

The height of their ambition is to be beside themselves: the Victorian actress in *No Name* and *The Christian*

Joan Riviere's 1929 essay *Womanliness as Masquerade* discusses several women who are

"acting a part, [putting] on the semblance of a rather uneducated, foolish and bewildered woman yet in the end always making her point" (39).

Riviere suggests that these women aspire to 'masculinity' and use scripted modes of behaviour, an exaggerated mask of femininity in order to obtain what they desire – love, authority, a successful career, independence; things which, she argues, they require at a minimum the permission, if not the assistance, of men. The idea of masquerade was not a new one and has been often repeated since. In 1739, for example, Sophia 'A Lady of Quality' - wrote that

...it is impossible ever to govern subjects rightly, without knowing as well what they really are as what they only seem; which the men can never be supposed to do, while they labour to force women to live in constant masquerade.¹

Riviere argues that most women can adopt the masquerade of femininity because femininity is itself constructed from a series of attributes ascribed to it rather than having any natural qualities. Sophia, on the other hand, suggests that there is a natural femininity; this has more authority than Riviere acknowledges – Sophia suggests that women are compelled to mask a natural femininity, to present themselves as less than they are in order to pacify a patriarchal system which would retaliate if threatened.

In the nineteenth century novel a similar picture emerges of independent thinking women who, through acting, experiment with various aspects of femininity – different types and degrees of attributes ascribed by society to the feminine – and

¹ Sophia, *Woman not inferior to Man* (1739)
<http://www.theabsolute.net/minefield/womnot.pdf> p. 16 – add something here about who it's attributed to .

more importantly learn through their acting experiences how to identify and manipulate the masquerade. In the first half of the century the masquerade, the adoption of these idealised feminine characteristics, is viewed as part of a young girl growing up. Nineteenth century society's image of the angel-woman with her focus firmly on the domestic, supporting and caring for her children and husband, passive and submissive, sweet and gentle, is reflected in the novels in the first half of the century as female protagonists learn to adopt these characteristics as they reach adulthood. In the second half of the century woman's place in society began to alter, with laws of the 1860s to 1880s changing their legal status particularly regarding marriage, divorce and property in response to these changing attitudes. This is reflected in later novels, as heroines became more aware of and more adept in using the variety of masquerades available to them – rather than submissively adopting them because they were presented as part of how an adult woman should behave, the later heroines become more able to manipulate society's views of 'the feminine'. Particularly as they become professional actresses playing a range of characters, these heroines become more self-reflexive and aware of their acting extending beyond the theatre.

The changes of women's positions in society, with the reform bills raising questions over women's legal status, property ownership and rights after marriage in particular, the increase of middle class women seeking employment, all brought into question the notions of a natural femininity. In novels, theatre novels in particular which have at their centre a heroine who is involved in acting and performance, authors exposed and discussed the potential subversion and destabilisation of society which could occur when women were forced to assume the masquerade – and began to manipulate it themselves.

Wilkie Collins's connections to the theatre have been well documented; his amateur acting and stage management experiences which introduced him to Dickens, his playwriting – both original scripts and adaptations of his own work, though these were invariably less successful than his novels – and his frequent theatregoing. Collins in fact considered himself a more talented dramatist than a novelist, hampered by the state of British theatre. He wrote that

If I had been a Frenchman – with such a public to write for, such rewards to win, and such actors to interpret me as the French Stage presents – all the stories I have written from 'Antonia' to 'The Woman in White' would have been told in the dramatic form...If I know anything of my own faculty, it is a dramatic one.²

The successes of his novels, however, have meant that his status as 'father' of the sensation fiction that dominated the 1860s has received more critical attention than his dramas, but theatre itself plays a crucial role in several of his novels. In *No Name* (1862), Magdalen Vanstone experiences a variety of theatre and acting environments in her quest to reclaim her lost inheritance – a familiar theme in sensation fiction. Through private theatricals, a professional acting career and numerous impersonations in her private life, Magdalen experiments with varieties of womanhood – usually erring on the femme fatale end of the angel in house spectrum.

