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**Becoming Frauds: Unconventional Heroines
in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Sensation Fiction**

Jan Schipper

**A dissertation presented to the
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Arts**

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**Becoming Frauds: Unconventional Heroines
in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Sensation Fiction**

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Abstract

Becoming Frauds: Unconventional Heroines

in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Sensation Fiction

By focusing on three of her early sensation novels, this study examines how Mary Elizabeth Braddon's fiction challenged conventional assumptions about the feminine and spoke to women's growing discontent with their limited roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Her novels suggest how a number of women became frauds, in the sense of using deception, inventing false identities, and committing crimes in order to meet conventional society's expectations for the proper female. Braddon's female frauds subverted dominant Victorian ideology's representation of women as domestic ideals by defying the impractical and impossible role of "angel" and rejecting gender and class-based discrimination.

The first chapter places Braddon's fiction within the Victorian cultural climate in which women had limited opportunities and faced unfair economic conditions; many women, like Braddon's fraudulent females, were becoming increasingly discontented and angry. Chapter two examines Braddon's fiction in the context of the sensation novel's rise and fall, mass appeal, rapid reproduction, and largely negative critical reception; exploring the conflict between Braddon's novels and her critics, it offers insights into the alarm generated by their critique of gender and class.

The third chapter examines *Lady Audley's Secret*, a novel whose central character impersonates the proper Victorian woman while simultaneously resorting to violent actions in order to retain her social position. *Aurora Floyd*, the focus of the fourth

chapter, presents a more conventional female character, one who has money and social status but who feels compelled to resort to fraud, and whose enforced conformity reveals the disturbing implications of society's threat to women. The fifth chapter examines *Eleanor's Victory*, one of the first Victorian novels with a female detective, but a novel that also illustrates the damage to marriage caused when women marry wealthy men in order to gain autonomy. The sixth chapter concludes that while critical opinion remained sharply divided on Braddon's literary merit throughout "the sensation decade," the amount of recent positive commentary suggests that Braddon's novels both informed and reformed.

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To Dr. Linda Badley and Dr. Kathleen Therrien: Thank you for your endless advice, support, and constructive criticism.

To my husband: Thanks for keeping our clothes ironed (most of the time); keep up the good work.

To my daughter, Caitlin: Thank you for making me smile; *ich liebe dich*.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The decade of the 1860s, often referred to by both contemporary and modern critics as the “age of sensation,” ushered a new and scandalous type of novel into the Victorian field of fictional writing, the sensation novel. In *The Sensation Novel: From The Woman in White to The Moonstone*, Lyn Pykett examines this fictional form and some of its writers, including Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Helen Price Wood, Rhoda Broughton, and Wilkie Collins, all novelists who, according to Pykett, created “a new kind of fiction which appeared from nowhere to satisfy the cravings of an eager and expanding reading public possessed of suspect, or downright depraved tastes” (2-3). Some of the sensation novelists, especially women writers like Braddon, Wood, and Broughton, created female characters who defied the prevailing Victorian conventions by asserting their independence from the male-dominated, class-conscious society and undermining the dominant image of the fragile female. Women sensation writers and readers it seems, increasingly perceived how limiting traditional social structures were to women.

The harsh reality that restricted women’s education, work, and responsibility angered some women, but many others quietly accepted their sheltered roles as subordinates to their brothers, fathers, and later their husbands. These women cultivated their domestic responsibilities, their only duty that permitted them any sway over

decision making in the family. Men, too, struggled with their expectations for women, but some men, as well as some women, expressed a disturbing view of women, that they should remain obedient, selfless, and dependent. Placing women within such narrow confines created a constricted existence in some ways analogous to slavery, with some women forced by circumstances and limited opportunities to be wives and mothers. Although women's existences differed significantly, the reality for many middle-class women was that without fathers, husbands, or fortunes, they were destined to eke out a meager living through any means available, either through marriage, a scanty subsistence from a job in service, or dependence on the good will of others.¹ At the same time, many other women refused to conform to patriarchal demands, and, feeling increasingly dispossessed and disconnected, these women began to rebel physically and spiritually against their enforced social situations by challenging assumptions about the feminine.

By focusing on how Braddon's fiction spoke to women's discontent caused by the Victorian unrealistic expectations regarding marriage and the proper female, this study will show how some women had to become frauds--using deception, inventing fraudulent identities, and committing crimes--in order to fulfill these expectations. Braddon's fiction exposes the Victorian woman as a patriarchal construct--a male-fabricated, domestic ideal, a recurrent theme in her sensation novels. This study will also show how Braddon's provocative novels articulated and contributed to the debate surrounding the Victorian "Woman Question," gradually undermining those institutions that were so important to Victorian beliefs and values--the institutions of marriage and the family. By writing about

¹ In *Daily Life in Victorian England*, Sally Mitchell lists and discusses the jobs and opportunities available for women, most of which were grueling service jobs and factory labor (47-70).

the secretiveness and rebellion concealed within the walls of many Victorian homes, Braddon exposed the Victorian hypocrisy that forced her heroines to become frauds. Ironically, her novels suggest that Victorian ideology had created just the opposite of what it intended; instead of shaping women into paragons of virtue, patriarchy had created a number of women who used deception in order to guarantee financially secure futures, escape their discontented lives as domestic ideals, or gain autonomy.

By mid-century, many Victorian women were beginning to carve better places for themselves, domestically, socially, and economically. Concomitantly, Braddon's novels served as both a product and a reinforcement of the growing rejection of the conventional heroine and the "angel in the house" memorialized by Coventry Patmore's verse novel, *The Angel in the House* (1854-56), replacing her with a female character who more realistically represented the women of the 1860s, complete with their faults and failures. Some sensation novelists also drew upon the image of woman created by well-known female novelists like Emily Brontë and George Eliot, whose early female heroes, Catherine Earnshaw and Maggie Tulliver, must die after exposing their intelligence and then passionate natures because they defy the conventional roles assigned to women.² Early on, each woman's actions project a strong-minded rejection of convention, but both

² Catherine's agonizing love for Heathcliff and her struggle with her conflicting impulses--to follow her passion and marry Heathcliff or adhere to convention and marry Edgar Linton--become central to Brontë's novel of love, retribution, and reunion. Catherine's marriage to Edgar and the impending birth of their child fail to separate Heathcliff and Catherine, whose punishment for her passionate nature is death. Similarly, Maggie Tulliver's sexual attraction to Stephen Guest, her cousin's fiancé, accounts for her gradual movement from proper feminine to passionate, improper feminine and her return to conventional feminine and redemption. Maggie's passive departure with Stephen and her passive return contrast sharply with the passionate Maggie described throughout the novel. Instead of marrying Stephen and quelling the community's indignation, she chooses repentant self-sacrifice. Maggie, like Catherine, dies after choosing to adhere to convention, Maggie for rejecting Stephen's love in favor of appearances and Catherine for choosing Edgar's civilized world over her spiritual connection with Heathcliff.

eventually adhere to tradition, seemingly doomed to perpetuate the conventional structuring of women's roles.

While the sensation novelists constructed heroines who were intelligent, capable, and defiant, some of these writers also permitted their protagonists to exert their independence, demand some semblance of freedom, and challenge anyone who became an obstacle to gaining their goals. Their heroines were also frauds. Braddon, especially, created fraudulent women--women who reinvented themselves as conventional domestic angels while their deceptive appearances permitted them to hide scandalous secret pasts or to perform unconventional actions. As Lyn Pykett points out in *The Sensation Novel*, "Braddon's heroines are, for one reason or another, not what they seem" (52). In particular, Braddon's female protagonists, Lady Audley, Aurora Floyd, and Eleanor Vane, fashion fraudulent identities for themselves. At times, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon's heroine seemingly performs the role of the ideal Victorian woman until her security is threatened; at other times, her female characters resist their allotted roles, only to later resign themselves to domesticity, as in *Aurora Floyd* and *Eleanor's Victory*.

Fictional heroines were not the only ones who rejected their inconsequential status as informed by patriarchy. Throughout the nineteenth century, while many did conform, some women from all social classes rebelled against the double standard that allowed men privilege and freedom while confining women within the conventional, feminine role. In "Of Queen's Gardens," John Ruskin draws a clear distinction between men's and women's duties and responsibilities:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest whenever war is just, whenever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,--and her intellect is not for invention and creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision [. . .]. Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial:--to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offense, the inevitable error [. . .]. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. (146-47)

What Ruskin's rigid structuring of the borderland between male and female roles ignores is that not all women accepted their assigned place under the male's compulsory protection. Some women, as evidenced by the challenge to domesticity in the sensation novels, responded to this harshly inequitable system by opposing the limiting structures of Victorian conventional society and insisting on a greater opportunities in the public (or man's) world.

As Sally Mitchell explains in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, while many people believed marriage and a home solved the woman problem, the majority of working class women, unmarried and unemployed, found themselves in a contest for the service and

labor positions available to them (143). Mitchell also points out that it was “socially unacceptable” for middle-class women to earn money (143); hence, women’s restricted opportunities accounted for many of the dilemmas they faced both financially and socially. Employment was not the only opportunity denied to women. Educational opportunities, too, were limited (women were not awarded university degrees for the same educational accomplishments as men until 1869), as were political and legal rights for women (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 187-88). Regardless of their social positions, women were economically dependent on their fathers, husbands, or employers. In this climate of economic limitations, some women fabricated an ideal image in order to marry a man with money, actions that suggested, for some women, that marriage was little more than “legalized prostitution,” with women legally bound to submit to their husbands’ demands (Pykett, *The ‘Improper’ Feminine* 18). According to Mitchell’s *The Fallen Angel*, “Marriage required a woman to give up her name, her identity, her right to her own body, her property, her legal existence and her ability to act independently” in exchange for economic security and a husband’s protection (175). Trapped by social obligation and financial necessity, married women became socially, economically, and legally subordinate to their husbands.

Many women writers, brooding over women’s dispiriting, desperate lives, sought to stifle the male-constructed idea of female contentment within domestic confinement. Women who were discontented as both the symbols and victims of Victorian repression began to ask the question first posed by Florence Nightingale: “Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity--these three--[. . .] and a place in society where no one of

the three can be exercised?" (qtd. in Strachey 27). Locked inside her so-called natural profession, a woman was destined to be a wife, mother, and moral guardian. Women's lives centered on the home and family, with the added responsibility of preserving the moral values of her husband: "If she successfully made the home a place of perfect peace, her husband and sons would not want to leave it for an evening's (morally suspect) entertainment elsewhere" (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 266). The term "Victorian morality" became synonymous with contempt, Mitchell explains, because it implied "prudery, hypocrisy, sexual repression, and social control" (259). Much of the contempt women felt stemmed from the conflict between male and female gendered roles that were readily accepted as the doctrine of separate spheres--the woman's powerlessness planted her firmly within the male's powerfulness, whether she wanted that position or not.

It was the legal subordination of women to their fathers, the laws, and later their husbands that became a central issue of debate during the century and a dominant theme in sensation novels. Previous to 1870, married women could not own property; when a woman married, her money and property belonged to her husband (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 103-4). A central feature in Braddon's sensation novels is women's longing for freedom to work, earn an education, control their money and property, and live independent lives, free from what they perceived as legally binding slavery. Much like the heroines in sensation fiction, many Victorian women wanted freedoms that men enjoyed, but, without economic or political status, most women had no means of escape from their vulnerable positions. Although sensation novelists encountered hostile reviews because of their tendency to applaud unconventional women, the novels exploited the public's

interest in women's issues and articulated a number of anxieties about changing gender roles. Pykett states, "The Woman Question and the question of woman are perhaps the central preoccupation of this genre" (*The Sensation Novel* 10). For the first time, an entire genre focused on women and women's concerns, suggesting a growing trend that challenged preconceived notions about women.

The writers and the readers of sensation fiction, as well as the critical response to the genre, focused on the many issues related to the Woman Question, including "debates about women's legal and political rights, women's educational and employment aspirations and opportunities, and women's dissatisfactions with and resistances to traditional marital and familial patterns" (Pykett, *The Sensation Novel* 41). Pykett maintains that "the women's sensation novel seems to be concerned with a new sense of marriage and family as problematic institutions for both women and men" (45). While marriage was conventionally viewed as a woman's coveted and expected role, sensation novels challenged the naturalness of the assumption that a husband should have absolute authority over his wife.

Defiance of male authority is a recurrent theme in Braddon's novels; her female characters are typified by "active, assertive women, who convey a sense of the threat of insurgent femininity trying to break out of the doll's house of domesticity, and passive, dependent women, who are imprisoned by it, unable to articulate their sense of confinement, and driven to desperate measures" (Pykett, *The Sensation Novel* 49). The active, assertive woman, like Lady Audley, hides skillfully behind a mask of passivity, but she still possesses violent tendencies that emerge when her security is threatened. She

undermines the conventional feminine ideal by outwardly presenting herself as the perfect angel, while her angelic countenance conceals a woman capable of resorting to bigamy and murder for self-preservation. Lady Audley threatens the respectable ideal by suggesting that the proper feminine is both deceptive and destructive.

In contrast, the visibly active, assertive female, like Aurora Floyd, is viewed by Victorian standards of femininity as a danger and a threat. She rides horses, elopes with a person from the lower class, and whips a stable hand, all behaviors associated with the stereotypical upper-class male. It is Aurora's seemingly casual indifference to her eventual enforced submission to male power that reveals a harsh critique of patriarchy. Braddon's subsequent heroine, Eleanor Vane, combines elements of both the passive and the active female; young, determined, but financially dependent on her job as companion, she exposes the fraudulence of the conventional marriage when she marries in order to conceal her true purpose and to achieve her goal, which is to find her father's murderers. The imposed and unhappy fates of Braddon's discontented female characters pose a real threat to patriarchy. They conceal their unhappiness and anger beneath seemingly contented submission, but those submerged emotions eventually erupt in ways that are destructive to men, women, and social conventions.

Braddon's unconventional, fraudulent female characters spoke to many discontented women about their unsatisfactory lives and drew a large number of readers to the sensation novels. With the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon was immediately launched into the public's view, and her novel became the center of troubled discussion in the working class home as well as the upper-class parlor (Wolff

196-97). According to Patrick Brantlinger's "What Is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel'?" the sensation novel "stripped the veils from Victorian respectability and prudery" (26). Braddon's clever, active women project a rejection of convention by guaranteeing socially and financially secure futures through aggressive actions. In *The Sensation Novel*, Pykett claims that "many commentators on contemporary life and letters saw the [sensation] genre as both the cause and symptom of the depravity of contemporary morality and the modern sensibility. The existence of the genre was taken to be evidence of a cultural disease" (5). Some critics blamed the sensation novel genre for what they saw as a negatively changing Victorian society rather than examining a number of anxieties about the shifting roles of men and women and recognizing the significance of the social message implied within the new sensation novels.

In scathing reviews, critics accused sensation writers of "offering undesirable patterns of female behavior" and of "preaching immorality" (Terry 60). Concerned about the impact of Braddon's likeable frauds on women readers, critics began devising ways to curb the onslaught of excitement elicited by Braddon's novels (Hughes 167). Many male readers and reviewers felt threatened by Braddon's scheming female characters' challenges against patriarchy and the novels that placed these discontented, secretive, scheming and aggressive female characters directly within the male sanctuary--the Victorian home. And instead of presenting male and female relationships as illustrations of domestic tranquility, Braddon wrote of male/female relationships as often harrowing ordeals. Her female characters plotted revenge and attempted murder in order to gain or retain their places in the social and economic hierarchy. As expected, men were outraged

that Braddon portrayed women, whom these men had previously thought to be the guardians of morals and the sources of all virtues, as challengers of the subservient roles to which they had been relegated. As Kate Flint argues in *The Woman Reader*, the sensation novel's "threats to domestic order" account for much of the outrage and fear men felt about this popular novel form (277).

Men were not the only ones aghast at Braddon's heroines, who saw themselves as clever individuals as capable as men of making decisions that did not involve the home, husband, and children. Many women, too, saw these new heroines as traitors to their positions as wife and mother. Margaret Oliphant, Braddon's most aggressive female critic, upbraided Braddon with repeated accusations of corrupting young girls and "of foul-mindedness" (qtd. in Wolff 203). Braddon knew, though, that just as there were women who preferred and spoke in favor of the role of submissive wife and mother, there were also women who fought against the restrictions placed upon them and who were eager for novels that spoke to their changing ideas and needs. Defying conventions became a central attraction in Braddon's sensation novels as well as Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* and Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, But Too Well*, popular novels whose plots and heroines were clearly unconventional in a time when propriety was not only expected but also demanded. In Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley resorts to a fraudulent marriage, attempted murder, and murder in order to escape her poverty-ridden existence. In Wood's *East Lynne*, Isabel leaves her husband in a jealous rage, abandoning their children for a villainous man who later deserts her and their illegitimate son. Broughton's Kate, in *Not Wisely, But Too Well*, falls in love with a man other than

her husband and experiences a near-sexual encounter with the married man, but after a struggle with brain fever, she embraces a new life as a Sister of Mercy.

Braddon, like Wood and Broughton, punishes her heroines, not for their moral failings, but to satisfy conventions. As Elaine Showalter explains in *A Literature of Their Own*, female writers like Braddon used the sensation novel as "a transitional literature (an incorporation of the earlier protest fiction and the social and problem novels) that explored genuinely radical female protest against marriage and women's economic oppression, although still in the framework of feminine convention that demanded the erring heroine's destruction" (28-29). The sensation novelists knew that their unconventional heroines would horrify critics; they also knew that women readers, many of whom were becoming increasingly discontented with their places in society, might no longer be satisfied living half lives. Novelists like Braddon knew that the domestic angel was, for many women, a myth, yet critics were outraged. They did not want the myth dismissed so easily, but their cause was destined to fail as increasing numbers of women sought to carve better places for themselves by proving their values to society and by confirming their abilities to achieve something other than domestic accord.

Perhaps one reason for the steady crumbling of the myth of the happily submissive woman was that the sensational elements in the sensation novels--secrecy, bigamy, and especially murder--were not attached solely to the Lady Audleys of the fictional world. According to Mary Hartman in *Victorian Murderesses*, "In England, from 1855 to 1874 the annual totals of women tried for murder, which ranged from twelve to forty-two, twice exceeded those for men" (5). Murders committed by women in England, while not

commonplace, had become a regular occurrence, and “an analysis of their motives reveals that they murdered far more frequently for money” (Hartman 5). For most of these women murderers, the fear of enforced poverty, as well as a possible ruined reputation, compelled them to commit heinous crimes if that crime could ensure a safe future for themselves and their children.

Many non-criminal women were also discovering that the myth of the protected Victorian female was deceptive and unwelcome. At the same time that men were applauding themselves for their compulsory protection, women were struggling to emerge from the male’s crushing dominance. As Sally Mitchell points out in *The Fallen Angel*, “In this new climate, some women writers used fiction to deal seriously with those special aspects (prostitution and disease) of the social problem that they believed were important to women. They wrote both to inform and to reform” (22). Some women writers were hopeful that they could encourage women to take action against patriarchal privileging of important information.

With the publications of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *Eleanor’s Victory* in rapid succession, other voices--although fictional--were added to the women’s challenge to class and gender roles that prevented many women from obtaining employment and escaping poverty except through marriage to wealthy men. Despite the subservient enterprises of some Victorian women, Braddon’s female characters show that many women were less passive in the nineteenth century than the “angel in the house” myth would have us believe. Among all classes, there were tough-minded, determined

women who used their popularity and their public exposure to dislodge the Victorian male from his perch.

Much like her fictional female characters, Braddon herself soundly rejected economic dependency, earning her own living through acting and later writing. She also wrote against the subservience of women, she produced novels that defied gender-based conventions, she created violent heroines, she challenged male domination, she defied her critics and reviewers, she criticized social positioning, and she challenged the marriage laws by living with a married man and bearing five illegitimate children. Well aware that marriage meant social and economic security for many women, the central focus of many of her novels became marriage as a financial transaction between men and women. The dissimilar treatment endured by people in different social positions also remains a central issue in Braddon's sensation novels. Her female frauds defy and reject both gendered boundaries and their limited social existence. These female characters come from diverse social classes--Lady Audley, the lower class, Aurora Floyd, the wealthy class, and Eleanor Vane, the middle class--yet all three women become frauds in order to present the image of the respectable woman. Aware that society's expectations and a respectable marriage demand that a woman perform as "the feminine ideal," the female frauds perpetuate the illusion of the angelic woman, yet at the same time these fraudulent women ironically subvert the concept of the feminine ideal and the conventional ideas about marriage that compel women to invent new identities in order to remain in or reenter society. By assuming fictitious names, hiding shocking pasts, and feigning

domestic contentment, Braddon's fraudulent women perform the role of the feminine ideal, all the while plotting and maneuvering to attain some equal grounding with men.

