

## Melodrama and the Penitent Woman Tableau in Victorian Culture: From Tennyson to Conrad

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### Abstract

This essay investigates an important stock scene of female peril and suffering from Victorian melodrama that I am calling the penitent woman tableau. I argue that this highly iconographic staged moment, where a sexually fallen daughter, fiancée, or wife sinks to her knees in remorse at the sight of the father, lover, or husband she has betrayed, derives its emotional energy and cultural force less from its representation of feminine terror and more from its equivocal portrayal of masculine authority. The penitent woman tableau spotlights a tense moment where violence against a woman could occur but doesn't; it is a performance of masculine power where the man's physical force is implicitly available but never literalized. Both visual artists and writers of the Victorian period were drawn to this scene, which I believe fascinated audiences because it spotlights the difficulty of representing masculine mastery in a society increasingly skeptical of physical force as a desirable means of domestic discipline. By examining the penitent woman tableau across several Victorian media and literary genres, including painting, poetry by Alfred Tennyson, and fiction by Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Joseph Conrad, I not only attempt to enrich our understanding of the unstable nature of masculine authority within the middle-class mid-Victorian family but also to illuminate the ways in which melodramatic conventions were crucial to the exploration of this urgent social question. Melodrama, often thought of as both feminine and conservative, offers a surprisingly complex depiction of masculinity within the penitent woman tableau.

In using "I believe," a form of *self mention*, the writer centers herself as an assessor of the significance of the topic. In this case, "believe" operates as a *hedge*.

The abstract highlights the significance of the research in this particular area of literary studies. The development of arguments in the abstract reflect the development of the same in the research article, such as the theories used and the texts on which the author conducts the close reading.

The writer uses the *booster* "surprisingly" to strengthen the potential significance of her reading of the penitent woman tableau and the aspects of melodrama overlooked by other literary scholars.

In literary criticism, research articles do not follow the IMRaD structure typical of the sciences and social sciences: Introduction, **M**ethods, **R**esults, and **D**iscussion. Research articles that follow the IMRaD structure, title the sections according to that structure. However, in this article, the author forgoes section headings altogether. That may reflect a disciplinary practice.

The writer provides a “Note” to secure the claim in the sentence. The citation in the “Note” establishes common ground (*shared knowledge*) amongst scholars in the field.

The use of “however” provides a transition for readers from established knowledge in the discipline, the literature review, to the current contribution -- “I will investigate.”

The writer facilitates reader engagement by identifying and describing a literary trope already familiar within the field of Victorian literary studies.

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The writer begins to sketch out the broader concepts and concerns of the research (melodrama, representations of female peril and suffering, amplification) and situates the study within an ongoing scholarly conversation amongst Victorianists.

Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, melodramatic heroines struggled through spectacular scenes of extreme physical jeopardy: lashed to railway tracks, abandoned in snowstorms, threatened by mobs, adrift on ice floes.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, however, I will investigate another, equally important stock melodramatic scene of female peril and suffering, one that paradoxically derives its emotional energy and cultural force by refraining from the explicit depiction of physical violence against women rather than by amplifying the representation of it.

The writer highlights her authority as a knowledge maker: she coins a term for the kind of scene she identifies (i.e., the penitent woman tableau).

In this section, the writer forecasts (“I will begin by”) the structure of the study and the chain of argumentation. She points to the significance of her contribution in a field overlooked by previous research.

The word “but” introduces the research gap or knowledge deficit this study fills. The writer develops this research gap further in the *literature review* on the next page.

Indeed, this scene spotlights a tense moment where violence against a woman could occur but doesn’t, a simultaneous performance of both profound female terror and masculine self-restraint that resonated so powerfully with writers and visual artists of the Victorian period that they returned to it again and again. I call this scene the penitent woman tableau: that highly iconic melodramatic moment where a sexually fallen daughter, fiancée, or wife sinks to the ground in remorse at the sight of the father, lover, or husband she has betrayed (**fig. 1**, S. C. Allen and Company’s late-nineteenth-century theatrical poster of the Little Theatre’s production of *East Lynne*). As the man stands over her, the woman supplicates, conveying her contrition and fear by kneeling, groveling, or even outright cowering. Although other scholars have acknowledged the popularity of this scene, they have tended to examine only the portrayal of the fallen woman within it. But a close reading of the penitent woman tableau not only complicates our understanding of middle-class masculine authority during this period but also illuminates the ways in which the formal conventions of melodrama—especially the tableau—helped to articulate some of the most important cultural questions of the nineteenth century. I will begin by exploring the melodramatic conventions of the scene and will follow with an examination of several key instances of the penitent woman tableau in art and literature, including Augustus Egg’s popular triptych *Past and Present* (1858), Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1859-99), and several mid- to late-century novels.

The writer forecasts for readers the next steps in the analysis and the structure of the paper (i.e., “begin by,” “will follow with,” “ultimately.”) These phrases provide readers with a “map” to help them anticipate and manage information.

Ultimately, I suggest that the penitent woman tableau illuminates not only the reciprocal relationship between masculine self-control and feminine intimidation within the Victorian domestic ideal but also the difficulty of representing masculine mastery in a society increasingly skeptical of physical violence as a desirable means of domestic discipline. As Anna Clark observes, “wifebeating slowly became illegal” (“Domesticity” 27) over the course of the nineteenth century, “as the middle class, motivated by Evangelicalism and humanitarianism, demanded rational, efficient protection” (31). The penitent woman tableau can

Earlier, the writer used a numbered “Note” to introduce and identify a scholarly source. However, it is more typical of writing in literary studies (in English) to name and cite others in the sentence itself. The *citation* reflects the role of the researcher as a knowledge producer.

The writer *refers to herself* (“I”) to identify, for readers, her contribution to the scholarly conversation.

In the disciplinary context of literary studies, writers often present their own arguments, findings, and claims with some degree of uncertainty; that is, they *hedge* the claim such that it seems plausible, not certain. The choice to hedge with words such as “suggest” is a part of the process of scholarly knowledge production. The writer offers the contribution to the disciplinary community for assessment and evaluation.

be read as a compelling response to this broad cultural change, one that attempts to navigate between older and newer forms of masculine power in the domestic sphere.

To begin to understand the cultural authority of the penitent woman tableau, it must first be recognized as a melodramatic moment, even when it occurs in other media and venues besides the stage.<sup>2</sup> As others have observed, melodrama is profoundly visual and does not merely subordinate dialogue so much as actively resist it, favoring what Elaine Hadley calls “nonlinguistic forms of representation—physical gestures, political actions, and visual clues” (4). One step away from the diorama or the pantomime, melodramas unfold through a series of abrupt scenic shifts that propel the action forward, achieving what Michael Booth describes as “emotion in a framework of fast, short and rapidly changing scenes mounted with a maximum of sensation and scenic effect” (39). “Motion [on the melodramatic stage],” remarks Martin Meisel, “in effect was movement to and away from pictures (or, more radically, was the succession of pictures)” (67). Or, as Carolyn Williams has more recently suggested, “The temporal form of melodrama may be described as a rhythmic alternation between movement and stasis” (49). In other words, Victorian melodrama works to create pictures, and it periodically arrests the action to linger on static visual moments within the narrative. The heart of melodrama’s visual language is the tableau, a lengthy pause where the actors temporarily freeze their physical positions, transforming the onstage action or conflict into a fixed and emotionally loaded pictorial scene usually accompanied by music. At this moment, remarks Peter Brooks, “symbolic action entirely replaces words” (61). Because it invariably elicited a frisson of excitement in the audience, the tableau bears a striking resemblance to the “sensation scene.” Stopping the narrative dead in its tracks, the tableau plays a crucial role in melodramatic production, for it focuses both the play’s technical energies and its central thematic conflicts. In a purely formal sense, the tableau embodies melodrama’s quintessential attributes: highly fraught visual and auditory cues, hyperbolic emotion, exaggerated dynamics of revelation and confrontation. But its iconographic mode of representation also helps it to spotlight important cultural concerns. If, as Martha Vicinus claims, melodrama manifests “primal fears clothed in everyday dress” (128), then those primal fears emerge most fully and visibly at those moments when the action coalesces into a tableau.

