

Affirmative Naming in *No Name*

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In the Victorian novel *No Name*, Wilkie Collins uses naming and un-naming to show the powerless state of women under English common law. When Magdalen Vanstone discovers she is both illegitimate and disinherited after her parents' sudden death, she loses her wealth, social identity, and name in one. Deprived of her family name, Magdalen begins to embody the sinful (and ultimately repentant) associations of her Christian name as she plots to win back her wealth by marrying her cousin under a false identity. Yet when she succeeds in her plan and is once again reduced to namelessness and powerlessness by her husband, she becomes emblematic of all Victorian women under the doctrine of coverture who lost both their independent social identities and control over their wealth when they married and gave up their family names.

Wilkie Collins introduces Magdalen in his 1862 novel *No Name* by saying that she is a misnomer. "Magdalen!" he writes. "Surely, the grand old Bible name—suggestive of a sad and somber dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion—had been here...inappropriately bestowed" (15)? For the blithely innocent Magdalen Vanstone seems at first wholly unlike her Biblical namesake, and her character "out of all harmony with her own Christian name!" Yet just as names have denotative and connotative meanings, so characters in Collins' novel have both inherent and acquired significance. Collins suggests that "beneath the outward and visible character which is shaped...by the social influences around us," we have another, "inward, invisible disposition, which is part of ourselves; which education may directly modify, but can never hope to change" (146). Underneath the "glitter of Magdalen's bright spirits" lurks another self capable of embodying the associations of her name: a sinful, suffering, and ultimately repentant woman. Paradoxically, the calamity that leaves her

"Nobody's Child" and strips her of her name is the very catalyst for her fall into a Mary Magdalen-like existence.

The *Magdalen* to which Collins alludes in the beginning of *No Name* who recalls "mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion" (15) is a composite figure made up of the unnamed Biblical sinner who anoints Christ's feet in Luke 7:37-38; Mary called Magdalene (Luke 8: 2), or Mary of Magdala, a disciple of Christ freed from seven demons who was present at his crucifixion and resurrection; and Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who represents the contemplative life. Since St. Gregory the Great, Latin exegetes have tended to conflate these three figures, though there is little textual evidence linking them, as both the Greek Fathers and recent scholars have pointed out (Witherington 1984; Pagels 1989; Heine 1987). Popularly, Mary Magdalen represents penitence, contemplation, and resurrection, a threefold symbolism Collins uses in *No Name*.

Most scholars believe the place name from which Magdalen derives, *Magdala*, comes from a Hebrew word *migdal*, meaning 'tower' or 'High Tower,' and the name in turn came to represent her fortified chastity (and sometimes miraculously renewed virginity) after her repentance as well as her unshakable faith, as in St. Jerome's comment: "Mary of Magdala received the epithet 'fortified with towers' because of her earnestness and strength of faith, and was privileged to see the rising Christ before even the apostles" (quoted in Haskins 1993, 55). In the Middle Ages, female mystics such as Catherine of Siena, Margery Kempe, Juliana of Norwich, and Christine de Pisan also saw Mary Magdalen as a model of piety, strength, and ministry as well as a means of defying male oppression and gaining spiritual autonomy (Bell 1985, 54, 200), thereby embodying one possible meaning of *Mary* besides 'bitterness,' 'rebellion' (Dunkling 1985, 302). Inspired by her example,

Women, who were excluded from a sacerdotal role because of their gender, and whose salvation was

supervised by a male, as was their life in the world,...took to the new forms of religious life as a form of rebellion against the roles imposed upon them as wives and mothers, regaining their autonomy, and becoming mistresses of their own destinies. (Haskins 1995, 178-179)

Mary Magdalen preached to the multitudes and even to the Apostles despite the fact that women were forbidden to join the priesthood (Baron 1958, 240), and she was the first witness of Christ's resurrection, a role which earned her the appellation *apostola apostolorum*, or 'apostle of apostles.' Collins was interested in early Christian history and legends and dramatized the clash between Pagan and Christian fanaticism in his first novel, *Antonia or The Fall of Rome*, set in the fifth century. In *No Name*, Collins uses the various apocryphal and Biblical associations of the name Magdalen to create a repentant outcast who nonetheless defies her patrilineal society by daring to reclaim her name and follow a forbidden calling.

