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# *Lady Audley's Secret*

MARY ELIZABETH  
BRADDON



# LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET

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Mary Elizabeth Braddon

*Introduction and Notes by*

ESTHER SAXEY



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

*General Adviser*

KEITH CARABINE

*Rutherford College*

*University of Kent at Canterbury*

## INTRODUCTION

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, everyone knew *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). It helped to launch a new genre – ‘sensation fiction’ – which dominated the marketplace for decades with tales of crime and sexual transgression. *Lady Audley's Secret* and fellow ‘sensational novels’ Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) and Mrs Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) were the three bestsellers of the entire century (Phegley). The novel’s pace of production is as impressive as its sales; in a letter to her mentor Edward Bulwer Lytton, Braddon states, ‘I wrote the third & some part of the second vol of “Lady A.” in less than a fortnight.’ Critics lambasted this new genre for having no ‘divine influence [ . . . ] beyond the market-law of demand and supply’. But Braddon saw potential for compromise, commenting to Bulwer Lytton (a fellow sensation author) that she wished to ‘serve two Masters [ . . . ] God and Mammon’: ‘Can the sensation be elevated by art, and redeemed from all it’s [*sic*] coarseness?’ (Wolff, 1974).

Following its heyday, the book lapsed into relative obscurity until its recent revival, a revival in part due to feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter who sought to discover a tradition of female writing. These critics found it necessary to reconsider or dispense with traditional critical evaluation, and have analysed genres previously excluded from the category of 'literature', including sensation fiction (Gilbert and Tromp, p. xix). A recent critical interest in popular culture has also assisted its revival. Early cultural critics such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had condemned popular culture, claiming that it manipulated society into passive acceptance of dominant cultural values, particularly those which supported the ruling classes and capitalism (see 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944). In recent years this view has been challenged, and academic interest in 'non-literary' literature has increased.

*Lady Audley's Secret* is at first glance an ideal object for these two fields of investigation: a popular text by a woman author. However, feminist critics – while not having uniform or simplistic expectations – often appreciate texts which subvert their society's dominant ideas about gender, or present an analysis of gendered social and economic roles. Similarly, scholars of popular culture, keen to disprove Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis, often admire texts which resist hegemonic values and which analyse or disturb existing class arrangements. In this light, *Lady Audley's Secret* becomes a problematic text for the very groups who have aided its rediscovery. Its gender politics are complex. On one hand, it presents a young wife and mother, abandoned by her husband and exploited by her alcoholic father. Driven to desperate measures to ensure her own livelihood and the wellbeing of her son, she is condemned by society, but attracts reader sympathy. She makes explicit the financial basis of marriage which the romance novel traditionally obscures. These elements all run counter to the norms and ideals of Victorian womanhood. On the other hand, the wronged wife and exploited daughter dispenses with the sympathy of the reader in a spectacular fashion. She lays plots to cover her tracks, attempts murder, compounds it with arson. On being discovered and cornered, she is defiant and shows no remorse.

In class terms, the novel's central setting is a run-down aristocratic estate: 'The broad outer moat was dry and grass-grown', and 'the rusty wheel of [an] old well' stands 'half buried among the tangled branches and the neglected weeds'. The ageing head of the family has made an unwise marriage, and the heir, his nephew, is an indolent dandy. The

heroine, Lady Audley, previously worked as a governess but now smoothly performs the role of 'Lady'. The novel seems to imply that aristocratic manners and status can be acquired, as easily as cosmetics or furs. The decay of the ruling classes, and the mobility of the heroine, could easily be elements of a critique of the class system. But during the course of the book, Lady Audley is exposed as a criminal impostor, and the idle heir remakes himself into a productive, hard-working hero. The Audley family line continues, strengthened by the very act of ejecting the woman who has schemed her way into a higher social position.

