

INTRODUCTION

The Life of the Author

In 2007, Rosemarie Bodenheimer published a groundbreaking book that elegantly juxtaposed letters, stories, articles, and sections of novels to reveal patterns that she saw as common to both Dickens's life and his writing. As an interpretive study, *Knowing Dickens* made its home in what Bodenheimer calls "the gap between the chronological imperatives of biography and the literary imperatives of criticism, following some representative clusters of thought and feeling that link Dickens's ways of talking in letters with his concerns in fiction and journalism."¹ Working within this gap, Bodenheimer connects the inner, private (biographical) world of the author with that world's exterior (fictional and non-fictional) manifestations. Her ultimate goal is to develop "a picture of Dickens's mind and art"² by assembling

¹ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) 2.

² Bodenheimer, 15. To a large degree, *Knowing Dickens* is the organic extension of the questions Bodenheimer began grappling with many years earlier in her biography of George Eliot. In *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, Bodenheimer set out to undo the dichotomy between fiction and biography by suggesting that "a 'best history' of George Eliot may be told by reading her letters in conjunction with her novels, stories, and poems." See *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) xiv. For Bodenheimer, such work clarifies "the intense autobiographical charge of George Eliot's fictions and her great and flexible capacity for self-understanding, for transforming painful preoccupations into distanced fictional figures" (xvi).

bodies of textual evidence that, once united under particular umbrellas, tell unique and intriguing stories about Dickens and the writing he produced.

Knowing Dickens confirmed for me a somewhat heretical idea I had been having for many years: that the author was indeed still alive. In 1967 Roland Barthes had famously pronounced the author dead, calling for his impeachment in the activity of literary interpretation, since his role as God-like creator did not help explain texts, but rather imposed limits to our understanding them.³ Then two years later, Michel Foucault articulated “the author function”—the idea that the concept of an author allows us to classify or group together “a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others.”⁴ For Foucault, the “death” of the author was not so much about the extrication of an author from the notion of his work, but rather the killing off of the idea that an author is someone who exists with a kind of *a priori* or unquestioned status.⁵ Together the calls and ideas of these two

³ “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ — victory to the critic.” Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 147.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 107.

⁵ An author, for Foucault, is something that we ourselves create in order to elevate, and by extension exclude certain discourses: “We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely.

thinkers (as well as those of others who succeeded them) influenced the field of literary interpretation through the 1980s and 90s to such a high degree that it became nothing short of anathematic to mention the author's life in relation to his or her work during formal academic presentations and seminars. To do so would have exposed one as being unsophisticated, uninformed, even Luddite. We became afraid to talk about authors, and for anyone with serious intentions of performing rigorous literary analysis, the author needed to "assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing."⁶

Recently, however, books like Bodenheimer's *Knowing Dickens* (as well as many others cited later and throughout this study), have expressed both an interest in and a call to re-examine the life of the author in relation to his or her work. This dissertation joins those studies in an answer to that call. "The Value of Storytelling" explores the lives and works of three major nineteenth-century British authors—Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and George Eliot—and in each case asks questions about the relationships among story, author, and marketplace in the Victorian period. My investigation of those intertwined relationships raises three critical questions:

What is the story, both fictional and historical, that emerges from the production of a

The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of signification which fills a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction." Ibid. 118-19.

⁶ Ibid. 103.

novel? Who is ultimately telling that story? And what are the artistic, professional, and financial incentives for telling it? Looking closely at Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60), and Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), "The Value of Storytelling" tries to address these questions by examining both the business practices and narrative strategies of very different authors during pivotal moments in their careers. I chose *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Woman in White*, and *The Mill on the Floss* as the texts for this study because they represent better than any other novel in each author's oeuvre the work that transformed these writers from journalists and published storytellers into professionals and celebrities. Ultimately, "The Value of Storytelling" seeks to demonstrate that we cannot separate the business of storytelling from the telling of the stories themselves, and that the novels so important to each author's professionalization thematize and reflect the complex, often vexed histories of their own publications.