Collins not only "played with the names of his characters" (Lonoff 1980, 156) in his novel such as Magdalen, he also took great pains about the title of *No Name* itself and turned to Dickens for help. Collins ultimately rejected all 26 titles his mentor suggested—understandably, for they included such unpromising suggestions as *The Twig and the Tree*, *Through Thick and Thin*, *Which is Which?*, *Straight On!*, and *Changed, or Developed* (Dickens 1998, 21). Finally, Collins called his unnamable book *No Name*, a title that is both a play on the absence of a proper name for the book and a comment on the function of names and their removal in the narrative. Naming the book *No Name* also seemed to solidify the book's main purpose for Collins, and he inserted passages in 1862 underlining his intention that do not appear in the original manuscript (744 n. 181) such as "she and her sister had No Name" (182) and "I have no position to lose, no name to degrade" (182).

As these lines from the novel suggest, *No Name* protests what happens to women who—"by the accident of their father having been married, when he first met with their mother" (139)—are stripped of their names and thus of their inheritance, social identity, and legitimacy in Victorian England. As the family lawyer says in an impassioned speech in the novel,

I am far from defending the law of England, as it affects illegitimate offspring. On the contrary, I think it a disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the names of morality and religion. (139)

The issues of legitimacy and marriage were of particular concern for Collins, who had three children out of wedlock and lived with two women—sometimes simultaneously—without ever marrying. His own children's illegitimacy, like that of his characters in *No Name*, "made them the outcasts of the whole social community" and "placed them out of the pale of the Civil Law of Europe" (139). One early reviewer divined Collins's intent in the novel, complaining that while "*No Name* is principally a protest against the law which determines the social position of illegitimate children," it was also "a plea in behalf of the connection to which these children owe their existence" (Mansel 1863, 495). Collins objected to the subordinate position in which marriage put women socially and legally as well as the strictures it imposed upon male society. "The scope and purpose of the institution of marriage," he complained in "Bold Words by a Bachelor," "is a miserably narrow one" (quoted in Peters 1991, 198).

In *No Name*, Collins not only protests against the law of England in regards to illegitimate children, he also uses names and their absence to comment on the powerless position of women in general, who lost both name and power over their

fortunes when they married and became metaphorically illegitimate. "Like the illegitimate daughters of Andrew Vanstone," Lillian Nayder points out, "the married women of *No Name* discover that they have no property or earnings" (1997, 88) and can be disinherited by their husbands, a fact that Magdalen learns all too well by the novel's end. Collins's novel criticizes the powerless position of women deprived of their family names through illegitimacy or legal marriage, and his choice of the name *Magdalen* emphasizes the book's double-edged attack: "Collins may well been aware of the Medieval tradition of giving the name Magdalen to daughters born out of wedlock," Susan Haskins points out, "but he also uses it symbolically for Magdalen's lack of status" (1995, 330).

The novel begins with a portrait of the Vanstone family living an idyllic existence on a country estate, complete with an amateur staging of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Rivals*. Yet Collins foreshadows the hardships to come through the use of place names, family names, and personal names. The family dwells in *Coombe-Raven*, or 'raven-hollow,' a valley haunted by the shadow of death to come. The surname he chooses for his heroine, *Vanstone*-from the Dutch *Van Steen*, 'dweller near the stone' (Smith 1973, 528)-suggests coming trial and toil. These come soon enough. When Magdalen's father hears of her betrothal to the anything but "forthcoming and earnest" *Frank Clare* (who leaves her when she loses her fortune), he hastens to London on a mysterious errand and dies in an accident; his wife soon dies from grief. Magdalen and her sister Norah learn from the family lawyer that their father was secretly married before and had only recently married their mother after hearing of his first wife's death. Because he failed to make another will after his second marriage ("a man's marriage...destroys the validity of any will which he may have made as a single man" (136)), Magdalen and Norah are not only illegitimate and nameless under English law, they are also disinherited and left at the mercy of a heartless uncle. "Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children," the

lawyer says mournfully in a refrain that echoes throughout the novel.

