her victimisation of Grandcourt's children. When her posturing is interrupted by the sudden opening of a secret panel which contains a hideous painting of a fleeing figure and a dead face, she gets a foretaste of the punishment to come. Ignoring Lydia Glasher's claims on Grandcourt proves dangerous to Gwendolen herself: there is an implicit warning in his savage attitude towards his discarded mistress, but the heroine fails to detect it.

Chapter 14 of Daniel Deronda does not describe the manner in which Gwendolen Harleth finds the courage to turn her back on Henleigh Grandcourt: in fact the heroine is shown to be incapable of tragic self-sacrifice. George Eliot backs Lydia Glasher, and it is the intruder - the displaced stranger who invades Gwendolen's story with her tainted children - who summons the heroine to the Whispering Stones, puts her on the defensive, and forces her to admit the illegitimacy of her position, not vice versa. The children become living proofs of a recent successful sexual partnership which Gwendolen is on the verge of destroying, rather than potent symbols of a soured and sinful liaison. Their presence only strengthens the reader's emotional attachment to Mrs Glasher: in this case each illegitimate child becomes another reason for us to be on her side. Gwendolen's relationship with Grandcourt is prompted by a combination of fear, greed and self-consequence, whereas Mrs Glasher's was the result of hot-headed and heartfelt passion. In this scene, Lydia controls the rhythm of the prose as well as the physical movements of her rival. She talks while Gwendolen listens and assents: she summons and indicates her children while Gwendolen is startled and steps backwards. Her penchant for living dangerously may be only the index of her essential powerlessness, but even so Gwendolen has no choice but to take Mrs Glasher's plight into her consciousness. '[W]atching Mrs Glasher's face while she spoke, [Gwendolen] felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, "I am a woman's life."' (DD pp 189 -190)

As Anthea Trodd has noted, the heroine 'becomes the victim of her tendency to place herself at the centre of sensation fictions, and her life is increasingly elaborated on such lines, with herself as the helpless unreasoning victim ... the famous wedding-night scene of her reception of the Grandcourt diamonds sent by Lydia overtly orchestrates a range of sensation motifs, the letter from a "ghost"; the "poisoned" diamonds; Gwendolen's perception of herself as a series of Women in White.' 20 I would add that it is not the fragile English beauty who is the victim of the Grandcourt marriage, but the sinister and exotic dark lady, Lydia Glasher, whose name conjures up the image of Wilkie Collins's greatest femme fatale, Armadale's Lydia Gwilt. As Trodd continues, while Gwendolen 'reads herself as the Woman in White', she is in fact 'presented to the reader as a possible Lady Audley', blonde, beautiful and deadly. (Domestic Crime p 124) The diamond necklace is an extremely potent symbol of her penchant for undervaluing human bonds and affiliations. At Leubronn Daniel Deronda had redeemed a turquoise necklace given to Gwendolen by her father, after she had sold it to pay her gambling debts. Joseph Wiesenfarth points out that this sale reveals 'a carelessness about her past that Deronda's relentless search for his own roots shows to be a major flaw in [her] spiritual make-up.' 21 With her two necklaces - one from her father via Deronda, the other from her husband via Mrs Glasher - the heroine seems stranded at the epicentre of a moral earthquake zone. The necklace that she chooses to relinquish is the one she should have kept, and the one which she is given ought never to have come to her. In George Eliot's tragic scheme of things, no one who makes such terrible mistakes about human relationships can ever be truly happy.

Lydia Glasher fights her battle for non-exclusion on three fronts. Her approach to Gwendolen appears successful, yet within a few weeks her rival backtracks and agrees to marry Grandcourt in spite of his 'left-handed marriage' to save herself from the horrors of genteel poverty - from

20. Anthea Trodd, Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p 124

21. Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'The Medea in *Daniel Deronda*', Die Neueren Sprachen 2, (1973), p 107

being 'treated like a passenger with a third-class ticket.' (DD p 306) Next there is an abortive meeting with Grandcourt, but while the children strengthened her case with Gwendolen, they now handicap her because she knows that they will suffer if she makes things difficult for their father. Having failed twice, the cast-off mistress resorts to ritualised curses and symbolic actions which are profoundly disturbing.

Gwendolen's decision to officially bastardise Mrs Glasher and her children diminishes her as a human being:

The brilliant position she had longed for, the imagined freedom she would create for herself in marriage, the deliverance from the dull insignificance of her girlhood - all were immediately before her; and yet they had come to her hunger like food with the taint of sacrilege upon it, which she must snatch with terror. In the darkness and loneliness of her little bed, her more resistant self could not act against the first onslaught of dread after her irrevocable decision. That unhappy-faced woman and her children - Grandcourt and his relations with her - kept repeating themselves in her imagination like the clinging memory of a disgrace, and gradually obliterated all other thought, leaving only the consciousness that she had taken those scenes into her life. Her long wakefulness seemed a delirium; a faint, faint light penetrated beside the window-curtain; the chillness increased. She could bear it no longer, and cried 'Mamma!'

'Yes, dear,' said Mrs Davilow, immediately, in a wakeful voice.

'Let me come to you.' (DD p 356)

For Gwendolen, whose 'fierceness of maidenhood' (DD p 102) is stressed, the past sexual relationship of the man she intends to marry with the woman she intends to displace is the stuff of nightmares. Nothing influences Gwendolen's relationship with Grandcourt as much as the Lydia Glasher episodes. The heroine marries on a gamble, but her rival brings her face to face with the truth about life. Eventually she becomes so painfully conscious of her guilt that she condemns herself to childlessness, lest she produce a "legitimate" heir to permanently displace Lydia's children. At first she considers the comparatively sophisticated problem of her own degree of moral responsibility for destroying Mrs Glasher and her family, but as the night wears on her mind can take in nothing beyond the sexual union. Lydia Glasher can have no peace outside marriage, but Gwendolen will get none within it. The 'imagined freedom' she will derive from her marriage is only another form of imprisonment.

Gwendolen's thoughts resemble Esther Lyon's consideration of her power to throw Harold Transome out of Transome Court. The dreams of both girls must be purchased with 'a hard, unfair exclusion of others', (DD p 380) but whereas Esther cannot bring herself to pay that price, Gwendolen finds it acceptable. Her revulsion is partly jealousy, of course: the sheer weight of past memories must tend to make Mrs Glasher and her family pre-eminent in Grandcourt's life even now, and she resents their history 'as if it had been a deliberate offence against her.' (DD p 343) Gwendolen's anguished cry in the night recalls another much-loved firstborn child who called out to his mamma, but went unheard, and so our pity for her depends upon her identification with Mrs Glasher's dead son, as another legitimate victimised by the same family of bastards. This kind of displacement has happened to her before: her resentful feelings towards her half-sisters, let alone her mother's permanent attitude of loving apology towards her, tell us that much. Second time around, however, she deserves it. Originally Gwendolen recoils from Grandcourt because of his relationship with Mrs Glasher per se. Later, however, she is able to pinpoint exactly why it appals her so much, namely the nature of that past relationship, and what it tells her about her husband. Through Grandcourt's discarded mistress, who embodies male-induced suffering, Gwendolen is able to make the connection between uncontrolled sexuality and social exclusion.

Mrs Glasher lives in exile at Gadsmere with her four children, managing to pass herself off as a widow. A few people remember the scandal about the Irish officer's beautiful wife and the young Henleigh Grandcourt, but they all consider that any woman 'who was understood to have forsaken her child along with her husband had probably sunk lower.' (DD p 385) In fact 'No one talked of Mrs Glasher now, any more than they talked of the victim in a trial for manslaughter ten years before: she was a lost vessel after whom nobody would send out an expedition of search; but Grandcourt was seen in harbour with his colours flying, registered as seaworthy as ever.' (DD p 386) Remembered with a frisson of horror but never discussed, in the scene at Gadsmere Lydia becomes a woman who *is* talked about, and the illegitimate at last becomes a fit subject for discussion.

When Grandcourt visits his ex-mistress to make her return the diamond necklace, George Eliot's prose reeks of the torture-chamber, of stasis, sickness and death. The beautiful children play in the gloomy garden, apparently oblivious to the grown-up games which their parents play inside. Mrs Glasher, 'unconscious of everything but her wretchedness, pressed her forehead against the hard cold glass of the window. The children, playing on the gravel, took this as a sign that she wanted them, and running forward stood in front of her with their sweet faces upturned expectantly. This roused her: she shook her head at them, waved them off, and overcome with this painful exertion sank back into the nearest chair.' (DD p 392) Given her fear of Grandcourt and what he might do to the children, we cannot overestimate the psychic damage which results from the telepathic contact between the suffering mother and her threatened brood.

This scene is to all intents and purposes a divorce hearing convened by the children's father - 'the administrative necessity of arranging things so that there should be as little annoyance as possible in future.' (DD p 393) Grandcourt's view of the proceedings explains his refusal to allow Lydia to speak. In associating his behaviour with the law he realigns himself with the patriarchal system, finding it convenient to start looking at his past relationship through the eyes of those conventionalists who have refused to recognise it all along. (In this light, Lydia's ownership of his mother's diamonds is unacceptable.) Grandcourt allies himself with the society whose values he has taken on board at the last minute to further his own ends. This is how he pronounces sentence:

Don't make the affair more disagreeable than it need be, Lydia. It is of no use to harp on things that can't be altered. Of course it's deucedly disagreeable to me to see you making yourself miserable. I've taken this journey to tell you what you must make up your mind to; - you and the children will be provided for as usual; - and there's an end of it. (DD p 393)

Grandcourt is, of course, only doing to Lydia what she had done to her husband. Occasionally the mother and father are not presented as opposites: as the knotted prose of chapter 30 indicates, 'Grandcourt had

never disentangled himself from Mrs Glasher.' (DD p 386) Their perfectly counterpointed relationship is examined in the following passage, during which they go through the motions of everyday life, both knowing that Grandcourt has yet to state his intention of reclaiming the diamond necklace:

[H]e had still to speak to Lydia on the second object of his visit, which like a second surgical operation seemed to require an interval. The hours had to go by; there was eating to be done; the children came in again - all this mechanism of life had to be gone through with the dreary sense of constraint which is often felt in domestic quarrels of a commoner kind. To Lydia it was some slight relief to have the children present: she felt a savage glory in their loveliness, as if it would taunt Grandcourt with his indifference to her and them - a secret darting of venom which was strongly imaginative. He acquitted himself with all the advantage of a man whose grace of bearing has long been moulded on an experience of boredom - nursed the little Antonia, who sat with her hands crossed and eyes upturned to his bald head, which struck her as worthy of observation - and propitiated Henleigh by promising him a beautiful saddle and bridle. It was only the two eldest girls who had known him as a continual presence; and the intervening years had overlaid their infantine memories with a bashfulness which Grandcourt's bearing was not likely to dissipate. He and Lydia occasionally, in the presence of the servants, made a conventional remark; otherwise they never spoke; and the stagnant thought in Grandcourt's mind all the while was of his own infatuation in having given her those diamonds, which obliged him to incur the nuisance of speaking about them. He had an ingrained care for *what he held to belong to his caste*, and about property he liked to be lordly; also he had a consciousness of indignity to himself in having to ask for anything in the world. But however he might assert his independence of Mrs Glasher's past, he had made a past for himself which was a stronger yoke than any he could impose. He must ask for the diamonds which he had promised Gwendolen. (DD pp 395-396)

The way in which Grandcourt speaks to Lydia is a world away from his smooth bantering with Gwendolen. With the former his tone and phrasing suggest a deadly statement of finalities, while with the latter he is intelligently non-aggressive and restrained. It is when he addresses Lydia in Gwendolen mode - or vice versa - that matters become 'deucedly disagreeable' for him: the odd 'conventional remark', after all, is hardly the most appropriate way of talking to the mother of one's four children on the point of final separation. He finds it impossible to dismiss her because of the weight of the shared past which is symbolised by their children. In Romola it was stated that children, unlike deeds, could be

strangled. In Daniel Deronda, however, Grandcourt's offspring are present as deeds which cannot be strangled, rather than as children who can.

Both parents use the children to further their own purposes - Lydia to bask in their beauty as a mocking insult to Grandcourt and his indifference, and Grandcourt to arm himself against any further irritating and potentially dangerous outbursts from Lydia. His nursing of Antonia parodies her nursing of Henleigh: as Deidre David has put it, 'his idea of paternal responsibility is to give instructions to the local bank.' 22 The fact that the two eldest girls feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in their father's company reminds us that bastard children are not necessarily placed or secured by their father's presence. They take their cue from Lydia, sensing from her manner that their father's visit means trouble. His promised gift to the little boy is even more disturbing, for the mention of a saddle and bridle recalls George Eliot's riding metaphor for Grandcourt's desire to get the better of everyone - rather ironic given his 'imperfect mastery' of Lydia in this scene. (DD p 399) As it happens, the only method of chastisement which Grandcourt dare use against Lydia involves setting her at war with herself rather than imposing his own will. When she refuses to hand over the diamonds, and insists that she be allowed to send them to Gwendolen on her wedding-day, Grandcourt cannot afford to press her too hard. Instead he refuses to speak at all, and his unaccustomed silence creates a frightening void which her overwrought imagination fills with visions of what this may mean for her children. Accordingly she suffers 'the horrible conflict of self-reproach and tenacity. She saw beforehand Grandcourt leaving her without even looking at her again - herself left behind in lonely uncertainty - hearing nothing from him - not knowing whether she had done her children harm - feeling that she had perhaps made him hate her: - all the wretchedness of a creature who had defeated her own motives.' (DD p 397) By action or non-action, Grandcourt manages to deny that Lydia's simpler emotions have substance.

22. Deidre David, Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p 184

Lydia's children are set up as social victims, but score a massive social triumph. In relation to Grandcourt, of course, everyone looks like a potential victim - his dogs, his sidekick Lush, his discarded mistress, his proud young wife - and the children's pathetic dependence on his goodwill, their lonely exile at Gadsmere and Grandcourt's manifest lack of interest in them tend to confirm them as paternally dispossessed and injured. Yet in the end Grandcourt makes little Henleigh his heir, declares in his will that the children must henceforth take his name, and shifts them all from the wings to centre stage. The children displace Gwendolen as she once displaced them, and as the novel closes, she is shunted off to Gadsmere and displaced again (as Daniel Deronda's heroine, by Mirah Lapidoth.) Even the way in which she discovers the truth about Grandcourt's will is a calculated insult. She is informed of her husband's decision by Thomas Cranmer Lush, who enjoys doing the sexual dirty work of this new Henry VIII as much as James Carker relished doing it for Paul and Edith Dombey. Gwendolen, of course, is glad that little Henleigh has inherited his father's estate because it eases her conscience and makes her feel better about his original dispossession. Nancy Pell has argued that 'the structures of atonement that [she] chooses to observe are devoted to the restoration of the conventions of patriarchal power.'<sup>23</sup> But in fact the boy's illegitimacy makes him the very last person who ought to inherit, as Gwendolen's uncle, the rector, points out. In intimating that she considers Henleigh the rightful heir, therefore, Gwendolen signals her utter alienation from conventional society and the way it operates. It seems extremely significant that in Daniel Deronda those who inherit are marginal characters such as Catherine Arrowpoint, Sir Hugo's daughters and Lydia Glasher's children rather than major figures like Deronda, Gwendolen or Grandcourt. The finale of Daniel Deronda is more sensational than most sensation novels. Whereas writers like Mary Braddon wound up their readers with the ghastly prospect of violent cultural upheaval and then put them out of their misery by re-establishing order, George Eliot's little 'cherubs' make a mockery of society's prohibitions.

23. Nancy Pell, 'The Fathers' Daughters in *Daniel Deronda*', Nineteenth Century Fiction 36, (1982), p 449

Does the fact that the cultural threat posed by the bastards' inheritance originates with Grandcourt indicate that George Eliot suffered a crisis of confidence over her decision to "legitimate" them? In other words, because it is the villain of the piece who creates space for his bastards within landed society, is she providing her readers with a moral get-out clause? On the contrary, I believe that she is in fact challenging them to accept that for once Grandcourt has got it right. Many of her readers, seeing illegitimacy as a grave threat to the moral, economic and cultural foundations of society, would have been outraged by his actions. Gwendolen's uncle puts their feelings into words:

When a young man makes his will in health, he usually counts on living a long while. Probably Mr Grandcourt did not believe that his will would ever have its present effect ... The effect is painful in more ways than one. Female morality is likely to suffer from this marked advantage and prominence being given to illegitimate offspring. (DD p 826)

The rector's speech is designed to silence conservative critics by allowing an unimpeachably moral spokesman to have a say. Yet conventional morality is not given a fair hearing: in fact it is hopelessly compromised. The rector, like the landed society he represents as a member of the Conservative party at prayer, has not declared his vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo. As well as being the dispossessed widow's surrogate father, as a clergyman he will go out of business if too many wealthy and influential men follow Grandcourt's lead. In suggesting that the children's legitimisation was not necessarily final, the rector states his firm belief that Grandcourt would have come in time to realise that his will was a bastard document.

George Eliot does not let the rector speak until she has first primed her readers to mistrust him. She tells us that he had known of Grandcourt's 'former entangling dissipations' before his niece's wedding, and remarks contemptuously that 'he had not foreseen that the pleasure which had probably, so to speak, been swept into private rubbish-heaps, would ever present itself as an array of live caterpillars, disastrous to the green meat of respectable people. But he did not ... lower himself by expressing any indignation on merely personal grounds, but behaved like a man of the

world, who had become a conscientious clergyman.' (DD p 826) But in undermining the rector in this way, George Eliot also undermines her own status as an impartial commentator. Morality is given a hearing, but she does not provide it with a top-flight spokesman like Deronda. When the decent face of impeccable conservatism - Sir Hugo Mallinger - declares point-blank that passing an estate to an illegitimate son makes more sense than passing it to a legitimate stranger, it is clear that the novelist is in radical territory. Sir Hugo, suspected of having fathered a bastard himself, proves incapable of delegitimising anybody:

Grandcourt had nobody nearer than his cousin. And it's a chilling thought that you go out of this life only for the benefit of a cousin. A man gets a little pleasure in making his will, if it's for the good of his own curly heads; but it's a nuisance when you're giving and bequeathing to a used-up fellow like yourself, and one you don't care two straws for. (DD p 826)

Grandcourt is perhaps inclined to play around with the inheritance rules of his society by reason of heredity as much as anything else. His father - Sir Hugo's younger brother - 'had married Miss Grandcourt, and taken her name along with her estates,' (DD p 204) and thus the paternal (Mallinger) line which Grandcourt well and truly dismembers had already been partly delegitimised. Henleigh, the name he inherits from his father and passes on to his son, is only a Christian name, and the surname which Lydia Glasher wants for her children is female. There could hardly be a more culturally impoverished figure than Grandcourt's mother, the last of her line, and yet in this complicated tracery of inheritance, maybe power does reside with her after all.

Throughout her final novel, George Eliot grimly questions the validity of contemporary moral standards. Imagining Daniel Deronda to be Sir Hugo's illegitimate son causes Gwendolen's overheated imagination 'to throw him into one group with Mrs Glasher and her children before whom she felt herself in an attitude of apology - she who had hitherto been surrounded by a group that in her opinion had need to be apologetic to her.' (DD pp 380-381) The difficulties encountered by those characters within the novel who attempt to assess Mrs Glasher mirror George Eliot's own uncertainty.

Both Deronda and Gwendolen are profoundly affected by her, while Grandcourt's projected marriage to her 'had long been a mark for the hovering and wheeling of [his] caprice.' (DD p 388) Yet the reader's sympathy is dissipated by her tendency to wallow in her suffering. Deidre David is right to stress that Grandcourt has secreted Lydia 'in a part of England whose sombre topography is analogous to her dark history', but since she gets a kick out of Gadsmere, in spite of its dank atmosphere and treacherous pools, (so obviously unsuitable for a lively growing family), she can seem bloody-minded rather than tragic. (Fictions of Resolution, p 186) Grandcourt sees her as a threatening enigma, an 'infernal idiot' who 'play[s] the mad woman'. When he adds in desperation, 'What is the use of talking to mad people?' it is in order to disperse her dangerous power by denying that her words have authority. (DD pp 396-398) Unfortunately his words only underline the powerlessness of the 'sane' in the presence of the 'mad'.

The most striking image of Mrs Glasher is that of 'the woman who had the poisoning skill of a sorceress,' (DD p 616) whose note to Gwendolen, enclosed with the diamonds on her wedding-night, poisons those gems 'as if an adder had lain on them.' (DD p 406) This hideous metaphor is taken a stage further when Lydia makes 'a Medusa-apparition before Gwendolen, vindictiveness and jealousy finding relief in an outlet of venom, though it were as futile as that of a viper already flung to the other side of the hedge.' (DD p 668) Soon after Gwendolen and Grandcourt are married, Lydia silently teams up with Grandcourt to master his new wife. For Gwendolen, 'the reading of [Lydia's] letter [begins] her husband's empire of fear.' (DD p 479) Mrs Glasher's dangerously unbalanced reactions give Grandcourt the whip-hand with Gwendolen, as he perceives. 'He felt sure that Lydia had enclosed something with the diamonds, and that this something, whatever it was, had at once created in Gwendolen a new repulsion for him and a reason for not daring to manifest it ... a change had come over the conditions of his mastery, which, far from shaking it, might establish it the more thoroughly.' (DD p 479) This sinister partnership ends, of course, in the triumph of their son. The more powerful and confident Mrs Glasher becomes, the more she resembles Grandcourt, who has been described as reptilian all along. At first Gwendolen mistakenly believes him to be

'a handsome lizard of a hitherto unknown species, not of the lively, darting kind ... probably gentle, suitable as a boudoir pet.' (DD pp 173-174) Later, however, it becomes clear that 'quarrelling with Grandcourt was impossible: she might as well have made angry remarks to a dangerous serpent ornamentally coiled in her cabin without invitation.' (DD p 735) The sexual terror inherent in this metaphor needs no elaboration.

George Eliot's critique of the patriarchal society - whose most obvious victims are fatherless children - is structured around a conventional plot which involves a hero in the process of investigating both his own origins and those of other people. Lydia Glasher's importance is made clear when Deronda comes to consider Gwendolen's relations with her. The mother who fights like a tigress for little Henleigh's inheritance, provides an ironic counterpoint to Deronda's own mother, who struggled to deny her son his Jewish heritage:

His own acute experience made him alive to the form of injury which might affect the unavowed children and their mother. Was Mrs Grandcourt, under all her determined show of satisfaction, gnawed by a double, a treble-headed grief - self-reproach, disappointment, jealousy? ... He thought he had found a key now by which to interpret her more clearly: what magnifying of her misery might not a young creature get into who had wedded her fresh hopes to old secrets! ... [I]mmediately the image of this Mrs Glasher became painfully associated with his own hidden birth. Gwendolen knowing of that woman and her children, marrying Grandcourt, and showing herself contented, would have been among the most repulsive of beings to him; but Gwendolen tasting the bitterness of remorse for having contributed to their injury was brought very near to his fellow-feeling. If it were so, 'she had got to a common plane of understanding with him on some difficulties of life which a woman is rarely able to judge of with any justice or generosity; for, according to precedent, Gwendolen's view might easily have been no other than that her husband's marriage with her was his entrance on the path of virtue, while Mrs Glasher represented his forsaken sin. And Deronda had naturally some resentment on behalf of the Hagars and the Ishmaels. (DD pp 488-489)

Morally and artistically George Eliot integrates the illegitimate experiences of Daniel Deronda and Lydia Glasher. Moreover her own experience of Lewes's convoluted familial relationships would have aligned her sympathies with 'the Hagars and the Ishmaels'. Her hero's character has been shaped above all by his feelings of ancestral insecurity:

Something in [Deronda's] own experience caused Mirah's search after her mother to lay hold with peculiar force on his imagination. The first prompting of sympathy was to aid her in her search: if given persons were extant in London there were ways of finding them, as subtle as scientific experiment, the right machinery being set at work. But here the mixed feelings which belonged to Deronda's kindred experience naturally transfused themselves into his anxiety about Mirah.

The desire to know his own mother, or to know about her, was constantly haunted with dread; and in imagining what might befall Mirah it quickly occurred to him that finding the mother and father from whom she had been parted when she was a little one might turn out to be a calamity ... it was the habit of his mind to connect dread with unknown parentage, and in this case as well as his own there was enough to make the connection reasonable. (DD pp 245-247)

Deidre David has suggested that Deronda's 'impulse to fill in the blanks of his own life is consistent with his impulse to fill them in for others,' and that for Mirah and Mordecai Lapidoth he is the 'detective of their lost histories, and coordinator of their reunion.' (Fictions of Resolution, pp 144-145) His personal maternal dilemma stems from the knowledge that a man is free only so long as his roots remain a mystery, since only then are people unable to judge him in relation to known sources or antecedents. Surely the dread of unknown parentage presupposes a dread of known parentage too.

Deronda's mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, was once the great Jewish singer and actress Alcharisi, whose name 'had magic wherever it was carried.' (DD p 697) It is possible that George Eliot meant her readers to identify her with the famous Rachel, who is mentioned in connection with Gwendolen's acting pretensions, and of whom, incidentally, G.H. Lewes had written a warm appreciation. 24 Moreover the train of thought opened up by the idea of the Alcharisi as a Rachel figure is intriguing. After reporting the Massacre of the Innocents, St. Matthew's gospel refers to the fulfilment of a terrible Old Testament prophecy:

In Rama was there a voice heard,  
lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
and would not be comforted, because they are not. (Matthew 2 v18)

24. Barbara Hardy, Notes to Daniel Deronda, (Penguin, 1967), p 888

This reference underlines the difference between the Jewish mother Deronda meets and the mysterious figure he has not dared to imagine. This Rachel refuses to weep for her children, and in the absence of any other form of cathartic release, wastes away from an incurable disease, no doubt psychological in origin. Having made her son a bastard Jew, it is her punishment to have him legitimise himself in spite of her.

Deronda's character has been shaped by his attempts 'since the early days ... to construct the hidden story of his own birth.' (DD p 488) At the age of thirteen - barmitzvah age, of course - he is launched upon a career of cultural criticism when he discovers that the Renaissance popes passed off their illegitimate sons as their nephews for the sake of appearances. He begins to wonder if this is his birth secret too:

Daniel felt the presence of a new guest who seemed to come with an enigmatic veiled face, and to carry dimly-conjectured, dreaded revelations. The ardour which he had given to the imaginary world in his books suddenly rushed towards his own history and spent its pictorial energy there, explaining what he knew, representing the unknown. The uncle whom he loved very dearly took the aspect of a father who held secrets about him - who had done him a wrong - yes, a wrong: and what had become of his mother, from whom he must have been taken away? - Secrets about which he, Daniel, could never enquire; for to speak or be spoken to about these new thoughts seemed like falling flakes of fire to his imagination. Those who have known an impassioned childhood will understand this dread of utterance about any shame connected with their parents. The impetuous advent of new images took possession of him with the force of fact for the first time told, and left him no immediate power for the reflection that he might be trembling at a fiction of his own. (DD p 206)

Deronda's identification of his mother as his father's victim is a fiction as important as the truth. His imagined experience shapes his created experience until his mother superimposes the truth upon it, and the weight of his ancestry flattens out his primal insecurities. Although he spends his youth analysing life rather than living it, it has been the ideal preparation for a Jewish life. As Deidre David has written, 'Interpretation of the text is passed from one generation of Jewish men to another, and Deronda, having interpreted Gwendolen Harleth in all her knotty psychological syntax, becomes an interpreter of Jewish writings. His first action as a Jew is to claim his grandfather's chest which is full

of manuscripts and family records ... Having spent most of the novel interpreting his own history, analysing his own experience, he now becomes an interpreter of the history of his people.' (Fictions of Resolution, p 144) Deronda was clearly right to assume that his problems were inheritance-related: his mistake was to identify that inheritance as social and genealogical rather than religious and political.

