Beyond bigamy: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's attempts to challenge and change expectations of the middle class Victorian woman

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BEYOND BIGAMY: MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON’S
ATTEMPTS TO CHALLENGE AND CHANGE
EXPECTATIONS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS VICTORIAN WOMAN

By

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Abstract

The novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon reflect a revolutionary perspective on woman’s role in society, and although the novels are enjoyable to read, their female characters convey a caution to women readers through their refusal to accept gender-coded expectations placed on them by male-dominated Victorian society. The need for Braddon’s fictional characters to act a certain part is an abiding theme in many of her books, and she often wrote about women who had to don a mask or act fraudulently in order to fit into the roles society expected of them. Robert Lee Wolff, her primary biographer notes, “[Braddon] suffered at the hands of Victorian society and loathed its hypocrisies and cruelties. These she taught herself to satirize so skillfully that her readers need not see her doing it. Even friendly critics failed to note that she was experimenting, innovating, developing, improving, changing” (8). Braddon’s sensational texts deserve to be studied for the rebellion they reflect; these novels asked crucial questions and projected ideals that challenged the Victorian status quo with respect to woman’s place in society. The fact that Braddon’s books were in high demand suggests that her writing spoke to her predominantly female readers who were not entirely happy with their lot in life and modeled for them means to push against the boundaries of narrowly acceptable conduct in Victorian society. An analysis of her work also invites us to focus on her search for woman’s voice; oftentimes, Victorian patriarchy silenced that voice, but the struggle of Braddon’s female characters as they rebel against silencing constitutes the center of many of her stories.
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The novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon reflect a revolutionary perspective of woman’s role in society, and while they are enjoyable to read, their female characters also convey a message to women readers from Braddon through their refusal to accept the gender coding and expectations placed on them in their male-dominated Victorian society. The need for Braddon’s fictional characters to act a certain part is an abiding theme in many of her books, and she often wrote about women who had to don a mask or act fraudulently in order to fit into society’s expected roles for women. Robert Lee Wolff, her primary biographer, notes, “She suffered at the hands of Victorian society and loathed its hypocrisies and cruelties. These she taught herself to satirize so skillfully that her readers need not see her doing it. Even friendly critics failed to note that she was experimenting, innovating, developing, improving, changing” (8). Braddon’s sensational texts deserve to be studied for the rebellion they reflect; there is no doubt that these novels asked crucial questions and projected powerful ideals that challenged the status quo with respect to woman’s place in society. The fact that Braddon’s books were in high demand suggests that her writing spoke to her predominantly female readers who were not entirely happy with their lot in life and modeled for them means to push against the boundaries of what was narrowly acceptable in Victorian society. An analysis of her work also invites us to focus on the search for woman’s voice, in spite of the Victorian patriarchy’s attempt to silence that voice.
It is important to understand the ways in which the Victorian middle-class woman was idealized, and one of the most popular immortalizations of her was the role of an idealized angel that emerged from Coventry Patmore’s poem, “The Angel of the House” (1854). According to Jeanne Peterson, in the narrowest sense the angel was the one near to God, the pious one who kept the family on the Christian path. In secular terms the angel provided the home environment that promoted her husband and children’s well-being in the world; she also provided a haven from its worst pressures through her sound household management and sweetness of temperament. The latter meaning suggests the angel’s domesticity, unworldliness, asexuality, innocence, even helplessness in matters outside the domestic sphere. (677)

Although conception of “woman as angel” was not limited to this time period alone, in the mid-Victorian era, by her nature woman was thought to require care and guidance provided by her male guardians in their role as father, brother, or husband. The ideal applied specifically to the middle and upper classes, yet for each socioeconomic situation in which a woman found herself, there were rules and guidelines to be followed. Braddon has, to some extent, been excluded from literary history, yet a study of her work is an opportunity to explore the ways in which she pushed the boundaries of the acceptable for Victorian women, rejecting many aspects of Patmore’s mythological angel. Many times, women acted the role of “the angel of the house” by adopting a mask that allowed them to fit in, for the characteristics of the angel were not inherent in women’s nature; at other times, however, the Victorian woman had to act for survival. Because of woman’s limited role in society, while appearing to achieve “the angel of the house” status, many of
Braddon’s fictional women do so in a fraudulent manner because this is not their natural state.

Braddon’s first two novels, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), are generally regarded as her most popular books, and both are sensational novels; by contrast, both *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864) and *The Lady’s Mile* (1866) were attempts by Braddon to distance herself from her reputation as a strictly sensational writer by publishing intentionally literary works such as these two novels. In this dissertation, I examine these four novels and explore their near-dialogic nature. When examined together, the reader is able to see that these four novels reveal the rebellious nature of Braddon and her characters. My particular fascination with *The Doctor’s Wife* is that in it Braddon creates a character who is a male sensational writer who voices literary and social concerns that Braddon herself advanced and thus provides her a voice through which to speak directly to her critics; this character appears again in *The Lady’s Mile*, where he elaborates on ideas first introduced in *The Doctor’s Wife*. Braddon’s fictional sensational author provides commentary, some tongue in cheek, some serious, on the role of the sensational author in society, while also examining the readers’ expectations of sensational literature, exploring gender expectations within these texts, and analyzing the intrinsic struggle of the sensational author to provide the public with work that will sell while also attempting to create good literature. Additionally, in *The Lady’s Mile* Braddon creates her most outspoken and revolutionary female characters and uses them to challenge the Victorian ideal of woman and agitate for change in popular attitudes towards women. Each of these four novels critiqued a society that fit women into a limited and limiting mold and challenged this society to embrace change.
As Braddon deconstructs the formation of the Victorian woman’s identity, her novels express significant challenges to the expected and accepted nature of the Victorian woman by calling into question the concept of the “true woman” in Victorian society. “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues---piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Welter 152). Braddon subtly challenged, while appearing to support, the idea of “the angel of the house” or the “true woman.” Most male critics, and some female critics, were not impressed by Braddon’s writing and damned her for focusing too much on bigamy, murder, fraud and for threatening the status quo, yet her books were always in high demand. She also refused to have her characters take on the mantle of “the angel of the house” without also using them to explore the demon (of the house), the opposite side of the idealized Victorian woman; in fact, quite often her characters will assume the role of angel while also acting far outside of behavior that was deemed acceptable for the Victorian woman.

In any discussion of Braddon’s novels, it is crucial to understand the sensational genre and her particular relationship to it. The sensational genre marked an era of change for Victorian readers, and while Wilkie Collins, the author of the *The Woman in White* (1860), was credited with being the first sensational novelist, current critics treat Braddon as a founding mother of the genre. “The sensational novel possessed a number of traits, and the prototypical sensation novel is preoccupied with materialism, spectacle, and the rise of the working class—all phenomena significant to the Victorian age” (Montwieler 48). *Lady Audley’s Secret* is considered to be the first mainstream sensational novel; both *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* were considered to be Braddon’s “bigamy
novels,” and they are credited with establishing the new genre. As did most sensational writers, Braddon grappled with an enormous range of issues that related to societal expectations of women; as Jennifer Carnell notes in *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, “Not only were [her] sensation novels perceived to be challenging the position of women, but also the whole order of society” (156).

Patrick Brantlinger examines what made sensational novels different from the dark Gothic romances that came before them and detective stories that followed, while also exploring certain inescapable similarities among the genre. Brantlinger first places the sensational novel in its historical setting, which is in the 1860’s “context of Gothic and domestic realism in fiction, the powerful influence of Dickens, stage melodrama, ‘sensationalist’ journalism, and bigamy trials and divorce law reform” (2). He considers it impossible to dissect completely the sensational genre, for aspects of earlier and later genres are implicit in it, even though the sensational genre inspired a far stronger negative reaction to Gothic romances and detective stories among those who feared its popularity indicated that Victorian society was in a slow state of dissolution.

Brantlinger explores the ways in which the sensational novel is connected to the past as well as the present: this “perspective involves isolating those structural features of the sensation novel genre that, in [Jacques] Derrida’s terms, represent its peculiar mark or marks, even while recognizing that such features may partially characterize some other genres as well” (2). While critics of the sensational novel prefer to see clear lines of division between sensational writing and that of the realists, Brantlinger, using Derrida, points out that there are shared characteristics between the two. For instance, sensational novelists and realists reflected on what was being reported in newspapers. Newspapers
carried stories of sensational crimes, yet the sensational novel bore the brunt of
conservative critics’ displeasure with their reportage on everyday life in Victorian
England; critics argued that the mere act of reading sensational novels would undermine
the moral thread of Victorian society. Indeed, sensational novels threatened the structure
of the society, especially in regard to gender expectations. The sensational Victorian
novel was seen as inferior to the more “realistic” novels of George Eliot, Charles
Dickens, and others, and yet sensational novels contained aspects of other genres as well.

In *The Private Rod*, Marlene Tromp explores the perceived differences between
sensational writers and the more literarily accepted realistic writers; according to Tromp,
realism often was the ground on which Dickens, Trollope, and Eliot were praised
and sensation fiction writers condemned. The complexly entangled notions of
gender, class, and imperialism, particularly as they were conceived of as realistic
or sensational, inflected the shifting discourses governing marriage, the domestic
space, and notions of violence and erected the seemingly firm boundaries between
the realist and sensational. (10)

While Eliot’s work is considered canonical, Braddon’s is not, and if we neglect to study
Braddon we lose a series of feminist writings that are ripe for exploration in the modern
day. In her preface to *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels in the 1860’s*, Winifred
Hughes describes the difference between a Dickens novel and a sensational novel, while
also noting similarities between the two:

Like Dickens, the sensation novelists insinuated elements of crime and mystery
into the lives of ordinary, respectable middle-class characters. Like Dickens, they
shamelessly exploited the familiar stereotypes of popular melodrama, in particular
the central confrontation between heroine and villain, which tended to focus all the implications of the universal moral conflict between good and evil on the single issue of a heroine’s chastity. Unlike Dickens, however, the sensation novelists revised the traditional significance of this confrontation, replacing the original moral certainty with moral ambiguity. (ix)

This moral ambiguity was met with disapproval and distrust by many critics, and despite the sensational novel’s connection to and difference from previous genres, the sensational novel was seen as a direct challenge to society.

Although Braddon has never been included in the Victorian canon, many Victorian writers who seem to have always been canonized greatly admired her work. According to Wolff, writers from Dickens, to Thackeray and Stevenson, to Henry James all respected and enjoyed Braddon’s work; he also notes that in 1894 Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to Braddon from Samoa: “I remember reading Lady Audley’s Secret when I was fifteen, and I wish my days to be bound each to each by Miss Braddon’s novels. . . . It is something to be out and away greater than Scott, Shakespeare, and Homer, in the South Seas, and to that you have attained”’ (9). Commenting on Braddon’s contemporary fame, Wolff states, “In 1901 she was known not only—as Arnold Bennett wrote—throughout the English speaking world, to people who knew not Hardy or Barrie, but also to Hardy and Barrie themselves, both of whom—like Dickens and Thackeray, Bulwer and Reade, Stevenson, Tennyson, Henry James, and George Moore, Ford Madox Ford, and Bennett himself—esteemed her novels highly” (15).

Conservative critics believed sensational writing exposed its predominantly female readers to violence and crime about which they otherwise would not know.
Tromp’s work explores why sensational novels have been marginalized and the extent to which their marginalization is a function of their having been written by women for women (with the major exception of Collins’s *The Woman in White*). Perhaps it is the nature of the sensational novel that questioned, challenged, or brought to the forefront the changes that were occurring in Victorian society that many did not want to face, for in so doing, the tenets of society were called into question and the hypocrisy of the reality of life in contrast to the theoretical aspects of society was revealed. Examining how the sensational novel chipped away at societal expectations that appeared foundational in Victorian society, Tromp observes that they tapped into ideological anxieties and contradictions, exposing and often exploding what seemed to be the real limits of discursive possibility. Deriving authorization for transgression from their classification in the literary taxonomy, and read by critics such as Henry Longeville Mansel and W. Fraser Rae, these novels betrayed literary as well as social and cultural, standards that had hitherto appeared firm.

(71)

Natalie Schroeder asserts that, “by rejecting the prudish moral tone that characterized the popular fiction of the 1850’s and by devouring novels filled with crime, passion, and sensuality, Victorian women readers began in the 1860’s to rebel against the establishment” (“Feminine Sensationalist” 1). Jan Davis Schipper’s *In Becoming Frauds* explores the sensational novel as an attack on the expected societal role of women and shows how women assumed a fraudulent role in order to meet society’s expectations. It is clear that the sensational novel had an emotional impact on the reading public, and while
they were enjoyed by many readers, they were also perceived by conservative critics as
dangerous to the existing social structure.

Tromp also explores the economic impact of sensational novels, pointing out that
even though they were often decried by critics, these novels were actually best sellers that
appealed to the general public. The appearance of the sensational novel coincided with
drastic advances in the general public’s access to written materials. A change in the way
that paper was taxed gave more people access to newspapers and other printed material
than formerly and had a positive impact on the sale of Braddon’s stories. Yet as readers
had increased access to the sensational in newspapers and fiction, critics and politicians
feared the impact such access might have on the infrastructure of society. P. D. Edwards,
in his introduction to *Aurora Floyd*, notes that:

> After the abolition of the stamp duty on paper in 1865 the circulation of
newspapers grew exponentially, and they became cheap enough to be afforded by
many working-class people, who were thus enabled to read circumstantial
accounts of the misdeeds of their social betters, and magnify their iniquities, with
the same freedom as the middle class had always enjoyed in reading about theirs.
In so far as the sensation novel circulated similar material, it too might contribute
to social insubordination, and to general loss of faith in the stability of the social
system. (ix)

According to Edwards, some of Braddon’s reviewers “saw some disturbing social
implications in the apparently insatiable public appetite for sensation” (x). This
confluence of change allowed Braddon to write stories that were accessed by increasing
numbers of readers, carrying the threat of a more far-reaching transformation of society.
As Schroeder and Schroeder note, “sensation fiction itself was both symptom and evidence of widening fissures in the Victorian domestic ideal, and it defiantly challenged patriarchal hegemony” (Sensation to Society 16).

As Braddon gained recognition predominantly as a popular sensational writer, she struggled between producing novels that would sell and novels that would be respected as good writing. Her books were immensely popular with the public, yet she tried to distance herself from merely being a sensational novelist. Known primarily for Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd (her “bigamy novels”), Braddon was a prolific writer who produced roughly eighty-three works of literature, including plays, poetry, and novels. Conflicted over producing work that would allow her to survive and work that was considered to be good literature, Braddon said, “I am always divided between a noble desire to attain something like excellence—and a very ignoble wish to earn plenty of money” (Wolff 165). This division plagued Braddon throughout her life.

Braddon’s sensational novels and more literary novels appear to uphold the Victorian moral code and beliefs, yet they also reject them; her subtle feminist rebellion against what society believes women should do and be is the legacy for which Braddon deserves to be remembered. It is important to explore her early sensational novels as well as the novels that followed them in order to see the progression of how she simultaneously supported and rejected mainstream opinions. Many readers saw Lady Audley, perhaps the most notorious of Braddon’s characters, as a threat to the order of the middle-class universe; instead of being a morally refined person, Lucy Audley commits deceit, fraud, and murder to achieve her goals. The conservative critics had much to say about Braddon’s books; writing for the North British Review, W. Fraser Rae
made clear his distaste for the sensational novels by talking specifically about *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*: “From a lady novelist we naturally expect to have portraits of women which shall not be wholly true to nature. . . . Lady Audley is as fantastic a sketch as that of any of the male characters. . . . Aurora Floyd is equally wanting in the traits which constitute a true woman” (189). Rae’s implication here is that only a male writer could adequately capture the true nature of a woman, and despite Braddon’s gender, she is considered to be incapable of creating an accurate sketch of woman’s nature. H. L. Mansel also damn the sensational novel for piquing the public’s interest without providing its readers access to good literature. “No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of his work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply; no more immortality is dreamed of for it than the fashions of the current season” (212). In this passage Mansel disparages the sensational novel for catering to the public’s desire to be titillated by literature that will come and go as fashion does for the season. He does not even take into account the female sensation writers, and while this attack, coupled with others, “constituted an agonizing episode in her life” according to Wolff (188), this does not prevent Braddon from creating female characters that ultimately challenged the status quo and the alleged nature of a true woman in order to protest the perceived natural order in Victorian England. As a result, novels such as *Lady Audley’s Secret* met with substantial hostility. Jan Davis Schipper notes that, “Although sensation novelists encountered hostile reviews because of their tendency to applaud unconventional women, the novels exploited the public’s interest in women’s issues and articulated a number of anxieties about changing gender roles. . . . For the first time, an
entire genre focused on women and women’s concerns, suggesting a growing trend that challenged preconceived notions about women” (7).

Reading Braddon’s works, one is able to examine the conflicts surrounding gender coding and expectations that occurred during the mid-Victorian era. Braddon was not content to let her female characters fall prey to the expectations of the patriarchal society; she recognized the power of this society, and in her novels she created characters that challenged the power dynamic. She created characters who in their day appeared to be subversive revolutionaries, yet her novels were still acceptable enough to be sought after by the general public. Braddon understood what she could get away with and what she could not, pushing the boundary of the acceptable in incredibly insightful ways. Although many of her female characters are ultimately unsuccessful in overthrowing the status quo and often punished for their behavior in ways that are destructive to either their persons or their minds—or both, Braddon’s women defy societal expectations, and to the extent that they succeed, their success is found in their commitment to and endurance of the struggle itself.

Whenever Braddon’s women venture too far outside of what is acceptable in Victorian society, they are deemed mad. To be “mad” in a Braddon novel often means that the female character is acting in ways that are so far from the norm that there is no other way to categorize her actions. “The only effective way for masculine interests to overcome her subversion of their authority is to render her unseen, that is, invisible” (Sensation to Society 51), or mad. Once they are deemed mad, such women are isolated, silenced, hidden away in asylums, or coerced into accepting aspects of the society that they formerly attempted to reject.
Braddon rebelled not only in her fiction but also in her life; she, too, rebelled against the society in which she was living in order to reveal a much deeper truth about the disparity between the respective positions of men and women in Victorian society.

Braddon struggled with the issues of survival and patronage in her life, just as many of her characters struggle to support themselves or literally to find themselves in an environment dominated by a strong and controlling male influence. Like her fictional characters who could not defy society without ultimately facing some form of punishment, Braddon could not work too far outside of what was socially acceptable if she wanted to sell her novels, yet she managed to sell her novels, in serialized and in book form to both the lower and middle classes. Of the few Victorian woman writers who became well known, Braddon’s personal life played some part in her notoriety. Wolff writes of the connection between her life and her work:

Braddon’s adventures and the thousands of pages of fiction that she wrote illuminate each other. Neither is understandable without the other. Looked at together, they help us recreate the lost age of the Victorians and the Edwardians as a time for a woman to be alive. The standards and behavior of a departed society, the life of the theatre, the inside of the novel-writing industry, what it cost a woman to defy sexual conventions, the conflict between money-making and artistic integrity, the brutality of hostile critics, the delicious fruits of success: all these are brought to life once more in her experience and in her prose. Our exploration of social history and of literary criticism, our biographical, detective work revives the complex character of a talented and sophisticated woman. (3)
Braddon’s own life did not exactly mirror that of “the angel of the house,” nor was her defiance of Victorian patriarchy limited to her fiction.

Although many of Braddon’s female characters grow up without strong mother figures, she was the daughter of a mother who made her own way in life. Examining Braddon’s early life, Jennifer Carnell finds Franny Braddon—Mary Elizabeth’s mother—a woman who was not content to accept the restrictions placed on her by society and who was a ghost-writer for her husband’s sports column. Fanny Braddon threw her husband out of their house, a rather bold move, because he was a philanderer who did not support his family, and this left her on her own to support her family. Mary Elizabeth sought to help her mother by becoming an actress in order to secure money for them. At this time, women in the theater were considered the equivalent of prostitutes. Braddon took a stage name, and Fanny served as her escort and chaperone in order to protect her reputation. Braddon used the name “Mary Seton” when she was acting, changing back to M. E. Braddon when she was writing novels. And just as she hid her real identity when she was an actress, when she began to write, she decided to hide her gender so that it would not hurt the sales of her writing, defying in her own life, the ideal of the “true woman”.

Braddon’s first writing appeared in the “penny dreadfuls,” as they were commonly called; writing sensational fiction provided her with an outlet that generated more money than she earned through acting. Her fascination with acting is seen in her life as well as in her fiction, where her theatrical experience influenced her writing. For instance, the need for Braddon’s fictional characters to act a certain part is an abiding theme of many of her novels. As Carnell notes in regard to *Aurora Floyd*, “Braddon often wrote of the love men in the audience came to feel for actresses they watched, and who
followed them from engagement to engagement” (106). She adds, “men often want to remove a woman from the stage, but there is not one case of a male character then going on to encourage her to take one of the only careers that could bring a woman fame or notoriety, that of an author” (109). Again, we see a mirroring of the struggles of Braddon’s personal life in those of her fictional characters.

Braddon often wrote about the need for women to act in order to fit the ideal, and though she achieved a portion of the fame she desperately desired, some of the issues she struggled with in her own life eventually became the major themes of her fiction. Braddon fell in love and lived with John Maxwell and his five children while his wife was still alive and purportedly living in an institution; she clearly went against the norm of the Victorian woman by living with a man in an unmarried state, supporting him and his five children by his first wife, and then their own five children. While they were unmarried, Braddon helped to support Maxwell, but had they been married, her money would have gone to pay for his substantial debts. By not initially marrying Maxwell, she was able to retain her financial independence. The fate of Maxwell’s first wife is unclear; recent research contradicts the belief that his wife was placed in an institution. Instead, it is now believed that due to the fact that she was suffering from some form of mental instability, she returned home to live with her family in Ireland. Regardless of where Maxwell first wife was, Braddon and Maxwell were caught in a moral quandary, with allegations of bigamy leveled against them when the truth was revealed that they were not initially married. After Maxwell’s wife died, Braddon married him, but they still were seen as flaunting the moral code of the day.
In her fiction and in her personal life, Braddon rebelled against the Victorian society in which she was living in order to reveal a deeper truth about the disparity in gender coding and expectations. Towards this end, she created seemingly villainous female characters who defied the expectations placed on them. Braddon’s women are unwilling to accept passively the lot that life has assigned to them, and although they are not completely successful in thwarting societal expectations, they try, and in so doing, they create the possibility of a new perspective on gender coding and expectations. Like her fictional characters who could not defy society without ultimately facing some form of punishment, Braddon could not work so far outside of what was socially acceptable if she wanted to sell her novels. The success of her novels owed much to the fact that many of her female characters revealed the hypocrisy that women faced and the double-standard that existed for the Victorian male’s advantage and the Victorian woman’s distinct disadvantage.

In her introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, Elaine Showalter states, “In its earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in class and popular male literature, and the exclusion of women from literary history” (5). Braddon’s attraction for the modern reader is in her relationship to her female readers; the fact that her work was in high demand in her time reveals that women were not necessarily happy with their lot in life. Her books offered them a powerful escape while also subtly challenging some of the tenets of Victorian society. As Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie note in their introduction to *Beyond Sensation: Mary*
Elizabeth Braddon in Context: “For the past several years, Victorian studies have prominently featured the name of Mary Elizabeth Braddon in their programs” (xv). If we neglect to study Braddon and her work, we lose an important piece of feminist history. For this lesson, we need to continue to claim her as a significant writer of the Victorian era. As Jan Davis Schipper notes:

As Braddon’s novels suggested, the ideal woman was, at best, a patriarchal construct and many women forced to fit within its narrow confines, felt compelled to disguise themselves behind fictitious names and secretive pasts. These disruptive female characters subverted the illusion of the feminine ideal by outwardly presenting the contented, submissive, good woman, while underneath their fraudulent disguises lurked women capable of bigamy, deceit, and murder. The effect of this doubleness was that these fraudulent women disrupted the conventional hierarchy, which in turn threatened the established domestic order.

In The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call upon the words of Virginia Woolf, “Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must ‘kill’ the angel in the house” (17). Woolf was writing in 1931, sixteen years after Braddon’s death. While Braddon may not be credited with killing “the angel of the house”, she must certainly be credited with challenging the ideal image, paving the way for Woolf’s admonition that the angel must be killed. Gilbert and Gubar go on to say in regards to contemporary women writers, “they are able to do so only because of their eighteenth and nineteenth-century foremothers [who] struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the
anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture” (51). We owe a great
debt to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and we must study her work in tribute to the feminist
legacy of which she is a part.
Chapter One

*Lady Audley’s Secret*

*Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) was Mary Elizabeth’s Braddon’s first book, and it is one of her most enduring and critically respected novels. Braddon was writing to survive, and yet, in *Lady Audley’s Secret* she created a book that simultaneously defied and supported society’s expectations. In her account of the novel’s print genealogy, Jenny Bourne Taylor notes that the first installment of the story appeared on July 6, 1861 in *Robin Goodfellow*, a weekly magazine that soon folded after just thirteen issues (vii). Braddon abandoned *Lady Audley’s Secret* to begin another tale, *Aurora Floyd*, but because those readers who had already begun reading *Lady Audley’s Secret* wanted the rest of that story, it was “revived in the monthly Sixpenny Magazine” in July 1861 (vii). Published in three volumes in 1862 under the name M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is the tale of a woman with multiple identities who chooses to recreate herself in order to live an economically stable life. This was a story that captivated its contemporary readers but concerned its critics; in her introduction to *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Taylor observes that Braddon’s work “created a huge moral storm” (1). The book brought to the forefront the differing expectations placed on middle-class men and women in the Victorian Era, with Braddon challenging readers to think beyond what is considered to be the norm.

W. Fraser Rae, whose article “Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon” appeared in *North British Review* in 1865, was not one of Braddon’s fans. He is one of the most vocal critics against Braddon as a writer. “Now there is a ‘faction’, which does not think her ‘sensation novels’ the most admirable product of this generation, and considers that,
judged by a purely literary standard, they are unworthy of unqualified commendation. To that ‘faction’ we belong” (181). He goes on to say, “Tested, then, by a purely literary standard, these works must be designated as the least valuable among works of fiction. They glitter on the surface, but the substance is base metal” (203). Rae asserts that the critics go easy on Braddon, praising her for accomplishments he feels she has not earned. He faults her for not creating Robert Audley as a believable character. He also disagrees with the way in which Braddon describes her female characters in terms of their hair, which seems a small fault. But Rae’s major concern with *Lady Audley’s Secret* is directed at the novel’s morality and aesthetics: “The artistic faults of this novel are as grave as the ethical ones. Combined, they render it one of the most noxious books of modern times” (187). Although he grants that Braddon has talents as a writer, Rae does not believe she has adequately developed them. But as a conservative critic, he did not speak for the women from both the lower and middle classes who made Braddon’s work so popular. While today’s critics are more accepting of Braddon, Rae and critics like him seem to have influenced the way in which she is still viewed as a writer; it is from this opinion that she needs to be reclaimed as a significant writer.

Rae’s comment that *Lady Audley’s Secret* is one of the most “noxious books” of its time is revealing. His review of the book is one of the more damning, and the vehemence of his tone discloses a reality of the time: Braddon’s books caused controversy. She had to negotiate her way between selling her writings and building a literary reputation, a negotiation with which she struggled throughout her career. Rae highlights the tension Braddon’s works exposed between a woman’s expected role in society and her actual position; this is the first of her books that deals with the duality of
the “angel of the house” as she struggles with the demon. Of all of her texts, Lady Audley is the character who most clearly embodies the extreme duality between the angel and the demon, and she fiercely challenges the society in which she lives. Braddon continues to write about women’s struggle to reject the ideal, but Lady Audley is her first character to do so and to create such popularity with her reading public and such a backlash from her critics. Rae unflatteringly accuses Braddon of creating in her fiction “principles that appear to us to resemble very strikingly those by which the Thugs used to regulate lives” (202). Yet in looking at Rae’s article from the vantage point of today, Braddon’s work needs to be reclaimed from the conservative critic’s words, for nothing less than their power caused Rae to have such a passionately negative response to her texts. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon, a woman writer, creates a new fictional world in which women do possess power. Her characters may not be as developed as Rae would like, but his article touches on the power that they create because *Lady Audley’s Secret* threatens the existing system. There appears to be fear on Rae’s part, conscious or unconscious, of the threat that a character such as Lady Audley presents to Victorian society; she acts contrary to the ideals that a Victorian woman is supposed to follow and advance, and she is the creation of a woman who does not follow along with the scripted roles either. Rae states in his review, “‘[Braddon] may boast without fear of contradiction, in having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room,’” yet as Taylor responds, such “mingling of very different social groups around a common addiction to sensation . . . worried the critical establishment” (xi-xii).

H. L. Mansel, another conservative critic, damns the sensational novel as he feels it “abounds in incident. As a general rule, it consists of nothing else. Deep knowledge of
human nature, graphic delineations of individual character, vivid representations of the aspects of Nature of the workings of the soul—all the higher features of the creative art—would be a hindrance rather than a help to work of this kind” (486). But, even as he denounces the genre, he attests to the power that Mary Elizabeth Braddon possesses as a writer: “Though both exaggerated specimens of the sensational type [the bigamy novels] are the works of an author of real power” (491).

Despite Rae and Mansel’s damning critiques, *Lady Audley’s Secret* achieved great popular acclaim. The message to women in Braddon’s books that fostered fear of them among conservative critics was the necessity to refuse and rebut the ideal of the Victorian woman. *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* create an alternate way of viewing society, if only for a brief moment. It is for the creation of her fictional female characters, for the way she critiques society, for the way that she lived her life, and for the division between the reception of her work by critics and by her reading public that Braddon deserves to be studied today.

