

‘Railway Fiction or Seaside Sensation? Journeys to the sea in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *No Name*.’

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Reading on the Rails

If the seasoned traveller of the 1860s knew (long before Oscar Wilde’s Gwendolen) the value of having “something sensational to read in the train,” the very act of reading could itself be sensationalized in the context of “rail travel as a time out from normal constraints” (Bailey 11). But while the now familiar image of sensational “railway fiction” is a powerful one in itself, it implies an important question that has attracted surprisingly little critical attention – where are all these readers *going* and are they likely to continue with the books that they have started (or at least taken with them) on the train?

The link between the major circulating libraries such as Mudie’s, the innovative W. H. Smith’s railway bookstalls and the success of 1860s sensation fiction is well established. But positioning the railway experience as a transitional or mid-point, and not necessarily as a defining context for the reading of sensation fiction, uncovers a second determinant in the writing and consumption of these novels: the Victorian seaside holiday. At a time when resorts were still catering for a significantly large number of invalids, the question of what and how visitors were reading was both vital and controversial. At the very least an over-indulgence in the latest novel could interfere with the health cure, as popular medical author Spencer Thomson explained, “one man goes to the sea-side, and lolls on the beach, or in the reading-room, and takes it easy, but gets half measure of the new air; whilst another exercising himself gets double measure and double good” (14). Possibly inappropriate reading forms a crucial link between travel and the seaside resort itself, but one that is largely

predicated on a discourse of nervous debility in which the sea air was prescribed as a restorative while “reading implied a transmissibility of emotions from text to reader that paralleled medical and psychological discussions of suggestibility” (Vrettos 97). In Kelly Mays’s analysis, “While reading habits resembled the automatic motions of the machine, they were also and more consistently described with reference to bodily ingestion – eating, drinking, and drug-taking” (172). This threat to bodily integrity was of course exacerbated in the case of women, with reading appearing “as a topic within the literature of hysteria” (Flint 58). But despite concerns about the impact of sensation fiction on women in particular, periodicals of the time routinely advertised the latest titles to the seaside holiday market.

Two major novels of 1862, Mary Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Wilkie Collins’s *No Name*, provide a test case for this difficult relationship. The increasing tendency from the 1860s to use “railway reading” and “seaside reading” as interchangeable terms has been largely overlooked in studies of the sensation genre and its contribution to debates about gendered reading. But *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *No Name* use the trope of the coastal resort as a means of exploring affective responses in the context of wider debates surrounding physical and moral health and the proper function of the seaside holiday. Both writers insistently portray the sea as both sinister and overtly sexual, in what amounts to a deliberate assault on the nerves. In a strategic move these novels engage directly with the debate on the ill effects of sensation fiction. Both include seaside settings in the context of women’s health, flagrantly playing to the preoccupations of female readers. But far from claiming that sensation fiction is beneficial to readers, these novels internalize the concerns widely expressed by critics, welding images of reading itself to themes of debility and breakdown between the railway and the coast.

It has become almost a cliché that the types of fiction read on the train are mirrored by anxieties about rail travel itself. The organisation of the journey may have, in Jonathon

Grossman's phrase, "standardized time and space" (9), but it could not standardise social behaviour. If travellers "found themselves in a fluid environment that lacked many of the usual markers of social class and identity" (Byerly 173), reading both offered an escape from social interaction and registered a potentially inappropriate commonality based on the similar choices made at the railway bookstall. Railway readers sought out books with sufficient appeal to distract them from the discomfort of their surroundings, but reading them entailed further inconvenience, as John Spiers reminds us, "The railways resulted in a significant increase in book buying and reading, even given the difficulties of doing so in primitive railway carriages. Indeed, the culture of the new railway library books must have been powerful to overcome these cold, draughty, dirty, lengthy discomforts." Paul Rooney notes that "the excursion passenger visiting the seaside on a daytrip or a traveller departing to take a vacation period and about to embark on a journey of several hours duration would be best served by a book with an immersive narrative that was conducive to a concentrated style of engagement" (47). The specific context of the railway was important in shaping the identity of the reader in ways that could implicitly be registered as secretive, even illicit. As Mary Hammond points out:

The reader who was meant to visit the public library in a mood of leisurely seriousness, in order to select self-improving literature based on the recommendations of literary columns and librarians, was not the same reader who visited the railway bookstall. They might be the same person. But their reasons for selecting and reading in each place were not the same at all.' (72)

Throughout the 1860s sensation fiction famously pulsates with scenes of fast-paced action interleaved with fatalistic apprehension and obsessive return. But the rise of seaside reading actually featuring coastal settings adds a new dimension to this affective experience.

Competing discourses of leisure and nervous debility come to characterize the British seaside at precisely the point when the benefits and dangers of the expanding railway network are also being widely discussed. This is the cultural moment at which sensation fiction infiltrates both the railway carriage and the seaside resort, importing unease and staging the adverse impact of affective reading in both these temporally liminal spaces.

