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Mary Elizabeth Braddon: Reconstructing Beauty from Portent
of Innocence to Potential Threat in Aurora Floyd
and Lady Audley's Secret

Susan Bryant Cook

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
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Mary Elizabeth Braddon: Reconstructing Beauty from Portent
of Innocence to Potential Threat in Aurora Floyd
and Lady Audley's Secret

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Introduction:

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, through her two novels, Lady Audley's Secret (serialized in 1861-62) and Aurora Floyd (serialized in 1862-63), ushered in a new view of the feminine ideal in Victorian literature. This new perception specifically targeted the beautiful, upper-class women typically characterized in the Victorian novel. While known primarily as one of the few female authors of her day to breach the male held dominion of the "sensation novel," Mary Elizabeth Braddon deserves recognition also for creating this new and expanded type of female character. The genre of the "sensation novel" did usher in the formula of having characters appear not as they really were; a necessary part of the plot device used to confound through confusion. Braddon's depiction of characters going against the feminine ideal, however, was not merely for the sake of sensationalism. Within the framework of exciting and thrillingly dramatic stories, she actualized the idea that an attractive, beautiful woman could be more than a mere parlor ornament and that a woman should not merely be judged by her beauty and manners. Braddon fought against the standard in novels of the time that tended to show beautiful, upper-class women as having the attributes and personalities of really nice furniture--attractive and utilitarian, and just as interesting to the reader. She also inserted into the public psyche the idea that perhaps it was a male weakness to rely so heavily on the appearance of a woman, rather than trying to see her as a complete person. She also demonstrated in Aurora Floyd that such reliance upon appearance alone could also be a feminine failing. Aurora, the title character, is duped in her youth by a weakness for a handsome male face.

The women in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels ran counterculture against two stock ideas in the literature of her time. The first of these conventional ideas to be attacked was the established convention that beauty in a "lady" always corresponded with virtue. Goodness and attractiveness were thought by most in society to go hand in hand. The truthfulness or honesty of an ugly or deformed individual was almost always suspect, no matter how unfair a prejudice this seemed to be. This concept of ugliness translating into evil was well established in literature. Joan Burstyn, in her work Victorian Education and the ideal of Womanhood, believes that Braddon peer Wilkie Collins also questioned this fallacy of the Victorian public to judge only upon the physical: "Collins draws upon elements of realism to criticize Victorian society for not having the moral courage to look beyond the visible signs of difference" (81).

This outdated concept of the virtuous beauty was on trial in many novels of the time. The Brontë sisters, as authors, were by this time weaving a totally different interpretation of beauty, especially beauty of the honored and traditional blonde, blue-eyed, society nymph. What reader, having read the classic Jane Eyre, can possibly forget that dependence upon physical beauty and appearance that permeates the novel and serves as the true source of all the evil that occurs within its pages? The novel serves as a consummate statement against the discrimination of those not blessed with what their society considered handsome features:

"Poor Miss Jane is to be pitied, too, Abbot."

“Yes”, responded Abbot; “if she were a nice pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that.”

“Not a great deal to be sure,” agreed Bessie: “at any rate, a beauty like Miss Georgiana would be move moving in the same condition.” “Yes, I doat on Miss Georgiana!” cried the fervent Abbot. “Little darling!-with her long curls and her blue eyes, and such a sweet colour as she has; just as if she were painted!” (15).

The irony in this statement presents a slap at those who would praise only the “feminine ideal.” Charlotte Brontë uses Jane Eyre to glorify those with imperfect beauty. Brontë ‘s physically attractive characters are, for the most part, flawed creatures--too vain, too domineering, and generally lacking in intelligence. Charlotte’s sister Anne, in her novel Agnes Grey, mimics this same idea. In her novel, also, the humble, not typically attractive woman is the source of all things wonderful, and the beautiful heiresses are soulless and lacking in basic human sympathies. Yet, for the most part, the other characters in these works are so blinded by physical beauty that they cannot recognize any moral ugliness hidden behind it. The Brontës were writing to create non-stereotypical female characters. Their only failing was that, by targeting most of the attractive characters and having them all be selfish and shallow, they created characters that were almost as generalized as the virtuous/handsome stereotypes they were fighting against.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon showed that people, and, most importantly, women, as a suppressed group, could not be judged merely on face value. A woman's beauty should not automatically imply to the reader that she is good/innocent or selfish/evil. Her two characters, Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd, showed the Victorian reader that a beautiful woman can hide an evil within and that a "unique" beauty itself can be of the "dangerous" sort when it flies in the face of what is conventionally called beautiful.

The idea that an attractive and aristocratic woman could be both intelligent and disarming was not the only conventional idea that Mary Elizabeth Braddon explored. She also, with her character of Lady Audley, showed that a female character in a novel could be an extremely complex character, with thoughts and motivations equal to those that would impel a male counterpart. In addition to complexity, the character of Lady Audley brings into question the idea of a woman's submission to "her lot in life."

The abandoned young woman who becomes Lady Audley does not choose to accept the hand that has been dealt her by her young husband. She takes action to save herself, rather than dying in the traditional and virtuous tradition of feminine characters in the novels of this era. While the author does not condone this action entirely, Mary Elizabeth Braddon does take the original step of allowing the character to attempt to justify her actions to her captor and to the reader.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, through these two novels, Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd, shows an excellent and highly developed ability to recognize the weakness society felt and still feels regarding the judging of a physically beautiful being. She acknowledges that the ideas her society held regarding anyone of great beauty, especially

women, instituted a dearth of fairness or equitable treatment to those lacking this fortunate attribute. She also finds it easy to mock the men in her novels for their inability to resist or easily deal with a beautiful woman.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's characters served not only to entertain her readers, but also to nudge those who would recognize the societal flaws they revealed. The ability of those characters to use their beauty to gull others and create situations to suit their own ends was both entertaining and enlightening. Mary Elizabeth Braddon revealed much to her readers about their society. She gave them the opportunity to see how the Victorian society made gross assumptions regarding a person's true nature, based simply on his or her beauty or lack thereof. Her novels seem to suggest that this is a ludicrous and overworked ideal. Braddon, through her creations, subtly prompted the narrow standards of her society to learn more about each other and to hopefully view people, and especially women, in a different and perhaps more human light.

Chapter One

Lady Audley's Secret

The character of Lady Audley is the best known of all of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's fictional creations. Lady Audley is similar to other fictional villainesses of her time, especially those created by Braddon's peer, Wilkie Collins. There is a similarity in theme found in the novels of both authors. As Lyn Pykett notes, "in particular the sensation novel habitually focuses on the secrets and secret histories of women" (Improper 83). There is a notable difference, however, that separates the character of Lady Audley from any other character within a sensation novel. With Lady Audley, Mary Elizabeth Braddon does not simply give the reader an evil character and then devote the rest of the novel to her eventual discovery and punishment. Lady Audley's Secret would still be an excellent sensation novel even if this were true. What sets this novel apart from other sensation novels, and what sets Lady Audley apart from other criminals, is the complexity of this female character and the issues that surround her. Mary Elizabeth Braddon is not merely telling a crime story; she is shedding light on a faulty value system within Victorian society.

At the start of the novel, Lucy Graham, the soon-to-be created Lady Audley, is most thoroughly described to the reader. The vast majority of these descriptions, however, reflect awe and admiration of her physical attributes:

soft and melting blue eyes, the graceful beauty of that
slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of

showering flaxen curls, the low music of that gentle voice;
the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm. (6)

This initial and almost ponderous emphasis on Lucy's physical charms has more purpose than merely creating a mental picture of the character for the reader. The significance of Lady Audley's beauty lies not just in the idea of a beautiful heroine, but the idea that all the other characters in the novel seem to adore her simply because of her beauty. This convention of having a beautiful heroine, beloved by all, would not have been at all unusual in the literature of the day. What should be noted is the intense stress that Mary Elizabeth Braddon is placing upon the reaction Lucy's beauty has upon all that meet her. The reader is given a list of characters: a boy, the verger at the church, the vicar, the porter from the railway station, her employer, his visitors, her pupils, the servants; all who have succumbed to the magnificence of Lucy's beauty and grace: "For you see Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Every one loved, admired, and praised her" (6).

The local aristocracy is not excluded from this list. It makes its appearance in the form of Sir Michael Audley, who having also glimpsed this loveliness has only to spend one evening's dinner party staring at Lucy's great beauty to decide he can't live without her as his wife:

That one quiet evening sealed Sir Michael's fate. He could
no more resist the tender fascination of those soft and
melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat

and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls, the low music of that gentle voice; the perfect harmony which pervaded every charm, and made all doubly charming in this woman. (6)

It should be noted that the vast majority of Lucy's fans are men. Not just a particular class of man or a specific type of man admires Lucy, but all the men of the area, of all ages, occupations and class. Again, this constant emphasis on Lucy's physical charms by these male characters seems overblown if merely a description of a novel's heroine.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon, however, is setting the reader up for a fall. Exposing as the blackguard of the novel the very character everyone had thought to be so wonderful would have been too simple a plot device. That type of surprise had, no doubt, been rendered many times before. Mary Elizabeth Braddon is making a statement of the fallibility of her society to beauty. Critic Chiara Briganti, in her work Gothic Maidens and Sensation Women, agrees that "the brilliance of Lady Audley's Secret is that the would-be murderess is the fragile blond angel of Victorian sentiment. Braddon means to show that the dangerous woman is not the rebel or the intellectual, but the pretty little girl whose indoctrination in the feminine role has taught her deceitfulness almost as a secondary sex characteristic" (3). In the text of Lady Audley's Secret, almost everywhere praise for a physical quality is given to Lucy, an equally pleasing personality trait is attributed to her. No real action or behavior, however, is catalogued to justify these positive personality traits. Yes, she is thought beautiful and her hair and eyes are cited as proof. But claims of her being "the sweetest girl that ever lived" (6) and of having an

"amiable and gentle nature" (5), are not backed up by any particular action of kindness or amiability. The fact that, with her beauty, she is willing to remain in the local village, as a governess, is deemed all the proof necessary to ascribe to her a personality of almost saintly proportions. Everyone (and again, that title of "everyone" seems ponderously weighted with male constituents) loves Lucy for her beauty and the goodness inside her that beauty must reflect.