Braddon's frauds eventually challenge the role of the subservient female industriously content within her domestic prison by defying their fathers and husbands, harboring secrets from the men in their lives, seeking revenge against their tormentors and accusers, and displaying emotions and passions that enraged reviewers. Braddon went so far as to create a female murderer complete with the ability to draw sympathy from her women readers and contemporary novelists. She also drew her audience into feelings of compassion and empathy for her heroines, emotions that provided sympathetic encouragement to women who sought independence through whatever means were available to them. And for this reason, among many others, Braddon's novels, which spanned nearly seven decades, elicited outrage from critics for their unconventional women even as they evoked praise and admiration from her reading public.

Despite the negative critical attention after the publications of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon immediately began *Eleanor's Victory*. After publishing *Eleanor's Victory*, Braddon wrote and published *John Marchmont's Legacy*, *The Doctor's Wife*, *Henry Dunbar: The Story of an Outcast*, *Only a Clod*, *Sir Jasper's Tenant*, *The Lady's Mile*, *Birds of Prey*, *Rupert Godwin*, *Dead Sea Fruit*, *Charlotte's Inheritance*, and *Run to Earth*. The critical furor continued with Braddon's rapidly produced novels that explored, exposed, and rejected the passive dependence expected of women in a time when women's financial security depended upon an advantageous marriage (Wolff 193). Braddon's novels evoked unrelenting censure by critics for the

entire decade, relenting only in 1868 and 1869 when constant and injurious charges concerning her personal life--her quasi-bigamous, adulterous relationship with a married man, in particular--and her novelistic content caused her to withdraw from novel writing for two years (Wolff 222-23). In 1870 Braddon resumed writing, yet her most popular sensation novels, *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, had already launched Braddon as one of the most notable and criticized novelists of the 1860s.

* * *

When Braddon created her sensational female frauds, she modeled her creations after the men and women she knew; she also constructed characters, both male and female, from her imagination and from her own life. As P. D. Edwards points out in his introduction to the Oxford edition of *Aurora Floyd*:

Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd are imaginatively embellished and disguised versions of herself, and of her perception of herself: Lady Audley a projection of her guilt, no doubt largely suppressed; Aurora of her sense of power--power to sweep aside all the obstacles raised by her disadvantaged girlhood, by her sex, and even by her own scruples of conscience. (xxi-xxii)

One need only read Robert Lee Wolff's biography of Braddon to appreciate Edwards' comment and to understand her conflicted struggle to earn a living for her family, to support her divorced mother, "and at the same time become a great novelist" (148).

Part of Braddon's own growth into a strong-willed woman resulted from her early disillusion with her father who, when she was five years old, deserted her mother, leaving an unemployed woman to fend both emotionally and financially for Mary Elizabeth, her

sixteen-year-old sister, Margaret, and her eleven-year-old brother, Edward. Braddon's early childhood disappointments left her with a cynical perception of the woman's submissive role. She learned early on that women were expected to depend upon men for their livelihood, but men often failed to fulfill that role, as did Braddon's father. The Braddons suffered emotional and financial hardships for many years, and, wanting to avoid that degradation again, Mary Elizabeth felt that she could help the family by taking a job as an actress from 1857 to 1860. In 1860, when she left the stage, she began writing in order to ease her family's financial burdens. While she had written for amusement from the age of eight, she now felt called upon to support her family, and John Gilby, a wealthy Yorkshire squire and ardent admirer of Braddon, financed her career move from actress to novelist.

But Gilby's constant demands upon Braddon's time--his encouraging her to write poetry, revise her book chapters, and meet with influential people who could help further her writing career--ended their relationship (Wolff 89-90). Shortly after Braddon began to be noticed as a writer, she met and fell in love with publisher John Maxwell, who encouraged her sensation novel writing. Almost immediately, Gilby began a fervid campaign to separate Braddon from Maxwell's growing influence, but by late 1860, Braddon's resentment began to intrude upon her financial arrangement with Gilby and the two parted under less than amiable terms, ending Gilby's financial support. Within weeks, Braddon was living with Maxwell, and once again, financial motivations, stemming from Maxwell's enormous debts, became the reason for the remarkable productivity of her early writing. In the first few years of the sensation decade, Braddon

wrote eighteen novels, several poems and plays, and edited the popular *Belgravia* magazine. She wrote at a frantic pace, publishing novels, short stories, and articles both anonymously and pseudonymously, but it was the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret* in installments in 1861 and as a novel in 1862 that established Braddon as a sensation novelist (Sadleir 69).

Although initially critics were outraged at Braddon's creation of sensational female protagonists who flouted conventions, she became a *cause célèbre* during her lifetime; however, she was nearly forgotten shortly after her death in 1915. What little interest remained in Braddon's novels was historical and biographical. In 1944, a chapter devoted to Braddon in Michael Sadleir's *Things Past* prompted a sentimental interest in her works, and in the 1970s, critics reexamined the sensation novel as one of the many popular genres of the mid-1800s. In 1979, Wolff rekindled the intrigue readers had found in Braddon's novels with the publication of her biography, which revived interest in both her sensation novels and her sensational life. By the 1980s, critics began to see Braddon's subversive critique of women's roles in Victorian England as a precursor to the New Woman and feminist writings. Braddon's representation of a headstrong, devious, and sometimes-murderous woman who challenged assumptions about the feminine had added "a new type of villainess" to the literary world (Hughes 124). Braddon's villainous protagonists provided depressingly lucid portraits of how women used secrecy and fraud to deal with surviving and obtaining a place in their world, middle class Britain in the mid-nineteenth century.

By writing about the secretiveness and rebellion concealed within the walls of many Victorian homes, hers included, Braddon exposed the ideological inconsistencies that forced her heroines to become frauds. As Braddon discovered early, she, too, had to become a fraud to support herself and her family by assuming a fake name to conceal her identity while working as an actress. As Fionn O'Toole points out in her biographical note to *Eleanor's Victory*, "Acting was associated with commonness and lewdness; nice girls did not make public exhibitions of themselves" (xi-xii). Much like the female characters in her novels, who had to become frauds to cope with societal expectations, Braddon had constantly to reinvent herself as a novelist by writing anonymously and pseudonymously to mask her identity as a talented and clever woman. She was forced also to live as a fraud by often hiding her authorial position and by pretending wedlock to a married man. In her life, as in her novels, Braddon exposed the discontent and dissatisfaction so apparent, yet so immutable, in women's lives.

Yet even with the early success of her novels, Braddon struggled throughout the 1860s with her need to support the family and her desire to write a novel of "high art" (Wolff 148). She provided for her rapidly expanding family and rescued Maxwell from numerous financial failures, but her anxiety about what she referred to as her "superficial success" weighed heavily on her mind (Wolff 154). She doubted her ability to produce high art, and in a letter to her mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, she writes: "Now *your* kind interest arouses an ambition which was [. . .] utterly dead [. . .]. I want to be artistic & to please *you*. I want to be sensational, & to please Mudie's subscribers [. . .]. Can the sensational be elevated by art, & redeemed from all its coarseness?" (qtd. in Wolff 155).

By the time this letter was written, Braddon's name had become irrevocably intertwined with sensation writing. At the same time she was striving to separate herself from sensation, she found herself enmeshed in the sensational and public scandal between Maxwell, herself, and the brother-in-law of Maxwell's insane wife.

The critical onslaught escalated, becoming more vocal and vicious with the birth of each of her and Maxwell's illegitimate children. During her relationship with Maxwell she would bear him five children, raise his five children by his wife who was at the time confined to a mental asylum, support his financial failures, and effectively fend off his financial ruin. Despite her tender concern for her family, Braddon was attacked by critics, in analogies to her fiction, for her unconventional lifestyle. Oliphant's accusations that Braddon showed "no inventive genius, no good taste, and no perception of character" were harsh attacks against a writer that Wolff, in the only biography of Braddon, presents as a selfless, intelligent, generous, kind-hearted woman who felt driven to take care of her family by whatever means were available (Wolff 250). Although Wolff maintains that Braddon "deliberately flouted conventions" in the early years of her relationship with Maxwell, she also "exemplified at every turn a passionate loyalty to principles and to persons, combined with sound common sense, a self-deprecatory appreciation of the ridiculous, a sensitivity to human suffering, and a tough capacity to bear suffering herself" (405). Yet the attacks on both her novels and her lifestyle grew increasingly vicious. Outwardly, Braddon fought vehemently against the harsh criticism, but the strain of trying to keep the adulterous relationship with Maxwell a secret took its toll on her health and her writing.

After the death of Maxwell's wife in 1874, Maxwell and Braddon quietly slipped away to Chelsea and married. With the central scandal in her life quieted, Braddon continued agonizing over her inability to produce the great "novel of character" she venerated. She was firmly wedged between the man she admired, Bulwer-Lytton, and the man she loved, John Maxwell, both of whom placed significant demands upon her writing and her time. Bulwer-Lytton viewed Braddon as a talented writer who was wasting her ability on sensation fiction instead of writing novels of consequence, and he encouraged her to produce works with more character and to abandon the sensation novel in favor of novels worthy of her talents (Wolff 154-55). Maxwell, however, consumed with debt, urged Braddon to produce as much sensational literature as possible, even pressing her to write for the penny dreadfuls, which she did under the pseudonym Babington White, a name created from the surnames of her grandmother, Anne Babington White (Wolff 207). Ironically, the woman who was forced at the age of twenty-two to work as an actress to support her mother and her siblings now found herself in a similar predicament as she struggled to support her husband and children by writing novels (Wolff 109).

But Braddon's novel writing did more than fend off possible financial ruin; her novels called attention to and exposed women's disturbing response to patriarchy, which called for them either to subordinate themselves to masculine power or cloak themselves with lies and deceit. As evidenced by her own life, Braddon defied dominant social ideology but still faced cultural and economic pressure to conform. Although this study is not a biographical examination of Braddon's novels, her life supports the fact that many

women recognized the impossibility of the feminine ideal. In this study, three of her early novels will be examined as fictional constructs of a social reality she identified with all too well.

* * *

In these three novels, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *Eleanor's Victory*, Braddon's female protagonists are frauds who, for a variety of reasons, reinvent themselves in order to hide their true identities, conceal damaging secrets, escape poverty, protect their social position and respectability, obtain employment, and flee from destructive marriages. Braddon's female frauds refuse to accept the conventional role for women as the moral protectors of the home and society, and they dismiss the notion that women can find satisfaction in domesticity while rejecting worldly interests in favor of male authority. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley, the most fraudulent of Braddon's heroines, employs lies and deceit to obtain a position as governess, a job that required a respectable reputation (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 179). She uses her fraudulent identity in order to marry a wealthy man. Lady Audley's years of poverty serve as a constant reminder that she might, at the whim of her male employer and later her husband, return to a life of indigence.

In *Aurora Floyd*, Aurora perpetrates her fraud in order to protect her second husband and her father from knowledge about her scandalous past and to preserve her image as a respectable young heiress. As the daughter of a highly regarded man, she must adhere to society's conventions. More disturbing, though, is the fact that Aurora continues the fraud when she seemingly accepts the conventional role of dutiful wife and

mother and settles down to a life of domestic subservience. In *Eleanor's Victory*, Eleanor becomes a fraud as she struggles to uncover the mystery surrounding her father's death. Eleanor marries in order to gain the mobility she needs as she searches for clues to her father's murder. By marrying, she gains the respect and approval of society and the married woman's freedom to travel without supervision. All of Braddon's female protagonists commit their various fraudulent acts because they see no other options, and it was these unladylike challenges to the ideological premise that gave critics cause for alarm.

In her novels, what remains clear is that Braddon never forgot her early lessons in "what it was like to struggle for money and reputation in a deeply censorious society" (O'Toole, Biographical Note xii), and in her novels, ranging from the early sensation novels of the 1860s to the social commentary novels produced during subsequent decades, Braddon helped forge a change in the way women viewed their allotted roles. Her heroines served as spokespersons for many women who were forced to become frauds in order to attract a husband. This first chapter has examined the cultural climate in which Braddon's female frauds emerged as constructs of patriarchy and advanced the notion that her fraudulent women simultaneously mimicked and mocked the male's assumptions about the proper female. This chapter also has analyzed the limited opportunities available to women and the economic conditions that forced them to hide behind deceptive public images. Finally, this chapter has explored Braddon use of a variety of schemes designed to expose the restrictions placed on women and how these restrictions produced just the opposite of what dominant culture had intended.

The second chapter of this study will analyze the sensation novel and Braddon's use of this literary genre to advance her criticism of the class and gender hierarchy. In addition, chapter two examines the origin, rise, and fall of the sensation novel. While sensation novels surpassed all other types of novels during the 1860s in numbers of volumes sold, by the 1870s, only a few novelists continued to write novels of sensation (Brantlinger 5). Indeed, the age of sensation seemed to end as quickly as it began, yet Braddon appeared unable to extricate herself from the label of sensation novelist despite her many novels after the 1860s that concentrated on historical events and social issues. Finally, chapter two analyzes the critical outrage directed toward sensation novelists in the 1860s and how this criticism affected content, resulting in a toned-down version of the sensation novels of the early 1860s.

Clearly this toning down of the sensational elements came after the affront Braddon faced with the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret*, the subject of the third chapter. In this, the first of her novels to receive international attention, Braddon's protagonist becomes a fraud by assuming a false identity, committing bigamy, attempting murder, and perpetrating premeditated murder, all acts by which she attempts to make a secure place for herself in a world that fails to recognize the appalling circumstances awaiting a woman without money or position. Aurora Floyd, the wealthy, coddled female protagonist in *Aurora Floyd* and the focus of chapter four, presents a much different type of heroine, one who challenges the prevailing Victorian conventions but who wins almost immediate forgiveness for her breach of conventions. Indeed, Braddon's second sensation heroine, Aurora Floyd, is nearly unrecognizable when compared to her predecessor, Lady

Audley because, once her previous life is exposed, Aurora submits to patriarchal conditions, is forgiven, and accepts the conventional role of wife and mother. In *Eleanor's Victory*, the subject of chapter five, Braddon's Eleanor Vane is a wholly new type of heroine in contrast to Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd. Eleanor doesn't set out to defeat the Victorian ideal of proper femininity, but social and economic barriers force her into the duplicitous acts of marrying for autonomy and engaging in the masculine occupation of sleuthing. And while Braddon grants her young detective beauty, intelligence, and common sense, she does not permit her to solve the mystery surrounding her father's death.

By the time Braddon had completed *Eleanor's Victory*, she had become a master of ambiguity, relying on her readers to comprehend the underlying message within her novels. Braddon's novel critiques the institution of marriage, labeling it as yet another form of prostitution in which the female amateur detective engages in matrimony in order to gain economic security and autonomy as she detects on her father's behalf. This study concludes with a summation of Braddon's social messages and contributions both to the sensation genre and Victorian literature as a whole, thus providing an overall look at how the outwardly reserved decade of the 1860s forced novelists as well as their female characters to become frauds.

Chapter 2

Braddon and the Sensation Phenomenon

Although the term “sensation novel” first appeared in 1861 in reviews of Helen Price Wood’s *East Lynne*, Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, published in 1860, is credited as the first sensation novel (Al-Solaylee xv). By 1862 and 1863, Braddon’s two bigamy novels became immediate and permanent examples of the quintessential sensation novel and helped establish the new genre. What was initially perceived as a fad quickly became a widespread phenomenon as the sensation novel developed into a popular and commercial success that critics could not ignore. “Sensational” almost immediately became the Victorian watchword for novels written to shock, thrill, and titillate the audience, and Braddon’s two novels, *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, contained all the sensational, “immoral” elements that critics would vilify for the remainder of the 1860s. The sensation novel, the “best seller” of the decade, combined realistic yet sensational events in a domestic setting, often within a respectable Victorian home. As Jenny Bourne Taylor explains in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Lady Audley’s Secret*:

Sensation fiction made the familiar world strange by probing what lies beneath the veneer of the apparently stable upper- or middle-class home. Abandoning explicitly supernatural devices, it achieved uncanny, unsettling

effects by transposing mystery into the private, enclosed world of the family, peeling away its past secrets, revealing the self as a masquerade. (xiv)

This unveiling and exposing were part of the sensation novel phenomenon, and both actions functioned as striking, sensational features of the genre, which emerged in part as a collection of elements from previous genres.

By drawing on such factors as the mystery and suspense of the gothic, the social satire of the picaresque, the terror of the Newgate novel, and the familiar setting of the domestic novel, the sensation novel turned into an exciting type of fiction demanded by the new mass of readers. With sensation fiction's emphasis on secrecy, bigamy, intrigue, crime, guilt, revenge, and murder, the suspense climbed until the novel's conclusion, which usually unraveled the mystery, revealed the secret, or solved the problem (Pykett, *The Sensation Novel* 4). This chapter will show that by integrating mystery, suspense, terror, crime, and satire from previous genres into her sensation novels, Braddon produced intensely popular novels at the same time that she exposed the anxieties and hostilities within many middle-class homes. This chapter will also examine that intersection and the subsequent clash between sensation novels and Victorian social traditions as well as the broader phenomena occurring in many women's lives and in their middle class homes. As her popularity grew, so too did the negative critical responses that ultimately forced Braddon to hide her condemnation of patriarchy under a cleverly written critique that castigated conventions by mirroring many women's discontent.

Critics almost immediately claimed the new subgenre--the sensation novel of the 1860s--to be an indicator of morally corrupt writers and readers. Sensation fiction

became “a form which was not only deviant, but also threatening and dangerous” (Pykett, *The ‘Improper’ Feminine* 34). In an article for the *Quarterly Review*, Reverend Henry Longueville Mansel maintains that the sensation novelists’ intent was to produce “excitement, and excitement alone” by incorporating intricate plots, excitement, shocks, and thrills into their novels in order to “supply the cravings of a diseased appetite” (482-83).

The much earlier gothic novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as practiced by Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, and Mary Shelley, overflowed with medieval tales of terror, mystery, and suspense that cloaked their secrets inside a dark, crumbling castle or monastery. Much like the gothic novel, the sensation novel of the 1860s relied on a gradual unveiling of a sordid past to advance the plot. But two significant differences emerged between the sensation and the gothic novels: the near absence of the supernatural and the replacement of the fragile heroine with an active, aggressive female character (Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel* 92). Another intriguing element of the sensation novel is that it “exorcised helplessness by ascribing evil to the actions of a single villain and then defeating that villain” (Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel* 92). Yet despite the duly punished villain, the sensation novel aroused anxiety through its depiction of a dangerous world that was no longer confined to ruined castles and monasteries; the threat was real, immediate, and domestic.

The domestic threat materialized even more so in the picaresque novel of the 1820s, a novel form that used satire to chronicle problematic social and gender identities, an element that appeared within many sensation novels. One important difference

between the two genres emerged in the sensation novel: instead of a young male in the role of the near-criminal, wayward, maltreated picaro, a female character filled that role. In creating a “picaresque” female, as William Makepeace Thackeray did with Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, the sensation novel satirized the domestic-feminine ideal, the angel in the house. The female hero performed the same types of actions as the picaro, but those actions usually occurred within a domestic setting: Sir Michael’s Audley Court, John Mellish’s Mellish Park, and Gilbert Monckton’s Tolldale Priory.

Another fictional forerunner of the sensation novel, the Newgate novel, dominated the reading lists in the decades immediately preceding the 1860s. The Newgate novel, which reached its height of influence in the 1830s and 1840s, included appalling details of life in prison and on the gallows (Kalikoff 35). Two of criminal fiction’s bestsellers during the time, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford* and Harrison Ainsworth’s *Jack Sheppard*, romanticized the criminal at the same time they criticized laws and punishment (Kalikoff 35). The Newgate novel tended to expose the unfair living conditions and lack of employment opportunities for the poor class, a social commentary that Braddon employed in many of her novels, namely *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Eleanor’s Victory*. The Newgate novels attracted their own particular type of criticism as critics became increasingly disturbed by the public’s tendency to applaud likeable and heroic criminals. In *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature*, Beth Kalikoff sums up the concerns many readers and reviewers felt toward crime literature: “Many people believed [. . .] that fiction featuring robbery and murder inspired rather than warned against crime by presenting wrongdoers sympathetically” (35). This

tendency to blame novels for encouraging wrongdoing and drawing sympathy for criminal heroes was repeated in the criticism of sensation novels.