The penitent woman tableau, where the remorseful woman signals her shame and regret by dropping to the ground to await masculine censure and discipline, captivated Victorian

The first three sentences of this paragraph detail the hypothesis/argument that structures her analysis of the “penitent woman tableau” in Victorian literature.

audiences. What made it so appealing? The obvious answer is that the iconography of the scene, which echoes the story of Mary Magdalene kneeling at Christ's feet, visibly reaffirms a tradition of voluntary feminine submission in the face of (possibly divine) masculine authority. Hence, most scholarly interpretations of this scene have focused primarily on its implications for women, noting that in one highly charged, compact spectacle, the staged revelation of the woman's guilt and contrition effectively "reassert[s] [feminine] virtue's function as the visible, familiar, and inalienable foundation of familial cohesiveness" (Hadley 155). Although the woman's transgression often carries dire consequences, including her exile or death, at least her remorse signals her embrace of the family as an institution, since her regret confirms the integrity of the traditional gender roles on which the authority of the family is based. In other words, as a late-nineteenth-century theatrical poster of the Little Theatre's production of *East Lynne* illustrates (see fig. 1), the penitent woman tableau exploits feminine regret to reinforce the domestic ideal.<sup>3</sup> In this melodramatic depiction, Lady Isabel, who has betrayed her husband by running away with another man, not only supplicates on her knees in front of him but also earnestly reaches up to touch his chest. Her intimate gesture and remorseful awareness of her transgression cannot restore their marriage but reaffirms their bond as husband and wife, upholding the social virtues of marriage even while it spotlights Isabel's personal failure.

But if the display of the corrosive effect and recuperation of transgressive feminine sexuality is admittedly a crucial aspect of the penitent woman tableau, then the urgency and intensity with which this scene was reproduced beyond the melodramatic stage suggests that perhaps there was more at stake than a comforting reiteration of feminine purity and traditional gender hierarchy. Indeed, the penitent woman tableau is often less concerned with the figure of the woman prostrate on the ground and more invested in the portrayal of the man's reaction to her remorse, an issue to which considerably less scholarly attention has been paid. In the *East Lynne* poster, for instance, it is Carlyle, not Isabel, who is the true focus of the tableau. Standing upright at the center of the composition with clenched fists and eyes turned heavenward, Carlyle vibrates with barely suppressed feeling. His closed fists signal both the potential for a physical outburst as well as his extreme self-control, and his earnest, prayerful gaze upward suggests that he requires special aid in order to restrain himself. The image implies that either he will continue to suppress his pent-up disappointment and anger or he will erupt into violence, capturing him in a moment of equivocation where he may or may not choose to discipline his wife.

Once again the writer points to the research gap or knowledge deficit in the field, which the current study addresses: her "reading" of the penitent woman tableau in art and literature.

The introductory sections conclude and the writer moves into the body of the paper in which they will conduct close readings, apply theories and develop new interpretations.

Hence, the penitent woman tableau is more than just a spectacle of feminine remorse. It also reveals the ambiguous role that physical dominance plays in Victorian families and especially within middle-class marriage, revealing a fundamental tension at the heart of the domestic ideal. Although physical violence is anathema to bourgeois conceptions of domesticity, that ideal is nevertheless founded on the husband's power to coerce obedience through brute force—a power that J. S. Mill and many other reformers repeatedly observed was sanctioned by Victorian law.<sup>4</sup> Socially, however, the notion of attaining patriarchal mastery through physical violence was increasingly frowned upon, and the penitent woman tableau explores the complexities of attaining masculine authority in a middle-class culture progressively more uneasy with—yet still attracted to—the idea of violence as a legitimate method of domestic control. I will now turn to several cases of the penitent woman tableau in both art and literature that use the iconography of this melodramatic scene to meditate on masculine power. All of these tableaux exploit melodrama's contrast between visual stasis and narrative movement to raise the threat of corporal punishment as a potential response to feminine disobedience, but all refrain from documenting that discipline explicitly, leaving it as a troubling but also tantalizing possibility.

In these two concluding sentences of the *literature review*, the writer details the research site (“several cases of the penitent women tableau in both art and literature”). The writer also establishes her main claims about these scenes that the article

I begin with the first painting in Augustus Egg's triptych *Past and Present*, often cited as the quintessential representation of the Victorian fallen woman and discussed by literary scholars and art historians in the context of adultery and prostitution (**fig. 2**, Egg's *Past and Present*).<sup>5</sup> Like the theatrical poster of *East Lynne*, this image is a penitent woman tableau, and most contemporary readings of it concentrate on the woman's role within the scene. But Egg's painting attends as carefully to the husband as it does to the spectacle of his wife's remorse. Although the wife swoons in the foreground of the composition, her face remains hidden. Egg renders the husband's face more completely, making him the painting's focal point and of course the apex of the triangular composition always created by the penitent woman tableau. At first glance, the husband seems incapable of any kind of action, appearing drained. Joseph Kestner suggests that “the paterfamilias in *Past and Present* can no longer assume the certainty of his moral persuasion and power” (161), and Lynda Nead goes so far as to argue that in this painting, “[t]he husband is produced as victim” (74). Yet Egg's tableau hints, if only obliquely, at the possibility of the husband's physical reprisal against his wife. Although he sits limply in a chair, one of his fists is clenched, while the other grips a crumpled letter. A picture, “perhaps of the wife's lover” (Nead 73), lies smashed beneath one foot. As so many others have observed, the

In this section, the writer begins to analyze the text. Typically, in the field of literary studies, researchers introduce aspects of the text to be analyzed and conduct a close reading of specific textual features.

painting stresses breakdown and ruin: the couple's daughters play with a toppled house of cards; one half of an apple has fallen to the floor while the other has been stabbed with a knife; a painting of a shipwreck hangs on the wall.<sup>6</sup> Egg's details, in other words, work overtime to suggest that the moment represents the aftermath of some tumultuous event. The painting's role within a triptych further alerts the viewer that this tableau is embedded within an ongoing narrative, inviting speculation about what happened in the moments immediately after the husband opened the revealing letter. The husband has smashed a picture; the wife has fallen to the floor; the daughters have been startled from their play. The painting refuses to reveal how—or in what order—these events transpired. In other words, there is a before and an after to this image—or, perhaps more accurately, a past and present.<sup>7</sup> The temporal awareness that the triptych promotes, reminding the viewer of the narrative possibilities beyond the moment in time that Egg has captured, raises the possibility of domestic violence by suggesting that Egg could have painted the husband striking his wife to the floor. The husband of Egg's painting may not have chosen not to discipline his wife physically, but the imagery of violent disruption suggests that he could have and perhaps did.

