

“Now, Muse! Let’s sing of Rats!”

Elements of Classical Tragedy in Wilkie Collins’s *Armadale*



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Cover illustration:

Medea by Evelyn de Morgan (1889)

Introduction

When H.F. Chorley, a contemporary of Wilkie Collins, read *Armadale* he had to think of a specific line in a poem by Granger called *The Sugar Cane*: “Now, Muse! Let’s sing of Rats!” (cited in Page 147). It is peculiar that this specific line should come to mind: a Muse, a divine creature from classical mythology, is invoked to help sing about something as earthly and banal as rats. Classical past and contemporary everyday life are united, just like Collins has done in his *Armadale*. Chorley is, whether he is aware of it or not, on to something.

Throughout the novel, Collins has hidden titbits belonging to the classics; when Midwinter is found in a field, he carries along a volume of Sophocles’s plays; the statue which Midwinter breaks during his argument with Allan is a figurine of Niobe, the woman who was punished for her hubris as she thought herself to be better than Leto (mother to Artemis and Apollo), because she had born more children; Roman citations are incorporated, as well as references to the classical architecture and other mythological entities such as Muses, Cerberus, and the Gorgons. Such references are all made in passing, and thus easy to miss. An even closer look sheds light on a variety of classical references, many of them borrowed from classical tragedy.

The different themes in *Armadale* have been researched, albeit perhaps not as extensively as possible. Two very enlightening works in this regard have proven to be Mariaconcetta Costantini’s *Armadale: Wilkie Collins and the Dark Threads of Life* and Peter Thoms’s *The Windings of the Labyrinth: Quest and Structure in the Major Novels of Wilkie Collins*. However, none of the scholars appears to connect these themes to the classical literary heritage. Edmund Richardson’s *Classical Victorians: Scholars, Scoundrels and Generals in Pursuit of Antiquity* explores the relationship between Victorians and classical antiquity, but unfortunately does not provide much on the aspect of classical literature, let alone its relation to Wilkie Collins and his novels.

In order to raise awareness of this hiatus this paper will argue that Collins has adapted many themes from classical tragedy into *Armadale*. The first chapter provides background information on *Armadale*, consisting of a discussion of the author of *Armadale* (1.1.1), as well as the manner of publication (1.1.2) and reviews (1.1.3), and a concise overview of classical tragedy in general (1.2). The following three chapters will explore three major aspects in *Armadale*: inherited sin (2), the importance of dreams (3) and the characterisation of Miss Gwilt (4). The conclusion will present the findings in a broader framework and touch upon the final similarities which have been left unexplored.

Chapter 1: Backgrounds

1.1 *Armadale*

1.1.1 The Author: Wilkie Collins

At first sight, Wilkie Collins does not appear to have been exposed to classical literature. The few years he spent at school seem to have been of very little, if any, use in this regard (Peters 51). However, they were plenty when looking at the various opportunities where classical literature could have influenced Collins.

William Wilkie Collins, born in London on 8 January 1824, grew up in an artistic and reasonably well-to-do family. His father, William Collins, was an evangelical, Tory, and a popular landscape painter. William Collins did his best to establish connections with and stay closely connected to the respectable and wealthy, since he considered this the way for him to succeed in his field (Pykett 2). Collins's mother, Harriet Geddes, was the daughter of an army officer. When she was in her teens, her father was no longer able to support her due to financial mishaps. Harriet had to make a living of her own, and as she was a talented actress she decided joining the Theatre Royal in Bath would be her best option, despite how this might affect her social status. It never came to this, thanks to the intervention of an evangelical cleric and his wife. Instead of making a living as an actress, Harriet was now able to provide for herself first, as a teacher at a London school, later, as a governess (Pykett 2-3). Harriet met William Collins in 1814 and the couple married in September 1822, the same year as when William Collins was elected a member of the Royal Academy. William spent the eight years between their first meeting and their wedding recovering from near destitution (Pykett 3). Collins's middle name derived from his godfather Sir David Wilkie, who was his father's friend (Pykett 2).

Collins did not fit well in the middle- and upper-class circles (Pykett 1-2). When he started to break free from under his parents' wings, Collins adopted his middle name, and

Willie became Wilkie. Additionally, he rebelled against their conventional beliefs and adapted a non-conformist demeanour (Peters 21). This non-conformism was not well received by polite society and thus he occupied the grey area between being an insider and an outsider, “a liminal position”. Not having attended public school nor university probably contributed to this position. Despite these social disadvantages, it was not hard for Collins to socialise with lawyers and actors alike (Pykett 2).

Collins enjoyed about four years of formal schooling. Peters remarks that “he had been to school for only eighteen months before going abroad” (49). During his travels with his family, Collins worn out several tutors, of whom at least one taught him Latin (Peters 40; 45). Upon his return from his family’s journey to France and Italy, Collins was sent to a boarding school in London, run by the Reverend Cole (Peters 49). According to Peters, the school was “not even a good one”, as, amongst other educational failures, “the classical syllabus, then the basis of schooling for boys, [does not] seem to have been well taught” (50-51).

The most invaluable for his education Collins considers to be his family trip to France (Paris and Nice) and Italy (Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice) at the age of twelve: “[What I learnt in Italy] has since been of [more] use to me, among the pictures, the scenery and the people, than I ever learnt at school” (cited in Peters 37). At this young age, he became acquainted with the Italian language and French and Italian art galleries. Furthermore, Collins was a bookworm: he devoured his mother’s extensive book collection, which contained, amongst others, works of Shakespeare and Byron (Pykett 4). This is not all his mother provided for him on a cultural level: during his trips to France, Collins developed a love for the theatre, a trait his mother was more than willing to cultivate (Pykett 10). It was this interest that ultimately brought Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens together in 1851: Dickens needed an extra actor for the production of the play *Not So Bad As We Seem* and it was Collins who took the part (Pykett 11).

