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Elevated by Art:

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Literary Ambitions to Transcend Sensation

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A Thesis in the Field of English

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

By any measure, Mary Elizabeth Braddon was one of the most successful novelists of the Victorian era, publishing more than eighty novels between 1860 and 1915 and earning the title of "queen of the circulating libraries." Yet her books disappeared from bookshelves within a few years of her death. In recent decades, although scholars have renewed their interest in Braddon's work and rescued her from obscurity, few have pursued the pivotal role of literary allusion and the physical act of reading by her characters. An irony of Braddon's career is the degree to which she integrated so many rich literary references into novels that critics condemned for their artlessness. Indeed, this thesis argues that Braddon thoughtfully layers literature into her novels through multiple techniques, including overt references to fictional works, character profiles defined by their reading tastes, and the metafictional usage of an intrusive narrator and chapter mottoes that function as meta-fictional clues for the attentive reader to decipher. This thesis demonstrates how Mary Elizabeth Braddon sought to elevate her fiction, producing novels that she intended to be sensational and literary at the same time. Furthermore, this thesis contends that Braddon consciously exploited her popularity and the circulating library paradigm to engage her female readers in questioning prevailing rules on what they should know, what they should read, and how they should behave.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Jason Shaffner was born in Bucksport, Maine, a small paper mill town on the way to Bar Harbor that no longer features a paper mill. He has always had a passion for literature, with a particularly fond memory of reading *The Canterbury Tales* and *Tom Jones* on a family road trip to Texas in eighth grade. After graduating from Bucksport High School in 1995, Shaffner matriculated at Harvard College, where he was an exuberant resident of Pforzheimer House and from which he graduated *magna cum laude* with a concentration in Social Studies. He remains proud that he can search for his senior thesis, "Anything to Survive: Union-Management Concessions and Cooperation at Two Maine Paper Mills," in HOLLIS and looks forward to seeing his labor-of-love thesis on Mary Elizabeth Braddon become his second entry there.

Mr. Shaffner has spent his professional career in higher education information technology, leading teams who build and support software applications for administrative functions such as human resources, financial operations, grants management, and student enrollment management. His profession may seem a far cry from Social Studies and English literature, but Shaffner believes that his experiences with literary analysis and social theory serve him better than one might suppose. He endeavors to avoid turning e-mail messages into academic essays; occasionally he succeeds.

Shaffner lives in Arlington, Massachusetts with his wife and son, both of whom are avid readers but do not quite share his enthusiasm for Victorian fiction.

Dedication

This project would not have been possible without unwavering support from my wife, Keryn, who is truly exceptional in every way. I am inexpressibly grateful for her love, encouragement, and patience. No more weekend term papers after this, Ker!

I want to thank my parents, Ray and Valorie Shaffner. My passion for literature began when I was a precocious child aspiring to go to Harvard when he grew up, a dream made possible through their devotion to seeing me thrive.

And finally, I must thank Eliot, who was still in diapers when I read the first page of *Lady Audley's Secret* and will be ten years old when this project concludes. His innate optimism is truly inspirational. As my thesis approached the home stretch, he served as a kindly drill sergeant, extolling me to get back to work and stop looking at my iPhone.

Therefore, I dedicate this completed work to Keryn, Eliot, Mom, and Dad—even though I suspect none of you will ever read it!

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the outstanding professors from whom I have learned during my studies at the Harvard Extension School, most notably Michael Shinagel and Theoharis C. Theoharis. Although I never met him, I owe a debt of gratitude to Matthew Kaiser, whose course on “Crime and Horror in Victorian Literature and Culture” is the only reason I discovered Mary Elizabeth Braddon in the first place.

Much thanks to Talaya Delaney, my research advisor, who helped me turn a loose set of ideas into a cogent thesis proposal. It was a true pleasure working with you.

I have been fortunate in having an outstanding thesis director, Linda Schlossberg, who worked with me to focus and refine this project, despite a host of challenges resulting from the global pandemic.

Citation Explanatory Note

For the purpose of simplicity given how many Mary Elizabeth Braddon novels will be cited in this thesis, I will employ short abbreviations for repeated references to her novels and an ordinal numeral (1, 2, 3) to disambiguate discrete volumes of that novel, if the edition referenced in this thesis was published in multiple volumes:

ASP = *Asphodel*

AF = *Aurora Floyd*

BKE = *Before the Knowledge of Evil*

DLC = *Dead Love Has Chains*

DW = *The Doctor's Wife*

HDS = *His Darling Sin*

JM = *John Marchmont's Legacy*

JHD = *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*

LAS = *Lady Audley's Secret*

LM = *The Lady's Mile*

TATM = *Thou Art the Man*

TBE = *To the Bitter End*

TS = *The Trail of the Serpent*

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Chapter 1:

"Miss Braddon"

Among the documents in the Harvard College Library is an 1887 American edition of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *To the Bitter End* (1872). The title page reads: "TO THE BITTER END. A NOVEL. BY MISS M.E. BRADDON." However, the copy in Harvard's collection includes several handwritten corrections made by a staff member while processing the novel for entry into the library's stacks. In elegant cursive, the librarian substitutes "Mrs" for "Miss," expands "M.E." to "Mary Elizabeth," and supersedes "Braddon" with "Maxwell"—the surname of Braddon's husband. The double underscore beneath the "M" signals the decision to catalogue the document under that letter instead of the author's life-long professional identity. Although this may have been a common practice in the late 1800s, it appears striking to the twenty-first century scholar given the magnitude of Braddon's writing career, which spanned six decades and produced more than eighty novels and hundreds of articles, stories, and poems. Furthermore, it is a tangible reflection of the paternalistic mores of the late 1800s in both England, where Braddon lived and wrote for her entire career, and the United States.

The breakneck pace of Braddon's literary output is even more remarkable than the statistics suggest when one considers that she raised eleven children along the way. Biographer Robert Lee Wolff, having read her personal correspondence, observes:

> If somehow one were to read only the diary entries […] one would conclude that [Mary Elizabeth Braddon] was a full-time housekeeper,

> wife, mother, stepmother, step-mother-in-law, stepgrandmother, hostess, and social butterfly and would marvel how she managed to avoid collapse. Yet of course she was also one of the most prolific novelists of her day. (Wolff 267)

Braddon was always most famous for *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and her early fame and financial success were undoubtedly enabled by the sensation fiction fad of the 1860s, yet her novels became more serious and less purely "sensational" over time. Despite this evolution, her novels remained extremely popular within circulating-library systems such as that operated by Charles Mudie, and Braddon earned a degree of recognition bestowed on relatively few of the other novelists who benefitted from the ascendancy of the sensation novel sub-genre in the 1860s. Newspapers and magazines routinely published profiles of "Miss Braddon"—with no further introduction necessary. The eleventh edition of the *Encylopaedia Britannica* (1910) describes her novels as "distinguished by constructive skill and opulence of invention" (v4, 369) and a flattering profile in *The Bookman* (1912) states:

> [I]t is difficult, nevertheless, for the present generation of novel readers to appreciate the way that this most popular of mid-Victorian novelists held over her public for many years […] Miss Braddon has for a period of nearly fifty years held a place in English fiction to which no other writer has succeeded in attaining. (Holland 149)

Despite such accolades and fame, within two decades of her death, none of her novels were available in print.

Literary historian Michael Sadleir dedicates one chapter of his 1944 memoirs to Braddon, in which he expresses frustration about both the critical reception of Braddon's work in her lifetime and the fact that her novels vanished so quickly from British bookshelves after she died. He claims that society errs in relegating her work to a historic footnote, observing that "her stories show a power of invention, a knowledge of the world, an understanding of the human mind under emotion and a mastery of easy vivid English far beyond the ordinary" (Sadleir 78). He further suggests that she embeds subversive subtexts within her novels but was "compelled to write by the exigencies of the market" (78) to sidestep taboos such as extramarital sex or letting villains get away with their crimes. In *Time Gathered* (1938), Braddon's son, novelist W.B. Maxwell, decried how critics mistreated his mother and her novels, bristling especially at the fact that "many of the younger critics of to-day [sic] agree to consider the whole bulk of mid-Victorian literature as a joke" (Maxwell 283). Maxwell defends his mother's work for an intrinsic quality of "interestingness" (268) and their realistic recreation of "faithful pictures of contemporary life" (269).

Three decades after Sadleir and Maxwell lamented Braddon's disappearance from mainstream culture, Robert Lee Wolff amassed and analyzed a vast collection of archival documents, including hundreds of letters, most notably her long correspondence with Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, manuscripts and notebooks, and Braddon's unpublished autobiography. In *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (1979), Wolff examines the connections between her publishing career and unconventional life story: absentee father, brief career in the theatre, long (and initially bigamous) relationship with her publisher John Maxwell, and her lucrative career as an

author. This is an essential document for any Braddon scholar, but since Wolff was a historian by trade, *Sensational Victorian* provides relatively sparse literary analysis to support his argument that "not only was she forgotten, but even at the height of her fame she had never been properly appreciated" (Wolff 3).

In fact, few critics have pursued the question of *how* Braddon's work reflected and/or subverted her contemporary culture, even as several observe it. According to Wolff, Maxwell, and Sadleir, Braddon's relationship with the literary establishment was fraught from the beginning. Initially rebuked by morality critics such as Margaret Oliphant or R. Fraser Rae for the alleged salaciousness of her novels during the ascendancy of the sensation genre in the 1860s, criticism followed Braddon throughout her life. Peers such as Bernard Shaw, George Eliot, and George Moore quarreled with her rate of publication, questioned her intimacy with "masculine" topics such as horse-racing and gambling, and lambasted her for having acquiesced to the conventions of the market and her publishers rather than maintaining a loftier artistic standard. They could not dispute that she was widely read and much beloved, but they were more than happy to denigrate the quality of her output, painting her as a widget-maker in the circulating-library factory of inferior literature, while noting that "the circulating libraries gradually exerted a material, intellectual and moral dictatorship on authors, publishers and readers" (Moore 12). For these (and other) critics, the popular novels of the circulating library were mere reflections of a corporate distributor's worldview and personal taste, which skewed toward prioritizing plot over emotion, sensation over psychology, and melodrama over seriousness. Whereas the early criticism hinged mostly on questions of morality, and whether young women might be driven to emulate the behaviors of monomaniacal,

murderous, or "masculine" heroines in the pages of novels, this later criticism focused on the classification of literature by the degree of seriousness and artistic realism.

This distinction, comparable to the twenty-fist century categorization of novels between "literary" and "trade" fiction, was often framed as a stark dichotomy. Yet even Anthony Trollope, an author generally put in the company of "realists," disputed the distinction, noting that "there has arisen of late years a popular idea as to the division of novels into two classes […] Now, according to my view of the matter, a novel is bound to be both sensational and realistic" (Trollope 123). Henry James, who later became a frequent visitor to Braddon's Richmond mansion, observed in 1865 that "[t]hese works are censured and ridiculed, but they are extensively read. [Miss Braddon] has a hold on the public. It is, assuredly, worth our while to enquire more particularly how she has obtained it" (James 114). More recently, Patrick Brantlinger explores whether "Braddon could be taken as going beyond the genteel realism of a Trollope or a Thackeray to unlock the true mysteries of life—those that more proper Victorians thought should be walled off from the reader" (Brantlinger "What Is Sensational" 12). Brantlinger's critique distinguishes between "realism" and "sensationalism" beyond sensational plot elements, focusing instead on whether novels labeled with each moniker actually differ in structure and character development; he concludes that the distinction may be narrower than many critics suggest, positing that "[t]he development of the sensation novel marks a crisis in the history of literary realism" (27). To some extent, the gap between sensation and realism may depend upon an author's intent.

Several studies, such as Lyn Pkyett's *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of*

Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing (1977), and Ann Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (1992) explore the controversial sensation fiction phenomenon. These studies not only explore the various cultural issues surrounding the reception to and success of sensation fiction, but they also contribute to an overarching project to invigorate interest in forgotten female authors of the period, including Braddon. They tackle many issues at the intersection of feminism and literary criticism, notably the sexist double standard that treated female authors such as Braddon, Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood, and Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) differently from male authors such as Wilkie Collins even though his novels contained comparably sensational content. As Kate Flint observes in *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (1993): "Attempts to legislate about reading and its effects can be seen on the one hand as a means of gaining control over subjectivity, and, on the other, as a means of obtaining access to different types of knowledge, and through this, to different social expectations and standards" (Flint 11).

Despite Braddon's epoch-spanning career and sustained popularity beyond the heyday of sensation fiction, most scholars continue to pigeon-hole her in the milieu of sensation and choose to analyze her talents and relevance to cultural history through a narrow selection of novels, especially her three most commercially successful ones (*Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Doctor's Wife*, and *Aurora Floyd*), all of which were published during the 1860s. In her essay "The Fashions of the Current Season: Recent Critical Work on Victorian Sensation Fiction" (2017), Anne-Marie Beller examines the resurgent interest in sensation fiction and other Victorian-era themes, not only in academic scholarship, but in popular culture. Beller concludes that "despite the wealth of

scholarship on sensation fiction […] there remain under-explored avenues of enquiry" (Beller 471). Indeed, although Braddon's name appears more frequently today in academic journals than forty years ago, many essays begin by observing that too much attention accrues to *Lady Audley's Secret*. Yet that novel ends up, time and again, the most popular analytic target. While numerous scholars (Brantlinger, Gilbert, Tromp) proclaim that Braddon has been re-discovered, few of her novels are available in print.[1]

In accord with the same narrow aperture through with critics have tended to evaluate her career, my relationship with Braddon began with *Lady Audley's Secret*. This novel was an unfamiliar title for me on the syllabus for a graduate English literature course, and perhaps an unconventional choice of "beach reading" for a family vacation. However, what I found in the pages of that novel was not merely an exciting mystery story, but a surprisingly vibrant narrative voice—wry, sarcastic, and incisive. I devoured the novel in one day, and even as I read the contrived happy ending, I admired how earnestly Braddon framed it: "I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace" (LAS 437). Here was an author, or so I inferred, who recognized both the absurdity of this happy ending and the expectations of her readers that she would deliver it; the comment seems like a wink to the critics. As I closed the novel, I asked myself two questions: why had I never heard of her and were any of her other books as richly entertaining?

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[1] As of October 2020, only four editions of Braddon's work were available at Amazon.com from traditional publishers: *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford World's Classics and Penguin Classics), *Aurora Floyd* (Oxford World's Classics), and *The Face in the Glass: The Gothic Tales of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (British Library). Twenty of her titles—less than 25% of her collected works—are available through Project Gutenberg, although HathiTrust and Google Books now offer the broadest availability of Braddon's work. The Sensation Press, a small imprint operated by Braddon biographer Jennifer Carnell, has printed approximately a dozen of her lesser known novels in limited editions.

As I began to explore Braddon's catalogue, I found that many of her novels indeed matched the quality and inventiveness of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Sensational plot elements—murders, stolen identities, secret marriages—abound, but I discovered that Braddon's accomplishments include the first modern detective novel[2] (*Three Times Dead* (1860); later published as *The Trail of the Serpent*), an adaptation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* years before it was translated into English (*The Doctor's Wife* (1864)), and an anti-slavery novel (*The Octoroon* (1861)). Braddon may recycle phrases, character stereotypes, and plot elements across her novels, which is a given for any prolific author, but what caught my attention was her continual emphasis on literary reference: characters quoting Byron; chapter titles sampling Swinburne, Tennyson, and Chaucer; and Goethe novels inspiring romance and murder.

Although some scholars (e.g., Flint, Gilbert, Tomaiuolo) analyze isolated instances where Braddon relies upon allusions and quotations, none have analyzed the pivotal role of both literary allusion and the physical act of reading across her novels. More specifically, what purposes do literature and reading serve for Braddon? As I examined this question, several patterns emerged, which collectively battle against paternalistic censorship of reading and critical bias against so-called "sensation" literature, while serving the practical functions of adding texture to the realism of her novels, clues to the plot ahead, and subtle subversions of societal norms.

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[2] Edgar Allen Poe is universally credited with creating the detective character, in the form of C. Auguste Dupin, across three short stories in the 1840s, but the debate over the first modern detective novel persists. Many credit Wilkie Collins for *The Moonstone* (1868) but Braddon's mute detective Joseph Peters, hero of *The Trail of the Serpent*, appeared eight years prior to Collins's Inspector Cuff. For more on this question: Watson, Kate. *Women Writing Crime Fiction, 1860-1880: Fourteen American, British and Australian Authors*. McFarland & Co: 2012.

In Chapter 2, "Literary Clues and the Imaginary Text," I evaluate how Braddon utilizes references to other works of literature to provide veiled clues to the mystery at the core of the novels or deeper insight into characters. Such allusions—if understood by the reader—serve as elegant foreshadowing devices that empower the learned reader to play the role of amateur detective and prognosticator. This chapter focuses on *To the Bitter End, Thou Art the Man,* and *Asphodel* to analyze literary references in dialogue, internal monologue, and unattributed quotations used as chapter titles.

Chapter 3, "My father has forbidden us to read Byron," examines how Braddon engages with prevailing theories that sensational fiction—or novels more generally—can have a disproportionately negative impact on young women. This was the same debate that prompted Braddon's excoriation at the hands of critics such as Margaret Oliphant, and she confronts it explicitly in *Dead Love Has Chains* and through narrative irony in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*.

In Chapter 4, "Mimetic Realism and Literary Taste," we consider how Braddon's treatment of books and their prominence in the pages of her novels reflects an attempt to mimic reality. I will argue that one of Braddon's responses to the false dichotomy between realism and sensationalism is to suffuse her novels with relevant cultural objects of the time, especially novels, thereby connecting her fiction to the real world inhabited by her readers. This chapter explores these questions in the context of *His Darling Sin.*

Chapter 5, "Metafictional Intrusion," explores how the voice of Braddon's narrator often intervenes in the action to characterize certain moments in her novels as being *non*-fictional. To explore this topic, I will demonstrate Braddon's use of metafictional techniques, most prominently unreliable narrators and narrators who break

the proverbial fourth wall to append additional commentary, with a focus on *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon's chaste adaptation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

In Chapter 6, "Pygmalion as Analogy for Social Change," I analyze how Braddon adapted Ovid's mythological tale about Pygmalion and Galatea into *Flower and Weed*, a dark fairy tale that brings together many of the themes from preceding chapters, including the subjection of women to chattel marriage, the tension about book-learning for women of lower social classes, and Braddon's creative usage of literary allusion.

Of all the criticisms lobbed at her, we see evidence that the one that bothered her most may have been the accusation Margaret Oliphant made at the outset, that the works of the sensation writers were hack jobs, bereft of literary talent. Through integrating so many works of prose and poetry into her novels—whether objects in the hands of her characters or allusions that demand the reader understand the "imaginary text" and participate in the broad community of thought to which Braddon subscribed—I believe that Mary Elizabeth Braddon sought to elevate the novel into something that could be both sensational and literary. Why should one have to choose between high-art and murder in one's entertainment? To that end, my thesis concludes with an examination of a paradox: that even as Braddon adheres to the cultural norms of her time—killers are brought to justice, stolen identities are exposed, wives stop short of extramarital sex—she exposes double-standards, gender stereotypes, and sexual discrimination; to do so through questioning whether novel-reading can really poison a woman's mind any more than it might affect a man may seem shallow by modern standards, but given the numerous constraints Braddon faced, her subversive actions in this vein represent an important, and largely unexplored, dimension to her career.

Chapter 2:

Literary Clues and the Imaginary Text

In *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (1998), Deborah Vlock posits that "people read novels, newspapers, social criticism—indeed just about everything worth reading—through the lens of popular performance" (Vlock 3). In her argument, Vlock proffers a concept of "imaginary text" which represents "a 'reading space' located outside of the actual narrative embodiments of Victorian novels […] idioms and gestures and a whole range of signifiers […] established by popular entertainers" (6). While Vlock's book does not contribute directly to the scholarly assessment of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, this concept of "imaginary text" is extremely relevant to understanding Braddon's motivation when she refers to fictional characters as if real, why she puts so many books in the hands of her characters, and why certain texts appear where and when they do.

As I will explore further in the next chapter, Braddon possessed a well-rounded knowledge of literature, so one would have to possess equally broad familiarity with English and French literature to catch every literary allusion in her novels. None of the novels are indecipherable without such deep knowledge—*His Darling Sin, Joshua Haggard's Daughter,* and the other novels I will examine in this thesis are not *Finnegan's Wake*. Nevertheless, in addition to enriching one's appreciation of Braddon's design, the reader who understands the references gains access to important clues to the

plot ahead. Put differently, access to the "imaginary text" beyond the page deepens the reader's participation in the novels.

Consider this snippet of dialogue from *His Darling Sin* (1899): "[There is] no mistaking him […] a damn good-looking demon, with the manners of Chesterfield and the morals of Robert Macaire, the sort of man most women admire" (HDS 25). To understand this one would need to be familiar with Robert Macaire, a character created by French playwright Benjamin Antier for his melodrama *L'Auberge des Adrets* (1823). The character of Macaire henceforth became the nineteenth-century version of a meme, appearing in numerous subsequent forms, including a picaresque illustrated version called *Les Cent Et Un Robert-Macaire* (1839), a penny blood novel by G.W.M. Reynolds called *Robert Macaire in England* (1840), and an English theatrical adaptation by Charles Selby, called *Robert Macaire, or The Two Murderers* (1843). An editorial introduction to the last of these characterizes Macaire as "the dashing, impudent, but still *gentlemanly* thief" (Selby 3). While in many other instances Braddon alludes to popular Romantic poets or popular novelists, this case relies on familiarity with a much lesser text and a character who was most popular some fifty years earlier. One might be able to guess the connotation from context, and the reference remains an incidental allusion that one can skip past without missing any major elements of the plot, but readers familiar with any of the many literary incarnations of Robert Macaire profit from having a much richer sketch of Colonel Rannock, an additional layer of intrigue around this shadowy scoundrel.

Jennifer Carnell has observed that Braddon's "novels never quite reach the stage of becoming a full detective novel […] Nevertheless, sensation fiction frequently presents the reader with a puzzle, a detective figure and a solution" (Carnell 235). In my

estimation, the presence of these clues recruits the reader into the mystery-solving vocation. Carnell's observation aptly describes a wide swath of Braddon's novels where some character takes on the role of amateur detective, such as Arnold Pentreath in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* or Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*. In parallel, she encourages the reader to play armchair detective. Beth Palmer considers this phenomenon as it played out within *Lady Audley's Secret* in her "Are the Victorians Still with Us?":

> Original readers were invited to follow Robert's detective processes closely but also to identify their own reading processes as serial readers with Robert's detection. Both are piecing together paper chains, Robert's of various kinds of evidence, the readers' of serial installments. Braddon's readers, aligned with Robert, are invited to see themselves as confident navigators of the story and of its wider print context. (Palmer 88)

Unlike the detective within the novel, however, who has access only to the evidence he can see and touch, the reader can access a much wider set of evidence. Not only for the usual reason that the narrative structure often allows purview to events and thoughts beyond what any given character can see or hear, but in the literary references scaffolding these stories. Robert Audley has his deep knowledge of French novels to inform his search for evidence, but he cannot benefit from the referential clues Braddon sprinkles on the path for her readers to pick up.

The legacy of the serial, alluded to by Palmer, is another element in how Braddon constructed her stories. Braddon earned her living with three-volume editions of her novels as distributed by Mudie's and other circulating libraries, but most of her novels initially appeared in serial form in magazines such as *Belgravia*, the magazine she edited

for nearly a decade. The success of novels in serial format depends upon cliffhanger endings that tantalize the reader into buying the next issue; Braddon emulates this pattern with gusto on the final pages of each volume of her novels. To pick one example, the first volume of *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) ends with Isabel thinking that "She knew nothing, she thought nothing; except that a modern Lord Byron was walking by her side, and that it was a very little way to the arbour" (DW 139)—who wouldn't wait eagerly for Volume II to find out what exactly happened in that arbor?

