M. E. Braddon's Early Fiction (1860 - 1868)

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PhD

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September, 1989

The thesis seeks to explore the appeal of M. E. Braddon's extremely popular early fiction, to look at its distinguishing characteristics and Braddon's particular relationship with her audience. Ch.1 looks at contemporary critical reviews as an indication of what was feared to be its appeal and at the personal comments about Braddon which were intended to distance women readers from her writing. The two facets of her novels which bore the brunt of critical outrage were her heroines and the accurate but 'improper' experience she made available to women. Ch. 2 focusses on sensational heroines, fictional and real, and the threat they posed to the ideal of domestic happiness within marriage. Ch. 3 looks at the movement in Braddon's fiction at the beginning of her career from stories centring on secrecy between wives and husbands to her notorious best-seller, Lady Audley's Secret, where she deliberately gave the secret to 'the angel in the house', who was consequently framed as mad. It explores Braddon's interest in the contemporary debate on insanity and suggests possible reasons for the absence of mothers in her fiction. Ch. 4 looks at how her reading, particularly of French fiction, contributed to the 'knowing' quality of her writing and suggests why this may have been especially attractive to women. Ch. 5 concentrates on Braddon's experience of theatre and how this informed her writing and her sense of the importance of audience. The last chapter focusses on endings, especially on the memoir which Braddon wrote just before she died and which shows the importance of the women, particularly her mother, who influenced her as a child. It looks at her last novel, at the ending of the 'innocence' which fuelled the creation of 'innocent' sensational heroines, and at the conventional endings of her novels which allowed the 'fantastic space' she provided to be exciting and inspiring.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

All page references in the text to Braddon's novels and short stories published under her own name, with the exception of Mary (1916), are to the Stereotyped Edition (Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., London 1891)

INTRODUCTION

The novelist and dramatist Lucy Clifford (a contributor to Temple Bar, Fraser's, Blackwood's and The Nineteenth Century) wrote to Mary Elizabeth Braddon in 1911 after reading a reprint of her novel Vixen (1879):

> You might have had three reputations ... People can't believe your work can all be on its highest level... because there is so much of it, so many good books, that they think it impossible that anyone could do so much that is good - though of course every book of yours... had only to appear to command its thousand of readers. It is a great triumph. In the far distant years (to come) you will be sifted down, probably, to a dozen or so, and live by those[1].

Braddon's reputation has revived in the last ten years but she is generally known only for her 'pair of bigamy novels', the best sellers Lady Audley's Secret (1862) and Aurora Floyd (1863). She was a prolific writer. It is difficult to be precise about the number of her novels and collections of short stories but from her first novel Three Times Dead (1860) to Mary (published posthumously in 1916) she wrote at least seventy seven, as well as plays, stories for children and a great deal of anonymous or pseudonymous fiction in the 1860s in cheap magazines like the Halfpenny Journal. The periodicals which first published her early fiction in serial form - The Welcome Guest, St. James Magazine, The Sixpenny Magazine, Temple Bar, Once a Week, The London Journal and Belgravia (which she edited) - reached a working and middle class audience of several hundred thousand[2]. Lady Audley's Secret required eight editions between October and December

1862 when it first appeared in 3 volume form and, together with Aurora Floyd, became one of the most widely read novels of the decade in both England and America. By February 1863 there were at least three stage versions[3]. Library editions and cheap re-issues (cloth reprints and the 2/- 'yellow backs' sold on railway platforms), foreign translations and an arrangement from 1873-87 with W. F. Tillotson, the Bolton newspaper proprietor, to publish her fiction in installments in his Lancashire papers and to sell the right to do the same in other newspapers in the English speaking world[4], meant that Mary Braddon had access to a large part of the market for books published in English. Walter Besant calculated this market to have grown from ½ million readers in 1830 to 120 million in 1890[5].

Though a spectacular literary firework Braddon was not the 'comet' the critics assumed would rapidly 'burn out'. She wrote novels for over fifty years and though she did not maintain the height of her initial popularity, she was very popular for most of her writing life. In 1894 Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to her from Samoa describing the eagerness with which traders awaited the arrival of a new schooner, adding, 'It is something to be out and away greater than Scott, Shakespeare, Homer, in the South Seas, and to that you have attained'[6]. She influenced and was read by respected contemporaries. Thackeray (who died in 1863) greatly admired 'Lady Audley's Secret and Dickens' favourite Braddon novel was said by his daughter to have been The Doctor's Wife (1864).[7] George Moore in his Confessions of a Young Man (1886) states that he 'took the first opportunity of stealing the novel' which so excited his parents (Lady Audley's Secret) and 'I read it eagerly, passionately, vehemently. I read its successor, and its successor, I read until I came to a book

called The Doctor's Wife'[8]. Christopher Heywood has argued that Moore drew directly on this novel for his own novel A Mummer's Wife (1885) and has suggested it may also have influenced George Eliot and Hardy in the writing of Middlemarch (1871) and The Return of the Native (1878) respectively[9]. It is possible that Mary Braddon was used as the model for Mrs. Jedwood in Gissing's New Grub Street (1891) whose husband, an energetic and sanguine publisher 'had no great capital, but the stroke of fortune which had wedded him to a popular novelist enabled him to count on steady profit from one source', and for Jane Highmore in Henry James' short story, 'The Next Time' (1895)[10]. In the light of her enormous popularity and the fact that she was read by such generally respected writers it is surprising that so little critical attention has been given to what she actually wrote. Until recently she has been dismissively categorised as a novelist whose ephemeral fiction merely happened to suit the public mood of the moment.

The mid-nineteenth century was an age of violent, sensational crime and spectacular events - one of the most resonant of which was Blondin's tight-rope walk across Niagara Falls, reproduced a year later in 1861 at Crystal Palace. There followed a spate of imitations throughout the country, including the pregnant performer who fell to her death because the rope she balanced on had become frayed through overuse, 'economics' not allowing it to be replaced. There was perhaps a common psychology responding to fact and fiction and sensation novels in general flourished. They might be characterised as 'exploring the dramatic side of familiar things' and the elements that were identified as their main characteristics were equally true of Braddon's fiction. They drew on the techniques of popular stage

melodrama, intensifying experience in a threatening context, concentrating on action and dialogue to dramatise a sense of conflict with a hostile world. As in earlier Gothic fiction the drama of the tale has its roots in psychological/emotional/sexual disturbance - the fears and desires of nightmare and fantasy. Though the 'known', the recognized, (often unwillingly or sub-consciously), is always an element, indeed perhaps the source, of fantasy and nightmare, sensation novels characteristically foregrounded the familiar. Their apparently extraordinary tales (though they insisted that much of their material was drawn from factual reports) took place within a carefully documented, recognizable, 'realistic' and apparently 'respectable' setting. The drama evolved out of threat and mystery, which in turn usually had its roots in crime or immorality. Sensation novels were 'novels with a secret' but most importantly, in Henry James' phrase, they were about 'the mysteries which are at our own doors'[11].

In this sense there was always an element of social criticism, always an exposure of the gap between appearance and reality, always to some extent an undermining of respectability, moral certainties, authority. However, a female writer's sense of 'something which is always going on beneath the surface', of socially required secrecy, and an assumed female reader's understanding of what she is being told, particularly about a heroine by her female creator, is specifically connected to their place in a power structure where for women there is always a sexual element. Braddon's 'secrets' involved female passion and sexuality and male sexual threat, the heroine's past and the possibilities of independent female action. Her plots centred on mistaken or unknown identity, ignorance and hidden motive.

She realised very quickly the potential of pivoting a novel on a secret held by a woman. Her critics implied that there was a falsity in these 'frantic attempts by any kind of black art or mad psychology to get some grandeur and sacredness restored to life - or if not sacredness and grandeur at least horror and mystery'[12], yet her readers, whether or not they identified with her troublesome vision, recognized it and enjoyed its expression. She did not need to inject a tension into her material, but contrived to restrict and ultimately distort so that its threat was moderated or masked through irony, its implications and offensive potential caged to an extent by conventionalities. I want to explore the balancing act her fiction performs between recognition and compensation, a compromising tight rope walk which looked dangerous and consequently excited an enormous audience, upon whose different constituents she kept a very knowing eye.

Discussion of 'sensation fiction' has until recently concentrated on Dickens, Reade and Collins[13]. Without doubt they influenced Braddon and she admired their work. She told Edmund Yates that though she had given her chief study to Bulwer Lytton and Balzac, reading their novels over and over again during the early period of her writing and regarding them as 'the great masters of prose fiction', she had experienced 'more pleasure in reading Dickens than any other author dead or alive'.[14] Charles Reade said of her, 'Her fertility of invention is boundless, her industry phenomenal, her style sound and vigorous and she has rare dramatic instincts',[15] and she was grateful for the support he and Bulwer Lytton gave her when she was being attacked most viciously by the critics and her

confidence was at its most fragile:

> Believe me I have a very poor opinion of my own powers and can only smile at the word 'genius' when applied by you to me. It is quite as much as I can do to struggle against the disgust and depression occasioned by little carping criticisms which teach me nothing and indeed seem intended only to wcund and annoy. For the last three weeks I have lived in a perpetual fever - and if it were not for the kindness of yourself and Charles Reade I should begin to think of myself as a kind of literary Pariah.[16]

She also admitted the influence of Collins:

> My admiration for 'The Woman in White' inspired me with the idea of 'Lady Audley' as a novel of construction and character. Previously my efforts had been in the direction of Bulwer, long conversations, a great deal of sentiment; you know what I mean. I suppose every young writer starts with an ideal author: Bulwer was mine, and the late Lord Lytton took great interest in my work.[17]

But these male writers were also her commerical rivals and to a certain extent she emulated them, studying what they did and attempting to do better. She was both respectful of their authority and uncomfortable with it in a way that might have been restricting, as a letter to Bulwer Lytton written in November or December 1864 shows:

> My next story is to begin in Temple Bar in January [Sir Jasper's Tenant], if I live - and is to be sensational, for Wilkie Collins in Cornhill will be a mcst powerful opponent and I can only fight him with his own weapons - mystery, crime etc. You see I am obliged to sink my own inclinations in deference to the interests of the magazine...[18]