Collins must have come across classical references multiple times when sifting through his mother's bookcase and reading whatever he could lay his hands upon. Some of these works contained themes and motifs already present in classical literature, for instance Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, which draws on *Thyestes* by Seneca, a Roman playwright and philosopher in the first century CE. Unfortunately, it cannot be confirmed that Collins read this specific play. It is certain, however, that he was acquainted with Homer and Vergil, as the Reverend Cole forced Collins to read their works (Law and Maunder 10). If this is what set the door to the classics ajar, possibly his trip with his parents to France and Italy, cradle of the Renaissance, not to mention home to the classical cities of Rome and Naples, blew it wide open. During his stay in Rome, his favourite city, Wilkie was taken on a tour and, amongst other sights, witnessed the Colosseum by moonlight (Peters 43-47). In Naples, too, Collins went sight-seeing, including Mount Vesuvius and the cave of the Sibyl (Peters 45). Classical history provided the base for Collins's first novel *Antonina; or the Fall of Rome*, published in 1850 (Law and Maunder 13).

To conclude, Collins's classical education may not have been properly established and therefore may show some lacunas. However, the structure and content of *Armadale* shows that he has been taught enough to be aware of the classical literary heritage.

1.1.2 The Novel: Manner of Publication

Collins's fourth sensation novel, *Armadale*, was published in *The Cornhill Magazine*, a monthly magazine sold at one shilling. George Smith, one of the proprietors of the magazine, offered Collins a staggering amount of £5,000 for the serialisation of a novel, which was to be *Armadale* (Law 24; 161). The novel was serialised between November 1864 and June 1866 and published in volume in May 1866 (Sutherland in Collins xix; see also Appendix I). Instalments of *Armadale* nearly average 15,000 words, which is the typical amount for monthly serials. Such amounts would flood weekly journals, since they consisted of circa 24

pages, and are impossible for a writer to produce on a weekly basis (Law 184; see also Appendix I). Therefore, a monthly serial was a perfect fit for *Armada*le.

In the mid-nineteenth century a new audience was tapped in addition to the current audience, which consisted of the commercial middle class: those with occupations that required literacy, such as small shopkeepers and clerks (Law 7-8). As Graham Law explains,

[t]he general trend during the Victorian period was from the predominance of monthly serialization in relatively expensive, low-circulation formats, produced as petty commodities for the bourgeois market by the book publishers, to that of weekly serialization in relatively cheap, high-circulation formats, produced as commodities for the mass market by newspaper proprietors. (14)

In the middle of the Victorian era, right around the time *Armada*le was published, the gap between the two audiences, i.e. the “bourgeois market” and the “mass market”, started to close, as the prejudice of the middle class against the weekly periodical diminished simultaneously with the autonomy of the working class (Law 23). Two different social strata seemingly began to coalesce on a literary level. A similar coalescence can be observed in *Armada*le, as people from different walks of life engage in social and emotional bonds: a vagabond befriends a nobleman, who has been tutored by a clerk.

Lyn Pykett, Professor of English at the University of Wales, acknowledges the difficulty of identifying the nineteenth century reading public (72). Nonetheless, and despite its size, it is remarkable that one of Collins’s four major sensation novels appeared in a monthly instead of a weekly, which originally comprised two different audiences. It may be too much to expect members of the working class to be thoroughly acquainted with the classics; members of the middle class, however, could very possibly have been naturals at

recognising classical themes whenever they were to happen upon it, as a classical syllabus was part of their education (Peters 51).

Whoever the intended or target audience might have been, Wilkie Collins knew how to engage his readers. He implemented three devices typical for sensation novels, which Walter C. Phillips, an early twentieth century scholar, defines as “the striking opening to the work as a whole to increase the chances of its ‘taking’ with readers; the episodic integrity of the individual number; and ‘climax and curtain’ endings in instalments to encourage readers to come back for more” (cited in Law 184). This earned Collins the formula “make ‘em laugh, make ‘em cry, make ‘em wait” (Law 184).

In the first instalment Midwinter’s father, who is dying, confesses to a crime he committed in his younger years in a letter to his son, who is at the time too young to be burdened with such knowledge. At the end of the chapter, Midwinter’s father has died, and Mr Neal, at the father’s request, has posted the letter to the executor. The first step toward some inevitable fate has been taken. This fuels the audience’s curiosity. The instalments can be considered as smaller episodes of the narrative itself, and each time Collins works up to a climax. For example, the first instalment ends with the posting of the letter; the second with Midwinter reproducing this same letter in a conversation with Mr Brock; and the third with Midwinter and Allan being stranded on the boat on which Midwinter’s father’s crime took place years earlier.

1.1.3 The Novel: Reviews by Contemporary Critics

Collins’s contemporary critics appear to concur with one another on the novel’s biggest merits, i.e. plot and Collins’s writing skills, and flaw, i.e. characterisation (of Miss Gwilt in particular), of *Armadale*. Norman Page has collected a few contemporary reviews of the novel in his *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*. For instance, Connop Thirlwall, Bishop of St. David’s, historian and theologian, mentions in a letter to a friend that he has read *Armadale*. He did not enjoy it very much; indeed, he feels “this class of novels [is] an unhappy invention,

creating an insatiable demand which must be met by less and less wholesome food, and absorbing a great deal of ability which might be much better employed” (cited in Page 145-56). He does not care for the character of Miss Gwilt very much; he calls her a “tragic Becky Sharp” and writes that he is relieved when the novel is nearing its end so he does not have to read Miss Gwilt’s diary entries any more (cited in Page 145-6).

H.F. Chorley is also appalled by Miss Gwilt. He imagines her as “the sorceress of *Armada*” and a person who belongs in “the sinks and sewers of society” instead of staining Fiction, with a capital F, with her presence (cited in Page 147). However, Chorley acknowledges Collins’s remarkable writing skills when he writes that “these abominations are displayed with concise neatness and excellent precision of language which distinguish Mr. Wilkie Collins” (cited in Page 148). He considers Collins as a painter with words, especially the epic scene in which Miss Gwilt appears on the edge of the pool after Allan’s dream vision (Page 148). Nonetheless, Miss Gwilt does not evoke any sympathy in Chorley, since he objects to her morals.

It can be concluded from these reviews that the character of Miss Gwilt was, to say the least, problematic. Her nature is so utterly depraved that it leaves Collins’s critics in disgust, and perhaps even a little concerned about the possibility that the characterisation of Miss Gwilt is not as farfetched as it may seem. In the end, Miss Gwilt appears to overshadow most of the story and leaves little room for critics (and perhaps also readers) to appreciate the finer things in the novel such as the classical references.