Stripped of their sire-names in an unforgiving patriarchal society, the sisters begin to affirm their given names. *Norah*—a diminutive of either *Eleanor*, from the Greek *Helen*, or *Honorio*, the Latin word for ‘honor’ (Hanks 1950, 252)—turns to the honorable profession of a self-denying governess, while Magdalen runs away to become an actress, a socially stigmatized profession. Magdalen’s search for what to be called is also a search for a calling. Vocation in *No Name* not only determines how one lives, but who one becomes. What seems like a trivial avocation at the beginning of the novel becomes Magdalen’s true vocation. When the family governess apprehensively views Magdalen’s first performance on a neighbor’s stage, she realizes that her young ward’s potential rebelliousness: “Magdalen, in the capacity of a thoughtless girl, was comparatively easy to deal with. Magdalen, in the character of a born actress, threatened serious future difficulties” (57). The play in which Magdalen makes her acting debut, *The Rivals*, like *No Name* itself, is largely about plotting, feigning identities, and assuming names. Acting the parts of both the conniving maid Lucy and the honorable Julia not only awakens Magdalen’s latent sensuality and acting ability, it also prefigures her struggle between the good and evil connotations of her Biblical name, a theme Collins suggests in the Preface to his novel: “It has been my aim to make the character of ‘Magdalen,’” he wrote, exemplify “the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have all felt” (5). Towards the close of the novel when she poses as a maid in order to steal a secret trust, she will once again assume the name and role of Lucy and thereby earn the nickname *Jezebel*, the lascivious wife of Ahab who serves in the novel as a biblical reminder of the sinful connotations of the name *Magdalen*.

Because Magdalen is now no one, she can become anyone and assumes the role of surrogate novelist and playwright who “jumps into the skins” of other characters much the way Collins himself acted in stage productions or invented characters. Keats describes this ability of actors and writers as a “poetical character” that “is not itself -- it has no self -- it is everything and nothing -- it has no character -- it enjoys light and shade -- it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated” (1958, 387). Magdalen similarly says when she prepares to take on a role to deceive her cousin, “There are things I would have died sooner than do, at one time—things it would have turned me cold to think of. I don’t care now, whether I do them or not. I am nothing to myself” (333). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Mary Magdalen’s reputation as a copious weeper gave rise to the word *maudlin* (1973, 1661), and Magdalen Vanstone’s lack of affect after she learns of her illegitimacy and plots to regain her fortune bespeak of her fall from her proper role as a grieving daughter and nameless woman: “They had summoned their courage to meet the shock of her impassioned grief, or to face the harder trial of witnessing her speechless despair. But they were not prepared for her invincible resolution...[her] terrible questions...her immovable determination” (158). When she loses her social self, she loses her emotions as well and plays many parts with only momentary lapses into regret or sorrow; the recovery of her name and identity at the end of the novel will only come at the price of her tears.

When Magdalen descends into acting, she falls from social grace. And yet reputation, for “Nobody’s Child,” seems irrelevant; as she tells her sister in a letter, “Whether I succeed, or whether I fail, I can do myself no harm, either way. I have no position to lose, no name to degrade” (182). Unlike Mary Magdalen, who was allegedly a reformed prostitute (though the Gospel does not specify the nature of the unnamed sinner’s transgressions with whom she is identified),

Magdalen Vanstone does not literally become a prostitute—unless one can call the selling of one's body in marriage prostitution, a view that Collins might well have held. ("Thousands of women marry for money," Magdalen protests. "Why shouldn't I?") Magdalen nonetheless becomes ostracized like her Biblical namesake when she takes up acting and acts for herself. Nina Auerbach notes that "the phrase 'public woman'" was used in Victorian England "for performer and prostitute alike" (1982, 205), and later on Collins again dramatizes this eponymic name in a novel called *The New Magdalen* in which an illegitimate prostitute assumes the name and identity of another woman in a vain attempt to advance herself, then repents and marries. "Your way of life—however pure your conduct may be," Magdalen's former governess writes to her, "is a suspicious way of life to all respectable people. I have lived long enough in this world to know, that the Sense of Propriety, in nine Englishwomen out of ten, makes no allowances and feels no pity" (313). Like the Biblical Mary Magdalen, who practiced a socially suspect calling as the apostle of apostles, Magdalen Vanstone's true vocation renders her an outcast.

