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Behind closed doors: the theatrical uncanny and the panoptical viewer in the
dramas of Wilkie Collins.

Wilkie Collins's dramas, *The Red Vial* (1858), *Miss Gwilt* (1875) and *The Moonstone* (1877), each share a process of adaptation, alteration or arrangement between stage and novel. In this chapter, I will consider Collins's use of the onstage/offstage door as an exit to the dead/alive realm of the uncanny. Linking Collins's scenographic positioning of doors and the rooms they conceal or reveal to Foucault's analysis of Bentham's Panopticon, Collins places his actors under observation, sometimes by the audience and sometimes by the dramatist himself, whose authorship haunts both stage and adaptation.

In her article 'An Uncanny Theatricality: the Representation of the Offstage', Beliz Güçbilmez rereads the offstage as 'the unconscious of the stage'.¹ In a manner that recalls Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of the windowed stage,² she considers the role of framing in setting out the special limits of the onstage, creating 'the conventions of how to watch a play'.³ Güçbilmez describes the offstage as having an ambiguous and transitory nature:

The offstage softens the sharpness between the fictional and the real world: it is related to both but possessed by neither. It's where we are in limbo. Offstage is not a place but an idea. ... Offstage is world minus stage; this means that it is "anywhere but here", and its time is time-minus-now'.⁴

Referring to the nineteenth-century psychologist Ernst Jentsch's seminal essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1906) Güçbilmez highlights the sense of disorientation experienced by those who enter the realm of the uncanny.⁵ Citing Patrice Pavis she describes '*Enter* and *exit*' as marking 'the boundary between the stage and the outside, hence the real and the symbolic importance of the door in theatre'.⁶

Collins relegates the instances and manifestations of the uncanny described within his novels to the area behind the stage doors of his dramatic plays and adaptations – doors situated not only within the locked, disciplinary locations of the asylum and the clinic but also within the waiting limbo of the

dead house and the private interiors of the domestic home. Doors open onto an intermedial theatrical space in which the uncanny elements of suspended animation, madness and drug-induced trances are rendered visible within the audience's imaginations.

Julian Wolfreys highlights 'that often-assumed Victorian drive towards making things visible',⁷ referring to what the critic George Henry Lewes described as 'the invisible visible by imagination'.⁸ In both the novels and the dramas, Collins swings between these notions of visibility and imagination from allowing the reader or spectator to be party to all that occurs behind an infinite number of closed doors, to consigning what becomes invisibly enclosed to the spectator's imagination. Andrew Sofer discusses the effect of this invisibility on the audience, comparing it to 'dark matter' - 'the non-luminous mass that cannot be directly detected by observation' in physics and astronomy:

Translated into theatrical terms, dark matter refers to the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance. ... No less than physical actors and objects, such invisible presences matter very much indeed, even if spectators, characters and performers cannot put their hands on them.⁹

As with his inclusion of dark matter - the juxtaposition of the visible and the invisible - Collins's work reflects both the uncanny and Derrida's theory of hauntology; Collins's spectres manifest themselves within the imagination of the characters, operating within the senses; imagination defying ontology in its lack of physical materiality. Further to this, many of his themes are played out in the indefinable space between the dead and the alive. Collins frequently relies on the effects of drugs on the nervous systems of his characters, committing their bodies and minds to a trance-like state of limbo - comparable to the dead/alive state of suspended animation. Jentsch similarly made the connection between the susceptibility of the nervous, drug or alcohol-influenced imagination and the fear of the uncanny,¹⁰ clearly apparent in Franklin's dreams in *The Moonstone*, while emphasising the centrality of uncertainty, invoked by a fear of reanimation as exemplified in *The Red Vial*.¹¹

Most readings of the uncanny link it to the psychological analyses of Freud and are unfailingly based on his famous essay of 1911 which supplanted and obscured Jentsch's earlier essay, creating the impression that it was Freud who originated the concept.¹² Regardless of Freud's influence, few writers have even attempted to examine the presence of the uncanny in any depth within Collins's novels – and none within his dramas. Timothy L. Corens examines imperial culture in *The Moonstone* in relation to the uncanny¹³ and in the introduction to her study of the psychological aspects of Collins's novels, Jenny Bourne Taylor seeks to define the complexity of Collins's use of the uncanny.¹⁴ Both of these works are, predictably, based on Freud's essay with neither conveying a sense of how absolutely central the presence of the uncanny is to Collins's works as a whole. Charting the etymology and early historical meanings of the word 'uncanny', Nicholas Royle concludes that Freud ultimately serves to 'deny it (the uncanny) a history'.¹⁵ Attempts by writers to define the sites of the uncanny and its phenomena include and range from death and corpses, cannibalism, live burial and reanimation, to doubles, madness, the hospital, the asylum, the home, somnambulism, epilepsy, automata, dolls, waxworks and machines - but all are in agreement with both Jentsch and Freud that it is the feeling of uneasiness invoked by the close juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar that is of the essence. Royle links the Romantic use of the term to 'the need to tell' equating it with storytelling (paradoxically drawing our attention inevitably to Freud again):

In the closing paragraphs of 'The Uncanny' Freud writes: 'the storyteller has a *peculiarly* directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide our current emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material'.¹⁶

Collins is undoubtedly reliant on the power of the uncanny narrative on the readers' senses, but he consciously transposes this to a more theatrical effect on the stage. He does not simply reiterate the techniques used in his writing but has a clear sense of what will produce the greater effect dramatically - a theatrical

're-telling'. Although there are earlier precedents for its supernatural association, Royle traces the modern understanding of the word 'uncanny' to the 1850s: 'as the OED suggests, it was only around 1850 that the sense of the word 'uncanny' as 'Partaking of a supernatural character; mysterious, weird, uncomfortable strange or unfamiliar' became 'common' '.¹⁷ It is at exactly this chronological point that Collins began to experiment with dramatic form, combining naturalism and melodrama with the familiar and the unfamiliar, the fictional and the real.