Bodenheimer tells us that the topics she decided to address in her biography of George Eliot became worthy of full blown chapters because she found particular clusters of letters especially compelling, and because "they suggested a fruitful dialogue with imaginative fictions."⁷ This dialog between the written life and the written fiction is at the heart of "The Value of Storytelling." With Bodenheimer, my

⁷ Bodenheimer, *Mary Ann Evans*, xiv.

ambitious goal is actually to blur the boundaries between the two. When one looks at the correspondence between Dickens and his publishers at the start of his career, one cannot help but observe a preoccupation with and preponderance of writing about contracts. The preoccupation is visible everywhere in Dickens's work—both in the public writing of fiction and the private “life” writing of letters—and the dialog between these artifacts tells a rather comprehensive story. The same is true of Wilkie Collins, whose preoccupations with his own authorship and the idea of legitimacy burst forth in much of his writing around the time of his professional ascent. And for George Eliot, the concern over how competitive forces affect peoples' choices and relationships is outlined in *The Mill on the Floss*, as well as in much of the painful correspondence surrounding that book. These dialogs and texts tell a story, and the question this thesis wants to ask, at the most basic level, is what are the stories they tell? Again, I can defer to Bodenheimer here, who has stated the situation of biographical criticism better than anyone else: “We cannot go back and forth between life and work because we do not have a life; everything we know is on a written page. To juxtapose letters and fiction . . . is to read one kind of text alongside another.”⁸ The stories we read then—indeed the stories we as interpreters of life and fiction create—cannot rely on the distinctions of biography versus fiction. Biography is more similar to fiction than we are accustomed to thinking, in so much as it is an

⁸ Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*, 16.

individual's written interpretation of "what happened"—biography itself is a story. In our critical assessments, we cannot privilege it over fiction any more than we can privilege fiction over "fact." "Neither has explanatory power over the other," Bodenheimer writes. "All we can do is observe, make connections and interpretive suggestions."⁹

In this way then, it becomes possible to talk about novels as biography, and biography as novelistic—even "fictional"—in the sense that these amassed amounts of biographical and fictional writing are all part of one large "story"—the story the author is telling about his or her life and in his or her works of fiction. At the same time, interestingly, the interpretation of a single biography allows us to see that there are often many authors behind a particular tale. The big alternative author who looms throughout this thesis is the literary marketplace itself, with its power to influence and drive stories on as it shadows and even directs the pens of its writers. In a sense, Dickens, Collins, and Eliot were the representatives (we might even say vehicles) of their market, and so through the study of biographical and historical documents, the idea of what an author is—or who he is—expands. It is a line of argument that Barthes and Foucault themselves might even have been open to considering.

Barthes called for the death of the author (or at least the reassignment of that role to the reader) in the interpretation of literary texts. I am calling for the author's

⁹ Ibid.

resurrection. While Barthes was correct in saying that there is no such thing as a “single” author for a text, he was hasty in rejecting the author—or “scriptor” of those texts, as he called them—from the catalog of multiple authors. The author, as we shall see, plays a crucial role in the interpretation of literary texts—that is, if we’re interested in the whole story. With that said, we can now begin to discuss the multiple authors who are the subjects of the following chapters.

Charles Dickens and *Nicholas Nickleby*

Between October of 1835 and July of 1840, Charles Dickens signed, discussed, negotiated, or re-negotiated no less than twenty-one formal and informal contractual agreements with his various publishers.¹⁰ During this brief but tumultuous period of his publishing career Dickens committed himself (or more accurately, over-committed himself) professionally to three major publishers as well as a handful of other minor figures who sought his talent in some capacity. Despite being at times “over head and ears in work,”¹¹ Dickens managed to produce *The Pickwick Papers* in 20 monthly numbers (published as 19) between April 1836 and November 1837,

¹⁰ For a summary list of the bulk of the agreements, see “Appendix A: Dickens’s Agreements with his Publishers, 1836-1840.” The “twenty-one” figure includes contracts with John Macrone, which are not reflected in the appendix.

¹¹ To J.P. Collier, 29 September 1836. The Pilgrim Edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, et al., vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002) 178. Hereafter cited as Pilgrim with volume and page number.

Oliver Twist in *Bentley's Miscellany* between February 1837 and April 1839, *Nicholas Nickleby* in 20 monthly numbers (published as 19) between April 1838 and October 1839, a disjointed but abundant series of sketches that appeared in numerous publications between 1833 and 1836 (eventually collected and published in volume form as *Sketches by Boz* in February and December of 1836), the libretto for *The Village Coquettes*, a comic operetta performed in December of 1836 and published by Richard Bentley that same month, a two-act farce called *The Strange Gentleman*, which opened in September of 1836, and *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, which he edited, again for Bentley, in the months preceding its February 1838 publication.¹² These years describe a chapter in Dickens's nascent professional career replete with enormous creative output, great financial anxiety, a workload beyond modern comprehension, and a rapid rise to fame. They also mark the period during which Dickens's worth as an author increased exponentially, practically by the day.