The hero's sensitivity towards 'the Hagers and the Ishmaels' makes him painfully conscious that he himself might father illegitimate children. Hence when he first meets Mirah Lapidoth, Deronda is frantically concerned that his behaviour towards her should be seen to be quite above board. His own fears about birth secrets have prompted 'a vow to himself that - since the truths that disgrace mortals are not all of their own making - the truth should never be made to disgrace another by his act.' (DD p 248) Deronda is no Arthur Donnithorne, and seduction is out of the question.

Deronda's experiments in self-created history threaten to overdevelop his critical faculties to the point where he will be incapable of direct action - intellectually muscle-bound, so to speak. Only his mother's intervention prevents her son's acquired philosophising inheritance flooding his moral character. In damming his habitual analytical streams of thought with a patrilineal inheritance which demands his positive intervention in world history, the Princess saves Deronda from a life of sterile cerebrality.

Like Edward Casaubon and Tertius Lydgate, Deronda wants to discover a way of decoding his personal discoveries. His particular 'Key to All Mythologies' is the perennial thought - the 'fibre that lay close to his deepest interest in the fates of women - "perhaps my mother was like this one."' (DD p 231) Gwendolen, Mirah and Lydia are all refracted images of the Princess Halm-Eberstein: the strong-willed autonomous gambler, the ideal Jewish wife, and the suffering deserter of a first-born son. But none of these visions is compatible with his imagined paternal inheritance, and in this paradox George Eliot's final experiment in illegitimacy reached its climax.

When Sir Hugo asks Deronda if he would like to be a great opera singer, the boy reacts violently against the suggestion because the Alcharisi's profession is incompatible with the lifestyles of both Sir Hugo and Daniel's natural father. 'The lad had been stung to the quick by the idea that his uncle - perhaps his father - thought of a career for him which was totally unlike his own, and which he knew very well was not thought of among possible destinations for the sons of English gentlemen.' (DD pp 208-209) As time passes and Daniel begins to question Sir Hugo's textual (and paternal) authority, we see how his ancestral insecurity has shaped his critical faculties. 'That Sir Hugo had always been a Whig, made Tories and Radicals equally opponents of the truest and best; and the books he had written were all seen under the same consecration of loving belief which differenced what was his from what was not his, in spite of general resemblance. Those writings were various, from volumes of travel in the brilliant style, to articles on things in general, and pamphlets on political crises; but to Daniel they were alike in having an unquestionable rightness by which other people's information could be tested.' (DD p 211) But these texts, as he discovers, are not necessarily 'fleckless' because they have been written in good faith. Deronda feels that the critic must illuminate and not destroy, which is why he is so suited to biblical exegesis, the relentless scrutiny of the Mosaic covenant. As the novel ends, George Eliot sends him off to study patriarchal and textual authorities which, far more so than Sir Hugo's narrowly political tracts, will stand up to repeated and detailed examination. It is in this field that Daniel Deronda will try to work out his ultimate understanding of the rules of legitimacy and inheritance.

#### vi. Conclusion: The Problems of Parenting

In spite of George Eliot's wide-ranging interest in the theme of illegitimacy, all her bastards fall into one of two categories. The first group consists of children under twelve: Poll Fodge's child in 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', Hetty's baby in Adam Bede, Lillo and Ninna in Romola and the Grandcourts in Daniel Deronda. Secondly there are the young men in their twenties and thirties, from Tito Melema, Harold

Transome, Joshua Rigg and Daniel Deronda to Jetsome in The Mill on the Floss, towards whom Mr Wakem holds a mere 'chiaroscuro parentage' and the fashionable young lawyer who once thought of making Treby Magna a spa-town in Felix Holt, who was 'probably the illegitimate son of someone or other.' (FH p 207) The difference between the typical bastard characters of George Eliot and Wilkie Collins reveals a great deal about the respective concerns of each writer.

The theme of illegitimacy gave Wilkie Collins access to other social, political, economic and cultural areas in which Victorian women were disadvantaged, and proved to be an excellent standpoint from which a sympathetic male writer could view the female experience of life. As a woman, George Eliot often used illegitimacy in exactly the opposite way: as a handicap for male characters who were otherwise quite socially secure. Both writers were convinced that discrimination on the grounds of birth could only impoverish their culture, and they sought in various ways to screen out the authority figures who seemed to be casting a horrendous blight upon their society.

It was Henry James who first noticed how often George Eliot's nominal heroes and heroines are driven out of the limelight by characters with some sort of secret. (Literary Criticism, p 921) Even so, Lydia Glasher's four children are prone to marginalisation and obliteration. They are regularly ignored, overlooked and miscounted by the critics: John R. Reed and Jerry Herron actually miss them out of an article called 'George Eliot's Illegitimate Children'. 25

In his appraisal of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the queen of the sensation novel, Henry James said that 'the novelist who interprets the illegitimate world to the legitimate world, commands from the nature of his position a certain popularity.' (Literary Criticism, p 745) This remark appears to imply that any discussion of illegitimacy presupposes an investigation of a

25. John R Reed and Jerry Herron, 'George Eliot's Illegitimate Children', Nineteenth Century Fiction 40, (September 1985), pp 175-186

criminal and unnatural counterworld which is the sphere of avowedly "popular" fiction. But when George Eliot interpreted the subject popularity was neither what she hoped for nor sought. For her, as for Wilkie Collins and Mary Braddon, the drama of illegitimacy was lived experience as well as grist to the literary mill. Her union with G.H. Lewes perfectly demonstrated the shallowness of the laws relating to marriage and illegitimacy, while in her fiction she endowed the bastard with power, celebrated the possibilities of an unofficial existence, applauded the imaginative attempts of foster- and step-parents to create worthwhile relationships with technically unrelated children, and displayed a growing contempt for the regulations and conventions of her society.

Other writers' bastards do noticeably worse than George Eliot's. Hers inherit property, acquire excellent foster-parents, marry, have children and are assimilated into conventional society with comparative ease. Wilkie Collins's, on the other hand, are abandoned, beaten up, prostituted, raped, jailed, confined to lunatic asylums, murdered, driven to suicide and burned alive. George Eliot's need to inflict pain or disgrace upon the outcast is comparatively minimal, perhaps because her concern is so often for the sinning parent and his or her reactions to the rights and responsibilities which go with having a child. A conflict is thrown up between natural and nurturing relationships which resources a radical reassessment of conventional notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy.

The number of bastards littering George Eliot's novels reveals her perception of bastardy as a symbolic as well as a literal condition. It involves a resistance to conventional ideas about relationships and affiliations, and a stubborn refusal to lock into mainstream notions about heredity and descent. Yet like Dickens and Collins, she certainly believed that knowing about oneself - that is, where one comes from, and how one fits in - was absolutely crucial. Either her illegitimates come to realise what they are missing and take steps to rectify their rootlessness, like Daniel Deronda, or they don't, like Harold Transome, with the inevitable ill consequences.

George Eliot strongly disapproves of illegitimate fathers, and hence her bastards bring suffering down upon the heads of their begetters rather than suffering themselves. She is appalled by society's refusal to recognise and sympathise with 'the secluded anguish of exceptional sensitiveness into which many a carelessly begotten child of man is born.' (DD p 526) When Daniel Deronda comes to consider the possibility that he may be Sir Hugo Mallinger's illegitimate son, the 'uncle whom he loved very dearly took the aspect of a father who held secrets about him - who had done him a wrong - yes, a wrong'. (DD p 206) Since power necessarily resides with the father in a patriarchal society, the misuse of that power seems particularly contemptible. If he chooses to deny or withhold from his child the very knowledge of that fatherhood - information which George Eliot identifies as crucial if we are to make sense of ourselves - he risks destroying both himself and his child. Matthew Jermyn is the quintessential example of this kind of malevolent father.

On the question of parenting, George Eliot took a standpoint almost diametrically opposed to Dickens's. By and large her bastards are brought up by their natural parents in blissful ignorance of their illegitimacy, which means that they do not get shunted from pillar to post and hounded by society in the way that Dickens's do. Moreover her foster-parents are usually excellent: there are no Miss Barbarys or Miss Havishams in her novels, only Betty Higdens. For George Eliot, the ties of blood meant less than they did to Dickens. She saw parenting as a privilege which was not always best bestowed upon those biologically connected to a child.

George Eliot often treats her careless fathers (and it is *always* the fathers who are careless) with a cool and detached irony which often crosses the border into dry humour. Arthur Donnithorne, Godfrey Cass, Tito Melema, Matthew Jermyn, Harold Transome, Peter Featherstone and Henleigh Grandcourt are all in turn subjected to the play of her devastating irony and precise moral analysis. The illegitimate mother, on the other hand, is identified by Daniel Deronda as a victim to be pitied, not blamed, along with her child: 'and what had become of his mother,' he wonders, 'from whom he must have been taken away?' (DD p 206)

The relationship of the suffering mother and her illegitimate child is always poignant and painful, if not downright disturbing. George Eliot's unmarried mothers are unquestionably vulnerable and consistently menaced by the forces of the viciously male society in which they operate. Yet through their illegitimate children, they manage to substantially undermine the patriarchal culture which has cast them out in the first place. Lydia Glasher and Arabella Transome, for instance, are mature and sexually confident women who produce bastard children - and just about manage to get away with doing so - as a direct result of giving up on their moribund marriages to unsatisfactory men. Fully in control of their actions and aware of what they are doing, these women - George Eliot's most prominent unmarried mothers - pose a far more radical threat to society than the powerless working-class Hetty Sorrel, who is treated much more harshly.

One of the main reasons for George Eliot's often oblique approach to the subject of illegitimacy (as opposed to Dickens's passionate engagement with the subject) is the middle-classness of her bastards. I have previously shown how Dickens's working-class bastards are degraded in ways which utterly prevent their moral reintegration with the community they had previously been part of, while his middle-class bastards suffer secret psychological tortures which, although no less painful, do not leave them permanently compromised. By comparison, of all George Eliot's bastards, only Tito Melema undergoes the "working-class" humiliations of poverty, neglect and ignorance, and in any case he is rescued at a very young age from the worse horrors (such as crime and prostitution) to come. Consequently, since none of the others suffer in any obvious material, social or sexual sense as a result of their birth, George Eliot is able to quizzically probe and deflate the snobbish reactions of upper- and middle-class people to the concept of illegitimacy without seeming tasteless or glib. Given what happens to the bastards of Dickens and Collins, for either of them to have treated the subject - or even conventional society's reactions to it - as potentially *amusing* would have seemed quite disgusting. In any case, Dickens never saw anything remotely funny in respectable society's contradictory and illogical responses to the problem of illegitimacy. Haunted by the idea of the neglected or abandoned child and the unloving or uncaring parent, which translated into a more

generalised hatred for the social institutions which also failed to protect the helpless, George Eliot's more subtle and slanted attack was quite beyond him.

The most important thing to note about George Eliot's bastards is what happens to them when they come to understand about their fatherless condition (or don't, as the case may be). Unlike Dickens, she was not primarily concerned with what happens to the illegitimate as a result of society's violent disapproval of them. Quite often in her novels, society - society as personified by Bernardo Rucellai, Sir Maximus Debarry or Sir Hugo Mallinger at any rate - either doesn't know, or doesn't care. In the same way that Little Dorrit's acceptance of her name was a lesson to Miss Wade and Tattycoram on how to deal with society graciously, so Daniel Deronda's philosophising about the nature of family relationships as complicated by inheritances and illegitimacies shows us how a real and life-enhancing voyage of self-discovery can be begun. Vital questions of sex, class, power and descent are raised when George Eliot's bastards discover that they are the heirs to hidden, strange and often profoundly disconcerting family histories. When Eppie Warner discovers that Squire Cass is her real father, for instance, 'her imagination dart[s] backward in conjectures, and forward in previsions, of what this revealed fatherhood implied.' (SM p 232)

Basically George Eliot is concerned with the bastard's effect upon society rather than with society's effect upon the bastard. Illegitimacy, like bigamy, adultery, desertion or divorce, was one of the cankers at the heart of the concept of the bourgeois marriage. It is society's responsibility to face up to what it really thinks about such matters, and the possible moral consequences of its opinions. In Adam Bede, for instance, Hetty Sorrel kills her child because she understands only too well what her contemporaries think about illegitimate babies. She commits infanticide because she thinks society wants her to, and is then judicially punished for doing what she thought had to be done. A climate of opinion has been created in which infanticide seems to be the only solution. The devastating consequences of this conviction leave any notions of justice

and morality which society might have claimed to underpin its position hopelessly compromised.

None of her characters has a terrible haunted childhood on a par with most of Dickens's bastards, and no one suffers the torments of the damned because of their illegitimacy per se. Harold gets to keep Transome Court, Rigg inherits Stone Court and sells it to start his own business, and the little Grandcourts inherit their father's name, title and property. So what are the effects of bastardy in George Eliot's novels? What does she do with the subject, and how does it resource her moral scheme of things?

Firstly, it is worth pointing out the vast difference between her treatment of the theme and those of Dickens and Collins. George Eliot's illegitimates do not inhabit the quasi-metaphysical counterworld in which Dickens's - and even more so Collins's - seem to exist. For her, the only reason the illegitimate can threaten the security of the legitimate is because the legitimate are frightened of them. The danger, in other words, is second-hand, stemming from the perceptions of the legitimate rather than from the actions of the illegitimate. Characters like Dickens's Maypole Hugh - regardless of how they got that way - are undisputably dangerous to society. For her the concept of illegitimacy is a way of questioning the ways in which families are structured and why some set-ups are valued more highly than others. She was not interested in the psychopathology of the bastard, nor in his socialisation, nor in society's degree of responsibility for his suffering. When, for instance, in Silas Marner Eppie turns out to be Godfrey Cass's legitimate daughter, it is not so that the girl can be proved to be morally uncontaminated and mentally sound. Eppie is legitimated because this gives Cass a legal claim on her, and this in turn sets up a dichotomy between the weaver, Silas, as Eppie's nurturing father and Godfrey, the squire, as her natural parent. The social, economic and moral pressures on Eppie to reject 'her old long-loved father' in favour of 'the newly-revealed father' are intense, as Cass himself states:

I should have thought, Marner ... your affection for Eppie would make you rejoice in what was for her good, even if it did call upon you to give up something. You ought to remember your own life's uncertain, and she's

at an age now when her lot may soon be fixed in a way very different from what it would be in her father's home: she may marry some low working-man, and then, whatever I might do for her, I couldn't make her well-off. You're putting yourself in the way of her welfare; and though I'm sorry to hurt you after what you've done, and what I've left undone, I feel now it's my duty to insist on taking care of my own daughter. I want to do my duty. (SM pp 231-232)

Clearly Cass's perceptions of the disadvantages his now marriageable daughter may suffer if left in Marner's care are based on his class-based assessment of her as an economic asset of considerable worth - a potential heiress in fact, whose value on the marriage-market would be very high. He genuinely does think that he has Eppie's best interests at heart, but no blood-tie can survive an eighteen year separation and the complete abrogation of all parental rights and responsibilities. In George Eliot's scheme of things, legitimate and illegitimate relationships have nothing to do with traditional patterns of descent.

Like Bleak House, Daniel Deronda falls into two halves, one of which is female-dominated and domestic in character and the other, essentially masculine, in which the action tends to take place in the sphere of public affairs and world events. In Bleak House it is Esther Summerson's female section which contains the motif of illegitimacy - even possessing an illegitimate narrator. In Daniel Deronda, however, both narratives have illegitimate potential, even if the theme is ultimately related to Gwendolen's life and experience rather than to Deronda's. George Eliot's heroine learns that she does not need the social and economic security and recognition which come to her via Grandcourt, but moral and spiritual therapy from Deronda. For precisely this reason Gwendolen is chastised for depriving Grandcourt's children of the social protection which they - as bastards - require in order to survive in a patriarchal and capitalist society, but which she can do without.

Illegitimacy is a key aspect of George Eliot's critique of the patriarchal society because it is so closely bound up with her notions of family and kinship. The family is a continuous matrix which supports and sustains humankind on its journey through life. Yet the support which it offers can inhibit and crush individualism, and its seemingly

indestructible internal links can forge a drag-chain of ever-increasing frustrations and divisions. The Victorian conception of a static and solid family structure within which the differing rights and responsibilities of the members were permanently set down was important to George Eliot. She spent much time - especially in Middlemarch, with the marriages of Dorothea and Casaubon, and Rosamond and Lydgate - delineating the complexity of "real" relationships, and the disparity between these and the false expectations inculcated by the fixed ideas of society at large. Illegitimacy is one of those imponderable variables which can throw the whole neat equation out of the window, as shown when Lydia Glasher wrecks Gwendolen's marriage to Grandcourt. As Jenni Calder has written, in George Eliot's novels, whatever else it may be, marriage 'is not a safeguard, it is not stability, it is certainly not fulfilment.' 26

George Eliot charts the impact of various moral, social and psychological variables on the apparently rock-solid institution of marriage. It was not that she did not believe in it; on the contrary, when patterned on the relevant qualities and talents of the individuals concerned she rated it very highly. She never went as far as Wilkie Collins, who saw marriage as merely institutionalised slavery for women, and yet both interpreted it as a power-game in which the odds were firmly in favour of the men. Gillian Beer has pointed out that marriage 'is the closest and most sustained point of contact between self and other that [George Eliot's] society had prepared. Man and wife are not original kin; they are not linked by descent though perhaps by affinity and certainly by circumstances.' 27 Logically, therefore, the essential "strangeness" which existed between husband and wife could lead into the secret areas of adultery, bigamy, elopements and illegitimate births - in fact private hidden scandals of all kinds. These kinds of horrors lurking just below the surface of the bourgeois marriage enabled her to even the score to some extent, since the aberrant behaviour patterns which they implied

26. Jenni Calder, Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, (Thames and Hudson, 1976), p 142

27. Gillian Beer, George Eliot, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p 117

constituted one of the few ways in which her rebellious female characters could undermine the honourable estate. That none of her radical women manage to play with fire without getting their fingers burned says nearly as much about the strength of pre-existent cultural stereotypes as it does about George Eliot's own female concerns.

The question of illegitimacy could lead to terribly mistaken assumptions about the nature and value of human relationships. Vital questions about "natural" and "social" morality are raised for the villagers of Hayslope, for Esther Lyon, for Romola di Bardi, for Nicholas Bulstrode, for Sir Hugo Mallinger. How these ordinary people respond to the dispossessed is a key to how highly developed their social consciences are, and their critical faculties are sharpened by the exercise offered by such a complex moral problem. When moral decisions have to be made, and social pressures begin to bite, her characters face a stark choice: either to stand their ground over what they believe in, or to surrender. Categories such as sane/mad, pure/contaminated, moral/immoral and above all good/bad are forced to the surface of things, and prompt the most intriguing questions about women, power and subversion.

## CHAPTER 4.

### WILKIE COLLINS: SENSATION AND PSYCHOSIS.

#### 1. 'Hide and Seek' and 'The Dead Secret': Lies, Secrets and Silences

In Wilkie Collins's fiction the bastard became the personification of alienation and vulnerability, and the scapegoat for society's deepest fears about the nature of female sexuality. Yet the theme of illegitimacy seemed to develop a life of its own, to the point that where Collins saw the essential truths about contemporary society most clearly, his authorial vision became weirdly distorted. When his mind revolted from the prevalent opinions of the day, Collins's divided loyalties refocussed his rage, sometimes unconsciously. Eventually illegitimacy became a cypher which even he could not always decode.

Building up a composite portrait of the typical Collins bastard appears deceptively simple at first - the result is a beautiful, friendless young woman, probably an orphaned only child. Yet of his bona fide bastards, one is a middle-aged man, one a small boy, and one a baby girl. Some are aggressive, mobile and defiant, but others are passive, settled and submissive. Some are consciously realistic portraits, some are highly stylised and symbolic, and others are both. In this chapter I hope to show that Collins's different criteria of illegitimacy correlate to his most important moral and artistic concerns.

According to Charles Dickens, Hide and Seek (1854) was 'far and away the cleverest novel ... ever written by a new hand.'<sup>1</sup> Geraldine Jewsbury wrote that although 'The root from which the story grows is a deep and most

1. Charles Dickens, letter to Georgina Hogarth 22 July 1854, in Norman Page (ed), Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p 61

pitiful tragedy ... [it] is almost free from exaggeration and false sentiment.' It was, she concluded, 'a work which everyone should read.' 2 The central theme of the illegitimate child owed much to Bleak House, which was published the previous year. The illegitimacy of both Esther Summerson and Mary Grice is physically (and thus symbolically) manifested, although Collins's heroine is a perfect inversion of Dickens's. The voluble narrator Esther contracts a terrible and disfiguring disease, while the beautiful Mary - who so resembles Raphael's paintings of the Virgin that she is nicknamed "Madonna" - is a deaf-mute who can only explain herself in mime or in abbreviated notes which she writes on a miniature slate. Her tantalisingly obscure origins provoke the first outbreak of "detective-fever" to be found in Wilkie Collins. In all his future books, hide was to seek as itch was to scratch.

According to Robert Ashley, 'Madonna's interest for modern readers lies mainly in the success Collins achieved with his attempt - the first in English fiction, according to Collins - "to draw the character of a 'Deaf-Mute' simply and exactly after nature, or, in other words, to exhibit the peculiar effects produced by the loss of the senses of hearing and speaking on the disposition of the person so afflicted." This interest must be all-sufficient, since Madonna's affliction has no influence whatsoever on the course of the narrative.' 3 It is a rare thing for Wilkie Collins to be criticised for not making a character's handicap a handle with which to crank up the plot, but then Madonna's deafness is not merely an exercise in character-drawing. Instead it is a symbolic device which heightens our sense of her as someone not of the real world.

The Biblical symbolism surrounding Madonna is laid on with a trowel. Born among thieves and robbers to a poor girl called Mary, she is found by the roadside by the Good Samaritan, Martha Peckover, who considers it a blessed day. She has a mysterious father whose existence the faithful (ie. Mat Marksman) must believe in despite a lack of real proof. Her birth

2. Geraldine Jewsbury, Athenaeum 24 June 1854, in Norman Page, Critical Heritage, p 56

3. Robert Ashley, Wilkie Collins, (Arthur Barker Ltd, 1952), p 37

is shrouded in mystery, and she is raised by adoptive parents. To reject her is calamitous: when the respectable and religious Mr Thorpe is revealed as her natural father, his moral status is destroyed, and his strict Sabbatarianism is shown to be a hypocritical and joyless perversion of true Christianity. She has a good side-line in healing the sick: through her, crippled Mrs Blyth is given a new lease of life. 'All the friends of the family declared that the child had succeeded where doctors, and medicines, and luxuries, and the sufferer's own courageous resignation had hitherto failed.' (HS p 92) Collins's naive but nonetheless appealing message seems to be that goodness and happiness crop up in the unlikeliest places, and that a handicapped bastard dragged up in a circus may be a source of inspiration to everyone around her.

There are signs in Hide and Seek that Collins was starting to link illegitimacy with other themes which became increasingly important in his later fiction. Madonna's early success as a circus performer and her flair as a mime artiste prefigure the acting skill which Percival Glyde, Lydia Gwilt and Magdalen Vanstone exploit to such brilliant and dangerous effect. Like them, Madonna makes use of an acute and incisive ability to get the measure of the people around her, although she does not use her knowledge to manipulate others as they do. Despite her habitual passive and childlike innocence, for some time she harbours strong sexual feelings for Zack Thorpe, who is 'handsome enough to tempt any woman into glancing at him with approving eyes':

A bright flush overspread the girl's face while Zack addressed her. Her tender blue eyes looked up at him, shyly conscious of the pleasure that their expression was betraying; and the neat folds of her pretty grey dress, which had lain so still over her bosom when she was drawing, began to rise and fall gently now, while Zack was holding her hand. If young Thorpe had not been the most thoughtless of human beings ... he might have guessed long ago why he was the only one of Madonna's old friends whom she did not permit to kiss her on the cheek! (HS p 99)

Many critics were pleasantly surprised by the end of the story, in which Madonna is revealed as Zack's half-sister, thus circumventing the inevitable last-chapter wedding. She is in fact one of the very few fictional bastards to be the unknown or unrecognised child of someone who also has acknowledged legitimate offspring.

Madonna's marked physical resemblance to Simple Sally of The Fallen Leaves, written twenty five years after Hide and Seek, underlines Wilkie Collins's reliance on certain characteristics of illegitimacy which persist in novel after novel. Despite Madonna's position as Collins's blueprint bastard, however, she does in fact possess far more typical characteristics than can reasonably be dealt with in one person. It may be that at this early stage in his writing career, Collins was not consciously endowing Madonna with characteristics associated with illegitimacy: possibly it dawned on him only gradually that he had stumbled across a rich seam.

Collins's first two bastards seem wholly unaware of their significance, as perhaps their creator was at this early stage. Yet while Madonna Grice was a symbolic figure who could never have described the meaning of illegitimacy even if she had discovered it, Rosamond Frankland is bright and articulate, and uncovers her own birth secret. Nevertheless she is as uncommunicative as Madonna, with far less reason, and as a result The Dead Secret is considerably less interesting and significant than its predecessor.

In his 1861 preface to The Dead Secret, Wilkie Collins noted that when the novel had been translated into French, 'The one difficulty which ... [no one] proved able to overcome, was presented, oddly enough, by the English title. When the work was published in Paris, its name was of necessity shortened to Le Secret - because no French equivalent could be found for such an essentially English phrase as a *dead secret*.' (p x) The idea that a birth secret cannot remain a dead secret is, I think, the most important to arise from the novel. Like No Name, The Dead Secret involves a duel between two resourceful women, one of whom is determined to bury the central mystery and another who wants to dig it up. While it tells of an inspired female plot against the property rules of a patriarchal society, The Dead Secret is also a thoroughly trivial tale spun out over two decades and two volumes because a dying woman with 'disordered faculties' and a superstitious lady's maid couldn't get their act together.

While her sailor husband is away at sea, Rosamond Treverton adopts her maid's bastard child and passes the baby off as her own. While the

pregnant servant Sarah Leeson escapes social disgrace and economic catastrophe by allowing her boss to take the child, it is in fact the angel of the house who has the most to gain from a substitution plot which totally undermines the principle of patrilineal descent in landed society. Ultimately Collins punished them both with mental instability and death. It is tempting to wonder if their madness was also meant to be a possible - perhaps the only possible - explanation for such a crime.

