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The Antivivisection Polemic of Wilkie Collins’ *Heart and Science*

The antivivisection rhetoric is not elusive in Wilkie Collins’ *Heart and Science* where the monstrous vivisector Dr. Benjulia takes advantage of his helpless victims, both animal and human. Critic Jessica Straley, author of “Love and Vivisection: Wilkie Collin’s Experiment in *Heart and Science*” asserts that this human-animal relationship is an important aspect of the antivivisection polemic. She argues that although Collins writes within the Sensation genre and draws upon many of the familiar antivivisection arguments, he avoids using Sensation fiction as a metaphor for vivisection and subsequently attempts to recover physiology as a basis for human emotion and morals (by doing so he prevents any relation between the text and the medical dissections it condemns). Straley seeks to recover how Collins establishes *Heart and Science* as more than the aesthetic counterpart to vivisection, bringing together the movement with the genre, and consequently redefining Sensation fiction as a means of furthering Collins’ argument against vivisection.

Collins creates a sort of paradox as he writes an antivivisection novel within a genre which many have claimed does the metaphorical equivalent of vivisection: shocking the reader just as a subject of such scientific practices is also shocked. Straley claims that “[like] an autopsy, Sensation fiction [is] drawn from the exposed bowels of an eviscerated social body, and, like vivisection, it morbidly excited its readers’ nervous systems” (351). It is therefore rather contradictory that, if to write within the framework of Sensation fiction is to utilize dissection and vivisection, Collins would write an antivivisection Sensation novel. Sensation fiction is meant to grip, shock, and even haunt the reader. It allowed for literature to focus on more controversial topics (such as vivisection) and often depicted shocking, if not deplorable, acts that were meant to evoke emotion and which produced a supposed violent effect on the reader (Straley 351). Given this, the reader was often likened to that of the subject of experimentation (animal or human) and the author to that of the scientist or experimenter: “both scientific and literary practices operated to the same effect: vivisectors exposed the brains of immobilized animals, boiled their skins, and galvanized their spinal cords, while sensation writers stood likewise accused of… ‘giving Shocks to the Nervous System’ of the captive reader” (Straley 350).

Collins, however, works within the framework of such a genre to further his antivivisection argument instead of establishing it as a metaphor for the act which it denounces. The novel itself, as Straley indicates, “is not the kind of Sensation novel that can be likened to vivisection” (351). For an antivivisection work, *Heart and Science* withholds many of the horrors that stem from such medical practices as vivisection and Collins is sure to criticize vivisection in the preface “promising to protect readers from its disturbing content” (351). Collins establishes that the reader is “purposefully left in ignorance of the hideous secrets of vivisection. The outside of the laboratory is a necessary object in [his] landscape but [he] never once opens the door and invite[s] you to look in” (Collins 38). Thus, while Collins shields the readers from the grisly details, closing the door of the laboratory so that only the most general descriptions are available to the reader, “he does so only to focus our attention on how literature incites its own victimizing, and sanctifying, vibrations” (352). *Heart and Science* challenges what Straley refers to as the “cultural authority” ceded to science and establishes Collins’s interest in physiology as a basis for human emotion and action.

The novel, *Heart and Science*, depicts the story of Carmina Graywell who is under the custody of her aunt Mrs. Galilee. Her father’s will (which left money to Carmina) stipulates that if she should die without a child, the money should go to her aunt. The covetous Mrs. Galilee, motivated by her desire for the young girl’s large inheritance, has little regard for the well-being of her niece. In order to preserve her chances of receiving such a large sum of money, she attempts to prevent the burgeoning romance between her son, Ovid, and niece, Carmina and is relieved when Ovid announces he will be traveling to Canada. Accusing Carmina of being a “bastard” born illegitimately, Mrs. Galilee literally paralyzes her, subjecting her to the care of Dr. Benjulia, the known vivisectionist (Collins 249). The vivisectionist is interested in the case as he hopes the solution to her illness might benefit his research regarding the “grand problem” of brain disease. He hopes that by examining Carmina, as he does the animals he experiments on, he will be able to find the solution. Fortunately, Ovid returns in time to save his young lover and brings with him a published text highlighting a cure for her illness. The cure has been “wholly derived from the results of beside practice” and is “innocent of the useless and detestable cruelties which go by the name of Vivisection” (Collins 307). Carmina is cured and the two lovers marry, while Dr. Benjulia commits suicide and burns his laboratory in a rather dramatized defeat of the scientific practice.

As stated in the introduction, Collins utilizes many familiar antivivisectionist arguments to establish his stance. He plays upon the fear that, if experiments as invasive in nature as vivisection are allowed, there is nothing to stop the same from being done to humans. In an attempt to establish his antivivisection rhetoric and “to devise the danger facing his heroine” Collins “borrowed from antivivisection literature the caveat that, if experiments on animals be allowed, then human victims are next” (Straley 358). In her critique of the novel, Straley highlights how such fears are furthered by Darwinism, which “seems to exonerate the vivisector’s graduation from animal to human victims: if there is no hard boundary between species, then the underprivileged and disenfranchised are first at risk” (358). The notion that the cruel nature of such experiments can lead to a cruel person, i.e., the vivisector is turned into a monster of sorts, is utilized by Collins as a further means of antivivisection rhetoric. Straley notes that the medical mistreatment of animals was often associated with spousal abuse, where the beaten wife is a metaphor for the animal. In the novel, Carmina, a weak and rather helpless female character, is associated with a stray dog who was killed in the streets early on in the novel as well as with the dogs Benjulia uses for his experiments (Collins 57 & 324). This contrast between the helpless wife and the abusive husband (though not married, Benjulia serves the same purpose as an abuser) is analogous with the experimental subject and the experimenter.