While Collins is a familiar figure both in critical literature and on bookshelves, the other author I will discuss, Hall Caine, is not. Despite his 1897 novel *The Christian* being the first to sell one million copies and listed in *The Telegraph's Best 100 Novels in the World* in 1899, and in addition to numerous other successes, Caine has virtually disappeared from modern critical thinking about the nineteenth century along with his 19 best-selling novels. Caine himself was a celebrity; people queued

² Robert P. Ashley, 'Wilkie Collins and the American Theatre', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 8.4, (Mar 1954) 241-255.

outside his home to catch a glimpse of him. He worked as secretary and companion to Dane Gabriel Rossetti, was present at the poet's death and wrote the first biography of Rossetti. He was friends with Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, and towards the end of his life in 1929 he collaborated on a film version of his novel *The Manxman* which became Alfred Hitchcock's last silent film. His disappearance from the public recognition he sought perhaps demonstrates the timeliness of his work; his stories are intensely dramatic and have a tendency towards the didactic which, as *The Times* commented in his obituary:

often raised his work to a fine fervour; at its worst, it robbed him of his sense of proportion and of his sense of humour.³

This is a reasonable assessment – Caine was aware of the novel's potential to educate and tried to use it to its full extent. Unfortunately Caine lacked the deft touch of Dickens which perhaps accounts for his comparative lack of longevity. His characters and plot lack the humour of Dickens, which would have lightened Caine's insistence on moral education; instead he tends to through his characters, lecture his readers.

Collins's *No Name* protagonist Magdalen Vanstone and Caine's Glory Quayle in *The Christian* both experience various acting environments which enable them to practice modes of femininity in a far more self-conscious way than earlier theatre-novel heroines did. Dicken's suggestion that

every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage⁴

indicates the close connections which existed between the novel and stage in the nineteenth century. The two forms inspired and drew from one another. Adaptations

³ {Unknown, 1931, *The Times*, Obituaries}

⁴ Quoted in {Kobbetts Miller, 2000, *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, -222 @208}

of novels were among the most successful plays in the later half of the century and were rarely off the stage. Novelists wrote with a view to adaptation as well as serialisation and publication; Collins considered himself to be a dramatist compelled to write novels due to the state of British theatre and Caine's novels were adapted for the stage, and then eventually into film. Novelists were also involved in the theatre in other ways; Dickens and Collins were semi-amateur actors, Bram Stoker was a theatre manager working with Henry Irving (and a friend to Hall Caine), Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a professional actress, and authors from Austen to Brontë to Hardy were keen theatregoers. Given this involvement and the place of theatre in the nineteenth century as a social occasion and gathering place, it is unsurprising that theatre of some variety features in so many nineteenth century novels.

Technological advances in theatre led to its increased professionalisation – with more expensive sets, lighting, costumes and effects ranging from a train crash to a thunder storm, theatres had to become more professional, in part to meet their rising costs, and in part because the various aspects of the design and manufacture of the production grew to demand an increased level of specialism. Christopher Kent's excellent study *Image and Reality: The Actress and Society* studies the rise of the actress as the place of theatre in society shifted. Alongside the production becoming more professional, so did acting itself. Kent also identifies an increased acceptance of actors and actresses in society; there were ten times the number of actors and actresses recorded in 1911 than 1841, and in the last fifteen years of the century there were nineteen marriages between actresses and aristocracy. Actresses did not become wholly acceptable; the shame Magdalen feels and the treatment Glory receives because of their experiments with acting demonstrate that the profession was still not considered to be wholly

suitable for a middle class woman, but it was gaining recognition. The figure of the actress is a clear example of the nineteenth-century dichotomy of the angel and the whore, and the increasing difficulty through the century of placing women in just one category. The changes in middle-class participation in theatre are also clear in the types of acting these heroines experience. Theatre within the home is prevalent at the beginning of the century with the private theatricals of *Mansfield Park*, charades in *Jane Eyre* and the semi-private performance in *Villette*, to an invited audience.