The image of the labyrinth has always been used to describe the concealment and detection of crimes and secrets, and it is the classic metaphor for ideas of initiation and entrapment. Sarah Leeson's maze at Porthgenna is designed to cover up the true circumstances of young Rosamond's birth, but it is also a test of the heroine's mettle which the reader hopes and expects her to prove equal to. This story of a pure rose literally 'amazed' echoes and subverts the sad tale of Henry II's mistress Rosamond Clifford, tracked down in her bower at Woodstock by his jealous queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine: Collins's rose can stand her ground. Even so, in fiction as in history, it is the angry wife who comes to understand how women can exercise power in a male-dominated society, and the bastard-bearer who becomes her victim. Rosamond Treverton believes that fecundity is power, and so she steals a child. As her confession to her husband states:

[My] fondness told me that your barren wife would never make your heart all her own until she had borne you a child; and your lips proved it true. Your first words when you came back from sea, and when the infant was placed in your arms, were:- 'I have never loved you, Rosamond, as I love you now.' If you had not said that, I should never have kept my guilty secret. (DS p 255)

Arthur Treverton's wife is no patient Penelope, striving to maintain the status quo until her wandering sailor comes home. By the time he returns to Porthgenna, she has produced the heir he has longed for, and thus secured her own position. For a servant of humble birth, however, knowledge is fear and fecundity disgrace.

As Anthea Trodd has written, 'The sensationalism of the mid-Victorian period depended upon the contrast between the facade of the respectable middle-class home and the dark secrets which lurked behind it. In the maintenance of such a facade the servants were seen as the weak point ... In the crime plots of the period ... the family privacy became the family's dark secret. The threat to the household of exposure or of a radical shift in power became explicit.' 4 But in the Treverton household the servants pose no threat to the family: in fact it is Sarah who suffers because of the secret. When the heroine's illegitimacy is exposed (or rather when she chooses to publicise it) no one is willing to disinherit her. Because Rosamond is already a wife and a mother, securely "placed" in relation to two men, the loss of her legitimate daughterhood is comparatively insignificant. Moreover the circumstances of her birth persuade the eccentric Andrew Treverton to further sabotage the established way of doing things, and when Rosamond gives him her fortune (as Arthur Treverton's legal heir) Andrew hands it back to her, because she is *not* the child of his hated sister-in-law.

Despite her alienation from her daughter, Sarah Leeson manages to relate to her in specifically maternal ways. She nurses Rosamond as a baby - a poignant example of displaced mothering which recalls the story of Moses - and when Rosamond gives birth to her own child, Sarah is the midwife. The sculpture of Niobe in the Myrtle Room (which is where Sarah has hidden Mrs Treverton's confession) is the image of a bereft mother. The wicked stepmother is also symbolically present when Rosamond discovers her birth secret, for Mrs Treverton's confession is hidden inside a portrait of the ghost of Porthgenna, a woman who possessed a 'leering, wicked, fatal beauty' and was 'guilty of deceiving her husband in some way unknown.' (DS p 243) In a room named after an evergreen sacred to the goddess of love, steeped in the histories of powerful and dangerous women past and present, Rosamond finds the courage to disclose her illegitimacy to her blind husband instead of leaving him - quite literally - in the dark.

4. Anthea Trodd, Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p 53

Throughout the novel Rosamond is unconsciously in search of her own secret, but what should be a central narrative impulse is skewed and dissipated because the plot relies on her remaining ignorant of what she is looking for. That it is not the mystery in itself which is at fault, but Collins's management of it is obvious from the fact that while two identical mysteries lie at the heart of The Woman in White, no one is disappointed when both Anne Catherick and Percival Glyde turn out to be illegitimate. Since The Dead Secret's secret is obvious from the start, the reader can only ever be interested in the way in which it is brought to light, and its possible consequences. If one had any forebodings about what might happen to the heroine as a result of her exposure as a bastard, they are immediately allayed. Rosamond's illegitimacy is neither realistic nor symbolic: the secret of her birth matters for about five minutes, while she makes up her mind whether or not to tell her husband. Hence this is a trivial book about a serious subject, because illegitimacy - like everything else - has been subordinated to the need for a secret. In ignoring its psychological potential, Wilkie Collins left the Trevertons' dead secret a somewhat meaningless hole in the fabric of his story. The spirited and interesting heroine, however, playing her detective games in Porthgenna Tower, certainly foreshadows Magdalen Vanstone in her sleuthing at St Cruz.

ii. 'The Woman in White': The Illegitimate Identity in Peril

In The Woman in White Wilkie Collins hit upon one of the best ways of showing how highly most people value their social identity and the lengths they will go to in order to protect it, by demonstrating how easily the identity may be attacked and destroyed. In this novel and in his later fiction, he dramatised the perils of social exposure by concentrating on those people who had been written off by the Victorian caste system - criminals, lunatics, bastards and fallen women. The rare but inevitable collisions between the Brahmins and the untouchables coincide with the textual crises of his novels. Whenever they are forced to have dealings with his outcasts, society's respectable members use a bargepole they call the law in order to avoid contamination. Yet while criminals can be

jailed, lunatics placed under restraint and fallen women subjected to degrading medical examinations, bastards cannot be officially disciplined just for being bastards. Consequently the way in which Collins frequently decides to forfeit his bastards' immunity to prosecution or illtreatment by making them criminal, mad or sexually deviant as well as illegitimate is extremely significant. This trick demonstrates his belief that society consciously or unconsciously treats its most dangerous outcasts - the ones over whom it can exert no official control - in such a way as to force or incite them to commit offences for which they can then be properly punished. Always potentially uncontrollable, however, Wilkie Collins's bastards continue to invade respectable society like escaped viruses.

The many substitutions, doublings and deceptions in Wilkie Collins's novels are the backbone of his exploration of the shapes and forms of identity and the ways in which it is created, moulded and sustained. In order to get hold of Laura Fairlie's fortune, Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde imprison her in a lunatic asylum under the name of Anne Catherick, and bury the real Anne as Laura, Lady Glyde. The plot of The Woman in White centres on the gradual undermining of Laura's identity through her relationship to men - as a daughter, lover, wife, and mother. In each relationship, her role, her sense of self, and her sense of failure or success is determined by the men who control her.

The villain's substitution plot hinges on the extraordinary physical resemblance between the heiress and the 'forlorn, friendless, lost' Anne Catherick, an obvious theatrical likeness which has overshadowed for too long the complex textual inversions and repetitions which reveal the Woman in White to be far more than a dazed replica of the novel's conventional heroine. Ultimately it may be that while the plot requires Anne to look like Laura Fairlie, she is symbolically a distorted reflection of Marian Halcombe.

As Philip Fairlie's sole heiress and unacknowledged bastard respectively, Laura and Anne are both imprisoned by their father's inheritance. Their paternal relatives - the vicious aunt, the egocentric

uncle, the malevolent uncle-by-marriage and the psychotic husband chosen for Laura - see one daughter dead and the other in a lunatic asylum in six months flat. Philip Fairlie's legacy to his two children is even less satisfactory than Andrew Vanstone's in No Name:

There rose on my memory the remembrance of the Scripture denunciation which we have all thought of in our time with wonder and with awe: 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children.' But for the fatal resemblance between the two daughters of one father, the conspiracy of which Anne had been the innocent instrument and Laura the innocent victim could never have been planned. With what unerring and terrible directness the long chain of circumstances led down from the thoughtless wrong committed by the father to the heartless injury inflicted on the child! (WW p 514)

If Anne had never been born, Laura could never have been deprived of her identity. If Philip had not wished for it, Laura would never have married Sir Percival Glyde. If he had not left her so much money, no one would have gone to the trouble of robbing her. Laura is hemmed in by her inheritance - cultural, psychological and economic - whereas her half-sister Marian, whose father was too careful to produce any bastard children, too intelligent to make marriage plans for her, and too poor to leave her any money, possesses great freedom of movement. The weakness is all from the paternal - Fairlie - side: Marian is like her mother.

The appearances and disappearances of Anne Catherick always provide profound textual crises. When Walter Hartright first meets her, the poignant appeal of the woman from outside, combined with a conventional fear of being dragged into something beyond his control, starts the adrenalin coursing through him. When he discovers that the mysterious woman has escaped from a lunatic asylum he is terrified, for he had noticed no signs of madness in her. It seems that if the Woman in White is truly wrong in the head, Hartright's faculties are somewhat dulled too:

What had I done? Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and every man's duty, mercifully to control? (WW p 22)

Toying with the possibility that he may have unleashed a voracious nymphomaniac on an unsuspecting city, Walter Hartright realises that one cannot tell simply by looking whether or not someone should be locked up. Since Victorian women were intellectually, legally and economically marginal, the extent to which they managed to control their sexuality became the yardstick by which their sanity was assessed. Collins's plot, as Barbara Fass Leavy has pointed out, 'does not merely involve the substitution of a sane woman for a deranged one in a lunatic asylum, but rather the substitution of an obviously unjustifiably confined woman for another whose commitment is also questionable.' 5 Leavy notes that while The Woman in White was appearing serially in All The Year Round (November 1859-August 1860) a Parliamentary Select Committee was looking into 'the Operations of the Acts of Parliament, and Regulations for the Care and Treatment of Lunatics and their Property.' ('Wilkie Collins's Cinderella', p 92) In this context Anne Catherick begins to emerge as an important cultural figure.

By the 1850s, there were more women than men in English lunatic asylums. 'In line with their celebration of women's domestic role, the Victorians hoped that homelike mental institutions would tame and domesticate madness and bring it into the sphere of rationality ... Mirroring the patriarchal character of the Victorian age, the asylum became increasingly like the family, ruled by the father, and subject to his values and his law.' 6 Anne Catherick weirdly shadows the passive and domesticated Laura Fairlie rather than the passionate and unconventional Marian Halcombe: hence her asylum symbolically replicates the middle-class Victorian home.

Karl Miller has written of the differences which usually exist between most literary doubles. 'One self does what the other self can't. One self is meek while the other is fierce. One self stays while the

5. Barbara Fass Leavy, 'Wilkie Collins's Cinderella: The History of Psychology and *The Woman in White*', Dickens Studies Annual 10, (1982), p 98

6. Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture (Virago, 1987), p 17/p 50

other runs away.' 7 If this model is followed, then Anne is Marian's double as well as Laura's. Indeed if it was only the doubling of Anne and Laura which mattered, surely Marian could have been merely a cousin or friend: by making her Laura's half-sister, Wilkie Collins made her the mirror-image of Anne. As Jenny Bourne Taylor has written, 'In Collins's fiction "others", split and double selves, are obsessively repeated figures, figures who threaten and move beyond the boundaries of the "orderly outward world"; they are perceived as anomalous, deviant, or insane, and continually come back in a way that challenges the boundaries that were founded on their exclusion.' 8 In representing the two extreme potentialities of Laura's character, Anne and Marian leave her without much room to represent herself.

When Wilkie Collins at last found a title for his new novel in 1859, no one except Charles Dickens really liked it. John Forster, who was never his most generous or perceptive critic, complained that it was too long and too irrelevant. Yet this foregrounding of a character who is second reserve heroine at best is, in fact, highly suggestive. Besides being the catalyst of the entire action, Anne's function is deeply symbolic. Her stiff and savage communiqués to Laura, written and oral, are the most compelling and important warnings that we receive during the novel. The trouble is that Anne's efforts are consistently undervalued because they are not unequivocally active and interventionist.

When Marian declares herself able to assess Sir Percival Glyde's actions by referring to Anne Catherick's accusations, she makes the point that the Woman in White's words provide a touchstone for acceptable behaviour. Glyde is horrified by the power possessed by the madwoman in his attic, whom he locks up in order to secure his disordered past. Anne cannot be kept under surveillance, and disappears too often for comfort. She can run rings round the trained staff at the asylum, and manages to

7. Karl Miller, Doubles (OUP, 1987), p 416

8. Jenny Bourne Taylor, In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth Century Psychology (Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1988), p 16

impose upon her captors as Laura never does. She is far from being merely powerless and persecuted, yet still ends up a victim - not because she is weak, but because she doesn't understand the true source of her power. Since she is operating in a conventional world, Anne assumes that the best way to help Laura while protecting herself is to redress the balance of power as conventionally as possible - via blackmail. But she is no Lydia Gwilt and cannot adapt quickly enough to survive in a society in which men decide who is sane and who needs locking up, and in which she has already had her card marked. She gets further - much further than she knows - when she tackles society on her own terms, and makes no attempt to play its games. Anne's apocalyptic visions, trances and outbursts terrify Glyde and Hartright both, since neither has any reference point for her unnerving behaviour. She is plainly in possession of important information, but it is not formatted in a way that society can easily accept. Anne's dispatches require decoding, since she expresses herself in a symbolic and prophetic manner. If her listeners could only differentiate between the sound information she imparts and the off-putting way in which she expresses herself, they would actually come very near to the truth. Elaine Showalter has explained how the uncontrollable behaviour of many female mental patients surprised their doctors, who had assumed that since women were used to falling in with the wishes of their male relatives, they would be no trouble. As it was, 'Victorian madwomen were not easily silenced, and one often has the impression that their talkativeness, violations of conventions of feminine speech, and insistence on self-expression was the kind of behaviour that had led to their being labeled "mad" to begin with.' (Female Malady, p 81)

Wilkie Collins gave Anne Catherick many of the qualities associated with the medium or necromancer. This unique role offers her both authority and independence, but leaves her open to attack by the exclusively male medical profession whose sole earthly power over life and death she threatens. Anne introduces her dream about Laura and Glyde by referring her readers to the bible passages which describe Joseph and Daniel interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar. This solemn preface indicates that she is convinced of her own usefulness to her social superiors. The fact that she does not feel it necessary to explain the

dream to Laura indicates that she may have sensed that her sister is already unsure about her forthcoming wedding: she may be a psychic, too. Anne's form of narrative generates suspense in the reader and disbelief in the other characters within the novel: it is left to her mother to formalize the servant's narrative in written form. Anne's dream is the encapsulation of her position as the mediator between husband and wife: the scapegoat whom Glyde attacks when he can't attack Laura, and later the catspaw whom he employs to destroy her. When Anne is buried under a tombstone bearing both of their names, we see an inverted reflection of Marian Halcombe nursing Laura's baby by Walter Hartright. The potent linking symbols of cradle and grave have been annexed by Laura's two sisters.

As Jenny Bourne Taylor has noted, 'The use of dreams clearly has a specific kind of function in the story as an embedded narrative, which on the one hand suggests that the explicit authority of the narrator is undermined, opening a space for the emergence of unsolicited thoughts and emotions; on the other, it is a more detached premonition or warning interjected into the main body of the story.' (Secret Theatre, p 84) But Anne's dream 'loses credibility for Hartright and Marian by being triply embedded - in a dream, in a letter, in a deranged person.' (Secret Theatre, p 111) Anne's narrative techniques all fail: even her attempt to annex the power attached to the written word. Her dream-letter - 'feeble, faint, and defaced by blots' - is as inherently untrustworthy as her spoken communications. For Wilkie Collins's readers, as opposed to Anne Catherick's readers, however, the very suspense which her communication generates encourages them to believe in the essential truth of what she is saying.

Wilkie Collins painstakingly evokes Anne's past history with reference to the testimony of Mrs Fairlie, Mrs Clements and Mrs Catherick perhaps, as Barbara Fass Leavy suggests, in order to 'construct for his own satisfaction at least a medical case history that might render Anne possibly mad but not necessarily so.' ('Wilkie Collins's Cinderella', p 99) Considering that the Woman in White is so often seen as a shadowy and insubstantial figure, we actually know a great deal about her background -

far more, in fact, than we know about Laura or Marian. Both Mrs Fairlie and Mrs Clements, Anne's good mothers as it were, explicitly deny that she is an idiot. They testify to her loving and gentle nature, while admitting that she is a little slow and backward. It is Anne's real (bad) mother Mrs Catherick who refers to her as 'queer', 'crazy' and 'half-witted.' (WW pp 497-498) Mrs Catherick is an angry, aggressive and unloving parent, who nevertheless refuses to relinquish Philip Fairlie's child entirely, and interferes with Mrs Clements' attempts to be kind to Anne. Abandoned by both her father and her step-father, mothered badly, incompetently or partially, Anne's upbringing more than accounts for her symptoms of melancholia and depression.

The Woman in White's ostensible heroine is twice displaced by her sisters - by Marian as the active heroine, and by Anne as the symbolic uncontrollable female who must be shut up to protect a guilty man from the consequences of his crime. Marian's energetic and ferocious love for Laura defeats Fosco and Glyde, but ensures that her sister will fill only a peripheral role within the family. The Woman in White closes with Marian nursing Walter Hartright's son while the baby's mother stands idly by, flicking through a sketchbook. Laura's money and status will give the child a secure future as the 'Heir of Limmeridge', but it is his aunt who will bring him up. Laura, of course, will be Anne Catherick, as maybe she always was, and the question of just who is the real 'Woman in White' persists to the end of the novel.

Laura's virgin sisters are twin conduits through which the heroine's marital relationships are filtered. Marian, the dark lady, dreams of Laura with Walter Hartright, father of the Heir of Limmeridge, while Anne, the Woman in White, dreams of Laura's marriage to the impotent asset-stripping Percival Glyde. Neither one believes that Laura can be safe alone with a husband. Anne's psychic disturbance is revealed when she refuses to name Glyde for fear of further diminishing her own reserves of mental strength: 'I can't - I daren't - I forget myself, when I mention [him].' (WW p 18) Marian, for her part, loses control when Glyde arranges an early date for Laura's wedding:

Are you to break your heart to set his mind at ease? No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us women! Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace - they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship - they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel. And what does the best of them give us in return? Let me go, Laura - I'm mad when I think of it! (WW p 162)

As Elaine Showalter reports, the Victorian doctor F.C. Skey felt that his hysterical patients were often particularly independent and rebellious women 'exhibiting more than usual force and decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger.' (Female Malady, p 145) In the event, Marian enters the asylum only in order to rescue Laura, but the laxity of the Victorian conception of "madness" remains very deeply disturbing, especially given Marian's talk of being dragged about and chained up by controlling men who are the enemies of her sex.

Anne Catherick distills the evil forces which threaten both of Philip Fairlie's daughters but converge upon Laura because she is sane, rich and legitimate. As well as containing two heroines and two villains, however, The Woman in White also contains two bastards, the unavenged victim and the unpunished villain of the drama. The counterpointed destinies of Anne Catherick and Percival Glyde substantially undermine the novel's insistence on the triumph of good over evil. Symbolically the mysteries of both bastards must be solved by their doubles, Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright, in order to reconstruct Laura's identity. The Woman in White's secret leads to the secret of Sir Percival Glyde, and their illegitimacy explains both her obliteration and his psychosis.

As Walter M Kendrick has written, Sir Percival Glyde's existence 'has been a forged document: [he] owes his power and position to a few lines of writing where there ought to be a space.'<sup>9</sup> Glyde is an impostor, a fraudster and a cheat, and his mean-spirited crimes clash violently with the famous British sense of fair play. 'You will not think me vain,' declared Wilkie Collins, almost twenty years after the publication of The

9. Walter M Kendrick, 'The Sensationalism of The Woman in White', Nineteenth Century Fiction 32, (June 1977), p 30

Woman in White, 'when I tell you, as a simple matter of fact, that people took extraordinary interest in my mean villain, and laid bets concerning the nature of the mysterious crime which put him in the power of Anne's mother.' 10 This is surprising, given that both Hide and Seek and The Dead Secret had illegitimate births at their centres.

Percival Glyde illustrates that no one is more dangerous than a coward. The morally weak always blame others when things go wrong, and because they bear a grudge against life for doing them down, any action which is to their advantage can be justified. Faced with trouble or danger, people like Glyde react like cornered rats. Having amassed a chain of certificates with which to authenticate his official self, Glyde has reached the point where there is no one with the right combination of power and knowledge to threaten his position. But being safe yesterday is no good if you don't know you will be safe tomorrow. After living a lie for more than twenty years, the way in which his terrible fear colours even his most inconsequential actions threatens to trip him up psychologically at any time.

During their time at Glyde's ancestral home, Blackwater Park, both his friends and his enemies spend an inordinate amount of time observing, discussing and weighing up the character, motives and preoccupations of their fellow guests. The psychological detective games which are played in the bastard's house are significant: something about the place encourages its inhabitants to mistrust other people. The psychotherapist at a loose end might have whiled away many an hour at Blackwater studying Laura's Electra complex, Marian's lesbianism, Anne's chronic depression and Fosco's megalomania, but it is the master of the house who comes under the most relentless scrutiny. In this instance he is observed by Marian Halcombe:

If I take a book from the library and leave it on the table he follows me and puts it back again. If I rise from a chair, and let it remain where I have been sitting, he carefully restores it to its proper place against the wall. He picks up stray flower-blossoms from the carpet, and mutters to himself as discontentedly as if they were hot cinders burning holes in

10. Wilkie Collins, 'How I Write My Books', The World 26 December 1877, reprinted as Appendix C to The Woman in White (OUP, 1973), p 592

it, and he storms at the servants if there is a crease in the tablecloth, or a knife missing from its place at the dinner-table, as fiercely as if they had personally insulted him. (WW p 193)

Glyde's obsessive, ceremonial mania for regularity reflects his primal guilt and dissatisfaction at the confusion surrounding his social identity, and a subconscious wish to reveal what must at all costs remain hidden. Because he thinks that his secret will be exposed by one of the Cathericks, Glyde tries to silence them, but ironically his methods are so over the top that they attract considerable attention. The more he worries that another person will let slip the truth, the more likely it becomes that he will panic and let it out himself. As Peter Gay has written, the mind 'resembles a maximum-security prison holding anti-social inmates languishing for years or recently arrived, inmates harshly treated and heavily guarded, but barely kept under control and forever attempting to escape.' 11

When The Woman in White was first published in book form Margaret Oliphant argued that 'Sir Percival Glyde, who conducted himself before his marriage as astutely as Fosco himself could have done, becomes a very poor, passionate, unsuccessful rascal after that event - a miserable attempt at a villain, capable of deceiving nobody, such as novelists are fond of palming off upon us as impersonations of successful scoundrelism.' 12 But Wilkie Collins did not simply tire of Glyde once Fosco had come on the scene to absorb all his creative energies: if anything, his delineation of Glyde's unstable thought-processes gets more impressive as the novel progresses. Both Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright believe that Glyde's behaviour is quite intelligible when related to his secret. As Hartright declares, in this context the baronet's manic mood-swings take on a whole new meaning. Mad bastards are quite understandable:

The paltry means by which the fraud had been effected, the magnitude

11. Peter Gay, Freud: A Life For Our Time (J M Dent and Sons Ltd, 1988), p 128

12. Margaret Oliphant, 'Sensation Novels', Blackwood's Magazine May 1862, in Page, Critical Heritage, p 119

and daring of the crime that it represented, the horror of the consequences involved in its discovery, overwhelmed me. Who could wonder now at the brute-restlessness of the wretch's life - at his desperate alternations between abject duplicity and reckless violence - at the madness of guilty distrust which had made him imprison Anne Catherick in the Asylum, and had given him over to the vile conspiracy against his wife, on the bare suspicion that the one and the other knew his terrible secret? (WW p 471)

While Fosco's substitution plot is a complex tour-de-force, Glyde's crimes are brilliantly simple. He is illegitimate, so he marries his parents; he is a criminal, so he makes Jane Catherick an accessory; he is a psychopath, so he locks people up in an asylum. One of the juiciest components of this heavily ironic passage is the section in which Walter Hartright - who once felt unqualified to judge whether or not Anne Catherick was mad even after having a long talk with her - confidently pronounces upon the mental state of a dead man he has never met. Once a scrupulously modest eyewitness, Hartright now presumes to sum up the bastard for us from the hearsay evidence of his sworn enemy, Marian Halcombe. And in fact how well did she - or anyone - really know him? The charming baronet who paid court to Laura Fairlie was not a real person, but a series of characters adopted by an actor of consummate skill. This theatrical streak symbolically manifests his determination to be who he wants to be, and devastatingly parodies the smooth pliancy of the practised social chameleon. In fact Collins handles this theme so well that in comparison, his lengthy discussion of the bastard as actress in No Name loses much of its freshness and bite. Here, Marian Halcombe is impressed in spite of herself with the range of her brother-in-law's repertoire at Limmeridge House:

His elaborate delicacy; his ceremonious politeness, which harmonised so agreeably with Mr. Gilmore's old-fashioned notions; his modesty with Laura, his candour with me, his moderation with Mr. Fairlie - all these were the artifices of a mean, cunning, and brutal man, who had dropped his disguise when his practised duplicity had gained its end ... (WW pp 227-228)

Like Margaret Oliphant and Marian Halcombe, the attentive reader cannot fail to be struck by the contrast between the confident, controlled, self-reliant Glyde of Limmeridge House and the psychopath who patrols

Blackwater Park after six months absence abroad. D.A. Miller has noted that 'characters who are not constitutionally nervous become circumstantially so, in the unnerving course of events.' 13 Surely it is no coincidence that Marian only becomes aware of Glyde's unbalanced state when she herself has begun to lose her grip on reality. For Glyde, drastic events, economic and psychological, occur during his honeymoon. His financial state has become so completely compromised that even his shady contacts on the continent cannot help: if he succeeds in obtaining his wife's fortune he will only clear his debts, not raise any working capital. When he writes figures in the sand with a stick and then erases them, this is an apt metaphor for his financial position as well as for his psychological one. More importantly, the combustible psychological material attending his birth has been ignited by a sexual drama linked to his position as a newly-married husband.

Like Edward and Dorothea Casaubon, Sir Percival and Lady Glyde honeymoon in Rome, haunted by the presence (or absence) of the handsome and artistic young man who eventually becomes the young bride's second husband. A chance remark enables Glyde to discover the name of Laura's former lover. This is how she tells it to Marian:

[The moment we were in the drawing-room, he locked the door, pushed me down into a chair, and stood over me with his hands on my shoulders. 'Ever since that morning when you made your audacious confession to me at Limmeridge,' he said, 'I have wanted to find out the man, and I found him in your face tonight. Your drawing-master was the man, and his name is Hartright. You shall repent it, and he shall repent it, to the last hour of your lives. Now go to bed and dream of him if you like, with the marks of my horsewhip on his shoulders.' (WW pp 237-238)

When Glyde finds Hartright in Laura's face he sees (or imagines that he sees) his wife in a state of sexual excitement: keyed up to a pitch he will never be able to bring her to himself. The fact that he physically restrains Laura while talking of thrashing Hartright suggests his emotional confusion. Glyde is clearly frightened by Laura's capacity to experience

13. D A Miller, '*Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's The Woman in White*', in Jeremy Hawthorn (ed), The Nineteenth Century British Novel (Edward Arnold, 1986), p 99

sexual passion and jealous of Hartright's capacity to inspire it. He (in common with Wilkie Collins's readers) has never seen it before, and never will again. This psychosexual drama relates to the impotence which Sir Percival presumably discovers on his honeymoon, the condition which causes him to leave his young wife alone at night, 'to go among the Opera people.' (WW p 235)

Glyde tells Fosco that Laura is 'not in the least likely' to have a child, but as she later has a healthy son by Walter Hartright, we must assume either that he is physically impotent, or that he is ensuring she doesn't produce an heir to inherit the fortune. If he's impotent, he is a defrauded father, and if he isn't, then he is defrauding his children of the right to live. In either case, Glyde has to deal with a colossal burden of personal and inherited sexual guilt, and he does this by projecting his own secret on to his innocent wife, who becomes contaminated and untouchable. His guilt is founded on his illegitimacy and exacerbated by his impotence, and his attempt to get rid of it by transferring it to another person is an example of one of humankind's most primitive psychological defence mechanisms at work. Barickman, McDonald and Stark have described both Fosco and Glyde as 'viciously masculine', but in the light of Fosco's effeminacy and Glyde's psychological or physical impotence it seems that their viciousness may be related to their fundamentally ambivalent sexual status. 14 Glyde's perverted interest in Laura's previous relationship with Hartright echoes the voyeuristic nature of Don John the Bastard in Much Ado About Nothing, who was fascinated by the sexual interplay between Hero and Claudio. It seems that in the absence of personal fulfilment, the bastard is inclined to obtain it vicariously, and then attempt to punish the innocent young lovers who make him feel so guilty and inadequate.

