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19th Century Novel Podcast
Episodes 14-15

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*

Part One
Volume 1, Chapters 1-6

Mary Elizabeth Braddon opens *Lady Audley's Secret* with a description of the Audley family estate, Audley Court:

> The house. . . . was very old, and very irregular and rambling. The windows were uneven; some small, some large, some with heavy stone mullions and rich stained glass; others with frail lattices that rattled in every breeze; others so modern that they might have been added yesterday. Great piles of chimneys rose up here and there behind the pointed gables, and seemed as if they were so broken down by age and long service, that they must have fallen but for the straggling ivy which, crawling up the walls and trailing even over the roof, wound itself about them and supported them. The principal door was squeezed into a corner of a turret at one angle of the building, as if it was in hiding from dangerous visitors (7-8).

Not a description likely to generate interest on Realtor.com (although an ideal candidate for a home improvement show), this strange old house establishes the novel's tone: something's not quite right here. Given the importance of a family estate within Victorian culture, with its markers of class and gender, of tradition and power, of order and morality, one should, when reading a Victorian novel, attempt to decipher the meanings built into these descriptions. What, in other words, does this homely home signal? And what dangerous visitor awaits?

There's a bit of the Gothic in this house's age and decrepitude, alerting the reader to the immanence of violence, the confinement of a young woman, and an atmosphere of terror. More than establishing a foreboding mood, Audley Court signals Braddon's goal of showing the damage done to women by ruling class and patriarchal culture. Braddon emphasizes the house's mishmash of styles and features, large and small, strong and fragile, old and modern. The house is an accretion of pieces added over time with little logic or coherence, a perception reinforced by its interior: It is

> a house in which you incontinently lost yourself if ever you were so rash as to attempt to penetrate its mysteries alone; a house in which no one room had any sympathy with another, every chamber running off at a tangent into an inner chamber, and through that down some narrow staircase leading to a door which, in its turn, led back into that very part of the house from which you thought yourself the furthest. (8)

This description, reminiscent of the labyrinthine passageways of Gothic fiction, conveys a sense of the uncanny, of something that can't be understood by rational

investigation. And this map that can't be followed prepares us for the novel's maze-like narrative which will take us on a crisscrossing journey through England only to end where we begin, at Audley Court.

The singular nature of Audley Court made people curious about its real-world inspiration. According to the biographer and theater critic Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald, "Lady Audley's mansion . . . was, as it might be expected, sought to be identified, and various gloomy abodes in the country were named" (280). And was found in Ingatestone Hall, a manor home in Essex. Braddon told Fitzgerald,

> there was a long, narrow avenue of tall limes, very quiet, very secluded, and aloof from the garden of a dear old oak-paneled grange in Essex, and it seemed to me one summer evening, walking with the master of the house, that this lime-walk suggested something uncanny in the history of domestic crime. So I said to my host, 'If I were to take this house of yours as the scene of a novel, would you mind very much if I made the inhabitants a rather bad set of people?' 'Mind! People it with fiends if you like, my dear!' said he. (qtd. in Carnell 144)

In his biography of Braddon, Robert Wolff adds that a "Strong local tradition at Ingatestone, Essex, identifies the celebrated family house of the Petre family there . . . with [Braddon's] Audley Court. And indeed, its clock with one hand over the stables and its avenue of limes make the identification plausible" (437n40). The author of a local history, E.E. Wilde, asserts that Ingatestone stood as the model for Audley Court: "Miss Braddon laid the scene of her thrilling novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, at Ingatestone Hall. Her description of Audley Court is, in the main, a correct description of the Hall.. . . Miss Braddon stayed in the vicinity whilst writing the book, and reproduces in it a very good picture of the neighbourhood" (303).

Yet the notion that Ingatestone Hall served as the sole model for Audley Court seems overstated. As to whether Audley Court was based on a real place, Braddon said, "Well there never *was*, save in the novelist's imagination. The murderous element in the landscape had to be supplied from the 'scene-dock' of fiction" (qtd. in Carnell 144). A "scene-dock" is a place near the stage where scenery is stored. Or in this case, it's that part of Braddon's mind—her memory and imagination—from which she drew inspiration for her fictional narrative. The tree-lined drive, the arch and clock, the pond and ivy-draped building, the walls and garden, multiple chimneys and priestly hiding places are taken from Ingatestone Hall, a place Braddon likely visited during the initial stages of the creation of *Lady Audley's Secret* and which seems to have imprinted itself vividly in her memory (Wolff 437n40).

However, Ingatestone doesn't fully correspond with Braddon's description of Audley Court. Its history doesn't match. Ingatestone Hall was built on Catholic Church land confiscated during the dissolution of the monasteries, land sold to Sir William Petre, secretary of state to Henry VII, in 1539. But the history of Audley Court goes much further back, to the Norman conquest, a half a millennium earlier.

Additionally, Ingatestone Hall was built according to the principles of Tudor architecture, with modifications made in the 18th century, including the addition of its

peculiar clock ("Ingatestone"). But it generally follows one style and displays a certain symmetry and regularity, which doesn't at all parallel Braddon's description of Audley Court,

> a house that could never have been planned by any mortal architect, but must have been the handiwork of that good old builder, Time, who, adding a room one year, and knocking down a room another year, toppling down a chimney coeval with the Plantagenets, and setting up one in the style of the Tudors; shaking down a bit of Saxon wall, allowing a Norman arch to stand here; throwing in a row of high narrow windows in the reign of Queen Anne, and joining on a dining-room after the fashion of the time of Hanoverian George I, to a refectory that had been standing since the Conquest, had contrived, in some eleven centuries, to run up such a mansion as was not elsewhere to be met with throughout the county of Essex. (8)

What seems to match this description is a house Braddon knew well, Skisdon Lodge, the Braddon family home in the village of St. Kew, Cornwall. Even the names of these two settings, the metrically identical Audley Court and Skisdon Lodge, suggest the memory of Skisdon was alive in Braddon's thoughts as she created Audley Court.

Braddon charts Audley Court's roots in British history from its current state in the 1850s back to the early 1700s of the Hanoverian reign to the 15 and 1600s of the Tudors to the 1200s through 1400s of the Plantagenets to the Conquest of 1066 and to even further back in time. Eleven centuries would mean the foundation of this house was established sometime in the 800s, when the Anglo-Saxons were fighting off Viking raids, about the time the poem *Beowulf* was being composed. In reality, the oldest continuously inhabited home in Britain, Saltford Manor House, near Bath, seems to have been built 300 years later, around 1148. Skisdon Lodge isn't nearly as old, but a contemporary realty brochure, besides telling us that the house can be ours for £1.35 million [Smellie]), reveals that it's older than Ingatestone Hall and follows an architectural style more resembling Audley Court: it was first "mentioned in 1350. . . . It is believed that the property would have originally been two cottages which were then knocked into one single residence. During the Tudor period, a range of rooms were added to the rear of the original property, with remains of the Tudor hearth evident in the main kitchen" (Savills).

Braddon relies on Ingatestone Hall for its atmospherics, what she describes as "something uncanny," but she incorporates aspects of Skisdon Lodge for its history. Braddon is doing more than describing changing architectural styles; she is suggesting the persistence across centuries of elite—especially male—rule. That this structure is so convoluted and unplanned suggests the illogical and at times ad hoc nature of this rule. And yet Braddon also describes this house as "a glorious old place—a place that visitors fell into raptures with" (8). This critique of Audley Court and what it stands for and praise for the tranquil beauty of its surroundings suggests an ambivalence at the heart of the novel, a criticism of and acceptance of prevailing social hierarchies.

Into Audley Court will enter Lucy Graham. But she first works as governess for the village surgeon, Mr. Dawson, a modest position taken by an unassuming young woman. Governesses were a popular subject for Victorian novelists. Kathryn Hughes, Director of Creative Non-Fiction at the University of East Anglia, notes that "From 1830 to 1865 there appeared in fiction every type of governess imaginable. . . . it sometimes seemed as if no novel of the period was complete without its governess" (xiii).

Lucy Graham is an impeccable governess: "Her accomplishments were so brilliant and numerous, that it seemed strange that she should have answered the advertisement offering such moderate terms of remuneration . . . but Miss Graham seemed perfectly satisfied" (11). As governess, she teaches the Dawson daughters to play Beethoven sonatas and to paint water-color landscapes, skills typically imparted to the daughters of the middle and upper classes to render them more marriageable. Lucy attends religious services three times on Sundays, is relentlessly charming, is described as amiable and gentle, always light-hearted, happy, and contented (11). "Miss Lucy Graham," Bradden tells us, "was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Everyone loved, admired and praised her. . . . Everybody [was] united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived" (11).

Is it any wonder that Sir Michael Audley, widower for seventeen years after a brief marriage he remembers only as "a dull, jog-trot bargain, made to keep some estate in the family" (12), should fall feverishly in love with young Lucy? He is attracted by her charm and grace but even more by her beauty:

> He could no more resist the tender fascination of those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls; the low music of that gentle voice; the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman; than he could resist his destiny! (12)

To a modern reader, these signs of female beauty—melting eyes, slender throat, flaxen curls—which Sir Michael cannot resist, are not realistic expressions of a man's sexual desire. We expect, from a middle-aged man gazing at a young woman, something more sexual than the perfect harmony pervading her charms.

But for Victorians, a woman's hair was often a sign of her sexuality, hence the novel's almost obsessive, if not fetishistic focus on Lucy's hair. This near fetish was a common feature of Victorian novels, as Elisabeth Gitter, Emerita Professor of English at John Jay College, explains:

> No other writers have lavished so much attention on the physical properties of women's hair: its length, texture, color, style, curliness. There is scarcely a female character in Victorian fiction whose hair is not described at least perfunctorily, and often a woman's hair is described repeatedly and in considerable detail. The brown, neatly combed heads of the virtuous governesses and industrious wives; the tangled, disorderly hair of the sexually and emotionally volatile women. (941)

Victorian readers would find meaning in Lucy's hair, her long flaxen curls suggesting an unrestrained female passion. Even the color of Lucy's hair is suggestive. As Gitter explains, for the Victorians golden hair

> became an obsession. In painting and literature, as well as in their popular culture, they discovered in the image of women's hair a variety of rich and complex meanings, ascribing to it powers both magical and symbolic. Golden hair, through which wealth and female sexuality are inevitably linked, was the obvious and ideal vehicle for expressing their notorious—and ambivalent—fascination both with money and with female sexual power. (936)

Reading these signs, a Victorian reader, would from the start be suspicious of Lucy, sensing that her innocence and honesty might cover up her sexual and monetary desires.

Dante Gabriel Rosetti, "Baca Baciata," 1859 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bocca_Baciata#/media/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_Bocca_Baciata_1859.png)

John Everett Millais, "The Bridesmaid," 1851 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Millais,_Bridesmaid.jpg)

The man enthralled by Lucy's looks and locks, Sir Michael, is vastly superior in wealth and position. He is a baronet, a low rank in the British aristocracy (that's why he is called "Sir," not "Lord," Michael), but a rank commanding respect and wielding power. The historian David Cannadine explains: "Between the peers and the commoners came the baronets, of whom there were 856 in 1880. This . . . was a legally established title, a hereditary knighthood. . . . many baronets ultimately became peers, and some rose very high into the ranks of the nobility" (11). In pursuing Lucy as wife, Sir Michael is violating class boundaries. According to University of Texas-Austin Professor of English Ann Cvetkovich, *Lady Audley's Secret* reinforces traditional social hierarchies, criticizing Sir Michael and demonizing Lucy for breaking these bounds. "The novel scapegoats [Lucy]," Cvetkovich argues, "for the threat posed to the stability of marriage and the family when either impulse (economic gain or sexual desire)

operates to exclude the other. . . . Such desire threatens social divisions when it leads men to choose women, such as . . . Lucy Graham, who are outside their class" (51-2).

Sir Michael faces another barrier—their age difference: he is fifty-five; she looks no older than twenty. He worries that she may be interested in his money and even tells her, "I scarcely think there is a greater sin . . . 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" (14-15). Shaped by his own loveless marriage "made to keep some estate in his family" (12), Sir Michael's belief in the sinfulness of marrying for anything but love seems to overlook how customary this practice was, with marriages among the upper classes often more commercial enterprises than romantic pursuits. And he seems oblivious to the economic needs of unmarried women of the lower and middle classes. A wealthy and powerful male can assert his romantic ideal, while a poor and powerless woman like Lucy can't indulge in the luxury of love, as Braddon shows in suggesting that "the simple [middle class] Dawsons would have thought it something more than madness in a penniless girl to reject such an offer" (14).

When Sir Audley asks for her hand, Lucy is overwhelmed, silently gazing into the dark countryside until, "turning to him, with a sudden passion in her manner, that lighted up her face with a new and wonderful beauty which the baronet perceived even in the growing twilight, she fell on her knees at his feet" (15). From this worshipful and inferior and sexually provocative position, she tells Sir Michael that she can't separate financial necessity from her decision to marry, "cannot be blind," she says, "to the advantages of such an alliance" (15). As she remains in this inferior position, "still on the ground at his feet, crouching rather than kneeling, her thin white dress clinging about her, her pale hair streaming over her shoulders, her great blue eyes glittering in the dusk, and her hands clutching at the black ribbon about her throat, as if it had been strangling her" (15-16), Sir Michael succeeds in getting Lucy to agree that she doesn't dislike and will therefore marry him.

The images here, seen from Sir Michael's perspective, again focus on Lucy's hair and eyes and throat, adding a further sensuous detail, a white dress clinging about her. The black ribbon around her throat, though, is more than an erotic accessory. That Lucy clutches at this ribbon as if it's strangling her indicates that something about this proposal—or perhaps about marriage more generally—unsettles and oppresses her.

Despite the alluring woman crouching before him, Sir Michael is troubled, "an undefined something in her manner" filling him with vague alarm (15), leaving him with "some stifled and unsatisfied longing which lay heavy and dull at his heart, as if he had carried a corpse in his bosom" since he must now "be contented, like other men of his age, to be married for his fortune and his position" (16). But Lucy, seeming to overcome her strangling fear, is elated; this marriage will mean no more "poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations! . . . No more dependence, no more drudgery . . . every trace of the old life melted away" (16).

On the one hand, Lucy is a modest woman who behaves as a governess should; she's responsible, modest, competent, and devout. She observes class and gender boundaries. And she does not deceive Sir Michael about her feelings. On the other, there's something peculiar about her. "It seemed strange," Braddon writes, that Lucy agreed to such a remote and poorly remunerated job; it's strange that she has only one reference. And she seems too perfect, as if anyone could truly be, as Braddon puts it, "the sweetest girl who ever lived." In short, Lady Audley has a secret.

From this mysterious opening, Braddon takes us to the deck of the Argus, a ship sailing from Sydney to Liverpool. Here we meet George Talboys, a man eager to reach England after what was likely a four-month journey. (If you're interested in learning more about such journeys, I recommend William Golding's *To the Ends of Earth* trilogy, the first novel of which, *Rites of Passage*, won the 1980 Man Booker Prize). George is returning to England after three and a half years drudgery in the Australian gold fields, hoping to reunite with his wife Helen, whom he had left in order to make his fortune and with whom he has not corresponded since departing.

Speaking to a fellow passenger, George explains that he had been a cavalry officer stationed in a small seaport town, , where he had managed, he says, to avoid the ploys of a shabby old man trying to marry off his daughter "to the highest bidder. Luckily for me," he confesses, "I happened just then to be the highest bidder, for my father is a rich man" (22). George marries the daughter, Helen Maldon. Upon hearing of this unwise marriage, however, his father disowns his son. "No sooner . . . did my father hear that I had married a penniless little girl, the daughter of a tipsy old half-pay lieutenant," George explains "than he wrote me a furious letter, telling me he would never again hold any communication with me, and that my yearly allowance would stop from my wedding-day" (22). George is forced to sell his commission; he is unable to find a job to support his wife and newborn son; Helen berates him, letting him know that he "had done her a cruel wrong in making her [his] wife" (23); he decides to sail to Australia to seek his fortune.

George describes the hellish nature of gold mining, of toiling "through disappointment and despair, rheumatism, fever, starvation; at the very gates of death" (24). The discovery of gold in the Australian outback in 1851 led to a gold rush reminiscent of that in California. "By the middle of 1852," writes the Australian art critic Robert Hughes, "there were perhaps 50,000 people on the diggings" (563), "an impacted mass of clay-colored men, shoulder to shoulder, hacking in delirium at the fickle earth" (562). Hughes describes the social environment: "In the grog shops and hotels that lined the filthy, traffic-jammed streets of the young city, where a man could sink up to his knees in mud and ordure merely by stepping off the curb, a round-the-clock orgy was conducted by . . . the diggers and their hangers-on, their mates and their flushed doxies, drinking the gold away" (563). (For a deeper look at the cruelty and chaos in gold-mining communities, I recommend *The Luminaries*, Eleanor Catton's Booker Prize-winning novel set during the New Zealand gold rush of the1860s.)

In this degrading environment, George retains his sanity and morality by recalling the image of his wife:

> I clung to the memory of my darling, and the trust that I had in her love and truth was the one keystone that kept the fabric of my past life together—the one star that lit the thick black darkness of the future. I was hail-fellow-well-met with bad men; I was in the center of riot, drunkenness, and debauchery; but the purifying influence of my love kept me safe from all. (24)

This belief in a wife as purifying influence saving her husband from temptation and corruption is the essence of the angel in the house myth, the idea that a wife's function is to provide her husband with comfort and moral reinforcement against worldly temptations. Having met and overcome these dangers, and having discovered a large gold nugget, George flies home to his angel.

From the deck of the Argus, we return to Audley Court, where Lucy Graham has become Lady Audley. And where nineteen year-old Phoebe Marks, who has moved from the Dawsons to become lady's companion, including traveling on the continent and using the little French she has, is sitting with her fiancé and first cousin Luke Marks, whom Braddon describes as "a big, broad-shouldered, stupid-looking clod-hopper of about twenty-three years of age. . . . [his] mouth . . . coarse in form and animal in expression. Rosy-cheeked, red-haired, and bull-necked, he was not unlike one of the stout oxen grazing in the meadows" (28). Phoebe complains to the brutish Luke that the new Lady Audley hardly deserves her respect since only recently they'd worked together at the Dawsons. "What was she," Phoebe asks, "but a servant like me? Taking wages and working for them as hard, or harder, than I did. You should have seen her shabby clothes . . . worn and patched, and darned and turned and twisted, yet always looking nice upon her, somehow" (29).

These comments reflect the uncertain status of governess, an educated woman, usually from the middle-class in need of steady income—and thus sharing a cultural affinity with the people in whose home she lives and whose children she teaches—but who, as Phoebe notes, works as a servant. Phoebe's current position is equally uncertain; the role of lady's companion was usually filled by a woman of genteel birth: "The companion's role was to spend her time with her employer, providing company and conversation, to help her to entertain guests and often to accompany her to social events" ("Lady's). Phoebe provides companionship for Lady Audley but takes no part in social events; she does not have the class background and social training to do so. She has been chosen as companion because there are few options for such in the isolated region of Audley Court, because she is close in age to Lady Audley, and because Lady Audley, given her own class background, doesn't want as companion someone superior to her in taste and education and manners. Phoebe would also be more likely to keep Lady Audley's secrets—or so Lady Audley believes—given her gratitude for this respectable, undemanding and comparatively well-paying position.

However, whatever scruples Phoebe might possess are overcome by Luke, who has Phoebe take him through Lady Audley's rooms, leading "the astonished countryman into a fairy-like boudoir" (31), where, both angered and astonished, he recognizes that just one of her diamond rings could set him up for life. Going through Lady Audley's jewelry box, Luke discovers in a secret drawer "a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a

baby's head" (32), which he is about to dismiss as junk until Phoebe, her thin lips curling into a smile, tells him, "'I'd rather have this than the diamond bracelet you would have liked to take" (32) and promising him that they will achieve their dream of owning a pub.

From this Lady's boudoir, we travel to a bachelor barrister's chambers, the residence of 27-year-old Robert Audley, nephew of Sir Michael. Robert is pleasant and inoffensive, happy with his own company and the company of the stray dogs he collects. With 400£ per year left him by his father, Robert is content to smoke his pipe, read French novels, and do nothing related to his ostensible profession of barrister. A friend of George Talboys (they were schoolboys at Eton together), he bumps into George on a London street, then accompanies him to a coffee house where George has planned to reunite with his wife Helen. But while there, George reads a brief announcement in that day's newspaper noting the death "On the 24th . . . at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, [of] Helen Talboys, aged twenty-two" (36).

Upon reading this news, George, a rugged former soldier and miner, faints, a response which in Victorian fiction is associated with women, a symptom of their physical weakness and excessive emotion. That the strong George faints upon hearing of the demise of his loved one is the first of the novel's many gender reversals. Recovering from this shock in Robert's chambers and medicated with an opiate, George dreams he finds his wife "wrinkled, old, and grey" and his son Georgey "grown into a young man" (39). The next day, George and Robert travel to the village of Ventnor on the Isle of Wight to search for Helen's father and to visit her grave. They start at the "shabby, bow-windowed cottage looking towards the water" (39) where Helen died. Of the cottage's landlady, Braddon writes, "She was . . . accustomed to sickness and death, for many of her lodgers came to her to die" (40). Contemporary readers must wonder why this woman has encountered so many dead and dying lodgers. Is it just bad luck? Is it that she offers affordable short-term rentals? Is this some sort of Victorian hospice? Is she selling homemade meat pies?