Magdalen Vanstone also participates in private theatricals at the beginning of *No Name* but this novel demonstrates the crossover point at which middle class actresses began to move out of the home and into professional careers, a transition completed by Glory Quayle's professional acting in *The Christian*. Performances in the home are a part of the early socialisation of girls into adopting the 'appropriate' modes of femininity. When acting moves outside the home, becoming more professional, the masquerade begins to break down. Collins and Caine both question the nature of womanhood, whether it is the binary figured as the natural code of behaviours – the angel, being threatened by seduction and immorality and at risk of becoming the whore – or whether it is in fact fluid, mutable and not so easily categorised.

Magdalen Vanstone's acting experiences of acting give her a chance to explore a variety of feminine behaviour and the reactions of others when she adopts them. She uses this to get what she wants – the return of the inheritance she lost when it was discovered that she and her sister were illegitimate, and the restoration of her name. Magdalen is aware enough of the masquerade to be able to use it to her advantage. She recognizes that people can be taught to act the part they wish to play in society. When trading positions with her maid Louisa she remarks that a lady is simply

a woman who wears a silk gown and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back and the sense in your head. (613)

She also adopts the position of a more authoritative servant, that of her governess

Miss Garth. In her first acting experience, a private theatrical version of Sheridan's

The Rivals she plays two characters. The first is Lucy, the manipulative servant who passes letters from one character to another, lying about their origins in order to ensure her payment. The second, Julia, is a young woman, a fairly insipid character but this serves to prove that the fears of her lover, Faulkland, are the product of his imagination and his ideas of romantic love as a torturous, all-consuming passion.

With echoes of *Mansfield Park*, Magdalen and Frank's relationship develops through the play though, unlike Mary Crawford and Edmund Bertram, simply as a result of spending more time together rather than as a reflection of the characters they play. In *The Rivals* Frank, who later becomes engaged to Magdalen, plays Faulkland – the same narcissistic, overly-sentimental character that he is himself with a tendency to blame others for his misfortune and lack of talent. Magdalen, however, plays characters which are very different to herself, enabling her to try different types of womanhood. The manipulative and scheming Lucy is played from her imagination, but for the role of Julia, Magdalen takes her sister as a model. Norah, watching from the audience, sees

All her own little formal peculiarities of manner and movement, unblushingly reproduced – and even the very tone of her voice so accurately mimicked from time to time that the accents startled her as if she was speaking herself, with an echo on the stage. (62)

In playing these two roles Magdalen experiments with the duality that she experiences throughout the novel, the difference between the innocent, well brought up and demure young woman her family intended her to be, compared to the scheming and deceptive woman she becomes in order to retrieve her fortune. Lucy and Julia in *The*

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Rivals demonstrate both sides of the angel/whore binary, and this is Magdalen's first real experience with it and with the suggestion that they are not mutually exclusive – she can, after all, play both without having been typical of either in her real life.

Her later professional experiences are in *at Home* performances – modelled on Charles Mathew's performances popular in the 1820s, Magdalen performs a series of monologues. *At Homes* consisted of a

table entertainment in which a monologue provided the avenue for anecdote, jest and song that [carried the] audience through a series of amusing adventures and provided the opportunity for imitations of all the human oddities encountered along the way⁵

Magdalen is incredibly skilled; her performances enable her to play many different characters over the course of an evening and in just a couple of months she was able to earn £1000 – around £90,000 in modern terms, and Michael Booth estimates that when Marie Wilton opened the Prince of Wales theatre in 1865 she did so for around £900.⁶ Madge Kendals' *Dramatic Opinions* published in 1933 and based on her life as an actress suggested that a high salary in 1880 would be £20 a week, or around £1000 a year. (105)

Magdalen recognizes the value of the masquerade; her own personality is exuberant and independent once she loses her place in society she must learn how to behave in different ways depending on her situation, surrounds and goals. Magdalen is one of the women who, Riviere suggested, assumed womanliness

to be worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it. (38)

Magdalen knowingly uses her governess's and sister's feminine behaviours, which she has practiced through her acting, to obtain authority and control while pretending to Noel Vanstone that he is guiding their relationship and controlling her. She adopts a

⁵ {Klepac, 2004, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography}

⁶ {Booth, 1995, Theatre in the Victorian Age @32}

similar approach with Captain Wragge; though he orchestrates her theatre tour and for some time considers himself to be successfully defrauding her of the majority of her earnings, he later finds that she is entirely aware of the measures he has been taking to control her. Even with her recognition of the masquerade she still can't reject it entirely and demand her ambitions on her own terms.