To the Bitter End (1872) offers a few striking examples of literary breadcrumbs that a reader should follow. In the first volume, Grace Redmayne, at that point the ostensible heroine of the novel, references Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* when she tries to paint a mental picture of the mysterious Frances Clevedon, who owns a neighboring estate but has been living abroad and whom she has never seen: "She had a girlish notion that he must be like Edgar Ravenswood—superb and gloomy and uncivil" (TBE 14). One can read this analogy and assume merely that Grace fills in the gaps with a familiar hero. However, if one pauses to consider this to be a more carefully selected allusion, several possible meanings dwell in the imaginary text. For example, Frances Clevedon resembles the character from Scott's novel in several ways, including the most obvious fact that both are young scions of old families who live in exile in France. This parallel may occur to Grace Redmayne; or it may be that Scott's novel established a mind's-eye prototype of the handsome rich man. But if we consider for a moment that the reference is intended to be more meaningful still, we might start to build our own conjecture about the plot ahead. Although at this moment of Grace's inner reverie, there is no adversarial relationship between the Redmayne family and the Clevedons, which is

an important difference between Francis Clevedon's and Edgar Ravenswood's situations, a careful detective may wonder whether that or other parallels might emerge in time. Perhaps the equivalence between Clevedon and Ravenswood will turn out to be important. Might other aspects of Scott's novel presage Grace's fate? For instance, the reader already knows that Grace's aunt is unkind; will she emerge as a villainess in the vein of Lady Ashton in Scott's novel?

In fact, a grave conflict between the families *does* materialize. Grace dies under mysterious circumstances. Her father, having returned from abroad to fetch his daughter only to find that she has disappeared, soon follows the evidence to the townhouse in London where an unnamed girl, whose description matches Grace's, had recently died. Back on his estate, Redmayne finds a locket which has a secret compartment that conceals a cameo silhouette which he recognizes as Frances Clevedon. Richard Redmayne considers this locket to be evidence that Clevedon, who has finally returned from exile to take possession of his estate, is responsible for Grace's disappearance and death. In fact, the actual culprit is Hubert Walgrave, who convinced her to elope, brought her to a carefully decorated love-den in London, and then confessed that he could not marry her because he is already engaged to another woman—echoes of Lovelace in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. Grace dies from the shock, and Walgrave arranges a clandestine burial. To further thicken the plot, Walgrave turns out to be Clevedon's secret, illegitimate half-brother, which explains the physical resemblance. Grace's father accidentally avenges his daughter's death when he mistakes Walgrave for Clevedon in the darkness and kills the "wrong" man.

Well before this turn of events, Braddon hints that Walgrave's priorities are off kilter through his peculiar interpretation of *Pendennis*:

> "You remind me of Pendennis," [Grace] said, smiling, when Mr. Walgrave had described his bachelor life.
>
> "Do I? I would rather remind you of some one better than the selfish, shallow young cynic. Warrington is the hero of that book." (37)

Readers familiar with Thackeray's novel know that Warrington's life was ruined by a first marriage, in a similar way that Walgrave's pursuit of Grace is thwarted by his first betrothal, which forces him into the ill-fated attempt to keep her as a mistress. Walgrave sees Warrington as the hero both because of this parallel and because he wants to imagine himself as the hero of his personal story. In seeing his flawed interpretation, the attentive reader may begin to suspect that Walgrave will prove less than trustworthy.

Braddon's novels feature ample foreshadowing of the standard variety, often through the voice of her intrusive narrator, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, but she employs a more nuanced form of foreshadowing by utilizing literary reference in at least three forms: in the mouths of her characters, by way of the narrator's comments, or in chapter titles. According to Patrick Brantlinger:

> Without *any consciously experimental intention*, she pushes third-person omniscient narration to its logical limits. The narrator, even while foreshadowing with fatalistic implications, ceases to convey all information and begins to disguise much of it as hints, clues, hiatuses. (Brantlinger "What is sensational" 14; emphasis mine)

While agreeing with Brantlinger on his latter point, I dispute his opening premise. Given the extent to which Braddon utilizes such instances of foreshadowing by way of literary reference, it is impossible to believe them to be anything other than intentional actions.

Scraps of Scripture

Thou Art the Man (1894) owes its title to the Book of Samuel, but even one unfamiliar with the allusion can readily surmise that someone will be accused of a crime. After all, this is a novel by the author of *Lady Audley's Secret*. The central puzzle of the entire novel appears in the opening scene, when a tramp stops the carriage of Lady Sibyl Penrith, "a lady whose importance filled the land to the furthest limit of moor and valley, and away to the edge of yonder distant sea" (TATM 3), and forces a note into her hand. The note reads: "Out of the grave, the living grave, a long-forgotten voice calls to you. Where their worm dieth not, and their fire is not quenched" (3). Although Sibyl finds the handwriting vaguely familiar, she does not grasp the note's meaning, musing that it comes from "A religious enthusiast, perhaps! The scrap of Scripture pointed that way" (3). That she recognizes the second half of the message as biblical is notable only because she overlooks the critical message it conveys. The verse quoted in the note comes from the Book of Mark, in the context of a parable about Christ curing an epileptic child: "Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; / And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away" (Mark 9:17-18). Given that most of Braddon's contemporary readers would have been fluent in the Bible, many would have recognized the reference, which is a thrice repeated refrain in Jesus's speech after he has healed the child. Even if a reader knows the prominence of epilepsy in Mark, when we encounter this passage, the full relevance

cannot be known because to that point there has been no suggestion of how epilepsy figures in the narrative. Given this, readers might think that the handwriting, which Sibyl vaguely recognizes, will be the crucial clue, when in fact they should be storing the Biblical context for future consideration.

The reader cannot intuit more until we encounter Brandon Mountford, the long-missing accused murderer of Sibyl's half-sister, and learn about his affliction, but Sybil *should* understand. In a flashback scene later in the novel, Brandon explicitly cites that exact parable to Sibyl while confessing why they cannot be together: "My lot is the torment you have read of in the Gospel. I am the man possessed of devils; and there is no Divine Healer upon earth now to exorcise Satan's Crew" (100). Thus, there can only be two explanations for what transpires in the opening scene of the novel: either Sibyl forgets that conversation *and* her knowledge of scripture, or the narrator omits the explanation so that we can sort it out for ourselves. Either way, the scrap of paper is a clue for both Sibyl and the reader. This seed, planted in the reader's mind, eventually bears fruit: the instant Brandon suffers from an epileptic seizure, a reader who was paying attention to the scriptural reference should realize that Brandon must have sent the note. This realization, if the reader experiences it (full disclosure: during my initial reading of *Thou Art the Man*, I did not), adds an unexpected additional layer of foreshadowing without the narrator needing to intrude.

Such sleight of hand depends upon an unreliable narrator, and this manner of misdirection and unreliable narration is taken up by the promising mechanism of Coraline Urquhart's double-entry diary-keeping. Her father is Hubert Urquhart, the man who committed the murder of which Brandon was accused, with the dubious explanation that

Brandon stabbed Marie Arnold, Sibyl's half-sister, in the midst of a grand mal seizure; in fact, Hubert stole a knife from Brandon's luggage and killed Marie for spurning him, and Brandon's seizure provides an ideal subterfuge.

When Coraline begins to stay at her aunt Sibyl's home, Urquhart asks her to document all that she hears and sees—ostensibly out of an abundance of caution that Sibyl might serendipitously divine that Brandon remains imprisoned with a nearby family. Initially Cora mocks what she expects to be the banal diary entries of a girl her age and in the comfortable confines of the upper-class home: "Poured out father's coffee. Went for a walk in the Green Park with the landlady's daughter. Began another novel, rather stupider than the last" (14). However, she has the idea to maintain "a system of diary-keeping by double entry" (17)—one for parental review and one for private purposes alone. In theory, this device gives the reader three perspectives on the girl: a view from the omniscient narrator, the father-friendly performance, and the private thoughts of the young woman. Under this structure, Cora modulates her opinions according to the expectations of her father, such as when she paints a picture of her aunt's idiosyncrasies that embraces a gendered perspective on literature and learning:

> [H]er love of books […] astonishes me, books not being at all in my way. I never read a book when I can get a newspaper; and I infinitely prefer *Truth* and the *World* to any of the authors who are called classics. Nor do I see that book-learning is of the slightest use to any young woman who does not want to write school-books or go out as a governess. The little I have seen of masculine society has shown me that men detest "culture" in a woman. (20)

By contrast, the observations of her aunt in Cora's "private" journal are more textured and revealing about Sibyl's circumstances and bearing:

> She goes through life like an animated statue, coldly beautiful, benevolent, charitable, religious; polite and amiable to a most unsympathetic husband; fulfilling all the duties of that station to which it was pleased God to call her, and, if I read her right, caring for nothing in the world except her books and piano. (18)

Appealing again to her father's sexism to prove that she is his trustworthy agent, Cora describes what she understands to be the "proper" expectations of feminine behavior: "She may say a smart thing now and then, but she must never pretend to be a wit. She must accept her position as man's inferior, and honour and revere her sultan. If my father favours me by reading the last remarks he will perceive I have taken his lessons in worldly wisdom to heart" (21). Yet when Cora writes for her own eyes only, she projects frustration with sexist norms, such as her exclusion from the billiards room: "The proprieties forbit me masculine society after ten o'clock" (17). In her personal journal, she can confess that she prefers to spend her leisure time "making the most brilliant flukes and some really clever cannons […] It is wonderful how good a game I can play when I have no opponent and no gallery" (272). Beyond her love for this "masculine" pastime, the other sentiment Cora expresses here is a desire to stop performing for masculine audiences whose necessity she questions.

To her father Cora recapitulates the orders he gave her: "I have been told to study the lady's character, and some part of her character must reveal itself in the books she chooses" (21). This comment gives explicit voice to Braddon's own purpose when she

details the contents of the bookshelves and stacks on end tables in each of the rooms into which she leads her readers. Sibyl's library strongly resembles every other worthy library Braddon describes in the other novels to be considered in this thesis: "Byron, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and Tennyson are lavishly spread along the shelves […] Milton and Shakespeare are equally honored […] Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Lytton, George Eliot, and here and there a volume by a lesser light" (21)[3]. However, Cora is perplexed by the unexpected selection of books positioned in the most convenient location to the chair where Sibyl most often sits: "a collection of books upon African travel and African sport […] I never saw so many books on one subject in any library I ever looked at" (21). In one of these books, Cora finds an inscription that is her first clue toward the mystery, but the second for the reader: the book is inscribed "B.M. to S.H." (23). Neither the reader nor Cora can yet connect the handwritten note of Scripture to the (perhaps) distinctive swirls of the inscription, and within the first-person limited point-of-view in Cora's journal, the omniscient narrator is unavailable to provide the comparative analysis for us.

Compared to many of Braddon's other novels, the plot of *Thou Art the Man* hinges less on existing literature—Byron, Scott, and Shakespeare are relatively absent. Instead, the plot depends on new literature in the form of Cora's diary. Shortly after introducing the dual-diary structure, the novel detours into third-person chapters that play out the events from a decade before, when Brandon Mountford initially came to visit the Higginson family. Because the reader sees this in flashback, the moment we see

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[3] Although many of the other major novelists of the era appear on the bookshelves or end tables of Braddon's characters, she never goes as far as to include one of her own titles. This may have been an act of modesty, and the reference here to "a volume by a lesser light" may be a gently self-deprecatory remark. Another possible explanation is that given the pains to which Braddon went in proclaiming the events of her novels to be non-fiction, to include *Aurora Floyd* on a bookshelf would shatter the illusion.

Brandon's name, we immediately know who inscribed the books that Cora has found in Sibyl's library. If we trust Cora's interpretation of the inscription as suggestive of intimacy, we can presume, even before the novel has shown us these events, that the relationship between Brandon and Sibyl may have been intimate. Despite the fact that he is ostensibly no longer part of her life, she retains enough sentimentality about him to have kept these books near her reading chair. We do not know what happened to him or how Sibyl found herself in a loveless marriage or where the man who generated her interest in Africa has gone. Even as all these questions swirl above the action and the narrative jumps through time and point-of-view, pieces of the puzzle continue to fall into place. The amateur detectives in the novel—Sibyl, Cora, and Mr. Coverdale—operate with incomplete information, and some of the answers they find remain their private domains to the very end. Most notably, despite her eventual break from her father, Cora never tells anyone that she witnessed him murder his brother, Lord Penrith, in cold blood.

Cora initially demonstrates disinterest in reading—a suspicious character trait throughout Braddon's work. Sybil tries to distract Cora as she begins to investigate the mysterious message:

> [Sybil:] "Would you like to sit in the carriage till I have done? There is the *Nineteenth Century* to amuse you."
>
> She pointed to a half-cut magazine on the empty seat. I hate those learned periodicals which presuppose a corresponding erudition on the part of the reader: and the notion that Lady Penrith did not want my company gave a stimulus to my curiosity. I jumped out of the carriage with alacrity. (25)

This passage reveals several things about these characters. On the one hand, we learn what Lady Penrith reads, and the fact that it is a journal which Cora derides for excessive erudition is a piece of evidence to support Cora's cynical observations about her aunt's nature. *Nineteenth Century* was often critical of plot-driven novels such as *Thou Art the Man*. One well-known example, John Ruskin's essay "Fiction – Fair and Foul" (1880), took aim at the prevalence of sensational elements in modern fiction, although he does not mention Braddon by name. Edward Salmon's "What Girls Read" (1886), taken from the same journal, is another example of patriarchal attitudes toward literature; in addition to an unusual recommendation of *East Lynne* we will consider next chapter, Salmon made the following claim about which books should be available to young girls:

> Girls' literature performs one very useful function. It enables girls to read something above mere baby tales, and yet keeps them from the influence of novels of a sort which should be read only by persons capable of forming a discreet judgment. It is a long jump from Aesop to 'Ouida' […] We do not often see an account of a girl committing any very serious fault through her reading. But let us go into the houses of the poor, and try to discover what is the effect on the maiden mind of the trash which maidens buy. (Salmon 522-523)

Thus, one might argue that Braddon's choice of reference is a tongue-in-cheek jab at the questionable wisdom of *Nineteenth Century.* Yet this passage serves a more practical purpose in solidifying Cora's disinterest in reading. She is much more motivated by action, mystery, and loyalty to the spy-mission her father has given her: "I must be loyal to him, however disloyal I may be to my uncle's wife" (TATM 218).

In chapter eighteen, after spending fourteen chapters in flashback, the narrative abruptly returns to the present tense to show Lady Penrith consulting with her trusted accountant, Orlebar. We know the accountant to be "arithmetic incarnate," at least according to Sybil's father. His office is "a place of pigeon-holes, and ledgers, and dockets, and files, its most interesting literature a long row of Whitaker's Almanacks, sole record of the passing years" (67). Since the choice of reading material nearly always reflects a character's mind, it does not surprise us that Orlebar rejects the idea that the message Sibyl received on the moor could have been written by Brandon Mountford, Orlebar agrees "there is certainly a resemblance" to the handwriting, but his intrinsic skepticism guides his interpretation: "how can you for a moment suppose that this scrap of paper given you by some crazy mendicant on the moor could emanate from Brandon Mountford, who disappeared ten years ago, and whom we have every reason to believe dead?" (195). Orlebar's years of reading almanacs color his perspective; there is no space allocated in his mental ledger for romance, fantasy, or chance.

Mr. Coverdale, on the other hand, demonstrates a soft spot for romantic stories. Sibyl invites him to understand the full story of Brandon Mountford, and in the process recounts the story of her own mother's near marriage to Brandon's father. Coverdale immediately draws a literary parallel—one that we have already considered in this chapter: "That kind of story—the idea of a hopeless love, a hopeless grief, manfully battled with—is always pathetic. You remember Warrington's story—a mere episode in 'Pendennis.' It moves one more than all the rest of the book, doesn't it?" (282). The analogy is imperfect, though far closer to the mark than Walgrave's self-pitying equivalence in *To the Bitter End*, but Coverdale's point is not the analogy itself, but the

hopelessness of the Warrington situation. Sibyl notices the "stifled sob from the man sitting by her side" (282) but Coverdale brushes off her inquiry into his physical reaction by employing the reference as a smoke screen. By utilizing a fictional sob story that he knows she will remember based on his knowledge of her reading history, he diverts her attention away from the feelings he has for her—feelings which Cora has observed, and which partly drive her antagonism toward her aunt, but of which Sibyl herself remains fully unaware given how entrenched she is in both her loveless union with Lord Penrith and mournful longing for her ill-fated romance with Brandon.

Cora finds joy in writing in her journal, which has begun to reflect an increasingly dramatic mystery. She speculates about every unusual action Sibyl takes, including impromptu visits to various nearby families and an unusually keen interest in the vicar's home. The intrigue—and the physical act of recording it in her journal—stirs Cora's passion: "I take as much delight in trying to thread the mystery of this wonderful woman's mind as an enthusiastic pianist can feel in unravelling the web of a Beethoven sonata" (198). As the mystery continues, Cora wonders whether she might find a fruitful career in writing, beyond the end of her dual journals:

> I see myself ten years hence a spinster novelist, in a snug little house—in Mayfair […] My father might be dead by that time. I am not calculating on his death in a cold-blooded manner; but we are all mortal, and it is only natural that I should look forward to the years when I may stand alone in the world, free from a tie that galls me. (273)

Cora's father encourages her, but in a backhanded manner that belies the inherent cynicism of the Urquhart character, as opposed to the more optimistic view Sigismund

Smith espouses in *The Doctor's Wife* when he encourages Isabel Gilbert to use novels as a manner of vicarious escape. Urquhart sees virtue elsewhere: "You are cultivating exactly that part pessimism which readers like nowadays" (218).

When Cora hears the story of a physical altercation between her father and her uncle, in which Lord Penrith (Sibyl's husband) pushed her father through a glass door, her response seems out of character, even if appropriate to the situation. Specifically, she invokes Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, saying: "And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer, / Never to hope again" (TATM 250; *Henry VIII* 3.2.371-372). Misplaced and awkward as the quotation feels given the depiction of Cora's character thus far, Cora's comparison of her father with the devil can be seen to reflect both her personal growth to this stage of the drama and her dawning realization that her father's designs are more sinister than she realized. For all of Cora's cynicism about her aunt, who "has done nothing to deserve this good fortune except take the trouble to be born" (TATM 274), Cora seems to finally grasp her father's malign intent. Soon thereafter, she watches him walk into the woods with his rifle and she hears one shot—the shot that kills Lord Penrith and frees Hubert Urquhart to assume the hereditary title and lands he thinks that he deserves.

Witnessing her father's cold-blooded killing of her uncle prompts her to abandon her new hobby: "I shall write no more in this journal. I close the book for ever this miserable night. My heart is frozen" (278). She briefly frets over the possibility that "if the modern craze of heredity has any foundation" that she may be doomed by having inherited her father's "venom in my blood" (313). Thus, the issue of heredity pertains not only to Brandon's epilepsy, but for the Urquhart character. Coralie overcomes this by abandoning her Urquhart-inspired hobbies—journaling, billiards, espionage—and taking

up novel-reading instead. In other words, she moves from being a writer to becoming a reader, whose character might someday be measured by what she puts in her library.

Literary Flirtation and Poetic Death in *Asphodel*

Clues of the nature described in the previous section are hidden like Easter eggs throughout Braddon's novels, but she utilizes another mechanism to weave literary references into her novels: through injecting meaningful allusion into the mottoes serving as titles for her chapters. In *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction* (1979), Michael Wheeler assesses the valuable role chapter mottoes can play within the novel:

> The best mottoes become integral parts of the texts, generally functioning as crucial plot pointers or thematic pointers […] readers who ignore them miss what may be an important element of the text, particularly as partial knowledge of what is to follow adds to the tension generated by the development of a plot. (Wheeler 24)

Such chapter titles increase the reader's engagement by building anticipation or leading the reader to make predictions of what is going to happen in the pages ahead.

Braddon utilized chapter mottoes in nearly all her novels. However, this is an area where she experimented with many different techniques. In *The Trail of the Serpent* she provides only descriptive chapter mottoes—e.g., "The Good Schoolmaster," "Two Coroner's Inquests," "Midnight by the Slopperton Clocks." These titles are useful guideposts but require little intellectual engagement from the reader. Starting with *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Braddon tried her hand with embedding literary allusions as chapter headings. Chapter XIV of that novel carries the motto "Love took up the glass of time,

and turned it in his glowing hands" (AF 153) which invokes Tennyson's "Locksley Hall"—a poem about bitter unrequited love, somewhat similar to Talbot Bulstrode's feelings toward Aurora. However, the chapter plays out as an inversion of the Tennyson poem; the bitterness comes first, and the love scene in the woods—as Bulstrode comes upon Aurora's cousin Lucy, whom he eventually marries—comes second. The quotation itself fits the circumstances of *Aurora Floyd*, as in effect the clock does start over again for Bulstrode, but the inversion of the poem gives it an interesting additional meaning.

Chapter XXI references "Mariana," another Tennyson poem, with the quotation "He only said, I am a-weary" (AF 242). However, the quote includes a critical change of pronoun: whereas the subject of Tennyson's poem is female, Braddon swaps the subject to James Conyers, Aurora's secret (and long-presumed dead) husband, who has taken a job in the Mellish family stables so that he can continue his extortion of Aurora. P.D. Edwards suggests that the quotation is "not very apposite here" (AF 470, in footnote), but I disagree. Someone familiar with the poem might recognize the degree of despair inherent in Mariana's refrain:

> She only said, "My life is dreary,
> He cometh not," she said;
> She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
> I would that I were dead!" (Tennyson, "Mariana")

Recognizing the reference adds depth to the chapter that follows the motto, in which the narrator shows Conyers's agitation and listlessness: "Conyers grew weary even of his own ease […] he began to chafe at the rural quiet [and develop] that chronic disorder which is popularly called 'the fidgets'" (AF 245). Like Mariana, he is waiting for

someone—literally expecting Aurora to bring him the two thousand pounds he has demanded from her—but his weariness is deeper, and his thoughts do stray to death briefly before returning to focus on getting the payoff he believes that he deserves from his wife in exchange for leaving her alone. Little does he know that his own weariness with life mirrors that of Steeve [sic] Hargraves, the stable hand who ultimately murders Conyers to steal the extortion spoils for himself.

Braddon evokes Shakespeare's *Othello* for the final literature-derived chapter motto in *Aurora Floyd*, kicking off Chapter XXVII with Othello's misguided condemnation of Desdemona: "My wife! My wife! What wife? I have no wife" (320). As we will see in the next chapter, through the example of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, *Othello* was a favored source for Braddon. Here, it foreshadows the moment when John Mellish learns that his wife was married to James Conyers, as the coroner found the marriage certificate in the dead man's waistcoat. Thus the motto proves apt. Even though Aurora honestly believed Conyers to be dead when she married Mellish, the discovery literally voids her marriage. They have unknowingly been in a bigamous relationship, and this reality crushes Mellish, shaking his intense "pride in his wife [which] had touched upon that narrow boundary-line which separates the sublime from the ridiculous" (324). Yet the *Othello* quotation remains misleading—unlike the Moorish general from Shakespeare's tragedy, Mellish is not an intrinsically jealous man, nor is he likely to follow Othello's vengeful footsteps. Or is he? One must read on to know.

Fast-forward two decades, and Braddon's *Asphodel* (1881) features a far more intricate adoption of chapter mottoes. Rather than employ literary allusions sporadically

and with targeted purpose, *Asphodel* pursues a much more challenging implementation of this technique. As Kate Flint observes about this phenomenon in Braddon's novels:

> This attention which is demanded on the part of the reader, not to mention the command which she is implicitly expected to uphold over a wide range of literary references, goes some way towards giving the lie to the dangerously uncritical mindlessness which so many critics chose to present as being induced by the opiate of sensation fiction. (Flint 293)

The level of difficulty in *Asphodel* comes from the fact that Braddon abandons the usual retinue of Romantic or contemporary poets with whom it would be reasonable to expect her readers to bear moderate familiarity. Instead, Braddon introduces each chapter with a line of Middle English poetry from Chaucer, pulled from the spectrum of his *oeuvre*; not only *The Canterbury Tales*, but numerous sources including "The Legend of Good Women" and "The Romaunt of the Rose."