The Red Vial

The Red Vial (1858) was Collins's second play to be professionally staged, two years after the production of *The Lighthouse* at the Olympic.¹⁸ Although *The Red Vial* succeeded in running for four weeks, the drama initially received poor reviews and was subjected to uncompromising cuts in response to its critics.¹⁹ *The Lighthouse* had been firmly grounded in the uncanny, containing themes of the supernatural and of reanimation. In Act I, Aaron Gurnock has a fearful, premonitory dream in which a vision of the murdered figure of Lady Grace appears to him, and in Act II, Lady Grace returns from the apparent uncertainty of death to confront him with his crime. These themes can be identified in later novels such as *Armadale* (1866), but Collins reused and developed them more immediately in his serialisation of *The Dead Secret* (1857) and the drama *The Red Vial*. After public criticism of *The Red Vial*, Collins refused to allow the play to be restaged,²⁰ only returning to it in 1879 when he re-worked it as *Jezebel's Daughter* in serial form, publishing it in novel form the following year. *The Red Vial* is unusual in its position as the original stimulus for the subsequent novel, it is therefore not in the context of a straightforward adaptation that I am here approaching it, but in Collins's startlingly transparent dramatic manipulation of the uncanny from the offstage space to the onstage, which, I argue, was the main cause of the audiences' and critics' quite extreme revulsion and objection to the third act in particular. Critics found much else to condemn in *The Red Vial*; its similarity to the French Drama (in terms of its unrelenting seriousness and uncompromising themes) was lamented by some, and the contradictory figure of

the beautiful but murderous Widow Bergmann offended others; but it was the third act that critics unanimously found disturbing and I suggest that this was due to the embeddedness of the uncanny, which Collins intensified as the act progressed.

Güçbilmez states that:

... the knowledge of the outside has been carried to the stage through the narratives of messengers, and this extensional and external diegesis provides an enlarged range of sight to the audience topographically, cognitively, and of course, imaginatively'.²¹

In *The Red Vial* Collins turns to diagetic technique in Act I, through Hans Grimm's account of his former cell in the madhouse. Through Grimm's description the audience is witness to his dead and alive state of incarceration. Hans Grimm's rescue by Rodenberg represents his passage from the site of the uncanny (the *Unheimliche* or unhomely) within the asylum to the homely refuge of the philanthropic and humane Rodenberg, and can be read as a metaphorical resurrection – a new life away from the asylum – reiterated through the literal reanimation of Rodenberg himself at the end of Act III. It is Grimm's 'need to tell' that references the uncanny storytelling tradition of the German Romantic period in which the play is set. Collins's oblique reference to the stories of the Grimm brothers establishes both the macabre and the gothic.²²

Although the uncanny permeates the play in its entirety, it is throughout the third Act that it takes a complete hold of the audience. Collins sets the whole of Act III in the Frankfurt Dead House. In the preface to *Jezebel's Daughter*, Collins's writes:

... it may not be amiss to mention, ... that the accessories of the scenes in the Deadhouse in Frankfort (sic) have been studied on the spot. The published rules and ground plans of that curious mortuary establishment have also been laid on my desk, as aids to memory while I was writing the closing passages of the story.²³

ILLUSTRATION OF THE DEADHOUSE PLAN HERE

The Dead House was instituted to address the common fear of burial alive. Bodies of wealthy citizens could be deposited after death before being committed to burial. The attachment of a bell to the corpse's finger would signal any signs of life to the paid watchmen and medical attendants present day and night. Collins's stage directions replicate the layout of the Dead House, (as shown in Illustration 1) including the doors, corridors, windows, the cells and the watchman's room. The audience is able to view the institution from a wide-angle perspective.

Act III

The Bell

Scene. The Dead House at Frankfort. The stage represents part of a long corridor, the ends of which are supposed to terminate, on the right and the left, out of sight of the audience. The scene in the Flat presents a plain panelled wall. In the middle of the wall, a narrow black door, with the figures, 10, painted on it in large white characters. Above the door, and on the left hand side of it, a large bell, moved by a wooden crank. Attached to the crank, a rope; with the end passed through a hole in the wall. The rope is not drawn tight to the crank, but hangs down loosely below it in a loop. On the right of the door, a bracket fixed against the wall. The Flat scene is continued off the stage, to right and left, as far as the audience can see. At the left end of it, a black door, marked, 9, with a bell painted above it, to correspond with number 10. At the right end, a door marked, Watchman's Room. On the right side of the door of Number 10, a plain arm chair, placed against the wall. On the left side, a small round table, and a second arm chair. A lamp burns on the table. The light on the stage is dim.²⁴

We are reminded of Foucault's description of Bentham's Panopticon, in which the rooms and cells the actor inhabits 'are like so many small cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible'.²⁵ But the actor is visible only within the imagination of the audience and Collins carefully allocates parts of the set to the offstage (my emphases in the stage directions above), beyond the sight of the audience. Placing the dramatist in the position of the observer, Collins employs the doors

to the cells as the entrance to the offstage theatres of the uncanny.