Glory Quayle in Caine's *The Christian* begins her acting career in the same place as Magdalen, in *At home* performances though in her case she literally takes her performance into the home, performing her monologue in parlours and drawing rooms rather than in theatres. Glory is as aware of the demand for the masquerade as Magdalen but unlike Magdalen, tries her hardest to avoid acquiescing. She has a very strong sense of her own character, and struggles when expected to behave in a different way. Glory has very strong moral values, and holds others to them – her decision to leave the hospital where she is training as a nurse is in part because of the hypocrisy of the board of directors who fire a nurse who has become pregnant after an illicit affair with one of them. That she takes up an acting career demonstrates something of the change in status of profession by the time of the novel, set in the last quarter of the century.

Glory's experiments with femininities isn't confined to the stage, though she plays a range of women as a chorus girl. She comes into many in the theatre; a programme seller who with her boyfriend takes Glory to a club frequented by prostitutes, and the ballet chorus girls who are more sexually knowing than they 'should' be. Caine doesn't shy from the working class actresses, and the potential for girls in the theatre to be corrupted but he insists that the theatre is not a special case; girls are equally at risk in nursing or other professions. Glory can adopt the masquerade when required, for

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example returning to her grandfather's home on the Isle of Man, she behaves as she knows he would prefer – but for a limited time, and in deference to their relationship rather than because she needs something from him. For the most part she tries to live in society without the façade of 'appropriate' womanhood. Like the new women beginning to emerge at the end of the century, claiming a greater role and a greater equality in society, Glory tries to make her place in the world without acquiescing to the two men of the novel; Lord Drake, a politician who helps with her acting career and attempts to become her lover, and John Storm, a vicar whom she has known since childhood. Both demand that she change her behaviour - Storm wanting her to give up her acting career, Drake wanting her to behave 'more like an actress'. Glory's sexual experiences are a part of what marks her as a new woman, and are indicative of Caine's radical approach to his heroine. Glory is kissed by Drake, and eventually makes love to Storm; her guilt when she is involved with Drake contrasted to the sensuous, remorseless morning after with Storm indicate that it is not the act itself which Caine portrays as corrupting for the girls working in the theatre, but the emotions behind it – relationships purely for profit and advancement are criticised. Glory's sexual experience as part of a loving relationship, however, Caine portrays as acceptable, and inevitable.

Collins is sympathetic to Magdalen but ensures that she cannot be accused of being wanton or overly sexualised. Magdalen's sexuality, when it emerges, is presented as a natural part of her personality and unthreatening. It's suggested that her marriage to Noel remains unconsummated, meaning she is driven by financial need rather than through any sexual motivation. At the end of the novel she is physically submissive to

her second husband; Magdalen is protected from accusations of wantonness which might blunt Collins's point regarding the legal position of women.

Magdalen and Glory both attempt to use their understanding of the masquerade to achieve authority and a form of equality alongside their more material objective financial independence. Virginia Woolf said nearly seventy years after the publication of *No Name* that it was "necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry."⁷ Magdalen and Glory both recognised that financial independence was essential to enable them to live with authority and equality. Magdalen uses the masquerade to her advantage but Glory tries to use her recognition of it to remove it from her actions. She enjoys her acting career but sees it as a career confined to the stage rather than something to continue in her everyday life; she would rather achieve authority as herself, the authentic rather than the façade. The change in the importance of the masquerade becomes complete with Glory; she eventually gives up her acting career but does so when she wants to rather than at the insistence of someone else. She consistently behaves the way that she wants to – on occasion she may slip into the role others expect of her, for example the dutiful granddaughter when with her grandfather or the actress allowing Lord Drake to treat her casually, but these are momentary responses to external pressure and cause her great anxiety. The acting experiences both women have give them an understanding of the masquerade which is lacking in earlier heroines. Magdalen begins to manipulate this without truly achieving her goals through, but Glory discovers that by turning her back on the masquerade she can in fact claim authority for herself.

⁷ A Room of One's Own, chapter five