Reading Lady Audley’s character, Rae asserts,

Lady Audley is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel. In drawing her, the authoress may have intended to portray a female Mephistopheles; but if so, she should have known that a woman could not fill such a part. The nerves with which Lady Audley could meet unmoved the friend of the man she had murdered, are the nerves of Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed, and not those of the timid, gentle, innocent creator that Lady Audley is represented as being. (186) Rae believes that a woman cannot fill a powerful part, and yet Braddon creates a character who attempts to do so by envisioning a fictional world in which Lady Audley
can exist. Her lifestyle in the novel is so foreign to the patriarchal Victorian world that Rae cannot fathom her existence, and so he accuses Lady Audley of being unsexed, like Lady Macbeth, and asserts that it is only through her exhibition of male characteristics that she is able to act in the way that she does. Braddon creates an alternate universe in her fictional worlds that threatens the prevailing social structure. Rae compares Lady Audley to a fallen arch-demon and with devilish power, and when he talks about Braddon, he says something similar about her: “She has bewitched so many persons that those who have the misfortune to be blind to her charms have had small chance of being listened to when pronouncing an adverse judgment” (180). Both the character and the author are accused of bewitching those around them, and the supernatural must be invoked because both Braddon’s and Lady Audley’s behavior is so far from what is expected and accepted. Although Rae tags the author’s and the character’s behavior negatively, that behavior nonetheless underscores their power. And there is great male fear of that power, lending credibility to the assertion that this is a feminist text in many ways, and the furor around this text actually reveals the power that it possesses. It is a fictional book written by a woman; both the author and the character are powerful women in a Victorian world that did not value powerful women. In fact, these women frightened the patriarchal world.

We can also find damning critics in the modern day as well. In The ‘Improper’ Feminine Lyn Pykett writes, “Few (if any) of the female sensationalists could be regarded as either feminist or progressive” (5). She goes on to say that sensational fiction is “grounded in women writers’ attempts to find a form, or forms, in which to represent and articulate women’s experience, and women’s aspirations and anxieties, as well as
anxieties about women. They are therefore, particularly fertile ground for feminist investigation” (6). Discussing sensational texts, Pykett has perhaps failed to see the power in Braddon’s novels. *Lady Audley’s Secret* should be interpreted as a feminist and progressive text, for in it Braddon created a female character who embraced both the demon and the angel; she created a character who presented herself as the epitome of the Victorian woman, but the truth revealed was that Lady Lucy Audley was playing a part in order to survive, and this character, who neither fully accepted nor rejected the role of woman, forces the reader to think deeply about Lady Audley as a fictional character who is representing the fate of independent Victorian women. H. L. Mansel condemns her as “some demon in human shape” (489), but this demon, possessing the façade of the aristocratic woman, possesses power.

Although Lucy Audley initially appears to be the epitome of “the angel of the house,” Braddon sets her up as the ultimate contrast to the ideal woman of Coventry Patmore’s well-known poem. As noted in the introduction, Barbara Welter, in her famous article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” explores the ideal woman of the Victorian era and points out, “This ideal of womanhood had essentially four parts—four characteristics any good and proper young woman should cultivate: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness” (2). Even the characterization of “the angel of the house” is a creation of the patriarchal society that determines how femininity is defined and thus proves that there is no fixed definition of what it means to be the perfect Victorian woman. Lucy Audley takes cover under the depiction of the ideal woman in order to hide the fact that she is the antithesis of the ideal. While she is initially portrayed as the villain in the piece, her character possesses depth, and Braddon does not create her
as a profoundly evil character, nor is she ultimately a victim. The truth of her character is richer and more complex. She is a woman caught between societal mandates and gender expectations. Placing Lady Audley in the untenable situation that she finds herself in, Braddon questions societal ideals regarding gender and forces the reader to look beyond the surface of things to witness the reality beneath them. Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie argue in their introduction to *Beyond Sensation*,

> Although many of Braddon’s novels may seem to capitulate to normative Victorian standards or morality in their closing moments, the resistance depicted throughout the novel as a whole provides a form of ‘revelation’ . . . a subversive variety of revision that allows figures like the infamous Lady Audley to confound, and thus, call into question notions of gendered identity and domestic order. (xvii)

Cracking open the “domestic order” to find that things are not what they seem was an important part of Braddon’s sensational novels.

As *Lady Audley’s Secret* opens, we have a description of the beautiful Miss Lucy Graham, who is a governess to a local family when Sir Michael Audley first sees her. While we know little about her history, she is described as “blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile” (*LAS* 12). Lucy possesses the power of fascination and intoxication in terms of the men around her; she can fascinate them as a snake might, or intoxicate them as a strong spirit might. These descriptions establish her as a powerful woman, even if the means by which she attains this power are depicted negatively. As we learn her back-story, we become aware that the power she wields is a result of her excellent acting ability. Lucy is a powerful woman who uses her talents to secure her livelihood; during the course of the
novel she takes on a number of personas in order to survive. She is a radical woman who capitalizes on the expectations of society by embracing the societal ideal on her own terms; she then uses this ideal to further her own goal, which is survival. She does not allow society to impose these attributes on her; rather, she embraces them in order to act her way into a position that she should have been able to attain only by being born into, according to the beliefs of the day. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is a story about a woman who takes her survival into her own hands, and she is successful at it for a period of time. Recognizing the power of the imagery, Braddon plays with the angel and demon figures in her character. Even as Lady Audley’s identity is revealed in the final chapters of the book, exposure does not lessen her power.

Lucy Graham is a governess for a surgeon who is doing one of few socially acceptable jobs for women in order to earn a living, meager as it might be. She appears to be the epitome of the ideal woman described by the narrator as “the sweetest girl that ever lived” (*LAS* 12). But as her story develops, it is clear that she is a woman who takes on a number of identities and masks in order to survive, and in doing so, she challenges what society expects of a middle-class Victorian woman. In fact, she serves as an example that could topple the society’s gender and socio-economic expectations, and therein is the power of Lady Audley’s story.

The second chapter of *Lady Audley’s Secret* begins with George Talboys on a boat from Australia to England in the hopes that he will be reunited with this wife. Lucy Audley’s story begins here. Lucy Audley’s history begins with her as Helen Malden, who originally marries George Talboys, a cavalry officer and the son of a wealthy man, who appears to be a good match for her. From the outset, it is clear that Helen does not have
many options in order to secure her financial independence. She can become a governess, teach piano, or, preferably, marry above her social station. Marriage is one of the most feasible means for a woman to “move up” in society. Helen’s father is the mastermind behind her first marriage, as he wants to see his daughter married to someone who will provide for both of them in a union that will markedly improve her socioeconomic status; he is ready to sell her hand in marriage to the highest bidder, and George is the highest bidder. Initially, this match is thus made for economic reasons, although Helen and George appear to be in love. George sees Helen as the ideal, just as Sir Michael Audley will later on in the novel. George Talboys sees her as a “poor little girl,” a pet, a “little darling” (LAS 23), and Helen is willing to don the mask in order to secure the financial stability that Talboys offers until he is disowned for marrying beneath his station. George regards his wife as childish and innocent; in this respect, Helen validates her husband’s conception of the ideal Victorian wife, though Helen’s father sees her as a pawn to help him gain better economic footing. As she offers her beauty and childish dependence to her husband, and she hopes to bring more financial security to her father, Helen appears to be valued only for what she can deliver to the men in her life. This is the first example we see of Helen grappling with issues of survival; she can be the perfect woman and wife so that George, her social superior, will wed her. But once he weds her, their financial security disappears, and Helen says to her husband, “that he had done her a cruel wrong in making her” (LAS 24) his wife. She is cognizant of the expectations, that she is to be the sweet wife and he is to provide for her, but when he does not honor his end of the bargain, she is forced to look elsewhere to survive. Her decisions are tightly controlled by the men in her life.
Estranged from his father soon after his marriage to Helen, George, with a wife and son, finds himself on the verge of poverty. George then decides to go to Australia to seek his fortune. He takes half of their savings in order to book passage on a ship to Australia, saying he will return when he has the money to support his family. He blithely assumes that Helen will continue to be his innocent and child-like wife, and that she will wait for him until he returns or drowns. As a man, George has the freedom to head to Australia to seek his fortune, but his actions could never be emulated by a woman in the nineteenth century. In ““Mary Elizabeth in Australia,”” Toni Johnson-Woods points out that “when male fictional characters leave domestic confines to either solve the mystery of domestic disharmony or recoup financial losses by exploiting the colonies, they are escaping domesticity in order to experience adventure, the adventure of empire” (114). For George Talboys, leaving his wife and child behind permitted his escape from both “domestic disharmony” with Helen and “financial losses” brought about by his disinheritance. As a male, he feels pressured to recoup his status within the patriarchy, and he has the freedom and the culture’s permission to abandon his family, as long as he is seeking financial security. As Jan Davis Schipper notes, “Conditioned as he is by patriarchal gender coding, Talboys expects his abandoned wife to wait for him indefinitely” (39). He is working within what is acceptable according to his gender coding, while Helen is caught between expectations when her husband leaves for Australia.

Helen does not hear from her husband for over three and a half years. Despite his faith that she will be waiting for him when he returns, she does not have that luxury. She cannot. Helen thus fakes her own death so that she will be free of her first husband, and
she is savvy enough to know that she must erase all traces of her history in order to start a new life. So Helen Malden, who became Helen Talboys, eventually becomes Lucy Graham and then Lady Lucy Audley. In order to survive, Helen Talboys must, like a chameleon, hold onto the expectations of the ideal woman and don the mask of a new identity. She must become what the men around her desire. She recognizes this, but rather than allowing the men to control her life, she rebels and attempts to gain some control in the situation. Despite the fact that she has few options, this is a powerful act of rejection of societal norms, and she refuses to be controlled by her husband or her father.

Braddon does not create Helen Malden, who eventually becomes Lady Lucy Audley, as an evil woman; when one reads closely, the text is full of examples of Helen/Lucy letting the mask of the ideal woman slip in order to reveal her true thoughts and feelings. She is desperate and must figure out what she can do to survive. Her story is one of survival, of life or death, and in order to move forward, she has to be self-serving. To secure her survival, the mask is quickly put in place, and she acclimatizes herself to becoming what the next man in her life seeks in her, just as she had previously done with both her father and her first husband. She is not alone in aspiring to be the ideal woman; the men around her exert pressure on her to do so.

After George’s departure, Helen’s father’s health deteriorates because of drink and age, and she does not have many options in terms of caring for her child. In fact, Helen has few options generally, and yet she must earn a living for her son and her father or she must leave them to strike out on her own as her husband did. Helen tries to stay with her son and father, attempting to make money by giving piano lessons. Later in the novel Robert Audley discovers this information as he is attempting to ascertain Lucy
Audley’s true identity when he visits her old neighborhood and speaks to Mrs. Barkamb, who owned the cottage that Helen formerly lived in with her father:

Indeed! Yes, she left abruptly, poor little woman! She tried to support herself after her husband’s *desertion* by giving music lessons; she was a very brilliant pianist, and succeeded pretty well, I believe. But, I suppose her father took her money from her, and spent it in public houses. However that might be, they had a very serious misunderstanding one night; and the next morning Mrs. Talboys left Wildernsea, leaving her little boy, who was out at nurse in the neighborhood.

(*LAS* 246; emphasis mine)

Thwarted by her father—who spent her earnings to buy liquor—in her attempt to survive, and abandoned by her husband, Helen’s life becomes one great challenge. To survive, she shirks her duties as a mother in violation of an absolute expectation of the ideal middle-class Victorian woman. She walks away from being George’s wife and her son’s mother, the opposite of what the good Victorian woman should do, but in doing so, Helen becomes Braddon’s controversial character who is taking charge of her life after the men in it have taken advantage of her. With this example, Braddon shows her readers the possibility of rejecting the ideal, and this is an extremely powerful realization for them. At this crucial point in the novel Helen recreates herself. Schipper refers to her actions as fraudulent, but they are merely the introduction of masks that Helen comes to wear in order to survive. Helen Malden becomes Lucy Graham in order to create a new life for herself as a governess to a country surgeon. Her life is not grand, but her income is steady, and while such actions are hardly acceptable in Victorian culture, Lucy Graham nonetheless recreates herself into a new person by showing great resolve and courage.
Rejecting the ideal of motherhood and ceasing to be the patient wife waiting for her husband to return home, she embraces the ideal on her own terms and walks away from roles that were thrust upon her.

At times, Helen sends money back home, which casts her as a humane and sympathetic character rather than as a heartless fiend. She keeps a necklace hidden under her clothes; this necklace bears her wedding ring from her first marriage wrapped in paper, which leads the reader to believe that Helen felt a strong tie to her first husband, and again, we feel sympathy for her. Contemplating marriage to Sir Michael Audley, she says, “No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations, every trace of the old life melted away—every clue to identity buried and forgotten—except these, except these” (LAS 17). Here, Braddon creates a character who is willing to resist woman’s most sacred of roles; she is willing to forsake her son so that she can achieve a modicum of happiness for herself, but she is not without strong feelings. Braddon does not create her as a cruel and completely selfish woman; in fact, Helen’s/Lucy’s new position exacts a price from her, for she feels pain over what she has left behind. And, moving up the social ladder, Lucy must embrace and adhere to a new set of societal expectations, which become more and more inflexible, yet as she does so, she challenges societal expectations which, in turn, represent an even greater challenge to the status quo.

When Mrs. Dawson, the surgeon’s wife, first tells her of Sir Michael Audley’s interest in her, Lucy appears surprisingly distraught at the prospect of marriage to him: “I think some people are born to be unlucky, Mrs. Dawson, . . . it would be a great deal too much good fortune for me to become Lady Audley” (LAS 14). Unnerved by the bitterness in Lucy’s voice, Mrs. Dawson replies, “You, unlucky, my dear! I think you’re
the last person who ought to talk like that—you, such a bright and happy creature, that it does everyone good to see you” (14-15). In this passage, which appears early in the novel and foreshadows the future, the bitterness of Helen’s/Lucy’s life is revealed; she is not entirely the happy young woman she appears to be. Perhaps it is only exhaustion she is now voicing at the weight of the masks she has worn and will wear, and she is tired of the extended charade. Yet marriage to Sir Michael Audley would make her financially secure in a way that her previous positions have not allowed. It is clear that she feels ambivalent about the prospect, which reveals that the seemingly happy and carefree Lucy possesses a depth of feeling that she does not openly convey. Lucy is acting in each of the roles that she takes on; while she is able to secure a more stable economic situation with each change of identity, it is hard work for her to do so, and, even if she is successful, there is no guarantee that she will be happy. At the end of the discussion between Mrs. Dawson and Lucy about the latter’s marriage to her social superior, the narrator introduces madness, stating, “Indeed, the simple Dawsons would have thought it something more than madness in a penniless girl to reject such an offer” (LAS 15). Lucy would be deemed mad to pass up this opportunity, yet the idea of madness, like the idea of the ideal Victorian woman, is defined by society. She might be mad to pass up this opportunity, but in fact she will be convicted of being mad at the end of the text for her decision to accept Sir Michael Audley’s offer of marriage.

Ultimately, then, she accepts. Lucy, however, makes it clear that she will have an active role in shaping her future; once she has achieved position, she will settle into the role, but she believes she will be living her life on her own terms. Lucy is not middle class, but she is not poverty stricken, either. She begins in that respectable but lamentable
position of a governess, a position for a woman of little means. She secured the position
by fraudulent means, assuming a new identity and without offering references. Yet
becoming Lady Audley would be another fraudulent act; she would need to become the
ideal wife of Sir Michael Audley, and this is a quite different role from that of the
governess for a family of modest means. Lucy knows that this role will require more
intense acting. Playing the part of Lady Audley will be her most difficult role yet; she
was not born into the position.

When the prosperous aristocrat proposes to her, hoping that she will profess her
love for him, he says, “I scarcely think there is a greater sin, Lucy, than that of a woman
who marries a man she does not love. . . . Nothing but misery can result from a marriage
dictated by any motive but truth and love” (LAS 15). Sir Audley honestly states his mind
here, and he hopes his love will be returned. However, the mask seems to slip and Lucy is
brutally honest with him, despite the fact that he begs her not to say the truth about her
situation. But, Lucy presses on, saying, “You ask too much of me! Remember what my
life has been; only remember that . . . I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the
advantages of such an alliance. I cannot! I cannot!” (LAS 16). Being honest with Sir
Michael in this scene, she does not profess her love for him and tells him honestly why
the alliance will be good for her. In attempting not to lie to him, Braddon shows us
Lucy’s humanity. She is conflicted, but she does not lie about loving him. She gives him
the chance to retract his proposal, but he does not. Lucy knows that this is another role
that she will adopt, and she knows the work that it will involve. But she is also not
immune to the fact that this marriage would give her incredible security in terms of her
financial status, as long as no one knows her true identity. It would seem, given her
position as a mere governess, that she would be thrilled to move up into the aristocracy as Lady Audley. Yet she understands and articulates, in the brief moment when her mask slips, that she will be trading one set of expectations for another, and there has been a high cost for her movement up the socio-economic ladder. In many ways, this will be her biggest role yet; she will have to act the part of an aristocrat, a position that she should have been born into according to society’s mandates. Lucy has the integrity not to lie to him, and Sir Michael accepts her lack of love for him in order to have her as his wife.

After accepting the proposal, her mask slips back into place; she assumes the mantle of becoming Lady Audley, devoted to her husband and happy to let Sir Michael direct her life, as long as she has beautiful trinkets with which to adorn herself. Her husband’s wealth assures Lucy that, as long as her true identity and nature remain secret, she will be financially secure. She becomes what he wants her to become, childish and innocent; she is compensated by the jewels, the gowns, and the furs her husband lavishes on her. In many ways, Lucy appears to see her latest role as a business venture, for there are great economic advantages to this union. She uses her beauty to manipulate the men around her, rather than allowing them to manipulate her. Sir Michael Audley enters this union aware that she does not love him, but his desire for her outweighs his concerns. Lucy is the one in control of this situation, manipulating a wealthy aristocrat, but she does not do so in a heartless and cold fashion; she is honest about what is happening, although her husband does not want to hear this as it interferes with his view of what she is and what she will be: the perfect, beautiful, and child-like wife he desires. Even so, Lady Audley maintains power: “Now, so complete was the dominion which Lady Audley had . . . obtained over her devoted husband, that it was very rarely that the baronet’s eyes
were long removed from his wife’s pretty face” (LAS 58). When Lady Audley wishes to convince her husband not to do something, all she has to do is raise her eyebrows and he understands her disapproval. Her power, however, is confined to what is deemed acceptable behavior according to her new position, and it comes at the cost of her freedom, as she must stay in character at all times.

Lady Audley, who becomes convincing as “the angel of the house” in reality, is also linked to the demon because she is not innately an angel, and she also brings the taint of insanity to the Audley name. She is described in magical terms, so beautiful that she appears to cast spells on the men around her. Sir Michael is described as having “fallen ill to the terrible fever of love” (LAS 13), a description that makes love appear to be a plague. Lucy inhabits a place where the lines separating an angel, a witch, a siren and a demon are not clearly drawn. George Talboys once says of her, “She’s for all the world like one of those what’s-its-names, who got poor old Ulysses into trouble” (LAS 38). George is referring to her as a sort of siren, with the power to lure men to their deaths. Lucy embraces Patmore’s vision of the angel as that is what is required, while also refuting this image to secure a better spot in society; she uses the image to achieve her means; she manipulates the societal view in her favor, but Braddon wants us to realize the difference. Lucy Audley is not an innate angel; it is not her innate nature; in many ways, very few women achieve the ideal put forth for them by the patriarchal society. To become “the angel of the house” is to become an actress, pretending that Nature is a fixed thing rather than a fluid identity. The view that the Victorians have of their angels is quite different from the reality. Nina Auerbach, in The Woman and The Demon, traces the creation of angels in antiquarian texts, and the angels of the past were male, bi-sexual,
and very powerful, so even the angel of the Victorian era was co-opted by patriarchal society and molded into the view that is expressed in Patmore’s poem (71-72). The Victorian angel is submissive, lacks sexual desire, and focuses only on bringing calm and joy to her mate.

Lucy Audley capitalizes on this knowledge as she fashions herself into what she needs to be in order to survive. Once she marries Sir Michael, she discards her original identity as a young mother abandoned by her husband. She puts on the mask of the lady of the house, just as she took on previous roles, and she does this in an extremely compelling manner. At the end of the story, Helen, then known as Lucy, is cast as a demonic character and deemed insane because there is no logical explanation for her actions according to the dominant paradigm. George Talboys, who commits a similar action in leaving his family for over three years ostensibly to earn enough money to keep his wife in style, is not seen as an evil character. He leaves his son and wife, never contacting them to say he is alive and let them know that he will return to them. Arguably, this was a selfish action but it is ultimately deemed acceptable.

Initially portrayed as a lazy and oblivious character, Robert Audley, Sir Michael’s nephew, possesses a law degree but does not practice the law. In many ways, he represents the power of the Victorian male. With an annual income from his father, he does not need to worry about survival; he attended Eaton, and although he is not wealthy, he certainly enjoys a solid standing in society. He neither fears for his survival nor is responsible for providing for anyone else; his birth and last name provide him with a secure future. He is also a foil for Lucy Audley.
When Robert first encounters his uncle’s young wife as she is returning home in a carriage, he seems to fall in love with her. He is then able to gaze longingly at her portrait, a Pre-Raphaelite painting, when he and George go to visit and Lady Audley is not at home. In her absence, Alicia, Sir Michael’s daughter, invites George and Robert Audley into Lucy’s private chambers to look at her portrait. Finding the door locked, Alicia remembers a hidden passage that enters the chambers. By means of power and position Robert and George gain access to Lady Audley’s most private inner chamber; indeed, their gender coding allows them to believe that they are allowed to do this with impunity, and as Braddon describes it, the manner in which they penetrate Lady Audley’s inner chamber is not unlike the description of a rape. They are not invited in, but they feel as though they have a right to gaze upon her. Leading George and Robert into Lucy’s chambers, Alicia is the one, as Elizabeth Langland notes, in her essay about framing women’s bodies, who permits them to penetrate Lucy’s personal space and ultimately reveal her true identity (9). Remarking on the scene in which Alicia leads George and Robert into her lady’s chambers, Pykett observes, “The physical manifestation of the improper feminine—Lady Audley’s body—which has persistently been represented and read as spectacle, is finally represented simply by means of the Pre-Raphaelite painting that had promised to hold up her secrets” (93). This is the moment in which George realizes that his wife is indeed alive and married to another man, under a new name, and it is also the moment in which Robert Audley sees aspects of the fiend in the portrait; there is more to Lady Audley’s character than he at first assumes.

In the novel, Robert’s presence in Lady Audley’s chamber introduces two significant twists, one aesthetic, the other coincidental. On the aesthetic side, the demon
imagery becomes more pronounced when, in awe of Lucy’s beauty, he also detects in her features the “aspect of a beautiful fiend” (LAS 72); on the coincidental side, he is also a close friend of George Talboys, Helen’s/Lucy’s first husband, who, having returned from Australia, believes she has died and is with Robert when he sees the picture of his new aunt; after seeing Lady Audley’s portrait, George suddenly disappears again. Caught between being attracted to his uncle’s wife and his desire to get to the bottom of his friend’s unexpected disappearance, Robert finds a real purpose for his life. His purpose is to find his friend, George, or otherwise learn his fate; however, by pursuing this purpose, Robert also brings about the destruction of Lady Audley. Formerly lazy and oblivious, Robert now becomes a new man; he is focused, driven, and committed to figuring out the mystery of his lost friend. As the novel progresses, Robert Audley is the character who most wants to expose Lucy Audley and see her brought to justice, and he, not her husband, is the one who attempts make her tow the line of societal expectations. Because he values his friendship with George Talboys over what he believes is a fraudulent marriage Lucy has entered into with Sir Michael, Robert’s dual search for Lucy’s identity and his lost friend provokes the crisis that will ironically prove Lucy’s undoing.

According to one critic, Robert Audley seeks to “prove Lady Audley’s madness partly to save his friend and his uncle from scandal, but largely because his notions of the feminine cannot reconcile sane femininity with the criminally duplicitous behaviour of which he intuitively knows Lady Audley to be guilty” (Pykett 94). And yet, Sir Michael freely entered into marriage with his eyes open; Lucy never sought to trick him into marrying her. Robert, however, is unable to see it this way, and he is furious with Lucy for this charade. Confronting Lucy, he says,
“Yes, a conspiracy concocted by an artful woman, who had speculated upon the chances of her husband’s death, and had secured a splendid position at the risk of committing a crime; a bold woman, my lady, who thought to play her comedy out to the end without fear of detection; a wicked woman who did not care what misery she might inflict upon the honest heart of the man she betrayed; but a foolish woman, who looked at life as a game of chance, in which the best player was likely to hold the winning cards, forgetting that there is a Providence above the pitiful speculators, and that wicked secrets are never permitted to remain long hidden.” (LAS 266)

Robert does not necessarily know about Lucy’s honest exchange with Sir Michael before they marry, but neither does he ask his uncle about the circumstances of their engagement and marriage. He merely assumes that Lucy is deceiving his uncle, when the truth is that Sir Michael entered willingly into this marriage because he desired Lucy. True, he did not know that she had been married before, yet Lucy is honest when she tells Sir Michael that she does not love him. But there is no room in Robert’s thought process for Lucy to have been honest with Sir Michael; he assumes she is deceptive to the core. Later in the story, Robert reveals more of his true feelings about women: “Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance” (LAS 222). Upholding the social ideal, Robert finds woman most appealing (and bewitching) when she is performing the most feminine of tasks, serving tea. In this passage, he reveals that he is solidly ensconced as a member of Victorian patriarchal society; he seeks women who fit Patmore’s ideal, and yet, even in this ideal, there is an
element of “witchery.” Casting a spell on men, a pretty woman causes them to be attracted to her; in Robert’s mind, then, Lucy Audley, the apparent angel, is really a scheming witch who seduces men. Robert’s position on women seems to corroborate Auerbach’s woman/demon dichotomy, and there is no way for Lucy—or any other woman—to escape this double bind: in Lucy’s case, she is damned for her ability to deceive, and she is also damned by her inability to achieve financial security by any other means. Hardly a progressive or a subtle figure, Robert exposes his deep-seated misogyny in his own words:

“I hate women,” he thought savagely. “They’re bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at this business of poor George’s! It is all woman’s work from one end to the other. He marries a woman, and his father casts him off, penniless and professionless. He hears of the woman’s death and he breaks his heart—his good, honest, manly heart, worth a million of the treacherous lumps of self-interest and mercenary calculation which beat in women’s breasts. He goes to a woman’s house and he is never seen alive again. And now I find myself driven into a corner by another woman, of whose existence I had never thought until this day.” (LAS 208-209)

In this monologue, Robert reveals his true feelings about women, yet in doing so, he also acknowledges their power. He specifically recognizes Lady Audley’s power, and even though he does not mean this as a compliment to her in any way, it is a testament to her strength. She is not “the angel of the house” and completely helpless; instead she is mighty and ready to defend herself against him. Similar to those of W. Fraser Rae, an actual critic and not a fictional character, Robert’s passionate feelings about women
reflect his fear of their power. Lady Audley, and, in turn, Mary Elizabeth Braddon as the creator of this text, stand as women who threaten the Victorian social order.

Despite the fact that Robert is half in love with his beautiful aunt, and that through her visible actions she appears to be the feminine ideal he seeks, Lucy is claimed by his uncle. In contrast, Alicia Audley, Sir Michael’s daughter who appears to be a tomboy, is attracted to Robert, who is oblivious to her attraction to him. Were he to marry Alicia, he would secure his rights to Audley Court, superseding Lady Audley’s tenure. Alicia does not like Lucy, undoubtedly because it was generally accepted that “Lucy [was] better loved and more admired than the baronet’s daughter” (LAS 55). Alicia, who is represented as a rebellious young woman, does not take on the mantle of genteel womanhood as easily or as well as Lucy, the imposter, does, even though Alicia has been born into the position. This leads the reader to believe that the construct of the Victorian woman is just that: a construct, not an innate reality. Robert is charged with maintaining the status quo or, more precisely, with exposing Lucy Audley so that the societal status quo prevails. He becomes obsessed with this mission, perhaps because he believes his love has been spurned by virtue of his uncle’s marriage; he is also attached to George Talboys, possibly in a homoerotic way, which would be as unacceptable to Victorian society as the aberrant female. Given the remarkable convergence of Robert’s duplicitous character with his decidedly mixed feelings for others, Braddon may intend his palpably masculine meanness toward Lucy, indifference toward Alicia, and attraction to George as a parody of Victorian manliness; if so, she has Robert expose himself and the socially secure men he represents:
“Who would have thought that I could have grown so fond of the fellow, or feel so lonely without him? I’ve a comfortable little fortune in the three per cents; I’m heir presumptive to my uncle’s title; and I know of a certain dear little girl, [Alicia,] who, as I think, would do her best to make me happy; but I declare that I would freely give up all and stand penniless in the world tomorrow, if this mystery could be satisfactorily cleared away, and George Talboys could stand by my side.” (LAS 163)

Sanctioned by society, Robert sets out to destroy Lady Audley, but since Braddon does not develop her as a completely evil character, it is difficult to watch Robert go after her in such a ruthless manner. He does not like women who do not fit into the accepted category of the ideal Victorian woman, yet rather than pursue a woman who conforms to the ideal, he prefers the company of men. Robert ultimately marries George’s sister, who looks exactly like George; his invested interest in revealing Lucy’s true identity will allow him to assume ownership of Audley Court once Sir Michael dies. He could have more easily accomplished this goal by marrying his cousin, Alicia, who is clearly infatuated with him. Braddon’s idea of the text that should be inscribed on Lucy is vastly different from that she inscribes on Robert Audley.