With such potentially contradictory meanings, what should the twenty-first-century reader make of this book? Is its treatment of class and gender fundamentally subversive, or does it gesture towards problems in these areas only to re-establish traditional values more firmly at its close? Within five years of publication, the Second Reform Act (1867) extended the vote to all men renting or owning property valued over £10, enfranchising many working-class men. The first Married Women's Property Act (1870) transformed the legal status of married women. On one level, this novel slyly applauds such egalitarian alterations to Victorian society. On another level, the novel relies on the reader's fear of such changes to generate its air of menace, and its mesmerising villainess.

To investigate this conflict, this Introduction considers the genre of sensation fiction. Then, at more length, I examine the characters of beautiful bigamist Lady Audley, and her nephew and nemesis Robert Audley. Their complementary narratives – her downfall to punishment and his ascension to the role of detective, and to manhood – are the twin motors of the novel.

## I

The 'sensation novel' was a term coined by critics in association with several bestselling novels published in the early 1860s, including *Lady Audley's Secret* and another bestseller by Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (1863). The plot of *Aurora Floyd* also revolves around bigamy; the upper-class heroine elopes with a horse trainer in her youth, and lies about his death in order to remarry. Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) is a story of fraudulent identity exchange, in which the wealthy heroine is imprisoned in a private asylum and a working-class look-alike buried under her name. In Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) the married heroine leaves her family with a seducer, is horribly scarred in a train accident and returns unrecognised to her former home as her children's

governess. These books give some idea of the subject matter and hundreds of similar novels followed in the next two decades. The name chosen by the critics has a significant double meaning. A 'sensation' is that which is shocking, exaggerated or scandalous, but more simply refers to an effect on the senses. The novels used the former to produce the latter in the reader.

It is hard to make out the genealogy of the genre, and its striking new combination of sentimental, melodramatic, realist and scandalous elements. It takes from the gothic novels of the nineteenth century (such as Matthew Lewes's *The Monk* and Anne Radclyffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*) the goal of producing physical reactions in its readers, by using themes of secret threats to the social and moral order. However, most gothic novels were set in mediaeval times, in European Catholic countries. The sensation novel brought the horror home to modern Britain; *Lady Audley's Secret* is crowded with contemporary details, naming specific consumer goods, advertisements, and train timetables. It borrows from the Newgate novel of the 1830s and 1840s its tales of crime. But the Newgate novel focused on the poor, who were, in the Victorian view, the natural agents of violent acts. The sensation novel's relocation of criminality within the 'respectable' classes could be subversive, but the genre relies on the ideal of the middle-class home, or there would be no thrill in its violation. Some sensation novels were prompted by the same impulses as the Victorian social-problem novel: both Collins's *The Woman in White* and Charles Reade's *Hard Cash* are protests against the abuses of private asylums, but in both cases, the melodramatic content overwhelms the call for reform.

Stage melodrama also contributed to the sensation novel, and vice versa – *Lady Audley's Secret* became a popular play, adapted several times, and performed at venues including the Royal Victoria Theatre – known as 'The Blood Tub' (Kaplan) or 'The Bleedin' Vic' (partly because of the extended performance of *Sweeney Todd* on the premises). However, the calm exteriors of the characters, and the lengthy scenes of detection were too subtle for melodrama, and in Colin Hazlewood's 1863 adaptation, several new scenes and dialogues are added. Lady Audley confesses her bigamy early in the play to the audience in a gloating monologue. She is shown in her attempted murder, crying, 'Dead men tell no tales!' She produces a dagger from her bodice and George Talboys wrestles it away: 'And thus I rob the serpent of its sting!' (Kaplan).

None of these roots – gothic, Newgate or social-problem novel, or stage melodrama – definitively suggest whether the genre should be

read as either progressive or conservative. Critics of the time took a third option, and condemned them as degenerate. W. Fraser Rae called Braddon's novels 'one of the abominations of the age'. Both meanings of 'sensation' were condemned; the author's selection of the most corrupt elements of life was revolting, and their quest to make the reader's heart race and hair stand on end (instead of a more enlightening or morally uplifting result) was unethical. Jennifer Phegley sees these attacks as part of newly vigorous attempts to separate high and low culture; the sensation novels were a battleground for those who defined the consideration of high literature as necessary for the health and progress of the nation, and the consumption of low novels as individually and socially harmful (typified by Matthew Arnold's 1864 *Cornhill* article 'The Literary Influence of Academies').

