

## The Beauty and the Barrister

Gender Roles, Madness, and the Basis for Identity in *Lady Audley's Secret*

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the concept of identity in the novel *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In the mid to late Victorian period, self-definition was strongly tied to gender roles. Men were expected to be mentally active, physical strong, and morally guiding leaders of society, and women were to be their passive, pious, domestically minded followers. These expectations for behavior were so strong that those breaking them were in danger of being considered insane. In Braddon's novel, the behavior of most characters does not align with the expectations for their gender. The exception is Lady Audley, the apparently ideal woman whose beauty and charm mask a vicious and criminal nature. Her plea of insanity, while it may offer an excuse for her unfeminine behavior, does not pardon her crimes. However, hero Robert Audley's behavior is absolutely effeminate, but he has a strong moral sense and total devotion to his loved ones. Their deviation from or adherence to gender-appropriate behaviors does not change their essential natures. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon uses gender roles and the theme of insanity to critique the Victorian conception of identity.

The Beauty and the Barrister: Gender Roles, Madness, and the Basis for Identity in  
*Lady Audley's Secret*.

The Victorian period was full of contradictions. As Jerome Buckley phrases it in his book, *The Victorian Temper*, “[t]he outlines of the Victorian era blur beyond recognition in the confusion of contradictory charges” (2). It was a time of economic prosperity, social progress, and technological advances unlike anything the world had ever seen. Religious piety and family values drove efforts to reform prostitutes, educate paupers, and improve the government. Industry, economy, and education were the watchwords of an age that produced great strides in technology, medicine, and the arts. But there was also a dark side to this apparently wholesome age, and this is nowhere more obvious than in the literature that was devoured by Victorian readers. Authors like Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë depicted human nature as a combination of dark and light, with scenes and situations that leaned heavily toward the Gothic. Later, Thomas Hardy questioned the existence of God in novels like *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Robert Louis Stevenson suggested the duality of human nature in his novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle elevated reason and depreciated human nature in novels like *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The novel was central to Victorian literature and served as the mirror that reflected the nature of the Victorian identity as well as the trends of Victorian thought.

As the novel became a recognized and respected literary form, it gave rise to many subgenres, some of which, though they did not survive long, provide excellent opportunities for studying the Victorian mind. Of these, one of the lesser known but most fascinating is the sensational novel. This genre combined elements of earlier

genres such as the romance and the Gothic novel in a modern setting and was the origin of the modern mystery novel. One of this genre's most famous authors was former actress Mary Elizabeth Braddon. During her life, she produced dozens of novels and short stories, most of which were published serially in magazines and newspapers run by her married lover, later her husband, John Maxwell. Of all these works, her novel *Lady Audley's Secret* was by far the most popular, a runaway best seller that helped to give Braddon the nickname "Queen of the Circulating Libraries" (Bernstein 215) and catapulted her to instant fame.

Braddon's works were popular literature rather than high art and serve to reflect an unconventional woman who was a keen observer of the cultural norms that surrounded her. Like many of its descendant genre, *Lady Audley's Secret* contains a detective, a false identity, a murder, and an insanity plea, but it is far more complicated than a simple murder mystery. This novel provides a fascinating window into the dark side of the Victorian mind, with its depictions of characters bending traditional gender roles and insights into nineteenth-century conceptions of madness. The Victorian fascination with crime, curious in a society that highly prized family life and religious piety, gave rise to novels like these in which murder, adultery, and deception formed the backbone of the plot. Through the characters, the events, and even the settings of this novel, Braddon shakes the very foundations of the Victorian identity. She asks why a beautiful and ostensibly moral woman cannot turn out to be a murderer. Why cannot a good and honest man be deceived by a devious wife? And most frightening of all, why cannot an outwardly sane person, in a moment of emotional turmoil or mental exhaustion, fall into insanity? These questions tantalized the imaginations of the good

people of Victorian England and added to the success of *Lady Audley's Secret* and of the sensational genre as a whole.

These same questions probe at an issue that was at the heart of the Victorian consciousness. During the Age of Enlightenment, man looked to his senses for answers about the world around him, evaluating his perception on the basis of empirical evidence. A century later, the Victorian focus began to turn inward, investigating the workings of the mind. Psychology became a serious field of study, and insanity became a curable illness rather than a divine curse. Discussion turned to the fate of the soul after death as Spiritualism claimed that the deceased were not beyond the reach of the living. All of these issues are part of a larger question that occupied authors well into the twentieth century and beyond. That question is one of identity. The search for identity occupies every novel from Defoe's *Moll Flanders* to the present, but the sensational genre was uniquely suited to explore this fundamental concern of its authors and readers. The formation and conception of identity is central to the plot of *Lady Audley's Secret*.

In Braddon's novel, the question of identity is addressed through two main topics: gender roles and insanity. Traditional gender roles formed the backbone of Victorian society. Feminine women and masculine men derived their identity from the roles society gave them. Ruskin describes the differences between men and women in his lecture *Sesame and Lilies*: "The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender" (59). By contrast, the woman "sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. ... By her office and place she is protected from all danger and temptation" (59). The idea of the man as the

strong, masculine provider to his household and the woman as the angel or spirit of that household was the foundation of a society that prized family life above almost anything else. One of the deeply controversial aspects of *Lady Audley's Secret* is the way that its characters cross and bend traditional gender roles, from the apparently masculine George Talboys to the languid Robert Audley, the deceptive Phoebe Marks, and the quietly powerful Clara Talboys. The exception is the title character, Lady Audley, who outwardly fulfills every Victorian idea of what a woman should be and how she should act. In fact, she even uses those ideals as cover for her crimes, hiding her devious plotting under the mask of the innocent, coquettish society lady. When finally confronted with the evidence of what she has done, Lady Audley circumvents gender role expectations by attributing her transgressions to madness, claiming that she could not help herself. This end to all her schemes for wealth and power is hardly satisfying. It seems as if even Braddon felt the need to offer this excuse to her more conservative readers, not only for Lady Audley's criminal nature but for the extent of her "unwomanly" ruthlessness and resourcefulness.