Nothing so dramatic. Undercliff, an area at the southernmost part of the Isle adjacent to Ventnor, was identified in *The Influence of Climate in the Prevention and Cure of Chronic Diseases, more particularly of the Chest and Digestive Organs*, by James Clark (physician to the poet John Keats in Rome and later physician to Prince Albert) as having a climate especially conducive to health, or as one doctor proclaimed, this was "a climate as favourable to the invalid as any part of England can afford" (qtd. in Clark 32). Invalids came to Ventnor to experience its healing climate and, failing that, to die in its beautiful and peaceful environment. Karl Marx, for instance, spent his last two winters there, calling the Isle "a little paradise" ("Ventnor").

Braddon explains that Helen "had come to Ventnor only ten days before her death, in the last stage of decline; and . . . she had gradually, but surely, sunk under the fatal malady" (40). Used to the rituals of death, the landlady hands George that familiar Victorian mortuary token, "a long tress of hair," which she had cut from Helen's corpse as she lay in her coffin. George presses the hair to his lips, murmuring, "this is the dear hair that I have kissed so often when her head lay upon my shoulder," but he

questions why her hair, which had once had a rippling wave, now "seems smooth and straight," to which the landlady replies, "It changes in illness" (41). George and Robert then go to the cemetery where they view a recently dug grave and a headstone engraved thus:

Sacred to the Memory of
HELEN,
THE BELOVED WIFE OF GEORGE TALBOYS,
"Who departed this life
August 24th, 18—, aged 22,
Deeply regretted by her sorrowing Husband. (42)

This cold stone convinces George of his wife's death. But it's probably not as convincing to readers, for the next scene, where George and Robert encounter Helen's father Captain Maldon, is sprinkled with clues alerting us that all is not as it seems. Captain Maldon makes small talk about George's beard rather than expressing his condolences for the loss of George's wife (and his own daughter); he seems half afraid of George; Helen and George's son, Little Georgey, has curly hair (unlike the straightened lock of Helen's hair); and the impoverished Captain Maldon is said to have had money enough to cover his daughter's illness and burial. But George and Robert do not suspect foul play. Instead, to escape his sorrow, George joins Robert on a trip to St. Petersburg, Russia.

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Still grieving one year later, George compares his suffering to

> some of our fellows . . . wounded in India . . . [who] came home, bringing bullets inside them. They did not talk of them, and they were stout and hearty, and looked as well, perhaps, as you or I; but every change in the weather, however slight, every variation of the atmosphere, however trifling, brought back the old agony of their wounds as sharp as ever they had felt it on the battle-field. I've had my wound . . . I carry the bullet still, and I shall carry it into my coffin. (47)

George's use of this martial metaphor fits his character since, when he met Helen, he was an officer in the British Army, although he didn't serve in India. There's little overt concern with British imperialism, its rule over India, in *Lady Audley's Secret*. But this seeming absence of evidence isn't determinative. Common practice within contemporary literary scholarship is to identify historically significant and socially troubling references to matters like imperialism and slavery, however textually peripheral, under 1) the belief that the fortunes, the manor homes, the aristocratic privileges of the British upper class, and the rise in living standards of the middle class, depended upon exploitation of the subaltern, and 2) the belief that such concerns, even when appearing in occasional and obscure references, can contribute significantly to our understanding of a text by explaining its historical and social context.

Another way to look at it is that in their seeming omissions such novels replicate Britain's marginalizing and obscuring of its dependence upon exploitation and racism

and oppression. However much the dominant ideology sought to repress these issues (and however much writers of realistic novels attempted to adhere to this ideology), as in any form of repression, the repressed subject returns, disguised, distorted, hidden. Literary critics seek to uncover this repression. Lilian Nayder, English Professor at Bates College, does just this when she writes, seemingly against the spirit and content of *Lady Audley's Secret*, that "Braddon fills her novel with references to India and the Indian Mutiny" (37). Nayder cites many such references: Robert shares a railroad carriage with "an elderly Indian officer" (138); Lady Audley "wrap[s] herself in an Indian shawl . . . that had cost . . . a hundred guineas" (318) and proudly displays "a marvelous Indian tea-caddy of sandal-wood and silver" (191) and has in her boudoir "fantastic [chests] of Indian filagree work" (251); Alicia Audley, mocking what an Army officer had told her father, jokes, "we should have another war before long . . . we shall have no army at all, by and by, nothing but a pack of boys . . . fighting in Oudh in calico helmets to this very day" (280).

The latter refers to the onset of the Indian Mutiny. As K. Theodore Hoppen, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Hull, reports, the British Governor-General in India "took under British rule no less than seven Indian states. . . . Then in 1856, throwing any pretence at legality to the winds, he annexed the populous kingdom of Oudh" (187), initiating a series of circumstances, what Hoppen describes as "the fortuitous conjuncture of comparatively minor accidents" occurring within "the wider context of discontent and uncertainty created over the previous decades" (187), ultimately exploding into the Indian Mutiny. (For a more detailed discussion of the Indian Mutiny, turn to Episode 7 of this podcast, beginning at the 23-minute mark.)

Since this conflict occurred at the same time as the narrative's main action (and only four years before the novel's composition), its omission, other than Alicia's jibe, is striking. In the late 1850s, Braddon was not only aware of the Mutiny but was caught up in the public outrage over atrocities committed against the British, even publishing, in provincial newspapers, poems defending British rule and condemning Indian violence, beginning the poem "Delhi," for instance, with lines demanding the eradication of Britain's Indian foes:

> Down to the ground, scattered be every stone!
> Annihilation be thy mildest fate;
> And be thine epitaph these words alone:
> Here lie the bones of fiends infuriate—
> Here rot the carcasses of million slaves;
> And here *free* Britain's unstained banner waves.

Braddon's exterminationist response to the Mutiny was likely inflamed by her personal connections to Anglo-India. Her uncle William, notes Braddon biographer Robert Lee Wolff, "had spent thirty years as a judge in Bengal and had . . . come home, well-to-do and generous" (30). Following in his uncle's footsteps, Braddon's brother Edward began his remarkable career, setting sail for India in 1847 to work for his cousin's Calcutta mercantile firm, leaving in the early 1850s to become manager of several indigo factories. According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*,

> Braddon . . . display[ed] the usual planter arrogance towards the Indians. A European deputy magistrate once actually found him guilty of "aggravated and unprovoked assault", a decision that was later reversed. In July 1855 his work was interrupted by skirmishes and cleaning-up operations against the Santal people who had revolted briefly. The opportunity for martial activity pleased him, and he later spoke of it as 'a splendid substitute for the tiger-shooting which came not to my hand. (Bennet)

Edward Braddon would fight as a volunteer for the British during the Indian Mutiny and serve for many years in the Indian civil service. With these family connections to India and with the public furor aroused by and trauma caused by the Mutiny, it's no surprise that we find traces of the Mutiny in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Braddon was far from alone in responding so excessively to the Indian Mutiny. Saverio Tomaiuolo, Associate Professor of English at Cassino University, Italy, argues that the Mutiny was "one of the most tragic events in Victorian and imperial history . . . a cultural trauma that affected the public opinion and the literary world in unprecedented ways" (113). Ironically, the response to this sudden and violent threat to British certainties and self-identity was itself a form of intolerance and violence. Some criticized their fellow Britons' rage, Benjamin Disraeli, for one, declaring, "I have heard things said, and seen them written of late, which would make me almost suppose that the religious opinions of the people of England had undergone some sudden change; and that instead of bowing before the name of Jesus, we were preparing to revive the worship of Moloch" (qtd. in Herbert, "Doctrine" 434). For Karl Marx, Indian violence had its origins in British colonial violence:

> However infamous the conduct of the Sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule. To characterize that rule, it suffices to say that torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy.

Living in London and exposed to English reporting on the Mutiny, Marx noted the hypocrisy and hyperbole of the press: "it should not be forgotten that, while the cruelties of the English are related as acts of martial vigor, told simply, rapidly, without dwelling on disgusting details, the outrages of the natives, shocking as they are, are still deliberately exaggerated." The unease and threat and immorality that define the sensation novel, then, were in part a reaction to the many ways the Indian Mutiny threatened conventional and comforting British self-identity.

The fate of George Talboys, his disillusion and despair over the death of his wife, that dream which had kept him alive and struggling to make his fortune in a distant part of the empire, resonates with this background, with a questioning of the rightness of British imperialism. George asks why he sought gold at all if his goal, to support a wife and son, was to no purpose. Likewise, Britons began to question why their nation was pursuing imperial dominion if its idealized objective, to improve lives through the

spread of Christianity and British civilization, might be merely a cruel and bloody fantasy.

To lift George's spirits, to take away his feeling of suffering like a wounded soldier, Robert proposes a fox-hunting trip at Audley Court. Lady Audley, we learn, has settled into her role as wife of a baronet:

> She had appeared at several public balls . . . and was immediately established as the belle of the county. Pleased with her high position and her handsome house; with every caprice gratified, every whim indulged; admired and caressed wherever she went; fond of her generous husband; rich in a noble allowance of pin-money; with no poor relations to worry her with claims upon her purse or patronage; it would have been hard to find in the County of Essex a more fortunate creature than Lucy, Lady Audley. (50)

When not performing as a Lady, she appears as a child. She says she's 20 years old, but looks no more than 17. She has "the innocence and candour of an infant . . . and the character of extreme youth and freshness." Other than drawing and playing the piano, she seems to have no adult interests. "All her amusements were childish," Braddon explains, "She hated reading or study of any kind, and loved society." Her role as Lady is just that, a role she plays: "she looked like a child tricked out for a masquerade, was as girlish as if she had just left the nursery," and she discusses the new "costume" she'll wear to a dinner party (50).

This repeated description of Lady Audley as child suggests her youthful inability to convincingly fill the role of Lady of the house. There's no indication, in fact, that she performs any of the functions of this role: to make sure that a house, presumably which includes multiple servants and a husband and a step-daughter, is run efficiently. Playing the child also suggests she has adopted a persona in order to hide her insecurity, a way to fend off both criticism and suspicion. And it is an example of the Victorian eroticizing of children, her childishness being an essential element of her sex appeal, the result of a culture which defined a desirable woman as innocent and angelic. She "thereby embodies a central contradiction in the patriarchal ideal," assert Natalie and Ronald Shroeder, Emeritus English Professors at the University of Mississippi, "which simultaneously constitutes a powerful male fantasy: women are innocent and morally pure like a child; at the same time, feminine beauty is figured to be sexually provocative. The ideal woman, therefore, is the inviolable child whom men clamor to violate" (32). It's worth remembering that Sir Michael is 23 years older than the girlish Lady Audley. Braddon's depiction of her raises several questions: Is she suggesting that this childish affect has been adopted consciously by Lady Audley because she recognizes its seductive power? Is Braddon aware of this "powerful male fantasy" and thus criticizing it? Or is she uncritically describing men's and young women's interaction, unaware of its fetishistic and abusive character?

The perception of Lady Audley as childlike is shared, and repeatedly mocked, by Sir Michael Audley's daughter, Alicia. Having an unrequited love for Robert, Alicia is

perpetually frustrated by his obliviousness. And she is contemptuous of the new Lady Audley. Part of this hostility is the predictable reaction of a daughter to her father's remarriage, especially to a stepmother only a few years older who seems even younger. Whereas others find Lady Audley's childishness charming, to churlish Alicia it seems simply childish. And she's jealous, recognizing that "In spite of [her] undisguised contempt for her step-mother's childishness and frivolity, Lucy was better loved and more admired than" she was (50). When Robert, seeing her for the first time in a carriage outside the Inn where he and George are staying, praises Lady Audley's beauty, Alicia responds, "I'm sorry to find you can only admire wax dolls" (53). It's tempting to read in this statement Braddon's own commentary on male desire. But since Alicia is a comically obtuse character, it's difficult to align her views with Braddon's.

Alicia leads Robert and George on a tour of Audley Court, since Lady Audley, accompanied by her husband, was suddenly called to London in response to a telegram she had received from Mrs. Vincent, the schoolmistress who had written her reference to Mr. Dawson, urging her to see her immediately since she was dangerously ill. Eager to see the captivating Lady Audley, whom Robert has had only a fleeting glimpse of and whom George has not seen at all, they decide to view her portrait, entering her locked boudoir by crawling through a hidden passageway. Portraits, especially of a distant ancestor hanging in an ancient family home, are a common device in Gothic tales. These haunting images suggest a family curse, the undead, the past continuing into the present, the power of the supernatural. For instance, here's Charles Maturin's description from *Melmouth the Wanderer*, often identified as the last of the English Gothic novels, of his protagonist John Melmouth seeing for the first time, amidst a collection "of family pictures . . . left to moulder on the walls of a family mansion" (16), his ancestor's portrait:

> John's eyes were in a moment, and as if by magic, rivetted on a portrait that hung on the wall. . . It represented a man of middle age. There was nothing remarkable in the costume, or in the countenance, but *the eyes*, John felt, were such as one feels they wish they had never seen, and feels they can never forget. . . . he continued to gaze in stupid horror (16-17).

Unlike the 1646 portrait of Melmouth, the portrait of Lady Audley is rich in detail and vivid in color, following the practice of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Like the portrait of Melmouth, Lady Audley's portrait uncannily hints at her true character: there's "a strange sinister light to the deep blue eyes. . . . that pretty pouting mouth [has a] hard and almost wicked look . . . [she] had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend" (65). Enthralled, George stares silently at the painting, about which Alicia comments, "sometimes a painter . . . is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression . . . not to be perceived to common eyes" (66). The painter, in other words, has revealed a secret Lady Audley (but not Lady Audley's secret).

This two-facedness, a childlike one in public, the other a fiend kept behind a locked door in a private boudoir, matches Victorian women's need to maintain an artificial

image of good-natured propriety and to keep their true selves, their frustrations and desires, forever hidden. Sophia Andres, professor in the Department of Literature and Language at the University of Texas-Permian Basin, makes a similar point: "the paradoxical perspective governing Lady Audley's Pre-Raphaelite portrait," she writes,

> captures some of the inherent contradictions in Victorian gender ideology which at once worships women and imprisons them within the domestic sphere, depriving them of the power it grants them. Extending Lady Audley's power beyond the traditionally domestic constraints, the narrator seems to empower her, yet at the same time weaken her by casting her as a stereotype, a femme fatale, "a beautiful fiend."

Because her power seems unconstrained by domestic conventions, Lady Audley becomes a fiend. In other words, she's a fiend because her actions violate accepted gender rules, while appearing to personify them as a "representative of the Victorian culture's worship of the child-woman or the Angel in the House" (Andres). This transformation, this literal demonizing, is a common response to individuals (or classes of individuals) perceived as a threat to the dominant ideology. Demonizing a threat is a way to disarm it. Yet the demonized figure can also be viewed as evidence both of the continuing threat this figure poses and of a culture's inability to contain it. Which of these views Braddon endorses—Lady Audley as demon or demon as transgressive female or some combination of the two—is a matter of continued debate among literary scholars.

Just as this portrait can be viewed as either suppressing or empowering women, so the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's depictions of women have vexed art critics since first they were hung on gallery walls, Victorian critics finding these women's flowing locks and dishabille too erotic, recent critics finding this eroticism an objectification of women to satisfy the male gaze. As for example in the following analysis of Lady Audley's portrait by Purdue University-Fort Wayne Emerita English Professor Lynette Felber:

> The description of the portrait . . . hovers with fetishistic pleasure. The passage frames a static moment of pleasure, arresting time and lingers over the detailed, minute particularization of physical traits, of the fetish itself, the partial, fragmented view represented (hair, mouth, eyes) dwells on the parts without integration into the whole. (474)

Yet many Pre-Raphaelite paintings depict something much different, fully clothed women in some sort of confinement, notably in the many paintings based on Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shallot" and Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." These paintings can be read as responses to women's confinement in the home. Or they can be read as a romanticizing and sexualizing of women's suffering, of a damsel in distress, a woman denied agency. In the equivocal nature of their portraits—temptresses and victims, sorceresses and prisoners —the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and Braddon in *Lady Audley's Secret*, responding to the

constraints imposed upon Victorian women, inevitably found themselves entangled in ideological contradictions and gender confusions and aesthetic choices and commercial demands, leading to still unresolved questions about the intent and the effect of their portraits.

But there's no question about the effect Lady Audley's portrait has upon George Talboys. Returned to their Inn, during a loud thunderstorm, Robert notes George's appearance. "If you could see yourself," he says to George, "white and haggard, with your great hollow eyes staring out at the sky as if they were fixed upon a ghost. I tell you I know that you are frightened" (67). The next day, George wanders off and does not return. Much of the rest of the novel will consist of Robert's attempt to solve the mystery of his friend's disappearance.

Thinking that George has returned to London, Robert visits Audley Court where Sir Michael proudly displays his trophy wife: "Sir Michael watched the impression my Lady made upon his nephew with a proud delight in her beauty and fascination" (78). Robert notices the contradictory nature of her character as "she wandered into a pensive sonata of Beethoven's. It was one of the many paradoxes of her character, that love of sombre and melancholic melodies, so opposite to her gay, frivolous nature" (79). Just like the difference between the real Lady Audley and her portrait, this difference between preference for melancholy music and a cheerful demeanor suggests she is putting up a front, a public face covering an unhappy secret.

Discovering George hasn't returned to London, Robert travels to Southampton where Captain Maldon lives with his grandson, Georgey. Maldon tells Robert that, yes, George had come to see him and his son the previous night, then left for Liverpool, from where he will go on to Australia. But there are many clues of something nefarious: Georgey wasn't wakened by his father's kissing him goodbye; Georgey recalls a wealthy woman visiting him and giving him gifts, a woman not to be confused with his mother who he remembers crying all the time; Robert discovers in the hearthrug a half-burned telegram, which reads: "—alboys came to —— last night, and left by the mail for London, on his way to Liverpool, whence he was to sail for Sydney." The name and address of the sender have been burned away.

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Without solving the riddle of the half-burned telegram, Robert returns to his London flat and has a troubling dream:

> he was in the church-yard at Ventnor, gazing at the headstone George had ordered for the grave of his dead wife. . . . went to the grave, and found this headstone gone, and on remonstrating with the stonemason, was told that the man had a reason for removing the inscription; a reason that Robert would some day learn. (87)

Robert is then awakened by a knocking at his door. In the 1862 version of the novel serialized in the *Sixpenny Magazine*, Robert continues to sleep and continues to dream: "In another dream," Braddon writes,

> he saw the grave of Helen Talboys open, and while he waited, with the cold horror lifting up his hair, to see the dead woman rise and stand before him with her stiff, charnel-house drapery clinging about her rigid limbs, his uncle's wife tripped gaily out of the open grave, dressed in the crimson velvet robes in which the artist had painted her, and with her ringlets flashing like red gold in the unearthly light that shone about her. . . .
>
> Once he was walking in the black shadows of [Audley Court's] long avenue, with Lady Audley hanging on his arm, when suddenly they heard a great knocking in the distance, and his uncle's wife wound her slender arms around him, crying out that it was the day of judgment, and that all wicked secrets must now be told. Looking at her as she shrieked this in his ear, he saw that her face had grown ghastly white, and that her beautiful golden ringlets were changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her fair neck (qtd. in Houston 34).

These paragraphs were excised from subsequent editions, presumably because Braddon believed they spoiled the novel's mystery. These passages, though, are worth discussing as an example of pre-Freudian dream psychology. Braddon shows how unresolved and unrecognized concerns—those triggered by George's disappearance and clues Robert hasn't yet pieced together—are beginning to be pieced together within his unconscious.

Braddon also shows how in dreams this work takes the form of images and symbols: a woman leaving an open grave, Lady Audley's curls becoming serpents, two references to "gold" ("her ringlets flashing like red gold," "her beautiful golden ringlets . . . changing into serpents"), images that connect Lady Audley's beauty to money and that suggest her beauty is murderously dangerous.

When he awakens, Robert is discomfited by his dream and by the partial telegram he found, realizing now that "there was some mystery involved with the disappearance of his friend—some treachery towards himself, or towards George" (88). And so he "bought the *Times* newspaper, and looked instinctively at the second column, with a morbid interest in the advertisements of people missing" (88). Robert's turning to the second column would have been a natural choice for someone looking for a lost friend: in the 1850s, the *Times* of London featured lost and found listings in the second column on its front page. Looking at the front page of the October 22, 1857 edition (a date I picked at random but within the time frame of the novel), one can read about lost purses and wallets and opera glasses, as well as lost dogs:

- a small RAT-COLOURED TERRIER DOG—tan face and legs, white breast . . . comes to the name of Smut;

- a BROWN AND GRAY ROUGH SCOTCH TERRIER DOG, ears uncut and black, black nose, and has lost the front teeth underneath, light bushy tail and answers to the name of Boz;

and even a lost husband:

- Mr. George Green, late brushmaker of Northstreet, Brighton, is earnestly and affectionately entreated to RETURN, or Communicate immediately with his wife, his absence causing her and his relatives, much grief and anxiety.

The first column of the paper listed announcements of births, marriages, and deaths. It's where George first read of the death of his wife Helen. On this particular day, October 22, 1857, in addition to men, women, and children who died of natural causes, are four officers who died during the Indian Mutiny, including this family tragedy:

- In the intrenchments at Cawnporne, killed by a round shot, Capt. W.L. Halliday, 56th Regt. N.J., youngest son of the late John Halliday, Esq. of Chapel Cleeve, Somersetshire; also of small pox and fever, Emma Laetitia, his beloved wife, and, it is believed, on the 27th of June, Edith Mabel, their daughter, aged 2 years and 3 months.