In an interview with Joseph Hatton in 1887 she said , 'Wilkie Collins is assuredly my literary father'.[19] As for so many of her fictional

heroines, father figures (whether they were literary, critical, genetic, marital or symbolic) loomed large for Mary Braddon. Her sense of their weaknesses and limitations but also of their power fuelled an imaginative expression of her own unease. Instinct and experience equipped her to transform the tension into dramatic fiction, making use of material while she mocked it, as this letter to Yates when he was editing Temple Bar shows:

> The Balzac-morbid-anatomy school is my especial delight, but it seems you want the downright sensational: floppings at the end of chapters, and bits of paper hidden in secret drawers, bank notes and title deeds under the carpet, and a part of the body putrefying in a coal-scuttle. By the bye, what a splendid novel, a la Wilkie Collins, one might write on a protracted search for the missing members of a murdered man, dividing the tale nct into books but bits! 'BIT THE FIRST:The leg in the gray stocking found at Deptford'. 'BIT THE SECOND:The white hand and the onyx ring with half an initial letter (unknown) and crest, skull with a coronet, found in an Alpine crevasse!'
>
> Seriously though, you want a sensational fiction... I cannot promise you anything new, when... everything on this earth seems to have been done, and done again!... I will give the kaleidoscope (which I cannot spell) another turn, and will do my very best with the bits of old glass and pins and rubbish.
>
> There they all are - the young lady who has married a burglar and who does not want to introduce him to her friends; the duke... who comes into the world with six and thirty pages of graphic detail, and goes out of it without having said 'bo!' to a goose, the two brothers who are perpetually taken for one another; the twin sisters, ditto, ditto; the high bred and conscientious banker, who has made away with everybody's title deeds. Any novel combination of the well-known figures is completely at your service, workmanship careful, delivery prompt.[20]

Ignoring the pressures and tensions this cynical humour and self deprecation reveals, one could argue that such comments show that

Braddon herself believed the sort of novels she was writing to be little more than slickly formulaic, and a crude explanation of her popularity might be that she knew what the reading public required and she was skilful enough to provide variations until they had had enough. Her mentor Bulwer Lytton rebuked her for her lack of earnestness though her humour made her appear more confident than she was. Demands for different types of performances came from different spheres. She had to find a way of performing herself that did not blatantly antagonise those parts of the audience whose applause she valued. Not surprisingly, she told Bulwer Lytton that the 'behind the scenes' of literature had in a manner demoralized her:

> I have learned to look at everything in a mercantile sense, and to write solely for the circulating library reader, whose palette (sic) requires strong meat, and is not very particular to the quality thereof ... I want to serve two masters. I want to be artistic and to please you. I want to be sensational and to please Mudie's subscribers.[21]

I want to look at her awareness of readership and at the strategies she adopted to be to some extent her own mistress and to please herself.

I also want to try to account for her particular appeal and the antagonism it aroused. Because the plots of the two early novels through which she gained notoriety both involved bigamy, Braddon's distinction from other sensation writers came to be defined through her use of this theme. Thomas Hood made fun of her in Beeton's Christmas Annual 1864 in the form of two cartoon strips entitled 'Quintilia the Quadrigamist: or, the Heir and the Hounds' and 'Maurora Maudeley: or, Bigamy and Buttons'.[22] More snidely and more revealingly, since fairground animals were usually thought remarkable

for their capacity to perform actions more common to men, like smoking a pipe or drinking a glass of ale, the Westminster Review accused Miss Braddon of parading a 'big black bigamy baboon' to incite the curiosity of young female readers:

> When Richardson, the showman, went about with his menagerie, he had a big black baboon, whose habits were so filthy and whose behaviour was so disgusting, that respectable people constantly remonstrated with him for exhibiting such an animal. Richardson's answer invariably was, 'Bless you, if it wasn't for that big black baboon I should be ruined; it attracts all the young girls in the country'.[23]

It would seem though, that she soon became bored with baboons and, versatile showwoman as she was, was more inclined to bring on the boars and the bears and the snakes in the menagerie. She wrote only two 'bigamy novels' and these at a time when bigamy was already a conventional plot device. As Jeanne Fahnestock points out the peak years 1862-66 produced a whole crop of permutations of real/apparent/accidental/intentional bigamous marriages as plot conventions.[24] In 1857 the Matrimonial Causes Act liberalised divorce laws and set up a Court with all the powers necessary to dissolve marriages. (A husband could petition on the grounds of adultery. A wife had also to prove desertion, cruelty, incest, rape, sodomy or bestiality.) Contemporary literature began to reflect this disillusionment with the institution of marriage and fascination with escape. It reflected too, the interest in the Yelverton bigamy case of 1861. But Mary Braddon had a more personal reason for being interested in the complexities of the English marriage law. She was a young novelist, very much dependent on Mudie's support and the thousands of 'respectable' subscribers to his library, living with

the publisher John Maxwell who was already married and whose wife was in an asylum in Dublin. She was also, as Fahnestock perceptively notes, particularly 'adept at using news sources for her literary productions', having already written her long poem Garibaldi (1861) from the columns of The Times. Some critics' disgust at her novels led them to conclude that 'such women as many of Miss Braddon's heroines would have become mistresses just as soon as bigamists'.[25]

It would be a mistake and one which, understandably, Victorian critics were inclined to make, to assume that the subversive implications of Braddon's novels reflected chiefly on the authority of the husband. She was consistently much more concerned with patriarchal authority in all its manifestations and especially with daughters' relations to this. One possible explanation of her popularity and the viciousness of the attacks upon her is that she gave imaginative expression to 'insubordinate' desires, particularly through encouraging respect, if not simple identification, for heroines who refused to be confined within the conventionally expected, dependent roles of daughter and wife. She clearly preferred to 'reward' rather than punish their waywardness but this is often done through a concluding image of the happy home, the very domestic fulfillment which her heroine's actions throughout the novel have been interrogating. In this way she protects both her readers and consequently herself from the implications of the responses she has invited.

I want to explore the appeal of the 'balancing act' she managed to perform within her fiction, looking particularly at the novels of the early sensational period up to her breakdown in 1868. A cartoon in The Mask in June of that year shows her as a circus performer

balancing on the back of the horse Belgravia while jumping through Maxwell's hoops of saleable novels. By 1881 a Punch caricature entitled 'Just as I am!' shows her confidently tickling the chin of horror-filled, gaping-mouthed Sensation while looking out at the reader very knowingly, with a smile that seems to say, 'If you like'.[26] Without doubt Mary Braddon liked to entertain and she was an inventive, uninhibitedly imaginative entertainer, but like the actress she originally was, she was prepared to assume roles, sometimes to voice the required lines. She was conscious that roles could be explored, their boundaries blurred and room left for irony in the interpretation; however if she wanted the applause - which she did - her own sensitivity about what the audience would accept would impose limits. She was both a clear and perceptive writer and yet characteristically ambiguous. She was not without respect for her readers whose taste made her rich and allowed her to support an extended family and to buy five fine houses. She was not impervious to the critics and the authority of established male writers like Bulwer Lytton who constantly told her what she ought to be writing, but in spite of her own frustration, she accepted compromise because she recognised the importance of audience, allowing her own various interests development and her perceptions veiled expression. To do this she necessarily developed a protective cynicism, a sense of humour about herself which extended to self-parody, an ironic tone and a very cool, unflinching eye.

CHAPTER ONE

Research into the appeal of popular twentieth century literature has raised the question of whether mass fiction re-inforces conventional attitudes or, however, minimally, undermines them. Feminists have tried to assess how women's reading affects their views of themselves and the effects this may have.[1] They have come to contradictory conclusions but broadly, with some reservations about how conscious mass art's management of (particularly female) desire might be, I think most feminists would accept Frederic Jameson's analysis of how the text works and, by implication, why it is so appealing. He contends that mass art does not create 'false anxieties', manipulate 'false needs' or impose a false consciousness but performs 'a transformational work on [real] social and political anxieties and fantasies.'[2] When Janice Radway examined a specifically female readership - regular readers of popular romantic fiction - for her survey Reading the Romance (1984) she looked at the act of reading from two perspectives: as it was understood by the women themselves and the covert significance of the narrative structure. In her attempt to comprehend what the women understood themselves to be gaining from their reading while simultaneously revealing how that practice and self-understanding had tacit, unintended effects and implications, she found that the first perspective suggested romance reading was oppositional because it allowed the women to refuse momentarily their self-abnegating role. The second perspective embodied a simple recapitulation and recommendation of patriarchy and its constituent social practices and

ideologies. In other words her approach 'provided clues to both the deprivation that prompts their activity and the fears that are assuaged and managed in the reading experience.'[3]

It seems to me that sensation fiction - similarly categorised as formulaic with a very large popular appeal, similarly assumed to be mainly read by women - worked in a very similar way but the obvious problem when one attempts to analyse the appeal of nineteenth century fiction is that there is no easy direct access to the common reader. The alternative I have adopted is to take contemporary critical reviews as an indication, a gauge of what was feared to be its appeal and to look at the specific characteristics which were attacked. This raises the question of how far the characteristics cited feel to be accurately perceived and how far they seem to indicate an 'hysterical' response, though this is perhaps an inappropriate word since the criticism was largely male and feels very purposeful. Sensation fiction in general was felt by 'authority' (whether literary, religious or social) to be both deplorable and potentially threatening. When the criticism was directed at the appeal of these novels written by a woman, as in Mary Braddon's case, for an assumed female audience, it took on, in an attempt to counteract their attraction, a particularly nasty personal edge directed at her sex and status.