Kelly Jones links the writing of stage directions by authors of contemporary ghost plays as ‘an attempt to control the phenomenological experience of the audience, directing and manipulating the atmospheric tension’, thus the author remains in control of ‘the poststructuralist concern with the death of the author’ by asserting his presence over the production.²⁶ In Act III of *The Red Vial*, Collins can be seen to be consciously controlling his audience’s experience through what he allows them to see or not see, thus privileging the role of the author. Rodenberg lies behind the door of cell No. 10 in a state of suspended animation, ‘hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate’;²⁷ as Derrida states: ‘On ne sait pas si c’est vivant ou si c’est mort.’²⁸ The Dead House is a space of uncertainty, bodies are placed there in the hope that they may return to life. Throughout the third act, the audience views the watchman’s room onstage while simultaneously imagining the interior of the offstage cell in which Rodenberg’s body lies behind the door. Rodenberg’s body, although physically secreted, is the subject of the Act, and relies on the elements of the hauntological to create fear and suspense. It is what lies unseen that stimulates fear in Collins’s works and his constant use of uncertainty maintains this fear. Güçbilmez describes the offstage as the ‘Hades’ of the stage, referring to the attempted rescue of Eurydice from the underworld, ‘when we penetrate offstage ... we abdicate our sight so we must hear/listen to the voices/sounds in order to find our way. The language of the offstage is always a language which (here citing Foucault) “only appears for itself, with the disappearance of the subject”’.²⁹ Collins signals the offstage action through the ringing of the bell, indicating the reanimation of the supposed corpse:

The bell swings slowly to and fro – then rings one deep note. Shwartz starts from his sleep and looks up in terror. ... A pause. The door opens a few inches– then bangs to again with a dull sound. A second pause. The door opens a few inches again.

Both audience and onstage actors must ‘hear’ and ‘listen’ to the sound of the bell in order to find their way. Collins maintains their uncertainty for as long as

possible, eventually exposing the space and non-space of the offstage from which the uncanny figure of Rodenberg crosses the threshold between the dead and the living to appear onstage:

A bare hand and arm steal out over its black surface, and slowly move it back. As it opens wide, Isaac Rodenberg appears on the threshold. He is dressed in a robe of black velvet, which covers him except for his right hand and arm, from the neck to the feet. His head is bare: his face deadly pale. He stands looking straight before him, without moving or speaking; the light from the lamp on the bracket falling in one bright ray across his face.

It was the deathly appearance of the reanimated Rodenberg that dismayed audiences and critics. Reviews unanimously judged the Dead House scene to be 'revolting',³⁰ 'unpleasant' and 'objectionable'.³¹ The emergence from the cell of the 'bony hand and arm ... creeping along the wall'³² followed by the revelation of the living corpse dressed in a black pall were the primary objects of audience discomfort – 'the shock almost shocked too much'.³³ *The Musical World* attributed the play's failure to the combination of:

Idiocy, theft, murder, and the Morgue – such are the materials from which Mr. Wilkie Collins has wrought his new play. ... Mr. Wilkie Collins has ... overleapt himself, and lighted on the unnatural. In some respects *The Red Vial* betrays great ingenuity, and even indicates power, but the "horrors on horrors" which the writer accumulates, he has not poetical forces or elevation of sentiment to assuage or modify, and the facts are left to their own native repulsiveness.³⁴

Repulsive and unnatural - the currency of the uncanny. The power referred to by the critic above can be viewed as Collins's authorial authority through which he controls the audience's fear. But in what could have become a damaging battle of power for Collins, he succumbed to the critics' pressure and agreed to a radical cut, 'doing away with the appearance of the revived corpse, and bringing the curtain down at the point when ... the bell strikes, at which moment *Madame Bergmann* expires, leaving *Hans* in an attitude of triumph and joy'.³⁵

In Act III of *The Red Vial* Collins evokes the archetypal representation of the uncanny through the dead/alive corpse of Rodenberg invoking fear and revulsion in the audience. It is this deliberate use of ambiguity that distinguishes Collins from other dramatists working within the same genre of suspense. True to Güçbilmez's conclusion that 'The representation of what has been entombed in the offstage as the unconscious of the stage is the presence of the uncanny theatricality',³⁶ Collins exploits the theatricality of the offstage through the literal entombment of Rodenberg in the Dead House cell.

An anonymous female reader, signing herself as an 'Englishwoman', wrote to the editor of the *Daily News* requesting him to 'afford space for a feminine view' on the causes of the play's failure, objected to *The Red Vial's* 'uncanny theatricality', wishing instead for it to have been written for literary serialisation:

Without a doubt, the last scene was the specially fatal point ... yet had it come before us in the pages of *Household Words*, simply written in the powerful style that Wilkie Collins can command, it would doubtless, have impressed its readers with precisely the feelings which he would have desired, although *when brought visibly before us*, much of it repelled and disgusted. ... The maniac and the murderess, ... the drunkard and *the unseen dead*, formed a group fraught with strong dramatic interest. ... The group, as mentioned above, *we could have seen without being revolted*. The opening of the tomb door from within, and the naked arm of the inhabitant wavering its way forth, *were things to be imagined, not seen*, even when followed by the entrance of the form hung with sable drapery, classically arranged ... but the walk across the stage, the unassisted return, the exit, the re-entrance, &c., all gone through by a person just awakened from a death-like trance, preceded by two months' illness, which had converted him into a helpless invalid, were really things *neither to be imagined nor seen* (my italics).³⁷

The anonymous critic expresses all the concerns raised by Collins's 'uncanny theatricality'. In her view, Collins held the 'powerful command' of an author to make visible the uncanny or to relegate it to the audience's imagination, but by even staging *The Red Vial's* uncanny narrative, Collins was, it appeared,

overstepping his role as a writer. Similarly, the reviewer of the *Examiner*, stated that

