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Power, Domesticity, and Insanity: Gender Roles in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

by

Danielle Hestand

Under the Direction of Paul Schmidt, PhD and Tanya Caldwell, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* typically focuses on Lady Audley. This thesis adds to the scholarship by analyzing the main characters Robert, George, Alicia, and Clara through a feminist lens in order to confound contemporary notions about gender roles. I argue that Braddon gives Robert and George traits often associated with women in the Victorian period, such as intense emotions, to overturn assumptions that men should not have feminine traits. I then claim that Braddon bestows on Alicia and Clara some characteristics associated with men to suggest that women should also not have to obey all gender roles.

INDEX WORDS: Feminism, Sensation Novel, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Gender, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Historicism

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2022

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May 2022

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother.

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I would like to thank Dr. Schmidt, Dr. Caldwell, and Dr. Richardson for their valuable help.

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INTRODUCTION

Mary Elizabeth's Braddon's thrilling 1862 sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* was extremely popular in the mid-Victorian period. Within only three months of its release, it was printed eight times (Schroeder 9-10). The sensation fiction genre, influenced by the Gothic, deals with scandalous events and attempts to produce intense emotional reactions, and these novels covered themes such as crime and infidelity – topics that shocked or offended some Victorian audiences. Ann Cvetkovich, however, believes that sensation novels prioritize “affective responses” rather than challenging social norms (23). While these novels aim to elicit strong emotional reactions, they arguably still engage with social ordeals and present the need for societal changes.

Lady Audley's Secret questions assumptions about gender. In Braddon's novel, Lady Audley marries Sir Michael Audley, but she conceals her prior marriage. She trades the identity Helen Talboys for Lucy Graham to keep others from discovering her bigamy. Additionally, she experiences scorn from her daughter-in-law Alicia who is near her own age. Initially, Lady Audley is unaware of a friendship between her first husband George and her nephew-in-law Robert. When George accompanies Robert to Audley Court, Lady Audley attempts to murder George to protect her secret. She fails, yet George disappears.

Believing that Lady Audley may have killed George, Robert investigates to uncover his potential murder. Even though everyone else believes that George has disappeared to Australia, Robert persists in his efforts. Robert locates George's estranged father who refuses to help, but Robert also meets George's sister Clara. She becomes his romantic interest and insists on assisting him with discovering George's fate. Finally, Robert proves that Lady Audley tried to murder George. With Sir Michael Audley's permission, Robert convinces Dr Mosgrave to place

Lady Audley in asylum. Additionally, Robert discovers that George is still alive. Robert and Clara marry, and Alicia marries Sir Harry Towers – a man she rejects earlier in the novel.

Throughout *Lady Audley's Secret*, the four main characters Robert, George, Clara, and Alicia challenge gender roles. For instance, these characters all have different relationships to the domestic realm than their genders would lead to expecting. Robert and George are more obsessed with the home than would seem masculine, and Clara and Alicia have fewer domestic skills than many Victorians demanded of women.¹ The men sometimes do not have the intellectual abilities men were assumed to possess, but Alicia and Clara often have cognitive capacities thought of as belonging to men. Additionally, Robert and George spend more time feeling emotions than societal expectations for men often allowed.² Consequently, these characters provide insight about the domestic and public spheres in the Victorian period. They are mostly neglected in the scholarship and appear much less frequently than Lady Audley.³ As the protagonist, Robert receives more attention than the other three. Despite analyzing Robert's role more frequently, scholars generally apply queer theory to Robert.⁴ While these studies are insightful and important, I want to focus on his deviation from gender expectations. Even though George has a smaller role in the novel, he still has a major influence on the narrative and enables Braddon to question stereotypes about masculinity. Alicia's frequent appearances in the book

¹ Elaine Hartnell shows that Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem "The Angel in the House" involves "a prescription for certain kinds of female behavior" (466). According to Hartnell, the poem suggests that Victorian women should be naïve and illogical (466). She states that "Patmore's fictional poet-narrator finds women fascinating only in proportion to their ability to" benefit their husbands and care for the home (461). The women in *Lady Audley's Secret*, by contrast, contradict the claim that married women exist primarily to transform domestic life into a haven for men.

² Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights* is an example of a Victorian literary character who is traditionally masculine. He is more selfish than Robert and George, lacks their dedication to the home, is more aggressive, and often shows fewer emotions.

³ Critics who focus on Lady Audley include Lynette Felber, Lynn M. Voskuil, and Karen Chase and Michael Levenson.

⁴ Scholars that analyze Robert using queer studies include Jennifer S. Kushnier, Ann Cvetkovich, and Richard Nemesvari.

render her general exclusion from the scholarship surprising. Although Clara is not present until the latter half of the book, she still has a substantial role. Braddon gives Alicia and Clara a mixture of masculine and feminine traits that also question gender roles.

I wish to add to the scholarship through my study of these characters. I use a feminist lens and incorporate history to examine the ways *Lady Audley's Secret* questions gender roles. The first chapter explores Robert and George. I demonstrate that they display both traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics and show that Braddon uses them to protest Victorian gender roles. After analyzing Robert and George, I focus on Alicia and Clara in the second chapter. Throughout the chapter, I argue that Braddon gives her female characters some traits associated with men to suggest that masculine behaviors can also be acceptable for women. Additionally, I claim that Braddon weaves both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits into their personalities to interrogate the idea that people always adhere closely to any particular gender expectations.

1 CHAPTER ONE

Robert and George both deviate significantly from expected gender norms; they both experience emotions and mental states that the Victorians typically assigned to women. At the same time, the Victorians would consider their preference for domestic life at the exclusion of the public feminine. These traits operate alongside traditionally masculine characteristics such as when George commands social situations or excels at games. Through their significant roles, these two characters demonstrate that Braddon does not seek to reinforce Victorian patriarchal assumptions in *Lady Audley's Secret*. In this chapter, I argue that by giving these men a mixture of masculine and feminine traits, Braddon challenges Victorian conventions about gender expectations in *Lady Audley's Secret*; I also demonstrate that Braddon indicates a need for broader acceptance of traits that are not gender-conforming by presenting Robert and George positively when they defy gender roles.

Despite their important roles in the novel, the scholarship does not thoroughly explore the characters Robert and George. Scholars who comment on Robert, such as Richard Nemesvari, Ann Cvetkovich, and Jennifer S. Kushnier, generally conduct queer studies interpretations. While insightful, they do not include other aspects of Robert's character. By contrast, the scholarship lacks in-depth character studies of George. That circumstance leaves the opportunity to investigate how Robert and George defy gender expectations within Braddon's novel.

Throughout the novel, Braddon uses these men to demonstrate that the behaviors of people or the amount of power they have within society does not always match Victorian gender expectations. Many of these two men's behaviors would have been considered feminine in the nineteenth century. For instance, George's emotions often fluctuate or become difficult for him to control. Robert's passiveness is also a trait many Victorians thought was unmanly. Besides

giving George frequently changing emotions and making Robert submissive, Braddon uses the two characters to question claims that men and women had different intellectual capacities and that women were less mentally stable than men. Braddon gives Robert and George multiple characteristics that make them less masculine to a Victorian audience. They both enable Braddon to question Victorian gender stereotypes.

At the same time as they possess other stereotypically feminine traits, they both prefer domestic life which many Victorians associated with femininity. Even George's involvement in Victorian imperialism allows Braddon to interrogate understandings of gender because it leads to him desiring the home intensely but interferes with his ability to function as a family member. Robert and George are frequently within homes and generally prefer them to public spaces. George longs for his wife and child, but he fails to successfully perform male duties within the home. Many Victorians would have considered George responsible for his failure to provide the financial resources needed for his family or to recover from the nervous disorder he displays signs of. When men suffered from some psychological disorders, many Victorian doctors thought that they caused it themselves by working much more than was healthy for them, but they were expected to become cured by having a long enough break from working (Oppenheim 152-155). The Victorians also often considered death or monetary distress reasonable causes (Oppenheim 155). The length of time that George's grief continues to overwhelm him, however, would make Braddon's audience more likely to view his behaviors as feminine. His distress simultaneously only arrives because of his retreat from the domestic to an adventure for financial gain primarily for men. Additionally, Robert frequently progresses in solving the mystery about George within the home and retreats from most public spaces. When they conform to their gender roles too strictly to their gender roles without consideration, such as when George

abandons domesticity, they generally either suffer or behave in unsympathetic ways. Braddon overturns Victorian ideas about gender by rewarding deviations from gender scripts.