Throughout the criticism of the sixties there is a horror of the popular literature enjoyed by the working classes being shared by the middle classes and repeated reference (ranging from the snide to the outraged) to the kitchen boys, cooks, and nursery-maids 'whose taste is now leading a fashion in the world of fiction.'[4] Sensation literature's descent from the Erotikoi, Gothic romance and the

highway novels featuring Dick Turpin, Claude Duval and Jack Sheppard was stressed and Braddon's place in this disreputable tradition emphasized. A review of Lady Audley's Secret commented that' the classes who would once have read Mrs Radcliffe now pore over stories as absurd as hers'.[5] The link with the 'penny dreadfuls', to which Braddon was a contributor, was mentioned to discredit genre and writer. She certainly did a lot of literary hackwork, contributing seven novels to Maxwell's Halfpenny Journal between July 1861 and June 1865[6] and another, 'Diavola; or, The Woman's Battle', to the London Journal (1866-67),[7] and she knew its value:

> This work is most piratical stuff... The amount of crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning and general infamy required by the Halfpenny reader is something terrible. I am just going to do a little paracide [sic] for this week's supply.'[8]

The Braddon novels which her middle class audience were more likely to read often shared some of the characteristics of the penny novel serials - 'fierce melodrama', 'short dialogues and paragraphs on the French pattern', 'a "strong situation" dragged in by the neck and shoulders for the end.'[9] This base source was continually 'placed' by critics in an attempt to maintain distance and separateness from it for middle class readers, as in the Spectator's review of Lady Audley's Secret:

> There are classes who love the horrible and the grotesque. We do not object particularly to their gratification - provided that those who cater to them are content with their true place in literature, which is not above the basement.[10]

It was precisely the household which was under threat. For sensation novelists Australia may have been a goldfield in terms of plot

structure, making 'bigamy , missing letters, the rapid accumulation of money, and misreported deaths amazingly feasible'[11] but a crucial characteristic of sensation fiction was felt to be its proximity, not just in time but in place. Its secrets were located within the middle-class home. Beyond the horror at a literature whose 'appropriate' appeal to the lower classes was spreading upwards, it was intolerable that influence was being exerted by women writers which broke down the boundaries between the carefully defined spheres within the home itself, particularly if this was implying ccmmon factors in the relationship of the women of the household, whether above or below stairs, to the master. Braddon was singled out for particular mention:

> Her achievements may not command our respect; but they are very notable, and almost unexampled. Others before her have written stories of blood and lust, of atrocious crimes and hardened criminals, and these have excited the interest of a very wide circle of readers. But the class that welcomed them was the lowest in the social scale, as well as in mental capacity. To Miss Braddon belongs the credit of having penned similar stories in easy and correct English, and published them in three volumes in place of issuing them in penny numbers. She may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing Room[12].

Significantly, there was repeated allusion to the 'woman's crime' of poisoning. In spite of the notorious mid-Victorian cases of the poisoning physicians it was young, middle-class Madeleine Smith who had captured the country's imagination when she was tried for poisoning her lover in 1857[13]. With reference to sensation novels the suggestion was of an evil-minded conspiracy emanating from

(presumably the female housekeeper or cook) below stairs which polluted the appetites of the middle classes. It was necessary to stress the lack of taste in an appetite for this novel fare. Certainly the pleasure of consuming Braddon's stories was felt to have a piquancy beyond what was 'naughty but nice'. Hence The Examiner told the story of,

> an exquisite gentleman to whom everything upon his daintily appointed breakfast table is uneatable. 'Did you ever', asks his doctor, who is breakfasting with him, 'try a red herring?' Here is a glorious idea, here is an absolutely new sensation to be got; the faithful serving man is despatched immediately to Fortnum and Mason's for a red herring. He goes to a chandler's shop in a back alley to buy the herring, and his master eats the whole of it with utmost relish. There are some fastidious novel-readers to whom one of Miss Braddon's stories may have, in this way, the relish of a penny herring out of the back alley.[14]

The irony was that while the master may have been enjoying his red herring regardless of where it came from, his wife, daughters and possibly their female servants were probably enjoying more various and substantial fare from the same source, and potentially concocting dishes that he and his male guests would find hard to swallow.

When Braddon was attacked for her sensuality and for encouraging self-indulgence images of the breakdown of household order were evoked. The Christian Remembrancer referred to:

> that one feature of housekeeping - that one geniality which our authoress never withholds from an individual or a society worthy of her sympathy. No landlady - not Mrs. Gamp herself - has a greater horror of locks and keys, and distinct times for eating and drinking which may not be anticipated or unduly prolonged,

> than she manifests on every occasion where the expression of the sentiment is possible. The word 'unlimited' is dear to her. It atones even for homely surroundings otherwise abhorrent. Whenever something to eat and drink and smoke is always going, her spirit can conceive the idea of comfort, repose and positive satisfaction.[15]

Many critics warned of the disruption to social order which might ensue. That women should have something in common which made class boundaries less relevant was inadmissable and the nature of the shared response and the possible explanations of it went unexamined. It was threat enough that neither the novels, nor their women readers and writers were remaining in their 'proper' place. Some critics, like Francis Paget in his book Lucretia : or, The Heroine of the Nineteenth Century (1868) specifically linked this to potential revolution, as in France. His fear was that sensation novels would 'rapidly and largely produce such a condition of society as they portray; they will create the characters they depict' and crucially, 'women will cease to set store upon purity and an unblemished reputation'. His outrage was directed chiefly at,

> the writers of these books, ay, of the very foulest of them, - ... - these writers are, some by their own admission, some by internal evidence, (where the publication is anonymous), women; and the worst of them, UNMARRIED WOMEN!
>
> No man would have dared to write and publish such books as some of these are: no man could have written such delineations of female passion ... they are women who, by their writings, have been doing the work of the enemy of souls, glossing over vice, making profligacy attractive, detailing with licentious minuteness the workings of unbridled passions, encouraging vanity, extravagance, wilfulness, selfishness, in their worst forms; and not scrupling to pollute their pages with oaths and

> blasphemies. Women have done this, - have thus abused their power, and prostituted their gifts. (p. 305)

In the nineteenth century prostitution was not a charge that would have been brcught against a male writer and with most women writers it was not necessary to make the analogy so forcibly. The more widespread female literacy and the appeal of novels which questioned traditional sexual mcrality, the more imperative it was to maintain sccial control over female readers. Hence distance, disassociation of 'respectable' middle class wives and their marriageable daughters from disreputable women writers and their mercenary and immoral fictional performances was encouraged.

It is interesting to note the slippage in descriptions of the polluting effect of contact with this diseased and unsettling fiction. Sensation novels appealed to a range of bodily appetites. There is an implication that they were not only a poison but a bestial virus, likened to the lycanthropy of the middle ages[16] and ccntemporary venereal disease. They were seen as 'indications of a wide spread corruption' of which they were 'in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply'.[17] In an age of growing concern at the spread of both, if sensation novels were like rampant venereal disease, their communicators were prostitutes. The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, '66, and '69 (providing for the compulsory medical examination of any woman believed to be soliciting, the registration and licensing of prostitutes in seaports and garrison towns), brutally and misogynistically attempted tc contain the problem by citing it solely within the working class or

'fallen' female body. Just as the men who infected their wives, other women and unborn children were not examined, male writers were not vulnerable to this specifically sexual 'placing' but working and heterosexual women in general and women writers in particular were subjected to this sexual abuse.

Thus when reviewers wanted to distance middle-class women readers from an educated and appealing woman writer like Braddon much more than class difference was stressed. Not only was she once a writer for Reynolds Miscellany but she was also a provincial actress, a light lady of the stage.[18] Not only was she unaware of the cultural knowledge of 'gentlemen who have been educated at English public schools and English universities'[19] and hence could hardly be a lady but she was also apparently ignorant of how well-bred women felt. Complaining of the heroines of women's novels Margaret Oliphant stated with righteous indignation:

> The girls of our acquaintance in general are very nice girls; they do not, so far as we are aware... pant for indiscriminate kisses, or go mad for unattainable men... It is thus that Miss Braddon and Miss Thomas and a host of other writers, explain their feelings. These ladies might not know, it is quite possible, any better. They might not be aware how young women of good blood and good training feel. The perplexing fact is, that the subjects of this slander make no objection to it. Protests are being raised everywhere in abundance but against this misrepresentation there is no protest... the fact that this new and disgusting picture of what professes to be the female heart, comes from the hands of women, and is tacitly accepted by them as real, is not in any way to be laughed at.[20]

Braddon, 'most deeply stung by this uncalled for unjustifiable charge' complained angrily, 'Now can anything exceed the covert

insolence of this?' She assumed the writer was a man:

> Who is this writer who dares to tell me that I do not know how a virtuous or well-bred woman feels. Does he judge by the evidence of my books. I say boldly- No.

and speculated, 'Is this gentleman one of the "nice men", who are always nasty men, I wonder, by the bye'.[21] Certainly there was a nasty edge to the criticism, to the point where one wonders whether The Athenaeum critic, for example, knew in 1863 that Braddon had been living with John Maxwell for over two years and had two children by him. She was taken to task over her ignorance of the marriage service because in John Marchmont's Legacy (1863) a naive female character misquoted it when explaining to her husband that all her wealth was his:

> 'I remember the words in the Marriage Service, "with all my goods I thee endow"'. When Miss Braddon knows more about the Marriage Service than she does at present, she will know that these words are uttered by the bridegroom, - not the bride: and that, instead of conveying to the person addressed all the speaker's property, they are merely a formal recognition of her rights to dowry'.[22]

It may be that Braddon intended her heroine's misapprehension as a comment on the reality of the laws affecting a married woman's property rights but whether the confusion was deliberate or not, the critic's comment is a particularly pointed one. It would not have been made about an unmarried male writer and would not have been intended to sting in the same way.