*Lady Audley's Secret* is deeply concerned with the subject of madness and the treatment of the mad, and this subject is never separate from the consideration of gender roles. Several characters are accused of madness or threatened with commitment to an asylum: Lucy Audley's mother is institutionalized after her daughter's birth due to the onset of what modern medicine would term an extreme form of post-partum depression; Robert Audley is threatened with the asylum if he persists in hunting for evidence of his new aunt's crimes, an accusation that would find a foothold in his eccentric and effeminate behavior; and finally Lady Audley herself confesses that the

unwomanly actions such as murder and arson of which she is guilty were brought on by insanity, thereby absolving her of guilt. She is then placed in a *maison de santé* in Belgium to end her days in obscurity.

Insanity and gender roles were inextricably linked in the Victorian mind, and both were intertwined with the question of identity. For what is madness if not ignorance of one's own identity? Insanity is not mere irrationality; it must go beyond that. Michel Foucault offers the hypothetical case of a man who believes he is made of glass and therefore can neither move nor be touched (94). If the man really were made of glass, nothing could be more rational than his behavior. His mistaken idea of his own nature is what makes his actions mad. Insanity is manifested in the way that an image of self relates to the outside world. In effect, insanity consists of the ideas and behavior that emerge from a twisted sense of self. And since identity in the Victorian period was so often drawn from gender roles, those transgressing gender expectations were in danger of being accused of insanity.

Elements like Lady Audley's duplicitous nature and meditations on dramatic themes like the nature of insanity and murder are typical of the sensational genre as a whole. As David Punter and Glennis Byron put it in their book, *The Gothic*, "Sensation fiction ... focuses upon secrets, social taboos, the irrational elements of the psyche, and questions of identity" (94). This distinctive genre functioned not only as the precursor to the modern mystery and thriller novels, but as the expression of the darker side of the Victorian mind. A discussion of its defining characteristics is necessary in order to understand both the aims of its authors and the tastes of its readers.



Victorian fiction is remarkably dark; even authors as timeless as Dickens drew heavily on Gothic images and settings for works like *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. In the midst of the progress in social reform, technology, and industry for which the nineteenth century was famous, a fascination was growing in the public mind with crime and insanity. The inordinate fascination surrounding the Jack the Ripper murders was merely an extension of the growing public interest in crime, particularly the psychological aspects of crime. Out of this fascination grew a genre of literature that fed the Victorian appetite for dark doings. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes used logic and deduction to solve grisly murders and strange happenings, Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* painted pictures of unconscious crimes and mistaken identities, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley's Secret* featured heroines who engaged in criminal behaviors such as bigamy and murder. These stories, often published serially in magazines and newspapers, were devoured by readers and republished in novel form to be enjoyed again and again.

However, not everyone approved of this scandalous genre and the authors that produced it. Eva Badowska best summarizes the attitude of more conservative critics toward this genre in saying that sensation fiction was considered "both repulsively modern and inevitably ephemeral" (158). These critics considered the sensational novel as merely a passing fad, and one whose fast pace and dramatic content would ensure that it passed quickly. Whatever else sensation fiction might have been, its settings were very similar to those of its Victorian readers. Its impossible plots took place in places with modern artifacts like train schedules, telegrams, and banks. Wilkie Collins often wrote his works in epistolary style, allowing the characters to tell their own

experiences as if they had just occurred. While *Lady Audley's Secret* is told almost entirely in the third person, it so often invades the thoughts of the characters that it has an epistolary quality of its own. The up-to-the-minute, contemporary nature of sensation fiction constituted an argument among critics that it would soon pass into obscurity as a genre. And while there is no longer a genre of "sensation fiction" as such, this genre served as the inception point of a genre that is enjoyed by today's readers. The mystery genre, home to the works of writers like Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is a direct descendant of sensation novels. Its fascination endures to this day with many of the same elements that shocked and fascinated the Victorian public.

In addition to its contemporary nature, the sensation novel was characterized by the unlikely, even impossible series of coincidences that usually made up the plot. For instance, in Collins' *The Moonstone*, the odds that Franklin Blake would have identical reactions to opium years apart are astronomical, but without this coincidence the theft of the Moonstone would never have been solved. Similarly, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the chance that a bigamous woman would marry the uncle of her first husband's best friend, thereby putting that friend in the perfect position to expose her, is incredibly unlikely. That this woman, who had been painstakingly careful in concealing her original identity, would be careless enough to leave a label with her real name on a trunk in a house where she was known to have lived is equally trying to believe. However, perhaps the prosaic details and settings of these works serve to balance out the often incredible nature of the plot.

Finally, the genre of sensation fiction is, as its name suggests, characterized by sensational events. This feature is the genre's most memorable and most controversial characteristic. Themes like murder, theft, adultery and other criminal behaviors are common, and led some critics to make statements like the following, taken from the *London Review* of March 7, 1863: "These narratives of unredeemed depravity, while pandering to the morbid thirst for violent 'sensation,' can neither chasten, refine, nor invigorate the mind" ("Lady Audley on the Stage" 27). Many critics believed that the greatest danger of sensation novels was that their readers might begin to romanticize crime and criminals. In 1864, a reviewer from the *Christian Remembrancer* said disparagingly, "Crime is inseparable from the sensation novel, and so is the sympathy with crime, however carefully the author professes, and may even suppose himself, to guard against this danger by periodical disclaimers and protests" ("Our Female Sensation Novelists" 107). In other words, critics were concerned that regular exposure to the criminal side of fiction would lead readers to an unrealistic idea of the nature of crime.

