Wilkie Collins’s Armadale in The Cornhill Magazine

Generic collisions in The Cornhill

In The Maniac in the Cellar, Winifred Hughes has argued that the ‘primitive, troublesome vision’ of the sensation novel ‘collided sharply with that of the reigning domestic novel’, going on to state that a gulf existed between the ‘tame fare’ of novels by Eliot, Gaskell, and Trollope, and the sensation novels of Collins, Braddon, and Wood.¹ This divide, however, was not always as sharp as Hughes suggests. Sensation novels and their domestic realist counterparts existed within Victorian culture at different points along a continuum, rather than as unrelated or opposite forms. The resemblances between the two genres frequently failed to register with Victorian reviewers, who condemned sensation fiction for its reliance on lowbrow forms, such as melodrama, while remaining blind to the fact that many domestic novelists also drew in various ways upon the melodramatic tradition.² Between 1864 and 1866, readers of The Cornhill Magazine were offered an unusual opportunity to compare the two dominant literary genres of the period when Collins’s sensation novel, Armadale, was serialized alongside domestic novels by Elizabeth Gaskell and Anthony Trollope.

The Cornhill was an upmarket monthly magazine which from its inception had presented two serial novels in each issue. Armadale, described by one reviewer as ‘a lurid labyrinth of improbabilities’,³ ran for over a year alongside Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters, and when Gaskell’s novel ended, Trollope’s The Claverings took over as Armadale’s accompanying serial.⁴ Collins’s sensation novel and its domestic companions share numerous themes, such as the problems surrounding courtship and marriage (particularly the transmission of property through marriage), and the social and economic position of women, explored in all

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three novels by means of dual heroines, one well behaved, the other more
defiant of social constraints. Each novel represented middle-class
domestic life in terms of its boundaries, tensions, and ideals. Their
appearance in the same literary space is highly unusual, for family
magazines which carried serialized novels tended to specialize in a
particular genre.5

During the early 1860s *The Cornhill* specialized in domestic realism,
largely rejecting the sensation fiction which dominated many other
magazines of the period. For example, when readers of the *New Monthly
Magazine* were presented with *East Lynne* in 1860, *The Cornhill* was
serializing Anthony Trollope’s *Framley Parsonage*, where a clergyman’s
problem with debt is the closest the novel comes to a sensational plot.
Trollope’s *The Small House at Allington*, George Eliot’s *Romola*, and *Cousin
Phillis*, by Elizabeth Gaskell were characteristic of *The Cornhill’s* fiction.
However, this emphasis on domestic fiction was twice disrupted; firstly by
Frederick Greenwood’s bigamy novella, *Margaret Denzil’s History*, serial-
ized from 1863 to 1864, and secondly by Collins’s more spectacular
sensation story, *Armadale*, a novel vividly focused upon the career of a
female forger and murderess. Lydia Gwilt’s plots for self-advancement
were used by Collins to link the world of criminality to the respectable
world of the landed gentry. By contrast, the accompanying serials by
Gaskell and Trollope represent a relatively calm version of respectable
society disrupted only by the trials and tribulations attendant on the
finding of suitable marriage partners for (temporarily) wayward sons and
daughters. These more obvious differences, however, mask the underlying
similarities between the two genres, similarities which will be explored
further in this chapter.

The juxtaposition of *Armadale* alongside *Wives and Daughters* and *The
Claverings* was accidental in the sense that Collins submitted the
manuscript of his novel to George Smith, *The Cornhill’s* owner, much
later than he had planned. The contract for the serial had been signed
shortly after Collins’s success with *The Woman in White*, when his
reputation as a controversial novelist had not yet developed. As a novel
written specifically for *The Cornhill, Armadale* appears particularly
provocative, as though Collins had set out to challenge the magazine’s
comfortable, educated readership. He clearly felt called upon to assert the
power of the new sensationalism by offering those readers who favoured
domestic fiction a sample of an ‘alternative’ genre. Collins also set out to
challenge the nineteenth-century realist tradition, as his Preface to the
subsequent volume edition of *Armadale* indicates. He may have had *The
Cornhill’s* readers in mind, along with hostile critics, when he wrote that