Originally featured at the center of the triptych, Egg's tableau leaves open the potential for the husband's physical punishment of his wife, and this possibility made the painting deeply compelling to Victorian audiences.<sup>8</sup> Most of the reviews immediately seized upon its sublimated violence: T. J. Edelstein points out that "Francis Turner Palgrave called it 'Tale of Terror'" (208-09), echoing the literal physical peril of Gothic heroines, while the *Art Journal* remarked that a "whirlwind of passion . . . must have just burst forth in that room" (168), suggesting that the husband's current "heaving under the agony of the shock" (168) was preceded by something far worse. The *Athenaeum*'s review of *Past and Present* proclaimed that

[t]here must be a line drawn as to where the horrors that should not be painted for public and innocent sight begin, and we think Mr. Egg has put one foot at least beyond this line. . . . The first scene . . . shows us the husband just returned from a journey, reading a little note, . . . [which] has disclosed his wife's disgrace. He has screamed it forth,—throwing her shame like a dash of burning vitriol full in her spotted face. Poor sinful creature! it has felled her like a blow from a murderer's club. She lies face foremost on the ground in a swoon, her white braceleted-arms stretched out as if to fend [sic] a death-stroke. (566)

Later, the *Athenaeum* wonders if perhaps the painting is not about infidelity at all, speculating that “[t]he distracted husband might be a drunken gamester reading the news of his loss after a quarrel, in which he has beaten his wife to the floor” (566). Either way, the review suggests that he is capable of extreme violence.<sup>9</sup> The lurid characterization of Egg’s husband as a club-wielding murderer, an exaggeration obvious from the wife’s live presence in the last painting from the triptych, responds to the potential for physical discipline suggested but not explicitly represented by the tableau moment.

Indeed, the *Athenaeum*’s reference to the club goes so far as to imply a connection between Egg’s paintings and one of the most famous depictions of domestic violence in nineteenth-century fiction: Bill Sikes’s brutal murder of Nancy in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) (**fig. 3**, Harry Furniss’s “The Death of Nancy” [1910]).<sup>10</sup> Dickens’s melodramatic depiction of Nancy’s murder, a startlingly visceral moment of violence, is surely one of the most intensely theatrical episodes of his fiction. The murder begins as Bill Sikes draws back the curtain of Nancy’s bed, after which he drags her to the middle of the room—or center stage—before he beats her to death, first with the butt of his gun and then with a “heavy club” (316). As Nancy pleads for mercy, Dickens escalates the violence, depicting her as “nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead” (316) as she affects the classic posture of the penitent woman. Struggling to her knees, she pauses in a pose of supplication, holding Rose Maylie’s white handkerchief aloft and breathing “one prayer for mercy” (317) before Bill’s final blow. The difference between Dickens’s graphic depiction of feminine terror and the typical penitent woman tableau as exemplified by the *East Lynne* poster or Egg’s painting is, of course, that the penitent middle-class wife ultimately gets up and walks out the door.<sup>11</sup> But Egg’s painting so successfully conjures the aftermath of an actual murder (sans the blood and club) that the *Athenaeum* compulsively draws a connection between the two forms of violence represented in each scene.

The penitent woman tableau thus seized the cultural imagination not because it rejected what mid-Victorian culture viewed as working-class forms of physical brutality in the domestic sphere but because it equivocated between them. The effectiveness of the husband’s actions in Egg’s painting registers in the daughter’s startled glance: whatever the husband has done to bring his wife to the floor, the punishment for feminine disobedience will be absorbed as a lesson by the next generation of women in the family. But *Past and Present*’s portrayal literally temporizes

about the necessity for physical discipline within the scene. Without actually reproducing an upsetting and socially unacceptable scene of wife beating in a middle-class household, it creates a break in the narrative progression that comes as close to a portrayal of domestic violence as it can without compromising the bourgeois ideal of masculine self-control. The penitent woman tableau is a display of extreme female vulnerability to the aggrieved man's possibly violent reaction, a moment when women, especially wives, are exposed to the intimidation of potential physical force. Moreover, it invests the woman's show of penitence with an erotic charge. After all, hers is almost always a sexual transgression, and the formal postures of each party—the woman's prostrate, vulnerable form contrasted with the man's upright (and, in many cases) erect, hard stance—visually reminds the audience of the scene's inherent sexual violence. If the woman who has transgressed is a wife, then the tableau raises the possibility that her husband might exact his punishment through rape, a legal right up until mid-century and a distinct possibility even after it became a crime. A. James Hammerton notes that although "rape became a marital offence in 1857, warranting a divorce decree, it was never defined, the drafters of the act taking for granted that it could not occur in marriage" (202n). Clark further observes that although Victorians grew increasingly concerned about the possibility of rape on the city streets, the home was not considered a site of sexual danger. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, remarks Clark, which raised the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen, "included a watered-down clause which made sexual harassment of a chaste girl by a guardian or master an assault" ("Sexual Violence" 711), but the act did not address the possibility that a husband might choose to discipline his wife through sexual assault. The penitent woman tableau reminds us that the dishonored husband might decide to deploy a more traditional version of masculine authority, one where the husband's assertion of his sexual rights over his wife is an acceptable method of establishing clear boundaries for her own sexual behavior.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that although the swiftly decisive physical violence portrayed in *Oliver Twist* violated mid-century conceptions of polite domesticity, Victorian audiences notoriously clamored for Dickens to read Nancy's death over and over.<sup>12</sup> As the *Athenaeum's* eagerness to place a club in the hands of the betrayed husband in Egg's *Past and Present* suggests, there was something compelling, possibly even appealing, about Sikes's ability to take action in a mid-century Victorian world where middle-class masculine authority seemed increasingly ungrounded. As Frances Dolan observes, arguments against the physical discipline



of women were available for some time before the Victorian period: domestic reformers in early modern culture, for instance, also “argued that refraining from violence is more dignified, authoritative, and expedient [for men] than resorting to it” (84). But, as Martin Wiener has demonstrated, the nineteenth century was a “watershed” (xii) moment for the social and legal regulation of masculine violence. Wiener argues that “men’s violence, particularly against women, became in this period a matter of greater import than ever before, evoking strong but complex and often conflicting sentiments and legal actions and that in the end, such violence was viewed with ever-greater disapproval and treated with ever-greater severity” (xii). Ultimately, as James Eli Adams and others have noted, middle-class masculine authority in the Victorian period was supposed to originate in a man’s reserve of power, a form of mental self-discipline rather than the open display of physical strength.<sup>13</sup> While the Victorian bourgeoisie invoked such restraint in order to distinguish middle- and upper-class masculine behavior from the coarse physicality they assigned to lower-class men, representations of masculine reserve also tend to portray it as an equivocal form of power—hardly the unambiguous message produced by displays of physical force. Though widely repudiated, the idea of physical dominance over wives remained appealing as a form of masculine authority that—while crude—was unequivocal and absolute. The audience watching the suspended scene of the penitent woman tableau knows that in that moment, the betrayed husband will not surrender his self-control, but, in suggesting that he did or could, the tableau implies that physical violence underwrites middle-class masculine authority. The tableau refrains from the exhibition of physical force but fully articulates it as a possibility, an ever-present if muted prospect within melodramatic narrative.

To further establish her contribution, the writer positions the tableau within the canon of an established nineteenth-century writer (Tennyson) and proposes a new reading in this context. Later, the writer focuses on the tableau in the works of William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and Joseph Conrad and so develops an argument about the function of the tableau in changing gender norms of the Victorian era.