1.2 Classical Tragedy

What Collins and classical tragedians have in common is their dependence on the audience for success. Without the approval of the masses, the chance of success was slim to none. The audience of classical tragedy was mixed: both men and women attended the stagings (van Erp Taalman Kip 17). These stagings were part of a contest between tragedians: each playwright

would participate with a trilogy of plays, often concluded by a satyr-play¹. The content of the plays greatly varies: impact is the common denominator (van Emde Boas 3 September 2012). Usually, judges for the contest were assigned by lot, although during the Great Dionysia of 468, the magistrate opted for inviting the ten generals of Attica to take this task upon them (Sommerstein 7). It is unknown how victors were eventually appointed (van Erpe Taalman Kip 16). Therefore, it is difficult to determine how much influence the audience had on the final results.

Spectators (or readers) of tragedy are invited by the playwright to contemplate problems of human life and world-order. This means that the main focus of the plays was reserved for “the meaning of the action as exemplifying the relation of man to the powers controlling the universe, and the relation of these powers to his destiny” (“Tragedy”). This relation can be applied directly to *Armadale* as well: Midwinter considers these evasive powers continually.

Another common denominator is the influence of the audience on the success of the play or novel. In ancient Greece, a jury chosen from the audience was responsible for selecting the winner of the contest between playwrights. Therefore, a tragedian would be wise to captivate the attention of his audience for a few days with a trilogy or tetralogy of plays that centres on the most remarkable of mythological circumstances or events, or, in the case of the *Persians*, parts of actual history. Collins, likewise, was also dependent of his audience for his success. *Armadale*, as a serialised novel, had to gain and hold the attention of its audience for no less than twenty months. This accounts for the high level of misfortune, whether it is caused by providence, fate, or free will; the audience is eager to see if and how this misery is to be resolved.

¹ The term tetralogy is also used.

Lastly, a trait of classical tragedy that deserves special mention is the character of the messenger. Major actions (such as murders or battles) happen off-stage and are rendered by a herald afterward to the characters concerned. In other words, the delivery of messages is a vital part of the plot of a tragedy: without it, the audience, as well as the characters on stage, would be clueless as to what horrors have happened outside their view. Collins adapts this device in *Armadale*: instead of a messenger who relates important events, Collins implements epistolary episodes and episodes centring on Miss Gwilt's diary entries. Perhaps this adaptation can be attributed to the oral tradition of classical Greece having become obsolete.

Chapter 2: Inherited Sin

2.1 Classical Approach

The motif of inherited sin is a regular guest in classical tragedy and, as it turns out, one of the driving forces behind *Armada*. Generations of families have failed to break the chains this imposed, with the Tantalids at the top of this list. For instance, in Seneca's *Thyestes*, inherited sin is the driving force behind the relationship between the two brothers Atreus and Thyestes. They have been fighting over the throne of Argos for years, finally resulting in the exile of Thyestes and his children. The play resumes the thread at the moment when Thyestes is lured back to court by his brother under the false pretences: Atreus made him believe that he is willing to share the throne. In reality, Atreus is determined to punish Thyestes for his adultery with his wife by feeding him his own children. In the dialogues between Atreus and Thyestes, the king of Argos is very careful to use as much innuendo as he possibly can. Atreus loses himself in his search for revenge and the desire to be satiated by it; Thyestes pushes through despite the sense of pending doom, which, when voiced to his son Tantalus, is easily dismissed by him. The play closes with the unholy feast ("*dape impia*", Seneca, *Thyestes*, 1034) after which Atreus reveals the truth about the meal to his brother (Motto 11-12). Just like Medea's and Phaedra's, Atreus's resolve is unwavering in the face of vengeance, regardless of the consequences. It should be noted that Thyestes and Atreus are victims of inherited sin, as is Phaedra. Tantalus, Atreus and Thyestes's grandfather, is responsible for the curse upon the Tantalids, as he tried to test the omniscience of the gods by feeding them his only son, Pelops. This is the same inherited sin that weighs down the protagonists of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, as Agamemnon is a son of Atreus.

“[J]ustice, or rather *dikê* in its three senses of ‘right and wrong’, ‘punishment’ and ‘judicial proceedings’” is the general theme of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* as identified by Alan H. Sommerstein, professor of Greek at the University of Nottingham (193). The trilogy shows

how generation after generation offspring seeks to avenge injustice done to its forebears. On the one hand, the righteous can count on the favour of the goddess Dike, while the wicked should be wary of her; on the other hand, it is hubris that generates hubris. If, as Sommerstein remarks, “a righteous person is the victim of an act of *hybris*”, an oxymoron is created: this person, or his family if he is dead, would be fully entitled to exact revenge, as demanded by Dike (197). This revenge can only be attained through another act of hubris. Thus the tables are turned as the sufferer of hubris has become the doer, and then the cycle can start all over again, potentially until infinity (Sommerstein 197).

Lastly, in Seneca’s *Phaedra*, Phaedra falls madly in love with her stepson Hippolytus. When Hippolytus rejects Phaedra’s advances, her love becomes frantic. She turns on her stepson and declares to her husband, the hero Theseus, slayer of the Minotaur, that Hippolytus has tried to seduce her. Theseus believes her and curses his son, who is destroyed by a sea-bull. It is in this play that Seneca emphasises the concept of inherited sin: “progeny returns to its ancestors and degenerate blood traces to the first root” (“redit ad auctores genus / stirpemque primam degener sanguis refert.” Seneca, *Phaedra*, 907-8). It suggests that all character traits of the offspring are determined by those of their ancestors (Motto 13-15).

2.2 Collins’s Approach

The opening chapter of the novel sets wheels in motion which will prove to be a driving force of the narrative: the warning of inherited sin in the letter of Midwinter’s father. Afraid of inadvertently passing down the black pages of the family history to his son, Midwinter’s father unveils in his letter his past crimes. Already in the opening paragraph Midwinter’s father voices his fear for inherited sin, mentioning: “. . . a danger that lies in wait for him [i.e. Midwinter] – a danger that will rise from his father’s grave, when the earth has closed over his father’s ashes” (Collins 27). He refers to this notion throughout his letter:

I look in on myself – and I see My Crime, ripening again for the future in the self-same circumstance which first sowed the seeds of it in the past; and descending, in inherited contamination of Evil, from me to my son . . . Think what the strength of my conviction must be, when I can find the courage, on my death-bed, to darken all your young life at its outset with the shadow of your father’s crime. (Collins 47-48)

Towards the end of his letter, he works up to a tricolon consisting of those people he desperately wants his son to avoid at all cost: the widow, Ms Blanchard, the maid in her service, Miss Gwilt, and finally, the widow’s son, Allan Armadale. When Midwinter receives the letter, Ms Blanchard has already passed away, Miss Gwilt is not yet in his sight (though she is in Mr Brock’s), but his friendship with Allan has already taken root and, even in the light his father has shed on the possible disastrous results if he were to meet Allan at all, Midwinter remains utterly reluctant to let his best friend go.

