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# "Telling the Story Second-Hand": Victorian Sensation Fiction and the Pre-History of the Spoiler

2019 arguably represents the high-water mark of the spoiler. That year saw the culmination of both HBO's fantasy series Game of Thrones (US 2011–2019, Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss) and Marvel's superhero "Infinity Saga" in Avengers: Endgame (US 2019, Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo): two globally popular franchises that had dominated television and film for nearly and over a decade, respectively. The long, well-publicized buildups to their releases saw feverish discussion about all facets of the spoiler, that is, "premature and undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude" (Johnson and Rosenbaum 1069), which is assumed to negatively impact audiences' enjoyment. Online guides advised on how to live "spoiler free" or else satirically denied the possibility, while offline, the situation was even more fraught. Most notorious was the case of the moviegoer physically assaulted for announcing the conclusion to Endgame outside a cinema in Hong Kong (Ivie). If the perpetrators had evidently broken the law, those sympathetic to their actions could cite as extenuating circumstances the victim's breach of a *moral* imperative. Had Disney not implored fans #DontSpoilTheEndGame (Radulovic)? The spoiler had well and truly arrived as a ubiquitous and fraught fixture of the global media consciousness.

Although it received somewhat less fanfare, admittedly, 2019 was also the year in which I submitted my PhD thesis on Victorian sensation fiction, and in the course of re-reading novels that had once captured the attention of the British reading public in the 1860s and beyond, I could not help but think that these conversations about the spoiler—its origins, what it said about contemporary society, and so on—were suffering from a distinct lack of historical consciousness. Nearly exclusively, they perpetuated a sense that the spoiler was a uniquely twenty-first-century phenomenon, arising from the instantaneous transmissibility and accessibility of plot information via the internet; the creation of extended, serialized franchises released to global audiences almost simultaneously; and the infantile, hyper-capitalist habits of consumers who, once told of plot details in advance, saw either less or no value in that piece of media. Perhaps it was not the films themselves but their audiences that were *spoiled* (Robbins; St. James). In scholarship, at least,

Richard Greene was directing focus as far back as Agatha Christie's West End play *The Mousetrap*, which since its opening in 1952 has famously implored audiences not to reveal its twist ending. Yet, while I could see the obvious precedent here for the "modern conception of the spoiler" (Greene), I was at the same time reading an appeal by the English novelist Wilkie Collins, in which he asked critics to refrain from revealing the plot details of his latest, best-selling novel *The Woman in White* (1860). The request was, naturally, framed in different language and received under very different cultural assumptions than those operating in the 1950s, let alone today. That being said, *here*, I thought, in the 1860s' response to the sensation novel, were the first meditations on spoiler culture as we would recognize it today.

This chapter delves further into that moment, as well as others before and after the release of *The Woman in White*, in order to offer a pre-history of the spoiler, and to excavate the origins of what has become arguably the most ubiquitous and controversial figure in popular media discourse. Recovering such moments helps uncover a great deal about the conditions necessary for the spoiler to achieve such prominence, the practices of media consumption and reviewing both then and now, and the reasons why the spoiler can foster such polarizing responses.

## The Chain and the Veil: Collins Challenges the Critics

Precursors to the Victorian sensation novel had entertained British readers during the 1850s and even before. But Collins's *The Woman in White* was the example—alongside Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)—that crystallized the "new school in fiction" in the minds of readers and critics alike, leading to the label of "sensation fiction" afterward becoming more widely understood and used (Beller 7). Like others of its kind, *The Woman in White* is a tightly-plotted novel hinging upon a central mystery that is only gradually revealed. The identities of the eponymous "woman" and of the antagonist Sir Percival Glyde, as well as the nature of the scheme meditated by Glyde and his villainous co-conspirator Count Fosco, are interlinked secrets not fully disclosed until the novel's later parts. Integral to the fostering of suspense was its original serialization in Charles Dickens's literary magazine *All the Year Round*, which meant practically that from November 1859 to August 1860 readers were forced to wait at least a week at a time to read the latest installment. The temporal character of the original reading experience was hence more akin to that of the television or radio serial than to that of novel-reading nowadays, when nothing prevents

a novel's consumption in a single sitting. To help ensure the retention of its considerable readership, Collins made frequent and pioneering use of what we would now term "cliffhangers" for many of the instalments' endings: the protagonists are left in a dangerous or dramatic situation whose outcome is highly uncertain. Jointly, these characteristics produced a reading experience that was intensely social, and which ran at a fever pitch, where breathless speculation by readers occupied the interval between each new release (Allen 34–35).