By the 1850s, the gallows literature had been overshadowed by the domestic novel, which soon became the most widely recognized literary genre of the decade and featured familiar situations in domestic settings (Hughes 6). Novels like Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, and George Eliot's *Adam Bede* primarily focused on the immediate with specific interest centered on guaranteeing consequences for inappropriate or immoral actions. Characteristically, domestic fiction centered on those people perceived to be the victims of society, while at the same time the perpetrators of society's wrongs were punished. But one important feature of these novels--the realistic, domestic setting--became a crucial point of later attacks on the sensation novel, which used the familiar setting but permitted a corrupt person to intrude upon the tranquility of the home. This dangerous person threatened domestic harmony, suggesting that even the middle-class home was fraught with danger.

Throughout the "domestic" decade, women's lives were inextricably linked to domesticity and helplessness, but as Sally Mitchell points out, "by the 1860s helplessness, even of women, had apparently lost its attraction" (*The Fallen Angel* 93). In fact, the ever-increasing number of readers hungered for a different type of fiction, a fiction that would speak to them about their interests and their lives. R. C. Terry in *Victorian Popular Fiction* contends that "the Victorian bookworm, whether highly educated and leisured or with the minimum of knowledge and of humble status, could move comfortably from classic to bestselling sensation novel, deriving from each kind

certain values and ideas [. . .]” (4). Although this new group of readers came from all social classes, they had one thing in common--an insatiable hunger for sensation novels. As Winifred Hughes points out in *The Maniac in the Cellar*, “When the sensational novel exploded onto the literary scene at the start of the 1860s, it did so, predictably enough, in the character of a phenomenon, something in the nature of a traveling-circus exhibition--prodigious, exciting, and agreeably grotesque” (5). By Victorian standards, the sensation novel’s tendency to emphasize inappropriate actions and characters articulated a number of anxieties and fears about the changing roles of men and women, causing some critics to take a moral stance against what they saw as undesirable reading material.

One of these critics, the Reverend F. E. Paget, author of *Lucretia; or, the Heroine of the Nineteenth Century* (his satirical look at the sensation novel and its equally sensational heroines), ended his novel with a sermon designed to disparage the sensation novel as a purveyor of immodest acts by impressionable young women. Paget described the sensation novel as wicked and blasphemous; further, because of the “utterly demoralizing,” “revolting,” “licentious” nature of the sensation novels, Paget claimed “that he must try to protect the purity of the young against them” (qtd. in Wolff 218). Paget, and other critics as well, felt the need to muzzle sensation novelists before they created any other defiant frauds that would become the public’s heroines.

In a scathing and initially anonymous critique of sensation novels, Margaret Oliphant claimed that sensation novels played on the anxieties of women and lower-class readers--readers with what Oliphant referred to as indiscriminating tastes in novel reading and a craving for lurid situations (414). Oliphant also contended that

the reading of sensational novels must have a deteriorating effect on the mind, and we doubt if a single human being has ever reaped one iota of benefit from them. They stimulate only to depress. They are the worst form of mental food, if we except that which is absolutely poisonous [. . .]. They represent life neither as it is nor as it ought to be; and, therefore, while they fail to instruct, they do not even attempt to elevate. In a word, they are neither exact nor exalting; and the world may congratulate itself when the last sensational novel has been written and forgotten. (424)

Oliphant's criticism duplicated the responses of a number of critics who felt duty-bound to position themselves as defenders of middle class readers, intent on reinforcing (or perhaps reestablishing) the perceived moral distance between lower- and middle-class readers. Reverend Mansel, an Oxford philosopher and subsequent Dean of St. Paul's, wrote:

The sensation novel, be it trash or something worse, is usually a tale of our own times. Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion; and a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days among the people we are in the habit of meeting. (488-89)

Mansel was even less kind to the reading public that he relentlessly attacked for their proclivity for the sensation novel. "There is," wrote Mansel, "something unspeakably disgusting in this ravenous appetite for carrion, this vulture-like instinct which smells out

the newest mass of social corruption, and hurries to devour the loathsome dainty before the scent has evaporated” (502).

Mansel, however, focused the brunt of his attack on the sensation novel and the reading public instead of directly castigating Braddon and the other sensation novelists. Although he discussed Braddon as one of the writers who had precipitated “the disease,” his descriptive label for the public’s insatiable appetite for sensational literature, he stopped short of denouncing Braddon. Instead, he merely drew the conclusion that “the skill of the builder [Braddon] deserve[d] to be employed on better materials” (491). What Mansel failed to address was that some of Braddon’s materials were taken from dramatic, real-life events and used to emphasize the connection between what was actually occurring in the mid-1800s and what she was writing about in three of her early novels, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *Eleanor’s Victory*.

Braddon’s use of elements of sensational court cases combined with fictional events as dominant plot elements seemed designed to dismiss the stereotype of the angelic, blond heroine and the obedient, wealthy heiress. But it was this combination of truth and invention that produced the sensation and anxiety reviewers eventually challenged in Braddon’s early novels. Critics like Oliphant viciously criticized Braddon’s personal life as well as the content of her novels, claiming that Braddon “knew too much about bigamy for her own good” (Wolff 203). Indeed, Braddon knew about bigamy firsthand from her relationship with John Maxwell, a married man; accusations of bigamy were leveled against Braddon and Maxwell after they had falsely claimed to be married. Braddon had also learned about bigamy from one of the most publicized court cases of

1861, the bigamy trial of Captain William Charles Yelverton. Yelverton, who participated in a secret marriage with his longtime lover, Theresa Longworth, married another woman after Theresa refused to emigrate with him to New Zealand (Fahnestock 50-51).¹ Sensational court cases concerning bigamy and murder drew spectators by the hundreds, most of whom attended for the entertainment elicited by the scandal (Hartman 251). In her fiction, Braddon's use of the bigamy theme reflected not only the newspaper headlines and the court documents, but also the public's interest.

One had only to read the latest Victorian newspaper to learn that Braddon's so-called sensation novel was not as sensational as it was realistic. Braddon's biographer, Robert Lee Wolff, claims that much of what Braddon wrote about came from the newspapers, from other novelists' works, notably those of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, from the lives of people she knew, and from her own life (Wolff 8). In her most recognized novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon combined elements of fiction and realism at the same time that the daily newspaper headlines glaringly sensationalized the murders committed by Maria Manning, Madeline Smith, and Constance Kent. According to Mary Hartman in *Victorian Murderesses*, women were committing crimes with growing regularity at the same time they were pretending to embrace their subservient role. For example, Manning, with the help of her husband, murdered her lover when he arrived at the Manning home for a visit, and Smith, after a brief liaison with a social inferior, murdered her lover before he could "spoil" her marriage plans with a more

¹ As Jeanne Fahnestock points out in "Bigamy: The Rise and Fall of a Convention," "The bigamy convention in particular owes its popularity not only to the force of popular novels but also to a contemporary scandal and trial, to public outrage over the confused state of the marriage laws, and finally to its unique ability to satisfy the novel reader's desire to sin and be forgiven vicariously" (48).

suitable, wealthier admirer. Kent, a twelve-year-old girl, murdered her young sibling in a jealous rage. In 1855 alone, twelve women were tried for murder; by 1874, that number had risen to forty-two (Hartman 5). As Hughes points out, “The chosen territory of the sensation novelists lies somewhere between the possible and the improbable, ideally at their point of intersection” (16). For Braddon, this intersection culminated in a scandalous novel content that incorporated reality and fiction designed to excite and shock the reading public.

The scandalized reactions of some readers and critics of sensation novels caused several sensation novelists, namely Collins, Wood, and Braddon, to claim that their works were purely fictional and written solely for entertainment (Edwards ix). But as Braddon continued her critique (albeit less obviously than in *Lady Audley's Secret*) of gender roles and women's discontent with their place in society, she drew her characters in such a way that meticulous readers easily grasped her message at the same time she seemed to conform to tradition. As Wolff points out, “Complying, as she had to comply, with the Victorian code for novelists, she became a master of ambiguity” (16). Braddon cloaked her critique of society under an ambiguous and continual shifting of her female characters' actions: she presented the public with unconventional, passionate heroines, but she ended each of her novels with an unsettling, yet conventional, punishment or repentance. Braddon challenged the stereotype of the delicate, virtuous heroine by creating seemingly respectable women who were capable of bigamy, deceit, and murder, differing somewhat from the mainstream sensation novelists, especially Collins and Wood, who never quite permitted their heroines to exhibit a penchant for wickedness.

Another significant difference between Braddon and the other sensation novelists was her omission of authorial moralizing when her heroines acted inappropriately. Wood, especially, created female characters capable of breaking the law, but she supplemented her narratives with moral messages about the consequences awaiting villainous women. In *East Lynne*, Wood used her authorial power to step into the narrative and zealously instructed the reader on the appropriate, proper way to live:

Oh, reader, believe me! Lady--wife--mother? Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awaken! Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, *resolve* to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them: pray for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon that would urge you to escape; bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on it, will be found far worse than death! (287)

After berating readers with her moral pronouncement, Wood offers additional moralizing about how Isabel "ought not to have" believed a scoundrel, deserted her husband, committed adultery, assumed the role of fraud, and returned to her former home (603). Despite Wood's authorial moralizing, it is not unlikely that many of the rapidly increasing and socially broad group of fiction readers would have begun to perceive the sensation heroine's rightful objection to her secondary status. As P. D. Edwards claims in his introduction to Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, reviewers found less fault with Collins' and

Wood's sensation novels because Collins' "grotesqueries, ingenious masquerades, and intricately convoluted story-lines" and Wood's "melodramatic emotionalism, pietism, and histrionics" left readers with a sense of invention and fiction, whereas Braddon's novels began "normalizing and domesticating crime and vice" (vii).

Braddon made few moralizing concessions in her narratives; instead, she produced novels that exposed a far different social order than was popularly accepted. Wolff claims that Braddon "deliberately decided [. . .] to flout Victorian convention and the Victorian proprieties," and this violation of conventions caused her a great deal of distress as well as "a degree of social ostracism" (9). She offered no apologies, however, for characters and plots that were certainly sensational: Lady Audley's murderous actions are exposed when one of the men she attempts to murder confronts her the morning after her vicious attack; Aurora Floyd's secret marriage is revealed when the detective discovers the marriage certificate in her murdered husband's waistcoat pocket; and the murderer of Eleanor's father is exposed when a chance sighting reveals her employer's son to be involved in the murder.

These elements of excitement and intrigue, as well as the previously mentioned links between the realistic and the fictional, are among the reasons why a long list of contemporary writers, including Alfred Lord Tennyson, Edward Fitzgerald, and R. D. Blackmore, defended the sensation novel (Wolff 9-11). Tennyson claimed to be "steeped in Miss Braddon," Fitzgerald affirmed that he found more "enjoyment" in sensation novels than in the accepted novels of the time, and Blackmore "admitted he much preferred Miss Braddon's golden-haired homicidals" to the heroines of the highly

regarded writers of the 1860s (Terry 4). By voicing their support, these respected writers encouraged sensation novelists like Braddon, who was certainly privy to this support, to reject the vitriolic tirades of the carping critics and focus on writing novels with exciting if unconventional heroines.

The challenge to convention did not go unnoticed by women readers, either; indeed, many women began identifying with the sensation novels' heroines. Fionn O'Toole brings up an interesting point in her biographical note in Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory*. According to O'Toole, Braddon's female characters' "extraordinary popularity" stemmed in large part from readers' ability to relate to the characters (xiii). As the sensation novels grew in popularity in all classes, many women began to realize that matrimony and motherhood were not enough to fulfill an independent woman's needs. As Kate Flint notes in *The Woman Reader*, "In many ways [sensation] fiction's most disruptive potential lay not on the emphasis which it placed on woman's capacity to express powerful, emotional reactions, but in the degree to which it made its woman readers consider their positions within their own homes and within society" (276). Many women readers welcomed unconventional heroines who projected a strong-minded rejection of women's seemingly predetermined identity, whereas the critics' reactions stemmed from the assumptions about the feminine ideal. Braddon's protagonists--independent, passionate, active women--enraged reviewers while thoroughly entertaining and engaging her readers. Most alarming to critics, though, was the fear that with Braddon's astounding productivity--she published eighteen novels between 1861 and

1868 (Wolff 413)--her reading public would become desensitized to criminal acts by women and begin to empathize with her characters (Terry 60).

But Braddon had created more than a sympathetic woman character; she furnished the public with a Real Woman, a woman capable of presenting a demure social façade, lying about her somewhat sordid past, harboring murderous characteristics, and feigning psychotic behavior in an attempt to save her life. Braddon endowed her female characters with a combination of anger, intelligence, ambition, criminal intent, murderous inclinations, and insanity, characteristics that differed significantly from many of the sensation novel's earlier female protagonists who quietly accepted their subservient roles. As Mansel notes in the *Quarterly Review*, Braddon was the first female novelist to create heroines who clearly and reprehensibly defied the accepted roles allotted to women (490-91).

And judging by the increased demand for sensational heroines and novels, the public responded favorably to Braddon's scandalous fiction. The literature that appeared in the early years of the 1860s provided readers with an abundance of options for reading material, but the sensation novel rapidly became the most popular choice for readers. The growing popularity of the circulating libraries, the decreased cost of books, and a much larger reading public accounted for an even more considerable rise in novel reading in the 1860s (Altick 145-47). Many of these female readers, bound by restrictions and injustices and trapped by social and economic conventions, sought a thrilling type of fiction as well as one that would reach into their lives and address their interests. As O'Toole points out:

The principal subscribers to the circulating libraries that distributed [Braddon's] novels were middle-class women, confined by upbringing, society and expectation to limited lives of domesticity and dependence upon others. They were required to be passive, submissive, undemanding and selfless. Fulfillment was to be found through others: husbands, children and families. M. E. Braddon's novels feature much more resourceful, active women who exert themselves in order to achieve social respectability and financial security. (xiii)

Braddon's unconventional heroines raised powerful possibilities for women; equally important, many mid-Victorian women were beginning to explore new interests for themselves and to demand something more appealing in their lives than domestic duties, and the sensation novel, for the decade of the 1860s, met this need.

This new fictional form, "the sensation novel--brash, vulgar, and subversive--was viewed with undeniable justice as something of a literary upstart" (Hughes 6). However, with the sensation novel, Braddon had discovered the literary form that would allow her to present a realistic representation of the failings of men and women who, when forced to fulfill a fixed societal role, become frauds who outwardly reinvent themselves as models of respectability. Ultimately, Braddon created novels that castigated a seemingly respectable society, and she quenched, if only for a short time, the public's craving for melodrama. Braddon had created the female fraud, and the reading public loved both the creator and the created. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the subject of chapter three, Braddon presented her first and most disturbing fraud, Lady Audley.

Chapter 3

“A Bitter Thing It Is to Be Poor”: *Lady Audley's Secret*

In a letter to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, contemporary Robert Louis Stevenson writes, “I remember reading *Lady Audley's Secret* when I was fifteen [in 1865], and I wish my days to be bound each to each by Miss Braddon's novels” (qtd. in Wolff 9). According to Braddon's biographer, Robert Lee Wolff, Stevenson's views represented those of several other well-known authors, including Alfred Lord Tennyson, who professed to have read everything Braddon wrote; William Makepeace Thackeray, whose daughter claimed that he had made three trips in one day to the local railway station to discover if his order for Braddon's latest novel had arrived; Henry James, who favorably reviewed several of Braddon's novels for *The Nation*; Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon's mentor and friend, who encouraged her talent; and Charles Reade, who praised her industriousness and her talent for writing dramatic scenes (9, 10, 11).

Generally, however, critical interest soon shifted from complimentary reviews, like Reverend Henry Mansel's claim in “Sensation Novels” that Braddon “construct[ed] a narrative the interest of which is sustained to the end” (491), to W. Fraser Rae's moral indictment of *Lady Audley's Secret* in “Sensation Novelist: Miss Braddon” as “fascinating to ill-regulated minds [and written for] the lowest in the social scale, as well as in mental capacity” (105). In the early weeks following the publication of *Lady*

Audley's Secret, reviewers' attacks focused on what they saw as Braddon's debased depiction of the "angel in the house," referring to her latest novel as "absurd" and "wild," written for the "classes who love the horrible and grotesque" (qtd. in Wolff 6). While Rae acknowledged the popularity of Braddon's novel, he chastised novel readers for championing Braddon's beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed fraud who constructs a new identity in order to obtain a position in society, first as a governess and then as the wife of a wealthy landowner.

With the creation of the outwardly angelic female protagonist who furtively plots three murders, Braddon's novel subverts the image of the proper Victorian female by presenting the public with a representation of the domestic ideal that is in fact a frightening, dangerous inversion of the idealized Victorian woman. Braddon's outwardly beautiful but inwardly deadly female character also crosses class boundaries without immediate detection, but with eventual and disturbing results. By charting her dangerous female character's transition from Helen Malden, a young, beautiful, but poor woman, to Helen Talboys, a woman in love with her officer husband who is soon left as an abandoned and destitute mother of an infant son, to Lucy Graham, the governess in the home of a respectable doctor, to Lady Audley, the wife of Sir Michael Audley, baronet of Audley Court, and ultimately to Madame Taylor, an inmate at a *maison de santé*, Braddon reveals the sordid path allotted to many women as they struggle to survive in a world where men dictate the legal and domestic rules.

Helen/Lucy/Lady Audley, the victim and the perpetrator of a criminal tragedy, calls into question and ultimately rejects notions of class and gender grounding. Helen

reinvents herself in order to move into the upper class ranks, an impossible task unless she impersonates the proper female. According to Lyn Pykett in *The 'Improper' Feminine*, this “impersonation of proper femininity [. . .] explores and exploits fears that the respectable ideal, or proper feminine, may simply be a form of acting, just one role among other possible roles” (90). First as Helen, and later as Lucy Graham, Braddon’s protagonist learns that fitting into the accepted female role means reinventing herself as the feminine ideal. Thus Braddon’s novel exposes a fraudulent and increasingly alarming duality in women. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Helen/Lucy/Lady Audley invents successively fraudulent identities in order to advance both socially and financially. Outwardly, her appearance and her actions seemingly embrace firmly grounded Victorian class and gender ideologies, yet underneath her newly created façade hides a woman who knows that dominant culture insists on female duplicity if she intends to immerse herself in her new role. Braddon’s novel explicitly challenges women’s fixed but conflicted identities as domestic angels. Furthermore, Braddon’s male characters, equally informed and constrained by Victorian ideas of class and gender, insist that Braddon’s most appealing fraud, Lady Audley, fit into their version of accepted femininity or face punishment and confinement.

According to Carol Dyhouse, “Heroines who ventured any protest against the social expectations of the time were, at least until the 1860s, somewhat scarce” (175). But not only did Braddon create a female character who rejects passivity as a female duty, she constructed a heroine who is intelligent, cunning, and capable of violence. Helen assumes fraudulent identities in order to hide her miserable past and to reenter society as the

proper feminine. Locked into poverty with a drunken father, Helen totally immerses herself in a plan whereby she can escape poverty and advance socially, and she uses her youth and beauty as saleable commodities while she plots an escape from her wretched existence. Helen's desperate early years with her alcoholic father, an insane and absent mother, and the harsh struggle in a life of poverty are reminders of the enormous hardships that lie ahead for her if she fails to create a new life for herself. Determined to oppose the limited options for working class women, Helen Maldon, who later becomes Helen Talboys, then Lucy Graham, then Lady Audley, cleverly trades one caged existence for another, a life of poverty for marriage to a wealthy man.