In addition to stories of crime and criminals, sensational tales of insanity and mistaken identity were also popular, including Collins' *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*. The plot of the latter, especially, hinges on a resemblance between unknown half-sisters Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon explores this same idea, and the mistaken – or rather, the changed – identity of the title character is central to her crimes of bigamy and attempted murder. The quest of Lady Audley's nephew by marriage to prove her true identity occupies most of the novel. The list of names by which this unique woman is known to different people at different

times forms a dizzying account of the life of someone who is never content, but always grasping for more, and her final plea that she is insane, and therefore not responsible for her actions, does not prevent her being punished for them.

In the midst of the somewhat hackneyed plot elements and characters that make up the sensational genre, it can be easy to dismiss it as the historical equivalent of the modern romance novel: there to titillate the senses, but without the substance to satisfy a reader looking for more. But to discount this genre out of hand would be a mistake. As already mentioned, these novels showed the interests and values of the Victorian reading public. They are a mirror reflecting the accelerating pace of life, the beginning of the modern obsession with the psychology of the dark side, and the genesis of a gender revolution.

The author of many of these extraordinary novels was Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Born October 4, 1835 to Henry and Fanny Braddon, young Braddon's life was unconventional almost from the beginning. According to a biography of Braddon by Jennifer Carnell, her parents separated when she was only four years old, leaving her and her mother to provide for themselves (5). To this end, Braddon began acting in local theatres under the name Mary Seyton when she was only seventeen. Her passion for the arts led to her writing her own plays and novels. According to a chronology by Natalie Houston, Braddon's first play, *The Loves of Arcadia*, was performed at The Strand theatre in 1860, the same year as the publication of her first novel, *Three Times Dead*, and, even more importantly, her first meeting with publisher John Maxwell (30). Maxwell would not only be instrumental in publishing nearly all of Braddon's works, but in her personal life as well. According to a biography by Robert Wolff, Maxwell

and Braddon lived together despite his previous marriage and five children until his wife, who had been placed in an asylum in Ireland, died in 1874 (249). Less than a month after her death, Braddon and Maxwell were married.

Her unorthodox relationship with Maxwell may have made Braddon an outcast in “respectable” society, but it had virtually no impact on her popularity as an author. *Lady Audley’s Secret* was only the most popular of a flood of novels, short stories, and plays that lasted even after her death; Houston’s chronology notes that Braddon’s final novel, *Mary*, was published posthumously (30). Her relationship with newspaper man Maxwell would have ensured that she was intimately familiar with current events in Britain, the changing pace of life and the increasing importance of technology and information. She underwent the trials of a female author, a working mother, and a social outcast. She encountered the treatment of the insane, the dangers of childbirth, and the deprivations of poverty. And the elements of her experiences come through clearly in her works. *Lady Audley’s Secret* alone contains events that serve as reflections on the risks of motherhood, the treatment of the insane, and, of course, the social dangers of extramarital relationships.

The plot of *Lady Audley’s Secret* may be considered in many ways a reflection of the author’s mind. It is at the same time prosaic and fantastic, messy and polished, contemplative and full of action by turns. It begins at Audley Court, the honorable, lovely country home of Sir Michael Audley, his daughter Alicia, and his young and beautiful new wife, Lady Lucy Audley. This fortunate young lady is introduced to Sir Michael while working as a governess to a nearby family, and the noble gentleman is so struck by her beauty and youth that he marries her despite her own admission that,

though she will be as good as wife as she can, she does not love him. Their life together seems idyllic, except for the jealousy of Lady Audley's new stepdaughter, the only person in the county who dislikes her. In the next chapter, a man named George Talboys is introduced, returning victorious and rich from three years in the gold fields of Australia. He is everything the ideal Victorian man should be; handsome, charming, optimistic, hard-working. He is a family man, describing to a fellow passenger his hard struggle to reclaim a fortune for his darling wife and baby son. His wealthy father disinherits him when he marries a penniless sailor's daughter, and he turns to gold mining in Australia to support his family. Three years later, he is returning to England with his hard-won fortune. He has not heard a word from his wife in the meantime, but he is confident that she is waiting for him. But on his arrival, he learns that she has died only days before he returned. His grief is debilitating, and he degenerates into a pale and silent shadow. But in his broken heartedness, he has the comfort of his oldest friend, Robert Audley, with whom he lives after learning of his wife's death. A year later, the two young men go the village of Audley, Robert's birthplace, to visit his uncle Sir Michael and his new wife, though they end up staying in an inn due to the indisposition of the lady. After a visit to the court, in which they have the chance to see a recent portrait of Lady Audley in lieu of the beauty herself, George Talboys acts strangely, finally asking Robert Audley if they can put off their intended departure the next day and go fishing together instead. Audley agrees, and dozes off on a sunny bank with his line and rod beside him. When he wakes up, his friend is gone.