Reference was made to trade and, by implication, the money involved in the intercourse of readers and writer's text but when the seller was a woman (the pimping role of male publishers being

conveniently ignored) the intended slur went beyond class to sex. Paradoxically the attacks were launched on two fronts, recognising both the female market and the whorish writer. Hence, for example, in the same article The Saturday Review could condescendingly concede that in the commercial atmosphere which floated around works of Miss Braddon's class she could produce 'as good a specimen of the marketable ladies' novel as could be found', and accuse her of being a 'literary *fille du régiment*'. The critic admits her 'knowing' quality has a certain piquancy for the male reader but it should not attract middle class ladies:

> She knows all about men and their ways. She is up to everything. For the first time we have the pleasure of perusing a description, from the pen of a lady, of all the tastes and sport and literature of the sort of men who are born to amuse themselves. There is something quaint and tickling in finding that the pages of a lady's novel show an accurate knowledge of sporting, horses, dog-carts, tobacco, the signs of intoxication, and betting. Miss Braddon is a literary fille du regiment, and writes like a dashing young officer ... the usual meek lady -novelist must console herself with thinking that it does not fall to the lot of every woman to be up in tobacco or brandy-and-water, and horse flesh.[23]

While denigrating both the bold woman who knows and the domesticated lady who does not, the reviewer who is freely familiar with both is at pains to stress the 'coarseness' which he hopes will clearly maintain the distance between the two. This sort of personally directed analogy must have felt and been intended to feel much more vicious than that directed at the disreputable and low class nature of sensation fiction in general.

It also, I think, highlights one of Braddon's great attractions;

she challenged the definition of women's 'legitimate' experience. Her accurate, authoritative but 'improper' details frequently referred to experiences normally closed or only vaguely known to middle-class women. 'It has' presumed the Saturday Review, 'been Miss Braddon's lot to see a phase of life open to few ladies and she freely draws upon what accident has furnished her with'.[24] I would argue that it is precisely the combination of what chance and choice furnished her with - her experience of being brought up without a respectable father by a strong, educated mother with a love of literature, whom she later supported through the disreputable profession of acting, then, at a time of financial pressure, providing for the man she lived with and their illegitimate children through her writing - that formed the source of her particular strengths and characteristics. Her novels implied that neither her sympathetic heroines nor her respectable women readers would be any the worse for knowing what their husbands, fathers, and sons probably knew only too well and that, in fact, women were better off knowing.

The critical response to this was double-edged. On the one hand, it repeatedly questioned how Braddon had access to such disreputable detail and consequently 'placed' her through slurs on her morality, as in W. Fraser Rae's review in the North British Review:

> The authoress exhibits great familiarity with the customs of the least reputable district of London. She tells us Francis Tredethlyn 'found that Bohemia was a kind of Belgravia in electro-plate'... To us it is a mystery far more perplexing than anything in these novels, how a lady should be able to describe with such minuteness what she designates as 'remote and unapproachable regions, whose very names were only to be spoken in hushed accents over the fourth bottle of Chambertin or Clos

Vougect at a bachelor's'.[25]

It also, through back-handed praise which acceded her 'knowingness' but was never without disparagement of her personal standing, denigrated the curiosity of her female readers. Henry James, for example, at twenty two years old and eight years Braddon's junior, commented on the interest 'our sisters and daughters' showed in her 'illegitimate world':

> Miss Braddon writes neither fine English nor slovenly English; not she. She writes what we may call very knowing English. If her readers have not read George Eliot and Thackeray and all the great authorities, she assuredly has, and, like everyone else, she is the better for it. With a telling subject and a knowing style she proceeds to get up her photograph. These require shrewd observations and wide experience; Miss Braddon has both. Like all women, she has a turn for color: she knows how to paint. She overloads her canvas with detail. It is the peculiar character of these details that constitute her chief force. They betray an intimate acquaintance with that disorderly half of society which becomes everyday a greater object of interest to the orderly half. They intimate that, to use an irresistible vulgarism, Miss Braddon 'has been there'. The novelist who interprets the illegitimate world to the legitimate world, commands from the nature of his (sic) position a certain popularity. Miss Braddon deals familiarly with gamblers and betting men, and flashy reprobates of every description. She knows much that ladies are not accustomed to know, but that they are appparently very glad to learn. The names of drinks, the technicalities of the faro-table, the lingo of the turf, the talk natural to a crowd of fast men at supper, when there are no ladies present but Miss Braddon, the way one gentleman knocks another down - all these things - the exact local coloring of Bohemia - our sisters and daughters may learn from these works. These things are the incidents of vice; and vice, as is well known, even modern civilized, elegant, prosaic vice, has its romance. Of this romance Miss Braddon has taken advantage, and

> the secret of her success is, simply, that she has done her work better than her predecessors.[26]

Braddon's 'knowing' not only provided her with a wide range of material through which she could imaginatively expand the social space of her readers but her experience as an actress developed a specifically 'dramatic' sense (the ability to 'hear' dialogue, a strong visual sense and perception of behaviour pressurized by action at a particular moment, the importance of pace in the structure of plot, the manipulation of climax and denouement). Her experience of the theatre also revealed how powerful but potentially offensive material was adapted and 'sugared' to suit Victorian propriety and she certainly reworked her own reading, particularly of French fiction and drama, in this way. In fact a good deal of her apparent 'experience' came from an extraordinary capacity to imaginatively rework what she had read. Because her parents were separated (due to her 'respectable' father's infidelity) she could write with some knowledge of male demands, of weakness and violence, and even make the possibility of conventional male heroism irrelevant. Brought up by a mother who supported her in her stage career, she knew a female capacity for independence and passion which was very different from the Victorian feminine ideal and conventional notions of duty (which presumably most of her readers were attempting to live by).

It becomes very clear that however much critics voiced concern for the young, their real worry was the effect on women, particularly those who might be expected to hold to 'respectable' middle class values. The Reverend Francis Paget devoted a whole book to describing the 'kind of follies, scrapes and difficulties, into some of which a girl might not improbably fall who should take the

sensation novel as her guide in the common-place events of everyday life'[27]. Generally, her vulnerability was felt to be much greater if the writer was a woman. In an attack on 'the clever ladies who supply our circulating libraries' The Saturday Review felt it necessary to define woman's proper experience and apt source of fulfilment for those who were in danger of questioning it:

> Her power, in the highest and best sense, rests on isolation, not on contact with the world, however successful. It is not by practising in law courts, and lecturing on platforms, but by gradually leavening society with her greater purity and disinterestedness, that the highest purpose of her being is fulfilled.

However, 'nowadays', as opposed to the values one might find expressed in novels of the 'pre-Braddonian period',

> A wave of materialism has succeeded on the crest of which novels in which woman plays a very different and much more exciting part still ride in triumph. If, as French sociologists are never tired of telling us, woman in a special manner reflects her surroundings, it is only natural that the clever ladies who supply our circulating libraries should reflect in their writings the change in spirit and taste of the age, and go to Bow Street and the Divorce Court for their inspirations... The earthy, sensuous tone of the class of novel now so popular has unquestionably contributed in no small degree tc debauch the taste and lead the judgement astray .[28]

'Our Female Sensation Novelists' were felt to be inciting a re-reading of and a rebellion against the values of patriarchal middle class society:

> The 'sensation' novel of our time, however extravagant and unnatural, yet is a sign of the times - the evidence of a certain turn of thought and action, of an impatience of old restraints,

> and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society.[29]

Furthermore, it was recognised that the danger to women (readers) from women (writers) was primarily effective through women (heroines). The critics realised early in the decade that rebellious 'experienced' heroines were proving very attractive and their possible influence was taken seriously:

> It is only one step, in the case of ninety-nine women out of every hundred, from the breach of social laws to the breach of moral ones ... Hence the danger of setting the defiance of conventional usages in an attractive light. And, though we do not think that any girl who is truly a lady will be led astray by the example either of Lady Audley or Kate O'Reilly, yet there is a class, only just below that of ladies, upon whom we would not answer for the effect being equally innoxious.[30]

There was concern, with some justification, about the 'immoral' effects, the implications, of Braddon's heroines and they, together with the 'experience' their creator was revealing, bore the brunt of the critical outrage.

One tactic used to discredit the novels was to emphasize their absurdity. Laughing at their excesses was a common response to sensation novels in general. Punch parodied the stories in The London Journal with a five-part serial, 'Mokeanna or, The White Witness, a Tale of the Times', 'Dramatically divided into Parts'. It satirised sensationalism in its mock prospectus of a new journal, 'The Sensation Times', which would 'devote itself to Harrowing the Mind, making the Flesh Creep, causing the Hair to Stand on End, Giving Shocks to the Nervous System, Destroying Conventional Moralities, and generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic

Avocations of Life'[31]. In America one of Bret Harte's Condensed Novels (1867) was entitled 'Selina Sedilia. By Miss M. E. B--dd-n and Mrs. H-n-y W-d'[32], and W. S. Gilbert composed a Bab ballad, 'The Sensation Captain' (1868) and an operetta A Sensation Novel in Three Volumes (1871) which summed up the 'crucial' ingredients:

> Take of foolscap half-a-ream,
> Take, o take, a convict's dream,
> Lynch pin, fallen from a carriage,
> Forged certificate of marriage,
> Money wrongly won at whist,
> Finger of a bigamist,
> Cobweb from mysterious vaults,
> Arsenic sold as Epsom Salts,
> Pocket-knife with bloodstained blade,
> Telegram some weeks delayed,
> Parliamentary Committee,
> Joint Stock panic in the City
> Trial at Old Bailey bar,
> Take a Newgate calendar,
> Take a common jury's finding,
> Take a most attractive binding...[32]

However the response to Braddon went beyond Punch's enjoyment of a joke, the making fun of her in mock-nursery rhymes:

> Ding dong bell, Talbot's in the well,
> Who put him in ? Lady Audley's been .