But the novel's reception was complicated by what was to become customary for serial fiction thereafter: its republication in the dominant novel format of the day, the so-called "three-volume edition" (Allen 42). This brought the opportunity to attract new readers, not least because it occasioned the critics to belatedly review the novel in its entirety. But it also a presented a potential dilemma for Collins: what was to be the experience of this "new class of readers" (Collins, "Preface" vii) who were about to have key parts of the all-important plot spoiled by critics? (It was standard practice in this era for reviewers to use their permissive word counts to provide a comprehensive synopsis.) His concern prompted him to conclude his Preface to the three-volume edition with a highly unusual appeal. In the event of its "being reviewed," Collins writes (with faux modesty):

> I venture to ask whether it is possible to praise the writer, or to blame him, without opening the proceedings by telling his story at second-hand? […] No small portion of this space [the novel] is occupied by hundreds of little 'connecting links,' […] of the utmost importance. If the critic tells the story *with* these, can he do it in his allotted page, or column, as the case may be? If he tells it *without* these, is he doing a fellow-labourer in another form of Art, the justice which writers owe to one another? […] lastly, if he tells it at all, […] is he doing a service to the reader, by destroying, beforehand, two main elements in the attraction of all stories—the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise? ("Preface" viii; original emphasis)

Despite being written for a very specific purpose, the Preface illuminates Collins's ideas about the purpose of his fiction more generally, as well as the landscape of mid-century criticism. That he couches the request in such cautious and flattering language (he elsewhere writes that his "questions" are of the "most harmless and innocent kind" ["Preface" viii]) suggests that the writer was only too aware of the novelty of his request. The use of metaphor substantiates the same point. Collins attempts to familiarize the strange by likening the novelist's work to that of the expert craftsperson: the critic cannot hope to reproduce the same effect without using the same materials in the same way; and even if they managed to somehow do so, it would only be

to rob the story of what makes it compelling. Intriguingly, Collins appeals to both tradition and novelty as he talks around the concept of spoiling. The qualities present in *The Woman in White* are, to his mind, timeless aspects of "all stories"; it is only the fact that he has worked them up to such an unprecedented degree that make this intervention necessary. Preventing the premature disclosure of plot is therefore crucial, because his novel relies to an unusual extent upon the plot being revealed in pre-planned ways that arouse feelings of curiosity, surprise, and excitement.

In fact, though Collins's request was extraordinary, it was motivated by the critics' previous treatment of his writing as far back as nearly ten years prior. In 1852, Collins published his second novel *Basil: A Story of Modern Life,* one of the prototypes for sensation fiction. Unlike *The Woman in White*, the novel is not structured by a central mystery. The antagonist's identity is revealed relatively early, shifting the focus to *how* he plans to revenge himself upon the protagonist. That said, the sequence of events—the plot—remains a chief attraction, and the cultivation of suspense becomes especially pronounced as the novel nears its climax. The critics recognized such a quality when they reviewed *Basil* at the start of 1853. The popular periodical the *Dublin University Magazine* summarized many of the events depicted in the novel, but it stopped short of those that form the conclusion; "over this part of the story," their reviewer writes, "we must drop a veil" (78). The use of the veil metaphor, like that of the chain, signals an attempt to familiarize readers with an original concept. Readers readily understood the veil's ability to conceal the face and yet also to heighten the anticipation of it being revealed, and so it was with this partial description of plot. Frustratingly for our purposes, the reviewer declines to specify the reasons for their partial synopsizing, but a sense of it can be gained by looking at a review of another of Collins's novels, *Hide and Seek* (1854). This novel, much like those before and after it, is structured by the suspenseful unfolding of plot. In this case, Geraldine Jewsbury, writing for the literary magazine *The Athenaeum*, offers only scant details on the events depicted in the novel and concludes her piece with the tantalizing remark that "we will not spoil the reader's interest in the book by developing the story." To that end, she refuses to "extract" passages from it (that is, to provide excerpts), suggesting instead that readers get their hands upon the work directly (775). By using the term "develop," Jewsbury implies that there is an acceptable degree of detail to which critics can discuss plot, enabling them to recognize a book's virtues while not risking its enjoyment by its would-be readers.