It is Lucy's beauty that serves as the impetus for the novel. Her beauty brings about all other actions and reactions within the story. Her first husband, a young soldier, is overwhelmed by her beauty and ignoring her sketchy background and lack of dowry, marries against the wishes of his family. It is the same beauty that enthralls Sir Michael Audley to the point that he, like his predecessor, ignores the conventions of class and status and marries a penniless governess. It is also her great beauty that awakens the interest of Sir Michael's previously indolent nephew and goads him into an investigation of what else lies behind her perfect features. Lucy's beauty is the impelling force of this story.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon is tweaking not only her society's predication that beauty equals goodness; she is making the point that the men in her novel (and her society) seem most likely to make and be ruled by this assumption. She is using the character of Lady Audley to admonish her society for the value it places on a woman's appearance and the slight worth given any other aspect of her being, especially her intellect. Lucy's exaggerated socially "perfect" beauty hides a woman capable of acting in a way unimaginable to her readers. The fact that such a "fiend," as Lady Audley is

purported to be, could be hidden in the guise of a gentlewoman is exactly what is so deliciously unique about her. As Pykett emphasizes, “Braddon’s first femme fatale, the bigamous, murderous and possibly insane Lady Audley, seems, at least on the surface, to be contained within the boundaries of the proper and respectable feminine” (Improper 88). Pykett believes that this duplicity in the lady’s appearance versus her “real” self

explores and exploits fears that the respectable ideal, or proper feminine, may simply be a form of acting, just as one role among other possible roles. Even more seriously, the representation of Lady Audley, like that of some of Braddon’s other heroines, raises the spectre that femininity is itself duplicitous, and that it involves deception and dissembling (Improper 90).

Ann Cvetkovich, in her work Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism, points out that the portrait painted of Lucy is a match for the overblown physical descriptions of her beauty:

The portrait shows Lady Audley as a “beautiful fiend” not because she is unfeminine, but because the marks of her femininity are exaggerated: “No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting

mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait. It was so like and yet so unlike . . . had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend. (Braddon 49).

This description of both the woman and the painting shows an ideal taken to the extreme and turned into something horrific. It is both the painting and its description that are a fundamentally accurate depiction of what makes up the character of Lady Audley.

The character of the local aristocrat, Sir Michael Audley, is the walking, breathing epitome of the attitude that beauty tells all that is required of a woman. He doesn't care that Lucy is of low birth or that she has a mysterious background. He doesn't even really blink at her affirmation that she cannot love him. He must marry and own this beautiful creature, even if it means creating a matching fantasy in his mind of her morals and principles. Under the guise of glorifying the overwhelming beauty of Lucy, the author is really mocking her male readers and nudging her female audience. This is quite the bold gesture for a woman to make to the Victorian audience.

Lady Audley's nemesis in the novel, Robert Audley, is at first, as are all the men in the story, overwhelmed by her beauty. Though he is destined to uncover the truth of Lady Audley's secret nature and to expose it as being as dark as her appearance is light, he marvels at her physical perfection. After his first glimpse of his new step-aunt, he is practically gushing: "Why she's the prettiest little creature you ever saw in your life, George . . . Such blue eyes, such ringlets, such a ravishing smile . . . I am falling in love with my aunt" (56). Later, when shown a letter from his aunt, Robert even raves about the beauty of the lady's handwriting to his cousin: "I think that if I had never seen your aunt,

I should know what she was like by this slip of paper. Yes, here it all is—the feathery, gold-shot, flaxen curls, the pencilled eyebrows, the tiny straight nose, the winning childish smile, all to be guessed in these few graceful up-strokes and down-strokes" (64). Within this foolish seeming paragraph is again the subtly crafted idea that not only are beautiful people automatically classified as being virtuous, but beautiful writing also equals an attractive writer. Mary Elizabeth Braddon is once again forcing the reader to agree with the absurdity of this kind of classification system.

Though readers have been made suspicious of Lady Audley long before Robert even begins to harbor doubts about the true nature of his aunt, they, as he, are held at bay from total condemnation of her. What is it that prevents this condemnation? Mary Elizabeth Braddon might be said to be tempting the audience with Lady Audley's beauty in order that readers might ignore their suspicions of bigamy or worse: that is, she is so beautiful, such a thing cannot be true. Jenny Bourne Taylor, in her work In the Secret Theatre of the Home, remarks that the sensation novel, Lady Audley's Secret in particular, "displayed villainy as the mimicking inversion of respectability, feminine anomaly as the masquerading of the codes of femininity" (9). Presented again is the idea that the lady is too truly beautiful in the Victorian tradition to be capable of any wrongdoing. At this point in the novel, when Lady Audley first begins to fear the discovery of her secrets, the audience has the first inkling that the lady might be using her beauty not only as a power over those around her but also as a powerful weapon. Her abandoned husband has unwittingly come to her new home and has seen her portrait as the new but bigamous lady of the manor. If she is guilty, it would seem Lady Audley is

on the brink of exposure. The morning following this event, however, Mary Elizabeth Braddon is careful to once again describe Lady Audley to the readers, "her cheeks tinged with as delicate a pink as the pale hue of her muslin morning dress. Like the birds and the flowers, she seemed to recover her beauty and joyousness in the morning sunshine . . . looking as fresh and radiant as the flowers in her hands" (76). This description is definitely the author's strongest clue to the audience so far that reliance on beauty as goodness is a false theorem. Rather than being repentant or even worried about her misdeeds, the lady's mind is obviously working on a solution to her problems and using her perfect outer shell as the tool to continue her ruse. The reader wonders at the audacity: is it daring or proof of innocence?

A true test of this innocence appears in the form of the man the readers must suspect of being Lady Audley's true husband. He comes to Audley Court to see her and upon finding her out, goes into the secluded lime-walk to find her. Later she returns from where they might have met, carrying a book and singing. The reader is as overwhelmed as the male characters in the novel. Mary Elizabeth Braddon has let us suspect Lady Audley, but now, through her further descriptions of the lady's beauty and calm, has allayed those suspicions. What criminal could look or act so when confronted? Obviously only one of the most hardened nature could act in such a manner, and certainly not a woman. Many critics of the time actually refused to believe that any woman was capable of acting in such a manner. At the time of the novel's publication, popular critic of the time W. Fraser Rae remonstrated, "Lady Audley is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel. In drawing her, the authoress may have intended to portray a

female Mephistopheles; but, if so, she should have known that a woman cannot fill such a part” (Ranace 186). Mary Elizabeth Braddon is using the beauty of this character just as the character herself is using it, to draw away suspicion from a too beautiful individual. How false this veil of appearance is is revealed much later in the story, when the audience realizes that Lady Audley’s singing return from the garden immediately follows her supposedly successful murder of her husband. Only at this point, which is near the conclusion of the novel, does the audience realize that the idea of Lady Audley’s innocence/beauty had earlier duped them as much as the characters in the novel. They, as readers, behaved as foolishly at this early point in the novel, as Sir Michael Audley did in being overwhelmed by a beautiful stranger.

Who in this novel can look past the villainess’s outer beauty and see the evil behind it? Two of the major characters do manage to see beyond Lady Audley’s mask to the world. The first of these is her new stepdaughter, Alicia. Why is this young woman not overpowered by the lady’s charms, as is the rest of the county? The first explanation would be that Alicia, being a woman, is less susceptible to the physical beauty of another woman. This does not seem a plausible reason, however, as several other woman are under Lady Audley’s spell. Her early employer, who gave her such a glowing reference, was a woman, who very much admired Lucy, as is the vicar’s wife, who aids in her marriage to Sir Michael.

If it is not Alicia’s femininity that allows her to see past Lady Audley’s physical subterfuge, it is perhaps the non-traditional womanliness of her nature that gives her insight. This unfeminine aspect of Alicia, indeed, a leaning toward masculinity in

Victorian eyes, is her love of riding and of participating in the hunt. Contrasting strongly with the delicate Lady Audley, Alicia spends most of her time outdoors, enjoying horses, dogs, and all sports associated with them. Her cousin, while disapproving, notes: “How charmingly she sits her horse! What a pretty figure, too, and a fine, candid, brown, rosy face” (116). While Victorian society would not wholly condemn such interests in a woman, it was believed that these were masculine occupations. A woman who pursued them was slightly less lady-like than those who didn’t.

This idea followed the Victorian ideas regarding the regulating of both nature and women. Victorian society adored nature, as long as it was strictly controlled. Flowers and botanical beauty were lovely displays, but much more suitable when pressed between glass or placed under magnifying glasses. The great animals of nature were revered, but this reverence took the form of trophy heads and animal-skin carpets. Nature was wonderful, as long as it could be confined in an attractive manner within the parlor.