Finding no death or missing announcement of someone who might be George Talboys, Robert travels to Liverpool to determine if George had, in fact, left for Australia. No one by that name is listed on the shipping rosters, and only one man had appeared just before a ship departed, a Thomas Brown, who had an arm in a sling. And so Robert concludes, "George Talboys never sailed for Australia . . . If he is alive, he is still in England; and if he is dead, his body is hidden in some corner of England" (90). It's at this point that Robert shifts from friend to sleuth, compiling a "Journal of Facts Connected with the Disappearance of George Talboys," which are as follows:

1. I write to Alicia, proposing to take George down to the Court.
2. Alicia writes, objecting to the visit, on the part of Lady Audley.
3. We go to Essex in spite of that objection. I see my lady. My lady refuses to be introduced to George on that particular evening on the score of fatigue.
4. Sir Michael invites George and me to dinner for the following evening.
5. My lady receives a telegraphic dispatch the next morning which summons her to London.
6. Alicia shows me a letter from my lady, in which she requests to be told when I and my friend, Mr. Talboys, mean to leave Essex. To this letter is subjoined a postscript, reiterating the above request.
7. We call at the Court, and ask to see the house. My lady's apartments are locked.
8. We get at the aforesaid apartments by means of a secret passage, the existence of which is unknown to my lady. In one of the rooms we find her portrait.

9. George is frightened at the storm. His conduct is exceedingly strange for the rest of the evening.
10. George quite himself again the following morning. I propose leaving Audley Court immediately; he prefers remaining till the evening.
11. We go out fishing. George leaves me to go to the Court.
12. The last positive information I can obtain of him in Essex is at the Court, where the servant says he thinks Mr. Talboys told him he would go and look for my lady in the grounds.
13. I receive information about him at the station which may or may not be correct.
14. I hear of him positively once more at Southampton, where, according to his father-in-law, he had been for an hour on the previous night.
15. The telegraphic message. (90-1)

Considering these points, Robert resolves to renew his search at George's last known location: Audley Court. But first he places an announcement in the *Times*: "Mr. George Talboys.—Any person who has met this gentleman since the 7th inst., or who possesses any information respecting him subsequent to that date, will be liberally rewarded" (92).

Meanwhile, at Audley Court, Lady Audley is talking with her companion, Phoebe. They seem to have a close relationship. With Alicia's animosity and Sir Michael's preoccupation with "agricultural pursuits and manly sports" (94), Lady Audley increasingly turns to Phoebe for companionship. Phoebe even "knew enough of the French language to be able to dip into the yellow-paper covered novels . . . and to discourse with her mistress upon the questionable subjects of these romances" (94). These "yellow-paper covered" books are French novels, which Braddon refers to at least eight times, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, not to mention two references to Balzac and Alexandre Dumas and one to Paul de Kock; Robert Audley, in fact, can't seem to go anywhere without bringing a stack of them with him. Braddon herself was a great admirer of French novels, even writing a version of *Madame Bovary*, *The Doctor's Wife*. But for many British readers, these novels, whether the frank realism of Flaubert or the popular romances by now forgotten writers like Paul de Kock, were irreligious and offensively risqué.

In 1847, a writer for *Hood's Magazine*, using the penname "a modern tourist," complained of the immorality of novels by Eugene Sue, Alexandre Dumas, George Sand, "and a host of others" who "assail the morality of the people. In their writings, the abandoned wife, the profligate husband, the unprincipled adventurer . . . are rendered attractive to young minds. . . . With [these writers] sensuality is love. . . . The tinselled garb in which they array their heroes and heroines, conceals their deformity from view, and renders what should be the subject of disgust, the object of admiration." The novelist William Makepeace Thackeray voiced a similar objection: "A hundred years hence," he wrote,

> what a strange opinion the world will have of the French society of to-day! Did all married people, we may imagine they will ask, break a certain

> commandment? Thev all do in the novels. Was French society composed of murderers, of forgers, of children without parents, of men consequently running the risk of marrying their grandmothers by mistake; of disguised princes, who lived in the friendship of amiable cut-throats and spotless prostitutes. . . All these characters are quite common in French novels" (qtd. in Hawes 10).

Donald Hawes, visiting lecturer in English at the University of London and the University of Westminster, explains this animus toward French novels, especially at the onset of the Victorian era: "In the 1830s, and to a lesser extent in the 1840s, many English critics denigrated or opposed the work and ideas of these new and startling writers for a number of reasons, which included fear or disapproval of the 1830 Revolution, a neoclassical distaste for Romanticism, a partly Evangelical insistence on a strict moral code, and a feeling that novels were inferior works of literature" (5).

Not all critics, of course, disliked French novels. And after mid-century, as Victorian tastes began to change, appreciation for French novels grew. Here, for instance, is praise for these novels which appeared in the London newspaper *The Standard of Freedom* in 1851:

> All readers of French novels are struck by the enchaining interest of the plot, and the skill with which its capabilities are brought out and wrought up to the height of their effect. No opportunity is lost of giving expression to the subtle emotions of the scene, or of resolving into action the salient points of the fable. Everything seems to - flow obviously and easily; every line contributes to the onward and accumulating interest; . . . all is essential, natural, and fresh. You are never suffered to dawdle or drop asleep over the book, and rarely find yourself galloping through half-a-dozen pages at a time to get at the pith of the story. ("French")

No wonder Lady Audley and especially Robert Audley are avid readers of these books (although earlier in the novel Braddon had said that Lady Audley "hated reading or study of any kind"). That they both read French novels suggests they share a sympathy of character, a skepticism about Victorian moral codes, and perhaps a wish to escape the humdrum of respectability.

It's precisely this humdrum that Phoebe desires, revealing to Lady Audley that she will marry her cousin Luke. Appalled, Lady Audley sharply asks, "You surely are not in love with the awkward, ugly creature, are you?" (96). Admitting she doesn't love Luke, Phoebe says she promised to marry him when she was fifteen and is afraid of what Luke might do to her should she refuse him. "It is just such men as he," she explains, "who have decoyed their sweethearts into lonely places, and murdered them for being false to their word. When he was a boy he was always violent and revengeful. I saw him once take up that very knife in a quarrel with his mother. I tell you, my lady, I must marry him" (96).

Another explanation could be that she and Luke have already been sexually intimate, seeing that there was a substantial difference in premarital sexual behavior between the lower classes and those above them. As Sally Mitchell, Professor Emerita at Temple University, explains, "lower-class women were known to be sexually active," an analysis of the 1851 census revealing "that one woman in thirteen was likely to produce a bastard. Parish records and the testimony of rural clergymen revealed how many of the rest were already pregnant when they got to the altar" (xiii).

There's no evidence that Phoebe is pregnant—or even that she's been intimate with Luke. But her anticipation of his violence if she were to leave him is more explicable if she were leaving a man not just whom she's been engaged to but whom she's been sexually engaged with. Fear of pregnancy and of losing her reputation should they part, then, may also factor in her decision to marry Luke. As Phoebe tells Lady Audley, "I must marry him. You don't know what he is. It will be my ruin, and the ruin of others, if I break my word" (97). "Ruin" in this context may refer to the threat of Luke's violence. But more commonly "ruin" would suggest the destruction of Phoebe's reputation, what the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "dishonour of a woman caused by her seduction and subsequent abandonment; degradation resulting from this." Her ruin would reduce her chances of marrying, forcing her to struggle on her own. Lady Audley suspects "there must be some secret at the bottom of all of this" (97). And Phoebe agrees: "'There is, my lady,' said the girl with her face turned away" (97).

The secret here is not about a sexual relationship, though, but about Luke and Phoebe's blackmailing Lady Audley for money enough to purchase a pub, a plan that forces the shame-faced Phoebe to turn away, as Luke presses her mistress for money. Lady Audley initially refuses Luke's entreaties. But Luke responds by saying in a tone of "quiet insolence, that had a hidden meaning" (98) that she will pay. Understanding Luke's threat, Lady Audley turns to Phoebe and exclaims, "You have told this man" (98), to which Phoebe pitifully replies, "He forced it from me, or I would never, never have told" (98). We don't at this point know what Phoebe told Luke, only that it is a secret painful enough that Lady Audley must give in to blackmail.

Phoebe's fear of Luke's violence, so much that she will marry him and leave her job as companion, seems a valid explanation for her capitulation. But other factors are at work. For one, in a growing capitalist economy, the couple's chances of improving their living standards are greater from running a pub and producing their own income than if Phoebe were to remain Lady Audley's companion, a position with little opportunity for financial gain, a position which depends on the wages and whims of her mistress. Luckily, or so they perceive, the blackmail succeeds, and Luke achieves his dream of purchasing a pub and gaining a wife.

The dreary village of Mount Stanning in which Phoebe and Luke Marks marry is clearly meant to contrast with the splendor of Audley Court. Whereas in Audley Court "the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed" (7), near the village "the cattle [were] groping their way through the dim obscurity and blundering stupidly against

black and leafless hedges, or stumbling into ditches" (98). Clearly, Braddon isn't merely discussing farm animals. The differences here are the differences between the upper and lower classes, the one inquisitive, the other stupid. It's worth noting that "cattle" is a frequently used metaphor for the undifferentiated and unthinking lower classes; Friedrich Engels, for instance, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, describes the dwellings of the poor in Manchester as a "collection of cattle-sheds for human beings" (63) and the corpses of the London poor as being "dumped into the earth like infected cattle" (295). Besides the use of this metaphor, Braddon shows the difference between the two locations, Court and village—and the two social classes associated with these—through descriptions of the natural environment. The land around Audley Court is "rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures" (7), while the village features "black and leafless hedges" and ditches. The natural world of Audley Court is thriving and aesthetically pleasing, the natural world of the village black, dying, and undistinguishable.

The language Braddon uses to describe the landscape emphasizes socio-economic difference: Audley Court's environment is rich, fine, old and associated with luxury, just like the families who have lived there for generations. When describing the village, Braddon uses no similar language. She further contrasts the two scenes—and the two economic classes—through her description of the paths that lead to each location. To approach Audley Court, one traverses "an avenue of [linden trees] bordered on either side by meadows" (7). No borders or lines of trees mark the village, which instead is seen as a chaotic jumble, "every winding path and cottage door, every gable end and gray old chimney, every village child and straggling cur seeming strange and weird of aspect in the semi-darkness" (98). Again, we see the poor associated with animals, this time in the pairing of "village child and straggling cur." In fact, these poor children are almost unnatural, strange and weird. Unlike the Audley offspring, these children have no well-marked avenue leading to their homes, no clear path to a certain future. Thus, the stumbling and weird darkness which Phoebe and Luke must navigate to reach the chapel in which they will marry before taking over a rural inn is suggestive of their lives and the lives of others of their class, of the obstacles and chaos they must confront as they struggle to survive. In just these two short contrasting descriptions, the well-ordered and beautiful Audley Court and the obscure and dingy village, Braddon conveys much about the seemingly permanent economic differences and impermeable social boundaries that determined individual fates in Victorian Britain.

In describing the ironically named Castle Inn, the dream purchase of Luke and Phoebe Marks, Braddon, in one of the novel's more striking passages, conveys the desperate conditions and impossible hopes of a working-class husband and wife. This "object of [Luke's] life-long ambition," Castle Inn presents the couple with the opportunity to work for themselves and, potentially, to gain what work at Audley Court could never provide them—an increase in wealth and a rise in social class. But Braddon's description of the Inn immediately shows how unrealistic are these hopes (and how insurmountable the class boundaries) within Victorian Britain:

> It was not a very pretty house to look at; it had something of a tumble-down, weather-beaten appearance. . . . The wind had had its own way with the Castle Inn, and had sometimes made cruel use of its power. It was the wind that battered and bent the low, thatched roofs of outhouses and stables, till they hung over and lurched forward, as a slouched hat hangs over the low forehead of some village ruffian; it was the wind that shook and rattled the wooden shutters before the narrow casements, till they hung broken and dilapidated upon their rusty hinges; it was the wind that overthrew the pigeon house, and broke the vane that had been imprudently set up to tell the movements of its mightiness; it was the wind that made light of any little bit of wooden trellis-work, or creeping plant, or tiny balcony, or any modest decoration whatsoever, and tore and scattered it in its scornful fury; it was the wind that left mossy secretions on the discolored surface of the plaster walls; it was the wind, in short, that shattered, and ruined, and rent, and trampled upon the tottering pile of buildings, and then flew shrieking off, to riot and glory in its destroying strength. (98)

Just as its new owners must struggle against destructive headwinds, the social and economic forces which have shaped their lives and against which they have no power, so Castle Inn struggles against the impersonal cruelty of the wind. Braddon here uses the rhetorical device of anaphora, the repetition of sentence or clause openings, beginning five consecutive clauses with the phrase "it was the wind." This use of anaphora emphasizes the incessant and inescapable forces that batter Castle Inn and by association the forces that batter Luke and Phoebe. These winds are also personified: they are cruel; they ruin and trample and shriek and riot. While this passage is powerfully written, its attribution of the forces against which Luke and Phoebe must fight also obfuscates. The obstacle to their and others' economic security is a political economy that was established in feudal times, a system based on inherited wealth and title and a region dominated by a single substantial property-owning family. But we get little sense of this larger picture, not even of the Audley family's land holdings. In Britain of the 1870s, a lower-nobility family like the Audleys was likely to have owned at least 1000 acres (Cannadine 9). The Petre family, upon whose ancestral home Audley Court is based, were "among the most extensive in Essex, and, in addition to reaching into many other parishes, comprised almost the entire acreage of East Horndon, West Horndon, Ingrave, and Herongate" ("Lord"). Like the Petres, the Audleys would earn substantial income from rents on this land. But none of this background makes its way into the novel in which, for Luke and Phoebe, it's not rapacious landlords and gross economic inequality that threaten to destroy them; it's the wind that does.

Luckily, Castle Inn's despairing appearance does not keep customers away: "Sturdy drovers stopped to drink at the little bar; well-to-do farmers spent their evenings and talked politics in the low, wainscoted parlor . . . Sometimes even the members of the Audley hunt stopped to drink and bait their horses" (100). It's at one such fox-hunt that we next meet Robert Audley. He's brought his stray dogs and cigars and French novels to Audley Court. "Dawdling over a slice of bread and marmalade" and showing

no interest in conversations about famous racehorses and past hunts and injured colts, Robert is perceived as "an inoffensive species of maniac" (101). Instead of joining in the hunt with the other guests, Robert "spent his time entirely in lounging in the drawing-room, and making himself agreeable, after his own lazy fashion" (102). He also finds himself berated by Alicia Audley, who is frustrated by his lack of interest in her and by his disdain for one particular guest, the young and wealthy Sir Harry Towers who is pursuing Alicia.

But Robert's purpose at Audley Court is to interrogate Lady Audley, "fresh and radiant in her elegant morning costume, her yellow curls glistening with the perfumed waters in which she had bathed" (104). As she works on one of her water-color sketches, he takes on the role of detective, using what has become a convention in detective fiction, the cat-and-mouse exchange between knowing detective and cagey suspect, speaking to her indirectly in an almost coded exchange. That is, while commenting on trivial matters, he is referring to her possible crimes. He is, in other words, signaling to her that he knows she is guilty of something. And she knows he knows.

For instance, he praises her skillful painting, noting that "Some women would do a great deal to accomplish such a change" (105). Robert isn't really discussing her artistic process but is implying that she would do anything to change her life, including creating a wholly new persona and doing away with George Talboys. Braddon signals to us that Lady Audley understands Robert's meaning:

> [her] clear blue eyes dilated as she fixed them suddenly on the young barrister. The wintry sunlight, gleaming full upon her face from a side window, lit up the azure of those beautiful eyes, till their color seemed to flicker and tremble betwixt blue and green, as the opal tints of the sea change upon a summer's day. The small brush fell from her hand, and blotted out the peasant's face under a widening circle of crimson lake. (105)

Too distracted to work on her painting, Lady Audley, "seating herself in the deep recess of another window at a considerable distance from Robert," began to work on a piece of embroidery (105). Eventually, conversation turns to George's fate. Robert tells her that George didn't make it to Southampton where his son and father-in-law live, that he thinks Captain Maldon was lying about this, and he asks her if she knows what circumstantial evidence is, giving a long description of how slight bits of evidence can become "links of steel in the wonderful chain forged by the science of the detective officer," leading to the construction of a gallows and the hanging of a criminal (107). After this long discourse, "Faint shadows of green and crimson," writes Braddon, "fell upon my lady's face from the painted escutcheons in the mullioned window by which she sat; but every trace of the natural colour of that face had faded out, leaving it a ghastly ashen grey" as she fainted away (107).

One of the more striking aspects of this scene is its use of color. It's not just Lady Audley painting but Braddon as well. With its many colors—blue, azure, green, opal, crimson, amber, grey—this scene resembles a Pre-Raphaelite painting. That these

colors are associated with a woman embroidering near what seems a Gothic-style window is reminiscent of John Everett Millais's popular 1851 painting, "Mariana," based on Tennyson's poem of the same name.

It's not the narrative behind this painting that's important but the atmosphere it conveys of a woman's loneliness amidst the trappings of wealth, a fine-gowned woman in the midst of splendor wearily stretching before a window, her embroidery laid out on a table in front of her. As Lady Audley tells Phoebe about Audley Court, "It is a dull place . . . Though I am the wife of one of the most influential men in the county, I don't know that I wasn't nearly as well off at Mr. Dawson's; and yet it's something to wear sables that cost sixty guineas, and have a thousand pounds spent on the decoration of one's apartments" (95). Braddon's allusion to Pre-Raphaelite paintings, of course, is meant to remind us of Lady Audley's portrait, with the "strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes" and her "hard and almost wicked look."

As I noted earlier, the Pre-Raphaelites were criticized for their eroticized depictions of women. They were also criticized because often the models they painted were physically imperfect. These painters did not idealize their female subjects or follow the classical precepts of beauty. Besides violating classical aesthetic principles, these female figures challenged gender and class definitions. The prevailing view was that women, especially upper-class women, should be presented as having a harmonious and flawless beauty because this physical appearance reflected their characters. Imperfect beauty meant imperfect character. These imperfections were also commonly associated with lower class women. Whatever their appearance, the women in these paintings were ennobled, sometimes by the painting's context (a saint or heroine or goddess) but often just by being the subject of the painting, a person spectators are made to look at and admire. It was obviously inappropriate, and at times shocking, to ennoble someone who was not noble, who may in fact, judged by their appearance, be of dubious moral character. The logic goes like this: upper-class lady has perfect beauty hence perfect character. Lower-class woman has flawed beauty hence flawed character.

Although it seems odd to equate beauty with social class, we should remember that there is some basis for this perception. The circumstances of working-class women's lives—surviving on poor nutrition, living in toxic environments, receiving little or no medical care, working dangerous or wearying jobs (perhaps beginning when they were young children)—are likely to produce physical imperfections. And these imperfections could be read as vulgar and unfeminine. One critic, for instance, denigrated Millais's Mariana as "only an ill-complexioned lady straining herself into an ungraceful attitude" (qtd in Casteras 19). That is, she has the unhealthy complexion and lack of grace of the poor. This connection between class and appearance is even more apparent in the responses to two of Millais's paintings displayed in 1852, one, according to Professor Emerita in Art History at the University of Washington Susan Casteras, "was loathed for its 'very commonplace face earnestly looking down at the owner's two common-looking hands,'" the other "was even more disagreeable for its highly commonplace face'" (20).

John Everett Millais, "Mariana," 1851, (https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariana_(Millais)#/media/File:John_Everett_Millais_-_Mariana_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

Lady Audley, on the other hand, is an idealized beauty: her "melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of [her] slender throat and drooping head, [her] wealth of showering flaxen curls; the low music of [her] gentle voice [create a] perfect harmony" (12). Her perfection should signal a perfect character. For just as in paintings, so in novels a woman's appearance denoted her character (with notable exceptions such as the plain but admirable Jane Eyre). "The pressure to idealize female character was strong for the mid-Victorian novelist," argues University of Maryland English professor Jeanne Fahnestock, "reflecting the stake contemporary society had in an ideal, gentle, innocent, truthful womanhood, no matter how far from reality" (316). Mid-century writers, though, had more liberty in their novels than painters did on their canvases to present physically imperfect heroines for the sake of more realistic character portrayals. As Fahnestock puts it: "The face remains an accurate mirror of the character, for the heroine of irregular features is capable of irregular conduct" (331). In other words, the connection between face and character remains but becomes more nuanced: a heroine can have physical and corresponding moral flaws.

This connection between appearance and character was more than a literary and artistic convention; it drew on popular pseudo-scientific beliefs in craniology and phrenology and, especially, physiognomy, the belief that a person's character can be judged by facial characteristics. Casteras cites a number of popular titles—*Face Reading: With Hints on Love, Courtship and Marriage; The Study of the Human Face:*

Mouth, Lips, and Nose; Noses and How to Read Them—to argue that "Many people accepted in general the beliefs and conclusions conveyed by these publications, which offered a supposed system of classification by which to analyze (or psychoanalyze) human nature and conduct" (14).