One of Lucy’s most apparent sins against the Victorian norm of the ideal woman is her attempt to kill George Talboys, her first husband, in order to keep her identity secret; she wants to continue as Lady Audley, and yet by George’s existence, she is a bigamist, a figure society cannot countenance. Lucy attempts to murder Talboys in order to preserve her secret, but she fails. The relevance of this is that George, Robert, and Sir Michael possess power that eludes Lady Audley. Men hold power, physical and
economic, and when Lady Audley attempts to overcome her first husband physically, she is not as properly equipped as a man is to succeed. Beyond physical strength, men also have the ability to earn an education, seek employment, achieve financial security, create and enforce laws, and acquire the perfect wife. Writes Auerbach, “Excluded as woman is from ‘normative’ maleness, she seems less an alien than man in the nonhuman range of the universe. Men are less her brothers than is the spectrum of creation’s mutants” (66). Ultimately, Lucy stands so far outside of the relatively narrow boundaries of what is acceptable or possible for a woman that she is committed to an asylum for the rest of her life.

Lyn Pykett’s research is crucial to our appreciation of the threat that Lucy Audley represents to Victorian society. Pykett argues that Lucy becomes a demon because she successfully enacts the role of an aristocratic woman without possessing its requisite characteristics. She becomes a believable lady, not because she is born into the position or because of her innate mental or physical states, but because of her ability to act. And, if Lucy Audley can do this, convincing those around her that she truly is of the highest social standing, then the question is raised, is the entire perspective of the ideal Victorian woman a farce? Is it that “the angel of the house” must hide her inner demon in order to put on a spell-binding show to become “the angel of the house”? Is this entire characterization of the Victorian woman based on a woman’s ability to channel her inner angel while suppressing her inner demon from detection? If so, such willful acting calls into question the entire construction of the ideal Victorian woman, and while doing so also creates grave anxiety for the patriarchy and concern for the very foundation of Victorian society. The threat to society is as real and harsh as the critical reaction to Lady
Audley’s story. Braddon’s novel critiques her society in a subtle and near-subversive way by assigning that society to a text that was worth contemporary critical examination as much as any work by Dickens, Wilkie Collins, or any other highly esteemed author of her time.

In *The Private Rod*, Marlene Tromp maintains that “sensation fiction provided early portraits of resistance to (as well as capitulation to) violence, and that sensational narratives, profoundly popular in a culture often believed to have been silent on these issues, participated in a transformation of the terms of the legal debates and ultimately disrupted the Victorian vision of violence” (8). Tromp focuses on the issue of marital violence, but her argument can be used to support the fact that the sensational novel, and specifically those by Braddon, attempted to thwart societal expectations of women in the economic sense, thereby showing both the difficulties women faced in attempting to escape their societal position and the accepted disparity when Victorian society judged men’s and women’s transgressions. Although Braddon creates a female character who appears to defy societal expectations successfully, in the end Lady Audley capitulates, to borrow a term from Tromp, thereby trapping herself in mainstream expectations because she lacks other options. Her attempt to defy societal expectations is successful until she is forced into an asylum for the rest of her life. The act of her defiance still serves as a blow against the unfair expectations that burdened women. Braddon used *Lady Audley’s Secret* to critique society in a subtle way, yet with a strong feminist undercurrent.

Some readers may see *Lady Audley’s Secret* as a non-feminist text, in that Lady Audley is ultimately punished for her sins. But she still achieves a life that in many ways defies the societal mandates that initially shaped her life. She broke out of these confines
to accept the confines of yet another set of societal expectations, yet she did this on her own terms because she did not want to be a street-walker or starve to death. She opted for a much more exclusive sort of prostitution in that she married a gentleman, whom she did not love, in order to survive. No matter how one views Lady Audley, she is a woman who pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be a woman in her time; put another way, Braddon does create a strong, feminist character in this text.

As mentioned above, Jan Davis Schipper argues that society forces Lucy to become fraudulent in attempting to conform to society’s limited expectations of women. However, Lucy exchanges masks throughout the novel in order to escape one situation for another; she is willing to take on appearances that allow her to move from class to class in order to secure her livelihood within the limited options available to her. She is able to, in a sense, trick society by using the skills that she has; she is not willing to sit back and let her life happen to her. All of her actions are fueled by her need for survival; when her husband abandons her, she must find a way to survive; the image of “the angel of the house” does not take into account the possibility of abandonment and its resultant destitution. In a worst-case scenario, she could become a prostitute to secure her living, but this is a harsh and difficult life. Instead, in a move that is contrary to the ideal woman, Helen Talboys elects to shape her own life. She does not want to be defined in reaction to the men in her life; rather, wanting to assert more control over her identity than she is originally afforded, Helen defies expectations by leaving her father and son to become a governess, where she is paid for her services and not expected to render them for free. She is shrewd and savvy, becoming what the patriarchal society deems she should be, if she were not married, a mother—or a woman. The next role that she embraces is that of
“the angel of the house”, but not because she is born to the position of wealthy aristocrat; instead, she is able to take on this role, in essence to manipulate society’s attempt to control her, in order to secure a position that allows her economic stability. Doing so, she becomes the fraud. But she is also an excellent actress who recognizes what she must do to pass successfully as a lady. Lucy must act in order to survive; she must successfully portray roles in order to live and to find economic security.

While Lucy Audley maintains power at Audley Court, Marlene Tromp argues that one of “the most subversive acts in the novel is Lady Audley’s performance of a gentility formerly articulated as innate. By winning the hearts of a baronet and his community with sheer spectacle, she exposes the qualities of a ‘lady’ as a social construction, not birth” (Private Rod 82). This impacts society, for it was believed that in order to be of the aristocracy, one had to be born into it; thus, the jump that Lucy Graham, governess, makes to Lady Audley, mistress of the Court, is too broad. The fact that George Talboy’s father cut them off once he found out about his son’s marriage to a woman below him in station, underscores the extremity of Lucy’s ability to assume the role of Lady Audley successfully.

As Pykett observes, conforming to society’s expectations, Lucy is to be “the angel of the house” but she refuses to have this gender code forced upon her; instead, she takes on the role in order to better her position in society. For this subtle rejection of the angel, she is depicted as the demon. The angel and the demon are closely linked in figures such as Lucy, and Braddon intentionally played upon how Lucy would have been responded to by contemporary readers. Nina Auerbach writes about the connection between the woman, the angel, and the demon: “The demon that accompanies the woman
of my title [*Woman and the Demon*] exists in the broadest sense: as that disruptive spiritual energy which also engorges the divine. This demon is first of all the woman’s familiar, the source of her ambiguous holiness, but it is also the popular—and demonic—imagination that endowed her with this holiness in defiance of three cherished Victorian institutions: the family, the patriarchal state, and God the Father” (Auerbach 1). Although Braddon’s Lady Audley appears to have achieved the angelic state, in reality, she is literally demonic. The iconography is relevant; analyzing the prevalence and power of the demon in this text, Pykett states, “Lady Audley, like that of some of Braddon’s other heroines, raises the spectre that femininity is itself duplicitous, and that it involved deception and dissembling” (91).

Braddon created Lady Audley and, knowing the severe expectations placed upon her, situated her in a prescribed role within society. Lady Audley’s character reflects that authorial knowledge. She could be seen as a potential murderer, who sought to move up in society dishonestly and, as a result, was imprisoned in an asylum for the rest of her life. But an alternative reading of her situation is that the power Lady Audley holds is not able to be imprisoned within the walls of the asylum of Audley Court or the actual asylum to which the character is confined until her death. Braddon purposely creates this character to attest to the power of woman and acknowledge that the angel image is only an image created to curb her power. Lady Audley is a glorious Victorian woman who perhaps comes closer to reality than sensationalist critics could ever accept. And, in the vehement reaction to *Lady Audley’s Secret*, it is clear that the depth of the reaction serves as an index to the fear that the main character creates because her presence attests to the fact that woman is powerful.
Gender coding is a key component of any discussion of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, for Lucy Audley’s body can be seen as a text upon which society writes its expectations and beliefs. Lady Audley is able to assume the shape and characteristics of the woman she is attempting to be, thus revealing both that the idea of the feminine is open-ended and that the true woman is able to decipher what patriarchal society values and serve it up in a credible fashion. Lucy’s body becomes a template. For example, when she is married to Sir Michael Audley, she adorns herself with furs, beautiful jewelry, and exquisite dresses because as his wife she needs to reflect his wealth and station; at the same time, her position is all established through the clothing and jewels. In *Writing and Sexual Difference*, editor Elizabeth Abel chooses essays that analyze the ways in which, to follow the French feminists, woman’s body serves the text on which society writes its mandates. Woman is not the sculptor or writer, but she is the text, the canvas, on which society’s rules are inscribed. While there are no specific essays about Braddon in this compilation, much of what is included can be directly applied to her work. When a woman author is writing from within a system, it is difficult for her to find the language to write outside of the paradigm. Drawing from the work of Luce Irigaray, Abel says,

The question of the woman writer (and the feminist critic) can express her difference only through a posture critical of prevailing discourse. Since she has no alternative to discourse, however, the woman writer must inscribe her disaffection either through a deliberate mimicry that, but its very imitation, gestures toward unthinkable alternatives, or through metaphors of female desire. . . . Subversive imitation is also the focus of Margaret Homans’ analysis of Eliot’s response to a particular male authority. (Abel 3)
What Abel is saying here applies directly to Lady Audley and to Braddon as well as to George Eliot. Braddon had to walk the fine line of critiquing the society in which Lady Audley lives while still producing the text within the acceptable limits of society so that the book would sell and her subversive message be apparent, but not too obvious. Passionate reactions to *Lady Audley’s Secret* reveal that people felt strongly about Braddon’s work; the strength of the reaction points to the fact that she was indeed creating a subversive, feminist message in this book.

The scene in which Robert notices that Lady Audley has a bruise on her arm is a clear example of this reading of her body as a text, but in this scene, Braddon complicates the idea of body as text (LAS 91). Here, it appears that someone has grabbed Lady Audley’s wrist with great force, and gentle soul that she seems to be, she is marked by the experience. Her pale and beautiful skin, the canvas on which Robert, George, and Sir Michael create or paint their own version of femininity, reflects the violence of a man against a woman. But Braddon turns this episode on its ear, for the seemingly fragile and gentle Lucy has been “accosted” while trying to *kill* her first husband to prevent him from destroying the life she has created for herself at Audley Court. By pointing out in this instance that there is a different truth inscribed on Lucy’s wrist, Braddon is calling into question the theoretic belief the Victorian woman’s body is a text on which society inscribes its definition of femininity.

Treating the character of Phoebe Marks, Lady Audley’s personal maid, Schipper complicates the issue of gender coding in Braddon’s novel by examining Phoebe “as an interesting foil to her mistress” (43). Phoebe is described as looking like Lucy, albeit she is a washed out version of the fair lady: “But there were certain dim and shadowy lights
in which, meeting Phoebe Marks gliding softly through the dark oak passages of the Court, or under the shrouded avenues in the garden, you might have easily mistaken her for [her] lady” (LAS 108-109). Taken into her mistress’ confidence from the beginning of their acquaintance, Phoebe is privy to Lucy’s secrets, and the two become friends though one is a lady and the other a maid. Lucy gives Phoebe her clothes, so that she becomes an image of Lucy, and Braddon cultivates this connection between the two women.

Phoebe’s character represents the basic struggle that is at the foundation of patriarchal gender coding; Luke, a brute character and undergroom at Audley Court, can do as he likes with Phoebe, his cousin and fiancé, once she is his wife. His ownership will allow him to enact violence on her with impunity. Her fear of Luke and the underlying violence that is a part of Luke represents the potential violence of the male/female relationship. In addition, like Lucy Audley, Phoebe appears to have ascended the social hierarchy without the requisite biological tie to aristocracy; through her connection to Lady Audley, another woman who defied societal mandates to better her position in society, Phoebe Marks does something quite similar.

Phoebe is a character who also wears masks to survive, and the mask that she wears most is that of the dutiful woman and wife, although her mask covers her fear of the violence her betrothed might eventually do to her. She is afraid of her cousin and fiancé, and has been since they were children. In an unguarded moment with Lucy Audley, Phoebe describes her feelings for her soon-to-be-husband, who, she admits, she does not love: “‘I don’t think I can love him. We have been together from children, and I promised, when I was little better than fifteen, to be his wife. I daren’t break that promise now’” (LAS 111). Recognizing the potential for violence, and just before Phoebe marries
Luke, Lady Audley asks Phoebe, “Do you think, then, if murder is in him, you would be any safer as his wife?” (LAS 111). Despite the fact that she enjoys her position as a lady’s maid and companion, she gives this up in order to marry Luke.

Phoebe, like Lady Audley, also wears the mask of a woman looking to survive. In her quest for survival, she is willing to turn against her mistress in order to help her husband to start a business. She does not want to do this, but she feels compelled by fear of Luke; if she does not do as he says, he threatens violence. Her fear of Luke dictates that she must betray Lady Audley, and she does so in order to secure money to buy an inn. The issue of blackmail is obviously problematic in the women’s friendship, but in their Madwoman in the Attic Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert argue that “given the female vulnerability such perils imply, female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other” (38). Phoebe blackmails her mistress, and because this is a story about women doing what they must in order to survive in a patriarchal society, Phoebe’s treachery is the only option available to her if she wants to improve her economic situation. Despite Lady Audley’s distaste for being blackmailed, she still maintains a connection to Phoebe. The inn and Audley Court share some similarities; as the mistress of the inn, Phoebe must take on the mask of the wife that Luke wants to see. She must not take on airs or use the knowledge she gained while working for Lady Audley, for which Luke berates her. One interpretation is that the underlying violence of this relationship is to remind the reader of the potential violence in any relationship in which the man possesses more physical or economic power than a woman to whom he is connected.
Phoebe attempts to stay loyal to Lucy Audley, bearing her loutish husband’s ill will as he berates her for trying too hard to be something that she is not; she is not a fine lady, yet Luke accuses her of trying to be one; then again, by the Victorian standards neither is Lucy Audley a lady. Here, Braddon appears to be once again exploring the way in which a woman can fraudulently achieve a higher rank in society without being born into the position. Phoebe wears the mask of one who is of a higher station because of her contact with Lucy Audley; despite marriage and position, she is still able to retain an aspect of a social class that is above her own, thereby revealing a chink in the armor of the social hierarchy. She is another woman who successfully dons a mask to become something that society cannot condone; no blue blood flows in her veins, yet she is the image of Lady Audley.

In the final chapters of the novel Robert Audley ultimately wins; revealing Lucy’s crime, she is imprisoned for defying the expectations of society, then banned to an asylum for the rest of her life for her fraudulent behavior. She does not kill George Talboys, but she does try, in order to secure her identity as Lady Audley, and this is seen as a shocking act. She also tries to kill Robert Audley, another shocking act for a woman, by burning down the inn in which he is staying, yet she is not successful in this endeavor, either. In the battle for survival, Robert Audley wins, and Lucy loses both her position as Lady Audley and her livelihood. If she had won, Robert Audley would have lost his chance to inherit, but he still has the ability to earn a living and retain the status in life to which he is accustomed. This battle is one that Lady Audley wages against patriarchal society.
Lucy kills Luke Marks, the physical brute of the story, and the reader is inclined to accept the justice of her action when Luke dies. Throughout the novel, Luke is the most obvious physically intimidating man; he threatens his wife and scares her. Yet because of his powers of persuasion and his standing in society, Robert Audley convinces those around him that Lady Audley’s behavior is so far beyond the acceptable that she must be punished. The title of “mad woman” is a sort of generic diagnosis. Again, Lucy is used as a text on which Robert Audley inscribes what is socially acceptable; she accuses him of being mad, but his actions are all for a man of power in the Victorian era. Towards the end of the book there is much discussion and debate between Lucy and Robert about which of them is more insane. For her part, Lucy covertly asks her husband if he thinks that Robert’s actions are odd; she also fights back against Robert Audley and his threat of finding her insane, saying, “‘You are mad Robert Audley . . . you are mad and your fancies are a madman’s fancies. I know what madness is. I know its signs and tokens, and I say that you are mad’” (LAS 294). But Lucy Audley does not win in her bid to convince the world that Robert is the one who is mad; his actions are regarded as acceptable for a man in his position. It is a covert fight to surmise who has the power to determine madness. The male lawyer born to an aristocratic family, not surprisingly Robert Audley proves the stronger of the two, so that while she wins some battles, he wins the overall war and has her committed to an asylum. He gives her a generic name, Madam Taylor, taking away her ability to create her own name, and he makes plans to have her committed to a maison de santé in Belgium.

“There have always been those who argued that women’s high rate of mental disorder is a product of their social situation, both their confining roles as daughters,
wives, and mothers and their mistreatment by a male-dominated and possibly misogynistic psychiatric profession” (Showalter 3). Is it any wonder, then, that Helen, otherwise known as Lucy, is thought to grow mad by the end of the book? And yet, she does not appear to exhibit actual signs of madness; what she exhibits is behavior that falls so far outside of accepted behavior for women in Victorian society that she must be deemed mad to preserve societal expectations in the patriarchal society that rules all, including her. When George Talboys attempts to destroy the new life Lucy has built for herself, she attempts to throw him down a well to drown, but she does not succeed. She adopts what is seen as traditionally “male” behaviors to try and hold on to her world. Robert Audley, originally a non-practicing lawyer, and a lazy man at that, feels compelled to reveal Lucy to the world as an imposter, and by doing so, he retains his hold on Audley Court at Sir Michael’s passing. And, what is Sir Michael’s responsibility? He knows that Lucy does not love him, yet he marries her in spite of this knowledge in an attempt to reclaim his youth. As he walks away after she has accepted his proposal, he has a sick feeling in his stomach, yet he ignores it and marries Lucy. The psychiatrist, called upon to diagnose Lucy Audley, at first says that she is not mad:

“There is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and apposition. There is no madness in there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that.” (LAS 370)
When Robert tells the psychiatrist that Lucy’s first husband is missing and perhaps dead, he asks to speak to Lucy, whose mother, he knows, died in an asylum, saying, “There is latent insanity . . . she is dangerous!” (LAS 372). She is dangerous, but dangerous to whom? To society’s dictates? If she is left unchecked, she will have bested the system. She is dangerous to Robert Audley in that she might deny him his inheritance if she remains Lady Audley, but she is not dangerous to Sir Michael, as he seems quite happy with her. Thus, the psychiatrist’s ultimate diagnosis that she is the victim of “latent insanity” provides an explanation for actions that are so far beyond the norm that there is no other way to qualify or quantify them than to say their doer is mad.

Mary Wollstonecraft died in 1797, before completing *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, a novel that would have extended the theme of her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In the introduction to *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter writes, “To Maria, the ‘mansion of despair’ in which she is incarcerated becomes a symbol of all the man-made institutions, from marriage to the law, that confine women and drive them mad” (1). This symbol is also applicable to Helen Malden, when she lives at home in near poverty with her father, an aging ex-military man. Helen’s father wants to marry her off to someone who will be able to support both of them, but when George Talboys’ father learns of the marriage, he cuts his son off from his allowance since he sees Helen as someone outside of George’s social class. With that, George runs off, leaving Helen with a young son and not many options for survival. She leaves her child, changes her identity, and becomes a governess for a surgeon. Again, she is taking care of someone else’s children in a limited way; she is not a member of the family, and it is clear that she has little money. She must act in accordance to the rules
that govern poor governesses. She leaves this restrictive position for another that appears to give her substantial financial security, but is restrictive as well. Yes, she gains wealth and status as Lady Audley of Audley Court, while also accepting a new set of rules and regulations; becoming the property of Sir Michael Audley, she once again adapts to a new situation and dons the necessary masks to be successful. Her final role is that of madwoman in a private asylum, but this role is perhaps the most restrictive of those she takes on, for she is confined to the asylum until she dies. It is “man-made institutions” that plunge her into despair; she cannot escape their laws. She does the best possible job that she can, given her circumstances, but she basically leaves one social setting to enter into another, and then another, yet all impose on her restrictive rules, created by society and sanctioned by the law and the men that make up the rules and run the society.
Chapter Two

_Aurora Floyd_

The second of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s sensational novels was _Aurora Floyd_, which, together with _Lady Audley’s Secret_, endures today as the two books for which she is best known. My original premise was that _Lady Audley’s Secret_ was more openly anti-establishment than _Aurora Floyd_, and that because of the criticism of _Lady Audley’s Secret_, _Aurora Floyd_ would present a more moderately feminist text. However, upon closer analysis, I have found this not to be true. In some ways, _Aurora Floyd_ may be an equally, if not more so, openly feminist statement than _Lady Audley’s Secret_, especially for its acceptance of the aberrant female.

As characters, Aurora is more easily accepted than Lady Audley; in the novel her nature is lauded as “good,” and she appears to have the freedom to be who she is. Unlike Lady Audley, Aurora is not compelled to hide her true identity, her character, under different names and personas. Class does distinguish them to the extent that Aurora enjoys a higher status than Lady Audley originally represents, and Aurora is not necessarily as desperate as Lady Audley. But, in _Aurora Floyd_, both Aurora and her mother are strong women who defied what society dictated they should be. Braddon creates female characters in this novel who are more believable and likable, but just as powerful as those that she created in _Lady Audley’s Secret_. Just as Braddon was a woman who defied boundaries, her female characters also defy the expectations placed upon them by society; ultimately, however, once her characters’ behavior is open to public
scrutiny, they are either accepted back into the fold of society or punished for living so far outside of it. Although Braddon had to operate within the expectations of society so that she could sell her books, she was constantly asking her readers to think about the boundaries within which women were placed. In a subtle fashion, then, she continues to encourage her readers to see the possibility of the rejection of the ideal in her characters.

*Aurora Floyd* was published at the end of January 1863, shortly after the appearance of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In his account of the novel’s print genealogy, P.D. Edwards notes that *Aurora Floyd* was serialized in thirteen installments in the monthly periodical *Temple Bar* from January 1862 to January 1863, and it was printed as a novel in three volumes in January 1863” (xxii). *Aurora Floyd*’s publication created a stir comparable to that of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In *Beyond Sensation*, Marlene Tromp contends that, although Braddon “had her champions, one essay calling *Aurora Floyd* a sign of her genius (Miss Braddon’s Novels 436-38), [her] reviewers were often exceedingly hostile” (Tromp 94). Tromp goes on to say that critics had a difficult time with *Aurora Floyd* because of the negative effect sensational books might have on the general reading public of the day, and on young women in particular. Braddon was accused of creating characters who were unnatural and could not possibly occur in Victorian society except in the pages of a sensational novel. The hostility that the book created attests to the power within it, but also to the possibility of change. *Aurora Floyd* deals with the taboo subject of woman’s desire, something that “the angel of the house” was not supposed to feel. This is a text about two generations of women who defy society. It is also an analysis of the necessity of acting within the Victorian woman’s life,
and the continuation of a discussion of what constitutes madness, all ideas originally from *Lady Audley’s Secret*, but presented here in a different manner.

Edwards notes that in announcing the publication of *Aurora Floyd*, its publisher, Tinsley Brothers, revealed the identity of the author; prior to this, Braddon wrote using only her first initials, which is how she signed *Lady Audley’s Secret*. As soon as Braddon’s identity as a woman was known another storm of contempt was raised against her. As Edwards explains, “Braddon, whose sex had been previously undetermined was upset to have her identity revealed. When it was assumed she was a man, she came under criticism for knowing too much about women, but once her gender was revealed, she was then accused of knowing too much about men’s activities” (xxiii). She could not win in this situation: she was critically damned for knowing too much about men, and then she was critically damned for knowing too much about women.

Braddon’s gender is central to any discussion of her purpose for writing, her reception, and her work. The revelation of Braddon’s gender fits with the overall themes she creates; from her characters, to her own identity, Braddon was grappling with the expectations thrust upon both her and her fictional female characters by Victorian society. The Victorian era was a period in which men and women had clearly defined roles; the woman, as previously discussed, was to be “the angel of the house.” Coventry Patmore’s poetic narrative, “The Angel in the House” (1854), immortalized woman as the angel of the house; she was to occupy the moral center of the domestic sphere, and she was the person specifically charged to tame the animalistic nature of the man. She was to create a calm oasis for her husband, apart from the worries of the outside world, yet she was to be submissive to him in all areas of life. Within this narrow frame of expectation,
there was little room for variation, yet many women simply did not fit into such traditional expectations. Just as many of Braddon’s fictional characters did not fit into the “angel” motif, Braddon herself was a woman who challenged traditional expectations as well. The world was on the brink of some powerful change, and Braddon’s life and writing helped to fuel these changes.

On the surface, the overall story line of *Aurora Floyd* appears simple enough. Aurora is the daughter of Archibald Floyd and his young wife, Eliza Prodder, a former actress. Eliza and Archibald stun the sensibility of Victorian gentry when he brings the former actress home as his wife. Eliza, who is not a member of the right caste to be married to the rich Archibald Floyd, dies giving birth to Aurora, and, then, Aurora grows into a non-traditional woman in many ways. Her love of horses, racing, and other non-female interests brand her as a social anomaly. She is sent off to boarding school, where she runs off with her father’s former groom; they marry, but theirs is not a good match. He is far below her socially, and he is abusive as well; she finds out that he wants her merely for her money. In a shocking act, Aurora abandons him and returns to her father. In time, a newspaper article states that Aurora’s husband is dead, killed in a riding accident, so Aurora, incredibly relieved, thinks she is free to marry again, which she does. However, the first husband, John Conyers, is not dead; he reappears in order to blackmail her, and chaos ensues. At the end of this tale of unintended bigamy, the first husband is indeed killed, and while it at first appears that Aurora may have been his murderer, she is exonerated and seems to live happily ever after in a marriage to her second husband, John Mellish.
Braddon takes this story, which although may seem tame by today’s standards was read as sensational to the extreme against the standards dominant in the 1860s, and creates a book that is wonderful to read, but she also creates a subversive text that challenges certain traditional expectations placed upon women based on their gender and economic situation. *Aurora Floyd* can be read as a text that critiques and exposes the ways in which women might push back against societal expectations. The reality created in the novel was not as neat as the paradigm of the traditional Victorian marriage implied. Aurora does not intend to be bigamous; she truly thinks her horrid first husband is dead, but she is wrong.

When *Aurora Floyd* opens, we learn about the marriage of Archibald Floyd to Eliza Prodder. Eliza was an actress in London when Archibald saw her and fell in love with her, but stage-acting was not regarded as a respectable job for a proper woman; in many ways, her career put Eliza on par with prostitutes, and neither position was morally acceptable in Victorian society. The rules were quite strict about how women were allowed to make money to survive; opportunities were few, and exceptions were rarely granted. Nonetheless, Eliza is beautiful, and Archibald is quickly taken with her:

Let the reader recall one of those faces, whose chief loveliness lies in the glorious light of a pair of magnificent eyes, and remember how far they surpass all others in their power of fascination. The same amount of beauty frittered away upon a well-shaped nose, rosy pouting lips, symmetrical forehead, and delicate complexion, would make an ordinarily lovely woman; but concentrated in one nucleus, in the wondrous luster of the eyes, it makes a divinity, a Circe. You may meet the first any day of your life; the second, once in a lifetime. (*AF* 7-8)
Interestingly, Eliza is described in terms of Circe. Circe was regarded as a witch in Greek mythology, and when Odysseus was trying to make his way home, he was delayed by a visit to her island, where she poisons the men’s food, and they are turned into animals. Braddon’s reference to Circe is a direct allusion to Eliza’s power; however, although her beauty and her love ensnare Archibald, Eliza is not described in negative terms. Rather, this powerful witch is seen as a beautiful and divine figure, which is blasphemous for the time. Braddon is giving Eliza power through her beauty here, and she uses the description for Eliza, Aurora’s mother, because she wants us to like her, despite the fact that she literally, and through mythological allusion, lives and acts outside of what is acceptable in Victorian society. Braddon purposely does this in order to push against the boundaries of what is acceptable. If a reader is sympathetic to Eliza, and later Aurora, what might that do to the fabric of the society? Mother and daughter stand as dangerous women to this societal configuration.

The narrator goes on to describe Eliza’s work as an actress: “And Eliza Prodder patiently trod the old and beaten track, far too good-natured, light-hearted, and easy going a creature to attempt any foolish interference with the crookedness of the times, which she was not born to set right” (AF 12). In his editorial notes, Edwards explains that here, “the state of the British stage is being compared with the ‘rotten’ state of Denmark, which Hamlet was ‘born’ to set right” (460). The initial reference is to Shakespeare, but on closer scrutiny, another interpretation is also possible: Eliza is going to go ahead and forge her way in the world, making a living for herself as an actress. She does not have the power to change the way her society views women or the way in which a woman can make a living and still be seen as an acceptable person in society. The “crookedness of
the times” might refer to the ways in which women were forced to adhere to the role of “angel” in the domestic or public spheres, such that while this statement looks ahead to a brighter time in which women might enjoy more freedom of place, freedom will not come in Eliza’s lifetime. Even so, Eliza is also not going to allow the times to dictate what she can and cannot do, even if she does not agree with the rules. Perhaps her daughter, Aurora, will not be the one either to set things right, but she will provide women with more freedom from the constrictions of society. And in many ways, both Eliza Prodder and Aurora reflect aspects of Braddon herself; Braddon may not be able to change society, but she can certainly continue to push the boundaries of what is acceptable through her fiction.

