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Educating boys to be queer? : Robert Audley's homoeroticism straightened out

Jennifer S. Kushnier
Lehigh University

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Kushnier, Jennifer
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Educating Boys to be Queer?
Robert Audley's Homoeroticism Straightened Out

by

Jennifer S. Kushnier

A Thesis

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of Lehigh University

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~~Thesis~~ Advisor

Co-Advisor

Chairperson of Department

Table of Contents

Abstract of Thesis	1
Thesis	2
Works Cited	25
Vita	27

Educating Boys to be Queer?
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Abstract

Mary Elizabeth Braddon endows Robert Audley with an intense longing to be with his old Eton school mate George. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon critiques the mid-century notion that homosexuality was “a phase” to be passed through, particularly in the public schools, which condoned homosexuality and homoeroticism among their boys. Robert is a homosocial product of Eton schooling, and Braddon is critiquing public education during a period of investigations into education.

At the end of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), her hero-detective Robert Audley marries the near-identical sister of George Talboys, his one close friend since their days at Eton College years before. Throughout the novel, Braddon characterizes Robert as having effeminate mannerisms and a strong longing to be with George. She consciously makes him an alumnus of Eton College, which one contemporary critic cited as a prime example of "characteristic faults and virtues" of the entire public school system (Payne 35). One perceived "fault" of the public schools in particular was that homosexuality and homoeroticism were condoned among the boys, who were later expected to "become" heterosexual upon graduation. But Robert's homoerotic urges do not disappear with his "purchase" of a heterosexual marriage at the novel's end.

While recent scholarship on the novel tends to focus on *Lady Audley*, several scholars have addressed Robert's homosociality and possible homosexuality. Richard Nemesvari discusses how sensation novels, such as *Lady Audley's Secret*, "tended to present sexual irregularities as motivating the crimes which drove its plots" (515), and he elaborates by examining the sexual "irregularities" of both lead characters in Braddon's novel. He briefly notes that the novel's "passing reference to Eton," when Robert wants to have a drink with his old school mate George in order to reminisce, is a sort of "clue... for the attachments formed [at Eton] were often more than platonic" (521). Nemesvari continues, "It is also, of course, such elite male schools, which by definition exclude female participation, that form the homosocial bonds at the heart of British patriarchal power" (521). While all-male institutions can indeed foster such an environment, I will argue that Robert's homosociality at Eton is the result of factors other than the absence

of women. Further scholarship on the novel includes Lynda Hart's examination of "the homosocial and homoerotic bond between men, *as secret*" (6-7) and the exploration of Robert's homosociality in relation to his detective work. Finally, Ann Cvetkovich devotes a chapter of her *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* to Braddon's novel, in which she investigates Robert's "development from aimless son of the aristocracy... to a full-fledged member of the patriarchy," using the detective case as "the means to both professional and sexual maturity" (56). Basing my argument on these works, I will further suggest that the Eton connection is central to the homoerotic issues in the novel *because* Robert was a student of Eton College.

Focusing on Robert, a product of Eton, Braddon is critiquing elite public education¹ in the dawn of investigations into education in the late 1850s and early 1860s, specifically the Clarendon Commission of 1861.

Unemployed barrister Robert Audley is determined to discover not only what happened to his dear missing friend George Talboys but also his own sexual identity. When he reunites with this old school mate, whose supposedly dead wife has changed her name from Helen to Lucy and married Robert's uncle, Sir Michael Audley, Robert experiences a reawakening of the feelings he had known when they were last together at Eton College. Devastated by his wife's "death," George accompanies Robert to his uncle's country estate, where he astonishingly sees his wife in a portrait. Later, when George seeks out Helen/Lucy, she pushes him into a well, leaving him for dead. His strange disappearance leads Robert on a mission to discover the truth. Robert is also on a

¹ "Public" education was, by the nineteenth century, a misnomer. The public schools, by definition, had begun as endowed institutions for educating the poor. They differed from private education, however, because private schools profited their owners.

quest, however, to find a means by which he may “become” heterosexual in the eyes of a society that expected the homosocial years to end at Eton College. At Eton, Robert was put to quite another test than those in Greek and Latin; yet the question of his sexuality is the direct result of such studies, particularly those in Greek.

The emphasis on Greek and Latin studies, as well as the abuse of endowments and the poor condition of the boys—such as grim provisions and lack of heat—that went unchecked within the public schools’ walls,² prompted the Liberal government in power to appoint a Royal commission on 18 July 1861. Under Lord Clarendon as its head, the Commission looked into the administration, finance, and curriculum of the nine “great” public schools,³ with Eton as its principal target (Card 34). By 1860 and 1861, published criticism of Eton appeared in such newspapers and periodicals as the *Times* and *Westminster Review* (32). The Commission’s findings were not entirely condemnatory, but it was clear that Eton did not fare as well as the other schools examined (41). What resulted were recommendations to widen the curriculum from only Greek and Latin grammar to include compulsory French, history, geography, and science with the option of music and drawing available.⁴ Qualifying entrance exams were instituted, and regular exams were required for promotion to the next grade; fees were reduced, and special charges were dropped. The Commission also investigated the system of “fagging,” or, the

² See Card, Lyte, Payne, Shrosbree, Talwar, and Wright for detailed descriptions of what the public schools, particularly Eton, were like before reform.