The discovery of his friend's disappearance is the first link in a chain of evidence that will eventually lead Robert Audley to the person who at first seemed least

likely of anyone on earth; his uncle's beautiful young wife. By a series of clues and accidents, veiled hints and open confessions, Robert Audley discovers that Lucy Audley, his uncle's beloved wife, is actually Helen Talboys, the woman who faked her own death in order to marry a wealthy nobleman. And though he has no way to prove it, Robert Audley strongly suspects that she is also responsible for his friend's disappearance, and likely his death. His regard for his uncle's reputation at first prevents him from exposing Lady Audley's crimes, but when the lady retaliates against his snooping by attempting to burn him alive in an inn where he is staying, he finally forces her to confess all to his uncle. Now the beautiful, deceitful Lady Audley reveals her secret; her crimes are the result of insanity. She describes her mother's mental illness, which began with her own birth and ended when Mrs. Maldon died in an asylum. A similar struggle with mental illness occurs after the birth of Helen Talboys' son, and though she does not then succumb, she emerges in a weakened mental state that, she says, gives way in moments of stress to madness. The heartbroken Sir Michael leaves the house immediately after his wife's confession, turning her over to his nephew. Robert, balancing the desire for secrecy with the need for justice for his departed friend, places Lucy Audley in the safe keeping of an ironically named *maison de santé* in Belgium, there to live out her days in obscurity. Returning to England, Robert Audley discovers a note left for him by George Talboys, which indicates that he survived his wife's attempt to murder him and fled the country. Before Robert and his new fiancée, George's sister Clara, can leave to find him, George returns to complete the happy ending.

When summarized, the plot of *Lady Audley's Secret* sounds like mere popular romantic fiction. And to some extent, it is; after all, it is intended as entertainment, not philosophy. But within the confines of the impossibly coincidental events and sometimes stereotypical characters of the novel, there are subtle but profound questions about the Victorian way of life. These questions are most evident in the actions of the characters, who consistently cross boundaries of traditional gender roles in ways that must have startled Braddon's contemporaries.

The Victorian woman, as described in Emily Allen's essay "Gender and Sensation," was expected to be "naturally given to the domestic virtues of morality, chastity, piety, sympathy, humility, and nurturance" (403). They were the spirits of the home, the source of domestic comfort for their husbands and families. The ideal woman was devoted to the happiness of her husband and children at the expense of her own, capable of running her household but sheltered from the business of the outside world. In contrast, Allen points out, men of the same period were given to the business of the outside world and the virtues it represented: "strength, courage, resourcefulness, drive, intellect, sharpness, confidence, and vision" (403). Their sphere was the world of trade, of politics, and of academia. Women, on the other hand, were confined almost exclusively to the home, unless spinsterhood or poverty made earning a wage more necessary than maintaining their more socially acceptable as homemakers. Braddon herself worked to support her family from a very early age, and the damage done by Lady Audley's quest for financial independence and freedom from the need to work is a good indicator of her opinion of this social ideal.



The characters in this novel – particularly the female characters – are portrayed not merely as the extremes of “angel” and “monster” described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (17), but as a realistic mixture of good and evil. Alicia Audley is petty but honest, Phoebe Marks is dishonest but devoted to her mistress, and even the crimes of Lady Audley herself invite pity for her desperation as well as horror for her wickedness. Every single character is primarily associated with a quality that is in opposition to his or her gender. And while Robert Audley and Lady Audley most clearly exhibit this divergence from the norm, they are visible to a lesser extent in every character in the novel, from Lady Audley’s maid Phoebe Marks to George Talboys’ sister Clara.

Phoebe is the first of these two women to be encountered in the text. Physically, she is “not ... positively a pretty girl; but her appearance [is] of that order which is commonly called interesting” (64). A resemblance between Phoebe and Lady Audley is mentioned several times, and the impression given is that Phoebe functions as a sort of ghostly double of her mistress, a confidante as well as a servant who will obey without question. The first clue that Phoebe is something out of the ordinary comes only a few lines later, in the statement that “in the pale face and the light grey eyes ... there [is] something which hint[s] at a power of repression and self-control not common in a woman of nineteen or twenty” (64). The foundational trait of Phoebe Marks’ character is strength of will, an attribute that was more associated with men than women during that time. She uses that strength to guide her boorish cousin Luke, later her husband, into a life of prosperity, to blackmail Lady Audley into providing for them both, and to keep her ladyship’s secret safe from the prying of her nephew by marriage. As Robert

Audley himself thinks later, "This woman would be good in a witness-box; ... it would take a clever lawyer to bother her in a cross-examination" (164). Though Phoebe outwardly displays the quintessentially feminine traits of humility, domesticity, and nurturing in her later career as an innkeeper's wife, these traits are always secondary to the immense, silent self-control that characterizes her. Though she is in many ways a devoted servant and a good secret-keeper for Lady Audley, she is also fiercely jealous of her mistress. That jealousy is early expressed in a remark to her cousin Luke, in which she describes the beautiful ornaments of her lady's bedchamber, and then breaks out harshly, "Why, what was she in Mr. Dawson's house only three months ago? ... Taking wages and working for them as hard, or harder, than I did" (67). Phoebe's envy leads her far beyond words throughout the course of the novel. She watches her mistress, learns her secrets, and then uses what she learns to blackmail Lady Audley into giving her enough money to pay for an inn for herself and her husband. And in her marriage, though her husband is a brutish, tyrannical man, Phoebe is the real power in the relationship. Her quiet determination often triumphs over Luke's loud cruelty. Nevertheless, critics like Elizabeth Steere, who suggests that Phoebe is the real villain of the novel and manipulates Lady Audley into her crimes (300), may find this claim hard to prove. Phoebe's conscience, though apparently congenial enough to theft and blackmail, draws the line at murder. Her reaction when she realizes that Lady Audley has set fire to the inn where Robert Audley as well as Phoebe's husband is sleeping is one of pure horror and terror. She later repents of her actions enough to tell Robert Audley what she knows. She even retains some affection for Lady Audley, and when Robert Audley tells her his aunt has been taken away, she anxiously enquires, "But she

has not gone where she'll be cruelly treated; where she'll be ill-used?" (415). In fact, this is the last time Phoebe appears in the novel, showing concern over the fate of the woman who destroyed her livelihood. Her greed and selfishness are apparently softened into sorrow by her suffering.