Midwinter himself also frequently refers to his inherited sin. When he speaks to Mr Brock about his past hardships, he calls them “natural penalties . . . , which the child was beginning to pay already for the father’s sin” (Collins 89). In the same conversation, Midwinter reads out, softly, the part of his father’s letter containing the warnings, and when Mr Brock asks him why he did this, he answers:

“. . . You must know how much there is of my father in me, before you trust me to be Mr Armadale’s friend. . . . When I [got] back, and when [Allan] met me at night on the stairs, I thought I was looking him in the face as *my* father looked *his* father in the face when the cabin door closed between them. Draw your own conclusions, sir. Say, if you like, that the inheritance of my father’s heathen belief in Fate is one of the inheritances he has left to me. I won’t dispute it; I won’t deny that all through

yesterday *his* superstition was *my* superstition. The night came before I could find my way to calmer and brighter thoughts. But I did find my way. You may set it down in my favour that I lifted myself at last above the influence of this horrible letter. Do you know what helped me? . . . My love for Allan Armadale.” (Collins 101-102)

Ironically, Midwinter’s father’s greatest fear turns out to be Midwinter’s salvation: if Midwinter had not befriended Allan, then he would have lost his way, which would have meant the end of Allan’s life, and perhaps also of his own. This episode encompasses precisely the ambiguity in Midwinter: his belief in fate and his love for Allan (Thoms 119). Depending on the circumstances, Midwinter moves back and forth between these two viewpoints. His resolve to leave all superstition behind is severely shaken when the two friends find themselves stranded aboard the very same ship on which Midwinter’s father killed Allan’s father (Collins 130), but still, though wary of the dream², Midwinter’s love for Allan perseveres, and thus the two remain inseparable. The day after the duo has arrived at Allan’s inherited estate at Thorpe-Ambrose, Midwinter starts exploring the manor. One of the first rooms that draws his attention is the room in which the third vision will take place. After having taken in the trimmings of the room, he sighs that “here in the country-house, or there on board the Wreck, . . . the traces of my father’s crime follow me, go where I may” (Collins 185). The final remark on this inherited sin is made when Midwinter tries to verify whether the new governess is the Miss Gwilt of whom he was warned. When Midwinter finds Mr Brock’s description of Miss Gwilt to differ tremendously from the vision of a woman he sees before him, his mind is eased into a (false) sense of safety, and he is happy that his father’s crime will not part him from his best friend. This ambiguity has been detected by Maurizio Ascari in Collins’s novels in general: “individual agency, or free will, is repeatedly contrasted

² The importance of this dream will be explored in 3.2.

with the idea of a predefined and inescapable ‘unfolding’ of events” (Costantini 200). Peter Thoms concurs with Ascari in this respect: parallel to Collins’s protagonists’ attempts to change their lives runs their undermining providence. Consequently, they manage to break away from the confinements put upon them by the chain of events. The protagonist needs to rise above this chain if he wants to succeed at shaping his own life (Thoms 8).

As the visions of the dream are realised in the course of the narrative, it leads the reader to suspect that Midwinter and Allan are heading for the much feared and apparently inevitable confrontation: Midwinter committing the same crime as his father. However, the climax is completely different. At the end of the novel, his friendship with Allan leads Midwinter to risk everything, even his own life. The outcome is not nearly as disastrous as Midwinter’s father anticipated: both Allans survive and their friendship remains as strong as ever. In the final chapter, Midwinter reflects on Allan’s dream and comes to the following conclusion:

I once believed that it was sent to rouse your [i.e. Allan’s] distrust of the friendless man whom you had taken as a brother to your heart. I now *know* that it came to you as a timely warning to take him closer still. Does this help to satisfy you that I, too, am standing hopefully on the brink of a new life, and that while we live, brother, your love and mine will never be divided again? (Collins 677)

This is the final step in Midwinter’s quest of unburden himself from his inherited sin through free will.³

In the case of inherited sin, a certain acquaintance with the family history of the protagonist(s) on the audience’s part is expected. In classical tragedy, such family histories

³ The very first step is Midwinter’s decision to abandon his real name and live by the pseudonym of Ozias Midwinter (Ascari in Costantini, 202).

are part of myths and classical religion, and thus firmly rooted in classical culture. This essentially makes such family histories general knowledge for an ancient Greek or Roman. For instance, someone attending Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* would already be aware of Agamemnon's ancestors; the strife between Thyestes and Atreus; the dirty games of Pelops; the deceit of Tantalus himself.

However, Collins does not have this luxury, and therefore introduces the Armadales's ancestry as early as possible: after the first instalment of the novel, his audience is fully equipped with the same kind of knowledge that left the classical tragedy audience more or less one step ahead of the characters. In contrast to his classical predecessors, Collins puts his audience on the wrong path in regard to the conclusion of Midwinter's inherited sin by structuring the narrative around the dream (see also chapter 3). When one dream vision after another becomes reality, it leads the audience to suspect Midwinter, like his classical counterparts, cannot break free from his inherited sin. As it turns out, the opposite is true; Midwinter saves instead of takes Allan's life.

Chapter 3: The Importance of Dreams

3.1 Classical Approach

Another key element in classical tragedy, and also in *Armadale*, is dreams and their visions. They are premonitory in nature, and often appeal to the general knowledge of the audience; Collins makes the most of this device in *Armadale* by linking action of the narrative not only to inherited sin, but also to dream visions.

A telling classical example is Aeschylus's *Persians*, the only extant play based on actual events rather than mythological (Sommerstein 45). One of the omens for the downfall of Xerxes, and with him the Persian army, is the dream rendered by his mother Atossa to the chorus. When Xerxes tries to put two sisters, one in a Ionian dress, the other in a Dorian, under the yoke because the women were arguing, the Ionian proudly accepts her task, but the Dorian revolts and breaks the yoke, causing Xerxes to fall. The Ionian woman represents the Persians, the Dorian the Greeks. Atossa is adamant to try and change her son's fate by making a sacrifice to the gods, but before she can do so she witnesses yet another ill omen (Sommerstein 49).