Through George's frequent thoughts about his wife and his distress, Braddon highlights his obsession with domesticity and intense emotions that many Victorians considered excessive for men. Braddon demonstrates George's fixation on the home through his language and actions:

‘What a fool!’ he cried, striking his clenched fist upon the side of the vessel,
 ‘what a fool I am to be frightened at this! Why do you come and say these things to me? Why do you come and terrify me out of my senses, when I am going straight home to the woman I love; to a girl whose heart is as true as the light of heaven; and in whom I no more expect to find any change than I do to see another sun rise in to-morrow's sky? Why do you come and try to put such fancies into my head, when I am going home to my darling wife?’ (21)

His emotions overwhelm him as the woman he speaks to causes him to fear not seeing his wife again, and the novel presents him as less capable of logic. Many Victorians considered unregulated emotions feminine.⁵ When he describes himself as “a fool,” he recognizes his failure to adhere to ideals of intellect for men (21). This effect is heightened as he says it twice. This section also contains dramatic irony since George believes that she is “a girl whose heart is as true as the light of heaven” (21). She, instead, deceives him by secretly marrying another man in his absence and faking her death. Her betrayal of him further overturns Victorian assumptions about gender, and multiple Victorian scholars comment on Lady Audley's bigamy. Maia

⁵ Oppenheim discusses how Victorian nervous illnesses, such as hysteria, were seen as more reminiscent of women even if men experienced them (141). They sought explanations such as laboring too much which helped them appear less frail than women (152). When considering these explanations, Braddon probably bestows emotional responses associated with women on George in part because her Victorian audience could choose to view that as occurring due to George exerting himself too much in the process of becoming wealthier before returning to his impoverished wife and son.

Mcaleavey explains that the Matrimonial Clauses Act of 1857 made it easier for a greater number of British people to obtain divorces (6). According to Mcaleavey, that circumstance contributed to novels featuring bigamy to investigate changing norms around divorce (14). Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder make a similar argument stating that Braddon keeps Lady Audley from even considering divorce due to “the ambiguous consequences of that legislation” (37). Their observations are significant because they illuminate how lasting marriage became steadily less guaranteed. In a novel that questions gender norms, Braddon, of course, interrogates one of the most prevalent social institutions at the time – one which often confined women and that Victorian culture tied their identities to.⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggests that women authors in 1800s literature treat “houses as primary symbols of female imprisonment” (85). They explain that being trapped inside of homes led to “their rebellion against being duty bound” (84). As George thinks about the home, he views his wife as belonging completely to the domestic sphere. He, instead, becomes imprisoned in domestic thoughts about matrimony.

When Braddon addresses the home that Gilbert and Gubar describe women feeling confined within, she attaches the men to domestic life more than the women. The men do not feel trapped as Gilbert and Gubar describe women within homes in nineteenth-century fiction

⁶ Stickney Ellis, for instance, idolizes domestic life for British women in her 1838 *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*. She asserts that “women of England . . .” have “the grand privilege of being better instructed than those of any other country in the minutiae of domestic comfort” and “have obtained a degree of importance in society beyond what their unobtrusive virtues would” indicate (57). In other words, most of women’s value derives from their ability to properly care for the home and family. She ignores whether the women themselves might consider any of their other qualities equally important. By saying “women of England” as if speaking for all people in the country, she illustrates a prevalent Victorian assumption that women belong primarily in the home. As another example, John Ruskin in the 1865 *Sesame and Lilies* also presents domestic duties as more important for women than for men. Even though he claims to think of life inside and outside of the home as equally significant for men and women, his words advocate for an unequal distribution of domestic tasks for men and women. He states that “a woman has a personal work or duty, relating to her own home, and a public work or duty, which is also the expansion of that” (306). When Ruskin places domestic obligations earlier in the sentence than any outside of the home, he suggests that he still thinks that a woman should consider the home first. Calling her other tasks an “expansion of that,” Ruskin makes it sound as if a woman’s identity is constructed nearly entirely around domesticity reinforcing the gender roles that he first acts like he will challenge.

feeling, but Robert and George, instead, appear most satisfied in the feminine realm. The home represents freedom from Victorian masculine roles for them. George, however, projects his assumptions about the ideal domestic life onto Lady Audley believing her to embody gender roles perfectly when she is not actually a devoted wife or mother. Through constantly doting on his wife, George places himself in the stereotypically feminine realm by revealing his deep desire for domestic bliss. He sees himself as equally responsible for their marriage's success, and he knows his wife's happiness is as important as his own. In George's declaration that he is "going straight home" to his wife, he recognizes his obligation to provide companionship to Lady Audley (21). Rather than expecting his wife to simply manage his own joy, he longs to contribute to a rewarding partnership. He, therefore, challenges the idea that the goal of Victorian marriage is primarily for a wife to guarantee a man's contentment. Additionally, his questions reflect his inability to master himself in the moment.⁷ Despite being closer to Victorian feminine ideals than Lady Audley, George still tries to think of her as traditionally feminine. He cannot completely relinquish himself from cultural ideals of masculinity that assumed men's ownership of women.⁸ Through blaming her for his emotions and "the fancies in my head," he tries to reassert the idea that she ultimately causes his undesirable thoughts (21). Despite blaming her, George only experiences his suffering because of his own choice to venture entirely into the

⁷ Braddon also gives George hints of what the Victorians considered moral insanity. Valerie Pedlar suggests that a "distinction" existed "between physical and moral causes" of insanity with the latter occurring through extreme emotional responses (3). James Prichard's 1835 book *Treatise on Insanity* used the phrase "moral insanity" and introduced many Victorians to the concept (Pedlar 3). Oppenheim explains that when Victorians mentioned "moral causes of insanity, they referred to emotional trauma" (41). George's separation from his wife is a type of event that the Victorians would see as emotionally destructive enough to trigger it for him. Even by providing this event as a cause for George, Braddon still links him with femininity by presenting him controlling his emotions less than the what the Victorian ideal for men was.

⁸ As his wife, Lady Audley is legally his property. In her 1854 *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women; Together with a Few Observations Thereon*, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon laments how women lose their rights to property and their own finances if they marry anyone (296). George's behavior reflects these legal dynamics that treat a woman as if a man possesses her.

masculine public and leave the feminine domestic sphere. Even while away from his home, he still expects her to fulfill her duties to keep the home magical and ensure his happiness. The aspect of his conformity that causes him pain is his belief that she should be responsible for managing his happiness as the one who primarily handles domestic life. His non-conformity, however, in being exceedingly obsessed with his wife allows Braddon to suggest that this amount of emotion is not exclusive to women.

While Braddon demonstrates the significance of the home for George, she also bestows behaviors on him strongly associated with Victorian men. The narrator reveals his masculine traits that exist alongside feminine characteristics:

This George Talboys was the life and soul of the vessel; nobody knew who or what he was, or where he came from, but every body liked him. He sat at the bottom of the dinner-table, and assisted the captain in doing the honours of the friendly meal. He opened the champagne bottles, and took wine with every one present; he told funny stories, and led the laugh himself with such a joyous peal, that the man must have been a churl who could not have laughed for pure sympathy. He was a capital hand at speculation and ving-et-un, and all the merry round games, which kept the little circle round the cabin lamp so deep in innocent amusement, that a hurricane might have howled overhead without their hearing it; but he freely owned that he had no talent for whist, and that he didn't know a knight from a castle upon the chessboard. (17-18)

As “the life and the soul of the vessel,” George exhibits a masculine public persona engaging with the world outside the home. Everyone’s appreciation shows his success. Since he assumes control, he initially behaves in a manner that distances him from feminine traits in novels. Jane

Wood reveals that the Victorians expected women to engage in “self-effacement and passivity” as “signs of normative . . . femininity” (31). This standard for women finds reinforcement often in Victorian literature which often reflects the social norms of the time. Beth Newman explains, “Well into the 1860s and 1870s the plots of canonical novels tend to reward the woman who repudiates self-display and punish those who do not” (21). While Newman focuses more on women’s appearance, the argument that they are punished for defying social conventions within novels still applies. Through having George participate in the opposite of these feminine behaviors, Braddon distinguishes his actions enough from women’s actions to appease her audience. He does not yet isolate himself and avoid the public.

This scenario parallels a man’s expected role in the household since he “led the laugh” (18). John Tosh points out that “manliness” often required behaving in whatever ways were considered to oppose the expected behaviors of women who were required to not assert themselves which would lead it to follow that men were expected to (11). Since no one knows his origins, he also removes himself from a family connection that could link him to femininity.⁹ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson point out that the home held importance for all Victorians but also state that a woman “was expected to be the mistress of household matter” (11). Consequently, a man risked ridicule if he showed few interests outside of domestic life. Drinking freely also signals George’s masculinity.¹⁰ By making him also skillful at some of the games, she highlights his intelligence. The Victorians generally considered women’s brains less

⁹ While Victorian men could use family status to define their masculinity, George forfeits that possibility due to his wife who his father considers too low status to uphold their legacy as Rachel Heinrichs discusses. According to Heinrichs, George “defines his value as husband, father, and man by his ability to provide for his family through work” rather than status (104). George’s family history, instead, would be less likely to lead everyone to consider him masculine as a result of being disowned.