Clara Talboys, sister of the missing George Talboys, serves as a foil to Phoebe Marks. Where Phoebe is plain, silent, and reserved, Clara is handsome, warm, and, when away from her father's repressive influence, passionate in her devotion to her missing brother and in her demand that Robert bring those responsible to justice. Though Clara is not introduced until relatively late in the novel, she serves the important purpose of bolstering Robert Audley's flagging determination to follow the evidence to her brother's killer. She becomes his inspiration, his forensic muse, so to speak. And perhaps even more importantly, she makes him feel that he is not alone in his search for the truth. She also serves as his motivation to change himself from a laconic, selfish man into one of moral determination, and becomes his reward by marrying him at the end of the novel. She is forthright and determined, and her strong sense of morality drives Robert Audley as well as herself. That determination, that drive, characterizes her and sets her apart from the majority of women of her time. The very intensity of her devotion to her brother is, as she says herself, due to the strange circumstances under which she was brought up. Her father, Harcourt Talboys, a man whose whole character is contained in the phrase "he was ... vain of his hardness" (205), isolates her from everything of the outside world, like a Victorian version of the princess in a tower. She explains her own intensity to Robert Audley in these words:

I have grown up in an atmosphere of suppression. ... I have stifled and dwarfed the natural feelings of my heart, until they have become unnatural in their intensity; I have been allowed neither friends nor lovers. ... I have had no one but my brother. All the love that my heart can hold has been centered upon him. (222)

Clara's brother is the only real family she has. The news that he may have been murdered is devastating to her. She is wildly passionate in her desire to find his killer, even if it means going out on her own to search out the guilty party.

As Robert Audley's muse, she is often mentioned as beckoning him down the road that leads to the destruction of his uncle's house. Her figure, her face, her voice are his reminders that justice must be served. And later, after the criminal is punished, she is the motivation for Robert to change his entire way of life. Knowing of his lack of ambition and laziness in his professional life, she "recommend[s] Mr. Audley to read hard and think seriously of his profession, and begin life in real earnest ... ; a life of serious work and application, in which he should strive to be useful to his fellow-creatures, and win a reputation for himself" (438). And, to please her as well as to vindicate the uselessness of his past life, Robert complies. Though not a major character herself, Clara is so influential on protagonist Robert Audley that she is a key mover of the plot.

Another character who greatly motivates Robert's search for the truth is Sir Michael Audley. Robert's uncle is, in a word, a paragon. He is a man of unexceptionable moral character, high family, excellent fortune, and, unfortunately for him, susceptible heart. He has been a second father to his nephew Robert, a benefactor

to the poor of his village, and an indulgent parent to his daughter Alicia. His compassion is certainly responsible in some measure for his love of penniless governess Lucy Graham, although her youth and beauty surely contribute as well. His first marriage to Alicia's mother was presumably entered into for financial reasons rather than for love, and in the light of his grand passion for young Lucy Graham, it seems merely a "dull, jog-trot bargain made to keep some estate in the family that would have been just as well out of it" (48). In fact, his purely heartfelt motive in marrying Miss Graham would have been quite unusual for the time, especially considering that he has no son to inherit his estate. Generally, as Steven King and Mark Shephard point out in their article on remarrying men in late Victorian England, widowers who remarried in this time were "motivated not so much by love but by opportunity, the desire to reestablish the domestic environment which allowed them to function as men and as economic entities" (320). In other words, passion normally took second place to necessity, when a man needed a woman to manage the family and household matters so he was free to focus on business. In Sir Michael's case, his courtship is so completely removed from practical matters that he never "once calculate[s] upon his wealth or his position as a strong reason for his success" (49). This emphasis on sentiment, this disregard for practicality and reason, is what sets Sir Michael apart from the ideal Victorian man. However, Sir Michael is harshly punished for marrying this lovely girl by the discovery of Lady Audley's real identity, her attempted murder of her first husband, and, worst of all, her matter-of-fact statement that the "mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in [her] madness" (362). On the day that he proposes to her, she admits that she does not love "anyone in

the world” (52), and perhaps this sets the ground work for the shadow that never leaves their marriage. When her husband learns of her crimes, he is less surprised than grieved.

Sir Michael’s reaction to his wife’s deceit is the occasion for an aside on the part of the narrator in which the husband rather than the wife is depicted as suffering most when they are forced to separate, where the “wife's worst remorse when she stands without the threshold of the home she may never enter more is not equal to the agony of the husband who closes the portal on that familiar and entreating face” (Braddon 299). In this case, where Lady Audley shows no remorse at all for what she has done, this is particularly true. At the same time, the text makes clear that Sir Michael, though unwittingly the means by which Helen Talboys commits bigamy, is a man whose honor is his highest regard, and he follows through in putting his wife into the care of his nephew. Though he loves the woman he knows as Lucy with a love “as tender as the love of a young mother for her first born, as brave and chivalrous as the heroic passion of a Bayard for his liege mistress” (295), he is still able to know the right thing and do it. This tension between sentiment and self-control sets Sir Michael apart from a common Victorian idea that held that sentiment was a woman’s domain and self-control a man’s, so that women had to be protected from themselves by their steadier husbands and male relatives. Sir Michael’s deep love for the woman who betrays him is second only to his concern for his own honor and good name.