* * *

Helen's childhood years and her life as a young woman afford readers a view of poverty, neglect, and ill-treatment at the hands of her half-drunken father, a man who frequented ale houses and sought to sell his beautiful daughter "to the highest bidder" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 18). What becomes clear from Helen's father's determination to "sell" her is that a woman's security rests solely on the man she marries, and, while Helen's father's financial interest in his daughter primarily reflects his own greed, it also mirrors his fears for his daughter's future, his declining years, and his grandson's fate. When Helen meets George Talboys, the son of a wealthy squire, her father knows he must use lies and deceit in order to marry Helen to her affluent admirer, a feat designed to obtain some sense of security for his daughter and himself. Helen's father continues his complicity in Helen's fraud as he creates a position he does not possess and later hides

the truth about Helen in an effort to ensure his daughter's financial security, first through her marriage to Talboys and later through marriage to Sir Michael Audley.

Helen's newfound security in her marriage to Talboys almost immediately vanishes when Talboys' wealthy father disowns him for "marrying the daughter of a drunken pauper" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 182). After exhausting their meager savings, Talboys deserts his wife, leaving her behind with a drunken father, an empty purse, and their infant son. Despite his distressed feelings about abandoning his wife and child—he initially contemplates suicide in order to free his wife to marry someone who can financially provide for her—three days later he boards a ship bound for Australia's gold fields, claiming that he will earn a fortune and return within a year and "throw [the fortune] in her lap" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 20). Convinced that he will obtain a fortune in Australia, he leaves his wife and child behind in an appalling situation, with little money and no way to earn a living (*Lady Audley's Secret* 20); as Sally Mitchell explains in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, "Working women seldom earned enough to support young children; they usually had to go into the workhouse" (143). Talboys' sense of adventure, gained during the hours he listened to men talk as the ship prepared to debark, combined with his need to return triumphant from a successful sojourn in the gold fields, compels him to board the ship bound for Australia.

In "Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Australia," Toni Johnson-Woods points out that "when male fictional characters leave domestic confines to either solve the mystery of domestic disharmony or recoup financial losses by exploiting the colonies, they are escaping domesticity in order to experience adventure" (114). For Talboys, leaving his

wife and child behind permitted his escape from both his “domestic disharmony” with Helen and the “financial losses” brought about by his disinheritance. As a male, he feels pressured to recoup his status within patriarchy, and he has the freedom and culture’s permission to abandon his family, as long as he is seeking financial success. In the end, it is Talboys’ sincere, but egocentric, abandonment of his wife and child that forces Helen to assume her various fraudulent identities; equally culpable is Victorian culture’s structuring of gender roles for men and women. As Johnson-Woods points out, some of “Braddon’s males [including Talboys] echo the same sentiments [as women] about the narrow bounds of their world and their feelings of constriction” (114). Faced with the difficulty of reconciling dominant culture’s conventional image of femininity with their knowledge of women’s conflicting qualities, some men felt threatened by possible “emasculatation” (Johnson-Woods 114). Furthermore, this threat to the males’ dominant gendered position promoted, in some part, the continued subjugation and restriction of women, which ultimately compelled some women to fraudulently and sometimes object violently to their limited possibilities.

Helen, forced to contemplate possible solutions to her dismal existence, claims that poverty blunts the sense of honor and principle, and once again calculates ways to advance both financially and socially (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 355). What is important to note is that at the time women had few options for ending disagreeable marriages or divorcing deserting husbands. While divorce became more easily obtainable under the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, women had to prove adultery as well as some other cruelty before a divorce would be granted. In Helen’s situation, she could have proven

that her husband had deserted her but, according to Mitchell, “divorce was still very expensive” (*Daily Life* 105). And because she had been left almost penniless, Helen could not afford to secure a legal end to her first marriage.

Even for those few women who could pay the exorbitant fees, “divorce was thought to be shameful, not so much because it ended a marriage and broke up a family but because the grounds for divorce were so limited. A woman’s adultery or a man’s cruelty had to be proven by evidence supplied to the court” (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 105). Further, women who were deserted or divorced were often assumed to be at fault, and their husbands were rarely assigned the blame for a failed marriage. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 supported this contention by granting divorces to men who claimed their wives were adulterers, while denying women the same rights (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 267). As a married but abandoned woman, Helen could not pay the exorbitant fee for a divorce nor could she face the disgrace assigned to divorced women. Imprisoned by both formal legal structures and social laws, Helen is left with two options: continue her life of poverty or begin a new life. Helen chooses the only option she sees as viable; she fashions a new identity and abandons her father and infant son (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 355). In a letter left behind with her father, Helen explains: “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 brings me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 355).

What is significant about Helen’s actions is that she clearly mimics her husband’s earlier desertion when she too abandons her family. Unlike George, however, at the

moment Helen leaves her father's squalid home, she conceals her secret life and constructs a suitable double. Helen changes her name to Lucy Graham and secures a governess's position in the home of a respectable doctor. For women like Lucy--poor and with minimal references (she invented a seemingly plausible and trustworthy past)--there remained only one option for respectable employment, working as a governess. She understandably objects to the disagreeable position, aware that she could anticipate "no security of employment, minimal wages, and an ambiguous status, somewhere between servant and family member, that isolated her within the household" ("Victorian Age" 2:1903). Yet, she feels safe and protected in her new position, and "there was nothing whatever in her manner of the shallow artifice employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 7). Lucy knows that if she wants to exchange her life of poverty for wealth and security, she must create a fraudulent identity that will permit her to move freely and undetected under the protection of upper class society.

Lucy's new identity allows her to conceal her previous marriage to Talboys and establish herself in a more agreeable position, and it also enables her to meet the wealthy baronet, Sir Michael Audley. Her well-hidden scheming unscrupulousness, designed to entrap Sir Michael in marriage, is easily explained because of her previous circumstances, the devastation of parental neglect compounded by the later spousal abandonment. The shameful truth Braddon reveals through Lady Audley's rise and fall is that a woman's life had not progressed for the better since Moll Flanders, nearly one hundred and fifty years earlier, proclaimed, "I saw [that] nothing but Misery and Starving was before me" as she was forced into prostitution as a means of supporting herself

(Defoe 110). Like Moll Flanders, Lucy knows “what a bitter thing it is to be poor” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 349). She despises the bitterness of a working class life, and she once again determines to use her beauty, intellect, and treacherousness to escape the harsh and wretched reality of the unprivileged class. As Lucy later explains, “I had learnt that in some indefinite manner or other every schoolgirl learns sooner or later--I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage [. . .]” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 350). Within weeks, Sir Michael proposes marriage, and Lucy exchanges her life of poverty for a position and money through marriage to a wealthy man.

The compelling images of a life of poverty as opposed to a life of prosperity transform Lucy's acceptance of Sir Michael's marriage proposal into a clever victory, and her maneuvering to marry for convenience, money, and security defies and subverts the conventional Victorian idea of marriage “as woman's natural destiny” (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 269). Although Sir Michael is aware that Lucy agrees to marry him solely for what he can offer her, he resigns himself to possess her on these conditions. Lucy's two qualifying factors--youth and beauty--replace, in Sir Michael's mind, an agreeable marriage to a wealthy and socially acceptable woman. He tells Lucy that “he could hardly expect to be the choice of a beautiful young girl” (9). Within a few minutes' time, Lucy explains to him that her life of poverty prevents her from loving anyone; undeterred, he still pursues her by asking, “Is it a bargain, Lucy?” (11). Lucy accepts Sir Michael's bargain because for Lucy marriage means “no more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations [. . .]” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 12).

Convinced that the husband who abandoned her over three years earlier will not return, she secures a shielded life with Sir Michael, marrying the wealthy baronet despite her still legal marriage to Talboys. Her crime of bigamy becomes an act of self-preservation as she struggles to gain the safety and security of the domestic sphere. Lucy, now Lady Audley, finds temporary satisfaction while playing her role. As Sir Michael's wife, Lady Audley is "the belle of the county," she is "fond of her generous husband," and she capably manages Sir Michael's household (*Lady Audley's Secret* 53). She continues her fraud by performing spectacularly in her new role as the feminine ideal, the perfect wife who conforms to societal expectations. She is constantly aware, though, that one false move, one wrong word, or one acquaintance from her past can destroy her carefully constructed life with Sir Michael.

To be sure, her marriage to Sir Michael is calculated, but not entirely heartless. She tells him quite honestly that she cannot love anyone, and while their marriage is not a perfect, idealized union, she treats him kindly and fondly. Lady Audley appears to be the embodiment of the domestic ideal, but the threat of exposure dooms the possibility of performing successfully forever in that role. According to Hughes, "The feminine ideal, as [Braddon] portrays it, is potentially treacherous, for both the women who conform and the men who worship them; the standard feminine qualities--childishness, self-suppression, the talent for pleasing--inherently contain the seeds of their own destruction" (124). These descriptive tags that label women as childlike, obedient, and pleasant limit women's opportunities for developing into valuable members of society, a restriction that necessitated some women's duplicitousness. Lady Audley's duplicity--concealing one

marriage and flaunting another--allows her to manipulate society for a short time, but her newly constructed life with Sir Michael is threatened when Talboys ends his three-year adventure in the Australian gold fields and returns to reclaim his wife.

What is especially significant here is that Talboys' concern for his wife only strikes him on the journey home from Australia. He tells a shipmate, "What a blind, reckless fool I have been! Three years and a half, and not one line, one word from her, or from any mortal creature who knows her" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 23). Again, he accepts little responsibility for forcing his abandoned wife to pursue any means available to evade a life of poverty; instead, he places the onus of contact on her, even when he left without providing her with a way to locate him. Conditioned as he is by patriarchal gender coding, Talboys expects his abandoned wife to wait for him indefinitely.

Faced with Talboys' imminent return, Lady Audley fabricates the death of Helen Talboys, hoping to end any plans he has for reuniting with her. However, a chance meeting between Talboys and his old schoolmate, Robert Audley, Sir Michael's indolent nephew, culminates in Talboys' visit to Audley Court and his eventual confrontation with Lady Audley. Expecting her to be passive and childishly submissive, Talboys fails to note her impassioned pleas for his mercy and his silence about their past relationship. Since Lady Audley cannot allow the previous relationship between her and Talboys to become known, when Talboys confronts her about her deception, she pushes him into an abandoned well and leaves him for dead, actions that again mimic his earlier abandonment of her and their child. Terrified by what Talboys' threat will mean to her

life with Sir Michael, her feelings of victimization surface, and she resorts to violence for self-preservation.

As Virginia Morris argues in *Double Jeopardy*, “Women’s economic and emotional dependence on men, and men’s physical and psychological dominance over women contributed to, even precipitated, [such a] shocking moment of violence” (1). Like most people, Lady Audley becomes defensive and combative when her security is threatened. Yet what is equally important and similarly ignored by nineteenth and twentieth century critics is that Lady Audley exhibits no fiendish behavior early on; it is only when she becomes fearful of the threats made against her by Talboys, and later by Robert, that her villainy emerges. Ultimately, the very notions of gender that Lady Audley is violating inform her behavior. Lady Audley does not strike the first blow, nor does she attack Talboys in any way until he threatens to expose her to Sir Michael, an action that Lady Audley knows will destroy the new life she struggled so hard to create. She tries to discourage Talboys from ending her comfortable relationship with Sir Michael: “I was determined to bribe him, to cajole him, to defy him; to do anything sooner than abandon the wealth and position I had won, and go back to my old life” (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 392-93). After her pleas for understanding fail, Lady Audley resorts to criminal actions to solve her dilemma.

Lady Audley’s tormented existence doesn’t end with Talboys’ fall into the abandoned well, though. Robert Audley, Sir Michael’s “handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing” nephew (*Lady Audley’s Secret* 32), cannot tolerate the threat Lady Audley poses to his conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. Robert’s initial attraction

toward the beautiful, innocent-looking Lady Audley--he is alternately disturbed and entranced by her--is quickly replaced by his determination to demonstrate his assumed authority over the disruptive female. Conditioned by years of male privilege, he immediately changes from idle barrister to determined detective in order to discover what happened to the missing Talboys. Robert's loyalty to the dominant culture's code of behavior and established gender norms leads to his determination to expose Lady Audley as a violent inversion of the domestic ideal. Ironically, Robert ignores his own fraudulent strategy--he intends to re-establish his attachment with Talboys, restore himself as heir to his uncle's estate, and rid Audley Court of Lady Audley--at the same time he struggles to expose Lady Audley duplicity.

Robert's determination to banish Lady Audley hammers home his anxieties about unconventional women, and, loyal to his culture's code for social behavior, he embraces his privileged position. Robert, "the most vacillating and unenergetic of men," quickly becomes Lady Audley's tormentor and destroyer (*Lady Audley's Secret* 39). But his conviction to unveil Lady Audley becomes more than a plan to avenge the suspected death of his friend; it becomes a culturally-conditioned obligation to assert masculine power and banish the disruptive female. By ousting Lady Audley from his supposedly rightful place as heir to Audley Court, Robert can reclaim his position of power at the same time he reinforces dominant cultural ideas of gender and class roles.

Robert similarly perceives Lady Audley to be a threat to his place in the affections of Talboys; even Robert's cousin, Alicia, who is in love with him, views Talboys as a rival for Robert's affections. In his article, "Robert Audley's Secret: Male Homosocial

Desire in *Lady Audley's Secret*,” Richard Nemesvari claims that “Braddon explicitly presents the threat posed by [Lady Audley] as a challenge to male homosocial bonds” (515). Robert, initially attracted to and soon rejected by Lady Audley, quickly turns his attention toward unearthing the events surrounding his friend’s disappearance. After a series of suspicious incidents and circumstances, Robert embarks upon a scheme to expose Lady Audley as an imposter and a fraud, an action that permits him to escape an extended examination of his own homoerotic feelings for Talboys. While Braddon’s description of Robert falls short of actually labeling him homosexual, Nemesvari claims that “Braddon has associated him with a recognizable aristocratic type possessed of [. . .] clear homosocial/homosexual overtones” (519-20). Nemesvari suggests that Robert’s “intense bonds [. . .] between himself and other men” leave little room for understanding or sympathy with women’s subordinate place in society (520).

Although Braddon never explicitly mentions Robert’s assumed superiority and greed, her satirical portrayal of Robert’s “listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner” suggests that Robert exists and expects to always exist on the dole of a wealthy relative (*Lady Audley's Secret* 32). As Mitchell explains in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, “It was not uncommon for young men of good family to study law [. . .] without ever intending to practice” (67). For Robert, studying law becomes a way to avoid being labeled “lazy,” a direct breach of the Victorian virtue of “hard work” (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 261). For reasons of appearance, Robert, like Lady Audley, fashions a respectable position for himself, but unlike his nemesis, Robert’s class and gender permit him to play

the part of a barrister with impunity, effectively masking his idleness with a fabricated sense of duty and industriousness.

For some time, Robert manages to hide his misogyny under a cloak of apathy and tolerance, yet his actions mimic the more malignant temperament of Luke Marks, Lady Audley's blackmailer. For Robert, unmasking Lady Audley will reinforce his existing idea of how a woman should act and exposing her past will end her agreeable relationship with Sir Michael. Robert's determination to oust Lady Audley from her position of power as Sir Michael's wife is evidenced by his insistence on displacing Lady Audley from domestic ideal to villain. Ann Cvetkovich notes that for Robert, "Lady Audley also serves as [. . .] the duplicitous woman whose seduction of Michael Audley and George Talboys must be exposed in order to rid the family of female evil and safeguard it for male bonding" (59). What Robert's single-minded commitment to unveil Lady Audley illustrates is that patriarchy cannot abide or accommodate a woman who threatens male control or male relationships.

Later, still struggling with his homoerotic feelings for Talboys, Robert says, "I hate women [. . .]. They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 207). Robert, reflecting his dominant culture code, accepts the idea that he is superior to women, and his unnamed relationship with Talboys further complicates his feelings toward Lady Audley. As Nemesvari points out, "It is Robert Audley's task to meet and beat back the threat posed by Lady Audley by re-establishing the 'proper' homosocial bonds she has disrupted. But, in doing so, Braddon has him reveal more about himself and the society he represents

than he is willing to recognize” (518). Conditioned by social customs and gender privileging that demanded women’s dependence on male authority, Robert asserts his male power through a gradual unveiling of Lady Audley’s secrets. As Nemesvari further claims, “The ‘unspeakable’ secret of male homosocial desire is essential to Braddon’s feminist critique of the roles and behaviors forced upon women by men who are unwilling to acknowledge their own motives and insecurities” (516). By immersing himself in his detective work, Robert can submerge his homoerotic feelings for Talboys, and, intent on revealing Lady Audley’s buried past, Robert launches his plan to hold Lady Audley’s trial inside Audley Court.

Robert’s actions offer ample evidence that Lady Audley is right to be wary of him; he is deceitful, condescending, and manipulative. But when he faces the possible loss of power, Robert insists upon performing what he perceives as the male’s moral duty: he demands the subordination of Lady Audley. Since Lady Audley does not represent the ideal woman—controlled and passive—Robert constructs a list of circumstantial evidence against her in order to gain control. Robert’s patriarchal position demands that he expose Lady Audley’s breach of conventions, so he promotes himself from the pampered nephew to the magistrate, juror, and jailer of Lady Audley. Robert’s status permits him to prey unchecked on Lady Audley’s feelings and actions, and he “subverts his pose as reformed protector of what is right and proper by exposing the illicit foundation upon which his status rests” (Nemesvari 527). By rendering Lady Audley silent, Robert reestablishes his masculine status and reinstates the masculine “voice” at Audley Court. Having silenced Lady Audley, Robert almost immediately plots to exploit and punish

Lady Audley's transgression by controlling and then confining her, actions that permit him to impose his own interpretation of social responsibility. Backed by dominant culture coding, Robert's privileged social position allows him to manipulate Lady Audley's life according to his assumptions about the proper female.

Class bigotry and male dominance were widely accepted and certainly not limited to the Robert Audleys of the world. For example, in Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds*, Lord George tells Sir Florian Eustace's widow, Lizzie, "If you were nobody, you would, of course, be indicted for perjury, and would go to prison. As it is, if you will tell all [about hiding the supposedly stolen diamonds] to one of your swell friends, I think it is very likely that you may be pulled through" (617). For Robert, too, wealth, position, and gender determine a person's worth, and since Lady Audley gains wealth and position when she marries Michael, Robert schemes to uncover every fraudulent act Lady Audley has committed throughout her life in order to expose her as a fraud. Robert even questions Lady Audley's tender attentiveness at her husband's bedside when he lies ill: "There is no one to whom my uncle's life can be of more value than to you. Your happiness, your prosperity, your *safety* depend alike upon his existence" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 217). Robert suspects Lady Audley of past indiscretions, and his subtle threat is designed to terrify Lady Audley into submission; he refuses to acknowledge any guilt for the actions of any of the males in Lady Audley's life. In fact, "Robert never mentions or conducts an unofficial legal investigation of Michael Audley's offense of expecting a young wife's absolute devotion, and George's transgression, desertion of both wife and child" (Houston 28). At no time during his scrutiny of Lady Audley's life does Robert

condemn the harshly inequitable system that denies women legal and economic recourse against deserting husbands and negligent parents. Ironically, Robert's investigation of fraud also ignores his own fraudulent actions.

Robert Audley's fraudulent behavior arises too with his fabricated concern for Sir Michael when, in fact, he makes excuses to avoid visiting his elderly uncle. He also pretends to be a barrister, when everyone knows he is too lazy to work, and he feigns concern for others when his goal is to extract as much information from them as possible. Above all, Robert is a fraud because he refuses to confront his sexual attraction to Talboys, and he hides these emotions behind a vehement desire to uncover the truth about Talboys' disappearance. Finally, Robert feigns concern for and interest in the lives of Luke and Phoebe Marks, working class acquaintances of Lady Audley, but that attention is a thinly disguised ruse invented to expose any secret Phoebe might have learned while serving as Lady Audley's companion.