Criticism peaked in 1867. According to Phegley's account, this was because Braddon had launched (with her partner) a literary magazine called *Belgravia* of which she was the editor, a position which implied guardianship of public tastes. An attack by Frederick Greenwood appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and another by Mrs Oliphant was published in *Blackwood's*: 'According to Miss Braddon, crime is not an accident, but it is the business of life. [ . . . ] the chief end of man is to commit murder, and his highest merit to escape punishment; [ . . . ] women are born to attempt to commit murders, and to succeed in committing bigamy.' Braddon published many refutations in *Belgravia*.

These attacks usefully spell out for the modern reader the imagined relations between books, readers and society at the time. The novels are variously compared to alcohol, narcotics 'drugging our thought and reason' (*The Living Age*, p. 362) or 'carriion' (Mansell, p. 506); the readers are addicts and scavengers. Braddon herself characterises her work as 'strong meat' and, in the novel *The Doctor's Wife*, has a character compare novels to 'sweetmeats with opium inside'. The heroine is ruined by her overconsumption of novels: 'she wanted the drama of her life to begin . . . ' The heroine is compared to a 'respectable' person who turns regicide assassin 'in a paroxysm of insensate yearning for distinction'. A cause of particular concern was the relationship between the sensation novel and young women. An anonymous critic in *The Living Age* protested: 'the utter unrestraint in which the heroines of this order are allowed to expatiate and develop their impulsive, stormy, passionate characters. We believe, it is one chief among their many dangers to youthful readers that they open out a picture of life free from all the perhaps irksome checks that confine their own existence' (pp. 353-4). These dangers to young women are



expressed as bodily fears of physical and sexual contamination. Mrs Oliphant observes the heroine of the sensational novel, who waits:

for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions [ . . . ] this intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as the portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and mental food. [p. 259]

The popularity of the novels is seen therefore as both the symptom of, and a contribution to, the degeneration of society. As Mansell writes: 'works of this class [belong] to the morbid phenomena of literature – indications of a widespread conception of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite' (p. 482). The body of the middle-class young woman reading the novel stands in for the 'body politic' or society as a whole; her permeable body, suffused with 'diseased appetites' and dangerously open to the wrong 'mental food', is both the representative for the morals of the whole culture, and their weakest spot. This reaction could suggest that the genre contained unpalatable truths about women's anger and sexuality, or simply that it was a highly lucrative attempt to shock the bourgeoisie.

The commercialism of the new genre was on a different scale from that seen in any literary form previously. Elaine Showalter describes female authors making money at an unprecedented rate, reaching vast audiences. Their works were circulated by subscription libraries (such as Charles Edward Mudie's), and serialised in the newly founded magazines (such as *The Cornhill Magazine*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, *Temple Bar*, and Braddon's own *Belgravia*). But there is no simple connection between the production methods of literature and its politics; even with women writing and reading these texts, and working at the magazines which published them, they need not have been 'feminist' – either in sympathy with the growing first wave of feminism at the time, or as we understand feminism's various branches today.

The common plot elements of this new genre include arson, forgery, murder, insanity, sexual immorality, and their concealment and revelation. Around this framework of scandal, the most striking themes involve the loss or exchange of identity: Franklin Blake stares at the garment he believes will reveal the thief in *The Moonstone*, and finds his own name on the label. Laura Fairlie (Lady Glyde) stands next to her own grave in *The Woman in White*. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert

Audley traces the life of his friend's dead wife forwards, and the life of his uncle's new bride backwards, to their vanishing points; he removes a luggage label and reveals one name concealed by the other – the two wives are one and the same.