It was not these experiences that conditioned Collins's appeal for the critics' silence, however, but those of the opposite nature; the tendency to avoid summarizing the plot in its entirety was far from universal. The example of Collins's later novel *The Dead Secret* (1857) illustrates the point perfectly. This was, again, reviewed in the *Athenaeum*, but by someone else. Unlike Jewsbury, Horace St John's review roams across all the major plot points. Moreover, in case readers ascribed this to a casual oversight on his part—perhaps with an eye to the precedent set by his colleague—he goes out of his way to explicitly dismiss that idea. St John prefaces his piece with the claim that "no injustice will be done to Mr. Collins if we trace the outline of his story [*The Dead Secret*] before estimating its qualities as a work of art" (788). By the use of the words "trace" and "outline," we see once more, just as in Jewsbury's review, the navigation of an issue that continues to dog reviewing culture to this day: *to what extent* can plot details be explicated before they constitute a spoiler? For this reviewer, it is the *quality* rather than quantity of his disclosures that makes them acceptable. Readers may learn about all the events of the novel, including those contained in the conclusion, but the lack of specificity and detail means that readers' enjoyment will not suffer for it. It is therefore clear that St. John's review is marked by more than a touch of self-consciousness around this question of what to cover and to omit; though he does "spoil" the novel, according to a modern understanding, he is also aware of the ruinous effects that such premature disclosure might have on the reading experience and, therefore, on its creator. It is only by believing that there will be no "injustice" committed that St John gives himself the license to proceed as he does.

The treatment of *The Dead Secret* by another contemporary reviewer is revealing for distinct reasons that I will revisit later. *The Saturday Review*'s piece on the novel also discloses the plot, but it justifies the decision on alternate grounds: "as the secret is plainly discernible in the very opening of the book, the interest of the story hangs not upon the nature of the secret, but upon the mode in which it is discovered" ("Review of *The Dead Secret*," 188). For this reviewer, it is not the premature disclosure of plot details per se that risks readers' interest, but the revelation of those not easily guessed at: those that create suspense when they are withheld from readers and whose later reveal elicits surprise. This instance tallies with what Vera Tobin describes as the "well-made surprise." She outlines its characteristics as follows:

> The tradition of the well-made surprise asks, has this revelation been built on an expertly crafted foundation? It places highest value on the satisfactions that come

> from the sense that the plot is a finely-constructed mechanism, a well-oiled trap, […] the surprise should be not merely unexpected but also revelatory. (Tobin 2)

The well-made surprise is, to my mind, an underappreciated precondition for the spoiler. That is to say, for a plot development to qualify as a spoiler, it must be deliberately and carefully built towards during the narrative, so that any knowledge of it before the fact creates a new perspective as regards the content that comes before it—and one not intended by the work's creator (implicitly, then, a *lesser* experience). Tobin expands upon this point, with reference to people's aversion to spoilers, by noting that "they want to avoid a premature and underwhelming transformative experience, so that they can experience the best possible version of the transformative experience a given work has to offer" (282). Not every plot development is capable of producing such an effect, and this is the argument of the *Saturday Review*'s piece on Collins's *The Dead Secret*. The secret is not of a revelatory sort, and the novel is not structured by guiding readers to its eventual reveal; hence, the premature disclosure of it has no potential to negatively impact the reading experience. Like St John's contribution to the *Athenaeum*, this review does not refrain from divulging all plot details, and it shares with that piece an awareness for how the critics' work may jeopardize the enjoyment of a novel heavily reliant on plot.