If told on paper as none would know better than Mr Wilkie Collins how to tell it, everything in it would pass muster; the reader would be in the story-teller's power. But to give such a story flesh and blood, risk a comparison with living probabilities by setting it upon the stage, and the story-teller is in the hands of his public, powerless.³⁸

The reviewer implies that Collins, 'an absent presence, both there and not there'³⁹ will relinquish his control of the text through staging it; by handing it over to the audience, the author is unable 'to enjoy control over the reception and meaning of their corpus of work. This ghostliness of authorship is, arguably, even more noticeable when the text in question is a script intended for theatrical performance'.⁴⁰

In *Jezebel's Daughter*, Collins recast Rodenberg as his female double - Widow Wagner. Collins restored the emergence of the 'corpse' from the Dead House cell to the novel; but the 'horrible' impact it had on theatre audiences is considerably lessened for the reader by rendering the 'corpse' a more living being through the feminisation and gentle animation of its body, thus no longer situated in the grey and shadowy, hauntological site of the spectre:

The curtains swayed gently. Tremulous fingers crept out, parting them. Slowly, over the black surface of the curtain, a fair naked arm showed itself, widening the gap.

The figure appeared, in its velvet pall. On the pale face the stillness of repose was barely ruffled yet. The eyes alone were conscious of returning life. They looked out on the room, softly surprised and perplexed – no more. They looked downwards: the lips trembled sweetly into a smile.⁴¹

In *The Red Vial*, Collins based the Frankurt merchant Rodenberg's benevolent adoption of the lunatic, Hans Grimm, on William Tuke's Quaker model for the humanitarian care of the insane. Tuke was a key historical source for Foucault's discussion of reformatory asylum practices, describing the move

away from traditional practices of restriction and containment to a self-regulatory and seemingly more humane approach towards its patients.⁴² In *The Red Vial*, Rodenberg saves Grimm from his chained existence in Bedlam, the notoriously hellish asylum, and seeks to reform him in his own home through faith, trust, responsibility, work and loyalty. Foucault describes the authority of the patriarch as mirroring the family-based structure deliberately created by Tuke within his new-style asylum. Grimm assumes the metaphorical role of the son in Rodenberg's home. Grimm's filial relationship with Rodenberg parallels the mother/daughter relationship of the murderer, Widow Bergmann, and daughter, Mina. Bergmann's crimes are driven purely by a mother's love and Collins asks his audience to sympathise with her protective maternalism, typically breaking the rules of conventional melodrama by creating a paradoxical villain whose motives are driven not by inherent evil but by the womanly instinct of care and concern for her daughter. Collins further parallels the mother/child role by replacing the patriarchal figure of Rodenberg with his female counterpart, Widow Wagner. Collins inserts a direct reference to Tuke (even going so far as to provide a detailed footnote reference) in *Jezebel's Daughter*, substantiating Wagner's methods (inherited from her husband's) to reform Grimm:

In the first place she had discovered, while arranging her late husband's library, a book which had evidently suggested his ideas of reformation in the treatment of the insane. It was called, "Description of the Retreat, an institution near York for insane persons of the Society of Friends. Written by Samuel Tuke." She had communicated with the institution; had received the most invaluable help; and would bring the book with her to Frankfort, to be translated into German, in the interests of humanity.

(1)

(1) Tuke's Description of the Retreat near York is reviewed by Sydney Smith in a number of the "Edinburgh Review," for 1814.

Through her humane and philanthropic treatment of Grimm, Wagner becomes an exemplar of the caring parent in contrast to Bergmann's warped methods of

parenting as she desperately tries to ensure her daughter's wellbeing. Thus the mother, Wagner, assumes the dominant position, replacing the patriarchy of the asylum and offering a nurturing, safe-house for Grimm.

Foucault further identifies the system instituted by Tuke as a 'phenomenon of observation', an 'observation that watches, that spies, that comes closer in order to see better'.⁴³ In the novel, *Armada* (1866), Collins, returns to the asylum – a theme earlier explored in *The Woman in White* (1860) - incorporating the systems of both observation and panopticism in the humanitarian guise of Dr Downward's sanatorium 'for the reception of nervous invalids'.⁴⁴

Miss Gwilt

In the novel, *Armada*, the layout of the sanatorium corridor is strikingly similar to that of the Dead House in *The Red Vial*. The small rooms, or apartments, opening out of the corridor on either side are labelled one to eight and include accommodation for the night attendants. The action of the last scene in which Midwinter and Armada exchange rooms is dependant on this very specific numbering of rooms and the proximity of each to one another. In *Miss Gwilt*, the dramatic version of the novel, Collins compacts the corridor making only the Doctor's drawing room (similar to the positioning of the night watchman's room in *The Red Vial*) and one of the numbered rooms visible onstage, leaving the spectator to imagine a further room.