Based in part upon the knowledge gained during his manipulation of Luke and Phoebe, Robert initiates the climactic scene designed to dramatize Lady Audley's villainy. As her juror, Robert leaves only one option open for Lady Audley: that she must leave Audley Court forever. This suggestion shows him to be unconcerned about legal punishment for criminal acts and more concerned about preserving his upper-class family's good name and, perhaps more importantly, re-securing his inheritance and the male's notion of proper femininity. Lady Audley's response reveals the terror attached to any thoughts of returning to her previous life of poverty. She says, "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--as my mother died, perhaps" (*Lady Audley's Secret* 316). At this point, Lady Audley's greatest fears, that Robert may uncover the secrets Luke harbors and send her back to her former life of poverty, are rapidly becoming a reality. She perceives the danger that will result from Robert's exposure of her actions, and her rage, which is directed toward the man responsible for her miserable situation, is mistaken for madness or unnaturalness. Even the narrator's description of Lady Audley concentrates on the unnaturalness of her appearance and her actions:

An *unnatural* spot burned in the centre of each rounded cheek, and an *unnatural* lustre gleamed in her great blue eyes. She spoke with an *unnatural* clearness, and an *unnatural* rapidity. She had altogether the appearance and manner of a person who has yielded to the dominant influence of some overpowering excitement. Phoebe Marks stared at her late mistress in mute bewilderment. She began to fear that my lady was going mad. (*Lady Audley's Secret* 313--emphasis added)

Lady Audley is not mad; her "unnaturalness" is merely an indicator of the fear and anger that stems directly from her feelings of vulnerability against her male tormentors.

Even the narrator intervenes to point out that Lady Audley is not insane but that she *would be mad* if she chose to exit the house by one of the main doors (*Lady Audley's Secret* 314-315). Instead, Lady Audley stealthily chooses one of the less used doors, suggesting that she is not insane; rather, her thoughts are deliberate and calculated. She cleverly determines to thwart Robert's attempts to destroy her. Aloud to herself, she says,

“I will not go back--I will not go back. If the struggle between us is to be a duel to the death, you shall not find me drop my weapon” (*Lady Audley's Secret* 317). At no time is her desire for self-preservation more apparent than when she sets into motion her plan for murder. After her initial bouts of terror, her unnaturalness subsides into the “defiance and determination” needed to carry out her plan as she plots the murders of both Robert and Luke Marks (*Lady Audley's Secret* 316).

Lady Audley's violent retaliation offers explicit insights into a harshly inequitable system that pits males against females and the wealthy against the poor. Robert's misogyny and desire for control, as well as Marks' vicious and greedy persistence in blackmailing Lady Audley, are clearly rooted in both men's social circumstances. Robert, conditioned by his culture's notions about gender roles, insists upon Lady Audley's conduct conforming to his idealized version of the proper Victorian woman. Equally important, Robert's privileged social status prevents him from understanding Lady Audley's fear of poverty. Even Marks, who knows first-hand how poverty can affect a person's actions, shows no concern for Lady Audley's dire situation, choosing instead to exhaust her patience as well as her money supply. Marks' fraudulent actions--hiding Talboys' letters that detailed his escape from the well and his reasons for leaving Audley Court--reflect his own need for security and an escape from the misery of poverty. But Lady Audley's terror soon erupts in violence against her male persecutors (she causes the near death of Robert and the eventual death of Luke Marks, who succumbs to his injuries from the fire), and Robert's social duty demands that he expose and contain Lady Audley. The complex interaction of social environment and social circumstances

influences both men's manipulative actions, just as they had influenced Lady Audley's monstrous acts.

Even when her actions are unearthed, Lady Audley refuses to surrender to Robert's vindictive threats of returning her to her destitute beginnings. Instead, she pleads for her life by claiming madness:

When you say that I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me; and reproached me, and threatened me; my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and I *was mad!* (*Lady Audley's Secret* 346)

According to Showalter, "As every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley's real secret is that she is *sane* and, moreover, representative" (*A Literature of Their Own* 167).

Showalter's suggestion that Lady Audley is "representative" of women who, because of social and patriarchal restraints, claim to be mad is supported by Dr. Mosgrove, the physician Robert summons to commit Lady Audley to an insane asylum and whose practice it is to treat mental diseases. Dr. Mosgrove knows that Lady Audley is not mad

[b]ecause there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune

and position. There is no madness there. 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. (*Lady Audley's Secret* 377)

Lady Audley's self-imposed insanity is her final attempt to escape the moral retribution imposed by the males in her life.

The Victorian gender construction that defines women who step outside their social roles as mad clearly informs Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Further, Braddon reveals that the Victorian public too, and especially males, felt safer when women who deviated from the stereotypical angel were deemed mad or insane, since this labeling of them as deviant permitted many Victorian men and women to deny the reality that women were driven to and were capable of committing crimes of passion, anger, and self-preservation.¹ The attribution of madness merely constituted another form of social control--social control in the hands of males like George Talboys, Robert Audley, Luke Marks, and eventually, Sir Michael.

For all his generosity and kindness, Sir Michael, too, abandons his wife, leaving her at the mercy of Robert's hostility. The novel's fiercest indictment against Sir Michael arises from his disavowal of any responsibility or concern for his wife, even when she begs for forgiveness after disclosing the strain of madness and the appalling life of

¹ See chapter three of Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* for detailed accounts of hundreds of women who were subjected to heinous, demoralizing, and terrifying operations designed to make them docile and sexless any time they deviated from the submissive role assigned to them.

poverty that she blames for her actions. Lady Audley's tenacious clinging to Sir Michael, as he refuses to meet her pleading gaze, and his growing resistance to her show how far he is removed from her genuine torment and her fear of indigence. Forgiveness remains impossible, since men like Sir Michael knew nothing of the devastation of poverty. Sir Michael's ignorance and pride, complicated by Lady Audley's betrayal and his significant social position, prevent him from showing her any sort of mercy.

In part, Sir Michael's detached response stems from Lady Audley's inversion of his image of the perfect, golden-haired goddess and replacing of her with a woman who commits monstrous acts, hides her secret life, and feigns insanity. As Pykett claims in *The Sensation Novel*, "The classic nineteenth-century madwoman is the deviant, energetic woman who defies familial and social control" (20). Lady Audley's infractions imitate male actions, and insanity emerges as the cause and the excuse when she reacts in a way that mimics typical male behavior. Even when it is clear that she commits fraud to save herself from a life of poverty, she is presented as a despicable imposter and sentenced to social ostracism, later to be confined to a mental asylum. The lower class Marks must also die for his misdeeds, while the wealthy male frauds are duly ignored or applauded. For Lady Audley, attempting to murder her first husband and premeditating the murders of Robert and Luke Marks are eclipsed by her "true crime: her fraudulent social identity and artificial femininity" (Haynie 64).

However, Lady Audley claims insanity, one of the few avenues of escape available for women. If Lady Audley is sane, then she must face criminal charges. However, if she is insane, she will spend the remainder of her years in an asylum, dying a slow death like

the one her mother endured. As Gail Houston states, “At the end of the novel, when Robert and his friends and family enjoy their idyllic, social world, the reader knows it is the result of physically confining ‘the wretched woman who was wearing out the remnant of her wicked life in the quiet suburb of the forgotten Belgium city’” (28). Braddon allows Lady Audley to assume the role of madwoman rather than accept a fate in the gaol; she becomes the outsider whose initial acceptance and later rejection by society undercuts social roles and reveals the limitations for Victorian women. Even in the face of ill treatment from critics for her creation of a caged heroine, Braddon placed the onus of woman’s madness on male domination, thereby warning men about the dangers of subjugating women.

Since social factors--Victorian concepts of female/male authority and female purity--seemingly contributed to female madness, a reasonable conclusion supports claims that women used madness equally effectively as a ploy to escape culturally-informed containment. Lady Audley uses madness as a ruse to escape patriarchal punishment, but madness also becomes the male’s excuse for ejecting an unwanted female. Robert’s victory over the disruptive female permits him to banish her from the family home and remove her from potential contact with his uncle and Talboys: “With Lady Audley gone women are securely back in their place as passive and silent objects of exchange, while the men are free to work out the homosocial relationships which determine society’s structures” (Nemesvari 526). Although Robert seemingly struggles with his decisions, he eventually and expectedly makes the decisions that benefit him--he is going to inherit, he is going to win Clara (the mirror image of her brother), and he is

going to save face by conforming to Victorian roles for males by quietly accepting a female version of George. His decisions reinforce and confirm dominant ideologies about gender roles.

Beyond her specific focus on male and female role-playing, marriage, divorce, feigned or escapist insanity, and gender inequality, Braddon critiques the Victorian social classes in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Through her satirical portrayal of the men in Lady Audley's life, Braddon shows how the privileged males escape accountability for their fraudulent acts, whereas the lower class female character, as well as the lower class Marks, must adhere to conventions or be punished. *Lady Audley's Secret* questions bourgeois values concerning the social roles that privileged men over women and especially wealthy men over underprivileged women. Moreover, Braddon reveals the considerable harm to dominant social values and the status quo that can come from an individual like Lady Audley, who is constantly threatened with fear of poverty. Many women's desperate desire for social and financial status and the distance between the lower and the upper classes stand accountable for Lady Audley's villainous acts. Braddon, perhaps recalling incidents from her own poverty-stricken early years, provides through *Lady Audley's Secret* a clearer understanding of the enormous hardships women face because of their lack of options in employment, marriage, and decision-making in general.

Lady Audley's Secret effectively shattered the myth of the spineless Victorian heroine, happily domesticated in her role, and Braddon had created a heroine who fought against her economic and patriarchal oppression by committing bigamy and creating

fraudulent identities. Only months before the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret*, critics had accepted Ellen Wood's bigamy novel, *East Lynne*, because Archibald Vane, the male bigamist, had remarried only after learning the news that his estranged wife had been killed in a violent train crash. When his first wife returns to the family home and the truth is revealed, she conveniently dies, however, but not before Archibald has time to deny any knowledge of his first wife's existence. Furthermore, the narrator chides her heroine for reappearing in the life of the husband she had previously deserted and assures readers that the heroine's actions are immoral.

While readers and critics accepted Wood's penitent heroine, Braddon's Lady Audley refuses to express regret for committing bigamy and for impersonating the feminine ideal. Braddon's most well-known fraud, Lady Audley, defies gender roles and lashes out at the males who attempt to dominate and destroy her. Lady Audley has learned from the males in her life that she must impersonate the domestic ideal in order to seemingly acquiesce to the males' gender assumptions about women. As Elaine Showalter points out, with her aggressive, hostile actions, Lady Audley becomes a murderer who "defends herself through violent attacks on men" (*The Female Malady* 72).

Braddon's bitter realism, which adds force and depth to Lady Audley's villainous acts, exposes the social hypocrisy that informs women's fraudulent actions. Lady Audley, a murderer and a victim, assumes a fraudulent role that includes creating a new identity and feigning madness in order to make a place for herself in a world dominated by males and a patriarchal social structure that controls the money, denies the opportunities, enacts the laws, and executes the punishments. Lady Audley appears to be the embodiment of

the feminine ideal—she is childlike, playful, and beautiful—but she is a danger to the accepted norm because her male counterparts do not easily control her. Instead of offering herself up as a sacrifice, she fights back, adding force to the critics' claims that heroines like Lady Audley posed a threat to the domestic order (Tromp 95).

Amid the outrage and abuse directed at her for her creation of a heroine who looked but did not act the part of the blond-haired, blue eyed Victorian heroine, Braddon depicted the falseness associated with the angelic appearance of the Victorian woman. But her unconventional female character enraged the critics and, with the ensuing attacks directed against her with each installment of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon felt compelled to strike back at the dictatorial zeal expressed by her critics by writing letters to the magazine editors who published anonymous, venomous attacks against her and her novels. One of many slanderous reviewers, W. Fraser Rae, wrote that Braddon “may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room” (105). As Wolff points out, Rae’s personal attack dredged up, for the public, reminders of Braddon’s beginnings by “implying that MEB was lower class, a former actress, and a woman of doubtful acquaintance and behavior” (Wolff 197). Braddon, emotionally injured and enraged by the seemingly endless allegations that she lacked moral character, soon discarded her obvious critique of Victorian society.

Ultimately, Braddon, the first sensation novelist to conceive of and present the reading public with the fair-haired demon, succumbed to the demands of the furious critics, and she never again bestowed her heroines with such obviously unfeminine

inclinations as those exhibited by Lady Audley. Wolff writes that Braddon faced “the sneering disapproval and cruel snubs of the self-righteous Victorian social world [and] her sufferings permanently affected her attitudes toward society and would be manifest in her writing for the remainder of her days” (108). In her next novel, *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon replaced her obviously critical views with a more hidden, but equally telling, portrayal of the woman’s predicament. Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* provided a thinly disguised attack on Victorian hypocrisy; *Aurora Floyd* would be a more heavily disguised critique of the roles allotted to Victorian women.

Chapter 4

“Spoiled Child of Fortune”: *Aurora Floyd*

After the negative critical response following the publication of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon altered her tactics in her second bigamy novel, *Aurora Floyd*. Braddon, well aware that she needed to tone down her novels if she intended to produce an economically viable product, more heavily disguised her attack on the treatment of women (Wolff 151). In *Aurora Floyd*, published only three months after *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon replaced her “fair-haired demon” with a “black-eyed heroine” (*Aurora Floyd* 144). But while Braddon gave readers what appeared to be an authentic Victorian lady, she also presented the public with a passionate heroine who defied her restrictive class code. In the end, Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* is no less incriminating of Victorian patriarchal society than was *Lady Audley's Secret*. Lady Audley chooses the role of fraud in order to submerge herself in her new life with a wealthy husband, whereas Aurora, trapped by her privileged upbringing and forced into the role of the proper female, becomes a fraud and engages in fraud in order to remain a respected member of Victorian society. When contrasted with *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* also made a significant point about class. When the fraud, in this case, Aurora Floyd, comes from a wealthy, respected family, she is not shunned and cast aside by her husband and society;

rather, she finds refuge and support with her social equals and escapes legal and moral punishment relatively unscathed.

Despite the author's disguised attack, a Braddon novel was once again seen as a corrupter of the reading public. In *The Maniac in the Cellar*, Winifred Hughes states that "during the 1860s, both readers and reviewers were on the lookout for sensation, whether to devour it in shilling numbers or to denounce it from literary pulpits" (167). W. Fraser Rae, incensed that Braddon's novels "attract[ed] countless readers, and [were] praised by not a few competent critics," characterized them as "one of the abominations of the age" (92, 104). Therefore, when Braddon and other sensation novelists claimed, according to Reverend Henry Mansel, that their purpose for writing sensational literature was "to warn fast young ladies, forsooth, of the fatal consequences to which fastness may lead them" (502), Mansel, always quick to chide the novelists as well as the reading public, characterized Braddon's type of writing as "playing no inconsiderable part in molding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation; and doing so principally, we had almost said exclusively, by 'preaching to the nerves'" (482). Despite these and other critics' grumbling about sensation novelists morally transforming young women from respectable to disreputable, their carping failed to reform a reading public enamored with Braddon's sensational heroines.

Braddon never claimed to be trying to mold her female readers into amiable, sweet-tempered maidens; instead, her novels illustrate the disparity between the way Victorian women were expected to conduct themselves and the way women had to conduct themselves. As an anonymous reviewer for the *Christian Remembrancer* was quick to

point out, “The ‘sensation novel’ of our time, however extravagant and unnatural, yet is a sign of the times--the evidence of a certain turn of thought and action, of an impatience of old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society” (qtd. in Hughes 72). What the sensation novel articulated was a number of anxieties about the changing roles of men and women, clear indications that a significant percentage of the population found Victorian societal and gender assumptions unacceptable. Braddon’s novels, of course, were controversial, but more than that, Braddon was encouraging change.

What became clear during the rapidly changing decade of the 1860s was that the sensation novels forever altered the austere and seemingly inflexible hold the Victorian age asserted over society, and especially women (Hughes 71). Changes in the gender, class, and numbers of the reading public caused a shift from the upper class to the masses, which incensed critics like Rae, Mansel, Margaret Oliphant, and a host of others who vilified sensational literature as “fascinating to ill-regulated minds,” “the morbid phenomena of literature,” and an “intense appreciation of flesh and blood” (qtd. in Edwards xvii). The fact that the critical reaction was so forceful only serves to reinforce the idea that social changes, especially in regard to gender, marriage, and the law, was very much on the minds of Victorians. Before long, though, critics’ negative responses and attacks on sensation novelists, including Braddon, forced many sensation writers to reinvent their heroines and their tribulations and “disavow any aims other than entertaining the reader” (Edwards ix).

Clearly, though, Braddon's claim of writing for entertainment only was a ruse to appease her critics, many of whom believed her assertion and failed to uncover the social critiques that were less overt in *Aurora Floyd* than in her earlier novel. In the introduction to the Oxford paperback edition of *Aurora Floyd*, P. D. Edwards states:

It must be said, in fairness, that most reviewers took Braddon's word for it when she disclaimed any social purpose in her fiction, but even among these some saw disturbing social implications in the apparently insatiable appetite for sensation. What was missing in real life that had to be made up for by such vicarious immersion in crime and vice? Here, even in novels innocent of any desire to expose and set right the problems of society, there was concern about the heavy reliance on present day crimes and criminals. (x)

As noted previously, the notion circulating at the time was that the reading public would become enamored by the lives and crimes of the beautiful lawbreakers in novels like Braddon's and would begin to empathize with the heroine's predicament (Tromp 94). In fact, with Lady Audley as with *Aurora Floyd*, many readers did react sympathetically, even to the point of supporting Lady Audley's desperate attempt to free herself from Robert Audley, the amateur detective who vows to unveil her (Pykett, *The Sensation Novel* 55-56). Equally important, the actions of *Aurora Floyd*, the subsequent heroine that Braddon claimed reflected no social critique, clearly suggest that Victorian women, regardless of class privilege and wealth, lacked most, if not all, of the social freedoms and opportunities that men enjoyed and were subjected to many of the same restrictions forced upon poor women.

In *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon's heroine rejects the familial codes of behavior; she refuses to adhere to the patriarchal demands of her father; she commits bigamy; and she renounces the female's assigned role in Victorian society. However, Aurora does not set out to destroy the myth of the feminine ideal; instead, she merely lives her life according to her desires, without much thought to the moral character expected of women. She chafes under the restrictions of having most of her freedom and authority granted, rather than freely given. Unlike her predecessor, Lady Audley, who came from poor beginnings, committed fraud, and paid for her "sins" by being committed to an insane asylum, Aurora is the spoiled, petted daughter of Archibald Floyd and heiress to the Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd banking houses. Unused to controlling her passion, Aurora has problems settling into the role of obedient daughter, but she has even more trouble acceding to the feminine ideal. Her over-zealous passions, compounded by her unfeminine love of horses and horseracing, illustrate how unsuited Aurora is for the prescribed female role.

Patriarchal privileging and feminine restriction emerge early in *Aurora Floyd* when the reader learns that the sixteen-year-old Aurora's doting, indulgent father becomes mortified when his daughter spends an entire afternoon horseback riding with his groom, James Conyers, and immediately sends her to a French finishing school to remove her from temptation. Much later in the novel we learn that the strong-willed Aurora has responded to her father's restrictions by eloping with the groom. Accustomed to truth and having a woman's limited knowledge of dishonest men, she succumbs to Conyers' sad tale and responds to her romantic delusions about the maltreated hero by marrying him. Within days of their marriage, Aurora discovers that her new husband is abusive and

unfaithful, and he married her to gain access to her father's money. As Jenni Calder explains in *Women and Marriage in Victorian England*, "A woman could easily be no more than a pawn in the hands of the economic aspirations of men" (16). Conyers marries the naïve heiress in order to fleece her wealthy father. Aurora's description of her first husband confirms what the reader already knows:

She had never seen or known in this man [. . .] one redeeming quality, one generous thought. She had known him as a liar, a schemer, a low and paltry swindler, a selfish spendthrift, extravagant to wantonness upon himself, but meaner than words could tell towards others; a profligate, a traitor, a drunkard. This is what she had found behind the school-girl's fancy for a handsome face, for violet-tinted eyes, and soft-brown curling hair. (*Aurora Floyd* 393)

In her moment of recklessness, Aurora dooms herself to be victimized by the "town-bred imposter" and "unscrupulous schemer" (*Aurora Floyd* 353).

But it is only after her failed marriage over a year later that she admits her imprudent mistake:

I did this mad and wicked thing, blighting the happiness of my youth by my own act, and bringing shame and grief upon my father. I had no romantic, overwhelming love for this man. I cannot plead excuses which some women urge for their madness. I had only a school-girl's sentimental fancy for his dashing manner, only a school-girl's frivolous admiration of his handsome

face. I married him because he had dark-blue eyes, and long eyelashes, and white teeth, and brown hair. (*Aurora Floyd* 352)

Aurora blames her tragic error on her gendered upbringing and her sheltered and lonely existence at Felden Woods, her father's home, secluded with only "a silly woman" for her governess, "the few guests who came to Felden," and her father's groom for company (*Aurora Floyd* 353). According to Aurora, Conyers claimed to be "a prince in disguise," "a gentleman's son," "ill-used and trampled down in the battle of life" (*Aurora Floyd* 353).