In this context railway travel can be seen not so much as a linear movement from one networked point to another, but more as a loop in which the traveller moves from a given starting point to a location beyond the railway itself, and finally returns by making the same journey in reverse (possibly with the same book). This mode of reading, bridging the discomforts of the train and the ostensibly therapeutic effects of the seaside holiday, offers new opportunities for fiction to destabilize discourses of health, travel and the act of reading itself. Erika Wright has argued that in medical discourse of the time “readers must be conditioned to take an interest in their health” (57). But if the vicissitudes of the journey present an obvious weak spot in medical prescriptions for rest and relaxation, the sensation plot systematically undermines the Victorian emphasis on the “healthy” seaside holiday by presenting it as a threat to the most vulnerable. Where seaside guides of the period typically establish the pedigree of a town through a detailed account of its history and beauty spots, these novels repeatedly shuttle highly mobile and unsettled characters from London to the coast and back.

The sensational reader, whose own routine is in course of disruption by the train journey and the cultural limbo of the seaside holiday, is invited to chart the impact of this programme in terms of increasing nervous debility. Such malaise might be vaguely defined - in Janet Oppenheim’s analysis “The words *nervous* and *nervousness* themselves scarcely concealed broad expanses of medical ignorance” (9) – but it was none the less potent for that.

If “By the mid-Victorian years, seaside towns were invariably describing, and defining, themselves as ‘health resorts’” (Hassan 5), seaside reading was a crisis waiting to happen.

Reading-on-Sea

With characteristic verve, as health tourism developed through the nineteenth century sensation fiction internalised topical concerns about the nervous response of invalid visitors sent to the resorts for a cure, much as it played with contemporary fears about the affective response of its more vulnerable readers by staging representations of madness and moral decline. “The beach was an invention of the modern age” (Gillis 143) in the sense of becoming a socially and metaphorically charged space where a range of meanings came into constant collision. It is no coincidence that, in Gillian Hanson’s analysis of coastal literature, the carnivalesque “urban seaside setting often provides the background for murder and deceit, or, conversely, for celebration” (6). Sensational readers are repeatedly invited to participate in acts of both freedom and deceit, albeit from a discreet social distance. The nervous reader, in other words, was set to undergo the ordeal of railway travel followed by immersion in the possibly immoral and “socially opaque” (Daly, *Sensation and Modernity* 6) world of the resort, where familiar social networks would be dissolved or recalibrated. Arguably a sensation novel was the worst choice they could make, but thanks to the railway bookstall it was also the most likely. As the *Morning Post* acknowledged in 1863, “Railways, as everybody knows, have revolutionised the literature of the seaside” (‘A Book for the Beach’).

If the railway carriage encouraged women in countercultural practices embedded in “everyday, quotidian, thoughts, fantasies, and activities” (Despotopoulou 14), the resort was presented in sensation fiction as a site where these fantasies might be played out. The construction of femininity assumes new implications in the context of crime and deceit, and at its most extreme, characters’ social and gender identity is at risk of disintegrating

altogether. From its eighteenth century origins the seaside resort, according to Alain Corbin, had presented the female body as the object of medical authority, while signalling its ability to elude control, “Physicians and hygienists speak of alarm and desire at the same time as they discuss scientific knowledge. Their discourse generated, handled, or codified practices that would gradually escape from their control” (57). These practices might include nude bathing (regardless of local bye laws), and John Walton suggests that “regulation was often unwelcome” (193).

Overt voyeurism is not among the risks directly registered by novels at the time.

Nonetheless by the 1860s fictional plots in which beautiful women lure men into intrigue are ostensibly reflected in the behaviour of holiday readers themselves, ‘Young ladies, if adepts in the art, can flirt and enjoy Miss Braddon at the same time’ (*Preston Herald*. 18 July 1868). The sense that ephemeral literature by definition quickly became obsolete, while books read on seaside holidays were at best a casual distraction and quite possibly a prop for flirtation used by poorly chaperoned young women, is mediated through jokes about the cheap library with aspirations to be seen as fashionable. In 1871 *Fun* had just that with its advice that ‘When you read a sensation novel, and are desperately anxious to know how it will finish, it’s as well to look at the close of the third volume – especially if procured at a seaside library – to make sure the end hasn’t come out.’ (‘General Advice on Particular Subjects’) Such jokes about light seaside reading are heavily class-inflected, mocking the aspirations of both the resorts and their assumed middle and lower-middle class clientele. But the ‘if’ in this joke inevitably rebounds on itself – a sensation novel may well be found in more fashionable surroundings than a dusty seaside library. This of course was precisely what caused such concern, the wide appeal of writers such as Collins and Braddon “making taste a very inaccurate index of social position” (Daly , *Sensation and Modernity* 7).

