

Foreign devils and funny foreigners: approaching the woman in white



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The *Woman in White*, with its many twists and cliffhangers, reflects the turmoil of Victorian England, which was becoming a multicultural society. London's hosting of the 1851 World Fair, a lavish affair hosted in a massive "Crystal Palace", reflected both this transformation and England's pride in its important place on the world stage. Yet the growing waves of immigrants arriving in England also provoked fear and tension; caricatures in the then-popular magazine *Punch* reflect the fear of competition for jobs and of foreign thieves. In his novel, Collins represents attitudes towards Italian immigration through the characters of Fosco and Pesca. The two men embody a variety of Victorian stereotypes of Italians specifically and foreigners generally: Fosco is both the suave charmer and Machiavellian poisoner; Pesca is simultaneously an irremediably foreign buffoon and member of a dangerous political society. By giving these two characters personalities based around often-conflicting stereotypes, Collins gives them more depth than a number of his British characters; by seemingly pandering to his audience's clichés, he subverts them, giving the presumed "funny foreigner" or "foreign devil" archetypes nuance and credibility.

Collins makes Pesca and Fosco Italian characters, allowing him to cover a variety of the often-conflicting stereotypes the British had about foreigners. In the 19th century, the *Risorgimento*, a political and social movement attempting to create a unified Italy, resulted in the political exile of many. Pesca represents these refugees, a number of which came to Britain, welcomed with both disdain and fascination. Annemarie McAllister explains that

“Italians inhabited a particularly contested cultural area. They were dashing revolutionaries, winning their liberty, they were the inheritors of Rome, they were sensuous, exciting, musical, handsome, and therefore represented a threat to the self-esteem of the Englishman. So other strands of discourse about them were necessary—the bourgeoisie could constitute Italy as a place of peasants, whose much-vaunted cultural superiority stood revealed as a sham—a degenerate animal-like race who used music as a weapon for blackmail and legitimized crime.” (180)

The Hartright family's treatment of Pesca reflects these contrasting attitudes; elderly Mrs. Hartright is rejuvenated by his presence, and delights in his antics – to her, Pesca is the archetype of the “Funny foreigner”, whose mannerisms and unfamiliarity with British culture are a great source of amusement. By contrast, Walter's sister struggles to accept Pesca's “un-Britishness”, which offends her sense of propriety. Collins condemns the latter feeling through Walter, who wonders whether “[we are], in these modern days, just the least trifle in the world too well brought up?” (Collins 14). As the reader's main “guide” throughout the novel, Walter appears trustworthy and likeable. Collins' choice to give him these sentiments gives them particular weight, as he has established himself as something of a hero by rescuing a drowning Pesca – and yet is also a likeable, ordinary young man. This use of average British characters to praise tolerance and open-mindedness shows Collins' desire for his message to be heard; for instance, Mrs. Michelson's plea to benevolence towards foreigners is easy to relate to for Collins' Victorian readers, because she herself is a comfortingly familiar figure: a clergyman's widow, respectable and very ordinarily British.

This argument for more understanding of foreigners does not initially seem very radical, as Mrs. Michelson speaks in pious terms of the need for “ a feeling of humane indulgence for foreigners. They do not possess our blessings and advantages;” (Collins 362). Yet this form of close-mindedness, as well as Mrs. Hartright’s limiting Pesca to an amusing distraction, are subtly mocked by Collins. Mrs. Michelson is well-meaning but easily fooled character, letting Fosco charm her immediately. Collins even appears to mock her, when it is revealed that Fosco, whom she praised as a “ most considerate nobleman”, is probably not a real count, and details how he took advantage of her “ simple confidence” (Collins 601). Mrs. Hartright is equally blind, in another way – Walter comments that she believes Laura is a madwoman tricking him, and she abandons them, unlike Pesca. Pesca overthrows the image she has of him when he reveals his affiliations with a secret society, in which he has a high rank. Fosco and Pesca are not helpless foreigners in a strange country – Fosco speaks English with more ease than most British, and Pesca has great responsibilities in the English branch of his organization; Collins makes clear that they do not deserve pity or suspicion based on their foreignness.

It may seem ironic that Pesca escapes the stereotype of the foolish, funny foreigner by representing another one, that of the revolutionary Italian, part of a mafia-like secret society. These real-life organizations, such as the Carbonari, doubtlessly added to the Victorian idea of Italians as “ dashing revolutionaries” invoked by McAllister. Yet Pesca and Fosco subvert this stereotype. Fosco is an elderly, obese man with almost childish mannerisms, and Pesca is almost a dwarf; neither could truly be described as “ dashing”,

despite Fosco's enormous charm. Collins presents a balanced, realistic view of Italy, a country that he traveled to and appears to have been fond of – according to Mariaconcetta Costantini, he “felt a strong attraction for the culture of the Mediterranean country, which he strove to represent from a realistic, unbiased perspective” (Costantini 13). He acknowledges the political reality of secret societies, and creates characters well-anchored in these realities, but rather than pander to his audience's imagination of handsome revolutionaries fighting in the streets, he reminds them that people are full of surprises – including foreigners, and that Italy's politics are more complex than we understand.