Those are some of the contexts that motivated Collins to request that reviewers refrain from disclosing key aspects of *The Woman in White*. But what was the reaction of the critics? The first thing to remark upon is how many of the reviews explicitly mention the request, in a further indication of how unusual it was. Perhaps surprising, therefore, is the extent to which Collins's appeal was obliged. *The Morning Advertiser* deemed it reasonable and accordingly refrained from discussing plot details in its review (3). *The Critic* likewise acknowledged that there "is certainly much reason in his request." They explained through an extended (and fairly macabre) metaphor that to do otherwise than honor it would be akin to rearing a child for many months, only to strip it of all interest and exhibit its skeleton (233). Significantly, the same review also goes on to recognize the great difficulty readers will face in trying to predict the end for a certain character in the novel (233). Implicitly, the magazine thereby corroborates the thinking behind the earlier *Saturday Review* piece on *The Dead Secret*. The novel is seen to contain, to use Tobin's terminology, a "well-made surprise"—one that is revelatory and carefully built towards during the novel, and one that therefore *deserves* to be kept from readers until the designated moment of disclosure, lest the suspense and surprise of *The Woman in White* be ruined. That

same publication, the *Saturday Review*, also complied with Collins's request, despite their contrasting treatment of the earlier novel. They explained their reasoning as follows: "on the present occasion it would be unnecessary, and perhaps unfair to the story, considering its nature, to analyze it in detail" ("Review of *The Woman in White,*" *Saturday Review* 250). The statement is clearly of a kind with those reviews of the author's earlier works (with their concern for "spoil[ing]" the effect and the "injustice" of disclosure), and it is intriguing for its recognition that there is something unprecedented about *The Woman in White* that justifies deviation from standard reviewing procedure.

Collins's conversion of the critics was far from total, however. For instance, even as the *Critic* accepted and understood the request, they settled upon a compromise that would enable them to carry on with the task at hand. With wry acknowledgment of the potential upset to readers, they venture that an "occasional hint" and "dark allusion" to the plot of *The Woman in White* would be permissible ("Review of *The Woman in White,*" *Critic* 233). Once more, therefore, we see the navigation of that fine line between a review offering so much substance as to risk the reader's enjoyment of its subject, and so little as to obstruct the purpose of the critic. *The Guardian* was among the other publications to accept Collins's request, and they justified it on the same grounds of the reading experience: "to betray the plot to those who are yet ignorant of it would be to take the edge from their enjoyment" ("Review of *The Woman in White,*" *Guardian* 780). Like their fellow publication the *Saturday Review*, they observe that there is something particular about the development of plot in Collins's new novel that necessitates a change: "such a story, in which the gradual involving and unrolling of events constitutes the chief interest, would be obviously spoiled by the knowledge of a meagre outline" (780). In stark contrast to St John's *Athenaeum* review of *The Dead Secret*, therefore, the *Guardian* contends that offering even just an "outline" of the plot—perhaps *especially* just an outline—would be unjust. Affirming Collins's own analogy of the storyteller and the master craftsperson, the critic can only hope to create a poor imitation of the work under review. In lieu of a synopsis, the paper's critiques center instead on isolated incidents within the novel and generalized observations, including the consistency of motivations and characterization (780). The typical format of the mid-century review is thereby reworked in response to the demands of the plot-heavy, suspenseful narrative. More intriguing still, however, is the *Guardian*'s subtle change of subject; whereas Jewsbury wrote of the "reader's interest" being spoiled, here it is the novel itself that is threatened with the same. This is not quite the explication of "the spoiler" itself as an independent entity within media

discourse, but it is not far from it. Even admitting this, if we consider these reviews of *The Woman in White* and Collins's earlier novels *Basil, Hide and Seek*, and *The Dead Secret*, we find a careful consideration by critics of the same issues tackled in the reviewing culture of today. Critics must be attentive to their audience and the nature of the work being considered, including the particular plot developments it contains (are they revelatory or are they easily guessed at?), and adjust their practices accordingly.