The theme of doubling is touched on in *Lady Audley's Secret* repeatedly: Lady Audley says to her maid: "Do you know, Phoebe, I have heard some people say that you and I are alike?" This early remark seems to suggest that Phoebe will stand in for Lady Audley in the novel, possibly as Anne Catherick stands in for Lady Glyde in *The Woman in White*, being buried under Lady Glyde's name. But this moment never comes. The significance of the similarity between the two women seems to be that anyone – from any class – could be Lady Audley, with the correct cosmetic alterations and purchases. Lady Audley's other double is Matilda Plowson, the sickly blonde girl who is buried under Lady Audley's name; her family is poor enough for her own mother to sell her body to secure Lady Audley's class mobility.

Jonathan Loesberg sees the theme of lost identity in this genre as specifically a fear of lost *class* identity, and links it to the concerns around the Second Reform Act in 1867, when a significant number of working-class men were enfranchised for the first time. The decay of Audley Court ('a broken ruin of a wall [ . . . ] everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy') could express a critique of the aristocracy, or it could metaphorically represent Sir Michael Audley, lapsing from his appointed role by marrying Lady Audley.

The breakdown of the traditional family and of sexual mores is also key. Winifred Hughes argues that the image of the divided hearth in Dickens's *Bleak House* could stand as the epigraph of the entire genre. In this novel, Lady Dedlock has a child in her youth; she conceals this past when she marries Lord Dedlock. The cold sunshine intrudes into the Dedlocks' home and 'athwart the picture of my Lady, over the great chimney-piece, throws a broad bend-sinister of light that strikes down crookedly into the hearth and seems to rend it'. Mrs Oliphant protested particularly that *Lady Audley's Secret* 'brought in the rein of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime, which no doubt shows a certain deference to the British relish for law and order. It goes against the seventh commandment, no doubt, but it does it in a legitimate sort of way.' Bigamy sums up the sensation novel's obsessions; sex and crime lurking close beneath a respectable exterior. The gothic novel worked on a grand scale, the Newgate novel showed the underbelly of society, but the sensation novel showed the crack within the Victorian ideal – the domestic middle- or upper-class family. The ignorant party in a

bigamous marriage – in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Sir Michael Audley – has their family revoked at a stroke. Bigamy is also the most appropriate crime for a genre which specialises in uncanny doubling, as it makes two brides of one women, creates two husbands for one wife. When Lady Audley's maid Phoebe marries, the narrator comments that on-lookers 'might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vault below the church'. Her double, Lady Audley, is also a living bride and a buried one; she has been buried as Helen Talboys and remarried as Lucy Graham.

The plot of the sensation novel in essence owes much to the gothic novel. A sexual or criminal threat is introduced; the threat is neutralised and expelled; order is restored. The reader enjoys the depiction of immorality, but also presumably enjoys the ritual of expulsion. Which aspect is the more fundamental? Lady Audley, as I will discuss further in the following section of this Introduction, is expelled in more ways than one. But other heroines fare better; Mary Elizabeth Braddon allows the bigamous Aurora Floyd to repent and renew her second set of marriage vows, and the novel's conclusion shows Floyd bending over the cradle of her firstborn. Collins's *The New Magdalene* (1873) even shows a former prostitute marrying the man she loves (a Church of England clergyman) and beginning a new life with him in America.

Because of their practice of both entertaining and punishing transgression, these texts can be read as both conservative and radical. Elaine Showalter believes the genre expresses the anger that middle-class women felt with their roles before they had found an articulate way to express it, and argues that the Victorian women readers recognised this anger in the transgressive heroines. She reads the passions of the plot and the threatened sexual disorder as appealing to proto-feminist sympathies. But she concludes that the novels do not offer a sustained analysis of gender roles, and as such are only potentially political. Mrs Wood's *East Lynne* is a sharp example of the ambiguity of the genre. Showalter reads the novel as sympathetic to the scarred repentant wife, particularly to her sexual boredom within marriage. But it is equally possible to read the novel as a parable affirming the most conservative Victorian values, as the reader sees the repeated punishment of the sexualised woman.

For the rest of this Introduction, I examine the characters of Lady Audley and Robert Audley to see how the novel manages these twin pleasures – of crime and punishment, of transgression and the return to order. Lady Audley is the beautiful face of transgression. Her nephew Robert Audley is a dandy and an aristocratic idler. They are pitted against one another in a battle of wits which causes her downfall, and transforms him into a dedicated detective, defending society's laws.