¹⁰ Women frequently participated in the temperance movement. The presence of organizations such as the 1876 British Women’s Temperance Association demonstrates its connections to Victorian femininity (Liggins 614-615).

sophisticated than men's brains.¹¹ As a result, Braddon introduces George with enough masculine behaviors to not shock her audience too much before she challenges their thinking about gender.

Even as Braddon gives George masculine traits, she mingles them with feminine ones. Words such as "pure" and "innocent" link him to Victorian femininity (18). Braddon simultaneously places him in domestic roles by having him help with the food which connects him to the home rendering his personality more feminine. His struggle to understand some of the games detracts from his superiority at others. The Victorians considered men to have superior reasoning skills (Malane 22), but George does not consistently match that requirement. Nolan Boyd's understanding of Lady Audley illuminates George's embrace of some feminine traits. Boyd claims that "Lady Audley . . . poses a queer challenge to patriarchal and heteronormative discourses" through not behaving how Victorians expected women to (409). George, likewise, does not follow the codes of masculinity perfectly which also challenges the dominant hierarchies expecting men to have higher social standing than women but requiring them to follow strict gender roles to accomplish that task. Unlike Lady Audley, George continues to be able to operate fully within society by the novel's ending making him a character who Braddon rewards in spite of his non-conformity. Braddon presents him as a sympathetic character in

¹¹ For instance, Herman Schaafhausen claimed in the mid-nineteenth century that female brains were less developed and more childlike (Malane 7). Additionally, Henry Maudsley argues in *Sex in Mind and Sex in Education* in 1874 that education could hazard women's health and distract them from their domestic duties (198-9). When Braddon gives George some intellectual skills, she incorporates her awareness of the expectations for men to display intelligence. Of course, some people disagreed with the dominant narrative about women's intelligence. Elizabeth Garret Anderson disputes Maudsley's conclusions in "Sex in Mind and Education: A Reply". Other women also entered the debate about Maudsley's essay. Mary Chapman explains, "Crucially, the discussion of Maudsley's article in non-specialist periodicals enabled women to have their views heard as, unlike the medical journals of the time, these publications were open to submissions from female authors" (405). This scenario reveals that enough opposing view points existed for people to wish to discuss them, but that narrative did not receive the same level of promotion. Since the men controlling the scientific discourse presented women as less intelligent, the women who believed in similar cognitive capabilities had fewer opportunities to sway opinions.

moments when he defies these stereotypes indicating that she interrogates gender expectations within her novel.

After George's interactions with others aboard the ship reveals his masculine and feminine traits, his lack of expected intellect is prominent. The narrator exposes flaws in George's self education in this description:

Indeed, Mr. Talboys was by no means too learned a gentleman. The pale governess had tried to talk to him about fashionable literature, but George had only pulled his beard, and stared very hard at her, saying occasionally, 'Ah, yes!' and, 'To be sure, ha! (18)

This language conflates George's limited educational accomplishments with those many Victorians thought the female brain had. Braddon's choice to render him less well-read and less well-educated than the woman he speaks to shows his failures in the masculine pursuit of acquiring knowledge. George's frequent expressions of agreement interspersed with no dissent or opinions of his own suggests his behaviors are more stereotypically feminine in this instance. His minimal speech reflects the inadequate knowledge he demonstrates and seems strange given his college degree. Since it does not complement his apparent education level, his college degree has another function in the novel and does not just explain how he knows Robert. According to Jennifer S. Kushnier, Robert's "Eton connection is central to the homoerotic issues in the novel *because* Robert was a student of Eton college" (61). Kushnier reveals that Eton allowed men to have feelings for or engage in romantic or sexual behaviors with other men (64). Even though Kushnier focuses on the significance of this circumstance for Robert's character,¹² it arguably

¹² Richard Nemesvari and Ann Cvetkovich also investigate Robert's attraction to George. Nemesvari even considers it "essential to Braddon's feminist critique of the roles and behaviors forced upon women by men" (516).

extends to George. Even though George's feelings about Robert center friendship rather than sexual attraction, having as his close friend a man who is attracted to him also overturns understandings of gender roles given the heteronormativity within Victorian culture. Being pursued, even if to uncover details of his murder, casts him in the role of a woman.

Besides demonstrating the educational attainment associated with women, George also displays a range of emotional expression the Victorians thought belonged to women. Further into George's conversation, the narrator declares, "The young man suddenly changed his attitude, and turned his face full upon his companion, with a look of alarm. She saw in the pale light that the colour had faded from his cheek" (20). The changing appearance of his face shows an emotional display that was considered more acceptable for women. On one hand, George's visible signs of distress show the subtle power this woman holds over him as she controls the conversation's emotional tone and unintentionally provokes physiological reactions from him. On the other hand, the "alarm" mentioned also distances him from the degree of reason that men were expected to have. The Victorians saw emotional expression as feminine and saw it as distant from reason. Rachel Malane explains that the categories of "emotion versus reason and of the male mind versus the female mind became inextricably bound together such that a reference to the two types of psychological function was simultaneously a reference to the distinct mental inclinations of men and women" (22). In other words, people could decipher whether someone meant a man's or woman's cognitive processes simply based on whether the person mentioned feelings or logical thinking. The public often saw male and female brains as more unique than similar.

By making George express so much emotion, Braddon portrays him in a way likely to make her Victorian audience think of behaviors as reminiscent of women.¹³ The Schroeders, however, suggest that the marriages of both George and Sir Michael Audley indicate “the patriarchy’s blind infatuation with its own creation, the ideal woman” (42).¹⁴ They suggest that this scenario is a mistake of the men in the novel. Even with it being a pattern amongst the men, the Victorians likely would still have considered George’s emotional behavior excessive. Additionally, the slight conformity on George’s part regarding who he is attracted to is also one of the features that the novel presents as condemned since marrying this woman is the most unwise decision he makes in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. By giving George behaviors associated with women, Braddon contributes to normalizing men embodying both traditionally masculine and feminine traits rather than remaining confined by traditional ideas about gender. She simultaneously challenges Victorian assumptions about gender roles by having Lady Audley trick George through her apparent conformity to both women’s roles and beauty standards.

Through continuing to show his feelings about his behavior in this conversation, George shows how he actually causes harm when he adheres too much to societal expectations. He states, “My pretty little wife! My gentle, innocent, loving, little wife! Do you know, Miss

¹³ The Victorians generally held an extremely essentialist view of gender. They thought that men’s and women’s brains were drastically different and that biology determined behavior. The scientists Henry Charlton Bastian and Jules Bernard Luys claimed that women’s brains were more symmetrical which gave them a disadvantage over men with men’s brains being more superior for Bastian and women’s brains more likely to lead to insanity for Luys (Malane 28). Scientists also posited that women’s reproductive systems made them more emotional and less stable than men (Malane 36). In consequence, Braddon’s choice to give her characters traits not associated with their gender is innovative for the Victorians.

¹⁴ Ann Cvetkovich sees the women in *Lady Audley’s Secret* as present largely for the men to trade them amongst themselves. She says that “the novel sets into motion the relation between affect and capitalism by displaying the beautiful and rebellious woman as the figure for the desiring consumer and the desired commodity” (70). She also describes Clara as a “medium of exchange” (59). Even after considering Cvetkovich’s interpretation, the women in the novel frequently enough have power over the men in it that they appear to not merely be items exchanged by the men. The Schroeders’ suggestion that the men become fooled by their own standard indicates that they can be seen as subject to idolizing the most seemingly feminine women rather than using them to maintain their own power structure. In this novel, the men and women, other than Lady Audley, appear to generally be able to escape many expectations of patriarchal culture without facing consequences for it.

Morley,' he said, with all his old hopefulness of manner, 'that I left my little girl asleep, with her baby in her arms, and with nothing but a few blotted lines to tell her why her faithful husband had deserted her?'" (21). While generally Victorians would not have considered this action completely acceptable,¹⁵ his retreat from his wife is his most masculine action in the novel. Braddon demonstrates the inadequacy of Victorian gender stereotypes through George's reckless actions. Embarking on tasks for the British Empire has not helped him, and he regrets neglecting his supposedly feminine duties. The language he uses demonstrates his own failures. His "few blotted lines" shows how poorly the letter was written and how clearly disastrous his actions were (21). When he calls himself "her faithful husband," that statement highlights the incongruence between it and his actions (21). By saying "deserted," he shows that he understands the severity of his actions and chose to leave in spite of the unethical nature of his decision (21). He realizes he behaved selfishly.¹⁶ His failures to attend to the needs of his wife and child appear rather unethical with his language explaining it as such; this circumstance enables Braddon to show that defying Victorian morals can benefit men and enable them to improve their family units. His prior refusal to dedicate himself to his family and the home is a flaw, and Braddon presents it as the source of his agony. Additionally, Braddon shows the impossibility of subscribing to some masculine ideals simultaneously; George is unable to make smart decisions, be adventurous, and inhabit the public realm at the same time.