When those chapter titles are assembled together, as they would have been in the table of contents for each volume, they almost read as a singular tragic poem:

> Volume 1:
>
> I. And she was fair as is the rose in May
>
> II. And this was gladly in the eventide
>
> III. And volatile, as ay was his usage
>
> IV. Curteis she was, discrete, and debonaire
>
> V. Thou lovest me, that wot I wel certain
>
> VI. Love maketh all to gone misway

VII. His herte bathed in a bath of blisse

VIII. God wote that worldly joy is sone ago

IX. Of colour pale and dead was she

X. And spending silver had the right ynow

XI. Yeve me my Deth, or that I have a Shame

Volume 2:

I. And to the Dinner Faste they hem spedde

II. After my Might ful fayne wold I you plese

III. Love is a Thing, as any Spirit, free

IV. Not for our Linage, ne for your Richesse

V. No Many may always have Prosperitee

VI. And in my Herte wondren I began

VII. Love wol not be constrained by Maistrie

VIII. I deme that hire Herte was ful of Wo

IX. Al soddenly she swapt adown to Ground

X. For Wele or Wo, for Carole, or for Daunce

XI. For I wol gladly yelden hire my Place

XII. And come agen, be it by Day or Night

Volume 3:

I. Ay fleth the Time, it wol no Man abide

II. But I wot best wher wringeth me my Sho

III. Forbid a Love and it is ten Times so wode

IV. I may not don as every Ploughman may

V. Love is not old, as whan that it is new

VI. I meane well by God that sit above

VII. Ther was no Wight, to whom she durste plain

VIII. I wolde live in Pees, if that I might

IX. For Love and not for Hate thou must be ded

X. Is there no Grace? Is there no Remedie?

XI. Sens Love hath brought us to this piteous End

Released nearly two decades after Braddon's debut novel, *Asphodel* seems to be an experiment in several respects, not just in the Middle English chapter mottoes, but in the constant presence of Byron and Shakespeare. Although we will explore numerous ways in which Braddon infused her novels with literature, *Asphodel* requires more scholarly knowledge to make sense of every allusion. This is almost certainly more than Braddon would have expected from her readers, yet exactly what she did in composing this novel. For the attentive reader who pays attention to the references—whether or not they known the source material from which the refences have been drawn—the experiment is duly rewarding, as one can surmise that things will not end well in this novel merely from the title of Asphodel's final chapter: "Sens Love hath brought us to this piteous End.[4]"

Beyond the literary clues of *Thou Art the Man*, which resemble traditional evidence that a detective might piece together to solve a crime, I have already suggested that Braddon sometimes utilizes such references in place of traditional foreshadowing, even where there is no crime to solve but only a story arc to predict. This pattern proves

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[4] This line comes from Chaucer's "The Legend of Good Women: The Legend of Thisbe of Babylon" (Chaucer 417).

especially rich in *Asphodel*, a novel which Braddon characterized as one of her favorites (Holland 157), and which provides an example of both where the "imaginary text" shapes the narrative and of literary performance.

Asphodel features one of Braddon's preferred structures, which I shall describe as a love parallelogram. Not a triangle, because there are two men and two women involved, and not a square, because the shape is lopsided. In *Asphodel* (among other novels) Braddon makes it painfully evident that Man A *should* be with Woman A and Man B *should* be with Woman B, but because of some past betrothal or other circumstance, they are all mismatched—"A" unhappily or begrudgingly paired with "B." Sometimes things are sorted out for the best in the final volume; more typically one person dies, leaving one of the "right" couples to realign and live happily ever after, with the fourth person left disappointed. *Asphodel* offers a dimmer fate, as the ill-fated Woman A (Daphne Lawford) drowns herself in Lake Geneva and the ill-fated Man A (Gerald Goring) subsequently throws himself off a mountain pass. But before this dismal conclusion the novel is more of a romantic comedy, with all the stock characters of that modern form.

Daphne is the prototypical heroine, a gorgeous young woman who falls in love with a man already betrothed to another, in this case to her half-sister Madoline (Lina). *Asphodel* is Daphne's bildungsroman, tracing her development from ne'er-do-well free spirit into an intensely loyal woman, whose commitment to her sister outweighs her love for their common love interest. Early on, we learn about Daphne's reading tastes:

> Daphne was a fervent lover of verse, so that it came within the limits of her comprehension. Her tastes were catholic; she worshipped Shakespeare; she adored Byron and Shelley and Tennyson, Mrs.

> Browning, and the simpler poems of Robert Browning; and she had heard vaguely of verses written by a poet called Swinburne. (ASP1 98-99)

Braddon's narrator slips in a jab regarding "the limits of her comprehension"—what we might characterize today as high literary taste was not then a reflection of a keen intellect, as Daphne's abilities end at the "simpler" works of these men. Nevertheless, Daphne's "worship" of Shakespeare figures prominently in the novel's plot. The novel's setting plays a crucial supporting role here, as the Lawford estate lies along the Avon, and one of Daphne's hobbies is to go rowing down that river, so she has literally grown up in Shakespeare's neighborhood. On one occasion in the novel, the mismatched lover-pairs visit Anne Hathaway's cottage; Daphne and Gerald admire the guestbook: "Alas! how many a hand that had written in it was now dust. Here was the signature of Charles Dickens, nearly thirty years old, and pale with age […] Sir Walter Scott's name was in an older book. Both of these were as dead—and as undying—as Shakespeare" (ASP2 60-61). Daphne looks for answers not just from within the plays and poems but beseeches the dramatist for answers from his personal life, hoping for a model like that which she imagines for her own fate. When Daphne struggles with guilt over her unrequited love for Gerald, she visits Shakespeare's grave and interrogates him:

> "Were you always so happy, my calm-faced Shakespeare? […] Could you have sounded all the deeps of sorrow without having yourself suffered? […] Was Anne Hathaway your only love, I wonder—you who wrote so sweetly of sorrowful hopeless love—or was there another, another whom we know as Juliet, and Imogen, and Cordelia: another from whom you always lived far apart, yet whom you always loved?" (ASP3 20-21)

Literature is something of a religion for her, as she confesses to the local rector: “I’m afraid I know Hamlet’s soliloquies better than I do my duty to my neighbor” (ASP3 28). Alas, Shakespeare provides her no solutions.

To continue the theme of *Asphodel* as a romantic comedy, Gerald Goring plays the dashing leading man: charming, wealthy, and handsome. He has already inherited a large estate near the Lawfords and has long been betrothed to Daphne’s sister (Lina) by way of the typical family arrangement to unite estates. While traveling through Europe, Gerald visits Fontainebleau at the same time that Daphne, whom he has never met, is attending school. They “meet cute” when a casual hike through the hills overlooking the French village brings Gerald past Daphne, who is attempting a landscape painting of the same vista. Gerald offers her unsolicited advice on her brushstrokes and shading; thence ensues casual flirtation. Neither party reveals their true identities—nor should they necessarily need to, as it seems to both an incidental meeting of strangers. With the intention of being playful, Daphne re-christens herself Poppaea, after Nero’s wife, of whom she learned from the “latest chapter of Roman history […] toned down and expurgated to suit young ladies’ school” (ASP1 34); Gerard responds in kind by telling her that his name is Nero. Suggestive though this could be, in choosing a name that would mark the two of them as lovers, the relationship remains innocent, and neither realizes that Gerald is already affianced to Daphne’s sister until much later, when they meet again in England and feign ignorance of the other’s identity.

This flirtation, which starts on the foundations of art and ancient history, pivots to literature by way of feigned arguments over Shakespeare. Gerald later describes his reading tastes in a letter to Lina:

> I read no end of poetry—Byron, Shelley, Keats—and that book whose wisdom and whose beauty no amount of reading can ever dry up—Goethe's 'Faust.' I want no new books—the old ones are inexhaustible. Curiosity may tempt me to look at a new writer; but in an age of literary mediocrity I go back for choice to the Titans of the past. (ASP2 126)

Shakespeare, perhaps the grandest "titan" of them all, sits at the crux of the flirtation between Gerald and Daphne, both in their early encounters in Fontainebleau and back in Warwickshire. Fully aware of Daphne's reverence for the playwright and poet, Gerald frequently pokes fun at her: "I'll give her [Lina, Daphne's sister] anything you like, as long as you [Daphne] don't bore me to death about Shakespeare" (ASP2 26). More often, Gerald drops quotes from the bard into conversation, and not always in jest:

> "There, you see," cried Daphne triumphantly, "you can't live without quoting him. He has interwoven himself with our daily speech."
>
> "Because we are parrots, without ideas of our own," answered Gerald. (ASP2 43)

Through quotations both remarked upon by other characters and others that pass through the dialogue unnoticed—save perhaps for the attentive reader—Shakespeare is a major presence throughout Asphodel: Braddon includes the dramatist's name fifty-six times.

Even if we ignore Daphne's unrequited love for Gerald, there is perhaps no more obvious hint that Daphne and Edgar Turchill, her erstwhile fiancé, are doomed as a couple than the gaping abyss between their perspectives on reading:

> "You have too much imagination," said Edgar. "You ought to read sober solid prose."
>
> "'Blair's Lectures,' 'Sturm's Reflections,' 'Locke on the Understanding,'" retorted Daphne, laughing. "No; I like books that take me out of myself and into another world."
>
> "But if they only take you into charnel-houses, among ghosts and dead people, I don't see the advantage of that."
>
> "Don't you? There are times when anything is better than one's own thoughts." (ASP2 230-231)

Although Edgar often tries to defuse the tension between Gerald and Daphne on the subject of Shakespeare, his motivation is obsequious rather than genuine. Daphne likes Shakespeare, Tennyson, and the rest—consequently Edgar will defend them against criticism; it is an odd form of heroism, though, and does little to sway Daphne's emotions. On the whole, Edgar fills the place of the well-intentioned, fawning, and bland boyfriend who never gets the girl; or as Braddon, puts it: "He was a good man, in a limited way." (ASP2 34)

I have argued that Braddon's motivation for literary reference cannot be attributed to Kate Flint's purported rationale of "assert[ing] one's place within the cultural assumptions of that society" (Flint 257) but that does not preclude Braddon's characters from using literature for that purpose. Along these lines, when Edgar shows knowledge of poetry, such moments feel akin to *performance* rather than true to character. For example, when the narrator observes that "He had Shakespeare's sonnets by heart, and was somewhat of the slavish lover therein depicted" (ASP2 35), I had to read the passage

again to make sure she was talking about the same Edgar. One doubts Edgar can observe, let alone value, the aesthetic qualities of the poetry. Instead, the more likely explanation is that memorizing love poems is the sort of thing a good man like Edgar might do to win a literary-minded girl's heart. Or consider the scene wherein he wonders "'whether she has read Don Juan?'[…] The water, the gipsy breakfast, the sweet face smiling at him, reminded him of an episode in that poem. 'Were I shipwrecked tomorrow I would not wish to awaken in a fairer paradise'" (ASP1 170). On the one hand, it is jarring that Edgar thinks of Byron—it is hardly what the reader would expect from him, but we can also interpret this as Edgar failing to perceive the flaw in the analogy. He chooses a lousy poetic antecedent to compare to a woman whom he loves: Don Juan meets Haidee because of a shipwreck but she dies heartbroken when he leaves. Has Edgar forgotten her fate? I do not interpret Edgar's behavior to be conniving, as will prove to be the case when Roland Lansdell uses literature as a form of seduction in *The Doctor's Wife* or when Oswald Pentreath does the same in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, examples we will examine more deeply in the chapters ahead. In this instance, the most logical conclusion is that Edgar is trying so hard to play the part of the dutiful, cultured boyfriend that he grabs the most romantic bits and ignores the tragic parts.

In the final corner of *Asphodel*'s love parallelogram, we come to Lina: perfect daughter, genuinely caring sister, the idealized woman for whom all men swoon. Indeed, Edgar Turchill courted Lina years before she rejected him in favor of Gerald; this fact continually undermines Daphne's belief in the earnestness of Edgar's courtship and remains a bone of contention for Edgar's mother, who treats Daphne as decidedly second-rate. Lina is not vacuous, nor does the narrator encourage the reader to root

against her in the way in which Braddon often framed such idealized paragons of feminine beauty and societal expectation. Instead, Lina plays a more three-dimensional character, nearly a sister-mother. For example, she often litigates on Daphne's behalf with their stubborn father, whose feelings toward Daphne border on hatred, a feeling borne out of the mysterious way in which Daphne's mother left him two decades before. Lina's genuine love for Daphne sits at the core of Daphne's self-flagellation about her buried feelings for Gerald: even when she learns that Gerard reciprocates her love, Daphne cannot betray the one person who has ever truly watched out for her.

Rounding out the cast of this late Victorian romantic-comedy-turned-tragedy, are several essential supporting characters. The sourpuss father is Sir Vernon Lawford, whose differential affection toward each of his daughters from two wives is an emotional albatross around Daphne's neck. We never learn the details of how Daphne's mother betrayed him, but we know how he feels: "Vernon had made up his mind that his younger daughter was a frivolous butterfly-being" (ASP1 267). Despite frequent entreaties to do so, most vehemently from Lina, he is incapable of imagining that Daphne might have a higher moral standard than her biological mother; he sees Daphne as a ticking time-bomb, predestined to blow up another life the way her mother did. This rigidity of attitude matches the books in his study: "Sir Vernon's study [was] a room in which the driest possible books, in the richest possible bindings, repelled the inquiring mind of an ordinary student, who, looking for Waverley, found himself confronted with Blackstone, or exploring for Byron, found himself face to face with Coke or Chitty" (ASP2 244). The absence of Sir Walter Scott's beloved novel series from Sir Vernon's shelves belies the man's complete disinterest in romance and adventure.

In a similar vein, Sir Vernon's sister, Mrs. Ferrers, joins the family for a long sojourn in Switzerland. We get a good sense for how she operates after an extended discussion about Voltaire, whose home in Geneva was a popular tourist destination. She strongly condemns the immorality of Voltaire's writing, but Mrs. Ferrers derives her judgment from hearsay: "Hard pressed, Mrs. Ferrers was constrained to admit that she had never read a line written by either Voltaire or Rousseau, and that she had only a kind of dictionary idea of the two men, so vague that their images might at any moment become confounded in her mind" (AP3 175).

Mrs. Ferrers's literary tastes derive more from practicality than aesthetics: "She had a volume of Byron in her hand all day, and quoted his description of Leman and Chillon in a way that was almost as exasperating as the torture inflicted by a professional punster" (ASP3 176). For Mrs. Ferrers, Byron is little more than a poetic Baedeker, a guidebook to the Swiss lakes, peaks, and castles his poems made famous. Yet the more relevant work to *Asphodel* is Byron's *Manfred* (1817). Daphne and Gerald discuss the play, which is set in the Alps and pertinent to their discussion of the various peaks:

> [Gerald:] "Can you, who have so devoured your Byron, be indifferent to the background of that gloomy individual's existence?"
>
> [Daphne:] "There is an interest in that, certainly." (ASP3 74)

Although these references to *Manfred* seem innocuous on the surface, a reader familiar with the work will perceive the consonance between Manfred's plight and Daphne's guilt over her secret love for Gerald, which intensifies as Gerald proffers a concrete plan to elope, an abstract impossibility shifting into train tickets and an appointment with a magistrate in Geneva. Gerald imagines how the scenario will play out:

> Madoline's gentle nature would forgive a wrong which was the work of destiny rather than of man's falsehood. Sir Vernon would be angry and unpleasant, no doubt; but Gerald Goring cared very little about Sir Vernon. The world would wonder; but Gerald cared nothing for the world. He only desired Daphne, and Daphne's love; having all other good things which life […] could give. (ASP2 245)

Unfortunately, Daphne has not lived the same coddled life as Gerald and does not share the libertine callousness with which he dismisses the impact of his deeds on others and which he attributes to fate rather than human agency. While Gerald arranges and operates their elopement, Daphne arrives at a starkly different conclusion. Even though she has no intention of going through with Gerald's plan, she suffers a final confrontation with her father in which he refuses to agree that he owes her the love a daughter deserves:

> [Daphne:] "Have you no tenderness, no pity left for me? Am I not your daughter too?"
>
> [Sir Vernon:] "Your mother was my wife," he answered curtly, pushing her out of his way as he passed from the room. (ASP3 237)

This final rejection settles the question for Daphne: "[A]nd then there came into [her mind] unawares a verse, taken at random, from a familiar hymn: The trials that beset you, The sorrows ye endure, The manifold temptations, that death alone can cure" (ASP3 238). Although an English hymn ("O happy band of Pilgrims") comes into Daphne's mind at this point, a reader familiar with Manfred's story, which has been hanging like a dark cloud over the entire third volume, might think of his comparable plea to the spirits:

> MAN. Oblivion, self-oblivion—
>
> Can ye not wring from out the hidden realms
>
> Ye offer so profusely what I ask?
>
> SPIRIT: It is not in our essence, in our skill;
>
> But—thou mayst die.
>
> MAN. Will death bestow it on me? (Byron 14)

When Manfred seeks release from his own forbidden love, he summons the spirits to help him achieve "forgetfulness." Unfortunately, they cannot help him, except through his death—although this, too, remains uncertain. If one paid attention to the earlier references, including the foreboding chapter mottoes in the table of contents, one might foresee the ending of *Asphodel* many pages in advance. As the specter of suicide hangs over the melodrama, readers can wish that they have jumped to the wrong prediction of the characters' fates. Foreboding moments sustain the atmosphere, such as when Gerald is late to return from a long hike (on which he finally pleaded with Daphne to leave their mismatched lovers behind) and Lina becomes worried. Edgar chides her gently: "Do you mean that he can have tumbled off a precipice? Hardly likely. A man who has climbed Mont Blanc and the Jungfrau would scarcely come to grief hereabouts" (ASP3 213). Yet that is precisely the fate that Manfred contemplates:

> And you, ye crags, upon whose extreme edge
>
> I stand, and on the torrent's brink beneath
>
> Behold the tall pines dwindled as to shrubs
>
> In dizziness of distance; when a leap,
>
> A stir, a motion, even a breath, would bring

> My breast upon its rocky bosom's bed
>
> To rest for ever—wherefore do I pause? (Byron 20-21)

Daphne rows far onto Lake Geneva and drowns herself, though in one more offhand "Manfred" reference (and play on words), she forbids her dog, Monk, from joining her. In this she is unlike Manfred, who dies with an Abbot by his side. Gerald, on the other hand, looks to the choice Manfred did not make, and engineers his own death on a hike with strangers on the Matterhorn, turning himself into "a dark figure [who] slid with a fearful velocity along the smooth whiteness of the frozen snow, and then shot over the edge, and dropped from precipice to precipice to the Matterhorn glacier below" (ASP3 271). The romance between Gerald and Daphne, born through literary flirtation, dies with suitably Shakespearean/Byronian flair and in accord with the Chaucer quote that opens the sixth chapter of the first volume of *Asphodel*: "Love maketh all to gone misway."[5]

[5] This motto comes from Chaucer's "The Romaunt of the Rose" (Chaucer 245).

Chapter 3:

The Danger of Reading

The notion that reading too much—or too much of the wrong content—might result in corruption, was hardly unique to the sensation fiction controversy in England during the 1860s. The impulse to constrain and censor has existed from the very moment humans invented systems of writing, in societies as geographically and culturally diverse as Ancient Rome and the Mayans; Steven Roger Fischer, in *The History of Reading* (2003), observes that "popular literacy had to be anathema to those who controlled reading and writing: they could share such power only with those of like birth who would maintain the status quo" (Fischer 128). Through carefully managing which cohorts of society possessed the skills necessary to read and write, those in power maintained their authority. However, since the commercial value of literacy was too vast to remain exclusive to rulers and scribes, educational systems expanded, thereby swelling the ranks of literate men and, eventually, women, until many countries, England among them, became almost universally literate by the nineteenth century.

As the question of *whether* the masses should learn to read steadily faded into history, a new question emerged: *what* should people be allowed to read? Documents that contradicted regimes and their belief systems were the most obvious targets. Consider the fate of William Tyndale, executed for having had the audacity to translate the Bible into English, lest the masses possibly arrive at divergent interpretations when their consumption was no longer mediated through the clergy. Or consider Voltaire's essay

"*De L'horrible Danger de la Lecture*" (1765), which responded to contemporary censorship movements and skewered the paternalistic motivation behind governing literacy and the logical extremes to which it could reach:

> [F]or the edification of the faithful and for the good of their souls, we forbid them to ever read any book at all, under pain of eternal damnation. And, for fear that the diabolical temptation to educate themselves might take hold of them, we hereby ban fathers and mothers from teaching their children to read. And, to prevent all violations to our edict, we prohibit them expressly from thinking, under the same penalties. (Warman 131)

Although Voltaire strikes a sarcastic tone here, his essay was a genuine response to prevailing attitudes; even during a time period known today as the "enlightenment," centuries-old prejudices toward restricting free thought remained vibrant.

While all reading might be seen to represent some degree of risk, fiction is especially dubious: "something to be feared, because it represents the unfettered mind, capable of anything. Knowledge is clearly something to be directed for the common good. But fiction […] has always aroused suspicion and invited censure" (Fischer 53). In that vein, the opening chapters of *Don Quixote*, considered by many to be the first novel, posit that the eponymous knight errant was driven to insanity by his dedication to reading stories of chivalry and romance:

> In short, our gentleman became so caught up in reading that he spent his nights reading from dusk till dawn and his day reading from sunrise to sunset, and so with too little sleep and too much reading his brains dried

> up, causing him to lose his mind. His fantasy filled with everything he had read in his books, enchantments as well as combats, battles, challenges, wounds, courtings, loves, torments, and other impossible foolishness, and he became so convinced in his imagination of the truth […] that for him no history in the world was truer. (Cervantes 21)

Chivalric notions not only abolish authentic history from Don Quixote's mind, but they kill off all rational thought; the false reality of narrative fiction becomes the man's lived-in reality. Although *Don Quixote* is a fictional narrative and the titular hero a fictional man, many real people continued to fear that his condition represented an authentic risk and was not merely a literary device conjured by Cervantes. In fact, by the time Mary Elizabeth Braddon published *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), the notion that fiction could cause mental illness had become something of an established fact in Great Britain.

Several contributing factors coalesced at this historical moment: the attainment of mass literacy in England, the maturation of industrial printing presses, improved distribution channels via railroads, and commercial circulating libraries. As Richard Altick states in *The English Common Reader,* "In preceding centuries […] some hand-workers and some members of the lower-middle class had been readers; but not until the nineteenth century did the appetite for print permeate both classes to the extent that it became a major social phenomenon" (Altick 7). Just as troublesome was the potential that fiction might corrupt the minds of impressionable women, a danger common across social classes. Take, for example, "Novel-Reading a Cause of Female Depravity" (1817), an essay which pins blame on novels for inspiring women to steal the husbands of their friends, among other crimes: "[t]hose who first made novel-reading an indispensable

branch in forming the minds of young women have a great deal to answer for. Without this poison instilled, as it were, into the blood, females in ordinary life would never have been so much the slaves of vice" (*La Belle Assemblée* 219). From what source other than fiction might a woman come up with such an idea?

The publication of *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863)—the novels which most firmly established Braddon's fame—coincided with the parallel success of similarly plot-driven novels such as Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood's *East Lynne* and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Indeed, an oft-cited critical essay by H.L. Mansel in *The Quarterly Review* on "Sensation Novels" (1863) takes as its subject twenty-four questionable texts.[6] However, according to many modern scholars, Braddon's notably subversive technique, which distinguished her from the pack, was to situate her sensational tales directly inside the upper-middle-class home, a design that resonated more strongly with readers but drew more intense criticism because it broke with comfortable conventions. Such plots belonged among the working classes or, at least, outside the safe space of the upper-middle-class home. As Natalie and Robert Schroeder observe in *From Sensation to Society: Representations of Marriage in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 1862-1866* (2006), "The very presence and popularity of sensation fiction taunted the complacent stereotypes of the separate spheres, the home as walled garden, and the wife as submissive angel" (Schroeder 16).

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[6] The Mansel review cites the two Braddon novels, *No Name* by Wilkie Collins, *Danesbury House* by Mrs. Henry Wood, and twenty novels by less famous writers, all of which Mansel derided because "Excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which they aim—an end which must be accomplished at any cost" (Mansel 481).

Kate Flint pursues the issue of how readers may have interacted with Victorian fiction, claiming that the field of reader-response criticism has largely ignored female readers and writers. Her research delves into all aspects of how, where, what, when, and why women read or *did not* read in this period. Flint states that "[t]he practice of reading, at once pointing inwards and outwards, to the psychological and the social-cultural, is an ideal site for the examination of this intersection of Victorian, Edwardian, and contemporary preoccupations: bodies, minds, and texts" (Flint 330). Such tensions were well known to Braddon, as shown in a satirical essay called "My Daughters" (1861) published in *The Welcome Guest.*[7] In this article, Braddon adopts the narrative voice of "Mr. Blankstars," an exasperated man sent to his wit's end by the literary obsessions of his three daughters: "Talk of the cholera, or the measles, or any of the prevailing epidemics a family man is subject to; what are they to a new novel breaking out in this household, and every member of that household taking it successively?" (Braddon, "My Daughters" 80). This treatment of book-reading as literally a disease is clearly satirical, but parody depends upon a reality in which there are people who hold the belief as true. For Mr. Blankstars, the key problem is how this flu-like influence of romantic idealism defines his daughters' taste in men: "what are you to do with girls who form their idea of a husband from the last book they read, and whose standard of perfection alters every time John Thomas brings a fresh cargo from Mudie's?" (81).