Comparing Eliza from *Aurora Floyd* and Lady Audley from *Lady Audley’s Secret*, we see that in them Braddon creates two fictional women who find themselves elevated by marriage to a higher social station than they formerly enjoyed, although Eliza does not strive to fit in that station as Lady Lucy Audley does. She is able to maintain more of her individuality than Lucy can, but Eliza is not the fraud that Lucy is. Eliza has come to acting to make money and survive, but she also seems to enjoy the professional accomplishment of being on the stage. Because Lucy is not born into the role of a lady, she must recreate herself around this identity, for her very survival depends on it. Lady Audley must act the role of the proper lady all the time, and when she fails to do so and is discovered, she is committed to an asylum for the remainder of her days, where she is faced with acting for survival. But Eliza does not do this, and she is not apologetic, either; yet Braddon appears fascinated with the interconnection between these women and acting; whether upon the stage for pay or in a wealthy country-seat, each woman’s
ability to act her role is crucial. In *Aurora Floyd*, Eliza is able to be more honest about her position, and Braddon thereby establishes her as a likeable character. Describing Eliza, the narrator calls attention to the fact that she is still a gem despite the fact that she has no money. What the narrator establishes is a radical perspective for the era:

> What was the obscurity from which he had taken her to him? Is a star less bright because it shines on a gutter as well as upon the purple bosom of the midnight sea? Is a virtuous and generous hearted woman less worthy because you find her making a scanty living out of the only industry she can exercise; and acting Juliet to an audience of factory hand, who give three pence apiece for the privilege of admiring and applauding her? ([AF](#))

In this short passage, the narrator appears to be speaking out against the generally accepted perspective; people were encouraged to stay within their own social structures, not mix with those above or below them. There is a spirited manner about the narrator of *Aurora Floyd* who is more willing to make observations that fly in the face of what is generally accepted. This narrator seems to like Eliza far more than the narrator of *Lady Audley’s Secret* appears to like Lucy Audley. In *Aurora Floyd*, there is an acceptance of the actress in a way that clearly goes against what society thought of the untitled actress who made her living by performing.

There is a feminist appreciation of Eliza Prodder in the first few pages of the story that is absent from *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and of a series of strong women who create a legacy. There is a deeper voice in *Aurora Floyd*, one that is more willing to defy society and defend the actions of Eliza Floyd. Here, the narrator does not appear to condemn Eliza in the way that he does Lady Audley, and here, too, the narrator reports a sense of
genuine feeling between Eliza and Archibald. Archibald buys her extravagant gifts, and she thinks he has lost his mind. She is concerned for him, and while the madness that Sir Audley feels for his wife is noted by the narrator of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, in *Aurora Floyd* it is Archibald’s wife who worries that he is spoiling her too much, as if madness has overtaken him. Braddon creates power dynamic of husband and wife as equals in the relationship between Eliza and Archibald: “Eliza remonstrated with her new master, fearing that his love had driven him mad, and that this alarming extravagance was the first outburst of insanity” (15). As in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, we have the taint of insanity in *Aurora Floyd*; when a man loves a woman, the power that she has over him manifests itself in a sort of spell that causes insanity. The sensational element comes into this story when the poor actress is seen ensnaring the wealthy, older bachelor, making him insane with his love for her. He, too, like Sir Audley, is accused of insanity for loving a woman of a lower status; in fact, many women in the community wondered why his family did not “institute a commission of lunacy, and shut their crazy relative in madhouse” (9), for they believed that his actions merited his institutionalization. Throughout both *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, there is a sense of the power that women have over men in the form of love, and sometimes, this love can be likened to madness, which gives Braddon’s women power over the dominant male in their immediate society, and the issue of sanity and insanity is one that she explores in both texts as means to once again test boundaries.

While Lucy Audley appears to care for her husband, their relationship is more about manipulation than about mutual caring. There is not a strong sense that she has deep feelings for anything other than her husband’s social standing and money. But, in
Aurora Floyd, Eliza does fall in love with her husband. They are deeply in love, and she loves him as much as he loves her: “Mr. and Mrs. Floyd made one of the happiest couples who had ever worn the bonds of matrimony” (16). There is genuine emotion between these two, and their marriage is based on love rather than on social status.

Braddon has Eliza die in childbirth, yet had Eliza lived, she would not have been a traditional mother; rather, she would have been a renegade, raising a daughter who possessed the capacity to make her own way in spite of Victorian expectations. Eliza is not overly concerned with the fact that the women of her husband’s social standing “hated her above all, for her insolence in not appearing in the least afraid of the lofty members of that new circle in which she found herself” (9). The former actress is not as concerned as Lucy Audley with acting the part of the wealthy wife, although she does take on this role very naturally. In this respect, Eliza’s character provides another example of Braddon creating women who skirt the boundary of what is considered appropriate and what is considered over the line in gendered behavior. She creates Eliza as a strong and independent character, but she is not allowed to live in order to promote these ideals within her daughter. It is the ultimate womanly sacrifice, to give one’s life for one’s child, and this is the price that Eliza pays for living outside of the realm of the acceptable. The fact that Braddon creates her attests to her power, but the fact that she must die is a sacrifice Braddon makes to Victorian standards.

Eliza’s power then passes to Aurora, whose name connects her to the Roman goddess of the dawn and, in the context of the novel, suggests that she brings with her a new dawn in gender expectations and, perhaps, the capacity to complete the reformations Eliza’s beliefs and practices held forth for Victorian society. Aurora’s life may usher in a
period which will be more open to women’s role in society. Braddon, who infuses hope for change in the fact that Eliza has a daughter that she names Aurora, reveals her adeptness at staying within the boundaries, but pushing them even as she does so. In spite of losing her mother, Aurora shares many similarities with her mother; indeed, her father, who is too smitten with his child to discipline her, ends up fostering an independent spirit within her despite the fact that Eliza is not raising her.

Aurora is described as a spoiled child, for she is not brought up with limits on her behavior or consequences for it; she possesses a wild nature:

Aurora was spoiled. We do not say a flower is spoiled because it is reared in a hot-house where no breath of heaven can visit it too roughly; but then, certainly, the bright exotic is trimmed and pruned by the gardener’s merciless hand, while Aurora shot whither she would, and there was none to lop the wandering branches of the luxuriant nature. She said what she pleased, thought, spoke, acted as she pleased; learned what she pleased; and she grew into a bright impetuous being, affectionate and generous hearted as her mother, but with some touch of native fire blended in her mould that stamped her as original. (AF 20)

Here, Braddon extends the daughter’s connection to her mother. Aurora is not like all of the other women in her peer class; she is independent, spirited, and unique, and this is a very hopeful passage about the type of woman she will become. Her freedom will last only for a while, until her boughs are trimmed so that she again fits in with the rest of society. But, for the brief time that she is this original and independent woman, she stands in opposition to the Victorian norm of the ideal woman, and a different future is envisioned with this possibility. Through much of the novel, Aurora defies what is
expected of her to the point that she is likened to Cleopatra: “What if those masses of blue-black hair were brushed away from a forehead too low for the common standard of beauty? A phrenologist would have told you that the head was a noble one; and the sculptor would have added that it was set upon the throat of Cleopatra” (20). Aurora possesses a passionate beauty and an exceptional nobility, but Braddon does not hail these in the traditional Victorian sense, for she associates Aurora with another strong women who secured power in a time when women were not supposed to be powerful.

Ultimately, because it defies pruning, Aurora’s ungoverned nature is unacceptable to society. The adoration of her father allows this spoiled and “handsome” (20) young woman to defy what society expects of her, and he gives her the freedom to pursue her interests. The exotic hot-house flower, and not the hardy English rose, bring to mind a sultry and sensual flower whose natural state is not accepted on its own. There is an implication of eroticism here, the “erotic” Aurora with “a pair of eyes like stars in heaven . . . and the masses of blue black hair . . . brushed away from a forehead too low for the common standard of beauty” (20). She is other, she is mesmerizing, but she is just a bit off. She does not completely fit in English society.

By the age of six, Aurora is described by the narrator as being “fast” (21); this hardly accords the description of a proper Victorian young woman. She does not want to play with dolls, she likes to play with her rocking horse and hunting dogs, which are traditional symbols of masculine development. Aurora gravitates towards behavior that is not fitting for a proper English girl; she gravitates towards the things that boys her age would like. As she matures, she speaks, not about balls and other social gatherings, but rather about horses and horse racing. In this patriarchal society, her father is blamed for
allowing her to be spoiled, but the power dynamic is clear: “He could not bring himself to
tell her that she was not all he could desire her to be. If he could have governed or
directed that impetuous nature, he would have had her the most refined and elegant, the
most perfect and accomplished of her sex; but he could not do this, and he was fain to
thank God for her as she was, and to indulge her every whim” (21). He appreciates her,
adores her, and ultimately allows her to develop into an atypical woman, but his deep
desires are reflected in the quotation; he would rather have her fit into more traditional
gender roles. His love for her and his guilt that she does not have a mother in her life
allow him to spoil her, but he does recognize that she is not what she should be. Yet, he
does not act on this knowledge, and he continues to allow her to develop her knowledge
and love of horses and horse racing. She is not all that he had hoped she would be. And,
had he wanted to, he could have made her tow the line, crushing her spirit, and forcing
her to cleave to the ideal as he possesses the power. She is independent and unique
because he allows her to develop these qualities. Despite the fact that the narrator
portrays Archibald Floyd at odds with his feelings for his daughter, it appears that his
acceptance of her wins out; he does not seek to change her to better fit the expectations of
a young woman of her social caste. There is an acceptance of her nature here, even
though her nature is not necessarily approved of by the society in which she lives and in
which her father would have liked her to prosper.

Passionate about horses and horse racing, Aurora’s interests and behavior place
her squarely within the masculine realm. The term “fast” refers to her interest in horses
and animals and her lack of interest in the more feminine pursuits. Yet, it is interesting
that today’s connotation of the word “fast” has sexual implications, and despite the lack
of sexual action in the text, it is present and powerful in Aurora Floyd’s life. For she does defy all societal expectations by marrying John Conyers, her father’s former groom, because he is handsome; she marries outside of her class, and the reason appears to amount to little more than her lover’s attractiveness. This is a covert discussion of the existence of lust which fuels Aurora’s decision to marry her first husband, and Aurora refers to herself as mad when she succumbs to the unfaithful and abusive Conyers and marries him. However, a more accurate interpretation might be the fact that she did not succumb to madness but rather to lust. And, of course, lust was not something that the traditional Victorian woman was supposed to feel. She was supposed to endure sex in order to attain the goal of motherhood, but there was to be no pleasure for her in this act. Women were thought not to experience pleasure in sex in this time period, so, for Aurora to marry a man far below her social status because she found him attractive is to act so far out of the bounds of societal expectations that she must have been crazy to have done so. Just as Lady Audley’s secret is that she is ultimately mad, Braddon and Victorian society also use madness to explain actions and desires that fall outside the boundaries of the acceptable. An argument can be made that Braddon does not agree with this explanation of madness, and while she uses the term to explain things that are not accepted within Victorian society, she nevertheless purposely uses this term. She wants the reader to challenge the meaning of the word madness; while she will not come out and clearly reject the ideal, she does so in a subtle and near-subversive way in both texts to encourage the reader to question accepted definitions.

While Aurora is the horse-loving tomboy of the text, another crucial woman in the text is her cousin Lucy Floyd, who represents the ideal Victorian woman. Lucy is
Aurora’s foil. This young woman is depicted as a washed out version of Aurora; Lucy is perfect, and she does everything as she should do according to the norms of her class. She is timid, shy, and very afraid of animals. She is the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, perfectly bred English woman. As Aurora is compared to Lucy, Braddon makes clear that Lucy, not Aurora, fits the accepted ideal: “She was a fair-faced, blue-eyed, rosy lipped, golden-haired little girl, who was direfully afraid of her cousin’s ponies and Newfoundland dogs, and had a firm conviction that sudden death held his throne within a certain radius of horse’s heels; but she loved and admired Aurora, after the manner common to these weaker natures” (21). Neither “fast” nor “horsey,” Lucy is quite terrified of the very things that Aurora loves. The narrator discusses her weaker nature and finds her more malleable, conservative, and traditional than Aurora. She possesses a traditional beauty with her blond hair and blue eyes. In the following comparison between the two girls, Lucy is rendered the ideal of the “angel of the house,” while Aurora is described as outside of, and a threat to, all that the ideal represents:

All that Aurora’s beauty most lacked was richly possessed by Lucy. Delicacy of outline, perfection of feature, purity of tint, all were there; but while one face dazzled you by its shining splendour, the other impressed you only with a feeble sense of its charms, slow to come and quick to pass away. There are so many Lucys but so few Auroras; and while you never could be critical with one, you were merciless in your scrutiny of the other. . . . [Lucy] was exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife. She had been educated to that end by a careful mother. Purity and goodness had watched over her and hemmed her in from her cradle. She had never seen unseemly sights, or heard unseemly sounds. She was
ignorant as a baby of all the vices and horrors of this big world. She was lady-like, accomplished, well-informed; and if there were a great many others of precisely the same type of graceful womanhood, it was certainly the highest type, and the holiest, and the best. (AF 48)

Lucy is the ideal, representing much of what Aurora is not, and yet Aurora is the exciting one, the one who is intriguing. Only by tracing the story of these three women, Eliza, Aurora, and Lucy, do we discover an important informational subtext in Braddon’s story. Lucy is raised by a careful mother who has taught her well, while Aurora has grown up without a mother. If her mother had lived, Eliza might have been a non-traditional mother, but since she died in childbirth, a void is created which forces Aurora, at least in some instances, to define herself. Braddon, in the creation of both Eliza and Aurora, crafts women who are defiant and powerful. Lucy, the ideal, is seen as somewhat of a boring and placid character, unable to feel the heights of passion that Aurora does. The reader comes to like Aurora, even though she is the devilish twin of the otherwise angelic but ineffectual Lucy Floyd.

As in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, societal expectations play an important role in *Aurora Floyd*. When Aurora grows into a woman, she is still considered to be “fast”; she reads horse magazines, she is passionate about riding, she loves her dog, and, contrary to her father’s hopes, she never outgrows these interests. When courting becomes possible, we are introduced to Talbot Bulstrode, another character who underscores societal expectations in the story. He represents what the patriarchal society of the day sought in the ideal Victorian man. Talbot wants what he has been taught to want, and as a suitor he
wants only a mate who will fit as neatly into the acceptable category as he does. He is searching for the ideal Victorian woman:

In the ordinary affairs of life he was as humble as a woman or a child; it was only when Honour was in question that the sleeping dragon of pride which had guarded the golden apples of his youth, purity, probity, and truth awoke and bade defiance to the enemy. At two and thirty, he was still a bachelor, not because he had never loved, but because he had never met with a woman whose stainless purity of soul fitted her in his eyes to become the mother of a noble race, and to rear sons who should honour the name of Bulstrode. He looked for more than ordinary every-day virtue in the woman of his choice; he demanded those grand and queenly qualities which are rarest in womankind. Fearless truth, a sense of honour keen as his own, loyalty of purpose, unselfishness, a soul untainted by the petty baseness of daily life---all these things he sought in the being he loved; and at the first warning thrill of emotion caused by a pair of beautiful eyes, he grew critical and captious about their owner, and began to look for infinitesimal stains upon the shining robe of her virginity. (AF 31)

While Bulstrode represents the ideal Victorian male, in this passage he also seems to be a parody of the Victorian male in terms of what he wants and expects of a mate. Yes, the narrator is clearly articulating what it is that Talbot Bulstrode seeks in a wife, but the tone of the passage reveals that his expectations are impossible to fulfill. Here, he sounds like an arrogant, egotistical figure, who will not settle for a wife that is anything but the ideal as well, but his desire for someone who is like him is tainted with pride and an unrealistic opinion of who he is and who his potential mate could be. His expectations could be
taken from a manual about the ideal Victorian woman who is the perfect wife and mother. Ultimately, the ideal that he holds will cause him to miss out on what could have been the love of his life for fear of what she might do to his family’s good name. He is not strong enough to allow his love to triumph over his self-centered fear. In the end, he ends up with Aurora’s cousin, the perfect Lucy Floyd, and in some ways theirs is a fitting match, for they both are boring and insipid.

In the narrator’s descriptions of both Talbot Bulstrode and Lucy Floyd there is a hint of parody, or perhaps of disdain. Bulstrode’s arrogance and Lucy’s fear of the world around her do not endear these characters to the reader. In the passage quoted above, the narrator describes why, at thirty-two, Talbot is still single: “he was still a bachelor, not because he had never loved, but because he had never met with a woman whose stainless purity of soul fitted her in his eyes to become the mother of a noble race, and to rear sons who should do honour to the name of Bulstrode” (31). As his obsession with honor seems to tip into the realm of the absurd, Braddon may be encouraging her reader to dislike the societal ideal. Whereas the reader cheers for Aurora, even though she is not the ideal embodiment of the ideal woman that those of Bulstrode’s society seek, parody, which is a subversive literary act, undermines the standing of Bulstrode and his set.

When Talbot Bulstrode first sees Aurora, he is overtaken by passion, likening it to the first and only time he smoked an illegal drug. He sees Aurora as

A divinity! Imperviously beautiful in white and scarlet, painfully dazzling to look upon, intoxicatingly brilliant to behold. Captain Bulstrode had served in India and had once tasted a horrible spirit called ‘bang’ [pot] which made the men who drank it half mad; and he could not help fancying that the beauty of this woman
was like the strength of that alcoholic preparation; barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening. (AF 33)

Here, Bulstrode is accusing Aurora of casting a witch-like spell on him, and because of her beauty, he is mesmerized. But “barbarous, dangerous, and maddening” are hardly positive adjectives to describe the way that Aurora makes him feel. She possesses power, like a witch or demon, but it is not power that is positive. While this is negative power, it is power nonetheless, and it is power that she wields over him. Uptight and judgmental, Bulstrode then begins to criticize her physique, seeing her as “but another trap set in white muslin, and baited with artificial flowers, like the rest” (34). Aurora’s first words to him are about horse racing, and he is, of course, appalled and reduces her to “A Cleopatra with a snub nose two sizes too small for her face and a taste for horseflesh!” (35).

Bulstrode also refers to himself as being mad when he is in the throws of attraction to Aurora, but his feelings are too far outside of what he deems acceptable. He feels a sexual pull or attraction towards Aurora, which he blames on her, but he nonetheless feels it and considers it madness. Anything that falls outside of the traditionally accepted roles of men and women, any behavior that falls outside the norm, is deemed an act of madness. Talbot is a character who is irreparably torn between his feelings and societal norms he has embraced that call his feelings into question; put another way, he is attracted to and falling in love with Aurora, but his personal code prevents him from moving forward on the basis of his feelings. He wants a woman who is spotless and blameless, someone who will not sully the Bulstrode name. Because he cannot be guided by sexual attraction, he must blame Aurora, like Eve, for attracting him,
and in so doing he negates the possibility of her becoming his wife, despite his strong feelings for her and the fact that their marriage might actually be a passionate one.

Another factor that makes Aurora a less than ideal mate for Talbot Bulstrode is a secret that she will not share with him, and he is too worried that her secret will reflect poorly on him, and indeed, it would, were it ever to be known. Despite the fact that Aurora believes that John Conyers is dead, she will not share the story of their marriage with Talbot, and he cannot accept not knowing. He envisions many different possible secrets that she might be holding from him, and he is too concerned with his sense of his and his family’s honor to take any risks. In fact, had they married, she would have been committing bigamy with him, and this would have destroyed absolutely the honor of his name. Ultimately, he finds love and acceptance with the Lucy, the Victorian ideal. She looks the part of the angel and adores Talbot as a god. She defers to him in all matters, loving him in silence until he takes notice of her after he has called off his engagement to Aurora.

Aurora will do anything to protect the secret of her first marriage, and Conyers takes full advantage of that when he appears as a horse trainer for her second husband, John Mellish. Based on lust and desire that defied societal expectations, Aurora’s first marriage is the secret she must hide from her father and husband. But keeping this secret carries a price for Aurora, who falls ill after Bulstrode breaks their engagement.

Jan Davis Schipper refers to the fact that after Aurora’s illness, John Mellish is the one to nurse her back to health, but she observes that he does so in a calculating manner. As the power balance in the text begins to shift, Schipper asserts that Mellish bullies Aurora into marrying him, not only because her father accepts him as a potential son-in-
law, but also because he spent so much time at her side when she was ill. Aurora also feels great guilt at the pain she has caused her father, and so she succumbs, agreeing to marry Mellish. Described as an oaf and a child, Mellish is still the one who has power in the eyes of society. Schipper refers to both Talbot Bulstrode and John Mellish as the men in the book who represent the societal ideal (see Schipper 69). Talbot marries Lucy, and Aurora marries Mellish, who is willing to marry her without knowing her secret; after they are married he stands by his wife even when he thinks she is guilty not only of bigamy but of murder as well, when Aurora’s first husband ends up mysteriously murdered after an attempt to blackmail her.

Bulstrode and Mellish are the agents who bring Aurora back into the fold of acceptable society. Schipper talks about their ability to tame her, and by taming her they redirect her actions to behavior that is considered to be feminine rather than unfeminine. Mellish, Bulstrode, and Archibald Floyd are the ones who hold the economic power and the societal power in the novel; exerting that power, they become the “gardener’s merciless hand” that trims and prunes Aurora, the once defiant and “bright exotic,” into a woman who conforms to the acceptable societal ideal.

Talbot Bulstrode always had great disdain for Aurora’s love of horses and racing; in his mind, her taste for horseflesh indicated that Aurora defied society’s expectations of her. He finds this unattractive in a woman, and he contemplates what Aurora’s father should do to his errant daughter: “What will this poor old banker do with her? Put her in a madhouse?” (35). So, like Lucy Audley in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, because Aurora dares to be different in defiance of society’s expectations, she could be committed to an institution for the insane. And yet Talbot attempts to blame his feelings on her power. There is
hypocrisy here, just as in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Bulstrode goes so far as to say that, if Aurora Floyd were his sister, “he would shoot her” (36). This is an unusually violent reaction, but it reflects what Bulstrode fears most: women’s destruction of the moral and ethical code of society as it is. He wants to see society remain intact, and Aurora represents a challenge to the status quo. There is great fear embodied in change, and Bulstrode’s reaction invites comparison to the reaction that some of conservative critics had for Braddon and for sensational fiction in general. They feared the changes that such literature could instigate, for these changes could completely upend society.

Lucy Floyd, the beautiful angel, is the ideal Victorian woman, while Aurora is not. Yet despite her purported shortcomings, Aurora lives a more full and adventurous life than Lucy. Bulstrode is dazzled and bewitched by Aurora’s nontraditional beauty, yet he is convinced that, despite his feelings, Lucy will make him the better mate:

Talbot Bulstrode’s ideal woman was some gentle and feminine creature crowned with an aureole of pale auburn hair; some timid soul with downcast eyes, fringed with golden-tinted lashes; some shrinking being, as pale and prim as the mediaeval saints in his pre-Raphaelite engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of home. (*AF* 40)

Talbot and Lucy make a sensible marriage that suits them both; Lucy possesses none of the dangerous qualities that make Aurora both compelling and dangerous to Talbot and the social order for which he stands.

Given the strong critical reactions against *Aurora Floyd* for the danger it represented to innocent female readers, Marlene Tromp considers the ramifications of
Aurora’s creation in “The Dangerous Woman: M. E. Braddon’s Sensational (En)gendering of Domestic Law.” Looking at the perceived danger that Aurora represented to the conservative critics reveals another danger that she represents: the dangerous power of the aberrant woman, fictional or real. The ultimate example of the aberrant woman is the prostitute, and while she is feared, she also possesses the power to corrupt. The prostitute represents the rejection of the Victorian ideal. In this society in which women were not supposed to be sexual or allowed to earn money, the prostitute represents a serious threat to the Victorian order. Aurora’s potential danger was connected to the larger danger of women who operated outside of the bounds of society; exposing innocent readers to Aurora’s story introduced them to the “deteriorating effect” (Tromp 94) that the sensational novel was seen to have on its women readers. There is a connection between Braddon’s characters and the feared danger of the prostitute. The Victorian prostitute is the opposite of the “angel of the house”; she is the fallen angel, the whore. The dangerous woman is also implicated in the creation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, in which laws were enacted to bring aberrant women back into the acceptable fold of society. The Contagious Diseases Acts allowed officials to capture women thought to be prostitutes against their will and commit them to a lock hospital for venereal disease testing and treatment.

Tromp draws some interesting correlations between the power of the aberrant woman and the Contagious Diseases Acts, which were instituted about the time of Aurora Floyd’s publication. Then, as Tromp notes, “Parliament was generating its own version of the dangerous woman in the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts), and the similarities between the rhetoric of the novel and the debates surrounding the repeal of
the acts are stunning” (94). The Contagious Diseases Acts were examples of societal responses to the fear engendered by the presence of powerful women in Victorian society; this fear was very real, and not just in the minds of the critics who worried about the impact of the sensational novel on the innocent female reader. In CD cases, “the prostitute, like Aurora, was marked as a murderess and the moral and social bane of the respectable family. The CD Acts, like the novel, figured prominently in the cultural conversation” (94). And there is a larger context of fear that surrounds the literature and the society. The Contagious Diseases Acts were a tangible piece of law that encapsulated the fear of woman; these acts were an attempt to curb the danger of the woman, and to put her more solidly back in her place. This is what Braddon herself faced as a woman trying to survive as an actress and then as a writer. The Contagious Diseases Acts, like critics’ responses to the novel, represent a tangible example of the fear that society has of a woman who cannot be controlled. Whether an actress, a female author, or a fictional character, these women, and the power they shared, were to be feared.

There is a broader connection between the prostitute and those of Braddon’s female characters who reject society’s ideal. Consider, for example, the power to be feared from Eliza Floyd, Aurora’s mother; here is a woman who lived her short life on her own terms, a life that continues with Aurora, the “fast” and “horsey” young woman who does not follow what society dictates; both women possess power that they amass by defying society’s dictates. The Contagious Diseases Acts solidifies the connection between Aurora Floyd’s power and the more general fear of women who lived outside of the acceptable realm in Victorian society and thus represented a threat to the stability of
society. According to Tromp, the Contagious Diseases Acts quantified fear of the powerful woman:

the debates surrounding the Contagious Diseases Acts, which appeared only after *Aurora Floyd* had been widely circulated and digested, suggest that Braddon’s contentious, exploratory fiction engaged in the revisioning of the language that created law, playing out and exposing the complex network of cultural tensions that generated the construction of the dangerous woman. Braddon’s novel challenged the often unspoken beliefs that produced both the domestic angel and her dangerous ‘other,’ and more significantly for my argument, resisted the containment of violence in the home, culture, and the letter of the law within the body of this figure, anticipating and supplying the framework for the sensational anti-CD Acts literature and debates. (95)

The Victorian prostitute was another powerful woman to be feared, for she garnered her power from the fact that she used sex as a way to gain money; she did not follow the rules prescribed by Victorian society. Some women resorted to prostitution out of necessity, while others did so in order to supplement their income. Not many economic opportunities were available to women of the lower class; sewing often did not bring a living wage and, at times, women fell into prostitution or actively chose it in order to make a wage that allowed them to live. Prostitution was referred to as the “Great Social Evil,” and the Victorian prostitute was the opposite of the “angel” of the middle class; she was portrayed as the whore, the sexual deviant who enjoyed sex with multiple partners with little care for the spread of disease. It is interesting that only in combining the beliefs of the Victorian middle- and lower-class woman is it possible to come up with a woman
possessing sexual desire and moral standards. It is as if Victorian society had to delineate
two views of woman, neatly dividing them into two separate categories.

An analysis of prostitution is relevant to any discussion of middle-class women’s
sexuality, for the prostitute provides a perspective opposite to that of the angel of the
house. In his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Havelock Ellis references Victorian doctor
William Acton’s famous statement to this effect: “The majority of women (happily for
society) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind” (194). Yet, as
reflected by the example of the prostitute and the fact that Aurora Floyd married her
father’s groom strictly because of desire, this is clearly not true. In *The Nature and
Evolution of Female Sexuality* Mary Jane Sherfey looks at the concept of female
sexuality from pre-Neolithic times to the twentieth century; although her primary interest
is to look at the ways in which women’s bodies react physically to sex, she is also
interested in the ways in which women’s sexuality has been researched and written about:

Behind the subjugation of women’s sexuality lay the inexorable economics of
cultural evolution which finally forced men to impose it and women to endure it.

If that suppression has been, at times, unduly oppressive or cruel, I suggest the
reason has been neither man’s sadistic, selfish, infliction of servitude upon
helpless women nor women’s weakness or inborn masochism. The strength of the
drive determines the force required to suppress it. (139)

Here, Sherfey implies and later forthrightly states that women’s capacity for sexual
enjoyment is immense, and that this has been a constant for the last 7000 years (140), but
the force exerted by society has changed, and thus the perspective through which we
examine women’s sexuality has been influenced by the society in which woman is living.
Economic, cultural, religious, scientific variables are all parts of the whole that define the sexual expectations of men and women. The core of the issue of women’s sexuality in the Victorian era is inclusive of both Sherfey’s research and Acton’s quote. The fascination with the Victorian woman’s sexuality is played out in Braddon’s fiction and in the Contagious Diseases Acts, and in many other places both real and fictional. Much energy and research was exerted to try to contain and control woman’s sexuality in this time period in order to eliminate the power that accompanies it.