→ The cultural resonance of the penitent woman tableau may be gauged by its importance to Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, which summons the tableau—and its attendant theme of masculine domination—to resist the weakening of traditional male authority and the masculine lyric voice. Much scholarly energy has been devoted to investigating what Herbert Tucker calls Tennyson’s “generic miscegenation” in *Idylls* (“Trials” 444), but little attention has been paid to Tennyson’s affinity for melodrama, which surfaces primarily in his penchant for creating tableaux. As Hadley suggests, the melodramatic mode “resists romantic poetry’s interiorization of the subject” (11), and I propose that melodrama provides Tennyson with strategies for resisting the potentially unmasculine solipsism of lyric. Tennyson achieves social authority for his lyric voice, in other words, by calling forth the melodramatic tableau, which in his poetry operates as a narrative

disruption that checks the unmasculine rehearsal of grief and loss threatening to overwhelm his work. The extravagantly elegiac character of Tennyson's early lyric voice was associated with a feminized passivity and weakness—Adams points out that there was “a widely shared suspicion of [Tennyson] as a figure resistant to manly self-discipline” (133)—but his ability to deploy the visual language of melodrama help to redirect this potentially unmasculine energy into more conventional patriarchal forms.<sup>14</sup>

*Idylls* is punctuated throughout by luminous tableau moments, and the poem inspired a plethora of visual adaptations throughout the nineteenth century, including the photographic series Tennyson commissioned from Julia Margaret Cameron. “So like a painted battle the war stood / Silenced, the living quiet as the dead” (“The Coming of Arthur” 121-22), Tennyson says of Arthur's triumphant first battle, a remark that presages the many “painted” scenes to come.<sup>15</sup> Marylu Hill reads these lines as gesturing toward photography—“[T]he *Idylls* are full of what one might facetiously call ‘Kodak moments’” (450), she observes—but Tennyson's emphasis on paint points to stage scenery, evoking the presence of melodrama. In a poem that underscores the power of the visual and, more particularly, the theatrical force of the staged moment, the most significant tableau in *Idylls* occurs, of course, in “Guinevere,” where the shamed queen grovels at Arthur's feet in a melodramatic performance of her guilt and remorse. In this remarkable episode, Arthur and Guinevere reenact the penitent wife tableau from nineteenth-century domestic melodrama. He stands; she shrinks away. He browbeats; she cowers. A melodramatic interlude, the scene briefly interrupts the ongoing narrative of Camelot's decline and ruin, as the poem momentarily abandons the epic battles of “The Last Tournament” and tightens its focus on Arthur and Guinevere alone in her convent quarters. Save for a single disruptive trumpet blast, the war outside fades away, leaving only the intimate surroundings of domestic drama: husband, wife, bedroom.

Before his arrival in Guinevere's convent chamber, Arthur's misty, questionable corporeality seems profoundly at odds with the marked visibility of the melodramatic body. As others have observed, Arthur is often alarmingly ephemeral. Both he and Camelot threaten to disappear from the earth, and Arthur frequently appears—as he does in Leodogran's dream—to be already in heaven. Much of Arthur's authority, moreover, derives from what Eliot Gilbert identifies in his well-known essay as the king's apocalyptic break with conventional masculinity, for Arthur's moral purity and his lack of libidinal energy align him with Victorian conceptions of

the feminine. Arthur plays “the part usually assigned by culture to women” (233), remarks Gilbert. But although Arthur’s “restrained, almost maidenly” (Gilbert 229) approach to leadership may be his dominant style, Clinton Machann has more recently noted that the poem also contains much evidence of Arthur the “warrior king” (208), evident, for instance, in the depiction of Arthur standing victorious atop a pile of corpses at the Battle of Mount Baden: “High on a heap of slain, from spur to plume / Red as the rising sun with heathen blood, . . .” (“Lancelot and Elaine” 302-04). I would argue further that Tennyson not only depicts Arthur as displaying a more traditional version of masculine authority on the battlefield but also periodically portrays him as a man fully cognizant of more traditional masculine methods of disciplining women. When an angry widow discourteously demands a favor from Arthur in “Gareth and Lynette,” for instance, Arthur warns her that as a response to her rudeness he may dispense a corporeal punishment of the kind practiced by earlier courts: “The kings of old had doom’d thee to the flames; / Aurelius Emrys would have scourged thee dead, / And Uther slit thy tongue; but get thee hence— / Lest that rough humor of the kings of old / Return upon me!” (366-70). If the threat is not serious, Arthur’s point is: “rough humor” is always available in the wings. Chivalric restrictions on masculine violence are thus underscored by the threat of physical brutality rather than operating as an alternative to such threats. Throughout *Idylls*, Tennyson reveals that Arthur’s domination over his subjects depends on his physical strength as much as his moral piety and chaste self-restraint.

Indeed, on his way to Guinevere’s convent bedroom, the hazy, heavenly Arthur transforms into someone frighteningly physical. Dressed in full armor, heavy footsteps striking the floor, Tennyson constructs Arthur’s impending denouncement of Guinevere as a military attack, portraying him as an “armèd warrior” (“Guinevere” 406) whose “armed feet / Thro’ the long gallery from the outer doors / Rang coming, . . .” (409-11). Without touching her, the force of his indignation knocks her to the ground, where she remains throughout the course of Arthur’s speech: “[P]rone from off her seat she fell, / And grovell’d with her face against the floor. / There with her milk-white arms and shadowy hair / She made her face a darkness from the King” (411-14). Tennyson underscores the duration of her groveling by punctuating Arthur’s long monologue with periodic descriptions of Guinevere’s prostrate form—“[Arthur] paused, and in the pause she crept an inch / Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet” (524-25)—which help to achieve the sense of sustained staging conveyed in an onstage melodramatic tableau. As Arthur

chastises her, Guinevere acknowledges her crime in a mute gesture of melodrama, helplessly awaiting either her husband's forgiveness or punishment.

The tableau constructed in this scene, in which a fully armed husband stands imposingly over his groveling wife, suggests that Arthur might physically discipline Guinevere for her transgression—or at least makes this possibility strongly imaginable. Arthur's vigorous verbal denouncement, in which he compulsively foregrounds Guinevere's body, only furthers this impression. He fixates on Guinevere's "golden head" (532), the "hair, with which [he] used to play" (544), and her "imperial-moulded form, . . ." (545). He lingeringly catalogs her lips, hands, hair, and flesh, a word he at one point repeats no less than three times in one sentence (550-51). He emphasizes the idea of physical contact, telling Guinevere, "I cannot touch thy lips" (548)—a remark that Tennyson changed in his original manuscript from the less sensual "I cannot *keep* thy lips."<sup>16</sup> Arthur's painfully tardy awareness of his wife as a physical, sexual presence reveals his anguished sense of loss, but his verbal fragmentation of her body (lips, hair, and hands) also reminds Guinevere that he has the right to break her into pieces, language reminiscent of Othello's less equivocal threat to "chop [Desdemona] into messes" (4.1). Arthur's speech, moreover, comes on the heels of a pattern of escalating violence as a response to feminine betrayal in the poem. In the final published version of *Idylls*, the scene where Guinevere grovels follows Geraint's exposing Enid to danger when he forces her to ride ahead of him. It comes after "Pelleas and Ettarre," where Pelleas, knowing that Gawain and Ettarre have betrayed him, lays his "naked sword athwart [their] naked throats" (443) as they sleep. It most immediately echoes the overt brutality of "The Last Tournament," where Mark cleaves his wife's lover "thro' the brain" (748). In this context, Arthur's condemnation takes on a more ominous cast.

Of course, Arthur does not beat Guinevere, and herein lies the real power of the penitent woman tableau. Given the strident tone and vitriolic intensity of Arthur's verbal condemnation, he may not seem especially self-restrained. But his ultimate refusal to punish his wife through physical violence signals the depths of his willpower. For Victorian readers, Tennyson's melodramatic representation of Guinevere and Arthur's final parting confirmed the logics of bourgeois patriarchal identity by suggesting that masculine self-restraint is most praiseworthy in those moments of greatest provocation, when there are violent energies to be suppressed. The excitement of the scene derives from the possibility that Arthur, on the brink of losing control, masters Guinevere all the more thoroughly by not losing control. Indeed, by arresting a moment

where the husband acknowledges his violent impulses but does not actually act upon them, Tennyson's penitent woman tableau suggests that there is a reciprocal relation between violence and masculine self-mastery. If Guinevere's flattened stance is any indication, Arthur's extreme self-control actually redoubles her terror instead of alleviating it. Tennyson's tableau ultimately points back to an earlier historical period that affirmed the coercive physical power of masculinity and forward to a mid-Victorian moment that promoted male self-mastery, a mastery portrayed as more terrifying for wives than brute force and potentially appealing to men searching for ways to confirm their dominance without resorting to crude displays of violence.