If because of the consequences of poverty, beauty could convincingly be linked to class and because of strict bourgeois morality, character too could be tied to class, then physiognomy seemed to make sense. As a result, the culture could have some assurance that its classification of women based on physical appearance, as well as its larger social system based too on what appeared proper, was fair and true. But as I've argued throughout this podcast series, there existed in the 19th century a tension between appearance and reality, between public and private, between decorum and immorality, a tension that is a mainstay of Victorian novels. Sensation novels like *Lady Audley's Secret* were controversial because they suggested that this tension had broken, that there existed an unacknowledged, and perhaps irreparable gap between decorous appearance and degraded reality.

If Braddon's descriptions of Lady Audley's appearance bely her character, Lady Audley's own artistic endeavors, that is, her painting, reveals it (as does her portrait with its strange, sinister eyes and hard, wicked look). As she talks with Robert, she's copying "a water-coloured sketch of an impossibly beautiful Italian peasant, in an impossibly Turneresque atmosphere" (105). Perhaps there's narcissism here, a beautiful once poor woman painting a beautiful peasant. Rather than pre-Raphaelitish, this painting is Turneresque, indicating Lady Audley's tumultuous emotional state, as Braddon suggests in the sanguinary detail of a "widening circle of crimson lake" (105). When startled by Robert's comments, the brush dropped from Lady Audley's hand "and blotted out the peasant's face" (105), a telling image in a story about a man who has disappeared, who has himself been "blotted out." It's interesting that Braddon doesn't identify the gender of this figure, making the blotting out also a covering up of Lady Audley's own identity. I linger over this scene, testing readers' and listeners' patience, because, except for its focus on painting, it's representative of a technique Braddon often uses. Just as Robert teases Lady Audley, so Braddon teases the reader, playing cat-and-mouse with us, putting us in the position of detective trying to discover meaning in what may be the trivial and irrelevant.

As the hunting party departs Audley Court, we learn that Sir Harry Towers has proposed to and been turned down by Alicia who remains stubbornly enthralled by the ever-oblivious Robert. We see Lady Audley offer her farewells to her house guests in what seem sincere gestures but what Braddon suggests are false and perfunctory: "Her great blue eyes had a pretty mournful look, in charming unison with the soft pressure of her little hand, and that friendly, though perhaps rather stereotyped speech, in which she told her visitors how she was so sorry to lose them" (108). We see Lady Audley convince her husband to tell Robert that he too must depart from Audley Court because, as she explains to him, Alicia is jealous of the attention Robert gives her. And so Robert must domicile elsewhere: "he went straight up to the little village of

Mount Stanning, and walking into the neatly-kept inn, asked Phoebe Marks if he could be accommodated with apartments" (115).

Once there, Robert continues his detection, asking Phoebe questions about Lady Audley's past, which Phoebe, who in the meantime has sent a private message to Lady Audley, deftly answers. That's when Robert shifts his approach to asking questions of the far less cunning, if not thick-headed and drunken, Luke, who, ignoring his wife's warnings, complains that "if folks hadn't been so precious stingy, I might have had a public in a thrivin' market town, instead of this tumble-down old place. . . . What, indeed, is a hundred pounds to a man possessed of the power which you hold, or rather which your wife holds, over the person in question" (120). From this, Robert gathers that, because of secrets they knew about her, Lady Audley was forced to give Luke and Phoebe the money to purchase Castle Inn.

The next morning, lounging at the breakfast table with his dogs at his side, to his great surprise, in walks Lady Audley. "A false move," Robert declares, "and one I never looked for from you" (121). Radiant, with a "pretty little rosebud of a mouth," Lady Audley, Braddon describes, "looked a childish, helpless, babyfied little creature" (121). She tells Robert she has come to apologize for his sudden eviction from Audley Court. But we know she received from Phoebe news that Robert was at Castle Inn asking about her. She has come, no doubt, to discover what he has discovered. Again playing the coy detective, Robert tells her he has come to Castle Inn because he "felt an interest in [Luke] . . . a dangerous man . . . a man in whose power I should not like to be" (123), at which "A sudden change came over Lady Audley's face; the pretty, roseate flush faded out from her cheeks, and left them waxen white, and angry flashes lightened in her blue eyes" (123), and she cries passionately, "'What have I done to you, Robert Audley . . . what have I done to you that you should hate me so?" (123). Robert responds by almost directly blaming her for George's disappearance:

> [he] might have been made away with in this very inn. . . . What do we know of the mysteries that may hang about the houses we enter? . . . Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs; terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot where they were done. . . . I believe . . . that we may walk unconsciously in an atmosphere of crime, and breathe none the less freely. I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer, and admire its tranquil beauty. (123)

This passage epitomizes the sensibility of sensation fiction, a recognition that violence and criminality often occur in the most unassuming of settings, that beneath the polished surface of decent British society, inside the homes of the prosperous and the morally upright, within the hearts of its respectable members, behind a lady's sparkling blue eyes and flaxen curls hides a wicked amorality.

Robert makes his accusation plain to Lady Audley when he tells her that in a smiling and tranquilly beautiful face we may be viewing the face of a murderer. Then he alludes to the physical evidence he has in London, letters from Helen Talboys to her husband George, written in her fine, elaborate, unique script (a script identical to Lady

Audley's), at which she abruptly leaves, not for Audley Court, as Robert first suspects, but for London. Once he realizes her destination, Robert declares to himself, "I'll follow her to London by the next train, and if I'm not very much mistaken, I know where to find her" (125).

But Lady Audley would remain unfound to readers of the original serialized version of the novel, the magazine it was being serialized in, *Robin Goodfellow,* folding after only twelve issues and eighteen chapters of the novel (Houston 32). The magazine's editor, Charles Mackay, by the way, was himself a writer, a journalist who covered the American Civil War and authored that classic text on financial bubbles, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. Mackay was the father of an illegitimate daughter, Marie Corelli, who would in the 1880s, following the publication of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, become an extremely popular novelist, surpassing, according to *Wikipedia*, "the combined sales of popular contemporaries . . . Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, and Rudyard Kipling" ("Marie"). With the closing of the magazine *Robin Goodfellow*, Braddon put her manuscript aside to begin another novel, *Aurora Floyd*. To consider the life of its creator, we, too, shall briefly put aside *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was born in 1835, the third child of Henry and Fanny Braddon. Just as her maternal grandmother had separated from her husband, whom Braddon in an unpublished memoir calls "not a satisfactory person" (qtd. in Wolff 20), so, when Braddon was four years old, her mother Fanny parted ways with her husband Henry, an unsuccessful solicitor and successful adulterer whom Braddon describes as "nobody's enemy but his own" (qtd. in Wolff 22). Fanny raised her three children by herself, moving to a poorer section of London, taking in boarders (Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie, xxii), and relying on the generosity of relatives and friends, likely including her uncle William who had for over 30 years accumulated wealth as a judge and merchant in India and whom Braddon describes as "generous to his kith and kin" and "whose innumerable favours . . . put her on a proper footing" (Braddon, "Before" 70). This generous uncle, in an act fit for a sensation novel, according to Bradden, "was murdered in his bed because he refused to give a false character to a Swiss butler" (qtd. in Wolff 166).

The Braddon family, mother and three children, lived well enough that youngest daughter Mary Elizabeth, at the age of six, had a governess, Miss Parrot, whom Braddon remembers teaching her reading and writing and history and geography and "another branch of education that I found distasteful in the extreme—and that was plain needlework" (Braddon, "Before" 82). "When our books and pen were put away," she writes,

> there came the work basket and endless strips of cambric which had to be neatly hemmed with a small needle and fine cotton, and a severe regularity in stitches. . . . to be made into the cambric frilling which in those simple Victorian years was considered a sufficient trimming for feminine under-linen. (Braddon, "Before" 82)

Besides this instruction, Braddon attended several schools, but most of her education came from her mother, who had herself been an author of sorts, ghostwriting many of her husband's sporting columns; she was, writes Braddon, "the ghost who supplied the flowing paragraphs and lavish quotations. . . . [who] developed his crude notes in magazine English" (89). Her mother taught her French and conveyed to her a deep appreciation for literature. As Braddon notes, "The history of my life is for the most part the history of the books I have written and the books I have read" (qtd. in Wolff 35). Before she turned nine, Braddon was reading Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. And she began to play at writing fiction, remembering that

> The interval between the ages of eight and twelve was a prolific period, fertile in unfinished MSS., among which I can now trace an historical novel on the Siege of Calais, an Eastern story, suggested by a passionate love of Miss Partes Turkish tales, and Byron's "Bride of Abydos,"which my mother, a devoted Byron worshipper, allowed me to read aloud to her . . . a story of the Hartz mountains, with audacious flights in German diablerie; and lastly, very seriously undertaken, and very perseveringly worked upon, a domestic story, the outline of which was suggested by the same dear and sympathetic mother. . . . There came a very few years later the sentimental period, in which my unfinished novels assumed a more ambitious form, and were modelled chiefly upon 'Jane Eyre,' with occasional tentative imitations of Thackeray. Stories of gentle hearts that loved in vain, always ending in renunciation (Braddon, "My").

While Braddon was playing at authorship, her brother Edward began his career in India. Her other sibling, her sister Maggie, married and moved to Naples. With both brother and sister overseas, Braddon, at age 16, chose to help support her mother by becoming an actress, "a thing," she writes, 'to be spoken of with bated breath, the lapse of a lost soul, the fall from [refined London] to the bottomless pit" (qtd. in Wolff 45). Consequently, she acted under a stage name, Mary Seaton.

The actress "Mary Seaton" (https://maryelizabethbraddon.com/biography/).

Adopting a stage name was not uncommon for actresses wishing to avoid scandal: when Harriet Taylor, stepdaughter of the philosopher John Stuart Mill, attempted a career as actress, she took the stage name "Mrs. Trevor" (Davis 73). Such disguises were understandable since, according to Northwestern University Professor of English and Theater Tracy Davis, for men, "the distinction between a prostitute and an actress was of little importance because they were both types of women whose public lives, financial fragility, and independence signaled vulnerability and the likelihood of successful undetected exploitation" (92).

Perhaps Braddon's depiction of the allure of childlike women like Lucy Graham was influence by her experience as a teenaged actress who likely had to fend off unruly male fans and persistent stage door Johnnies. Braddon must also have been aware of the threat posed by male predators among cast and crew, as well as among managers and agents and bookers. Clement Scott, theater critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, well before Me Too and Harvey Weinstein, warned that "a woman who endeavours to keep her purity is almost of necessity foredoomed to failure in her [theatrical] career. . . . her prospects frequently depend on the nature and extent of her compliance" (qtd. in Davis 94). To protect herself from these threats while working as an actress, Bradden was accompanied by a permanent chaperone, her mother.

Under the name Mary Seaton, she performed, mostly in provincial theaters, until leaving the stage in 1859 to pursue her novelistic career (Pykett, "Mary" 124). She had, though, while working as an actress, been writing poems, publishing in provincial newspapers such as the *Beverley Recorder and General Advertiser* and the *Brighton Herald*. Her poems attracted the attention of a printer in Beverley who offered her ten pounds for the serial publication of a novel, leading in 1860 to her first novel, *Three Times Dead; or, The Secret of the Heath*. It was not an auspicious beginning: the book received little notice and she received no money. (After the success of *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Three Times Dead* would be republished and retitled *The Trail of the Serpent* [Carnell 203]).

Through her poems, Braddon attracted the interest of another Beverley resident, John Gilby, who likely saw her perform on stage. He had inherited income from his father, which he increased as a horse owner and trainer (Carnell 107). According to Braddon biographer Jennifer Carnell, "he took a great deal of interest in Braddon and her work; so much so that he invested money in her and became in effect her patron, paying her a wage so that she could leave the stage" (105-06). The nature of their relationship is unclear. Lucy Sussex, in *Woman Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction*, declares his relationship with Braddon "was that of artist to patron. Gilby kept her, but as writer rather than concubine" (85). But Gabrielle Malcolm, author of several books on Jane Austen, writes,

> They were intimate, I think it is safe to say, although he did not want there to be any appearance of impropriety. . . . . Gilby wanted Braddon to develop her social standing and commissioned her to work as a poet. He was wealthy and thought he could direct her career, probably with a view to marrying her at a later date once she had become a respectable published author.

While Malcolm's description of the role he played in her life is accurate, there's no evidence they were intimate. Nor can we know, as Sussex alleges, that their relationship was chaste. Fourteen years her senior, with crippled legs, Gilby is unlikely to have been the romantic hero of a young girl's dreams. Nor does the novelist Charles Reade's description of Gilby suggest a man likely to spark romantic desire: "Her first patron was a simple noble-minded Yorkshire squire. . . . He got her 'trail of the serpent' published. . . . [He said] I have long loved, and would have asked her to marry me: but I am rich: she was poor. I wished her to have reputation. . . that it

might be she who did me the favor of marrying me" (qtd. in Wolff 79-80). On the other hand, Gilby did possess attractive traits: he was well-educated, wealthy, had a literary sensibility, and was eager to promote Braddon's writing career. So it's possible that Braddon, like Lady Audley, recognized the advantages of intimacy with an older man.

While we can't know how intimate they were, we do know that, whatever the nature of their intimacy, it ceased in 1861. Gilby's last letter to Braddon reveals the sorrow and anger of a spurned lover (or spurned wannabe lover): "gratitude! Why you hardly know the meaning of the word. Honoour! Your code of Honour? . . . I can only feel pity for you not unmingled with contempt, and wonder if you have one redeeming trait in your character" (qtd. in Wolff 96). Eventually, Gilby would experience substantial financial losses and would suffer a fate fit for a sensation novel: at age 62, he hanged himself. His housekeeper described Gilby's last days, as reported by the official inquest: "Deceased had been out of spirits for the last seven months, and had spoken about destroying himself. He had also threatened to set the house on fire, and last week nearly bit her thumb off" (qtd. in Carnell 128).

The likely cause of Braddon's separation from Gilby was that she had fallen in love with the magazine impresario John Maxwell, a man much different from Gilby, remembered by his son as "a big strong creature, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, and possessed of very great vitality" (qtd. in Wolff 100). Within two years, Braddon would have "at least five serials appearing anonymously in four different magazines" (Pykett, "Mary" 125): *Ralph the Bailiff*, *The Lady Lisle*, *The Black Band*, *The Octoroon*, and the initial chapters of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Most of these titles were quickly written "penny bloods" aimed at the lower classes. Braddon biographer Robert Wolff posits that "a reader of her other fiction will ask himself whether the same woman could have written these diffuse, pedestrian primitive efforts to entertain the nearly illiterate" (121).

Writing multiple serials simultaneously, Braddon complained, "I have never written a line that has not been written against time" (qtd. in Wolff 134). And she described the nature of this early fiction: "I gave loose to all my leanings to the violent in melodrama. Death stalked in ghastliest form across my pages: and villainy reigned triumphant till the Nemesis of the last chapter" ("My")." (qtd. in Wolff 113). Or as she explained to novelist and mentor Edward Bulwer Lytton,

> I do an immense deal of work which nobody ever hears of, for Half penny & penny journals. This work is mostly piratical stuff, & would make your hair stand on end, if you were to see it. The amount of crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning, & general infamy required by the Half penny reader is something terrible. I am just going to do a little paracide [sic] for this week's supply. (qtd. in Wolff, "Devoted" 11)

Lady Audley's Secret, though, was different, written for a more genteel audience, what Lyn Pykett, Emerita Professor of English at the University of Aberystwyth, Wales, describes as "equally thrilling, but more literary and sophisticated, [a tale] in a different social register" ("Mary" 125). Braddon received many requests to continue the unfinished *Lady Audley's Secret*, notably from the actor and playwright J.B.

Buckstone, a prominent figure in the English theater, author of 150 plays, including the hugely successful *Jack Shepard*, based on the controversial Newgate novel by William Ainsworth. Buckstone was prolific in other ways: he had five children by his first wife, 12 by his second; one daughter, because of her blonde hair and round face, he nicknamed "Audley" (Carnell 144).

Buckstone acted in and managed the Haymarket Theatre in the West End for 26 years until his death in 1879. Some say he never left the stage, that he continues to haunt the Haymarket. In 2009, during a performance of *Waiting for Godot* at what is now the Theatre Royal Haymarket, Patrick Stewart seemed distracted, causing his co-star Ian McKellan to ask, "What happened, what threw you?" Stewart explained that "he had seen, from the stage, a man standing in the wings wearing what looked like a beige coat and twill trousers." Stewart told McKellan, ""I just saw a ghost. On stage, during Act One" (qtd. in Adams).

Buckstone (the actor, not the ghost) and other enthusiastic readers, convinced Braddon to continue her narrative. In 1862, *Lady Audley's Secret* was serialized in the *Sixpenny Magazine* and published as a three-volume novel. It was an instant success, generating excited and condemning responses. Adding to this contretemps was Braddon's scandalous personal life. But if you want to know what Lady Audley's secret is—and if you want to learn about Braddon's own secret—unlike the initial readers of Braddon's novel, you won't have to implore me to continue. Instead, all you need do is listen to the next episode.

Part Two
Volume 2, Chapters 1-5

After Robert Audley mentions he has, in his chambers, handwritten letters from Helen Talboys, Lady Audley quickly departs for London. Learning her destination, Robert too boards a London-bound train in Essex, catching "an express . . and settl[ing] himself comfortably in a corner of an empty first-class carriage, coiled up in a couple of huge railway rugs, and smoking a cigar in mild defiance of the authorities" (125). What's a "railway rug?" you ask. I'll let *Wikipedia* explain: "Some carpet bags could also serve as a 'railway rug,' a common item in the 19th century for warmth in drafty, unheated rail-cars. The rug could either be opened as a blanket, or latched up on the sides as a travelling bag" ("Carpet").

And so, comfortably coiled up in his railway rug, Robert heads to London. Braddon's characters frequently travel by rail, which had become ubiquitous in England, fundamentally altering people's lives. In one trivial instance, fox-hunting of the kind that is enjoyed at Audley Court became more popular, appealing to women and to members of the middle class due to the ease of rail travel. "Fox-hunting enjoyed a golden age between 1850 and 1875," explains K. Theodore Hoppen, "It was above all the railways that allowed this to happen. . . . The number of people hunting grew substantially" (358).

In hunting for the truth of George's disappearance and in disrupting this hunt, both Robert Audley and Lady Audley rely on rail travel, which had become commonplace by the time of the sensation novel, the miles of rail in Britain having grown from 1400 in 1840 to 9000 in 1860, with the number of passenger journeys increasing from about 160 million in 1860 to more than 300 million a decade later (Hoppen 289). Rail travel plays an important role in the other two sensation novels I've examined in this podcast series. In Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, the female protagonist is seriously disfigured and loses a child in a train wreck. In Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower*, the female protagonist is forced to spend a night in a country inn with an unwanted suitor after the horses pulling their carriage are spooked by a passing train.

Nicholas Daly, Chair of Modern English and American Literature at University College Dublin, sees the railroad as a sign of a new, fast-paced, and dangerous modernity and the sensation novel as reacting to—and even embodying—this disorienting change. The sensation genre, he writes, is "an attempt to register and accommodate the newly speeded-up world of the railway age" (464). The critical reaction to the sensation novel, he argues, mirrored the reaction to the growing rail system, both of which were overturning convention: "The heated response to both the railway and the sensation novel suggests difficulties in accommodating a specifically modern form of sensory experience" (471). For Daly, the inescapable forward momentum and excitability of the sensation novel parallel the movement of rail travel. "In both cases," Daly elaborates, "the subject is thought to be reduced to a position of passive reception, but also to be over-stimulated by this experience, to be rendered uneasy, even fearful" (471).

Both Robert and Lady Audley take advantage of rail travel, a skill that reveals something about their natures. From sedentary to peripatetic, from couch to coach, Robert is transformed as he travels to Essex, to Liverpool, to Southampton, to London, to Hull, and with George to Portsmouth, followed by a ferry to the Isle of Wight and a carriage to Ventnor. To Beth Seltzer, Academic Technology Specialist at Stanford University, "The careless, time-wasting Robert Audley of the novel's first chapters is transformed into a productive member of modern society by his adaptation to modernity's disciplines. He allows himself to be forced into rapid motion and physical activity, and he learns to follow time-based schedules" (49-50). Lady Audley, too, possesses these skills. Her ability to manipulate modern technology allows her, at least temporarily, to outwit men like Robert. Popular culture often depicted women as confused by the demands of rail travel and often in need of a man's assistance to negotiate its difficulties. That's not true of Lady Audley. "Speed, mental acuity, and a precise grasp of the modern world around her," writes University of Rohampton Senior Lecturer Louise Lee, make Lady Audley "more than a match for her male pursuers. . . [She] negotiates the outside world, the world of the railway, the world of half-built London streets, and of gloomy deserted provincial housing, with the same airy insouciance and confidence as if she were ambling through her own bedroom" (135).

Traveling alone by train, women such as Lady Audley gained some freedom of movement, the angel freed from the house. On the other hand, rail travel allowed people to live farther from town, denying homebound married women the invigorating features of city life. The English physician Andrew Wynter in his 1875 book *The Borderlands of Insanity*, addressing the causes of bourgeois wives' excessive drinking, believed that the psychological impact of this isolation, their "hysterical depression," was caused by "The railway [which] may be said to have driven female society farther and farther into the country. The man goes forth to his labour in the morning and returns in the evening, leaving his wife, during the whole day, to her own devices" (60-61). She no longer has access to "that intensely feminine refreshment, shopping, to solace [her] *ennui*" (61). Wynter strikingly anticipates the alienated suburban housewife of the 1950s and 1960s, left alone in a landscape of banality, turning not to sherry and brandy but to martinis and glasses of wine. As well as consuming brandy, women in the 19th century were the primary consumers of laudanum. According to Andrzej Diniejko, Senior Lecturer in English Literature and Culture at Warsaw University,

> Women made a substantial part of the addicted Victorian population, and were, as a rule, more medicated than men. A number of patent drugs and proprietary medicines containing opium or its derivatives, were called 'women's friends'. Doctors prescribed widely opiates for 'female troubles', associated with menstruation and childbirth, or fashionable 'female maladies', such as the vapours, which included hysteria, depression, fainting fits, and mood swings.