The importance of a dream vision is also apparent in *Choephoroi* (the second play of the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus), where Clytaemnestra, widow of king Agamemnon of Mycenae, foresees her own death. The chorus reveal to Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, that they were sent by Clytaemnestra to offer libations at the tomb of Agamemnon after she had had a premonitory dream. She dreamt that she gave birth to a snake, dressed it as a new-born, and nursed it. Instead of drinking milk, the 'infant' drew blood. This dream foreshadows the end of Clytaemnestra: she will be killed by her own child. This fate she cannot escape, however hard she tries. Near the conclusion of the play, it is indeed her son, Orestes, who slays her, taking revenge for his mother slaying his father.⁴

⁴ This happened in *Agamemnon*, the first play of the trilogy.

Characteristically, the events that come to pass in these visions are inevitable. No matter how much the protagonist tries to avoid these, they will happen. This power is larger than life, a feat hard to accept for those concerned.

3.2 Collins's Approach

In addition to inherited sin, dream visions are another driving force in *Armadale*. In the fourth instalment of the novel this subject is broached, when Allan and Midwinter are stranded by accident (or perhaps it was the hand of fate?) on the very same vessel Midwinter's father killed Allan's father. Midwinter is, by then, fully informed of his father's transgressions and worries. A sense of pending doom takes possession of him, but when Allan falls asleep, Midwinter soon discovers that it is going to be Allan who will suffer the worst of it: a dream comes to Allan in the night, warning him of future events. The next morning, when the party is rescued, Midwinter presses Allan to tell him about his dream. Allan at first refuses, as he does not see the point in doing this, but soon caves in under Midwinter's incessant badgering. The dream, as revealed by Allan, contains four visions (Collins 123-42).

The first vision is a vision of the past, which Midwinter immediately recognises to be actuality. It is the same scene painted by his father in his letter: the drowning of Allan's father. Allan, however, as he is still completely in the dark as to his family's history in this regard, dismisses this notion instantly, and finds an ally in this in the form of a local doctor, who offers a perfectly scientific explanation to all of the four visions (Collins 142-52). The reading public, who are, like Midwinter, fully informed of the two families' history, will very probably side with Midwinter's take on the vision. Collins has been paving the way for this by occasionally, though not unnoticeably, touching upon the notion of inherited sin (see above).

The second vision, like the third and fourth, is a vision of the future. Again, it is Midwinter who takes this vision seriously, since he and he alone knows the truth behind the first vision. Again, the doctor, and therefore Allan as well, dismisses it. The second vision

entails the shadow of woman at the edge of pool at a red sunset; the third, the shadow of a man knocking over a statuette in a library with French windows which open to a lawn and a garden during a downpour, and Allan, partly angry, partly distressed, bending to look at the fragments; the fourth, the shadow of a woman pouring something liquid, handing it to the shadow of a man, who hands it to Allan, and him drinking the liquid and instantly feeling extremely unwell. Thus ends Allan's dream (Collins 142).

When the second vision of the dream comes true in the eighth instalment, it is at the end of a picnic, and both Allan and Midwinter are witness to it. Midwinter is utterly shocked and flustered at the sight of it. Allan, on the other hand, dismisses it with the same ease as he did when in the company of the doctor. The explanation is simple; it is only Miss Milroy's new governess, Miss Lydia Gwilt, meeting the picnic party at the agreed place. Midwinter, frightened, takes off to the estate, and Allan, after hesitating whether to go after his friend or meet the governess and escort her to the Milroys, opts for the latter (Collins 265-66).

In the tenth instalment, there is a scene which resembles the third vision, and again, Midwinter recognises this scene to be the setting of the vision. However, the scene comes to an end before the statue is shattered into pieces, and it looks as if the dream cycle is broken (Collins 305-06). Collins lulls the reader into a false sense of safety, since the third vision is realised, in fact, in the thirteenth instalment. Midwinter, only barely returned after touring a fortnight in the country, has just discovered that Allan is having Miss Gwilt followed and is now confronting his friend with this information. Their conversation turns into a battle royal, and in the heat of the argument Midwinter knocks over the statue of Niobe, leaving Allan stooping over the fragments. Before Midwinter leaves the room, he acknowledges the third vision of Allan's dream in a whisper (Collins 398-99).

In the eighteenth instalment, the fourth and final vision of the dream takes place. The way the realisation of this vision is narrated is different from the second and third vision. The

fourth vision is recounted by Miss Gwilt in her diary, when she reflects on the events of that evening. She thought it peculiar that Midwinter asked her to verify the conditions under which the vision was realised, and therefore decided to make a note of it in her diary entry (Collins 561-65). In this way, the realisation of the final vision is narrated as a flashback, instead of as if it is happening right there and then, like the second and third vision.

There are striking similarities between the dream visions of Allan and those of dream of Clytaemnestra in *Agamemnon*. Allan, though only having seen a portrait of his father and not knowing the man in person, immediately recognises him when he appears in his vision. As his dream evolves into the next three visions, Allan only plays a part in the last two of them. Like Allan's, the first part of Clytaemnestra's vision reiterates a past event, namely the birth of her son. Despite this son having the appearance of a snake in her dream, she instantly recognises it as her own. A significant difference, however, is that Clytaemnestra acknowledges the dream for what it is; an omen of a threat to her own life. The past event, i.e. the birth of her son, shows there is truth in her vision, which allows her to be warned of the future event, i.e. the drawing of her own blood by her own blood. This foreboding turned out to be true, and Clytaemnestra eventually dies at the hands of her son. Allan does not recognise his dream as a premonition, perhaps mainly because he is unaware of the truth behind his first vision. This makes it easy for him to wave aside any objections his friend Midwinter makes. Midwinter, on the other hand, immediately infers the severity of the dream, as he knows the first vision to hold the truth. As a result, it is Midwinter, and not the receiver of the dream, who considers the dream to be an ill omen: it is a threat not to his own life, but to the life of the dreamer, Allan.