The same requirement was made for a truly feminine woman. Interests that entailed a woman’s leaving the parlor for outdoor pursuits were frowned upon. Lucy’s femininity is emphasized yet again with her daily pursuits:

Lady Audley flitted from room to room in the bright
September sunshine – now sitting down to the piano to trill
out a ballad, or the first page of an Italian bravura, or
running with rapid fingers through a brilliant waltz – now
hovering about a stand of hothouse flowers, doing amateur
gardening with a pair of fairy-like silver-mounted

embroidery scissors – now strolling into her dressing-room
to talk to Phoebe Marks, and have her curls re-arranged for
the third or fourth time. (77)

In contrast to her stepmother, the femininity of Alicia is suspect. She avoids such treasured womanly pursuits as needlepoint, music and vase painting. Instead, Alicia follows the hounds with her male cousins and other male members of the community. Her cousin Robert comments on the damage done to her womanly psyche:

That's the consequence of letting a girl follow the hounds.
She learns to look at everything in life as she does at six
feet of timber or a sunk fence; she goes through the world
as she goes across country – straight ahead, and over
everything. Such a nice girl as she might have been, too, if
she'd been brought up in Fig-tree Court. (116)

To modern eyes this description of a forthright and adventurous woman would be considered a positive one, but not in the viewpoint of the world of the conservative Victorian. This passage is used to show the “damage” inflicted upon Alicia by this freedom of action and purpose. It is also cited as the main reason her cousin cannot view her romantically. While Alicia's deportment is not a radical departure from the norm, perhaps it is enough, in the author's eyes, to enable Alicia to recognize those who have also stepped beyond the social mean. Not as bound by social mores as others, Alicia can see a reflection of this rebellion hidden behind her aunt's simpering adherence to the rules of feminine parlor perfection. Alicia can see through the silk and flower-scented

guise of her stepmother. She, again, perhaps because of her more masculine attributes, can also see the weakness Lucy's beauty inspires in the men who come into contact with her. She reproaches her father for this weakness, "you think her sensitive because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating" (103). Mary Elizabeth Braddon is subtly expressing that Alicia's almost unique ability to see her stepmother for what she truly is is due to the fact that Alicia is not so rigidly mired in the classifications of gender enforced by her society. Thus, Alicia is more open to a true reading of the nature of an individual.

The same duality of personality, a mixture of masculine and feminine, can be noted in Robert Audley. He is the second and most important character to discern Lady Audley's true nature. His feminine side is found in his lack of interest in the gentlemanly sports of hunting or shooting. He describes himself, "Why, man, I don't know a partridge from a pigeon and it might be the 1st of April instead of the 1st of September for aught I care. I never hit a bird in my life, but I have hurt my own shoulder with the weight of my gun" (50). The descriptions of Robert's rooms, also, mark him as an untraditional man. His friend, George Talboys, notes "the stand of flowers and two or three birds in cages" (38) that are in Robert's rooms. Robert also has some European tastes that would also mark him as a non-Victorian prototype. He smokes a German pipe and reads French novels for hours at a stretch.

An excellent example of the fact that Robert does not judge by physical standards is his penchant for adopting stray dogs: "The young barrister had brought a couple of

dogs with him; and the country gentleman who gave fifty pounds for a pointer, and travelled a couple of hundred miles to look at a leash of setters before he struck a bargain, laughed aloud at the two miserable curs" (113). Robert's non-conformist lack of concern regarding the physical attributes of his pets reflects his individuality, as does his lack of concern over the opinion of the other gentleman who mock him. Robert's obvious disinterest in the required standards which symbolize a Victorian male signal, as Pykett notes, that "his insight into Lady Audley's secrets is also associated with his own feminized identity" (Improper 103).

These two untypical Victorians can penetrate Lady Audley's guise of beauty while all others remain spellbound. This is Mary Elizabeth Braddon's way of rebuking the rigidity of her society that stressed outward appearance and manners above all else. It is also her way of questioning the narrow nature of social rules that identified an exemplary Victorian woman and a respectable Victorian gentleman. Author Ann Cvetkovich agrees that beauty clears all boundaries in this superficial predication for appearance over any other qualification: "A woman like Lady Audley can take advantage of a man and marry for money rather than love. And blindly infatuated men like Sir Michael and George can choose inappropriate objects of desire" (51).

The issue of beauty exemplifying goodness is not the only convention which Mary Elizabeth Braddon fights against. The second chapter of the novel deals with a male character, George Talboys. The reader discovers that this man, under the threat of poverty, deserted his young wife and son and left them to the care of her father, a drunken retired seaman. He left his wife and traveled to Australia to earn a fortune and is

now, after three and one-half years, returning to offer her a life of ease. On the ship, George relates his story to a fellow traveler, a young woman. She expresses shock at his confession of his abandonment of his family, but after hearing how badly he felt about it and how hard he has worked while away, she can only exclaim, "How brave you were!" (22). George, also, feels that he has done nothing wrong. He is later confronted by his late wife's landlady who identifies him as: "him as deserted her so cruel, and left her with her pretty boy upon her poor old father's hands" (41). "I did not desert her," George retorts, "and then he told the history of his three years' struggle" (41).

What is Mary Elizabeth Braddon saying about this woman's acceptance of George's story? What is she saying by putting this character to the fore through the first few chapters of the novel as the possible hero? Braddon recognized that a large portion of her readers would identify with and accept the character of George Talboys. His action to leave his family has seemingly turned out well; he is, after all, now rich. It should have been the fate of his beautiful young wife to await whatever should befall her and their child. Her reward for her perfection in Victorian feminine inaction would have been to share her husband's wealth or suffer a martyred but universally approved death from starvation. Who, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's mind, would have identified more closely with George's actions and be more willing to forgive and forget his conduct? Her male readers, of course, were the part of the author's audience most likely to be swayed in George's favor.

What of the female readers, however? Would they be so quick to forgive George and wish a happy ending for his story? Halfway through the second chapter it is already

patently obvious that Lady Audley is none other than George Talboy's abandoned wife and that she is guilty of bigamy. While realizing the fraud Lady Audley is perpetrating, isn't Mary Elizabeth Braddon sending out an appeal to her female audience to see things from the discarded wife's point of view? Lady Audley, when told George's story by Robert, has some reflections of her own. While Robert assures her that George was broken-hearted over the loss of his wife, she observes:

I did not think men were capable of these deep and lasting affections. I thought that one pretty face was as good as another pretty face to them, and that when number one with blue eyes and fair hair died, they had only to look out for number two with black eyes and hair, by way of variety. (85)

This statement lets the reader know that Lady Audley is aware of the foolish Victorian emphasis on appearance rather than a woman's true self. She mocks not only this foolishness, but George's grief as well, "It seems almost cruel of Mrs. Talboys to die, and grieve her poor husband so much" (85). Here Lady Audley lets the reader know that George never knew the true Lucy and that he is grieving, indeed, only over his loss of her blue eyes and blond ringlets.

The Victorian view of Lucy's situation would have been that she should have waited for George until his return or until she genteelly starved to death. Nothing else would have been considered socially acceptable. For a gentlewoman to take action to determine her own fate would have been equal to one's tigerskin rug escaping from its velvet-draped parlor prison and returning to the wild. The women reading about her

plight might be tempted, despite her obvious deception to Sir Michael, to have not only sympathy, but even empathy and some admiration for a woman willing to take action to give herself and her family a better life. Lady Audley feels no sympathy for George, and it would be difficult for Mary Elizabeth Braddon's feminine readers to have any either. Lyn Pykett notes that "The reader is also implicated in this common-sense view of Lucy's situation (and thus aligned with the views of a criminal and/or madwoman)..."(Improper 93).

Heroines of this era's novels were generally inactive, static characters. Events happened to them, at them, and for them; they, for the most part, didn't act. Lady Audley, as the abandoned Lucy, has taken action. She has saved herself and her family from perhaps starvation. She has provided for them and achieved for herself what she always desired. Such a feat, especially one involving fraud, could not be imagined as being accomplished by a woman, especially a beautiful, delicate, feminine woman. An example of how rare such a female character would be can be found in Wilkie Collins's novel, The Woman in White (26 November 1859 – 25 August 1860). The woman in this novel who does take action, Marian Halcomb, and who is praised throughout the novel for her bravery and intelligence, is considered too manly in manner (and unfortunately in appearance). It is as though Wilkie Collins rationalizes Marian's intellect and decisiveness by making her unattractive and therefore unwomanly.

There is a character within Lady Audley's Secret who serves to act as a direct antithesis to the singularity of Lady Audley--Clara Talboys, sister to the presumed murdered George Talboys. Clara is introduced to the reader as she is introduced to Robert

Audley: "this second person was a lady, who sat at the last of a range of four windows, employed with some needlework, the kind which is generally called plain work, and with a large wicker basket, filled with calicoes and flannels standing by her" (187). Clara sits where her father has bade her to sit and does not stir because he has commanded her to be still. No matter how terrible the news Robert imparts to both her father and to herself, she does not shift from her assigned position or demeanor.

Robert Audley is at first put off by this rigid conformity to the societal rules of filial obedience. He considers himself a free spirit, not bound by the strict behavioral codes of his era. He finds the excess of this inflexible system of demeanor and comportment within the Talboys' home ludicrous and mean. Clara represents the perpetration of this behavior, adhering so rigidly to these rules in the presence of her father, that Robert believes her entire makeup must also be patterned within the narrow scope held by her father. Clara is a far cry from the vivacious Lady Audley. The reader could not see the latter held in social check by her father or any other male. Clara Talboys does not lack the physical charms that would allow her to wield a spell of bewitchment on men. Robert Audley describes her, "his cousin was pretty, his uncle's wife was lovely, but Clara Talboys was beautiful. Niobe's face, sublimated by sorrow, could scarcely have been more purely classical than hers" (200). She has the beauty, but not the intent to use it as Lady Audley certainly does. She has chosen the honorable path of obeying the paterfamilias and waiting until another masculine influence can come and effect a change in her life. This is the acceptance and compliance that George Talboys expected but was denied by his wife.