Pesca and Fosco have been established as characters that surpass the stereotypes concerning their nationality; yet Collins goes beyond using them as devices to prove his point, and makes them central figures both in the plot. It is Pesca, the short Italian who speaks broken English, who starts and ends the action of the novel, first by securing Walter his position as Laura's drawing-master, then by becoming the key to Fosco's undoing. That he becomes Walter and Laura's son's godfather is a testimony to his crucial role in the book – more than just an amusing friend, he gains a place of honor in the family, along with the very British Mr. Gilmore, an indication from Collins that foreigner and British have equal weight in his novel; he radically makes the godfather of the aristocratic Earl of Limmeridge an Italian member of a secret political organization, who admits to having led a tempestuous life. Furthermore, by choosing to make Pesca the instrument of Fosco's unraveling, Collins shows that what Walter could not accomplish alone, he can do with Pesca, who remained his steadfast friend when he went into

hiding with Laura and Marian, more so than his own family. He even states that “ his honour and his courage were to be implicitly relied on” (Collins 565), attributing to Pesca qualities that were considered quintessentially British. As further proof of Walter -and, by extension, Collins’ - regard for Pesca, his confession of his link to the Count is in Italian. Walter reveals he himself “ learnt to read and understand his native language...in the earlier days of our intimate companionship” (Collins 574) For once, Pesca is not struggling to speak English; it is Walter, the British hero, who is adapting to a foreign language he learned from his friend. The revelations that follow are crucial to Walter’s victory over the Count, and to the novel’s resolution – and they are translated from Italian. Collins makes it clear that foreignness has its place in the heroes’ fight for justice; here, success comes from collaboration with a political rebel from another culture, rather than from a British representative of law and order like Mr. Kyrle or Mr. Gilchrist.

Fosco also has more depth than just being the “ wicked foreigner”. He defies that role by proving to have a real philosophy behind his actions, and by being much more capable of thought than the very British villain, Sir Percival. Fosco plans the switch of Laura and Anne Catherick, rather than be a simple sidekick to Percival. Marian, whose judgment the readers trust, warns Walter that “...if you are obliged to spare one of them, don’t let it be the Count” (Collins 448), indicating that he is the real threat. Fosco, for all his melodramatic theatrics, is also one of the most nuanced characters in the novel. He excels at chemistry, and uses it to create poisons; yet he also correctly identifies Marian’s typhus, and is willing to use his talent to save her, despite being her enemy. His attraction to her also reveals an inner

turmoil – he is clearly capable of deep feelings, even when they impede his plans. The force of his personality is best shown by Marian’s attraction to him in return – she admits he is one of the few men that could have “tamed” her completely. Fosco further shows the genuine depth of his character by his discussion with Marian, in which he argues “I have met, in my time, with so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled, in my old age, to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong” (Collins 234). By giving Fosco a voice to argue his position – and, later, allowing him to narrate the story – Collins points out the narrow-mindedness of the British, and the ability of foreigners to express their own ideas and live by their own values. It is especially significant that Pesca later echoes Fosco’s words, passionately telling Walter to “Leave the refugee alone! Laugh at him, distrust him, open your eyes in wonder at that secret self which smoulders in him...but judge us not!...the long luxury of your own freedom has made you incapable of doing us justice now.”(Collins 575). While readers may not be convinced by the villainous Fosco’s argument for moral relativism, they must be more affected by Pesca’s impassioned plea, in which he attacks the attitudes toward foreigners that have been present throughout the novel. He and Fosco are on opposite sides, one a villain, the other a protagonist, yet they express the same sentiment, forcing readers to wonder whether this is a frustration shared by many foreigners; Collins uses these two very different men as a plea not to judge what is different and unknown. Both Fosco and Pesca defy the readers’ initial judgments by proving to be conflicted characters with real backstories, feelings, and ability to argue their cause – in this way, they are given more life than British characters such as Laura and Mr. Fairlie.

It is interesting to note that Mrs. Rubelle and Louis, the other two foreign characters in the novel, have no voices. Collins lets a count and a respectable teacher of aristocratic women express their frustrations as refugees and outsiders, but the working class foreigners must remain silent – even more so than British servants, such as Mr. Michelson, who at least get a narrative. With this choice, Collins may be reflecting a certain attitude of his era – that the British were willing to accept upper-class, “civilized” foreigners, such as the dashing revolutionaries described by Annemarie McAllister, but not ordinary, unexciting people – the “peasants” she describes as being looked down upon by the English.

Collins’ main denunciation in *The Woman in White* is of marriage, specifically the way it robs a woman of her identity and rights. Yet he includes a call to his readers to review their treatment of foreigners, by creating foreign characters that seem to comply with the stereotypes of their nationalities – until they subvert them and reveal the full extent of their nuance and depth. Collins gives Laura no voice, the better to denounce her treatment; Fosco and Pesca, however, are rich characters, given unique voices to speak in the defense of what is different and unfamiliar to Victorian England.

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