Allan's dream resembles Atossa's in *Persians*, though there is a major difference: the vision in Atossa's dream has already come to pass, albeit without her knowledge, and contains no reference to the future. The people that appear in her dream are easily identified

as her son Xerxes, her late husband Darius, and two unnamed women, who are siblings and function as a *pars pro toto* for the Persian and Grecian nations. Here, the role of Atossa can be paralleled with Allan's: both are ignorant of the truth in this vision. Midwinter, then, finds himself in the same position as the audience of the *Persians*, since both are aware of the reality of this past event and thus know how it will turn out. What Midwinter and Atossa have in common is that both fear for the well-being of a loved one, Allan and Xerxes, respectively. Both Midwinter and Atossa try their very best to avert this ill omen, despite of it appearing not to be a threat to themselves. In the end, only Midwinter succeeds in protecting his beloved Allan; the warning in Atossa's dream came too late for her to save her son from pending doom.

In the larger scheme of the narrative, the dream, and the vision it contains, is a necessary means for the creation of the plot; without the dream, the protagonists have nothing to fear, and it is fear that drives Midwinter, Clytaemnestra, and Atossa. Without the dream, the audience is bereft of sharing in this fear, and misses out on a core element of tragedy, impact. Ascari rightly argues that such premonitory dreams "create a set of expectations not only in Collins's characters, but also in his readers, who are often in a better position to understand the implications of these ambiguous messages, although they are far from able to decipher them in their entirety" (Costantini 206). This also applies to classical tragedy. The audience is very likely already familiar with the myth that is staged, and thus equipped with the necessary tools to adjust their expectations. However, just like Collins, playwrights use such expectations, whether they are formed by the characters or the audience, to their own advantage. It allows them to surprise the audience with variations in the way the main events come to pass, or in the type of punishment.

To conclude, the motif of dreams and visions, with its classical roots, proves to be an indispensable framework for the development of the plot in *Armadale*. Collins uses it and

adapts it to his own needs. He adds to the sense of tragedy by dividing the dream and the suffering because of the dream between two different characters, instead of reserving them for one and the same character. Thus, Collins enhances the impact.

Chapter 4: Characterisation of Miss Gwilt

4.1 Classical Approach

4.1.1 Female Protagonists in Classical

Miss Gwilt's character is, in terms of classical tragedy, neither typically feminine nor masculine, but rather draws on characteristics from both sexes. Both Euripides's *Medea* and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* centre on a strong, female protagonist who displays a trait also attributable to Miss Gwilt: the desire to get what is rightfully hers, i.e. revenge. This is achieved through guile and deceit, and by any means necessary, even if this means resorting to unnatural behaviour.

In Euripides's *Medea*, the love story between Jason and Medea comes to an end: Jason is planning to leave Medea for a Corinthian princess. In the face of not only losing her husband, but also her status, Medea wants revenge and make her former lover as miserable as possible. After all, thanks to her efforts Jason succeeded in his past endeavours. She tricks the king of Corinth into allowing her to stay one more day so she can make the necessary arrangements before she has to leave town. In the course of the play, she manages to eliminate the competition and prepares for her ultimate act of revenge against Jason: the murder of their two children. For a short moment, Medea doubts whether this is the right course of action, since she has to sacrifice two loved ones for the punishment of a third. However, she perseveres and does the unthinkable, the most unnatural deed for a mother. Thus Medea succeeds in her vengeance at the cost of her entire family at a price she was willing to pay after all.

Another cunning and deviant female protagonist is Clytaemnestra in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. The murder of Agamemnon in this play is an act of rebellion against the boundaries between the two genders. In contemporary Athens, men and women virtually lived in two separate spheres: women had no formal authority and were excluded from civic life,

with the exception to certain religious festivities (Sommerstein 181). Clytaemnestra defies these boundaries by interfering in public life and resorting to rather masculine deeds. Such unnatural behaviour goes against all common believe, and that is why the chorus do not, or perhaps cannot believe the truth when they are told that Clytaemnestra will kill her husband (Sommerstein 182). It is simply unthinkable for a woman to behave in this way.

4.1.2 Male Protagonists in Classical Tragedy

On the other hand, Miss Gwilt's character bears resemblance to those of Sophoclean Ajax and Oedipus, both male protagonists: the harder these men (and Miss Gwilt) try to make things better for themselves, the more this desire turns to dust. Additionally, they commit crimes in their quest to fulfil this desire. However, in the end, their character has evolved for the better through their penance for these crimes, and their suffering has not been for nought.

This evolution is characteristic for both Sophoclean Ajax and Oedipus, as they transform into what Charles Segal, a classicist, calls "a heroic self" (110). Sophocles's *Ajax* centres on the struggle of Ajax with the loss of Achilles's arms to Odysseus and the consequences of his bout of madness. Segal recognises in Ajax's misery a pattern that is typical for Sophocles: he loses the arms not to someone who is the better and stronger warrior, which would be more acceptable, but to someone who is the better orator and schemer. Losing the arms means Ajax loses one of the two things that define him: his prowess as a warrior. The other, being part of a community, Ajax loses when he slaughters a flock of sheep (which he mistook for enemy troops) and retreats into isolation. Amidst these misfortunes Ajax is forced to "[draw] close to something in himself that is eternal and therefore divine" (Segal 110-12). In the end, Ajax commits suicide.

A similar pattern can be found in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where Oedipus learns from an oracle he is destined to murder his father and bed his mother. In order to avoid the oracle, Oedipus leaves the people he takes for his parents and flees to Thebes. However, this is done

in vain: he unwittingly kills his father and weds his mother. When Oedipus and his mother/wife Jocasta finally learn the truth about his heritage and his identity, Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself. Thus, by desperately trying to avoid his fate Oedipus sets the wheels in motion for its fulfilment. As Segal notes, “Oedipus, becoming identical with the pollution and murderer, becomes a more essential heroic self” (Segal 110).

Another important element of *Ajax* is the contradiction between what the hero wants in his life, and life itself (Segal 120). The tighter the hero tries to hold on to his aspirations, the more they turn to dust. According to Segal, “the impulse toward self-realization is both glorious ennoblement and a union with dark, self-destructive forces” (120). G.M. Kirkwood, professor of Classics and Emeritus at Cornell University, concurs with (at least) the first part of this notion. He argues that Sophoclean tragedy can be defined as “an action in which admirable character and crucial situation are combined; the situation involves religious and moral issues and entails suffering for the leading figure” (Kirkwood 16). This definition touches upon what Kirkwood calls “related factors” which are at the very centre of Sophocles’s plays: “emphasis of noble character and emphasis on the sphere of human action and interaction”. This does not exclude the divine sphere but rather treats the two spheres separately (Kirkwood 16-17).