Is it this almost servile attitude of Clara's in the presence of her father, rather than her greater physical beauty, that causes Robert Audley to find her more beautiful than his aunt? Robert Audley does at first decry this seemingly cold and lifeless attitude she exhibits. Perhaps, however, he is beginning to admire this behavior as the suitable comportment for a woman. He has seen the unsuitable in his aunt with dishonorable and calamitous results. Perhaps the comparison of the vivacious beauty to the dutiful daughter has effected a change in his own attitudes towards women. The reader finds as the novel progresses that the more "masculine" Robert becomes during his quest, taking action to find his friend, confronting the presumed murderess with her crimes, the more the obsequious character of Clara appeals to him. Pykett believes that this aspect of his character "is used to focus attention on the social construction of gender as he progresses from a period of 'feminized' indolence to a fully 'masculinised' role as head of the bourgeois family" (Improper 102).

Clara Talboys, as the virtuous and true example of the Victorian woman, is also the most blank and uninteresting of all the characters in the novel. Pykett even refers to the innocuous Clara as "transparent" (Improper 104). The nonconformity of Lady Audley and even of Robert Audley's cousin, Alicia, creates much fuller and more enjoyable characters. Clara seems to exist only to serve as a prize turned over to Robert Audley at the end of the novel. She seems but a reward for Robert's successful transition from an overly-feminine, French-novel reading and bird-keeping idler to working detective and, in action, the new masculine head of the Audley family. His reward for returning to the conformity of his class and rank is this Victorian symbol of a true

woman. Clara Talboys is indeed the feminine antithesis of Lady Audley. By assigning her such a role, however, the author also seems to have been unable to make her an equally compelling character. Her compliance to correct behavior is too pale a reflection to the thrilling rebellion found in Lady Audley's actions. Perhaps Pykett is correct in believing that Clara's main purpose is to act as "the foundation of Robert's emergence into a properly socialized masculinity; his quest to unmask and expel Lady Audley becomes the route to that destiny" (Pykett, Improper 104).

With Lady Audley, Mary Elizabeth Braddon is creating a female character that would unnerve her male readers. They would be shaken by a woman portrayed as evil, yet also startlingly beautiful, intelligent, and proactive. This uneasiness would not be felt by only the male readers. Woman readers, also, would be equally uneasy with Lady Audley's character. They would be uncomfortable to be placed in the position of identifying with and perhaps, not consciously, rooting for a bigamist. Perhaps in recognizing this invidious sympathy, Mary Elizabeth Braddon decides to have Lady Audley, in her attempts to avoid detection, enact more criminal and unforgivable acts, such as attempted murder and endeavoring to have her nephew branded as mad.

Lady Audley's beauty does blind those around her to her true self, but it is her intelligence that impresses the reader and allows her to elude capture for so long. It is her quick thinking and action that show that her true strength is in her intellect. She sends herself a telegram as an excuse to leave town for a while. While this is obviously a duplicitous act, it is not damning evidence enough that something besides music and light resides behind Lady Audley's beautiful blue eyes. Mary Elizabeth Braddon furthers the

rounding out of the lady's character by detailing Lucy's performance when the telegram arrives: "'A telegraphic message!' She cried . . . 'What can be the matter?' She looked up at her husband with wide-open, terrified eyes, and seemed half afraid to break the seal" (59). Through a mixture of money and the strengths of her class and beauty, she convinces an honest tradesman to allow her to search her nephew's rooms and steal some evidence that might prove incriminating. She manages to keep track of her pursuer, Robert Audley, through all of his investigations of her, and she even starts a cunning campaign to undermine him with his uncle, her duped husband. The question must be asked, however, is the lady so very brilliant, or is so little intellect expected from an attractive woman? Her beauty not only disarms, it also dissuades. So lovely a creature cannot be capable of evil or intelligence.

This campaign of wits against the investigative powers of Robert Audley is the most frightening and intellectually insidious action for a woman to take. Lady Audley decides that her only defense against Robert's accusations will be to lay the groundwork to have him thought mad. Thus when Robert attempts to expose Lady Audley's crimes to her husband, he will be sent to an asylum. This passage in the novel is riveting with its example of Lady Audley wielding the power of her beauty upon her doting husband in attempt to castigate the mental state of her nephew. She begins to discuss her nephew's possible madness in a manner almost matter-of-fact:

"I believe he has lived too long alone in those solitary
Temple chambers. Perhaps he reads too much, or smokes
too much. You know that some physicians declare

madness to be a mere illness of the brain – an illness to which any one is subject, and which may be produced by given causes, and cured by given means. (286)

Her husband, Sir Michael, at first protests the idea that his nephew might be mad. He is, however, soon partially won over by the arguments of his lady: "It is generally a stranger who is the first to observe any psychological peculiarity. The big words sounded strange from my lady's rose lips; but her newly adopted wisdom had a certain quaint prettiness about it, which bewildered her husband" (288). Her husband is as much, if not more, swayed by her beauty as he is with her reasoning.

It is this beauty which Lady Audley never loses, despite the corrupt personality it hides. The day following her mortally wounding one man and attempting the murder of another, she admires herself in her looking glass: "A long night's rest had brought back the delicate rose tints of her complexion, and the natural lustre of her blue eyes . . . My lady smiled triumphantly as she contemplated the reflection of her beauty" (373). Even after being forced to confess her crimes, Lucy is still an incredibly beautiful being. Relegated to a mad-house, the resident physician calls her a "beautiful devil" (391). Robert, in his last interview with her, is still remarking on her "feathery golden curls" and that "glorious glittering hair" (392). Lady Audley's beauty is unchanged, no matter what evil she performs. It remains even after she and her schemes have been exposed. This is proof to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's readers once more that Lucy's beauty was merely a mask, independent to the thoughts and actions of its wearer. Once again, Braddon is

warning against the proclivity for judging the inner person by his or her appearance alone.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon is exposing Victorian society for its tendency to judge women as one would judge a good piece of furniture or a horse, assessing them for their attractiveness and soundness. She was, however, a working writer, with dependents. Braddon wanted to create a best seller and knew that to allow these themes to guide the entire novel might offend her socially strict and male dominated audience. It seems an appeasement of these values and an attempt to assuage the reading public that cause Braddon to offer the reader the idea that Lady Audley is not really a master criminal, something inconceivable in a woman. Braddon decides to brand Lady Audley as mad, something many readers would have probably already suspected, being unable to imagine anything else that would render a woman so formidable a foe. It is a disappointing choice for many readers and perhaps can be discerned to be dissatisfying to Braddon herself. In her work, Gothic Maidens and Sensation Women, Chiara Briganti also decries that “Lady Audley’s unfeminine assertiveness must ultimately be defined as madness” (4). Braddon allows most of the characters (and readers) to choose the madness theory if they desire. Not only would the readers be seeking some other explanation for Lady Audley’s actions, other than personal and unfeminine greed, they would also be cognizant of the need for family privacy. This fear of the public disclosure of a private scandal would be especially true in an aristocratic household. Robert Audley is desirous of justice, but cringes at the thought of public disclosure of Lady Audley’s crimes. With this object in mind, Pykett explains, “Audley seeks to prove Lady Audley’s madness partly to save his

friend and his uncle's family from scandal, but largely because his notions of the feminine cannot reconcile sane femininity with the criminally duplicitous behavior of which he intuitively knows Lady Audley to be guilty" (Improper 94).

Braddon provides one last perspective to serve as a counterpoint to the theory of the lady's madness. Braddon introduces the character of Dr. Mosgrave, the physician who examines Lady Audley for signs of insanity. The doctor honestly and frankly states, not only to Robert Audley, but also to the audience, that he doesn't believe that Lady Audley is mad. He believes her actions to be those of a thinking, rational being determined not to remain passive and accept a life she didn't choose and didn't like:

She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better.

There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate.

She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that. (377)

This is the most candid speech in the novel and it seems to have the flavor of the author speaking to the understanding portion of her audience. After interviewing Lady Audley, the doctor is even more blatant; he still states, "the lady is not mad" (379), but he admits, "She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what

she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!" (379). In saying this Dr. Mosgrave is justifying a fearful aspect to the Victorian reader. A woman with Lady Audley's intelligence and ability to act, not to mention beauty and the ability to blend with the highest elements of society, would represent an incredible danger. If she is *not* mad, then she is a type of woman not imaginable to the Victorian mind. It is easier for Braddon and her audience to deny this possibility. This explanation also serves as justification for Lady Audley's safe removal from society to a fashionable madhouse. It is this madness, as Briganti notes, that "spares Braddon the unpleasant necessity of having to execute an attractive heroine with whom she identifies in many ways, but also to spare the woman reader the guilt of identifying with a cold-blooded killer" (4).

Lady Audley's Secret is a wonderful blend of suspense story and social derision. The latter is so expertly crafted that it can be ignored entirely, if desired. Mary Elizabeth Braddon wanted a bestseller, but as a self-reliant woman, with dependents of her own, it would have chafed too greatly not to have included a strong tweak at the society which disapproved of any independent and intelligent woman.

Chapter Two

Aurora Floyd

Aurora Floyd was Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel immediately following Lady Audley's Secret. It retains the same basic motif, a secret concerning a bigamous marriage. The heroine, Aurora, while compelling, is not the powerful and forceful character that made Lady Audley so riveting. Unlike Lady Audley, Aurora does not wittingly commit bigamy, nor is she willing to kill to keep her fraud a secret. At the time of her second marriage, she is sure that her first husband is dead. There is no cunning in Aurora, just a desperate desire to have a happy life, unburdened by her youthful error of a poor marriage. Surely this would strike a chord with many readers. Divorce laws were impenetrably strict; individuals really were married for life. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's own life mirrored that of her heroine Aurora and also the life of her contemporary, George Eliot. Both authors lived with men who were bound by marriage to other women. Mary Elizabeth Braddon would have been more than familiar with the legal and social strictures of a bigamous or unlawful marriage.