When criticism focussed on what was seen as specific and crucial to her novels – bigamy – the mockery was more scornful than playful:

> Forbid her bigamy, and Miss Braddon has little to tell the world that can possibly induce it to turn aside for a moment to listen to her. It is the one string to her instrument, and that removed, the rest is only fit for the fire[33]

Braddon actually wrote only 'a pair of bigamy novels' - Lady Audley's Secret, (1862) and Aurora Floyd (1863) - but significantly, unlike Theresa Longworth in the famous court case against Major Yelverton in 1861 which probably inspired public interest in the theme, it was her

heroines who were the bigamists, not, as was far more common, the men. Geraldine Jewsbury was quick to realise that bigamy was not objectionable merely as a repeated plot device. What was disturbing about bigamy was what it implied about marriage:

> Heroes and heroines of the present generation of novels rarely dispense with the marriage ceremony altogether, - it would be a want of propriety which would shock both author and reader; but illegal marriages and supernumerary ceremonies are the order of the day. Novels have always some basis of probability; they seldom paint an entirely false picture of manners; and as bigamy and the conditions to which bigamy is allied form the basis of every second novel that has been published for some time past, we must conclude that there is a great deal of latent sympathy with this state of things, which an author can appeal to with the certainty of exciting the reader's lively interest ... This tendency to bigamy in works of fiction points to a joint in cur social armour. Our marriage laws are confessedly imperfect and open to hair-breadth escapes, which offer a fascinating complication not devoid of probability.[34]

Again, almost inevitably, and particularly painfully since in 1864 the journalist Richard Knowles had declared in several papers that Maxwell was still married to his sister-in-law[35], the comments on Braddon reflected on her personal status:

> She has brought in the reign of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime, which no doubt shows a certain deference to the British relish for law and order. It goes against the seventh commandment, nc doubt, but does it in a legitimate sort of way, and is an invention which could only have been possible to an English woman knowing the attraction of impropriety, and yet loving the shelter of the law.[36]

Braddon's use of bigamy was felt to be an obvious example of a craving for fundamental change because it disturbed 'the reader's

sense of the stability of things, and opens a new, untried vista of what may be'.[37]

Even though it might be shown she did not often use bigamy, her novels invariably used other crimes. 'Crime is inseparable from the sensation novel, and so is sympathy with crime, however carefully the author professes, and may even suppose himself [sic] to guard against the danger by periodical disclaimers and protests' wrote The Christian Remembrancer in its discussion of 'Our Female Sensation Novelists'. One problem was Braddon's unfortunate tendency to make her villains indistinguishable from respectable men, particularly if they were fathers, like the heroine's in The Doctor's Wife (1864):

> It is not known in what manner Mr. Sleaford earns money, but he is supposed to be a member of the legal profession. The truth is that he is the chief of a gang of forgers.[38]

This implied a radical social critique and try as they might, and some critics tried very hard indeed, to insist that it was absurd, others recognised that the real threat lay in its credibility.

> It is dangerous in proportion as the murderers and forgers and bigamists and adulterers are people like ourselves, such as we might meet any day in ordinary society.[39]

Another problem was that although she was not supposed to have any credible male characters, neither did she treat them as static melodramatic 'types'. They did change in ways that for her could outweigh their previous exertions of power (whereas for the critic these changes were apparently trivial or even irrelevant compared to previous crimes). W. Fraser Rae referred to Eleanor's Victory (1863):

> The moral of the story seems to be, that to cheat an old man at cards and to forge a will are no impediments to attaining

> distinction in the world, and, indeed, are rather venial offences. Let the authoress speak for herself on this momentous point: 'And although the artist did not become a good man all in a moment, like the repentant villain of a stage play, he did take to heart the lesson of his youth. He was tenderly affectionate to the mother who had suffered so much by reason of his errors and he made a very tolerable husband to a most devoted little wife.[40]

While she exposed the hypocrisy of men in positions of responsibility, she also, as A. H. Japp recognised in 1867, removed the possibility of heroic action from her male characters:

> Miss Braddon and her class ... studiously, and of set purpose, seek to awaken our sympathies for certain types of character by involving us in such circumstances as tend to set us in active opposition to some conventional moral regards... Practically, the result of such books is to reverse the grand old idea of what constitutes heroic behaviour, by cunningly eliciting our sympathy for individuals placed in doubtful circumstances, who fall into falsely tragical positions because of their weakness, and their want of that will in which lies the very root of heroic action. And here, we regret to say, Miss Braddon and George Eliot join hands, Lady Audley and Mrs. Transome being twin-sisters of fiction.[41]

This is one of the most radical differences between Braddon's sensation novels and other fiction, like sentimental or romantic novels, with enormous popular appeal. Her treatment of her male characters was bitterly complained of by the critics and they sought to stress its absurdity.

Early criticism objected to the removal of male characters from centre stage. They were still 'useful for the purposes of the plot' but only relevant in relation to the heroine:

> That is all, indeed, that Miss Braddon ever introduces a man into a story for ... The nearest approach she can make to a representation of the manly character is to draw a woman disfigured with more than masculine vices.[42]

This reversal of conventional treatment was of course seen as a reduction of the male role to one of passivity, of male characters being manipulated and made to respond in ways that were felt to be unrealistic. The Saturday Review was explicit about the reasons for the horror at men's lack of control over their wives in Braddon's novels:

> Take, for instance, the largest novel-consuming class of the day - young ladies. Their amiable propensity to fall down and worship something ought to be directed towards fit and worthy objects. As possible wives, they ought to be taught to admire what is truly admirable in the opposite sex, and weaned as far as possible from the mere fetish worship of money and a moustache. This is a grave responsibility for the novelist, which a woman writing for women especially should feel. But what sort of man is the model husband of modern fiction? At best a goodlooking, good tempered wealthy dolt, who will not even raise a finger to interfere with his wife's crimes if she be criminally disposed, or with her follies if she be discreet enough to be content with folly.[43]

It is clearly not the husband's personality, mental capacity or status which prevent him from being a fit and worthy object of worship but the fact that he allows his wife autonomy. If female writers made this attractive in fiction the fear was that young women would want the same freedom from their husbands in fact. Of Aurora Floyd it was said,

> The gentlemen are, if possible, still less attractive and life-like than the ladies. There is Talbot Bulstrode who

> combines in his own person more contradictions than any other man who ever figured in a novel.[44]

Criticism of Braddon's male characters seems to lean in two directions. They are 'unnatural' or they behave in an 'impossible' manner, and they are badly treated by their wives. The complaint is made even when a portrayal is read as being sympathetic, as with Aurora Floyd's second husband:

> The entire unselfishness and single-heartedness of John Mellish's character is the best part of the book ... All this fine feeling on the part of a great, overgrown country squire may be called absurd, unnatural, impossible ... John Mellish is a creature of the imagination. Probably no man alive, in his place, would have acted as he did ... But in the popular novels of the present day it is not requisite that the characters described should bear the slightest resemblance to human beings.[45]

The implication is that he should not have acted as he did, whereas the comments on Sir Jasper's Tenant (1865), for example, suggest that no husband could be deceived as he was:

> ... as a sort of companion picture to the wrongful impersonation of one man by another in Miss Braddon's earlier tale of 'Henry Dunbar', we have, here, in this story of 'Sir Jasper's Tenant', the wrongful impersonation of one woman by another, and that too under circumstances if not equally heinous, far more astounding in audacity. For, the impersonation is one requiring for its successful accomplishment, the baffling of the sagacity of a husband in the recognition of his own wife, or rather, it should be said, in his recognition of her twin sister as that wife's impersonator![46]

That a man should not recognize his own wife clearly did not feel so impossible to women writers and readers. Mrs. Henry Wood, Braddon's strongest rival in the popularity stakes, had used a version of the

same idea in the best seller East Lynne (1862), where Lady Isabel Carlyle returns unrecognised (we are asked to believe, because she is so badly disfigured) to her previous home. Braddon's use of this idea feels much closer to twentieth century women writers', seeing it as a potential source of women's power. Because they are unseen, unknown by their husbands, this allows wives, if they choose to use it, room to manoeuvre and manipulate. She makes it clear that this is not necessarily because the female characters are naturally duplicitous or choose this state of affairs. Often, as in The Lady's Mile (1866) it saddens them, but, predictably, this is seen as unreasonable, even ungrateful behaviour by male critics:

> It is always an excuse for whatever this authoress's heroines may find themselves tempted to do, that their husbands have a profession that occupies their morning, and even infringes upon the evening... The lawyer is amusing to everyone but his wife:-
>
> > '... She knew that he loved her, she knew that he was generous, good, true; but this knowledge was not enough. She knew that he was clever, but her lonely days were never brightened by any ray of his intellect, her desolate evenings were never enlivened by his wit. Was he her husband? Was he not rather wedded to that inexorable tyrant which he called his professicn?'
>
> In justice to this business-loving husband, it must be explained that when he talked to her of what interested him she gave no response; and when he invited his friends and their wives to grand dinners, where there was no longer need to weigh the respective cost of different dishes, the 'legal magnates with whom the great O'Boyneville chiefly associated were not interesting to his young wife'.[47]

The Lady's Mile, is not a sensation novel. Unlike all the other Braddon novels of this period, it contains almost no sensational incidents or elements, and is therefore much closer to the sentimental 'woman's novel', the light fiction which middle class women chose most to read in the 1860s, and which Sally Mitchell has characterised as novels where 'the emotions most indulged are strongly clustered around a complex of pain, suffering and alienation. The initial situation of the heroine - the figure with whom the reader identifies - is one of discomfort'.[48] She argues that the sentimental novel functioned as a pleasurable daydream, encouraging identification with the heroine's suffering (because it is 'legitimised' by her generally being right in what she does and vindicated by the events of the book) and allowing the indulgence and expression of emotions or needs not otherwise satisfied, either because of psychological inhibition or social context. I would agree that popular novels provided a fantasy space for the resolution of specific frustrations created by the writer's and reader's particular social situation and that we should see them 'as emotional analyses, rather than intellectual analyses, of a particular society'. But whereas Mitchell focuses on the masochistic personality encouraged by a society which suppressed women's sexual needs and desires and demanded the formation of a dependent character, commenting that 'the decade of the sixties was also the most tight-laced - literally', I would argue that this makes the appeal of sensation novels, with their over-riding of traditional restraints and sense of will and activity not to be contained, all the more understandable.

Part of the critical condemnation of Braddon's heroines focussed on what they implied about her attitude to marriage. Her subversive treatment was undeniable and recognised throughout the sixties. Already by 1863, The Christian Remembrancer was claiming that 'the acknowledged new element of this order of fiction is the insecurity given to the marriage relation'.[49] With reference to Aurora Floyd where 'sympathy is all on the side of the bigamist'[50], it continued: .