¹⁵ Claudia Nelson points out that many traits Victorians associated with women were also considered significant for men. She uses Catherine Sinclair's novel *Holiday House* as an example claiming that a preference for "femininity" is "explicitly linked to the behavior of a hero rather than that of a heroine" (534). She points out that the character Frank dies due to being kept from the home, and Nelson reveals that Sinclair presents Frank's feminine behaviors positively. George's distress in *Lady Audley's Secret* similarly arises from his irresponsible abandonment of domestic duties which the Victorians still would have considered extremely masculine behavior.

¹⁶ Victorians typically demanded more altruism from women than from men. Stickney Ellis claims that every woman should always care for the needs of others over her own (55). She suggests that women's "moral feelings are less liable to be impaired" (56). George wanting to be more selfless is, therefore, a feminine Victorian virtue.

Since George does not initially perceive the devastating consequences of his actions to his family, he does not conform to standards for men to be more rational and intelligent than women. This instance is also apparent in how his wife fools him making her appear smarter and more duplicitous than him; he does not meet standards to be intellectually superior as a man. Saverio Tomaiuolo reveals that borrowing from but simultaneously defying conventions of the Gothic is integral to *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Lady Audley is part of that goal. Tomaiuolo explains that “the beautiful, fair-haired and delicate Helen Talboys/Lucy Graham in the role of the villain” is the person who “replaces the morally corrupted males of eighteenth-century Gothic fictions” (25). The woman who would conventionally be cast as helpless, instead, is a character who manipulates men to achieve her goals but accomplishes these ends through convincing people she is defenseless.¹⁷ George, who cannot see past her deceptions, resembles a defenseless maiden more than she does; he is the character whose supposed death Robert investigates and who needs rescuing. He projects onto her that she is “gentle,” “loving,” “innocent,” and “little” (21). The latter two terms indicate that he does not see her as his equal. Braddon criticizes these attitudes presenting women as less capable than and inferior to men. When endorsing this aspect of gender roles, George garners less sympathy than at other moments.

When George abandons domestic life again, he leaves it to due to pain and as a punishment for himself. Since George sees family life as superior, he suggests that he no longer

¹⁷ Lady Audley's two marriages could be interpreted as her having an intense interest in sex. The Victorians could consider that nymphomania or a type of moral insanity with Oppenheim suggesting that the latter was the more common interpretation in the medical field (204-25). Andrew Mangham's understanding of Lady Audley involves her adhering to that idea of sexuality. He says that “Lady Audley's most violent act appears to support the prevailing notion that there was a fine line between female brutality and women's carnality” (89). That interpretation is one way to understand Braddon's portrayal of Lady Audley. She, however, seems more concerned with bolstering her station and acquiring wealth than with sex. Her marriage to Sir Michael Audley is for material advantages.

feels worthy of domestic life when he leaves his son with the grandfather. Robert asks him about why he will not assume responsibility for his son. George replies, “Because I shall sail in the very next vessel that leaves Liverpool for Australia. I shall be better in the diggings or the backwoods than ever I could be here. I’m broken for a civilised life from this hour, Bob” (44). George’s fixation suggests that he has monomania. Monomania was a deep obsession that could interfere with functioning, and the Victorians considered it a form of being somewhat mad (Oppenheim 56). That connects him to the feminine realm of insanity, but his extreme effort to leave the home contributes to him being in that state. Through presenting George as potentially mad, Braddon connects him to femininity. He also experiences condemnation for leaving domesticity from his friend. Robert’s disapproval of his decision enables Braddon to explore an alternative Victorian society in which men have the same amount of familial responsibility as women do. Being away from the home is his self-imposed punishment for abandonment, and Braddon’s choice to brandish penalties for leaving the home interrogates Victorian stereotypes about men.

Robert considers George’s choice to follow the extremely masculine role of not having a home life detrimental. Robert says, “I think for his own sake he’d much better stay in England and look after his son” (44). The sentence uses careful framing to present it as the best option for George with the phrasing “for his own sake” (44). Even though the wording is primarily for George’s own benefit, the implication that caring for his son is significant remains. Additionally, Robert avoids mentioning the child’s need for care. His phrasing decreases the risk of making George sound feminine in front of his grandfather since people often saw caring for children as women’s responsibility. By focusing on him rather than the child, he makes him sound more independent and less self-sacrificing. In adding the word “I think,” Robert also sounds less as if

he potentially infringes on George's masculine autonomy. Robert's words are still subversive.¹⁸ Through using them, Braddon indicates that living primarily in the domestic sphere can be the best option for some men. In this novel, men can be satisfied with being primarily inside the domestic realm and not venturing into the public realm for extended periods. Through this dialogue, Braddon hints at the complexity of men and women and indicates that she does not consider them to always match strict stereotypes.

Not only does George have monomania that causes him to keep withdrawing from the public, the clothing he wears and the scenery around him reflects his emotions and mental state. Braddon shows their importance in the novel when the narrator states:

The first year of George Talboys' widowhood passed away; the deep band of crape about his hat grew brown and rusty, and as the last burning day of another August faded out, he sat smoking cigars in the quiet chambers in Fig-tree Court, much as he had done the year before, when the horror of his grief was new to him, and every object in life, however trifling or however important, seemed saturated with his one great sorrow. (47)

As George fixates on his negative thoughts, his behaviors match those the Victorians considered more common in women. His aging hat reflects his current disdain for social interactions and represents his mourning process. It complements the feminine nature that his mourning routine includes. While widowers did also display signs of mourning, the length and intensity of his are closer to those prescribed for Victorian women. Rebecca N. Mitchell explains that "widows faced up to a year of social isolation" (599). That expectation matches the amount of time

¹⁸ Robert's feelings in this moment are arguably also subversive. Sexual interactions between men could still result in the death penalty in Victorian England until 1861 (O'Malley). Robert's potential attraction to George that Patrick R. O'Malley, Nemesvari, Cvetkovich, and Kushnier note is, therefore, also part of Braddon's interrogation of gender roles due to strict sexual codes that saw it as between a man and a woman.

George attempts to avoid public life to steep himself in his sadness. She also explains that women's actions and attire "were expected to mirror the role of dutiful wife she had played" (599). George's level of devotion to his dead wife resembles the extreme quantity the Victorians expected in women.¹⁹

Even when venturing into Fig-tree Court, he keeps thinking that everything "seemed saturated with his one great sorrow" (47). His inability to think about anything else shows that he still suffers with monomania presenting him as even more feminine in his grief. He forgets about the rest of life distancing him from the Victorian association of masculine rationality. According to Pedlar, insanity in Victorian literature "exposes and explores some of the fears, ambiguities and hazards of achieving and maintaining masculinity in a patriarchal society" (162). George is not engaging in an attempt to keep others from questioning his masculinity, but Braddon's characterization of George extends beyond the goals that Pedlar addresses to question the relevance of Victorian gender roles. Besides placing George in a feminine mourning role and giving him traits her audience would associate with madness, George only suffers in this scenario due to his prior extreme masculine role. He also endures this intensity of grief due to abandoning his family; that scenario enables the novel to suggest excessive conformity to Victorian gender roles sometimes has negative consequences for Victorian individuals.

¹⁹ If a man experienced profound grief, society expected him to complete his own tasks rather than consume nearly his entire life which renders George's reaction outside the limits of Victorian acceptability. Stephen Garton examines Dr John William Springthorpe's journals that occur from 1883 through 1930. He points out that he records long periods in which he felt intensely mournful but suggests that it did not interfere with other aspects of his life. Garton says that Springthorpe "lived the codes of Victorian masculine culture . . . allowing him to juggle private despair and public achievement" (43). George, however, does not abide by this Victorian standard for men since his internal feelings consume the rest of his life rather than coexisting with it.

Along with bestowing a preference for the private realm on George, Braddon also further challenges gender conventions by having Robert defy them. The narrator's description of Robert illustrates how Braddon presents alternatives to traditional Victorian masculinity:

Robert Audley would have assented to a far more disagreeable proposition than this, rather than have taken the trouble to oppose his friend, so the matter was immediately agreed upon; and after they had finished their breakfast, and ordered a four-o'clock dinner, George Talboys took the fishing-rod across his broad shoulders, and strode out of the house with his friend and companion. (69)

This passage occurs shortly after Robert and George engage in home activities connecting them to Victorian feminine ideals. Even though the segment focuses on George deciding for them to leave the house, most of the sentence still occurs within it emphasizing their investment in it. The language reflects their fascination with it since the words related to the home such as "breakfast," "four-o'clock dinner," and "house" appear more in the sentence with "fishing-rod" being the only term describing an activity that occurs outside of it (69). Additionally, the sentence structure reflects Robert's submissiveness. By saying that "the matter was immediately agreed upon," the narrator uses a passive construction reflecting Robert's minimal exertion of will (69). When Braddon has the narrator suggest that "Robert Audley would have assented to" activities that he felt opposed to (69), she indicates that Robert expresses the passiveness associated with women.