Although Aurora Floyd’s economic struggle is certainly not as dire as the prostitute’s, she is still faced with challenging circumstances even though her position as the daughter of a wealthy banker allows her some degree of financial security. But in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Lucy Audley’s character does not possess such security, and so she trades her freedom for the financial support of Sir Audley. Her power, like the prostitute’s power, comes as an exchange of sex for money. Aurora Floyd’s situation is not quite so clear, but there are clear connections to the world of the prostitute. These are all women who are living on the fringes of society to varying degrees.

The incident in which Aurora whips Steeve Hargreaves, the Softy, presents an interesting case of the clash of gender expectations; she is neither the angel nor the demon here, but she takes on the male role. The Softy, who is brain-damaged, is seen as the weaker of the two despite the fact that he is male, and Aurora takes on the role of the male, enacting violence on the female. Aurora becomes incensed over the fact that the Softy has kicked her beloved dog, Bow-Wow. In this scene, she is magnificent in her fury at the Softy:
Aurora sprang upon him like a beautiful tigress, and catching the collar of his fustian jacket in her slight hands, rooted him to the spot upon which he stood. The grasp of those slender hands, convulsed by passion, was not to be easily shaken off; and Steeve Hargraves [the Softy], taken completely off his guard, stared aghast at his assailant. Taller than the stable man by a foot and a half, she towered above him, her cheeks white with rage, her eyes flashing fury, her hat fallen off, and her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, sublime in her passion. (AF 138) Aurora clearly has the upper hand in this skirmish, and even though her whip is seen as “a mere toy with emeralds set in its golden head, . . . [it stung] like a rod of flexible steel in that little hand” (138). A number of critics have pointed to the fact that in this scene Aurora takes on the male role, physically punishing a man for hurting her animal. In another of her studies, Marlene Tromp looks at the symbol of the rod, the phallic and biblical symbol that represents the power of the husband over his wife. In this scene, Aurora has the rod, and even though it is tiny and toy-like, she still possesses it and uses it to inflict violence on the Softy. For this brief moment, she flips the power dynamic and takes on the more powerful male role, but the scene still reveals Aurora enacting violence on what is perceived as the weaker of the two characters. Yet as Tromp argues in “The Dangerous Woman: M. E. Braddon’s Sensational (En)gendering of Domestic Law,” Bow-wow is, by extension, symbolic of Aurora, so that when the Softy kicks the dog, he is enacting violence against Aurora. Examining the power dynamic in the relationships between man and animal and man and woman, Tromp suggests that Softy still maintains more power than Aurora because he is a man, despite his brain-damage; “I contend,” she writes, “based on these associations, that Softy’s attack on
Bow-Wow metonymically represents an attack on Aurora, representing the violence described and imagined by her lovers in a more socially palatable form” (99). Tromp brings up an interesting point here in that she is examining the power dynamic of this scene. She goes on to say:

Softy’s attack on Bow-Wow, then represents an encoded performance of the intramarital violence, dramatizing the potentially menacing side of the domestic space—a husband’s assault on his wife. This multi-layered performance reveals that the domestic space itself, rather than serving as a safe haven that secures and fortifies a womanhood that naturally blossoms into respectable motherhood and manufacturing men who become protectors, fathers, and providers, may be a site of danger that disrupts firmly held notions of gendered identity. (100)

Both interpretations of this scene are valid and have merit, but the issue that connects the two interpretations is that each deals with violence and the power dynamic among Aurora, the Softy, and Mellish. Aurora may not at any point in the book be seen as a completely liberated woman, but for the time period, there are aspects of her character that nonetheless fly in the face of convention. Always aware of the fine line between total radicalism and marketability, Braddon once again skillfully acts within the bounds of the acceptable in order to challenge the status quo. She needs to be situated within the realm of the acceptable so that her books will sell, for ultimately, she, too, is a woman working outside of the acceptable in Victorian society, making her living as a writer, and supporting her husband and his children from his first marriage.

Marlene Tromp applies her argument to the larger context of the sensational novel, examining the power dynamics that are revealed. In her book *Private Rod: Marital*
"Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain," she asserts, “I maintain that sensation fiction provided early portraits of resistance to (as well as capitulation to) violence, and that sensational narratives, profoundly popular in a culture often believed to have been silent on these issues, participated in a transformation of the terms of the legal debates and ultimately disrupted the Victorian vision of violence” (8). Here, Tromp focuses on the issue of marital violence, but by the same token, her argument can be used to support the fact that the sensational novel, and more specifically this scene of violence between Aurora and the Softy, asks readers to think about violence enacted upon women and examine the power dynamic between men and women.

By the end of the scene, despite the interpretation, power is clearly restored to the man. John Mellish happens upon the clash, and he “took the splintered whip from her hand, picked up her hat, which she had trodden upon in her rage, and led her across the yard” (AF 139). Reclaiming her whip and her hat, he is taking away the symbols of Aurora’s power and placing her back within the realm of the acceptable. Her hat should constrain her hair, just as her emotions should be constrained, and the rod is not something that the woman should possess, according to the traditional thinking of the day. Mellish goes on to say, “‘You should not have done this; you should have told me’” (139). She should not have taken on the male role and whipped him; she is his wife, and property, and he should be the one to defend her and Bow-wow. Mellish says to the Softy, “‘It wasn’t Mrs. Mellish’s business to horsewhip you, but it was her duty to let me do it for her’” (140). Mellish is clearly regaining the power that he thinks is rightfully his. However, this does not detract from the fact that Aurora has a blazing moment of power in this scene. Bringing it back to a practical issue, Braddon was masterful at walking that
fine line between pushing boundaries and needing to create work that was acceptable enough to be popular and not unduly censored by critics. Thus, this scene, and the multiple interpretations of it, provide an example of Braddon’s power as a writer whose fiction promoted rebellion within society. Her work asks the reader of then and now to examine societal expectations and assess how the reader feels about them. Are they too restrictive? She gives us just enough to contemplate and answer the question.

For many of Braddon’s female characters, and especially for Aurora, it is the lack of a mother figure that is blamed on a character’s wild nature; in Aurora’s case, her father spoiled her too much, and thus she does not respond well to restrictions. Her mother is blamed for this lack of bringing her up in the traditionally accepted realm of the Victorian society. Yet, the irony there is that Aurora’s mother was a woman who also defied the societal restrictions based on women. She was an actress, which, in Victorian times, is barely a step above prostitution. She made money working on the stage. So, it is not clear that, had Eliza Floyd lived, she would have tutored Aurora in the ways of the acceptable Victorian female. She seems to be a feminist figure who pushes the acceptable boundaries. There is this power that is demonized in women, but it is power nonetheless. But, this power appears to have little role in this society except to make men and women act in ways that are not acceptable. It is not a society that would embrace Eve or Lillith, but it is a society that strives to hold that Adam is the victim of Eve, and that all women follow after Eve.

Just as Braddon herself acted on the stage, and, as Schipper in Becoming Frauds, points out, there is certainly a correlation among Lady Audley, Aurora, and Braddon herself. Braddon defied societal expectations by working on the stage as an actress to
support both herself and her mother. There seems to be so much emphasis, in this time period, for women to act according to the patriarchal structures that dominate the society. For, to defy them is to make the structure of society vulnerable. Critics who disliked the sensational writers felt that they were focusing too much on the sordid side of life. And, as Edwards notes in his introduction to *Aurora Floyd* (ix), that with the falling price of newspapers, more people had access to the news. The lower class could read about the faults and foibles of the upper class, and with sensational writers writing about bigamy, murder, divorce, people were exposed to these ideas more and more. The ironic thing seems to be that people could read about such matters in the public press, yet it is sensational writers who are blamed for focusing too much on these matters to the detriment of society at large. There is also a class issue represented in Victorians’ fear of sensational literature, and it seems to be that the main idea is that members of the upper class are exposed for the crimes and sins that they commit. No longer is that class protected as it might have been, for now, people from different classes can access newspapers and read about the aristocracy and the sins that they commit.

Schipper asserts that Aurora becomes a fraud in that she is trying to be what her father and Talbot Bulstrode want her to be, an unsullied and perfect female. She cannot bear to disappoint her father any more in regards to John Conyers. She hopes to keep her past a secret as she does not want to bring dishonor on her father. He knows she has married his former groom, but she tells him that he has died so that she can get out of the marriage. She returns home based on this lie. And, she hopes to marry Bulstrode but she does end up marrying Mellish, under these circumstances. However, Conyers is also described as a controlling and abusive man who, despite his good looks, marries Aurora
solely to be in close access to her father’s estate. She gives in to sexual temptation, not by having sex with him outside of marriage, but by marrying him and then having sex. Aurora is proper in her rebellion. Braddon is flirting with the idea of rebelliousness, having a character that is traditional and acceptable enough that she will be able to sell to a large audience, and yet she creates these characters who skate right on the edge of what will be deemed acceptable in the world of published literature.

Despite the fact that Braddon herself says that these books are just for a good read, there is too much support to argue this statement. She is not being completely honest here, because her characters do defy what society deems to be acceptable. She is balancing on the fine line of creating a living for herself from her writing, and her ability to create women who are potentially rebellious and threatening to society, just as she herself is. Schipper asserts, “Clearly, though, Braddon’s claim of writing for entertainment only was a ruse to appease her critics, man of whom believed her assertion and failed to uncover the social critiques that were less overt in Aurora Floyd than in her earlier novel” (60). Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a female author making a living from her writing, and while she did critique society for those who read closely, she had to distance herself publicly from this critique so that she could make money from her sales; she struggled with wanting to be accepted as a good writer and with needing to pay bills. But, her writing does critique society, and it pushes the reader to see other possibilities.

At the end of the novel Braddon reigns Aurora back in. Aurora is deemed innocent in the shooting of John Conyers, and when he ultimately does die, her husband accepts her, they make their marriage legal, and she bears her first son. The last line of
the book deals with the narrator’s certainty that Aurora will now care much less about horse issues and more about the issues surrounding her husband and child.

So, we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first born: and though there are alterations being made at Mellish, and loose-boxes for brood mares building upon the site of the north lodge, and a subscription tan-gallop being laid across Harper’s Common, I doubt if my heroine will ever again care so much for horseflesh, or take quite so keen an interest in weight-for-age races as compared to handicaps, as she has done in days that are gone. (AF 459)

She has been taken back, once again, into the fold. John silences Aurora, and as Tromp notes, “by the end of the narrative, Aurora has become, “‘Mrs. Mellish’—John’s wife, though she has been referred to as Aurora throughout the novel” (“Dangerous Women” 103). Tromp further notes that we do not hear from Aurora in the last eight pages of the novel (105). Accepting her role as mother and wife, and in keeping the shelter of her marriage, she must give up the characteristics that make her who she is. Just as Lady Audley is sentenced to an asylum for the rest of her life, Aurora must leave behind her original ways in order to prove that she can take on the role of the ideal wife and mother; it is a role in which she is trapped as much as Lucy Audley is in her cell. Yet the ending does not negate the rebelliousness of Aurora’s life.
Chapter Three

*The Doctor’s Wife*

Mary Elizabeth Braddon often struggled with her image as a sensational writer. Although her *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) were financial successes, Braddon wanted to achieve a reputation as a writer whose fiction was accepted by literary critics and compared favorably to that of Dickens and Thackeray. Toward this end, each year Braddon attempted to produce a novel that was sensational and intended to sell, and another that would be applauded as a significant literary achievement. In 1864, she wrote and published *Henry Dunbar* as her sensational novel, and *The Doctor’s Wife* as the literary novel that would survive as an example of her best writing.

Critic W. Fraser Rae did not think that it was possible for Braddon to sever her ties with her identity as a sensational writer completely, but he recognized *The Doctor’s Wife* as coming closest to showing her potential as a serious writer. Lyn Pykett asserts that Braddon saw *The Doctor’s Wife* as a different sort of story that would reflect her gravitas as a writer (viii). But in many ways *The Doctor’s Wife* presents a complex conflict in terms of what Braddon sought to do and what she actually accomplished in the writing of this book. Although in this book Braddon tried to distance herself from her reputation as a sensational novelist, she did not fully achieve this goal; as Tabitha Sparks remarks, “Braddon’s novels typically figure intrigue and passion as the dysfunctional tenants of the country estates that populate her imaginative terrain, [but] she determinedly resists sensationalism in *The Doctor’s Wife* . . . only with partial success” (197). Even so, *The Doctor’s Wife* is a novel worthy of study because, just as she did in both *Lady
Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd, here Braddon sheds considerable light on the position of the Victorian woman as a woman, a reader, and a wife. The Doctor’s Wife is less of a sensational novel until the end, but it goes into a deeper analysis of some of the themes that she touches on in the “bigamy novels.” This text provides an introspective look at an unhappy marriage, questioning gender expectations of both men and women, while also shifting focus to what is necessary for a marriage to create happiness. She also explores the role of the sensational author in society, from both a humorous and serious perspective.

Assessing the ways in which Braddon has been categorized and politicized as a writer by contemporary critics, Pykett states, “Elaine Showalter’s Braddon is—like her sister sensationalists—ultimately a failed or compromised radical or subversive, trapped by her own social conformity and by prevailing literary conventions and generic codes” (xxiii). Pykett does not necessarily agree with Showalter; she is merely examining the ways that Braddon’s work has been interpreted. Yet perhaps another way to look at Braddon is not as a failed or compromised radical but, rather, as a subversively successful one. She had to sell books in order to survive and support her family, but she also was able to challenge successfully the standards and expectations of her society in order to champion change on behalf of women. Although she initially seems less subversive than either Lady Lucy Audley or Aurora Floyd, Isabel Sleaford, the main character of The Doctor’s Wife, is also one of Braddon’s subversive women who are fighting for change. She is not a fiery or passionate character, and although the reader does not always find her to be a compelling character, her experience reveals the painful reality of an unhappy marriage, and how the lack of a proper education, coupled with society’s expectations
that she should become the married “angel of the house,” lead to great unhappiness for Isabel Sleaford and potentially for other women whose predicaments are comparable to hers.

The plot of *The Doctor’s Wife* is taken from Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857). The recycling of other writers’ works was not an uncommon practice in the Victorian age; here, “Braddon, an inveterate recycler of her own and other novelists’ plots, borrowed . . . the story of the adulterous wife of a provincial doctor which was to become one of the classics of the nineteenth century European novel” (Pykett viii). But Braddon puts her own spin on the story, writing a novel that is ultimately quite different from *Madame Bovary*; for example, in Braddon’s handling of her the doctor’s wife does not actually commit adultery. Pykett asserts that a better comparison might be between *The Doctor’s Wife* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72), arguing that “Braddon’s novel, like Eliot’s, succeeds in its attempt to offer . . . a serious analysis of the limitations of women’s education, the constraints of middle-class domesticity, and the dangers for women of romantic fantasy” (xxiv). Natalie and Robert Schroeder extend this line of criticism, noting that *The Doctor’s Wife* critiques marriage and the unhappiness it brings to women:

In *The Doctor’s Wife* more than in any other Braddon novel that preceded it, Braddon fixes her gaze on contemporary marriage and in particular on the causes and consequences of female dissatisfaction. . . . The imagery of bondage is familiar stuff . . . in Braddon’s novels, but she has never before been so explicit about the desolation that marriage becomes when husband and wife have nothing in common. Even though they behave with the utmost civility, their life together
must become a horrible parody of marital companionship, in which both the husband and wife suffer, tragically without understanding why. (*Sensation to Society* 162, 164)

In effect, then, in *The Doctor’s Wife* Braddon is dealing with many of the themes she developed in her earlier sensational novels, but here she explores them in a more introspective setting. We see the day-to-day life of Isabel and her husband George, and it is apparent that they have nothing in common; theirs is a painfully empty marriage, despite good intentions on both sides. Although *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* expose the limited options available to women in Victorian society at large and a woman’s inevitable loss of power in marriage, both *The Doctor’s Wife* and *The Lady’s Mile* (1866) deal with these same issues while eliminating some of the sensational aspects. As an author who successfully challenged the society in which she lived and wrote, Braddon, in *The Doctor’s Wife*, deals with the limited social role available to a poor and partially educated young woman, the power of reading, and the role of the sensational writer in this time period.

A central character in both *The Doctor’s Wife* and *The Lady’s Mile* is Sigismund Smith, a sensational author who delivers pointed commentary, some humorous and some serious, on a number of topics. In many ways he is the most compelling character in the text, as he may be voicing certain of Braddon’s opinions, as well as introducing a dark, sardonic tone to the novels. Exploring one possible function of Sigismund Smith, Pykett suggests that he may be “Braddon’s fictional alter ego; indeed Robert Lee Wolff went so far as to describe him as an authorial ‘mouthpiece’” (ix). If so, by creating such a character as her alter ego, Braddon could address directly her reading public—fans and
critics alike—through him, and his presence enables her to confront some of the criticism leveled against her art while also providing her the means to call into question certain societal conventions and beliefs.

The main character in *The Doctor’s Wife*, George Gilbert, a parish doctor preparing himself to take over his father’s practice, comes to visit his friend, formerly known as Sam Smith who now goes by Sigismund Smith, the sensational author who is gaining in reputation.

“‘My dear old George!’

‘My dear old Sam! But you call yourself Sigismund now?’

“Yes, Sigismund Smith. It sounds well; doesn’t it? If a man’s evil destiny makes him a Smith, the least he can do is to take it out in his Christian name. No Smith with a grain of spirit would ever consent to be a Samuel” (*DW* 10-11).

In this exchange, it is clear that Sam has changed his name to create intrigue and because Sigismund appears to him a name that better fits the image of a sensational writer. Pykett comments that Smith “has changed his name from the prosaic Sam to the more exotic Sigismund as more suited to his authorial persona,” a change that, in turn, “might also be seen as a device by means of which his creator [Braddon] simultaneously satirizes and celebrates the sensation genre, attacks its critics, and at the same time distances her own ‘artistic’ narrative from the low genre(s) with which she has hitherto been associated and some whose machinery and effects she continues to employ” (x). Developed across two of Braddon’s books, this character raises important questions about the role of the sensational author and his or her readers while also providing pointed commentary on the role of woman in Victorian society.
Sigismund mentions to George that when he actually meets some of his readers, he does not seem to fit their expectations, and so they are disappointed. The narrator explains that, because Sigismund creates stories in which the main male character is physically pleasing, when his readers meet him, they expect him to be like one of his fictional characters. But readers’ disappointment in the difference between the fictional character and the sensational writer who creates him is immediate: “Was this meek young man the Byronic hero they had pictured? . . . They had imagined a splendid creature half magician, half brigand, with a pale face and fierce black eyes” (DW 13). Sigismund thus changes his name, but the change hardly has the desired effect: “This was the sort of thing the penny public expected of Sigismund Smith; and, lo, here was a young man with perennial ink-smudges upon his face, and an untidy chamber in the Temple, with nothing more romantic than a waste-paper basket, a litter of old letters and tumbled proofs, and a cracked teapot simmering upon the bob” (14). Possibly here Braddon is commenting on the real distance between the book and the author, for no matter how he alters himself, Smith is decidedly unromantic and unequal to the dashing figures he creates in his fiction. Just because the author is writing about the sensational does not mean that he is a person who lives a sensational life; in fact, because he is always creating stories and struggling to meet deadlines, Sigismund does not have much of a life at all. Braddon may well have wanted to make this point for herself to underscore the fact that her characters are not extensions of herself; however, in some ways this is ironic because parts of her life did reflect aspects of the sensational. But, despite her attempt to avoid aspects of the sensational novel in this text, she is not completely able to do so in The Doctor’s Wife.
The narrator goes on to describe what the reading public most prized in Smith’s novels: “Sigismund Smith was the author of about half a dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature like they like their tobacco—very strong” (11). This is a reference to the fact that sensational writers were seen as inferior authors who focused too much on creating prose that stimulated the senses of their readers, rather than prose that might appeal to and stimulate their intellects. Sigismund writes for the penny journals, which is seen as the lowest form of sensational writing. However, his ambition “was to write a great novel; and the archetype of this magnum opus was the dream which he carried about him wherever he went, and fondly nursed by night and day”; but in the meantime, “he wrote for his public, which was a public that bought its literature in the same manner as its pudding—in penny slices” (12). As she has Sigismund struggle with making a living for himself and being remembered as a great artist, perhaps Braddon is, like her character, attempting to work out these issues in *The Doctor’s Wife*.

Karen Odden asserts that through Sigismund Smith’s character Braddon was attempting to show the connection between her work and the work that came before it, thus proving that sensational novels were not all that different from more serious, literary fiction, nor exclusively the product of late-Victorian authors:

In *The Doctor’s Wife*, Braddon rejects the idea that the sensation novel had few precursors. Braddon begins chapter two with a humorous description of Mr. Sigismund Smith as a male version of herself: “he was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, ‘sensation,’ had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed
nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsieur Jourdain talked prose. Sigismund Smith was the author of about half a dozen highly-spiced fictions.” This passage reflects that Braddon saw the sensation novel as beginning well before the genre was labeled in the early 1860s. Part of her point may have been to convince her critics to temper their criticism by showing them that her fiction was not radically different from what came before. Generic boundaries shift as genres evolve. (11)

Yet another perspective comes from blogger and Ph.D. candidate Nick Milne, who sees Smith’s character as a parody: “Sigismund Smith is Braddon’s hilarious and basically unforgettable—I won’t soon forget him, at any rate—paradigmatic parody of the ‘sensation author.’ His output is unmatched by any other writer of his age, we learn, and he spends his days at a little desk in an unassuming office churning out page after page of copy under titles like The Smuggler’s Bride, and Lilia the Deserted, and—his most popular work—Colonel Montefiasco, or the Brand upon the Shoulder-blade.” It is simplistic to assert that the character is created merely for parody, but parody is certainly an important part his character plays. There is pronounced humor in this text, mostly in the form of parody, as Milne points out, which is different from Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd. Braddon is both making fun of the sensational genre and its critics, while also using this character to share more serious thoughts and opinions.

Sigismund Smith always has murder on his mind. As George waits for his friend to finish writing a passage in order to make his latest deadline, Sigismund suddenly attempts to cut his throat first with his left hand, then with his right, in order to see how one might commit suicide in this manner. Later in the text, we are told, “His friends
found him on one occasion stretched at full length amongst crisp fallen leaves in a recess that had once been a fireplace, with a view to ascertain whether it was long enough to accommodate a body” (*DW* 203). He apparently mimes bizarre behavior before including it in his novels, and he is always thinking about his next murder, his next book, and his next intrigue. In comparison to Smith, a proper Victorian writer would presumably never focus on something as base as murder, suicide, and bigamy, but sensational writers do focus on such matters, and their work sells. So, when George questions Sigismund about the fact that there is a suicide in his story, he gleefully replies that the story “teems with suicides” (12) in a tongue-in-cheek tone that informs all aspects of Smith’s personal character. As Smith reveals that there is not one suicide in his story but many, his over-exaggeration is ironic in that Braddon, the master of the sensational, may well be satirizing the view critics have of her and her writing. But they, and we, miss a key point if we accept her work at face value, for there is much more meaning existing just below the surface.

Sigismund Smith’s character also forces the reader to examine the power of reading. Readers are crucial to his success, and this story deals with the power of reading and the influence it has on the reader. In order to be a successful author, he must have readers who are willing to defy the conservative critics and read his novels; these readers must be willing to expose themselves to the dangers that the sensational novels allegedly contained. Sigismund also has the ability to comment on the reading public, and he makes the point that sensational writers could never survive if the public did not buy their work: “It’s a great pity that fiction is not compatible with a healthy appetite; but it isn’t; and society is so apt to object to one, if one doesn’t come up to its expectations” (188).
On the one hand, the critics denounce sensational writers as appealing too much to the senses and corrupting the innocent, and on the other hand, the public clamors for more installments of the latest story; there is a double standard here between what the critics think and what the public wants. Both Braddon and Smith capitalize on the sales of their sensational texts, yet they both yearn to write a novel that is considered good literature. Braddon explores this dichotomy in *The Doctor’s Wife*.

Sigismund Smith also appears in Braddon’s *The Lady’s Mile*; in this text he changes his name once again to become Sigismund Smyth. Smyth examines how new technology has altered Victorian life. He notices that the steam engine has had a profound impact on society, and as he observes how the pace of Victorian life moves more quickly now that it did before, he decides this, too, must be reflected in his books. The power of the printed word is vital, and it is important to know that technology and new ways of printing opened up the world of literature to more than just the educated upper class. The world was moving in different ways with the advent of technology; Beth Palmer explores the phenomenon:

Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), one of the best selling and most frequently read of the 1860’s sensation novels, is supremely self-aware of its status as a printed product. Both Nicholas Daly and Patrick Brantlinger have argued that sensation novels provide their readers with the different kinds of training needed to operate in a modernizing and technologizing world, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* provides a kind of meta-narrative about how readers might navigate their through a newly complex print culture. (87)
Although this passage refers to *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the same argument can be made in regard to both *The Doctor’s Wife* and *The Lady’s Mile*. The focal point of *The Doctor’s Wife* is the education that Isabel Sleaford, the main character, receives through her reading of the printed word; it is an incomplete education, but it is nonetheless one of the most important influences on the course of her life.

As already noted, in *The Doctor’s Wife* Braddon is recycling Flaubert’s work, and as Smith explains what he terms the “combination novel,” he justifies it as the inevitable consequence of the pressure placed on the sensational writer to churn out so many stories: “‘Why, you see, when you’re doing four great stories a week for a public that must have a continuous flow of incident, you can’t be quite as original as a strict sense of honour might prompt you to be; and the next best thing you can do if you haven’t got ideas of your own, is to steal other people’s ideas in an impartial manner. Don’t empty one man’s pockets, but take a little bit all around’” (*DW* 45). This passage may be humorous, yet it reflects a reality that Braddon herself faced. Here, a degree of blame is placed on the public’s voracious appetite and the author’s need to make a living, the result of both being that the writer’s honor is sometimes sacrificed. In some ways, the narrator faults readers of penny journals, saying that they do not differentiate between their pudding and their serious reading, so the writing of a great novel would be lost on them. Braddon, along with her fictional character Smith, sought financial security as well as literary fame; in *The Doctor’s Wife* Smith’s character reveals much about Braddon and her struggle to achieve security while also achieving respect as a serious writer.

Although *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* feature leading female characters who are intriguing even if they may not be particularly likeable, Isabel
Sleaford of *The Doctor’s Wife* is not as compelling a character. In *Beyond Sensation*, Tabitha Sparks notes that the first half of *The Doctor’s Wife* shares some similarities to the sensational novel in terms of the way that the reader relates to Isabel Sleaford:

“Rather than feel sorry for Isabel during the first half of the novel, we are incited to judge her according to the sensational standards that she so provocatively seems to follow, and we are implicitly cautioned not to identify with Isabel” (204). *The Doctor’s Wife* is more subtle than the “bigamy novels” in its examination of Braddon’s central concerns; while Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd may inspire passionate responses, the reader’s reaction to Isabel is not particularly strong. Perhaps one reason why we react to Isabel this way is that she seems to accept her subordinate role before she leaves her father’s house. Her rebellion against the controlling nature of Victorian society comes through her reading and her romantic view of the world around her. But, this romantic view is misguided, and Isabel is thus created as a character who has the potential to be strong but who never actually achieves this goal. Her life is unfulfilling, and so she looks to fiction to find some deeper meaning. As Sparks notes, at least in the first half of the novel, Braddon may be guiding us to reject the image of the innocent female reader who is corrupted by reading sensational literature and, instead, deem her foolish, unbelievable, and minimally the victim of a lack of education.

Isabel is the daughter of her father and his first wife, while the boys are the result of her father’s second marriage. Isabel’s mother died just three years after Isabel’s birth; she is a motherless daughter, as are many of Braddon’s heroines. Isabel is more engaged by the fictional world in which she has immersed herself than in the real world around her. Later on Sigismund says to Isabel, in regards to the book that has so captured her
attention, that the book is “‘dangerously beautiful . . . beautiful sweet meats, with opium instead of sugar. These books don’t make you happy, do they, Izzie?’” (DW 24). There is an implication here that the act of reading these books is like drug addiction, and this is a charge often leveled against sensational authors. Isabel replies that although the books do not make her happy, she likes the feeling of unhappiness she has when she reads them. Isabel’s life is not as exciting as she would wish, and she lives in a house of boys. She has not had a thorough education, but received “that half and half education which is popular with the poorer middle classes. She left the Albany-Road seminary in her sixteenth year, and set to work to educate herself by means of the nearest circulating library” (28). This is a key fact; it is not that Isabel is an unintelligent character, but she has not had opportunities to develop her intellect; with her lack of formal education, she has cobbled together one of her own out of books she likes to read. The fiction she reads has irreparably influenced her outlook on life, and she is not able to view life without attempting to put it into the plot of a melodramatic story. She desperately wants romance and intrigue in her life, and in the void created by the lack of opportunities open to her, she relies on reading as a crutch for survival in her life.