Reading Sensation

Maia McAleavey argues that “conceiving of plot as a mode of reading” and not just a series of events attached to a specific text or a secret to be revealed can expose “new patterns” (93) across generic fields. An awareness that “neither plot nor genre is immanent in a work of literature” (29) usefully blurs the boundaries between designated categories, allowing shared tropes to emerge across realist and sensation, canonical and popular literature. Seaside interludes do appear in a number of realist novels across the nineteenth century, and these scenes consistently suggest a level of conspicuous display and a relaxation of social codes (notably with regard to flirtation) as a special feature of the seaside holiday. But to reverse the terms of McAleavey’s analysis (perverse as such a move may seem), a seaside setting highlights the ways in which realist novels and even non-fiction texts may be destabilised as they are infiltrated by the sensation craze.

When Trollope strategically places scenes of dubious romance by the sea in both *Ralph the Heir* (1871) and *The Way We Live Now* (1875), the reader’s ability to decode the danger signs is implicitly derived from an awareness of the sea as a sensation convention. In Emma Worboise’s evangelical novel *Sissie* (1882) the virtuous heroine is accosted at a railway station by an importunate young man who has first seen her at the seaside – he assumes that the book she is reading must be a novel and by implication, that it can be used as an opening for unregulated conversation. But at least in these novels the assimilation of such brief scenes into a realist framework ultimately offers an assurance that the affective threat will be contained. In sensation fiction by contrast fashionable admiration of the coast as a series of holiday views is debunked in a series of seascapes characterised through images of deceit, decay and death.

Despite its own fashionable and supposedly artificial status, sensation fiction typically creates a resonant unease in the deserted spaces of the resort as it appears “out of season”. While the lack of chaperonage and surveillance creates new opportunities for deviance in a context already associated with excitingly promiscuous social mingling, authors such as Braddon and Collins both position sexually desiring men as particularly vulnerable in this context. Popular culture of the time might configure the naïve young woman as likely to misbehave, tempted by the freedom of the seaside (as interpreted by visitors at least) into indiscretions that would be impossible at home. By extension the adventuress can reinvent herself in the out of season resort, undetected by the usual social mechanisms that would be brought to bear in the community from which she – or indeed her victim - has come. The investigator must therefore learn to decode the resort much as the reader is trained through their own reading practices to see below the surface of the scheming woman’s beauty.

The search for clues in sensational mode typically plays past events “on repeat” over the main drive towards narrative resolution. In this type of narrative the reader is simultaneously propelled forwards through a rapid succession of dramatic events and obsessively returned to an imperfectly hidden past through fragments of material memory. Nicholas Daly explains that sensation novels “depend on the rapid succession of diverse locations, at the same time that the distance between these locations is erased” through railway travel (Daly, ‘Railway Novels’ 473). Sensation fiction is notably preoccupied with train timetables and the rapid movement of both characters and the newspaper reports and private letters they deploy in their investigations. Such free-floating documents themselves often constitute a form of illicit reading. Maria Damkjaer’s point that “Print culture is, and has always been, a meeting place where a multiplicity of temporalities linger – either acknowledged or unacknowledged” (144) could equally be applied to the ways in which manuscript clues connect past and present in unexpected ways. In the context of the sensation

novel a constant looping back towards a secret past, often embodied in the investigator's journey by rail, constitutes an exquisite strain on the nerves.

But in decoying characters out of their usual environment and habits, and separating them from their family and friends, the narrators of *No Name* and *Lady Audley's Secret* are among the first to exploit the assumed dangers of seaside culture in the related contexts of debility and the journey by rail. Intensifying their readers' concern with both illness and railway travel as markers of unregulated feeling, these pioneering novels take the already titillating image of the seaside romance and link it to ideas of female deviance in new ways. Specifically they highlight the act of holiday reading as a form of vicarious crime, locating and revealing the machinations of their female characters in recognisable seaside resorts.

Lady Audley's Secret

In an elaborate play on the "dangers" of inappropriate reading, *Lady Audley's Secret* takes fiction itself as a marker of the unsocialized protagonist, whose position as his uncle's heir demands his assimilation into class and patriarchal structures. The sensational investigation of the titular secret is mediated through two related tropes: the effect of illicit reading on the nerves, and the threat that this practice will be perpetuated by the railway links between London, the country and the sea. It will finally uncover the secrets of the seaside, where scheming women use their sexuality to entrap unsuspecting men.

Robert himself is not only an avid reader of sensation fiction; as Rachel Heinrichs points out, he is also a writerly gentleman detective, who "figures himself and others as characters in melodramas, French novels, Shakespearean plays, fairy tales, and epic poems" (105). Compiling his first amateur case, "he does not contemplate the evidence of the clues on the page; rather, he contemplates 'the written page' itself and makes aesthetic changes in anticipation of a future reader" (Heinrichs 110). As such, and despite his disclaimers, the once torpid gentleman of leisure is well placed to interpret the significantly literary tropes of

illicit desire he encounters, and with which his narrative is strewn. Notably the seaside locations invoked by the narrator and by both George and Robert offer a culturally loaded clue to the falsity of the ostensibly dead wife whose naïve pretence that she is oblivious to the attentions of the regiment in general has only increased her worth in the eyes of the one officer she means to marry.