At the same time, this instance further complicates Victorian gender roles due to Robert's potential attraction to George. Cvetkovich says that "the mutual imbrication of the sexual and the nonsexual realms means that the structure of relations in the professional sphere . . . carries over into the sexual domain, as evidenced by the homoerotic bond between George and Robert" (59). In other words, romantic feelings between Victorian men are taboo as part of the public realm;

the attraction that exists between Robert and George causes their public friendship and work to fuse with the private romantic domain. Consequently, the public and private realms are not as separate for these two men as would be expected. Not only is that domain mingling apparent in the time they spend together inside the home, it occurs in how Robert complies with George's suggestions. Robert's behavior mirrors the expectations that women follow the expectations within the household. At the same time, his indifference to George's request presents him as less masculine. In other words, Braddon overturns expectations about domestic life through presenting men who value it to the extent that Victorians often expected women to.

Besides the harm that accompanies George due to fleeing the home, his flight from domesticity leads to Robert suffering too. The narrator says, "Left alone in the dusky little sitting-room, Robert Audley folded his arms, and sat absently staring at the floor" (85). Shortly after, the narrator also states, "George was gone, then; he might receive some letter of explanation, perhaps, when he returned to London; but the chances were that he would never see his old friend again" (85). Robert exposes the depth of his attachment to George while in a domestic environment and having less regulated emotions in the former sentence. He displays traits the Victorians associated with women. Instead of a positive effect, George, while pictured most conforming to gender roles by venturing to Australia, causes harm to Robert by conforming too closely to standards of masculinity. Through expecting George to stay within the domestic sphere, Robert becomes a moral guardian for him. The Victorians generally expected women to keep the men who married them moral and protect ethics within the home (Wood 24). Braddon presents Robert's attempts to guide George to better moral decisions positively suggesting that role does not belong exclusively to Victorian women. At the same time, Robert's actions, such as crossing "his arms" and "staring at the floor," betray his symptoms of monomania (85).

According to Oppenheim, Jean Etienne Dominique created this disorder in the early 1800s and considered it “partial insanity” involving an intense obsession (56). Robert’s potential monomania manifests through his investment in George. As Andrew Mangham suggests, Braddon incorporates Victorian assumptions about madness into her novel (87). Mangham reveals specifically the “links between the female body and violent insanity” in the novel which he suggests guaranteed a massive audience (87). Even though Braddon presents Lady Audley as insane and uses terminology to paint her as mad for sensational effect, she also portrays the men similarly. In consequence, she places the men in female gender roles indicating that Victorian men and women do not strictly adhere to gender expectations.

As Braddon questions Victorian understandings about men’s and women’s behaviors, she also presents Robert’s nonconforming traits, including the monomania, as often useful. Through his obsession, Robert discovers a clue to finding George. The narrator shows Robert’s success in finding George through not conforming by saying:

A twisted piece of paper lay half buried upon the hearthrug; he picked it up, and unfolded it, in order to get a better pipe-light by folding it the other way of the paper. As he did so, absently glancing at the pencilled writing upon the fragment of this paper, a portion of a name caught his eye - a portion of the name that was most in his thoughts. He took the scrap of paper to the window, and examined it by the declining light. (85)

Since the item lies “half buried,” Robert exercises intelligence finding it, but he is only able to because of how attentive he is to anything that might direct him to solving George’s murder. In these sentences, the narrator focuses on Robert’s actions. That choice differs from many other instances in the novel in which the narrator does not describe Robert directly engaging in actions

and often instead relies on passive constructions. The first clause describes the “twisted piece of paper” as if it performs an action which signals the object’s importance. The narrator, however, presents Robert as the subject throughout most of these three sentences which shows his active participation in what happens.

Even the section that begins with “a portion of a name” and then uses “his eye” rather than referencing Robert directly still links directly to his thoughts. He is, in effect, actively engaging in the action. The narrator also describes Robert more closely than George who only appears through a hint. Ruth Rosaler, incorporating reader response theory, considers sensation novels to depend on “salient implicatures” that are “the blueprints of the reader’s expected collaboration” (126). Besides involving the reader, depending on someone to guess at Robert’s thoughts about George in this minute, illustrates Robert’s significance in the moment as the person described directly. At the same time as Robert’s agency remains obvious, he places himself through enough effort to need to look at the “scrap of paper” through “the declining light” (85). That lighting represents the hope Robert maintains in spite of the small chance he has of avenging George. Without his monomania symptoms, he would not direct that effort into successfully finding George. Braddon presents his symptoms as helpful. She, consequently, shows Robert in a state associated with femininity many Victorians saw has negative but makes him excel through his stigmatized traits. *Lady Audley’s Secret* questions Victorian gender roles through presenting this departure from Victorian masculinity as essential.

2 CHAPTER TWO

Like Robert and George, Alicia and Clara often remain unrecognized in the scholarship. Investigating these two characters illuminates different aspects of the book than examining exclusively Lady Audley who scholars investigate much more frequently.²⁰ Yet, Alicia and Clara's roles do more than reiterate traditional Victorian views about gender. We should consider that Alicia and Clara do not face punishments for their transgression of strict gender roles. Their complex mixture of masculine and feminine traits parallels Robert and George's characteristics. I argue in this chapter that Braddon uses the characters Alicia and Clara to dispute some Victorian norms about what behaviors are acceptable for women; I show how she accomplishes this task through giving them traits many Victorians associated with men such as assertiveness and not excelling at domestic tasks. I also demonstrate that Braddon challenges, in the same way as for Robert and George, the idea that men or women behave exclusively according to their expected gender roles by giving them feminine and masculine traits.

When Alicia enters, she already shows this mixture of traits associated with men and women. Although she appears first in the home, she behaves much differently than many Victorians expected women to. The narrator illuminates how she defies strict gender scripts:

For seventeen years he had been a widower with an only child, a daughter, Alicia Audley, now eighteen, and by no means too well pleased at having a step-mother brought home to the Court; for Miss Alicia had reigned supreme in her father's

²⁰ Historically, critics, such as Rachel Malane, Ayse Naz Bulamur, and Andrew Mangham, think that Lady Audley's punishments reassert widespread Victorian views about women's roles. According to Malane, Lady Audley reflects "the discourse of a gendered psyche . . . in the widespread anxiety about the vulnerabilities of the brain" (201). According to her, the novel reinforces the idea that women are less mentally stable than men. Bulamur believes that Lady Audley eventually adopts "the Victorian assumption that selfishness, assertiveness, aggression, and intellect are exclusively male traits" that do not apply to her (120). In other words, she shares Malane's belief that *Lady Audley's Secret* presents women as submissive and less smart than men. Mangham claims that the novel "is apparently willing to allow the idea of female biology as linked to insane violence to remain unchallenged" (92). Consequently, it portrays restrictive gender norms if one only examines Lady Audley.

house since her earliest childhood, and had carried the keys, and jingled them in the pockets of her silk aprons, and lost them in the shrubbery, and dropped them into the pond, and given all manner of trouble about them from the hour in which she entered her teens, and had on that account deluded herself into the sincere belief that the whole of the period she had been keeping house. (10)

Alicia believes that she assumed charge of feminine domestic duties, but she does not behave as gracefully as traditional guidelines for women's behavior dictated. For instance, in her 1839 conduct manual *The Women of England*, Stickney Ellis argues that "confusion and neglect at home" along with "domestic comforts uncalculated" should make English women feel embarrassed (54). Since she constantly misplaces the keys, Alicia is unorganized and squanders time she could spend making the home pleasant. In the 1865 *Sesame and Lilies*, John Ruskin considers "the woman . . . the centre of order, the balm of distress, and the mirror of beauty" within the home (306). Alicia, instead, adds to domestic chaos. Through the "trouble" that she causes with the keys, Alicia increases unhappiness within the home. Additionally, she does not handle the housekeeping since she "deluded herself" about her abilities (10).

Alicia defies restrictive gender codes more successfully than Lady Audley, however. Lynn M. Voskuil explains that she uses the home to hide her history. She claims that "the figure of Lady Audley" disrupts "the . . . binary of public men protecting private women" since "she retreats too far into female interiority and reconceives its purposes" (626). Voskuil presents Lady Audley's traits as punished rebellions. Alicia, likewise, uses domesticity to counter patriarchal expectations. Since she "reigned supreme," she assumes authority often forbidden to women (10). The narrator also mentions the outdoors at the same time as Alicia's house guardianship; the "shrubbery" and "pond" place her outside the home (10). The time Alicia spends outside the

home hints at a desire to leave the domestic for the public sphere. Consequently, Alicia blurs the distinctions between the home and other locations that Lady Audley does, and she dismantles barriers between masculine and feminine behavior. For example, her dominant behavior matches common expectations for men.²¹ She counters a “stereotype of Victorian womanhood” as an “extremely fragile creature” who depended on men “utterly for protection and support” that Janet Oppenheim discusses (206). Through Alicia’s assertiveness and excursions outside of the domestic space, Braddon shows that women are not inevitably frail or unable to care for themselves. Braddon reveals through Alicia’s traits that women have many societal roles other than domestic responsibilities.