Sigismund Smith is a boarder in Isabel’s home, who often uses Isabel as a sounding board for ideas he might develop in his novels. He seeks readers like Isabel who want to be the heroines of romantic fiction. When Sigismund and George first enter the garden, Isabel is so entranced by the book she is reading that she does not even notice them. Sigismund diligently tries to get her attention, wishing that his readers were as invested in his books: “I wish that was Colonel Montefiasco. I should like to see a lady so interested in one of my books that she wouldn’t so much as look up when a gentleman
was waiting to be introduced to her” (DW 23). In this scene, Isabel’s family is not well off, and her father, who appears to present himself as a lawyer, is really a swindler. Isabel’s day-to-day life is monotonous, so she seeks and ultimately finds excitement in the pages of books that she reads. The Doctor’s Wife is a story about the power of reading, both the rewards and the pitfalls, and Isabel’s life is dominated by her reading:

She read on more eagerly, almost breathlessly, as the light grew less; for her stepmother would call her in by and by, and there would be a torn jacket to mend, perhaps, or a heap of worsted-socks to be darned for the boys; and there would be no chance of reading another line of that sweet sentimental story, that heavenly prose, which fell into a cadence like poetry, that tender, melancholy music which haunted the reader long after the book was shut and laid aside, and made the dull course of common life so dismally unendurable. (27)

Later, it comes to light that Isabel reads a mixture of different types of literature, but once she finds a novel she likes, she will read it over and over again. She learns what she knows of life and love from her books, and she creates for herself a fictional fantasy world that will never live up to the actual life she leads. The act of reading is dangerous for her; while reading, Isabel creates a life that has virtually no connection to the reality of her world, and thus she sets herself up for eventual disappointment with respect to love and marriage.

Assessing Isabel’s character, Sparks observes that The Doctor’s Wife possesses elements of the sensational, but it also has elements of sentimentalism and realism; all three of these literary forms were popular in the 1860s.
Braddon’s multifaceted, but ultimately confused compendium of three types of popular Victorian literature, sensationalism, sentimentalism, and realism, makes *The Doctor’s Wife* an extraordinary document of the competing epistemologies at work in 1860’s fiction. Braddon’s use of these contrasting narrative styles allows us insight into her understanding of the representation of women, as the often-convoluted portrait of Isabel provides an unusual perspective into the wildly divergent characterizations of heroines in this decade. For despite the flaws in *The Doctor’s Wife*, Braddon’s ability to trouble the generic conventions of each of these categories of fiction attests to her uncanny insight into the limiting and insufficient representations of women in all types of Victorian fiction. (198)

This important factor determines how the reader responds to Isabel. Because of the “often convoluted portrait of Isabel” and “confused compendium,” Isabel ends up being a character who is difficult to understand or like completely. At times in the novel, it is virtually impossible to determine how Braddon wanted readers to react to Isabel’s character.

Isabel Sleaford is described by Charles Raymond, a phrenologist and friend to both Sigismund Smith and George Gilbert, as “a very good little girl; but she’s got too much Wonder, and exaggerated Ideality. She opens her big eyes when she talks of her favourite books, and looks up all scared and startled if you speak to her while she is reading” (*DW* 67). She reads Shakespeare, Thackeray, Byron, and Dickens, but she has no point of reference outside of her novels. She reads good literature, yet it is also implied that she reads at least some sensational literature as well. The interesting thing is the way in which Isabel is influenced by all of the books that she reads; we learn that she
“glowed and trembled with childish love for the dear books out of whose pages she took the joys and sorrows of her life” (68). This is a romantic notion on her part, of course, but it also reveals Isabel’s inability to embrace any reality beyond that of her favorite novels. Regardless of the type of novel she is reading, she attaches herself to it to the exclusion of anything else that may be going on around her. Lacking a mentor or guide as well as a type of education that might broaden her horizons, she is left to her own devices as she creates her world out of the pages of the fictional texts she reads.

The narrator vacillates between seeing Isabel as a smart young woman who is tied to her socio-economic position and, therefore, not able to dream of a larger and more exciting life than the one she has and seeing her as a young woman who dreams a lot, seems slightly silly, and is unable to finish the passionate poems or the plays she begins creating, or the play that she starts but is unable to finish. She “rarely finished either the plaint or the invocation” (75); she has dreams and desires, but she is unable or unwilling to fully develop them. Ultimately, the narrator appears to settle on a more negative than positive view of Isabel as a character, stating, “There is no dream so foolish, . . . no fancy however childish, that did not find lodgment in Isabel’s . . . mind during the long idle evenings in which she sat alone in her quiet school room, watching the stars kindle faintly in the dusk” (73).

Perhaps, as Sparks asserts, Braddon is critiquing the limited outlets available for women such as Isabel; there are not many ways in which they can make a living, learn about the world, or move forward in life. Beyond the discussion of the possible love affair between George and Isabel, at least on George’s part, there is also an examination of what Isabel Sleaford can actually do, given the fact that she does not possess a full
education, she is from a poor middle class background, and she is not male. At one point, Isabel thinks about becoming an actress, yet she does not act on it. The creation of her fantasy life almost seems to paralyze her, but there are so few options open to her that she is trapped, waiting for a hero to come rescue her. The education that she has gleaned from her reading is that her romantic hero will come and rescue her from her mundane life. It appears that her reading has almost encouraged her to give up any potential power she might have to wait for her knight in shining armor to come and create an exciting life for her.

Isabel was “so eager to be something” (73). But lacking realistic options, the best she can do for herself is to wish to be a heroine who will either die for what she believes or be swept off her feet by a member of the peerage; Isabel cannot envision anything for herself beyond these because she is not encouraged or urged to do so. Isabel reflects the difficult position in which women of her socio-economic means typically find themselves; in her case, her best option is to be the governess for a pair of children who were “rather stupid, but they were very good” (71) in a very limited world. The narrator comments on Isabel’s desperation: “I think [she] was just in that frame of mind in which a respectable, and otherwise harmless, young person aims a bullet at some virtuous sovereign, in a paroxysm of insensate yearning for distinction. Miss Sleaford wanted to be famous. She wanted the drama of her life to begin, and the hero to appear” (73). Isabel is so starving for direction and purpose in her life that she might well resort to violence; she does not, of course, but there is at least the hint of the possibility that the lack of direction she is experiencing could lead her to a sort of craziness. We can infer that she is not alone, that there are flesh and blood women of this period who also might be driven
to violence as a result of the limitations of society and the excruciating boredom of their lives. Isabel is a significant character to the extent that she represents women who are in situations similar to her own, who, because of society’s ideals or their own faulty values, believe that marriage will bring them happiness and economic security.

According to Sigismund Smith, Isabel is “dreadfully romantic as she reads too many novels” (30). She is choosing, for the most part, what is considered to be good fiction; she “settled at once upon the highest blossoms of the flower-garden of fiction, and read her favorite novels over and over again” (28), but, in reading Dickens, Thackeray, and Bulwer-Lytton (who was a mentor of Braddon’s), she succumbs to the drama and the romance of these novels. The world of her imagination eclipses reality, and reading almost appears as a sort of addiction for her. Sigismund says, “No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think their lives are to be paraphrases of their favorite books” (30). Isabel is no wise woman, and these novels are dangerous to her for they completely influence the way she sees the world, when she retreats to her novels, the real world cannot compete. Without access to the outside world, and without the means of supporting herself, Isabel’s fiction provides her with all of the stimulation, pain, and happiness that she needs. Isabel “wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine,—unhappy perhaps, and dying early” (28); the act of reading only heightens the unhappiness of Isabel’s life, and her goal in life is to be some sort of heroine, to suffer, and to die young. She does not believe strongly in a cause that she is willing to die for; she just wants to be the main character in some story. She appears to be quite limited in her perception of the world.
Charles Raymond, the ward of the orphaned children whom Isabel serves as governess, sees that Isabel has the capacity to achieve greater things, but he notes that her capacity is not necessarily positive given the time and society in which she lives. He says, “That girl has mental imitation,—the highest and rarest faculty of the human brain,—ideality and comparison. What could I not make of such a girl as that? And yet—.” Mr. Raymond only finished the sentence with a sigh. He was thinking that, after all, these bright faculties might not be the best gifts for a woman. It would have been better, perhaps, for Isabel to have possessed the organ for pudding-making and stocking-darning, if those useful accomplishments are represented by an organ. The kindly phrenologist was thinking that perhaps the highest fate life held for that pale girl with the yellow tinge in her eyes was to share the home of a simple-hearted country surgeon, and rear his children to be honest men and virtuous women. (82)

Raymond adds that he can see a brighter life for Isabel, but then he ends up thinking that she can hope for nothing more than marriage to an unimaginative country surgeon.

Braddon invests hope in the fact that he can see a different future for her, but as Isabel is too anchored to the present expectation of a woman in her position, she cannot hope for anything better. Raymond sees a near-fatal dichotomy in Isabel’s life; she is intelligent, but she has never been fully educated. Thus, he decides that her best option may be to attempt to embrace “the angel of the house” image so that she can be the dutiful and happy wife of the country surgeon.

The narrator appears to poke fun at Isabel at times, which adds dark humor to the text. “She pined to be the chosen slave of some scornful creature, who should perhaps ill-
treat and neglect her. I think she would have worshipped an aristocratic Bill Sykes, and would have been content to die under his cruel hand, only in the ruined chamber of some Gothic castle, by moonlight, with the distant Alps shimmering whitely before her glazing eyes” (72). Isabel makes even the villainous character from *Oliver Twist* into a romantic hero; she romanticizes people and actions within novels that are not romantic characters. Bill Sykes later goes on to murder Nancy, a prostitute; he is obviously not a heroic character. Isabel’s naiveté is exposed here, and she appears gullible to the point of humor. One of the most accepted positions for a young Victorian woman of some education but no money is that of a governess. Yet Isabel’s charges are hardly the brightest, and Charles Raymond comments on her influence, “If they were clever children, I should be afraid of her exaggerated ideality but they are too stupid to be damaged by any influence of that kind” (72). Isabel’s charges are so intellectually limited that it does not matter that she is not the ideal governess as she will cause them little harm. The children love it when Isabel acts out scenes from her books; it is the only part of their education that they enjoy. It almost appears that Isabel has squandered her intellect, but Braddon is not placing all of the blame on her, as society bears more of the blame in terms of the options that are open to women and the limited expectations of what woman can do and be.

George Gilbert and Isabel Sleaford view their interactions differently, and in viewing this difference, we recognize the hopelessness of their match. A small town country surgeon, George is not particularly romantic, does not like to read books, and sees the world in a very utilitarian way. He falls in love with Isabel because she is beautiful, yet he knows virtually nothing about her: “His love! Did he love her then, already—this pale-faced young person whom he had only seen twice; who might be a
Florence Nightingale, or a Madame de Laffarge, for all that he knew either one way or the other?” (78). Isabel could be a saint or a murderer, but regardless, because she is beautiful, George is convinced that he loves her. This is the way that men feel about Lucy Audley and Aurora Floyd. Men fall in love with these women because of their beauty, and then they soon discover that they have made a mistake, like. George is also described as a man whose “nature” lacked “[t]he poetry of friendship[. . .] He was honest, sincere, and true, but not sympathetic or assimilative; he preserved his own individuality wherever he went, and took no colour from the people amongst whom he lived” (58). Not romantically inclined, George is also not a lover of poetry or fiction. The love affair between Isabel and George is destined for doom because they are shockingly different in the way that they each view the world. When they are together at a picnic, and George is poised to profess his love to Isabel, the narrator interjects,

I suppose that simple little story must be a pretty story, in its way; for when a woman hears it for the first time, she is apt to feel kindly disposed to the person who recites it, however poorly or tamely he may tell his tale. Isabel listened with a most delightful complacency; not because she reciprocated George’s affection for her, but because this was the first little bit of romance in her life, and she felt that the story was beginning all at once, and that she was going to be a heroine. (87).

Isabel is excited that someone is actually professing his love to her, but she is indifferent to the speaker, while George believes, based only on her outer appearance, that he is successfully pouring out his heart to the woman he loves. George has no idea what Isabel is thinking; he interprets her indifference positively, while she is actually
thinking that her life is finally just begun and that her prince will soon come and secure her love, but she does not recognize George Gilbert as that man. The narrator comments, “Yes, George pictured Miss Sleaford the heroine of such a domestic story as this, and had not power to divine that there was an incongruity in the fancy; no fineness of ear to discover the dissonant interval between heroine and the story” (78). What George sees as the end of the story, Isabel sees the beginning; she does not share his passion, but she is moved by it: “She didn’t like him, but she liked him to be there talking to her” (88). In fact, as George is proposing to her, Isabel is thinking not about him, but about the Dickens story she recently read; George thus is interchangeable with any other man who had these feelings for her: “‘I shouldn’t so much mind being poor,’ repeated the girl; for she thought, if she did not marry a duke or a Dombey, it would be at least something to experience the sentimental phase of poverty” (90). Isabel spares no thought to the reality of her life with a man she does not love; she hopes to experience the “sentimental phase of poverty” but there is no such phase. The poverty that she could fall into is not sentimental, but brutally painful. Sarcastic humor is woven into the story that pokes fun at both Isabel and George. George contemplates asking Isabel to marry him: “His love! Did he love her, then, already—this pale-faced young person, whom he had only seen twice; who might be Florence Nightingale or a Madame Laffarge, for all he knew, one way or the other?” (78). She could be either a saint in disguise or his potential murderer, yet this knowledge does not have any impact on his decision, and he still convinces himself that he loves her, and that he should ask her to marry him. This is different from the previous texts, but it is still part of a larger goal of critiquing the gender expectations
of men and women. They are both presented as limited and naive to the world around them.

Regardless of the reader’s opinion of Isabel, whether she is seen as a compelling and likeable character or not, at the core of the text, and beyond the humor is the tale of mismatched lovers, and a sad illumination of an unhappy marriage. In the beginning, it is George who has the power in the marriage. He seeks to make Isabel over in the fashion that he knows, just as John Mellish eventually remakes Aurora Floyd at the end of that novel. The name of this book is *The Doctor’s Wife*, not *The Education of Isabel Sleaford*. She is defined by her role as the wife of surgeon George Gilbert. He does not understand her, nor does he understand her love of poetry, beauty, and romance:

He loved and admired her, and he was honestly anxious that she should be happy; but then he wanted her to be happy according to his ideas of happiness, and her own. . . . He had married this girl because she was unlike other women; and now that she was his own property, he set himself conscientiously to work to smooth her into the most ordinary semblance of everyday womanhood, by means of that moral flat-iron called common-sense. (116)

He wants to shape her according to his view of what she should be. In many ways, of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *The Doctor’s Wife*, this is the text that is the most forthcoming about the patriarchal power dynamic in a marriage. George sees her as his property, to do with as he likes. There is a painful scene in which Isabel and George are returning from their honeymoon. She is traveling in her brown silk wedding dress, when a farmer, riding the omnibus with them, wipes his muddy boots on the hem of her dress. She feels she cannot read her book because her husband does not read, and she is
trying to think of ways that she can change George’s cottage to make it a brighter and more welcoming place. George is oblivious to her discomfort about the dress and the lack of reading, and he swiftly informs her that she will not be spending any money on making the cottage more comfortable. She pulls the veil down over her face so that she can quietly cry. “It was a mistake,—a horrible and irreparable mistake,—whose dismal consequences she must bear for ever and ever” (110).

Isabel concedes defeat early on as she recognizes that she has made a grave mistake in marrying George, not because he is a bad man, but because they have nothing in common: Isabel “had made a mistake, and she accepted the consequences of her mistake; and fell back on the useless dreamy life she had led so long in her father’s house” (116). Not understood in her father’s house, she is also not understood in her husband’s house, so she retreats once again to the world of fiction that she knows. Schroeder and Schroeder note that in *The Doctor’s Wife*, Braddon “fixes her gaze on contemporary marriage and in particular on the causes and consequences of female dissatisfaction” (*Sensation to Society* 162). Isabel is extremely dissatisfied with her life; she still attempts to be “the angel of the house” but she finds it excruciatingly boring to do so. Her dissatisfaction with her marriage leaves her open to the possibility of infidelity, and this is another theme that Braddon explores, not in the sensational form of bigamy, but in a less dramatic and more in-depth situation in which a wife knows that no happiness will come from her marriage.

The possibility of infidelity comes with the arrival of Roland Lansdell, a member of the upper class, who is the owner of Mordred Priory, a country estate near Isabel’s town. Lansdell becomes another patriarchal force in Isabel’s life. She first learns of him
by reading his poetry. Isabel loves the work of Byron and Shelley, but then she is
introduced to the work of Roland Lansdell through his collection of poems called *An
Alien’s Dreams*. She comes to adore Lansdell’s volume and holds it up as one of the most
outstanding collections of poetry she has ever read. Lansdell uses this book as an outlet to
explore his life, which he finds meaningless after losing a great love. It is not a well-
known piece of writing, but it soon becomes one of Isabel’s favorites. When she finds out
he is the author of the volume, and she actually meets him, she is in awe of him. He
appeared to be the hero whom she had waited for all of her life, and it puts her own life
with her husband in stark contrast with her fantasy life. The act of reading leads her into
dangerous territory, and she is strongly drawn to Lansdell.

Although the title of Lansdell’s book is not intended to refer directly to Isabel, in
many ways, it could, for in this novel she is the alien who feels she does not belong. “The
Alien’s dreams seemed like her own fancies, somehow; for they belonged to that bright
other world which she was never to see” (*DW* 120). Isabel dreams of a much different
life than the one she has; she desperately wants to be a member of the upper class, to
have a life of intrigue, and to meet the hero of her life, but as she has neither the
education nor the family background to achieve any of these, she should be happy as the
wife of a good, though boring, man. Isabel perceives herself as an alien in her own life,
and Lansdell’s book of poetry speaks to her about her life and unhappy marriage.

Isabel tries to share her love of poetry, and specifically *An Alien’s Dream*, with
George, but inevitably, she would “catch him yawning behind his glass of ale, or
reckoning a patient’s account on the square tips of his fingers” (121). In a moment of
clarity she says to her husband, “‘You don’t understand me,’ . . . ‘you don’t understand
me.’” (121). Clearly, George Gilbert does not understand his wife, and he thinks that she is just being illogical and emotional in this scene when she bursts into tears. He sees her as “capricious and ill-tempered” (121), but it is her life with him that is causing her to be so. Similar to Lucy Audley, Isabel does not have a lot of choice in terms of how she will survive; she can forever be a governess to dim-witted children or she can marry well. The description of George’s loudness as he eats radishes sums up her unhappiness in her marriage: “and, oh, how George could eat radishes, crunch, crunch, crunch!—till madness would have been a relief” (135). She finally seeks to escape him and their insufferable marriage through her reading and her long walks with Lansdell.

George Gilbert initially views Isabel as a beautiful object and feels he must possess her as his wife, despite the fact that he does not know much about her. But, the narrator, perhaps reflecting Braddon’s opinion, has a pithy comment, warning the reader:

But then, if a man chooses to marry a girl because her eyes are black and large and beautiful, he must be contented with the supreme advantage he derives from the special attribute for which he has chosen her: and so long as she does not become a victim to cataract, or aggravated inflammation of the eyelids, or chronic sty, he has no right to complain of his bargain. (160)

The narrator rails at George for choosing a wife based on the beauty of her eyes and nothing else, but there is also a deeper message delivered here: George has no one to blame but himself if things do not work out. He was seduced by a pretty face without knowing the actual woman, and not wanting to spend time getting to know her, he would rather shape her into something that he desires. George is not portrayed as a vicious or cruel character; he is merely doing what he thinks is his right to do, which is to shape his
wife into the ideal that he envisions. He does not need to try and share her interests, nor does she need to share his. But, the failure to attempt to compromise perpetuates the unhappiness found in their marriage.

In comparison to George, Roland Lansdell is a wealthy rake with a lack of purpose in life. He was destroyed by the loss of his first love, and as a result, he has ambled through life, searching for meaning but finding none. The narrator bluntly assesses Lansdell: “[A]t thirty Roland was nothing” (140). He has no faith in God, no focus in his life, and, appearing quite shallow, no depth of character. He first thinks that Isabel is pretty, just as George does, but he also initially thinks her stupid and empty-headed, though he later emends this initial opinion:

Mrs. Gilbert was not stupid, after all; she was something better than a pretty waxen image, animated by limited machinery. That pretty head was filled with a quaint confusion of ideas, half-formed childish fancies, which charmed and amused the elegant loiterer, who had lived in a world where all the women were clever and accomplished, and able to express all they thought, and a good deal more than they thought, with the clear precision and self-possession of creatures who were thoroughly convinced of the infallibility of their own judgment. (DW 161)

The elegant loiterer, Lansdell, has a change of heart and finds Isabel attractive on physical and cerebral levels, but it is her lack of knowledge that he finds most attractive. The narrator vacillates in describing Isabel; earlier in the book she is described as good and full of Wonder, but in this passage she is described as “very wicked, and she was very foolish, very childish. . . . Left quite to herself through all her idle girlhood, this
foolish child had fed upon three-volume novels and sentimental poetry” (184). Roland Lansdell wants to educate her so that she will ultimately do his bidding, and he thinks that after he educates her, she will follow his lead, but their relationship is not quite so simple. Isabel sees him, however, from the start as, “the incarnation of all the dreams of her life, he was Byron alive again, and come home from Missolonghi” (139). He is the hero of whom she has dreamed.

Neither George Gilbert nor Roland Lansdell seems to be the ideal hero in this text, and perhaps Braddon is forcing the reader to question the creation of the male hero as well as the female heroine. Isabel creates the perfect image of her hero out of her reading; there is little in her real life that correlates to what a genuine male hero should be. Her father is not the lawyer he pretends to be; instead, he is a swindler who ends up serving time in prison. When she becomes intrigued by Roland Lansdell, she is looking for happiness in a world in which she is unable to find it. They share an interest in reading, and they spend hours talking about the books that they have read. Braddon does not create her as an immoral character, ready to have an affair with Lansdell, nor does Isabel leave her husband when Lansdell asks her to run away with him. But Roland Lansdell represents the happiness that Isabel might have been able to find; better yet, with an education and knowledge beyond her books, she might have actually found a way to support herself until she was able to fall in love and marry a man of her choosing and not merely out of circumstance. But, this was not to be Isabel’s path.

Phrenologist Charles Raymond realizes the significance of the role of woman in a Victorian marriage, and in many ways, he speaks the most eloquent truths in the book. Although Robert Wolff and Lyn Pykett argue that Sigismund Smith is speaking for
Braddon, Raymond is the one who speaks his mind in a way that sounds much like Braddon. “Depend upon it, Mrs. Gilbert,” he says to Isabel at one point, “the men who lead great lives, and do noble deeds, and die happy deaths, are married men who mind their wives” (133). He recognizes that Isabel is smart, and he recognizes her capacity to make more of her life than to settle for marriage to George and bearing his children. But then as he thinks about it, he realizes that being smart in Victorian England is not necessarily a gift for a woman. He vocalizes the limitations placed upon Isabel and suggests that it might be easier for her to accept her lot in life and not wish for anything more. He goes on to note,

She’s so pretty—so pretty; and when she talks, and her face lights up, a sort of picture comes into my mind of what she would be in a great saloon, with clusters of lights about her, and masses of shimmering colour, making a gorgeous background for her pale young beauty; and brilliant men and women clustering around her, to hear her talk and see her smile. I can see her like this; and then, when I remember what her life is likely to be, I begin to feel sorry for her, just as if she were some fair young nun, foredoomed to be buried alive by and by. (83)

Charles Raymond understands Isabel’s character with uncanny ability, and Isabel is doomed to be metaphorically buried alive in the life that she lives with George.

To escape her life and his boredom, Isabel and Roland Lansdell meet almost every day to discuss poetry and fiction. As they take long, rambling walks, the small town of Graybridge begins to take notice. Gossip abounds about the inappropriate relationship between the two, and most villagers assume that more is going on between the two than their sharing long walks. At Raymond’s urging, Lansdell is encouraged to
leave Mordred, his estate, in order to stop the gossip and leave Isabel alone. He does this, but before he leaves, he opens his house and library to Isabel. There, she spends many days reading by the fireplace, and as she reads more and more, she becomes aware of what she formerly did not know:

Her mind expanded amongst all the beautiful things around her, and the graver thoughts engendered out of grave books pushed away any of her most childish fancies, her simple sentimental yearnings. Until now she had lived entirely too much amongst poets and romancers; but now grave volumes of biography opened to her a new picture of life. . . . The consciousness of her ignorance increased as she became less ignorant; and there were times when this romantic girl was almost sensible, and became resigned to the fact that Roland Lansdell could have no part in the story of her life. (236)

Her self-education is expanding, and she is learning about the world around her. Her goal appears to be that she should become more sensible, accept the life that she has, and find comfort in the fact that she has married a local doctor. The big, grave biographies she reads are supposed to supplement her education and facilitate her transformation into a sensible person, but this is not who she is. She tries to forget Lansdell, but she cannot stop loving him.

Influenced by the reading she did as a younger woman, her ideas are established, and it is difficult if not impossible for her to change them. Although The Doctor’s Wife is not a sensational novel, madness is incorporated into it; Isabel, we are told, “was beginning to feel that people guessed at her wickedness, and tried to cure her of her madness. Yes; she was very wicked and very mad” (230). Back on this familiar ground,
Isabel, like Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd, accuses herself of madness because of her wicked thoughts about a man who is not her husband. Though she never acted on her feelings for Roland, the fact that she has them indicates madness to her. She is in a loveless marriage to a good man, and she does not expect to find in this world the love she had hoped to find. Yet by desiring what she is forbidden to have, Isabel thinks she is mad. Isabel’s belief in her madness fits into the overall paradigm of madness in Braddon’s novels, where women who venture outside of acceptable Victorian behavior are invariably deemed mad.

Roland Lansdell returns to his estate because he cannot bear to be away from Isabel; he resumes his courting of her, this time accepting that he cannot escape her love and no longer wants to. He pursues her in the expectation that they will be able to be together; and he believes that she will leave her husband to be with him. In a compelling speech to Charles Raymond, Lansdell explains that if he knew that Isabel loved her husband, he would not pursue her, but he knows that she does not love her boring husband: “They have not one single sentiment in common. . . . If I had seen Isabel Gilbert happy with a husband who loved her, and understood her, and was loved by her, I would have held myself aloof from her pure presence; I would have stifled every thought that was wrong to that holy union” (244). He hopes to spirit her away so that they can create a partnership, despite the fact that they would not be able to marry without a divorce. He does not want her to be his mistress, but rather his partner, companion, and love. But, in spite of her negative experiences with marriage, Isabel is not ready to act immorally and go against the moral expectations of marriage. She misses out on the opportunity of
potential happiness here, trapped by what she thinks is morally correct despite her unhappiness.

The Doctor’s Wife provides an analysis of marital infidelity that goes far beyond the bigamy evident in Lady Audley’s Secret or Aurora Floyd. Isabel and Lansdell present the case of two people—one childish and foolish, the other wealthy but with little focus in his life—who do indeed love and care for each other but are not destined to be together. Theirs is not a case of mistaken identity; Lansdell does not seduce Isabel as Aurora is seduced by her father’s groom. And although the principal characters of The Doctor’s Wife might not seem as compelling as those of Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd, this book does seriously examine the doomed love between Isabel and Lansdell and weighs the fairness of an end that denies happiness to both characters.

George Gilbert is a nice enough figure, but the fact that he chomps on his radishes as his wife attempts to share her love of poetry with him makes us want her to find some happiness to compensate for the bleakness of her life with him. Here, then, as the reader is rooting for the taboo, Braddon has subtly influenced the way readers view what is considered socially acceptable. The reader is almost hoping that Isabel will leave her boring husband to find happiness with Roland Lansdell. Just as Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd have moments in which they almost achieve the happiness they seek, so too does Isabel. Instead of condemning her for wanting the forbidden, we want her to achieve happiness. Braddon takes this couple to the edge, and then swiftly deposits them right back on more acceptable ground.

Isabel loves Roland with a great and blinding love, but she will not act on it: “It was such a love as this which Isabel imagined she had won for herself. It is such a love as
the dearest desire of womankind,—a beautiful useless, romantic devotion,—a wasted life of fine regretful worship” (249). Relying on what Isabel has read, this is how she defines love. Roland believes that Isabel feels as he does about love and that she will run away with him, leaving the small town and her husband behind. Yet although Isabel would be willing to die for Roland, to suffer for him, she will not do anything as immoral as leave her husband to live with her lover in sin, even if doing so brought her happiness. According to the books she has mastered, her idea of romantic love included suffering but not the baseness of intimacy, which she could not accept emotionally. Taking to heart the lessons of the sensational novel wherein the female protagonist who breaks the rules is ultimately punished, Isabel will not risk such an end for herself. Lansdell fails to understand this aspect of Isabel’s character until it is too late; as he becomes furious and then devastated, she says to him, “‘You do not understand—no one understands how I love you!’” (270; emphasis added). Realizing that he has gravely misunderstood the woman he loves, Lansdell also realizes that, “There was no middle standing-place which [he] could occupy in this foolish girl’s mind. If he was not a demi-god, he must be a villain” (271). Theirs is actually a love doomed from the start, and for his part Roland “no longer consider[s] it his duty to think of her as a pretty, grown-up child, whose childish follies amused him for the moment” (217). The love story falls apart as it comes close to its consummation; in the end, George Gilbert will leave Isabel a young widow eligible to become Roland’s bride.

After Isabel denies Roland her love, she once again attempts to be a good wife and becomes devout, seeking in religion an outlet for her passionate feelings. She tries to read only the Bible and other religious works, but she cannot commit herself to this life
because she is incapable of being the logical and sensible girl she is urged to be by those around her.