The increase in Dickens's value during this time was not simply due to the unparalleled sales of *The Pickwick Papers*, or the immense popularity of his other

¹² The list is by no means exhaustive. We can add to this the political pamphlet *Sunday Under Three Heads* (June 1836), the one-act burletta *Is She His Wife?* (performed in March of 1837), *Sketches of Young Gentlemen* and *Sketches of Young Couples* (Published in February of 1838 and February of 1840, respectively), *The Loving Ballad of Lord Bateman* (June 1839), the general editing of *Bentley's Miscellany* from January 1837-January 1839, the editing of *The Pic Nic Papers* (a three-year project for the benefit of Macrone's widow that materialized in 1841), and the start of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which began serialization in *Master Humphrey's Clock* on 25 April 1840.

works. It was also due in large part to Dickens's realization that he was himself a valuable commodity, and his insistence on negotiating and re-negotiating contracts that increasingly entitled him to what he thought he deserved. "The consciousness that my books are enriching everybody connected with them but myself," he wrote to Forster in January of 1839, "and that I, with such a popularity as I have acquired, am struggling in old toils, and wasting my energies in the very height and freshness of my fame, and the best part of my life, to fill the pockets of others, while for those who are nearest and dearest to me I can realize little more than a genteel subsistence: all this puts me out of heart and spirits."¹³ The frustration and disgruntlement expressed in this letter (written to announce yet another controversial delay in the composition of *Barnaby Rudge*), are typical of Dickens's sentiments during this time. "I do most solemnly declare," he continues,

that morally, before God and man, I hold myself released from such hard bargains as these, after I have done so much for those who drove them. This net that has been wound about me so chafes me, so exasperates and irritates my mind, that to break it at whatever cost—*that I should care nothing for*—is my constant impulse.¹⁴

For Dickens, the impulse not only to alter his contracts, but at times to refuse to abide by their very terms and conditions, is a morally justified attempt to exercise more influence over the financial compensation due to him, the deadlines under which he

¹³ To John Forster, 21 January 1839. *Pilgrim I*, 493-94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 494.

would work, and the content he agreed to deliver. The history of Dickens's contracts, as Robert Patten has noted, "is a history of agreements ever more favorable to Dickens, giving him increasing authority over all aspects of the issuing of his books, and an ever greater share of the profits."¹⁵ Those profits, along with storyline, reputation, public approval, and a keen sense of entitlement, were key factors in the development of Dickens's fiction.

Part I of this thesis, "Charles Dickens and *Nicholas Nickleby*," argues that the story of *Nicholas Nickleby*—both the one that precedes and surrounds its composition, and the one that takes place in the novel itself—is a story about making and breaking contracts. The chapter poses such questions as what, for Dickens, constitutes a contract? When is a contract not a contract? Who are the rightful authors of those contracts? And what motivates the negotiation or renegotiation of such contracts? During the past century of Dickens biography and scholarship, numerous authors have recounted the details of Dickens's early relationships with his publishers, and have answered some of those questions, directly or indirectly, to a large extent.¹⁶ But my analysis of Dickens differs from previous examinations in that

¹⁵ Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (Santa Cruz: The Dickens Project, 1991) 18. Cited hereafter as Patten with page number. (Other works by Patten are cited with title and page number.) My working version of *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* is a reissue of the Oxford Clarendon Press edition of 1978.

¹⁶ Forster was of course the first to publish private details about the negotiations between Dickens and his publishers in his *Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872-74), followed by other major biographers (who revised

it focuses specifically on the author's attitude toward contractual obligations in both his professional life and his fiction. One could easily offer any of the early works—*Sketches By Boz*, *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*—as compendium pieces to the at times stormy negotiations that took place between Dickens and his publishers during the late 1830's; but if we look at *Nicholas Nickleby* and all of the writing that surrounds it, we find a particularly impressive story. The novel's plot, laden with contracts that are honored or dishonored at various points, stands at the center of another story—the story in which the author, for the first time, attains full ownership of his novel's copyright, resigns permanently as the novel's editor, and establishes himself as the sole creator of his work, complete with faithful reproductions of his signature and portrait.