The topography of Blackwater Park, with its stagnant lake, decaying vegetation and oppressive dark trees is analogous to the mental state of the master of the house. Wandering by the lake alone, Marian Halcombe

14. Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p 39

sees, 'lying half in and half out of the water, the rotten wreck of an old overturned boat, with a sickly spot of sunlight glimmering through a gap in the trees on its dry surface, and a snake basking in the midst of the spot, fantastically coiled and treacherously still.' (WW p 184) George Eliot also uses this repulsive snake/boat imagery in Daniel Deronda, to dramatise the very real sexual threat which Grandcourt poses to Gwendolen. He is portrayed as 'a dangerous serpent ornamentally coiled in her cabin without invitation.' (DD p 735) Whereas Grandcourt, the father of four bastards, poses an extremely physical threat to the heroine, the impotent Glyde is incapable of raping his wife.

When Laura will not sign a legal document before she has read it, Glyde sees her action as a direct attack on his authority, and his mind jumps to guilty conclusions which he must then try to disown. Her refusal to authorise the fraudulent document is the symbolic antithesis of her husband's creation of a marriage certificate which had never existed, and knowing that he is the guilty one, Glyde instead casts suspicion on Laura: 'It is rather late in the day for you to be scrupulous. I should have thought you had got over all weakness of that sort, when you made a virtue of necessity by marrying me.' (WW p 223) The all-important document, which would give Glyde the right to manage Laura's money, is described by the unsentimental lawyer Mr Kyrle as 'a fraud upon [Laura's] unborn children.' (WW p 244) In trying to make her sign it, Glyde manifests a desperate contempt for the conventions of kinship, inheritance and regulated descent which relates to both his own position as a defrauded child, and the knowledge that he will never be a father. Throughout the novel, Wilkie Collins has intimated that Glyde is rudderless and futureless. As the child of a misanthropic cripple who failed to secure his son's birthright, what sort of ideas about family loyalty should he have? Glyde, like Norah and Magdalen Vanstone, is almost more than merely illegitimate. Under French law, people in their circumstances were not *enfants naturelles* - the children of unmarried parents - but *enfants adulterines*, whose parents could never have married, as one partner had a spouse still living. Such children had to remain forever unacknowledged by their fathers.

Glyde courts the suspicion that he is a bastard father to avoid exposure as a bastard son: he is happy for the Old Welmingham gossips to assume that he was Jane Catherick's lover if that will throw them off the scent and cover up the real secret. Illegitimate fatherhood never carried the same stigma as illegitimate motherhood, of course, especially if one were rich and important, but Glyde's unconcern stems from the fact that he has no reference point for the concept of loving and responsible parenthood. Hartright is right to doubt that Anne's illegitimate birth is the secret - as he says to Mrs Catherick, 'I'll tell you what I *don't* suspect. I *don't* suspect him of being Anne's father.' (WW p 452) Yet illegitimacy is the secret after all. The threat which Glyde poses to the patriarchal culture and the laws of inheritance does not originate with the careless procreation of a mentally retarded bastard child: after all, he does more than anyone to see that Anne is safely locked up and marginalized. On the contrary it is his own career as Sir Percival Glyde which has been the swindle, unparalleled in any Victorian novel, and it is for this symbolically anti-social crime rather than for his victimisation of Laura Fairlie that he must die.

Alexander Welsh has described how in The Woman in White 'blackmail is endemic, practised even by the protagonists to keep their adversaries in check.'<sup>15</sup> Given that most of Collins's characters believe that trading in other people's secrets is justifiable, Walter Hartright's thoughts about blackmail after Glyde's death are extremely revealing:

Suppose he had lived ... Could I have made my discovery a marketable commodity, even for Laura's sake, after I had found out that robbery of the rights of others was the essence of Sir Percival's crime? Could I have offered the price of *my* silence for *his* confession of the conspiracy, when the effect of that silence must have been to keep the right heir from the estates, and the right owner from the name? Impossible! If Sir Percival had lived, the discovery, from which (in my ignorance of the true nature of the Secret) I had hoped so much, could not have been mine to suppress, or to make public, as I thought best, for the vindication of Laura's rights. In common honesty and common honour, I must have gone at once to the stranger whose birthright had been usurped - I must have renounced the victory at the moment when it was mine, by placing my discovery unreservedly in that stranger's hands ... (WW pp 487-488)

15. Alexander Welsh, 'Blackmail Studies in Martin Chuzzlewit and Bleak House', Dickens Studies Annual 11, (1983), p 27

This is not Hartright the outraged lover talking: at this point, Glyde's 'robbery of the rights of others' seems more dangerous than his destruction of Laura's identity. Hartright chooses to restore the name (title) of a total stranger who doesn't know that he has lost it, rather than the name (identity) of his emotionally crippled wife. Some hero. It comes down to a question of ethics: of duty versus inclination. Hartright allies himself with Glyde's cousin, a man whom he has never met, and who - like Hartright himself - has no great expectations. As the novel closes, however, the unknown sailor and the penniless artist are in control of the Blackwater and Limmeridge estates respectively. I infer two things from the hero's refusal to base Laura's social rehabilitation on the discovery of Glyde's social crime. Firstly, the honest artisan now knows that he is *not* cut off from the sphere of inheritance which the reader had assumed was monopolised by moribund aristocrats like Sir Percival Glyde: on the contrary, he personally revitalises the fading order by fathering the 'Heir of Limmeridge'. Secondly, Hartright considers the repair of the terrible damage done to the fundamental inheritance patterns of his society to be more important than the rescue of a single victimised heiress, which indicates that he has come to perceive a link between himself and privileged society which is entirely independent of his marriage to Laura Fairlie.

Percival Glyde's covert actions make him a conscious fifth-columnist within the patriarchal culture, and thus a much more threatening revolutionary figure than Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name*. As a man, he is a traitor to the sex which has established the rules of primogeniture to exclude and marginalise women: given Magdalen's non-stake in Victorian society, she is expected to rebel, by Wilkie Collins at any rate. Thus although Glyde and Magdalen both sneakily claw their way back into a society which rejects bastards out of hand, their relative allocations of authorial support and sympathy are radically different. Moreover Wilkie Collins's Glyde/Hartright discourse opens up a space in his packed narrative for the interesting question of what constituted masculine power and authority in the Victorian age - birth and breeding, or worth and achievement. As criminal and detective, Glyde and Hartright are mirror-images. The bastard buries his secret in a vestry, his wife in an asylum,

and his accomplice in a forgotten town, only for his opposite number to expose his hidden crimes and the terrible birth secret to which they are all related.

iii. 'No Name': The Destruction of the Bourgeois Family

Wilkie Collins's best female characters are always culturally insulted and injured. Preoccupied by the apparent instability and fragility of the social identity, he was curious about the possible consequences for a society in which many people felt unsure of who they were and how they fitted in. In spite of the madness inherent in making respectable society a club so exclusive that it has no members, his characters always end up trying to protect or acquire an identity in the face of external forces denying them the right to be whole.

Collins redefined his society's ideas about courtship, sex and marriage in terms of fraud and crime by empowering radical women like Magdalen Vanstone and hinting that more conventional ones like her sister Norah were basically powerless. In the words of Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, as his sensation novels 'intertwine[d] the respectable and the criminal worlds, [they implied] that an elaborate criminal intrigue is the truest analogue to respectable social relations. Significantly, the respectable world becomes more impotent and demoralised as the power and complexity of the criminal plot emerges.' (Corrupt Relations, p 26) The more bizarre and overwrought the plot, the more certain it is that Collins is viciously undercutting the ways in which conventional society attempts to cope with the shadowy figures it perceives on its threshold. His dealings with warped, fractured and incomplete family relationships - abused children, morganatic marriages, bitter separations and the like - feed into a massive indictment of the Victorian legal system. His illegitimates are prostituted, raped, jailed, burned alive, disinherited and turned out of their homes: their suffering represents a wholesale repudiation of the patriarchal system.

Although Wilkie Collins was attacked by his contemporaries for running guided tours of what Geraldine Jewsbury called a 'moral hospital', his works were always considered suitable for the circulating libraries, and he was never accused of being indifferent to morality. (Page, Critical Heritage, p 55) Yet few of his critics have attempted to say in what his moral vision consists. Is it coherent and distinctive, or does the reader merely sense that he is against greed, hypocrisy and self-deception and for living and letting live? Of all his books, No Name has tried the patience of more critics than most. Geoffrey Tillotson seems really exasperated by Collins's failure to deliver a statement of moral intent:

[I]n No Name Wilkie Collins shows no sound sense of morality. There are, to be sure, some fragments of a moral scheme. But even these fragments exist at variance. Guilt works no changes in the mind; it goes unpunished by the conscience. I say guilt because I am accepting Wilkie Collins's own judgement on the acts of Magdalen Vanstone. He speaks of her as standing between Good and Evil, and choosing Evil ... she chooses Evil - so Wilkie Collins has it - and drives to her ruin. But her ruin turns out very pleasant: she gets not only what she sets out to get, the lost fortune, but, into the bargain, the excellent Mr Kirke for husband. Meanwhile, of course, she has suffered great misery, but merely the misery of physical exhaustion and the fierce vexation of the frustrated ... Her only possible complaint is that she did not gain the objective for herself. ... The only moral we can draw from No Name is one that we know from his smug preface Wilkie Collins did not intend - the moral that evil is the best policy because, though it may fail directly, it succeeds indirectly. Instead, he pipes that 'evil brings ruin'. The reason for his moralising use of the word evil can only be guessed at: it may have pleased those of his readers who felt easier in their consciences if the novels they yielded to claimed to be edifying: it may have been welcome because it added another dark colour to his lowering canvas; or it may have been a token of the homage which a writer of thrillers pays to the great novelists, a twinge of aspiration towards the philosophy that moves in the great novels, in the novels, say, of Thackeray and George Eliot. 16

Although most of Wilkie Collins's contemporaries saw that No Name had not been written for the morally and socially insensitive, the novel was never seen as his critique of Victorian England in the way that Middlemarch was seen as George Eliot's. Perhaps it was not so much the case that Collins was not a moral writer as that no one wanted him to be one. While Tillotson rightly draws attention to the extremely ambiguous "morality" of

16. Geoffrey Tillotson, Criticism and the Nineteenth Century (The Athlone Press, 1951), pp 241-243

No Name, he is quite wrong to suggest that evil succeeds indirectly, or indeed at all. What *does* succeed is some other process - chance, circumstance, Providence - or maybe just Wilkie Collins's conception of how things tend to work. While this process may seem arbitrary, it is in fact under Collins's overall control, and leads inexorably to things working out for Magdalen. Far from being morally incoherent, the story of the Vanstone family's wills and marriages orders and enlivens his minute analysis of society's customs and contracts in a unique and subtle way.

Pinpointing the moral scheme of No Name involves identification rather than interpretation: it is a depressing vision, not a blueprint for change. Barickman, MacDonald and Stark have shown how 'Collins thoroughly parodies the values and practices of the Victorian middle-class family in characters like ... the Wragges. He focusses on those who are outcasts of the family-centred system, who have broken with it openly, who manipulate it for their secret advantage, or who are victims of it. All this suggests that the family ... was an inescapable matrix, the pattern that determines in some way all variations, even those that struggle to escape its influence or to destroy.' (Corrupt Relations, p 33) To some extent the entire Vanstone clan over three generations is incestuous, warped, unhealthy and unforgiving. The wills made (or not made) by the male members of the family bring about suffering, hardship and death. Family life, conventionally rooted in the marriage contract, is broken up by the working of the law. Collins's England is dangerously overexposed to it: as the down-to-earth governess Harriet Garth comments, 'Parchment is sometimes an obstacle.' (NN p 68) People and relationships are only worthwhile once they have been ratified and recorded. The Vanstone family, with its Ins and Outs, Haves and Have-nots, legitimate men and illegitimate women, is a microcosm of nineteenth-century England. Magdalen Vanstone is the first in a long line of Collins's heroines to discover that her society is fundamentally dependent on inequality and oppression, and that she is perhaps a more obvious product of such a culture than her most respectable contemporaries.

The Vanstone family history, traced through the all-important male line, begins with Andrew's unnamed father and ends with the death of his

unnamed son. Herein lies the greatest paradox of the novel, which serves to communicate something of Wilkie Collins's value system. Even though the only Vanstones who matter to us are Norah and Magdalen, their malevolent grandfather and pathetic little brother are, in the general way of things, very much more important. Since the value system of the law and society is clearly antithetical to Wilkie Collins's, which we have already accepted, unconsciously we have taken an illegal and antisocial stand. The moral question is not whether to approve Magdalen's initiative or Norah's stoicism, but whether to back respectable society instead of our heroines, regardless of which sister we side with.

The law in society is symbolised by the Vanstone wills, and its divisive effects are represented by their intergenerational conflicts. No one endows a cat's home, and the fortune always stays within the family: nevertheless, the watertight wills of old Mr Vanstone and his grandson Noel - together with those his sons fail to make - disenfranchise and marginalise their female relatives. In No Name wills are exclusively male documents which regulate female lives. All the Vanstone men are dangerous - the harsh patriarch, the vicious Michael, the careless Andrew, degenerate Noel, even the dead baby grandson - and most dangerous to the women they are closest to. The marriage contract is, of course, the most important component of family law, and Collins uses it to hold up a mirror to the customs and legalities of Victorian society as a whole.

For a long time, Wilkie Collins was writing a book with no working title, a sensation he must have enjoyed, given his subject matter. It was first published in Dickens's magazine All the Year Round in 1862-3, and at the proof stage Dickens began to put pressure on his friend to announce a name, compiling a list of twenty seven possible titles for him to choose from. One of his better suggestions was The Combe-Raven Tragedy, which centres the main action firmly in 'the secret theatre of home.' Wilkie Collins nimbly achieves an atmosphere of unease which prepares us for a 'home-wreck', although when we glimpse the mysterious Wragge lurking about the homestead we are set looking for trouble in the wrong place. It is the openhearted master of the house who poses a threat to the family security, not the secretive stranger:

Mr Vanstone showed his character on the surface of him freely to all men...Estimating him by years, he had turned fifty. Judging him by lightness of heart, strength of constitution, and capacity for enjoyment, he was no older than most men who have only turned thirty. (NN p 2)

The front view of [Wragge] was the view in which he looked oldest; meeting him face to face, he might have been estimated at fifty or more. Walking behind him, his back and shoulders were almost young enough to have passed for five-and-thirty. (NN p 14)

The effect of this latter passage is disturbing - even though Wragge himself is a red herring - because someone we are being encouraged to see as a potential threat so closely resembles honest Andrew Vanstone. Miss Garth is on the right track when she identifies family business as the source of trouble: this family's terrible weakness is internal. Combe-Raven, the valley of the crows, is harbouring secrets as explosive as nitroglycerine: the safety and happiness of Norah and Magdalen Vanstone is undermined by their own parents. As Elaine Showalter has written, 'The power of Victorian sensationalism derives ... from its exposure of secrecy as the fundamental and enabling condition of middle-class life, rather than from its revelation of particular scandals. The essential unknowability of each individual, and society's collaboration in the maintenance of a facade preoccupied many mid-century novelists.' 17

The history of the Vanstones is narrated by their family solicitor, Mr Pendril, to Miss Garth. Although the tale is purely factual so far as he is concerned, Wilkie Collins has in fact threaded another ribbon of meaning through it:

Mr Vanstone the elder ... married early in life; and the children of the marriage were either six, or seven in number - I am not certain which. After [Michael, the eldest son and Selina, the eldest daughter] ... came other sons and daughters whose early deaths make it unnecessary to mention them particularly. The last and by many years the youngest of the children was Andrew ... (NN p 87)

17. Elaine Showalter, 'Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion in the Novels of the 1860s', in Anthony S Wohl (ed), The Victorian Family: Structures and Stresses (Croom Helm, 1978), p 104

As Wragge reminded us of Andrew Vanstone, so this family structure is also strangely familiar. The Combe-Raven Vanstones also had several children, only two of whom survived infancy: their eldest, and their much younger favourite; Andrew's insignificant dead siblings recall his last (and only legitimate) child, who lives just a few hours, but whose influence on the family inheritance patterns is incalculable. In both cases, the family implodes on the death of the father. Familial treachery is born on itself: as Percival Glyde robbed his cousin of Blackwater Park when betrayed by his father, so Michael Vanstone in his turn deprives his nieces of Combe-Raven.

Andrew's notoriously bad head for business - lovingly parodied by Magdalen - leaves his daughters vulnerable to attack and abuse from within their own family. Vanstone's marriage to Norah, the mother of his grown-up children, invalidates his will, but he is killed in a train crash before he can settle things. His attempt to bring his unorthodox domestic arrangements into line with the expectations of his society destroys everything he holds dear. The more he struggles to fill the shoes of the conventional Victorian patriarch, the more hopelessly enmeshed in the relentless customs and legalities of his society he becomes.

When Vanstone tries to get the law on his side at last by marrying the mother of his children, it destroys him. As Mercy Merrick discovers in The New Magdalen, once society's rules have been broken, it is impossible to 'get back'. Michael Vanstone's disgusted reaction symbolises the outrage of those respectable persons with a vested interest in upholding the status quo: 'He appears to have systematically imposed a woman on Society as his wife, who was not his wife; and to have completed the outrage on morality by afterwards marrying her. Such conduct as this, has called down a Judgement on himself and his children.' (NN p 110) In other words, Michael moves the goalposts by condemning his brother on moral rather than legal grounds. It's the old, old story. In The New Magdalen Collins stresses that while the Bible may teach that 'Joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner who repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance,' more often than not, the joy of the ninety and nine just persons is somewhat muted. (NM p 19)

Andrew Vanstone's legal incompetence reveals that having cut himself off from the law for so many years, he is now unable to cope with it. The solicitor, Mr Loscombe, would say that it served him right: as far as he is concerned, when 'uninstructed persons meddle with law' the result is never to their advantage. (NN p 441) The hideous mess created by a decent man trying to placate society and make amends for his errors makes his daughter's belligerent and uncompromising survival strategies look sensible as well as exciting.

While Norah resembles the mother she is named after, Magdalen's physical appearance is intrinsically suspicious. 'By one of those caprices of Nature, which science still leaves unexplained, the youngest of Mr Vanstone's children presented no recognisable resemblance to either of her parents. How had she come by her hair? How had she come by her eyes? Even her father and mother had asked themselves those questions, as she grew up to girlhood, and had been sorely perplexed to answer them.' (NN p 5) This description implicitly questions Magdalen's honesty - is she some kind of thief or trickster, who has appropriated from birth a skin she should not have jumped into? She is indeed a unique sensation heroine: as Margaret Oliphant tartly observed, 'The Magdalen of No Name does not go astray after the usual fashion of erring maidens in romance. Her pollution is decorous, and justified by law; and after all her endless deceptions and horrible marriage, it seems quite right to the author that she should be restored to society, and have a good husband and happy home.' 18 Magdalen wills her own fall and does it lawfully. Just like her father, she takes on the law and tries to 'get back' covertly.

As poor and disgraced bastards, the sisters are told to take society's word for it that they have even fewer options than their respectable female contemporaries. Given the choice of marriage to Frank Clare or governessing, the unfixed social identity which enables Magdalen to reject both choices seems enabling rather than disabling. With Wragge's help Magdalen persuades her cousin Noel (who has inherited her father's money)

18. Margaret Oliphant, Blackwood's Magazine August 1853, in Page, Critical Heritage, p 143

to marry her under the name of Susan Bygrave. As part of a recognisable social unit, Magdalen does not seem dangerous. Paranoid about the possibility of his unknown bastard cousin enacting a terrible revenge upon him, Noel Vanstone dreads an independent, self-determining female working secretly and alone - an unnatural and unfeminine predator whose behaviour will give her away. His naive and stereotyped ideas encourage him to permit the unthinkable. When he mistakes the friendless Magdalen (who is acting a part and renting her relatives) for a genuine Victorian Madonna nestling at the heart of a respectable family, he becomes the means by which the bastard is legitimised. As she declares in the hour of her bitterest triumph, 'Nobody's Child' has become 'Somebody's Wife'. (NN p 436)

No-naming is a dangerous and unpredictable process which is used as an agent of social control but can cause virtual anarchy. As a result, Magdalen and Norah Vanstone are stripped of their identities not in a gloomy madhouse but in broad daylight. In The Woman in White the illegitimacy of Anne Catherick and Percival Glyde finally made sense of them, but in No Name the Vanstones' illegitimacy is made known much earlier, so that the reader may consider how their story relates to their secret. Magdalen has an extremely sophisticated sense of her namelessness and what it symbolises. When she writes a long autobiographical letter to her sister, she will not sign it: 'there was a blank space reserved, to be filled up at some other time.' (NN p 358) Wragge notices her 'morbid distrust of writing her name at the bottom of any document' and her reluctance to choose a stage name. (NN p 172/p 174) Sir Percival Glyde, with a birth secret still to keep, is given to filling in documentary gaps. Hence the decision to sign herself 'Magdalen Vanstone' at the end of her letter to Mr Loscombe indicates that she has a new confidence in her identity, for legally speaking, there is no such person. Noel's wife is either "Mrs Noel Vanstone" or "Susan Vanstone" - but Magdalen feels entitled to use her surname in her own right when communicating with a lawyer.

But what about her unusual Christian name? Magdalen was named after an aunt who had died young, yet the narrator expresses surprise at this

traditional choice: 'Surely, the grand old Bible name - suggestive of a sad and sombre dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion, had been here, as events had turned out, inappropriately bestowed?' (NN p 7) The spoilt darling of Combe-Raven is nothing like a Magdalen, for the name encapsulates the notions of sexual sin and redemption. However she grows into it, and as a bastard she forfeits her surname rather than her apparently incongruous forename. Her legitimate stillborn brother's position is exactly opposed to Magdalen's, for while he has an absolute right to the name of Vanstone, he is not given a Christian name.

Magdalen's legal battles - to get a name, to get a husband, to alter a will - are crucial. Wilkie Collins perceived a link between the intricacies of the law and the workings of the female mind - both, presumably, being warped and tortuous in the extreme. In Armadale Mr Pedgift is said to be persisting in a line of questioning 'as only lawyers and women can persist,' and Collins's best female characters remorselessly pursue carefully researched and amazingly complex plans of action in defiance of all distractions and contra-indications. (A p 322) The extent to which Collins's women get involved with the law, which excludes them both practically and professionally, is an index of their qualities and talents: while Magdalen and her arch-enemy Virginie Lecount tackle it head-on, Norah and Miss Garth prefer to let Mr Pendril act for them. Norah's husband, kindly George Bartram, has 'no understanding of legal technicalities'. (NN p 511)

Because the law is basically opposed to the interests of all women, in Magdalen's eyes this fact authorises any steps she may take to devalue it. Knowing full well that the law is bending her father's "will" out of shape, she speaks as one determined to uphold the idea of regulated patrilineal descent in the face of sinister outside forces which are seeking to undermine it. Masquerading as Miss Garth, she warns Noel that 'nothing would induce her to leave you in possession of the inheritance which her father meant his children to have ... She is a nameless, homeless, friendless wretch. The law which takes care of you, the law which takes care of all legitimate children, casts her like carrion to the winds. It

is your law - not hers. She only knows it as the instrument of a vile oppression, an insufferable wrong. I tell you she would shrink from no means which a desperate woman can employ, to force that closed hand of yours open, or die in the attempt!' (NN p 212)

As time passes, Magdalen is increasingly alienated by a society in which goodness is negative rather than positive, and legitimacy is the status of anyone who manages not to get caught doing anything illegitimate. If Wilkie Collins originally intended to stick with his dispossessed heroine through thick and thin, somewhere along the line it became clear that the plot was no longer his but hers. Ironically he used another woman, Virginie Lecount, (whose name suggests a link with the forces of good), to bring down the wrath of the patriarchal culture on Magdalen's head: with the law on his side, Lecount tells Noel Vanstone, he will be able to 'crush this woman into submission.' (NN p 411) Mrs Lecount is only villainous in so far as she opposes Magdalen, for her motives are honest, if not precisely honourable. Magdalen, however, is morally cheapened by her persecution of Noel, who is desperately sick. Her saving grace is that she realises it herself. Deliberately she drops the class distinction between herself and the maid, Louisa, announcing that it is *she* who is degraded - Louisa has merely had an illegitimate child by the man she loves and wishes to marry. When Magdalen assumes Louisa's identity in order to get into Admiral Bartram's house art mirrors life: the fallen woman is a role she plays only after she has prostituted herself by marrying Noel Vanstone.

As Barickman, MacDonald and Stark have noticed, 'Magdalen's story contains two stages: first her observations of other women and the lessons she draws from them about women's options, and second, her own parodic repetition of their roles. These are acted out self-consciously and with revolutionary intent. She sees that neither her mother, her governess, her 'aunt', her maid, nor her sister has found a way to achieve happiness or independence. Magdalen mimics these roles, designedly and dishonestly, in order to gain power not otherwise available through acceptance or compliance.' (Corrupt Relations, p 121) (This strategy seems less than praiseworthy when we consider that Anne Catherick also adopted the role of

her sister in The Woman in White, to Laura's extreme disadvantage.) Magdalen is a compulsive actress whose characterisations gradually spiral out of control to the point where she is no longer in control of her actions. Physical and mental sickness alone can stop her in her tracks. Perversely, however, this shamelessness, recklessness and unconventionality make her a rather stereotyped Wilkie Collins bastard.

To read many critical discussions of No Name you would never know that the book contains two illegitimates trying to make sense of a harsh new world and their place within it. Like Fanny Price in Mansfield Park Norah Vanstone does not direct the course of events, but endures them. Her response to the home-wreck at Combe-Raven differs from Magdalen's but is not necessarily invalid for that reason. There is nothing wrong with choosing to soldier on rather than crack up.

Norah is used to taking second place to her lively and over-indulged sister. She expects relatively little from life, and seems to care little about her position as "Miss Vanstone", with all that that entails. Magdalen is very literally-minded - when the law takes your name and money away, you go and get them back - but Norah already knows what it is like to be undermined by her family. Like Katherina in The Taming of the Shrew, she is set to 'lead apes in hell', the perennial fate of the unmarried older sister. As literary forbears, however, Fanny and Kate could hardly be more different, and this fact suggests that Norah is a far more complex character than many critics have supposed:

Norah's self-control began to show signs of failing her. Her dark cheeks glowed, her delicate lips trembled, before she spoke again. Magdalen paid more attention to her parasol than to her sister. She tossed it high in the air, and caught it ... Norah seized her passionately by the arm ...

'You are treating me heartlessly ... If I hold you by main force,' she said, 'you shall stop and hear me ... [Frank Clare] is selfish, he is ungrateful, he is ungenerous ... And this is the man I find you meeting in secret[!] ... For God's sake ... control yourself before it is too late!'