Despite her attempt to eliminate aspects of the sensational in this novel, Braddon is unable to do so towards the end of the book. Isabel’s father, who has been in jail for forgery but is now on parole, and who has not been mentioned in the story since the first few chapters, is a source of keen embarrassment to Isabel for the crimes he committed. He presents himself as a lawyer early in the text, but it is revealed at the end that he is really a forger known as “Jack the Scribe” (358). Isabel has never talked about her father to Sigismund or George and appears to become distraught when his name is even mentioned. The reason for her embarrassment becomes evident when we find out that he has been in jail for his business dealings. One of the key elements that leads to his arrest was the testimony of Roland Lansdell. Lansdell had not been directly involved in any crimes by Mr. Sleaford, but he did endeavor to help have him arrested by identifying him. 

“Every privation and hardship endured had been a fresh item in his long indictment against Mr. Lansdell, the ‘languid’ swell,’ whom he had never wronged to the extent of a halfpenny, but who, for the mere amusement of the chase, had hunted him down” (360-361). Mr. Sleaford vowed that if he ever got out of jail, he would go after Lansdell with a vengeance and kill him. Isabel’s father comes to her to demand money, and rumors abound that once again Isabel is engaged in inappropriate behavior as she is seen after dark with a strange man while her husband is dying. Lansdell hears of this and confronts Mr. Sleaford.

Once it is determined that Mr. Sleaford is Isabel’s father, Lansdell reveals his identity, and, as a result, Mr. Sleaford beats Lansdell over the head with his cane. While
Isabel finds her husband much more interesting in sickness than in health, yet despite her ministrations, she is unable to save him. George Gilbert dies of typhoid fever, and while there is a slim hope that Lansdell will survive so that he and Isabel can be together, Roland Lansdell dies the next day, succumbing to his wounds. Braddon does not eliminate the melodrama in the final chapters of the text. The narrator writes, “This is not a sensation novel” (358), in a defensive tone, and yet despite this statement the events are sufficiently melodramatic as to provide the reader with elements of the sensational novel. The narrator protests too much here, in essence drawing more attention to the sensational elements.

According to Roland Lansdell’s will, Isabel inherits the bulk of his fortune, and she is able to achieve the higher standing in society of which she always dreamed. She did not have her true love to share it with, but Lady Gwendoline, Roland Lansdell’s cousin, and her father give her the education that she never had before. Isabel grows into a woman who is concerned about the welfare of those around her, and she uses her inheritance to build cottages and schools for the poor people of the neighborhood. She has expanded her reading repertoire to include books outside of the fictional realm, and she does achieve at least part of the education that she was denied, but in many ways, the end of the book is anticlimactic; the biggest change in Isabel’s life is that she now has the money to pursue the education that she lacked, but she also loses the potential for happiness as well.

Sigismund Smith has the last word in the book. “He has consulted Mr. Raymond respecting the investment of his deposit-account, which is supposed to be something considerable; for a gentleman who lives chiefly upon bread and marmalade and weak tea
may amass a very comfortable little independence from the cultivation of sensational literature in penny numbers” (404). He has the last laugh as amidst this discussion of wealth and poverty in the book the sensational writer has quite a nest egg of savings, which will allow him to marry as he pleases. And again, it does not seem a far cry to apply these words to Braddon, in that she might be addressing the public in his last paragraph of this text which is not a sensational piece, but her last words are a defense of her work; as a woman author, she has amassed independence and security as a result of her writing. She has achieved success in a way that is usually reserved solely for male authors, and she has done this in a controversial manner. She struggled with creating fiction that would be considered to be more literary, and yet she still achieved success on her own terms based on her writing, and this last paragraph seems to be an affirmation of this success.

*The Doctor’s Wife* is a pivotal text, although perhaps not exactly in the way that Braddon intended. Here, as she examines the unhappiness caused by an empty marriage and actions that lead up to a dismal union, the novel ultimately agitates for a change in the way that a society views marriage. Isabel’s life is an example of wasted potential with respect to marriage, education, and love, and to that extent, her character is projected by Braddon as a representative of many women in Victorian times. Although she eventually achieves security at the end of the book, which is something she greatly desired, there is no indication that security has made her happy. The romanticism she brought to her life was dangerous to her, as was the stultifying marriage she entered into with George Gilbert. *The Doctor’s Wife* may not be the most compelling of Braddon’s works, but it represents an important shift in her writing in its attempted departure from
sensationalism; instead of a purely dramatic story of bigamy and infidelity, we here gain a glimpse into the literal drudgery and unhappiness associated with marriage. Braddon extends her discussion of the limitations of marriage for women and men in *The Lady’s Mile*, where she employs characters who are more compelling and a story that is more engaging than that one finds in *The Doctor’s Wife*. 
The Lady’s Mile, published in 1866, is a wonderful text to close out a limited study of Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In many ways, it more clearly states subtle opinions put forth in The Doctor’s Wife about the institution of marriage and woman’s role in it. This chapter will also function as a conclusion, using The Lady’s Mile as a lens through which to examine the main themes of Braddon’s novels and to complete an analysis Lady Audley’s Secret, Aurora Floyd, The Doctor’s Wife, and The Lady’s Mile. The Lady’s Mile is considered to be Braddon’s first society novel that deals with the intricacies and expectations of Victorian society; in it, she creates female characters who once again critique the institution of marriage and society, but now more forcefully than in her earlier novels. Many of the themes familiar to readers of Braddon’s Aurora Floyd, Lady Audley’s Secret, and The Doctor’s Wife are further developed in this book: the limited options available to women who wish to make their own place in society, the ability of a woman to find and exercise her own voice, and, especially, the constraining nature of the institution of marriage. Although many of Braddon’s early female protagonists come close to descending from propriety to impropriety in their actions but step back at the last moment, the female characters of The Lady’s Mile clearly voice their concerns about the limited options available to women, and here there is also a glimpse of hope for the future. The clarity and honesty of this book direct the reader to view Braddon’s themes with greater exactitude than formerly and thus provides a fitting conclusion to her earlier works. Analyzing a series of marriages and looking at the expectations of gender and
class as well as a woman’s ability to achieve happiness, in *The Lady’s Mile* Braddon’s art is still restrained by the need to create characters who are not too revolutionary, for she must still sell her books to the public, yet in many ways, this book is more clear and less subtle in acknowledging the drawbacks of marriage for women and in challenging some of the precepts of society for both men and women.

“Sam Smith,” the sensational author from *The Doctor’s Wife*, reappears in *The Lady’s Mile*, where his name is now Sigismund Smythe. Here, Sigismund Smythe is “the novelist who had abandoned the penny public to court the favor of the circulating-library subscribers, and had sublimated the vulgar Smith into the aristocratic Smythe” (*LM* 1: 13). Smythe’s reformed “aristocratic” identity is crucial in *The Lady’s Mile* for a continuation of the discussion of the influence of both gender expectations and print technology on society begun in *The Doctor’s Wife*. Sensational texts were believed to be a corruptive influence on their readers; at the same time, as the nineteenth century progressed, life seemed to be moving at a faster pace, and information was available to a wider variety of socio-economic classes than earlier in the century; in fact, despite the widespread desire among the ruling class to maintain the status quo in society, Victorian society was changing with the times, and sensational texts reflected many of these changes. Smythe comments on the invention of the steam engine and the influence it has had on the increased pace of society, explaining to his artist friend, Philip Foley, “Depend upon it, that ever since mankind began to exist, every succeeding age has lived faster than its predecessor. . . . We educate our children by steam, and our men and women want to grow rich at the rate of sixty miles an hour” (1: 16). To the extent that their plots and themes challenged societal expectations, the popularity and power of sensational novels
mirrored the impact of the steam engine on society at large, and their literal speed in altering readers’ mores was regarded as a threat to the cohesion of established Victorian society.

As technology played an important role in the advancement of the printing industry, the steam engine facilitated the near-instantaneous dissemination of sensational texts. In a letter to his daughter, William Makepeace Thackeray describes anxiously waiting at the train station for the next volume of one of Braddon’s books to come in (Wolff 9). Technology and new ways of printing made the world of literature accessible to more than just the educated upper class. The sensational genre created fear that the abiding social hierarchy might fall, but it also pushed society forward, forcing readers to look at new possibilities in terms of gender expectations, and in this respect alone there was no denying the fact that society was changing.

In the opening pages of *The Lady’s Mile*, Sigismund Smythe, who was considered by Braddon’s primary biographer Robert Lee Wolff to be her alter ego, directs this astonishing observation about the role of women in society to his friend Philip: “Don’t rail against the women, my dear Philip; the women are—what the men make them. You must have *Lui* before you can have *Elle*” (1: 17). When he acknowledges the power structure of Victorian society, Smythe here asserts a belief that had not previously been so clearly stated in Braddon’s works, and the remainder of the novel deals with the dissatisfaction that is harbored by women who have been omitted from the power structure. While the women in *The Lady’s Mile*, like many of Braddon’s female characters, attempt to fight against the ideal, in varying degrees, they, like Lady Audley, Aurora Floyd, and Isabel Sleaford, are eventually reabsorbed back into the fabric of
society, not in the role of revolutionary wives, but, rather, in the role of obedient wives who have succumbed to both their husbands’ and society’s expectations of them as women and wives. Yet in *The Lady’s Mile*, Braddon’s characters do speak out against the constraints of marriage, and the novel offers a glimpse into the ways marriage might be a happier institution for both men and women as a result of significant changes in gender expectations. As Natalie and Ronald Schroeder argue, “In the end, with no means of escape, women suffer the compounded bondage of reconciling themselves to the very conditions of their imprisonment. In her unflinching portrayal of the misery of these matrimonial arrangements in *The Lady’s Mile*, Braddon mounts a sustained critique of contemporary marriage, and she challenges the laws and culture that nurture the conditions in which marital bondage flourishes” (“Miserable Bondage” 83).

Braddon uses her wit and sense of humor when Sigismund is discussing his own marriage and the truth of the assertion he makes about the way that men create the expectations of women in society. Married to the orphan charge of Charles Raymond, a character from *The Doctor’s Wife*, Sigismund Smythe will not allow his wife to read his sensational novels and offers the following argument to his wife to justify this prohibition:

> If you read my books you’ll make suggestions, and if you make suggestions, I shall hate you, and the better your suggestions are the more I shall hate you. . . . Nor do I care about your knowing the depths of infamy which the human mind, for an adequate consideration, can fathom. The critics inform me that my fictions are demoralizing. As a writer and a ratepayer I believe in my fictions; but as a
husband I defer to the critics, and I forbid my wife to read my novels. (LM 2: 319).

In this passage, Smythe believes in his writing but, deferring instead to the critics to interpret his work, will not allow his wife to read it, yet if all husbands banned their wives from reading his books he could not survive financially. Smythe is both a husband and writer; in his role as husband, he supports the patriarchy, but as a writer, he simultaneously challenges social norms through his work. Braddon does much the same thing in her writings, for we cannot escape the absurdity of the scene in which, as she creates a sensational author who will not allow his wife to read his work, she calls out the patriarchy under the guise of a sensational writer.

Talking to his friend Philip about what he should be looking for in a wife, Smythe suggests that Philip should marry a poor orphan, as he has. He extols the virtues of a young woman who has not been fully educated, and who will see small gifts as extraordinary extravagances: “That’s the only kind of wife for a rising man—the dear good uncomplaining helpmate, who will devote all the strength of her intellect to make both ends meet, and will, while sitting by your side in the parlour, have an instinctive consciousness that the maid-of-all-work is burning a tallow-candle to waste in the back-kitchen” (2: 322). This description sounds suspiciously like a parody of the role of “the angel of the house,” the woman whose sole purpose is to be an uncomplaining helpmeet who is consumed by candle waste. She is, by virtue of her lack of education and the force of her nature, to be gifted in knowing when a servant might be wasting tallow. Happy with small gifts that appear to be extravagances, she is not smart enough to know the
difference between the two. The tongue-in-cheek tone of the passage underscores it as Braddon’s parody of the ideal role for a Victorian woman and wife.

In addition to the treatment of Sigismund Smythe’s marriage, in The Lady’s Mile Braddon exposes the nature of Victorian marriage through the experiences of three other couples featured in the novel. The conclusion Braddon comes to is that marriage is extremely limiting to women, but she does not stop there, as she did in the three previous novels. Here she agitates for even more change, and not by merely pointing out the negative aspects of marriage, for she is also looking ahead to the future. As Schroeder and Schroeder assert, “The Lady’s Mile passionately argues for love in marriage and implicitly appeals for cultural reform that will make marital love and companionship possible” (“Miserable Bondage” 83).

In the first of these three marriages, we encounter a woman who understands the limited ways for a woman—married or not—to achieve financial security, but she neglects to factor in any other significant characteristics of her marriage. Florence Crawford, the motherless daughter of painter William Crawford, is sent away to her mother’s rich relatives to be raised after her mother’s death because her father, then a struggling artist, could not afford to raise her. Later in the story, William Crawford becomes a celebrated and wealthy painter, and he is able to bring his daughter back to live with him. Before Braddon embarks on the tale of Florence’s marital woe, however, she presents us with a model of what a good marriage or partnership might be.

Crawford’s breakthrough painting for which he is accepted and recognized as a great painter is his painting of Pericles and Aspasia; there is great symbolism in the fact that Crawford chose this piece to paint. Through the painting, Braddon highlights a true
partnership between a man and woman in ancient times. Pericles was a powerful Athenian leader when he fell in love with Aspasia, a courtesan who was a well-educated. When Pericles began his relationship with her, some historians assert that he regarded her as an equal and she served him as an advisor, but given the Athenian code of conduct for a right marriage, they could not marry because she was a hetairai:

There is no English word to accurately translate hetairai, but they were more than courtesans. They were indeed sexual partners, but they were also companions, better educated than other Greek women. They were educated in philosophy, history, politics, science, art and literature, so that they could converse intelligently with sophisticated men. Aspasia was considered by many to be the most beautiful and intelligent of the city’s hetairai. (Brainard 1)

Pericles and Aspasia experience a true partnership that none of the couples in The Lady’s Mile ever achieve. They create a union based on intellect, sensuality, and equality, and through their union Braddon introduces the idea of equality in marriage to the Victorian reader in conjunction with her belief in the positive power of a woman’s sexuality and mind, as opposed to the accepted view of women in the Victorian era. Here, she is not only pointing out the limitations of Victorian gender expectations but also offering a solution to the inequalities associated with a woman’s place in a marriage by providing readers with a different way of envisioning the institution. This painting, we are told, made Crawford a celebrated artist: “William Crawford had toiled for twenty years, finding no drudgery too hard, no monotonous repetition of study too wearisome. And now at eight and thirty, he found himself a great man” (LM 1:105). Although Braddon’s fictional couples are never able to reach this ideal, by including the story of
Pericles and Aspasia in the novel she challenges the socially accepted ideal of marriage in the Victorian era. In her previous three texts, Braddon explored the ways in which women are restricted in society and male-female partnerships, but through the inclusion of this painting in *The Lady’s Mile*, she demonstrates the possibility of a happy union based on equality.

As Robert Lee Wolff argues, in her description of William Crawford Braddon is also describing her own travails as an artist: “And into her account of them Mary Elizabeth Braddon put her ideas not only about painting but about the life of the artist and its trials, including the agonies caused by the attacks of ignorance and prejudiced critics. These passages surely portray her own ordeals as a writer” (173). Wolff goes on to say that when Crawford is accused of “sensualism” (*LM* 1:112) in his painting, the accusation corresponds to Braddon’s attack from the critics that she is a sensational writer and nothing more. According to Wolff, “only the painters——William Crawford, the accomplished man who is Florence’s father, and Philip Foley, the beginner who is Florence’s rejected suitor——emerge with honor for their high professional standards and their high moral character” (173). Braddon may have portrayed some of her own artistic struggles through Crawford’s, for she does not portray her struggles through any of the female characters in the text. To the extent that a female character could not have reflected the artistic challenges Braddon faced because readers might have doubted the veracity of her claim, only a male artist would be believable as a famous artist who struggled against his critics and achieves public renown. If this is the case, then it represents one more comment from Braddon on the dominance of male power in Victorian society.
The painting of Pericles and Aspasia is William Crawford’s daughter’s favorite one, which is fitting as Florence searches to find her own husband; however, she seeks out a sort of misguided equality in her marriage. Her cynical view of marriage urges her to marry not for love, but in order to secure a wealthy match. She explains and justifies her position to her good friend, Lady Cecil Chudleigh:

Do you know, Cecil, I sometimes think that if we are unbelieving and mercenary—if we worship nothing but the pomps and vanities of society—our wickedness is only the natural effect of the precepts instilled into the youthful mind by those dreadful grandmothers and maiden aunts of the old school, who were always preaching against all that is romantic and poetical, and whose dearest delight was to bray their children’s brains in the stony mortar of common-sense. (*LM* 1: 314)

Florence is not in danger of romanticizing her view of love and marriage, as Isabel Sleaford did, and it is clear that Florence has been overly influenced by the values that have been instilled in her, not just by society but also by the women in her family. In this passage, she acknowledges the truth of what maiden aunts and dreadful grandmothers have preached to her, that a woman must make a good marriage, as it is one of the only ways to secure economic stability, and to marry for anything but money is foolish. Hers is a stark and mercenary view of marriage that is not entirely false; a woman needs money to survive and to be influential, as seen by the example of Lady Audley. There are not many opportunities outside of marriage for Florence or most other women to achieve this. As Schroeder and Schroeder remark, “Some of the pressure [for women to marry] was ideological: women who did not marry were regarded as incomplete and redundant;
they were failures to themselves, to their families, and to all society. Finally, some of the
pressure was economic: for women society offered few opportunities for the kind of
employment that would enable them to live independently; consequently, unless they
inherited wealth, they depended on a husband for their very sustenance” (*Sensation to
Society* 12).

The flaw in Florence’s perspective on marriage is that it does not take into
account the significance of happiness and love, but the grandmothers and maiden aunts
who influenced her thinking appear to have been insightful as to the workings of society;
according to them, love and happiness are not necessary for a good life, but money is.
Florence, especially given her upbringing in the care of wealthy relatives, believes this
dictates a wise course of action when a woman is seeking a husband, “but she
misunderstands her relation to money’s power” (*Sensation to Society* 198), thinking
against the reality of a woman’s situation that she will have power because her husband is
wealthy. The money is his to dole out to her—or not.

Pointing out the fact that man is complicit in the creation of what is expected of a
woman, Florence evidently shares Sigismund Smythe’s belief that women are the
products of what men seek to make them:

The men complain that we are fast and mercenary; that we talk slang, and try to
make rich marriages; and there are articles about us in the fashionable
newspapers, just as if we were a new variety in animal creation, on view in
Regent’s Park. Do they ever stop to consider who taught us to be what we are?
Can the gentleman, whose highest praise of a woman is to say that she is jolly,
and has no nonsense about her, and sits square on her horse, wonder very much if we cultivate the only accomplishments that they admire? (LM 1: 314)

In this passage she is confiding, once again, to her friend Cecil Chudleigh, who cautions her about her upcoming engagement to millionaire Thomas Lobyer. Florence acknowledges the power that men have in influencing how women act and what they seek to accomplish for themselves. Philip Foley, a suitor Florence rejects over the fact that he is a financially poor artist, says, “The women of the present day live only to look beautiful and to be admired. They are pitiless goddesses, at whose shrines men sacrifice the best gifts of their souls” (1: 19). Braddon’s narrator implies that men are complicit in creating these pitiless goddesses, a startling fact in itself, for we have not witnessed such a forthright account of male culpability in Aurora Floyd, Lady Audley’s Secret, and The Doctor’s Wife.

Schroeder and Schroeder note that “Florence . . . submits herself to the humiliating moral commercialism of the ‘marriage market,’ an institution of Victorian courtship that critics recognized demeaned respectable middle-class women and corrupted marriage itself” (“Miserable Bondage” 87). They then liken the society woman who is trying to marry the richest suitor to the plight of the prostitute, asserting that Florence sells herself, similar to the way in which a prostitute sells her services; but this marriage is sanctioned by society as legal, thereby providing an example of seemingly legal prostitution. We once again see the connection between the prostitute and the Victorian woman, just as we saw it in Aurora Floyd. When Lobyer approaches Florence’s father for his daughter’s hand, he discusses the upcoming marriage to Florence as a business transaction:
“You won’t find me illiberal in the matter of settlements, Mr. Crawford,” said the rich man, as the painter deliberated with a clouded brow and a thoughtful aspect. “Let your lawyer name his own terms, and fight the business out with my fellow. When I fall in love with a beautiful woman I’m not the sort of man to spoil my chance by a niggardly policy.” (1: 269)

William Crawford is offended by Lobyer’s approach to the ritual of a suitor negotiating terms with his prospective father-in-law and reads Lobyer’s overture as an attempt to buy Florence from him. Again, there is a subtle allusion to prostitution here, and “whenever Braddon represents marriage as a bargain or sale, there is always at least some oblique recognition that the contemporary commercialization of marriage has transformed matrimony into a version of prostitution, the different being, of course, that marriage is legal and culturally acceptable” (Sensation to Society 200). In effect, Lobyer is buying Florence’s person to be his wife; he is purchasing her so that he can own her and trot her out at dinners and parties. He is not necessarily interested in her, but he is interested in the way in which other men will react to her: she is a commodity worth having because others appear to want her. Lobyer views Florence as yet another object for him to possess and flaunt, and Florence sees him as a means to happiness through his money. Braddon’s critique of marriage is leveled at the society that sanctions this brand of marriage.

A woman without either a husband or money is usually limited in society, and although Florence seems to be attracted to Philip, the poor painter, she decides not to pursue that relationship and instead she seeks a wealthy mate. Florence says to her friend Cecil Chudleigh,
“If I was going to be sacrificed upon an alter tomorrow, like that young woman in Racine’s tragedy, people couldn’t go on about me worse than they do. Of course I don’t pretend to say that I am romantically attached to Mr. Lobyer—first and foremost because I don’t believe there are any romantic attachments in these days; and secondly, because if there are, I’m not at all the sort of person to be the subject of one” (LM 1: 316).

Unfortunately, she sacrifices herself upon the altar of marriage in the mistaken belief that money alone will bring her power. Lobyer, “an emblem of established patriarchal power in marriage” (“Miserable Bondage” 88), seeks a pretty wife, and the match the two make unfolds as an unhappy one. Lobyer, who was “known to be stupid” (LM 1: 200), is neither clever nor particularly intelligent; he is not a nice person nor is he able to appreciate good art, but his money encourages many women, including Florence, to overlook his flaws. Even his own animals dislike him! But outside of marriage, there were few ways for a woman to achieve the economic security he offers. Florence thinks that this marriage will bring her happiness and power as it will allow her to avoid impoverishment, but she neglects the lesson of Aspasia’s story about the importance happiness, equality, love, and compatibility in marriage.

Florence understands the limitations for women in Victorian society; early in the novel, she concedes that she originally wanted to be a male in order to enjoy access to patriarchal the power: “She would have preferred to be a heavy-browed person of the masculine order, with blue-black hair and an aquiline nose” (1: 22). Now, taking on a masculine persona, Florence marries for wealth and the power it brings; not blessed with actually being a man who can move freely about in society, she settles for the next best thing—money. What she does not understand is that life is not so simple. She “talked
slang and affected a masculine contempt for all feminine pursuits” (1: 116), but in adopting masculine contempt for the feminine, and in taking on aspects of masculine culture, Florence distances herself from the feminine ideal and attempts the opposite of being “the angel of the house.” But happiness will not be found at either extreme.

Florence represents a character who takes seriously the idea that a woman logically ought to marry strictly for money, but Braddon points out another flaw in her thinking; that Florence never seriously considered the role of happiness in her life. Her life is full of parties replete with social acceptance, but it appears to be as empty as the one to which she would have been fated as “the angel of the house.” Braddon does not place all the blame for the emptiness of her life on Florence, for her husband is as culpable as the society in which they live, but Braddon does point out that while Florence understands the limitations of a woman’s role in society, she misses entirely a potential solution to her fate. In spite of her husband’s wealth, marriage to a man Florence dislikes cannot bring her happiness.

Although she originally wants to be male, Florence defines herself as a woman in material terms she believes will facilitate her acceptance in society. She wants the bonnets and gloves high society expects, and she seeks financial freedom to the exclusion of other types of freedom. In so doing, she gains a degree of freedom but at the expense of independence in other areas of her life. Florence remarks to her friend, Lady Cecil, “I am a woman of the world, dear, and I mean to do the best I can for myself. It is very dreadful, I know, but at least I am candid with you. I went to a fashionable school, and you’ve no idea how we all worshipped wealth and finery” (1: 120). Florence is clear that she was brought up to worship material finery and appearances, and she intends to marry.
a man who will provide her with the means to worship wealth, but she is blind to the price she will have to pay to achieve her goal of a life of wealth without love. Materialism without love will not bring her happiness.

Florence ultimately achieves the role she seeks, that of wife to a wealthy man, and throws lavish parties that her husband never attends. At Pevenshall, she is the supreme hostess, planning and executing all sorts of entertainment for her guests; one of her smashing successes is a play she and a few of her closest friends perform for the entertainment of her guests. The play, replete with wigs and costumes, takes place in a drawing room, and everyone enjoys it immensely. Here, Braddon incorporates the role of acting strictly for enjoyment, but the play is also a metaphor, calling the reader’s attention to the fact that Florence is acting the role of happy wife even though she is unhappy with her husband. Her husband wants her to act as a beacon for his wealth, and if she does not wear the perfect number of diamonds he is upset. Florence tries to convince herself that this way of life is bringing her happiness, but when she thinks about it, she knows this is not the case, a revelation she shares with Lady Cecil when she says, “I really believe I am the happiest creature in the world, Cecil, for I am only unhappy when I think; and as I may almost say that I never think, it must follow that I am never unhappy” (2: 206). But on the rare occasions she does think about her position, Florence finds her life empty; although she lives in a society that does not always encourage women to think, by not thinking Florence expresses Braddon’s severe comment that the only way a woman escapes the emptiness of her life is by not thinking.

Sir Nugent Evershed, a participant in the play Florence produces, overtly flirts with her. She responds to his attention as a harmless but enjoyable flirtation, especially
since it turns out that her husband is having a blatant affair. Thus, to “spite her husband for the insult of keeping a mistress, Florence openly flirts with Sir Nugent. . . . Deprived of access to the legal and economic resources that Lobyer smugly enjoys, Florence turns to the power of her own sexuality to achieve some degree of equality with her husband” (“Miserable Bond” 90). She does not harbor true feelings for Sir Nugent, but allows it to appear that she does as a way to assert her power. She does not have money of her own, nor does she have access to a lawyer or anyone else to help her prevail over her husband’s open indiscretions. At some point, Thomas Lobyer comes to believe that Sir Nugent and his wife are actually having an affair and hires a private investigator to find evidence of it that will hold up in divorce court. Whereas Lobyer could easily divorce his wife if he found out that she was having an affair, Florence could not divorce him solely on the evidence of his well-known infidelity. Schroeder and Schroeder point out the discrepancy in gender expectations with regards to divorce in Victorian England: “The Divorce Act of 1857 established that a wife must prove not only adultery but also some aggravating offense to justify divorce” (“Miserable Bond” 90). In Victorian marriage, then, the man possesses legal and financial power, and to secure a divorce, a woman has to prove that her husband is guilty of two offenses, while her husband merely has to show her guilty of one offense to secure a divorce. Braddon exposes the inequity of Florence’s situation. If Thomas secured a divorce, he would not lose his wealth or social standing, while Florence, as a divorced woman would become the equivalent of a prostitute; “in sum, her status as an outcast would be irremediable” (“Miserable Bond” 91).

Sir Nugent asks Florence to run away with him, to be loved in the way that she was meant to be loved, but she is furious at him for voicing his love for her and retreating to
behavior that is socially acceptable. Even though she is unhappy in her marriage, Florence still appears to believe in the guidelines that rule Victorian marriages: “She was just one of those women who may balance themselves for ever upon the narrow boundary-wall between propriety and disgrace and never run the smallest risk of toppling over on the wrong side” (LM 2: 305).

Florence fully realizes the limitations of her marriage and recognizes that she is little more than an object Lobyer parades before his guests. He has no real feelings for her, and she has no real feelings for him. She painfully acknowledges her situation when she says to Lady Cecil, “I have no self-respect. I have never respected myself since I married Mr. Lobyer. O Cecil, there is nothing that has ever been written about such marriages too strong or too bitter for their iniquity. We sell ourselves like slaves, and when the bargain is completed, we hate the master who has bought us” (2: 137).