Forster's accounts), notably Edgar Johnson in "Dickens Clashes With His Publisher," *The Dickensian* 46 (Winter 1949): 10-17, and 46 (Spring 1950): 76-83, a two-part article series that he wrote in preparation for *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, 2 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952). Previous to this, Arthur Waugh published an important "insider" account of Dickens's relationship with Chapman and Hall (*A Hundred Years of Publishing: Being the Story of Chapman and Hall, Ltd.*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1930), but this account is largely limited to Dickens's negotiations with that firm. The definitive study on Dickens's relationships with his publishers is Robert L. Patten's *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Kathryn Chittick's more recent *Dickens and the 1830s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) combines biography, publication history, and critical reception in a meticulously researched study of the period.

Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*

“I have always held the old-fashioned opinion,” wrote Wilkie Collins in his preface to the 1861 single-volume edition of *The Woman in White*, “that the primary object of a work of fiction should be to tell a story . . .”¹⁷ Collins was many things during his lifetime—an artist, a law student, a seasoned traveler, a journalist, a playwright, an actor, a philanderer—but above all, he was a consummate storyteller. By now the story of *The Woman in White*’s momentous appearance is well-known and well-documented: often pointed to as the foundation of the “sensation fiction” genre, the book had an explosive effect on the British readership, exciting huge audiences with its cast of mysterious characters and forty deliberate “cliff-hangers.”¹⁸ The story’s

¹⁷ “Preface to the Present Edition” (1861), *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 4.

¹⁸ For an overview of the origins and cultural context of sensation fiction, see Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel: from The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994). Pykett provides a nice summary of the genre in Chapter 1: “These electrifying novels . . . were mainly distinguished by their devious, dangerous and, in some cases, deranged heroes and (more especially) heroines, and their complicated plots of horror, mystery, suspense and secrecy. The sensation plot usually consisted of varying proportions and combinations of duplicity, deception, disguise, the persecution and/or seduction of a young woman, intrigue, jealousy, and adultery. The sensation novel drew on a range of demise, from illegal incarceration (usually of a young woman), fraud, forgery (often of a will), blackmail and bigamy, to murder or attempted murder. Formally sensation fiction was less a genre than a generic hybrid. The typical sensation novel was a catholic mixture of modes and forms, combining realism and melodrama, the journalistic and the fantastic, the domestic and the romantic or exotic.” Pykett, 4.

On Collins as the originator of the sensation novel, see Henry James, “Miss Braddon,” *Nation* 9 November 1865: 594-95. James notes that Mary Elizabeth Braddon “created the sensation novel,” but that she had been “preceded in the same

success was tremendous, and during its serialization in Dickens's *All the Year Round* (26 November 1859 - 25 August 1860), and upon its publication in book form, *The Woman in White* inspired not only a series of imitators (chief among them Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* [1861] and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* [1862]), but also what would nowadays be called a "sales mania and a franchise boom."¹⁹ Kenneth Robinson, one of Collins's earliest biographers, provides an entertaining description:

While the novel was still selling in its thousands, manufacturers were producing *Woman in White* perfume, *Woman in White* cloaks and bonnets, and the music-shops displayed *Woman in White* waltzes and quadrilles. Even Dickens had not known such incidental publicity . . . Thackeray sat up all night reading it. Edward FitzGerald read it three times, and named a herring-lugger he owned Marian Halcombe, "after the brave girl in the story." The Prince Consort admired it greatly and sent a copy to Baron Stockmar.²⁰

path by Mr. Wilkie Collins," to whom belongs the credit of "having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors. This innovation gave a new impetus to the literature of horrors." Quoted in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) 122.

Page attributes Kathleen Tillotson with tracing the earliest instance of the term "sensation" to describe literature in an anonymous review in the *Sixpenny Magazine*, September 1861. See Page, 17. For an expanded etymology of the word with regard to sensation fiction, see Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989) 186-87.

¹⁹ John Sutherland, introduction, *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) vii.

²⁰ Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 149. A lugger is a small fishing boat. Sutherland further notes: "Cats were named Fosco and thought to look more sinister. Walter became a suddenly fashionable name for babies." Sutherland, introduction, viii.