The character of Lady Audley was the focus of much critical bile, but her popularity spawned a multitude of blonde villainesses (at which Mrs Oliphant protested). Beautiful and charming, she delights her husband and visits the poor of the parish. Lady Audley is an example of the 'Angel in the House', a Victorian archetype named after a poem by Coventry Patmore: 'Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure . . . ' The stereotype it enshrined was so powerful that, in 1931, Virginia Woolf advised every female writer to 'kill the Angel in the House'. Braddon turned the Angel into a murderess.

There was enormous resistance to the idea that the role of the innocent girl and virtuous wife could be faultlessly imitated; in modern terms, that femininity could be a 'performance' rather than an essence. From *The Living Age*, again:

the authoress may have intended to portray a female Mephistopheles; but, if so, she would have known that a woman cannot fill such a part. The nerves with which Lady Audley could meet unmoved the friend of the man she had murdered are the nerves of a Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed, and not those of the timid, gentle, innocent creature Lady Audley is represented as being.

The novel itself satirises the ease with which Lady Audley's appearance is taken for her essence. In her impoverished days as governess, 'She would sit for a quarter of an hour talking to some old woman [ . . . ] the old woman would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, beauty, and her kindliness, such as she never bestowed upon the vicar's wife, who half fed and clothed her.' Even more sinister, Lady Audley states that she could have continued this performance until her death: 'I think I might have been a good woman for the rest of my life, if fate would have allowed me to be so.'

Robert Audley sees through the angelic exterior, and is therefore tormented by images from the negative end of the supernatural

spectrum: Lady Audley as fairy, as mermaid, as Medusa (with its Freudian connotations of castration). Even her first husband compliments her thus: 'She's for all the world like one of those what's-its-names, who got poor old Ulysses into trouble' (presumably a siren). These are attempts to imply Lady Audley's guilt by metaphor, attributing to her a supernatural capacity to make men love her against their better judgement: 'For you see, Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination, by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile.'

It is with bigamy that Lady Audley is most persistently associated. The idea of a double marriage seems to suggest that Lady Audley pursues her sexual desires beyond the bounds of the law. Could this be a proto-feminist defence of women's sexual desires? Braddon's own subsequent novel, *Aurora Floyd*, can be read as a protest against the 'double standard'. Aurora's early marriage to a handsome groom is forgiven by her second husband and she suffers few ill-effects. But Lady Audley is not Aurora Floyd, being less passionate, and more calculating. Her bigamy does not sprout from passionate desire, but from cold calculation. She marries to improve her material status. She herself states: 'The mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in my madness.' The contrast between her fate and Floyd's suggests that a more passionate, less heartless and shrewd heroine is more easily forgiven. Lady Audley even argues that her heartlessness would have assisted rather than hampered her role as a wife: 'I would have been your true and pure wife to the end of time, though I had been surrounded by a legion of tempters. [ . . . ] here at least extremes met, and the vice of heartlessness became the virtue of constancy.' Lynda Hart has noted that 'true' and 'pure' are the words used by Freud decades later to describe narcissistic women, who he states may be the most conventionally feminine (p. 18). Lady Audley sensuously enjoys furs and velvet, but as her finances are closely connected to her sexual behaviour, it would be dangerous to direct her sensuality towards another person. Can it be accurate to cast Lady Audley as a symbol of female sexual transgression as she has no apparent sexual desires?

It can if one recognises that Lady Audley's real sexual 'crime' is knowing too shrewdly her role in the Victorian economy of marriage. Heroines have traditionally balanced their economic savvy with disinterested, untainted love. Lizzie Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* can joke that she became attracted to her husband on seeing his estate, but she loves him sincerely. Even in *Lady Audley's Secret* there is confusion; Lady Audley's employers 'would have thought it something more than

madness in a penniless girl to reject' Sir Michael Audley's proposal. But must a 'penniless girl' also be in love?