SCENE. -- *The Sanatorium. The stage represents a drawing-room, with a door and a window at the back, and a bedroom on the right hand. The bedroom is furnished with a bed (without curtains), a table, and a chair. A candle (made to burn gas) is placed on the table. The bedroom is divided from the drawing-room by a vertical partition, with a door in it marked in large characters, on the drawing-room side, No. 1. On the left hand is a similar door, opposite, supposed to lead into another bedroom which is not seen, and marked No. 2. On the drawing-room side of the door of No. 1, and placed close against the partition wall, is a pedestal in imitation marble, with a vase of flowers placed on it. The pedestal is hollow; it opens at the top on the vase being removed, and is supposed to contain the DOCTOR'S vaporising apparatus.*⁴⁵

In the light of the critics' condemnatory reactions to the uncanny elements of *The Red Vial*, Collins perhaps made a careful decision to make transparent to *Miss Gwilt's* audience what had remained unseen in the novel.⁴⁶ The moment in which Midwinter slips into semi-consciousness as he is overcome by the poisonous chemical gases, pumped into his room via the Doctor's vaporising equipment, is therefore revealed to the spectator through the introduction of a split-compartment scene. Collins perhaps feared a similar reaction to the offstage/onstage revelation of Rodenberg's corpse by leaving the spectator to imagine Midwinter's drawn out poisoning behind the locked door of the apartment - only to be revealed by Miss Gwilt who is able to force the lock and retrieve Midwinter's dead/alive body. In the novel, Collins works within the currency of the uncanny by employing the formulaic methodology of uncertainty as Gwilt gazes upon her unconscious husband:

Was it death that spread the livid pallor over his forehead and his cheeks, and the dull leaden hue on his eyelids and his lips?⁴⁷

But Collins had perhaps learned from his experience in staging *The Red Vial* that whilst readers could cope with descriptions of suspended animation, theatre audiences would remain uncomfortable, rendering it necessary for Collins to abandon any obvious use of the offstage uncanny in *Miss Gwilt*.

Further to Collins's reversal of the offstage/onstage, he reverses the positioning of the panoptical viewer in the sanatorium scene. In *Armada*, Miss Gwilt leaves Bashwood, her obsequious admirer, in the night attendant's apartment to observe the rooms on the opposite side of the corridor in which Midwinter and Armadale are locked, through a small grill designed for the purpose of patient surveillance. Bashwood, like the public visitors of Bentham's Panopticon, is granted the privilege of seeing while remaining unseen – Foucault's 'phenomenon of observation' – an observation 'that watches, that spies, that comes closer in order to see better',⁴⁸ essential to the construction of the reformed nineteenth century asylum and serving Collins's purposes as a site of one-way containment and surveillance in which to present and organise Miss

Gwilt's crimes. In *Miss Gwilt* however, Bashwood is entirely absent, replaced in his role as panoptical observer by the theatre audience. In *The Red Vial* Collins maintains the offstage suspense of the Dead House cell before exposing the corpse; in *Miss Gwilt*, he diminishes the suspense, thereby reducing any sense of the uncanny, by allowing the spectator to fully view the interior of the apartment (visible via the compartmental stage set) in which Midwinter and Gwilt are, respectively, rendered unconscious and poisoned. Through making the scene visible throughout the act, Collins relinquishes authorial agency by handing over both a material realisation of the text and the panoptical viewpoint to the audience, granting them control of the scene. Collins attempts to appease the audience by reversing the uncanny/panoptical processes failed to please the *The Pall Mall Gazette's* theatre critic who found *Miss Gwilt's* final scene a target for derision:

... the real "sensation" of the piece – the poisoning scene in the sanitorium – will have rather a mirth-provoking than a horrifying effect.⁴⁹

The critic cited the cause of such mirth as:

... principally due to the fact that to represent Miss Gwilt's murderous attempt the stage has to be arranged so as to represent two rooms divided by a party-wall, a device utterly fatal to scenic illusions (due to) ... the spectator's inability to conceive himself as present in two rooms at once.⁵⁰

Collins's return to the visible multi-compartmental set - that leaves nothing to the spectator's imagination - failed to have the effect Collins might have hoped for. The critic found the 'spectacle of Midwinter' as he coughed his way through 'gradual asphyxiation', in full view of the audience, unimpressive and unrealistic, according with his overall view that 'the dramatic form is, in fact, peculiarly unfavourable to the realisation of those stories of which Collins is the most successful producer'.⁵¹

The Moonstone

The Moonstone has been described as the first detective story to be situated within a domestic setting; Steve Farmer likens the theft of the Moonstone to 'an embryonic "locked room" crime'.⁵² It is perhaps unsurprising then that actual theft of the diamond and its subsequent revelation, is reliant on the positioning of the rooms and their corresponding doors within the Verinders' country house. Collins provides little description of the house prior to the theft but, in order for the plot to succeed, emphasises the layout of the rooms and the doors before and after the theft occurs, including the doors of the cabinet in which the diamond is hidden. Collins returns to these descriptions towards the end of the novel when the theft is re-enacted. Franklin Blake's discovery that he himself is the thief hinges on the smear of paint on the doorframe leading to Rachel's room and the corresponding paint-stain on his nightshirt. Ablewhite's discovery of Franklin's possession of the Moonstone similarly rests on the existence of the connecting doors between his and Franklin's bedrooms and on Franklin having left the door of Rachel's sitting room open, through the crack of which he is able to observe Franklin unseen.

The challenge for Collins in his dramatic version of *The Moonstone* (1877) would therefore have been the enactment of the theft onstage given the scene's reliance in the novel on the action occurring within and between the various rooms and doors of the Verinder's house. Any playwright or director will understand the precision and accuracy required in the negotiation of exits, entrances and the positioning of practicable doors. Collins might well have chosen to stage the theft through a multi-compartmental stage set, similar to that of the sanatorium scene in Act V of *Miss Gwilt* or of Act II of *The Red Vial* in which the stage represented 'two rooms of unequal size, divided by a wooden partition' - a bedroom and a sitting-room.⁵³ Instead, he surmounts these practical difficulties by once again consigning the rooms to the *offstage*, compacting the action to take place in the invisible area behind the doors of the offstage rooms or in the one visible room, the inner hall, in which the cabinet containing *The Moonstone* now stands. [Illustration of Collins's set of The Moonstone HERE](#) Franklin's actual theft of the Moonstone is invisible to the reader of the novel, only becoming visible when Collins directs his characters to re-enact the theft towards the end of the book. This process of re-enactment can be likened to a