After she loses her name and her identity, Magdalen vows revenge and assumes the names and identities of others. Like the *magdalens*, or prostitutes, in an article that appeared in *The Magdalen's Friend and Female Homes' Intelligencer* a year before Collins wrote *No Name*, Magdalen's fall from respectable society inspires in her not humility, but vengeance:

Who can tell the pestiferous influence exercised on society by the single fallen woman? Woman, waylaid, tempted, deceived, becomes in turn the terrible avenger of her sex. Armed with a power that is all but irresistible, and stript of all which can alone restrain and purify her influence, she steps upon the arena of life qualified to act her part in the reorganization of society. The *lex talionis*-law of retaliation is hers. (1861, 134)

Using her considerable physical charms and innate acting ability, Magdalen plots to win back her fortune. She enlists the aid of a distant relative, *Captain Wragge*, a self-styled swindler and “moral agriculturalist” (211) who maintains his honor even when reduced to rags and tatters: “He paced the streets of York, a man superior to clothes and circumstances; his vagabond varnish as bright on him as ever” (187). Although Collins did not invent this patronymic—it denotes ‘Descendant of Ragg (the gods)’ (Smith 1973, 561), a meaning to which Collins apparently does not allude, and appeared in Worcestershire, Lincolnshire, and Northamptonshire (Reaney 1976, 393)—*Wragge* seems like a portmanteaux word without quite being one. Like the names of many characters created by Dickens, with whom Collins collaborated on several projects, “The sounds themselves and the echo-allusions hidden in them are intensely evocative” (Le Guin 1998, 25). *Wragge* suggests the wrangling, roguery, rags, and waggish demeanor of its owner who is below the rungs of society and turns to swindling to survive.

With *Wragge*’s aid, Magdalen dons a series of elaborate disguises to hoodwink her ironically named cousin *Noel Vanstone* into marriage. The weak and petulant Noel, however, will not inspire a “rebirth” in her, but bring her to the brink of suicide. Although he is closely guarded by a housekeeper named *Virginie Lecount* who—as her name suggests—feigns virtue while counting Noah’s fortune, Magdalen nonetheless succeeds in enticing her cousin to marry her under the false name of *Susan Bygrave*. With this alias for his heroine, Collins perhaps intends to recall *Susanna*, a figure in the Bible who was part of the Galilean discipleship along with Mary Magdalen and Joanna and stood by Christ’s tomb at his resurrection (Luke 8:1-3, 24:10). After Magdalen assumes this identity, she will eventually come back from the brink of physical and spiritual death.

With this marriage to her unwitting cousin, Magdalen not only regains her last name, *Vanstone*, but also her fortune

and social identity as well: she writes to her former governess, "Do you know who I am? I am a respectable married woman, accountable for my actions to nobody under heaven but my husband. I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last....my wickedness has...made Nobody's Child, Somebody's wife" (590). Noel, on the other hand, seems to lose his identity by marrying her: "Am I nobody in the house?" he wonders aloud (537), and later complains, "She takes her own way, as if I was nobody" (540). The recovery of Magdalen's identity and the loss of that of her parsimonious cousin would seem to signal the end of *No Name*, and yet the reader attentive to the Biblical associations of *Magdalen* understands that the drama is not yet over, for Magdalen Vanstone has not lived up to her name: "I don't wish to tell you that I was the reformed and repenting creature whom *you* might have approved" (586), she tells her former governess. The recovery of her fortune, social identity, and name brings no pleasure, forgiveness, or spiritual growth for her, only despair. Even this bitter respite does not last long. When Noel discovers Magdalen's true name, he makes another will shortly before dying of a heart attack in which he leaves everything to a cousin and disinherits her. Once again, Magdalen loses her identity, wealth, and status—but this time, because she has married.