## The "How" or the "What"? Braddon and the Later Legacy

If not a full-scale trend, Collins's request did at least prompt further imitations, and seems to have left a minor legacy in the reviewing culture of the 1860s. His fellow writer and founder of sensation fiction, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, subsequently achieved huge success with her second novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which, as the title suggests, much depends on the suspenseful unfolding of hidden plot developments. But it was her next novel, *Henry Dunbar: The Story of an Outcast* (1864), that prompted Braddon to re-iterate the stance taken by her contemporary. Even more than her earlier work, *Henry Dunbar* is structured around readers' ignorance of a case of false identity that is perpetrated within the early part of the novel, but which is not revealed until the conclusion. In the Preface to the three-volume edition, Braddon therefore makes the following request:

> The author [...] has to make the same appeal to the critics which has been made by an eminent novelist on a previous occasion: [...] not to describe the plot. The story [...] pretends to be nothing more than a story, the revealment of which is calculated to weaken the interest of the general reader, for whose amusement the tale is written. ("Preface" v)

The "eminent novelist" being none other than Collins, Braddon tries to leverage his precedent of four years prior to give extra weight to her own demands; there is a fledgling tradition in the making. Her case relies on quite a different rhetorical strategy than its predecessor, however. Whereas the dominant view of fiction's purpose at this time emphasized its didactic role —its capacity to benefit readers morally and intellectually—Braddon situates her own work within an alternate tradition of pure storytelling, one that she deprecates as unpretentious. By using self-effacement and citing an alternative literary barometer by which to judge the work, Braddon tries to propose that customary reviewing practices ought to again be suspended as they had been for *The Woman in White*.

In contrast to the generally warm reception of Collins's appeal, however, Braddon's seems to have been received more skeptically. The literary magazine *The Examiner* acknowledged her request, for instance, but refused to adhere to it. Their reasons relate less to the nature of the ask, though, than to what they perceive as *Henry Dunbar*'s failure to provide the "well-made" surprise that would justify the break from tradition. With echoes of the *Saturday Review*'s 1857 piece on *The Dead Secret*, they judge that the central mystery is actually "manifest from the beginning"; hence, there is no merit in keeping it hidden from readers at the cost of being able to properly evaluate the novel's merits. Their criticism goes beyond the particular case, however, and into a more far-reaching commentary on the spoiler-free review (to use an anachronism). How, they ask, is a novel's plot to be "at the same time concealed and criticised" ("Review of *Henry Dunbar,*" *Examiner* 404). Whereas prior reviewers of *The Woman in White*—including in their own publication, it should be recalled—opted to adapt their writing to meet the unprecedented character of that novel, here the *Saturday Review* stridently defends standard practice. In their eyes, generous synopsizing and discussions of plot are necessary to the critics' work and must be retained above all other considerations.

The *Sixpenny Magazine*, in which Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* had debuted two years prior, viewed the point differently. Its reviewer observes firstly the consistency with which the writer treats the "paramount incident" found in each of her novels: "the great secret is constantly before the reader, and yet he is constantly self-deluded" ("Review of *Henry Dunbar,*" *Sixpenny Magazine* 84). In other words, the solution teases predictability, only to repeatedly prove otherwise. In terms that closely echo Collins's chain metaphor, the critic notes that each sentence in her fiction is purposefully crafted to advance the narrative and to link one part to the other until the conclusion (84). For this reviewer, such careful planning—the effect of which is to create a riveting narrative—means that the simplicity of *Henry Dunbar* in terms of its plot and the central mystery is not the decisive point. Such a character requires that the critic take extra care in how they discuss the novel, since "almost one word would unravel it" (84). The *Sixpenny Magazine*'s reviewer declines to be the one to do so and encourages their counterparts likewise:

> It is not for us to utter that word, and we should think that the appeal which Miss Braddon on this point makes in her brief preface will be generally respected by those into whose hands these volumes may fall for critical review. (84)

The job of the critic is not to risk readers' enjoyment by unpicking the links carefully crafted by the writer. Taking this case alongside those aforementioned, we see that even as spoiler-free reviewing practices start to become more conspicuous by the mid-1860s, it remains at the discretion of individual critics as to whether or not this nascent custom is followed. The inconsistencies between the *Saturday Review* cases demonstrate, in addition, that editorial oversight did not create any kind of unanimity on the question either. Rather, to provide a "spoiler" as it would be understood today was to pass judgment on the quality of a suspenseful novel: if a critic revealed a novel's secrets, it was an indication that those secrets were not "well-made" and therefore revealing them did not risk ruining the reading experience.

*The Times*, in its review of *Henry Dunbar*, justified their own refusal to adhere to Braddon's request on two counts. First, the secret is not "well-made." Second, the intention of the request is misplaced. The pleasures of novel-reading, so they argue, do not depend on "ignorance" of a story's conclusion. Readers are more intrigued by the *how* of the mystery than the what: "Miss Braddon labours under an extraordinary delusion if she imagines either that the fact upon which the story hinges is unknown to her readers, or that if known it must tar the interest of the novel" ("Review of *Henry Dunbar*," *Times* 4). Such a perspective challenges the very concept of the spoiler, since it disputes whether the premature disclosure of plot details can negatively impact the reading experience. For this reviewer, there are other, *worthier*, pleasures than a suspenseful wait for a surprising discovery.

Such a question of whether it is better to experience media with or without foreknowledge remains contentious in the present day, in circles both popular and academic. The *Times* review anticipates the direction of, for instance, psychological studies that have proposed that knowing plot details in advance may increase pleasurable tension and be akin to perceptual fluency (Leavitt and Christenfeld 1152).[1] By removing the mental burden of trying to anticipate surprises, the reader (and nowadays also the viewer, listener, and player) is free to focus on the formal qualities of the work. And by knowing what is going to happen, they experience exciting anticipation over how the event will be handled by characters; this would seem related to the effects of dramatic irony. Based on the example of the *Times* review and others, we see that Braddon's appeal and the discussion that ensued around the spoiling of *Henry Dunbar* prompted a deeper consideration over issues such as where the enjoy-

1 For an overview of empirical research on spoilers, see Judith Rosenbaum's chapter.

ment of reading novels originated and the role of the critic—topics of ongoing relevance and contention in the present.

Unsurprisingly, given how unsettled they remain today, the issues raised by Collins's and Braddon's appeals provoked diverse responses in the decades that followed. In its review of Herman Ludolph Prior's suggestively titled sensation novel *Behind the Veil* (1871), for example, the *Saturday Review* confesses to finding suspense unpleasant and preferring to know plot developments in advance. But they admit that they are not in the "majority of novel-readers" who, in their words, "value a story the more highly the more they are hurried through it by their anxiety to discover the end" (Review of "*Behind the Veil*" 316). The reviewer revisits the previous point about the relative merits of reading spoiled or unspoiled by observing that this headlong rush toward discovery inhibits readers from attending to either the "development of character" or the "minor details" of plot (317). Working like a tidal wave through the novel, all else besides the primary incidents is swept aside in the reader's haste. This diatribe against the reading practices of those who consume sensation novels forms the precursor to this reviewer's total spoiling of the novel: "enter[ing] rather more minutely into the plot" of *Behind the Veil* (317), they disclose among other things the dramatic death of the antagonist as well as the ending; little of consequence is spared from their synopsizing tendencies. *The Saturday Review* critic hence recognizes audience antipathy to spoilers, but they neither sympathize with it nor respect it. The premature disclosure of plot becomes, in their hands, almost a means of punishing reading practices they regard as infantile. The role of the reviewer, at least in this case, is reimagined as an act of resistance: spoiling is a cudgel by which they can in some way rectify the fallen state of novel-reading. Needless to say, this was far from the only perspective on the subject.