Both Robert and the reader are aware from quite an early stage of the narrative of the direction the investigation must take and what it is likely to reveal. Learning to read forensically in order to establish control over the false story constructed by Lady Audley, ironically Robert must reject the titillating fare through which he has presumably first become attuned to the significance of such devices as half burned letters and false identities. The tension is exacerbated by the inevitable suspension of cultural expectations as he is forced to read – with a view to convincing his uncle of his wife’s treachery – private documents that he was never meant to see.

While the backstory is revealed according to convention only in retrospect, as Robert connects the series of clues that ultimately identify Lady Audley / Lucy Graham with his friend’s supposedly dead wife Helen Talboys / Maldon, the recovery and curation of these documents is not linear but circular. Robert’s perpetual movement between town and coast is prompted by the accumulation of written clues to what he insists on as a fixed and inviolable past. But he travels between different locations to retrieve written clues which he then re-reads and collates before he can shape them into chronological order, a subtle reminder that reading is a sustained process rather than a clearly defined event. The nightmare scenario for Lady Audley is that this evidentiary loop is metaphorically closing round her as Robert’s method of reading on repeat allows him to construct what he himself describes significantly as a “chain”. But as they both know, the threat of monomania is more than just a device by which Lady Audley can arrange to have her persecutor institutionalized. It is a potent threat

precisely because it destabilises the gendered authority by which his investigations are justified. If the conflict between the two antagonists is largely played out through their ‘rival appropriation of railway space’ (Humphries, p. tbc), Robert himself is aware that the balance between masculine resolution and nervous obsession is difficult to maintain, as his investigation repeatedly leads him into the ambivalent spaces of seaside resorts and perpetuates his now unwilling practice of illicit and feminised reading.

When Helen absconds from the resort of Wildernsea following what seems to be George’s desertion, she leaves few clues behind her, mimicking the transient habits of the seaside tourist. But in one of the novel’s many reminders that supposedly ephemeral writing can attain to unexpected longevity and significance, the landlady is able to produce the last letter Helen left for her father, causing Robert to remark that “The person who stole Helen Maldon’s love-letters from George’s trunk in my chambers might have saved themselves the trouble” (267). While Helen’s obscure allusion to the secret of her life is not open to interpretation at this point, she could have had no way of realizing that the writing itself would ultimately betray her. Her identification as Lucy Graham is confirmed because Robert knows enough about the logistics of travelling to peel off the top label on her trunk. Lori Brister confirms that “Like lovers’ letters or scraps of handwritten notes, luggage labels became telling clues in the long paper trails of sensation fiction and detective novels”, although Brister identifies this trend “particularly in the 1890s” (146). For Damkjaer such survivals are characteristic of the ways in which print can determine characters’ experience of time itself:

the temporality of ephemeral print objects can extend beyond the short life-span so often associated with the term ephemera. It is a question of what kinds of reading practices the specific printed form facilitates or complicates. ... Not just at the point

of entry into the domestic everyday, but in its repeated use or defiant survival, the ephemeral print medium shaped time.’ (124)

Ephemeral objects inevitably become overdetermined as ‘evidence’, exacerbating the sense of tension, as ‘escape’ to – or from – the seaside is registered as illusion and prescribed regulation is replaced by unwanted surveillance. For the newly created “Lucy Graham” ephemera such as the false obituary in the newspaper must be carefully planned in order to be seen by the right person at the most strategic moment. But the sheer speed of her reinventions and the need to keep moving may preclude the systematic destruction of evidence such as luggage labels (it is no coincidence that she is trapped by such an obvious symbol of restlessness and instability). Robert Audley is in this sense at an advantage, working as he is with the fixed premises of past time rather than needing to react moment by moment under the pressure of new developments or to second guess what may happen in the future. On the contrary his recovery of events is carefully framed and ritualized, building in pauses for reflection and self-communion or justification. In principle their respective journeys suggest the different aspects of rail travel as both relaxingly convenient and fast (in both senses of the word). In the case of Lady Audley the railway ‘makes possible her audacious rise as subversively as it aids her eventual destruction’ and the reinscription of male control (Humphries p.tbc). But it is a reading of hidden or sensational material that galvanises Robert and prompts each journey, rendering his experience of the railway increasingly fraught as he travels from one seaside location to another and connects them together to decode the dangerous femininity of his aunt. This strategy deliberately undermines the transient quality of the resort by reinserting it into a wider narrative. What happens in Wildernsea will most certainly not stay in Wildernsea. Just as railway time is both exploited and collapsed in Robert’s accumulation of evidence from different times and