With this plot twist, Collins makes Magdalen's fall from legitimacy at the beginning of the novel emblematic of married Victorian women in general who lost both their names and their fortunes when they married. Because of the doctrine of coverture, married women did not have property rights and could, like one of Magdalen's relations, be reduced to poverty by squandering husbands. Married women did not receive the right to their own earnings or personal property until the first Married Woman's Property Act was passed in 1870, a hotly debated issue in Parliament when Collins was writing *No Name*. "Illegitimacy," Virginia Blain argues, "serves here as an evocative and subversive metaphor for the position

of women as non-persons" (1999, xix). By having Magdalen lose her name and wealth twice in the novel—first through illegitimacy, then through legitimacy—Collins subtly comments on the plight of all married women under English common law.

And yet the book's ending seems to belie such social critique. In her frantic search for her sister, the pious and long-suffering Norah meets and marries their cousin *Bartram*, or "bright raven," who restores the fortunes of Coombe-Raven to the two sisters. Thus, Norah succeeds in regaining a name, position, and wealth through duty and resignation where Magdalen could not. Collins appears to sanction Norah's honorable conduct and censure her sister's autonomous scheming, though early on in the novel he describes Norah's quiet passivity as arising out of "pride, or sullenness, or distrust of herself, or despair of doing good" (75). By the end of the novel, Magdalen is no longer the vivacious, engaging, and idiosyncratic character she was in the early chapters; the more names and identities she assumes, the less inner self she seems to have.

And yet Collins seems to make Magdalen less of an individualized person to make her more of an allegorical figure. Indeed, the capitalized "Secret Trust," "Somebody's Wife," "Nobody's Children," "Propriety," and "Purpose" play such an integral part in the novel that they almost become characters. Characters affirm their names at the end of *No Name*, and Collins increasingly uses metonymic descriptions to stage Magdalen's changing consciousness. As Magdalen's actions lead her further and further into a life of decline, the landscapes through which she moves become progressively degenerated and their names allegorically significant. Thus, it is not surprising to find Magdalen making one last desperate attempt to regain her fortune in a house called *St. Crux*, a name that suggests a puzzle, a central point, and a cross. It proves to be all of these things: the key to the Secret Trust, the

climax of the novel, and the turning point for Magdalen's conversion.

Destitute, Magdalen withdraws from society to a squalid room by the sea in a feverish state of near-starvation, recalling Mary Magdalen's legendary seclusion in Provence to which Collins alludes in the beginning of the novel where the saint lived virtually without food in penance. In the significantly named *Aaron's buildings*, Magdalen falls ill and loses all but an inchoate sense of identity, nearly dying of a brain fever before being resurrected by the aptly named *Captain Robert Kirke*. As his name suggests, the heroic Robert Kirke represents both "bright fame" or "bright counsel" (Kolatch 1990, 231) as well as the strength, authority, and redemptive power of the 'church.'¹ He sails into port on a ship named *Deliverance* after rounding the Cape of Good Hope and helps Magdalen fulfill the destiny of her name. His love casts out the names and identities she has assumed the way Jesus exorcized Mary Magdalen's seven demons; but oddly, it is Magdalen who rises from the dead and Kirke who witnesses her resurrection, recalling the Biblical accounts of Mary Magdalen's witnessing of Christ's resurrection and putting Magdalen in the position of Christ, perhaps to suggest that she has become a martyr to society. After Magdalen confesses her sins, Kirke proposes to her, recognizing "the priceless value of a woman who tells the truth."