To be sure, *The Woman in White*, as Collins noted in his 1861 preface, had been received with “marked favour” by “a very large circle of readers.”²¹ As a serial, the novel lifted the circulation of *All the Year Round* to even higher levels than had Dickens,²² and Sampson Low’s first printing of 1,000 copies of the three-volume edition in August of 1860 sold out on publication day.²³ Collins was indeed telling his story, over and over again in the form of the weekly serial and subsequent book editions of his novel; but when one looks more closely at Collins’s professional history, one wonders if “telling the story” was really the author’s “primary objective.” Sue Lonoff argues, thoroughly and convincingly, that the reading public’s interest and the responses of his audience were the dominant concerns that defined Collins’s long and successful career. “Collins,” she says emphatically, “wrote to be read.”²⁴ But there is slightly more to Collins’s “story” than the desire to satisfy the tastes of his readers. Like Dickens—his mentor, editor, publisher, friend, and rival—Collins quickly became aware of his value not just as a journalist or a periodical writer, but as a literary sensation in his own right. When George Murray Smith, founder of *The Cornhill Magazine*, initially offered him £500 for the volume reprint rights to *The*

²¹ Collins, “Preface” (1861) 3.

²² Sutherland, introduction, viii.

²³ John Sutherland, “Appendix A: The Composition, Publication, and Reception of *The Woman in White*,” *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 654.

²⁴ Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers* (New York: AMS Press, 1982) 15.

Woman in White, Collins was wise enough to decline, and instead consigned the rights to Sampson Low—Dickens’s favored publisher for serials in *All the Year Round*—likely for a proportion of the volume form’s profits, but more importantly for a limited amount of time that returned the copyright of the novel to the author after three years. Sutherland nicely sums up how, in less than a year after *The Woman in White*’s completion, Collins’s value as a novelist had increased tenfold in the literary marketplace:

With the volume publication of *The Woman in White*, and the overwhelming demand for the story from library subscribers, Collins’s reputation soared like a rocket. When he made his bid for Collins’s next novel (*Armadale*, as it was to be) in July 1861, Smith raised his offer [from £500] to £5000. It was, as Collins proudly told his mother, a scale of payment which only Dickens had hitherto commanded.²⁵

By 1861, Collins had established himself professionally and financially, and had pitted himself against Dickens as the heir (or perhaps even usurper) to a literary throne. More than Dickens, who tended to prefer the open spaces of the expansive monthly number, it was Collins who gained the reputation as the master of the weekly serial’s mechanics: the striking opening to increase the chance of a serial’s “taking” with subscribers; the episodic integrity of the compact installment; the manipulation of mystery and suspense; and the frequent “climax and curtain” endings required to

²⁵ Sutherland, “Appendix A,” 654. The famous letter to which Sutherland refers here (To Harriet Collins, 31 July 1861) will be addressed in Chapter 7.

make readers come back for more.²⁶ But the path to that success and reputation was not quick or without its challenges. For nearly a decade before *The Woman in White*, Collins toiled to produce stories, essays, and reviews for the pages of London's leading periodicals—*Bentley's Miscellany*, Edward Pigott's *The Leader*, and of course Dickens's own *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. Contrary to the impression given by the often highly dramatized descriptions of *The Woman in White*'s “bombshell” appearance, in 1859 (when the serial first began to appear), Collins was by no means an unknown author. Unlike Dickens, who had only completed one “novel” before publishing *Nicholas Nickleby*,²⁷ Collins had produced with reasonable success four novels (*Antonina* [1850], *Basil* [1852], *Hide and Seek* [1854], and *The Dead Secret* [1857]), two collections of short stories (*After Dark* [1856] and *The Queen of Hearts* [1859]), a book of travel essays (*Rambles Beyond Railways* [1851]), a biography of his father (*Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.* [1848]), a Christmas book (*Mr. Wray's Cash Box* [1852]), and an unpublished manuscript (*Ioláni* [1845]), not to mention the numerous stories and journalistic pieces that were the source of his principal income. As Catherine Peters notes, “[Collins] had already been described, with some hyperbole, as ‘a man of commanding genius, and one destined to occupy a principal place in the republic of

²⁶ Graham Law and Andrew Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 46.

²⁷ It is questionable as to whether *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) was considered a novel at the time of publication.

letters.’”²⁸ But with *The Woman in White* Collins far outstripped his earlier successes and, as Dickens had done with his own portrait, reached out to his audience with a photographic likeness that legitimized him as an author, visually, beyond his own words.

