

***Wilkie Collins in Context*, ed. by William Baker and Richard Nemesvari.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 346.
ISBN (13): 978-1316510575**

Barişcan Özkuzey*
University of California, San Diego

Edited by William Baker and Richard Nemesvari, *Wilkie Collins in Context* is an extensive collection of essays that mark the 200th anniversary of Wilkie Collins's birth by celebrating the multifaceted life of the author in four parts: life and works, critical response and afterlife, literary contexts, and cultural and social contexts. In the preface, Baker and Nemesvari put emphasis firstly on the treatment of Collins's writing in his age as belonging to a second-class status, stemming from the fact that the most impact he had on the period's culture has been through his sensation novels, especially *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* (p. xvii). However, as it is also revealed by the thirty-five essays by the distinguished contributors of this volume, the thought of Collins as a "one-dimensional purveyor of a niche and ephemeral genre" (p. xvii) is no longer as popular as it once has been, though the unfairness of the fact that this ever happened is still lamented by the editors. Consequently, the reader can sense that one of the goals of this introductory preface is to broaden the horizons of the possible research on Collins, as Baker and Nemesvari refer to previously overlooked aspects of Collins's life and work. Their discussion of the different aspects of Collins, such as his familial relationships and connection to painting and art through his father and his brother, and his friendships within the Victorian artistic community, allow the reader to get insights into Collins's early years and his life beyond the sensationalist elements. Another point that Baker and Nemesvari seem to dwell on in the preface is Collins's relationship to Dickens, as both were career novelists who were recognized for their impressive sales, with Dickens being able to "escape being tarred with the sensationalist brush" (p. xvii). Their shared love of theater is also touched upon, with further ruminations on Collins's love for dramatic work in Caroline Radcliffe's essay and the necessary context overall provided by Melisa Klimaszewski's opening account of Wilkie Collins's life. Overall, the preface does its work as a guide to this collection of essays, and by the end of it, the reader knows what to expect. The focus Baker and Nemesvari put on Collins's multifaceted persona shines through not only the preface they have written, but also the structure and contents of the volume itself. It certainly carries the weight of its title, *Wilkie Collins in Context*, well, as it is perhaps one of the most comprehensive works regarding Wilkie Collins's life and work ever.

The volume begins with a chronology of Collins's life, followed by Part One, which focuses on his life and work. The chronology is exceedingly detailed: it includes details from his personal life, the dates for his publications, his theatre work and productions, serializations, and important publication dates of some of his contemporaries that are mentioned in this book. Perhaps the most important work of the chronology is that it helps the readers visualize how prolific a writer Collins was: one cannot help but be astounded by the sheer volume of his work. Part 1 consists of nine essays, each dedicated to a different aspect of Collins. The first essay of the volume, *Life* by Melisa Klimaszewski, does a good job of building

*PhD Student, Dept of Literature, University of California, San Diego
ORCID# 0000-0002-5131-0418; oozkuzey@ucsd.edu; <https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss>
CUJHSS (ISSN 1309-6761) Special Issue Jan 2024, 92-94. Received Oct 20, 2023; Accepted Nov 27, 2023
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) 2024 © The Author(s)