Hence, Tennyson's interpretation of the penitent woman tableau reaches its apex in Arthur's final farewell to Guinevere, where he blesses instead of punishes her:

And while she grovell'd at his feet,  
She felt the King's breath wander o'er her neck,  
And in the darkness o'er her fallen head  
Perceived the waving of his hands that blest.

Then, listening till those armèd steps were gone,  
Rose the pale Queen. . . . (577-81)

When Arthur's breath wanders over Guinevere's neck, Tennyson suggests that Arthur's voice replaces the power of his hand. Arthur has no need to beat Guinevere, for his voice has already done the job. By evocatively conjuring the image of the inspirational animus claimed by Romantic poets, moreover, this final moment from the penitent woman tableau in "Guinevere" also comments on the creative power of the male poet. As Eric Griffiths remarks, "The word 'breath' and its cognates mattered to [Tennyson] because breath intimately brings together life and poetry in the fact that it is with the breath that keeps us living that we sing or speak" (42). By harnessing the power of the breath to melodrama, Tennyson importantly suggests that the lyric voice is a source of male authority. Tennyson's emphasis on the self-mastery of male violence, embodied in Arthur's exhaled blessing (not beating) of Guinevere, intimates that the poetic voice can achieve recognition and power through the supreme control of language.

If we read the apotheosis of *Idylls* as a highly visual, staged moment of melodrama, one that allows for the poem briefly to break out of its narrative of patriarchal loss and to defend Tennyson's poetry against accusations of effeminacy, then this sheds new light on the hyperbolic

praise of the Guinevere episode that appeared in Tennyson's lifetime. Coventry Patmore remarked that the description of "the disgrace and repentance of Queen Guinevere, and the destruction of the fellowship of the Round Table, through her guilt. . . . is . . . the highest as well as the last of the poet's efforts" (260), and William Gladstone called it "the resplendent top of human excellence" (258).<sup>17</sup> "Guinevere" apparently moved George Eliot to tears (H. Tennyson 2: 109), while John Ruskin cited the line "In the darkness o'er her fallen head" (579) as "finer than almost all you have done yet" (qtd. in H. Tennyson 1: 453). Guinevere's groveling became an extraordinarily popular scene in mid-century painting and other decorative arts.<sup>18</sup> Some of these visual interpretations emphasize Arthur's forgiveness: Hammat Billings's 1888 illustration, for instance, depicts Arthur with an outstretched hand (**fig. 4**, Billings). But all relish the disparity between Guinevere's vulnerable, prostrate form and Arthur's lavish armor, and many depict Arthur's sword as jutting directly down near Guinevere's head, making it look as if it has penetrated her (**fig. 5**, Fredericks, and **fig. 6**, Rhead).<sup>19</sup> John Moyr Smith's 1875 Minton tile illustration portrays Guinevere writhing in pain at Arthur's denouncement (**fig. 7**, Smith). Smith flattens the planes so that Arthur, standing immediately behind the queen in the center of the composition, appears to be sitting directly on top of her. Arthur gestures to the queen that she should depart to the right, but Guinevere, one hand protectively covering her head, crawls frantically to the left, her other arm desperately stretching past the picture's frame. These interpretations savor Guinevere's helplessness, and, even more importantly, visually augment the force of Arthur's verbal disapproval, drawing upon Tennyson's own portrayal of the lyric voice as reinforced by the physical power of melodrama.

But it is important to recognize that in narrative, the tableau moment is never stable. The staged scene inevitably dissolves and with it, the form of masculine power embodied within it. Arthur's condemnation of Guinevere is not a frozen moment but part of a longer narrative, and, as such, he cannot maintain his posture of authority forever. It is the instability of masculine authority embodied within the penitent woman tableau that ultimately haunts the rest of *Idylls* and other Victorian literature. The melodramatic moment, which reaffirms masculine authority, cannot be sustained. This instability appears with greatest force at the end of *Idylls* in "The Passing of Arthur," when Camelot has been destroyed and Arthur fades away, carried into the West on the barge along with the three queens who mourn his passing. Left on the shore, Bedevere inherits the role of keeper of Arthur's memory, a position that at first he resists by

refusing to throw Excalibur into the lake. As he observes, without the sword, no one will believe that Camelot existed: “What record, or what relic of my lord / Should be to aftertime, but empty breath / And rumours of a doubt?” (266-68). Bedevere’s desire for material evidence of Camelot’s existence—material evidence obviously symbolic of phallic violence, no less—is essentially a yearning for the props of Victorian stage melodrama, which paired its unrealistic plots with highly realistic stage sets. Drawing rooms, city streets, even trains appeared on the stage with absolute fidelity to the original. Forced to work without props, Bedevere must find other ways to preserve Camelot’s legacy. At the opening of “The Passage of Arthur,” he has resorted to telling the story of Arthur’s passage to “new faces, other minds” (5). Indeed, Bedevere, now “[i]n the white winter of his age” (4) is “no more than a voice” (3), making him the figurative stand-in both for the king and the poet. Of all of Arthur’s knights, Bedevere is the one who remains standing. But there is no supplicating woman at his feet to remind him of his power. After Arthur’s barge has disappeared on the horizon, Bedevere stands helplessly on the shore “[r]evolving many memories” (438) in his head, the last slender thread linking the present day to Arthur’s glorious past, an idyllic world of myth and legend where gender codes were clear and male authority more effective. On one hand, this final image of Bedevere, and our knowledge that his voice has carried on beyond his corporeal form, suggests that Tennyson ultimately gives up on the physical authority of melodrama and instead invests the male voice with the powers of imagination and history. On the other hand, Bedevere’s voice is fragile, frail, and always in doubt without the material evidence of Camelot that Arthur has made him destroy.<sup>20</sup> *Idylls* disavows melodrama yet mourns its passage, persistently uneasy about whether or not Bedevere’s—and, by implication, the poet’s—voice can keep faith alive. When Guinevere grovels, Arthur temporarily asserts his dominance without needing to use his physical strength, substituting his voice for his sword. The poem, however, ultimately remains dubious about the endurance of this form of power. Perhaps this accounts for the popularity of the Guinevere scene in visual arts, where the moment remains frozen in time, set apart from the insecurities and inevitable doom of its larger narrative context.

The writer reviews her arguments and, in so doing, directly involves readers in the chain of argumentation. Note the past tense (“I have argued”).

➔ I have argued thus far that the penitent woman tableau embodies a middle-class masculine ideal wherein men exert control without needing to resort to physical force. But I have also argued that because of its transitory nature, the tableau is also a moment that reveals the impermanence of this kind of masculine mastery. The short-term duration of the penitent woman

tableau when it occurs within narrative winds up highlighting the precariousness of the man's power, since the scene captures masculine dominance for a moment but must dissolve as the narrative progresses. Thus, when it appears within the pages of the novel, the penitent woman tableau often suggests that the tableau moment is equally terrifying for men because it reveals that their power cannot last. In conclusion, then, I would like to consider the issue of male terror in the penitent woman tableau in three different novels: *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), *Great Expectations* (1861-62), and *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Each novel presents a compelling variation on the penitent woman tableau, using the iconography of the woman on the ground at the man's feet to explore the erosion of masculine authority rather than to reaffirm the man's dominance. When examined chronologically, these novels suggest that as the nineteenth century progressed, the figure of the penitent woman grows progressively more alarming for the men at whose feet she grovels.