Likewise, women in the mid-20th century were the primary consumers of the newly developed tranquilizers Miltown, Valium, and Librium (Prewitt). Women's addiction to drugs and alcohol was in large part due to the confining lives society imposed upon them, angels in the house and housewives in the suburbs. Wynter recognized that "arrangements of society and the railways have banished our wives from all the amusements and excitement of town" (62), concluding that to lessen the problem of female addiction, women needed a more compelling education to provide them with intellectual fulfillment but only "after the humdrum housekeeping labours for the day are accomplished" (61).

One might ask why women (especially if they had governesses or were childless) couldn't, like their husbands, simply take the train into the city. One reason was that in doing so they risked being sexually assaulted. Anna Despotopoulou, Associate Professor of English Literature and Culture at the University of Athens, drawing from a variety of newspaper accounts, reports that "ladies were subjected to embracing, kissing, fondling, molesting, violating, and beating, or, in milder cases, to language described as disgusting, disgraceful, indecent, or brutal by passengers deemed maniacs, ruffians, drunkards, or scamps" (23). Things could be no better for a woman walking alone on a city street. Writing in 1880, Mark Twain observed, "if a lady, unattended, walks abroad in the streets of London, even at

noonday, she will be pretty likely to be accosted and insulted—and not by drunken sailors, but by men who carry the look and wear the dress of gentlemen" (545). However much these accounts might be exaggerated and might be expressions of a moral panic generated by a too rapidly changing culture, there's no doubt that a woman traveling alone faced threats of assault.

Both rail travel and shopping in fashionable locales such as London's West End also meant an uncomfortable mingling of classes. Unlike many a cossetted upper-class lady, Lady Audley risks being accosted, mingling with the lower classes, traveling the rails and traversing the city streets alone.

Robert runs into Lady Audley at a London train station; he has just arrived; she is already returning to Essex and Audley Village. Robert notices a change in her demeanor: whereas at Castle Inn she'd appeared "a childish, helpless, babyfied little creature" (121), she is now bold and self-assured. "She is altogether a different being to the wretched, helpless creature who dropped her mask for a moment, and looked at [Robert] with her own pitiful face. . . . She looked at him for a moment with a smile, which had something defiant in its brightness" (127). "What has happened to cause the change" (127), Robert asks himself, only to find the answer when he reaches his chambers. Lady Audley has contrived to enter his rooms and take away the letters whose handwriting, presumably, would have proved that she and Helen Talboys are the same person. "Oh, George Talboys . . . am I ever to come any nearer to the secret of your fate?" cries Robert, "Am I coming nearer to it now, slowly but surely? Is the radius to grow narrower day by day, until it draws a dark circle round the home of those I love? How is it all to end?" (132).

Robert feels defeated; he can't even console himself with reading his beloved French novels: when "he opened a volume of Balzac . . . his uncle's wife's golden curls danced and trembled in a glittering haze" (134). But as he contemplates his next steps, he discovers among George's possessions a book with three inscriptions, the first from its original owner in 1845, the second from this owner to Helen Maldon in 1850, the third from Helen Maldon to George Talboys in 1853. "At the sight of this third paragraph," writes Braddon, "Mr. Robert Audley's face changed from its natural hue to a sickly, leaden pallor" (137).

Before further pursuing the truth about George, Robert decides he must save Georgey from his unhealthy life with his grandfather, Captain Maldon. And so he travels to Southampton, to the impoverished neighborhood in which the boy is being raised. Although scholars have, understandably, focused on the sensational aspects of this novel, especially its gender concerns, class division and exploitation are also a frequent concern for Braddon. She explicitly critiques the class divide in Britain, describing the painful living conditions of the poor. Maldon lives "in one of those dreary thoroughfares which speculative builders love to raise upon some fragment of waste ground hanging to the skirts of a prosperous town" (139). Walking to Maldon's home, watching a child's funeral procession as it leaves one of the ramshackle houses, and recognizing the connection between this "poverty-

stricken locality" and disease, Robert resolves that "the poor child shall not sleep another night in this wretched hovel" (139). Childhood mortality is so common here that 6-year-old Georgey "had attended several infant funerals in the neighbourhood, and was considered valuable as a mourner. . . . [and] had come . . . to look upon the ceremony . . . as a solemn festivity, in which cake and wine and a carriage drive were the leading features" (150). In this passage, one worthy of Dickens, Braddon shows that for a child growing up in poverty and inured to death, funerals are a welcome festivity.

Besides telling Maldon he'll be taking his grandson away from this potentially fatal setting, Robert accuses him of having lied about George's sailing to Liverpool. Robert lets him know that he found the burned telegram which had warned Maldon of his arrival in search of George. And he declares that "At two o'clock on the 7th of September. . . . George Talboys was seen, alive and well, at a house in Essex. . . . I believe . . . that my friend never left Essex, and I believe that he died on the 7th September last" (145-46). Robert takes Georgey away, arranges for his schooling at Mr. Marchmont's academy for young gentlemen and, remembering his own childhood dislike of dinners of bread and milk and mutton, provides him with a hotel-restaurant dinner consisting of "a little [vegetable soup], some stewed eels, a dish of cutlets, [roast pheasant], and a pudding," all washed down with Bass's pale ale (150). Exactly what we'd feed a hungry six-year-old today.

Braddon next takes us to the home of Mr. Harcourt Talboys, George's father, whom Robert visits to discuss what he believes is his son's murder. Mr. Talboys bases his life on classical Roman stoicism, on the cold application of logic and the denial of feelings. He had, writes Braddon, "no curves in his character"; he is proud of his strong and unwavering moral code, his never having "admitted the idea that circumstance might mitigate the blackness of wrong or weaken the force of right" (156). When Robert tells him he believes George is dead, his father responds by accusing his son of running a scam to regain his father's feelings and fortune: "The disappearance was a clever trick. . . . [George] is not dead. . . . he is keeping out of the way for the purpose of alarming me, of trifling with my feelings . . . and of ultimately obtaining my forgiveness. . . . he will not obtain that forgiveness, however long he may please to keep out of the way" (163). Harcourt Talboys remains angry that his son married "the daughter of a drunken pauper" (164). And he dismisses Robert's narrative as "a conspiracy against myself" (166). Throughout this interview, George's sister Clara has sat unmoving and unresponsive next to her father. Receiving no empathy or concern from George's family, Robert decides to give up his detection. Why pursue George's fate if his own family won't?

Case closed with no resolution, Robert climbs into his carriage, about to leave the grounds of the Talboys estate, when he spies an apparition, a woman running and "waving a handkerchief in her uplifted hand" (168). It's George's sister Clara. "Let me speak to you," she implores, "I believe what you believe; and I shall go mad unless I can do something" (169). She asks for the name of the woman Robert believes killed George. But Robert says he can't tell her until he can prove his

suspicions. Her eagerness to help find her brother's murderer, Robert recognizes, is "no transient womanish enthusiasm, which would give way under the iron hand of difficulty" (171). "Let mine be the hand to avenge his untimely death," she intones, so unlike the typical passive angel (171). Robert is dazzled by Clara, staring at her with "awe-stricken admiration." And he is overcome by her beauty which was "elevated into sublimity by the intensity of her suppressed passion. She was different to all other women that he had ever seen. His cousin was pretty, his uncle's wife was lovely, but Clara Talboys was beautiful" (171-72).

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Upon his return to his dreary bachelor quarters, Robert, still captivated by Clara, goes through a long interior monologue about women and marriage and the meaning of life. He in fact has something of an existential crisis, despairing at the inconsequence of life, of its emphasis on the material and the proper, feeling "an unreasoning rage against the mute propriety of chairs and tables, the stiff squareness of Turkey carpets, the unbending obstinacy of the outward apparatus of existence" and sensing "the nothingness of everything and the folly of taking too much trouble to walk upon a road that led nowhere" (175-76). The way out of this crisis, it seems, is through Clara. "I accept the dominion of that pale girl, with the statuesque features and the calm brown eyes," Robert concedes, "I recognize the power of a mind superior to my own, and I yield to it, and bow down to it" (176).

But this surrender causes Robert to consider the confining nature of marriage and the controlling nature of women, what he calls a "petticoat government" (177). Women, according to Robert, are concerned only with surface appearances and have no appreciation for the deeper truths of life. A woman "goes through [life] as if it were a pageant. . . . She dresses for it, and simpers, and grins, and gesticulates for it" (177). She pushes her husband into a career, "mak[ing] him something that she wanted him to be made. . . . The square men in the round holes are pushed into them by their wives" (177). He concludes by telling himself, "They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, soldiers, legislators—anything they like—but let them be quiet—if they can. . . . I hate women . . . . They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors" (178).

What are we to make of such a strange misogynist rant? On the one hand, this passage reflects male anxiety about the potentially changing status of women, a concern much in evidence in the 1860s, a decade which would conclude with the publication of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. Braddon is mocking this male anxiety, this perception that women, confined to narrow roles and denied even the right to vote, are actually the dominant force in society, that in beginning to gain some few rights, they seek the destruction of men. On the other hand, some of

this passage reflects what Braddon, independent, self-supporting, and unconventional, likely felt about the superficiality of middle- and upper-class women. And there's a third reading of these lines, one that depends upon our understanding of the relationship between George Talboys and Robert Audley.

Critics have pointed to the homosocial nature of this relationship, especially from Robert's perspective. When they encounter each other on a London street, George exclaims, "You don't mean to say that you've forgotten George Talboys." "No, I *have not*," replies Robert with, writes Braddon, "an emphasis by no means usual for him; and then hooking his arm into that of his friend" (35). After George faints, like a typical Victorian heroine, Robert, like a typical Victorian heroine, nurses him back to health. The following dialogue, from which I've removed some material, further documents their homosocial relationship:

> "'Bob," [George] said, "where are we?"
>
> "In my chambers, dear boy. . . . You have no lodgings of your own, so you may as well stay with me while you're in town". . . .
>
> "George," said Robert Audley, laying his hand gently upon the young man's arm, "you must remember that the person whose name you saw in the paper may not be your wife". . . .
>
> He shook off Robert's restraining hand, and rising from the bed, walked straight to the door.
>
> "Where are you going?" exclaimed his friend.
>
> "To Ventnor, to see her grave."
>
> "Not to-night, George, not to-night. I will go with you myself by the first train tomorrow."
>
> Robert led him back to the bed, and gently forced him to lie down again. He then gave him an opiate which had been left for him by the medical man. (38-39)

This fond care for one another is repeated when Robert goes through George's possessions after his disappearance, "handl[ing] the things with a respectful tenderness, as if he had been lifting the dead body of his lost friend," laying out "the neatly folded mourning garments," his pipes and crumpled gloves from a Parisian maker, his old perfume bottles, and letters and books (133). These particular items, garments and gloves and perfume, suggest an intimacy between the two men, an intimacy made explicit when Robert asks himself, "Who would have thought that I could have grown so fond of the fellow . . . or feel so lonely without him? . . . I declare that I would freely give up all, and stand penniless in the world to-morrow,

if this mystery could be satisfactorily cleared away, and George Talboys could stand by my side" (138).

Further evidence of Robert's gay leanings is seen in his relationship with Alicia. Braddon explains that

> It might have seemed to other men, that the partiality of a young lady who was sole heiress to a very fine estate, was rather well worth cultivating, but it did not so occur to Robert Audley. Alicia was a very nice girl, he said, a jolly girl, with no nonsense about her—a girl of a thousand; but this was the highest point to which enthusiasm could carry him. (33)

The infatuated Alicia is frustrated by Robert's inability to carry his feelings any further, by his lack of interest in and his total ignorance of her quite obvious feelings for him. She even at one point accuses Robert of having no interest in women at all, saying that Lady Audley "is the first woman of whom I ever heard you say a civil word" (53). Alicia "might have told him [she loved him]," Braddon writes, "a hundred times a day for all the three hundred and sixty-five days in the year; but . . . [it's doubtful] he would ever have discovered the state of her feelings" (57). And her physical charms hold no appeal for Robert:

> [the] heavy clustering locks, that clung about [her] slender brown throat, the red and pouting lips, [her turned up] nose, . . . the dark complexion, with its bright crimson flush, always ready to glance up like a signal light in a dusky sky, when [she] came suddenly upon [her] apathetic cousin—all this coquettish, [playful,] brunette beauty was thrown away upon the dull eyes of Robert Audley. (57)

These dull eyes will never shine in response to the beautiful Alicia. But Robert does appear genuinely attracted to George's sister Clara. This attraction, though, seems more due to her resemblance to George than to her womanly appeal. "He could see that she was young," Braddon writes, "and that she was like George Talboys. . . . She had brown eyes, like George's" (160). When Robert tells himself "it seems d[amne]d lonely to-night," he realizes that "If poor George were sitting opposite to me, or—or even George's sister—she's very like him—existence might be a little more endurable" (179). And there's evidence suggesting that George, too, might have had same-sex leanings: at age 22, he had "no better experience of woman than is to be learnt at a flower-show or in a ball-room" (211); he views "Robert Audley's handsome face" (37); he lives with Robert in London and St. Petersburg.

The novel signals Robert's homosexuality in other ways. For one thing, Robert befriended George when they were schoolmates at Eton and grieves for "my old school-fellow, and for the companion who had been dear to me" (165). Boarding schools such as Eton were commonly understood to encourage intimate male-male relationships. As University of Sussex English professor and pioneering scholar in queer studies Alan Sinfield explains, "public schools were crucial in the

development of homosexual identity because despite the official taboo, they contributed, in many instances, an unofficial but powerful cultural framework within which same-sex passion might be positively valued" (65-66).

For another thing, much of Robert's sensibility, his interest in the decorative and the foreign, reads as gay, Jennifer Kushnier describing him as "a rather effeminate gentleman. . . . [with] a penchant for German pipes and French novels. He wears a blue silk handkerchief around his neck. His apartment is filled with flowers and canaries." And he "dislikes hunting, claiming to have hurt his shoulder with a gun" (66). Likewise, Robert Nemesvari, English professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, points to "the implied significance of Robert's style of dress, his mannerisms, and his attachment not only to French fiction and German pipes but also . . . to 'Turkish tobacco.'" "Robert's tendency towards a laconic, drawling irony in his speech, and his complete lack of skill and interest in fox hunting," Nemesvari explains, "foreshadow Wilde's quip about [fox-hunting as] the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable. . . . At the very least a Victorian audience would have associated Robert's habits with the kind of Romantic decadence against which the period defined itself" (519). Some scholars have asserted that this equation of effeminacy, this dandyism and decadence, with homosexuality is a more recent phenomenon, developing only after the Oscar Wilde trials in the 1890s, Alan Sinfield, for example, asserting that "Until the Wilde trials, effeminacy and homosexuality did not correlate in the way they have done subsequently" (4). "The trials helped produce a major shift in perceptions," he argues, "the entire vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence, and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived . . . as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image" (3).

The philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault goes further, suggesting that the very notion of homosexuality as an identity, rather than as just a sexual practice, was initiated in 1870 with the publication of the German psychologist Carl Westphal's *Contrary Sexual Instinct: Symptom of a Neuropathic (Psychopathic) Condition*. Foucault explains that prior to this era, there was no concept of homosexuality, merely a recognition of the act of sodomy, "a category," Foucault writes, "of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridicial subject of them." But, Foucault continues, "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology" (43). In further support of Foucault's thesis, one should remember that it wasn't until 1890, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that the word "homosexual" entered the language, in the poet and cultural historian and groundbreaking gay scholar John Aldington Symonds's book on ancient Greek sexuality, *A Problem with Greek Ethics*, privately printed in a press run of only ten copies ("John").

Another early use of the word, just a year after Symonds's, appeared in the English translation of that catalog of fetishes Richard Kraft-Ebbing's *Pyschopathia Sexualis*. Not only does Kraft-Ebbing use the term "homosexual," he seems to have coined the

terms "masochism" and "necrophilia," as well as been the first to use "fetish" in a sexual context. Thus the sense of homosexual as an identity, it can be argued, resulted from the propensity of 19th century scholars like Kraft-Ebbing to catalog and classify. In their newly developing field, psychologists classified sexual practices and individual identities in a manner reminiscent of the animal and plant taxonomies used in the biological sciences. On this argument, having a specific sexual identity was the result of scientific practice, not the innate feelings of gay and straight and bisexual men and women.

I can't present a definitive argument against these interpretations of the historical understanding of homosexuality; however, I will suggest that Foucault's claim seems overstated. Surely, women and men who felt primarily—if not exclusively—a same-sex attraction often defined themselves, that is, fashioned a self-identity, in reaction to (and against) the dominant heterosexual culture. And such identities were likely shaped and reinforced by same-sex communities in schools and clubs and other private urban locales, to the extent these existed in Victorian Britain.

The idea that certain behavioral traits are connected to male homosexuality because of the Oscar Wilde trials likewise seems an overstatement. Some scholarship suggests that the association of effeminacy with male homosexuality came about in the 18th century with the rise of private spaces where men could behave according to their natures rather than to an established model of masculinity. To support this claim, I turn to the satirical journalist Ned Ward, who has the distinction of having been criticized by the Puritan clergyman (and participant in the Salem witch trials) Cotton Mather for being the author of works that were "pestilences . . . worse than Egyptian toads" (qtd. in Haims 25). In his 1709 *The Secret History of Clubs*, Ward provides us with one of the earliest descriptions of the patrons of private gay clubs:

> They adopt all the small vanities natural to the feminine sex to such an extent that they try to speak, walk, chatter, shriek and scold as women do, aping them as well in other respects. In a certain tavern in the City, the name of which I will not mention, not wishing to bring the house into disrepute, they hold parties and regular gatherings. As soon as they arrive they begin to behave exactly as women do, carrying on light gossip as is the custom of a merry company of real women. (qtd. in Greenberg 332-33)

The effeminate affect of this merry company, David Greenberg, Sociology professor at NYU, argues, became widely associated with male homosexuality in the 18th century: "Even though it was not shared by all members of the homosexual networks, the high cultural salience of gender and the conspicuousness of gender-linked mannerisms, clothing, and coiffure led observers to regard effeminacy as a key component of male homosexuality" (335). Greenberg continues: "So firmly had the stereotype of the male homosexual as effeminate become established that when thirty men were arrested in a raid on the White Swan Tavern in London in 1810 (the 'Vere Street scandal'), people seemed genuinely surprised that many had

physically demanding blue-collar occupations" (335). The scandal Greenberg refers to consisted of a police raid on a so-called "molly house," which resulted in eight men being arrested and convicted for sodomy, six of whom were pilloried, the other two hanged ("Vere"). (In 1861, the penalty for sodomy was reduced from execution to life imprisonment. However, notes Ari Adut, Assistant Professor in Sociology at the University of Texas, these "homosexuality norms were rarely and reluctantly enforced in Victorian England" [214]).

Assuming that the stereotype of male homosexual as effeminate, or just less "manly," persisted into the Victorian era, we can see how Robert Audley's behavior could signal the novel's readers of his homosexuality. I assume, though, that there was no essential correspondence between effeminacy and male homosexuality and, in fact, that the varieties of relationships, of male sexual preferences and sexual identities that exist today existed in the 19th Century. Susie Steinbach, Chair of the History Department at Hamline University in Minnesota, provides a useful overview:

> Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a subculture of "sodomites" or "Mary Annes," which was characterized by cross-dressing and effeminate men, and by such social events as . . . a formal costume ball that featured cross-dressed men. But there was also a much larger group of men who had sex with men but did not consider themselves effeminate or "sodomitical." Some men had sex only with other men, others with both men and women. Some men lived in "marriages" with other men; others were married to women, but had sex with men; others remained unmarried. Male "friendship" was a flexible and ambiguous concept that encompassed both sexual and non-sexual relationships. (247)

Trying to understand the precise character of the homosocial relationship between Robert Audley and George Talboys, which depends upon textual inferences and historical uncertainties, seems all but impossible. In our post-Freudian, sex-dominated, LGBTQ-awakened, pansexual age, we see evidence of sexual desire everywhere and see denials of such as self-destructive repression. Thus, we can easily project our modern sexual preoccupations onto what may be genuinely non-sexual behaviors and relationships. Robert and George may merely be good friends. But a striking and surprising piece of evidence can be adduced to support the homosexual component of these characters' relationship: Robert's surname, "Audley."