Though all this suffering seems to be rather pointless, it is not. It can be the result of an act of hubris or excess, or of a hapless event in the past, for instance Herakles bringing another woman into his and Deianeira’s household leads to his untimely demise in Sophocles’s *Trachiniai*. It can be that this suffering does not detract from the aspirations and stature of the one who suffers, e.g. Ajax is still an honourable man in Sophocles’s *Ajax*. Lastly, it can be worthwhile, such as Antigone’s suffering resulting from her standing by her beliefs in Sophocles’s *Antigone* (“Sophocles”). In short, when a character suffers for the right reasons, it should not be considered as a pessimistic viewpoint.

4.2 Collins's Approach Concerning Miss Gwilt

Miss Gwilt is, like Sophoclean Ajax and Oedipus, trying to build a better world for herself any way she can. The means she uses to do this are, however, criminal. The difference between the crimes committed by the Sophoclean heroes and Miss Gwilt is that she commits them wittingly. In the end, just like the two male protagonists, Miss Gwilt feels she has to pay for her crimes, and in an attempt to make up for her deeds she commits suicide. Therefore, both her quest for revenge and the evolution of her character resemble the aforementioned classical heroines and heroes. This quest for revenge is another driving force in the narrative, and therefore deserves special attention.

At the outset of the novel, Miss Gwilt is introduced to the reader at odd moments before she enters the narrative as a participating character. This kind of introduction is quite common in classical tragedy as well, as it prepares the audience for the entrance of another important character. In these moments, Miss Gwilt is depicted as a troubled woman with a dark history. The first hint of her appearance is already given in the first instalment, when Midwinter's father writes about a scam in which an unknown twelve-year-old girl was involved in the capacity of an adept forger of handwriting (Collins 34). In the second instalment, friend of the family and clergyman Decimus Brock recollects a chance encounter with a veiled woman wearing a black dress and a red Paisley shawl, who had asked him for directions to Mrs Armadale's house. When Mr Brock visits Mrs Armadale afterwards, the encounter with Miss Gwilt seems to have frightened her (Collins 70-73). In the same instalment the unfortunate vicissitudes of the male heirs of Thorpe-Ambrose preceding Allan are recounted, and as it turns out, one of them tried and saved a suicidal woman, wearing a black dress, a veil, and a red Paisley shawl, who jumped off a boat (Collins 79-80). In the third instalment, it is Midwinter who first puts two and two together, Mr Brock's encounter and the police report on the attempted suicide (Collins 106). The fifth instalment opens with a

chapter consisting solely of correspondence, and this is when the audience meets Miss Gwilt in person, albeit through letters, for the first time, as she exchanges letters with her partner in crime Mrs Oldershaw. In her first letter, Miss Gwilt writes in a most belittling tone, calling Mrs Oldershaw an “Old Wretch” (Collins 161). Both the second-hand and first-hand information make out her character to be troubled, dark, and mischievous. Collins builds up the suspense to the moment when Miss Gwilt finally meets Allan and, by association, Midwinter. The audience already knows that whenever Miss Gwilt is on the brink of being discovered, she finds her way out, by hook or by crook. Now that she is about to enter the lives of the two protagonists, the audience is in anticipation of even more exhibitions of Miss Gwilt’s cunning.

However, Miss Gwilt seems to change for the better, like Sophoclean Ajax and Oedipus, when Midwinter finally gives into his love for her. She thought herself incapable of ever loving another man again, given her history, but what she feels for Midwinter is, as she eventually admits, exactly that: love (Collins 514-15). Despite this change, she remains uncompromising in her resolve to become mistress of Thorpe-Ambrose by murdering Allan; how Midwinter fits in all this is a notion she’d rather not think about (Collins 599). This inner strife comes to a climax when she lures Allan to the sanatorium under false pretences in an attempt on his life. To her surprise, Midwinter accompanies him, and during the night, which the two men have to spend there, Midwinter suspects something is amiss. Unwittingly, he disturbs Miss Gwilt’s plans by switching rooms with Allan in the middle of the night and thus taking the very room Miss Gwilt is filling with poisonous gas. Miss Gwilt discovers the exchange and rescues Midwinter just in time; she carries him from the poisonous room into safety. While Midwinter is slowly recuperating, Miss Gwilt leaves a note in his hand. The tone of this note is very different from her first message, in which she continually rebukes Mrs Oldershaw; this more affectionate and frank tone almost makes her likable, if it were not

for her horrible history. As her final act, and as a form of repentance for the misery she caused Midwinter, she locks herself into the poisonous room, after allowing herself one last look at Midwinter (Collins 630-66). She, like Ajax, retreats in isolation as penance for her actions, and through her suicide she pays for them, like Ajax and Oedipus paid for theirs.

This turn of events is rather surprising. For the better part of the novel, Miss Gwilt embodies evil, a truly vile woman who does not stop at anything. She is the Victorian version of the Euripidean Medea, or the Aeschylean Clytaemnestra. All three women stray from what is feminine behaviour to what is considered masculine: they do not passively undergo their hardships, but take matters into their own hands and try to even the balance by any means necessary. This kind of female characterisation is, according to Ascari, one of the things Collins excels at (Costantini 198). Miss Gwilt, Medea and Clytaemnestra share more common ground: they all are seeking vengeance for past transgressions. The main difference, however, is that the classical characters want to avenge personal loss caused by their lovers, whereas Miss Gwilt's loss is caused by Miss Blanchard, whose housemaid she used to be. The type of loss is also different. Medea is cheated out of her family and status when Jason decides to win the hand of a Corinthian princess. Clytaemnestra's loss is primarily family-related, since her husband had sacrificed their daughter before he left for Troy and brought another woman into their home at his return. Miss Gwilt, however, misses out on profits made and status gained thanks to her efforts, and thus her loss is solely of a material nature instead of emotional. In this regard, then, Miss Gwilt seems to resemble Medea most. Furthermore, like Medea, Miss Gwilt finds herself doubting her course of action in the face of her love for Midwinter.