³ The “great” nine public schools included Eton, Rugby, Winchester, Westminster, Harrow, Charterhouse, Shrewsbury, Merchant Taylors, and St. Paul’s—the latter two being upper-class day schools included in the Clarendon Commission’s investigation. In 1861, one-third of the 2,696 boys in the “great” nine were at Eton (Altick 174; Payne 44; Shrosbree believes there were 2,708 total boys, 8).

⁴ Legislation was needed to amend Public School Statutes; the much-amended Bill passed a Select Committee in 1867, and it became the Public Schools Act of 1868 (Card 46).

enslavement of younger boys by seniors, and the boys' utter lack of supervision during the evenings.

If the events of *Lady Audley's Secret* can be understood to have taken place concurrently with the novel's publication, Robert, at age 27 and five years out of college, would have studied at Eton in the early 1850s, years of public criticism not only of England's public schools⁵ but also the emergent homosexual subculture.⁶ This criticism became manifest by the decade's end and persisted into the 1860s, while Braddon was writing *Lady Audley's Secret*. Braddon already had achieved some notoriety for her previous periodical publications.⁷ Her new novel would therefore incite interest and be widely read; indeed, it went through eight editions in its first year, and with it Braddon

⁵ Critics of Victorian public schools abounded in the 1850s and early 1860s. See Searle, who writes that British public schools provided a false sense of what a British gentleman entailed, which subsequently led to the neglect of scientific and technical matters in favor of those classical (237). Reed maintains that unless a boy's future was secure, "his public school education may prove a liability rather than an asset" (65). With his aristocratic background and inheritance, Robert had no need to work. Lord Clarendon, after these investigations, concluded that it was deplorable that the subjects a "well-educated English gentleman ought to know" were not taught in lieu of the Classics, which turned out to be "in a lamentable state of deficiency" anyway (Payne 60-61).

⁶ While the term "homosexual" was not coined until 1869 by Hungarian doctor Károly Kertbeny, Foucault describes the emergence of a homosexual identity—or rather, a "species" now called the homosexual—in the nineteenth century (43). Foucault, as Halperin clarifies, "detached 'sexuality' from the physical and biological sciences... and treated it, instead, as the 'set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations.' . . . He divorced 'sexuality' from 'nature' and interpreted it, instead, as a cultural production" (7). For a complete history of this "new" sexual identity, see Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Martin also places the "emergence of a homosexual identity in the nineteenth century, coincident with the invention of the term 'homosexual' itself" (69). More specifically, Reade suggests there was a discernible wave of homosexual subculture, beginning around 1850 (3). Sedgwick notes in that by 1865, a "distinct homosexual role and culture" was in place for aristocratic men and a select number of their friends (*Between* 172).

⁷ See Wolff, *Sensational*; Devonshire; Nyberg; and Robinson.

achieved fame and financial success.⁸ Within this popular form of sensation,⁹ she encoded timely material, capitalizing on the Clarendon Commission's publicity and hinting at the significance of Robert's schooling by naming Eton four times. By casually naming expensive Eton, Braddon was accomplishing more than merely placing Robert in the upper echelon socioeconomically.¹⁰ She was signaling to her readers that this school was instrumental in creating the homosocial-homoerotic Robert Audley they would encounter in the novel.

Overtly representing Robert's homoerotic leanings toward George Talboys,

⁸ Wolff, *Sensational* 135.

⁹ As Showalter explains in *A Literature of Their Own*, women novelists were able to express in their work opinions that subverted mainstream culture. Such subversion occurred often with sensation novels, which could bring attention about societal problems to the reading public. See also Showalter, "Desperate Remedies," where she writes that sensation's popularity stems from its "exploitation" of repressed sexual fantasies (2). Grose argues in her dissertation on the sensation novel and social reform that "Victorian writers used the sensation novel to criticize societal prescriptions... [and] advocate social reform... not merely [as] an escapist form of fiction" (v, vi), noting that Braddon confronts the idea of bachelorhood as well as "the related issues of gender expectations and stereotypes" (4). Cvetkovich writes that sensationalism "derives its power from rendering concrete or visible what would otherwise be hidden" (50). Devonshire's dissertation on Braddon's early fiction emphasizes that Braddon's periodical publications helped her to reach a mass audience and that Braddon had a firm awareness of her readership. She adds that one of sensation fiction's "crucial characteristics" was its "proximity" in time, place, and situation (15), and that "there was always an element of social criticism, always an exposure of the gap between appearance and reality" (4). Loesberg notes that sensation fiction can, with its politically charged ideologies, determine political implications (116). Robinson maintains that Braddon attempted to elevate both the genre and criticism surrounding it since, as Robinson believes, mid-century critical discourse centered on sensational fiction (111). Nemesvari recognizes that the concept of homosexual, as described by Foucault, "was being formulated at almost the exact historical moment sensation fiction first achieved notoriety" (515). See also Wolff, *Sensational*, where he writes that Braddon "had deliberately decided in the late 1850's and early 1860's to flout Victorian convention and the Victorian proprieties" (9); she thought hard about larger social questions and viewed Victorian society "with a jaundiced eye" (14).