Alicia’s success outdoors compensates for her failure in domestic roles. The narrator explains:

But Miss Alicia’s day was over; and now, when she asked anything of the housekeeper, the housekeeper would tell her that she would speak to my lady, or she would consult my lady, and if my lady pleased it should be done. So the baronet’s daughter, who was an excellent horsewoman and a very clever artist, spent most of her time out of doors, riding about the green lanes, and sketching the cottage children, and the ploughboys, and the cattle, and all manner of animal life that came in her way. She set her face with a sulky determination against any intimacy between herself and the baronet’s young wife; and amiable as that lady was, she found it quite impossible to overcome Miss Alicia’s prejudices and

²¹ John Tosh states, “Manliness claimed the active virtues for men” through “dwelling on their female opposites: dependence, emotionality and timorousness” (465). He considers it a Victorian counter to an eighteenth-century masculinity requiring more sophistication. Even though Alicia also has feminine traits, her autonomy matches manly standards.

dislike; or to convince the spoilt girl that she had not done her a cruel injury in marrying Sir Michael Audley. (10)

In this passage, the narrator allows the audience to see from Lady Audley's perspective. In the rest of the novel, Alicia ultimately fares better than Lady Audley who is more feminine and sophisticated. Through her nonconformity, she escapes patriarchal gender scripts more effectively. Lynette Felber points out that Lady Audley's elegant appearance, for instance, subjects her to objectification from "the [male] gaze" (478). In other words, she does not control the desires that men project onto her. Beth Newman also explains that Victorian women lived in "a libidinal economy that defined them as objects of the look" (21). Unlike Lady Audley, Alicia often avoids appealing to men's visual pleasure. The narrator assesses Alicia's beauty less often than Lady Audley's. With "sulky determination" in "her face," she regulates how people perceive her through her outward appearance (10). Additionally, Alicia lacks influence in the home, but she has many other skills. While women in literature generally had accomplishments,²² Alicia's talents surpass the amount necessary for societal or male approval.

As Alicia allocates her leisure time to the outdoors, she avoids domestic duties and exercises an identity apart from men. Her art emphasizes how subversive her actions are. When she draws the "ploughboys" and "cottage children," she rebelliously associates herself with lower class people (10). Braddon infuses this section with earlier Romantic notions; William Wordsworth discusses them in his 1801 essay "Preface to Lyrical Ballads".²³ Her artistic pursuits and fascination with nature allow her to behave unconventionally; she explores rather than

²² As an example, Aurora's aunt in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1856 poem *Aurora Leigh* requires her to learn numerous skills and subjects, but she does not explore them extensively. Her aunt does not expect her to pursue her passions but, instead, provides superficial knowledge of topics Aurora often scorns. Her education's main goals are to improve her marriageability and conversation topics.

²³ Within this essay, he sees nature as the most important source of inspiration, but he demands that the subject be "rural life" (307). Alicia uses the same inspiration for her drawings.

absorb herself in only feminine pursuits. According to Patrick R. O'Malley, Lady Audley "has violated the patriarchal order" and lives in an asylum at the novel's end as a result (122). Alicia, however, flourishes without conforming. Lady Audley, ironically, believes Alicia is "spoilt" (10). Instead, Alicia shows wisdom by not trusting her. Although words such as "cruel," "dislike," and "sulky" suggest that Alicia reacts dramatically, they do not make her seem irrational since Lady Audley, the novel's villain, applies them to her.²⁴ At the same time, she has no obvious signs of diagnoses, such as hysteria, that Braddon bestows on her male characters and sensationalizes as insanity.²⁵ Braddon tempers these traits with Alicia's feminine behaviors to challenge stereotypes. She minimizes the chances of isolating her audience through controlling how much Alicia deviates from gender expectations.

Not only does Alicia prefer the outdoors, she also assumes responsibility for correspondence. While that circumstance is not unusual, the amount she expresses herself challenges social conventions. She displays authority and does not merely discharge a duty. In her letter, she writes, "My Dear Robert, - How cruel of you to run away to that horrid St Petersburg before the hunting season! I have heard that people lose their noses in that

²⁴ Rick Rylance, in *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880*, reveals that the soul influenced Victorian thinking about the mind. He explains that the soul doctrine did not just place humans over other living beings but that it also determined how people thought about gender and the brain. He says that the soul "discriminated higher minds from lower" and uses the separation of "men from women" as an example (27). Given the theological influence in the Victorian period, many Victorians would have accepted the idea that the soul itself could lead men and women to be extremely dissimilar. During the Victorian period, therefore, the idea that men's minds were spiritually superior to women's still had at least some supporters. Since Braddon recognizes that her audience would include many Christians, she has to interrogate ideas influenced by the religion. Through Alicia's ability to intuit Lady Audley's nature, Braddon challenges the idea that men had a spiritual intellectual advantage over women. Alicia, therefore, possesses a cognitive capacity to discover someone's character beyond superficial appearances to a greater degree than Robert and George.

²⁵ Hysteria, which doctors mostly just diagnosed women with, could describe many different emotional and physical behaviors that were not always similar or connected; it could include uncontrollable crying, shaking, an inability to attend to basic needs, or many other symptoms (Oppenheim 181). Even though the diagnosis was often random, Alicia's emotional reactions in this passage are not extreme enough for a Victorian doctor to consider her hysterical, and she does not have physical symptoms. This circumstance distinguishes her from Robert and George whose behaviors some Victorians would consider mad and feminine.

disagreeable climate, and as yours is rather a long one, I should advise you to return before the very severe weather sets in” (46). Ignoring etiquette, Alicia accuses Robert. She defies social conventions more thoroughly than Lady Audley. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson argue that Lady Audley threatens social conventions because she is “a mobile female agent” not subjected to men’s sovereignty (203). They show that Lady Audley’s crimes are less threatening than her autonomy. Although Alicia cannot travel freely, she challenges gender roles with her tone. When Alicia calls Robert “cruel,” insults his face, and begs him “to return,” she fuses anger and concern – intense emotions aiming for Robert’s obedience (46). She troubles the hierarchy of men above women.

While being assertive, Alicia potentially also engages in physiognomy when she describes Robert’s nose. Victorian psychiatrists, such as Henry Maudsley, often thought that people’s facial characteristics revealed their personality traits.²⁶ Vanessa L. Ryan explains that writers also used it “as a means of character description” and argues that Wilkie “Collins depicts the limitations of physiognomy” (43). As Collins’s contemporary and another sensation fiction novelist, Braddon was probably equally familiar with physiognomy. When Alicia describes Robert’s “long” nose, she places it within her sentence implying that he is stubborn for being in the “disagreeable climate” (46). Despite Victorian women’s limited access to sufficient education, Alicia casually engages in this subject. Braddon, indeed, enters into the debate on women’s education through Alicia’s knowledge. Lydia Becker, for instance, in her 1869 essay “On the Study of Science by Women,” argues that gender does not determine intellectual skill. She states that people have “distinct types . . . of mind” but claims that they are unrelated to “the physical distinction of sex” (460). While her statement does not question most social hierarchies,

²⁶ Melissa J. Ganz, for example, reveals Henry Maudsley believed that people inherited madness which their faces indicated (371-2).

she still advocating for education regardless of gender. Braddon achieves a similar but subtle argument in 1862 by making Alicia knowledgeable without explicitly calling for women's education. Her characterization defies much mid-Victorian rhetoric about women's education. For example, Henry Maudsley, in his 1874 *Sex in Mind and in Education* argues that education interferes with women's health due to "the development of the reproductive system" (198). Alicia, however, shows this intelligence and independence and still marries before the novel ends; Braddon argues for women's cognitive capacities before many scientists considered them equal to men's. Alicia's observation also overturns Robert's masculinity because she feels he should stay somewhere dangerous and that he should follow her commands. Since Braddon has them both stray from their gender scripts, she suggests that society does not need strict Victorian gender roles.

At the letter's end, Alicia further questions societal expectations. She laments, "Papa is perfectly absurd about his new wife, and she and I cannot get on together at all; not that she is disagreeable to me, for, as far as that goes, she makes herself agreeable to everyone; but she is so irretrievably childish and silly" (46). While Sir Audley is unusually fixated on his wife, Alicia still interrogates Victorian assumptions about household hierarchies. At the same time, Alicia questions assumptions about domestic life's inherent goodness. She shows that she does not fulfill her domestic duties since she relentlessly dismisses her father's behavior, and she is honest about her conflict rather than accepting it passively. By acknowledging that Lady Audley is "agreeable," Alicia reveals her awareness that she breaks social norms through her criticism. She simultaneously protests the notion that women are childlike when she calls Lady Audley "childish and silly" (46). Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder explain that Victorian standards often depict "women" as "innocent and morally pure like a child" (32). Lady Audley's nature is

actually the opposite, but Alicia protests this ideal more effectively by not adopting Lady Audley's childlike masquerade.²⁷ Braddon challenges the idea that women are immature.