> The whole idea of life and love in writers of this class is necessarily mischievous and, we will say, immoral. Independent of the fact that "John" was duped by his wife all this time, that she knew her first husband was living and that therefore she was not his wife, the picture of the relation between these two is one really incompatible with the weight and seriousness of matrimonial obligations ... So far as real life seems, or ever has seen anything like this, it is among the Cleopatras and other witch-like charmers who have misled mankind; not among wives and daughters of repute in Christian or even in heathen times.[51]

Speaking of the heroine of Eleanor's Victory (1863) and her relations with her husband Gilbert Monckton, a very rich man and guardian of the young woman to whom Eleanor was companion, the New Review commented with heavy disapproval, 'She married him without loving him, or without any thought of making him believe that she loved him'.[52] If the attitudes and morals of Braddon's wives are disapproved of, her treatment of these heroines was considered even more scandalous. Referring to Isabel Sleaford, the heroine of The Doctor's Wife, the Athenaeum commented, 'The author ridicules the girl's folly, and then brings about the accomplishment of her expectations'. In this novel loosely based on Madame Bovary (1857), which was still hardly known in England, and to which she said she gave her best thoughts, 'by disappointing her heartless seducer, and

making her false wife stop short of adulterous intercourse with the man she prefers to her generous and devoted husband, Miss Braddon lays claim to rank among writers of morality'.[53]

This was outrageous in a sensation novel but her treatment of marriage in her fine novel of manners, The Lady's Mile (1866), was even more objectionable.:

> A more uncomfortable novel for all married men could not well be written. Those who love their wives, and those who do not, may be equally alarmed by the picture of conjugal shakiness which the author holds up as the result of taking a wife out of the Lady's Mile ... So that, on the whole, the prospect for persons married or about to marry, is far from reassuring ... the Lady's Mile supplies a couple of heroines, each of whom marries from motives not recognised in the Church Service, and each of whom is overtaken by the Nemesis of the age in the shape of a lover who is not the husband ... the heroines marry each a different kind of husband, of whom one is a very hateful type of Manchester man, while the other is a peculiarly true-hearted and generous barrister. But, of the two, the barrister's wife treats her husband a great deal worse than the other treats the Manchester man ... So long, therefore, as marriages arrange themselves on the prevalent system, no amount of kindness or attention on the part of the husband is sufficient to guarantee him a constant wife ... 'Perhaps in these latter days', says the authoress, 'when the chronicles of the Divorce Court furnish such piquant reading for middle-class breakfast-tables, it would be well if husbands were a little more inclined to jealous watchfulness, and somewhat less disposed to believe implicitly in their own invincible claims to all love and duty'.[54]

Such a criticism of the assumed claims of Victorian husbands, even when it was agreed that 'Miss Braddon has made her Manchester man a singularly odious character', guaranteed a closing of male ranks. The tone of sneering sarcasm as the review continues indicates the

loathing Braddon's heroines provoked particularly because they were wives:

> If the husband is not a nice person - and the authoress seems to think that no rich plebeians are nice persons - what is the poor matron to do? Obviously her only course is to look elsewhere; otherwise she may literally let all those rich emotions with which nature endows her, like her sisters, run unenjoyed to waste ... The Manchester man cannot help being rich, poor soul; and surely, therefore, it is a hard case for him that he is violently besieged or cunningly ensnared by a whole army of Belgravian virgins, each of whom is ready to protest that she loves him for himself, quite apart from his wealth, and then, when she has secured him, show plainly that if she could have his wealth without him she would be all the better pleased ... If the barrister would only have consented to neglect his business, and ceased to interest himself in his cases, and talked tender moonshine by the hour to his wife instead of business moonshine to juries, he would have saved both himself and the lady and the officer a world of trouble ... Only one feels that his wife is scarcely worth the trouble - a weakish, morbid woman, for whom the barrister, in spite of his crimson bag and his disgusting industry, is a great deal too good.... At all events, she is not the kind of woman to save whom from herself a barrister fast rising to the bench could be expected to neglect his business .

As a type, Laurence O'Boyneville, the barrister in question, feels very close to John Maxwell and some of the fictional character's behaviour may have been modelled on the publisher's. Certainly Braddon was in a low state of mind in March 1866 when she wrote to Bulwer Lytton,

> For the last five years of my life I have lived chiefly amongst thoroughly practical people - very clever - but entirely unpoetic. All the sentiment I ever had seems to have faded out of my mind - only to return for a few moments now and then under particular influences ... The ridiculous side of things strikes

> me before the poetic ... I think I want the repose of the country and a little more solitude than I get.[55]

For once she may have agreed with her critic's summing up - 'If the condition of things described in The Lady's Mile corresponds to the reality, it is not polygamy so much as total abstinence from marriage that seems the most advisable course in the matter'[56] - though the novel makes it clear that the pressures on women to marry and the ambiguous position of women, even if they are widows, who choose to live alone make this a much more difficult decision for them than for men.

The difference in response to a novel like Only a Clod (1865) which Braddon herself described as 'quite a from hand to mouth affair, and done to keep my hand in and earn money'[57] but which describes a wife's growing love of her husband, is marked:

> A good- humoured, simple-hearted and spoiled young lady is easily drawn, but to change her gradually, and without melodramatic violence or nonsense, into something very different, requires more than smartness and ordinary skill ... The young lady in Miss Braddon's novel marries an honest fine-spirited husband, but without being very much in love with him ... The notion is not particularly new, and the mere situation of a woman who only learns to love her husband by degrees is particularly old. But Miss Braddon treats it in a style that is distinctly her own.[58]

Similarly, it is enough for The Spectator that the heroine of The Doctor's Wife, however, contemptuous she may be, does not actually commit adultery, and this gives rise to rare praise:

> We are bound to say that in her new walk Miss Braddon has displayed quite unexpected power, that she can create a female

> character ordinary and yet bizarre, analyze her emotions with delicate skill, and display her action in incidents each of which is a surprise, yet on reflection is pronounced by the reader accurate and natural ... We confess when we came to this incident we expected the ordinary routine, - the silly woman beguiled into elopement with her idol, the premature death and the long misery, but Miss Braddon knows her art better than this ... We cannot quote the rest of one of the ablest scenes we ever read - but Isobel does not fly.[59]

By 1868 the accusation has moved from the novels' depiction of 'unsatisfactory' wives and shaky marriages to their positively encouraging divorce: 'all breaches of the seventh commandment are provided with apologetic excuses: antenuptial connections are treated of as inevitable; adultery as a social necessity; and bigamy and polygamy are assumed to be the most natural of matrimonial arrangements, except the condition of divorce, which is better still!'[60]

What was clearly recognised and resented was Braddon's skill at exposing the underside of respectable female appearance and her rejection of conventional notions of duty for women:

> Her bad people don't pretend only to be good: they <u>are</u> respectable; they really work, nay slave, in the performance of domestic duties and the most accredited of all good works... the real influence of everything this lady writes is to depreciate custom, and steady work of any kind whatever; every action, however creditable, that is not the immediate result of generous impulse. She disbelieves in systematic formal habitual goodness. She owns to a hatred of monotonous habit even in doing right. She declares for what she calls a Bohemian existence. She likes people to be influenced by anything rather than principle and cold duty; in fact, nerves, feeling, excitement, will and inclination are the sole motive powers of every character she

cares for.[61].

Most disturbing of all, a great number of respectable wives and daughters who seemed to be fulfilling their roles as feminine ideals were attracted to these novels and portrayals of women which undermined what they themselves apparently represented:

> Miss Braddon shows an equal repugnance to the humdrum and to the ordinary feminine ideal. Her odious females are all remarkable for conformity to the respectable type, whether as 'religious women doing their duty in a hard uncompromising way', or writing a 'neat' letter, or cutting their husband's bread and butter,or 'excelling in that elaborate and terrible science which woman paradoxically call plain needlework'... The ordinary, well-educated, young lady, the flower and triumph of civilization,who has mastered her lessons ... and liked them all, is alternately an object of amusement and contempt.[62]

Braddon fostered a re-assessment of women's potential roles and, by implication, of the lessons they had learned rather too unquestioningly.

Her novels were objectionable not least because her heroines, the perpetrators of these outrageous attitudes, were generally not 'made to pay' either with suffering or punishment. In conventional Victorian terms they were, again generally, successful, and, ridicule plot manipulation as they might, the critics were disturbed by this blatant 'rewarding':

> For calm, serene domestic felicity, the very last thing these heroines of many stormy adventures are fit for, is always the haven assigned to them ... Aurora Floyd does a hundred bad things and prospers in spite of them, both in her own fate and in the reader's favor[63]

Similarly in The Doctor's Wife;

> The termination of the story is not less immoral and foolish ... freed from her plebeian husband, her aristocratic lover and her blood-stained father, Isabel takes possession of her landed estates, becomes the intimate friend of Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey, and enters the ranks of the ar istocracy.[64]

One might agree, for very different reasons, that the heroines do not deserve their ultimate fates, but, ironically, if research into twentieth century women readers' responses to popular fiction is any indication, the 'happy ending' may well have been part of the enormous attraction of Braddon's novels.

Janice Radway found in Reading the Romance that for the readers she interviewed popular novels could be termed compensatory because they fulfilled certain basic psychological needs for women which often remain unmet in their everyday lives 'as a result of concomitant restrictions on female activity'. This certainly feels to be a possible explanation for some of the appeal of Braddon's fiction and the critical insistence on the absurdity and the immorality of her heroines. It is an interesting coincidence that Radway's research revealed women readers' sense of the attraction of romance reading to be operating in two principal ways. These are exactly the two areas where it seems, on the basis of the critical response, the main appeal of Braddon's sensation fiction was feared to be, that is, in her heroines and the details of (in her case 'illegitimate') experience she made available to her female readers. Radway found firstly that for twentieth century women popular romantic fiction provided 'vicarious emotional nurturance by prompting identification between the reader and a fictional heroine

whose identity as a woman is always confirmed'. It was precisely such identification between nineteenth century women readers and sensational heroines that critics feared and sought to undermine. Secondly Radway found that romance reading was coded for her twentieth century readers both as an entertaining and an instructional activity:

> a woman can indulge herself by engaging in an activity that makes her feel good and simultaneously congratulate herself for acting to improve her awareness of the world by learning through books.