... 'It's not often she flies into a passion,' thought Magdalen ... 'but when she does, what a time it lasts her!' (NN pp 46-47)

Nearly a decade her junior, prospective husband in tow, more confident, more popular, more extrovert - no wonder Norah's sibling is

giving her trouble. Frank Clare's first visit to the Vanstones after his return is very instructive. Norah persists in calling him 'Mr Clare', while the others all use his Christian name, sitting 'with her dark handsome face steadily averted, her eyes cast down, and the rich colour in her cheeks warmer and deeper than usual.' (NN p 27) At one point, Frank complains of her 'unladylike violence' towards him. (NN p 125) Do her reactions remind us of Madonna Grice, refusing to let her old friend Zack Thorpe kiss her?

Even before the death of their parents, 'secret misgivings on her sister's account' make Norah appear 'more than usually serious and uncommunicative,' but no one takes the trouble to try to understand her. (NN p 55) Miss Garth thinks she is 'one of the impenetrable sort ... as dark as night,' and compares her unfavourably with Magdalen, her favourite. Her sister merely scoffs that 'Norah's as sulky as usual.' (NN p 33/p 28) There is an important little scene right at the beginning of the novel in which Magdalen pelts downstairs to meet her returning father, while Norah remains seated. '[Mr Vanstone] flourished his stick gaily, as he observed his eldest daughter at the window. She nodded and waved her hand in return, very gracefully and prettily - but with something of old-fashioned formality in her manner, which looked strangely in so young a woman, and which seemed out of harmony with a salutation addressed to her father.' (NN p 5) It may be that her experience of familial conflict and emotional isolation stands Norah in good stead. After the big argument with Magdalen she uses a ready-made strategy:

She met Magdalen, later in the day, as if nothing had happened: no formal reconciliation took place between them ... Magdalen saw plainly, in her look and manner, that she had made her first and last protest. Whether the motive was pride, or sullenness, or distrust of herself, or despair of doing good, the result was not to be mistaken - Norah had resolved on remaining passive for the future. (NN pp 50-51)

It is as good a survival tactic as any, and certainly less humiliating than most.

That both women are attracted to the same chronically unsuitable man is extremely suggestive. Although Norah marries the healthy cousin while Magdalen marries the sick one, Frank Clare weirdly foreshadows Noel, and everybody notices George's resemblance to Andrew Vanstone. The sisters have a tendency to inbreed. Magdalen's incestuous marriage is the more dangerous - as Jenny Bourne Taylor has said, it is 'an act of individual survival that threatens to compound the family's degeneration' (Secret Theatre, p 144) - yet through her second marriage to Robert Kirke, the vigorous bastard sprig grafts itself onto healthy regular stock. Norah, who is described as a washed-out version of her mother, and whose name is linked with Noel's, never manages to break away from Vanstones and Vanstone-substitutes.

No Name examines the effects of the law and society on individual personalities: how they are altered and socialised, and how experience can corrode their uniqueness. But as Barickman, MacDonald and Stark have said, 'Collins sees no way ... of making his active heroines triumph as whole women. Whether he is inwardly torn by his own ambiguous view, whether he sees no way of portraying such success within the novelistic conventions of his time, or whether he simply sees no models in Victorian "real" life for his heroines to imitate, Collins offers no middle ground between the passivity that causes disintegration and the activity punished by social ostracism.' (Corrupt Relations, pp 130-131) In fact, I believe that Norah makes the best of the situation. Familial and social pressures affect both sisters, but Norah turns back in on herself and her own resources when she discovers her illegitimacy. She tries to restructure her life on a professional basis, and painfully regains a sense of self-worth as a governess. The transition is far from easy, but she does manage to adjust, and eventually "Miss Vanstone" becomes a professional title which she has earned. Always constrained in her dealings with her father, her governess, her sister and her family friends, at twenty-six, she seemed set to remain the spinster daughter at Combe-Raven for the rest of her life, while Magdalen left to produce a family of her own. Getting a job - even as a governess - is therefore a liberating experience for Norah. She is taken out into the wide world beyond the family home, into an arena where she is judged as an individual, and where she meets her

future husband. Unhappy in her first position, she simply packs up and leaves: an option simply not open to her at Combe-Raven. Ultimately both sisters take their memories of the family with them after the home-wreck. For Magdalen, it proves impossible to compensate herself for the loss of her happiness. For Norah, however, once she has found a position, life on the outside is only blighted by the bad publicity generated by Magdalen's barnstorming behaviour.

Magdalen can neither feel guilty about nor forget the stigma of her birth. She wants to smash the law up even if it means smashing herself up to do it, because she cannot stop relating herself, morally and psychologically, to a legal and philosophical concept which she is powerless to change. In this light, is Norah's acquiescence necessarily weakness, and Magdalen's intransigence, strength? According to Valerie Purton, 'In the end there is no place in ... society for Magdalen - she is "too healthy" - Collins tells us explicitly - for an implicitly unhealthy society. The inevitable reduction of Magdalen from health to frailty which allows her to resume her place in society is brilliantly accomplished in the central image of health versus sickness. At the height of her struggles, Magdalen says, "You know how strong I am? You remember how I used to fight against all my illnesses, when I was a child? Now I am a woman, I fight against my miseries in the same way. Don't pity me, Miss Garth! Don't pity me!" At the end of the story however, after her long illness, "[h]er energy was gone; her powers of resistance were crushed ... She yielded submissively, she trembled as helplessly, as the weakest woman living.'" 19

Norah's hard struggle to remain still and quiet is the conditioned reflex of the child who does not want to care, but her sexual feelings for the boy next door and the cousin reveal her desperate need to recreate and sustain her old family rather than build a new one from scratch. Magdalen's freewheeling exploits are directed towards the same end as the charming stratagems of society's most respectable young ladies - the

19. Valerie Purton, 'Dickens and Collins: The Rape of the Sentimental Heroine', *Ariel* 16, (January 1985), pp 88-89

getting of a wealthy husband. As she says, 'Thousands of women marry for money. Why shouldn't I?' (NN p 361) The sole difference is that - as Thackeray put it in Vanity Fair - 'if a dear girl has no Mamma to settle matters with the young man, she must do it for herself.' 20 No Name does not simply reveal the way in which two characters who suffer exactly the same fate may choose "good" or "evil", because Norah and Magdalen Vanstone do not start even. Their experience of life *before* the home-wreck had left Magdalen with a strong sense that things are meant to go well for her, and that she can mould her own destiny. Norah, on the other hand, believes that life is something which happens to you, over which you have little or no control.

No Name finalised the fictional formula of illegitimacy so far as Wilkie Collins was concerned. In his later novels, although he developed further original and sophisticated twists, his tale remained essentially the same: it is not that all his bastards are women, but that symbolically all women are bastards. As Virginia Blain has noted, the Vanstone girls' disinheritance must be seen as 'the disinheritance of Victorian woman.' Illegitimacy is 'an evocative and subversive metaphor for the position of all women as non-persons in a patriarchal and patrilineal society.' 21 The novel is certainly a penetrating critique of the role of women in the nineteenth century, yet it does not deal with the Vanstone women in a crudely schematic good sister/bad sister way. Rather than seeing Magdalen as choosing evil (assertion) while Norah chooses good (submission) the reader should look at the character traits they share. Firstly, they share a highly-developed capacity for seeing things as they really are. The bastards are both realists, even if one is cool-headed and the other a firecracker. But it is their acting skill which is the keynote of their characters. Magdalen's roles are wide-ranging and awe-inspiring, but their very brilliance serves to put people on their guard. Norah's permanent part of the perfect daughter seems far more sinister than her

20. William Makepeace Thackeray, Vanity Fair (1848) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p 65

21. Virginia Blain, Introduction to No Name (OUP, 1986), p xix

sister's, because no one recognises it for what it is. Her performance in the 'secret theatre of home' causes Miss Garth to mistrust her without quite knowing why: with Magdalen, the astute governess knows that it is 'in the character of a born actress, [that she] threaten[s] serious future difficulties.' (NN p 38) After the revelation of their illegitimacy, however, Norah's acting loses its sinister overtones, while Magdalen's gains them. In finding a role which she can adopt in public and feel comfortable with, which defines her status and for which she is paid, Norah comes to terms with her need to cover up. For Magdalen, however, the days of acting for her own amusement are gone, and her talent is used (or abused) in an extremely dangerous manner.

#### iv. 'Armadales': Feminism, Crime and the Law

The anti-heroines of Armadales and The Moonstone have untraced (and untraceable) origins. As fatherless suicides Lydia Gwilt and Rosanna Spearman make and take their own lives, beholden to no one for life and death. They effortlessly dominate the novels in which they appear, even though Lydia does not feature in the first third of Armadales at all, and Rosanna disappears about halfway through The Moonstone. Disturbing easy notions of femininity and criminality, their knowledge of the family secrets of their wealthy employers spectacularly avenges the powerlessness of The Dead Secret's Sarah Leeson. While Rosanna is a thief who commits crimes to live, however, Lydia lives to commit crimes. Her instinctive grasp of the criminal justice system is formidable: as Mr Pedgift remarks, 'What a lawyer she would have made!' (A p 320) The surname which is imposed upon her seemingly at random is in fact rather suitable, for as well as being derived from the Welsh for "wild" and containing the seeds of "guilt", Gwilt is the name of a firm of solicitors which was mentioned in No Name.

Lydia Gwilt's criminal behaviour is best explained by her past history and not by her current state of mind, i.e. by her bastardy rather than the idea of revenge on Jane Armadales. Entangling herself in the legal barbed wire which separates the sanctioned from the illicit, Miss

Gwilt receives the battle scars which identify her as thief, bigamist, murderess and suicide. Through her criminal activities the bastard gains a legal identity. Indeed she literally gets away with murder: as the 'Confidential Spy', Bashwood, remarks, 'the Law has said to her in the plainest possible English, "My charming friend, I have no terrors for you!"' (A p 459/p 471)

Lydia Gwilt is quite literally "nobody's child". 'All she could remember ... was that she was beaten and half-starved, somewhere in the country, by a woman who took in children at nurse. The woman had a card with her, stating that her name was Lydia Gwilt, and got a yearly allowance for taking care of her (paid through a lawyer), till she was eight years old. At that time, the allowance stopped; the lawyer had no explanation to offer; nobody came to look after her; nobody wrote ... She may have been the daughter of a Duke, or the daughter of a coster-monger. The circumstances may be highly romantic, or utterly commonplace.' (A p 464)

Significantly, as well as the sad ghost of the brutalised child who was Lydia Gwilt, Armadale is also haunted by the numberless illegitimate babies aborted by the 'ladies' medical man', Dr Downward. (A p 300)

Lydia has precisely the kind of deprived upbringing which forces Sally, the heroine of The Fallen Leaves, to become a prostitute. In spite of her rampant sexuality, however, Miss Gwilt does not take to the streets, probably because she never has time. A skilful forger at the age of twelve, by the time she reaches thirty-five she has tried her luck as a governess, a novice nun, a concert pianist, a professional card-sharp and gambler, a thief, a blackmailer and a murderess. Collins charts the exploitation of a friendless child and her inevitable drift into crime with great dramatic power, while celebrating his anti-heroine's reckless courage and brio.

An exquisitely pretty child, Lydia is sold by her brutal foster-mother to the Oldershaws, who use her to advertise their dubious cosmetics. They pretend to love her when it looks good for business - declaring 'themselves

to be her aunt and uncle - a lie, of course!' (A p 463) Since she is merely a commodity - 'a living example of the excellence of washes and hair-oils' - she is dumped as soon as she fails to return a good profit. (A p 463) Spoilt Jane Blanchard then takes a 'violent fancy' to her, and Lydia is 'petted and made much of at the great house, in the character of Miss Blanchard's last new plaything.' (A p 464) That telling phrase 'in the character of' reminds us that although the ability to play a part is Wilkie Collins's primary bastard signifier, Lydia Gwilt is actually forced into acting at the age of eight or nine. Moreover, while life at Thorpe-Ambrose may be a dramatic improvement on anything she has known before, it is in fact the highly respectable Miss Blanchard who first involves Lydia in crime. Indeed it is solely because of her intimate connection with the Armadale family fortune that she ends up as she does.

All her subsequent criminal activities can be related to the circumstances of her birth and upbringing. As Bashwood notes admiringly, she is a 'devilish clever woman, who hasn't been knocked about in the world, and seen the ups and downs of life abroad and at home for nothing.' (A p 465) Forgery, deception and impersonation are the crimes of an expert in the arts of diplomacy, concealment and self-effacement - but equally they require charm and bravado, and the instincts of a performer. These characteristics are the legacy of Lydia's time with the Oldershaws, and the keynotes of her illegitimacy. As Bashwood notes, most of the time she manages to polish up the false surface of things quite convincingly. 'Everything was right, everything was smooth on the surface. Everything was rotten and everything was wrong, under it.' (A p466) As John R. Reed has noted, Maria Oldershaw herself "covers up" as a cosmetologist, and also as a fire-and-brimstone evangelist. 'Just as she had once used rouge and powder to mask the signs of indulgence, she now uses "faith" and "religion" to smooth over the offences of society.' 22 The crazy, terrible counterworld inhabited by these habitual deceivers is of tremendous thematic importance. In the words of Catherine Peters, 'The distortions of the plot, the violent and irrational reactions of the characters, reflect and dramatize the ways in which [Wilkie Collins's] readers'

22. John R Reed, Victorian Conventions (Ohio UP, 1975), p 357

perceptions were distorted by the assumptions and hypocrisies of the society in which they lived.' 23 No wonder that one smart reviewer felt obliged to comment on the horrible atmosphere which dominates the novel. 'If it were the object of art to make one's audience uncomfortable, without letting them know why, Mr Wilkie Collins would be beyond all doubt a consummate artist.' 24

A talent for acting is Wilkie Collins's most frequent bastard signifier. When Miss Gwilt poses as a governess and infiltrates the Milroys' house, she combines the survival strategies of both the Vanstone sisters by using Norah's career and Magdalen's invasion technique. As Catherine Peters notes, for such a woman 'governessing is the perfect cover: a ladylike manner and good education, with a plausible reference, enable her to hide her criminal past and insinuate herself into country society by claiming to be drifting down rather than struggling up. The figure of the governess, in fiction and in the popular imagination, was changing from that of the downtrodden victim to a more ambiguous, attractive, and dangerous image.' (Introduction to *Armadale*, p xiii)

When Lydia's violent husband, Waldron, slashes her across the face with a riding-whip, 'the lady submit[s] as she ha[s] never submitted before.' As Bashwood comments, 'Some men might have suspected this sudden reformation of hiding something dangerous under the surface,' but seemingly Mr Waldron grievously underestimated the actress. 'All that is known is, that before the mark of the whip was off his wife's face, he fell ill, and that in two days afterwards, he was a dead man.' (A p 469) Throughout the history of her past life, Lydia claims to be ignorant of the criminal activities which surround her, innocent of any wrongdoing and declines to talk about herself, drawing a veil over it all. Card-sharpping is yet another defiant, dangerous and above all public crime in which the player must wear a mask at all times. The cheat can never relax for an instant because of the danger of challenge and exposure. At any time the intended

23. Catherine Peters, Introduction to *Armadale* (OUP, 1989), p xii

24. *Saturday Review* 16 June 1866, in Page, *Critical Heritage*, p 151 .

victim may become the aggressor, and this power-game between the illegitimate and the irreproachable is emblematic of Miss Gwilt's entire adult life. When she loses a skirmish in this deadly battle, the man who beats her blackmails her into marriage, and she is forcibly neutralised, legitimised and socially reintegrated. Murder is her inevitable response to this.

In a novel which teems with sexual passion and sexual jealousy, the illegitimate Lydia Gwilt is both the sufferer and the cause of it. She is a wild and uncontrolled woman in a wild and uncontrolled story, for Armadale is one of those barnstorming books in which Wilkie Collins sought in vain to elevate the tone of his discourse by analysing the criminal mind. Even in her teens Lydia was a successful blackmailer, and this points to an icy nerve, immense reserves of mental stamina and an intimidating personality. Norman Page has called Miss Gwilt 'a study in abnormal psychology comparable with Miss Wade in Little Dorrit.' (Introduction to Critical Heritage, p 18) This observation touches the nub of her character precisely: she is a Magdalen Vanstone for whom there can be no possibility of escape or redemption. However, Collins does not show that Miss Gwilt was mentally and morally programmed to become a criminal, or even that her crimes were inevitable, given her social circumstances. He plumps for neither the eugenicist's argument, which states that an underclass exists which is genetically predisposed to criminal activity, nor the liberal view that crime is the inevitable result of poverty, neglect and ignorance. If the latter were true, of course, it would mean that society has to accept a measure of responsibility for the existence of the criminal substratum. On the whole, however, despite his broadly liberal standpoint on most social issues, what Collins most wants to stress in Armadale is Miss Gwilt's unique and mysterious power, and not her ordinariness. He does not want her evil to be explicable with reference to social circumstances, but equally he cannot bring himself to say that she was genetically programmed to lie, cheat, steal and kill. Therefore when all is said and done, he seems to feel that the criminal mind is unlike any other. Lydia Gwilt's illegitimacy merely provides the backdrop which she requires.

'It is notable', says Catherine Peters, 'that, in a novel where the confusion of naming reaches nightmarish proportions, it is a woman, Lydia Gwilt, who stands out as the character with a steady identity.' (Introduction to Armadale, pp xviii-xix) In fact Lydia's illegitimate status makes this seemingly fixed notion of identity ambiguous, to say the least. As Peters suggests, she does indeed 'defiantly [stick] to her original name when a convenient pseudonym might have avoided many dangers.' (Introduction to Armadale, p xix) We must remember, however, that since she is a bastard, 'Lydia Gwilt' - the name written on a card given to a baby-farmer - is to all intents and purposes a pseudonym.

v. 'The Moonstone': Illegitimacy and the Social Construction of Femininity

Like her illegitimate predecessor Anne Catherick, Rosanna Spearman is everything that a Victorian heroine should not be - ugly, depressed, depressing, unlucky, unpopular and difficult to sympathise with. As Anthea Trodd has written, 'In The Moonstone Rosanna's crooked shoulder, hysteria and frequent appearances in places where servants are not supposed to be visible are the chief manifestations of disorder in the Verinder household.' (Domestic Crime, p 65) Wrapped up in her black shawl, Rosanna's penchant for symbolic actions and sympathetic magic performed with roses and nightgowns brings her very close to the Woman in White. She too interacts with the narrating hero so as to knock him off balance and disturb his central relationship with the heroine, and like Anne's dream-letter, Rosanna's testament simultaneously clarifies and complicates the novel's central mystery. In The Moonstone as in The Woman in White, the mysterious and symbolic figure of the doomed and isolated bastard hovers on the periphery of the hero's vision, causing him a deep sense of unease and calling into question the criteria by which the nominal heroine is judged.

Superficially, Rosanna's story is very simple. Unlike Anne Catherick, she has the power to narrate her own history in a letter which is not 'feeble, faint and defaced by blots' as Anne's was, but strongly worded and bearing the unmistakable stamp of truth. Briefly she tells

Blake about her early life:

Lady Verinder took me out of a reformatory. I had gone to the reformatory from the prison. I was put in the prison, 'because I was a thief. I was a thief, because my mother went on the streets when I was quite a little girl. My mother went on the streets, because the gentleman who was my father deserted her. There is no need to tell such a common story as this, at any length. It is told quite often enough in the newspapers. (M p 362)

Although the well-educated Rosanna realises that her mother's exploitation and betrayal was class-based, she leaves the sexual politics to her radical friend Lucy Yolland, who had wanted to set up home with her in London. Lucy warns of the day 'not far off when the poor will rise against the rich,' but Rosanna does not become a social revolutionary even though of all Wilkie Collins's bastards, she is the one with least to lose. (M p 227) She is so isolated, by rights she should be invisible: neither daughter, wife, mother, sister nor lover. Like Magdalen at St Crux, Rosanna is shunned by her fellow-servants because they sense that she is an outsider. Yet they suspect her of being superior rather than inferior, as she mistakenly believes: 'plain as she was, there was just a dash of something that wasn't like a housemaid, and that was like a lady, about her.' (M p 55) Rosanna is in many ways the embodiment of Wilkie Collins's attack on the social construction of femininity.

Through Rosanna, Collins shows how society's reactions to the criminalised bastard can destroy the mental balance of the individual in question. Once she becomes conscious of her status as a marked woman, her ability to function as a regular member of society is destroyed:

My life was not a very hard one to bear, while I was a thief ... it was only when they had taught me at the reformatory to feel my own degradation, and to try for better things, that the days grew long and weary. Thoughts of the future forced themselves on me now. I felt the dreadful reproach that honest people - even the kindest of honest people - were to me in themselves. A heartbreaking sense of loneliness kept with me, go where I might, and do what I might, and see what persons I might. It was my duty, I know, to try and get on with my fellow-servants in my new place. Somehow I couldn't make friends with them. They looked (or I thought they looked) as if they suspected what I had been. (M pp 363-364)

Rosanna's experiences in the prison and the reformatory are as damaging to her psyche and sense of self as Anne Catherick's incarceration in the asylum had been.

When Betteredge tells Sergeant Cuff that Rosanna has been 'mad enough to set her heart on Mr Franklin Blake,' Cuff's reply is swift and shocking. 'Hadn't you better say she's mad enough to be an ugly girl and only a servant? ... The falling in love with a gentleman of Mr Franklin Blake's manners and appearance doesn't seem to me to be the maddest part of her conduct by any means.' (M p 151) Blake is everything she isn't - handsome, popular, confident, gregarious - and when she first sees him, she is transfigured. He becomes her reason for living. The surprised Betteredge watches as 'Her complexion turned of a beautiful red ... [and] she brightened all over with a kind of speechless and breathless surprise.' (M p 59) Her passion exposes the blind offensiveness of the assumption that sex is only for the young, the beautiful and the loved. The right to love on equal terms is denied her, and reserved for Rachel.

The Moonstone has been seen as the symbol of Rachel Verinder's virginity. The colour of her most precious jewel waxes and wanes on a lunar cycle, and it is stolen from her in the dead of night by the man who loves her. Only Rachel and Rosanna know that Blake has committed the crime, but while Rachel is shocked and confused by her feelings for her cousin, Rosanna is thrilled by his fall from grace. Both women try to protect Blake from the consequences of his crime, but Rachel can offer only her silence, whereas Rosanna covers his tracks, conceals evidence, confuses the police and plans to put him in touch with a London fence who will take the diamond off his hands, no questions asked. Her reward is a 'little moment of pleasure' when she wears the stained nightgown which is proof of his involvement in the crime. (M p 374)

As with Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, in spite of the fundamental resemblances between Rosanna and Rachel, their relative positions are thoroughly polarised. While Rosanna's attempt to displace the passionate Rachel as Blake's lover is doomed to failure, her corresponding bid for the role of the heroine of the novel is successful for many readers.

Rosanna's hatred for her mistress is based on her knowledge that life has left Rachel unscarred: as she sees it, her own ugliness and Rachel's prettiness are not down to luck but due to social circumstance. As she complains to Blake:

If she had been really as pretty as you thought her, I might have borne it better. No; I believe I should have been more spiteful against her still. Suppose you put Miss Rachel into a servant's dress, and took her ornaments off - ? I don't know what is the use of my writing in this way ... who can tell what the men like? ... But it does stir one up to hear Miss Rachel called pretty, when one knows all the time that it's her dress does it, and her confidence in herself. (M p 363)

Symbolically substituting her rose for Rachel's in the vase on Blake's dressing-table, Rosanna ensures that her 'prince in a fairy-story,' her 'lover in a dream', will wear her emblem. (M p 362) Her job entitles her to enter Blake's bedroom, and this legitimate entry is in marked contrast to his violation of Rachel's room. It is her duty to go through his things, rearrange his clothes and make his bed - to perform, in fact, intensely personal acts of devotion which are quite out of bounds for Rachel. Though she tells Blake that Rachel can behave 'in a manner which would cost a servant her place', this division works both ways: Rosanna is free to do things for which Rachel would be socially crucified. (M p 363) Like the Woman in White, Rosanna appears in Collins's narrative at moments of extreme textual crisis. Unfettered and empowered by her menial position, the bastard can do what she likes so long as it is unsanctioned, illicit or sinful: in many ways her very helplessness transfigures her.

vi. 'Man and Wife': The Bourgeois Marriage in Danger

Man and Wife examines in detail both the scandalous anomalies in the marriage laws of the United Kingdom and the dark implications of the quasi-legal phrase "man and wife". The novel is a perfect inversion of No Name, to which it serves as an interesting postscript. Society's responses to marriage and illegitimacy dominate both stories. Born out of wedlock to parents of different nationalities and religions, during the course of the novel Anne Silvester contracts a series of illegitimate

relationships and gives birth to a stillborn bastard. Yet at the end of the story Lord Holchester, whose social credentials are impeccable, declares that Anne is a heroine who deserves both our pity and our respect - 'a woman who has been tried by no common suffering, and who has borne her lot nobly.' (MW p 239) It is significant that Holchester speaks in terms of a class struggle. When Anne finally takes her place in society as the wife of Sir Patrick Lundie, she is praised as 'a woman who deserves the calmer and the happier life on which she is entering.' (MW p 239) It is the last and simplest of her excursions into marriage, and the only one which actually provides her with the emotional, financial and social stability which she has consistently sought.

Like Magdalen Vanstone's, Anne Silvester's purpose is to force someone she finds repugnant to marry her. But for Magdalen her marriage was a means to an end, while for Anne it is an end in itself. 'Her whole future depended on Geoffrey's making an honest woman of her. Not her future with *him* - that way there was no hope; that way her life was wasted. Her future with Blanche - she looked forward to nothing now but her future with Blanche.' (MW p 49) Before Man and Wife is half over, the heroine has risen above any desire to claim Geoffrey as her husband for her own sake, and ultimately does so only to put Arnold Brinkworth in the clear. Having miscarried her baby in a cheap hotel, in her own opinion as well as that of society, Anne's position is wholly irredeemable. History has repeated itself; and Anne Vanborough's daughter has become as much a victim of society and the weakness of the man she has loved as her mother was.

The shifts of action within this novel emphasize Anne's basic powerlessness as she is shunted from Vanborough to Delamayn to Arnold, back again to Delamayn and finally to Sir Patrick. The letter of the law is adhered to rigidly throughout, bending Anne this way and that in a manner which may seem entirely arbitrary, but in fact possesses a warped internal logic. The law decides that Anne's mother was never a wife, that she herself is a bastard, that she is Arnold Brinkworth's wife, that she is Mrs. Geoffrey Delamayn, that she is an illegitimate parent, that her dead child was born within marriage, that she is a widow, and finally that she

is the new Lady Lundie. Anne is heavily over-exposed to the law : it appears to be fascinated by her, and quite unable to leave her alone. Time and time again it redefines her in relation to a man. The most dangerous of these compulsory relationships - her marriage to Geoffrey Delamayn - is the one the law tries hardest to hold her to:

Was there any hope? - hope, for instance, in what she might do for herself? What can a married woman do for herself? She can make her misery public - provided it be misery of a certain kind - and can reckon single-handed with Society when she has done it ... Was there hope in what others might do for her? ... Sir Patrick had pressed her hand at parting, and had told her to rely on him ... But what could he do? There were outrages which her husband was privileged to commit, under the sanction of marriage, at the bare thought of which her blood ran cold. Could Sir Patrick protect her? Absurd! Law and Society armed her husband with his conjugal rights. Law and Society had but one answer to give, if she appealed to them - You are his wife. (MW p 207)

In No Name Collins had reserved some of his wrath for those marriage laws which had chained Andrew Vanstone to his first wife, and caused all the trouble in the first place. In Man and Wife the situation is reversed: the marriage laws are his prime concern, and illegitimacy is the subsidiary topic which clarifies his major theme. Each novel's juxtaposition of these two crucial issues reveals that even though marriage is conventionally seen as the way in which illegitimate births and relationships are neutralized or prevented, in certain circumstances it actually encourages the spread of illegitimacy. No Name deals with an unnatural bond which is too strong - Andrew Vanstone's first marriage - while Man and Wife describes Anne Vanborough's, which is too fragile. It is no coincidence that these two unfortunate people have the same initials, and such similar names, even though Andrew Vanstone was to some extent responsible for his daughters' suffering, while Anne Vanborough is totally innocent. In the Collins scheme, men smash things up and women pay for it.