Here Braddon evokes the theory that young women cannot distinguish between fictional events and reality—they may expect that real-life men turn out to be as dashing

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[7] This essay was published in 1861, one year prior to the broad publication of *Lady Audley's Secret*. The essay's byline is "M.E. Braddon" so contemporary readers may not have known that the author was a woman, especially since she had not yet achieved fame.

and heroic as those in novels. As Flint observes: “First, the argument ran, certain texts might corrupt her innocent mind, hence diminishing her value as a woman. Second, it was often put forward that she, as a woman, was peculiarly susceptible to emotionally provocative material” (Flint 22). This idea that women had an innate tendency toward “monomania” and that a provocative text could catalyze her to commit immoral acts was not an abstract fear, as some doctors claimed to have medical evidence to support such claims. Flint further explains:

> Reading features in writings on hysteria both as a contributory cause of insanity, and as an activity to be monitored closely in the hysteric herself. That reading should regularly appear as a topic within the literature of hysteria is significant. It demonstrates the intensity with which some specialists believed the affective qualities of print could operate. (Flint 58)

Yet, in *Lady Audley’s Secret* it is Robert Audley, not the titular villainess, who obsesses over French novels.

As one trawls the critical literature of Braddon’s period, rather ornate conjecture abounds, as critical foes look for every possible way to malign novels. Not only those which contained adultery or murder were suspect; those replete with virtue presented other dangers. The explanations can prove rather byzantine:

> [A] young girl is in many ways less likely to be corrupted by work which an experienced adult might regard as unsuitable, since close analysis of the passions will be of little interest to her, whilst the avowedly ‘pure’ work

> may well lead her, far more damagingly, into believing in delusive idealism. (Flint 145)

By virtue of this logic, one can declare racy books uniformly dangerous, even though young girls without life experience will probably not understand the "adult" content, and yet one must also avoid wholesome novels that present love-based marriages, virile and faultless heroes, and happy families, features that might encourage young readers to await such circumstances in life. Which brings us back to Mr. Blackstars' lamentation: if his daughters expect the proverbial Mr. Right, they may never wed.

We need not repeat Flint's efforts to step through the complete history of these critical equivocations, but only to sample two snippets that give shape to the cultural context in which Braddon lived and wrote:

> The press teems with fiction, set forth in the most fascinating style, the tendency of which is to allure into forbidden paths. Ought we not to be as careful about the food of the mind, as we are about the food of the body? In either case poison, however sweet, will destroy life. The difference is, that in the one case the body is killed, in the other the soul! ("S." 934)

> A mind under the genuine influence of novel reading, shrinks from every thing [sic] like effort in study. It is simulated with artificial condiments, till it loses all natural and healthy appetite […] the habit of novel reading is almost as enervating to one class of their patients, as the use of opium, or of spiritous liquors, to another. ("Review of *The Pirate*" 239)

The latter excerpt comes from a review of Sir Walter Scott's *The Pirate*, and in this we discern evidence of the repeated cycle of intense criticism followed by assimilation into the mainstream that preceded the sensation phenomenon. Forty years after being compared to opium, Scott's novels were considered admirable, morally sound alternatives to sensation novels, and when Braddon cites the Waverly novels, it is generally intended to show reverence for the literary standard-bearers of respectability.

Even as some critics continued to focus on the dangers of "fast" heroines inspiring misdeeds in young Englishwomen, another band of critics took a slightly different approach. Rather than focus on danger, this school rejected unsavory novels as tasteless, artless, and trashy. Perhaps the most well-known essay on this topic is Margaret Oliphant's "Novels" (1867) published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*:

> The objectionable writers are all second-rate; genius there is none among them, and not much even of anything that can be called real talent. It is to be supposed they must be entertaining to somebody, else they would not be popular; but then we are all aware that there are a great many foolish people in the world. (Oliphant 280)

Later, Oliphant grudgingly compliments Braddon's occasional moments of inventiveness, but chafes at the notion that a female writer would indulge in pursing subjects so patently objectionable to her own sex, framing Braddon's actions as a form of gender betrayal.

By the later years of Braddon's career, conduct guides began to treat novels as something to be taken in moderation, the logical equivalent of modern dieticians advising on the place of fatty snacks or alcohol in a balanced diet. In *Stray Thoughts for Girls* (1910), Lucy Soulsby gives this advice:

> I do not say read no novels that are exciting and romantic, or even that are silly, but I do say, sandwich them. Face the fact that a silly or passionate novel is likely to have great power over you at this stage, and therefore read very few of them, and read many of Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Miss Austen, and Mrs. Gaskell. (Soulsby 36)

Despite the fact that Braddon's novels continued to be depicted as dangerous or dismissed as vacuous by critics throughout her career—and do not appear in Soulsby's list of recommendations—Braddon nevertheless continued to pass muster with customers and circulating library editors, who had their own reputation for cultural censorship and prudishness.[8] In the sections to follow, we examine how Braddon engaged with this question of whether novels are dangerous, in two starkly different ways, through *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (1876) and *Dead Love Has Chains* (1913).

"My father has forbidden us to read Byron"

Braddon confronts the argument that literature is dangerous in several novels, but none focuses on secular literature's nefarious influence as pervasively as *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* (1876)[9]. Braddon biographer Robert Lee Wolff frames this novel as one of Braddon's post-sensation "masterpieces" (Wolff 8). Nevertheless, this novel

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[8] George Moore, in *Literature at Nurse*, expressed his frustration at one of his novels being excluded from Mudie's system due to claims of immoral content. "My only regret is that a higher name than mine has not undertaken to wave the flag of Liberalism and to denounce and to break with a commercial arrangement that makes of the English novel a kind of advanced school-book, a sort of guide to marriage and the drawing-room" (Moore 32).

[9] According to Robert Lee Wolff, the novel was later re-published as simply *Joshua Haggard* in reflection of the fact that his daughter is an important character, but not as central as the original title suggests, although Wolff thinks that was a mistake and minimizes Naomi's role in the novel (Wolff 273).

features many hallmarks of a sensation novel, including murder. What distinguishes this novel from those she published in the 1860s is the degree to which internal psychology comes into play, bringing the reader into the minds of the characters rather than merely observing them. Building from this distinction, what makes this novel pertinent to the discussion at hand is that the central conflict of the book is ultimately driven by a novel falling into the hands of the wrong *men*, and how their reactions to the written word condemn them. In other words, Braddon tells a story of men inspired by literature to commit immoral acts—a situation that her contemporary society would surely have deemed absurd, thus inverting and parodying the prevailing wisdom about the danger novels posed for women.

Joshua Haggard's Daughter was published in 1876, but the action takes place fifty years earlier and centers around Joshua Haggard, a preacher and shopkeeper in the rustic town of Combhaven. In the opening scene, Joshua valiantly rescues Oswald Pentreath, scion of the local squire, from a shipwreck—an action the townspeople bemoan as a harbinger of bad luck. Tempting fate even further, perhaps, Joshua decides to host Oswald's recovery in the modest home he shares with his son (Jim), daughter (Naomi), and sister (Judith). The Haggard household is impressively somber, with all forms of pleasure strictly off limits: "Judith had gone through life with a fixed idea that cheerfulness and laughter, and all youthful trifling and unmeaning gaiety, were so many snares and pitfalls set by the indefatigable enemy of mankind" (JHD1 43). Indulgences of any kind, including rich or seasoned food, are literally off the table. Such conditions emerge not from necessity: the reader later learns that Joshua's wealth has accumulated sufficiently for him to afford a healthy dowry for Naomi's marriage. Instead, it reflects

the combined forces of Joshua's religious asceticism and his sister's arch-conservatism, "and Conservatism at Combhaven meant stagnation" (JHD1 56).

Jim provides a degree of comic relief to the Haggard table, imploring his aunt for indulgences: "Why don't we have bacon and fried potatoes for breakfast, like Christians?" (JHD3 4). Beyond advocating for bacon, Jim sometimes plays the conservative tendencies of his father and aunt against them. One can hear Braddon's tongue in her cheek, in the style of Voltaire's essay on reading, when she has Jim say:

> "If there was no arithmetic, there'd be no ledgers and daybooks; and if there were no tradesmen's books, nobody could get into debt. That's number one. Then if there was no arithmetic there'd be no usury, for the moneylenders couldn't reckon up their interest. In my opinion, the man who invented figures did as much mischief as Eve when she ate the apple." (JHD1 57)

The message here seems to be that one can make a rational-sounding argument out of almost anything, harkening back to "Novel-Reading a Cause of Female Depravity" and its premise that without novels, no woman would have ever stolen another woman's husband. In the most conservative viewpoint, reading, mathematics, and all sciences may lead to bad outcomes if one is not careful: indeed, the elder Haggards are prone to making broad pronouncements on where one might find temptation. Reading for pleasure is certainly not permissible within the Haggard home.

Oswald represents a host of dangers. The townspeople claim it to be a bad omen that Joshua rescued him from drowning, citing folk mythology, and Judith finds it suspicious that he comes from a different social stratum: "She regarded the good old

families, the patrician order of her neighborhood, with a grudging mind and jaundiced eye. She had that mistaken and distorted pride which reckons superiority of education or position as an injury, or even and insult, to the more humbly placed" (JHD1 86). But worst of all, Oswald indulges himself in poetry and fiction, and not exclusively from the safe reserve of his home, but "wandering about the woods and hills in a dreamy way, with a volume of poems in one pocket and a sketch-book and pencil in the other" (JHD1 93). It is only a matter of time before he introduces the Haggard children to temptation:

> [Naomi] looked wonderingly at Mr. Pentreath's book, which lay face downwards on the mossy bank—a book in boards, covered with coarse blue paper: our ancestors were content to accept their choicest literature thus rudely clothed.
>
> "Is that a tale?" inquired Jim, pointing to the volume.
>
> "No; it's a play, by Lord Byron."
>
> Naomi gave a little sigh—half surprise, half horror—as if she had found herself in evil company. (JHD1 97)

Evil company indeed, not only from conjecture about the general category of literature but based upon explicit instructions from Joshua, as Naomi confesses that "my father has forbidden us to read Byron" (JHD1 99). Oswald presses the question:

> "You like the Waverley Novels, I suppose, Miss Haggard?" asked Oswald, feeling that literature was advancing his acquaintance with this dark-haired girl.

> Naomi shook her head despondently. “I have not read one of them,” she said. “Father disapproves of novels. Jim had no right to read *Rob Roy*.” (JHD1 100)

Naomi simultaneously expresses these facts and develops feelings of doubt, observing to herself “that [Oswald] was talking of a world from which she was shut out—nay, must always be excluded” (JHD1 101). This sentiment reflects a complex brew of emotions: a tinge of sadness in being disconnected from the broader world in which such literature exists, and a resolution that the situation *must* be so. But if Joshua has trained his children that Byron and Scott are evils to be avoided, one may wonder whether this opinion emerges from direct knowledge, or merely prejudice.

Aware of the preacher’s attitude toward literature, Oswald ventures a conversation with his would-be father-in-law:

> There was a mahogany bookcase with glass doors on one side of the fireplace, containing several rows of books, neatly arranged and neatly bound – books that look as if they were treasured by their owner – not like Oswald’s ragged regiment of volumes, always out of their proper places.
>
> “You are fond of reading, Mr. Haggard,” said the young man, looking at the bookcase.
>
> “Very fond. I give all my spare hours to my books, but my spare hours do not make many days in the year. I carry a volume in my pocket when I have to walk far, and read as I go. That is my best chance of enjoying a book.”
>
> “And who are your favourite authors?”

> "Bunyan, Baxter, and Law."
>
> These were strangers to Oswald Pentreath, save for a dim remembrance of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, devoured and wondered over in early boyhood. The conversation came to a dead stop at this point, but there was no embarrassment. (JHD1 112-113)

That these two men share a similar passion for reading—both inclined to "carry a volume in my pocket"—is an important fact for us to consider, as is the point that the Venn diagram of their collections and reading interests have no overlapping regions. Haggard's passion in all things centers around conservative religion; the only creative literature appearing in his home, except for the troublesome Goethe novel which we will consider shortly, "was Milton's *Paradise Lost*, one of the few imaginative works of which Mr. Haggard did not disapprove" (JHD3 19). Whether Joshua actually read the epic poem, or judged its propriety by reputation alone, we cannot say.

By contrast, when Braddon leads us into Oswald's chambers, in the otherwise dour and neglected Pentreath estate, we enter a world of secular literature: "there was an old bookcase, which contained Oswald's meagre collection—Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Shelley, an odd volume of Wordsworth, a few of the classics, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*, *The Adventures of a Guinea*, and three of four volumes of the British Drama" (JHD1 79). These shelves mesmerize Naomi Haggard:

> Naomi went eagerly to look at the books […] Old poets—Spenser, Cowley, Waller, Dryden, Prior, Pope—in white vellum, with gilded lettering. The Essasyists, in neat duodecimo volumes, with faded calf bindings; Richardson's voluminous novels, in thin octavos, bound in

> brown. Naomi read the titles with keenest interest. The great world of books was an unknown region for her. (JHD2 69)

That these books come from an "unknown region" for Naomi represents the degree to which her father has excluded her from the material world outside their home or the literary world beyond the King James Version. Oswald spies in this an angle: if he subscribes to the belief that women are susceptible to temptation by way of the written word, then he can leverage forbidden poetry as a means of seduction. Soon enough, Oswald and Naomi are affianced, although Joshua insists upon a two-year engagement to ensure that it is not an impulsive action given the social stratification at play.

Meanwhile, Joshua travels on church business to Penmoyle, a nearby village, where he encounters a waifish teenager (Cynthia) who has escaped from a band of travelers. He installs her with the Weblings, two older women who agree to teach Cynthia how to read and keep house. When Joshua returns to check on Cynthia months later and witnesses her success in domestic and religious training, he abruptly marries her.

To the Weblings Joshua explains the motive behind his restrictions on literature, using arguments that echo the popular sentiments of the time:

> "I have forbidden my daughter to read novels […] lest the unrealities she would find in them should give her a false picture of life, and encourage her to form baseless hopes or foolish desires. But when she is married and the mother of a family she may seek amusement for an evening hour in some innocent fiction, and be none the worse for it. And, of course, at your discreet age, Miss Priscilla, an appeal to the imagination can do no harm." (JHD2 13-14)

Like the fictional Mr. Blankstars, Joshua's quarrel with novels is that their idealized sentiments and events might lead Naomi to expect unrealistic things from life, a danger that only subsides after one has settled down or aged enough to know better. Yet it is to literature that Braddon's narrator turns when Joshua encounters Cynthia in Penmoyle and observes "[t]he girl's red under-lip—fuller than the upper, like Sophia Western's—pouted a little as she meditated this question" (JHD1 158). The reference to *Tom Jones* surely represents Braddon's narrative voice rather than her staid preacher's point of view, since it would be entirely out of character for Joshua to have read Fielding's bawdy novel, but Braddon counts on her readers to grasp the reference and to wonder what the implications may be, if any, of the analogy.

In the next scene, Braddon introduces another, much less incidental literary reference. As Joshua looks at Cynthia in the Weblings' home, Braddon sweeps us away into Goethe's *Faust*: "So innocent, so artless, so unconscious, so divinely lovely may Gretchen have appeared to the student in that vision in the witch's kitchen" (JHD1 164). On the one hand, this establishes Cynthia as an ideal feminine form; but more crucially the passage aligns Joshua with Faust, whose pursuit of Margaret/Gretchen is guided by Mephistopheles. The implicit meaning here is that in pursuing Cynthia, Joshua may be making a deal of his own with the devil. This image recurs later, when Oswald sees the newlyweds in the Haggard home: "on the other side of the hearth that childlike face and figure, the very type of innocent and guileless maiden-hood, Oswald's idea of Goethe's Gretchen, nestling close to Joshua's side, looking up at him now and then with worshipping eyes" (JHD2 142).

Like the archetype to which she is compared in these passages, Cynthia is a paragon of virtue; consider how Mephistopheles describes Gretchen to Faust:

> She, there? She's coming from confession,
> Of every sin absolved; for I,
> Behind her chair, was listening nigh.
> So innocent is she, indeed,
> That to confess she had no need.
> I have no power o'er souls so green. (Goethe, *Faust*, Scene VII)

Given that Cynthia spent most of her life among a traveling circus, a modern cynic might point out how unlikely it would be for her to have maintained sexual innocence under such circumstances. However, one must be cautious to remember the frame through which Braddon's contemporary audience would have considered the situation. The novel unwaveringly paints Cynthia in earnest, with a child-like and virginal naivete. While Judith and others look at Cynthia with skepticism, at least initially, due to her poverty and lack of education, she remains until the end a perfectly virtuous person, in contrast to her husband, who is introduced as a model of virtue but succumbs to vice. Despite how cruelly Joshua treats her, Cynthia views Joshua as her savior and patron until her death.

Oswald's miserly father becomes gravely ill, prompting Cynthia to volunteer to nurse the dying man. Unfortunately, Oswald chooses this time of grieving to read Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and sees the eponymous tragic hero of that novel in the mirror. The novel appears for the first time much earlier, during an extended discussion about the popular success a Penmoyle minister has had with a based-on-a-true-story account of the virtuous life (and death) of a parishioner:

> On the female mind in Penmoyle the book had exercised as strong an influence as had the *Confessions of Rousseau* or the *Sorrows of Werther* on the world in general; and a young woman of Mr. Martin's flock would have considered that, next to marrying a rich farmer and driving one's own chaise-cart, the happiest destiny would be to die early and discourse wisely on one's death-bed, like Elizabeth Lucas. (JHD1 298)

In this passage, Braddon calls attention to the potential of literature to influence impressionable young minds in a more positive way, by motivating them to emulate virtue; but the passage also establishes a context for Goethe's book, which will not appear in physical form until late in the second volume of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*. Furthermore, this servs as an example of disguised foreshadowing, as Cynthia's death will largely mirror Elizabeth Lucas's in the minister's book.

In point of historical fact, the dangers of *Werther* had been feared since its publication, as Robyn Schiffman observes in her essay *A Concert of Werthers* (2010):

> What was it about Werther that prompted the Bishop of Milan, for example, to take the extreme measure of buying up all copies of the Italian translation when it appeared in 1781? Werther was widely seen as posing a serious threat to young women, who were impressionable and susceptible to sentiment. (Schiffman 216)

When Oswald introduces *Werther* to Naomi and Cynthia, he appears to be cognizant of the controversies surrounding it:

> "Is it a book that a Christian may read?" asked Naomi. "But I am sure you would not bring us any book in which there were evil thoughts."
>
> "There are no evil thoughts in this—only an irresistible fate governing a weak soul. There is no sin in the book—only foolishness and an overmastering sorrow."
>
> "What's it called?"
>
> "*The Sorrows of Werther*, a translation from the German of Goethe —a book that set Germany in a blaze many years ago, but which I never saw till the other day. (JHD2 215)

What remains ambiguous in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* is whether Oswald is inspired to love Cynthia from reading *Werther* while weakened by the strain of his father's illness, or whether it only serves as a catalyst for him to realize what he already feels. The transition happens quickly, as Oswald expresses no romantic feelings toward Cynthia until he reads the Goethe novel. The simplest explanation, and most likely what Braddon intended, is that this represents an ironic example of a man poisoned by a literary text: the book made him do it!

Oswald employs the novel as an instrument to reveal his feelings and encourage Cynthia to reciprocate: "He had meant to speak only through Werther; finding a morbid delight in dwelling upon the record of sufferings so like his own, half assured that Cynthia understood and recognised his passion veiled in the words of another" (JHD2 256). While Cynthia's physical reactions suggest she possesses a corresponding attachment to Oswald, she remains steadfastly dedicated to Joshua and rebuffs Oswald's

advances; she may be emotionally swayed by Werther's sorrows, but that psychological response is as far as it will go.

When Naomi and Judith discover the situation, Oswald breaks his engagement with Naomi and decides to extract himself from the scene by fleeing to America. Unfortunately, he arranges a final farewell to Cynthia, which Joshua observes from a secret hiding spot; without hearing their words, Joshua misinterprets the scene to confirm that the relationship has progressed beyond verbal assertions of unrequited love. This conclusion and Joshua's hasty response result from Joshua's equivocal interpretation of the Goethe novel. When Judith alerts Joshua about the book he dismisses it out-of-hand: "Joshua took the book and glanced at it helplessly. He was not able to take a bird's-eye view of plot and style, swoop upon a catchword here and there, and straightway made up his mind that the book was altogether vile, after the manner of certain modern critics (JHD2 238)." Beyond the direct jab here at literary critics, the passage suggests that Joshua does not immediately spy anything worrisome. Yet when he later reads the book more closely, and at a time when his emotional state has been drastically altered, the words resonate differently. Reading *Werther* while under the influence of jealously, Joshua finds an answer to his problems: "Those two lived happily together, when Werther was gone" (JHD2 296). He heads off to confront Oswald.

Despite his candid rejection of literature, Joshua appears susceptible to evaluating real-world events through biblical tropes well before he makes his fatal decision to seek vengeance; even while he shields his family from the adverse influence of literature, he may be the most vulnerable of all. Early in the novel, Judith accuses him of this weakness: "I'm afraid you've too much book-learning to be wise about the affairs of this

life" (JHD1 130). His well-traveled bible—also a literary text, of course—provides inspiration and justification for his actions, sometimes based on a rather loose interpretation. Shortly after he rescues Cynthia and brings her to the Weblings, Joshua delivers a sermon based on the Book of Ruth, from which he draws a direct parallel to their circumstances: "I want you to look with increasing favour upon my Ruth […] I am like Boaz […] I have no need to tarry any longer in doubtfulness of my own heart" (JHD2 33-34). Seeing himself in Boaz, as Oswald sees himself in Werther, is what makes Joshua's impulsive decision to marry the teenaged orphan.

This is a stunning example of how Joshua, despite his fears about the influence secular literature might have on his children, lets religious text guide his behavior, even when he aims to justify his killing of Oswald:

> [T]hat book was his rock of defence, his sheet-anchor. He looked into those pages for justification, for assurance of grace and redemption, and eh seldom looked in vain. If he had sinned, had not David sinned also, and yet retained his exalted place in the love of God and men? Was he to humble himself more than David humbled himself? (JHD3 227)

In addition to these examples of literary interpretation shaded by a personal agenda, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* includes several instances where the problem is misreading or jumping to *a priori* false conclusions. Like the "modern critic" Braddon refers to when Joshua skims *Werther*, no good comes from an individual who has not read the relevant text but nonetheless presumes an interpretation. Along these lines, Joshua seems obsessed with misunderstanding *Othello.* Quotes from the play appear in several chapter titles, including "Farewell, Content," which comes from the scene where

Othello has seen (false) evidence of Desdemona's (false) infidelity: "Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!" (*Othello* III.3.348). The epigraph to the fifth chapter, "Yet I feel fear" invokes Act V, Scene II, wherein Othello confronts and kills Desdemona; the words come from her pleas: "And yet I fear you; for you're fatal then / When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not, / Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel fear" (*Othello* V.2.37-38). As Pamela Gilbert observes in her analysis of *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*:

> The narrator's many references to *Othello*, and Joshua's language, taken directly from Othello's, operate both to underscore the themes of jealousy and wronged innocence and as an apologia for the value of cautionary tales: had Joshua been more of a reader, perhaps he might have been less quick to believe ill of his wife. (Gilbert 188)

The implication is that Joshua knows that the play hinges on infidelity and jealousy, but remains ignorant of the full plot, including Desdemona's innocence and Othello's unjustified murders of Desdemona and Cassio. Had Joshua known the broader lessons contained in Shakespeare's jealousy fable, he might have seen the folly of his own behavior. Instead, determined to eliminate the flesh-and-blood Werther from his life, Joshua confronts Oswald. That he kills Oswald is plain to the reader, although the details—that it was a duel rather than cold-blooded murder and that Joshua hid the body inside a well—only come out much later, when Arnold Pentreath, Oswald's brother, investigates his brother's disappearance.