*Heart and Science* “enthusiastically adopts” this analogy, not so much in that the husband abuses the wife, but in the relationships shown among the vivisectors would-be-victims (Straley 362). Straley relates the behavior of Carmina, in the early days of her courtship with Ovid, to be similar to that of his pet cat: “wherever [Ovid] went, whatever he did, Carmina was always with him” (Collins 83). The cat which Ovid had “rescued…from starvation in a locked-up house, the barbarous inhabitants of which had gone away for a holiday” (Collins 82) had become attached to his savior. Straley argues that “this pet-like devotion” is justified in that just as Ovid saves the cat, he also saves Carmina (362). What is interesting about Collin’s use of such relationships is that “on the one hand, antivivisectionists used the vivisector’s supposed equation of animal and human to highlight scientific brutality, and on the other hand, they employed the same equation to foster sympathy for vivisection’s victims” (362). Thus, Collins utilizes the same so-called “equation” to both condemn the inhumaneness of Benjulia and promote sympathy for his victims. Even though making the woman the equivalent to the animal was often associated with the vivisector, Collins adopts the analogy to support his antivivisection argument.

Similar to Carmina, Ovid’s younger sister, Zo, also demonstrates animal-like behaviors, especially when interacting with Dr. Benjulia. Just as Carmina’s actions parallel that of the cats, Zo’s behavior mimics that of various animals, most notably when she assumes the role of a dog while reluctantly submitting to the vivisector tickling her (Collins 96). Benjulia places his fingers on her, much like he would to the animals he experiments on, and watches her wriggle under his touch: “‘That’s how you make our dog kick with his leg,’ said Zo, recalling her experience of the doctor in the society of the dog…” (Collins 96). Her child-like observations only serve to further the human-animal relationship. Straley asserts that Collins utilizes characters such as Zo to emphasize the “language of expression shared by humans and animals by which emotion can easily and benignly be read-more in line with the practice of comparative anatomy than with dissection” (363). Thus, just as Collins avoids showing the grisly details of the vivisector’s laboratory in an attempt to evade dissection, he also avoids complicated emotion. Straley sees this technique as furthering Collin’s antivivisection argument and she claims that even more significant than the identity between the child and the dog is the emotional transparency which links them and consequently makes “both the heart and brain [openly] accessible to the careful observer” (364). Collins, therefore, integrates the association and subsequent implications of these animal and human relationships while emphasizing the importance of observable emotion in an attempt to deter invasive procedures as a means of understanding.

Collin’s avoidance of complicated, corporeal emotions as a way to condemn the invasiveness of vivisection is furthered by Ovid and Carmina’s romance. Their relationship is superficial in that there are no hidden emotional mysteries. Instead, the couple’s emotions are expressed transparently on their faces and through their actions, remaining only skin-deep and thus easily readable. Straley highlights the moments in the novel where Collins brings the reader’s attention to these visible changes: “‘a marked change…in [Ovid’s] face’ indicates his growing affection for his cousin, the plain ‘character in his face’ attests to his virtue, and the signs of Carmina’s illness show ‘plainly in every part of the face…’” (Straley 365). The transparency of the emotions and feelings which would otherwise be buried beneath the skin, allows the reader to observe without dissecting the characters. This explicit portrayal of emotion is another piece of Collins’ antivivisection polemic. Straley points to the idea that if Carmina and Ovid are to be the heroes of an antivivisection novel they “must learn to love without physiological excitation” (367). Even when Ovid returns with a cure for Carmina’s illness, their love is expressed in the most outward way. As their relationship strengthens, and Benjulia’s reputation diminishes, there is an even greater emphasis on the lack of physiological excitement between the couple, furthering Collin’s antivivisection stance.

Collins’ utilizes a variety of antivivisection arguments to persuades his readers of the cruelty and inhumanness of the practice which his position advocates against. In her critique of the novel, Straley reiterates these arguments with a focus on physiology as a basis for human morals and emotions. Thus, by having the characters, especially Carmina and Ovid, express love only in the most explicit of ways, they are actively shifting away from the need for any dissection; their emotions are transparent and the reader does not have to delve within them to understand. *Heart and Science* withholds many of the horrors which would usually be contained within an antivivisection work (such as Collins avoidance of Benjulia’s laboratory and any unpleasant descriptions of vivisection), even though it is written within the Sensation genre. Though readers may not themselves be against vivisection, Collins argument is almost convincing and his use of literature as an antivivisection argument is effective.

Works Cited

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