Fifteen years later, the reaction to George Manville Fenn's sensation novel *Double Cunning: The Tale of a Transparent Mystery* was completely different. *The Graphic* recognized that the nature of the work demanded they avoid the disclosure of plot to the utmost degree: "We shall avoid spoiling the effect by giving the least hint of its plot, the interest of which depends altogether upon the reader's coming to it with complete freshness and openness of mind" ("New Novels"). For this reviewer, reiterating earlier statements that include Collins's own appeal in 1860, even a faint indication of plot is enough to fatally jeopardize the reading experience and to constitute an injustice to the novel. A comparison between the opposite approaches taken by these later reviewers indicates how much critics' responses to the issues implicated by the spoiler were still highly idiosyncratic. There was nothing to indicate to the

periodical's reader—and would-be reader of the novel under review—whether they would find plot details disclosed entirely or, alternatively, a polite veil drawn over them.

Taken together, the examples discussed in this chapter reveal the conditions necessary for the idea of "spoiling" to crystallize in the popular consciousness, as well as the results of this formation. A particular confluence of narrative style and form, method of distribution, and publishing landscape was key: sensation fiction's elevation of suspenseful plotting to the chief attraction, combined with serialization and the re-issuing of the novel in a volume format, occurring in a reviewing culture that typically elaborated aspects of plot. The debate that followed Collins's appeal—and Braddon's invocation of that appeal four years later—shows how "the spoiler" inflected such crucial questions as the source of pleasure when reading fiction, the purpose and practice of criticism, and what readers, reviewers, and writers owed to one another. Nothing like a consensus is apparent on any of these issues; the days of an editorial policy on something like a "spoiler alert" were still in the distant future. But we do gain glimpses of common feeling shared among the critics, as well as between them and the novelists.

Bearing these contexts in mind, the novelty of the feverish debates over the spoiler that took place in 2019 becomes clearer. In certain respects, the appeal made by the co-directors of Avengers: Endgame to avoid spoilers is a resolutely twenty-first-century phenomenon: disseminated instantly to global audiences across the internet; responded to and shared by those same audiences via social media; and supported by a multi-billion-dollar media conglomerate in the form of Disney. None of this applies to the responses that came before and after Wilkie Collins's appeal in 1860. In the interim, concern about the spoiling of a novel or readers' enjoyment has morphed into the present-day concern for spoilers as independent entities that are both paratext and *part of the text* (Mecklenberg 55); to see this change unfold requires us to consider the twentieth century. But in sentiment, and in several other ways, the Russo Brothers' appeal is directly continuous with those issued by Collins and Braddon. Separated by 150 years, their requests are united by an appreciation for how the enjoyment of media can rely upon the pleasures of a suspenseful narrative and a "well-made surprise": pleasures that are all too easily risked by the disclosure of plot details in a public forum.

Recovering this pre-history enables us to disentangle the spoiler and spoiler culture from the twenty-first-century media landscape, and see it as emergent whenever plot is made the major attraction of a work; whenever seriality and multi-format releases stretch or partition the experience of a

work; and whenever a "collective audience" (Mecklenberg 63) is built around the consumption of a work, often on the basis of sharing a fleeting moment in time. It is worth emphasizing that Collins, Braddon, and the Russo Brothers made their respective pitches to protect audiences in their particular historical moment. They were not speaking to future readers or viewers, but to those either experiencing or imminently due to experience their works at the time of writing. Given this, I would venture that the spoiler says less about the peculiarities and pathologies of present-day audiences than it does about a deeper (more profound and more longstanding) desire for connection and community: something increasingly realized through the consumption of media and the fandoms that emerge from it. If that is so, then we come closer to understanding, though not condoning, why people should feel so provoked—even to the point of physical violence—by the airing of spoilers.

## Filmography

Avengers: Endgame. Director: Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. US 2019.

Game of Thrones. Creator: David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. US 2011–2019.

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