up on what Baker and Nemesvari have mentioned in the preface: the highlights of the essay include Collins's rather unorthodox romantic life, and Klimazewski's finishing lines on his legacy. Her focus on Collins as a path-breaking author who has influenced today's fiction in all forms allows the reader to form an enhanced connection with his work and humanizes him by taking his daily life and relationships out of the dusty pages of history. The rest of Part I is almost strictly focused on Collins's work. *Letters*, written by William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Graham Law, and Paul Lewis, delves into the statistics of the author's correspondences by providing tables of data that include points of interest such as the correspondents and composition by day of the week (p. 17). *Publishers and Editions* by Andrew Gasson again lists Collins's work under different publishers, which Baker and Nemesvari were interested in as they deemed Collins shrewd in his business decisions (p. xix), while *Early Novels* by Christopher Pittard draws an astute early profile of Collins as a novelist, with a particular focus on *Iolani*, *Antonina*, *Basil*, and *Hide and Seek*. *Middle Novels* by Tara MacDonald, on the other hand, focuses on the common features of Collins's 1860s-70s novels: "they all imagine worlds in which sensations move freely and spontaneously between people and spaces" (p. 41). His late novels are written about by Maria K. Bachman, who builds her essay by including short discussions of Collins's novels through the 1880s and beyond. The final chapters of Part I focus on his shorter stories, journalism, and drama. In the section of *Shorter Fiction* Graham Law purposefully avoids using the terms "short story" or "novella" as they only became associated with their current meanings late in the century (p. 60). Rather than presenting only a list, Law discusses Collins's work in context, including details from the stories in order to construct a theme-based analysis as well, concluding that Collins's shorter fiction is best seen as a balance between his preferred elements and the constraints of dominant publishing forms (p. 67). Collins' work in journalism, presented by Deborah Wayne, seems to have declined after having established himself as a leading novelist, while regarding his drama, the relationship between his career and realism in the visual arts and literature is highlighted by Caroline Radcliffe, ending Part I of the volume. The second and third parts of the volume are the shortest, being about the critical response and afterlife of Collins's work, and literary contexts correspondingly. Part II, through chapters ten to fifteen, includes an account of the critical response to, and adaptations of Collins's work from his death to the contemporary period, and is written by James Aaron Green, Richard Nemesvari, Tim Dolin, and Lucy Dougan, Alexis Weedon, and Jessica Cox. While short, Part II still presents a very detailed compilation of the scholarship regarding Collins, and allows the reader to better acknowledge his possible impact on a modern audience, and his "spectral presence" (p. 144) in the neo-Victorian movement. Written by William Baker, Catherine Delafield, Richard Nemesvari, Lizhen Chen, Emily Bell, and Jeanette Roberts Shumaker, the scope of Part III ranges from Wilkie Collins's own library to his sensational fiction, to his relationships with Dickens and other writers. Baker's account of Collins's library allows insights into the sources of the author's strengths as a novelist, and his possible inspirations, while Delafield gives a detailed account of Collins's serialized work. Exploring Collins as the novelist who invented Sensation (p. 168), Nemesvari tracks the development of sensation fiction and refuses to constrict Collins into it. His relationships with other authors are brought into light by Chen, Bell, and Shumaker, allowing the reader of this volume an almost complete account of Collins's life and correspondences regarding his contemporaries. Finally, as the largest section of the volume, Part IV includes the cultural and social context for Collins's life and work. *Money* by Paul Lewis tracks the author's finances meticulously, trying to account for his earnings, spendings, financial management and more. *Gender* by Tamara S. Wagner, in a complete change of topic, focuses on Collins's relationship with, and representation of, the concept mentioned. His writing is said to be challenging gender norms, although not to a great

extent, and his rejection of prescriptive gender attributes is a testament to the number of different discourses regarding gender in Collins's time (p. 218). Furthermore, Collins also found inspiration in scientific and medical discourses, as testified by Laurence Talairach (p. 227), and his novels are enriched by his interest in the presentation and reproduction of the documents that make up the story (p. 236), as Melissa Raines mentions in *Language*. The rest of Part IV, and the volume, is separated into chapters on art, politics and law, spatial elements, class, disability, and ethics. In *Collins and the Artists* and *Music*, Leonee Ormond and Allan W. Atlas respectively draw a picture of Collins in relation to the artistic community, and the reader is allowed to appreciate his multifaceted persona as an artist of multiple mediums, within the Victorian context. The inclusion of the political context by Patricia Cove sheds light on some of Collins's literary decisions regarding his plots, though the author cannot confidently say that Collins himself had revolutionary or radical ideas, as these are overlooked in sensation fiction (p. 260). Law is an important plot element for Collins's work, as introduced by Anne-Marie Beller. Perhaps stemming from his own life, laws relating to irregular marriages and illegitimate children are of concern and critique to him. His experience of different places and people, resulting from his many travels, are said to have enabled him to have a lasting legacy, Susan R. Hanes concludes at the end of *Geography and Places*, and Mark Frost's *Victorian Environments* sketches out Collins's approach to nature in his work, giving the necessary contexts to the reader of the volume. Collins's engagement with both urban and rural landscapes gives insights into his unique approach to cultural landscapes, Frost states (p. 290). As for his engagement with the concept of race, Klimaszewski states that Collins addresses race and empire in often complicated and at times contradictory ways, which goes along with the aspects of Romantic and Victorian culture (p. 297). His approach to class and social identity seems to be unsure, in Jenny Bourne Taylor's exploration, as he both accommodates and scrutinizes, the colonial legacy of the empire and the class norms of the Victorian society, in different novels. The impact of social attitudes can be seen in the reaction to Collins's inclusion of disabled characters too, Heather Tilley says, as the visibility of disability in his novels resulted in critique and has been seen as a defect of writing (p. 315). Finally, the volume ends with a short essay on Collins's ethics, written by Biwu Shang, who concludes that "Wilkie Collins asserts the [...] importance of maintaining ethical order and the [...] consequences of [...] misplaced ethical identities" (p. 323).

Overall, the many chapters and parts of *Wilkie Collins in Context* make an invaluable contribution to the current scholarship of Collins, especially by including an extensive context regarding Collins in the same place as knowledge of his life and critical reception of his work. Pursuing Collins scholarship from as many angles as possible, *Wilkie Collins in Context* becomes an impeccably researched and stitched-together tome of Collins scholarship, enriching both existing studies on Wilkie Collins and inspiring future ones.