Young Anne's victimisation destroys her mother's past. Everything Mrs Vanborough had taken for gold turns out to be false coin. The child no longer symbolises her parents' happy marriage, for legally she is the tainted issue of a commonplace liaison. As she lies dying, Mrs Vanborough

contemplates her daughter's inheritance in despair, perceiving a sort of historical inevitability in it:

I am afraid for my child ... Anne is my second self - isn't she? ... She is not called by her father's name - she is called by mine. She is Anne Silvester as I was. Blanche! *Will she end like me?* ... Don't bring her up like Me! She must be a governess - she must get her bread. Don't let her act! don't let her sing! don't let her go on the stage! (MW p 20)

Although Mrs Vanborough was herself an actress, her plea surely relates to the experience and example of Norah and Magdalen Vanstone. Lady Lundie is urged to dissociate Anne from Magdalen - 'the decade's dark image of the actress' - and to link her with the submissive Norah instead. 25 Mrs Vanborough is convinced that her bastardized child is morally and socially defenceless, and that only the creation of a safe and inconspicuous identity can secure her a future.

However Anne's illegitimacy is not the handicap which her mother had feared, since Lady Lundie appears to keep it a secret. No one ever refers to Anne as a bastard during the novel, and she mixes with Blanche's upper-class friends on an equal footing. Lady Julia Lundie, Blanche's stepmother, would certainly use Anne's secret against her if she knew it. Anne herself cannot know the full story, or she would never have formed a relationship with the son of her father's partner in crime. So did Wilkie Collins waste his favourite theme in this instance? If, as we suspect, Anne's dangerous liaisons have much to do with an innate sense of worthlessness, he is once more raiding the old stockpile of psychological and physiological bastard signifiers. Like so many illegitimate people, Anne has virtually no self-confidence, and Collins endows her with physical signs of a highly-strung nature - 'a nervous contraction at one corner of her mouth,' and 'a nervous uncertainty in the eye on the same side.' (MW p 25) Clearly Anne doesn't have to see her birth certificate to develop a nervous twitch.

25. Nina Auerbach, Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), p 255

Bastardy is of course the keynote of Anne's displacement and dispossession, but even for Wilkie Collins, four maimed heroines in a row with a grudge against society would have made the mixture far too rich. Anne is aware of her unconventional sexuality and aware of being victimised, but because she does not understand that her illegitimacy symbolically places her beyond the pale, no questions asked, she lacks Magdalen Vanstone's social insight. As Keith Reierstad has written, she 'can find analogies for herself in her mother and Hester [Dethridge], in the past and in the present - but she cannot find herself; for the doubles are also people who have lost their identity.' 26 While her mother's husband couldn't wait to get away, and Joel Dethridge stuck to poor Hester like glue, in Geoffrey Delamayn Anne gets a man who can persecute her both ways. Anne's illegitimacy is simultaneously realistic and symbolic, but because she is unaware of it, she fails to realise that the law is intrinsically hostile to her. Hence she lacks Magdalen's thorough understanding of the slights which she has to suffer. On the level of plot alone, Anne gets into trouble because of her illegitimate pregnancy and the consequent necessity of making Geoffrey Delamayn marry her. In Wilkie Collins's moral scheme of things, however, she gets into trouble because bastards *always* get into trouble.

Sexually Anne is very potent - 'the treasure of her life was at its richest' (MW p 31) - but recognising that her feelings are potentially dangerous, she tries to neutralise them. Whereas Magdalen was repelled by her cousin Noel, however, in the early chapters of Man and Wife Anne still has feelings for Geoffrey. Subconsciously she may feel that marriage will control her sexuality by giving it a legitimate outlet. (The two Anne Silvesters are the only Collins bastards to have bastards of their own, thus perpetuating a cycle of sexual deviance.) Yet once she and Geoffrey are actually man and wife Anne realizes that she is not merely allowed to have sex, but obliged to. With supreme irony, Wilkie Collins allows his heroine's blood to curdle at the prospect of marital intercourse. Illicit sex was pleasurable, but sex within marriage will be nothing less than

26. Keith B Reierstad, The Domestication of the Gothic in the Novels of Wilkie Collins (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1976), p 307

rape. (MW p 207) So completely has Anne Silvester clouded our perceptions of what constitutes legitimate sexual behaviour that her marriage to Sir Patrick Lundie - an elderly cripple - seems simultaneously decorous and disturbing.

As Barickman, MacDonald and Stark have noted, the sensation novel format allowed Wilkie Collins to 'conceal some of his most radical perspectives from his uneasy or censorious readers, [but also] concealed them from Collins's own conscious recognition.' (Corrupt Relations, p 113) While his plots and characters embodied a devastating and distinctive critique of Victorian England, Collins never publicly stated his belief that society ran on the principle of divide and rule. The massive strains and tensions which are there in all his best novels are caused by the disparity between his unspoken - maybe unconscious - despairing disgust at the whole sexual system, and his ostensible proposal that, say, tinkering with the Scottish and Irish marriage laws will go some way towards improving the situation. Although Man and Wife is shorter, simpler and neater than No Name, Collins still had not finished off the subject of illegitimacy to his own satisfaction.

vii. 'The Two Destinies': The Male Narrator and the Conservative Backlash

The Two Destinies was a novel marked out for obscurity. Tucked away amid some of Collins's best-known and most overtly feminist books - The New Magdalen, The Law and the Lady and The Fallen Leaves - it completely slipped out of sight. The narrator, George Germaine, gives us a dreary conservative antidote to the stories of radical women like Lydia Gwilt and Mercy Merrick, and The Two Destinies consistently subverts Wilkie Collins's characteristically liberal attitude towards bastards and fallen women. Simultaneously threatened and attracted by the dangerous social forces represented by Mary Dermody and her illegitimate child, Germaine resorts to clichés and stratagems as he tries to tell their story.

The villainous Van Brandt tricks Mary into a bigamous marriage. When he abandons her she refuses to marry Germaine, the love of her life,

because she knows that he will be socially disgraced. In a chapter entitled 'The Obstacle Defeats Me', Germaine discovers that Mary has a bastard child. The man who narrates the history of the fallen woman and her bastard is in a very strong position, but Collins thoroughly undermines it. One of the novel's most serious and dramatic moments becomes almost comic, as the frantic Germaine sits in a carriage outside Mary's house while his mother is inside, getting the full story. Dimly the hero senses that he has an enemy who can't be defeated, and symbolically he sends the spoils to the victor in the shape of a toy which he labels, 'To your little daughter, from George Germaine'. (TD p 151)

Fallen women in Victorian novels were usually given illegitimate children to let the audience know that the unwritten sex-scene had definitely taken place. Wilkie Collins's fallen women, however, tended to be bastards themselves rather than bastard mothers, and illegitimacy was presented as the cause of their fall rather than the result. While George Eliot discusses women like Hetty Sorrel and Lydia Glasher in a limited social context, Collins (like Dickens) deals with pimping, prostitution, forced abductions, rape and murder in an attempt to convey the economic and sexual realities of life in the big city. Thus when Germaine admits that he has been unfaithful to Mary in terms which would not be inappropriate for describing a blasphemy against the Virgin, it rings false: 'I profaned my remembrances of Mary in the company of women who had reached the lowest depths of degradation'. (TD p 48) Frightened by the potentially uncontrollable social elements which are symbolised by Mary and her child, Germaine stages a pathetic and degrading revolt of his own.

Tormented by dreams, George Germaine - in common with his family and friends - believes that he is psychologically unbalanced. He and Mary are telepathic, and her child communes with him in secret visions. In No Name, Armadale and The Moonstone the bastard wants to kill herself: here, through its appearances in his visions the bastard drives George to contemplate murder followed by suicide, the last refuge of the thoroughly alienated soul. The sickly child's cataleptic trances may remind us of Anne Catherick, but whereas in The Woman in White the bastard was mad, now she

is destroying the sanity of other people. No wonder Germaine is concerned when she takes it upon herself to construct a new family which includes him: his 'self-appointed daughter' is a profoundly disturbing character in his overheated imaginary landscape.

The child is a changeling who has no proper name, and is always known as 'Elfie'. Yet when she appears with her mother in Germaine's vision it is as the Christ-child:

Hand in hand, shining in their unearthly brightness ... the two stood before me. The mother's face looked at me once more with the sorrowful and pleading eyes which I remembered so well. But the face of the child was innocently radiant with an angelic smile. I waited, in unutterable expectation ... The child released its hold on the mother's hand, and, floating slowly upward, remained poised in mid-air - a softly glowing Presence ... The mother glided into the room, and ... took [my] pencil, and wrote upon the blank page [of my pocket-book] ... I saw in the writing of the ghostly hand these words only:

'FOLLOW THE CHILD'. (TD pp 292-293)

If Mary's child is simultaneously Christ-like and demonic, it seems that interpretation is all in all. Ultimately she is less important than the confused and emotional George Germaine, who struggles to come to terms with her. The Two Destinies - misdirected, unrealistic and unsuccessful - was a one-off experiment which dealt with conventional and non-conventional perceptions of illegitimacy. Collins never tried this trick again.

viii. 'The Fallen Leaves': Sex and Class and the Economics of Illegitimacy

According to Swinburne, The Fallen Leaves was 'too ludicrously loathsome for comment or endurance.' (Page, Critical Heritage, p 27) It immediately ended a series of books in which Collins juxtaposed his favourite social themes, bastardy and the fallen woman, and has been generally recognised as his worst novel. Collins's contemporaries reviled it almost unanimously: The Saturday Review was particularly scathing. 'All his characters are forced and unnatural, and no less so are the incidents of his story. Everything, in fact, is so extravagant, so absurd, and so grossly improbable that a kind of low harmony is preserved throughout. We

are not so much shocked as perhaps we ought to be by any one chapter, as each separate chapter is in strict keeping with all the rest ... It is not wholesome reading, but then its unwholesomeness is, as it were, sustained.'

27 Modern readers, however, may well find much that is of interest in the book, without necessarily claiming it as a work of art. In fact, The Fallen Leaves is unique in telling the story of a parent who deliberately ensures that his first-born child is born a bastard in order to legitimize his own social position. Perhaps this topsy-turvy situation is the ultimate statement of Collins's ideas about the way in which men and women interact within society. Not surprisingly, however, most of his contemporaries missed the point. In its detailed synopsis of the 'absurd' plot, The Saturday Review dismissed this aspect in three lines. 'The child's father, John Farnaby, stole the baby from its sleeping nurse, and handed it over to a "baby-farmer". By that means he secured - how we fail to understand - his marriage with the child's mother.' (Saturday Review, p 148) Throughout the novel, in fact, Wilkie Collins tries to convince us that his grotesque caricatures are in fact true pictures, and the number of times that he comes close to success should make us think twice before we write off the book altogether.

John Farnaby, clerk to the wealthy businessman Benjamin Ronald, seduces Ronald's eighteen year old daughter Emma so her parents will have to let them marry. Emma's mother argues passionately that Ronald must not give his consent, despite the birth of an illegitimate child, because Farnaby's attack on them is primarily economic rather than sexual:

He has acted throughout in cold blood; it is his interest to marry her, and from first to last he has plotted to force the marriage on us ... Don't you see it for yourself? If I succeed in keeping this shame and misery a secret from everybody - if I take Emma away, to some place abroad, on pretence of her health - there is an end of his hope of becoming your son-in-law; there is an end of his being taken into the business. Yes! he, the low-lived vagabond who puts up the shop-shutters, he looks forward to being taken into partnership, and succeeding you when you die! ... Am I wrong in making any sacrifice, rather than bind our girl for life, our own flesh and blood, to such a man as that? (FL pp 17-18)

27. The Saturday Review, 2 August 1879, p 148

Farnaby's behaviour reveals the problems inherent in dealing with illegitimacy strictly by the book. Though Mrs Ronald wants only what is best for her daughter, as does Emma herself in turn, the two fathers, Ronald and Farnaby, will sacrifice their children for the sake of respectability. The marriage of Emma and Farnaby is a grotesque inversion of all those clichéd happy endings in which the birth of a healthy grandchild reconciles the parents of the new mother and father to an originally unpopular match. Since their illegitimate baby will be a social handicap, Farnaby kidnaps his daughter before she is a week old, dumps her with a baby-farmer, and proceeds to wipe out every trace of her existence. Sixteen years later, the evil father has flourished and the alienated mother has been maimed by the loss of her child. The young American socialist Amelius Goldenheart brings Emma and her daughter together, but it is too late: after years of 'long unsoled suffering' Emma poisons herself.

Amelius first meets Emma's daughter Sally when she accosts him in the street, and he finds it impossible to square her 'artlessly virginal and innocent' (FL p 185) appearance with her obvious social role as a purveyor of illicit sex. Sally dwells in a private demi-monde somewhere between her natural sphere of purity and grace, and an unnatural one in which she is sexually degraded in a manner quite incomprehensible to her. Sally's extreme youth and fragility, together with her retarded mental development and ominous pliancy combine to make her the antithesis of the powerful, angry Mercy Merrick, heroine of The New Magdalen (1873). Both characters are stereotypical mid-Victorian *fictional* prostitutes: in real life, of course, the fallen woman was neither the victim of a corrupt social and sexual system nor of the white slave trade.

Sally's biological father, who is ironically described as owing 'his rise from the lowest social position entirely to himself,' (FL p 69) is an obscene distortion of the successful middle-class businessman who carefully dissociates his offspring from trade in order to pave their way into high society. Farnaby regards his daughter's expulsion from society as the price of his own entry-ticket, and passes the child on to the baby-farmer Mother Sowler. This woman - whose real-life counterparts monopolised the

trade in the illegitimate - is 'the last person in the world to trouble herself with ... any one of the unfortunate little creatures abandoned to her drunken and merciless neglect.' (FL p 220) Society has chosen a fitting foster-mother for the bastard. From then on the little girl is raised by a succession of hawkers and beggars, before a spell in a Refuge for homeless children and a few months with a couple of street musicians who teach her to sing 'Sally in our Alley', and give her a name. Remembering the apparent unsuitability of Magdalen Vanstone's name the reader must feel for Sally, whose name is an "appropriate" afterthought related to her job.

Sally's systematic sexual and economic exploitation by the patriarchal society - for which her natural father is the emblem - is offset by her search for a father who will love and protect her. In the Refuge she believes that she has been cruelly hoaxed when she is informed that her father is actually a 'Father in Heaven'. As she admits to Amelius, 'I said a wrong thing - I said, "I don't want him up in Heaven; I want him down here." They were very much ashamed of me when I said that.' (FL p 203) Later Sally refers to her vicious pimp as 'father', but still the law is determined to deny the legitimacy of her claim:

Amelius turned to her gently; she was shivering with cold or terror, perhaps with both. 'Tell me,' he said, 'is that man really your father?' 'Lord bless you, sir!' interposed the policeman, astonished at the gentleman's simplicity, 'Simple Sally hasn't got father or mother - have you, my girl?' (FL p 188)

In The New Magdalen, Mercy Merrick had begun to live under an assumed name at the age of five, when her street-entertainer protectors gave her 'the prettiest name they could invent ... "to look well in the bills"'. (NM p 329) In a sense, Mercy is Sally's avenging image, as she refuses to institute a search for the careless father who had abandoned her. She sees no need to find a parent in order to place herself. They have to drug and rape Mercy to make her a prostitute: poor Sally is far more vulnerable.

The experiences of Emma and Sally reveal that for most women in Victorian society, public and private marginalisation and exploitation was the bottom line. We may recall that in Man and Wife, Anne Silvester and Blanche Lundie were described in terms more appropriate for sale goods than human beings. (MW p 9) As the eccentric Rufus Dingwell remarks in The Fallen Leaves, 'The world is hard on women - and ... property is a damned bad reason for it.' (FL p 319) It is impossible to disentangle one form of corruption from the other as Collins's critique straddles both the public and private spheres. In The Fallen Leaves, an inherently warped sexual system simultaneously nourishes and feeds off the economic realities of society. We learn about the market value of the very young, sexually innocent girl, but we also become aware of the fact that for a man such as John Farnaby, trading in virgins can be an economic and social liability if the unforeseen result of the deal is a bastard child. He sexually exploits Emma Ronald as her clients exploit Sally: the sole difference is that for Farnaby, sex is merely a means to an economic end, rather than an end in itself. His lust is for cash, not flesh.

Sally's circumstances mean that she has a straight choice between selling herself for sex or starving. This is not much different - and probably less immoral - than what goes on in the most respectable circles, according to Collins: this is simply what women have to do to survive. (His fundamental belief that marriage was institutionalised slavery for the female sex accounts for the tortuous complexities of his own domestic situation, too.) In the following passage he dissects a smart society wedding by eavesdropping on two of the guests. His use of the word 'legitimate' in this context is extremely suggestive:

'I call it disgraceful,' the old lady remarked to a charming young person seated next to her.

But the charming young person - being the legitimate product of the present time - had no more sympathy with the questions of sentiment than a Hottentot. 'How can you talk so, grandmamma!' she rejoined. 'He has twenty thousand a year - and that lucky girl will be mistress of the most splendid house in London.'

'I don't care,' the old lady persisted, 'it's not the less a disgrace to everybody concerned in it. There is many a poor friendless creature, driven by hunger to the streets, who has a better claim to our sympathy than that shameless girl, selling herself in the house of God!' (FL p 315)

According to Laura Hapke, Sally's eventual marriage to Amelius takes place in a world 'where ordinary norms do not obtain.' 28 Sally is saved by a man, like Anne Silvester, not by self-discovery, like Mrs Gaskell's Ruth. Maybe this male rescue was a way of controlling the Magdalen by setting respectable limits for her sexuality at last.

In both The Fallen Leaves and Man and Wife, Wilkie Collins explores the notion that "bad blood will out". In Man and Wife, Anne Vanborough's greatest fear was that her illegitimate child would end up like herself. In this, she was articulating the prevalent social belief that a female bastard inherits a fatal predisposition to evil from her mother. Yet surely Collins expected his readers to look beyond the suffering woman's irrational application of this idea towards a realisation that if either of young Anne's parents has endowed her with an inheritance of sexual sin, it is her treacherous father and not her saintly mother. Indeed Collins appeals to historical precedent to engage all our most powerful sympathies for the wronged and powerless mother and child. In having his characters - the ageing foreign Catholic wife with an only daughter, and the younger husband who obtains a dubious divorce in order to marry an English gentlewoman - re-enact the story of Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII, Collins reveals the extent to which men can use the law to oppress women simply on the grounds that their faces no longer fit. If we follow this historical analogy through to its obvious conclusion, Anne Silvester is the tragic Mary Tudor, and certainly Mary's phantom pregnancy (during which she mistook for a baby the tumour which was to kill her) and Anne's miscarriage seem to be powerful indications of "bad stock" which should not be allowed to breed, albeit on physical rather than moral grounds. Symbolically, however, the inability to bear a healthy child may be the tragic fate of the woman whose home has been deliberately torn apart by her own father: the woman who has no family ties left to believe in. Anne's decision to marry Sir Patrick may have been influenced by the fact that he would be unlikely to father a child.

28. Laura Hapke, 'He Stoops to Conquer: Redeeming the Fallen Woman in the Fiction of Dickens, Gaskell and their Contemporaries', Victorian Newsletter 69, (Spring 1986), p 19

Again, in The Fallen Leaves, it is the heroine's paternal inheritance which ought to worry us. Yet according to The Saturday Review, both of Sally's parents were likely to have tainted her, and it goes into far more detail about her mother's failings than her father's. '[T]he chances, certainly, [were] strong against her turning out well. She came of a bad stock. Her father ... was a callous villain. Her mother, though she had good qualities, was given to drinking, heavy eating, and smoking, and in the end poisoned herself. The girl herself had been brought up from babyhood in the streets, and had always mixed with the most abandoned wretches and ruffians. We suppose that it was her web-foot that made her what she soon showed herself to be, [i.e. a good person] for we cannot see any other explanation of her utterly unnatural and absurd character.' (Saturday Review, p 149) Clearly Wilkie Collins's attempt to undercut existing hard-and-fast stereotypes had not succeeded. The reviewer is right to point out that a child brought up like Sally would most likely be socialised into crime, but she does become a prostitute, after all: what more does the critic want? Moreover, even the most censorious Victorian, one would have thought, would have realised that Emma's moral failings - if smoking, drinking and liking rich foods can be described as such - as well as her suicide, were not built-in character flaws, but the results of the traumatic kidnap of her daughter. Consequently they could never have been transmitted to Sally. This review reveals that ignorant and bigoted ideas about bad blood were still very much in evidence in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Emma, her father's most valuable asset, is the subject of a hostile take-over bid launched by John Farnaby, who then systematically undermines her as a partner and a mother. He makes her bear a child in order to get the business, but will not allow her to nurture it. Just as Sally seems stranded between two conflicting spheres of action, so Emma is prevented from assuming either a business or a maternal role. What John Farnaby does to his wife and child is paradigmatic of the pressures on all women in a society where masculinity is the norm. He makes them both non-persons so convinced they are misfits that suicide is the only answer.

'Providence has its favourites,' says Emma Farnaby, 'and I am not one of them.' (FL p 267) Because she has such remarkable reserves of mental and physical strength she cannot find relief in either madness or collapse. She shows Amelius a roomful of 'Dead Consolations' - a series of abandoned projects which have failed to distract her from her all too powerful emotional and intellectual problem - the discovery of her lost daughter. She does a homespun Open University course which encompasses mathematics, science, foreign languages, metalwork, creative writing and physical exercise, but nothing can take her mind off the child. Yet is forgetfulness really what she wants? Paradoxically her room contains several remarkable foreign prints which show 'infants parted from their parents by desertion or robbery':

The young Moses was there, in his ark of bulrushes, on the river bank. Good St. Francis appeared next, roaming the streets, and rescuing forsaken children in the wintry nights. A third print showed the foundling hospital of old Paris, with the turning cage in the wall, and the bell to ring when the infant was placed in it. The next and last subject was the stealing of a child from the lap of its slumbering nurse by a gipsy woman. (FL p 80)

Trapped in her gloomy house with the man she suspects of the crime, Emma dreams about her daughter because the baby's disappearance had ended all sympathetic contact between its parents. (Attempting telepathic communication with an illegitimate child harks back to The Two Destinies, of course.) Like Jane Catherick she covers up her sin and embarks on a new and respectable existence, but her moral outlook is very different. Whereas the unloving mother Mrs Catherick feels no shame or remorse for the past in spite of her own culpability, the loving and innocent Mrs Farnaby is driven to suicide. It is significant that the Ronald family business is a stationer's shop, for Emma Farnaby's economic and sexual exploitation is thus related to the tools of the writer's trade. When she finally begins to appropriate for herself the skills of the author by talking to Amelius, she sets in motion the final act of the family history. The female narrator has won back control of the vital lifeskill which underpins the economic success of her family: for her, however, it is too late to build upon this triumph and to begin seriously challenging the

authority of her evil husband by allying herself with her similarly persecuted daughter.

ix. 'The Black Robe': The Dynamics of Religion

In 1882, a Punch cartoon showed 'Wilkie Collins as the Man in White doing Ink-and-Penance for having written The Black Robe'. (Page, Critical Heritage, p 24) One of the kinder reviews said the book was 'rubbish ... but light and readable rubbish, [which] keeps up the interest throughout.'

29 A Jesuit priest, Father Benwell, schemes to recover the monastery lands that Lewis Romaine's family had been given by Henry VIII. Before their wedding, Romaine's wife Stella had been engaged to Bernard Winterfield. Benwell convinces the devoutly Catholic Romaine that in the eyes of God, Stella is married to her ex-fiance, and that her child by Romaine is a bastard. Romaine deserts his wife and becomes a priest, agreeing to disinherit his son for the sake of his faith. Collins's last work on the subject is a montage of the fictional elements we expect to find him associating with illegitimacy, and The Black Robe is filled with the ghosts of old characters and the remnants of familiar situations. Stella's on/off marriage recalls both No Name and Man and Wife and Winterfield feels the same resentment towards Stella's son that George Germaine felt for Mary's daughter in The Two Destinies. The most important parallel, however, is with The Fallen Leaves. Once again a marriage breaks down because the woman loves her child and her partner does not. In both novels illegitimacy is not the result of chance or carelessness, but the will of the bastard's father.

Lewis and Stella's unnamed son is the focus of the family's troubles. Stella is at war with her mother from the moment of his birth, as Mrs Eyrecourt's maid reports. Mrs Eyrecourt, like the strong-minded Mrs Ronald in The Fallen Leaves, is anxious to protect her daughter and grandchild from the baby's father:

29. Spectator in Page, Introduction to Critical Heritage, p 28

My good mistress, who possesses knowledge of the world, and a kind heart as well, advises that Mr Romaine should be informed of the birth of a son and heir. Mrs Eyrecourt says, most truly, that the hateful old priest will get possession of Mr Romaine's property, to the prejudice of the child, unless steps are taken to shame him into doing justice to his own son. But Mrs Romaine is as proud as Lucifer; she will not hear of making the first advances, as she calls it. 'The man who has deserted me,' she says, 'has no heart to be touched either by wife or child.' There have been hard words already ... (BR pp 399-400)

Although most of Wilkie Collins's later novels were heavily criticised on the grounds of their implausible plots and characters, The Fallen Leaves and The Black Robe were particularly badly received. The ways in which the evil Farnaby and the misguided and unstable Romaine disinherit their children for reasons of their own must have seemed typically perverse, but as The Saturday Review remarked, 'a Jesuit-plotter, however clever he may be, is never a match for the last half of the third volume of a novel.'<sup>30</sup> Then again, The Athenaeum attacked Collins on the grounds of incompetence, bluntly declaring that 'The author ought to have known ... that the devise of Vange Abbey to the Roman Catholic Church would have been utterly void.'<sup>31</sup> The critic may have had in mind the fact that Wilkie Collins was actually a trained lawyer, or perhaps he simply meant that he was a writer who could usually be trusted to have done his background reading. Either way, the comment shows that the technicalities of this particular case did not really concern Collins. The legal background to Man and Wife, for instance, had been meticulously researched because one of his stated intentions had been to expose certain anomalies in the law. The bastardisation which is just about averted in The Black Robe is purely hypothetical: in a sense simply an old man's whimsey. The Romaine case involves the destruction of a father's relationship to his son, and the idea of disinheriting a child in order to obtain a Cardinal's hat outdoes even John Farnaby's abandonment of a daughter for a stationer's shop for sheer unlikeliness. But how often was "likeliness" a criterion with Wilkie Collins anyway?