Braddon leaves it to her readers to discover that there is a connection between his public schooling and his feelings, which were expected to be “resolved” upon leaving the school system. One anonymous former Etonian from the 1850s refers to homosexuality at the school, recalling a long list of childhood “perpetrators” who would later run the country or become country gentlemen: “‘Happily an *evil* so difficult to *cure* is not so disastrous in its results’” (qtd. in Card 24, emphasis added).¹¹ What this fellow suggests is that homosexuality, contrary to what Foucault and others would later say, is temporary in a boy’s life. The anonymous Etonian also demonstrates the nineteenth-century attitude toward same-sex relations: they were “evil,” but, as long as they were not permanent, they could be overlooked. He does not say why homosexuality is “so difficult to cure” nor what is required for such a “cure,” but it can be assumed that it could not be “cured” until the boys left the school in which it was nurtured. This “homosexual phase,” explains Tim Card in *Eton Renewed*, through which the boys supposedly pass,

little matters provided heterosexual attitudes are later established: the relatively tolerant mood of 1860 was probably likely to cause less guilt and fewer subsequent problems to the young than the intolerance to be found later. (25)

“Provided heterosexual attitudes are later established,” as Card notes, a homosexual “phase” was condoned among school boys and in schools. As long as the boys “snapped out of” their homosexuality when they matured and entered the “intolerant” social life beyond school, educators apparently saw no problem with its presence in the public

¹⁰ Shrosbree writes that Eton had the most Court connections but the worst scholastic records (28), and Card notes that in 1859, 66 boys were either peers or sons of peers, and five were baronets (11).

¹¹ For a variety of similar recollections involving homosexuality, see also J.R. de S. Honey, *Tom Brown’s Universe* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977) and Ollard.

schools.

While Card is not clear whether “later” means once out of school or simply later in life, Robert, at the novel’s opening, is still in this homosexual “phase,” although he is not a practicing homosexual; rather, his desires for George are homoerotic. Paul Hammond describes the difference between “homoerotic” and “homosexual”:
“homoerotic” applies to feelings, particularly a desiring or admiring gaze, but not to acts directed from one man to another; these feelings may never be acted upon as they would in a “homosexual” relationship (5). Robert never makes overt sexual gestures toward George, but he does fantasize about their “lounging together, staring out of the window and smoking their cigars” (Braddon 60; ch.11). He has yet to take the “cure” of a wife, though by the novel’s end he will “purchase” a bride, George’s sister.

This link between homosexuality-homoeroticism and public schools has been studied in depth by many notable scholars and writers of memoirs.¹² At prep schools (particularly Eton) and at Oxford University—where Robert Audley likely received his legal education¹³—young men residing away from home with only other males often first

¹² For example, Coleridge describes many lasting friendships with hints of something erotic (70). Wright notes flogging in particular: “The infliction of pain often gives pleasure to the inflictor and... many men are sexually aroused in the process” (28); Ollard adds that flogging and athleticism “excited darker passions” (128). Wright quotes Honey’s *Tom Brown’s Universe*, where it is noted that sexual immorality was rife in Eton at this time, due to the wide range of sexual maturity and wide age-range of students: “The schools showed a marked lack of concern over the opportunities for homosexual temptation which this presented. The practice of two or more boys sharing a bed was common” (32).

¹³ Eton’s “sister” college had always been King’s College at Cambridge, hence, Eton’s King’s Scholars, but a shift toward Oxford occurred in the 1850s. See Dewey and Card for more information on this shift between the schools. Additionally, because Robert Audley was nephew to a gentleman and also son of a wealthy man, it is likely that he attended Eton as an “Oppidan,” rather than a “Colleger,” or King’s Scholar, which was a position reserved for the poorer boys, for whom the school was “public.” King’s College,

experienced homosocial associations.¹⁴ Hammond maintains that “intense bonds between men... were first fashioned at school” (126), and it was such “institutions of male power,” adds Robert K. Martin, “...[that] were intensely homosocial” (74).¹⁵ At issue here is not whether Robert Audley *arrived* at Eton with homoerotic desires or whether these desires were *developed* at school; at issue is that he would certainly have seen or even experienced homoeroticism in daily life at pre-reform Eton with its emphasis on Greek studies.¹⁶ One former Etonian, who was a student in the 1850s, comments that Platonism was everywhere at school, from sermons to dinner parties, and its inherent homosexuality ““was taken for granted”” (qtd. in Ollard 122).¹⁷ Robert, likewise, could not have avoided

therefore, was reserved for these boys, and up until 1860, King’s College admitted no Oppidans. Because Robert would have been a university student between roughly 1853 and 1857, he would have certainly attended Oxford.

¹⁴ Ollard notes that homosexuality was always a possibility in the schools, but the degree to which it was either accepted or punished cannot be determined (121).

¹⁵ Reade is more blunt when he states that homosexuality “breeds readily” in such environments that exclude members of the opposite sex (2).