theatrical restaging of the theft, for which Ezra Jennings acts as stage manager, responsible for the complete refurbishment of the rooms and the replacement of all of the objects in the rooms just as he would a theatre set, encouraging Franklin's emotion memory to lead him to enact the theft. Transposing and reversing the invisible and visible acts of theft, when Collins actually stages *The Moonstone* he allows the audience to view its *initial* theft in Act I as well as the re-enactment in Act III, which now takes on not only a theatrical but a meta-theatrical role. What the audience does *not* see is Franklin's restless sleep, disturbed and tormented by dreams, which now takes place offstage. When Franklin comes out of his chamber, returning onstage, his face is 'disturbed by guilty terror'.⁵⁴ The audience in this case, unlike the reader, is left to *imagine* what took place behind the closed door of Franklin's bedroom. Collins's opening stage directions indicate his return to a reliance on the theatre audience's imagination, Lewes's 'invisible visible by imagination'. He relies on the readiness of the audience to assume or suppose what is situated offstage:

The action of the drama ... passes entirely in the inner hall of Miss Verinder's country house. At the back of the hall is a long gallery, approached by a flight of stairs, and *supposed* to lead to the bedchambers of the house. ... Two of the bedroom doors, leading respectively into the rooms occupied by Franklin Blake and Godfrey Ablewhite, are visible to the audience. The other rooms are *supposed* to be continued *off the stage* on the left. The entrances are three in number. One, under the gallery, at the back, *supposed* to lead to the staircase in the outer hall and to the house door. One on the left, at the front of the stage, *supposed* to lead to Rachel's boudoir and bedroom. And one opposite, formed by a large window, which opens to the floor, and which is *supposed* to lead into a rose garden.⁵⁵ (My italics)

Collins's uses the word 'supposed' in the sense of 'imagined', leading the viewer offstage via the imagination. There is no need to literally represent the offstage space as it is represented in the novel.

In the novel, Franklin's 'night terrors' are caused by the laudanum which Dr Candy has secretly administered to him; in the play brandy and water are substituted for the opiate with the implication that alcohol, along with a large

portion of game pie, to someone unaccustomed to either, and already suffering from nicotine withdrawal, will produce the same sleep disturbances and subsequent somnambulism. When Ezra Jennings takes over the narrative in the novel, Collins includes a strangely redundant paragraph describing the effects of laudanum on Jennings's own sleep:

Rose late, after a dreadful night; the vengeance of yesterday's opium, pursuing me through a series of frightful dreams. At one time, I was whirling through empty space with the phantoms of the dead, friends and enemies together. At another, the one beloved face which I shall never see again, rose at my bedside, hideously phosphorescent in the black darkness, and glared and grinned at me.⁵⁶

The paragraph is extraneous to the plot, Franklin's sleep disturbance serves only to enable the theft of the Moonstone, his dreams are relatively inconsequential, hence it is Ezra's dreams that Collins describes, and not those of Franklin. The paragraph serves to usher the reader into the realm of the uncanny, in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar - Ezra's lover's face appears hideously phosphorescent, his friends manifest themselves as the phantoms of the dead. He whirls through an empty space, Derrida's hauntological space between the living and the dead in which the spectre can be described as 'hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate.'⁵⁷ But further to Ezra Jennings's own phantoms, the ghost of the author is both absent and present. Clearly based on Collins's own experiences of laudanum addiction, the paragraph summons Collins's own spectres while simultaneously imbuing the text with his own presence, thus Collins comes to haunt his own text. In the dramatic version, the spectres transpire in the offstage area behind closed doors - an intangible presence within Franklin's dreams. When Franklin emerges terror stricken, his *supposed* offstage dreams are now held in the audience's imagination.

The Dead Secret

In contrast to Collins's consciously theatrical use of the offstage to induce a build up of horror in the audience's imagination I will discuss an adaptation of another Collins novel, E. W. Bramwell's dramatic adaptation of the 1857 serialisation, *The Dead Secret*, performed at the Lyceum in 1877 with the author's permission.⁵⁸ The novel's mystery is reliant on the Derridean principle of the hauntological perception of the spectre as a memory or haunting of the past. The reader is never sure whether the ghost of Mrs Treverton is an apparition or appears solely as a memory within Sarah Leeson's imagination, a manifestation of the secret she has to bear. The plot rests entirely on this representation of Sarah Leeson's conscience as the spectre. Bramwell disrupts Collins's subtle and psychological use of the hauntological by using a physical actor to represent the ghost onstage throughout the drama, leaving nothing to the audience's imagination. The *Red Vial's* bad reception, prior to the cuts that were implemented to Act III, was due to the transferral of the implied to the material, i.e. the revelation of the uncomfortably real figure of Rodenberg in his uncertain state of animation; similarly, *Miss Gwilt* received criticism for the visible compartmental scene. By usurping the offstage area of the uncanny, Collins essentially lessened the imaginative effect on the audience and forced them into the position of having to confront their discomfort, creating a reaction of either pure revulsion or nervous laughter. In the novel, *The Dead Secret*, Mrs Treverton's ghost fills the empty space between imagination and text and this needs to be retained in any dramatic version so as not to leave the space empty. Similarly to the appearance of the corpse in *The Red Vial*, it was the misdirected use of the visible ghost that led to *The Dead Secret's* failure. In *The Red Vial*, the corpse was *too* real, emerging unexpectedly from the realm of the uncanny; in *The Dead Secret*, the ghost simply becomes familiar, negating any possible effects created through the *unfamiliar* realm of the uncanny – 'We see so much of the ghost that she becomes quite like an old acquaintance before the end of the play.'⁵⁹ A review in *The Times* stated:

The absurdity of the affair is, moreover, heightened by the transformation of the phantom of the poor woman's hallucination into a visible apparition. The image of the dead lady which the memory of the broken vow was for ever conjuring up

in the corners of Sarah Leeson's diseased brain, is now, as one may say, a 'real' ghost, which, with all the traditional accompaniments of slow music, limelight, and gauze, is perpetually appearing at the most unsuitable seasons – once by daylight, in a pretty rose garden – and is always greeted by Miss Bateman with the most robust expressions of fright.⁶⁰

Throughout the novel, the ghost of Mrs Treverton conforms to the principles of the uncanny by remaining in limbo, appearing in the darkened corners of rooms by twilight, only released when her secret is revealed according to her dying wishes. Likewise, the 'dead secret' itself, inscribed in a letter, also remains in limbo, hidden behind a small panel door behind a picture in the Myrtle Room only coming to light at the close of the narrative. The dramatic adaptation usurped all possibility of the theatrical uncanny by revealing the secret right at the start of the drama, much to the critics *chagrin*.

In the dramatic versions of both *The Moonstone* and *The Red Vial* Collins takes the role of the panoptical observer, asserting his authorial ownership through his control of the uncanny and the hauntological, consigned to an indefinable non-space behind the closed doors of the offstage while still allowing the viewer access via their imagination. In her discussion of three contemporary ghost plays, Kelly Jones traces the loss of agency experienced by the authors,

All three plays then, represent a failed attempt on the part of the author figure to control the supernatural experience. What is exposed is their inability to 'authorize' the supernatural experience, the snatching away of their 'ownership of the textual accounts of their ghost stories'.⁶¹

The Lyceum adaptation of *The Dead Secret* attracted criticism not only for its tangible onstage ghost but also for its lack of tangible authorship, adapted by 'some person or persons unknown'.⁶² Rather than the author controlling his theatrical panopticon the ghost took control of the author.

The uncanny is embedded in the work of Wilkie Collins; his mastery of the phenomenon undoubtedly contributes to his success as an author. In the adaptations discussed in this article, Collins can be seen to consciously conceal

or reveal the uncanny through the handing over of the panoptical role of the author to the audience. Collins's work is pertinent to Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon and the asylum, not only for the close historical relevance of Collins's thematic material but for its structural similarity to the theatrical scenographic designs realised by Collins both onstage and off, creating the onstage or offstage action visible or imagined by the viewer. Much of the perceived success, or indeed failure, of Collins's dramatic works can be attributed to the discomfort and uncertainty engendered in the spectator through Collins's control of the audience in relation to the onstage door as an exit from or entrance to the site of the theatrical uncanny.

¹ Beliz Güçbilmez, 'An Uncanny Theatricality: the Representation of the Offstage', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23:2, (2007), 152-160, 152.

² Jay Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1999). See Caroline Radcliffe, 'Remediation and Immediacy in the Theatre of Sensation', *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 36:2, (2009), 42, for a discussion of Bolter and Grusin's theory of the windowed stage in relation to nineteenth-century drama.

³ Güçbilmez, 'An Uncanny Theatricality', 152-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵ Ernst Anton Jentsch, 'Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen', in *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift*, 8.22, 25 August 1906, 195-823 and 8.23, 1 September 1906, 203-5. Güçbilmez, 'An Uncanny Theatricality', 154.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 80; Wolfreys is citing Kate Flint, 'Blood, Bodies, and *The Lifted Veil*' in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51:4 (1997), 455-73, 472.

⁸ George Henry Lewes 'Imagination' in T. Sharper Knowlson (ed.), *The Principles of Success in Literature* (London: Walter Scott, 1898), p. 55 cited in Flint p. 473.

⁹ Andrew Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁰ Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 2:1, (1997), 7-16, 13.

¹¹ 'Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become an original cause of the uncanny feeling, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate', Jentsch, p. 11. Freud was to quote this section of Jentsch's essay in his own essay on the uncanny.

¹² Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', trans. James Strachey, *Pelican Freud Library*, 14, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

¹³ Timothy L. Carens, 'Outlandish English Subjects in *The Moonstone*', *Reality's Dark Light: the Sensational Wilkie Collins*, Maria. K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 239-265.

¹⁴ Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*, (London: Routledge, 1988). Although Bourne Taylor presents a promising discussion on the presence of the uncanny within Collins's works in her introduction, she does not pursue the theme in any detail within the main body of her book.

¹⁵ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 23.

¹⁶ Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ *The Red Vial* opened at the Royal Olympic Theatre on 11 October 1858 and ran for four weeks. *The Lighthouse* was initially privately staged at Charles Dickens's home, Tavistock House, for four nights from 16 June 1855, followed by a single performance on 10 July at Campden House, Kensington; it ran at the Olympic from 10 August - 17 October 1857, see Wilkie Collins, *The Lighthouse*, eds. Andrew Gasson, Caroline Radcliffe, (London: Francis Boutle 2013), for a detailed history of the play. Previous to *The Lighthouse*, Collins had staged his first dramatic adaptation, *A Court Duel*, as an amateur, charity performance (26 February 1850, Soho Theatre).

¹⁹ See Jim Davis, 'Collins and the theatre', in Jenny Bourne Taylor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 168-180, (pp. 170-1).

²⁰ See letters to J. Stirling Coyne, 6 May 1859 and 18 February 1860, the second in which Collins states, 'after the reception accorded to the play in London, I have no desire to give that acutely-critical portion of the British public which frequents Theatres any second opportunity of taking their dose of dramatic medicine out of "The Red Vial"'. [William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Graham Law, Paul Lewis \(eds\).](#) *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters*, Vol I, Letters 1831-1864, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), pp. 177 and 190.