30. Saturday Review 28 May 1881, pp 697-698

31. Athenaeum No. 2792, 30 April 1881, p 590

On his deathbed Lewis Romaine repents of having disinherited his son:

Christ took a child on His knee. The priests call themselves ministers of Christ. They have left me, because of [my] child, here on my knee. Wrong, wrong, wrong ... Death is a great teacher. I know how I have erred - what I have lost. Wife and child. How poor and barren all the rest of it looks now! (BR p 438)

'Wife and child' reverberates through the final pages of the novel. Having seen his son for the first time, Romaine allows the uncomprehending boy to destroy the document which has disinherited him, witnessed by Bernard Winterfield:

Romaine put the will into his [son's] hand.  
The child's eyes sparkled. 'Burn?' he asked, eagerly.  
'Yes!'

Father Benwell sprang forward with outstretched hands. I stopped him. He struggled with me. I forgot the privilege of the black robe. I took him by the throat.

The boy threw the will into the fire. 'Oh!' he shouted, in high delight, and clapped his chubby hands as the bright little blaze flew up the chimney. (BR p 445)

The child's legitimacy (and hence his absolute right to the Vange Abbey estate) is only ever questioned by the Roman Catholic church, which has a vested interest in his disinheritance. Wilkie Collins has spent nearly thirty years investigating how notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy uphold the status quo within a patriarchal society, and now, just when it seems he has fully explained how the system works, the convention is turned on its head. What if another authority, above and beyond the English law, started to question society's rulings on legitimacy and illegitimacy? What if the people who have always had the largest slice of cake - males born more than nine months after their parents' wedding - could be arbitrarily stigmatised and disinherited too? It's an interesting idea, but the writer made little use of it. At the end of The Black Robe Father Benwell tells Bernard Winterfield that he will be back in twenty years' time to fight for the soul of Stella's son, as he once fought for her husband's. For Wilkie Collins himself, however, the battle was finally over.

x. Conclusion: Sensation and Psychosis

Reviewing No Name in 1862, Alexander Smith declared that everything was 'tense, strained and unnatural. The characters are preternaturally acute; they watch each other as keenly as duellists do when the seconds fall back and the rapiers cross ... Everything in these books is feverish and excited; the reader is continually as if treading on bombshells, which may explode at any moment.' 32 This comment might also apply to most of Wilkie Collins's other books, since paranoia is emblematic of everyday social relations in his scheme of things. As we are all under surveillance, knowing our neighbour's secret may ensure that our own is never publicised. In his novels, excellent, mediocre and pitiful alike, illegitimacy is emblematic of the family secret which has potentially devastating social and legal consequences. More often than not it emerges in a carefully designed circular form. While the presence of a bastard signifies a legal, societal or familial breakdown, such breakdowns themselves signify the presence of a bastard. It is a chicken and egg situation.

Wilkie Collins's interest in the outcast is well-known. His novels are jam-packed with the physically handicapped and/or mentally disturbed. Yet his blind, deaf, dumb, hunchbacked, legless, insane, epileptic and criminal characters have problems which are all too obvious, and hence he turned to the notion of illegitimacy as a much subtler reason for becoming a social pariah: a stigma which did its damage internally, and caused only invisible scars.

At the end of The Woman in White, Collins expects the reader to be surprised by Anne Catherick's illegitimacy and shocked by Sir Percival Glyde's. In The New Magdalen (1873), however, while it is possible to infer that the heroine is illegitimate, she is never actually said to be so. Simply because she has so many of the qualities associated with Wilkie Collins's bastards - obscure birth, deprived upbringing, status as a fallen woman and talent for impersonation - it is easy to use these

32. Alexander Smith, North British Review, in Page Critical Heritage, p 141

signifiers as clues with which to solve a mystery which may or may not exist. The author's methodically (or mechanically) neat construction encourages attentive readers to be similarly logical, but in this case, they may end up decoding a cypher which is not there. This point should indicate that at times Collins could overstretch his material, perhaps most noticeably in The Two Destinies and The Black Robe, where the illegitimate make moral points for other characters within the novel rather than in their own right, and even then have very little to say.

The distinctive qualities, talents, impulses and characteristics of Collins's bastards are easily identified. Physiologically, they tend to possess either delicate and ethereal good looks, or a strong dark beauty. They look, in other words, extremely innocent or extremely dangerous: at one end of the spectrum stand the Raphaels, Madonna and Sally, and at the other is Miss Gwilt, who has a 'sexual sorcery in her smile'. Collins presented an unparalleled array of Madonnas and Magdalens designed to confuse the categories in which his contemporaries tended to place them.

Anne Silvester and Percival Glyde manifest psychosomatic symptoms of an underlying trauma, and overall Collins's bastards have more than their fair share of mental problems, ranging from moodiness and nervousness, through depression and melancholia, to insanity and psychosis. Both bastards and their mothers (although usually *not* their fathers) have suicidal impulses. It is a measure of just how confused the male narrator of The Two Destinies, George Germaine, has become through his dealings with Mary Dermody and her daughter, that he should be driven to contemplate murder followed by suicide. Although he is not literally Elfie's father, he is pathetically eager to assume that role. Many of them get involved in crime - theft, fraud and impersonation, mostly. Some are drawn into prostitution, real or metaphoric, or at least illicit sex, and even their most successful relationships are unbalanced and unequal. Their overwhelming talent is for acting, often mimicry or burlesque. What are we to make of all this?

Bastards were the kind of people Victorian society did not want. They required supervision: things had to be done to or for them constantly,

just to maintain the status quo. They represented an alternative value system which did not sanctify chastity, family life and the role of the angel of the house. As she tries to reintegrate with society, the crypto-bastard Mercy Merrick's biggest stumbling-block is the need to kow-tow to the mediocre, the ignorant and the insipid. She becomes positively allergic to Horace Holmcroft's 'habitual glorification' of his smug and dreary female relatives. 'It sickens me ... to hear of the virtues of women who have never been tempted! Where is the merit of living respectably when your life is one course of prosperity and enjoyment?' (NM p 79)

Because they have such a highly developed sense of not belonging, Wilkie Collins's bastards tend to act as individuals, rather than collectively or through representatives. Some years ago, the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson posited the concept of "social crime" to account for the activities of food rioters, smugglers, poachers and industrial rebels. These "criminals", he argued, had vigorous community backing for their actions, which challenged the laws of a repressive and authoritarian regime both literally and symbolically. In a limited sense, the identity-thefts of Wilkie Collins's fictional bastards follow a similar pattern. He asks his readers to recognise that in certain circumstances this social crime is at least understandable, if not justifiable. Yet he was, after all, a man of his time, and while Magdalen Vanstone and Mercy Merrick get away with it, not even Collins can make out a case for Percival Glyde or Lydia Gwilt.

Mad bastards are locked up on the basis that, as with Leontes' insane jealousy, ''tis safer to/ Avoid what's grown, than question how 'tis born.' But Collins's aim is precisely that: to ask why and how they lost their sanity in the first place. Conventionally, mad people are shut away because they pose a threat to society, but Collins's bastards go mad because they are perceived to be nonconformist. He tackles the hideous concept of insanity caused by cultural pressures, by showing that society is often more of a threat to the individual than the individual is to society. It is not pleasant to think that we can make life so unbearable for these threshold figures that they resort to suicide.

In an article about Man and Wife, The Saturday Review argued that it was inconceivable that a 'refined and intelligent lady' like Anne Silvester could ever have been seduced by Geoffrey Delamayn, 'a rough, brutal boor, whose only recommendations are that he is the son of a lord and has rowed stroke in a University boat-race.' In fact, 'That [the writer's] machinery may work smoothly, a woman must be revoltingly abandoned at one moment, admirably virtuous directly afterwards, and none of her acquaintance must be shocked at her story.' 33 The frequency with which Collins's bastards get involved in unlikely and mismatched relationships tells us a great deal about his perceptions of them.

Although illegitimate children were thought to be particularly prone to sexual sin, Wilkie Collins's bastards are often more at risk from licensed (marital) sex or celibacy than from fornication. Magdalen's marriage to Noel, Lydia's marriage to Midwinter, and Rosanna's fantasy affair with Blake drive them to contemplate suicide. Only Magdalen, who detests her cousin, does not go through with it: the others die for love. His bastards seem ill-equipped to evaluate their personal relationships. They have little or no experience of mutually supportive family structures to build on, and their upbringing is usually deprived and brutal in the extreme. They have hardly any friends and relatives. When, how and with whom can they discuss their emotional and sexual feelings? Illegitimates are drawn towards harmful and unfulfilling relationships, and manifest a disturbing impulse for self-destruction. Several of Wilkie Collins's bastards lurch from quasi-prostitution to a relationship with a sexual innocent. Lydia Gwilt marries a man about fifteen years her junior, and Anne Silvester marries a crippled geriatric. The reformed prostitutes Mercy Merrick and Simple Sally get a vicar and a virgin respectively. Magdalen marries an invalid cousin with a congenital heart defect. These are not happy men. Clearly Collins's bastards do not form relationships with people from reassuringly secure family backgrounds, but go for those who have also experienced loneliness and isolation. Madonna Grice, Anne Catherick and Rosanna Spearman remain celibate of course. Rosamond Treverton has an ideal marriage, but it takes place long before she finds

33. Saturday Review in Page, Critical Heritage, p 184

out about her illegitimacy. Norah Vanstone's decision to marry a cousin who merely replicates the father who made her so constrained and uneasy tells its own story.

Given that Wilkie Collins was himself an actor and playwright, the number of actors who appear in his books is scarcely remarkable. What is distinctive, however, is their non-professionalism: apart from Magdalen Vanstone and Anne Vanborough, acting is a lifeskill rather than a career. The astute Miss Garth realises fairly early on in No Name that 'Magdalen, in the character of a born actress, threaten[s] serious future difficulties', but the remark is less appropriate to Magdalen's stage work than to her penchant for impersonation. (NN p 38) As a reliable member of Dickens's amateur theatre group, Collins probably had scant regard for the notion of inherent dramatic talent: in real life at any rate, he would have seen it as something to be practised and worked at. Consequently the innate acting skill of his fictional bastards is particularly interesting.

In No Name Wragge explains to Magdalen why it is dangerous to have too close-fitting a social identity:

After years of successful self-dependence, the penalties of celebrity are beginning to attach to me. On my way from the North, I pause at this interesting city for the third time; I consult my Books for the customary references to past local experience; I find under the heading, 'Personal position in York,' the initials, T. W. K. signifying Too Well Known. (NN p 154)

With respectable society always on the verge of catching up with him, the 'moral agriculturalist' has stockpiled a number of convenient false identities - 'a list of individuals retired from this mortal scene, with whose names, families, and circumstances, [he is] well acquainted'. (NN p 155/p 235) These 'Skins to Jump Into' equate not to the deep sea diver's wetsuit, but to his breathing apparatus - equipment which is not merely helpful, but essential. It is presumably because Wragge is stealing the lives of the dead that Collins gave him the alias of "Bygrave". Himself considered an "illegitimate" step-brother by Mrs Vanstone, Wragge teaches

Magdalen all she needs to know about tricking her way into a society which judges by appearance and reputation alone.

For Wilkie Collins, the theme of illegitimacy proved a useful medium for the communication of his idiosyncratic value system. His own moral tendencies, as well as the ways in which he believed the forces of conventional morality to operate within society, may be deduced from his management of the theme and his characterisation of the illegitimate protagonist. When he first latched on to the theme in the wake of the intense publicity generated by Mrs Gaskell's Ruth and Dickens's Bleak House, he saw it as a handy plot device, and a way in which to explore the all-powerful concepts of property and inheritance. As time passed, however, illegitimacy became his pass-key to other significant issues, with psychological motivation, social pressures and above all, the role of women coming to play an increasingly significant role in his fiction. The vast majority of his books contain both elements, of course, as the circumstances of a character's birth come to determine the course of events in both the public and private spheres of life.

Some of Wilkie Collins's bastards are born illegitimate, some achieve illegitimacy, and others have illegitimacy thrust upon them, which is to say that the essential condition which they share does not impinge on them all equally. Lydia Gwilt, Rosanna Spearman and Simple Sally are continually shunted from pillar to post, and receive a deprived upbringing which ought to ensure that they are socialised into the underclass of Victorian society. (These might be termed "Dickensian" bastards.) Rosamond Treverton, Madonna Grice, Percival Glyde, Magdalen and Norah Vanstone, Anne Silvester, Mary Dermody's daughter and Stella Romayne's son, by contrast, are brought up in comfort by upper- or middle-class parents or relatives who treat them exactly as though they were legitimate. (These are his "George Eliot" kind.) Anne Catherick, aptly enough, floats somewhere between these two extremes. Are there, then, two different character types, related in some way to the influences of environment rather than heredity?

By and large, Wilkie Collins tried to be realistic. The chances of Lydia Gwilt or Rosanna Spearman achieving the conventional family happiness with which Victorian heroines were generally rewarded were infinitesimal, given that there was no Jagers-like figure to interrupt the processes of socialisation at an early stage. Hence his decision to save Sally from her seemingly inevitable fate flies in the face of reason and commonsense. Like Dickens, what he tried to show was that bastards (like any other kind of social misfit) were not doomed to go to the bad, but were certainly likely to do so if treated badly enough. Hence, with the sole exception of Glyde, whose parents are antisocial and twisted in any case, the family-reared bastards survive and (ostensibly) live happily ever after. Clearly the bastard's personal experience of the family matrix is crucial to his or her emotional development. Only in their occasionally odd and sexless marriages do we see traces of their psychological traumas.

The dearth of children born to Wilkie Collins's illegitimate characters is extremely significant. Only Rosamond Treverton actually produces a healthy son, and she, of course, was married and pregnant before she found out about her birth. Anne Silvester has a miscarriage, Glyde is impotent, and several other characters either remain celibate or choose partners whose fertility is in doubt. For even his successful bastards, the creation of a "normal" family unit seems to be fraught with complexities.

Without exception, Wilkie Collins's adult bastards are actors in some sense. Madonna is a mime artiste and Rosamond is an actress's daughter who acts out to her blind husband the scenario of her own birth in order to test his response. (DS p 251) Glyde is a social chameleon and Anne Catherick unwittingly plays the role of Laura Fairlie. Magdalen is a professional actress, while Norah plays the part of the perfect sister and daughter. Lydia masquerades as a governess and Rosanna acts out a fantasy in which she is Franklin Blake's beloved. Anne Silvester is an actress's daughter who conceals from everyone her secret affair and pregnancy, and Sally is a street entertainer. In each case, the impulse to act stems from the bastard's need to cover up, or to get back, or simply to become someone else. (Mercy Merrick's impersonation of Grace Roseberry in The

New Magdalen is the logical culmination of this tendency towards self-effacement.) Just as people who are born blind may develop a preternaturally acute sense of hearing, so those born illegitimate also seem to develop this compensatory lifeskill. Since they have too thin a skin, they adopt another layer of protection which will enable them to survive. Their desperate sense of insecurity is overlaid with an act which gradually becomes reality, to the point where they resemble George Eliot's Rosamond Vincy, who is said to be 'by nature an actress of parts which entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.' (MM p 144) The way in which the bastard's acting skill functions as a basic defence mechanism is well illustrated by the scene which takes place between Rosamond Treverton and her husband Leonard Frankland in The Dead Secret, when the heroine discovers the truth about her birth. She has never had to "act" before, but on the spur of the moment, at a time of extreme emotional crisis when the survival of her marriage depends upon Leonard's reaction to her illegitimacy, the heroine creates a fiction of her own in order to anticipate the possible outcome. The bastard's acting skill is thus both a disguise and a signifier, and this paradox lies at the heart of Collins's theory of illegitimacy.

## CHAPTER 5.

### CONCLUSION: THE END OF AN ERA.

In his essay 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864), Matthew Arnold attacked the Philistinism of two major public figures, the radical reformer John Roebuck and the Tory politician Sir Charles Adderley. As Thomas Boyle reports, 'In speeches made to groups of industrial and agricultural workers, these men of conflicting political viewpoints had each displayed what Arnold calls an "exuberant self-satisfaction" about the "state of England" ... In opposition to [their] complacent statements, Arnold reproduces a newspaper item which he feels will effectively undermine them: "A shocking child murder has just been committed at Nottingham. A girl named Wragg left the workhouse there on Saturday morning with her illegitimate child. The child was soon afterwards found dead on Mapperley Hills, having been strangled. Wragg is in custody." Arnold then masterfully summons up the meaningful reverberations of this police report in the 1860s:

"Nothing but that, but, in juxtaposition with the absolute eulogies of Sir Charles Adderley and Mr Roebuck, how eloquent, how suggestive are those few lines! ... And 'our unrivalled happiness'; - what an element of grimness, bareness, and hideousness mixes with it and blurs it; the workhouse, the dismal Mapperley Hills, - how dismal those who have seen them will remember; - the gloom, the smoke, the cold, the strangled illegitimate child! ... And the final touch, - short, bleak, and unhuman: *Wragg is in custody*. The sex lost in the confusion of our unrivalled happiness; or (shall I say?) the superfluous Christian name lopped off by the straightforward vigour of our old Anglo-Saxon breed! There is profit for the spirit in such contrasts as this ... Mr Roebuck will have a poor opinion of an adversary who replies to his defiant songs of triumph only by murmuring under his breath, *Wragg is in custody*; but in no other way will these songs of triumph be induced gradually to moderate themselves, to get rid of what in them is excessive and offensive, and to fall into a safer and truer key." 1

1. Thomas Boyle, Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism, (Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), pp 181-183

As Matthew Arnold was only too well aware, many of his more complacent contemporaries only came face-to-face with people like the hapless Wragg and her poor little child in the sensational newspaper reports they read at their cosy breakfast tables. In a sense, therefore, such real-life persons were more remote to their consciences and imaginations than the fictional victims introduced into their households by writers like their beloved Dickens.

Perhaps the ultimate irony which pertained to illegitimacy in the Victorian era (and is not quite irrelevant even now) is the existence of an obvious legal solution to the problem. Yet of the three authors whom I have studied, only Wilkie Collins mentions the bastardy laws 'which are a disgrace to our nation', because the roots of the problem had penetrated far deeper into their culture than the superficial legal layer, as they all recognised. Simply repealing all the acts which discriminated against the illegitimate child would not put an end to their social disadvantages any more than the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act served to eradicate sexism in our own time. In a sense, therefore, the novelists' inability to contemplate an all-encompassing fictional solution to the problem is evidence of a thoughtful and thorough-going radicalism rather than a depressing conservatism. The only narrative solutions they can offer relate to the private lives of their individual characters - and from Oliver Twist to Daniel Deronda this is all they can ever hope to do.

The purpose of this thesis has been to describe and analyse the theme of illegitimacy as it appears in the novels of three particularly important writers of the mid-Victorian period. I believe that the way in which a society treats its illegitimate children says a great deal about its moral and sexual concerns, and that, in turn, the way in which Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins explored this field, alternately allying themselves with their contemporaries and harshly rejecting them, sheds light upon their own moral and sexual beliefs as educated Victorians.

The unprecedented importance which the bourgeoisie attached to the concept of monogamous Christian marriage during the high Victorian era

(circa 1850-1870) presupposed a climate of opinion in which anyone perceived as a threat to that sacred institution, such as the adulterer, the fornicator, the prostitute, the unmarried mother or the illegitimate child, would be severely punished. The suppression of those aspects of human love and sexuality which were seen to undermine the primacy and exclusivity of the contract between husband and wife was inextricably entwined with the middle class's understanding of the economic dynamics of the Victorian marriage.

The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1870 allowed a husband to divorce his wife for adultery. A wife, on the other hand, had to prove her husband guilty of 'incestuous adultery, or of bigamy with adultery, or of rape, or of sodomy or bestiality, or of adultery coupled with [extreme] cruelty ... or of adultery coupled with desertion, without reasonable excuse, for two years and upwards ... ' As Fraser Harrison has noted, 'For those who thought they detected a whiff of injustice arising from these laws, Lord Cranworth, the then Lord Chancellor and sponsor of the Bill, was at hand to correct such misapprehensions. A wife, he assured the House, might, without loss of caste, and bearing in mind the interest of her children and even of her husband, feel inclined to condone an act of adultery in her husband, but no one would venture to suggest that a husband could possibly do so. "The adultery of the wife", he explained, "might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife ... " The fear, expressed here so graphically, of being the victim of a paternity con-trick was fundamental to the sexual make-up of the middle classes, and it was no coincidence that it provided the principle on which all nineteenth-century divorce legislation was based.' 2

The mental leap required in order for a middle-class audience to assimilate the theme of illegitimacy as presented by Oscar Wilde in the 1890s was phenomenal, but the success of his plays reveals that many had crossed the barrier. In my introductory chapter I mentioned A Woman of No

2. Fraser Harrison, The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality, (Sheldon Press, 1977), pp 9-10

Importance (1893) and The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) as being the two works in which Wilde's interest in the subject is most clearly revealed, although there are also illegitimate and quasi-illegitimate characters to be found in Lady Windermere's Fan (1892) and The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890). At first it seems that Wilde's treatment of the theme in A Woman of No Importance is serious (even if the play itself is rather weak and dull by his standards) while in The Importance of Being Earnest - his most famous and glittering work - it is ultimately superficial. A closer look at the two plays, however, may reveal a much less clearcut distinction between them, and the apparently opposing currents of high drama and social comedy in fact cross and countercross both works.

In his brilliant biography of Oscar Wilde, Richard Ellmann reveals a fascinating footnote to the writer's family history which may account for his interest in the subject of illegitimacy and the mysteries of birth and parentage. Before he married Oscar's mother, Sir William Wilde had fathered three illegitimate children who frequently spent their summers with their legitimate half-siblings at the family home near Dublin. Tragically the two girls, Emily and Mary, died young, after an horrific accident. Ellmann reports that '[in] the course of showing off their ball dresses before a party, one went too close to an open fire, caught her crinoline in the flames, and was terribly burned. So was her sister, who tried frantically to rescue her.'<sup>3</sup> Ellmann has argued that 'The theme of the foundling in Wilde's plays can be best thought of as a secret that stands for all secrets ... We are not what we think we are or what other people think us, and our ties to them may be greater or less than we imagine.' (Oscar Wilde, pp 356-357)

Gerald Arbuthnot and Jack Worthing suffer emotional shocks based on the revelation of their true status which takes place during the course of the action. In both A Woman of No Importance and The Importance of Being Earnest illegitimacy is very much a family secret in every sense of the phrase. Gerald's (real) illegitimacy is known only to his mother when the

3. Richard Ellmann, Oscar Wilde, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p 13

play begins, and by the end only himself, his father and his fiancée have been told of it. Jack's (imagined) illegitimacy is accidentally revealed before a close-knit group of people who turn out to be related to him in any case. In no sense is the threat of social exposure the most significant factor determining the reactions of the heroes to their unexpected inheritance: secrets are revealed (as secrets always are), but only to those who can be trusted with them.

Gerald Arbuthnot - unlike Jack Worthing - is out of place in high society. He has to work for a living, in contrast to the dilettante aristocrats who surround him. The old idea of the bastard as a social misfit still lingers, and the theme of illegitimacy as a metaphor for social exclusion is taken up by Gerald's father, Lord Illingworth, when he disparages the Americans because they cannot trace their ancestors back to the Dark Ages. He declares that people from the New World are necessarily secretive about their origins: 'American women are wonderfully clever at concealing their parents.' (WNI p 85)

The fact that A Woman of No Importance contains a dark secret which remains hidden seems intensely ironic, given that this is a play in which most of Wilde's characters thrive on speculating about the skeletons which lurk in their friends' closets. According to Lord Illingworth - who ought to know about such things - 'the basis of every scandal is an absolutely immoral certainty.' (WNI p 88) The fundamental rule about sin and its relation to scandal is that only the innocent and inexperienced need suffer. As Mrs Allonby observes, 'The one advantage of playing with fire ... is that one never even gets singed. It is the people who don't know how to play with it who get burned up.' (WNI p 83) "Playing" at life and love is quite beyond the serious and passionate Rachel Arbuthnot, and it is as much her mental and moral attitude, Wilde suggests, as her social and sexual powerlessness, which enables Lord Illingworth to seduce her.

It takes the young American Hester Worsley - already identified by Lord Illingworth as a natural outsider - to expose the sex- and class-based double-dealing which is endemic within English society. According to her, 'It has blinded its eyes, and stopped its ears. It lies like a leper in

purple. It sits like a dead thing smeared with gold.' (WNI p 102)  
Singled out for her attack is a certain Lord Henry Watson, whose social popularity encapsulates the hypocrisy of the upper classes:

A man with a hideous smile and a hideous past. He is asked everywhere. No dinner-party is complete without him. What of those whose ruin is due to him? They are outcasts. They are nameless. If you met them in the street you would turn your head away. I don't complain of their punishment. Let all women who have sinned be punished ... It is right that they should be punished, but don't let them be the only ones to suffer. If a man and a woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded ... (WNI p 103)

The people who don't fit in - the foreigner Hester, the illegitimate minor bank official Gerald and the fallen woman Rachel employ the self-conscious language of melodrama, while the people who do - Lord Illingworth and his cronies - use bright, flip, shocking Wildean epigrams. This fact serves to emphasise that the opposing groups (quite literally) do not speak the same language. When the two sides confront each other, a breakdown in communications is inevitable. In reply to Hester's grandiloquent speech, for instance, Lady Caroline Pontefract replies, 'Might I, my dear Miss Worsley, as you are standing up, ask you for my cotton that is just behind you? Thank you.' (WNI p 103) Again, when Mrs Arbuthnot and Lady Hunstanton get on to a difficult moral problem, their differing approaches spark off a comic encounter:

*Lady Hunstanton:* Ah! We women should forgive everything, shouldn't we, dear Mrs Arbuthnot? I am sure you agree with me in that.

*Mrs Arbuthnot:* I do not, Lady Hunstanton. I think there are many things women should never forgive.

*Lady H:* What sort of things?

*Mrs A:* The ruin of another woman's life.

*Lady H:* Ah! those things are very sad, no doubt, but I believe there are admirable homes where people of that kind are looked after and reformed, and I think on the whole that the secret of life is to take things very, very easily.  
(WNI pp 120-121)

According to Rachel Arbuthnot, her son 'cannot separate his future from [her] past.' (WNI p 111) Gerald spends most of the play shuttling between his parents, alienating one as he draws nearer to the other. The melodrama degenerates into near-farce as Lord Illingworth tries to sexually assault Hester, and Mrs Arbuthnot is forced to reveal the secret of Gerald's birth in order to prevent him killing his father in revenge. However it is a neat touch to have the parents' sin come out at a moment already charged with such sexual tension. Gerald tries to force his parents to marry, but while Lord Illingworth is willing, Mrs Arbuthnot refuses. In her eyes, this would be dishonour and shame beyond anything she has ever felt or known, and Hester wholeheartedly agrees with her. The final confrontation between the estranged parents is a lot more impressive than much of the rest of the play because of Wilde's willingness to leave the crucial words unsaid, rather than have them declaimed. Lord Illingworth remarks, 'Quarter to two! Must be strolling back to Hunstanton. Don't suppose I shall see you there again. I'm sorry, I am, really. It's been an amusing experience to have met amongst people of one's own rank, and treated quite seriously too, one's mistress, and one's - - ' Before he can use the word "bastard", however, Mrs Arbuthnot snatches up his glove and strikes him across the face with it: she has, in other words, taken up the gauntlet which he had thrown down. '[Dazed by the insult of his punishment', Illingworth leaves the field of battle, utterly defeated. (WNI p 143)

A Woman of No Importance is permeated by irony to its deepest level. The likeable, witty characters to whom it is a pleasure to listen have no moral sense whatsoever, while those with an important message - the fallen woman, the bastard and the foreigner - are smug bores. Their ignorance of society and the way it works is good for them, yet their experiences are kept from those characters in the play who might profit from the moral lessons they contain. Kindly Lady Hunstanton, for instance, will presumably go on thinking of unmarried mothers (if she thinks of them at all) as fodder for charitable institutions because she is not given the chance to connect the much-admired Mrs Arbuthnot with "that sort of person". As Richard Ellmann has claimed, A Woman of No Importance 'does more than offer the stale theme of the Victorian fallen woman, and her

defiance of her seducer.' (Oscar Wilde, p 357) It is a play dominated by its female characters, who spend much of their time talking to one another about the influences upon their lives, the extent to which they are free to act as they like, their personal attitudes and moral standards, and their ability to withstand social pressure. Paradoxically, however, the vital personal history which is unfolding so close to them, and which would tell them so much about real life and the way it works, remains a dead secret, and thus they are destined to go on gossiping about nothing in particular and no one of any importance. In this suppression of a secret - which contains a valuable lesson for womankind, but would harm the social prospects of a man - it seems that Wilde comes very close to presenting a moral tragedy. Above all the play demonstrates his belief that the morality espoused by many of his contemporaries was in fact the mask of sin, and the fierceness of its attack upon society was unsurpassed even in his greatest works.