¹⁶ Ollard discusses five “inbuilt forces” that made the boys “more or less apt to be homosexual”: the same sex and young age of Eton’s inhabitants; the burgeoning athleticism and the romance of its successes; the Eton Society, or “Pop,” who “combined the ultimate in dandyism with the absolute in power”; and the reading of Greek (130).

¹⁷ A brief discussion of Victorian England’s Greek revival follows. For further information on Platonism, consult Dellamora, *Masculine*; Jenkyns; Lane; Morgan; the articles collected in *Rediscovering Hellenism*; and Dowling. The contemporary writings of A.G. Swinburne, Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Alfred Tennyson, and Gerard Manly Hopkins were encoded with what Dowling calls the Victorian “homosexual code” (xiii), within which writers and critics talked about things Hellenic as a hidden code to homosexuality. Brake argues that public sentiments were very anti-homosexual, but for gay writers, there was a subliminal gay discourse that included references to Greeks or male friendship, particularly between old and younger men (146n). Walter Pater’s Oxford lectures in *Plato and Platonism* extol male love; Yacovone writes of Plato’s *Symposium* that it “first defined the bonds of fraternal love,” which created a male-male bond more intense than any with a woman (196). Hammond adds that the mere “mention of Greece also carried an awareness—implicit or explicit—of the licence [*sic*] provided to sexual relations between men by classical literature and social custom” (135). In some contexts, writes Dellamora in *Masculine Desire*, Hellenism was a “euphemism for [sexual] desire... between men” (33). Braddon employs this

the homosexual-homosocial community that surrounded him. In his book on nineteenth-century homosexuality, Alan Sinfield writes that

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

Homosexuality and homoeroticism, if not encouraged, were indeed condoned in the school system, and Braddon was attempting to create this association in her readers' minds by making her two male characters Eton alumni. Her critique, however, is not that homosexuality and homoeroticism were tolerated but rather that this toleration was later denied these young men who had been surrounded at school by nothing except male love and the study of ancient Greece.

The revival of studies in classical Greek,¹⁸ which Richard Dellamora calls "the Victorian resuscitation of Greek existence" ("Victorian" 270), coincided with the emergence of a nineteenth-century homosexual identity and its presence in the public schools. Greek studies in the public schools and at Oxford helped define and validate

"secret" language, as Nemesvari suggests, in a passage where Alicia compares Robert and George to the Greek story of Damon and Pythias: "Clearly at least a portion of Braddon's Victorian audience might be expected to undersand the story... and recognize [the male-male relationship] it suggests" (522).

¹⁸ Dowling discusses the Oxford university-reform movement, or Oxford Movement, of the 1850s and 1860s and examines the sexual and emotional ties between men at the time. Her main point is that England needed the Greeks (and the male love encoded therein) to revive the deadening culture that threatened its world prominence. Because England was, as Dowling posits, in need of new ideas and intellectual power, Hellenism offered "alternative Victorian values" that "promised the hope of cultural transformation" (34)—in a sense, rescuing England from itself. Jenkyns, however, takes this notion of Dowling's to task, suggesting that the 1850s were probably England's best years, in which it enjoyed "massive political and economic strength, steady civic improvement and social reform, and a vigorous and robustly native culture" (144). See also Bowen. For

desire and love between men, as shown in one Eton headmaster's concern that young boys could read so much Greek and not "remain impervious to its often insistent homosexuality" (qtd. in Ollard 125). His concerns are validated, as one student in the 1850s maintains that those men who learned Greek "bear still generally... many traces of its influence" (qtd. in Turner 63). While school boys learned only the rudiments of Greek grammar without ever studying the philosophies behind the poets,¹⁹ chief among the Greek influences was pederasty, the love or attraction between adult and adolescent males.²⁰ Clive Dewey suggests that "Socratic" teachers developed a new method of teaching, "teaching through friendship," in which they first "attracted boys' affection; then they used their leverage over their emotions to mould their minds" (51). In Braddon's novel, there is at least some lasting influence of Greek studies, for among George's only belongings to be transported to and from Australia—where he spent three years, during which his wife remarried—was "an old Greek testament and the Eton Latin Grammar" (Braddon 102; ch. 19). Further, alluding to the current controversy over Eton's failure in training young men, even in Greek and Latin, the narrator comments that George's "classic lore was not very great" for he could not remember what the sirens were called in *The Odyssey* (24; ch. 4).

When Robert suggests that he and George reminisce about "those good old times when they were together [at Eton]" (24; ch. 4), George teases Robert that they and

background to the enrichment and preference of Greek studies over Roman, refer to Turner. See also Talwar, Donovan, and Spencer.

¹⁹ See note 5.