I begin with *Vanity Fair*. As other scholars have observed, it is a highly theatrical novel, and Becky Sharpe is its most accomplished actress. She plays to her audience almost constantly, strategically deploying the conventions of the stage in order to attain a starring role in her own show. Unsurprisingly, the penitent woman tableau makes an early appearance in her repertoire. When Sir Pitt Crawley proposes to Becky, a theatrical moment described as "the *tableau* with which the last act of our little drama concluded" (186), she responds by throwing herself at his feet. Informing Sir Pitt that she is already married, she says,

'. . . I can't be your wife, sir; let me—let me be your daughter.'

Saying which, Rebecca went down on *her* knees in a most tragical way, and, taking Sir Pitt's horny black hand between her own two (which were very pretty and white, and as soft as satin), looked up in his face with an expression of exquisite pathos and confidence, when—when the door opened, and Miss Crawley sailed in. (187)

Becky's quick and calculated pose reveals not only the cultural ubiquity of this iconographic melodramatic scene—she "confidently" expects Sir Pitt to recognize her posture and what it signifies—but also the woman's ability to manipulate its conventions. Becky's pose tacitly asserts that she expects Sir Pitt to respond with self-command no matter how betrayed or angry he might feel: the penitent woman tableau demands that he control any impulse toward physical reprisal.<sup>21</sup> Sir Pitt, of course, is not angry, but the novel portrays Becky as cognizant that



highlighting her potential vulnerability paradoxically places her in a position of strength, since any man who aspires to be respectable must play to the conventions of the scene by not beating the woman who has disappointed him. By throwing herself at Sir Pitt's feet, Becky activates the gentlemanly code. Thackeray thus satirically suggests that the penitent woman tableau is a moment when men, not women, are coerced into behaving as they should.

Of course, in this case, Becky's posture could easily have been a gross misstep, since the novel's historical setting makes physical violence an even more likely possibility. Sir Pitt is no Victorian gentleman and often rejects the very respectability on which Becky is banking when she flings herself into the posture of the penitent woman. Indeed, despite Becky's confidence in this scene, it shows that she really is vulnerable—she just fails to realize it. In this moment, *Vanity Fair* not only lampoons the penitent woman tableau, satirically exposing its potential for hypocrisy and exploitation, but also uses it to remind us of the potential for real violence against a woman in Becky's position. Becky may have the attention of the house, but the audience is not necessarily on her side, and her submissive posture does not guarantee her safety to any man unwilling or uninterested in bourgeois respectability. The scene, which supposedly showcases a man's self-mastery while under duress, can easily unravel, especially within the Victorian novel's long and complex plotting. Still, at this moment, Becky's gamble pays off: she gains the upper hand with the male authority figure in the household by manipulating the conventions of this iconic scene.

The idea that the novel may evoke the penitent woman tableau in order to explore the fragility of masculine authority may help to explain why the scene terrifies Pip of *Great Expectations*, a character profoundly anxious about his social status as a gentleman. Dickens presents variations on the penitent woman tableau throughout his fiction, but one of the most memorable occurs when Miss Havisham drops to her knees at Pip's feet.<sup>22</sup> Miss Havisham is already a melodramatic figure: her life itself is a frozen tableau, from the virginal bridal gown she has refused to remove to the stopped clocks of Satis House. Pip walks into this "arrest[ed]" (60) world as a boy, and discovers that it remains the same even while he grows and changes. If the meaning of Satis House is "enough," then this is the perfect name for a house suffused with melodrama, a mode of excess that periodically freezes at its most laden and charged moments. Perhaps it is no surprise that this melodramatic setting culminates in a penitent woman tableau.

When Pip finally confronts Miss Havisham for cruelly manipulating his social expectations, she unexpectedly begs for his forgiveness, falling to her knees in the classic penitent woman posture:

She turned her face to me for the first time since she had averted it, and, to my amazement, I may even add to my terror, dropped on her knees at my feet; with her folded hands raised to me in the manner in which, when her poor heart was young and fresh and whole, they must often have been raised to heaven from her mother's side.

To see her with her white hair and her worn face kneeling at my feet, gave me a shock through all my frame. . . . I bent over her without speaking. She was

not kneeling now, but was down upon the ground. (297)

Miss Havisham's display echoes Nancy's from *Oliver Twist* and implies that she is submissive, guilty, remorseful, and afraid of Pip's possible reaction. Yet Pip says that her posture causes him terror rather than the other way around. Why? Just as Nancy's murdered body ultimately haunts Bill Sikes, Pip feels coerced by Miss Havisham's deployment of melodramatic conventions, which aggressively attempt to reclaim her domestic virtue by demanding that he forgive her. By making such a spectacle of ceding to Pip's moral authority, awarding him power over her in a theatrical show, Miss Havisham reminds Pip that his masculinity was never that secure to begin with. Having taken it away in Pip's early days at Satis House, Miss Havisham gives it back in this tableau moment—but the moment, like all sensation scenes, will pass. The penitent woman tableau might promote a moment of masculine self-mastery and power, but, in Victorian narrative, this power is often revealed to be shaky and unfounded, struggling to sustain itself in a world where force might be legitimate but not always available to men aspiring to mid-century forms of bourgeois authority. The novel, with its greater emphasis on narrative progression, is less able than melodrama to sustain its vision of this authority before it crumbles—or before it is revealed never to have existed in the first place.

Perhaps the best instance of the penitent woman inspiring masculine terror occurs at the end of *Heart of Darkness*, which reverses the gender roles of this classic melodramatic moment almost a half-century after Tennyson published the first four books of *Idylls* in 1859. When Tennyson put out *Idylls* at mid-century, his poem engaged the familiar trope of marriage as an analogue for the larger British Empire, and the scene where Arthur brings Guinevere to her knees with the force of his disapproval suggests that this kind of masculine authority might serve as a

possible political template for the rule of unruly colonial subjects. The penitent woman tableau, which offers a model of power where moral posturing produces contrition without the use of force but importantly shows that force to be always accessible and legally sanctioned, would have resonated in a cultural context, where—as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 revealed—the British Empire was perceived as increasingly volatile. By the end of the century, however, John Tosh observes that men increasingly rejected both the metaphorical and literal consolidation of their domestic and imperial responsibilities. Many were reluctant to marry and fled to the colonies as an alternative to traditional domesticity, treating imperial space as a giant bachelor pad. “In England masculine identity was subject to constant negotiation with the opposite sex—and on domestic ground where they were often perceived to hold the advantage,” remarks Tosh. “By contrast the colonial world was thought of as a men-only sphere” (177). Hence, although Marlow’s journey into the Congo may be terrifying, his terror does not reach its *ne plus ultra* until the novel’s final scene when he returns to Brussels to visit Kurtz’s fiancée.

Back in the traditional domestic space of the bourgeois European drawing room, the obliquely atmospheric, proto-modernist language of *Heart of Darkness* gives way, somewhat unexpectedly, to the semiotics of mid-century stage melodrama. With dramatic lighting and carefully rendered interior details, the theatrical scenery of the Intended’s drawing-room—the windows, furniture, fireplace, grand piano, and door through which the Intended dramatically enters—sets the stage. But the final, melodramatic moment of *Heart of Darkness* calls forth mid-century melodrama only to reverse its gender relations, revealing the true horror of middle-class masculine identity. As Rita Bode observes, when confronted by the Intended’s intense virtue and unwavering affection for Kurtz, Marlow “falls apart physically and emotionally” (28). He stammers and mumbles his way through the interview “with a sensation of panic in [his] heart” (Conrad 74), on the brink of losing self-control and becoming almost mute with fright. Unable to “defend [him]self from the darkness” (75), Marlow cannot escape the Intended’s desire to hear Kurtz’s last words, and through the sheer force of her virtuous devotion, she ultimately manipulates Marlow into saying what she wants to hear. Like a penitent wife begging silently for forgiveness, Marlow, barely audible, pleads with the Intended not to make him confess: “I felt like a chill grip on my chest. ‘Don’t,’ I said in a muffled voice” (76). But her need—and her position as bereaved lover, intended wife, and icon of domesticity—eventually forces him to tell her the great white lie: “The last word he pronounced was—your name” (77). He then exits in a

panic: "It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head" (77). As Bode argues, the Intended becomes Marlow's true horror (29). Like the penitent wife of domestic melodrama, Marlow offers up the confession he knows he is supposed to give and flees the house in terror. Unlike Guinevere's or Lady Isabel's display of penitence in the domestic melodrama of mid-century, the presence of feminine devotion and submission in Conrad's fin-de-siècle colonial narrative actually exacerbates Marlow's anxiety, as the Intended's unwavering affection and dedication to her domestic role magnifies his sense of failure.