It seems significant that the word "importance" which figures in the titles of both these plays points towards the social consequences of one's birth and parentage. Mrs Arbuthnot, in the eyes of Lord Illingworth, is a woman of no importance, socially inferior and fit to be abandoned. It follows from this that her son is equally unacceptable. Jack Worthing's most notable discovery is 'the vital importance of being earnest', - i.e. that possessing not only the Christian name which his fiancée adores for its own sake, but also the heirship which it symbolises, is, in social terms, the true measure of his significance. In personal terms it is Gwendolen's attachment to the name which is of value to Jack, but beyond this dimension is his position as "Ernest", the eldest son of a patrician family and natural bearer of his father's name.

In The Importance of Being Earnest, Oscar Wilde's most brilliant and sparkling comedy, all the elements of high drama are there, transposed into a different key. The well-established idea of the bastard as someone forced to lead a double life is there in Jack Worthing's Bunburying. His unsuitability as a husband for the wellborn Gwendolen is expressed in Lady Bracknell's scandalized reaction to the prospect of her daughter 'marry[ing] into a cloak-room, and form[ing] an alliance with a parcel.'

(IBE p 269) The play is in fact a devastating parody of that stock Victorian melodrama which lurks just below its surface, Miss Prism's three-decker novel 'of more than usually revolting sentimentality.' (IBE p 309) In that novel, 'the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.' (IBE p 275) On stage too, even after baby Jack has been placed in the handbag in place of the bastard in Miss Prism's novel (for who can doubt that it would have contained at least one?) this comfortable maxim holds true, although the substitution does threaten to cause serious future difficulties for the dispossessed hero.

When Lady Bracknell questions Jack about his background, he is forced to admit that he has lost both his parents. This is not, of course, merely a convenient social euphemism for being an orphan, and Lady Bracknell interprets his answer as reflecting badly on his moral character, just as if he had admitted to being illegitimate. 'To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.' (IBE p 267) When quizzed further, Jack is forced to admit:

The fact is, Lady Bracknell, I said I had lost my parents. It would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seem to have lost me ... I don't actually know who I am by birth. I was ... well, I was found. (IBE p 267)

While Jack's surname encapsulates his essential "worthiness", unfortunately it also highlights his foundling status, since his saviour, Mr Cardew, had chosen it purely 'because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time.' (IBE p 268) In addition, Lady Bracknell feels that the circumstances in which Jack was found are intrinsically suspicious. '[A] cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion - has, probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now - but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in society.' (IBE p 268) The dubious connotations of the Brighton Line are not lost on her ladyship.

The whole story is as unpalatable to Lady Bracknell as the tawdry sexual excesses of the lower classes might be supposed to be to their betters, and just as completely beyond her ken. When introduced to

Cecily, she feels moved to ask if 'Miss Cardew [is] at all connected with any of the larger railway stations in London? ... Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a Terminus.' (IBE p 303) Her attitude echoes her nephew Algernon Moncrieff's reactions to the personal history of his butler. When Lane declares that he has been married only once, 'in consequence of a misunderstanding between [himself] and a young person', Algy declares to the audience:

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility. (IBE p 254)

The idea that one social class is obliged to justify its existence by setting moral standards for another is about as ludicrous, Wilde implies, as assuming that the indiscretions of the patricians are more palatable than those of the plebs. The fact that all Jack Worthing's problems are at an end when he is found to be Ernest Moncrieff, the most important member of an upper class household, inheritor of both a socially-useful surname and an absolutely vital Christian name, reveals the fundamental gulf between illegitimacy (and any other social problem) as it affects the rich and the poor. This social distinction - which harks back to the raffish last years of the Regency - implies that society's mores may have actually turned full circle. When Jack mistakenly assumes that Miss Prism - the owner of the handbag - is his mother, he is quite prepared to accept her, 'in spite of her situation:

Unmarried! I do not deny that this is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. (IBE p 311)

The comic way in which Jack glibly trots out these liberal clichés sounds the death knell for the high-Victorian drama of illegitimacy. These sentiments, after all, are those which writers like Dickens and Collins wrote whole books to try to inculcate into the often flinty hearts of their respectable middle-class readers. Now Wilde is daring his

audience to accept them as merely the conventional views of the time. He was probably somewhat ahead of them, but they were catching him up fast.

Clara Hopgood, written one year after The Importance of Being Earnest, is an equally radical reworking of the old story, but it lacks the anarchic cutting edge of Wilde's play. Claire Tomalin has said of Mark Rutherford's last novel that 'Madge Hopgood is ... the first English heroine to elect to become an unmarried mother on a point of principle, and to be given unequivocal credit for her decision by her creator.' 4 To see an unmarried mother as having a 'puritan conscience' might seem perverse at first, but if morality can be allowed to consist in having a highly developed personal sense of right and wrong, then Madge is an extremely moral person. It goes without saying, of course, that her private code of ethics has nothing whatsoever to do with that of her contemporaries. Madge receives a great deal of sympathy and support for her decision to raise her illegitimate daughter alone, but those whose reaction to her goes beyond outright knee-jerk condemnation are either blood relatives like her mother and sister, realists with first-hand experience of human sexuality like Mrs Caffyn, or progressive intellectuals like Baruch Cohen, who, as a Jew, is an outcast himself in a sense. Though the novel is in fact set in the 1840s, Mark Rutherford felt that even fifty years later, at the time of writing, a true understanding of the unmarried mother's situation was far from widespread.

The conventionalists in Clara Hopgood span every social class, from the paralytically respectable landlady who evicts the Hopgoods when she realises that Madge is pregnant, to the baby's well-meaning father, Frank Palmer, who pleads with Madge to marry him in defiance of her conscience, to the rector who judges the morals of the poor folk in his parish so harshly, in spite of the clear link between overcrowded and squalid living conditions, dire poverty and incest discerned by the uneducated Mrs Caffyn. (CH p257) The dead hand of "decency" and "respectability" is one of Mark Rutherford's prime targets. This destructive social force is directly

4. Claire Tomalin, Afterword to Clara Hopgood, (Hogarth Press, 1985), p iv

responsible for the particular kind of suffering which falls to the lot of the unmarried mother. "Respectability" has nothing to do with any notion of being worthy of respect: instead it seems to exist purely in order to inhibit the flow of natural human sympathy towards the less fortunate and to deny the validity of the world picture embraced by other people (such as Madge Hopgood).

Madge believes - in common with Rachel Arbuthnot in Wilde's A Woman Of No Importance - that a patched-up marriage to the father of her illegitimate child would be a 'crime'. Her use of this word (as opposed to 'sin', which would seem more appropriate in this context) is extremely significant. As she tells Frank himself, 'I know what you are going to say. I know what is the crime to the world; but it would have been a crime, perhaps a worse crime, if a ceremony had been performed beforehand by a priest, and the worst of crimes would be that ceremony now.' (CH p 162)

Madge's deeply-held belief that marriage to Frank would be something more than merely sinful demonstrates how the forces of respectability can transmute a private action into a public offence. In the eyes of the world, it is the former sin which demands penance or retribution: in the eyes of the heroine (and Mark Rutherford, of course) the latter crime would have the more desperate moral consequences. A shotgun wedding in these circumstances would be a betrayal of father, mother and child, for a loveless marriage would be a travesty of the "honourable estate ordained by God" which a religious ceremony celebrates. Once again, it is Mrs Caffyn who has first-hand experience of these bloodcurdling unions sanctioned by the church:

He's married that Skelton girl; married her the week afore I left. There isn't no love lost there, but the girl's father said he'd murder him if he didn't, and so it come off. How she ever brought herself to it gets over me. She has that big farm-house, and he's made a fine drawing-room out of the livin' room on the left-hand side as you go in, and put a new grate in the kitchen and turned that into the livin' room, and they does the cooking in the back kitchen, but for all that, if I'd been her, I'd never have seen his face no more and I'd have packed off to Australia ... As true as I'm a-sittin' here, our parson, who married them, went to the breakfast. It isn't Chorley as I blame so much; he's a poor, snivellin' creature, and he was frightened, but it's the girl. She doesn't care for him no more than me, and then again, although, as I tell you, he's such a poor creature, he's awful cruel and mean and she knows it. (CH pp 218-219)

In many ways the highly educated middle-class Madge Hopgood does not seem "the type" who usually produces an illegitimate child. As Mrs Caffyn tells Baruch Cohen, 'She isn't one of them as goes wrong; she can talk German and reads books.' (CH p 221) Actually it would be nearer the truth to say that Madge isn't one of those who habitually gets caught going wrong: her sort usually manage to get up to London to arrange a discreet abortion or adoption. It is her decision to keep the baby which exposes her. In books too there are few Madges: middle- or upper-class unmarried mothers tend to escape with their reputations intact, like Lady Dedlock. However, the many books which Madge has read do not seem to have taught her much worth knowing about real life, and in that sense, she very much resembles far more conventional Victorian heroines:

Madge at times was very far gone in melancholy. How different this thing looked when it was close at hand; when she personally was to be the victim! She had read about it in history, the surface of which it seemed scarcely to ripple; it had been turned to music in some of her favourite poems and had lent a charm to innumerable mythologies, but the actual fact was nothing like the poetry or mythology, and threatened to ruin her own history altogether. (CH p 108)

For men, perhaps, it is different: in fact Mrs Caffyn posits a direct link between Baruch Cohen's wide reading and his ability to accept Madge's status as an unmarried mother. 'He's always a-reading books, and, therefore, he don't think so much of what some people would make a fuss about.' (CH pp 295-296)

One of the clearest things to emerge from Clara Hopgood is that the fortunate - even privileged - position in which the pregnant Madge finds herself is class-based. As the novelists of the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s demonstrated, the penalties and stigmas associated with unmarried motherhood had never affected the working classes and those higher up the social scale impartially. When Madge breaks the news of her pregnancy to her mother, Mrs Hopgood's immediate thought is that her beautiful and talented daughter has been reduced to the level of one of the village sluts like the 'Polesden gal' castigated by the rector:

So much thought, so much care, such an education, such noble qualities, and they had not accomplished what ordinary ignorant Fenmarket

mothers and daughters were able to achieve! This fine life, then, was a failure, and a perfect example of literary and artistic training had gone the way of the common wenches whose affiliation cases figured in the county newspaper. (CH p 103)

Yet in fact Madge has enough money to be able to refuse Frank's offer of child support, and does not need to undergo ritual humiliation in the press. The truth of the matter is that her pregnancy and subsequent refusal to marry the father of her child cause other people far more problems than they cause Madge herself. The moral wranglings which disturb Frank Palmer's conscience, for instance, are explicitly related to his perception of Madge as a woman whom he cannot easily pay off or dismiss, and he too discovers the ironic gap between literature and life:

If he had been a dramatic personage, what had happened to him would have been the second act leading to a fifth, in which the Fates would have appeared, but life seldom arranges itself in proper poetic form. A man determines that he must marry; he makes the shop-girl an allowance, never sees her or her child again, transforms himself into a model husband, is beloved by his wife and family; the woman whom he kissed as he will never kiss his lawful partner, withdraws completely, and nothing happens to him.

... Nobody in society expects the same paternal love for the offspring of a housemaid or a sempstress as for the child of the stockbroker's or brewer's daughter, and nobody expects the same obligations, but Frank was not a society youth, and Madge was his equal. (CH pp 235-236)

Despite his uneasiness, however, in the end Frank does manage to make the required distinction between Madge and her baby and his wife Cecilia and their (as yet unborn) children. Ironically this happens when the time comes for Frank to make a will - the quintessential instrument of bourgeois power and respectability. After considering the idea of providing for his little daughter after his death (since Madge has forbidden him to support her while he lives) he feels obliged to reject it:

[Cecilia] would perhaps survive him, and the discovery would cause her and her children much misery; it would damage his character with them and inflict positive moral mischief. The will, therefore, did not mention Madge, and it was not necessary to tell his secret to his solicitor. (CH pp 240-241)

At this point, it is worth noticing how Frank feels that there is a difference between the passionate union which produces an illegitimate

child and the respectable marriage. We're coming very close to Richard Savage, and his theory about the 'dull domestic heir' again, it seems.

The tricky relationship between the illegitimate child and its parents is touched upon by Mrs Caffyn, who functions as the voice of the 'woman in the street', tolerant, kind-hearted, but very often extremely confused by the whole situation, at once so familiar to her, and yet so strange. On the subject of the baby's father, she says tentatively:

It isn't easy to believe as the father of that blessed dear could have been a bad lot. I'm sure he isn't, and yet there's that Polesden gal at the farm, she as went wrong with Jim, a great ugly brute, and she herself warnt up to much, well, as I say, her child was the delicatest little angel as I ever saw. It's my belief as God-a-mighty mixes Hissself up in it more nor we think. (CH p 193)

In this passage, underlying Mrs Caffyn's suggestion that 'a great ugly brute' and a girl who 'warnt up to much' would be likely to produce unattractive children is some vestige of the old-fashioned and primitive belief that the child of depraved or morally weak parents would exhibit at least some outward symptoms of its tainted inheritance, such as ugliness, physical handicap or mental retardation. Given the context of this remark, i.e. that Mrs Caffyn is making assumptions about Frank's moral character rather than the way he looks, it is not merely the physical appearance of his baby which concerns her, but its likely paternal inheritance. Mrs Caffyn's confusion emphasises the fact that Madge is presented as an atypical unmarried mother, whereas her predecessor Ruth Hilton was taken to be the archetype. When Madge's contemporaries - both within and outside the novel - measure her against the pathetic social victims (like Matthew Arnold's Wragg) whom they read about in the newspapers, they find it impossible to reconcile two such opposing images of the unmarried mother.

As Claire Tomalin has pointed out, Madge is in fact the leading character in the novel, even though it bears her sister's name. (Afterword to Clara Hopgood, p v) Yet 'Clara Hopgood' is also the name of Madge's daughter, and thus in one sense the little girl is the true focus of the story - the child whose words to her stepfather Baruch Cohen about her

heroic aunt Clara, who had died in Italy, fighting for the nationalist cause, end the novel on a profoundly symbolic note.

In the literature of the 1890s, trace elements of "the old story" are clearly present, used both consciously and unconsciously by the new generation of writers. The enormous moral and psychological ground which had been gained since the 1870s - let alone earlier - may be shown by comparing two novels by Thomas Hardy. Desperate Remedies (1871), his first published work, was a trashy sub-Wilkie Collins sensation novel, in which his Percival Glyde figure, Aeneas Manston, is a depraved thug who murders his wife in order to marry the heroine, Cytherea Aldclyffe. In Hardy's last novel Jude the Obscure (1895), however, Jude and Sue's two young illegitimate children are themselves murder victims, killed by their legitimate half-brother Old Father Time 'because we are too menny.' (JO p 410) The prime function of the middle-class marriage was to produce offspring, and there was a painful stigma attached to childlessness. In an age of big families, it was difficult for any bourgeois couple who could afford to support them to have "too many" children. Yet over-fecundity among the worse off, particularly when associated with illegitimacy, was very poorly received. As Jenni Calder has remarked, 'Jude and Sue produce several children in their unsanctioned relationship, and the nature of the burden these children are is explicit. They weigh them down, hamper their movements, are a hindrance physically and economically. Jude and Sue walk the streets of Christminster at a child's pace, bearing in their arms more children.' 5 As Time's action dramatises, one bastard is one too many. The reasons for his utterly nihilistic act - which is followed by Time's suicide - open up an appalling moral chasm on the eve of the twentieth century. Sue Bridehead is driven back into the arms of her lawful husband Richard Phillotson, compelled by Time's example to sacrifice herself in an equally tragi-comic excess of frenzied self-disgust. The destruction of his family complete, all that remains is for Jude Fawley to drink himself to death, amid the echoing laughter of the Christminster students.

5. Jenni Calder, Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction, (Thames and Hudson, 1976), p 196

In a sense, Wilde, Rutherford and Hardy can be seen as the natural heirs of George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins respectively. Each of these later writers mined a bastard seam which had been opened up by one of his illustrious predecessors. Wilde's mixture of radicalism, irony and humour resemble George Eliot's insistent subversion of conventional social mores. Rutherford's patient and realistic representation of the facts surrounding unmarried motherhood as he saw them reflects Dickens's examination of the way society worked. Hardy's sensational and frequently morbid manipulation of the subject is very clearly derived from the classic Wilkie Collins format. The strength and resilience of the various high Victorian treatments of the theme of illegitimacy is revealed when we realise that the facets exposed by George Eliot, Dickens and Wilkie Collins continued past Wilde, Rutherford and Hardy and on into the twentieth century, filtering into the mainstream of English popular fiction. In P.G. Wodehouse's The Code of the Woosters (1938), for instance, the humorous element of the theme is naturally uppermost. Bertie Wooster is informed by the omniscient Jeeves that in order to blackmail the would-be fascist dictator Roderick Spode, he need only mention that he knows all about Eulalie. As Bertie explains after the astonishing success of this tactic:

One can fill in the picture for oneself, I think, Aunt Dahlia? The trusting girl who learned too late that men betray ... the little bundle ... the last mournful walk to the river-bank ... the splash ... the bubbling cry ... I fancy so, don't you? No wonder the man pales beneath the tan a bit at the idea of the world knowing of that. 6

The truth, however, is somewhat different. Eulalie is in fact Spode's own alter-ego, and his shameful secret is that he designs fashionable ladies' underwear in his spare time. The way in which Wodehouse deliberately undercuts the cliché of the innocent girl seduced and driven to suicide echoes Wilde's subversion of the genre in The Importance of Being Earnest.

6. P G Wodehouse, The Code of the Woosters (1938), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p 127

By the Second World War, the popular writer could assume that most readers would interpret the hounding of the unmarried mother and her child as evidence of old-fashioned bigotry. At one time, turning a pregnant maidservant out of the house was one way for her employer to demonstrate a commitment to the moral standards of contemporary society. In Agatha Christie's famous thriller And Then There Were None (originally published as Ten Little Niggers in 1939), when a rigidly puritanical spinster adopts this harshly judgemental stance and drives her wretched servant to drown herself, she ends up on Nigger Island, to be punished along with nine other terrible murderers whom the law cannot touch. In the blockbuster fiction published during the 1980s by women writers such as Celia Brayfield (Pearls), Ann Victoria Roberts (Louisa Elliot) and Sally Beauman (Destiny), an illegitimate female heroine - or even, in the case of Judith Krantz's Mistral's Daughter, three generations of them - became a virtual sine qua non. In these rags-to-riches sagas, illegitimacy is a touchstone for undeserved social and familial deprivation, and also for daring unconventionalism and passionate waywardness. Now, as in the Victorian period, it is essential, as Harriett Hawkins suggests, for 'Literary fictions [to] ... allow their misfits, outcasts, and outlaws ... to plead their own cases, to have their say about the way things are, and in doing so they often evoke sympathies and raise questions that challenge reigning orthodoxies.' 7

Wilkie Collins died in 1889: by then the golden age of the bastard in literature was long gone. There were still interesting and thought-provoking studies to be written by Moore and Gissing, as well as by the writers mentioned in this chapter, but they were too concerned to produce realistic portraits of those radical women who would be proud to be unmarried mothers to bother with the old-style illegitimacy of their forbears. As the century drew to its close, the novelists felt able to open up the subject as never before: denied this comparative freedom of expression, Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins had had to resort to

7. Harriett Hawkins, Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1990), p 100

fascinating devices and stratagems. For the sake of their art, we should be glad that they were so restricted.

In Bleak House, Dickens had shown the extent to which the sensitive illegitimate character might want to work towards the unification of society rather than towards its overthrow, which was what society itself had traditionally assumed. In Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes (1911), the orphaned hero of the novel feels very much the same as Esther Summerson:

Officially and in fact without a family ... no home influences had shaped his opinions or his feelings. He was as lonely in the world as a man swimming in a deep sea ... His closest parentage was defined in the statement that he was a Russian. Whatever good he expected from life would be given to or withheld from his hopes by that connexion alone. This immense parentage suffered from the throes of internal dissension, and he shrank mentally from the fray as a good-natured man may shrink from taking definite sides in a violent family quarrel. 8

This elevated concept of nationalist sentiment, so generous and all-embracing, would be quite beyond any of the bastards in my study, except Daniel Deronda. The mid-Victorian society in which they operated was simply too enclosed, too stifling and too rigid in its structures to allow for any such philosophising. All that the bastards of Dickens, George Eliot and Wilkie Collins can contemplate is subverting or mitigating the effects of bigotry and prejudice on a personal level, and from Esther Summerson to Lydia Gwilt, this is all they ever - even partially - achieve.

8. Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes (1911), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p 17. (Thanks to Bob Jones for drawing this quotation to my attention.)

## APPENDIX 1.

### 1. THE BASTARDS OF DICKENS, GEORGE ELIOT AND COLLINS.

It is not the purpose of this short appendix to state the evidence for and against Dickens or Marian Evans (George Eliot) having had illegitimate children of their own, nor to retell the story of Wilkie Collins's. Such details are easily found in Claire Tomalin's The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens (1990), P. Bourl'honne's 1933 essay on George Eliot, and William M. Clarke's The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins (1988). As far as I am concerned, it is sufficient to say that from the scant evidence available, it seems possible - even probable - that Dickens's mistress, Ellen Ternan, gave birth to one or perhaps two children by him which died in infancy. On the other hand it appears extremely unlikely that Marian Evans had a child by either Herbert Spencer or John Chapman before she began to live with G.H. Lewes.

It's interesting to speculate about the possible effect that a writer's personal experience of illegitimate parenthood might have on his or her fictional dealings with the subject. It seems utterly unconvincing psychologically, for instance, that George Eliot could have written about bastardy so ironically and amusedly if she actually had an illegitimate child of her own which she never saw. Her experience of G.H. Lewes's complex family affairs, however, would have widened her understanding of the subject without any degree of personal trauma.

Again, it strikes me as extremely significant that Dickens never dealt with the drama of the careless parent and the abused child after Great Expectations, which was published the year before Ellen Ternan is thought to have had his child. Surely if she had indeed become pregnant in 1862, Dickens would have found it incredibly difficult to sustain his bastard thesis in the face of events. The timing seems crucial: because George Eliot's alleged "bastard history" predates her career as a novelist, whereas Dickens's follows his fictional dealings with the

subject, I am inclined to believe that in both cases, their writings may be related to their personal histories. As for Wilkie Collins, his domestic set-up, which included maintaining two mistresses and three illegitimate children, has become semi-legendary. In the words of Penny Perrick, 'he always expressed alarm at the prospect of marriage but the alternative arrangements he made were so complicated that I am reminded of a man who tries to close an open door by throwing cushions at it from the far side of the room rather than get up and give it a good slam.'<sup>1</sup> Of all the Victorians, he was perhaps the most relaxed about such matters: significantly the births of his three children made not the slightest difference to his fictional treatment of the bastard. Details of the interplay between personal and historical events and the fictional works of my three authors are included in the short table which follows.

1. Penny Perrick, 'Complicated Habits of a Singular Man', Sunday Times, 7 August 1988

ii. A BASTARD CHRONOLOGY, 1834-1900.

DATE	NOVEL	HISTORICAL EVENT	ILLEGITIMATE BIRTH
1834		Poor Law Amendment Act	
1835			
1836		Muller's Orphan Asylum founded: excludes illegitimates	
1837	<u>Oliver Twist</u>	Accession of Victoria	
1838			
1839			
1840			
1841	<u>Barnaby Rudge</u>		
1842			
1843			
1844		Mother regains right to petition father for maintenance	
1845			
1846			
1847			
1848	<u>Dombey and Son</u>		
1849			
1850			Edmund Alfred Lewes, 16/4/50
1851			Rose Agnes Lewes, 21/10/51
1852		Parliamentary Select Cttee. reports on 'Criminal and Destitute Juveniles'	False rumour of Marian Evans having child by Herbert Spencer
1853	<u>Bleak House</u>		Ethel Isabella Lewes, 9/10/53
1854	<u>Hide and Seek</u>		
1855			
1856			
1857	<u>Little Dorrit</u> <u>The Dead Secret</u>	Acton survey on illegitimacy	Mildred Jane Lewes, 26/5/57
1858			
1859	<u>Adam Bede</u> <u>The Woman in White</u>		
1860	<u>Great Expectations</u>		
1861			
1862	<u>No Name</u>		Birth and Death of son to Ellen Ternan? France, 1862-63
1863	<u>Romola</u>		
1864	<u>Armadale</u>		
1865	<u>Our Mutual Friend</u>		
1866	<u>Felix Holt</u>		
1867		Curgenven lecture on 'Waste of Infant Life'	Ellen Ternan pregnant again?

1868	<u>The Moonstone</u>		
1869			Marian Dawson, 4/7/69 (Unregistered)
1870	<u>Man and Wife</u>	Baby-farmer Margaret Waters hanged; 276 infant corpses found in London alone	.
1871		Female Mission to the Fallen opens first mother and baby home	Constance Harriet "Hettie" Dawson, May 1871 (Unregistered)
1872	<u>Middlemarch</u>	Bastardy Laws Amendment Act Infant Life Protection Act	
1873	<u>The New Magdalen</u>		
1874		Registration of Births Act: all bastards to be registered - father's surname could be used with his permission	William Charles Collins Dawson, 25/12/74 (Registered)
1875			
1876	<u>Daniel Deronda</u> <u>The Two Destinies</u>		
1877			
1878			
1879	<u>The Fallen Leaves</u>		
1880			
1881	<u>The Black Robe</u>		
1882			
1883			
1884			
1885			
1886			
1887			
1888			
1889			
1890		Merrick survey of "fallen women"	
1891			
1892			
1893	<u>A Woman of No Importance</u>	Bill to legitimate bastards on parents' subsequent marriage thrown out by House of Commons after first reading	
1894			
1895	<u>The Importance of Being Earnest</u> <u>Jude the Obscure</u>		
1896	<u>Clara Hopgood</u>		
1897			
1898		Baby-farmer Amelia Dyer hanged for child-murder	False rumour of Marian Evans having had son by John Chapman
1899			
1900			

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