Despite having eliminated the competition, Joshua cannot abide Cynthia's presence, no matter her pleas of innocence, and he turns her out of the house. Braddon

suggests that Cynthia's naivete and lack of formal education have left her unprepared to manage situations such as this, since "[s]he did not know that there is a kind of jealousy, and that which has its root in the deepest love, which puts on the garb of hate, and has not seldom culminated in murder —such jealousy as made Othello strike Desdemona before the Venetian emissaries, the passion of strong natures" (JHD3 47). Had Cynthia received more thorough literary training, beyond bible verses taught to her by the Weblings and her husband, or poems and novels read aloud to her by Oswald, perhaps she would have been better armed to confront the realities of life. In both cases, these carefully curated syllabi of reading experiences serve the pedagogical ambitions of those who assembled them, without any awareness of the risks inherent to their myopic perspectives.

The popular explanation for Oswald's disappearance is that he followed his emigration plan to America, but Oswald's brother suspects that something is awry. The critical clue for Arnold is not Goethe's text, which he finds silly, but a hand-drawn sketch in a notebook that he presumes to be Joshua's wife—at that moment the explanation seems obvious to him, and Arnold decides to read Werther for himself:

> [He] read the story carefully; but not being of so sentimental a turn as his brother, and not being in love with another man's wife, he had found the reading rather a laborious business, and Werther a weak-minded youth with a fatal habit of prosing about his own emotions. "God forbid that my brother should ever follow the example of such a booby!" said Arnold. (JHD3 165)

This lends further credence to the idea that such texts are not intrinsically malicious in nature. Nevertheless, Arnold proceeds to search the woods, where he finds his brother's

body hidden in a well. He promptly accuses Joshua in front of the preacher's congregation and a criminal inquest follows, although it ends in Joshua's acquittal when he discloses that he killed Oswald in a duel—it wasn't murder, but an action justified by duel convention. Despite being exonerated and retaining his freedom, Joshua grows overwhelmed by guilt regarding his treatment of Cynthia. He pursues her but arrives at the home of the Weblings mere hours after she has died; the shock causes him to have a stroke. On his deathbed, he repents his sins to Naomi and Arnold, confessing that he saw Oswald raise his pistol toward the sky but shot him through the heart anyway. In the epilogue, which fast-forwards three years, Naomi and Arnold are getting married in a church that was paid for with Naomi's inheritance. We are left to assume that they live happily ever after, immune to the further corrupting influences of literature.

Joshua Haggard's Daughter offers a rich story of male characters who allow the written word to determine their fates. In some sense, this supports the popular notion that literature is dangerous, but it flips the susceptible gender; this reversal subverts the notion that only women may be poisoned by what they read. The moral of the story is that in cases where literature might be blamed for one's actions, the true fault lies within each individual's predilections rather than any inherent evil within the pages of novels or the stanzas of poems. Only when he has already fallen in love with Cynthia does Oswald see Werther as his literary double; only when convinced of his wife's infidelity does Joshua see the threat in Goethe (Werther) instead of the opportunity (Gretchen). While literature does not poison or wreck Cynthia's virtue in any direct sense, when placed in the hands of the men around her, it certainly ruins her life.

On the Danger of Not Reading

As we have seen, *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* pushes against the question of the "dangerous novel" through the irony that the male characters in that novel prove more susceptible to temptation than the women. To consider another angle of Braddon's critique of the societal prejudice against the ability of female readers to distinguish fiction from reality, we turn toward *Dead Love Has Chains* (1910), a slender novel from Braddon's late career, which posits that the decision by patriarchal society to censor reading material—in their zeal to shield women from temptation—may prove even more harmful. According to Pamela Gilbert, Braddon's novels often suggest that "Experienced readers […] are better trained to interpret reality than those who have been kept from books" (Gilbert 188), and this sentiment figures prominently in *Dead Love Has Chains*.

Lady Mary Harling is returning to England by ship from Ceylon when she hears loud weeping in an adjacent cabin. There she finds a young woman (Irene Thelliston) who initially refuses to explain her distress and asks Lady Mary to leave. However, Irene soon knocks on Lady Mary's door to apologize. In Braddon's novels, even rooms on passenger ships are stocked with books, and that's one of the first things Irene notices when invited into Lady Mary's room. She remarks that "at school […] novels were contraband" (DLC 8) but that *Jane Eyre*—one of the many books in Lady Mary's collection—had been among her favorites, not knowing at the time that Lady Mary has something of her own Bertha hidden away in an asylum, as we will see. Lady Mary encourages Irene to pick a book to help distract her from whatever may be causing her such distress. But Irene makes an unorthodox selection:

> The girl surveyed the shelf slowly, then put up her hand and drew out a slim volume half bound in gilded vellum.
>
> "*The Scarlet Letter*" exclaimed Lady Mary. "Oh, that is such a painful story!"
>
> "Please let me read it. My father took it from me a year ago, when I was not half through it, for fear I should learn things a girl ought not to know. Is that your idea of girls? That they ought to know nothing of the sorrow and shame that some women have to suffer. Some who are no older than themselves?" (DLC 11)

The narrative irony of this passage becomes obvious once we learn the circumstances of Irene's disgrace: "She struck her hand fiercely on the loose muslin that was folded over her breast. 'The Scarlet Letter,' she cried, 'the Scarlet Letter ought to be there.' The story was told in that speech" (DLC 15). Here Braddon overtly confronts patriarchal censorship: Irene's father, in his attempt to prevent Hawthorne's novel from planting an impure idea in the brain of his teenager, may have helped ensure that her life turn out like Hester Prynne's.

The Scarlet Letter might be considered a special kind of medicine, similar to what Edward Salmon recommended as selective exemptions from the general rule that young women avoid sensational novels, in his 1886 essay "What Girls Read":

> *East Lynne*, in my humble judgment, ought to be placed in every girl's hands as soon as she has arrived at an age when she may find that life has for her unsuspected dangers. The work teaches many lessons valuable to

> young ladies, especially those of a jealous or impulsive disposition. (Salmon 524)

The novel referred to here features Lady Isabel Carlyle, who leaves her husband and children to run away with her lover, a serial rake who promptly abandons her. That is only the beginning of her troubles: Isabel loses her illegitimate child, becomes disfigured in an accident, and returns to England, unrecognizable from the accident, to serve as a nurse to her children while watching her ex-husband live happily married to his second wife, before finally dying of heartbreak. *East Lynne* received comparable criticism to Braddon's novels of the same epoch, yet Salmon's argument is that such sordid tales might serve to inoculate young women against sexual impropriety, if they see how poorly things may turn out in consequence. Who would want to imitate Lady Isabel?

Braddon faults selective reading for other ills in *Dead Love Has Chains*. Consider Irene's story of how her seducer bent Byron to his purpose: "One evening at sunset, when we had lost our way, he repeated some verses of Byron's—a scene on a Greek Island—Haidee and Juan, and after that he used to call me Haidee, whenever we were alone" (DLC 17). This is a reference we have already seen, in the mind of the hapless Edgar Turchill in *Asphodel*, but in this example, Irene's lover is not the one who is ignorant of the plot: Juan is sent away and Haidee dies—Irene should not have been pleased to be the solider's Haidee. Irene simultaneously misreads these romantic texts *and* recognizes the degree to which she has been conditioned, by the nature of how British society educates young women, to be susceptible to evils such as unknown poetry. For Irene, the reality has played out rather like Byron's poem. Before parting ways at the end of the voyage,

Irene makes Lady Mary swear to keep her pregnancy secret, taking advantage of Lady Mary's religious faith to secure her vow, which proves important later.

Once on shore, Lady Mary turns her attention toward the rehabilitation of her son, Conrad, who has been in a nearly vegetative state in an insane asylum after being jilted by a college girlfriend. Reading plays a critical role in the story of Conrad Harling. From his mother's point-of-view, poor choices in reading are at least partly responsible for his poor choices in life:

> And while she was dreaming of her son's marriage in his twenty-sixth year, Conrad Harling was going mad for love of an innkeeper's daughter, and had turned socialist in his desire to level himself down to her. He was a romantic young man, full of high-flown sentiments and wild Quixotism; and he took up Karl Marx with an enthusiasm he had refused to Aristotle. (DLC 25)

Rather than novels or Romantic poetry, it is the polemic of Karl Marx that pushes Conrad Harling astray. In addition, Conrad seems to have been ill-prepared for the possibility of being rejected by a barkeeper's daughter in favor of a lesser beau, perhaps because that outcome is not how things are meant to go in the traditional narrative; the expected (and appropriate) ending would be for the girl to spurn the brutish boxer in favor of the handsome aristocrat. Whereas his attachment to Stella Meadows relies not upon Shakespeare or Byron, but on simple lust, perhaps a more robust education in the literature of disappointment would have helped him stave off nervous breakdown. Lacking such preparedness, Conrad falls victim to the same epidemic afflicting the Blankstars daughters: he expects his life to follow the standard script.

However, it turns out that books prove essential to his recovery. The surest signal for Lady Mary that her son is recovering from his mental illness is his re-emergence as a reader. Having abandoned books at the asylum, he embraces them early in his convalescence:

> His table was loaded with books, and there was his old Eton desk which she had sent there, hopeless of his ever using it, now open and with sheets of manuscript scattered about it. She looked at the books, Darwin, Wallace, Tyndall, Clodd, and several new books on electricity.
>
> "You have taken up science!" she said, full of wonder.
>
> "Yes, it is a new world for me. The house doctor here is a dab at electrical science—and we have long jaws together."
>
> "But I hope you indulge yourself with a little light literature, Thackeray, Dickens, and the poets you were so fond of."
>
> "They are by my bedside—my close companions. I have a good deal of leisure for reading, you see, now I have gone back to books." (DLC 44)

The passage almost suggests that the written word can have restorative powers; at a minimum, it reflects Braddon's perspective that to be "normal" one must read.

Reading has a practical implication on Conrad's return to society, since Lady Mary's explanation for her son's disappearance was that he was pursuing adventure in Africa. To ensure that he could "play the part in the false stories his mother told during his confinement" (DLC 48), Conrad becomes a scholar of Africa: "there was no detail of the life—no thrilling moment of discovery, no vivid impression of the picturesque in land

or water, mountain or forest, no colour of earth or sky, that he had not absorbed and made part and parcel of his own mind" (DLC 58). Thus, a man who was essentially amnesiac for seven years crafts a sophisticated new base of memories, a rigorous fiction which Conrad internalizes as substitute reality for his missing years.

After Conrad recovers, he meets and falls in love with Irene, which comes as a great shock to Lady Mary when they are introduced. Unwilling to break her promise to keep Irene's past indiscretions in confidence, Lady Mary instead tries to convince Irene to leave her fragile boy alone, but Irene fights back:

> "What do you know about me? When I let him [the man who impregnated her] spoil my life! you say—When I let him! I was seventeen—and I had been educated by the proper people who never hint that life has dangers. When I let him! I was in the power of a profligate, intoxicated with sweet words, with flattered vanity, told for the first time that I was beautiful, and that I was beloved. What do I know of love but the sweetness of it—the love I had read about in Romeo and Juliet—the love *he* read of—the love of Haidee for Juan—oh, so overpoweringly sweet in the ears of ignorance." (DLC 81; emphasis original)

Here Braddon again calls attention to the deficiencies of shielding a young woman from racy literature: precisely those things moral authorities think young girls ought not to know about are the things society *must* teach them about. Second, there is the problem of selective skimming, which can result in judging Romeo and Juliet or Haidee and Juan to be romantic ideals worth of emulation. Shakespeare's play and Byron's poems *are* tales

of love and sexual passion, but they are tragedies: nobody lives happier ever after. If you know that, then you should know to avoid modeling your own life on theirs.

This speech represents an unusually emphatic rejection—for the times—of assigning all blame to the woman; reading the speech in the twenty-first century, it resembles contemporary discourse on sexual consent and sexual assault. Braddon reveals Irene as a victim of sexual assault during a period where such a situation also created a permanent *de facto* marriage contract with her assailant. Before Conrad and Irene can be married, Irene's former love returns to England and asserts what he claims to be, essentially, his property rights over her:

> And was she to surrender that noble lover [Conrad], to give herself to the man whose sensual passion had blighted her life, the unscrupulous seducer, who could not respect the innocence of a girl just escaped from a school where evil things were unknown, where every book and every lesson, every allusion to the outer world, was chosen with a studious reverence for youthful purity. (DLC 103)

This passage sums up a broad range of issues—including the dumbing down of female education and the attempt of British middle-class society to sculpt young women into virtue-idols, the proverbial "Angel in the House." Braddon implies that these actions leave young women unprepared for the harsh realities of male company. Even without the legal ties of marriage, and even though their illegitimate child did not survive childbirth, the sexual bond is sufficiently powerful. Irene finds herself "compelled […] to marry him" (DLC 122) despite her love for Conrad. When Conrad sees her for the last time, "The face he had seen was not the face of a bride, but the face of a victim" (DLC

129). The entire social situation can be reduced to something Irene says to Lady Mary: “I am a woman, and there is no pardon for a woman's sin” (DLC 80). In this statement we see how readily Irene could have seen herself in the mold of Hester Prynne.

Whereas Irene’s exclusion from reading *The Scarlet Letter* may have been a root cause of the chain reaction that ultimately leads her to forego her shot at happiness, Conrad’s reading is precisely what allows him to overcome the rupture in their relationship. Quixotic though it may seem, Conrad turns to the literature he once studied to ensure fidelity to his mother’s lies about his African sojourn. He tells his mother “I am going to make that fairy-tale a true story” (DLC 130). Rather than slip back into insanity, Conrad goes to Africa to convert his manufactured memories into real ones. Unlike Irene, he remains free to make his own decisions and seek true love. Sure enough, upon his return from Africa, Conrad meets a new girl and lives happily ever after. The double-standard prevails once again, permitting Conrad to live like a romantic hero while Irene must spend the rest of her life with the archetypical villain of such novels, a man who once took advantage of her, abandoned her, and then claimed her as his property.

Chapter 4:

Mimetic Realism and Literary Taste

> What is a novel?
>
> A picture representing, with more or less truth and faithfulness, the manners and customs of society. A work of fiction delineating dramatic or humorous characters. A web in which are skillfully wrought the passions, emotions, or feelings, supposed to fill the human breast, as well as the incidents which bring them into play.
>
> —Mary Elizabeth Braddon, "French Novels" *Belgravia,* June 1867

In the previous section, I examined the perceived risk that imaginative novels might corrupt the minds of readers, especially young, female ones. In part, what made Braddon's novels even more dangerous was the placement of the sensational action within the upper-middle-class home, thus potentially setting the stage for her readers to imitate sensational acts in their own lives. In *The Decay of Lying* (1891), Oscar Wilde posits that this might be looking at the situation backwards: "Cyril: 'But you don't mean to say that you seriously believe that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality?' Vivian: 'Certainly I do'" (Wilde 32). One might interpret this passage as lending credence to the idea, as discussed in the previous chapter, that fictional events provoke real-world malfeasance; in fact, Wilde agrees, to an extent:

> The most obvious and the vulgarest form in which this is shown is in the case of the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin, pillage the stalls of unfortunate apple-women, break into sweet-shops at night, and alarm old gentlemen who are returning home from the city by leaping out on them in suburban lanes, with black masks and unloaded revolvers. This interesting phenomenon […] is usually attributed to the influence of literature on the imagination. But this is a mistake. The imagination is essentially creative and always seeks for a new form. The boy-burglar is simply the inevitable result of life's imitative instinct. (Wilde 34)

It is notable that Wilde focuses on the impressionable male rather than the suggestible female of whom the anti-sensation critics were so protective. According to Wilde, reading nudges individuals to partake in behaviors already on the cusp of commission. The idea does not take shape because of the novel but was there already: seeing the idea play out on paper merely provokes the call to action. Inherent to Wilde's observation is the corollary that fictional events in an ostensibly realistic novel would be rather incoherent if they did not sufficiently reflect realistic possibility.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon frequently blurred the line between fiction and reality and called attention to the "rules" of novel-writing, such as the earlier example from *Lady Audley's Secret*. She also took great efforts to paint settings in vivid detail, through descriptive interludes that often include comprehensive inventories of furnishings, their materials, and the names of their designers:

> It was all a splendid chaos, in which antique oak cabinets, and buhl and marqueterie, and carved ebony chairs, and filigree-work and ivory, old Chelsea, Battersea, Copenhagen, Vienna, Dresden, Sèvres, Derby, and Salopian china, Majolica and Palissy ware, pictures and painted windows, revolved like the figures in a kaleidoscope before her dazzled eyes. (DW 172)

Such arch-detailed accounting sometimes reminded this reader of Patrick Bateman's obsessive materialism in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991): "A bottle of Scharffenberger is on ice in a Spiros spun-aluminum bowl which is in a Christine Van der Hurd etched-glass champagne cooler which sits on a Cristofle silver-plated bar tray" (Ellis 76). These interludes are superfluous to the narrative and the name brands may be unknown to the reader, but in their precision they aim to solidify the reality of the scene and to frame the persons occupying the space as realistic persons who occupy a comparable reality as the reader—a little fancier, perhaps, that the parlors in which many of Braddon's readers found themselves, but nevertheless grounded in the material realities of their world. As Lyn Pykett observes:

> The use of such settings offers two important sources of narrative pleasure. First it is a kind of voyeurism, allowing the reader to spy on the lives of those in a superior social class. Secondly, and more importantly for the ideological work of sensation fiction, it reconciles the reader to the limitations of her own marriage, home and social circle. (Pykett 111)

Even more than material possessions, Braddon infuses her novels with popular culture references (e.g., theatre, music, and fiction) as another means to connect her fictional world to the actual world, gilding the frame around the faux reality depicted within the novels. Braddon's books, she wants her reader to believe, are *less* fictional and *more* realistic than other novels they may encounter; her novels and the characters within them reside in a world that is aware of other stories but apart from them.

The old writing adage says to "write what you know"—and I submit that Braddon knew more about writing and reading than most. In the manuscript of her unpublished autobiography, *Before the Knowledge of Evil*, Braddon defines the joys of her childhood to have been "A garden by the river, plenty of books, a seat at a London theatre" (BKE 28). Indeed, these three loves pervade her fictional world[10], but what concerns us here is literature. Braddon came by her passion for reading through her mother and aunt:

> Aunt Mary was cultured, or what would be called so nowadays. She loved books, not the mere circulating library novel, not only Mrs. Gore, and G.P.R. James, but real books. She was an ardent Shakespearian, and she worshipped Byron, knew *The Giaour* by heart, from start to finish. It was her favourite and my mother's favourite among all those wonderful story poems which were a new thing in literature, new even after Scott's *Lady of the Lake* and *Marmion* […] She kept herself well abreast of modern literature until her death, and always welcomed a new writer who was

[10] For more on Braddon's stage career and the influence of the theatre on her works, Jennifer Carnell's *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* is an essential text. Carnell's document stands with Wolff's *Sensational Victorian* as the only definitive biographies of M.E.B.

> worth reading; and I remember no letter of hers that did not contain some criticism of new books read and thought about. (BKE 61-62)

Note how Braddon contrasts the "mere circulating library novel" to "real books"—a quasi-self-deprecatory observation given that she earned most of her income through her distribution by the circulating libraries. One might be surprised by Aunt Mary's emphasis on culture, to the point where she might be described as "Shakespearean" and would have memorized *The Giaour* by Lord Byron, a poem of more than 400 lines. Novels and poems were interwoven into Braddon's daily life: no mere form of amusement, but ubiquitous and important. When Braddon later puts *Marmion* in the hands of her characters, she is not intending to employ a contrived prop, but projecting authentic personal experiences into the lives of her characters.

Her literary indoctrination began early. Perhaps not with the intensity of John Stuart Mill's infamous childhood mastery of Ancient Greek and Latin, but early nonetheless: "before my ninth birthday," Braddon writes, "Mamma had opened the gates of that wide region of romance and history, chivalry, tragedy and comedy, which Sir Walter Scott created for the joy of mankind" (BKE 170). Reading provided insufficient stimulation for her creative mind, and soon Braddon began to write her own stories, as accounted in her entry from Jerome K. Jerome's anthology *My First Book* (1887):

> Far back in the distinctness of childish memories I see a little girl who has lately learnt to write, who has lately been given a beautiful brand-new mahogany desk, with a red velvet scope, and a glass ink-bottle […] Armed with that desk and its supply of stationary, Mary Elizabeth Braddon—very fond of writing her name at full length […] began that pilgrimage on the

> broad high road of fiction, which was destined to be a longish one. So much for the little girl of eight years old. (Jerome 109)

Braddon describes her earliest attempt at novel-writing as coming soon thereafter: "'The Old Arm Chair' was certainly my first serious, painstaking effort in fiction; but as it was abandoned unfinished before my eleventh birthday, and as no line thereof ever achieved the distinction of type, it can hardly rank as my first novel" (114). Instead she bestows that honor upon *The Trail of the Serpent* (1860), a novel published when she was twenty-five, two years before *Lady Audley's Secret*.

The aspiring child-novelist remained an ambitious reader. Profiling Braddon in *The Windsor Magazine* in 1897, Mary Dickens observed that:

> From the time when she could read at all Miss Braddon was a voracious reader . . . Her authors were far beyond her years. For her, Dickens, Scott, Shakspeare [sic], Goldsmith took the place of the ordinary children's story-tellers. The very first novels which she read were the "Vicar of Wakefield" and "Kenilworth," and those first readings she has never forgotten. (Dickens 417)

In another profile fifteen years later, Clive Holland remarked that "nothing, indeed, was more noticeable than her great generosity in appreciating good work, whether in music, art, or literature; of all three of which departments of human activity she seemed to have a wide, up-to-date, and sympathetic knowledge" (Holland 156). From these passages, one clearly perceives the depth of Braddon's relationship to literature, and she drew from this well many rich literary references and ideas. An irony of Braddon's career is the degree

to which she integrated such a broad array of literary references into the same novels that critics derided for their artlessness.

One explanation for this is that her usage of literary reference was an act of defiance against those critics. Kate Flint observes that "to employ a literary reference is to assert one's place within the cultural assumptions of that society" (Flint 257), but that suggests the author has the intention of making these references solely to prove her *bona fides.* That remains a plausible rationale for Braddon's technique, but a simpler answer would be that literary allusion is a natural by-product of literary immersion. Braddon's professional and personal lives were saturated with literature. As her son later wrote:

> She used to read to us; she walked with us, played with us, took us out for drives, but a good while elapsed before we knew that she had other more important tasks and that she belonged to the public as well as to us. Then I noticed that the name of a Miss Braddon was so often heard. Soon it seemed to have a glamour and a mystery. (Maxwell 279)

This relentless engagement with literature was foundational to Braddon's life and so it becomes central to her stories and the lives of her characters. Simply put: a life without constant literary stimulus would not have seemed normal to Braddon and could only be a sign of abnormality. A non-reader is not to be trusted, and a parlor without a stack of books on the table is not a room in which realistic drama can unfold.

Before proceeding further to examine how Braddon uses literature as means of deepening the realism of her novels, I want to explore the question of what defines "realism." Presuming that the differentiation of "sensation" as a unique genre ceased to be relevant beyond the 1860s, the question of determining a given book's degree of

realism depends upon mapping where that novel lands on the spectrum between realism and *un*realism. Setting aside the extreme end of unrealism—the domain of science fiction, speculative, or supernatural fiction (the last of these a genre in which Braddon sometimes dabbled[11])—we are considering a much narrower span. Except for a handful of historical novels, Braddon planted her stories solidly within the lifetime of the contemporary generation of her readers. Most take place in London or the English countryside, with occasional journeys to familiar European destinations such as Paris or the Swiss Alps. More important, still, is where the melodramas unfold within those larger geographic spaces. R. Fraser Rae's oft-quoted criticism comes to mind: "She may boast […] of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room" (Rae 204). This distinction between the "kitchen" and the "drawing room" represents one of the essential drivers of realism in Braddon's novels—her readers did not need to expend much imaginative energy constructing a mental image of the setting. Alberto Gabriele, in his study of Braddon's literary magazine, *Belgravia*, observes how "[t]he superimposition in the literary plot of alluring commodities and mysteries has a realistic touch deriving from easily recognizable locations of contemporary London city life and from known name brands" (Gabriele 96). Along these lines, the quick familiarity of setting elevates the excitement of the plot, transplanting sensational incident from rough neighborhoods like the Seven Dials or the Jago, where

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[11] In 2014, the British Library published *The Face in the Glass and Other Gothic Tales,* a collection of Braddon's short stories with supernatural effects; "The Cold Embrace" has been included in many anthologies of Victorian-era ghost stories. Eve Lynch's essay "Spectral Politics: M. E. Braddon and the Spirits of Social Reform" in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* (2000) considers whether Braddon's use of supernatural elements was a way to attack certain social conventions while circumventing censorship.

penny bloods typically unfolded, and into the adjacent parlor. As Judith Flanders writes in *The Invention of Murder* (2011):

> No longer set in dens of low-class vice, sensation-novels kept all the excitement of gothic horror, but situated the stories squarely in the middle-class home, which was now seem to be a den of infamy, filled with madness, forgery, and bigamy and murder. (Flanders 254)

The relative realism of the locations in Braddon's novels, somewhat paradoxically, creates a safe space in which bad things might happen. Unsettling to critics, but comfortable for readers, thus serving to elevate the degree of relatable realism.