Aurora as a character is not the deceptive or decidedly intelligent being that is Lady Audley. She does, however, as a bewitching beauty, serve as a catalyst for all of the action in the novel. Unlike Lady Audley, however, Aurora does not facilitate any of this action. Her character is somewhat of a return to the damsel-in-distress motif. She is unable to extricate herself from her dangerous situation and seems totally dependent upon her male guardians to save her. After the self-reliance of Lady Audley, this is

disappointing. Some reviewers of Lady Audley's Secret had declared it impossible that a woman could take action in the manner of Lady Audley. They felt she was a frighteningly dominant woman who controls her own actions and the actions of those around her. Perhaps Mary Elizabeth Braddon listened to these critics and altered her next heroine accordingly. Aurora is certainly more of the typical beauty who needs saving than a groundbreaking female protagonist.

Perhaps in revenge for toning down her heroine, Mary Elizabeth Braddon takes a very sharp line in this novel in her open and stinging criticism of the Victorian view of what constitutes a beautiful and suitable gentlewoman. In particular, she attacks the rigid and preposterous Victorian qualifications deemed requisite for a socially-acceptable wife. In Lady Audley's Secret, the author allowed the readers to come to this conclusion themselves. The reader, faced with the mistakes the male characters make by using only physical standards by which to judge the beautiful but deadly Lady Audley, is left to draw his or her own conclusions. In Aurora Floyd, however, Mary Elizabeth Braddon openly mocks her Victorian readers for their inflexibility to any individualistic characteristics (seen as flaws) in a potential wife and the penchant for choosing a wife with characteristics more similar to those of a "wax doll" than of another individual. That the titled character of Aurora will not meet these standards is obvious from the start.

The most discernable example of the Victorian-made-slave to that rigid society's nonsensical ideals of choosing a life partner, is the character of Talbot Bulstrode. In his earliest description, one at first gets the sense that he is the paragon of Victorian manhood. He is described as being an aristocrat, having a scientific and well-read mind,

virtuous and of a "certain noble and chivalrous" nature (31). The reader is given the comfortable impression that Talbot, having met all requirements for Victorian male perfection, will be the hero of the novel. It is at this point, however, that Mary Elizabeth Braddon alerts the reader to the fact that in spite of his splendidly aristocratic background, in spite of his wealth and intelligence, and in spite of his living an active and productive life, the reader must see that he suffers from a serious character flaw: "He had never met with a woman whose stainless purity of soul fitted her in his eyes to become the mother of a noble race, and to rear sons who should do honor to the name of Bulstrode" (31). Talbot cannot look at a woman without seeing a flaw, not only in her, but also in her potential progeny. His main view of women is that they are socially, morally, and intellectually, his inferiors. Having firmly established Talbot's pomposity as a possible suitor, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's tone towards his character from this point on in the novel is mocking. She almost seems to revel in letting the air out of his obviously socially correct Victorian arrogance and conceit.

When Talbot is first confronted with Aurora, he has been watching a ball with intense boredom, knowing that he is far too eligible a man to deign to make conversation with any woman in the hall. Any woman who would approach a man such as he would, of course, be quite aware of his superior standing and would therefore be on the prowl to increase her own social position and rank. Talbot does not even see these creatures as women, but rather as "familiar nets of gauze and areophane" (33). Upon being introduced to Aurora, however, Talbot instantly falls in love with her beauty:

A divinity! imperiously beautiful in white and scarlet, painfully dazzling to look upon, intoxicatingly brilliant to behold. Captain Bulstrode had served in India, and had once tasted a horrible spirit called bang, which made the men who drank it half mad; and he could not help fancying that the beauty of this woman was like the strength of that alcoholic preparation; barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening. (33)

He still, however, expects Aurora to act as “but another trap set in white muslin, and baited with artificial flowers, like the rest” (34). When she ignores him entirely, Talbot becomes even more interested in her. He lowers his guard enough to speak with her and finds she is interested in the latest sporting news. He immediately, and seemingly with some relief, finds this an insupportable flaw: “What a horrible woman! The Hussar’s vivid imagination pictured the heir of all the Raleigh Bulstrodes receiving his infantine impressions from such a mother” (34). Aurora, rather than being properly cowed at his response, views him with contempt and then continues to ignore him. It is perhaps this disinterest, as well as her beauty, which helps to make Talbot unable to forget her.

While Talbot covets Aurora, he still cannot understand why he is infatuated with a woman so far from the Victorian ideal of womanhood. The major flaws he finds in Aurora are that her beauty and her lifestyle are too unconventional. To the Victorian mind, unconventionality was the equivalent of a serious social stigma, especially when

found in the attributes of a woman. Aurora's beauty is the endowment of her actress mother, whose family history was such that even Aurora "knew little of her poor mother's history" (20). Aurora's physical beauty, then, is of non-socially acceptable origins. Her actions and behavior that mark her as being so different from the "pretty affectations" (31) of other women Talbot has met are also of an unconventional background. In The Improper Feminine, Lyn Pykett believes that the fact that Aurora was raised only by her father defines her character as "the motherless and hence improperly socialized and improperly feminized heroine of the novel" (86). She also states, "in so many nineteenth-century novels by women, the motherless heroine is both more vulnerable and more assertive than was the norm for the properly socialized woman" (87).

Another author, Lynda Nead, seems to follow this same idea in her work Myths of Sexuality, stating the Victorian doctrine that "The purity of domestic life was maintained by the influence and attendance of the respectable woman. In this way the ideologies of the home and the feminine ideal reinforced each other; woman's moral and sexual purity guaranteed the home as haven and a source of social stability . . ." (33). Because Aurora has had no mother to maintain these ideals, Pykett would agree that she has not benefited from "socially sanctioned mothering" (Improper 87). Talbot Bulstrode refuses to recognize that it is precisely Aurora's dangerously individualistic beauty, attitude, and lack of feminine kowtowing that attract him. He even gives her that most condemning of Victorian adjectives, "unfeminine" (Braddon 49). Pykett writes that Aurora's hold over Talbot is "the paradoxical effect of portraying the culture's demon, the masculinised

‘unwomanly’ woman, as the desirable and desired feminine” (Improper 88). Talbot continues to believe that he longs for his perfect woman:

some gentle and feminine creature crowned with an aureole
of pale auburn hair; some timid soul with downcast eyes,
fringed with golden-tinted lashes; some shrinking being, as
pale and prim as the mediaeval saints in his pre-Raphaelite
engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all
womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting
them in the narrow circle of a home. (40)

The author has arranged for such a woman to be presented to Talbot Bulstrode in the form of Aurora’s cousin Lucy. In having done so, she provides the readers with the hilarious picture of a man gifted with his ideal and totally ignoring her, or even worse, comparing the vibrant Aurora with the pallid Lucy, much to Lucy’s disadvantage. He “remembered how he had admired her [Lucy], and how exactly she corresponded with his ideal, and how determined he had been to be bewitched by her rather than by Aurora” (63). Lucy has that cherished Victorian cast of beauty: “she was fair-faced, blue-eyed, rosy-lipped, golden-haired” (21). Talbot even admits that “this was his ideal. This graceful girl, with the shimmering light playing upon her hair, and the modest droop in her white eyelids” (40). He recognizes the physical ideal that is supposed to attract him in “the golden halo about her face, and the delicate pink of her cheeks” (41).

This archetype of Victorian beauty is the direct opposite of Aurora’s physical persona. As Lyn Pykett tells us, “Aurora Floyd is represented from the outset as very

obviously transgressing the boundaries of the proper feminine. Her physical appearance is itself a sign that she belongs to the category of the dangerous improper feminine”

(Improper 88). Aurora is no wax-doll. She has flashing black eyes; they are called “like the stars of heaven” (Braddon 20). Her features are irregular, but:

You rarely, in looking at her face, could get beyond these eyes and teeth; for they so dazzled and blinded you that they defied you to criticize the doubtful little nose, or the width of the smiling mouth. What if those masses of blue-black hair were brushed away from a forehead too low for the common standard of beauty? A phrenologist would have told you that the head was a noble one; and a sculptor would have added that it was set upon the throat of a Cleopatra. (20)

Lucy is attractive, but already the reader’s thoughts are following those of Aurora’s father when he contemplates Lucy’s brand of beauty against Aurora’s:

she is very pretty certainly, with pink cheeks, a white nose, and rose-colored nostrils, and a species of beauty which consists in very careful finishing off and picking out of the features, but, oh, how tame, how cold, how weak. (217)

Both odd and enjoyable is Talbot’s pursuit of Aurora, under the guise of courting Lucy, while his true feelings for Aurora battle his Victorian yearning for the typical and socially acceptable norm. Mary Elizabeth Braddon has Talbot Bulstrode recognize this

flaw in his own logic. He tries desperately to ignore Aurora and to have some sort of feeling for Lucy. Sadly, Lucy recognizes this inner conflict herself: "she had at the same time a vague idea that he would much rather have fallen in love with herself, and that he was blindly struggling with the growing passion" (55). Talbot's true sentiments for Lucy's qualifications as wife are summed up, oddly enough, by Aurora herself. She describes her cousin:

She has studied enough, and learnt history, and geography,
and astronomy, and botany, and geology, and conchology,
and etymology enough; and she has covered I don't know
how many China jars with impossible birds and flowers,
and she has illuminated missals, and read High-Church
novels. So the next best thing she can do is to marry Talbot
Bulstrode. (156)

In contrast with his lack of feeling for Lucy, Talbot feels everything intensely when it includes Aurora. Her skill with and interest in horses horrifies him. Her interest in newspapers and happenings in the cities disgusts him. This preoccupation for things outside of the drawing room in a Victorian gentlewoman would be considered, for the times, extremely unfeminine. Talbot fights against his attraction to the unorthodox beauty of Aurora. He compares her glittery appearance and her open, animated demeanor with that of Cleopatra and describes her as "everything beautiful and strange" (47). She is dark and vibrant rather than being blonde and demure. She is impetuous and brave rather than meek and submissive. He even ignores his own feelings and characterizes Aurora as

"just the sort of creature that many a fool would fall in love with" (47). Aurora's riding in particular holds only disgust for Talbot, again emphasizing that a physically active woman, really an equestrian athlete, is the epitome of what was unfeminine. Joan Burstyn, in her work Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood, touches on this subject: "Throughout most of the nineteenth century, people generally believed in the physical delicacy of the human female. Although the physical stamina required by women of the labouring classes belied this, the ideal of womanhood rested in the prototype of the frail, protected woman of the upper classes" (95). In spite of this seeming penchant, however, Talbot admits that with regards to his "ideal" woman, that he "never admired Lucy so little as on horseback. His pale saint with the halo of golden hair seemed to him sadly out of place in a side-saddle" (Braddon 63).