Part II of this thesis, “Wilkie Collins and *The Woman in White*,” argues that the story of *The Woman in White*—for both the characters in the novel and for Collins as author—is a story about legitimizing identity by and through acts of writing as the principal means to acquiring property. The novel itself is one large collection of documents, amassed by an author—Walter Hartright—whose ostensible purpose is to legitimize, through a kind of legal presentation, his wife’s stolen identity. But one cannot disentangle Laura Fairlie’s identity from her property, since the success of the conspiracy at the heart of this narrative relies on stealing both her property and her identity. “As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now”—that oft-quoted sentence from the opening of the novel—introduces us to the methodology by which Hartright will both prove his case and establish his own identity as the master editor/author of this text. He presents a carefully-crafted body

²⁸ Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 211. The “description” is from John Cordy Jeaffreson, *Novels and Novelists from Elizabeth to Victoria*, vol. II (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1858) 345. Jeaffreson goes on to note: “For some time past his writings would lead one to think him as morbidly enamoured of the horrible and revolting as Edgar A. Poe, but we believe that in composing his terrible stories of crime and passion he is only passing through a phase of mental existence, that will be followed by the production of far nobler works than any that have as yet come from his pen.”

of evidence from Marian Halcombe, Vincent Gilmore, Mrs. Catherick, Count Fosco, and a host of other minor though no less “legally valid” characters, who aid him in writing and *rewriting* the story that has taken place. At the same time, through these multi-voiced writings, Collins himself became both progenitor and progeny of his art, perfecting his own identity as a legitimate and successful author.²⁹ For Collins, what ultimately made his occupation legitimate was the exorbitant amount of profit that finally enabled him to leave his editor. Like the confirmed identity of his characters, Collins’s own sense of personal and professional success depended on the closure of a narrative that awards the rights of name and property to the beneficiaries that the story legitimizes.

George Eliot and *The Mill on the Floss*

When Marian Evans began writing *The Mill on the Floss* during the first few months of 1859, she was, like the Wilkie Collins of that same year and the Charles Dickens of

²⁹ A similar thesis (without the focus on property) is argued by Gwendolyn MacDonagh and Jonathan Smith, who assert that *The Woman in White*’s treatment of illegitimacy is “a metaphorical dramatization of the conflicts [Collins] experienced in trying to legitimize new modes of narrative production.” For MacDonagh and Smith, authors in this novel “mimic on a small scale Collins’s own compositional techniques,” and are, like Collins and Dickens, “battling to establish serial publication’s legitimacy against the triple-decker novel, the legitimacy of professional authors against the privileged monopoly of Mudie’s and the coercive power of the established publishing houses.” Their thesis is fascinating, and one with which Part II of this project shares many overlaps. Gwendolyn MacDonagh and Jonathan Smith, “‘Fill up All the Gaps’: Narrative and Illegitimacy in *The Woman in White*,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 26.3 (Fall 1996): 288, 287, and 287, respectively.

twenty years earlier, a well-known and experienced writer on the verge of becoming a famous and professional author.³⁰ The sense of professional identity in Evans's case, however, was slightly different from that of Dickens or Collins, since it was George Eliot, the mysterious author of the highly successful *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, rather than Evans herself, who was "known" to the public. The "incognito," as she called it, was a complicating factor in Eliot's rise to fame because the removal of it before the publication of *The Mill on the Floss* posed a potential threat to her sales. As Eliot finished her manuscript and John Blackwood prepared to go to press with the new book, the haunting question remained: would "George Eliot," a woman living openly with another woman's husband, be able to sustain her proven popularity in the competitive Victorian literary marketplace? It was a question that plagued Eliot, George Henry Lewes, and the publishing firm of William Blackwood & Sons until the release—and enormous success—of Eliot's third triumphant novel.

While sales of *The Mill on the Floss* eventually demonstrated that the book-buying public could overlook the "truth" behind its author's identity, the fears of Eliot and her backers were not misplaced. The months leading up to *Mill's* publication

³⁰ Eliot's journals first mention beginning research for *The Mill on the Floss* on 12 January 1859 ("We went into town today, and looked in the Annual Register for cases of *inundation*"), but the novel itself is not mentioned until two months later, on 27 March ("Resumed my new novel, of which I am going to rewrite the first two chapters"). See *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 76-77. Hereafter cited as *Journals* with date and page number, unless referring to the ample editorial matter, in which case Harris and Johnston are cited instead.

represented a particularly critical time for Eliot as an artist and professional author: while her two previous books had created a considerable stir, her reputation was not yet firm. As Frederick Karl, one of Eliot's recent biographers, notes, "*Mill* would either establish her as a great novelist—in the line of women like Austen and the Brontës and men like Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope—or relegate her to a secondary position."³¹ But with her identity on the frightening precipice of revelation, it was all the more important that Eliot's third book outshine her earlier work. While Lewes vehemently defended the supposed object of Eliot's anonymity—to "get the book judged on its own merits, and not prejudged as the work of a woman, or of a particular woman"—his consciousness of the need to avoid scandal seems patently clear in that final suggestive clause.³² And in her adoption of and adamancy over the married name "Marian Evans Lewes" ("My *name* is Marian Evans *Lewes*," she insisted to Charles Bray, in July of 1859³³), Eliot's own sensitivity to the stigma

³¹ Frederick R. Karl, *George Eliot: Voice of a Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) 328.