²¹ Güçbilmez, '[An Uncanny Theatricality](#)', 153.

²² I am grateful to Kate Mattacks [for alerting](#) me to Collins's possible allusion to the Brothers Grimm [in](#) the naming of Hans Grimm.

²³ Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), first published in book form 1880, p. xii.

²⁴ There are two extant manuscripts of *The Red Vial, a Drama in Three Acts by Wilkie Collins*. The first, and earliest copy, is located in the British Library in the Lord Chamberlain's Plays Collection and the second, later version, at the University of Texas, Austin. The description of the Dead House scene varies between the two manuscripts – I discuss the separate versions in detail in my forthcoming edition of *The Red Vial* (with Andrew Gasson) and in my forthcoming monograph on Wilkie Collins's dramas. The scenic description of the Dead House here is transcribed from the British Library version, Act III.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan, (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 200.

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- ²⁶ See Kelly Jones, 'Authorized Absence: Theatrical Representations of Authorship in Three Contemporary Ghost Stories', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 32:2, (2012), 165-177.
- ²⁷ Colin Davis, 'État Présent', p. 376.
- ²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p. 26, cited in Davis, p. 376.
- ²⁹ Güçbilmez, 'An Uncanny Theatricality', p. 158.
- ³⁰ *Plays and Players: The New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German*, Issue 28, 7 November 1858, p.311.
- ³¹ 'Public Amusements', *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, Issue 831, 24 October 1858.
- ³² *The Critic*, 432, 16 October 1858, p. 693.
- ³³ *The Morning Post*, Issue 26463, 12 October 1858, p. 4
- ³⁴ *Musical World*, 'Dramatic Intelligence', 16 October 1858, p. 667.
- ³⁵ *Literary Gazette*, No. 16, 16 October 1858, p. 508.
- ³⁶ Güçbilmez, 'An Uncanny Theatricality', p. 159.
- ³⁷ *Daily News*, 14 October 1858, p. 6.
- ³⁸ *Examiner*, 16 October 1858, p. 661.
- ³⁹ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 2nd ed., (Harlow, Essex: Prentice Hall, 1999) p. 21, cited in Jones, 'Authorized Absence', p. 167.
- ⁴⁰ Jones, 'Authorized Absence', p. 167.
- ⁴¹ Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, p. 211.
- ⁴² Michel Foucault, 'The Birth of the Asylum', *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (London: Random House, 1979).
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- ⁴⁴ Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 709.
- ⁴⁵ *Miss Gwilt: A Drama in Five Acts. Altered from the Novel of "Armadale". By Wilkie Collins*. London, printed by Hanken and Co. London, 1875. (British Library), Act. V, p. 82.
- ⁴⁶ Collins made an earlier, printed, dramatic version of *Armadale* entitled *Armadale, A Drama, in Three Acts* in 1866. It was not performed. The 1866 version of the sanatorium scene sticks to the novel regarding the practical layout of the sanatorium corridor with the corresponding rooms off it. In the 1866 drama, Lydia Gwilt's death is enacted behind a closed door, only heard by the audience and not seen. Collins reverses the process of the offstage to the onstage for the 1875 version - *Miss Gwilt: A Drama in Five Acts*. For the purposes of this article I am only focussing on the 1875 adaptation but will outline the significance of the 1866 version in my forthcoming monograph. Richard Pearson gives a confusing account of the two versions, giving the impression that in the 1875 version Lydia Gwilt's death is obscured from the spectator's view – this is certainly the case in the 1866 version, but *not* in the 1875 version (see Richard Pearson, 'Killing Miss Gwilt's Double: Collins's Dramatic Adaptation of *Armadale*', in Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Armadale: Wilkie Collins and the Dark Threads of Life*, (Rome: Aracne, 2009), ed., 316-348). Collins makes it clear from the stage directions in *Miss Gwilt* that Gwilt's suicide takes place in the bedroom of the onstage two-compartmental scene and is in full view of the spectator (22 April 1876, *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins*, Vol.III, p.123).
- ⁴⁷ *Armadale*, p. 807.

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- ⁴⁸ Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, p. 250.
- ⁴⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, Issue 3502, 10 May, 1876, p. 11.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*,
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. Steve Farmer, (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999), p. 15.
- ⁵³ *The Red Vial. A Drama in Three Acts by Wilkie Collins*, manuscript, LCP, British Library, 1858, Act II, f. 1.
- ⁵⁴ [Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone: a dramatic story, in three acts. Altered from the novel for performance on the stage. By Wilkie Collins, \(This play is not published. It is privately printed for the convenience of the author\)* \(London: Charles Dickens & Evans\), 1877, Act III, p. 84.](#)
- ⁵⁵ [Collins, *The Moonstone: a dramatic story, in three acts.* p. 2](#)
- ⁵⁶ Farmer, *The Moonstone*, p. 466.
- ⁵⁷ Colin Davis, 'État Présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms', *French Studies*, 59: 3, 373–9, 376.
- ⁵⁸ *The Dead Secret: A Drama. Adapted by permission of the author from the novel of Wilkie Collins, expressly for the Lyceum Theatre*, London 1877.
- ⁵⁹ *Examiner*, Issue 3631, [1](#) September 1877, p. 1113.
- ⁶⁰ *The Times*, [8](#) Sept 1877, p. 10.
- ⁶¹ Jones, '[Authorized Absence](#)', 166.
- ⁶² *The Era*, 2 September 1877, p. 12.