Talbot feels Aurora's beauty strongly, but it is not the socially-acceptable form of beauty to which he has pledged himself. Because she does not physically or psychologically conform to his narrow interpretations of what beauty is, Talbot rejects her at the conscious level, but still yearns for her with his natural and unprejudiced subconscious. Some might argue that Bulstrode doesn't reject Aurora for her physical beauty, but for a social impropriety. Bulstrode rejects really, the very thing that makes her unique, that she is not the "white, unblemished page" (105) that Lucy so obviously represents. He has, yet again, forgotten how tedious he found such a "page" to be. Bulstrode rejects Aurora on the basis of her non-conventional actions, interests, behavior and foremost, her "type" of beauty. He doesn't even know what Aurora's secret is when he rejects her. The fact that she, a young woman, has a secret is damning enough. To

continue the “unblemished page” analogy, he believes that the history and thoughts of a young woman should be an open book, no matter how dull the resulting work should be. The fact that Aurora has had a life, a personal existence, before meeting him, confirms his fears of her marital unacceptability. He does not recognize that perhaps the very unconventional past that he fears is yet another factor that has helped to shape her startlingly different and attractive nature. The secret; what it has meant to her, does it really detract from the power of her magnificence--none of this matters to Bulstrode. It is the confirmation that she does have a secret that allows him the “out” that he has been waiting for. His inability to be happy with such a unique beauty/woman had caused him consternation throughout the entire courtship, as represented by his constant bewailing the shame it was that he hadn’t fallen in love with Lucy. He considers Aurora’s beauty, not merely her physical attributes, but her beautiful vibrant nature, the real impropriety. He has, in a sense, been “waiting for the other shoe to drop” during the entire course of their wooing. He is now too eager to snatch at this opportunity to deny her suitability as his wife, too little interested in any explanation or story.

Talbot is the Victorian suitor at his worst. He refuses to admit that the source of everything that he feels for Aurora is his inner desire for her wild beauty and vitality. He smothers these feelings from beneath the surface level of his emotions and declares that she is unsuitable to serve as a production machine for his future heirs: “How could he take her down to Bulstrode, and introduce her to his father and mother?” (55).

The closest Talbot will come to recognizing that Aurora really appeals to his true, inner nature is his recognition that all animals instinctively love Aurora. Seeing how they

accept her caresses and love her unconditionally, he acknowledges, "they recognize some higher attributes in this girl than we can perceive" (49). He is admitting that he is perhaps following their intuitive example by listening to his own physical nature over the protests of his strictly-corseted intellect.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon is not content to have the reader enjoy Talbot's discomfiture merely at the beginning of the novel. Even after he has lost Aurora to another suitor and he has married the "ideal" Lucy, Talbot's actions and inner musings are a constant barrage of reminders to the reader that he does not regret his choice of Lucy over Aurora. His continual harping on the justifications of his marriage to Lucy and his lack of remorse in Aurora's loving another man only sharpens the readers' knowledge that through Talbot's (and perhaps many male reader's) rigidity of mind, he has lost a fantastic partner in life. He never ceases to compare Aurora to his wife, to the latter's disadvantage. His regret and error are perfectly framed by the thoughts of Aurora's father upon Talbot's decision to choose Lucy over his own wonderful daughter. He describes Lucy, "how tame, how cold, how weak, beside that Egyptian goddess, that Assyrian queen, with the flashing eyes and the serpentine coils of purple-black hair!" (217). Talbot seems determined to ignore "Francis Bacon's view that 'there is no excellent beauty that has not some strangeness in the proportion'" (Lefkovitz 10). The comparison between the two characters, says Pykett, "contrives simultaneously to endorse this ideal [of the proper Victorian traits of a woman] and satirize it, but above all to make it seem much duller than its alternative, Aurora" (Improper 106).

Talbot tries to compensate for his loss, tries to believe that he was “happier with Lucy than he ever could have been with Aurora” (218). Lucy is, after all, his “ideal” of womanhood and her actions as a married woman continue to fit this mold, as described by Joan Burstyn: “The ideal woman was to be responsible for organizing the household, bringing up the children, and providing tranquility to which men returned as to a haven of peace from the turbulent world outside” (Burstyn 32). Talbot’s tribute to his marriage to the socially acceptable Lucy is a thinly disguised cry of anguish at the boredom and loss he feels in his marriage:

His fair young wife’s undemonstrative worship of him
soothed and flattered him. Her gentle obedience, her entire
concurrence in his every thought and whim, set his pride at
rest. She was not eccentric, she was not impetuous. If he
left her alone all day . . . he had no fear of her calling for
her horse and scampering away into Rotten Row, with not
so much as a groom to attend upon her. She was not strong
minded. She could be happy without the society of
Newfoundlands and Skye terriers. She did not prefer
Landseer’s dog-pictures above all other examples of
modern art . . . [S]he was altogether gentle and womanly,
and Talbot had no fear to trust her to her own sweet will,
and no need to impress upon her the necessity of lending

her feeble little hands to the might tasks of sustaining the
dignity of the Raleigh Bulstrodes. (218)

This terminal regret for actually accepting this kind of partner and life serves as punishment for Talbot. It is penance for obeying the social guidelines of the time rather than listening to his heart. As the novel goes on, the penalty for his choice in life even takes on a tangible form. He is found to be “calm, very quiet, but apparently sufficiently happy” (217). It is that fatal adjective, “sufficiently,” that leaks the true nature of Talbot’s future life. He is a victim of his dull marriage, brought about by his enforcement of the belief that “the ideal woman was protected from such evils as dishonesty, cheating, and profligacy since she did not have to take part in worldly transactions” (33). Lucy’s “protection” has left her a caricature of a woman rather than an actual helpmate and spouse.

Any earlier novel, perhaps one not written by a woman, would have punished the wildly attractive but unconventional Aurora with an early death or unhappy marriage to justify Talbot’s decision to marry his meek Lucy. Mary Elizabeth Braddon has no qualms with this final slap at the conventional ideal of the fictional heroine. Aurora and her husband, who accepts her for what and who she really is, are wildly and forever happy together. The final gesture of this happiness is the most visible symbol of success in a Victorian marriage. It is Aurora and her husband, John Mellish, who first have the prerequisite male child, while Talbot and Lucy’s first child is the conventionally literary throwaway girl baby. The exact value of the Bulstrode’s child is to be found in this description: “They [John and Aurora Mellish] lingered long at Nice, and here Talbot and

Lucy joined them, with an impedimental train of luggage and servants, and a Normandy nurse with a blue-eyed girl-baby” (458). The Bulstrode baby is listed as an item of luggage, nothing more. Aurora’s child, however is: “a black-eyed child—a boy—but wonderfully like that solemn-faced infant which Mrs. Alexander Floyd carried to the widowed banker two-and-twenty years before at Felden Woods” (258). The fact that Lucy fails to produce a male heir before Talbot’s former rival is yet another cross for Talbot to bear in his bundle of regret.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon showers the reader with the idea that judging a woman solely on her ability to meet society’s fickle standards of beauty and behavior is wrong. She showed this first in Lady Audley’s Secret, when the socially perfect beauty, Lady Audley, turns out to be a fraud and murderess. In Aurora Floyd, Mary Elizabeth Braddon punishes her representational Victorian male, Talbot Bulstrode, for his inability to break out of this frigid form of courtship and choose the woman he really loves.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s interest in her society’s preoccupation with beauty was not limited to female beauty. In Aurora Floyd, Aurora’s first husband, the horse trainer James Conyers, is also beautiful. He is described as:

wonderfully handsome—the very perfection of physical beauty; faultless in proportion, as if each line in his face and form had been measured by the sculptor’s rule, and carved by the sculptor’s chisel. He is a man about whose beauty there can be no dispute, whose perfection servant-maids and duchesses must alike confess. (180)

There is the insinuation in this speech that, in direct opposition to the commonly held beliefs about women, it is not a good thing for a man to be too good looking. A proper Victorian gentleman can be sternly handsome, as Talbot is described: "Tall, broad-chested, with a pale whiskerless face, aquiline nose, clear, cold, grey eyes, thick moustache and black hair, worn closely cropped . . . " (33). Also acceptable, for country gentry, are the charming physical attributes of John Mellish, a "big, hearty, broad-chested young Englishman, with brown hair brushed away from an open forehead and a thick auburn moustache bordering a mouth for ever ready to expand into a laugh" (57). These are the acceptable forms of male attractiveness. Conyers is much too attractive, especially for someone of the lower classes.

There is an interesting conflict within this idea. Male servants, such as footmen and coachmen, in positions that would occasion them to be in the public eye, were expected to be as attractive as possible. The Victorian ideal regarding servants was that they should have the appearance, personality, and functionality of good household furniture. To view a servant as a human being, with passion and ambition, was unthinkable. This class prejudice brought about the inclination to hire servants that would be "on display" with as much attention to attractiveness as one would give to the purchase of a vase that would be displayed in the drawing room.