Braddon might have chosen the name "Audley" to play on the similar-sounding "orderly" and "oddly." And she might have chosen "Audley" for its connection to the brother of a Lord Audley, William Ross Touchet, who in 1844 was acquitted of attempted murder by reason of insanity (Pykett, *Lady* 381n.7). But most likely she was alluding to a notorious instance of sodomy and rape in the early 17th Century. A different Lord Audley, Mervyn Tuchet, 2nd Earl of Castlehaven, was found guilty of raping his wife, more precisely of restraining her while one of his servants raped her. Or as the trial record reported, Audley was charged

> For a Rape committed against his own Wife, in compel|ling her, and forcing her to yield against her will, to the lust of one Giles Bradway. . . . He the said Earl hold|ing his Wife by one Arm and one Leg, until the Fellow had satisfied himself, the Earl holding a Knife in one hand; which done, the La|dy endeavoured to kill her self with a Knife, but they took the Knife from her, and brake it. ("The Trial")

Audley also was charged with what the trial records calls "sodomitry" with a different servant, Florence Fitzh-Patrich, alias "Fumy." "In addition," writes University of Southern California History Professor Emerita Cynthia Herrup,

> the trial testimony alleged, [Lord Audley] was a voyeur, he sodomized other male servants regularly, he encouraged several servants to have intercourse with his wife and one particular favorite to sleep with his adolescent daughter-in-law (who was also his step-daughter), he was a sometime Catholic, and he intended, directly and indirectly, to enrich his servants at the expense of his son and rightful heir (1-2).

For their crimes of rape and sodomy, Lord Audley and his two servants were found guilty and executed under the provisions of the Buggery Act of 1553. Braddon seems to coyly refer to this scandal when she has Clara Talboys recall "the story of some ancestor who was called Audley of Audley in the reign of Edward the Fourth. . . . I have never taken the trouble to remember his achievements" (220). Clara might be thinking of rumors from the 1400s that Isabel Mylbery, wife of John Tuchet, the son of John Tuchet, 6th Baron Audley, was Edward's illegitimate child (Hammond 232). That Braddon refers to this obscure Audley family gossip suggests that, when choosing the name "Audley," she must have been aware of its scandalous significance.

Clara's musings would have caused contemporary readers to think of the more notorious Lord Audley, whose "achievements" were well-known and well-documented, Herrup noting that "In addition to the administrative records of the trial, there are more than forty extant manuscript renditions, several rhymed libels, and four pamphlets devoted to it" (2). Yet one might doubt this incident would remain in the public consciousness well into the 19th century. Who in the 1860s would recall an obscure scandal that had occurred two centuries before? The answer is: many would. Reviewing *Lady Audley's Secret* in the *Times* of London, E.S. Dallas, for instance, warned his readers that they "may imagine that [Audley] refers to that most horrible story which appears in the record of our State trials—the story of Mervyn Touchet, Lord Audley, who was beheaded in the reign of Charles I for inflicting on his wife, Lady Audley, indescribable cruelties" (478). Assuming his readers would have been aware of the details of this scandal and respecting Victorian sensibilities, Dallas does not identify these indescribable cruelties, mirroring the view of the Privy Council's presiding officer 230 years earlier, who in passing sentence

described Audley's "offences . . . [as] so heinous and horrible, that a Christian Man ought scarce to name them" (qtd. in Frankland).

Further proof that a segment of the British public was familiar with the Audley scandal appears in the March 25, 1888, edition of the weekly *Reynold's Newspaper*, founded in 1849 by the novelist George W.M. Reynolds, author of the hugely popular "penny blood" novel *The Mysteries of London*. *Reynolds's Newspaper*, with a large readership in London and the industrial north, was, according to one scholar, "the most outspokenly radical paper of the day" (Ellegard 7). In keeping with this spirit, an anonymous writer in *Reynolds's Newspaper*, asserting that the House of Lords was "not only a useless, but an obstructive and dangerous institution" which should be abolished, pointed to the Audley scandal as evidence of its moral corruption, complaining that

> in the Upper House, by its constitution, men like Mervin Audley, Earl of Castlehaven, who was convicted, in 1631, of the foulest crimes that devilry could conceive—including sodomy, the prostitution of his own wife in his presence by servants, and the rape, under the most loathsome and unnatural conditions, of his daughter, a girl of twelve—can sit and legislate. ("End")

However, it was not the litany of these charges but sodomy specifically with which the name "Audley" became associated. As Tony Scupham-Bilton, creator of the Queerstory Files blog, explains, "The Castlehaven case. . . . would be the sex case everyone mentioned whenever another gay scandal emerged—until the arrest of a certain Oscar Wilde in 1895."

It seems likely, then, that the worldly wise 26-year-old Braddon, who had been a working actress for eight years, would have been aware of the homosexual resonance of "Audley." And she would likely have heard recent discussion of the case as Parliament was consolidating various criminal statutes into one over-arching bill, the *Offences Against the Person Act of 1861*, the very year Braddon began writing *Lady Audley's Secret*. In this Act, the penalty for sodomy was modified, as the legislation notes under the heading "Unnatural Offences": "Whosoever shall be convicted of the abominable Crime of Buggery, committed either with Mankind or with any Animal, shall be liable, at the Discretion of the Court, to be kept in Penal Servitude for Life or for any Term not less than Ten Years" ("Offences" 1861). (The Buggery Act of 1553 had been modified before, in the *Offences Against Person Act of 1828*, which had maintained the penalty of execution while clarifying that buggery and rape were defined not by ejaculation but by penetration, or as the Act clarified: "Offenders frequently escape by reason of the Difficulty of the Proof which has been required of the Completion of those several Crimes;' for Remedy thereof be it enacted, That it shall not be necessary, in any of those Cases, to prove the actual Emission of Seed to constitute carnal Knowledge, but that the carnal Knowledge shall be deemed complete upon Proof of Penetration only" ("Offences" 1828).

Since Victorian censorship would have prohibited Braddon from identifying her protagonist as a sodomite, she encoded his sexuality into the name "Audley," a code that would elude censors but that could be deciphered by many readers. Of course, this raises the question of why Braddon would go to such lengths to suggest a character was gay. Doing so makes narrative sense. Robert Audley and George Talboys were schoolmates, but they don't seem to have seen each other since then. Having had no contact with him for a decade, why would Robert go to such troubles to resolve the mystery of George's disappearance? Why exert this energy and undergo this emotional distress if George were merely a casual acquaintance? Robert would do so if they had shared an intimate bond. Robert's sexuality, in other words, helps explain his emotionally overwrought reaction to George's disappearance, his obsession with discovering George's fate, as well as his utter lack of interest in Alicia.

Continuing his obsessive investigation, Robert travels to Audley Court. He plans to confront Lady Audley but worries that doing so will harm the ailing Sir Michael. When Lady Audley sees him, she looks "scared and wan" and cries "in a faint tremulous voice." To assert his power over her and to watch her for signs of guilt, Robert says to himself, "I will make her meet my eyes, and I will read her as I have read her before." But Robert's fears for his uncle's life if he were to learn the truth about the woman he loves undoes his plan. Robert makes the mistake of telling Lady Audley that her happiness, prosperity, and safety depend upon Sir Michael's existence, which she instantly perceives not as the warning Robert intends but as a concession to her power and which consequently ignites a "gleam of triumph in [the] light" of her eyes (185). She warns him that "those who strike me must strike through him" (186). In the coded language they speak, Lady Audley is acknowledging the threat Robert poses to her position and is reminding him of the threat she poses to Sir Michael: his life depends on her secret remaining secret.

His plan thwarted, Robert will leave Audley Court. But first he speaks with Mr. Dawson, the village doctor who had employed Lucy Graham as governess and who has just finished ministering to Sir Michael. Robert interrogates the doctor about Lucy's past, reaffirming that she had said she was an orphan, and telling the doctor that he thinks she may not be worthy of being Sir Michael's wife, and explaining that he "must trace [her] life backwards, minutely and carefully from this night to a period of six years ago" (188), more precisely from the current year of 1859 to 1853 when George had abandoned his wife to travel to Australia. Robert learns from Mr. Dawson that Lucy had begun work as his governess in May 1856, presenting a recommendation from a Mrs. Vincent, the proprietor of the school where Lucy worked.

Robert follows this next link in the chain of evidence, tracking down Mrs. Vincent, who, living in London and having fallen upon hard times, "carries with her an aspect of genteel desolation and tawdry misery" (198). She tells him that Lady Audley did not visit her when she was recently ill. In fact, she hadn't been ill and didn't send a telegram. Robert also learns that when Lucy Graham arrived at Mrs. Vincent's school in August 1854, she had no references, saying she'd quarreled with her father and

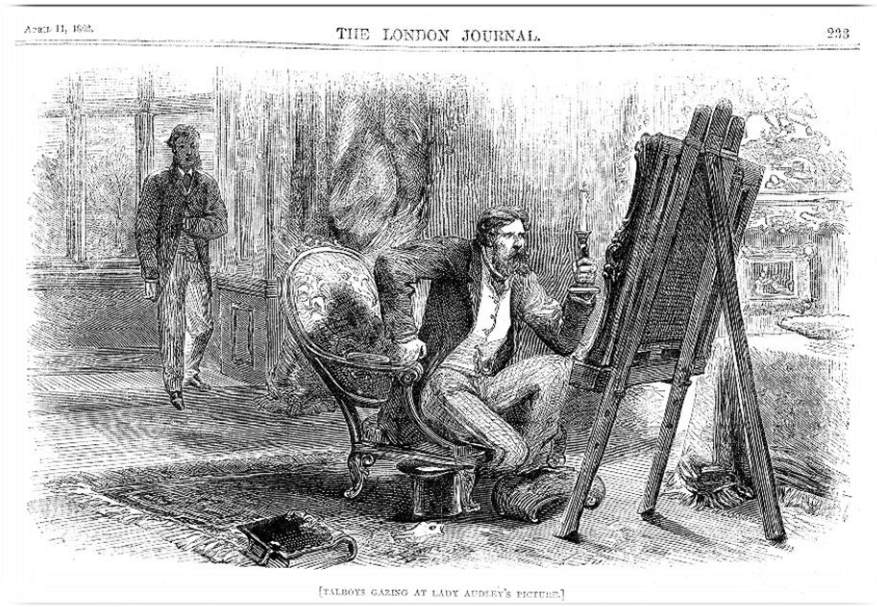
wanted to separate herself from all the people she'd known (201). Robert learns that Lucy "was only ornamental; a person to be shown off to visitors, and to play fantasias on the drawing-room piano" (202). And, handed a bonnet box once belonging to Lucy, Robert removes a label to find another underneath, which he identifies as "the connecting link between the woman whose death George Talboys read of . . . and the woman who rules in my uncle's house. . . . The history of Lucy Graham ends abruptly on the threshold of Mrs. Vincent's school" (204). Just what this evidence is, though, Braddon keeps from us, for the moment.

Since he can't trace Lucy's life any further back in time, Robert decides he must instead take Helen Talboys' life forward. So he boards the train to the coastal town of Wildersnea, where George and Helen had met. He speaks to the proprietor of the town's hotel who remembers Helen's father Captain Maldon as a frequent customer of the hotel's "coffee house," who knew that George had been stationed nearby, that he and Helen were married in December 1852, that they had traveled on the continent for six months before returning, that soon thereafter George departed for Australia, leaving behind his wife and their two-week-old son, that she "was very much pitied by . . . folks . . . for she was very pretty, and had such winning ways" (208). Robert also speaks to the woman who owned the house in which Helen and her father had lived. She reveals that after George left, Helen tried to support herself "by giving music lessons . . . and succeeded pretty well. . . . But . . . her father took her money, and spent it in public houses. . . . They had a very serious misunderstanding one night; and the next morning [she] left Wildersnea, leaving her little boy" behind (212).

And this landlady lets Robert read a letter from Helen to her father, in which she had written, "I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dissevered from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune" (213). The language here--"I am weary of my life here, and wish . . . to find a new one"— is reminiscent of the refrain in Tennyson's poem "Mariana" "I am aweary, aweary, I would that I were dead." Perhaps this echo of Tennyson is meant to remind us of Helen's abandonment and of her pre-Raphaelite portrait, "Mariana" having been the subject of a well-known painting by John Everett Millais; perhaps it's just Braddon drawing language from a popular poem that mirrors Helen's plight; or perhaps I'm dwelling on what is only a coincidental use of a common phrase and should therefore continue my retelling of the narrative. This letter is dated August 16, 1854, which prompts Robert to calculate that "Between the departure of Helen Talboys . . . and the arrival of Lucy Graham at the . . . school, not more than eight-and-forty hours could have elapsed. This made a very small link in the chain of circumstantial evidence, perhaps; but it was a link, nevertheless" (214).

Volume 2, Chapters 7-13

At this point in our story, we should take a step back and assemble the pieces Robert has collected. In 1852, a teenaged girl named Helen Maldon, living in the Yorkshire coastal town of Wildersnea, collaborated with her father to ensnare a wealthy officer, George Talboys, in marriage, alienating George's father who promptly disowned him. Without this support, George, in 1853, was forced to journey to Australia to seek his fortune, leaving his wife to live with her father and to support herself and her son through piano lessons. In August 1854, Helen sent a letter to her father announcing her departure. Two days later, Helen Talboys, calling herself Lucy Graham, without references and saying she had quarreled with her father, arrived at Mrs. Vincent's girl's school in London. After a year and a half there, in May 1856, Lucy, saying she was an orphan, was hired as governess for the Audley village doctor, Mr. Dawson. Soon thereafter, she married Sir Michael to become Lady Audley. Upon receiving news that George had returned from Australia and needing to protect her new station and identity, she posted a notice in the *Times* announcing Helen Talboys' death. When George and Robert visited Audley Court, she fabricated a telegram from Mrs. Vincent as an excuse to travel to London to avoid meeting her first husband. George, though, recognized Helen from her portrait and the following day went to Audley Court to confront her. That was the last time he was seen. To hide her complicity in his disappearance, Lady Audley sent a telegram to her father advising him to tell Robert that George had gone to Liverpool from where he would sail to Australia. Some of this information was used by Phoebe and Luke Marks to blackmail Lady Audley for the money they used to purchase Castle Inn.



Talboys Gazing at Lady Audley's Picture, *London Journal*, Vol. 27, no. 948 (11 April 1863), republished in *Victorian Periodicals Review* 2019 (https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Serialization%2C-Illustration%2C-and-the-Art-of-Anderman/0925d1ee372e318823005798b3e20f02869e5d2a/figure/2).

But this narrative remains more conjectural than evidential. So Robert must dig further. He decides again to confront Lady Audley at Audley Court. When he arrives

in Audley Village, Robert, overhearing organ music coming from the village church, wanders in to find Clara Talboys at the keyboard playing a fugue by Mendelssohn, an appropriately foreboding theme for what is to come.

Part Three

Volume 3, Chapters 1-6

As they get closer to discovering what happened to George, Clara and Robert grow closer together. Seeing her at her family home, Robert struggles to keep secret what he has learned because of the still provisional nature of his conclusions. And he does not want to hurt Sir Michael by revealing his suspicions about Lady Audley. Holding such secrets, though, is difficult since he finds himself so attracted to Clara. Or as he puts it, "What am I in her hands . . . the hands of this woman, who has my lost friend's face?" (221). This handy metaphor is made literal in the novel's most explicitly sexual scene when Clara "stretched out her ungloved hand, and laid it in his own. The cold touch of that slender hand scent a shivering thrill through his frame. . . Robert Audley pressed the hand that rested in his own, and raised it to his lips" (221-222). This touching moment persuades Robert to continue his investigation, even at the risk of Sir Michael's life. Just as he leaves, Clara is joined by the new rector of Mount Stanning, the little village near Castle Inn. Their conversation quickly turning to "the most important personage in the parish of Audley" (222), Clara learns that Sir Michael is now married and that his new young wife is "very, very pretty. . . . a childish beauty . . . with large clear blue eyes, and pale golden ringlets," an image that precisely matches, Clara remembers, her brother's description of his wife Helen (223). Clara now knows what Robert had sought to keep secret: he believes Lady Audley is responsible for her brother's demise.

Meanwhile, Robert again travels to Audley Court where he directly confronts Lady Audley, laying out all the details he has accumulated, to which she replies, "you build up some absurd theory of a conspiracy which has no existence except in your overheated brain" (230). Ultimately, she declares, "You are mad, and my husband shall protect me from your insolence" (232). Then Robert reveals the secret of the labels, which Braddon had withheld from us: the upper label bore the name "Lucy Graham," the one beneath it "Mrs. George Talboys." Clearly, they are one and the same. "Lucy" Lady Audley is silent. "Her two small hands were clasped convulsively over her heart," writes Braddon, "and [Robert] knew that the shot had gone home to its mark" (232).

But Lady Audley is too strong and too smart to give up so easily. She overcomes her initial shock and threatens Robert: "such fancies have sometimes conducted people, as apparently sane as yourself, to the life-long imprisonment of a private lunatic asylum" (233). At this, Robert perceives just how evil Lady Audley truly is. He recoils "a few paces among the weeds and brushwood," realizing "she would be capable of any new crime to shield her from the consequences of the old one," that with no

moral consciousness she might tell evil lies about him. "What," he wonders, "if this woman's hellish power of dissimulation should be stronger than the truth, and crush him?" (233). Nonetheless, Robert forthrightly asserts that George was killed at Audley Court, that "his body lies hidden below some quiet water, or in some forgotten corner" and that he will "level that house to the earth, and root up every tree in these gardens" to find "the grave of [his] murdered friend." To these charges, Lady Audley exclaims,

> You shall never live to do this. . . . I will kill you first. Why have you tormented me so? Why could you not let me alone? What harm had I ever done you that you should make yourself my persecutor, and dog my steps, and watch my looks, and play the spy upon me? Do you want to drive me mad? Do you know what it is to wrestle with a mad-woman?. . . Go away, Mr. Audley . . . You are mad, I tell you, you are mad. (235)

After this encounter, Lady Audley, "seating herself upon a velvet-covered footstool at Sir Michael's feet" (241), manipulates him into believing that Robert is mad by suggesting that his father was a known eccentric. After much resistance, she convinces him that Robert is monomaniacally focused on the disappearance of George, even asserting that he will tear Audley Court to the ground in his search and that, in Lady Audley's words, "he seems to connect me in some manner . . . with the disappearance of this Mr. Talboys" (247).

Except to Robert, Carla, and Alicia, Lady Audley remains the epitome of girlish charm and beauty. To Michael Audley, she is "his pretty nurse" who makes sure that he has "the pleasantest retreat that an invalid could have . . . [with] pillow, and heap of magazines and newspapers . . . arranged by my lady's own fair hands for [his] pleasure" (250). And she remains the perfect model for a Pre-Raphaelite painting "in that half-recumbent attitude, with her elbow resting on one knee, and her perfect chin supported by her hand, the rich folds of her drapery falling away in long undulating lines from the exquisite outline of her figure, and the luminous rose-coloured firelight enveloping her in a soft haze, only broken by the golden glitter of her yellow hair" (251). But beneath this painterly appearance, beneath this loving care and tender beauty, lies a monster who would have exulted if Robert Audley "had lain dead in the adjoining chamber" (252), whom Braddon likens to Lucrezia Borgia and Catherine de Medici (252), and who is a slave to "the three demons of Vanity, Selfishness, and Ambition" (253). Whereas women should be modest and passive, the heroines of sensation novels dangerously exceed the bounds of proper womanly moderation. "The domestic angel," writes Emily Allen, Associate Professor of English at Purdue University, "becomes either a she-devil [like Lady Audley], as likely to poison her husband as to influence him with her gentle ministrations, or so angelic [like Isabel Vane in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*] as to make us wince at the sound of her wings" (404-405). Whether unrepentant or redeemed, selfish or self-denying, these women experience extreme emotions which contradict Victorian norms of female moderation and passivity. That's why sensation novels were so popular with women readers—and why they were anathematized by so many reviewers.

The shocking discrepancy between the perfect surface and the turbulent underneath, between childish wife and vengeful demon, led to much criticism of Braddon's novel and of sensation fiction in general. This subversion of the exemplary female suggested that the exemplar was unreal, was a social construction, a perception that threatened the basis of bourgeois marriage, which in turn underpinned much of Victorian society. That creatures like Lady Audley were being created by women writers and that stories about such women were being read by countless women was troubling. For the popularity of these novels suggested that women at some level were dissatisfied with the conventional gender roles of self-sacrificing wives and dominating husbands. These novels began to appear as very modest changes were being made to divorce and married women's property laws, helping encourage a slow but increasing movement toward female liberation. Many of the attacks on these novels, especially for their depiction of monstrous women like Lady Audley who hide behind the façade of domesticity, were a response to the radical transformation of gender roles, however distant these changes ultimately would be.

Lucy Graham's role as Lady Audley, her position and name and financial well-being, are threatened by Robert Audley's incessant and incisive detection. She fearfully speculates about what her life would be like if her secret were revealed:

> What would become of me? I have no money. . . . What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old, hard, cruel, wretched life—the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle, and die. (269)

She perceives Robert Audley as a mortal threat. "Selfish, cold, and cruel, eager for her own advancement, and greedy of opulence, angry with the lot that had been cast her, and weary of dull dependence" (255), Lady Audley asks herself, "Will anything stop him—but death? She pronounced the last two words in an awful whisper and her head bent forward, her eyes dilated, and her lips still parted as they had been parted in her utterance of that final word 'death,' she sat blankly staring at the fire" (253-254). At that moment Phoebe Marks arrives to alert her former mistress of the appearance at Castle Inn of Robert Audley, no doubt, both women suspect, to pry information from Phoebe's husband Luke. Discussing her husband, Phoebe laments that because of his constant drunkenness they "run the risk of being burnt in [their] beds" (258). Soon thereafter, Lady Audley complains to Phoebe that given Luke's careless and drunken conversation, "It would have been a good thing . . . if your husband had been burnt in his bed before to-night" (259). She then has "a vivid picture flash . . . upon her. . . . The picture of that frail wooden tenement, the Castle Inn, reduced to a roofless chaos of lath and plaster, vomiting flames from its black mouth and spitting sparks of fire upwards towards the cold night sky" (259).