Another salient resemblance between Medea and Miss Gwilt is their acquaintance with poisons. Medea is known for her sorcery; according to myth it is thanks to her witchcraft that Jason manages to complete his tasks when he is in Colchis, and in Euripides's *Medea* she poisons a gown which she knows is meant as a present for Creusa. Miss Gwilt seems to take a

page out of Medea's book and uses various poisons to suit her own needs, most importantly her drops, which help quiet her mind, and the purple flask, its contents designed to kill Allan. Thus, H.F. Chorley refers to her as "the sorceress of *Armadale*" with good reason (cited in Page 147; see also 1.1.3).

It comes as a surprise that Miss Gwilt is softened by the affections of Midwinter, considering her sinister tendencies and the connotation of her character with such sinister women as Medea and Clytaemnestra. Nevertheless, Midwinter's love does not resolve Miss Gwilt's tendencies. Still, Miss Gwilt allows herself to reciprocate the sentiment, even to such a degree that she rescues Midwinter from an untimely death, instead of letting things be and in that way solve a problem she never wanted to deal with in the first place: what to do with Midwinter after she assumes the role of Allan's widow. When, after a few nerve wrecking moments, she has ascertained Midwinter's survival, she decides to commit suicide, probably to avoid having to face the consequences of her actions. Yet her farewell note to Midwinter and the emotional distress and elation she experiences shortly before evoke something that may be best defined as sympathy. In her final moments, Miss Gwilt shows a glimpse of the woman she might have been, if not for all the misery in her earlier life. In her decision to commit suicide, she lets go of everything she was trying to hold on to so desperately: Midwinter, revenge, and her aspirations to becoming mistress of Thorpe-Ambrose. The tighter Miss Gwilt tried to grip these desires, the more they slipped through her fingers, in the end leaving her empty-handed. This is very similar to the Sophoclean Ajax and Oedipus in a way; all do whatever is in their power to gain what they are wishing for, ranging from the armour of a lost brother-in-arms, to the avoidance of patricide and incest, and the gain of revenge and money. When they find themselves falling short, they resort to self-punishment, be it suicide or blinding. It might be taking it a step too far in suggesting that Miss Gwilt is a Sophoclean heroin, but it is apparent that she shares a common ground.

In summary, the characterisation of Miss Gwilt is two-fold; on the one hand, her character is moulded after depraved tragic heroines such as Medea and Clytaemnestra, and on the other, after tormented tragic heroes such as Ajax and Oedipus. It is remarkable that these two aspects depend on two different genders, and that both of them are united in the character of Miss Gwilt. It is her perseverance that unites these two extremes: it lets her (try to) realise both her quest for vengeance and her desire to make amends. Lastly, her suffering, i.e. suicide, is not in vain, as it saves the life of the man she believed she truly loved.

Conclusion

That Wilkie Collins is much indebted to classical tragic tradition for the creation of *Armadale* is beyond dispute. For its content Collins draws upon elements common in literary heritage; however, these elements are easy to overlook and often hard to recognise as (also) having classical origins. Perhaps the most obvious of these themes is inherited sin; besides its clear Christian roots, it also plays an important part in ancient Greek mythology. The same applies to the characterisation of a female persona as a danger to one (or more) male personae; someone less versed in classical literature almost naturally connects this to Adam, Eve, and the Fall of man, passing over Eve's counterparts in the classical heritage, such as Clytaemnestra and Medea.⁵

On a structural level, Collins derives the basis for *Armadale* from classical tragedians as well. Dreams and visions have also been part of the frame that is classical literature, as they are part of the most important devices for furthering the plot of, for instance, a play such as *Persians*. They function the same way in the narrative of *Armadale*, and Collins appears to have exploited this device to its full potency: without the dream, it is likely Midwinter would have taken his father's warning to heart as much as he has done now. In summary, Collins has adapted major themes in classical tragedy to his *Armadale*, both on a structural level and with respect to content. His plot devices show classical influence, as do the characterisation of Miss Gwilt and major themes such as revenge and inherited sin. Both the 'skeleton' and the 'flesh' of *Armadale* owe much to classical tragedy.

As to why exactly Collins chose to incorporate such elements of classical tragedy, one can only speculate. Perhaps he wanted to show his critics that he is not just the sensational writer that they make him out to be; perhaps he wanted to accost a classically literate

⁵ This reciprocity provides a whole new ground for research, and therefore it will be left at that.

audience; or perhaps he was simply enthralled with this aspect of classical literature and wanted his novel to reflect this.

In hindsight there are surprisingly many classical references and adaptations of classical themes in Collins's *Armadale*. Unfortunately this paper can only scratch the surface of something that seems like an almost bottomless well from which many more classical elements can be drawn and investigated. Many are left untouched and therefore provide an excellent starting point for further research, such as the messenger/correspondence episodes as a means of furthering the plot and communicating events that have happened off-stage/earlier; the complexity of the narrative; music as a part of the narrative; the similarity between Midwinter and the Sophoclean Ajax; the similarity between Midwinter and the Senecan Oedipus; the relation between the names of the two hapless vessels, *La Grace de Dieu* (French for 'the grace of God', the vessel on which Allan's father died) and *Dorothea* (Greek for 'gift to/from the goddess', the vessel on which Allan was supposed to die); and the ring-composition, a Sophoclean trait, in *Armadale*, as the events of the plot start and end in a sanatorium.

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Appendix I: Instalments of *Armada*

The instalments of *Armada* are distinguished as follows:

Publication no.	Publication date	Content	Amount of words
1	November 1864	1.1	19,308
2	December 1864	2.1	16,264
3	January 1865	2.2	16,664
4	February 1865	2.4	13,515
5	March 1865	3.1	11,911
6	April 1865	3.3	12,554
7	May 1865	3.5	14,550
8	June 1865	3.8	11,235
9	July 1865	3.10	13,431
10	August 1865	3.13	12,869
11	September 1865	4.3	12,732
12	October 1865	4.5*	14,572
13	November 1865	4.8	14,285
14	December 1865	4.10	14,270
15	January 1866	4.11	14,740
16	February 1866	4.14	14,036
17	March 1866	4.15	12,475
18	April 1866	5.1	14,529
19	May 1866	5.3 continued	40,551
20	June 1866	Book the Last	3,497

(chart derived from Sutherland in Collins xxxi;

added word count derived from Project Gutenberg)