²⁰ See Hammond, Dellamora (*Masculine*), and Dowling, who believes that along with Greek literature there occurred a "revival of the college tutorial as... [source of] intensely intimate personal [male] relationships" (xiv). There are also several reports of

George's wife, of whose supposed "death" he knows nothing yet, ought to retire on a yacht, where Robert "shall lie on deck and smoke" (24). George is implying that Robert *would not desire* his own female companion. He certainly assumes that there already is no female object of Robert's desires. Perhaps George's own reminiscences of Eton likewise conjure up images of young Robert's homoerotic feelings toward him. After George's mysterious disappearance, Robert's concern for him intensifies beyond the curiosity or alarm of a friend; he becomes keenly desirous of relocating him—in effect, he pines for him as would a melancholic lover. He tells Lady Audley, "I had a friend... whom I loved very dearly, and since I have lost him I fear that my feelings toward other people are strangely embittered" (93; ch. 18). Here he admits ambiguously to *love of a man*. He retains "embittered" feelings "toward other people," especially women, and, because he is preoccupied with his longing love for George, Robert cannot love another person, especially not a woman. He later laments, "Who would have thought that I could have grown so fond of the fellow... or feel so lonely without him?... I would freely give up all... if... George Talboys could stand by my side" (105; ch. 20). Robert declares that he desires George to be, in essence, his life partner. Furthermore, his pledge to renounce everything parallels George's fate when he married Helen Talboys/Lucy Audley, for George's disinheritance led ultimately to his wife's bigamy and attempted murder. Robert would gladly sacrifice for George as George had done for Helen/Lucy. He desires the company and comfort of his masculine companion.

That Robert prefers a male rather than female mate is evident in his failure to notice the amorous affections of his younger cousin Alicia:

headmasters at Eton paying more attention to attractive boys and even "buggering" them:

It might have seemed to *other* men, that the partiality of a *young lady* who was sole heiress to a very fine estate, was rather well worth cultivating, but *it did not so occur to Robert Audley*.... The idea of turning his cousin's girlish liking for him to some good account never entered his idle brain. (22; ch. 4, emphasis added)

It is she who recognizes that his “ever falling in love” with a woman is a “preposterous” idea (37; ch. 7). It is no accident, then, that Braddon periodically interjects Alicia’s failed attempts to arouse from Robert romantic feelings for her; these interjections are juggled with Robert’s own thoughts of George, so *just as* Alicia thinks of Robert, Robert thinks of George. Robert, however, is not immune to Alicia’s attempts; he complains, ““She’d like me to marry her I know.... But I’d much rather not”” (137; ch. 24). It is not Alicia particularly, however, whom he shuns, but women in general. Had he merely been not interested in Alicia, one might assume that his reasons could lie in his dislike of her rambunctiousness—which he disdains since his own greatest “exertion” is thinking (23; ch. 4). But because there are no other desiring women vying for his affections and getting rebuffed, his refusal of Alicia—representing all mature women—is indeed significant.²¹ He would “much rather not” spend his life with any woman, for not until the appearance of Clara, George’s sister who reminds him of George, does Robert show any sort of feeling toward someone other than George: ““And now I find myself driven into a corner by another woman, of whose existence I had never thought until this day”” (137). While acknowledging that he is thinking of her, he simultaneously negates the possibility of love that these thoughts might entail by his feeling “driven into a corner”:

see Hammond 28; Ollard 123-25; Reade 10; Dewey 72.

²¹ If, as Schroeder suggests in her article discussing Lady Audley’s homoeroticism, “In a novel where the heroine is not interested in men, Braddon is unable to titillate the reader

‘What a wonderful solution to life’s enigma there is in petticoat government! Man might lie in the sunshine, and eat lotuses, and fancy it “always afternoon,” if his wife would let him! But she won’t, bless her impulsive heart and active mind!... [Women]’re bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at this business of poor George’s! It’s all woman’s work from one end to the other.’ (136-137)

He insinuates that George would not be missing or murdered, as he suspects, were it not for a woman. Ironically he is right. But more importantly he implies that his life would be simpler if spent with a man.

Robert’s neglect of women does not go unnoticed by other men, either. When Alicia denies Sir Harry Towers’s proposal, her uncle tries to console Harry by suggesting she might be waiting for Robert to propose. Towers abruptly exclaims:

‘Don’t say that.... I can get over anything but that.... a fellow who turns his collars down, and eats bread and marmalade! No, no, Sir Michael; it’s a queer world, but I can’t think *that* of Miss Audley. There must be someone in the background, sir; it can’t be the cousin.’ (86; ch.16)

Towers is appalled at the very notion of being rejected in favor of someone whom he deems as less than a man. He further denies that Alicia could possibly love Robert, for her love could not be reciprocated. Towers’s comment reveals how other men, or at least some other men, might view Robert: as a man not interested in women. Sir Michael, likewise, senses something amiss at Robert’s lack of affection for Alicia: ““There’s some mystery there—there’s some mystery!”” (86) What both men have probably further observed in Robert is his lack of interest in any other women, as well.

Robert instead is preoccupied with thoughts of George. He is “flurried and

with veiled suggestions of heterosexual love” (91), then Robert’s disinterest in women likewise would provide a thin veil of his “heterosexuality.”

anxious... about his missing friend and... walking fast. 'I haven't walked fast since I was at Eton,' he murmured..." (55; ch. 10).²² His feelings toward George curiously remind Robert of Eton. Even during his first dinner with Lady Audley, which occurs after numerous interior monologues in which he admits that he is smitten by her beauty, Robert cannot divert his thoughts from George, "in spite of himself" (58; ch. 11). Lady Audley at length exclaims, "'Upon my word... you make me quite uncomfortable by the way in which you talk of Mr. Talboys'" (58). Although readers recognize, in retrospect, that her discomfort in hearing about George results from her attempted murder of him and the belief that she succeeded, at this moment Robert's longing for George—man longing for man—apparently unsettles her. Yet it does not unsettle Robert, for he seems to arrive at a semi-realization of his repressed desires: "'To think... that it is possible to care so much for a fellow!'" (60; ch. 11), a sentiment which he often repeats. He is at last beginning to *acknowledge* that he does have strong feelings for a *man*.