Many reviewers were horrified by Magdalen's redemption via marriage to an honorable man who must lower himself to wed her; Collins closes his book with the line, "He stooped, and kissed her" (741). Like Wragge, the sailor Kirke does not reside "in the artificial social atmosphere" of respectable society, yet he lives honorably and sees in Magdalen's desperate situation "nothing but the duty it claimed from him" (705). "Mr. Wilkie Collins," Mrs. Oliphant complained in a *Blackwood's Magazine* review,

Has chosen...to throw [his heroine] into a career of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness, with

which it is impossible to have a shadow of sympathy, but from all the pollutions of which he intends us to believe that she emerges, at the cheap cost of a fever, as pure, as high-minded, and as spotless as the most dazzling white of heroines.... Her pollution is decorous, and justified by law; and after all her endless deceptions and horrible marriage, it seems quite right to the author that she should be restored to society, and have a good husband and a happy home (1863, 143)

Similarly, Alexander Smith maintained that the book had a "horrible and unnatural interest" and thought that Magdalen's plots and counterplots "are cleverly told, but the repulsiveness of the matter disturbs the pleasure of the reader" (1863, 185), while H. L. Mansel wondered, "should there be...no punishment" (1863, 496)? Though Collins purposely wanted to draw on story of the repentant prostitute who washes Christ's feet with her tears and receives forgiveness, his reviewers were not afraid of casting the first stone at Magdalen Vanstone simply for taking up acting and refusing to accept her nameless state. Collins apparently subscribed to-or at least utilized-the tradition of Mary Magdalen as a repentant sinner, but he nonetheless also saw her as analogous to the new woman emerging in the Victorian era who was increasingly autonomous and self-reliant, and his readers were largely indignant. Although *No Name* initially sold well and made Collins over nine thousand pounds (Clarke 1991, 106), the negative reviews soon dampened sales.

Nonetheless, Collins's transgressive heroine may seem not transgressive enough to contemporary readers, for Magdalen does not remain an independent woman who makes a name for herself. Virginia Blain writes, "bold as Collins might have been in creating a strong heroine who defied society by fighting for what she believes to be her rights, he shrank from allowing her to win a victory on her own terms" (1999, XX). Magdalen admits the error of her ways and uses her considerable acting gifts in the end only to win

over her future husband, "laying little snares for him" (720). And yet Collins subtly undercuts his ending when he writes that

Openly and honorably, with love on one side and love on the other, Norah had married the man who had possessed the Coombe-Raven money—and Magdalen's own scheme to recover it, had opened the way to the event that brought husband and wife together! (725)

Magdalen's schemes not only resulted in Norah's honorable marriage, but also her own redemption and marriage to Kirke (whose father had also saved her father). The conventional happy ending, in other words, would have been impossible without Magdalen's unconventional behavior.

Ultimately, Madgalen's struggles for legitimacy and desperate plots to recover her name occupy the bulk of the novel and are difficult to forget even after she has capitulated and repented. Perhaps the anonymous reviewer of *No Name* in the *London Quarterly Review* was correct in discerning Collins's aim in the novel: "The tale is very powerful," he admitted; "the poison is distilled so subtly that the evil is wrought almost before suspicion is awakened" and "the mind unconsciously drifts on into an acquiescence in a state of things, which, were it free from the glamour which the author throws over the mental vision, it would at once condemn" (1866, 107-108). Like Mary Magdalen, Collins's Magdalen repents her sins but also dares to practice her true calling in the face of male opposition. Collins does indeed "hide [the novel's] real character and excite sympathy for that which should be visited with stern approbation" (*London Quarterly Review* 1866, 107-108), at least in Victorian England: the protest against the powerless and nameless condition of illegitimate children and married women alike. Despite her apparent acquiescence to conventional mores, Magdalen's disastrous marriage to her cousin, which left her as nameless and destitute as the earlier revelation of her illegitimacy, remains a

troubling comment on the role of married women under English common law. Magdalen reminds us of the tenuous position of women in the mid-Victorian era whose wealth, identity, and reputation could so easily be taken from them with the loss of their names.

Notes

1. The name Captain Robert Kirke also recalls Reverend Robert Kirke, who translated the Bible for the highlanders in 1690 and reputedly was spirited away by fairies for revealing too many of their secrets. Collins would have read about Rev. Robert Kirke *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* by Sir Walter Scott, whom Collins called "the Prince, King, Emperor, God Almighty of novelists" (Clarke 1991, 201). Interestingly, Magdalen's parents think of her as a changeling at the beginning of the novel, which could account for some of her uncanny fascination over Robert Kirke.

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