The novel's proposal scene dramatises this conflict. Sir Michael initially moralises: 'I scarcely think there is a greater sin, Lucy [...] than that of a woman who marries a man she does not love.' But his future wife begs him: '... you ask too much of me! [...] From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. [...] I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot!' On hearing this, Sir Michael reverses his opinion with alarming speed. Abandoning all mention of 'sin', he says: 'I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple'. His words to her – 'Is it a bargain, Lucy?' – admit the mercantile nature of their engagement. These are indications that a young penniless heroine may marry to her financial advantage without loving her husband in a romantic sense, but without attracting absolute condemnation.

But there is a balance, and Lady Audley tips it. Any love she has for her husbands is tied to their wealth: 'I think I loved him as much as it was in my power to love anybody; not more than I have loved you, Sir Michael – not so much, for when you married me you elevated me to a position that he could never have given me.' And again, of George: 'I loved him very well, quite well enough to be happy with him as long as his money lasted.' Gratitude is allowed to form part of the love of a penniless bride, but enjoyment of wealth is not supposed to be the whole of it. Lady Audley marries where she does not disinterestedly love, and she does so twice, which is unforgivable.

And even the small amount of leeway offered by the novel, for Lady Audley to juggle love and financial considerations, is retrospectively removed. At the close of the novel, the narrator announces that Sir Michael 'had been bewitched by her beauty and bewildered by her charms' but never 'really believed in his wife [...] There is beneath the voluntary confidence an involuntary distrust.' This 'involuntary distrust' has allegedly existed from the evening of his proposal, which is when Sir Michael accepted his fiancée's mercenary cooperation instead of the disinterested love he sought. The marital 'bargain' which Sir Michael brokered and the novel had seemed to endorse is declared dishonest.

Lady Audley's 'madness', with which I conclude this examination of her character, further muddies the waters. The novel's plot, morality and characterisation all rest on Lady Audley's 'madness'. However, the scenes in which it is introduced and handled are some of the clumsiest of the novel, as I will explore. Lady Audley's confession of madness raises more questions than it answers; the newly-introduced character

of the doctor is left attempting to steer the reader through a moral maze, an attempt which founders on the flawed logic of his stilted speeches. Because of this clash of expectation and execution, Lady Audley's madness becomes a fault line in the text, destabilising the novel's ostensible values.

Jean Matus convincingly argues that 'the final focus on madness serves to displace the economic and class issues already raised in the novel and to deflect their uncomfortable implications [...] because it allows historically specific issues of class and power to be represented instead as timeless and universal matters of the female body.' From the 1850s onwards, inherited biological explanations were increasingly sought for mental conditions. Reproductive moments of change – menarche, motherhood and menopause – were cast as the most vulnerable times for mental illness. It is in keeping with these explanations that Lady Audley's mother and grandmother are both mad, and that Lady Audley states: 'My baby was born, and the crisis which had been fatal to my mother arose for me.' Matus quotes E. J. Tilt in 1853: 'It is generally admitted that pathology and physiology are inseparable, and the female organs of generation afford, perhaps, the best illustration of the axiom.' These medical theories effectively made inhabiting a female body into a pathological state.

This association of women and madness could be used to pathologise undesirable behaviour. The diagnosis obscured true motivations and afforded a means of establishing control over the woman involved (at its most extreme, the private asylum, depicted in many sensation novels). Matus is convinced that Braddon see these 'uses' of madness, and 'apprehends social and medical discourses in the act of enunciating the "other" in order to shape a healthy, middle-class self' (p. 335).