Enduring unhappiness is the cost Florence has to pay for having fashioned her marriage into something more than it is:

Florence’s ornamental status sharply contrasts with her independence when she was single and represents one more example of Braddon’s writing this marriage as a bitter parody of Victorian ideology. Although she scarcely resembles Coventry Patmore’s ‘Angel,’ Florence ironically exhibits a number of the characteristics of the idealized middle class wife. She is ‘useless’; she has her separate sphere (so separate that Lobyer is bored to share any of it with her); and she is little more than one of his prized ornamental possessions. (Schroeder and Schroeder, “Miserable Bond” 89)
Lobyer does not move to divorce Florence, but he ultimately loses all of his money and commits suicide. The man with whom Florence flirts, Sir Nugent, is not anyone of real interest, and despite her attempts to avoid poverty, she ends up alone and impoverished and must return to her father’s house. Through Florence’s experience, Braddon critiques the institution of marriage, arguing that marrying primarily for money is never wise, but to their peril it is a consideration women too often entertain in the matches they seek. Florence acts without fully thinking through her decision to marry this man she neither likes nor respects, but even though she is presented with the opportunity to act in an iniquitous fashion, by running away with Sir Nugent or having an affair with him, she does not indulge any immoral acts. She is shown crying before the wedding, asking her father for forgiveness for not being a better daughter, and then she marries the man who will make her rich. She makes a foolish decision but nothing that causes harm to anyone other than herself; she has not strayed so far outside of the acceptable social codes that she could not be, once again, accepted back into proper society. Florence’s experience is in many ways the opposite of Isabel Sleaford’s, but her marriage serves as a warning to others: a happy marriage is not made by money alone. Agitating for marriage that is based on mutual compatibility and love, Braddon asks the reader of *The Lady’s Mile* to examine the way in which society prevents women from having access to their own financial independence.

As in her other novels, in *The Lady’s Mile* Braddon always had to walk a fine line between critiquing society and not appearing to be too openly rebellious; she had to sell her books to the public, and she had to be wary of agitating too far for the collapse of Victorian society. Thus, with Florence Braddon hints that, because she has not committed
too egregious an act, she still has the potential to achieve happiness when she returns to her father’s house and she discovers that her original suitor, the painter Philip Foley, has not married. All we know is that Florence may possibly be given a second chance to find happiness, but she will have to approach the opportunity if it is offered with a far different view of marriage than she held when she married Lobyer. Braddon uses the example of Florence and Lobyer’s marriage to illuminate the point that to achieve true happiness, both men and women must radically change their views of marriage and achieve a true partnership fashioned on the model of Aspasia and Pericles. Florence is certainly punished for her misguided ways, but because she did not sin too badly, Braddon holds out for her the prospect of redemption and love though a marriage to Philip Foley.

The situation is far different for Lady Cecil Chudleigh, a woman who cleaves to the code of the ideal woman—“the angel of the house”—but who, in an attempt to do what she believes is right according to society’s mandates and her economic situation, dooms herself to unhappiness. Both women ultimately wind up in unhappy marriages but for different reasons; whereas Florence is strong willed, Cecil “was not strong minded” (2: 201) and is influenced by the men around her. Cecil possesses an aristocratic title, but she is penniless and forced to act as her elderly aunt’s companion. Because her mother and father are dead, she has no one other than her aunt to whom she can turn for support or guidance in the ways of the Victorian world.

Wanting to defy the expectation that she make a brilliant match but lacking the resources and personal strength to do so, Cecil’s original desire is to live in a small town by the sea. According to the narrator, “For Lady Cecil the rustic village and weedy coast
had an odour of Longfellow and Tennyson that was delicious to her soul; and she felt she
would have been unutterably happy if she could have bidden an eternal farewell to Dorset
Square and Mrs. MacClaverhouse’s plate-chest and china closet, to take up her abode
under the shelter of the Norman castle and the grassy hills for the rest of her life” (1: 43).
Like Isabel Sleaford, Cecil believed she could find happiness in her life if she enjoyed
financial independence, but unlike Isabel, Cecil appears to possess intelligence and a
strong foundation for believing she would be happiest alone. Cecil’s economic situation
is dire, and she represents the position of many young women of the time from which
there are few means of escape. While some women—Braddon, for example—are able to
fly in the face of convention, a woman had to be strong to do so, and Cecil, although
stronger than Isabel, is not quite strong enough to forge her own path.

Despite the fact that her first choice is to be alone, we watch Cecil’s settling into
what society expects of her when she meets Hector Gordon, her great love and a distant
relation of her aunt, Mrs. MacClaverhouse. Cecil and Hector begin fall in love over their
mutual admiration of Victor Hugo’s work when Hector is on leave from his military
position in India. As romance blossoms between the two, Hector confesses that he is
already engaged to a woman from India who nursed him back to health after a tiger
attack. In love with Cecil, early on he asks her advice about whether he should seek
release from his commitment to his fiancée.

Unlike the courtship and marriage between Florence and Lobyer, it appears that
this couple has a foundation for a marriage that will be happy for both for they are
intellectually compatible. But Cecil thinks that she should place a higher value on honor
than on her own feelings; willing to suppress her own desires for what is considered to be
right, she acts as she thinks “the angel of the house” would and encourages Hector to honor his original commitment. Schroeder and Schroeder observe, “Even though [Cecil’s] advice to Gordon means that she relinquishes the opportunity to claim the ideal marriage she envisions, and that she guarantees her unhappiness, she dignifies fidelity to the social and moral expectations of respectable society ahead of her self-interest. Honor supersedes passion. Duty preempts love” (*Sensation to Society* 219). Cecil puts her faith in the ideal, but by doing so she commits to a future without Hector Gordon—and without love. She misses a chance for happiness, not because she seeks wealth, as Florence did, but because she cannot envision acting in a way that might appear dishonorable. Cecil feels it would be a greater sin for Hector Gordon to break his engagement and thus mar his honor than to marry for love. This sentiment turns out to be misguided.

Cecil decides never to marry after her experience with Hector, but her aunt continues to impress on her the dangers that await an unmarried woman. When Mrs. MacClaverhouse dies, Cecil will be penniless: “So long as I live you will be able to keep afloat somehow in society; but I should like to know what will become of you when I am gone?” (*LM* 1: 210). Because there is no wealthy relative who will care for her, Cecil could become a governess, but then she will be again dependent on someone else. Because her situation is dire, Cecil reluctantly reassesses her decision never to marry. When Laurence O’Boyneville, a well-known and powerful lawyer, pursues her, Cecil turns down his offer of marriage, much to her aunt’s chagrin; but the more he pursues her, the more she realizes that without a husband she faces at best an uncertain future. As O’Boyneville points out, “if Fate is the master of men, Circumstance is the tyrant of
women. A man may marry the woman he wishes to marry: a woman can only marry the man who wishes to marry her” (1: 191). O’Boyneville articulates the indisputable but restrictive truth for the Victorian woman.

Laurence O’Boyneville is an Irishman from the lower classes who through hard work and perseverance becomes one of the most celebrated lawyers in London. In many ways he represents the ideal Victorian male: he is opinionated, hard working, strong-willed, and renowned in his profession for his ability to win extremely challenging cases. Descriptions of him always include a discussion of the power that he radiates. Too busy building his career to look for a wife until he meets Lady Cecil Chudleigh, he now is determined to win her hand in marriage and initiates a full-scale assault on her feelings in order to achieve his goal. Previously, his opinion of women, formed mostly from his interactions with them in the courtroom, was not complimentary. He would, for example, attempt to dominate and bully his female witnesses: “In such ordeals Beauty appeared vainly to the merciless advocate; and having derived his chief knowledge of the fair sex from witnesses in nisi prius, breach of promise, and divorce cases, it may be that Mr. O’Boyneville’s estimate of womankind was scarcely an elevated one” (1: 148). O’Boyneville musters this experience to aid him in his pursuit of Cecil. In his first interaction with her at a society gathering, he offends her within minutes by asking inappropriately personal questions about her family’s economic standing. He simply does not know how to approach her, for he is “more accustomed to browbeat and terrify the fair sex than to make small-talk for their amusement” (1: 161). Despite the difference in class between them, the power dynamic is clear. Embodying patriarchal power prized by
Victorian society, O'Boyneville sets out to reach his goal regardless of Cecil’s feelings for him.

O’Boyneville represents an impossible challenge to women in that he has the power to raise himself out of poverty through work as a professional. A Victorian woman typically has no such option, except to marry a man who has more wealth than she. He does not know Cecil well when he declares his love for her, but he sees her fitting into his view of what the Victorian wife and woman ought to be: “pure, and true, and generous, and high-minded. A little proud, perhaps, but only as proud as a good woman has need to be in a bad world. He knew that [Cecil] was a prize worth wining, and he meant to win her” (1: 182). In his view, Cecil fits the description of “the angel of the house,” and although he has exchanged only a few words with her, he determines that she will be his wife because she fits his expectation. O’Boyneville is another of Braddon’s male characters who, based on the physical appeal of a woman, falls in love and seeks to make her his wife; of course, expectations do not necessarily guarantee a happy union.

O’Boyneville’s handshake is forceful, and when he first takes Cecil’s hand, he “gave her hand a grip that wounded the slender fingers with the rings which adorned them” (1: 174). He radiates power, has power over Cecil, and intimidates her. Possessing the power of his gender, the power of the law, and physical power over Cecil, he can offer her financial security, companionship, and his name. According to the narrator, “He wanted to marry Lady Cecil Chudleigh, and he meant to marry her. She might object at first, of course. People almost always did object to his doing what he wanted to do: but he always did it” (1: 180). Thus, O’Boyneville views the possibility of marriage to Cecil
as he might a case on which he was working; single-minded to the extreme, he would not
be deterred, even by the object of his affections.

In the first volume of *The Lady’s Mile*, Cecil expresses her envy of those who can
live their lives without economic pressure and societal pressure, saying, “I envy any one
and every one who can live their own lives” (1: 209). Desirable as living independently
may seem to her, Cecil is caught between languishing as her aunt’s servant or becoming
O’Boyneville’s wife. She sits, “pondering upon the dull blank life of spinsterhood and
poverty that lay before her; to muse a little sadly upon the text of her all her aunt’s
sermons—her lonely helplessness, her penniless dependence. . . . But there were times
when her pride revolted against the whole scheme of her existence, and a vision of the
future arose before her, blank and terrible” (1: 230). The only way she can think to rebel
against so bleak a future is to reconsider marriage to O’Boyneville. Recognizing a shift
on her position, O’Boyneville moves in to seal the deal of their marriage, and from the
outset of their courtship Cecil is overwhelmed by his power. In the descriptions of this
phase of their courtship, he leaches power from her:

The sense of Mr. O’Boyneville’s power subjugated her as she had never before
been subjugated. She was like the weakest of little birds who was ever spell-
bound by the gaze of a monster serpent. Whether his was animal magnetism,
whether it was the intellectual force of a dominant will, she never knew. From
first to last, she knew only that Laurence O’Boyneville exercised an influence
over her which no other living creature had ever exercised, and that was
powerless to resist his dominion. . . . Cecil, looking up at the earnest face that was
bent towards her, felt herself subdued by some wondrous fascination, and knew
that she had found her master. (1: 235-236)

Given the language of this passage, it is evident that O’Boyneville uses force and the
domination of his intellect over her to become Cecil’s master, and, unable to deny him,
she fully subjugates herself to him. The power dynamic described here is disturbing:
Cecil is unable to assert her own thoughts because of O’Boyneville’s influence over her,
while he is like a cobra who has trapped her in his gaze. From courtship through
marriage, he will wield the controlling power over all aspects of their relationship.

Schroeder and Schroeder assert: “Braddon intensifies Lady Cecil’s unhappiness by
making O’Boyneville a barrister. Since the law defines, commands, and justifies the
husband’s subjugation of his wife, O’Boyneville’s status as a legal professional and
master of the law creates him as both an effective agent and a menacing symbol of the
whole legal apparatus and tradition that relegate married women to the condition of
prisoner for life, with no identity of their own” (“Miserable Bondage” 94).

Always honest, Cecil consents to be O’Boyneville’s wife but confesses to him
that she loves another man, who she will now forsake. When she asks O’Boyneville if
this information changes his mind, he replies, “No, Cecil, when a man loves the woman
he marries as truly as I love you, it must be his own fault if he does not teach her to love
him before the end of the chapter, always provided she is a good woman” (LM 1: 239).

Again, the power dynamic is clear: Cecil must be good, and her husband will use his
power to teach her how to love. Agreeing to the marriage, Cecil essentially accepts his
dominion over her, and by doing so, she believes she remains committed to the Victorian
ideal, for she will assume the mantle of “the angel of the house.” Because her intentions
are pure, she expects she will receive in return companionship and friendship from her husband. When they are on their honeymoon, she hopes that, although she does not love O’Boyneville, they will be able to forge a meaningful connection. But, like Florence and Lobyer, their union cannot be a happy one.

O’Boyneville’s idea of love, as was common for the day, was about how he felt, and not really about what or how his wife felt, and as soon as they are married, and in fairness to him, that is how he envisioned marriage. After he and Cecil are married, O’Boyneville reverts to the routine before marriage: he is gone long hours, comes home, eats dinner, and returns to work. A typical breakfast conversation between them is one he ultimately has with himself about the case he is currently working on; by contrast, Lady Cecil finds herself married and financially secure, but with not much to occupy either her mind or her time. His work is his first love, and Cecil competes with his devotion to his work. Married, Laurence O’Boyneville is living the life to which he aspired; he does not think that anything is amiss in his marriage. According to the standards of the day, O’Boyneville truly believes that he is providing his wife with everything she needs, and so he does not feel obliged to delve into or even consider whether she is happy:

She knew that he loved her; she knew that he was generous, and good, and true: but this knowledge was not enough. She knew that he was clever; but her lonely days never brightened by any ray of his intellect, her desolate evenings were never enlivened by his wit. Was he her husband? Was he not rather wedded to that inexorable tyrant which he called his profession? He loved his wife, and was anxious to please her, but not if her pleasure involved the neglect of his professional duties. (1: 306)
Cecil is condemned to a quiet and lonely existence in which she is not her own mistress. She and her husband are from different worlds, and they have little in common. The loneliness that Cecil had hoped to avoid by marrying descends upon her life yet again. Cecil attempts to fulfill the role of “the angel of the house”; she had hoped that it would provide for her needs, but unlike Isabel Sleaford, Cecil possesses a keen intellect, and her position does not bring her fulfillment. The narrator observes, “No salaried house-keeper could have been more submissive than the Earl of Aspendell’s daughter showed herself to the sovereign will of her lord: so Mr. O’Boyneville told his old friends and familiars that he was the happiest fellow in existence, and that his wife was an angel” (2: 26). Cecil’s unfortunate position is a powerful commentary on the life of a married woman in Victorian society, and according to her husband’s perspective, she is “the angel of [his] house” but the position is hers at an outrageous cost.

Unhappy in her marriage, Cecil finds herself tempted by Hector Gordon, her first love. After his young wife’s death, he returns to England from India, and Hector and Cecil encounter each other a number of times. Hector has to leave for India once again, but before he leaves, he pleads with her to confess her true feelings for him, and knowing that she might never see him again, Cecil does. As a result of the confession, he returns to India, sells out his commission, and back again in England he seeks out Cecil, who is “once more victimized by predatory masculine will” (“Miserable Bondage” 94). Hector barrages her at every chance, confessing his love for her and urging her to succumb to him, calling upon her belief in the importance of honor so that she will recognize all that he has given up in order to court her again. When Cecil hears that Hector is coming to Pevenshall, she plans to leave abruptly; she does not want to see him since she is married.
and, unhappy as it is, committed to her marriage. But the constraints of the time prevent her from leaving.

The story of Cecil is the story of the restrictions of the time period; unable to make a living by herself, she is trapped by her poverty; she acts with honor when she tells Hector to marry the woman to whom he is engaged when she could have acted selfishly and told him to end the engagement; for all the wrong reasons she dutifully marries a man she does not love; and when she seeks to escape from temptation, she cannot find the means to do so:

But a woman is very seldom free to follow her first thoughts. If a man wishes to escape from any given place at a moment’s notice, he has only to declare himself called away on business, and lo! He is free to spring into the first handsome cab he encounters and start for the Antipodes, if he so pleases, without let or hindrance. But a woman cannot take an unexplained morning’s walk without the dread of question and scandal. (2: 200)

Cecil hopes that Hector will act honorably and leave her alone, but he does not possess the honor with which she endows him. According to the narrator, “A silent duel was always going on between these two. The poor hunted victim was always on the defensive; the hunter was merciless” (2: 204). Hector Gordon, like Laurence O’Boyneville, holds the power to pursue Cecil, but she cannot jump into a carriage on a whim to escape his advances and always has to justify her actions to her husband and her friends. Cecil is described as prey, and Hector Gordon hunts her down, attempting to accuse her of being the cause of his unhappiness. Angry with her for marrying O’Boyneville so soon after he married his wife in India, Hector appears to have no
knowledge of or concern over the hardship Cecil would have had to face if she had remained unmarried. Had he truly known her, he would not have pushed her into leaving her husband, for he would understand that even though she did not love her husband, she tried to do what was right.

Attempting to act according to the ideals of the day, Cecil finds herself unhappy in an unfulfilling life. The lesson that her character teaches the reader is that living a hollow ideal cannot bring happiness. Cecil “had lived all her life in the dread of those little social laws which a woman sometimes finds it more difficult to break than to violate the law of Heaven itself” (1: 201). Hardly inconsequential, these “little” laws have a huge impact on Cecil’s life and invite misery, and through Cecil’s experience Braddon is calling attention to all of “those little social laws” that govern and restrict a Victorian woman’s life, and ultimately subject her to an unhappy life existence. But Braddon is not letting Cecil off the hook completely; while O’Boyneville exerts pressure on her, as does society, Cecil could have asserted herself more in order to create a life that might provide her with more happiness.

Hector and O’Boyneville are the villains in this story, and they come close to destroying Lady Cecil in the tug of war between them for her affections. Because she is unhappy in her marriage, Hector is able to convince her to leave her husband and run away with him. However, even in falling to temptation, she does so feeling guilt over betraying her husband and a misguided sense of duty toward Hector. Going against her own sense of honor, she is no longer able to love Hector Gordon: “Her love has perished in the misery which it brought upon her” (2: 254). The punishment begins even before she plans to run off, for guilt destroys her and kills the love that she once had for Hector.
She commits to leaving with him because she wants to honor her promise to Hector, and
she knows that he has sacrificed so much to be with her. Again, as a sense of honor and
self-sacrifice fuel her actions, Cecil believes it is the right thing to do based on her
interpretation of society’s values. She still wants to do the right thing, and in a misguided
way, she feels that running off with Hector will be the lesser of two evils because he has
sacrificed so much for her.

Warned about his wife’s betrayal from her aunt, Laurence O’Boyneville suddenly
returns home on the night before Lady Cecil and Hector are to run away. O’Boyneville
intercepts the couple and tells them the fictional story of a case that he is working on in
which the wife is getting ready to leave her husband. This is how he informs Hector and
Cecil that he is aware of their plans. Schroeder and Schroeder describe how O’Boyneville
reasserts his power over his wife: “At O’Boyneville’s behest, a terror-stricken Cecil
mechanically pours tea, and thus O’Boyneville quietly and unmistakably reestablishes
patriarchal order in his home” (Sensation to Society 238). Cecil asks why the woman is
leaving her husband, and O’Boyneville responds:

“Why did she leave him!” repeated the barrister. “Who can tell? There are women
in Bethlehem Hospital who believe themselves to be queens in England, and there
are miserable creatures in the same asylum who have murdered families of
helpless children in sudden paroxysms of madness; but not one amongst them all
could be more utterly mad than this woman.” (LM 2: 261)

Here, Cecil is indirectly accused of being mad for thinking about leaving her husband.
This is so far outside of the realm of what O’Boyneville considers normal that he deems
her actions mad, for according to his perspective madness offers the only rational
explanation for her behavior. In fairness, O’Boyneville does not think that he has done anything wrong as he has acted according to society’s expectations of a husband. The knowledge that his dutiful wife is about to leave him is of great surprise to him, so he infers that her actions must be a sign of madness. According to Schroeder and Schroeder:

O’Boyneville’s speculation of madness is not a professional medical diagnosis but a social one. O’Boyneville does not much trouble himself about the circumstances of the wife’s desertion; when a married woman chooses to abandon her husband for an illicit affair her behavior is sufficiently aberrant to warrant incarceration. As critics have pointed out, and as Braddon illustrated in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, madness is a common Victorian diagnosis for whatever patriarchal authority perceived as improper behavior in women. Cecil is weak minded, but she is not insane. (*Sensation to Society* 239).

He explains that the husband in the case works many hours in order to provide his wife with a house and the things that she desires. But, there is no recognition of the fact that Cecil is lonely, and that she is drawn to Hector because she does not feel truly married to her husband. While O’Boyneville is a good man, he does not know much about marriage, and he does not make much of an attempt to learn what might make his wife happy.

Cecil is not mad, but she is weak. Her weakness is expressed by her attempt to live as the ideal Victorian wife, even though doing so cannot bring her happiness. She is not as strong a character as she could be; indeed, the reader expects or hopes that somewhere along the line Cecil will become angry—mad in that sense—over the realization that she has been the pawn of others since her parents died. Hector, a powerful soldier, blames her for making him marry a woman he does not love and empowers to
make him miserable if she will not leave her husband to be with him. In a warped way that makes sense only to her, Cecil is trying to act honorably toward Hector, but the reader would prefer to see her get angry at this cad who convinces her to act against her own moral standard to ensure his happiness. Cecil is willing to give up her happiness and love for Hector because she knows that by leaving her husband to run off with her lover, she will have acted against her own principles to an extent that guarantees there is no way that she will achieve happiness in her life. O’Boyneville knows this, and he paints a vivid picture of the misery of the fictional couple he describes in order to convince his wife not to run away with Hector. The stand off in this scene is between the two men, and Cecil is caught in the power-play between the two.

Reacting to the story that O’Boyneville’s tells his wife and Hector, Cecil falls gravely ill, and when she awakes days later, she is forever happy with her husband. He watched over her while she was ill, but Braddon never suggests that much has changed between the two of them. Cecil is saved from herself by her husband, and they go on to live happily ever after—again, according to his terms—but there is no evidence that their marriage has changed, only that Cecil now accepts the role that has been assigned to her. There is an atmosphere at the end of the book, similar to that at the end of *Aurora Floyd*, in which Cecil seems to accept the reality of her situation and succumbs to her husband in the role that he has assigned her. Here, Braddon is pointing out the flaw in Cecil and O’Boyneville’s marriage just as she did in Florence Crawford and Thomas Lobyer’s. After she has survived her illness, Cecil says to Florence, “We are very happy now——thank God, we are completely happy now. . . . It was in those long night-watches that I learnt to understand him; and I think there is nothing in the world that could come
between us” (2: 315). Because Cecil has learned to understand O’Boyneville, and he has not learned to understand her, their happiness is his happiness; Cecil may have recovered from her illness, but she has completely lost all sense of self, and there is no possible redemption for her in terms that Braddon or her reader is willing to accept. Living now as the “angel of the house,” she damns herself to a life of unhappiness and emptiness.

The last woman treated in The Lady’s Mile is the wealthy widow Georgina Champernowne. She is a fascinating secondary character in the story, and yet in many ways she is the most rebellious of the women in the text, at least for a time. Married to a man for many years, Georgina believes both her wealth and her freedom have been earned as a result. Natalie and Ronald Schroeder assert that Georgina’s marriage acts as a foil to the others treated in the novel, and makes her “the true heroine of the novel[...]. . . an elegant, refined, and wealthy widow” (Sensation to Society 245). In the novel, William Crawford, Florence’s father, meets Georgina after his wife’s death, and they become good friends. A widowed woman of means, she creates her own rules and defies societal expectations; as the narrator observes, “For her who had been so long an exile from society, the laws of society had little weight (LM 1: 279). Georgina keeps her own hours, refuses to attend society gatherings that do not interest her, and contents herself only with interesting people. She is described as a siren and a woman who collects men to attend to her, but at the same time, she is often described as an independent woman who greets life on her own terms. The character of Georgina Champernowne represents a battle between the siren and the independent woman, yet unlike the madness O’Boyneville diagnoses in Cecil, Georgina is labeled a siren and a devilish character because she refuses to live
according to anyone’s rules but her own. Valuing her freedom more than another
marriage, Georgina declines a proposal she receives from William Crawford:

“I am selfish; and my present mode of life is so agreeable to me, that I cannot
bring myself to change it. You, who have been your own master always, free to
follow your art, free to live your own life without question or hindrance, can
scarcely imagine what a precious thing liberty is to any one who has suffered a
long slavery. . . . I had the best and kindest of masters, and my bondage ought not
to have been irksome to me; but it was bondage and I thirsted for liberty.” (2:
162)

This is the clearest statement from any of Braddon’s female characters about the
state of female bondage created by the Victorian institution of marriage. Georgina rejects
Crawford’s proposal because to be someone’s wife is to be a servant and slave to that
man, even if he is a very nice husband and “master.” Rejecting this role, she asks
Crawford to understand her position and says that she hopes that they will be able to
maintain their friendship. When he says that he can no longer be her friend, she laments
the loss. Crawford then goes blind, signifying an intense vulnerability, retreating to a
small seaside town to recover and pine away for Georgina.

By creating the character of Georgina Champernowne, Braddon is seeking to
redefine the institution of marriage; however, at the end of the novel, Braddon reigns her
in. Georgina’s final actions sound a death knell for her feminist rebellion. Having
successfully lived outside of the mandates of society and enjoyed a full and exciting life,
she is once again accepted into the fold of society when she hears of William Crawford’s
blindness and hastily goes to him. Regretting that she declined his offer of marriage,
Georgina shares with him her change of heart: “I have learnt to hate my own selfishness since that day at Kensington. I have learnt to know that a woman cannot live her own life; that the time will come sooner or later when the presence of one dear companion will be necessary to her existence” (LM 2: 281). It is difficult to read those words, for they renounce all of the progress that Georgina’s character had made as a feminist and outspoken woman. She is an outspoken woman, but in the end, she yields once again to the mandates of society. She chooses an artist for a husband, and although he does not represent traditional patriarchal power, he is the artist who created the painting of Pericles and Aspasia; he is also blind and vulnerable—and needs her. Holding on to one last shred of her rebellion, she asks Crawford to marry her, and they enter into a tender union, but it is clear that she has renounced her independence. Nursing him back to health, she serves as his “ministering angel” (2: 283); there is reason to believe they will be happy together hope for their happiness, even though they rely on a traditional model of marriage.

Georgina is by far the most outspoken and forward thinking of Braddon’s characters, but the apparent ease with which she relinquishes her transgressive stance is hard for a reader to bear.

Examining Lady Audley’s Secret, Aurora Floyd, The Doctor’s Wife, and The Lady’s Mile, one discovers a dialogic component to the texts, as if each successive female protagonist picks up where the previous protagonists left off and thus continues an examination of the restrictive nature of woman’s role in Victorian society while also considering potential solutions to the problem. Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd are both sensational novels, and although there is a focus on bigamy and murder in them,
they each convey an underlying feminist message about the limiting role of “the angel of the house.” The sensational element is the subterfuge behind which Braddon takes cover in order to deliver a rebellious message. These books can be read as enjoyable fiction, but they can be read as damning critiques of gender expectations in nineteenth-century English society. *Lady Audley’s Secret* critiques the society in which Lucy Audley must do whatever she can to survive, for she does not have the option of a Laurence O’Boyneville, to make money through an education and a career. At the end of the novel, despite her initial success in defying society, she is brought to heel and committed to an asylum where she lives out her remaining days. Aurora Floyd is different from Lucy Audley in that she is an upper-class woman who is a tomboy with a secret; because of her passion and lust for a groom, she marries him and breaks societal custom. Punished for her sexuality and her lack of conventional demeanor, she is ultimately doomed to lose her individuality within her marriage and to lose her sense of self. She becomes Mrs. Mellish, her son’s mother, and we hear nothing more from her at the end of the text.

In *The Doctor’s Wife*, there is less reliance on sensational elements than formerly, but not a total eradication of them; here, Braddon’s message is more direct than in her previous texts as she points out the inequalities in society with respect to women, but she does not totally let her main character off the hook. Isabel Sleaford does not make wise decisions, and although her ultimate unhappiness is not all her fault, she bears some blame for it, as do the women in *The Lady’s Mile*. Together, *The Doctor’s Wife* and *The Lady’s Mile* provide an introspective look into the reality of abysmally unhappy marriages. In each book, Braddon becomes progressively less subtle: both men and women bear responsibility in creating a marriage of happiness, and men and women need
to think beyond the image of woman as angel, for it is a shared responsibility for
happiness or misery. Braddon agitated for change in these last two texts, not by damning
society or marriage altogether, but by advocating for deep and lasting change that
encouraged men and women to come together on common ground that included personal
compatibility and the potential for real happiness. Love, social position, desire, financial
situation, and intellect all play a role in finding and creating a successful marriage. *The
Lady’s Mile* is the culmination of that message, the finale to which the other texts are
building.

A key to *The Lady’s Mile* is found in the opening pages of the first volume, when
Florence Crawford describes “the Lady’s Mile,” the actual drive in London that women
of a certain social stature take to see and be seen: “The lives of women of the present day
are like this drive which they call the Lady’s Mile. They go as far as they can, and then
go back again” (1: 17). Florence states that to go beyond the boundary of the Lady’s Mile
is to enter into a land of no return, and she may as well be stating that, if a woman
transcends certain barriers in society, she can never be reclaimed and so spends her life
ostracized by society. This is Braddon’s own address to the reader in which she explains
that her characters can only go so far in their rebellion, and that to transgress beyond the
point of no return is to lose the woman forever. Her stories thus take women right to the
edge of that barrier and then draw them back again, and the lesson Braddon would have
Victorian readers take from the interrupted freedom of her women characters is that they
exist to show a new way—a fresh possibility for the future—even if that possibility
cannot be achieved in her nineteenth-century culture. She begins this message in *Lady
Audley’s Secret, continuing to develop it through Aurora Floyd, and the Doctor’s Wife, until she ends with The Lady’s Mile, the most overt of the four texts.
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