Aurora's scandalous mistake is compounded by the inadequate alternatives for women. Aurora clearly has few options she can pursue in order to end the miserable marriage and remedy her mistake. Even with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and the establishment of the Divorce Court on January 1, 1858, women like Aurora possessed few legal options for divorcing their intolerable husbands. One of the difficulties in obtaining a divorce stemmed from the courts' stipulation that women had to provide evidence against their husbands in a public court (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 105). In addition to the legal obstacles, few fathers and wayward husbands were willing to pay the large fees required in the Divorce Courts (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 105). Since Aurora married Conyers in 1856 and separated from him in 1857, she had to flee from her "mad marriage" rather than pursue the limited possibilities open to her (*Aurora Floyd* 360).

Braddon, through Aurora, does claim that "had [Aurora], upon the discovery of her first husband's infidelity, called the law to her aid--she was rich enough to command its utmost help--she might have freed herself from the hateful chains so foolishly linked

together, and might have defied [her first husband] to torment or assail her” (*Aurora Floyd* 393). But as pointed out earlier, a double standard existed that required women to prove adultery plus some additional grievance such as “desertion, cruelty, rape, buggery, or bestiality” (qtd. in Morris 48). As P. D. Edwards notes, “Under the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, [Aurora] would not have been able to ‘free herself’ simply on the grounds of her husband’s infidelity” (“Explanatory Notes,” *Aurora Floyd* 473), but Aurora had sufficient grounds for divorcing her husband: he had committed adultery with “a woman who knew [her] story and pitied” her, and he had been brutal to Aurora “on more than one occasion” (*Aurora Floyd* 354). As a later note indicates, her husband’s brutality would have provided Aurora with adequate grounds for divorce (“Explanatory Notes,” *Aurora Floyd* 473), though her humiliation would have been intense.

Aurora had other options, too; she could have admitted her mistake to her indulgent father, begged his forgiveness, and returned home to the safety of her father’s house, but her pride prevented her from turning to her father for help after he had forbidden her to associate with the man she married. Instead, Aurora chooses to leave her husband, return to her father’s house, and voice the lie that her husband is dead. Her self-serving rationalizations become another form of fraud: she lies to her father, and she withholds the truth from Talbot Bulstrode, her next suitor, and from John Mellish, her second husband. Aurora’s unsettling doubleness—she conceals her objectionable past and fashions a respectable public image—contrasts sharply with the idea of the fixed identity associated with the proper feminine. Aurora assumes the role of proper female and dutiful

daughter only after she returns home repentant after her marriage, a possibility available only to women of her protected class.

Herein lie the primary differences between the treatment of heroines from the two separate and distinct social classes. Working-class women were often victimized by the Victorian legal, social, and moral code for women's behavior, after all, as Morris explains, "men dominated the legal system throughout the century; all judges, lawyers, and jurors were men" (42). On the other hand, middle-class women could count on "masculine protectiveness [. . .] which guarded middle-class women not only from the opportunity to break the law but also from the consequences of having done so [. . .]" (Morris 50). The widely circulated belief that women were physically and emotionally weak perpetuated the notion that they needed male protection and intervention to safeguard them from the corruption of everyday life.

These assumptions about women's weaknesses account for the way Aurora reacts to what she perceives will be her father's and society's way of dealing with her reckless conduct and contribute to her fraudulent actions when she returns to her father's home. Fearing the consequences of her early and careless behavior, Aurora becomes a fraud when, in answer to her father's query about her husband, she tells her father that her first husband is dead, and she continues the fraud until she is forced to flee from John Mellish, her second husband. Her vacillations between telling her father the truth and keeping her marriage to Conyers a secret underscore her understandable hesitation in conveying the truth—if she tells her father and he forces her to seek a divorce, her guilt and shame will

be known to everyone, whereas if she hides the truth, she can return unscathed and respectable into her father's home.

Unlike Lady Audley, Braddon's first female fraud, Aurora does not *have* to become a fraud; she knows she has the love and support of her father. Lady Audley, however, has to perpetrate her fraudulent acts because she has no other options available to her. As Morris points out, "Social reformers like [Elizabeth] Wolstenholme and John Stuart Mill [. . .] tied the criminal actions of women to injustices in the economic and social systems of the country, and particularly to women's lack of independence" (31). Such is the case with Lady Audley, whose lack of family support, an absent husband, and inequitable laws that deny her the right to free herself from the husband who abandoned her, account for her desperate and violent actions. Therefore, when Lady Audley chooses fraud over truth, her decision stems from her lack of options, whereas Aurora's intent is to return untainted to her father's home, which means she must make a concerted effort to masquerade as the acceptable, if not model, Victorian female.

Yet Aurora, like many women in Victorian England, learns quickly that she is unsuited to play the role of domestic angel. She loves horses, the outdoors, and excitement, all of which Victorian culture deems undignified and unfitting for a woman of class. For example, Talbot Bulstrode, Aurora's first suitor upon her return to her father's house, cringes when Aurora mentions horseracing when he sits beside her at a dance because he has created in his mind the perfect woman by his and society's standards. As Lyn Pykett notes, "Aurora Floyd is represented from the outset as very obviously transgressing the boundaries of the proper feminine" (*The 'Improper*

Feminine ' 88). Aurora's rejection of the understood female role gives rise to Talbot's disillusionment, which begins with her interest in horseracing and ends with her intense demand that her past life remain a secret. Talbot's determination to maintain his respected position in society far outweighs any romantic feelings he may have for Aurora, and, upon learning that she has a secret, he tells her that she is "no fit wife for an honourable man" (*Aurora Floyd* 105). For Talbot, the externals of appearance, position, and family hold more value than a love match, and since convention demanded that women find contentment as men's inferiors, Talbot's demand that Aurora's reputation meet or exceed his stipulations forces her and many women similar to her to invent a persona that they are, in most cases, displeased with and ill-suited to fill. Talbot, conceiving himself as a patriarchal figure that should claim only an untarnished wife with no past, values his name and his reputation more than he values his relationship with Aurora.

While Talbot's reaction to Aurora's refusal to reveal her hidden past reflects his patriarchal attitudes, his refusal to marry a woman with a disreputable past is also based on the constricted, Victorian idea of marriage. Aurora's disposition and nature are incompatible with Talbot's expectations, yet she agrees to marry Talbot only moments after reading a false newspaper report that claimed Conyers, her first husband, was dead. In Talbot's defense, his adherence to established class and gender norms stems from his and Victorianism's characterization of women and the instability he fears may occur if he loosens his reins on Aurora, as the narrator makes clear:

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

Conditioned as he is by Victorian conventions of proper female behavior, Talbot cannot accept a woman who might threaten his fixed idea of the female ideal "with her unfeminine tastes and mysterious propensities" (*Aurora Floyd* 51).

When Aurora refuses to reveal her secret, Talbot tells her that they cannot marry because "the past life of [his] wife must be a white unblemished page" (*Aurora Floyd* 105). Talbot, unable to accept an unconventional wife, chooses to end their engagement rather than marry a tainted woman. His fears stem from his concern that the secret she harbors includes some disgraceful conduct that could eventually disgrace his name and threaten his manhood. As Sally Mitchell indicates in *The Fallen Angel*, "Men were threatened by riding women, by ambitious women, by women who used sexuality for their own ends" (77). More importantly, Talbot is threatened by what he doesn't know about Aurora.

John Mellish, Aurora's next suitor, is by no means oblivious to the implications of having an unconventional wife. He is also aware that Aurora had earlier chosen Talbot over him, yet when John asks Aurora for the second time if she will marry him, Braddon writes, "His appeal had taken the form of an accusation rather than a prayer, and he had

duly impressed upon this poor girl the responsibility she would incur in refusing him. And this, I take it, is a meanness of which men are often guilty in their dealings with the weaker sex” (*Aurora Floyd* 125). John, a robust, loud, and seemingly doting admirer uses his masculine power to overwhelm Aurora, playing on her emotions and sensitive feelings toward her father. The narrator explains Aurora’s thought processes upon learning that her father has welcomed John’s interest in marrying her:

All his patient devotion, so long unheeded, or accepted as a thing of course, recurred to Aurora’s mind. Did he not deserve some reward, some requital for all this? But there was one who was nearer and dearer to her, dearer than even Talbot Bulstrode had ever been; and that one was the white-haired old man pottering about amongst the ruins on the other side of the grassy platform. (*Aurora Floyd* 126)

Aware that her father’s “best and heartiest wishes” are that she marries John, Aurora sacrifices her freedom in order to ensure her father’s peace of mind (*Aurora Floyd* 120). The narrator tells us that “she can never love this honest, generous, John Mellish, though she may by-and-by bestow upon him an affection which is a great deal better worth having” (*Aurora Floyd* 130). Aurora remains fiercely passionate and self-ruling despite her agreement to marry John, and, with his professed acceptance of her veiled past, she is allowed to retain her secret. As Lyn Pykett argues in *The ‘Improper’ Feminine*, “Mellish negotiates (rather than confronts) Aurora’s secret and domesticates rather than expels the improper feminine” (107). Despite his apparently sincere effort to believe in her, John knows that his patriarchal position grants him the power in their marriage.

Aurora's bigamous relationship with John provides a case study of her self-deceit and lies, compounded by her pride. Her own desire for power asserts itself in a form of violence, a violent reaction associated with a woman's enforced powerlessness. When Aurora whips the elderly groom for brutally kicking her dog, John is embarrassed, offended, and threatened by her aggressive act: "John Mellish, entering the stable-yard by chance at this very moment, turned white with horror at beholding the beautiful fury [. . .]. It was such bitter shame to him to think that this peerless, this adored creature, should do anything to bring disgrace, or even ridicule, upon herself [. . .]. 'You should not have done this; you should have told me'" (*Aurora Floyd* 139). John is understandably humiliated and mortified by his wife's behavior, and the threatened disgrace disturbs John because women aren't supposed to react in such a violent, unfeminine manner. But while John is uncomfortable with Aurora's display of brutality toward the stable hand, he curbs his response because he values Aurora's potential as a conventional wife and mother.

When Aurora assumes the masculine position in her relationship with John, he is infuriated, but forgiving. He disapproves of Aurora's aggressive act, but he intends to tame her. For now, though, "he submits to the pretty tyrant with a quiet smile of resignation. What does it matter? She is so little, so fragile; he could break that tiny wrist with one twist of his big thumb and finger; and in the meantime, till affairs get desperate, and such measures become necessary, it's as well to let her have her own way" (*Aurora Floyd* 143). But he knows that whenever he tires of her improper feminine behavior, he will quietly, and perhaps violently, end his pretended compliance. Aurora too uses her

complicated form of pride as a devious kind of tool for asserting her power over John, not unlike her use of the whip on the stable hand. She has, by all accounts, assumed the male role by beating the groom, and, while John sees nothing wrong with whipping a servant, he demonstrates specifically that he, as the male, is supposed to be the flogger. Aurora, for a short time, assumes the male's role and subverts the convention of woman as victim, replacing it with a woman who is both aggressive and dominant to a subservient male.

Shortly after Aurora's violent outburst, John unwittingly hires Aurora's first husband, Conyers, as his new horse trainer, and Aurora finds herself in the dangerous position of trying to keep her deception a secret from her husband and father. Conyers, on the other hand, sees the opportunity he has been awaiting, a chance to extort money from the wealthy wife he lost due to his propensity for infidelity and brutality. Aurora, intent on protecting her secret, her father's peace of mind, and her husband's esteem, cannot confess her deception because she fears all three men's reactions to her lies. Fearful of the consequences if her bigamous marriage is exposed, she pays Conyers for his silence to avoid losing the respect of her husband and father because, in order to retain her fraudulent image, she must preserve the illusions her father and husband have created about her.

Even with her wealth and family, Aurora holds little political sway over her father and husband. Her powerlessness is made all the more apparent when she must plead with her father to advance her some of her allowance to pay her blackmailer. She recognizes then that her position is closely aligned with that of the servants: "If I had been the wife

and daughter of two of the poorest men in Christendom, I could scarcely have had more trouble about this two thousand pounds" (*Aurora Floyd* 231). That she, a married woman, must go to her father for money signifies the strain and the restrictions she operates under, while she fiercely struggles for some autonomy in her marriage. Although Aurora is fond of her husband and negotiates with him for some freedom for herself, her illusion of self-sufficiency crumbles when she realizes she cannot ask her husband for money and must plead with her father for financial assistance. Her feminine position prevents her from having access to her own allowance, either from her marriage to John or from money set aside for her by her father.

While John appears to be a generous, understanding husband on the surface, beneath the façade lurks a male who is as internally calculating as Talbot is externally dominating. When John discovers that Aurora is a fraud, he forgives her because he knows he can control and domesticate her by using his newfound knowledge about her past to his advantage. He is not unique in his actions. Even in Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, when Justice Hare complains to Archibald Carlyle that his daughter, Barbara Hare, no longer obeys him and that she's "beyond my correction," the kindhearted Mr. Carlyle informs his wife's father that Barbara will comply with his demands. He says, "She's not beyond [my correction] [. . .]. I assure you, justice, I keep her in order" (433). Much like Carlyle, Aurora's father controls her through his paternal demands. Talbot also controls Aurora when he refuses to accept a wife with a secret, and John controls her by pretending to comply with her reckless, unfeminine behavior. All of these men control

the women in their lives, and this problematic privileging of males over females becomes another way of manipulating women.

Even after Aurora's secret is revealed, John remains a seemingly doting and generous husband despite the near destruction of their marriage, but he obviously expects Aurora to fit his concept of the ideal wife. He accepts her secret and returns with her to Mellish Park because Aurora has agreed to pay for her mistake with her life. In other words, she submits to the expectations of a middle-class woman's role, which means that she must forfeit all inclinations to participate in unwomanly pastimes and in class-breaking. But what the reader knows is that latent within John's seemingly generous nature is a dominant male who coerced Aurora to marry him and who hid his class hypocrisy behind a pretended consideration for the unprivileged class.

While Aurora and John's marriage will perhaps remain an agreeable one as long as she acts within the limitations of her role, her previously "impulsive and impetuous" character is now subdued (*Aurora Floyd* 168). She has abandoned her spontaneous nature in quiet acceptance of the domesticated life expected of her as a wife and mother. What is even more troubling and completely overlooked by critics is John's class-consciousness. He merely pretends a concern for people of all classes, unlike Aurora, who sees no boundaries between herself and those of the lower class:

John Mellish was entirely without personal pride; but there was another pride, which was wholly inseparable from his education and position, and this was the pride of caste. He was strictly conservative; and although he was ready to talk to his good friend the saddler, or his trusted retainer the groom,

as freely as he would have held converse with his equals, he would have opposed all the strength of his authority against the saddler had the honest tradesman attempted to stand for his native town, and would have annihilated the groom with one angry flash of his bright blue eyes had the servant infringed by so much as an inch upon the broad extent of territory that separated him from his master. (*Aurora Floyd* 335)

One wonders how this type of regard for such solid class boundaries would appeal to Aurora, who, according to her cousin, Lucy, “would as soon talk to one of those gardeners as to you or me; and you would see no difference in her manner, except that perhaps it would be more cordial to them than to us. The poor people round Felden idolize her” (*Aurora Floyd* 45).

An even more telling example of her class-breaking stems from her marriage to her father’s groom. Despite the failed marriage, Aurora at no time places fault with Conyers’ lower social position; rather, she points to his tendency toward violence and philandering for the failure of their relationship. Therefore, when she repents and attempts to assuage her guilt for her unfeminine actions, Aurora again becomes a fraud by submerging her true feelings about the disparate treatment between the classes in order to conform to John’s expectations. What the reader suspects, though, is that Aurora’s conversion may be just another form of acting in order to escape male containment and punishment and redeem herself for her earlier mistake.

The concluding pages of the novel focus on Aurora’s transformation from irresponsible and thoughtless daughter and wife to submissive and domesticated wife and

mother. Following their reconciliation, John relishes his newfound authority over the repentant Aurora who, the narrator tells us, will never again “care so much for horseflesh, or take quite so keen an interest in weight-for-age races as compared to handicaps, as she has done in days that are gone” (*Aurora Floyd* 459). For Aurora, redemption occurs with her submissive return to the patriarchal home, and purification becomes complete when she forfeits her reckless, improper femininity for motherhood.

Unlike Lady Audley, Aurora’s husband, friends, and family coddle her, and, ultimately, Aurora is rewarded as an exemplar of the Victorian ideal after she discards her “male” pastimes and begins devoting herself solely to her husband and home. Marriage, as one of society’s devices for preserving a family’s name, property, and position, becomes a mechanism for domesticating Aurora because men need women to propagate the population, securing that family’s next generation (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 266). Braddon concludes *Aurora Floyd* by shaping Aurora into the obedient wife that she is expected to be in order to gain acceptance in proper Victorian society. As Sally Mitchell explains, expectations that women alone were responsible for the happiness and tranquility in their marriages inform the same expectations that force Aurora to concede her love of freedom in return for a pleasant marriage (*Daily Life* 266-267).

Braddon’s heroines demonstrate that if women intend to survive in a patriarchal society, despite the fraudulent roles forced upon them, they must participate in and perpetuate the Victorian myth of the domestic ideal. Braddon, outwardly appeasing her public and critics by fulfilling her pledge to write for entertainment only, ends her novel by explicitly illustrating the type of woman who is readily accepted in Victorian society,

the obedient daughter, wife, and mother: “So we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born” (*Aurora Floyd* 459). At the end of the novel, Aurora’s power is limited. Her impetuous nature and spontaneity have been stamped out. In “The Espaliered Girl,” Jeni Curtis writes that “harmony is achieved not at the cost of incarceration and death, as in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, but by another kind of violence: in the reshaping of the temptress Aurora into a Madonna figure [. . .]” (78). She has forsaken her wild, carefree behavior for that of an apparently loving and satisfied new mother, hovering over the cradle of her newborn son. Aurora has been domesticated and tamed, her vitality and energy converted into procreation, thus ensuring the future of her class.

The striking lack of a happy conclusion to *Aurora Floyd* provides a clear example of the doubleness characterized by Aurora’s role. Her passionate nature becomes disciplined when she reconciles her earlier careless actions by accepting her husband’s idea of marriage and duty, and the satisfactory resolution is achieved through the forfeiture of her energy and vitality. Further, the denial of women’s need for freedom and selfhood as well as the accepted yoking of morality and motherhood falsely suggest that all women crave marriage and maternity. Faced with her limited choices, Aurora chooses the role of the proper Victorian female, and we are left to assume that she finds domestic happiness with John. But we are a little suspicious about just how happy this marriage will be.

As Braddon demonstrates in *Aurora Floyd*, fraudulent women are not born; they are created. Just as Lady Audley becomes a fraud as a means of tolerating her poverty-

stricken life and later as a way to acquire security, Aurora becomes a fraud to protect her father, herself, and later, her husband from the shame of her earlier, disastrous marriage.

Soon thereafter, she perpetrates another fraud by outwardly presenting the socially accepted façade of the proper Victorian woman who is happily established in her domestic prison, cut off forever from her earlier vitality and intent on sacrificing her freedom for a life of repentance with her doting husband and newborn child. Thus, as Lyn Pykett claims, “Aurora is, in the end, rescued for womanhood by an ordeal of suffering and by maternity. First, Aurora’s disruptive femininity is contained by the threatened loss of her home and husband, and she is brought within the boundaries of the womanly behavior, she has hitherto despised and refused” (*Sensation Novel* 58).

Braddon, perhaps, had masterminded an even greater fraud; she superficially presented the reading public and her critics with a young, beautiful heroine who “learned her lesson” and who could now happily carry on the woman’s role of loving, obedient, and submissive wife and mother. Yet the disturbing implications of Aurora’s enforced marriage point to an unsettling observation about the conventional marriage: that women who conform are indulged, yet confined, while women who refuse to conform are rejected and discarded.