This idea of attractive servants did not, however, apply to the female staff. It was thought that if the young women were too good looking, especially if they outshone their mistresses, they would begin to consider themselves above their station in life. Even worse, a beautiful maid or housekeeper could be the cause of dangerous attraction from

the masters or sons of the superior family. The opposing notion that an upper-class woman might also be attracted to a handsome servant was considered preposterous. Rather, it wasn't given any consideration at all. As Burstyn explains: "Men could not hope to escape a life of worldliness but women in England could rise above such contamination" (34). So ludicrous was the idea that Aurora might be attracted to a good-looking servant that it does not even enter the mind of Aurora's father.

To squire his impressionable sixteen-year-old heiress about the countryside, Aurora's father hires Conyers, "a dashing young fellow, chosen by Mr. Floyd on account of his good looks for Aurora's especial service" (22). This seemingly foolish style of parenting was actually the Victorian norm. As Joan Burstyn states in her work Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood, "only through ignorance (referred to as innocence), it was believed, could women truly be preserved from the dangers of vice, for to have knowledge that something existed was to savor its quality, as Adam and Eve had learned in the garden of Eden" (34). It is this oversight of social education that proves to be Aurora's downfall. A nonconformist to the ideal of Victorian womanhood already, she does not allow Conyers' lack of rank to offend her romantic sensibilities. She admits that it was only Conyers' good looks that brought about her impulsive elopement: "I married him because he had dark-blue eyes, and long eyelashes, and white teeth and brown hair" (353). This confession shows the reader Aurora's great secret. By its coming very late in the novel, however, the reader has already decided the crime is no great one. She judged a man by his appearance and suffered by it. The novel has already given the reader a previous character that has done the same. For this reason, the

example of Talbot is given so early in the novel. He, too, judged Aurora by her appearance only and therefore will always suffer her loss. She committed the same error, in her extreme youth, in her judgement of Conyers. For this reason, Aurora is forgiven by Talbot, who can trace the parallel of her errors to those committed in his own life: "Let the past die with the man who died the other night" (362). Aurora is also forgiven by the reader, who has already seen how much Aurora and Talbot have suffered for their initial lack of depth in judging another human being.

Even the ideal Lucy has served as an example of a foolish woman who judges men by their appearance alone. Once again Braddon steps into the novel and gives her opinion of Lucy's foolish obsession for the uncaring Talbot:

Some women never outlive that school-girl infatuation for straight noses and dark hair. Some girls would have rejected Napoleon the Great because he wasn't tall, or would have turned up their noses at the author of "Childe Harold" if they had happened to see him in a stand-up collar...Where does that marvellous power of association begin and end?. (221)

Mary Elizabeth Braddon demonstrates that only Aurora and her husband are above this judgmental error. Aurora has learned this lesson through harsh experience. John Mellish is above such a flaw through true nobility of nature. At this point in the novel the excellence of Aurora's nature must be recognized. Mary Elizabeth Braddon proves Aurora's superiority to her cousin (and perhaps society), not only on the physical

front, but also in the quality of her mind and heart: “She [Aurora] had learned at a very early period of her life that there are qualities even more valuable than exquisitely-modelled features or clustering locks . . . [S]he had outstripped her contemporaries in the race, and had earlier learned to be wise” (221).

Mary Elizabeth Braddon also hints with both Aurora Floyd and Lady Audley’s Secret that excessive beauty can blight a life. She offers the idea that his great physical beauty is partially to blame for James Conyer’s ill-formed nature: “In the earliest childhood he learned therefore to trade upon his beauty, and to get the most that he could for that merchandise” (185). He is beautiful, but he is also a scoundrel. Blessed with enough good looks to overcome even the rigid class divisions of the day, Conyers destroys his own future with greed and ambition.

This idea of too much beauty corrupting the nature of its holder is paralleled in one of the last speeches given by Lady Audley in Lady Audley’s Secret. She blames the infatuation of society with her youthful beauty for the baseness of her nature: “As I grew older I was told that I was pretty – beautiful – lovely – bewitching. I heard all these things at first indifferently; but by and by I listened to them greedily, and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life, I might be more successful in the world’s great lottery than my companions”(350). Conyers experiences the same advantages, beginning in his youth, and early learns the same lesson that Lady Audley had absorbed, that society regarded beauty above anything else: “Even then he was for ever reaping the advantage of a handsome face; for tender-hearted matrons, who would have been deaf to the cries of a snub-nosed urchin, petted and compassionated the pretty boy” (185).

The importance of the physical attributes of all its characters in the novel is emphasized again and again. Giving examples of the reverse of physical beauty heightens this idea. The reader is given a character that serves as the physical antithesis of James Conyers, the deformed old groom, "Softy" Hargraves, who eventually becomes a sort of manservant to the handsome young horse trainer:

He was a squat, broad-shouldered fellow, with a big almost unnatural head, a pale haggard face, --a face whose ghastly pallor seemed almost unnatural, --reddish brown eyes, and bushy, sandy eyebrows, which formed a species of penthouse over those sinister-looking eyes. He was the sort of man who is generally called repulsive, -- a man from who you recoil with a feeling of instinctive dislike . . . (134)

In contrast to Conyers beliefs, Hargraves believes his *lack* of good looks has brought about his own bad nature. He stares enviously at the handsome face of the trainer and begrudges what he believes it has done for Conyers: "Perhaps I might have been good for summat if I had been like you . . . I shouldn't have been ashamed of myself then. I shouldn't have crept into dark corners to hide myself, and think why I wasn't like other people, and what a bitter, cruel shame it was that I wasn't like'em" (251).

As the physical opposite of Aurora, Mary Elizabeth Braddon creates the character of Mrs. Powell. Mrs. Powell is a conniving, shallow creature. Physically, she is, like Hargraves, far from the ideal. She is a "pale, whity-brown-haired woman" (133) with "a lady-like droop of the head" (51), a "faded countenance" (53), and "shallow-sighted blue

eyes” (54). She, like Hargraves, is as unattractive spiritually as she is physically, being “ignorant and soulless and low-minded and vulgar” (51). Mrs. Powell hates and envies Aurora for her beauty and zest for life. Her envy is a reflection of Hargraves’ for the trainer. Mrs. Powell “envied her [Aurora’s] glorious eyes and flashing teeth, her imperial carriage and generous soul. This pale, whity-brown-haired woman felt herself contemptible in the presence of Aurora” (133).

Again, in this novel, Mary Elizabeth Braddon is being much more explicit in her moral lessons than in Lady Audley’s Secret. In the latter, she chose to let the reader discover the idea that perhaps beauty or lack thereof shouldn’t be the criteria by which one’s true nature should be judged. Within Aurora Floyd, she actually steps into the story and harangues the reader:

Yet it must be that there is something anomalous in this outward beauty and inward ugliness; for, in spite of all experience, we revolt against it, and are incredulous to the last, believing that the palace which is outwardly so splendid can scarcely be ill furnished within. (181)

The moral champion of this belief in judging by character, not merely by appearance alone, is found in John Mellish, Aurora’s husband. He proves himself to be both Conyers’ and Talbot’s superior in character and in goodness of nature. Aurora’s husband is the true hero of the novel, despite the fact he is not the most attractive of Aurora’s suitors. He is not unattractive but pales in comparison with Conyers’ physical beauty

The trainer, handsomer than his master by as much as
 Antinous in Grecian marble is handsomer than the
 substantially-shod and loose-coated young squires in Mr.
 Millais' designs; as handsome as it is possible for this
 human clay to be, with every feature moulded to the
 highest type of positive beauty. (266)

Neither does Mellish's appearance prove a challenge against Talbot's description as a
 "dark-haired and grey-eyed divinity" (93).

Mellish's "beauty" is not found in his physicality. Mary Elizabeth Braddon intended the character of John Mellish to be viewed as the better man than either Talbot or Conyers, not in beauty, but in the honesty and nobility of his nature. Here she is not only enforcing her abhorrence of the Victorian proclivity for judging women by their appearance, but she is also using a male counterpart to Aurora to emphasize the error of this notion for both genders.

When Mellish is first described to the reader, it is not his appearance that is dwelt upon. The most concentrated portrait of Mellish is that which deals with his personality and character: "Who could help loving the honest, generous squire, whose house and purse were open to all the country-side?" (59). His ability not to judge others is also noted: "John Mellish was well content to be beloved, and never questioned the quality of the affection bestowed upon him . . . [Y]ou might have talked to him for twelve hours at a setting without convincing him that men and women were vile and mercenary creatures" (59). This gallantry of character allows him to win the prize of the novel, Aurora, and

exist in a happy life with her. He is the only one of Aurora's admirers to love the woman herself, not just her glorious beauty. He loves her very nature, that non-conforming, original character which Talbot considered the flaw in the perfection of her physical magnificence. It was her generous and non-prejudicial temperament which Conyers chose to exploit rather than cherish.

John Mellish is proud of Aurora's beauty, but just as proud to compliment her other attributes. He praises her riding ability by describing: "her marvellous leap over the bullfinch" (143). He is not afraid to applaud her intellect, even to other male companions: "the plan she drew for the new stables which the architect said was a better plan than he could have drawn himself" (143). He takes pride in her artistry, and her love and care for animals. Mellish values the very parts of her being that caused Talbot to shudder in rejection and to replace the dashing Aurora with the firescreen embroidering, vase painting, and all too doll-like Lucy. The character of John Mellish strikes at the very heart of the story. He triumphs because he has overcome the Victorian stricture of judging people, especially women, by physical standards alone. He cares for people; therefore he is the hero. A different kind of hero for the Victorian novel reader, quite a few of whom might have identified almost entirely with the classic Victorian character of Talbot Bulstrode. At the end of the novel it is the non-Victorian-stamped female printout, Aurora, and her equally unstuffy and un-Victorian-like compassionate husband who triumph and live happily ever after.