locations, the distance barrier becomes increasingly unstable as the sea begins to infiltrate inland settings, further threatening established boundaries between past and present. The chapter titled “Troubled Dreams” begins just after the moment when Robert’s “face blanched to a deathly whiteness” (128) as he reads the remains of a telegraphic despatch sent to Captain Maldon. His response is to leave Southampton immediately by “the mail” (129), a phrase reinforcing the association between railway, letters and the seaside. Following this journey he dreams of another key seaside location, Ventnor, before duly tracking George to the Liverpool docks. A later chapter sees Robert “Beginning at the Other End” immediately after reading Helen Maldon’s real name on a luggage label; his resulting journey to Wildernsea will take him both to the start of Helen’s story and in the opposite direction to his first investigations in Southampton. In another context the introduction of the town might suggest the language of a holiday guide, with its stress on the access by rail and the inclusion of precise timings, “Within an hour of the receipt of the message Mr Audley arrived at the King’s-cross station, and took his ticket for Wildernsea by an express train that started at a quarter to two” (259). But as his malaise grows:

The knowledge of the purpose of his journey blighted every object upon which his absent glances fixed themselves for a moment; only to wander wearily away; only to turn inwards upon that far darker picture always presenting itself to his anxious mind. (259)

The conjunction of medically inflected terms (‘absent glances’ are unable to ‘fix’ themselves for more than a moment before they ‘wander wearily’) is suggestive of mental decline as the pursuit of the female criminal allows her disordered thinking to invade Robert’s own consciousness.

Even before the pivotal encounter between George and the supposed Lady Audley that provides the catalyst for the main plot, the seaside resort has the power to invade and merge with other locations such as the Audley Inn, providing a subtle clue that is not available to Robert and that the reader initially has no means of decoding. As Robert is talking George falls into reverie and stops listening to his friend, They returned, all those old unforgotten feelings, they came back, with the scene of their birthplace.’ The use of the present tense invokes a hypnotic return to the past as ‘Again he lounged with his brother officers upon the shabby pier at the shabby watering-place, listening to a dreary band with a cornet that was a note and a half flat. Again he heard the old operatic airs, and again *she* came tripping towards him’. The mood shifts slightly to take in George’s own misplaced assumption that she is seeking support in ‘leaning on her old father’s arm’ (Magdalen Vanstone will stage a dependence on Captain Wragge’s protection in much the same way in *No Name*). In ‘pretending (with such a charming, delicious, serio-comic pretence) to be listening to the music, and quite unaware of the admiration of half a dozen open-mouthed cavalry officers’ Helen is of course far from serio-comic, and the reader will learn in their turn to mistrust ‘the old fancy’ that ‘she was something too beautiful for earth, or earthly uses, and that to approach her was to walk in a higher atmosphere and to breathe a purer air (94).

It would take an astute reader to connect the Audley Inn in Essex with the northern “shabby watering-place” at this stage of the narrative. However by the end of the novel the seaside setting has been superimposed twice more on Audley Court itself, as the combined weight of disturbing reading and rail travel cause Robert to break down yet again. When he visits Wildernsea during his investigation he again has nightmares in which the patriarchal

emblem of his ancestral home is invaded by what first seems to be a masculine, 'boisterous' element:

In those troublesome dreams he saw Audley Court, rooted up from amidst the green pastures and the shady hedgerows of Essex, standing bare and unprotected upon that desolate northern shore, threatened by the rapid rising of a boisterous sea, whose waves seemed gathering upward to descend and crush the home he loved.

But the sea itself has been infiltrated by feminine designs, 'As the hurrying waves rolled nearer and nearer to the stately mansion, the sleeper saw a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it was my lady, transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction' (263).

This identification of house and sea is invoked one more time in reverse; as Lady Audley waits for news of Robert's expected death the house itself becomes a liminal space, "The blue mists of evening had slowly risen from the ground. The flat meadows were filled with a grey vapour, and a stranger might have fancied Audley Court a castle on the *margin* of a sea" (351, emphasis added).

The sea functions both metaphorically, threatening to overwhelm the story itself, and as a visual frame for the shady activities of particular characters. In the case of Wildernsea the town itself offers a series of clues to its duality, through staged articulations of class and seasonal difference. Cheap rail travel is suggested by the provision for a less affluent holiday market, when Robert goes to the Victoria Hotel and immediately notices a side door "which led into a comfortable bar, where the humbler classes of summer visitors were accommodated with such refreshments as they pleased to pay for, without running the gauntlet of the prim, white-waistcoated waiters on guard at the principal entrance" (261).

The resort is implicitly characterised by its accessibility and desirability, both qualities produced by the efficiency of the railway network. But Robert reflects sadly that Wildernsea itself is duplicitous, or at least complicit in the downfall of his friend:

It is such a place as this,' he thought, 'that works a strong man's ruin. He comes here, heart whole and happy, with no better experience of woman than is to be learnt at a flower-show or in a ball-room; with no more familiar knowledge of the creature than he has of the far-away satellites of the remoter planets; with a vague notion that she is a whirling teetotum in pink or blue gauze, or a graceful automaton for the display of milliners' manufacture (264-5).