³² George Henry Lewes to Madame Eugène Bodichon, 30 June 1859. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vol. III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78) 106. Hereafter cited as *Letters* with volume and page number. Lewes's full citation runs thus: "It makes me angry to think that people should say that the secret has been kept because there was any *fear* of the effect of the author's name. You may tell it openly to all who care to hear it that the object of anonymity was to get the book judged on its own merits, and not prejudged as the work of a woman, or of a particular woman."

³³ George Eliot to Charles Bray, 5 July 1859. *Letters* III, 111. See also George Eliot to Bessie Rayner Parkes, 24 September 1857: ". . . you must please not call me *Miss*

attached to her unsanctioned relationship with George Henry Lewes seems equally pronounced. Harris and Johnston, the editors of Eliot's journals, propose that the pseudonymous authorial signature acted as a kind of additional protection for a woman who was already concealing sexual transgression behind another fictional name, and that "the conventional explanation for a woman's choosing a male pen-name, that the concealment of her gender enables her to compete on even terms in the literary marketplace, [had] peculiar potency in this case."³⁴

Evans again. I have renounced that name, and do not mean to be known by it in any way." *Letters II*, 384.

³⁴ Harris and Johnston, 283-84. A topic of endless fascination, the George Eliot pseudonym has been admirably thought about, discussed, and analyzed by numerous biographers and scholars, and need not be discussed at length here. John Walter Cross gives an account of why Eliot chose the pen name in his 1885 biography: ". . . my wife told me the reason she fixed on this name was that George was Mr. Lewes's Christian name, and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word." See J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as related in her letters and journals*, vol. I (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1885) 430-31. Rosemarie Bodenheimer illuminatingly discusses adoption and relinquishment of the pseudonym in Chapter 5 ("The Outing of George Eliot") of her biography. See Bodenheimer, *Mary Ann Evans*, 119-160. See also Alexis Easley, "Authorship, Gender and Identity: George Eliot in the 1850s," *Women's Writing* 3 (1996) 143-60; Catherine A. Judd, "Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England," *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 250-68; and Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 113-31. For a discussion of the male pseudonym as "a transformation of gender which granted the author male authority and placed her in a patriarchal tradition of storytelling," see Dianne Sadoff, *Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot, and Brontë on Fatherhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 104-11.

As of January 1859, Eliot had earned roughly £2238 from writing *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*—a substantially larger amount than Lewes’s average income of £350 a year.³⁵ Clearly the financial stakes were high, and the incognito had acquired a certain value in and of itself. The mystery around the author of *Scenes* and *Adam Bede* had inadvertently become a part of the marketing strategy responsible for the success of those two books, and the revelation of the author’s identity at any point would mean not just risking some loss of profits for author and publisher, but also the loss of artistic merit should Eliot suddenly find herself under the microscope of moral scrutiny. Years earlier, Lewes, ventriloquizing for an Eliot still in hiding from even Blackwood, had admitted to the publisher that his “clerical friend” was “unusually sensitive,” and “unlike most writers . . . most anxious about *excellence* than about appearing in print . . . He is consequently afraid of failure though not afraid of obscurity; and by failure he would understand that which I suspect most writers would be apt to consider as a success—so high is his ambition.”³⁶ One cannot overstate how much the fear of professional failure—something that would haunt Eliot throughout her entire career—preoccupied the writer and her circle during the uncertain time of *Mill*’s composition.

³⁵ See *Journals*, 30 December 1856, 31 December 1857, and 31 December 1858, pages 65, 72, and 75 respectively. Karl gives Lewes’s income for 1859 as £353—about one-sixth of Eliot’s income for *that* year. See Karl, 305.