Robert Audley, though also deeply concerned for his uncle’s reputation, strives to fulfill the demands of justice. Robert presents the most fascinating set of contradictions of any character in the novel, except perhaps for the woman he is

hunting. He also experiences the most drastic development of any character in the novel, going from lazy, selfish, and disinterested to driven, caring, and deeply concerned in the affairs of his family and best friend, George Talboys. He acts as the amateur detective of the novel, following every clue that might lead him to the true identity of his uncle's wife and his friend's murderer. And he is the eventual means of bringing Lady Audley to justice for her crimes. Herbert Klein points out in his article "Strong Women and Feeble Men," that though Robert is the hero of the novel, he "does not achieve this through the traditional manly means of muscular strength and bodily exertion, but rather through his powers of ratiocination" (161). Robert Audley is the observing eye and deducing mind that finally brings Lady Audley's crimes to justice. But when he is first described in the novel, he seems the least likely of anyone to embark on such an undertaking. As Vicki Pallo points out in her article, "From Do-Nothing to Detective," "Robert Audley's life is one that counters the role(s) that contemporary society has ordained for men – especially those in his social position" (470). He is neither ambitious, physically active, nor morally courageous; even his employment as a barrister is undertaken more from laziness than from any interest in that position. He fulfils neither the requirements of his profession nor of his masculine gender. Even consideration for his family name is not much more than an afterthought, since his immediate family is dead and his feelings for his uncle and cousin are passive at best. The only relationship to which he devotes any effort is his friendship with George Talboys, of whom Robert takes charge after George hears of his wife's death. George's sudden disappearance is the catalyst for a change that turns Robert Audley from the "selfish, cold-hearted Sybarite" (148) his cousin Alicia calls him and into

“what he had never been before – a Christian” (183). As Simon Petch puts it in his article, “Robert Audley’s pursuit of Lady Audley’s past is also his own quest for a professional future, and his investigation of Lady Audley’s secret is the means to the establishment of his own identity as a professional man” (1). During his investigation, Robert is forced to focus his efforts, put aside his lazy selfishness, and work toward the goal of discovering his friend’s fate. By the time he succeeds, he is a very different man than the one who sat smoking his pipe all day without the inclination to move from his chair.

Robert Audley changes more drastically than any other character over the course of the novel. In the beginning his behavior overturns every idea of what a Victorian man was supposed to be. His habits, which include reading French novels and caring for canaries and stray dogs, are distinctly feminine, as is the preference for domestic comfort over manly sports he displays when he goes to stay at Audley Court in Essex. He shows absolutely none of the masculine virtues listed by Allen in her article: he equally lacks “strength, courage, resourcefulness, drive, intellect, sharpness, confidence, and vision” (403). However, by the end of the novel, his search for the truth about his friend’s disappearance changes him so completely that he shows every single one of these manly qualities. His drive to find George’s killer is so strong that it changes his very nature. He is forced for the first time in his life into action, into energy, into using his “powers of ratiocination” (210) in the service of another. The same need to discover the truth pushes him into the path of Clara Talboys, and his instant interest in her may be read as a sign of his burgeoning masculinity. His developing power and energy are analogous to the same qualities displayed by Lady



Audley. Louis James, in his book *The Victorian Novel*, contrasts Robert's "developing masculinity" with "Lady Audley's disintegration as a woman" (173) as if the conflict of these foes brings out the masculine energy in them both, simultaneously removing the false identity that Lady Audley has adopted and allowing Robert to find his own identity for the first time in his life.

Finally, among the characters whose divergence from traditional gender roles constituted a challenge to the very foundations of Victorian identity, there is Lady Audley. This woman is the external embodiment of the feminine ideal: slight, fair, with masses of golden curls and wide blue eyes, cheerful in everything she does, charitable, loving, and childish. She is the darling not only of her noble husband but of the whole county besides, charming everyone she meets. And yet this same lovely creature is also a bigamist, an arsonist, and a would-be murderer. She is willing to abandon her child and change her identity to better her own circumstances, and prepared to do anything to keep the life she has schemed so hard to claim. In fact, as Kimberly Reynolds and Nicola Humble point out in their book *Victorian Heroines*, "Lady Audley does not hide her villainy behind her childlike exterior: her surpassing selfishness and her evil actions stem precisely *from* her occupation of the position of the cultural ideal" (109). Her awareness of her own loveliness and charm is the source of a belief that her beauty is "a right divine" (Braddon 310), entitling her to the best of everything. In her confession of her crimes to Sir Michael, she describes the moment when she first understands what her beauty means for her future:

I heard [that I was beautiful] and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life I might be more successful in the world's great

lottery than my companions. I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later—I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any one of them. (359)

But it is precisely that belief in her own deserts that is her eventual undoing, and she finally ends her days in a place where her beauty is a useless weapon.

In terms of identity, Braddon's villainess is a chameleon. Helen Maldon, Mrs. Talboys, Lucy Graham, and Lady Audley are all masks worn by a woman who is as deceptive as her catalogue of false names. But perhaps her reluctance to bear her own name is less blamable than it may seem. Helen Maldon, the name with which she was born, had a tragic childhood, and her determination to change her fate stems directly from the circumstances in which she grew up. Her mother is placed in an asylum shortly after Helen's birth, and her father, broken by the loss of his wife, is absent more often than not. She grows up in poverty and neglect. Her only asset is her beauty, and she makes the most of it. As a teenage girl, she uses her charms to attract a rich husband, Army dragoon George Talboys. However, when her wealthy spouse loses his money and leaves her to try to reclaim their fortunes in Australia, she considers herself entitled to leave her old life behind and find a better one. If Phoebe Marks is characterized by self-control, her mistress is defined by selfishness. And the lengths to which she goes to satisfy that selfishness shatter every Victorian ideal that her appearance seems to fulfill.