Turning now to Braddon's melodramatic plots: surely, they fail the litmus test of reality, as Braddon's critics contended? Consider the sordid plot of *Henry Dunbar* (1864), in which the titular character kills his former employer and steals his identity, events which Rae derided for their unreality: "Few other novelists could have invented anything so diabolical as the murder" (Rae 196). Yet these plots were often analogous to the "drawn from the headlines" plots on twenty-first century television procedurals such as *Law & Order.* Numerous scholars, including Richard Altick, Thomas Boyle, and Judith Flanders, have explored the enthusiasm of the Victorian public, even across class lines, for true crime. In *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (1970) Altick writes: "The passion for real-life murder was most unapologetically manifest among 'the million,' as the Victorians called the working class, but it prevailed as well by the firesides of the middle class and sometimes, though rather more covertly, in the stately halls of the aristocracy" (Altick 42). He further explains why the decision to re-locate the action from lower-class boroughs into upper-class ones had such a profound effect:

> Why confine oneself to ineffably thrilling transactions in far-off places which no reader among this semi-literate clientele had ever visited, when the same fearsome episodes could be portrayed in completely believable English settings? Murder was all the more dreadful, in a most agreeable sort of way, when the criminal and his victim wore the everyday dress of the present. (Altick 69)

It was in the context of this innovation that Braddon's career thrived, and she was herself a careful observer of the salacious true-crime media.

Braddon's personal notebooks and manuscripts are enlightening in this regard. One need not surmise that Braddon took inspiration from headlines, because I have reviewed a scorebook from the "Beverley Archery Society," which Braddon repurposed into a scrapbook of sensational crime stories literally cut from newspapers and magazines, with titles such as "An Alleged False Heir" or "Desperate Struggle with a Thief" or "The Doom Hanging over the Tuileries." Throughout this notebook, Braddon superimposed such newspaper clippings atop abandoned hand-written scraps of her own poetry or prose, interspersed with small pencil sketches, potentially of nascent characters described in those passages.[12] A scrapbook almost exactly like this plays a critical role in solving the mystery of *His Darling Sin*:

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[12] This notebook is one of several Braddon documents and manuscripts now in the collection of Houghton Library at Harvard University and which were procured at the urging of Robert Lee Wolff.

> Mrs's Faunce's book was a large folio bound in red levant leather, and containing newspaper clippings, pasted in by the lady's careful hands, and indexed and classified with neatness and intelligence.
>
> The volume was labelled "Not accounted for," and was a record of exceeding ghastliness.
>
> It contained the reports of coroners' inquests upon all manner of mysterious deaths, the unexplained cases which might have been murder, the "found drowned," the nameless corpses discovered in empty houses, in lodging-house garrets, on desolate heaths and waste places; a dismal calendar of tragic destinies, the record of hard fate or of undiscovered crime. (HDS 110).

Considering the prevalence of true-crime stories in everyday publications, Altick concludes that "Fiction, therefore, however sensationalized, could be regarded as a faithful transcript of contemporary life: there were the newspapers to prove it. They added verisimilitude to extravagance, and thus made the extravagant credible" (Altick 79). Perhaps the moral crusaders were equally disappointed in the popularity of newspapers, but in the argument between realism and unrealism, it would be difficult to say that murder or bigamy were sure markers of unrealism. Patrick Brantlinger claims that "the novelists paradoxically discovered that they were making fictions out of the stuff that filled the newspapers every day. Indeed, on one level they could even claim that to sensationalize was to be realistic" (Brantlinger, "What is Sensational" 9). Charles Reade, another author of so-called "sensation" fiction in the 1860s and 1870s, expressed his frustration with the critics: "Those who wanted to dismiss his novels as melodramatic,

crude, or worse, had first to show that the facts were not melodramatic or crude" (Brantlinger 10). Or, as Lyn Pykett remarks, "sensational narratives of actual murders were the staple daily reading diet of Victorians of all social classes, and the plots of many sensation novels were directly indebted to specific details and situations from actual cases as reported in particular newspapers" (Pykett 54). Viewed through this lens, the crimes in Braddon's novels are unexceptional. In the case of bigamy, that crime's grounding in realism came from rather close to Braddon's own home. As an article entitled "English Gossip" on the front-page of *The New York Times* on November 22, 1874 proclaimed: "A curious and […] characteristic incident has happened to Miss Braddon, the novelist. Having, like so many of her heroines, committed a species of bigamy, she has at last been found out" ("From Our Own Correspondent" 1). Also akin to many of her characters, and in the footsteps of Jane Eyre and Rochester, Braddon married John Maxwell as soon as the impediment of his first wife was out of the way.

When it comes to realism in characters, Braddon obviously provides physical descriptions, often with a degree of tongue-in-cheek interpretation; for example, when she describes Eliza Floyd: "Let the reader recall one of those faces, whose chief loveliness lies in the glorious light of a pair of magnificent eyes" (AF 7). And in the early pages of *The Trail of the Serpent*, Braddon invokes the now-discredited field of phrenology, a quasi-science of the 1800s in which the shape of one's head suggested one's morality, and which was often used in studies of criminals:

> [Jabez North] had also what was called a very fine head of fair curly hair, and what some people considered a very fine head—though it was a pity it shelved off on either side in the locality where prejudiced people place the

> organ of conscientiousness. A professor of phrenology […] had declared Jabez North to be singularly wanting in that small virtue; and had even gone so far as to hint that he had never met with a parallel case of deficiency in the entire moral region, except in the skull of a very distinguished criminal. (TS 7)

As it turns out, the phrenologist diagnoses Jabez North correctly, as the man murders a child and his twin brother before persuading a woman to poison her husband. The accuracy of this particular skull-reading aside, however, Braddon shows suspicion of the importance of physical characteristics in defining one's character, such as when she invokes *Adam Bede*: "With what wonderful wisdom has George Eliot told us that people are not any better because they have long eyelashes!" (AF 181).

Whether formal, in the case of phrenology, or informal, in the narrator's choice to mention a given detail, physical features can serve as a text of sorts, with a woman's hair color or the shape of a man's mouth passively communicating something about that person to the reader, allowing for interpretation and judgment. Although Braddon uses this device throughout her books, I believe that we learn much more about Braddon's characters from what they read than we do from physical descriptions. Consider this telling description of Lucy Audley: "The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness […] All her amusements were childish. She hated reading, or study of any kind" (LAS 55). Dangerous as those curly ringlets may be to susceptible older men such as Michael Audley, the more essential takeaway here is Lucy's hatred of reading. Time and again in Braddon's novels, one must beware such a non-literary person. By contrast,

when Braddon introduces Mary Harling in *Dead Love Has Chains*, we learn that "She was a member of the Dante Society, and took a keen delight in their proceedings, and read a little Dante every day as piously as her Bible" (DLC 3). This detail positions Mary as a woman who balances religious reading with Renaissance poetry; we are meant to see her as steady, reliable, and disciplined enough to take her daily doses of Scripture and literature. And, in a crucial element of the plot, to hold steadfast to the promise she makes that she will hold Irene's original extramarital dalliances secret, no matter the conditions, a promise few mothers would honor when her own child might be injured by it. To consider another example, much of what we need to know about Mary Marchmont, in *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), comes from knowing that "Mary had only one personal extravagance. She read novels,—dirty, bloated, ungainly volumes,—which she borrowed from a snuffy old woman in a little back street, who charged her the smallest hire ever known in the circulating-library business, and who admired her as a wonder of precocious erudition" (JM 22). Through details such as this, the two Marys appear not as complete fantasies, but as real people who might live down the street and might, like a reader of Braddon's novels, weep "silently that day over a three-volume novel" (JM 40) or foster "an insatiable passion for novel-reading" (TBE 9). Fictional characters who read become mirror reflections of the person holding the book, characters "just like me," so to speak, which raises the stakes of the character's fate in the mind of the reader. For the middle-class woman reader, the depiction of characters who subscribe to Mudie's and read French novels is another way to draw lines of kinship between those fictional characters and the flesh-and-blood reader.

To illustrate how these themes coalesce, I will turn now to *His Darling Sin* (1899), which centers on detective John Faunce, a retired police officer working as a private investigator, whom Braddon introduced a year earlier in *Rough Justice* (1898). Faunce is an unusually literary flatfoot in a mystery novel that revolves around literary taste. Lady Grace Perivale, recently widowed, returns to London after a season abroad and expects a crowd of friends to greet her. Much to her chagrin, she learns that she has been expelled from high-society company because everyone believes that she has been consorting with a certain Colonel Rannoc and masquerading as his wife throughout Europe. Although Rannock indeed asked Lady Perivale to marry him in the past, she is innocent of these rumors and helpless to resolve them—it appears to be a classic case of he-said/she-said, but for the fact that Colonel Rannock has vanished. Ultimately, it proves instead to result from mistaken identities and an overactive rumor mill.

Lady Perivale seeks comfort from her unexpected ostracization through reading:

> She tried book after book, Meredith, Hardy, Browning, Anatole France, taking the volumes at random from a whirligig book-stand, twisting the stand about impatiently to find a book that would calm her agitation, and beguile her thoughts into a new channel. But literature was no use to her tonight.
>
> "I see it is only happy people who can read," she thought. (11)

Perhaps Lady Perivale cannot calm herself sufficiently to read, but the content of books nevertheless remains a safe harbor in which to moor. Susan (Sue) Rodney is initially the only one of Lady Perivale's friends who is willing to engage with her. When the atmosphere remains uncomfortable, they turn to literature: "the conversation was still

about impersonal matters, the books the friends had read in the last half-year—a subject which both were fond of discussing—the authors they loved, the authors they hated, the successes they wondered at" (23). In Lady Perivale's agitation, she may not be able to read, but she can talk about reading; books remain a neutral source of respite.

Through the voice of Lady Morningside, the lone society peer who allows herself to consort with the innocent pariah, Braddon tackles the hypocrisy of the high-society circles from which Lady Perivale has been excluded:

> "And they all swear that they thought you one of the nicest women in London—only they can't go on knowing you, on account of their daughters—their daughters, who read Zola, and Anatole France, and Gabriele d'Annunzio, and talk about 'em to the men who take them in to dinner, and borrow money of their dressmakers? I have only one daughter, and I'm never afraid of shocking *her*. She has worked for a year in an East-end hospital, and she knows twice as much about human wickedness as I do." (29; emphasis original)

Such so-called society women claim that fraternizing with someone who would stoop so low as to vacation with a man who was not her husband would seem to be an indirect endorsement of such behavior. The risk of tolerating Lady Perivale's immorality is that these women would appear to grant license to their daughters to pursue similar actions. The hypocrisy is that these same mothers seem to have overcome the notion, discussed earlier, that racy literature—French novels no less!—might corrupt those same daughters. Their selective morality is questionable. Moreover, in comparison to "real human wickedness," Lady Perivale's purported "crime" is rather silly. In Braddon's telling it

seems to have been fashionable for people from the upper echelons of society to elevate rumored sexual improprieties to capital offense, punishable by a high-society death sentence. Braddon aims to ensure her readers perceive this snobbish perspective as skewed and misguided, but these are Lady Perivale's people, and she remains so desperate to clear her name that she hires John Faunce to get to the bottom of things.

Faunce starts out with his doubts: "He had heard such stories before—stories of mistaken identity […] and he very seldom believed them […] Nor had he a high opinion of women of fashion—women who lived in rooms like this" (39). Unlike the out-of-touch women to which Lady Morningside referred in the passage cited above, Faunce is fully cognizant of life's realities. In his experience as a police officer and subsequently as a private detective, he has seen much nastier situations; moreover, he knows that most rumors are based in truth. Experience notwithstanding, Faunce decides to believe Lady Perivale's story. He recognizes how difficult it is to refute rumors but keeps a trick in his back pocket: "*there will be a libel* […] You may safely leave the matter in my hands" (40; emphasis original). She does not understand that Faunce is announcing that the only way to disprove a "crime" such as that of which Lady Perivale accuses Colonel Rannock will be to manufacture a crime (libel) that forces the issue into the public domain. In other words, an article must appear in print that claims Lady Perivale gallivanted across Europe while posing as Rannock's wife before Lady Perivale can claim damages from that publication on her reputation. Litigation of the libel case will subsequently require the plaintiff to prove the falseness of the libelous document and in the process generate the evidence her former friends need to acquit her in the court of social opinion.

When Faunce begins his investigation, Sue Rodney is thrilled by the integration of a fictional character archetype into her reality: “I have always wanted to know a detective, like Bucket, the beloved of my childhood; or Mr. Cuff, the idol of my riper years” (44). She has no non-fictional models to compare Faunce to, so she thinks of the two most famous detectives of Victorian fiction (prior to Sherlock Holmes). But since—or at least as the narrator wants us to believe—Faunce is more real than Bucket or Cuff, he possesses idiosyncrasies of the type Braddon frequently gave her protagonists. The reader gets to know the man less from physical characteristics than from literary ones. For example, Faunce is a detective who cites Scripture, describing his itinerant life by invoking Job: “A good deal of my life is spent like Satan's, ‘Going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it’” (HDS 44, Job 2:2). More insight comes when Arthur Haldane goes to check in on the detective that his potential love interest has hired:

> The room reflected the man's mind. It was a perfectly arranged receptacle of a wonderful amount of precise information. It was like the sitting-room of an exceptionally methodical student preparing for a very still examination. The neat dwarf bookcase contained a goodly number of standard books of reference, and a lesser number of the most famous examples of modern fiction. (66)

Notably, the shelves contain Haldane’s own novel, adjacent to Willkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, from which we may safely infer that Faunce is familiar with the lead detective (Cuff) from Collins’s *The Moonstone*. Haldane’s reaction at seeing these books and hearing Faunce speak is to doubt him: “He had not expected to find a detective who talked like an educated man, and he began to doubt the criminal investigator's

professional skill, in spite of his tin boxes and reference books, and appearance of mental power" (68). The incongruity of a detective who reads sits uncomfortably for Haldane. Faunce anticipates the argument, noting that "one day I may let the reading world know that truth is stranger—and sometimes even more thrilling—than fiction"(66).

Prior to the controversy, Haldane had once been a potential suitor for Grace Perivale. Since then, he has become famous as a novelist, whose debut novel was "a work of fire and flame, which had startled the novel-reading world, and surprised even the critics, in an age when all stories have been told, and when genius means and original mind dealing with old familiar things" (19). Like Faunce, Lady Perivale, and many other characters we have discussed, Braddon describes Haldane as "a prodigious reader" (33). Although his success emerged from being an original, innovative voice, Haldane "read the books he loved again and again, till all that was finest in the master-minds of old was woven into the fabric of his brain. He seldom looked at a new book, except when he was asked to review one" (33). Thus, we see that Haldane is a literary snob, both in what he values for himself as literature and in what he expects from others. The detective who reads too much is suspicious, but Haldane does not see the hypocrisy in profiting from publishing or reviewing books that he would not otherwise allow into his home library.

Faunce heads to Morocco to continue his investigation, while Grace tries to rekindle things with Arthur Haldane: "They two had found so much to talk about after having lived a year without meeting. All the books they had read, all the plays they had seen, the music they had heard—everything made a subject for discussion" (63). Before long, they have fallen in love and are eagerly waiting for Faunce to redeem Grace from the shameful rumors. Their love rests on a literary foundation, as Grace confesses:

> "Every tear I shed over 'Mary Deane' was a link that bound me to the man who wrote the book. Of course I don't pretend that if the man had been fat and elderly—like Richardson—I should have fallen in love with him. But even then I should have valued him, as the young women of those days valued the fat little printer. I should have courted his society, and hung upon his words."
>
> "It is not every novelist who is so lucky," said Haldane. "I think I'm the first, since Balzac, whose book has won him the love that crowns a life." (82)

Grace does not fall in love with Haldane *only* because of the tragic love story of *Mary Deane,* but because he values what she values. Haldane's winning courtship strategy is not one that one would find in any how-to guide about dating strategies, then or now:

> Only by his seriousness in seeking her society, his grave pleasure in ministering to her love of books, and bringing her in touch with the choicest things in contemporary literature, could Lady Perivale discover that his friendship was any more than the admiring regard which every intelligent man must needs feel for a young and beautiful woman who is also intelligent […] He was a man to whom *community of thought* was an essential element in love. (83; emphasis mine)

In this passage, Braddon provides one of the most straightforward descriptions of how the "imaginary text" is more than simply a context for making inside jokes. Indeed, Braddon here posits an expanded version of imaginary text in Lady Perivale's concept of a

"community of thought," which comprises a shared vernacular of literary reference and a value system that emphasizes the aesthetic over the pragmatic. Beyond the community of thought between the characters within the novel, Kate Flint observes that "references to shared reading material certainly functions as a means of reinforcing the effect of the characters and readers occupying the same cultural space" (Flint 282). Many examples discussed throughout this thesis resonate with Flint's proposition, but the relationship between Haldane and Lady Perivale in *His Darling Sin* reinforces a different lesson. Since their relationship is grounded in literature to which the readers do not have access—Haldane's novel, for example—this instance is less about the readers and characters sharing common references and more about the emotional gravity resulting when two humans share common literary interests and value the community of thought that arises from such shared interest. Almost every successful coupling in Braddon's fictional universe depends upon such common intellectual ground, which falters in those relationships that fail, as we saw with Edgar and Daphne in *Asphodel* and will soon examine in the marriage between George and Isabel Gilbert in *The Doctor's Wife*.

While Haldane and Lady Perivale build their relationship, Faunce continues to investigate. He learns that Colonel Rannock, rather than masterminding an elaborate blackmail scheme, had indeed been traveling through Europe with a woman who was pretending to be his wife—but not at all pretending to be Lady Perivale in disguise. The woman in question is Kate Delamaine[13], an actress who bears a keen physical resemblance to Lady Perivale. The rumors plaguing Lady Perivale came from rational

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[13] Of note, the character is also referred to as Mrs. Randall at various points in the novel. For simplicity's sake, I have referred to her as Miss Delamaine throughout my analysis.

speculation by people who saw a woman who looked like her, consorting with a man with whom they knew she had once had semi-romantic relations. From a logical standpoint, their conclusions are entirely reasonable, and far from the "diabolical" (51) stratagem Faunce was hired to reveal. Moreover, Colonel Rannock cannot be blamed for spreading the rumors, as he has long since departed England—or so everyone believes—and has not communicated with anyone since his departure.

Since there is no actual crime, Faunce must fulfill his earlier promise to create a libel. Faunce bribes a magazine to publish a fabricated story detailing Lady Perivale and Rannock's escapades abroad. This published indictment of Lady Perivale's character creates the necessary conditions for her to sue the periodical for libel, which in turn requires Kate Delamaine to testify in court. She confesses that she was the woman seen with Rannock and her testimony instantly vindicates Lady Perivale. The public spectacle of this trial allows her friends to embrace her anew and clears the path for her to marry Haldane. The novel leaves the happy couple behind and returns focus to Faunce.

Despite having delivered victory for his client, the private detective remains determined to solve the mystery of Rannock's disappearance. He suspects foul play and cannot let the loose end dangle: "the old hunter's instinct of the Scotland Yard days was upon him" (95). He interviews Rannock's mother, who delivers a scathing indictment of Miss Delamaine: "She is that kind of aggravating creature that knows her power over a man, and can't be happy until she's made him miserable" (105). Whether this is fair or not, Mrs. Rannock unwittingly provides Faunce an essential clue when she mentions the actress's childhood sweetheart, a boxer who did not seem content with her attempts to end their relationship in favor of Colonel Rannock.

Back at home, Faunce peruses the scrapbook of grisly newspaper clippings which Mrs. Faunce has painstakingly curated. Therein he finds the answer, in a detailed report of an unidentified body that was found around the time that Rannock was supposed to have gone to seek his fortune in the Canadian gold rush. The detective solves the case not by engaging the physical world, but by reading. This may seem somewhat contrived, but we have already seen a real-life manifestation in the form of Braddon's archery scorebook/scrapbook. Again, this is a case of art imitating life, as Wilde suggested.

Following the lead discovered in his wife's scrapbook, Faunce traces down the full story. He confronts Miss Delamaine and extracts a confession: that she gave information to Jim Bolisco, a prize fighter who was her childhood boyfriend—and in another twist, her secret husband—who robbed and murdered Colonel Rannock. Faunce recognizes that far from being the calculating minx that Rannock's mother accuses her of being, the former actress is a broken soul: addicted to opium, mistreated by the men in her life, and dying of malnourishment and heartbreak. As we have already seen in *Dead Love Has Chains*, the implication is that the Victorian husband rules absolutely over his wife, and Faunce takes pity on Miss Delamaine, understanding that she would have felt genuinely powerless to resist Bolisco's orders, even if she knew they would result in Rannock's death. We can view Faunce's charity toward the actress as a direct contradiction to an observation made by a minor character early in the book: "nowadays the clever women have free and easy ideas of the marriage tie. They've been educated up to it by novels and newspapers" (25). Quite unlike those idealistic budding socialites, Kate Delamaine has been ruined by both her legal marriage and the false marriage that sparked Faunce's investigation. Once Grace Perivale has been redeemed from false

rumors, Miss Delamaine emerges as the true victim of Braddon's morality tale. The double-standard of class comes through clearly: the salvation of Lady Grace's reputation depends upon the sacrifice of the working-class actress, whose public shame ensures the redemption of Lady Perivale's reputation. In order to protect her from being tried as an accomplice in the murder of Colonel Rannock, Faunce constructs a case against Jim Bolisco that is strong enough to convict him even while omitting the details of Miss Delmaine's actions, thus allowing her to avoid further indignation or incarceration. Despite these efforts, Miss Delamaine's health continues to deteriorate; Faunce uses the remaining proceeds from his detective's fee to house and feed the ruined actress until her death. The dying woman confesses to Faunce that "if I'd known a hard-headed, kind-hearted chap like you ten years ago I might have been a better woman" (126), which contrasts against Lady Perivale (now Grace Haldane) whose letter to Susan Rodney serves as the epilogue: "Had I never known Arthur Haldane I might have married Colonel Rannock, and my fate might have been wretched, for I believe the only attraction I ever had for him, over and above my fortune, was my likeness to that other woman, his bad angel" (127). We know that the story is not quite so simple, and that Kate Delamaine never really had a chance.

Chapter 5:

Metafictional Intrusion

> The intense probability of the story is constantly reiterated. Modern England—the England of to-day's newspaper—crops up at every step.
>
> – Henry James, "Miss Braddon" in *The Nation*, November 9, 1865.

One strength of the third-person omniscient point-of-view, which was the standard model throughout the nineteenth century, is that the God-like narrator can relay to the reader things that characters themselves do not see, disclose facts about each person's beliefs, thoughts, and predilections, or provide historical or cultural context. The degree to which the narrator operates from an objective or subjective perch varies widely, however, as does the degree to which readers can depend on the omniscient narrator to be reliable, both in what the narrator tells us and what is left out. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's narrators often add "color" commentary—straying well beyond the facts and details of the scene or the characters to draw greater conclusions about the world around them, including societal expectations and double-standards, generational rifts, gender and class biases. As Audrey Peterson has written, "Sentimentality of every kind was meat and drink to the circulating library audience, and while Braddon gave them plenty of sustenance, she could not refrain from flashes of pithy commentary from time to time" (Peterson 166). In addition to such commentary, Braddon's narrator often breaks the figurative fourth wall for the purpose of distinguishing events in the novel one is reading from what would be likely to happen *if you were reading a novel*. Metafictional

digressions mark a technique by which Braddon utilizes the reader's knowledge of other texts to re-frame her own and to insist that her novels are telling a true story.