³⁶ George Henry Lewes to John Blackwood, 22 November 1856. *Letters II*, 276-77. Blackwood met George Eliot for the first time on 28 February 1858. See *Journals*, 28 February 1858, 295. (The entry was actually recorded many days after the 28th.)

And yet, as Gordon Haight has observed, it seems that as soon as Eliot's incognito was revealed, Marian Evans began to receive requests for stories from other editors.³⁷ Contrary to Eliot's and Lewes's fears, the "real" George Eliot—and of course what she could produce—was becoming more of a valuable investment opportunity than a liability. On 10 July 1859, addressing Eliot for the first time as "Madam," Dickens wrote to say that *Adam Bede* had "taken its place among the actual experiences and endurances of [his] life," and to suggest that Eliot become his "fellow labourer" in the pages of *All the Year Round*.³⁸ In August, the American periodical *The Century* offered her £1200 for a story in twelve parts—"an astonishing figure" according to Karl.³⁹ And by the end of the year, with *The Mill on the Floss* roughly half-way finished, Dickens's former partners, now competitors, Bradbury and Evans, offered Eliot £4500 for her next novel, to be published in the pages of *Once a Week*—a new illustrated weekly magazine, and rival to Dickens's *All the Year Round*.⁴⁰ As Karl notes, "a war was emerging on several fronts: Dickens's *All the Year Round* . . . set against Bradbury and Evans's *Once a Week*, with Blackwood's

³⁷ Gordon S. Haight, introduction, *The Mill on the Floss*, by George Eliot, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) xix.

³⁸ To George Eliot, 10 July 1859. Pilgrim IX, 93.

³⁹ Karl, 317. See also *Journals*, 12 August 1859, 79: "Declined the American proposition which was, to write a story of 12 parts (weekly parts) in the New York 'Century', for £1200."

⁴⁰ See *Journals*, 1 December 1859, 82: "Bradbury and Evans have offered me £4500 for my new novel, i.e. for publication in 'Once a Week' and for two subsequent editions."

forming the third point of the triangle.”⁴¹ And all of them wanted George Eliot. Like Dickens after the success of *Pickwick*, and Collins after the phenomenon of *The Woman in White*, Marian Evans, still largely unknown to the public, was realizing an exponential growth in the market value of the work she was producing under the pen name George Eliot. That growth in Eliot’s market value led directly to the development of a highly competitive atmosphere in which Eliot and Lewes courted and were courted by numerous “suitors” for whom the financial stakes were extremely high. To paraphrase a passage from Patten about Dickens and *Sketches by Boz*, the presence of so many rivals for the right to publish *The Mill on the Floss* showed what a valuable property George Eliot’s writings had become.⁴²

Part III of this thesis, “George Eliot and *The Mill on the Floss*,” argues that the story of *The Mill on the Floss*—for the as yet hidden and unacknowledged writer Marian Evans as well as the characters she was creating—is a story about competition and courtship. The chapter is concerned with a number of questions central to both the plot of *The Mill on the Floss*, and the emerging identity of the professional author, George Eliot. Namely: What kinds of choices become available when the literary landscape—both fictional and real—grows increasingly more competitive? What are the courtship rituals that rivals enact as they compete for success and how do the objects of those rituals respond? What kinds of markets and stories do competition

⁴¹ Karl, 325.

⁴² See Chapter 2, note 15.

and courtship produce, and finally what kinds of threats do they pose? For Maggie Tulliver, as for her creator, the circling of many suitors not only increases her options, but also intensifies the degree of internal conflict with which she is forced to struggle. Philip Wakem, Stephen Guest, and of course her brother, Tom Tulliver, all bring seductive “offers” to Maggie’s figurative negotiating table; but as the story of *The Mill on the Floss* unfolds, she, like Eliot, will need to carefully consider each proposal as she maneuvers with difficulty through an unforgiving marketplace.

In closing I should note that, while Parts I, II, and III of this thesis all contain multiple, self-standing chapters, each part is meant to be read as a whole. Like the serial novels they (in two cases) describe, the whole is greater than the sum of its “parts,” and each larger part tells a full story. The parts follow a loosely formulaic structure: a beginning chapter (or chapters, in the case of Dickens) sets the publication of the novel in the larger historical context of the author’s early career; a middle chapter provides an analysis of the novel in relation to that context; and a closing chapter talks more about the integration of story, author, and marketplace. “The Value of Storytelling” arose out of my love for both history and literature. It is an attempt to demonstrate that history and biography can illuminate our interpretation of literature as much as literature illuminates life.