The writer *hedges* ("perhaps") the potential significance of her contribution as she makes concluding statements and offers analysis.

→ Perhaps this is why the melodrama of *Idylls*, which does not ironize its display of sexual violence and suggests a less equivocal (if not completely confident) reaffirmation of Arthur's authority, proved to be such a durable model for representing domestic conflict, as revealed by the many illustrations of Guinevere's groveling that appeared in various editions of Tennyson's poetry throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. When presented as a static moment in an illustration or painting, the penitent woman tableau appears more stable and would seem to confirm masculine authority, whereas its presence within a narrative, by contrast, creates room for greater negotiation with and interpretation of traditional gender roles. I return, then, to my opening claim that melodrama importantly reflects the ways in which Victorian culture negotiated with and responded to changes to the traditional family structure and masculinity in particular, since its unusual blend of stasis and movement creates room for exploring these issues without promoting a definitive stance. Often considered one of the nineteenth century's most conservative modes of representation, the conventions of melodrama, which hover between the fixed nature of visual representation and the fluidity of narrative, help Victorian writers to meditate on gender in sometimes surprisingly complex ways, recognizing and even spotlighting the instability of masculine dominance rather than merely promoting a traditional patriarchal posture. Rather than stripping narrative of its moral ambiguity, melodrama, at least in the moment of the penitent woman tableau, amplifies that ambiguity, working to create a version of masculinity authority that seems cognizant of the temporary nature of its own force. Melodrama makes a powerful impression on other artists of the period not only because it holds the power to comfort its audiences by reaffirming traditional models of authority but also, conversely, because of its ability to equivocate between old and new forms of power. The penitent woman tableau

The writer uses the *self mention* "I" to foreground the overarching knowledge contribution for readers. At this point, readers recognize the concluding *moves* as the writer reviews key claims and puts forward arguments about larger cultural and social meanings.

The *boosters* "importantly" and "powerful" strengthen the claims about the previously underappreciated importance of melodrama in negotiating changing gender norms and power structures of the Victorian era.

The writer articulates how her interpretations of might influence future research. This future-directed move is typical of conclusions to research articles.

performs a version of masculinity that can never fully console because it is forever in danger of becoming unmoored, caught up in a narrative line that undoes its power.

### Biographical notice

Melissa Valiska Gregory is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Toledo where she specializes in nineteenth-century British literature. She has published recently in *Dickens Studies Annual* and *Victorian Poetry*, and she is currently working on a book entitled "Victorian Genres of Motherhood."

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In this discipline, Modern Language Association (MLA) citation style is standard. Members of the discipline know how to navigate the features of this particular citation style.

In this field, concluding sentences often point to the impact of the analysis on critical understandings of the text as well as the broader literary, social, and cultural contexts of which the text is a part. In this section, writers make a final attempt to convince readers of their findings and claims.

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### Notes

I would like to express my thanks to *RaVon*'s outside readers and also to the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Tate for allowing me to reproduce figures 1 and 2.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ben Singer's list of "typical sensation scenes" (153), which includes train wrecks, buzz saws, storms at sea, and "a heroine swinging by rope across a chasm to save hero from dynamite explosion" (154).

<sup>2</sup> Linda Williams argues that "[t]hough its roots are in the theater, melodrama exceeds the limits of the theatrical. Its genius lies in its protean ability to 'leap' across centuries and media, to make jaded readers, audiences, and viewers thrill to ever new forms of pathos and action" (16).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that neither Ellen Wood's 1861 novel nor the more popular stage adaptations of *East Lynne* included this particular scene between husband and wife: there is no penitent woman tableau in *East Lynne*. T. A. Palmer's popular 1874 stage version features a variation on the penitent woman tableau when Isabel is confronted by Lord Mount Severn, the next most important relative and male authority figure after her husband in Isabel's life. In Palmer's play, Lord Mount Severn's ruthless moral censure of Isabel ultimately fells her to the ground: the stage directions call for her to "sink on her knees despairingly as THE CURTAIN FALLS" (29) and the music of "Home, Sweet Home" begins to play. But although Lord Mount Severn has activated this iconographic moment through his condemnation of Isabel, he is no longer on the stage when she drops to her knees, which creates a scene that echoes the penitent woman tableau without fully reproducing all of its formal conventions. The final confrontation between Isabel and her actual husband, Carlyle, moreover, is usually staged with Isabel dying in bed, a scene more reminiscent of Eva's death in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) than the classic penitent woman tableau. That S. C. Allen's printing company chose to advertise *East Lynne* with the penitent woman tableau illustrates, I think, the way in which this scene functioned as a kind of visual

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shorthand in the Victorian period, compressing important cultural issues related to gender and power in a single iconic image.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Mill declared, “Until a conviction for personal violence, or at all events a repetition of it after a first conviction, entitles the woman *ipso facto* to a divorce, or at least to a judicial separation, the attempt to repress these ‘aggravated assaults’ by legal penalties will break down for want of a prosecutor, or for want of a witness” (161).

<sup>5</sup> By “first” I mean within the narrative. As a review in 1858 in the *Art Journal* indicates, the painting in question was actually exhibited in the center (or second in the series, technically out of order chronologically) with the two others on either side. I would argue that this display, which places the penitent woman tableau front and center, spotlights it as the triptych’s most important painting.

<sup>6</sup> See Nina Auerbach, Susan Casteras, Joseph Kestner, and Julia Thomas, among others.

<sup>7</sup> I should acknowledge that the title “Past and Present” was affixed to the painting at an undetermined later date; it was originally exhibited with no title. Edelstein says, “The earliest use of the name *Past and Present* I have discovered is in the 1861 Christie’s catalogue” (208n), appearing in reference to some earlier sketches or replicas of the painting. The name appears again in Christie’s 1863 catalogue.

<sup>8</sup> *The Art Journal* observed that Egg’s “pictures attract a large share of public attention; and not less from this circumstance than the very masterly style of the narrative” (167-68).

<sup>9</sup> In a letter, John Ruskin similarly suggested that “[t]he picture does not pretend to represent a pretty story—but a piece of very commonplace vice. . . . I don’t believe that much of the world’s vice is far above that standard—but when it really comes to its own wretched and appropriate

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catastrophe, and is finally stoned or crushed into putrescence—it becomes . . . ‘impressive’” (qtd. in Bradley 25).

<sup>10</sup> George Cruikshank’s original illustrations for *Oliver Twist* did not feature the murder of Nancy. But this later illustration by Harry Furniss, drawn for the *Charles Dickens Library* published in 1910, features a penitent woman tableau.

<sup>11</sup> Another difference between Dickens’s scene and Egg’s painting is, of course, that Nancy’s betrayal of Bill is not a sexual one, insofar as her purity is already compromised by both her relationship with Bill and her status as a prostitute. She has undermined his authority, however, by reporting on Fagin to Rose.