Such an intrusion comes early in *Aurora Floyd* (1863), a novel which begins with the story of the titular heroine's parents:

> *If this were a very romantic story*, it would be perhaps only proper for Eliza Floyd to pine in her gilded bower, and misapply her energies in weeping for some abandoned lover, deserted in an evil hour of ambitious madness. *But as my story is a true one*,—not only true in a general sense, but *strictly true as to the leading facts* […] I am bound also to be *truthful* here, and to set down as a *fact*, that the love which Eliza Floyd bore for her husband was as pure and sincere an affection as ever man need hope to win. (AF 16, emphasis mine)

Braddon assumes the reader is familiar with other creative works in the "romantic" vein and further assumes which presumptions those readers are likely to hold as they anticipate the arc of her story. By stepping into the foreground, the narrator seeks to redirect those readers: despite appearances, *this* story is not like *those* stories. *This* story will not follow the predictable arc of that novel from your last box from Mudie's, because *this* is a truer story, an *authentic* story about *real* people. Braddon's narrator suggests that the reader set aside all expectations one might naturally have for a romantic novel, because rote literary formulae do not apply to real-life.

Braddon returns to this point near the end of the first volume, when Aurora has married John Mellish and her cousin Lucy has married Talbot Bulstrode:

> Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall […] Yet, after all, does the business of the real life-drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a life-time? (163)

Again, Braddon invokes the reader's mental model of the romantic novel, while poking fun at how such novels typically end: at an arbitrary point convenient to the purpose of romance, but unrealistic in the context of authentic human experience. Yet, when we finally do reach the end of the third volume of *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon merely substitutes a different life event to trigger the proverbial curtain's descent: "So we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born" (459). Thus, Braddon trades an arbitrary marriage-ending for an arbitrary childbirth-ending.

This tendency to skewer tradition and then conform to it is a recurrent feature of Braddon's work. Elsewhere in *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon's narrator stops the action to offer her opinion that "I do not quite believe that people often make the pretty, sentimental, consecutive confessions under the influence of fever which are so freely attributed to them by the writers of romances" (109)—yet she uses that device in several novels, including *Joshua Haggard's Daughter* and *Charlotte's Inheritance*. One possible

explanation, other than comedic effect, is that Braddon is calling attention to the absurdity of traditions to which she was required to adhere. As Eve Lynch observes, "Braddon agitated to experiment with fiction that considered more pressing social issues, particularly in the problems she saw arising out of Victorian reform policies that ignored the private domestic trials of women and the poor" (Lynch 235). Braddon gives voice to this in *Asphodel*: "'Wait till you write a play or a novel,' retorted Daphne, 'and you'll find you'll have to adapt yourself to circumstances'" (ASP V2 54). There are rules that one must follow to be successful—the kind of rules that enraged George Moore and his friends, as discussed in Chapter 1.

The degree to which novels reflect reality is a topic that Braddon broaches through the voices of characters who are novelists. In *His Darling Sin*, Lady Perivale assumes that the tragic heroine in Arthur Haldane's novel must be drawn from a true lost love: "She was quite ready to accept the fiction as sober truth, beguiled by that stern realism from which the writer had never departed, but through which there ran a vein of deep poetic feeling" (HDS 34). Much like Daphne in *Asphodel*, who wonders aloud to William Shakespeare's tomb whether he modeled his tragic heroines on secret lovers, Lady Perivale assumes that for a character in a novel to be richly drawn, there must have been a real-life model. Haldane's refutation surprises her:

> "That, Lady Perivale, is the nucleus of my story. I imagined circumstances more romantic—dazzling beauty, a poetic temperament, a fatal love—and my child of the slums grew into a heroine."
>
> "And that is the way novels are manufactured," said Mr. Williams; "but Haldane ought not to be so ready to tell the tricks of our trade." (35)

Haldane claims to have taken only modest inspiration from an actual street-girl; she was merely the seed for his fictional heroine, a character whom that young, disheveled girl would never have recognized as a romanticized version of herself. Later, Grace remains confused about Haldane's craft:

> "You talk as if the web were not of your weaving, as if you had no power over the figures that move in it."
>
> "I have no such power, Grace. They come to me as mysteriously as the shadows in a dream, and their spell is strong. I cannot create them; and I cannot change them." (HDS 85)

One might interpret this as further reinforcement of the idea that these characters are "real," free agents operating of their own volition, and the writer is merely a scribe recording their lives on paper. If that is the case, then the fate of these characters, including actions both moral and immoral, dwell outside the control of the author. Judge not Braddon for the murders her characters commit or the desire they feel for men who are not their husbands; judge instead the characters, who must have flaws and foibles, or they would not be realistic. Braddon acknowledges this in *Aurora Floyd*:

> [I]f she had been faultless, she could not have been the heroine of this story; for has not some wise man of old remarked, that the perfect women are those who leave no histories behind them, but who go through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as leaves no footprints on the sands of time. (AF 193)

By this logic, one should question any novel whose heroes or heroines are too good to be true. One could measure instead the authenticity of the character by the degree to which they conform to the expectations of the genre. In *John Marchmont's Legacy*, when Braddon describes the title character's distaste for his cousin, she is aware of the literary antecedents one might run to. She preempts this logical prediction: "I have no romantic story to tell of a stirring scene in the humble schoolroom—no exciting record of deadly insult and deep vows of vengeance" (JM 34). In this case, the reality is *less* interesting than what you might find in Dickens.

The Doctor's Wife (1864) re-interprets many of the plot elements and character attributes from of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which had not yet been translated into English. Braddon explicitly sets her novel in 1852, four years prior to the novel's first edition in France. Isabel Gilbert, the doctor's wife from the title, *does* read French novels—in fact, the narrator tells us that Isabel knew "enough French to serve for the reading of novels that she might have better left unread" (DW 27)—but the precise timing of the novel's action ensures that *Madame Bovary* could not have figured among those she had read. Since Braddon depicts Isabel throughout the novel as a caricature of the susceptible female reader of novels, it is essential to prevent Isabel from reading a novel whose plot so closely mirrors her own life. Furthermore, this enables Isabel to remain innocent in her flirtation with the handsome Roland Lansdell—who can say what direction those innocent poetry recitations might have taken under the influence of Flaubert? However, I do not see that to be its only purpose. This deliberate timing serves as a device by which Braddon can claim that *The Doctor's Wife* is a *true* story: "This is *not* a sensation novel. I write here what I know to be the truth" (358; emphasis original).

If anything, we might be encouraged to think that Flaubert's infamously controversial novel could be considered a sensationalized version of Isabel's sad but chaste tale, with Flaubert taking the kind of dramatic liberties that Sigismund Smith, a minor but important character in *The Doctor's Wife*, would have taken when adapting Isabel's tale into one of his penny-blood installments.

The Doctor's Wife begins not with Isabel, but with George Gilbert, the mild-mannered country doctor whom Isabel marries. George lacks the sad backstory of Flaubert's Charles Bovary, but instead "had those homely, healthy good looks which the novelist or poet in search of a hero would recoil from with actual horror" (DW 6). Of course, he reads "Byron's fiercest poems" but unlike the prototypical romantic hero, George reads out of practicality rather than emotion, "sympathizing in his own way with Giaours and Corsairs; but with no passionate yearning stirring up in his breast" (7). This statement marks Braddon's purportedly real-life character as being supremely unqualified to be the hero of a romance.

In the second chapter we meet Sigismund Smith, a man whose job it is to convert mundane men such as George Gilbert and their uneventful lives into popular fiction. Braddon's introductory character sketch of Smith comingles anachronism (for 1852) with cynicism toward the critics:

> Mr. Sigismund Smith was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, 'sensation,' had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms […] Sigismund Smith was the author of about half a dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed an immense popularity amongst the

> classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco—very strong. (DW 11)

Smith is an old friend of George's and he plays the essential role of enabling George to meet Isabel. However, Smith plays an equally important part in Braddon's metafictional design. Some critics have interpreted Smith as a stand-in for Braddon, although his prevailing philosophy frequently clashes with Braddon's narrative voice. Smith is entirely motivated by money, and his utilitarian attitude is in strong contrast to Isabel's arch-romanticism: "Sigismund wrote romantic fiction by wholesale, and yet was as unromantic as the prosiest butcher who ever entered a cattle-market. He sold his imagination, and Isabel lived upon hers" (28). Smith follows a tried-and-true formula based on market demands, explaining that "What the penny public want is plot, and plenty of it; surprises, and plenty of 'em; mystery, as thick as a November fog" (45). Unlike the narrator of *The Doctor's Wife*, who yearns for the reader to accept the veracity of the story, Smith does not feel any devotion to realism, rebuffing George's attempts to correct a historical detail: "Oh, if you tie me down to facts […] I can't write at all" (46).

Braddon's narrator, on the other hand, sometimes calls attention to her inability to manufacture details and remains so dedicated to accurate reportage that she often announces situations where conjecture or invention would normally be called for: "It is easy to invent a castle, and go into raptures about the ivied walls and mouldering turrets; but I shrink away before the grand reality, and can describe nothing; I see it all too plainly, and feel the tameness of my words too much" (123). Sometimes, according to this narrator, it is impossible to recreate the real world in prose; since the events of Isabel's story are "true," to manufacture a stylized facsimile would be heretical. Unlike

the narrator, Sigismund Smith has no such hesitation about any aspect of his stories. He thrives in situations that call for him to conjure rich embellishments to amplify the sensation. Smith makes no claims, as Arthur Haldane would later do in *His Darling Sin*, that his characters are independent agents for whom he is merely a documentarian; on the contrary, he sees his stories as molded entirely to the demands of the market, rational or otherwise. Smith laments that "I had to bring Colonel Montefiasco to life again, after hurling him over a precipice three hundred feet high" (61), anticipating Arthur Conan Doyle's Reichenbach Falls by three decades (four by the novel's internal clock).

Isabel is a consummate example of a novel buyer, and when Isabel and George meet, the gulf between their interests is stark. Smith engages fluently with her, not merely because of prior acquaintance, but because they reside within the same community of thought, as discussed in the previous chapter. This shared intellectual space does not result in emotional attachment, as it did in *His Darling Sin*, but it does prove that Isabel and George will never be happy. Smith teases Isabel at first for not reading one of his novels, but they move on to discuss a (fictional) author, Algerman Mountfort, whose novels Smith characterizes as "dangerously beautiful," which suggests they might contain dubious moral content. As they discuss this dangerous author and other literary topics, the good doctor remains inert: "The young surgeon could only stare wonderingly at Mr. Sleaford's daughter, for he hadn't the faintest idea what she and his friend were talking about" (24). In his ignorance, George misses several potential warning signs that flash brightly at the reader.

Sharing common literary interests, or the "community of thought" as we saw in *His Darling Sin*, does not guarantee romantic attachment between a man and a woman,

but the complete absence of such a bond dooms Isabel and George. After their marriage, George retains his indifference regarding his wife's obsession with literature. At one point, Isabel throws a book across a room in frustration, prompting this response: "[George] walked over to the corner of the room, picked up the little volume, and smoothed the crumpled leaves; for his habits were orderly, and the sight of a book lying open upon the carpet was unpleasant to him" (121). He does not look at the book, take stock of its title or what kind of book it is, or ask Isabel why it stirs her emotions. George continues to be completely oblivious toward her passion for literature—and here the book in question contains poems written by Roland Lansdell, the man whom Isabel secretly worships. Not only does has George failed to be a romantic hero or to give Isabel the fairy-tale life she desires, but he makes no attempt to engage her keenest interest. Simply put: they share no community of thought.

Isabel resembles Austen's Catherine Moreland or Cervantes's Don Quixote in the degree to which she expects the plot of her life to match those of the stories she has adored. Rather than tilting at windmills, however, Isabel "wanted to be famous. She wanted the drama of her life to begin, and the hero to appear" (73). Hundreds of novels have served as a form of training for life, and Isabel constantly compares people and events to scenes from her favorite novels. Unfortunately, her desperation to begin her romantic journey is so potent that she jumps at George's proposal even though she knows that he does not fit the mold of her storybook hero. She cannot restrain herself to await a better option because "this was the first little bit of romance in her life, and she felt that the story was beginning all at once, and that she was going to be a heroine" (87). Time and again, Isabel latches onto the wrong fictional antecedents. It may be one thing to read

too many novels, an accusation lobbed at Isabel throughout the novel, but another thing to have *misread* them. Smith proclaims that "Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their lives are to be paraphrases of their favourite books" (30). George is a good man, but that is not what Isabel seeks; her instincts skew in another direction. As the narrator explains, "it was Steerforth's proud image, and not simple-hearted David's gentle shadow, which lingered in the girl's mind when she shut the book. She was young and sentimental, and it was not the good people upon whom her fancy fixed itself" (72). Likewise, on more than a dozen occasions Isabel cites Edith Dombey as the heroine after whom she wants to fashion herself, and she is saddened that her life is not more like that of a romantic heroine: "She was not to be an Edith Dombey or a Jane Eyre. Oh, to have been Jane Eyre, and to roam away on the cold moorland and starve,—wouldn't *that* have been delicious!" (98; emphasis original). Strange choices, which indicate a degree of misreading or masochism.[14] The narrator tells us that Isabel "pined to be the chosen slave of some scornful creature, who should perhaps ill-treat and neglect her. I think she would have worshipped an aristocratic Bill Sykes" (72). And if she cannot live the romantic life, at least perhaps she could die with suitable flair: "She had an especial desire to die early, by consumption, with a hectic flush and an unnatural lustre in her eyes" (28). These are abnormal fantasies, as Braddon knows, and placing them in the head of her main character is no accident.

It is in this context of quixotism that Roland Lansdell sweeps onto the scene. He is a triple threat: handsome, rich, and literary. He knows that literature is the route to her

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[14] The word "masochism" would have been anachronistic in the 1860s, since it was not coined until the 1890s, but the behavior would not have been.

heart and begins his seduction by bringing her into his library: “How she will open her eyes when she sees this room, and all the books in it!” (167). Roland fills an essential void which George has been shown to be completely incapable of filling, whereas Isabel is eager “to infuse some beauty into her life, something which, in however remote a degree, should be akin to the things she read of in her books” (115). As Ian Ward observes in “Things Little Girls Have No Business To Know Anything About: The Crimes of *Aurora Floyd*” (2011):

> If to be married was indeed to be ‘condemned to prison for life,’ as Caroline Norton alleged, if the institution itself represented a species of ‘slavery,’ as John Stuart Mill equally notoriously claimed, it is hardly surprising if fantasies of escape should be popular amongst those imprisoned and enslaved. (Ward 14)

Roland fills the vacuum, not only as the hero of her fantasies, but by giving her the community of thought she longs for. Yet her sexual innocence remains intact: despite often invoking Edith Dombey as her literary icon, Isabel never once considers leaving her husband, however boring he may be, to be with Roland. Given the chasteness of the situation, Isabel does not see anything amiss:

> Was it wrong to think of him? She never asked herself that question. Was it wrong to think of him? She never asked herself that question. She had read sentimental books all her life, and had been passionately in love with heroes in three volumes, ever since she could remember. What did it matter whether she was in love with Sir Reginald Glanville or Mr. Roland

> Lansdell? One passion was as hopeless as the other, and as harmless therefore. (DW 154)

Isabel once again conflates real-life and fiction. She does not understand the distinction that any regular person would see, the critical difference between admiring a fictional character and putting oneself in potentially compromising situations with a flesh-and-blood man.

Smith encourages Isabel to seek solace in writing, putting her fantasies down on paper and living vicariously through fictional versions of herself and Roland, the way he has lived through his authorial experience:

> "Suppose now," cried Mr. Smith, palpably swelling with the importance of his idea,—"suppose you were to WRITE A NOVEL! THERE! You don't know how happy it would make you. Look at me. I always used to be sighing and lamenting, and wishing for this, that, or the other…but since I've taken to writing novels, I don't think I've a desire unsatisfied. There's nothing I haven't done—on paper." (229; emphasis original)

When this experiment fails, Isabel returns to novel-reading: "She sat, with a volume open in her lap, staring at the fire, and thinking of *him*. She went back into the old italics again" (237; emphasis original). The metafictional commentary is almost too precious here, simultaneously calling attention to the artifice of the typeface and the sentiment it so perfectly reflects. Soon enough, Isabel is sneaking off to the woods to meet Roland, who has finally made up his mind to invite her to run away with him. Despite having given him every sign that this was what she wanted, she is shocked by Roland's offer:

"Oh, Roland! Roland! I have loved you so—and you could think that I—. Oh, you must despise me—you must despise me very much, and think me very wicked" (270). For Isabel, heroes are asexual, chivalrous figures of nobility, so when Roland pursues an unvirtuous and amoral path, it reflects not only his failure as a romantic hero, but Isabel's shortcomings as romantic heroine. In an instant, the fantasy collapses.

In "Other People's Prudery" (1984), Ellen Casey calls foul on situations such as this, wherein Braddon's characters think or act in ways that are completely disconnected from what would happen in real life: "The discrepancy between the potential and the actual is so immense that it is unbelievable. Braddon succumbs to decorum and plays herself false" (Casey 78). According to Jennifer Carnell, this may be a concession to the requirements of the literary marketplace at the time:

> Because Braddon had to make Isabel an innocent if she was to remain acceptable as a heroine, she has to make the lover in love with her childishness. Isabel worships Roland as she would a hero in a novel, any passion on her part would have been inadmissible, unless at the end she became disfigured and died in a particularly grisly fashion. (Carnell 216)

Indeed, after Isabel has rejected him, Roland asks: "Are you only an innocent child, after all, or the wiliest coquette that ever lived? You must be one or the other" (DW 272).

Barring the *East Lynne* or *Madame Bovary* paths for Isabel Gilbert, Braddon doubles down on sexual innocence. Braddon defends Isabel's extreme innocence as an outcome of having gained so little real-world knowledge that might otherwise have supplanted her romantic ideals:

> Isabel Gilbert was not a woman of the world. She had read novels while other people perused the Sunday papers; and of the world out of a three-volume romance she had no more idea than a baby […] having once placed Mr. Lansdell among the heroes, she could not imagine him to possess one attribute in common with the villains. (253)

However, the pieces finally click together in her mind after Lady Gwendoline refers to Isabel as "my cousin's mistress" (261), which I read as an intentional play-upon-words of the novel's title. Such a title will not do for Isabel's daydream, and suddenly "[a]ll the stories of aristocratic villainy that she had ever read flashed suddenly back upon Mrs. Gilbert's mind, and she made a crowd of evidence against Lady Anna Lansdell's son" (271). The narrator eventually intrudes to warn us against judging Isabel too harshly: "Do not believe that because she had been a foolish woman she must necessarily be a vicious woman" (321). This is an early example of Braddon's simmering frustration about the treatment of women by her own society, which took much more explicit form in *Dead Love Has Chains* and *His Darling Sin.*

Meanwhile, the sensation plot becomes more complicated: George contracts typhoid fever and Isabel's ex-convict father comes to Graybridge to ask her for money. Despite having rebuffed Roland's advances, Isabel asks him for fifty pounds with which she hopes to pay off her father so that he will go away. She does not reveal her purpose, however, and Roland becomes suspicious. When he learns that she has been seen visiting a mysterious man at the inn, Roland's suspicion turns into jealousy, and he decides to confront the man.

Unromantic as George may have been in life, on his deathbed the good doctor attains heroic status. Isabel stays by his side, motivated at least in part by the epiphany that she is finally living in a scene that could have been stolen from a novel. "Could he be dying?" Isabel muses, "—dying as heroic a death as any she had ever read of in her novels: the death of a man who speculates his life for the benefit of his fellow creatures, and dies by the venture" (65). This may not be precisely the variety of husband she initially sought, but it is something. Indeed, on the very cusp of death, George sits upright in bed and proclaims his wife's innocence and devotion. In this grand melodramatic gesture, George salvages her reputation in the house and resets the clock on what could still turn out to be a romantic life.

With her husband dead, Isabel can now (after an appropriate period dressed in black crepe, of course) freely pursue Roland. Elaine Showalter has observed that such a twist was ubiquitous in the era of sensation novels: "In many sensation novels, the death of a husband comes as a welcome release, and women escape from their families through illness, madness, divorce, flight, and ultimately murder" (Showalter 160). Fortunately, Isabel need not resort to murder, and in fact she bears no responsibility for her husband's death, which is a by-product of his vocation. Other than the judgment of some servants who have surmised a more-than-platonic relationship with Roland, Isabel has no true cause for shame or remorse. Unlike Emma Bovary, Isabel remains free from carnal sin.

But remember—the narrator has announced on multiple occasions that *The Doctor's Wife* is not a novel—and therefore convenient novelistic twists will not do. Before Isabel has begun to process her husband's unexpected death or her corresponding liberty, she learns that Roland has obtained grave injuries in a street-fight—killed by

Isabel's criminal father, in fact, which Roland chooses not to tell her[15]. Instead, he laments his rakish behavior, asks his cousin to always be a friend to Isabel, and dies. Husband and near-lover dead, Isabel's story surely ends as a tragedy.

But in this "true" story, another twist remains in order: Isabel learns that she has inherited Roland's estate and fortune, thus rendering the doctor's widow truly free to seek her storybook fantasy anew. Braddon cautions that "There is a great gulf between a girl of nineteen and a woman of five-and-twenty; and Isabel's foolish youth is separated from her wiser womanhood by a barrier that is formed by two graves" (402), before leaving the reader to wonder what happened to this young woman, whether she outgrew the romantic sensibilities of French novels, and whether *Madame Bovary* is actually a sensationalized version of her life.

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[15] In another of Braddon's melodramatic twists, Roland Lansdell was a witness against Isabel's father in his trial; the latter swore vengeance if he ever saw him again. While Roland confronts Mr. Sleaford out of jealousy, his death is an impromptu act of revenge by Sleaford, who knows nothing about the budding romance between Roland and Isabel. On his deathbed, Roland chooses to keep the secret.

Chapter 6:

Pygmalion as Analogy for Social Change

Earlier in this thesis, I explored some of the ways in which the norms of the era constrained Braddon. Michael Sadleir and Saverio Tomaiuolo both speculate that Braddon would have preferred to be more progressive than conditions allowed. Sadleir states that "[i]f her public and the taste of the day would have tolerated it, Miss Braddon could have made good use of a greater freedom" (Sadleir 79). More recently, Tomaiuolo claims that "Braddon was in fact a strongly assertive woman […] her political ideas were sometimes on the verge of radicalism […] and her novels portrayed male characters who were far from being heroic representatives of Victorian institutions" (Tomaiuolo 13). Indeed, for every fallen woman we have examined thus far there is at least one fallen man, who crumbles under the weight of criminal guilt or the woe of spurned love. For Braddon, "monomania," if such a condition actually exists, affects not only women; even if hereditary madness was the "secret" of her most famous heroine, many of her male characters suffer from mental breakdown and collapse. This subverts social convention, but falls short of true radicalism.

Given the scope, scale, and demographic composition of her readers, any more radical messaging in her novels could have had an outsize impact. Patrick Brantlinger suggests that such impact would have, paradoxically, been the direct fault of the censors:

> [C]ensorship usually winds up promoting that which it condemns. Whether attacking novels as poisonous and novel reading as a pernicious

> waste of time, or the cinema and television in almost identical terms […] the cultural pessimists more often than not also just add fuel to the fires they seek to douse. (Brantlinger *The Reading Lesson* 211)

Indeed, the critical assault from Margaret Oliphant, R. Fraser Rae, and others, were forms of both moral and intellectual censorship—sensation fiction from the likes of Miss Braddon is unhealthy for two reasons: first, because it portrays immorality; second because it does not pass the litmus test for great literature and thus wastes time.

Even if Braddon could not go so far as to challenge the socio-political-sexual status quo head on, her novels are replete with one-line zingers that jab at stereotypes and the patriarchy. Only those who truly *read* the novels can access these small moments, not the cynical critic who skims in search of bodies and bigamy. I have already referenced the dumbing-down of feminine education, which gave Daphne an incomplete picture of the life and times of Poppaea and Nero, the self-consciously ironic happy ending in *Lady Audley's Secret,* or the wry voice of the narrator calling out various inequities and frivolities. Elsewhere, Braddon critiques the need for feminine performance to account for male audiences, such as when Susan Rodney tells Lady Perivale "I never smoke before men […] They think we do it to please, or to shock them" (HDS 64); Susan understands the male psyche and modulates her behavior accordingly. Many of her female characters—Aurora Floyd, Daphne Lawford, Coraline Urquhart—seek leisure in pursuits that are not "ladylike"—horse-racing, sculling, billiards. Although these details may not rise to the level of fighting for equal rights, they do represent a form of subtle, persistent subversion of conventional rules for feminine behavior.