Long before Harry Towers's brief description of Robert, regarding his collar and marmalade, shows Towers's disdain of Robert's unmanly qualities, Lady Audley's discomfort at Robert's incessant sighing over George, and the appearance of Robert's intense longing for his missing friend, the descriptions of Robert's demeanor characterize him as a rather effeminate gentleman. He has a penchant for German pipes and French novels. He wears a blue silk handkerchief around his neck. His apartment is filled with

²² Nemesvari briefly discusses this passage, indicating that it "hints at the reason for Robert's intensity of response, and his perplexity about both why he is acting this way [flurried and walking fast] and about where he is going suggests that on some level he does not *want* to analyze too closely the motives which are driving him" (521).

flowers and canaries (Braddon 22; ch. 4; 31; ch. 6).²³ This attraction to things “decorative and foreign” would have, as Hammond explains, raised “doubts about the virility” of the men who held these attractions (Hammond 126).²⁴ Robert dislikes hunting, claiming to have hurt his shoulder with a gun (Braddon 34; ch. 7). He is “indolent” and “indifferent” (40; ch. 8), a “dawdler” (54; ch. 10), lazy, and somewhat misogynistic (137; ch.24).²⁵ While he declares women the “stronger sex” (136), he adds, “but let them be quiet—if they can.... I hate women” (137). It appears that he could rather do without women or activity altogether. He seems to be a hybrid of two characteristics of female writers’ heroes, as described by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*, who were often “impossibly pious and desexed, or impossibly idle and oversexed” (133); Robert is simply desexed and impossibly idle.

Because Eton at the time of Robert’s tenure taught Latin and Greek to the exclusion of all other subjects,²⁶ Robert would not have been taught French except

²³ For a thorough analysis of effeminacy in Victorian males, refer to James Eli Adams’s *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995).

²⁴ Cvetkovich labels Robert as “nonmasculine; he is more like a boy, a woman, or a homosexual” (59). Hart adds that Braddon “unmistakably *feminizes*” Robert and further notes that he is “selfish, bitchy, physically timid, and desexualized” (6, Hart’s emphasis). Sedgwick notes that homosexuality’s “strongest associations” were with effeminacy and with mainland Europe (*Between* 173).

²⁵ Robert’s reading the French novels, his laziness, and his dislike of hunting would be seen as very non-masculine at Eton, with its rising emphasis on hunting and athletics. That Eton condoned homosociality does not mean that a code of masculinity was not in place. For information on the rise of athleticism in Victorian public schools, see Mangan, Money, and Silver, who notes that the Clarendon Commission approved of games at public schools because they contributed to “social qualities and manly virtues” (42); see also Card, Shroobree, and memoirs of Etonians, such as Browning, Coleridge, Creasy, Lyte, and Michael Stiles, *Windsor and Eton* (Stroud: Chalford, 1998), for athletics at Eton College.

²⁶ “Public” schools were initially called “grammar” schools where only the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of Latin and Greek were taught at the expense of other lines of education. The irony lies in the fact that the boys from the public schools, particularly

through personal instruction, called “private business,” by a tutor on Sunday nights (Dewey 72). Robert, therefore, might have been taught or influenced by the non-athletic, France-loving “Socratic” teachers (69), as Dewey describes them in his sentimental depiction of Eton boys under Headmaster Edmund Warre (1846–54). This possibility places Robert in a rather precarious position: because he was wealthy, he would have likely been what was labeled an “Oppidan” rather than a “Colleger”—Collegers being those boys who lived “at college” and on scholarship²⁷ and who would therefore take their work more seriously (Card 27). While a certain class-conscious animosity existed between the two groups of scholars, this division was not always the case. It is certainly possible, then, that Robert might have spent some time with the Collegers, because Oppidans devoted more time to athletics, and, as one master noted, school work was not fashionable among them (Payne 50n). Nevertheless, Robert did enjoy French novels and obviously had learned enough Latin and Greek to get into Oxford.²⁸ The “Socratic” teachers of Headmaster Warre’s time would have been those of Robert’s time. Thus, Braddon implies that Robert engaged in some sort of intellectual activity beyond parsing

those from Eton, knew the least Greek and Latin. For more information on what Eton and the other “great” nine schools lacked, see Payne; Roderick and Stephens 32; Shrobbree; and Silver. For a closer look at Eton, see Browning; Card; Creasy; Dewey; Lyte; Ollard; contemporary critic and reformer of British education, Payne, for numerous critiques from Oxbridge professors regarding both the general sad shape of Classics education in the public schools and the deplorable state of things at Eton; Shane Leslie, *The End of a Chapter* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916); and Stiles, *Windsor and Eton*.