In addition to writing her letter, Alicia also ignores social conventions when she helps Robert and George visit Lady Audley's room. Additionally, she lacks Lady Audley's permission. No one, however, considers her behavior improper until Lady Audley learns about it. The narrator says "She chid Miss Alicia in a playful, laughing way, for her boldness in introducing two great men into my lady's rooms" (70). While the word "chid" suggests punishment, it becomes softened by Lady Audley's cheerful demeanor. The terms "playful" and "laughing" show that any penalty fails. "Boldness" might suggest a negative action, but the word has positive implications too and leaves ambiguity. When Lady Audley mentions the "two great men" she counters her social sanction partially. She still blames primarily Alicia since her praise shows the men finding her room does not offend her. Since Lady Audley is the only character punished as the novel concludes, her censure does not reflect negatively on Alicia's behaviors. Lady Audley judges Alicia the most frequently, so the conflict between them shows Alicia's foresight. Braddon uses Alicia's wisdom to undermine gender stereotypes.

Along with this perceptiveness, Alicia also deconstructs the idea that conventional beauty reveals anything about a woman's personality. When Sir Michael Audley defends his wife, Alicia criticizes his obsession with her appearance. Alicia argues, "You think her sensitive because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating. Sensitive! Why, I've seen her do cruel things with those slender white fingers, and laugh at the pain she inflicted" (92-93).

²⁷ The assumption that women were innocent had legal implications. In her 1854 tract *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women; Together with a Few Observations Thereon*, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichan states that a married woman "is again considered an infant" (296). Women unjustly had to trade their freedoms for marriage and be subject to someone's commands like a child.

Alicia's deductive abilities foreshadow Lady Audley's crimes. While Alicia may exaggerate Lady Audley's actions, she still almost certainly sees Lady Audley behave immorally. Even if one interprets Alicia's words as fabrications, they still show Alicia's awareness of Lady Audley's wicked nature. Alicia's jealousy factors into her response, but it does not explain accusing Lady Audley of "cruel things" (93). As a result, she becomes a means to surmise Lady Audley's deceptions. Ruth Rosaler points out "implicatures" in sensation novels "often exaggerate . . . the disreputable quality of the actions . . . they communicate" (126). Alicia's statement, however, accurately represents Lady Audley's character. Anne-Marie Dunbar suggests that the "detectives' use of circumstantial evidence" in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White* reveals its dominance but simultaneously shows its "failure to tell the whole story" (99). In Alicia's case, Lady Audley's character is truly revealed. Alicia's proclamation is a receptacle of truth alongside the deceptions. She shares Robert's ability to know Lady Audley is not innocent, so Braddon gives her intelligence similar to the male protagonist.

As Alicia describes Lady Audley's appearance, she deconstructs ideals about feminine beauty and shows that it is subjective. Lady Audley's "soft little white hands" and her "blue eyes" and "long lashes" make her sound delicate, so Alicia indicates that women do not have to present themselves as fragile (92). Her feminine appearance does not equate to graceful behavior. The pairing of the negative "pain" and positive "laugh" show how dreadful her actions are; the absence of guilt makes her appear more violent regardless of her delicate appearance (93). Braddon questions conventional beauty and its correlation with positive behaviors.

At the same time as Alicia questions the relevance of Lady Audley's appearance, she shows her willingness to contradict conventional ideas about gender roles. The phrase "you stupid men" sounds aggressive and shows her challenging men's dominance (93). Saverio

Tomaiuolo explains that the invasion of “detectives” into “a prevalently female space” in Braddon’s novels “signals a certain diffidence towards professional detectives that was widespread during the 1850s and 1860s” (84). He suggests that Braddon reacts to the anxieties about men entering “women’s domestic space” (84). Alicia’s response, however, to men’s frequent presence in the home is rebelling against women’s gender scripts. Rather than fearing the presence of men, she adopts some masculine behaviors. Her language, such as “fantastical” and “affected” exposes masculine and feminine behaviors as acts rather than inevitable traits (92). These words also demonstrate the discrepancy between Lady Audley’s behavior and how men perceive her; she also deviates from gender expectations. Alicia’s commentary on Lady Audley’s superficiality shows that gender does guarantee specific actions.

Even though Alicia is often emotionally reactive, she still is not a likely candidate for a diagnosis of hysteria or related Victorian maladies. Elaine Showalter explains, “In presenting textbook cases of female insanity, doctors usually described women who were disobedient, rebellious, or in open protest against the female role” (172). While Alicia ignores many gender codes, her emotional outbursts are temporary and do not suggest that Braddon tries to present Alicia as insane for sensational effect. Alicia becomes frustrated with Robert. The narrator states, “The young lady was walking up and down the room, slashing the skirt of her habit with her riding-whip. Her eyes sparkled with an angry flash, and a crimson glow burned under her clear brown skin” (103). Despite Alicia’s extreme agitation, her intense emotional response shows her mixture of masculine and feminine traits instead of associating women with instability. Her unregulated emotions are stereotypically feminine, but she also has masculine domineering behaviors. “Slashing” and moving the whip make Alicia sound fierce (103). The “crimson glow” that “burned” evokes images of fire rendering her more intimidating and masculine. Through this

imagery, Braddon suggests that people's personalities are more complex than strict gender roles acknowledge.

After Alicia expresses her fury, she suggests that Robert lacks concern for others. When he objects to her accusations, she says, "Yes, *selfish*, Robert Audley! You take home half-starved dogs, because you like half-starved dogs . . . But you lift your eyebrows a quarter of a yard when poor Sir Harry Towers tells a stupid story" (103). In this passage, Alicia only partly subscribes to gender roles. Marion Amies explains, "Women were assigned the role of moral guardians of the nation . . . cultivating self-denial" (542). Selflessness, manifesting in Alicia's anger that Robert is "*selfish*," proves important to Alicia (103). Even though Alicia tries to encourage morality, she guards it too assertively to be traditionally feminine. She represents Braddon's willingness to create expressive female characters who do not defend ethics in conventional ways. The italics on "*selfish*" and the exclamation mark after "Robert Audley" suggest that Alicia makes accusations boldly and has an angry tone. They demonstrate her unconventional directness along with the intelligence necessary to disagree. Since Alicia dismisses Robert's concern for animals, he also shows more compassion than her and simultaneously defies gender roles.

After she dismisses Robert's choice to "lift" his "eyebrows," she criticizes Sir Harry Towers herself through pointing out his "stupid story" (103). She allows herself to behave more judgmentally than Robert; she is more hypocritical rather than morally superior to him. She, however, implies that her intelligence surpasses Sir Harry Towers's. Through claiming to be smarter than a man, she challenges gender roles. Her language reflects her rebellion against traditionally feminine roles. The words "quarter" and "half-starved" link her to mathematics (103). Even though Alicia cries after this statement, she embraces additional masculine roles that suggest she is not more emotional because she is a woman. She is a multifaceted person with her

own emotional expressions, so Braddon does not hint that women are inherently more emotionally reactive than men.

Rather than portraying women's emotions more frequently, Braddon suggests that men have equally intense feelings. After Alicia receives a proposal from Sir Harry Towers, the narrator states:

Sir Harry Towers demanded and obtained an interview with Miss Alicia Audley in the oak library – an interview in which considerable emotion was displayed by the stalwart young fox-hunter; so much emotion, indeed, and of such a genuine and honest character, that Alicia fairly broke down as she told him that she should for ever esteem and respect him for his true and noble heart, but that he must never, never, never, unless he wished to cause her the most cruel distress, ask more from her than this esteem and respect.” (109)

Although Sir Harry Towers has masculine assertiveness, as the words “demanded” and “obtained” suggest, he shows more emotions, in this instance, than Alicia does (109). The library also links him with education and masculinity. The phrase “considerable emotion,” however, appears before “stalwart young fox-hunter,” and “so much emotion” follows the latter (109). By repeating the term “emotion,” the narrator presents Sir Harry Towers's feelings as more important than his thoughts during the conversation. “Considerable emotion,” indeed, appears as a subject creating the impression that feelings themselves control the conversation. Eva Badowska establishes that segments of the Gothic genre within the novel indicate fears about modern life. According to her, *Lady Audley's Secret* illustrates that new architecture and traditions are “fated to appear obsolete” (171). Sir Harry Towers's actions, likewise, demonstrate gender roles shifting with gendered conduct becoming gradually extinct. Not only does he adopt

feminine emotions, he also strives for feminine morality. Since the narrator addresses his “genuine and honest character,” he enforces morality more effectively than Alicia does. Braddon shows that emotions and ethics are not exclusive to one gender.