If this is true in the multi-media twentieth century world, how much more authority must the written word have had for nineteenth century readers. I think Braddon's sensation fiction, like the romances Radway investigated, compensated 'for a certain kind of emotional deprivation' and created, if not an illusion, certainly the impression of 'movement or change achieved through informal acquisition of factual "knowledge"'.[65]

There are important differences between the romance and sensation genres - most notably the relative importance of the hero/husband (a goal for romantic heroines, a given for most of Braddon's) and hence a difference in focus on, in the weight and implications of, women's desires and independent action - but both can be seen to stem from social and political dissatisfaction. The fantastic space they allow makes visible unacceptable and unfulfilled desires and embodies a valid, if ultimately contained, protest. I want to look first at the particular characteristics and implications of Braddon's heroines and then at her 'knowingness', and provision of more than was available in the mundane experience of her female readers.

CHAPTER TWO

The central appeal of Mary Braddon's novels lay in her active and (albeit temporarily) powerful heroines. They claimed the freedom to act alone, disregarding their assumed obligations to fathers and husbands and the traditional Christian virtues of meekness, patience and endurance. If not always criminal, they often harboured murderous, vengeful and adulterous desires or acted in a stubbornly wilful manner which determined events and directly affected the lives of those around them. To a certain extent they embodied power, a power not sanctioned by state, church or social mores but which was nevertheless an attractive fantasy. These female heroes[1] appealed because they expressed recognisable yet inadmissable desires but also because Braddon attempted to explain and elicit sympathy for their responses.

She did not choose easy options. In fact, in the case of John Marchmont's Legacy (1863) she seems to have deliberately chosen a central female character with whom she had little spontaneous sympathy and whom she struggled to understand. Amongst her early heroines are women who for a variety of motives marry men they do not love, women who wish they had not married, women who wish their husbands dead, women who desire 'inappropriate' men and women whose own desires (for comfort and financial security or to make a villain pay for his past behaviour, for example) are more important to them than the desire for any man. She also focusses on a young woman whose ideas of men have been fed by romantic fiction and to whom the reality of a husband is a rude awakening, and on a mature woman

debilitated by notions of Christian duty and unable to feel maternal love. Some of these feelings and experiences must have been personally recognisable to her readers. They posed a disturbing threat to the ideal of domestic happiness within marriage, a threat perhaps both feared and subconsciously desired.

Traditionally the novel concerned itself with love, marriage and family life but now it was beginning to reflect growing public doubts about the institutions and social ideals which were held up as a woman's goal and source of fulfilment. As far as common law was concerned marriage was the end of a woman's autonomous existence since within it she forfeited power over herself and her property. In 1857 the Matrimonial Causes Act made divorce and separation easier, the wife recovering her rights to inherit and bequeath her own property and keep her earnings. Women's rights, and specifically the rights of wives, were at the centre of debate and the reports of the proceedings of the Divorce Court were making available facts about the realities of marriage which had been withheld from women outside the institution and probably rarely acknowledged among those within it. The sensation novel reflected this interest in marital unhappiness through its concern with 'domestic offences'. Divorce as such rarely figured (most of the novels being set just before 1857) but in its treatment of bigamy, of burdensome marriage and the ease with which bad marriages were contracted the sensation novel found a way of subverting the ideal of 'sweet domesticity' and expressing doubts and fears which were only just, and then tentatively, becoming socially admissable.

Eliza Lynn Linton's (anonymous) 1862 article entitled 'Domestic Life', for example, on the less than euphoric conditions for most

wives was an extraordinarily open admission and one that she knew would be 'social blasphemy to the ears of some' :

> People who believe in the English home as something of divine origin and flawless practice will not readily credit the evidence of their senses, when that evidence goes to prove that there are chips, and cracks, and parted seams, and broken edges here, as in everything else, and that the English home is a fallible institution like the rest of human work ... Domestic life perfected in the really happy home: this is the Recherche de l'Absolu which each human heart enters on; but who can lay his hand upon the spot, and say that it is there? One here and there - favourite prize-holders of fate: but the multitude draw blanks, or, worse still, lots which bring them active sorrow and a life-long despair. I do not believe in happy homes: why, then, swear that the mirage is living water.[2]

Suddenly there was a form of fiction which sprang from the disillusion of its heroines and expressed women's knowledge about what marriage frequently was not and their fantasies about what they themselves might be. The popular sensation novel and Mary Braddon's in particular performed a literary feat comparable to Blondin's spectacular poise on the tight rope. They balanced between the familiar (the context of contemporary middle class domestic life) and the fantastic (actions and crimes not impossible but which 'respectable' women readers believed it unlikely they themselves would commit), between the known (inadmissable desires, deception) and the nightmare (discovery, disgrace). The attraction of the sensational heroines, like that of the tightrope walkers who performed throughout the country in Blondin's wake, may have been admiration for their dangerous acts. Women might fantasise about committing such feats and might even (ambiguously) wish they really could do so but at the same time knew they probably never would.

Sensation novels both fed the fantasy of rebellion, independence and the power to act and mirrored women's growing sense of entrapment. By 1865 Anne Ritchie in an article on 'Heroines and their Grandmothers' was asking, 'Why do women now-a-days write such melancholy novels?':

> ... it would seem as if all the good humours and good spirits of former generations had certainly deserted our own heart-broken ladies. Instead of cheerful endurance, the very worst is made of every passing discomfort. Their laughter is forced, even their happiness is only calm content, for they cannot so readily recover from the first two volumes. They no longer smile and trip through country dances hand-in-hand with their adorers, but waltz with heavy hearts and dizzy brains while the hero who scorns them looks on. Open the second volume, you will see that, instead of sitting in the drawing room or plucking roses in the bower, or looking pretty and pleasant, they are lying on their beds with agonizing headaches, walking desperately along the streets they know not whither, or staring out of windows in blank despair.[3]

Though they become increasingly so and though they do centre on women in crisis with problems that have to be resolved, I do not think Braddon's early novels are fundamentally 'melancholy' in tone. Her heroines, if not inspiring, are compelling. They have energy, courage, tremendous will. Paradoxically, whatever their crimes or socially unacceptable actions, they provoke, at least for a late twentieth century reader, something akin to respect and sympathy and I suspect that an element of this was operating for contemporary women. The very ambiguity of identification accounts for some of the fascination.

The actions of Braddon's heroines are often extraordinary. They put themselves beyond the pale and in their extravagance, their lack

of restraint they were conveniently at a distance from 'civilised' behaviour, improper both as fictional creations and role models. But whereas for women their impropriety referred to conventionally acceptable social behaviour, for men it consisted in going beyond the bounds,or so they insisted, of what was possible and credible both in fiction and in reality. Though Braddon's heroines had the capacity to outrage and critics were at pains to denigrate them, critical comment, particularly about Lady Audley's Secret (1862) repeatedly insisted on the implausibility of the heroines. Lady Audley was 'an artistic impossibility' and 'leaves the impression, not of an evil woman, or a mad woman, or any definite kind of woman but simply of a monstrosity'[4] creating 'the same sort of impression a bad dream might do. She is not a woman that we can believe in and may ever expect to meet with, but only a brilliant and incomprehensible anomaly'.[5] 'Whenever she is meditating the commission of something inexpressibly horrible, she is described as being unusually charming. Her manner and her appearance are always in contrast with her conduct. All this is very exciting; but it is also very unnatural. The artistic faults of this novel are as grave as the ethical ones. Combined they render it one of the most noxious books of modern times'.[6]

Even of Aurora Floyd, who was viewed much more sympathetically, in a novel where 'the characters are more natural and the story more probable', it was claimed:

> ... it is not probable that she should still persist in keeping the history of her former marriage a secret from her indulgent husband; and when he comes to life again to take the situation of trainer at Mellish Park, it is very unlikely that, instead of telling her father or John Mellish, she should prefer to meet him alone at night at the risk of compromising her character for

> life, and trying to bribe him with £2000 to leave her forever in peace ... She knew she could free herself from her fatal destiny by the law, for Conyers had given her every right to do so; and, in fact, the whole story is unnatural and false to the last degree.[7]

Of Eleanor Vane in Eleanor's Victory (1863) it was said that 'after having depicted the wicked Lady Audley and the tempestuous Aurora Floyd, Miss Braddon celebrated the victory of a heroine who is at once unnatural and namby-pamby' and of Olivia Marchmont in John Marchmont's Legacy (1863) the same reviewer commented, 'we are inclined to think she is but a creature of Miss Braddon's imagination, and that such a personage is as unreal as a hobgoblin.'[8] It was but a small step from the implausible to the crassly ridiculous and by parodying the actions of the heroine critics poured scorn on any originality in the author's treatment:

> The author dines on pork pie and plum cake, and returns to the affairs of the third heroine, who has a will to forge before explaining in a soliloquy how the relentless hand of destiny has made her what she is, and she is more to be pitied than blamed for having married and poisoned twenty-seven of her lovers. He for whom she stealthily retires to sweeten a night-draught is the twenty-eighth; she will fly to sunny Italy tomorrow with the stable-boy.[9]

The stress then was on impossbility, absurdity.