²⁷ See note 13.

²⁸ Payne notes that anywhere from one-third to one-half of Eton graduates (about 70) who applied to Oxbridge had to be rejected, even “with matriculation standards very low, and with every wish to admit men” (47). Out of all boys at the “great” nine public schools, one-third (820 in 1860, notes Card, 11) went to Eton, and Eton’s name depended upon one-twelfth of these who actually did their studies (44). See Payne’s full commentary for in-depth criticism on the “ignoramus” (47) that were Eton graduates and how poorly they fared at universities (45-47).

and construing ancient texts. These teachers “perfected a form of courtship” when teaching, maintains Dewey (53), and if the boys learned nothing else, they “learned the significance of passionate friendship between men” (51)—so the boy who was “potentially homosexual,” such as Robert, had many more opportunities for learning than the “normal boy,” and his “critical powers were developed” (qtd. in Ollard 122). Braddon’s Robert thus might well have learned of the “passionate friendship between men” in addition to his studies.

Robert’s positioning as a participant in a passionate friendship can be illuminated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussion in her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.²⁹ According to Sedgwick, homosexuality is located along an unbroken continuum of male bonding and male power; she terms the entire continuum “male homosocial desire” (2). This continuum of “homosocial desire” consists of an “emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality...; no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole” (1). All men experience shifting relations—including those of a homoerotic nature—along this continuum. Robert’s feelings, then, are not aberrant. Sedgwick, reinforcing Hammond’s distinction between homoerotic and homosexual, clarifies that “homosocial” describes the “social bonds between persons of the same sex...,” but distinguished from “homosexual,” and can be “applied to such activities as ‘male bonding’” (1). The bonds of male friendship between Robert and George had already begun at school, but Sedgwick’s continuum helps us account for George’s not reciprocating Robert’s love and his heterosexual marriage: George is not

positioned at the same point along the homosocial continuum as Robert. Moreover, while the continuum does not suggest that male bonding is interchangeable with homosexuality, it can explain why Robert, with a more homosexual positioning, would not have seemed “different” from George, who was positioned more heterosexually. Further, Eton tolerated the entire continuum of homosocial desire, giving the boys the impression that how they were living and associating was “normal,” yet never indicating that it was only “normal” insofar as they were in school. “The most natural thing in the world,” writes Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, is that people of the same gender, grouped together economically, institutionally, emotionally, and physically—as were the boys of Eton—would “bond together also on the axis of sexual desire” (87).³⁰ Indeed, the boys knew no other way to socialize or feel.

That Eton allowed various relationships along the continuum to coexist with one another, however, is not what Braddon critiques with her novel. She does not denounce homoeroticism while in school, but rather she criticizes the strict enforcement of heterosexuality thereafter. In short, she questions the notion of homosexuality as “a phase.”

Braddon complicates Robert’s positioning on the continuum by forcing him to marry George’s sister Clara, who effectively “replaces” George as the object of Robert’s affections.³¹ Clara is more complex than a surrogate George, however. Why Robert needs to marry her can perhaps be clarified by Sedgwick’s theory of triangulation. Using René

²⁹ For another discussion of *Lady Audley’s Secret* through the lens of Sedgwick, see Nemesvari.

³⁰ All other references to Sedgwick will be from *Between Men*.

Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1972), Sedgwick describes the triangulation "by which the 'commonsense' of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations" (21). Girard, explains Sedgwick, "traced a calculus of power that was structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle" (21).³² In other words, in any three-person relationship, two of the people rival each other for the third, even if one of them is not intentionally vying for the third, and this rivalry incites passions between the two; the third person is further not intentionally attracting both pursuers. In Braddon's novel, the points of this triangle consist of Robert, George, and Clara Talboys. Any triangular rivalry, writes Girard, consists of equally strong links between the rivals and between each rival and the love object; these bonds of "rivalry" and "love" are "in many senses equivalent" (21). The bond between Robert and George would be as intense as the bond between either man and Clara.

Robert's choice of Clara as his "love object," however, is determined not by any inherent qualities—such as her uncanny resemblance to George—she possesses, but by her already having been chosen as another man's "beloved," even her own brother's. A woman can be the beloved of her brother because, as Sedgwick clarifies, "the boundary between the sexual and the not-sexual [e.g., brotherly love]... *is variable*" (22, her emphasis). Keeping in mind Sedgwick's homosocial continuum, where homoeroticism lies alongside friendship, the love George and his sister bear each other need not be erotic. Clara tells Robert, "I have had no one but my brother. All the love that my heart can hold has been centered upon him" (Braddon 131; ch. 23), and, while Braddon does

³¹ See also Hart 8; Cvetkovich 59, 64; and Nemesvari, who maintains that this marriage "cements the homosocial bond between Robert and George even as [Clara] camouflages its potentially homosexual nature" (524).

not reveal George's own thoughts about his sister, it can be assumed that he feels similarly toward her. They too can have a strong fraternal bond, which qualifies Clara as George's "love object," and which therefore incites Robert's rivalry with George. While there is no open rivalry over Clara, Robert does become interested in her *because* of his interest in George and because of George's interest in his sister.