With Lady Audley uttering the word "death" while staring into the fire, hearing Phoebe's fears of Luke's accidentally setting fire to the highly flammable Castle Inn,

and picturing a man burnt in his bed as the Inn is engulfed in flames, readers should have little doubt of what is to come. And if they've been attentive, they have seen earlier clues linking Lady Audley with fire:

> [T]he luminous rose-coloured firelight envelop[ed] her in a soft haze, only broken by the golden glitter of her yellow hair. (251)
>
> The firelight shining on that pale face lit up the large, soft blue eyes and showed them drowned in tears. (241)
>
> A glittering light shone through the tears in her eyes, and the lines about her pretty rosy mouth, those hard and cruel lines which Robert Audley had observed in the pre-Raphaelite portrait, were plainly visible in the firelight. (242)
>
> My lady, brooding by the fire in her lonely chamber, with her large, clear blue eyes fixed upon the yawning gulfs of lurid crimson in the burning coals, may have thought of many things very far away. (252)
>
> Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest in this strange picture, hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of color as if out of a raging furnace. (65)

Even Audley Court is described as if it's about to combust:

> The . . . August sun glimmered redly upon the broad face of the old clock over that ivy-covered archway. . . . A fierce and crimson sunset. The mullioned windows and twinkling lattices are all ablaze with the red glory; the fading light flickers upon the leaves of the limes in the long avenue . . . even into those dim recesses of brier and brushwood, amidst which the old well is hidden, the crimson brightness penetrates in fitful flashes till the dank weeds and the rusty iron wheel and broken woodwork seem as if they were flecked with blood. (26)

The closer to ignition, the more frequent these fiery images—to the point of comic obviousness:

> The red blood flashed up into my lady's face with as sudden and transient a blaze as the flickering of a fire. (264)
>
> Lady Audley's face was no longer pale. An unnatural crimson spot burned in the centre of each rounded cheek. (266)
>
> The unnatural colour still burnt like a flame in her cheeks, the unnatural light still glittered in her eyes. (267)

> My lady looked upon these familiar objects with scornful hatred flaming in her blue eyes. (269)
>
> Her hair had been blown away from her face, and being of a light, feathery quality, had spread itself into a tangled mass that surrounded her forehead like a yellow flame. There was another flame in her eyes. (273)

More than merely foreshadowing, this imagery hints at Lady Audley's character, her wrathful nature and willingness to destroy, a nature that has even overtaken Audley Court—both the literal structure and grounds and what this place stands for, patriarchal and class rule and the rule of law. These are all at risk of ruin through her contrivance and cruelty—just as they're threatened by the growing resistance of women in 1860s Britain.

Arriving at Castle Inn after midnight under the pretense of paying down debts owed by Luke and Phoebe to the county bailiff who is staying at the Inn, Lady Audley makes an excuse to wander off with a candle, locks from the outside the room in which Robert is sleeping, and places the candle atop a dressing table in an adjacent room, "the flaming tallow candle very close to the [decorative] lace [fabric] about the [looking] glass" (276). As she returns to Audley Court accompanied by Phoebe, "the night sky was no longer all dark. The thick blackness was broken by one patch of lurid light" (277). Castle Inn is ablaze. Falling to her knees, Phoebe accuses Lady Audley of having gone there expressly to set a fire and to do away with her tormentors, Robert and Luke. She beseeches Lady Audley to tell her she's wrong. But Lady Audley replies, "I will tell you nothing except that you are a mad woman" and are "behav[ing] like a maniac" (278). "Get up, fool, idiot, coward," she exclaims, "Is your husband such a precious bargain that you should be groveling there, lamenting and groaning for him?" (278). Here Lady Audley reveals her true self, her belief that a woman who has empathy—or for that matter who feels anything for her husband—is an idiot. To have feelings for a man is to show weakness. To lament the loss of a loved one, for Lady Audley, is to grovel. When considering Phoebe's husband, Lady Audley naturally thinks in terms of material advantage: he is no "precious bargain." The night ends with Lady Audley walking toward Audley Court, while Phoebe remains "kneeling upon the hard road, where she had cast herself in that agony of supplication" (279).

Things are back to normal the next day, the burning of Castle Inn replaced by a blazing hearth, the crazed scene at the Inn replaced by a scene of domestic bliss, Sir Michael with wife and daughter Alicia, sharing a breakfast in the library "at a comfortable round table, wheeled close to the blazing fire" (279). The conversation turning to a discussion of Robert and his possible madness, as alleged by Lady Audley, Sir Michael considers some of his oddities, "some slight differences, not easily defined, that separated him from other men of his age and position" (281), particularly his lack of interest in Alicia or any other women. In Sir Michael's thoughts, we can recognize again hints of Robert's homosexuality: Sir Michael had forgot, Braddon writes,

> that there are men who go their ways unscathed amidst legions of lovely and generous women. . . . He had forgot that there are certain Jacks who go through life without meeting the Jill appointed for them . . . and die old bachelors. . . . He ignored all those infinitesimal differences in nature which make the wholesome food of one man the deadly poison of another. How difficult it is to believe sometimes that a man doesn't like such and such a dish! (282-283)

The emphasis here on difference and individual preferences, which Sir Michael had forgot but which Braddon underscores, seems clear evidence of Robert's sexuality. That Braddon uses the metaphor of food, with its many sexual connotations, furthers this interpretation. Braddon has Robert himself speculate about his lack of interest in Alicia. He concludes, "I'm not in love with her, I *can't* fall in love with her" (284). Robert's admission that it is impossible for him to fall in love with the beautiful and engaging Alicia, seems, given the other evidence in the novel, almost impossible not to read as anything other than a suggestion, if not an admission, of his homosexuality.

Meanwhile, Lady Audley, eager for news about the previous night's fire and fearing news about her involvement in it, locks herself in her room so that she won't be surprised by anyone's sudden appearance "before she had had sufficient warning," Braddon writes, "to enable her to face their scrutiny" (285). She watches the clock through her window. She sleeps briefly thanks to a dose of opium. She wakes and walks the grounds

> under the dominion of a horrible restlessness, which, would not suffer her to remain within the house waiting for certain tidings which she knew must too surely come. At first she had wished to ward them off. . . . And now her mind underwent a complete change. She no longer wished to delay the dreaded intelligence. She wished the agony, whatever it was to be, over and done with. (288-289)

The delay, she imagines, is due to the townsfolk's fear of confronting Sir Michael with news of his nephew's death. Alone, Lady Audley "paces up and down the straight pathways, listening for a footstep" (291), a footstep which will bring news of Robert's death and with it either a preview of her imprisonment or a declaration of her freedom.

Here's the moment that determines Lady Audley's fate:

> Every sound fell like a lump of ice upon my lady's heart. She could not wait, she could not contain herself, she lost all self-control, all power of endurance, all capability of self-restraint, and she rushed toward the archway.

> She paused beneath its shadow, for the stranger was close upon her. She saw him, oh, God! she saw him in that dim evening light. Her brain reeled, her heart stopped beating. She uttered no cry of surprise, no exclamation of terror, but staggered backward and clung for support to the ivied buttress of the archway. . . . she stood staring at the new-comer.
>
> As he approached her more closely her knees sunk under her, and she dropped to the ground, not fainting, or in any manner unconscious, but sinking into a crouching attitude, and still crushed into the angle of the wall, as if she would have made a tomb for herself in the shadow of that sheltering brickwork.
>
> "My lady!"
>
> The speaker was Robert Audley. He whose bedroom door she had double-locked seventeen hours before at the Castle Inn.
>
> "What is the matter with you?" he said, in a strange, constrained manner. "Get up, and let me take you indoors."
>
> He assisted her to rise, and she obeyed him very submissively. He took her arm in his strong hand and led her across the quadrangle and into the lamp-lit hall. She shivered more violently than he had ever seen any woman shiver before, but she made no attempt at resistance to his will. (291)

Things have at last righted themselves, a strong man leading a submissive woman. They go inside where Robert explains that he survived the fire because he didn't sleep in the room he had been given. But Luke has been grievously burned. Expressing his horror at her actions and character, Robert believes she is "no longer a woman" but "the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle" (295). To protect the name and reputation of Sir Michael, though, Robert offers her a choice: confess to her husband and accept whatever mercy he may be inclined to offer or be turned over to the authorities and be punished according to the law.

If convicted, Lady Audley could be publicly executed. Although the death penalty in Britain would continue for another century, the last *public* execution took place in 1867. And the last public hanging of a woman occurred in 1856 in Dorset when Elizabeth Martha Brown was hanged for murdering her husband with an axe after she found him with another woman. In contrast to the Sir Michael-Lady Audley relationship, Martha Brown was 20 years older than her husband who allegedly married her for her money (Lindgren 22). Among the thousands of spectators at this hanging, standing close to the gallows, was the sixteen-year-old future novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (Millgate 63). The hanging of Martha Brown would make its way into Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and have, according to Emerson College Professor Emerita Charlotte Lindgren, "a profound effect on Hardy, perhaps as his

wife Florence suggested . . . in a letter, casting the 'tinge of bitterness and gloom' to be found in his writing" (23).

Given a choice between incarceration with possible execution or confession, Lady Audley drops to her knees before her husband and recounts her painful childhood, explaining that her mother mysteriously disappeared when she was an infant, her father was frequently away at sea, and she was left in the charge of a woman who "vented her rage upon her" (296) because her father regularly fell behind in her wages. This woman also revealed Lady Audley's mother's secret: she was confined to a madhouse, which Lucy, at the age of ten, visited and where she saw that her mother was "no raving, strait-waistcoated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers," as she had expected, "but a golden-haired, blue-eyed girlish creature" who didn't recognize her visitors and who spoke in "gay, ceaseless chatter" (298). Lucy learns that this madness is hereditary, that her grandmother had also gone mad, and that this madness was brought on by childbirth. Lucy's own birth, in other words, triggered her mother's madness. Poor, abandoned, afraid of her own descent into madness as she entered her teens, Lucy, told repeatedly that she is "pretty-beautiful-lovely-bewitching," concludes, reasonably enough, that only one thing can lead her out of her miserable poverty: her beauty.

Continuing her narrative, she tells them of discovering her means of escape, "the wandering prince" George Talboys, tells them of their marriage three months after she turned seventeen, of their being disowned by his father, of the birth of her son, which didn't lead to madness but to something more like post-partum depression: "I was more irritable . . after my recovery," she explains, "less inclined to fight the hard battle of the world; more disposed to complain of poverty and neglect" (300). It's this complaining, this blaming George "for his cruelty in having allied a helpless girl to poverty and misery" (300) that sends him to the other side of the globe.

Whether Lucy is truly mad, "the hereditary taint that was in [her] blood" (300) having taken over, is open to question. The onset of her madness occurs at the very moment she is overcome by the burdens of poverty and motherhood. It's possible that her violence and despair were an understandable response to unchangeable circumstances, to being "allied forever to beggary and obscurity" (300). On this reading, she *perceived* she was going mad because that's what she expected: the hereditary curse would inevitably descend upon her. She goes on to talk about her feigned name, her work at Mrs. Vincent's school and as governess for Mr. Dawson, and her marriage "which would lift [her] at once into the sphere to which [her] ambition had pointed her ever since [she] was a school-girl and heard for the first time that [she] was pretty" (301).

Because of her success in becoming Lady Audley, she believes, she regained her mental health, even, uncharacteristically, feeling "for the miseries of others. . . . . reliev[ing] the poverty of [her] neighbours and tak[ing] pleasure in acts of kindness and benevolence" (301). This assertion, though, is not supported by the novel in which we see her luxuriating in her possessions and social engagements, with no

word about supporting her poor neighbors. Braddon may have not mentioned Lady Audley's pleasurable charity because it was uncharacteristic hence misleading. Perhaps, writing to meet serial publication deadlines, Braddon didn't consider this detail until much later into the narrative. Perhaps Braddon wants us to see that even at this exculpatory moment Lady Audley can't help dissembling about her character. Or perhaps she's showing us Lady Audley once again playing a role—that of Lady Audley—which she has convinced herself was real. But it's true, as she says, that she sent money anonymously to support little Georgey. We also learn that when she plotted her fake death to deceive the newly returned George Talboys, she had discovered that Mrs. Plowson, the woman taking care of Georgey, had a 24-year-old daughter who was near death from consumption. Lady Audley conspired to have this daughter travel from Southampton to the Isle of Wight where "she was attended by a Ventnor medical man as Mrs. Talboys," the name her death and burial were registered under (304).

Anguished and humiliated, Sir Michael can hear no more of this narrative. To help him overcome his distress, Robert has Alicia agree to travel with him to the continent, promising not to talk about or question him on the fate of his marriage—since Lady Audley will not be accompanying her husband and is, Robert explains, "the cause of your father's sorrow" (308).

That leaves Robert, while occasionally letting his fancy wander to Clara's "dark brown eyes that were so like the eyes of his lost friend" (316), to settle upon Lady Audley's fate. "Trying to think what he ought to do, and with the awful responsibility of a wicked woman's fate upon his shoulders" (313), he calls in Alwyn Mosgrave, M.D., a specialist in cases of mania. By the time of the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret*, psychiatry had begun to be established as a serious medical profession, with an emphasis on the criminally insane, the Association of Medical Officers of Asylums and Hospitals for the Insane having been founded in 1841 and its professional publication, *Asylum Journal*, first appearing in 1853. The term "mania" was used by the French scientist Phillipe Pinel who distinguished between "manie sans delire" (mania without delusion) and "manie avec delire" (mania with delusion) (Jones 54). The English psychiatrist James Cowle Pritchard further developed these insights through the concept of "moral insanity," which he defined in 1835 in his *Treatise on Insanity* as

> A form of mental derangement in which the intellectual faculties appear to have sustained little or no injury, while the disorder is manifested principally or alone, in the state of the feelings, temper, or habits. In cases of this description the moral and active principles of the mind are strangely perverted and depraved; the power of self government is lost or greatly impaired; and the individual is found to be incapable, not of talking or reasoning upon any subject proposed to him, for this he will often do with great shrewdness and volubility, but of conducting himself with decency and propriety in the business of life. His wishes and inclinations, his attachments, his likings and dislikings have all undergone a morbid change, and this change appears to be

> the originating cause, or to lie at the foundation of any disturbance. (qtd. in Jones 59-60)

This definition perfectly fits our contemporary notion of sociopathy (or what the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* labels "antisocial personality disorder"). Whatever the label, Lady Audley meets the definition. She is capable of "talking or reasoning upon any subject . . . with great shrewdness and volubility." As Dr. Mosgrave explains after interviewing her, "there is no evidence of madness in anything she has done"; all her actions are rational, designed to improve her life. "She committed the crime of bigamy," he clarifies, "because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. . . . When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that" (321). She suffers from mania without delusion, hence would not meet the legal definition of madness. But she is incapable of "conducting herself with decency and propriety in the business of life," as she herself admits: "I can feel nothing but my own misery. I am selfish. . . . Happy prosperous people may feel for others. I laugh at other people's sufferings" (295).

After interviewing her, Dr. Mosgrave concludes that "the lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is. . . . She is dangerous! . . . If she could have sprung at my throat and strangled me with her little hands, as I sat talking to her just now, she would have done it" (323-324). Since there's insufficient evidence (no body, only Phoebe's testimony about the fire) to convict her of a crime, but at the same time since she must be kept away from society, Dr. Mosgrave and Robert Audley conspire to have her institutionalized; Audley Court thus serves as a court punishing Lady Audley for her improper courtship. Her punishment: she will be confined for the rest of her life in a remote asylum in a rural Belgian town.

Beginning with a chapter titled "Buried Alive" and a character named "Mos*grave*," Braddon turns to the Gothic. The asylum is in an "old ecclesiastical town, always dull and dreary, seem[ing] more than ordinarily dreary under the grey evening sky" (326); their first stop had been "a monastery once, but . . . was now the courtyard of a dismal hotel, in whose cellars legions of rats skirmished and squeeked" (327), while horses' "wild shrieks and whoops [made] a demoniac sound in the darkness" (327); and Lady Audley's final destination is "a great mansion of grey stone, with several long ranges of windows, many of which were dimly lighted and looked out like the pale eyes of weary watchers upon the darkness of the night" (329); "one of the windows [is] shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, . . . the shadow of a restless creature who paced perpetually backwards and forwards" (329).

In seeing this woman pacing behind a faded red curtain, Lucy is seeing herself, her own dismal fate, for her spirit is broken. Entering her chamber at Audley Court, after she had finished recounting her secret life, Robert had discovered her

> lying upon the floor, upon the very spot in which she had crouched at her husband's feet telling her guilty story. Whether she was in a swoon, or whether she lay there in the utter helplessness of her misery, Robert scarcely cared to know. . . . My lady had not fainted; she . . . rose from the ground upon which she had groveled. Her golden hair fell in loose, disheveled masses about her ivory throat and shoulders, her face and lips were colorless, her eyes terrible in their unnatural light. (311)

What had once been the sign of her beauty and her power, those features that caused Sir Michael to swoon, "those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls" are all diminished, disheveled, discolored.

The loss of her vitality is shown as well in Braddon's use of fire imagery. Whereas Lady Audley had been associated with fire, with its suggestions of rage and violence, now she has been reduced to embers: after she leaves the room, leaning upon her maid's shoulder, Robert "sat down by the broad hearth upon which the red embers were fading, and wondered at the change in that old house which, until the day of his friend's disappearance, had been so pleasant a home for all who sheltered beneath its hospitable roof. He sat brooding over the desolate hearth" (312). And after Sir Michael departs by carriage from Audley Court, "Robert Audley sat alone in the dark library, where only one red spark glowed among the pale gray ashes" (313). From dangerous fire, Lady Audley has been reduced to fading embers and a single red spark. We should keep this imagery in mind when she sees a vision of herself in the woman behind the faded red curtain, a color suggesting the last remains of a fire, and thus the dwindling of her willful, energetic nature, of life itself. "You have used your power basely and cruelly," she tells Robert, "and have brought me to a living grave" (333).

As they conclude their conversation on the threshold of her new bed chamber, Lady Audley finally admits to the murder of George Talboys. They had, she recalls, been sitting atop the well at Audley Court. Despite her cajoling and attempts at bribery, George insisted he would reveal her secret to Sir Michael. "It was then that I was mad," she confesses, "it was then that I drew the loose iron spindle from the shrunken wood, and saw my first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well. . . . I heard no splash, only a dull thud. I looked down and I saw nothing but black emptiness." At this, "Robert Audley uttered a word of horror. . . . He moved a little nearer toward the door. . . . He shrank from even a momentary contact with this creature. . . . Half an hour afterward he was in one of the principal hotels . . . sitting at a neatly-ordered supper-table, with no power to eat; with no power to distract his mind, even for a moment, from the image of that lost friend who had been treacherously murdered in the thicket at Audley Court" (335-336).

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This body in the well is central to Christopher Herbert's argument that the power and inventiveness of *Lady Audley's Secret* "flow from its attempt to portray the traumatic inner damage inflicted upon Victorian society by [the Indian Mutiny] that haunted the national conscience. . . . There may in fact be no other contemporary document that testifies in such a concentrated, single-minded way, or with such prescience, to the transforming effect of the Mutiny on the Victorian psyche" (240). Indian rebels, after killing 60 male prisoners, held 200 British women and children captive near the village of Cawporne. Learning of the approach of the British, the rebels had the women and children hacked to death with cleavers and swords and their bodies dumped down a well. To an audience wounded by its memory of the Mutiny and scarred by this horrific incident, George's body left at the bottom of the well would have carried a visceral emotional charge.

This atrocity occurred in 1857, around the time, Herbert notes, that Lady Audley received notice of George's return to England. And the span of George's return stay in England—August 30, 1857, when he sees Helen's death notice, to September 7, 1858, when he disappears—bracket the Indian Mutiny. "Any reader of Braddon's book in 1861," writes Herbert, "would immediately have recognized that the time span of this narrative, insistently specified as it is, almost exactly corresponds to the . . . Indian Mutiny" (247). After he learns of George's fate, Robert is further troubled by the fact that he must not remove the body for a proper burial since doing so will lead to exposure of Lady Audley's crime, her prosecution with concomitant publicity, harm to the Audley name, and, most importantly, further emotional wounding of the already weakened Sir Michael. In this context, George's body lying at the bottom of a well at Audley Court and Robert's despair over being unable to exhume it, in Herbert's words, are "an exceptionally vivid figure of deeply buried mental trauma exercising its powerful effects. . . . The Indian reference of the Audley Court well, instantly perceptible though it must have been to contemporary readers, appears in the narrative in uncanny or hallucinated form only, as a repressed memory of unnamable origin" (256). In a subtle and detailed analysis, an example of the best of contemporary literary-historical critique, which I can only inadequately paraphrase, Herbert argues that *Lady Audley's Secret* "hints at the powerful repression of memory that was necessary to enable the mid-Victorian generation to regain its equilibrium. . . . [a] process of willed forgetting [that] becomes, in fact, a primary theme of this novel" (247-248). In sum, according to Herbert, the novel "focuses all its attention on a systematic investigation of the conditions that the war has left in its wake in England" (249).