In Braddon’s two novels, *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, both heroines’ fraudulent actions result from their inability to separate from a failed, earlier marriage, and both women’s second marriages unite them with husbands who possess wealth and social positions. But unlike Sir Michael and Lady Audley, John and Aurora occupy the same social class, and an error in judgment can be overlooked. However, Sir Michael,

whose knowledge of the lower class is limited, cannot understand or accept his wife's transgressions. In Aurora's world, the happy fates come to those privileged by wealth and patriarchy; for Aurora's predecessor, Lady Audley, the happy conclusion eludes her because she has no family, no husband, and no social position. Lady Audley's lack of social status propels the investigation into her suspicious past, whereas Aurora's social position somewhat protects her. When Aurora's first husband is murdered, she flees to the home of wealthy friends rather than face her husband and her father. When Talboys, Lady Audley's first husband, is believed to be dead, Lady Audley cannot flee; she has nowhere to run and no wealthy friends to offer her protection.

Yet Braddon clearly demonstrates the urgency felt by women from the lower to the upper classes to commit fraud as a means of protecting themselves from the dishonor, indignity, and abuse of society. Braddon's novel suggests that some women had to become frauds in order to survive in a male-constructed society, and she also exposes the feminine ideal as noxious and dangerous to men as well as women. Further, the unnaturalness of subjugating women--the act that forced many women to become frauds--suggests an eventual and radical rejection of the traditional Victorian woman's role. As Calder points out, "The vulnerability of women [. . .] stems not just from feminine weakness, but from their lack of economic status" (17). And whether from the poor class with no money or the wealthy class with no control over their allowance, most women were economically underprivileged.

Although Aurora, like Lady Audley, commits bigamy and fraudulently hides that truth, they are seemingly very different types of frauds. Granted, the violent actions of

Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd differ significantly, yet their motivations are quite similar. Both women know that to silence the onslaught of male outrage, they must appear to comply with the demands of their patriarchal society. For both women, compliance means that they must outwardly preserve the ladylike docility and respectability of a Victorian wife and proper female. Lady Audley's need for security and Aurora's need for freedom from restrictions cause them to become frauds for distinctly different reasons, yet society's demand for a proper lady is the basis for both women's fraudulent actions. As Pykett points out, "Both characters, in different ways, embody the contradictory discourse on woman in which woman is figured as either a demon or an angel" (*The 'Improper' Feminine* 88). In short, readers are expected to see Lady Audley as the demon that masquerades as the angel, whereas Aurora is a combination of angel and demon.

Braddon ultimately condemns the demon, Lady Audley, to an insane asylum, while she permits Aurora, now domesticated into the angel, to live happily ever after. Aurora, as a member of the respected class, redeems herself by becoming a respectable wife and mother. But whether Braddon's heroines spend the last years of their lives in asylums or in domestic confinement, both of which are forms of incarceration and regulation, Braddon's novels show how some women must invent themselves outwardly as gentle, loving, non-threatening, and dependent. That reality implies that women like Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd, forced to endure constant patriarchal supervision, find it necessary to resort to fraud as a way to tolerate their lives. Lady Audley, certainly from

ignoble beginnings, assumes a fraudulent role in order to survive, whereas Aurora becomes a fraud to save her public image and her reputation.

What Braddon's novels demonstrate is that women, regardless of their stations in life, are subjected to male expectations of the idealized woman, which ultimately results in many women having to tell lies and become frauds before they can effectively imitate what Lyn Pykett refers to as the "proper feminine" (*The 'Improper' Feminine* 90).

Ultimately, Braddon reveals significant implications in her quite dissimilar novels; the first is that women, regardless of their social class, are expected to perform according to society's terms and conditions; second, many women must assume the role of fraud in order to conform to the demands placed upon them by society; third, women's actions and reactions are based primarily upon their allotted social classes; and fourth, women's lack of choices undermines the sacred idea of marriage, an issue Braddon addresses in depth in *Eleanor's Victory*.

Chapter 5

“Half a Victory”: *Eleanor’s Victory*

In her biographical note to *Eleanor’s Victory*, Fionn O’Toole claims that Braddon’s female characters “articulate the suppressed grievances and frustrations of the ordinary women who read about them, hence part of their extraordinary popularity. They provided escapism, fantasy and release from the mundane, the oppressive and the unescapable” (xiii). With *Eleanor’s Victory*, Braddon subtly critiques patriarchy at the same time she presents the dilemma Eleanor Vane, her different sort of heroine and detective, faces when her father dies under mysterious circumstances. Left without money, family, and only a “woman’s education,” Eleanor vows to uncover the events surrounding her father’s last hours as he played cards with two unidentified men and gambled away the money earmarked for her education.

Eleanor, like Braddon’s “woman” as described by O’Toole, is “intelligent and retaliate[s] against injustice, poverty, [and] unfavorable circumstances [. . .]” (xiii). Unable to earn an adequate living, Eleanor, who is “transparent, ingenuous, and impulsive [but] not a good schemer” (qtd. in Hughes 153), is forced into fraud in order to gain employment as the companion to a wealthy lawyer’s ward; later, she prostitutes herself in marriage to her companion’s guardian in order to obtain the money and

mobility she needs to engage in her role as an amateur detective, a role that will permit her to find and punish the men responsible for her father's death.

Braddon's novel quietly castigates conventional Victorian society by challenging women's subservient role, lack of education, and limited opportunities for movement or agency; at the same time, she advances the notion that marriages of convenience provide women with money and position but cause distrust, friction, and discontent in their marriages. Eleanor's actions reveal what Braddon and other novelists were addressing: that when women are forced into marriage for economic reasons, the marriage becomes a fraud, a business transaction that undermines the very sanctity that marriage is supposed to endorse.

Despite the transgressive nature of Eleanor's role as amateur detective, Braddon had, as Michael Sadleir points out, "quickly learnt to give her worldliness just the right amount of play and to permit her heroines just the right amount of license" (79). By replacing her earlier defiant female characters with a heroine made likeable by her devotion to her father, to justice, and to family loyalty, Braddon's novel compels readers to champion Eleanor's search for justice on her father's behalf. Although Eleanor's father, George Vane, was a spendthrift, a gambler, and a dreamer who had lost three fortunes, buried two wives, and alienated two of his children, to his third child, the young and naïve Eleanor, "he was all that was perfect, all that was noble and generous" (*Eleanor's Victory* 22). Determined to discover the truth about her beloved father's death, Eleanor begins detecting in order to locate the men she suspects of causing her father to commit suicide.

Through the creation of her devoted and likeable heroine, Braddon demonstrated the need for more employment and educational opportunities for women so they could earn a living if circumstances demanded it. Jobs for middle-class women were restricted to respectable, non-paid work, a constraint that made marriage to a wealthy man a desirable, if doubtful, option. As Sally Mitchell points out in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, “Single women had an even more problematic role [because] most people considered it socially unacceptable for any middle-class woman to do paid work” (143). Concerned that the workplace would expose women to unsuitable situations and people, women were often restricted from most types of employment, another reason many women found marriage to be a convenient vocation. According to Calder, “Throughout the century the economic theme marches hand in hand with the marriage theme. They are inseparable [. . .]” (24). *Eleanor’s Victory* explores this seemingly judicious marriage theme by questioning the Victorian ideal marriage that is in essence designed to provide women with security and men with the expected family. As Mitchell notes, “Ideologically, the middle-class home and family represented the essence of morality, stability, and comfort [with full] legal and economic control” placed with the husband (*Daily Life* 142).

Braddon’s novel suggests that some women’s need to marry, based primarily on economics and freedom, instead caused them to become frauds in order to secure profitable matches, thus ensuring a financially comfortable future and some side benefits—for example, in Eleanor’s case, a license to travel. Eleanor gains financial security and mobility, first by creating a false identity and later through marriage to a

man she does not love, a move that will geographically locate her near her father's suspected killer.

As Joan Perkin argues in *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, Victorians viewed marriage as “an institution of immense social convenience [. . .]” (30). What is surprising to our twentieth century notions about convenient marriages is that many Victorian women “not only regarded marriage as their inevitable role in life, but actually welcomed it as an emotionally satisfying and, indeed, emancipating experience” (Perkin 3). This sense of liberation came from the woman's perceived release from her limited role in the parental home to an anticipated freedom to establish her own family and fashion a different life for herself (Perkin 3). As Sally Mitchell points out in *The Fallen Angel*, “a married woman had freedom of movement [. . .] [and] a settled income at her disposal” (84).

What many women discovered was that they simply traded one legal guardian (the father) for another (the husband); when Eleanor's father dies, she must align herself with another male who will provide financial support. According to Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, written nearly one hundred years before Braddon penned *Eleanor's Victory*, marriage meant that “the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being, or legal existence of a woman is suspended during marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything” (qtd. in Perkin 1-2). One significant point about Blackstone's ideology is that little, if any, change had occurred from 1765 to 1854, when Barbara Leigh Smith claimed in *Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most*

Important Laws of England concerning Women that “a married woman had no legal existence” (qtd. in Perkin 13). Implicit in Blackstone’s endorsement for subordinating women is what Perkin refers to as the “hidden person,” the woman who submerges her personality beneath the overwhelming demands of her husband (2). With only limited control over their lives, some women became frauds in order to fashion acceptable existences for themselves or to gain some freedoms.

In the beginning of *Eleanor’s Victory*, Eleanor Vane, unlike her fictional predecessors Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd, is not yet a fraud and does not hide a secret past. But Braddon’s motherless, and now fatherless, heroine is cast out into a world with no money, no close family, and few possibilities for earning a living, a dilemma that was not that unusual to Braddon’s Victorian audience. Eleanor, typical of many young, orphaned, and destitute women, can only look toward an uncertain future, a fearful future rooted in an inequitable social and economic system that denies employment and autonomy to middle-class women. Braddon’s Victorian audience was well aware that girls like Eleanor received an education that “emphasized culture, social graces, and appearance,” without giving much thought to practical matters of viable employment (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 181). As Perkin points out, “Middle-and upper-middle class girls developed social graces designed to win them admiration and notice (as well as husbands)” (250). The unrealistic idea of a woman’s education severely limited the forty-two percent of Victorian women twenty to forty years old who remained unmarried and unable to depend on a husband for financial support (qtd. in Poovey 4).

Alone in Paris, with no means of support and no marketable skills, Eleanor must depend upon the kindness and financial support of her two English friends, Richard Thornton and his aunt, Signora Eliza Picirillo (who remain in Paris with Eleanor), while she struggles through the grief-filled months following her father's death. Coerced by her wealthy, older half-sister, Hortensia, Eleanor hides behind a fake name in order to obtain "respectable" employment as a companion to the ward of a wealthy lawyer, Gilbert Monckton. Hortensia's suggestion that Eleanor is "ungrateful" and "a burden" to her friends compels Eleanor to agree to the deception: "I'll take a false name. I'll do anything in the world rather than impose upon the goodness of my friends" (*Eleanor's Victory* 86, 87). It is only Hortensia's acquaintance with the family and her demand that Eleanor hide her true name that guarantees Eleanor's acceptance to the position, a position that places her near Maurice de Crespigny, her father's oldest and dearest friend and the man who made a pact with her father during their college days that the first to die would leave his fortune to the other.

Forced for financial reasons to accept the position, despite her fear that she may never have the opportunity to discover what happened during her father's last hours, Eleanor travels to Berkshire, England, where she becomes the companion of her young charge, Laura Mason, and lives in the home of the widowed Mrs. Darrell. Almost immediately, Mrs. Darrell's son, Launcelot, comes under suspicion, but Launcelot misinterprets Eleanor's sleuthing as romantic interest, proposes to her, and is refused. Launcelot's mother, wanting to separate the two, appeals to Eleanor to return to her friends in London. As Eleanor leaves Berkshire, she observes Launcelot loitering in a

shop doorway and knows immediately that he is one of the two men last seen with her father on the night of his death. Alarmed by her discovery, but forced for financial reasons to continue her journey to London, Eleanor immediately begins plotting ways to return to Berkshire where she can expose Launcelot's involvement in her father's death. In order to return to Berkshire, Eleanor must resort to unconventional actions, by Victorian standards, because she cannot travel at will, and she must not conduct so unwomanly a business as exposing the perpetrators of a violent crime.

As the conventional voice of society, Richard, Eleanor's devoted friend, attempts to curtail what he sees as her unwomanly conduct. When Eleanor tells Richard that uncovering the truth behind her father's death "shall be the business of my life" and pleads for his help, he replies: "And what then Eleanor? Supposing you can prove this; by such evidences as will be very difficult to get at--by such an investigation as will waste your life, blight your girlhood, warp your nature, unsex your mind, and transform you from a candid and confiding woman into an amateur detective" (*Eleanor's Victory* 164). Richard, condemning Eleanor's desire to uncover the truth and doubting her ability to act outside of her female role, says: "Heaven forbid that you should ever be very clever in such a line as this. There must be detective officers; they are the polished bloodhounds of our civilized age, and very noble and estimable animals when they do their duty conscientiously; but fair-haired young ladies should be kept out of this [gallery]. Think no more of this business, then, Eleanor" (*Eleanor's Victory* 216).

As Glenwood Irons points out in his introduction to *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*, women who detect are separated from society (xii). Eleanor's sleuthing

places her outside of the social milieu for women, and her detecting becomes both the problem and the solution to avenging the criminals responsible for her beloved father's death. According to Irons, "The male detective operates outside society's conventions because that is what male heroes do; the woman detective should not be a detective *because* she operates outside society's conventions, and that is not what female heroes should do" (xii). According to Victorian standards of propriety, women were paralleled with good, and seeking revenge and solving murders remained frightening situations better left to males.

According to Maureen Reddy in *Sisters in Crime*, "When the detective is a woman, the problems increase geometrically, because the author must then deal with the prevailing conception of women as a group belonging to the private sphere, while the public sphere of action belongs to men" (18). What Reddy argues is that when a woman assumes the role of detective, she rejects her restriction to the private sphere by assuming a masculine role in the public sphere. For example, Eleanor begins her sleuthing by leaving the safety of the private home--both the home of her companion in Berkshire, England, and later, her friends' home in London--and moving into the public world of shipping clerks and a drunken Frenchman as she investigates the events surrounding her father's suicide. With her creation of the female amateur detective, Braddon "violat[es] traditional gender boundaries [. . .]" (Reddy 19). Men, society is saying, have permission to sleuth; women do not. In "Amateur and Professional Detectives in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon," Jeanne Bedell claims that what is unusual about a female amateur detective is that "women are usually the victims, not the pursuers of criminals" (21). For

Eleanor, accepting the role of victim would mean that the men responsible for her father's death would go unpunished (since the authorities had directed little attention toward the failed gambler's suicide), so she rejects the boundaries set for women in her time and place, and, instead of being the hunted, Eleanor becomes the hunter.

In addition to the disturbing implications of a female who is a detective are Eleanor's "youthfulness" and "childlike innocence," which make her seemingly ill suited to detective work (*Eleanor's Victory* 100). What becomes evident in surveying Victorian detective fiction is that most of the notable sleuths are males who can travel freely and detect without disgrace, while the female detective is considered transgressive. In *Bloodhounds of Heaven*, a critical look at detectives in English fiction, Ian Ousby provides a representative description of the professional and amateur sleuths: "Physically, the typical detective is clean-shaven (so that he can conveniently assume facial disguises), impassive, and keen-eyed, suggestive of continual shrewd observation. Otherwise his appearance may be that of a resoundingly lower middle-class and mildly comic bureaucrat [. . .]. More usually he is deliberately ordinary-looking" (113). Ousby's "clean-shaven" detective indirectly calls attention to the fact that detecting was primarily a male occupation; however, in Braddon's unconventional novel of detection, she places a female amateur detective at the center of the mystery, demonstrating that female sleuths are capable as well as compassionate--a move that gained the public's acceptance of her transgressive heroine.

By stressing Eleanor's predicament, Braddon highlights the significant differences between male and female freedoms and ideas about justice. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the

male detective's gender and class allow him to travel freely throughout England as he engages in a calculated unveiling of Lady Audley's secret. Eleanor, on the other hand, cannot move freely because she is a woman, and she is not married. As Sally Mitchell notes, "Preserving a girl's ignorance [and, by extension, innocence] required continuous supervision and a carefully restricted physical environment" (*Fallen Angel* 170). Another factor that differentiates the two amateur detectives stems from their views about justice. Robert Audley, accustomed to his privileged social position, detects in order to expose Lady Audley as an imposter and punish her for infiltrating the respected class; Eleanor, constrained by her limited position, detects to fulfill the promise to her dead father's memory and protect the family patriarch's name.

Restricted by her gender and financial situation, Eleanor cannot effectively continue her sleuthing to uncover the truth about her father's death. Yet her circumstances change when Gilbert Monckton, her companion's guardian, proposes marriage, promising to make Eleanor "independent and secure" (*Eleanor's Victory* 176)--the two things Eleanor must be in order to assume the role of detective--and she agrees to his offer. For Eleanor, marriage to Gilbert also means that she can end her dependency on her friends and offer them some much-needed financial support. Eleanor's heart is not engaged when she accepts Gilbert's marriage proposal: "She only regarded him as an instrument which might happen to be of use to her" (*Eleanor's Victory* 170). Eleanor's limited freedom and her socioeconomic environment influence her actions, and she accepts Gilbert's marriage proposal in order to continue her detecting work. As Gilbert's

wife, she can return to Berkshire where she can observe, and eventually expose, Launcelot's duplicitous and criminal activities.

Gilbert, however, is operating under a very different set of ideas and expectations. Conditioned to believe "the legal and social fiction that matrimony merges two persons into one" (Mitchell, *Daily Life* 174), he is convinced that a woman's coveted role is that of wife and mother. According to Gilbert, marriage offers Eleanor the only possible option and prospect for a contented life. He tells her to "think how dreary and undefended your life must be, if you refuse my love and protection. Think of that, Eleanor. Ah! if you knew what a woman is when thrown upon the world *without* the shelter of a husband's love, you would think seriously" (*Eleanor's Victory* 175). Gilbert's passionate pronouncement is designed to convince himself that his wife is fortunate to marry him despite his overriding suspicion that to Eleanor their marriage was only an "advantageous bargain" (*Eleanor's Victory* 197).

Eleanor, fearlessly pursuing her adversaries, is ill prepared to accept the burden of building a strong marriage, and, through Eleanor's marriage to Gilbert, Braddon exposes one of the many problems associated with convenient marriages: Women married men because they needed money and freedom, not because they sought happiness within marriage. Gilbert marries Eleanor because he wants a conventional home and marriage, neither of which Eleanor can provide until she sees that her father's enemies are punished. As Mitchell explains, in Victorian England "the pure woman's life was supposed to be entirely centered on the home [with the wife] always obedient to her husband" (266). But as Calder notes, "Marriage is a matter of trade, and the marriage

contract is a commercial one" (108). With his marriage proposal, Gilbert unknowingly offers Eleanor the opportunity to pursue the men responsible for her father's death; by accepting, Eleanor can "go back to Hazelwood. She would have returned as a kitchen-maid, had the opportunity of doing so offered itself to her; and she was ready to return as Gilbert Monckton's wife" (*Eleanor's Victory* 176). Their marriage bargain fulfills Eleanor's need for money and autonomy and Gilbert's desire for a wife, but it devastates the emotional bond between Eleanor and the man who loves her.

Before long, Gilbert's idealized union with Eleanor self-destructs as she gradually transfers all of her attention to Launcelot's movements, hoping to uncover any action on his part that might expose him as the murderer. Gilbert's determination to retain the appearance of respectability is further threatened by Eleanor's obsessive interest in discovering who Maurice de Crespigny (the man who promised to leave his fortune to Eleanor's father) assigned to inherit his fortune. As Gilbert's distrust of Eleanor increases and he believes her motive for marrying him to be a mercenary one, he reproaches himself for expecting a happy, contented marriage:

Did not girls, situated as George Vane's daughter had been situated, marry for money, again and again, in these mercenary days? Who should know this better than Gilbert Monckton the solicitor, who had drawn up so many marriage settlements, been concerned in so many divorces, and assisted at so many matrimonial bargains, whose sordid motives were as undisguised as in any sale of cattle transacted in the purlieu of Smithfield? Who should know better than he, that beautiful and innocent girls every day bartered their beauty

and innocence for certain considerations set down by grave lawyers, and engrossed upon sheets of parchment at so much per sheet? (*Eleanor's Victory* 187)

Since Victorians valued marriage so highly, Braddon's word usage--"mercenary," "sordid," "sale," "transacted," "bartered"--reflects some sense of the damage inflicted on the institution of marriage when women are compelled to marry wealthy men in order to secure some financial and personal freedoms.