To some extent, Lucy Audley's actions seem justifiable. Her husband abandons her and their newborn son without a word; surely it is reasonable for her improve her circumstances if she can. However, any sympathy for her vanishes when it becomes clear that she is perfectly willing even to murder to protect herself from the consequences of her actions. She plays with Robert Audley's investigation like a cat with a mouse, stealing evidence, confusing accounts, and paying off accomplices. Her manipulation comes to an end only when Robert Audley's evidence becomes too much to deny, and then she takes action against him personally, stopping even to murder by arson if it means that she will be safe from him. This criminal behavior seems all the more surprising from the initial description of this "fair-haired paragon" (88). She is hard-working, humble, charitable to the poor, charming, and, of course, beautiful. She meets every requirement of Victorian femininity. And yet that same beauty and charm mask not only a bigamist but a murderess. Lady Audley's feminine exterior gradually erodes over the course of the plot to reveal the villainess beneath. While Robert Audley discovers his masculine strength, she loses her feminine power to influence by the end of the novel. Finally, she must admit the "secret" that has haunted her entire life; she is mad, victim to an inherited insanity passed down from her mother. That plea of insanity rings hollow to modern ears, but at the time, madness was the most believable explanation for Lady Audley's behavior. In fact, in her book *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter suggests that "Lady Audley's unfeminine assertiveness ... must ultimately be described as madness, not only to spare Braddon the unpleasant necessity of having to execute an attractive heroine ... , but also to spare the woman reader the guilt of identifying with a cold-blooded killer" (167). Lady Audley's "insanity" is

necessary in order to constitute her a believable character, and this necessity reveals the extent of the Victorian reliance on gender roles for identity. This reliance was so strong that insanity became the only possible excuse for behavior that did not fit the mold.

During this period, there was beginning to be a shift in the way the medical community as well as the public in England thought about insanity. Madness had previously been considered as a primarily mental or physical problem, often believed to be connected to an imbalance of the humors, particularly to a melancholic disposition. As Foucault indicates, the attitude toward insanity during the Enlightenment is best described as one of revulsion toward its irrational nature rather than for any moral evil. During that time, confinement of the insane became common, as “[a]ll forms of evil that border[ed] on unreason must be thrust into secrecy” (68). However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, a growing interest in morality and social justice tended to view madness as an illness that was often brought about by immoral living. By the time *Lady Audley’s Secret* was published, the eighteenth-century tendency to consider insanity as a disorder in the logical processes of the brain had shifted to a belief that madness was an illness like any other, and one that could be cured by medical means. While this idea gave some comfort to the families of the insane, it also introduced a new and terrible fear that the narrator of this novel sums up in the question, “Who has not been, or is not to be mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance?” (Braddon 408). If insanity was merely an illness that affected the mind instead of the body, and one that was imperfectly understood at that, who could feel perfectly confident of sanity? But even with this ambiguity about the nature of madness, Lady Audley’s dramatic declaration of her own insanity seems like

more of an excuse than an explanation for her actions. This early use of the insanity plea proves effective in her case, however, and she avoids the spectacle of a murder or bigamy trial, ending up instead in the pleasant, if dull, surroundings of the *maison de santé* near Brussels.

One of the most startling statistics that emerge from studies of insanity in the mid to late nineteenth century is the proportion of men and women committed to asylums during that period. According to J. Mortimer Grenville's *The Care and Cure of the Insane*, in 1872 there were 58,640 certified lunatics in England and Wales and of that number, 31,822 were women (230). This wide discrepancy in the numbers is due almost entirely to the fact that, as Showalter puts it in her article "Victorian Women and Insanity," "female psychiatric symptoms were interpreted according to a biological model of sex differences and associated with disorders of the uterus and the reproductive system" (169). Men were free from such stigma, and it often turned out that when describing female psychiatric patients, "doctors usually described women who were disobedient, rebellious, or in open protest against the female role" (Showalter 172). In other words, they were sometimes declared insane merely because their actions or ideas made them inconvenient. Foucault describes the phenomenon of confinement as a sweeping under the rug of those for whom society had no place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Simply put, some European countries during this period, suffering under the effects of failing economies, created places in which to "contain the unemployed, the idle, and the vagabonds" (50). In Lady Audley's case, her confinement is due as much to the difficult position in which she places the Audley family as to her crimes.

Insanity was also considered a possible consequence of pregnancy and birth. Post-partum depression was often called “puerperal insanity,” and is defined by Hilary Marland in her article on the subject as “the conversion of birth into severe mental illness, accompanied by violent, outrageous and harmful behavior on the part of women normally deemed modest and decorous” (78). According to the same article, these women often experienced suicidal urges, psychotic episodes, and even homicidal impulses towards their infants or family members (79). Presumably, this degeneration is what happened to Helen Maldon’s mother, whose insanity began at the hour of her daughter’s birth. However, unlike the lunatics described in Marland’s article, Mrs. Maldon is “a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seem[s] as frivolous as a butterfly” (358). In this description she is identical to her daughter, the eventual Lady Audley. But unlike her mother, the birth of Helen Talboys’ child does not signal the end of her sanity, although, as she later puts it, the strain makes her “more irritable perhaps after [her] recovery, less inclined to fight the hard battle of the world, more disposed to complain of poverty and neglect” (361). Out of that irritability comes her determination to better her circumstances by whatever means necessary. And those means do not stop with murder, for she has the excuse of insanity to cover her wrongdoings. But is she really insane? Despite all her affirmations of the fact, there is considerable doubt in the novel, perhaps because Braddon’s nod to social pressure in making her “unfeminine” villainess into a madwoman was never intended to be fully convincing.