Matus compares *Jane Eyre*, written fifteen years earlier than *Lady Audley's Secret*. Jane Eyre, like Lady Audley, is a governess who marries above her station. But it is Jane Eyre who is unwittingly almost tricked into bigamy, and it is her employer/fiancé's first wife who is insane. Lady Audley and her mother are golden-haired childlike women, while Bertha Harris (the first wife) is bestial, taller than average and with 'dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane'. But the maternal strain of madness is again emphasised: Bertha is 'the true daughter of an infamous mother', who is in an asylum. There is confusion as to whether Bertha was inevitably mad, and whether the 'seeds' of maternal madness need to be nourished by the 'sins' of intemperance and unchastity in order to germinate; Bertha is both mad and bad, blamed for her own mental instability, and Lady Audley is similarly

ambiguous. A reading of *Jane Eyre* made famous by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar is that Bertha embodies the passion and rebellion of Jane Eyre, split off from the heroine (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the 19th-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979). In this light, it seems that Lady Audley might be an attempt to reintegrate the two sides, and express in one character the anger of respectable Victorian middle-class women. But the text refuses this integration; like Bertha, Lady Audley is confined and conveniently expires.

It is therefore hard to say whether the issue of madness allows social issues to be voiced, or more effectively silences them. It is worth revisiting the series of events through which the madness is revealed. When Lady Audley is confronted with evidence, rather than admit to murder or a forged identity, her confession goes beyond what the reader has been lead to expect: 'I killed him because I AM MAD!'

This sudden revelation of madness has the function described by Matus: it blurs the matter of her motives, as the insane person is perceived as being divorced from logic. In doing so, it also obscures her grievances and the inequalities of her life; her husband's abandonment, her exploitative father. In a sense, it also threatens to make a nonsense of the detective plot; her crime has been confessed, but how can a madwoman be held responsible for her actions? Lady Audley herself mocks Robert Audley's detective success: 'You have used your cool, calculating, frigid, luminous intellect to a noble purpose. You have conquered – A MADWOMAN!' (Capital letters are a common device of the genre; Franklin Blake, seeking the criminal's name on a laundry mark in Collins's *The Moonstone* 'read – MY OWN NAME'.)

But Lady Audley's subsequent story, told in a lengthy monologue, alternates between substantiating her madness and undermining it. Her account of her mother offers a hereditary link, and supports the contention that Lady Audley can appear both fair and friendly while being insane: her mother is not a 'raving, straight-waist-coated maniac, guarded by zealous jailers, but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly'. However, after her childbirth and subsequent 'crisis', Lady Audley states: 'I escaped, but I was more irritable perhaps after my recovery, less inclined to fight the hard battle of the world, more disposed to complain of poverty and neglect.' This implies that borderline madness can cause dissatisfaction with one's low income. Is this insanity or simple ambition?

Lady Audley's confession also suggests that she began to undermine the idea of natural femininity before she was mad. She states (before the



onset of madness): 'I did not love [my son], for he had been left a burden upon my hands' – suggesting that maternal love, like femininity and virtue, is not an essence but is dependent on circumstances. She has also already married once for money, again before her madness developed. Later, when fully 'mad', she conceals her identity, finds employment and marries again. She becomes sane in her new life of luxury. When she hears of George's return, 'Again the balance trembled, again the invisible boundary was passed, again I was mad.' She schemes with her father to fake her own death.

This recitation of events by Lady Audley suggests that whether sane or mad, she is intelligent, chafes against poverty, and has no passionate affection for either of her husbands or for her child. There is not a marked difference between the two states, and none of her actions are proof of insanity. The doctor called by Robert Audley notes as much in a brutal summary:

'She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that.'

He also knocks the central support out of Lady Audley's own thesis: 'Madness is not necessarily transmitted from mother to daughter.'

It is only after Robert Audley describes his fears of George Talboys' disappearance that the doctor even agrees to see Lady Audley. The reader is forced to wait with Robert Audley outside the door. Having seen in detail Robert Audley 'detect', when the focus of the plot shifts to madness, we are not permitted to see the doctor 'diagnose'. Possibly this is because the 'wonderful chain forged by the science of the detective officer' on which Robert Audley relies is not matched by anything as convincing on the part of the medical official. He emerges to announce, 'There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a lifetime.' The modern reader is most likely to conclude, with Jill Matus, that the diagnosis is a cover-up. It saves Sir Michael Audley from scandal, and quashes the questions raised by Lady Audley's difficult life. Did Braddon intend the manipulation of insanity to be so obvious, using this scene to emphasise Lady Audley's defeat by aristocratic male