Eleanor's and Gilbert's positions in the marriage are not clearly defined since Eleanor marries for reasons other than love, and Gilbert marries without trust because he senses that Eleanor is hiding romantic feelings for Launcelot. Gilbert places the blame for their failed marriage on a fabricated relationship between Launcelot and Eleanor, a jealous reaction triggered by thoughts of his earlier failed relationship. Likewise, Eleanor knows that she is "too much tied and bound by the obligations of the past to be able to fulfil [sic] the duties of the present" (*Eleanor's Victory* 178). She convinces herself that she intends to fulfill her duty as Gilbert's wife after she exposes the men involved in her father's death. But she fraudulently hides her plan to avenge her father's death from her husband, causing Gilbert to be suspicious of her covert actions (*Eleanor's Victory* 179). Assuming that Gilbert will react just as Richard had earlier, Eleanor decides to keep her appetite for revenge a secret from her husband:

She would have spoken, perhaps, and confided at least some part of her secret to her husband, but she refrained from doing so: for might not he laugh at her, as Richard Thornton had done? Might not he, who had grown lately cold and

reserved in his manner towards her, sometimes even sarcastic and severe-- might not he sternly reprobate her mad desire for vengeance, and in some manner or other frustrate the great purpose of her life? (*Eleanor's Victory* 205)

Eleanor misunderstands Gilbert's detached responses, and Gilbert wrongly attributes Eleanor's secrecy to an attraction to the much younger Launcelot, since she spends so much of her time observing him.

As a lawyer who often dissolves marriages, Gilbert distrusts Eleanor because of his own insecurities about their marriage as well as his daily contact with the marriage business. Gilbert's mistrust of Eleanor stems from "the secret sorrow of [his] youth [that] had made him suspicious of all womanly truth and purity" (*Eleanor's Victory* 190). Deceived by the first woman he ever loved, Gilbert believes Eleanor will react as his first love did twenty years earlier. Consequently, the secrecy and suspicion caused by Eleanor's deception and sleuthing fosters the disconnectedness between husband and wife and accounts for much of their marital dissatisfaction.

Eleanor's single-minded devotion to her cause upsets her husband and estranges them. Gilbert, perceiving Eleanor's interest in Launcelot to be romantic and her concern about de Crespigny's will to be mercenary, confronts her:

Why should you be different from the rest of the world? It has been my error, my mad delusion, to think you so [. . .]. You are *not* different to the rest of the world. If other women are mercenary, you too are mercenary. You are not content with having sacrificed your inclination for the sake of making what

the world calls an advantageous marriage. You are not satisfied with having won a wealthy husband, and you seek to inherit Maurice de Crespigny's fortune. (*Eleanor's Victory* 259)

Eleanor's interest in de Crespigny's will, her clandestine snooping, and her covert observation of Launcelot increase Gilbert's distrust of her.

Furthermore, her previous affectionate feelings toward Gilbert are submerged beneath her need for revenge:

There had been a time--before the return of Launcelot Darrell--when a word of praise, an expression of friendliness or regard from Gilbert Monckton, had been very precious to her. She had never taken the trouble to analyze her feelings. That time, before the coming of the young man, had been the sunniest and most careless period of her youth. She had during that interval been false to the memory of her father--she had suffered herself to be happy. (*Eleanor's Victory* 175)

Eleanor struggles to ensnare her father's double-crossing acquaintances before she can fulfill her marriage promises to her suspicious husband. With the unmistakable shadows of her father's enemies haunting her, a congenial marriage becomes impossible.

When her marriage of convenience crumbles, she persists with her fraud by changing her name to prevent her husband from locating her, leaving her free to continue her sleuthing. What Braddon illustrates through her heroine's fraudulent actions is that "like any other group with limited control over their lives," as Perkin notes, "women have always resorted to deceit as a survival technique. In the Victorian age deceit in matters

large and small was a socially prescribed form of middle-class female behavior” (262).

As Perkin points out, Victorian women were educated and trained in the art of lying about their emotions, their thoughts, and their desires. Conditioned by years of enforced deceit at the behest of the dominant male culture, many women drew on “half-truths or evasions” to avoid disharmony in their marriages (Perkin 263).

This enforced dependency on males informs a significant number of Victorian novels written by women and presents a vivid description of women’s distaste for and subsequent rejection of their assigned role. In addressing the agenda behind some women’s novels of the nineteenth century, Showalter states: “Men, these novels are saying, must learn how it feels to be helpless and to be forced unwillingly into dependency” (*A Literature of Their Own* 152). The inescapable discontent in these fictional women’s lives often stems from male-enforced dependency--a dependence some men think women want--and accounts for much of the secrecy and deceit some women use in order to fulfill a perceived idea of the acceptable woman. In *Eleanor’s Victory*, Braddon shows how women like Eleanor are ill equipped to function effectively in a world in which they are not permitted to make decisions for themselves. Eleanor, for example, is unprepared to fulfill the duty she feels toward her dead father because she has been denied the skills to act alone and successfully; therefore, she must call upon her male friend for help. Her powerlessness to act unless aided by a male materializes in one of her many letters to Richard:

Help me, Richard. Come to me; help me to find proof positive of Launcelot Darrell’s guilt. You can help me, if you please. Your brain is clearer, your

perception quicker, than mine. I am carried away by my own passion--
 blinded by my indignation. You were right when you said I should never
 succeed in this work. I look to you to avenge my father's death. (*Eleanor's
 Victory* 211)

While Braddon eventually allows Eleanor to use her wits, her femininity, and her instincts to expose the deceitful people she encounters, she is not allowed to resolve her problems alone. Instead of single-handedly exposing the scheme that led to her father's suicide, she must yield to male strength and action to solve the mystery of her father's death. Eleanor remains on the sidelines as her male friend and her husband expose the men who caused her father's death. When at last Eleanor supplies proof of Launcelot's crimes--he cheated Eleanor's father of their money (an act that caused George Vane to commit suicide), he lied about a three-year working trip to India, he paid for a forged will that left de Crespigny's fortune to him instead of Eleanor, and he maneuvered to marry Laura to gain her fortune--she cannot administer the punishment she's craved for three years. Instead, she says,

Oh, my dear, dead father! [. . .] you did wrong yourself sometimes; and you
 were always kind and merciful to people. Heaven knows, I have tried to keep
 my oath; but I cannot--I cannot. It seemed so easy to imagine my revenge
 when it was far away: but now--it is too hard--it is too hard [. . .]. I am a poor
 helpless coward. I cannot carry out the purpose of my life. (*Eleanor's Victory*
 381)

Faced with her long anticipated triumph, Eleanor is unable to mete out punishment to her and her father's enemies. Braddon allows her heroine "only half a victory" because she fails to grant Eleanor the freedom to solve her problems alone (*Eleanor's Victory* 380). At the same time, moreover, her compassionate response to the men who caused her father's death speaks for women who project a strong, but charitable, manner in the face of adversity.

Braddon shows that when Eleanor is permitted to make her own decisions, she chooses the honorable resolution to the heinous crime committed against her father. When Launcelot is exposed as one of the guilty men, Eleanor refuses to destroy him, knowing that any action she takes against Launcelot will devastate his mother, and Eleanor does not want an innocent person to suffer. Faced with the opportunity she has sought for over three years, Eleanor falters and asks her husband for advice. Gilbert, contented and supportive after his earlier mistrust of his wife, tells her: "I will not advise you, my dear. To-night's business is of your own accomplishing. Your own heart must be your guide" (*Eleanor's Victory* 380). Permitted to voice the final verdict against her father's enemy, Eleanor metes out feminine justice, the equitable and honorable course of action without male intervention: she pardons her father's foe. "Having once forgiven her father's enemy [. . .] in all Berkshire there was not a happier woman than Gilbert Monckton's beautiful young wife" (*Eleanor's Victory* 382, 383). As Winifred Hughes argues in *The Maniac in the Cellar*, "Eleanor's decision to sacrifice her purpose and to forgive her father's foe when she has him at her mercy constitutes her ultimate victory"

(153). Eleanor has gained in maturity, and her newfound confidence in herself and her marriage seemingly account for her relative strength and her apparent happiness.

Eleanor confirms through her compassionate response to her father's enemies that if women are permitted a more active role in society and greater involvement in their interaction with males, male and female relationships will be strengthened. As Sally Mitchell claims in *The Fallen Angel*, "The individualized woman--self-supporting, self-disciplined and responsible for her own moral choices--is, finally, a person" (160). Seemingly, Eleanor, like Aurora, is permitted to live happily ever after because "Eleanor's Victory was a *proper* womanly conquest" (*Eleanor's Victory* 383--emphasis added). Her quest for revenge is ended, and she assumes the role of dutiful wife. The resolved mystery surrounding her father's sudden death, so destructive to her relationship with Gilbert at first, seemingly reinforces her marriage. But the contradictions between the ideal marriage based on love and spiritual union and the reality of marriage based on economy, suggest that many women like Eleanor married far more often for financial security than for love. The end of the novel dispels Gilbert's jealousy and suspicions, Eleanor becomes the model wife, and Gilbert apparently becomes the model husband, but Braddon subtle critique of Victorian marriages exposes the fraudulence within the fundamental institution of marriage.

As in *Aurora Floyd*, the reader is left to reflect on this marriage of convenience between the energetic Eleanor and the authoritarian Gilbert. The apparently happy conclusion Braddon creates is a smokescreen seemingly devised to mislead the critics who were adamantly against women operating outside of the feminine ideal (Johnson

261-262). What Braddon's novel demonstrates is that women are capable of moving outside of the boundaries considered safe and respectable according to dominant culture's standard, and Eleanor's eventual actions imply that women are capable decision-makers and loyal caregivers when they are permitted some freedoms. Significantly, *Eleanor's Victory* suggests that if women are allowed to make some of their own decisions, earn an education, and possess property of their own, the lives and relationships of both men and women will profit by the changes.

Chapter 6

The Sensation Influence

The sensation heroines of the Victorian era, whether they were excused or punished, were almost never what they seemed. As Braddon's novels suggested, the ideal woman was, at best, a patriarchal construct and many women, forced to fit within its narrow confines, felt compelled to disguise themselves behind fictitious names and secretive pasts. These disruptive female characters subverted the illusion of the feminine ideal by outwardly presenting the contented, submissive, good woman, while underneath their fraudulent disguises lurked women capable of bigamy, deceit, and murder. The effect of this enforced doubleness was that these fraudulent women disrupted the conventional hierarchy, which in turn threatened the established domestic order.

Braddon's Lady Audley, the outwardly angelic but dangerous female protagonist creates consecutive fraudulent identities, crosses gender and class boundaries, and resorts to murder in order to protect the new life she has created for herself. Aurora Floyd, Braddon's pampered and privileged heroine, rejects gender and class restrictions by marrying and later hiding her marriage to her father's servant; unlike Lady Audley, Aurora's social position remains intact as long as she acquiesces to the demands of the males in her life. Braddon's Eleanor Vane, one of the first fictional female detectives, engages in fraud when she marries a man who can offer her financial security and

freedom to sleuth, thus chastising a society that limits women's opportunities to earn a living when they are left without financial support. The marriage business, as it is played out in Braddon's three novels discussed here, advanced the social comment that women's submissive roles encouraged--even demanded--that a woman hide her feelings and emotions under a fraudulent façade designed primarily in order to secure an acceptable husband.

Braddon's novels also provided a harsh critique of Victorian class- and gender-based conventions by presenting the distinct division between how wealthy and poor people, especially women, were dealt with by society. Her fiction established a number of parallels between her affluent and indigent female characters. They shared many of the same characteristics and they faced many of the same problems, but, in addition to their gender, their class determined their actions, how the public viewed their actions, and how they were punished or rewarded. And while Braddon suppressed her heroines in the end, her narratives posed a threat to the dominant gender and social class by criticizing the subservient roles delegated to women and denouncing the expectation that they perform within conventional roles. As Braddon's fiction suggested, women often assumed fraudulent roles in order to meet the demands of the dominant culture code, and, to gain financial security, these female frauds engaged in marriages of convenience. Braddon's novels offered a harsh criticism of the woman's predicament that forced women from all social classes to marry men with money or respectability in order to obtain a secure place in society. While the challenge against patriarchy accounted for much of the angry response to Braddon's sensation novels, the brunt of the critical outrage stemmed from

her sensation novels' problematic representation of women as unfeminine, uncontrollable, and dangerous.

On the surface, Braddon's female characters seemingly succumb to the dominant Victorian precept that they must be domestic, conventional, and controlled, or they must be insane; in reality, these sensation heroines castigated a society that failed to value women's intelligence or abilities. These unconventional female characters showed how some women felt compelled to assume multiple identities in order to fit the role expected of them and to avoid punishment, aware that a threat to the dominant social order would mean submission, incarceration, or both. Braddon's sensation heroines challenged the cultural roles for women by seemingly performing within the conventional subservient role as daughters, wives, and mothers, all the while concealing their intense feelings of discontent beneath a subtle challenge against patriarchy. By questioning the dominant culture's problematic but conventional roles for women, Braddon's sensation novels exposed the depth of defiance many women felt about the unspoken behavioral code forced on them by the limiting structures of Victorian society.

Essentially, Braddon's fiction cast the blame for disruptive women onto the paternalistic and class-conscious society that forced them to imitate the domestic ideal. Her novels also emphasized the powerlessness many women felt as victims of the separate and absurd standards by which they were judged. As Showalter points out,

the sensationalists made crime and violence domestic, modern, and suburban; but their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women's dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.

These women novelists made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction to suit their own imaginative impulses, by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape. (*A Literature of Their Own* 158-59)

Another reason that accounts for many readers' compassionate reactions toward sympathetic heroines is that they "recognized themselves in [. . .] outspoken heroines" (175).

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter argues that while these disruptive female characters echoed women's feelings of disillusionment, frustration, and anger, "the sensationalists could not bring themselves to undertake a radical inquiry into the role of women" (180). But as Joan Perkin points out, "Few women writers used fiction to advocate open revenge against patriarchy, and they would not have been able to sell their work if they had" (271). Showalter admonishes Braddon for being "careful" and for ensuring that her heroines are "punished, repentant, and drained of all energy" (180) at the end of each novel. However, during the 1860s, Braddon's female frauds defied the restricted roles for women; even as "the good were rewarded and the bad punished," many readers identified with the female characters, even when they committed criminal acts (Casey 73). Weary of trying to fulfill the role of domestic ideal, women developed their own ideas about their places in society. According to Ellen Miller Casey, "Braddon's sensation novels were responding to their readers' desires rather than defying them" (73).

Braddon's many supporters and defenders included an inordinate number of readers who intuitively understood her message. As the critical storm raged around Braddon and her provocative novels, Charles Reade's tribute to her revealed a much different Braddon than her critics would have readers know. Reade described Braddon as thus: "I don't know where to find a better woman. Industrious, self-denying, gentle, affectionate, talented, and utterly unassuming, a devoted daughter, faithful wife, loving mother, and kindly stepmother" (qtd. in Wolff 250). In the dedication of one of his books, Reade writes: "To my friend, M. E. Braddon, as a slight mark of respect for her private virtues and public talents" (qtd. in Wolff 250). Contemporary Arnold Bennett described Braddon as thus: "She is a part of England [. . .] she has woven herself into it; without her it would be different" (qtd. in Wolff 2). Perhaps the most telling compliment to Braddon's kindness and integrity comes from her son, William Maxwell who, recalling his mother's prolific novel writing throughout his life, explained how she

Got through her immense amount of work as if by magic. She never seemed to be given any time in which to do it. She had no stated hours, no part of the day to be held secure from disturbances and intrusions. She was never inaccessible. Everybody went uninvited to her library, we children, the servants, importunate visitors. I don't remember that she ever refused to come away from the quiet dignified room if we asked her. And she never failed to be available as a companion to my father when he wanted her, and no matter for how long. (qtd. in Wolff 261)

Braddon's commitment to her family, her work, and her public never waned, even at the height of the critical furor that surrounded her novels in the late 1860s.

Although the sensation novel was in vogue and in demand in the 1860s, by the mid-1870s, the shifting balance of power--from accepted subservience to a pronounced movement toward social change--emerged in part from women's determination to make decisions that affected their lives. Braddon's own life was calmer: she and Maxwell were able to marry in 1874, and she had made the transition from sensation novelist to domestic fiction writer. As Casey notes, "Braddon moved in accordance with popular taste from the sensation novel to the domestic one" (74). Her sharp social observation, finely drawn character sketches, and humor became constant elements in her novels after the 1860s. She replaced her moral fervor with self-satire and subtle public criticism, and, for the most part, Braddon had deserted her books of crime and criminals in favor of historical novels and social satires. The critical reaction against Braddon's novels declined, even though she persisted in perpetuating the dissolution of the patriarchal and class-conscious society, but critics still found plenty of situations and elements in Braddon's work on which to vent their critical inclinations. However, by the late 1870s, she had become "an admired and beloved member of the London literary, theatrical, artistic, and social world," a reputation that remained with her throughout her career (Wolff 9).

Following the publication of Robert Lee Wolff's biography, scholars began to take another look at Braddon's works. Indeed, the decade of the 1990s saw a decided increase in demands for Braddon's books, and, to meet the demand, additional Braddon novels

continue to be reprinted, suggesting that many of Braddon's supporters look beneath the sensational elements in her novels to discover the real truth that Braddon demanded to be heard--that women have the same capabilities as men and that poverty speaks volumes about the lengths and degrees people will go to avoid degradation and destitution.

Through her own life, as an actress, a novelist, a playwright, a poet, a publisher, a devoted friend, mother, wife, and daughter, Braddon confirmed that women were capable of far greater accomplishments than society was willing to accept. Her novels suggest the disquieting likelihood that many women were unhappy with their subservient roles and realized they were barred from realizing their full potential.

Throughout the final decades of the 1800s and into the early 1900s, Braddon's novels remained in print for the ever-increasing numbers of readers. Today, seven of her novels, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, *Eleanor's Victory*, *The Doctor's Wife*, *John Marchmont's Legacy*, *Vixen*, and *The Fatal Three*, remain widely available, introduced by scholars such as Jenny Bourne Taylor, David Skilton, and P. D. Edwards. Adding to the growing body of criticism is *The Sensation Novel* by Lyn Pykett and *Beyond Sensation*, a compilation that "marks a coming of age in Braddon studies" (Pykett, "Afterword" 277). While a number of studies conducted about Braddon's early works, especially in recent years, point out the significance of her social message and the number of anxieties her novels articulated about the changing gender roles in mid-Victorian England, there is much more to be done. Braddon's letters, diaries, and her later novels have been generally neglected. According to Wolff, Braddon's letters to her friend and mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (that extend from the early 1860s until his death in

1873), and her diaries (that encompass the years from 1880 until 1914) reveal the emotions, feelings, and aspirations of a beleaguered but persistent writer (262-63).

Many of her most widely acclaimed novels were also ignored until the publication of *Beyond Sensation*, a critical work that discusses some of Braddon's most celebrated fiction: *The Lady's Mile* (1866), *Vixen* (1879), and *Just As I Am* (1880), which contain Braddon's harsh social satire and critical comment on the rich. In *Strangers and Pilgrims* (1873) and *An Open Verdict* (1878), Braddon satirizes the hypocrisy of middle-class church values (Wolff 241). And the novel often regarded as Braddon's best, *Joshua's Haggard's Daughter* (1876), is a classical tragedy often compared favorably with George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* for its character sketches, its psychological exploration of the human mind, and what Wolff calls its "masterpiece" quality (257).

By the 1990s, scholars interested in sensation novels and Braddon's work in general demanded reprints of Braddon's novels and, to meet the demand, additional novels continue to be reprinted. Yet most Braddon scholars agree with Wolff's claim that "she has yet to be properly appreciated" (14). Perhaps the words chiseled into Braddon's memorial tablet can speak more closely to the legacy Braddon left behind: "A writer of rare and refined scholarship who gave profitable and pleasurable literature to countless readers in her library of three score & ten works of fiction" (Wolff 402).

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