<sup>12</sup> Also see Sue Zemka on the many stage adaptations of Nancy’s death that relished its violence.

<sup>13</sup> Adams remarks, “Self-discipline seemed a virtue open to all; hence efforts to claim it as a gendered activity are unusually revealing of the complexity and internal strain that characterize gendered identity” (7).

<sup>14</sup> More bluntly, Marion Shaw comments that “[t]here is a marked scarcity of manly men in Tennyson’s poetry” (220).

<sup>15</sup> All numeric citations for *Idylls* refer to line numbers.

<sup>16</sup> See John Pfordresher’s variorum edition, which cites the correction in the “Guinevere” manuscript contained in Harvard’s Houghton Library (93).

<sup>17</sup> Peter Levi notes that Gladstone used to read “Guinevere” aloud to the prostitutes he rescued and attempted to rehabilitate (224).

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, James Archer’s *The Parting of Arthur and Guinevere* (1865), Herbert Bone’s tapestry *Arthur Forgives Guinevere* (1879), and Gustave Doré’s engraving *The Parting of Arthur and Guinevere* (1868), among others.

<sup>19</sup> The illustration by Fredericks is attributed only to “A. Fredericks” in the *Poetical Works*, but my research suggests that the artist is most likely Alfred Fredericks, a New York-based landscape and figure painter who also had a successful career as an illustrator for magazines, comic publications, and books (see both Peter Falk and Sinclair Hamilton). I have found no evidence that an original painting of this scene exists.

<sup>20</sup> See Ivan Kreilkamp for an extended treatment of voice and the storyteller in the Victorian period.

<sup>21</sup> Becky is not Sir Pitt’s wife, obviously. But their relationship is such that he feels somewhat entitled to her loyalty.

<sup>22</sup> See Mary Saunders, who tallies the overwhelming number of times women fall prostrate in Dickens’s fiction.

Fig. 1

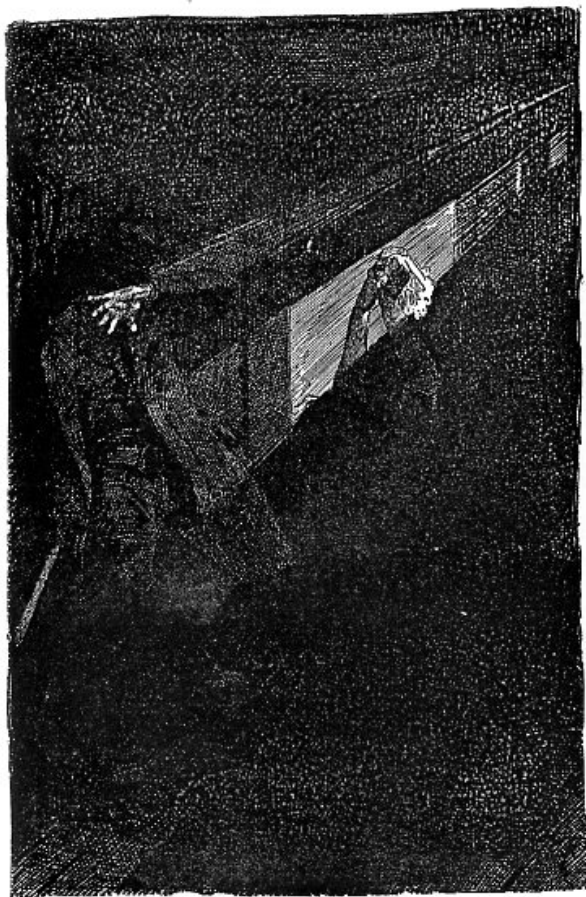


Fig. 2





Fig. 3



THE DEATH OF NANCY

*Oliver Twist*

Fig. 4



Fig. 5

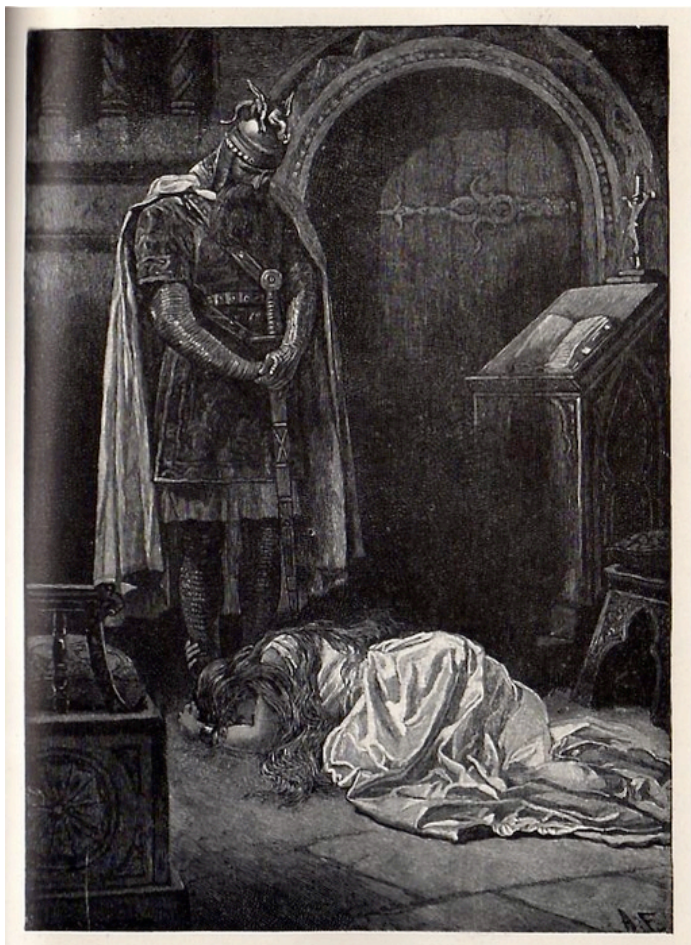
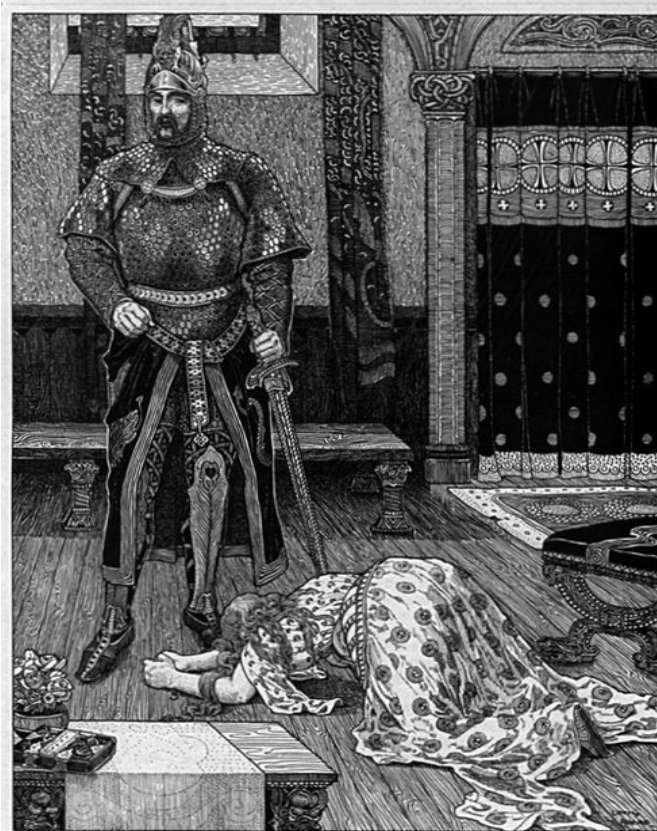


Fig. 6



"There with her milk white arms and shadowy hair, she made her face a darkness from the King."



Fig. 7