Eve Lynch proposes that "Braddon agitated to experiment with fiction that considered more pressing social issues, particularly in the problems she saw arising out of Victorian reform policies that ignored the private domestic trials of women and the poor" (Lynch 235). Several of the novels I have examined in this thesis present women in crisis, especially women trapped forever by their youthful indiscretions. Aurora Floyd is a powerless extortion target when James Conyers surprises her after having been presumed dead—despite her wealth, the norms of society restrict her options—while the fates of Irene Thelliston (*Dead Love Has Chains*) and Kate Delamaine (*His Darling Sin*), women who share few of Aurora's advantages nevertheless fall victim to the conventions of chattel marriage, both legal and extra-legal—by tradition, even when no longer by law.

These critiques, explicit as they may be in these novels, remain relatively small vignettes. However, Braddon pursued longer-form social criticism in *Flower and Weed* (1883) which initially appeared as the entirely of *Mistletoe Bough*, the Christmas annual Braddon published between 1878 and 1892. Much like *Asphodel*, this novel stitches together several literary inspirations. Coming thirty years before George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913)[16], Braddon's *Flower and Weed* recasts Ovid's myth of the artist Pygmalion and his sculpture-cum-lover Galatea into a modern drama of a wealthy

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[16] There are numerous similarities between Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Braddon's *Flower and Weed*, not the least of which is that both Galatea surrogates sell flowers in London and go by a shortened form of Elizabeth (Eliza vs. Bess). There is no question that Shaw read several of Braddon's novels while working as a literary critic for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, although he claimed not to think highly of her work. In a letter dated September 14, 1888, Shaw writes "Why don't you begin notices of boots, hats, dogcarts and so on? They would be fifty times as useful and interesting as reviews of the last novel by Miss Braddon, who is a princess among novel manufacturers" (Shaw "Collected Letters" 194-195). In an essay entitled "Another Source for 'Pygmalion': G. B. S. and M. E. Braddon" (1979) Sara Moore Putzell argues the parallels between Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Braddon's *Our Adversary* (1910). However, given the evocation of the Pygmalion myth throughout *Flower and Weed,* I believe this novella should be considered a stronger candidate for having influenced Shaw's work, whether he would have admitted as much or not.

country-estate heiress rescuing a poor girl from Whitechapel. In the process, *Flower and Weed* leverages contemporary familiarity with the ancient myth and Braddon's fame as a sensation novelist to challenge the priorities and norms of upper-class British society.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provides the canonical account for the tale of Pygmalion, a sculptor who "abhorr'd all womankind, but most a wife" (Ovid Book 10). Despite his misogyny, the sculptor nevertheless directs his creative energy to fashioning marble into an ideal woman. In due time, he falls in love with his creation and implores the gods to bring her to life. Even before they grant his plea, Pygmalion dresses his beloved statue in robes and jewelry and takes her to bed so that one night, when Venus answers his prayers to animate the statue, she views her "lover with surprise" upon waking and "ere ten months […] a lovely boy was born" (Ovid Book 10). For all the run-of-the-mill sexual dysfunction omitted with prejudice from the acceptable reading list for Victorian subjects, Ovid's tale of intercourse between sculptors and marble statues was recycled time and again as popular entertainment.

Some adaptations, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's lyrical opera *Pygmalion* (1778), emphasized more sensual dimensions of Pygmalion's irrational love, while Victorian adaptations exploited the most unsavory components of the myth. In William Brough's burlesque *Pygmalion; or, The Statue Fair* (1867), Venus and Cupid play tricks on Pygmalion for sport. A decade later (and a few years prior to *Flower and Weed*), the eponymous hero in W.S. Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea: An Original Mythological Comedy* is happily married but cursed by Artemis to instant blindness if he ever commits an infidelity. When the gods animate Galatea, Pygmalion briefly tries to be virtuous, but soon enough the statue seduces him; blindness ensues. After many bawdy puns,

Pygmalion finally rejects Galatea's advances. He gains his wife's forgiveness (and thus regains his eyesight), while Galatea returns to her marble form. In both plays, Galatea is merely a cartoon character.

Braddon upends this model in *Flower and Weed*, which Robert Lee Wolff described as "barely conceal[ing] its bitter social commentary on the behavior of the upper classes" (Wolff 288). This novella centers on Bess, a young woman from London who has been expelled from the infirmary of a workhouse and abandoned by her husband before collapsing from exhaustion on the grounds of Ingleshaw Castle. Lucille, the lord's daughter, finds "a girl in what should have been the first fresh bloom of girlhood […] lying pale and deathlike among the flowers" (FW 10) and brings the girl to the castle to recuperate. Lucille places Bess under the reluctant tutelage of Miss Marjorum, Lucille's own governess. Under the chiseling gaze of Miss Marjorum, Bess has soon "left off using vulgar expressions […] reads her Bible daily, and she has been to church" (FW 43).

Parallels to Ovid's myth are explicit: "Pygmalion's animated statue could hardly have begun life more newly than this girl, suddenly transferred from the slums to the palace" (FW 45). As in the Gilbert version of Ovid's story, however, romantic entanglements complicate the story: first, as Bruno, Lucille's fiancé, falls in love with Bess and, second, when Tom Brook, Bess's estranged husband, ambushes her on the outskirts of the estate. Tom mocks Bess as having been "pampered […] and made a fool of" (73) and reasserts his rights as "by law her master" (76) before letting her return to the castle, thus invoking again the language of chattel marriage, with or without legal ceremony. The pinnacle of Bess's rise from the gutter comes on Christmas Day a few weeks later; as she explains to Lord Ingleshaw, "I never knew what Christmas meant

until Lady Lucille taught me. O, how happy and good it all is, and how different from the life in the alley where I used to live!" (113). But even as she celebrates, Bruno notices that she seems "a reed that could be easily snapped in twain" (110) and Bess spies Tom Brook lurking on the grounds. Indeed, Tom raises a gang to break into the house and when Bess tries to defend Bruno from Tom she dies: "the blow […] fell, with all Tom Brook's savage strength, upon the breast of his wife" (128). For Bess, even something as meager as justice for her death proves beyond her reach: Tom Brook eludes the scaffolds by turning "Queen's evidence" (131) and trading the names of his co-conspirators in exchange for leniency.

Bess's prehistory emerges most tangibly when she meets Tom not long after having been accepted into the Ingleshaw castle:

> [Bess:] "You beat me."
>
> [Tom:] "Only when I was mad with the drink, my lass."
>
> [Bess:] "Mad with drink? Yes. You spent the money upon which we might have lived a decent life […] on drink that changed you into a savage. You made me work for you as well as for myself. You let me starve, and you left me." (74)

As Bess transitions from idle subject of Lucille's beneficence to assert more active agency, her core mission becomes the avoidance of relapse: "Could she, who had escaped from that pandemonium into the paradise of refinement and clean living, calmly contemplate the possibility of being flung back into that gulf of horror? No; a thousand times no" (51). Braddon splits the monolithic Pygmalion role across multiple characters. Whereas Lucille Ingleshaw establishes the vision and environment and takes credit for

the outcome, she relies upon Miss Marjorum to perform "the laborious work of revising a form of the English language […] enriched with the copious slang of London low life" (26), and Bruno assumes the pseudo-sexual characteristics of the mythical sculptor. In showing Bess that she is worthy of being loved by someone who will not abuse her, Bruno transports her soul to a higher plane, "as if she had been lifted into the empyrean, as if she were in a diviner, purer world" (80); this moment evokes through the choices of words "empyrean" and "divinity" the moment when the Greek gods transform Galatea from marble to flesh.

Lucille Ingleshaw has a myopic view of the real world, having grown up taking her surroundings for granted and with an abstract awareness of her own privilege. In many respects, she holds Bess's future in her hands—whether to groom Bess as governess, replacement for a soon-to-retire servant, or Lucille's long-term companion? The decision rests not with the subject, but with the sponsor. As the dynamic in their relationship vacillates under Lucille's suspicions about the relationship between Bruno and Bess, the latter becomes anxious that her fate will prove "no less a drudgery than the old life of the muddy streets and the flower-baskets" (70) and recoils against sudden transitions where "[a]n hour ago she had been Lucille's companion […] Now she was Lucille's servant" (51). Meanwhile, the resident servants at Ingleshaw Castle express their disdain of the newcomers, as when Miss Marjorum "protested vehemently" (46) against teaching Shakespeare to Bess, a situation she views as "imprudent and hazardous" (27). Servants go along because they have no choice—they remain, after all, subject to the whims of their employers—but in the proverbial "downstairs" of the Ingleshaw estate, the servants "disliked [Bess] as an interloper" (71). These servants,

along with Lucille's friends and family members, employ snobbish views of the poor in their attempt to slow Bess's ascent into society or to evict her from the house. Even when such prophesies come true—Lucille does catch scarlet fever and Bess's husband robs the estate—these arguments fall on deaf ears for the aspiring social crusader (Lucille).

Braddon suggests that settling into the purgatory between the classes—the world of servants—may not suffice once Galatea has tasted the fruits of wealth. Consider Bess's reaction, early in her sojourn at Ingleshaw Castle, when one of Lucille's servants suggests that Bess could aspire to a life in service: "You're the pattern I'm to cut myself out upon? I'd rather look higher, and imitate Lady Lucille" (24). Lady Carlyon, Lucille's cousin, doubts whether Bess will survive a transition into service, declaring that a position as governess "is a way of being buried alive which a young woman with her good looks will not endure long, I'm afraid" (69). On the one hand, the rescued heroines must cast off their previous lives, but on the other hand they may need old connections when or if they stumble.

At the Christmas celebration in *Flower and Weed*, Braddon highlights the long history of class stratification by describing how a "tankard that held [the wine] and the goblets into which it was poured were nearly three hundred years old—plate that had been buried […] during the Civil War, and had thus escaped that period of general melting-down" (101). The message is that lower classes may rise from time to time but the rich and their possessions will endure. Bess believes that the relationship between the classes need not be so fraught, as she explains in a blunt exchange with Lord Ingleshaw:

> "There is a new city wanted in London—a city built for the poor, and owned by the rich. Poor landlords and poor tenants—that means misery."

> "And by a rich landlord I suppose you mean a man who doesn't expect to get any rent?" said his lordship.
>
> "No, my lord; only a man who will give fair value for the money—a man who will see that his tenants drink pure water, and are not poisoned in their wretched houses. Let him be as exacting as he likes to get his due, but let him give us our due, and not take advantage of our helplessness." (113)

Coming on the heels of Bess's rejoinder to Lucille that "[w]inter means quite a different thing for the rich from what it means for the poor" (90), the directness of these attacks on English hegemony is startling given the subtlety with which Braddon had typically treated the issue. This is perhaps a reflection of Braddon's growing "concern that the wealthy ranks of society were deserting their responsibility to the poor and dependents" (Lynch 244). The dialogue echoes former British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli's novel, *Sybil; or The Two Nations* (1845), best known for an exchange that could easily fit in the pages of *Flower and Weed*: "our Queen […] reigns over two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy […] who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws […] THE RICH AND THE POOR" (Disraeli 96, emphasis original). According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, "[t]he problem of the two nations, for social critics as well as social novelists, was not so much a problem of poverty as such, not even of the gross inequality between rich and poor, [but] the 'feeling of alienation'" (Himmelfarb 528). Bess experiences this firsthand: "now that her ears had grown used to another language, that her eyes had looked upon another race—the face

and the voice, the tones, the movements of this man, who was by law her master, inspired such aversion, such an infinite, unspeaking loathing as she had never felt in her life before" (FW 76). This emotional alienation emerges as the fundamental social lesson of *Flower and Weed*—albeit one without a solution.

Robert Lee Wolff posits that "[i]t was too early in the social history of England for Eliza to catch Professor Higgins" (Wolff 288). This statement overlooks the fact that, despite numerous attempts by producers, directors, and fans to change the ending (Berst 21), Eliza and Higgins do not end up together in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, either. Beyond an error of content, however, Wolff's observation glosses over the moral of Braddon's story. The root of the tragedy that befalls Bess lies not with her failure to marry Bruno, but with the broken social contract and the asymmetries of power between rich and poor, men and women, including "the sense that […] human relations had been reduced to calculations of interest" (Himmelfarb 528). When Lucille tells Bess that "I believe it is in your power to be anything you like" (FW 89), we can presume that such aspirations are not expected to include stealing her affianced cousin.

Society's mislaid priorities come through most clearly in the fact that Bess's killer, "having thus made himself a useful instrument in furthering the ends of justice, got off lightly for so small a thing as a wife's life" (131). In the calculus of Braddon's England, robbery of a peer's estate trumps the murder of an impoverished girl. Given this cynical ending, one may find a modicum of solace in the fact that the transformation of Galatea, no matter her fate, has not been without a corresponding change to the sculptor. In framing the impact of Bess's death on Lucille and Bruno, Braddon's narrator tells us that "She who was nothing to them, neither by kindred nor by equality of rank or

fortune—who had come and gone out of their lives like a dream, had vanished like a tale that is told, leaving no token behind her—had yet influenced the lives of both too deeply to be easily forgotten, or to be thought of lightly now she was gone" (129).

Flower and Weed exemplifies many of the themes I have explored so far in my analysis of Braddon's usage of literary reference to add depth and nuance to stories that nevertheless remain plot-driven, suspenseful, witty, and, yes, sensational. This novella takes inspiration from both the Greek classic and the more contemporary treatments of the myth's themes, but it does so in an unexpectedly radical way. Not only in how Braddon channels the words and sentiments of Disraeli's *Sybil* to attack the double-standards of class and culture in England, but in the humanizing factor of a real-life Galatea. Bess does not begin as an inert stone pillar, but as a woman who has been abandoned by society. In her lack of proper education, she is not dissimilar from even some of the upper-middle-class women we have analyzed across Braddon's novels. Although the characters of Kate Delamaine and Irene Thelliston come later in Braddon's career, Bess embodies Braddon's overarching, but generally subtle, societal critique. Not only does she receive her education too late, but in many respects it does not matter; for the underprivileged flower girls of the London streets, the question of whether literature can corrupt or offer salvation proves sadly irrelevant.

Chapter 7:

Conclusion

> People talk of novels with a purpose; and from this class of works, both by her patrons and her enemies, Miss Braddon's tales are excluded […] Her purpose was at any hazard to make a hit, to catch the public ear. It was a difficult task, but audacity could accomplish it. Miss Braddon accordingly resorted to extreme measures, and created the sensation novel.
>
> – Henry James, *The Nation,* November 9, 1865.

When Henry James wrote those words in *The Nation* in 1867, his observation was based on a career that was only five years old. By that time, Mary Elizabeth Braddon had published a half-dozen novels, all of them commercially successful and having received prominent coverage (albeit often negative) in both the literary and popular press. From this standpoint, if her objective was merely what James suggests, "at any hazard to make a hit," then Braddon was off to an outstanding start. Indeed, as the primary breadwinner in the Richmond home that she had recently begun to share with John Maxwell, money was certainly more than an incidental by-product of her success. Writing for profit has always proven a bone of contention for critics—this issue sat squarely at the center of the debate regarding the virtues of "realism" versus the vices of "sensation" as has already been discussed at length, and carried forward through the modernism movement of the early twentieth century and all the way to our own contemporary classification of fiction into "literary" versus "commercial" categories. Occasionally, artists receive special

dispensation: permission to be considered both literary and commercial at the same time. Such cases are rare, but as Deborah Vlock observes in her analysis of this question with respect to Charles Dickens, hardly uncommon:

> Dickens was, certainly, "in it for the money"; there is no question about that. But if he wrote - and performed - to make piles of cash, if a kind of brittle utility browns the pages of his books and his life, then he is in good company indeed. Mozart rarely wrote a page of music, as far as we know, which someone had not bought from him. Beethoven made his living at composition; Schubert did not, and as the story goes, died young and hungry. (Vlock 190)

Braddon's character Sigismund Smith, in *The Doctor's Wife*, is unabashedly commercial in his motivation, a caricature of the morally vacant, profit-motivated novelist whom critics accused Braddon of being. Braddon's narrator never judges Smith for his commercial motivation, although the character himself occasionally veers into lamentation of the market conditions:

> "[T]here ought to be a literary temperance-pledge, by which the votaries of the ghastly and melodramatic school might bind themselves to the renunciation of the bowl and dagger, the midnight rendezvous, the secret grave dug by lantern-light […] But, you see, George, it isn't so easy to turn teetotaler […] Are not reformed drunkards the dullest and most miserable of mankind?" (DW 47)

This tension between the pigeon-hole of sensation and the pedestal of respectable fiction can be seen throughout Braddon's career. Braddon published a few veritable penny-blood novels, including *The Black Band* (1861)—often employing a pseudonym for those "lesser" novels, a subject Jennifer Carnell has explored at length, which indicates the degree to which she intended her mainstream novels to be looked at seriously.

This tension emerges within her fiction when she brings Smith back, two years after *The Doctor's Wife*, in her more self-consciously serious novel *The Lady's Mile* (1866). Perhaps as a projection of Braddon's own intent to shift away from high melodrama and toward more realistic action, Smith has undergone a transformation: "Sigismund Smythe, the *novelist*, […] had abandoned the penny public to court the favour of circulating-library subscribers, and had sublimated the vulgar Smith into the aristocratic Smythe" (LM1, 7-8, emphasis mine). Still motivated by the market, but a more refined market, and a turn which warrants a more refined name. Not only has his name changed, but the name of his vocation has evolved, from "sensation author" in *The Doctor's Wife* to "novelist" in *The Lady's Mile.* Rather than merely employing a synonym, I read this passage as Braddon making a gentle rebuke of the peculiar conventions and double standards of the Victorian marketplace. The transition from sensation writer to novelist also reflects shifts of contemporary culture within a narrow timeframe, as Saverio Tomaiuolo observes that "[c]ontrarily to what had happened in the past, readers from 'respectable' classes had started to appreciate tales that were once enjoyed only by the lower classes in third-rate Penny serials" (Tomaiuolo 7). So the Smith-to-Smythe pivot is further enabled by the corresponding changes in the literary ecosystem. One could interpret the Smith-to-Smythe passage as Braddon's critique of the

relative ease with which a man could execute such a switch into respectability: Sigismund Smith re-christens himself Sigismund Smythe and immediately is a "novelist," whereas Braddon struggled for respect from the broader literary community throughout her career and to transcend the anchor of being "the author of *Lady Audley's Secret*" as the title pages of her novels routinely described her.

Robert Lee Wolff claims that "although she had myriads of readers, nobody ever appears to have read her" (Wolff 14). Similar to the abstract critic whom Braddon rebukes in *Joshua Haggard's Daughter*, many critics may have been content to judge the merits of every Braddon novel by the flaws they perceived in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd.* This is the crux of Tomaiuolo's thesis in *In Lady Audley's Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Genres* (2010), wherein he argues that "Braddon's literary career can be thus interpreted as a continuous struggle for independence from the Lady Audley paradigm and as a confrontation with the novel that made her famous in the Victorian literary market" (Tomaiuolo 15).

According to Winifred Hughes, Braddon "knows exactly what she is doing; she has no exalted opinion of her material or her mission; she is quite willing and capable of playing around with her chosen conventions and making her own ironic compromises with the sticklish requirements of Victorian taste" (Hughes 122). However, what I have endeavored to show throughout the course of this thesis are the numerous ways in which Braddon took full advantage of her popularity—her successful penetration into the middle-class home—to engage her readers in questioning prevailing rules on what women should know, what they should read, and how they should behave.

In *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (1970), Guinevere Griest considers the intersection of contemporary social circumstances on the entire publishing industry, from writer to publisher to reader:

> In any period, of course, the creative artist will be influenced by the social conditions—economic as well as political, religious, and cultural—in which he lives and works. In particular, the web of complex interactions uniting the writer, his reader, and his publisher will have inevitable effects on the finished product, repercussions which must be considered in any complete evaluation of the work. The ways in which literature is produced in distributed also leave impressions on the writing. (Griest 2)

Braddon could hardly violate the conventions of her time while maintaining her robust sales, a constraint derived from the conservatism of circulating-library owners such as Charles Mudie. Lyn Pkyett has claimed that "[f]ew (if any) of the female sensationalists could be regarded as either feminist or progressive" (Pykett 5) but one can perceive Braddon's attempts to layer provocative material regarding progressive issues, more directly in a story such as *Flower and Weed*, which was initially published on Braddon's own label, and only subsequently as a circulating-library volume. The relationship between publisher and author required a degree of concession on both sides. On the one hand, Braddon's need for steady income forced her to be circumspect in her experimentation. As Alan Walbank explains in *Queens of the Circulating Library* (1950):

> Once a novelist was "made" […] it was necessary for continued success to go on writing the circulating library type of novel, and woe betide anyone

> who came under Mudie's ban! Publishers, realising that the public would not readily buy when it could borrow, found a sounder investment in the author who confirmed and, indeed, hardly dared to issue a book which would injure their connection in such an extensive market. (Walbank 10)

However, Mudie's would suffer if one of their most popular authors suddenly disappeared from their inventory. As Jennifer Carnell, notes, "[a]lthough Braddon had murderers, thieves and bigamist as central characters […] At the end of the day Mudie's was a business, and as Braddon was one of their most popular authors" (Carnell 169); therefore, even if Braddon toed the line, Mudie was more inclined to look the other way than with a less prolific and less popular novelist such as George Moore.

Jennifer Carnell has commented that "[t]he relationship of [Braddon's] novels to popular culture makes her especially interesting; she was writing for the people rather than the elitist few" (284). What I find so striking about reading her novels today is the insight they give into upper-middle-class life in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Along these lines, Robert Lee Wolff concludes that Braddon "was a camera, her eye recording inside and out the dwellings of her personages of all classes and all the periods of her life, their gardens, their food and drink, their paintings, bric-á-brac, dress, amusements" (Wolff 407). And let us not forget about their books, which Braddon's narrative eye almost always pauses upon to list and thus relay to the reader a distinct sense of each character's literary taste.

Unfortunately, the words of Arthur Haldane in *His Darling Sin* proved all to prophetic for the fate of the author of *Lady Audley's Secret*.

> "[Y]ou have been in the field, and have won your battle. I think everybody would like another story from the author of 'Mary Deane.'"
>
> "You do not consider how easily people forget," he said. (HDS 46)

Braddon's novels may have disappeared from bookshelves within years of her death, but fortunately her critical rediscovery has made her relevant once again, as scholars explore the treasure trove of her oeuvre, beyond *Lady Audley's Secret*. What I have discovered in my research is that Braddon's lesser known novels are entertaining, thought-provoking, and much more deeply literary than expected. One must try to imagine what it would have been like to be a Mudie's subscriber, eagerly awaiting the latest volume from Miss Braddon. For many female readers, Braddon's novels may have provided respite from their own realities. As Ian Ward writes, "stories of bigamy, so fashionable and fantastical and yet so oddly unthreatening, were […] especially popular. The women who read Braddon's novels were not free, not nearly. But in the practice of reading they might imagine the possibility" (Ward 237).

We cannot be certain of Braddon's intentions, especially because private correspondence that might illuminate her motives is remarkably sparse[17], it is clear to me that Braddon aspired for her novels to be more than mere "highly-spiced fiction" (DW 11). From her extensive correspondence with Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Robert Lee Wolff suggests that this was more than just a passing comment in *The Doctor's Wife* by quoting a letter from Braddon to Bulwer-Lytton: "I want to be sensational, & to please

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[17] According to Robert Lee Wolff, Braddon did not retain any of her private correspondence, but he was able to analyze the letters she sent to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, which are available in the Wolff Collection at the University of Texas. In *Sensational Victorian*, Wolff laments that "With the death of Bulwer, the biographer runs dry—no more content outside the novels themselves" (Wolff 237).

Mudie's subscribers . . . . Can the sensational be elevated by art, & redeemed from all its coarseness?" (Wolff 155; ellipsis and punctuation original). To please that core Mudie's audience—and to keep from falling into the trap Sigismund Smith articulates about the dullness of reformed drunkards—an intricate plot, replete with sensational incidents and shocking twists and turns, is a given. Indeed, not unlike many modern popular novelists, Braddon's back catalog establishes an atmosphere of suspense that serves a similar function as the literary allusions and chapter mottoes we have examined—to sensitize the reader to pay attention to offhand remarks from the narrator and watch for potential clues to the inevitable twist. In this sense, Braddon exploits her very own imaginary text, a vast body of antecedent events from her previous novels that shapes the reader's experience of every subsequent novel.

Although I have cited more than a dozen of Braddon's novels in this thesis, my inquiry barely scratches the surface—there are sixty additional novels that I have not tackled. Across that unexplored body of literature, however, I can confidently provide one consistent piece of advice: pay close attention to the bookshelves and reading habits of the characters, look out for (and enjoy) the intrusive narrator, and take a few extra minutes to dig deeper into those passing literary references which you might, at first blush, be tempted to ignore.

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