Specifically the resort (like the railway itself) is constructed as a point of transient encounter, more potent than a flower-show or a ball-room because of its greater opportunities and freedoms but also because it is unfamiliar.

The seaside resort constitutes a clearly demarcated space, its boundaries marked by lines of houses. But its main buildings typically face the sea, building in a strong visual image of instability and freedom not normally available to women. Nonetheless for Robert, who inhabits the restricted space of legal chambers by choice and is free to move between London the country, the resort is more confined and intense than an overheated ballroom, with its ritualised movements and system of chaperonage. A young man entering this feminised space, he ruminates,

comes to some place of this kind, and the universe is suddenly narrowed into about half a dozen acres; the mighty scheme of creation is crushed into a bandbox. The far-away creatures whom he had seen floating about him, beautiful and indistinct, are brought under his very nose

But far from pre-empting the intimate knowledge that is the designated province of marriage, this startling proximity is itself a mode of deception, ‘before he has time to recover his bewilderment, hey presto! the witchcraft has begun; the magic circle is drawn around him, the spells are at work, the whole formula of sorcery is in full play’ (265). The seaside, in other words, symbolically reflects the confined but excitingly sexualized space of the railway carriage in its enforced proximity to attractive strangers in a context where social regulation is uncertain or even suspended altogether. The Circe-like figure in this case is the “mermaid” Helen Maldon, who will beckon both George Talboys and later Sir Michael Audley to what is indeed their near destruction.

Ann-Marie Dunbar rightly notes that Lady Audley’s impromptu declaration of insanity provides her with the surest means of escaping justice at a moment when her options are rapidly disappearing, “Faced with an imposed identity (as criminal, murderer, arsonist), Lady Audley performatively creates an alternative identity (that of madwoman)” (105). But this identity is subtly reinforced by her association with the presumed curative properties of the sea – she meets George in one seaside resort and supposedly goes to another to die in greater comfort (although in fact it is her replacement, Matilda Plowson, who dies on the Isle of Wight).

A strategic acceptance of her own “mad” status ultimately destroys Lady Audley’s agency when she is incarcerated in an inland rather than a coastal asylum, with no expectation of an ultimate cure. When Robert ascertains from *Bradshaw* that “Villebrumeuse lay out of the track of all railway traffic, and was only approachable by diligence from Brussels” (389), he is not simply precluding any future attempt at evasion; he is implicitly acknowledging his aunt’s genuine nervous debility (possibly also his own) by delivering her through an alternative means of transport. Throughout their respective manoeuvres the railway network itself has been a catalyst for increasing nervous tension. Significantly Lady Audley is also

disconnected from the metaphorical power of the sea – her perpetual incarceration depends on their being no cure for her condition. But if the sea itself is a source of feminine agency and power for Braddon’s ‘mermaid’, in the hands of Wilkie Collins it is figured as a social rather than a mystical space. *No Name* takes the reader “behind the scenes” to deconstruct the sorcery of which Robert has complained and show precisely how it is performed.

No Name

The construction of Wilkie Collins’s *No Name*, as a number of critics have noted, reverses expectations in revealing the secret (illegitimacy) early on in the novel when Andrew Vanstone is killed in a railway accident and his wife dies shortly afterwards. In this novel the battle between the antagonists is not dependent on the uncovering of secrets. Instead the reader is textually battered, experiencing the developments of the plot alongside the central protagonist, with little time for reflection. But the coast-bound railway still plays a crucial role in the experience of both reader and characters.

Deracinated and mobile, Magdalen Vanstone takes the reader with her as she critiques the laws governing inheritance by illegitimate children, but also the social mechanisms governing courtship in general, plotting with the disreputable Captain Wragge to recover her father’s fortune through marriage to the legal (but accidental) heir to his estate. Where readers might be on holiday away from home, the sensation heroine is notably homeless and forced to keep moving. Indeed Magdalen’s “restless mobility” aligns her with the ambiguity of the railway itself. While the daughters never witnessed the accident that killed their father, the very sight of it summons up “horrible remembrances”, as Norah tells the lawyer Mr Pendril (Despotopoulou 46), and Magdalen’s association with railway travel marks her as unstable throughout the novel.

But she becomes most obviously visible in her movement towards the sea.

Magdalen's assumed identity, increasingly contested and elusive as it is, is challenged to the point of near dissolution in the morally questionable atmosphere of a deserted resort. The narrator stresses the useful isolation of the town by sending Captain Wragge to meet the coach that "then connected Aldborough with the Eastern Counties Railway" (326). But immersion in the revenge plot threatens to mark both character and presumably also reader, as Wragge immediately notes that Magdalen's face is 'as cold and still as marble' and that she has developed "a little nervous contraction on one side of her mouth" (327), both hallmarks of the nervous invalid.