The more Robert sees George in Clara, the more he loves her: "He saw that she was very handsome. She had brown eyes, like George's.... 'If poor George were sitting opposite to me, or—or even George's sister—she's very like him—existence might be a little more endurable'" (129; ch. 23; 137; ch. 24). Even George and Clara's handwritings are alike (138; ch. 24). By expressing his wish for *either* George *or* Clara to help him through life, Robert is reiterating his earlier sentiments about sacrificing everything to have George by his side. At the time, he was expressing his preference for a male companion. With Clara's introduction, however, he now begins to desire a woman. His considerations of the siblings' similarities are crucial because he has not completely given up George. When looking ahead to the sort of companion he wants, Robert now sees a kind of amalgamation of George and Clara. He thinks, "I accept the dominion of that pale girl.... I've been acting for myself, and thinking for myself, for the last few months, and I'm tired of the *unnatural business*. I've been false to the leading principle of my life, and I've suffered for the folly" (135-6; ch. 24 emphasis added). He has come to the realization that his homoerotic bachelorhood—"the *unnatural business*"—must come to an end. He must pass through the homosexual "phase" that he neglected to complete upon graduating from Eton, and the only way he can do so is by embracing heterosexuality and

³² All references to Girard's triangles come from Sedgwick.

taking the “cure” of a wife. Yet, to make the transition into a heterosexual lifestyle, he chooses Clara, merely a feminized version of George.

By regarding Clara as “love object” in Girard’s and Sedgwick’s rivalry triangle we more easily recognize that she is an object given to Robert by George in order to reposition Robert on the homosocial continuum. Clara ultimately serves as a commodity to be exchanged, which, as Cvetkovich argues, “allows for the culmination of the relation between the men” (59). Robert, in essence, “buys” the semblance of heterosexuality with Clara. Yet this marriage does not mean that Robert is now heterosexual. In order to “be with” George in a socially acceptable way—that is, heterosexually—Robert marries Clara, thereby solving the “problem” of his homoerotic interests in George, and, as Hart writes, “rescu[ing] endangered heterosexuality” (8). This patriarchal heterosexuality, notes Sedgwick, deals with traffic in women “for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (25-26). Clara resolves Robert’s dilemma about George. By becoming the object of affection and standing in for the homoerotic bond between them, Clara resolves Robert’s inner and outer conflict regarding homoeroticism’s place in a heterosexual world. As a result, he does not have to confront his homoeroticism, which he had only just begun to realize and acknowledge. With Clara as his wife—and as what Cvetkovich considers “a repository for Robert’s desire” (64)—he can live out his homoerotic fantasies with George, who, as an official widower, lives with Robert and Clara at the novel’s conclusion.

At the novel’s close, Robert has the “best of both worlds,” as Nemesvari notes (526). As an adult gentleman and as the homosocial product of public schooling at Eton, he, like his real-life male counterparts, “found neither a community nor a shared,

distinctive sexual identity ready for adults who wanted more” of the male-male sexual activities from school days (Sedgwick 176). Without such a receptive community, Robert has to appear to “pass through” his homosexual “phase.” He must appear to be as a heterosexual member of the dominant patriarchal culture. Unable to fully realize his homoerotic desires once outside the school’s walls, however, he marries the female version of his male-love interest. Robert himself is not altogether certain of the method he chose for entering such a society: he asks Clara, ““Do you think there will *not* come a day in which my meerschaums will be foul, and the French novels more than usually stupid, and life altogether such a dismal monotony that I shall want to *get rid of it somehow or other?*”” (281; ch. 39, emphasis added).

By using the popular genre of sensational fiction to depict Robert Audley’s secret homoerotic desires, their manifestations within the novel, and education’s responsibility for them, Braddon produced a social commentary on the state of the pre-reform public education in the 1850s. Homosocial desires, she implies, are not necessarily “unlearned” or “passed through,” nor should they be. At the novel’s end, Robert has married Clara, and they have a child. Robert has given up his pipe smoking and his French novels—having “presented” them to an ambiguous “young Templar with whom [he] had been friendly in his bachelor days” (286; ch. 40). In addition to “buying” his heterosexuality, he has participated in another form of sale, giving away the signature tokens from his homosocial youth. There is, moreover, a further hint of the novel’s critique of the practice of tolerating homoeroticism during school days and later enforcing heterosexism: George will not send his school-age son to Eton. In the happy ending of the novel, we learn that George’s son “declines *musa* at Eton” (285).

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Vita

Jennifer Susan Kushnier
521 Carlton Ave.
Bethlehem, PA 18015

- 1999 Rodale Press, Inc., Emmaus, PA
Research Associate for Health and Fitness Books
- 1998 Rodale Press, Inc., Emmaus, PA
Copy Editor, *Natural Healing and Alternative Medicine*
- 1997–1999 Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA
Masters of Arts in English: May 1999
Teaching Fellowship in English: August 1997–May 1999
Paper presented: Medieval Forum, Plymouth, NH: April, 1999
- 1992–1996 University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI
Bachelor of Arts in English
Paper accepted: Sigma Tau Delta National Convention, Albuquerque,
NM: March, 1996

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