Even though Braddon describes Alicia’s emotions in more detail, hers do not occur until after his. His, therefore, have greater significance. Alicia also tries to avoid emotions as he embraces them. She begs him to not “cause her the most cruel distress” indicating that she wants less intense emotions (109). Additionally, she makes a reasoned request by suggesting he should only expect her “esteem and respect” to avoid unwelcome consequences (109). She employs her mind more during the proposal than he does. At the same time, she focuses on the self and shows masculine independence. He, however, thinks more about her and has more social dependence. Through having Alicia give a reasoned response but still show overwhelming emotions, Braddon caters to her audience’s expectations through having Alicia have some stereotypically feminine traits. Braddon challenges their ideas about gender without having Alicia stray far from conventional behavior and shock them much for her gender interrogations to be effective. She also presents Alicia and Sir Harry Towers as equals through having her give a reason for declining him. Alicia has as much agency over her circumstances as the men in the novel, and she shows that women are not inevitably docile.

Although Clara appears later than Alicia, she also has a significant role and ignores expectations that women remain obedient. For instance, she acknowledges Robert who her father disapproves of her interacting with. Describing Clara, the narrator states, “The lady half rose from her seat, letting her work, which was large and awkward, fall from her lap as she did so, and dropping a reel of cotton, which rolled away upon the polished oaken flooring beyond the margin of the Turkey carpet” (161). The claim that she “half rose” shows she fears her father, but

it also exposes her willingness to disobey a domineering man. She is brave since she risks his scorn. Additionally, Clara has little feminine dedication to housework. Since she allows her craft to “fall from her lap,” she shows her failure to perform women’s work. At the same time, she risks making her guest unimpressed with the home. By “dropping a reel of cotton,” Clara appears clumsy rather than elegant (161). The “large and awkward” object mirrors her own inability to be graceful (161). Her actions contrast with “the polished oaken floor” (161). Its sophistication surpasses hers. Despite not possessing feminine ideals of gracefulness, Clara is rewarded by the novel’s end and receives no penalties for defying gender roles. Braddon suggests that women do not always have the skills Victorian society expects them to but also hints that they do not need them. Clara’s assertiveness and courage outweigh her inability to be traditionally feminine.

Once Clara’s father reprimands her, she finally follows his commands. She, however, remains reluctant as he commands her like an unruly child. The narrator states, “The lady blushed at this reproof, and stooped to look for the cotton. Mr Robert Audley, who was unabashed by the stern presence of the master of the house, knelt on the carpet, found the reel, and restored it to its owner” (161). While Clara “blushed” and is embarrassed, she fails to find the materials. She is less determined to locate them than Robert is, and her challenge to patriarchal structures resembles Lady Audley’s. Nolan Boyd explains that Lady Audley’s “failure to incarnate the docility and submissiveness of ‘true’ femininity” is “a queer challenge to patriarchal and heteronormative cultural discourses” (409). Since Clara is also not obedient or passive, Braddon employs her to challenge the traditional Victorian relationship structure that involves a man in command of a woman. Clara assumes more social power than Robert in this instance reversing the gender dynamics.

As Clara protests her father's authority, Robert behaves submissively. He searches much more carefully for the yarn since he "knelt on the carpet" (161). His position represents obedience since he is closer to the ground than the other two people, and this action prevents him from interacting with Mr Talboys as a social equal. Through Robert's behavior, Braddon questions the dominance of men in the societal hierarchy. According to the Schroeders, Lady Audley also exists outside of standard expectations for Victorian men and women in relationships. They claim, "By taking the steps she does and adopting a new identity, Lucy reclaims herself as a 'self' . . . with an identity of her own, separate from and equal to her husband's" (37). Unlike Lady Audley, Clara successfully maintains her independence from and similarity in power to Robert. His actions indicate that he continues to obey her. Since he "located the reel," he performs her task for her. He also succeeds at a domestic goal she does not which further deviates from Victorian gender roles. When Robert returns the yarn "to its owner," he is more helpful (161). Consequently, he adopts a traditionally feminine role that Clara partly ignores. Braddon, therefore, contradicts expectations about which character behaves more femininely and interrogates gender roles.

Besides making Clara and Robert equal, Braddon also renders Clara as adventurous as Robert. Clara joins Robert's quest to gain justice for George. Through stopping Robert in his carriage and demanding to speak to him. The narrator states, "She interrupted him suddenly, catching at his wrist with her disengaged hand – she was holding her shawl in the other" (169). By revealing that Clara "interrupted" Robert, the narrator shows that she does not abide by prescriptive gender norms (169). She, instead, assumes control of the social situation revealing her agency. "Catching his wrist" symbolizes her domination in this passage (169). Even though Clara abruptly stopping Robert would seem rude in some situations, she shows her determination

through forcing him to listen to her in this passage. She is as motivated to accomplish her goals as Robert, so Braddon suggests that men and women can be equally successful and bold.

When Robert requests that Clara return home, he suggests that she should not endure more pain related to George's death. Clara, however, insists on helping Robert. She declares, "You talk to me of suffering when the only creature in this world who ever loved me has been taken from it in the bloom of youth. What can there be for me henceforth but suffering?" (173). Clara shows intense emotion. Cvetkovich states that an "association of femininity with emotional excess underwrites . . . the nineteenth-century production of ideologies of domesticity" occurring within sensation fiction" (25). She argues that it reflects the idea that women are responsible for "the affective labors" within "the home" (25). Even though Clara's feelings overwhelm her, they counter this idea since they lead her to venture away from domestic life. Her reaction is also logical since she believes her brother has been murdered. She speaks also shows her assertiveness by starting her sentence with "You," and she confidently contradicts Robert through declaring that she is "suffering" rather than obeying him (173). Despite her aggressive tone and gloomy outlook, she argues effectively that Robert's speech is ludicrous. Through Clara, Braddon suggests that men should not shield women from unpleasant subjects.

Despite mourning, Clara shows that she has the same right to embark on a quest to discover George's murderer as Robert does. She declares, "I would walk from here to London barefoot through the snow, and never stop by the way, if I could bring him back to life" (173). The distance Clara claims she would travel in severe weather shows her willingness to complete a dangerous and arduous mission. The winter also symbolizes her inner turmoil, and her embrace of responsibility is evident in her statement that she would hazard her own safety to "bring him back to life" (173). Since she refuses to let only a man be the detective, she shows her

unconventional belief that her ability to accomplish to perform this task is similar to a man's.

Clara's actions contradict gender stereotypes. Braddon uses Clara to hint that women should feel encouraged to engage in more pursuits outside of the home.

Braddon presents Alicia and Clara as complex characters, and she presents their defiance of gender roles as positive. They face no consequences for rejecting aspects of femininity. This novel would be fascinating to compare with other Victorian novels for further research.

Comparing them would illuminate patterns about the frequency of Victorian challenges to gender roles. Since people are still trying to decrease the prevalence of gender stereotypes, understanding how they appear in novels is useful.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I argue that Mary Elizabeth Braddon uses the characters Alicia, Clara, Robert, and George to counter claims that men or women always behave according to a set code of gender roles. Each of them has a combination of characteristics associated with men and women. I claim that Braddon constructs her characters this way to both make them complex individuals and show the failures of gender roles. She also suggests that people do not have to follow Victorian gender norms. Through *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon boldly portrays characters who reject some social codes prescribed for their genders.

My first chapter shows that Robert and George adopt several traditionally feminine characteristics. For instance, they display a preference for the home over public spaces. They also have emotional and mental characteristics that were often associated with women. While they have these feminine features, they also have some masculine traits, such as when George ventures to Australia. Braddon often presents their behaviors associated with femininity as useful. Through their masculine and feminine actions, Braddon suggests that society should encourage people who ignore gender scripts.

In my second chapter, I further develop my argument that Braddon uses her novel to establish a need to accept deviation from gender norms. I show that Clara and Alicia have traits associated with both men and women and posit that Braddon uses their gender non-conformity to contradict the notion that women should only behave in stereotypically feminine ways. Alicia, for example, does not excel at domestic life and tends to command others. Clara shares these traits and is also adventurous. At the same time, they retain some traits associated with women such as their range of emotions. Their combination of behaviors associated with men and women allows Braddon to comment on gender roles without giving them so many masculine traits that

she risks shocking her Victorian audience too much for them to consider her challenges to gender expectations.

By exploring these characters, I am contributing to criticism on *Lady Audley's Secret* that focuses on characters other than Lady Audley. I also aim to demonstrate that this novel is worthy of analyzing. Despite the occasional resistance to the sensation fiction genre, it offers the possibility of conveying intriguing ideas that exist alongside exciting plots. For instance, *Lady Audley's Secret* is crucial for its challenges to patriarchal structures and accepted social norms. As an exceedingly popular novel, it also influenced Victorian thinking. Given the ongoing effort to liberate people from gender roles today, past attempts to question them are crucial to understand.

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