Regardless of the risk to health, reading invariably follows the sensation heroine around. As her nervous illness increases, Magdalen is actually invoking the literary sublime in her response to "The lonely, dreary, horrible sea!" (483) that only intensifies as her planned wedding day draws near. Victorian guide books encouraged visitors to filter the seaside through the Romantic sublime because, in Alain Corbin's phrase, "the therapeutic tendency had to make itself felt" (61). But as Corbin also registers, "a site that cannot be altered by force preserves no trace of human history: sand and water erase any sign, just as they frustrate any design" (60). The threat of nervous breakdown in the novel's sustained use of pathetic fallacy reminds the reader of Magdalen's essentially moral nature even as it symbolises the horror of what she plans to do. Even before she begins her campaign to lure her cousin Noel into marriage, she is characterized by her ability to appreciate the sea at a Romantic level, hinting at its deathly propensities:

Magdalen paused on the lonely public walk to breathe the air more freely. After a while, she turned her face from the breeze, and looked out towards the sea. The immeasurable silence of the calm waters, lost in the black void of night, was awful. She stood looking into the darkness, as if its mystery had no secrets for her – she

advanced towards it slowly, as if it drew her by some hidden attraction into itself (341).

For Noel Vanstone by contrast the house in which he is spending his holiday represents simply a clever bargain made by his father, who got it cheap.

The respective status of the characters is revealed by their ability to encode the vagaries of the sea in literary terms. But readers are also exposed to the stratagems deployed by the antagonists as they try to “read” each other. This is where the penny post (one of the great innovations of the early 1840s) is used to strategic effect, creating a hidden and time-sensitive circuit as letters are variously circulated along the railway lines, intercepted and answered with a view to surveillance and blackmail.

Even in this setting the machinations of the designing woman are made visible by the equally determined manoeuvring of her counterpart, the socially insecure but publicly respectable Mrs Lecount. Neither takes her eyes off the other’s proceedings for a moment; indeed the tacit understanding and competition between the two women itself starts to break down the boundaries between respectability and fallenness. New technologies allow the resort to be permeated by print culture, raising the stakes for the sensation heroine and her antagonist as the seaside is brought into closer alignment with London. Isolated as they are, their battle of wits is executed largely through the ability to send and receive letters, including Mrs Lecount’s appeal to Norah for information about Magdalen’s personal appearance. As a result of this counter-move Magdalen is forced to feign ill health and keep her room for several days. The careful calculation of timings involved in these manoeuvres depends on the precise regularity of the railway as documents are collected by coach, carried to London by train and directed to their final destination. The mechanisms of the seaside interlude, in other words, are still in some sense aligned with circular movement along the railway.

Magdalen's shape shifting in this space depends on who is reading what and when, as the circulation of letters closes the gap between seaside and town. Initially she abandons her various disguises even as she carries out a sensational staging of a false identity as Miss Bygrave - in Aldborough she feels able to dispense with all disguise as neither Noel nor Mrs Lecount knows her normal appearance. In the event she is able to captivate Noel in much the same way that Helen Maldon gets the attention of George Talboys, simply because she is the most attractive woman present and is effectively framed by the promenading spaces of the resort. As Laurence Talairach-Vielmas's work on consumerism in the 1860s shows, "In the 1860s the Victorian ideal was more and more self-made, seeking public exhibition, and therefore far less 'natural' and, as a result, hazardously close to the equivocal figure of the actress or even that of the prostitute" (61-2). Significantly Magdalen will be forced to resort to stage make-up at the point where a letter from her sister infiltrates the town, a covert investigation that is once again enabled by the mail train.

As in *Lady Audley's Secret* letters can be treacherous when they survive their intended context. But the circulation of a wider print culture can also be manipulated to blur the lines between private and public reading. In Braddon's account the newspaper detailing the supposed death of Helen Talboys is intended to be read by one particular character as he moves to London from the coast. In Collins's novel an entire family history is appropriated by the unscrupulous Captain Wragge, who steals the identity of dead or absent figures from one part of the country and moves them to another. The relative ease with which the deception is achieved severely compromises the social mechanisms of the resort as a means of protecting the innocent from designing strangers. Discussing Captain Wragge's accumulation of convincing detail in connection with the genuine Bygraves, Vicky Jones points out that "the curiousness of these details suggests that he may have obtained them

from cheap tabloids that dealt in such news; his possession of the information shows how readily private family details could be made public” (121-2).

The staging of familial relations as a marker of respectability is exploited - and crucially undermined - by Magdalen’s performance with Captain Wragge. But in the sensation novel the availability of private information (already suggested in the account of the false Bygraves’ arrival in the local press) renders its possession as a code for entry into society virtually worthless. In the limited circle of the out of season resort, such information is unlikely to be challenged by the few visitors Wragge expects to encounter (admittedly he does take the precaution of keeping his wife out of sight).

Once again railway behaviour primes the reader for what will happen in the resort. Both spaces were subject to attempts at regulation, in which a focus on ‘looking’ at a view was always perilously close to watching other people. Writers offering advice to the inexperienced traveller often frame – even commodify - particular views, so that everyone involved will know exactly where and how to look without rendering themselves vulnerable to annoyance. During the journey the passive rail traveller was trapped in a close carriage, expected ideally to appreciate the view framed by the window as ‘a resolutely artificial presentation of the landscape presented for the entertainment of the traveller’ (Mathieson 69), while avoiding promiscuous conversation.