As Robert is struggling with his own condition—the knowledge that George lies at the bottom of the well and will lie there forever—he receives a message that Phoebe's husband, Luke Marks, who Robert had dragged out of the fire, is dying from injuries sustained in the fire and wishes to speak with him. Death-bed scenes in Victorian novels often depict painfully repentant sinners. But, as Braddon makes clear, Luke "had undergone no moral transformation." He has only a weak perception of the need to atone: "perhaps some faint glimmer of light that had been far off from his life, now

struggled feebly through the black obscurities of ignorance that darkened his soul." With this "half angry, half sullen penitence" (351), he speaks to Robert, Phoebe at his bedside, about George, initially noting that "you was uncommon fond of that gent" and that servants at the Court had said how "If the two gents had been brothers . . . [he] couldn't have been more cut up when he missed the other" (352).

He had been walking by the well, says Luke to Robert, when he heard a groan from the bushes: it was George Talboys who had scaled the imprisoning well, thanks to skills he had developed as a miner. Luke reminds Phoebe of the night he brought home "a gentleman [who] was wet through to the skin, and was covered with mud and slush, and green slime and black muck, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, and had his arm broke, and his shoulder swelled up awful; and was such a objeck that nobody would ha' knowed him" (357). From a window in Audley Court, Phoebe had seen George fall into the well and had shared this knowledge with Luke. However, she hadn't recognized the rescued George. And Luke hadn't told her that George had survived so that they could use George's death to further blackmail Lady Audley. For five pounds, Luke explains, he had taken George to have his arm mended, which reminds Robert of the Liverpool clerk who had told him that the only passenger who had purchased his passage at the last minute was a man whose arm was in a sling. Luke dies soon after finishing his tale.

Robert shares the good news revealed by Luke with George's sister Clara; their relationship deepens; she lectures him "on the purposeless life he had led so long, and the little use he had made of the talents and opportunities that had been given him" (372). And Robert welcomes these lectures, recognizing that he couldn't continue to "read French novels and smoke mild Turkish until" he was seventy years-old (372). He tells her that he will be her "bounden slave for ever" (375), will lead "a life of serious work and application, in which he should strive to be useful to his fellow-creatures, and win a reputation for himself" (372). And so they will marry. When Robert, "a new man, with new hopes, new cares, new prospects, new purposes" (376), returns to his London chambers, he is greeted by a visitor, his lost friend, George Talboys. George had sailed to America, planning to travel to the California gold fields but, he tells Robert, "I yearned for the strong grasp of your hand, Bob; the friendly touch of the hand which had guided me through the darkest passage of my life" (378).

For the novel's last chapter, Braddon takes us forward two years. We learn nothing of the fate of the husbandless Phoebe, left without a public house to run or a lady to companion or an income to earn. The last we hear of her she "came up-stairs . . . ready to take her place at [Luke's] sick-bed, and Robert Audley went away" (368). Castle Inn presumably remains in ruins, and Audley Court is shut up, its residents only a "grim old housekeeper and gathering "blue mould" (379), unlike the newlywed Robert and Clara's thriving home, "a fantastical dwelling-place of rustic woodwork, whose latticed windows look out upon [a] river," "amid a little forest of foliage," atop a "smooth lawn that slopes down to the water's brink" (378-379). It's tempting to read the novel's transition from a mouldering Audley Court to a bucolic dwelling-place as a

move from Ingatestone Hall to Skisdon Lodge, a place Braddon remembered fondly from her childhood and which she would eventually purchase.

More importantly, given the symbolic significance of Audley Court, this move suggests some break with patriarchal and upper-class rule, an escape into a more egalitarian scene, one not freighted with tradition. To construct this fantasy, though, Braddon must erase all signs of class. There are no servants here (even in Audley Court we rarely see any of the help other than Phoebe), there is no nearby dingy town struggling in "the dim obscurity . . . seeming strange and weird of aspect" (98), nor is there a ramshackle Inn serving ale to villagers. The menage of married Robert and Clara, their newborn child, and George Talboys live in a pastoral setting, one as far removed from the real world as the traditional pastoral.

Little Georgey frequently visits on breaks from school (he' won't be going to Eton). Alicia, we learn, is to wed Sir Harry Towers, the suitor she had rejected when still frustratingly enthralled by Robert. Sir Michael has moved to London and will move again to the country to be near Alicia once she marries. And George may, writes Braddon, "find someone who will be able to console him for the past. That dark story of the past fades little by little every day, and there may come a time in which the shadow of my lady's wickedness has cast upon the young's man life, will utterly vanish away" (380). And what of Helen Maldon/Talboys/Lucy Graham/Lady Audley? A year earlier, Robert had received a black-edged letter from the Belgium asylum announcing her death from anemia and despair.

Lady Audley's Secret, which Braddon published simultaneously with another novel, *Aurora Floyd*, was a great popular success. And it was controversial, the target of much critical disdain for its depiction of the unrealistic and the sensational, the scandalous and the criminal. The book was overwrought; it depended on a false view of human nature and a particularly distorted view of women. The character Lady Audley was an especial target of critical ire. As University of Houston Associate Professor in English Lynn Voskuil reports, "Alarmed reviewers spoke their minds in almost all of the major and minor Victorian journals, focusing in many cases on Lady Audley as a character who had spuriously misplayed the natural roles of women" (614).

In his 1847 novel *Vanity Fair*, William Thackeray had created a similarly scheming, narcissistic and amoral heroine willing to use her feminine wiles to ruin others to achieve social and financial success. Yet Becky Sharp received little of the opprobrium that Lady Audley did. One obvious reason for this difference in critical response is the difference in their characters. Both sociopaths, Becky is not a violent madwoman. Lady Audley's willingness to physically destroy those who threaten her position and possibilities sets her apart and completely shatters the model of bourgeois femininity. Becky Sharp may be conniving and deceitful and amoral, but Lady Audley is all of these plus a bigamist, an arsonist and a murderer. Another reason Lady Audley was targeted for criticism was the context in which she appeared—at a time when legal and social restrictions on women were slowly being

loosened and advocates for women's rights were becoming more organized and vocal. Novels written by women for women featuring female protagonists asserting themselves in unladylike and even criminal ways were seen as possibly undermining the figure of the idealized bourgeois wife and mother central to Victorian social order.

In analyzing *Lady Audley's Secret*, contemporary critics wrestle with just this question: how much did Lady Audley undermine this conventional belief? Does Braddon's novel ultimately critique or reinforce traditional gender roles? Anna Cvetkovich summarizes this debate:

> One can read the novel from the detective or masculine point of view as a fantasy of control, surveillance, and power, in which threats to the family can be identified and contained. One can also read it from Lady Audley's or the woman's point of view as a fantasy of rebellion, in which women can take their revenge on a patriarchy that restrains them, and in which madness is a sign of resistance. The latter reading seems to be subsumed to the former by the end of the novel. (55)

For some, Lady Audley's independence and intelligence, her recognition that beauty is power and her willingness to use this power, her aggressive pursuit of self-interest, her facility with new technologies, and her disregard for Victorian verities like marriage and motherhood and all things domestic make her a radical alternative to the status quo, a woman who succeeds—almost—in triumphing over a repressive class and gender system. For others, the novel's ending—Lucy Graham imprisoned in a madhouse and dying offstage while the upper-class characters do their upper-class things, marrying well and frolicking with friends and families in Edenic settings—disables whatever critique Braddon might have offered earlier in the novel.

This critical debate turns on how much weight one gives to the conclusion, and it requires speculation about Braddon's intent. On one reading, the conclusion suggests Lady Audley is used as a sensational prop, a device to generate narrative chaos which Braddon discards in the process of returning things to their proper order. Lady Audley's in her madhouse and all's right with the world. Confining Lady Audley to an asylum, the novel follows a common practice in Victorian Britain of male doctors diagnosing non-conforming women with mental illness and in extreme cases institutionalizing them, a common practice of Victorian novelists as well. For novelists, Princeton University English Professor Emerita Elaine Showalter explains, "mental breakdown was often an expression of resolution of conflicts in the claustrophobic middle-class feminine role and. . . . Victorian psychiatric labelling and incarceration was an efficient agency of socio-sexual control" ("Victorian," 175).

On the other reading, Braddon had little choice but to end the novel this way, considering the restrictions imposed upon writers by book publishers seeking to appeal to the tastes of a large middle-class audience. To a sensitive reader, one who appreciates Braddon's limited options, or so this argument goes, this ending would be read as perfunctory, cliched, undeveloped, and out of keeping with the tenor of

the rest of the novel. It would, in other words, be obviously false, Braddon signaling to readers not to believe the novel's conventional moralizing. In the novel's closing paragraph, she even apologizes for her hackneyed conclusion: "I hope no one will take objection to my story," she writes, "because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace" (380). She follows by saying, unconvincingly and conventionally, that the good do not ultimately suffer, quoting from Psalms: "the righteous [are not] forsaken, nor [are] their offspring begging for bread" (380).

This anomalous Biblical passage contrasts jarringly with the novel's near omission of matters religious. Early on we're told that Lucy Graham "walked through the dull out-of-the-way village to the humble church three times on Sunday, as contentedly as if she had no higher aspiration in the world than to do so all the rest of her life" (11). Lucy here seems to be playing a role, establishing her ethos as the good Christian governess by letting all see her trek to church. Once she becomes Lady Audley, however, we hear nothing more about her church attendance. But that's true of all the characters in the novel. At one point, Clara Talboys talks to a clergyman's wife and plays a fugue on a church organ. At another, Luke and Phoebe are married in a village church. Other than that, the book makes no references to church or clergy. References to the divine, to heaven, to the savior are likewise rare or absent, except in expressions such as "God knows' and "Heaven forbid."

The only serious demonstrations of religious belief appear early in the novel when George describes, to a fellow passenger returning to England, his prayerful departure from his family: "I knelt down and prayed for my wife and child, with my head upon the white counterpane that covered them. I wasn't much of a praying man at ordinary times, but God knows that was a heartfelt prayer" (24). In his subsequent troubles, we see no evidence of a prayerful George; he is, as he asserts, not much of a praying man. If George is essentially irreligious, that's not true for the female passenger he's narrating his story to who responds to his fear that something may have happened to his wife by exclaiming, "My dear Mr. Talboys, why do you think of these things? God is very good to us; He will not afflict us beyond our power of endurance" (25), a view that's repeated in the closing allusion to the Book of Psalms and endorsed by the novel's idyllic conclusion but one that seems shallow and naïve and emotionally undone by the suffering and deceit and evil we witness throughout the novel.

Braddon presents one other passage in which a character seems to demonstrate faith in God, when Robert regrets the pain his investigation has caused Sir Michael:

> surely this must be God's judgment upon the purposeless, vacillating life I led up to the seventh day of last September. Surely this awful responsibility has been forced upon me in order that I may humble myself to an offended Providence, and confess that a man cannot choose his own life. He cannot say, 'I will take existence lightly, and keep out of the way of the wretched, mistaken, energetic creatures, who fight so heartily in the great battle. . . . He

> can only do, humbly and fearfully, that which the Maker who created him has appointed for him to do. (313)

While passages such as this in which characters regret their misbehavior and understand that their suffering is a lesson from God are common in popular Victorian novels, it's uncharacteristic of this novel and thus seems a reflexive gesture rather than a heartfelt one, something intended for Braddon's audience rather than something Braddon herself believes.

But for her public jaunts to church as governess, Lady Audley demonstrates no piety and no fear of heavenly punishment, marking her as even more of a subversive character. I'd add that in shunting Lady Audley's final years and death offstage, that is, in hiding much of her defeat, disgrace and demise, Braddon preserves this character's intelligence and strength. Convention may dictate that Lady Audley lose and suffer. But Braddon does her best to minimize this punishment by keeping it hidden from the reader. Knowledge of her death comes in a letter that tells us she expired peacefully after a long illness unlike the many Victorian novels which would detail, almost sadistically, the stages of her illness and the moments of her suffering to demonstrate that in God's domain the guilty are punished and the just triumphant.

Unlike this conventional moralizing, when we consider Helen Talboys's life, it's hard not to sympathize with her and see her as a victim of an oppressive class and gender system. She lives with an irresponsible, absent, and often drunk father; her mother is confined to an asylum; she has no other relatives or friends. The only companion she has in life is her paid companion, Phoebe. She has no genuine human contact, either with her husbands or her son. She shows no signs of love or sexual desire. At a young age, she realizes that the only power she has, the only way to escape her desperate background, is through a combination of sexual allure and role-playing. And the only way she can escape her emotional deprivation and find personal fulfillment is by succeeding materially, gaining wealth and social status, purchasing expensive clothes and jewelry and other fancy ephemera.

There's a logic to Lady Audley's seeking fulfillment through the purchase of expensive commercial goods, since she sees herself as essentially a commodity, believing her individual worth based not on her character or morality or intellect but on her charms and what these can purchase. In Victorian culture, she realizes, her only power is her sexual allure. For instance, as she awaited news of the burning of Castle Inn, "She looked upon that beauty as a weapon, and she felt that she had now double need to be well armed." Braddon continues: "She dressed herself in her most gorgeous silk, a voluminous robe of silvery, shimmering blue, that made her look as if she had been arrayed in moonbeams. She shook out her hair into feathery showers of glittering gold, and, with a cloak of white cashmere about her shoulders, went down-stairs" to meet her husband (287).

Because of the nearly supernatural power of her beauty (she's "arrayed in moonbeams" and her hair appears as "feathery showers of glittering gold"), Lady Audley is unable, until it's too late, to recognize the primary defect of her character and cause of her misdeeds, her narcissism. Only as her dismal fate approaches does Lady Audley regret this narcissism: "She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair, that beautiful nimbus of yellow light that had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty" (333). But she can't quite let go of her possessions. Even while her fate is being determined by Robert Audley and Dr. Mosgrove, she clings to an expensive Indian shawl "so that if hustled suddenly away, she might carry at least one of her possessions with her. . . . she [clung] with a desperate tenacity to gauds and gew-gaws, in the hour of her despair" (318). As she's in a carriage on the way to the asylum,

> Her mercenary soul hankered greedily after the costly and beautiful things of which she had been mistress. She had hidden away fragile tea cups and covered vases . . . among the folds of her silken dinner dresses. . . . [and she] had secreted jewelled and golden drinking cups amongst her delicate linen. She would have taken the pictures from the walls . . . had it been possible for her to do so. (326)

Despite an occasional awareness of her flawed character and misplaced values, she can't free herself from her material desires.

Lady Audley had, in fact, followed the English physician Andrew Wynter's prescription for females seeking to overcome ennui: that "intensely feminine refreshment, shopping." In doing so, in filling her emotional emptiness with material goods, she is doing exactly what the burgeoning consumer economy wants her to. In *Madame Bovary*, published six years before *Lady Audley's Secret*, Gustave Flaubert showed how commercial goods can achieve a magical allure. Stuck in a loveless marriage and living in a drab provincial town, Emma Bovary fantasizes about the exciting social life of the urban upper class, piling up large debts by purchasing "the new goods from Paris" (152). "She devoured," Flaubert writes, "all the accounts of first nights, races, and soirees, took interest in the debut of a singer, in the opening of a new shop. She knew the latest fashions, the addresses of the best tailors. . . . In Eugene Sue she studied descriptions of furniture; she read Balzac and George Sand, seeking in them imaginary satisfaction for her own desires" (50).

Just like Emma Bovary, despite her shallowness and self-indulgence, it's hard not to sympathize with Lady Audley. Her narcissism, her appreciation for her own beauty and preoccupation with social status, were generated by her circumstances. A poor woman like Helen Maldon had no other way to escape poverty, to become something, to in essence have a life of her own. It's also hard not to admire her cunning. All that Helen does to become Lady Audley—and to remain Lady Audley—reveals a steely determination and a fierce intelligence. Until Robert gets off his couch and focuses on

finding George, she is the only character who seems to possess any agency. The Audleys and the Harcourts are safely ensconced in their county manors, living off their inherited wealth, enjoying lives of privilege, doing nothing other than hunting foxes and holding dinner parties. Helen is also by far the smartest character in the novel, having insight into the psyches and motivations of others and using this knowledge to her advantage. In fact, if Robert hadn't switched rooms at the Inn, she would likely have succeeded in her nefarious plot and remained Lady Audley.

If Lady Audley's subversion of Victorian domesticity remains a matter of debate, Braddon's own transgression of these conventional boundaries is undeniable. Braddon met the publisher John Maxwell in London in April 1860 (Carnell 115). The current owner of the model for Audley Court, Ingatestone Hall, believes they might have met there since at the time it was being rented out to Catholic tenants; John Maxwell was an Irish Catholic; according to census directories for 1859, 1861, and 1863, there was a John Maxwell living in the village of Ingatestone ("Ingatestone Hall, *Academic*"; "History"); there's evidence that Braddon visited it in June1861 (Wolff 437n40); and local historian Jude James asserts, without evidence, that "by 1861 Mary and her mother had taken up residence with Maxwell in his house in Ingatestone, Essex."

It's more likely, though, that their first meeting was more prosaic—Braddon meeting Maxwell in his London office. But it would have been easy for him to commute by rail between Essex and London. And it's not clear what other reason Braddon would have had to visit Ingatestone Hall. A possible scenario, then, is that Braddon met Maxwell on business matters in his office—and later visited him in the intimacy of his Ingatestone residence, away from the prying eyes and gossip of London society. Braddon gave birth to their first child, Gerald Melbourne Maxwell, in March 1862, her second, Francis Maxwell in 1863, and her third, Fanny Margaret Maxwell, also in 1863. Before the decade was out, she would have three more children (Carnell 191n95). No surprise, then, that in 1864, in several newspapers, Maxwell published an announcement of their marriage: "Miss Braddon, the novelist, was recently married to Mr. Maxwell, the publisher" (qtd. in Wolf 104).

Braddon and Maxwell's having three children before they married would have been thought immoral. But many lower-class couples had illegitimate children, and Braddon and Maxwell allegedly did marry. So this sin could have been forgotten, if not forgiven. The problem was that at the time their marriage was announced, Maxwell was still married to Mary Ann Crowley, with whom he had had seven children. "After the birth of her last son in 1860," writes Saverio Tomaiuolo, "Mary Ann had started suffering from what was defined at the time as 'puerperal insanity' (the same pathology affecting Lady Audley and her mother) and had entered an asylum near Dublin" (11).

Even this scandalous behavior might have been overlooked, since artists were not held to the same strict moral standards as ordinary members of the bourgeoisie; George Eliot, for instance, lived with and considered herself married to the

philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes, even though he was married to another woman, Agnes Jervis, with whom he had had three children. One difference between the two situations was that, writes Elaine Showalter, "Unlike George Eliot, who was forced into an extremely conservative public space by her radical life style, Braddon refused to support ideas in which she did not believe. In particular, she satirized the sentimental codes of feminine weakness and affection" (*Literature*, 164). In addition, Lewes's wife Agnes did not object to his adulterous relationship with Eliot, seeming to have accepted Lewes's belief in an open marriage, and she herself had begun an intimate relationship with the writer Thornton Leigh Hunt, with whom she would have four children. Most importantly, Lewes and Eliot did not face public opposition from Jervis's relatives. On the contrary, after publishing their marriage announcement, Braddon and Maxwell had to deal with the journalist Richard Brinsley Knowles, brother-in-law to Mary Ann Crowley, first cousin twice removed from the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and, as Robert Wolff identifies him in the index of his Braddon biography, "persistent creator of scandal about" Mary Elizabeth Braddon (518).

Wolff narrates this misadventure:

> Knowles took it upon himself to deny the report of John Maxwell's new marriage in every paper that printed it. . . . [Braddon] and John Maxwell could not answer Knowles by publicly reaffirming that they were married. This could have led only to even more unhappy publicity. So the ambiguity and the social strain persisted. . . . The indiscreet attempt in 1864 to publicize their 'marriage' led to Knowles's damaging denials. The truth became widely known, and [Braddon] now encountered the sneering disapproval and cruel snubs of the self-righteous Victorian social world. (108)

This scandal flared up again in 1874, with Maxwell trying to keep private Mary Ann Crowley's death and Knowles, in response, identifying her in her death announcement as "the wife of John Maxwell, Esq., publisher" (249). At last, though, Braddon and Maxwell were able to get married. By this time, Braddon was a well-established popular novelist, the author, thanks to a need to pay off some of her husband's business debts, of a remarkable thirty-three novels, a feat made more remarkable by the fact that during this time she was helping raise her five children and the five step-children from Maxwell's first marriage, as well as writing for and editing the magazine *Belgravia*.

As prolific as she was and as well-regarded as are some of her other novels, it's *Lady Audley's Secret* that remains her most well-known and most influential work, itself a remarkable achievement, given her description of its composition: "It was written from hand to mouth, as a serial wherever I happened to be when the time of publication drew near . . . written anywhere and everywhere, in fact" (qtd. in Wolff 144). Its immense popularity and the controversy it generated made *Lady Audley's Secret* the most notorious of the sensation novels published in Britain in the 1860s. In criticism and in public perceptions, this novel became the epitome of the sensation

novel and Lady Audley the embodiment of the sensation heroine. When after a century of reputational decline and critical neglect, having fallen prey to the advent of modernity and the exclusionary power of professional literary scholarship which emphasized aesthetic complexity when forming the British literary canon, scholars at last turned their attention to overlooked literary works, encouraged by feminist criticism and a new historicism and an awareness of contemporary struggles over cultural meaning, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* became a central work in reopening the canon of Victorian novels, deepening our understanding of both the cultural and political struggles that marked mid-Victorian Britain and of the role that popular novels could play in these struggles.

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