Conclusion

Mary Elizabeth Braddon has been vigorously marketed as just another sensation novelist. Her literary setting was the era of the sensation novel, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon held her own in competition with her male rivals, Dickens, Collins, and Trollope. Being a well-known sensation novelist in Victorian England, therefore, was a profitable and socially heady position to possess. Braddon was interested in making money. She was the major provider for her family. Her father had abandoned the family early in Braddon's childhood, and the responsibility of supporting both her mother and herself fell quite early on Mary Elizabeth's shoulders. Scandalous as such a decision would be considered at the time, Braddon joined a local theatre as an actress, using the assumed name, Mary Seyton. Her career as an actress was brief, lasting only from 1857-1860.

At this point Braddon decided she could better support her family by writing. Her first novel, The Trail of the Serpent, sold in 1861, was immediately followed by the tremendously successful Lady Audley's Secret. Through the publication of her first novel she met John Maxwell, the man with whom she was to spend the rest of her life. They were unable to marry until fourteen years and six children later, due to the commitment of his first wife to an insane asylum. Following her death, their relationship was finally "legally and socially" established.

A combination of all of these factors, and more, within the life of their author makes Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd entertaining and stimulating works. It is understood that Mary Elizabeth Braddon began writing as a means to make money and to

escape the toils and embarrassing classification of actress. As she had to earn her living, her work was geared to suit a public desire for sensational literature. How much of her work was commercially inspired, however, and how much of it was motivated by experiences in her personal life and a desire to express her views of Victorian society is debatable. This desire within an author to change or at least explore some views of the rigid and morally inflexible society of her day is something that can very easily be sensed within her two most famous novels.

Her experiences as an actress can be found in the tremendous performance of Braddon's most famous literary character, Lady Audley. Lady Audley is able to hide the soul of a bigamous murderer behind the most beautiful and gentle façade ever created for a feminine criminal. The fact that Lady Audley is able to completely fool almost everyone in the novel as to her true personality proves to be a tremendous acting job. As a former actress herself, Mary Elizabeth Braddon was able to document in detail exactly how such a capable performer could easily dupe the men that surround her, men who were totally unsuspecting of Lady Audley's true nature and already enthralled with her beauty.

An actress is also mentioned in Aurora Floyd. The title character's mother, Eliza Floyd, is a former actress who married well and assumed a position as a lady of a manor. Here, the reflections of the author/former actress take on the remembrances, not of performance, but of the societal views she experienced as a socially derided actress. The neighbors of the character, Eliza Floyd, look upon her askance because of her background. This attitude doesn't bother her in the least:

If she had meekly eaten the ample dish of humble pie
 which these county families were prepared to set before her
 – if she had licked the dust from the aristocratic shoes,
 courted their patronage, and submitted to be ‘taken up’ by
 them – they might perhaps in time have forgiven her [for
 her lack of a proper background]. But she did none of this.
 If they called upon her, well and good . . . she would
 receive them as serenely as if she had been born in a palace
 . . . [L]et them be as frigidly polite as they pleased, she was
 always easy, candid, gay and good-natured. (10)

This paragraph is a strong statement about social inflexibility, something that, as a former actress and later as the mistress of a home rather than a wife, Mary Elizabeth Braddon would have been accustomed to experiencing herself.

Another parallel between the life and works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon is to be found in the hatred which her character, Lady Audley, displays toward her first husband, George Talboys. Not only is the emotion seemingly parallel, but the actions Lady Audley takes to support herself after he abandons her to go to Australia also seem to reflect Braddon’s own conduct. In the novel, Lady Audley née Helen Maldon, finds that early in their marriage her husband George has proven himself a spendthrift. A disinherited and somewhat spoiled eldest son, he is unable to handle their money and wildly spends their meager savings until it is all gone. His wife remonstrates: "she fairly broke down, and burst into a storm of sobs and lamentations, telling me that I ought not

to have married her if I could give her nothing but poverty and misery" (19). George uses this scene to justify his abandonment of his wife, leaving her to whatever fate, probably starvation, that will come to her. Helen, the soon-to-be Lucy and then Lady Audley, refuses to accept this fate of poverty and degradation. She finds work and eventually a rich man who wishes to marry her. She accepts him, knowing that her marriage is probably bigamous, but is determined to make her own way in life and to achieve the wealth and power she desires. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's father, in abandoning his family, acts as George Talboys does in the novel. He left his wife and child to whatever fate would befall them. Braddon and her mother did not starve either, thanks to their efforts to support themselves. Just as Lady Audley was forced to do, Braddon went out into a world that did not have much to offer in the way of employment to a young gentlewoman. While acting in the theatre was not of the same caliber of "domestic" crime as Lady Audley's bigamy, employment in the form of acting was not considered proper. By earning her living this way, Mary Elizabeth Braddon would be forever condemned as something less than a gentlewoman by Victorian society. It is also interesting that Braddon herself had used an alias when on the stage, an interesting counterpart to the many aliases of Lady Audley. Chiara Briganti sees a definite coactive relationship between Mary Elizabeth Braddon and her evil creation. She writes that "it is perhaps a sign of Braddon's ambivalence toward her heroine/villainess that she allows the novel to bear the title that Helen, alias Lady Audley has so fiercely struggled to retain" (190).

It is really, however, in debating the rationale and grounds with which the women of her time were judged as gentlewomen or even marriageable prospects that the true voice of Mary Elizabeth Braddon steps forward. This viewpoint can be recognized and heard above and beyond the stories themselves. The fact that a young woman who was forced to earn a living was looked down upon by the public seemed not only ridiculous, but also cruel.

As far as those financially-favored young ladies who didn't need to work, their lot was not much easier. Kept as separate and as isolated as hot house flowers, their only hope of change from their incarceration as modest young women, sheltered from any possible corrupting environment by their parents, was to wait for acceptance by a man as his wife. This freedom from the rigid home of their parents usually only gave way to yet another constricted and extremely limited home life. Still, as this hope of marriage was the only acceptable course for a proper young woman, it was devastating to realize that, generally, the main and ultimate criteria for being chosen for marriage was simply and singularly a woman's appearance. Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote of women who escaped this trap of conventionality, or who used its very rigidity to outwit it.

Physical beauty, its effect on the viewer, and the heavy emphasis placed upon it by Victorian society are perhaps the major themes and motifs within Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd. This theme is the recognition that women in Victorian society were not considered individuals at all and that their only redeeming qualities were to be found in their appearance and in their ability to provide a suitable home, comparable to a shrine of worship, for their husbands. Dickens is sometimes criticized, sometimes

lauded, for bringing social awareness to Victorian society regarding the degradation and suffering of the poor. Mary Elizabeth Braddon should receive the same degree of recognition as an author able to combine a story-telling talent with the ability to interweave social commentary into the plot lines of an exciting tale. Braddon goes a step further than Dickens, who addressed human issues discernible and appreciable to many facets of his social and cultural echelon. Braddon, acts as a sort of preliminary version of the feminine social psychologist, discoursing upon an issue that was not commonplace or if acknowledged, given little notice. She explored the issues surrounding the myth of beauty within the Victorian age and in particular, how women, for the most part, were judged and valued by the appearance alone.

Lyn Pykett reveals that even the critics who recognized what Braddon was attempting to bring to light thought the idea of a woman wanting to be and being more than an ornament so revolutionary as to be revolting: "Oliphant's critique of Braddon is couched in the language of class. She implies that the misrepresentation of the world which she detects in the novels of Braddon 'and her like' arises from ignorance of the respectable classes: she suggests that these parvenu writers 'might not be aware how young women of good blood and good training feel'" ("Introduction" xxi). This criticism is ironic when, in fact, Braddon is revealing that it is she, rather than society, that is precisely aware just how these young women feel. Braddon discloses, with such an enticing and subtle manner, within her novels, that in her society a woman was appreciated and valued as one would judge a horse or a decorative piece of artwork and was only given credit for as much sense as either animal or vase. Her characters rebel

against this stereotype. Her character of Lady Audley severely shocked the reading public on two fronts. First, by displaying her knowledge that her beauty gave her power over unsuspecting society and, also, having the intelligence to use this power to dupe those around her. Braddon even gives examples, too, of men that are “too beautiful” and who are given dangerous leeway because of it. Using her own voice, she steps into her own novel to bombast her readers. It is she, the author, not a fictional character, who makes the remark, “heaven help the woman who sells her heart for a handsome face, and awakes, when the bargain has been struck, to discover the foolishness of such an exchange!” (Braddon, Aurora Floyd 181). The same lesson is learned in Lady Audley’s Secret, where those who judge by beauty alone are undone by the beautiful but evil Lady Audley.

Braddon is able to address these issues fully within the excellent guise of exciting “sensation” novels. Part of the artistry of her work is the ability to weave these ethical values into her adventure stories with such intricacy and delicacy that readers can either be struck by the messages or affected by them in an almost subliminal fashion. Braddon not only allows her characters to represent the wrongs, errors, and jeopardy inflicted upon those who followed such a ridiculous and shallow social dictum, but she also had no compunction in allowing her own voice to step into a novel and to give her personal opinion on such matters. Again, speaking as herself, not as a character, in Lady Audley’s Secret, she boldly comments on a fellow female writer’s insight: “With what wonderful wisdom has George Eliot told us that people are not any better because they have long eyelashes!”(181).

Mary Elizabeth Braddon brought these issues to the notice of a public that would find them modernistic and threatening. Her works were read with fascination, not just for the mysteries, but for the “new” sensibility they seemed to impart regarding how the sexes viewed and judged each other.

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