On the supposed Bygraves’ arrival at the coast the success of the scheme to befriend Noel Vanstone depends to a great extent on the conspirators’ ability to negotiate movement in a designated space and to exploit the likely interpretations of their coded behaviour by a selfish but gullible victim. Noel Vanstone’s lack of local connections renders him doubly vulnerable to the temptation of an attractive new acquaintance. Having worked out Vanstone’s usual routine and engineered an initial meeting on the parade, Captain Wragge easily manages the introduction to Magdalen; greeting the gatekeeper Mrs Lecount “with the

frank and cheerful politeness of a naturally sociable man” (360) he tackles what might appear to be a problem, the absence of formal acquaintance between the two parties, by directly addressing the issue in his advances to Noel, whom he has recently met. In a parody of seaside etiquette, Wragge demands:

Are we formal people on either side? Nothing of the sort – we are just the reverse. You possess the continental facility of manner, Mr Vanstone – I match you, with the blunt cordiality of an old-fashioned Englishman – the ladies mingle together in harmonious variety, like flowers on the same bed – and the result is a mutual interest in making our sojourn at the sea-side agreeable to each other (360).

Reading itself is used as a device to hook the vain Mrs Lecount, who prides herself on being an intellectual rather than a sensational reader. During this first meeting Wragge has imbibed some basic knowledge of amateur science from *Joyce’s Scientific Dialogues* in order to distract her with appropriate pseudo-intellectual conversation while Noel flirts with Magdalen. At the same time he communicates with Magdalen by means of a simple code, moving a camp stool from one hand to the other as a warning when he can see that the ever-suspicious Mrs Lecount is attending to her conversation with her master. This manoeuvring enables a rapid intimacy to develop that would not necessarily be possible in the more prescriptive atmosphere of London. The focus on amateur science itself also provides an ironic counterpoint to the readers’ likely expectations of the sensational mode – Mrs Lecount keeps an aquarium containing a toad, left to her by her eminent husband the Professor. But this freshwater amphibian subtly invokes the mid-century craze for marine biology professed by visitors to the coast, and so creates a tension between the educational books considered

suitable for young women on holiday and the possibly more appealing sensation novels such as the one they are holding in their hands.

Characteristically Collins defends the status of the genre itself, not least in giving Magadalen sufficiently fine perceptions to make her sensitive to the sea, which her own mood leads her to regard as essentially hostile and forbidding. As the heroine of a sensation novel she implicitly critiques the basis on which such figures are judged: illegitimate, transgressive and ready to sell herself in marriage, she is also a clear-sighted judge of the shortcomings of the culture that condemns her. But it is given to Captain Wragge to mock and exploit the racketeering of the health industry, ridiculing holiday readers of wholesome popular science and finally making a fortune from bogus pills. This idea is surely inspired by his experience of encouraged invalidism in a seaside resort. Twenty years later visitors to the Folkestone Free Library could enjoy the novel itself and then read an 1853 treatise by George Moseley on the adjacent town of *Sandgate as a Residence for Invalids*, which includes a clipping from the *Folkestone Chronicle* of 1855 to the effect that the author has absconded leaving his debts behind him. Male authority may be imposed by the end of both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *No Name*, but for readers who have been taught to suspect and decode the performance of gender, its value is far from immutable.

Conclusion

As the rail links between London and the resorts enabled increasing numbers of people to visit the seaside, fictional 'light reading' would increasingly establish itself as the prevalent mode in both contexts, and novelists would eventually start to include the names of specific resorts in their titles. But in the 1860s books read by the sea are held to signal a great deal about the physical and moral health of visitors, who seek refuge in the healthy air of the resorts only to invite a dangerous assault on their nerves through railway travel and sensational reading. Particularly for the invalid, prescribed rest and sea air as an antidote to

nervous ailments, there was immediate danger in a journey by train followed by exposure to the suspended conventions of a seaside resort, and sensation fiction is often seen as part of the problem. But for novelists working in this highly metafictional genre it was the ideal context for reading. Not only did the railway journey and the seaside resort encourage affective responses – together they provided the perfect metaphor for instability and disruption. They were, in other words, the perfect advertisement for what the sensation novel was trying to do. Internalizing critical attacks in a rhetorical move that almost seems to mock the very readers they want to attract, *Lady Audley's Secret and No Name* position invalid or fragile characters in the ostensibly healthy resorts, which they then frame as dangerously sexual and possibly deadly. Nervous readers who take a sensation novel on the train are infected before they arrive at the resort, continue to damage their nervous system with a sustained course of reading, and finally follow the fictional characters back by rail. The ultimate irony, Braddon and Collins satirically imply, is that they might be safer staying at home.

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