When Robert Audley brings in a doctor to see his aunt, the man instantly guesses Robert’s real purpose: “You wish to prove that this lady is mad, and therefore

irresponsible for her actions, Mr. Audley?" (382). Robert is forced to admit that this is precisely what he wants, but Dr. Mosgrave can offer him no hope that his aunt's plea of insanity will convince a jury. On the contrary, when Robert tells him of his aunt's criminal actions as proof of her insanity, he says at once that he does not believe that these are the actions of a lunatic. Her crimes were for logical reasons, he says, and even more significantly, "[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" (383). Unlike many of his contemporaries, Dr. Mosgrave does not equate female criminality with insanity. Lady Audley's actions may be highly blamable, but they are not those of a madwoman. However, after speaking to her, the doctor appears to change his mind, at least enough to give Robert the name of the caretaker of an asylum in Belgium. He says that what she is afflicted with is "latent insanity" which "would only arise under extreme mental pressure" (385). She possesses "the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence" (385). Most of all, he says that "she is dangerous" (385). But these dire diagnoses fall somewhat flat, as Lady Audley's confinement in the *maison de sant * seems more like a respectable alternative to prison than medical treatment for a broken mind.

Like his aunt, Robert Audley's behavior falls outside of traditional expectations for his gender. He is lazy, unambitious, and selfish, showing no interest in either public or domestic life. And like Lady Audley, his failure to measure up to the ideal leads to questions about his sanity, first in the nature of offhand remarks by his uncle that are more a manner of speaking than actual suggestion of madness, but eventually in a real

threat of commitment to an asylum. A major factor that allows Lady Audley to suggest to her husband that Robert is mad is his disinterest in women, specifically his cousin Alicia. But critics like Richard Nemesvari, who suggest that Robert's disinterest in women and strong attachment to George Talboys are symptoms of homosexual tendencies (520), cannot expect much help from the text. Though Robert certainly displays some feminine characteristics in the beginning of the text, it does not follow that his bond with his old friend must therefore be a homosexual one. Robert's allegiance to George is such as can easily be explained by a lifelong friendship, without the added motivation of sexual desire. Though the thing that first interests Robert in his eventual wife Clara Talboys is her resemblance to her brother George, that is not the motivating force of their relationship. His attraction to her is based on character traits that set her quite apart from her brother as a distinct, and distinctly female, personality. And his desire to see George's killer brought to justice is tempered by concern for his uncle's good name when it becomes clear who the culprit is. But his need to see the killer punished is enough to scare Lady Audley, who turns to using her feminine wiles to convince Sir Michael that it is his nephew who is insane.

This scene is the last surge of Lucy Audley's power as a woman and a wife. Here she plays her cards skillfully and succeeds in half-convincing her husband of what his own mind struggles to accept. A chance remark that Robert Audley is "half mad" (296) is all that Lady Audley needs to start the seeds of doubt in his mind. His love for his wife is such that, as Robert once tells himself, "he would rather think [his nephew] mad than believe [his wife] guilty" (290). And though at first Sir Michael resists the idea that his own nephew could be insane – mostly on the grounds that "it's generally



your great intellects that get out of order” (300) and Robert is no great intellect – he is eventually convinced by his wife’s arguments, at least to the extent that he agrees to send a doctor to examine his nephew. However, before this operation can be carried out, Robert sends a letter to his aunt that so infuriates her that she attempts to burn down the inn in which he is sleeping. When he survives, she is so shocked that she confesses everything; her bigamy, her attempt to murder George Talboys, and her mother’s insanity, which she assumes she has inherited. Whether Lady Audley actually believes that insanity is the cause of her actions is irrelevant. What matters is that no one else, not even Dr. Mosgrave, seems to believe it. And when Lady Audley has played her last hand and failed, her time as mistress of Audley Court, the identity she gave up everything for, is over. She will spend the rest of her days under yet another false name, this time one not of her own choosing.

If the question of insanity is ultimately one of identity, of forgetting or losing a sense of self, then Lady Audley may indeed be insane. Perhaps that loss of her identity, not being certain which name is the real one, actually constitutes madness. If that is the case, then she is rightly placed in the asylum by Robert Audley. But Braddon’s goal is not to prove her villainess insane, but to pose the question of cause. What makes a person mad? What pushes him or her over the line from sanity to insanity? The answer, as it is in Lady Audley’s case, is identity and behavior. Being secure of one’s identity and acting out of that security is the definition of sanity. And since the Victorian identity was rooted in gender roles, insanity consisted of acting in a manner inconsistent with social ideals.

Although Mary Elizabeth Braddon's life was very different from that of most Victorian women, she must have felt the pressure of a society that demanded women to be wives, mothers, or daughters, their identities always linked to a family member, never independent. The censure that accompanied her affair with John Maxwell and her unorthodox career as an actress and author must have been painful, but rather than conforming to social pressures, Braddon used that criticism to produce novels inhabited by characters as unusual as she was herself; strong women and compassionate men whose identities were not grounded in society's expectations.

*Lady Audley's Secret* was a groundbreaking work of fiction in its time. Its wide readership made Lady Audley a household name and Mary Elizabeth Braddon a celebrity. Its engaging plot, familiar settings, and controversial characters combined to turn it into a cultural phenomenon. And though it might be too much to say that this work was the catalyst for change in the way gender roles were thought of, it is certainly reasonable to suppose that characters like Lady Audley undermine the image of the angel in the house. In today's society, where protest against traditional gender roles is a favorite topic of the media and cultural critics, it is easy to lose sight of the contribution of works like this novel, whose very popularity made it a better vehicle for change than many of the pamphlets and flyers passed out by reform societies. And that change, though subtle, is no less profound. It is that people be allowed to make their own identity as individuals, unhindered by the prescriptions of society or its impossible ideals. Lady Audley, with all her flaws, is a perfect example of the damage that is done when an individual gives up his or her identity in the effort to conform to a social ideal.

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