Gerard Genette in an essay on 'Vraisemblance et motivation' links the acceptance of 'plausibility' to 'propriety' and sees the precondition of 'vraisemblance' as being public approval. Anything can happen in real life and in true stories but in art 'likeliness' is expected and pre-conditioned by socially approved maxims. An 'original' action without a pre-existent maxim to confer plausibility

is read as extravagant. This partly explains why the behaviour of sensation heroines could be read as ridiculous and incredible:

> Real or assumed this 'opinion' is quite close to what today would be called an ideology, that is, a body of maxims and prejudices which constitute both a vision of the world and a system of values.[10]

Yet for the Victorians, as far as women were concerned, it was not even the case that extravagance was 'a privilege of the real'. The plausibility of real women who acted in a sensational way was similarly denied. Comments about Theresa Longworth, for example, in the Yelverton bigamy case (1861) provide an interesting comparison. They might just as easily have been made about a sensation heroine:

> If all our girls were of this pattern, social life would be an impossibility; and her career and her fate may be a useful warning. She towers above her sex; and the sex may be congratulated that hers is an unattainable level. She is a woman such as the world has seldom seen, and such as the world seldom wishes to see.[11]

Life was beginning to imitate art, 'the world' did not approve and declared reality a fiction. It was almost as though because such women <u>should</u> not be allowed to exist it was necessary to say they <u>did</u> not:

> Happily for society, we trust that the mould in which her character has been formed was broken after the first cast. Here we have the facts of a woman's life, and they are incontestable; but except in a 'scrofulous French novel' they have, we hope, never before existed. Even now we almost refuse credence to the existence of such a person.[12]

However, the fifty thousand people who were reputed to have gathered to hear the verdict of the Dublin trial clearly did believe

in and largely supported this real 'sensational' woman and I imagine women who followed the trial found her no more incredible than a fictional heroine. It was significant but in vain that the Saturday Review, two days after the House of Lords had upheld Yelverton's appeal, should declare, 'We have no notion of making a heroine of such a person as Miss Longworth. She is out of keeping with society, both as it is and as it ought to be'.[13] Serjeant Armstrong Q.C. defending Yelverton in Dublin had already described Theresa in sensational terms - she was a charming siren 'with an exquisite voice - and a consummate performer with that voice' - and the account of passion, treachery and desertion had been told, heard and read as a thrilling tale:

> The woman was an erratic adventuress hunting down this young man to her own purpose and her own passions, and not, as she had been represented at the opening of the case, an innocent, spotless woman. The defendant yielded to temptation at length. He profaned the altar it is true, but that was not the reason a woman such as this was, upon the evidence in this case supported by artifice and suppression, to rank with honourable married women who thronged the court this day.[14]

Accounts of the trial were in great demand, at least four pamphlets were published within a few days in Dublin , Glasgow and London, giving the evidence and speeches verbatim. With all the appeal of a sensation novel itself, the case inspired a novel, J. R. O'Flanagan's Gentle Blood (1861), and was dramatised by a contemporary, Cyrus Redding, as A Wife and Not a Wife (1867).

What makes the cross-referencing and merging doubly explicable is that within two months of the Dublin trial with the audacity of a sensation heroine Theresa published the first volume of a thinly

disguised autobiographical novel, Martyrs to Circumstance (1861) by 'The Honourable Mrs. Yelverton'. Two years later, still struggling for a verdict in her favour in England and much in need of money, she published her own letters as The Yelverton Correspondence. Her attraction as a sensational heroine (whether real, fictionalised or self-fictionalised) is explained in familiar terms: 'She is made up of passion and prudence, of hard intellectual vigor, and sensuous thoughts and feelings. She writes as no modest woman writes, and she schemes as no modest woman would scheme'.[15] As might be predicted the same review commented, 'there is much in these terrible letters which is simply loathsome.' Theresa Longworth revealed her sexuality but though in the context of bigamy, a crime as well as a sin, she did not have the cover a sensation novel would have provided. The novels were concerned with female sexuality but open discussion of the threat this posed was still taboo in literature and so bigamy was often used to externalise an emotional/psychological reality. The anxiety of fictional heroines like Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd could turn on the consequences of having broken the law but for Theresa Longworth, and to a certain extent Braddon too, sexual morality was more clearly the issue since the men who were their lovers and whose children they carried were legally married to someone else. Thus the focus on the real women's sexuality was clear, that of the fictional heroines more ambiguous.

Ironically, too adventurous and perhaps too permanently disillusioned to conform to the more usual fictional heroine's third volume, Theresa Longworth became a world-wide traveller (to North America, where she was critical of the excessive prudery, China, Saigon, Singapore, Sumatra and Ceylon, Persia, Fiji and New Zealand)

and was probably the first white woman to visit the ruins of Angkor Wat in the Cambodian jungle. She wrote another novel and two travel books [16] and finally became 'Kate the Critic', penning sketches of contemporary public figures in S. Africa for the Natal Witness. The travel, particularly to North America, at this time was not extraordinary nor incredible but perhaps the extent of it was unusual. Isabella Bird, for example, published her experiences in The Englishwoman in America in 1856 but did not begin her travels to Japan, Indonesia and the Middle East until 1878. Increasingly though, Victorian women were becoming 'extravagants' wandering ever further beyond the pale. Amelia Blandford Edwards was a comparable figure. Focussing on Egypt and Syria, she set off in 1873 after having established herself as a popular sensation story writer and the best-selling author of Barbara's History (1864) which, ironically, used details from The Yelverton Correspondence.

This symbiotic relationship between fact and fiction is particularly apparent in the 1860s. The comment of a contemporary on another notorious case of 1861, 'The Northumberland Street Affray', as 'curious and the details are worthy of a modern French novel' is typical.[17] Reality was being read as though it were fiction, or at least response to the sensational did not recognise any difference. On the same day (13 July 1861) news of another sensation, the attempt of the Baron de Vidil on his son's life, broke in the press and in a paragraph in its leader the Daily Telegraph commented:

> As we peruse its startling details we seem to be reading a chapter from Frederic Soulié or Paul Feval, rather than the narrative of an occurrence which took place on the outskirts of this metropolis.[18]

The Morning Chronicle (15 July 1861) recalled that three of its columns in the Saturday edition 'were filled with the narrative of two domestic tragedies which we might almost fancy to have been drawn from the stimulating pages of a French romance, so much do they exceed the inventive powers of the humble penny-a-liner'.[19] Part of the denigration of sensation fiction was that it drew freely from disreputable French literary sources. But if Braddon and sensational novelists in general were influenced by other contemporary writing of a sensational type and by real sensational events, it is very apparent that those events, whether they were crimes or marvels, horrid or intriguing incidents, were referred to as though they were sensation fictions. An implication was that if reality often resembled sensation novels then the novels could not be so unlike life. It was as though a common context, a common psychology which responded similarly to factual reporting and popular fiction was tacitly acknowledged.

Often the allusion was implicit or even unconscious rather than direct. The Times obituary of Theresa Longworth (28th November 1881), for example, concluded with the comment, 'Her mind was clear and vigorous up to the last moment. She died peacefully and seemed glad to leave this world'. Fact, hearsay, invention or moral comment, it is a remark that is reminiscent and might just as easily have been made of Lady Audley, one of the very few Braddon heroines whose actions were so extreme as to make them irretrievable. The final very short chapter of Lady Audley's Secret is entitled 'At Peace'. It appears, particularly because of Braddon's tongue-in-cheek hope that 'no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy', to refer to

the idyllic domestic arrangements of the extended Audley family. However, her heroines are never irrelevant even when they have been permanently incarcerated three chapters previously. Lady Audley goes out, or rather goes in to her living tomb, with the final clear-sighted and defiant words,

> 'You see I do not fear to make my confession to you ... for two reasons. The first is, that you dare not use it against me, because you know it would kill your uncle to see me in a criminal dock; the second is, that the law could pronounce no worse sentence than this, - a life-long imprisonment in a mad-house. You see I do not thank you for your mercy, Mr. Robert Audley, for I know exactly what it is worth'. (Ch. 38 p.304).

She does not need to be considered or directly referred to again. But she is. Her maid, Phoebe Marks, asks what has happened to her and wants assurance that she will not be cruelly treated because 'my lady was a kind mistress to me' (Ch. 39, p.317), and tucked in amongst the details of conjugal bliss on the final page is a reference to the only peace possible to the heroine:

> It is more than a year since a black-edged letter, written upon foreign paper, came to Robert Audley, to announce the death of a certain Madame Taylor, who had expired peacefully at Villebrumeuse, dying after a long illness, which Monsieur Val described as a 'maladie de langeur'. (Ch. 42, p.343)

It is Lady Audley's peace which provides a final resolution rather than the fictional convention of the happy family home and we feel that in her release she certainly would have been 'glad to leave this world'.

However, popular as the novel was, Braddon's treatment of Lady Audley is exceptional in that in nearly all her other sensational novels she manages to save her vagrant heroines from isolation and,

however outrageously they have behaved, bring them back into the social fold, and I suspect this was part of their attraction. It is both conventional, recognising the importance of 'respectability', the status of wife and motherhoood, and unconventional in that independent, wilful, sexually experienced women are shown not to sacrifice their eligibility for these socially desirable roles. As magical controller of her fantasy Braddon shows that the expectations and treatment of women operating in a recognisable social world need not be accepted as immoveable. They and the values on which they rest are conventions which strong women can challenge or ignore without depriving themselves of social respect (in fact, conversely, by doing so they are more attractive, fitter mates for the 'good' men who ultimately support them and provide their security). As has been seen, there were men, particularly other novelists, to whom Braddon's novels strongly apppealed but it was recognised, even if sneered at, that her particular fascination for women sprang from a shared reality which may have been rooted in biology and/or gender:

> ... It is with her own sex principally that her power prevails. Whether it be that there is a subtle affinity between the dispositions of all women, which as their detractors affirm, causes the best as well as the worst of them to rejoice in intrigue and obliquity, to revel in mystery and perplexities ... or whether it be nothing of the kind, let physiologists determine; but there is one fact which we cannot gainsay - and that is the fascination exercised by Miss Braddon.[20]

In her best-sellers, the sensation novels of the first half of the decade, she dramatises the over-riding of the barriers defining

women's capacity and place in a way that was attractive to many women because it enacted the imaginative potential of their own kindling desires. It was outrageous to many men, not least because in spite of their protestations, she made this feel possible, credible.

I do not think this fantasy, this idealism in her fiction lasted but it did correspond to women's initial aspirations and vision of what they might be and do. By mid-decade in The Lady's Mile (1866) Braddon prefigures the realistic exposure and, to a certain extent, acceptance of limited possibilities, characteristic of the New Women novels of the later decades. In this novel Sigismund Smythe, the sensation novelist who since his appearance in The Doctor's Wife (1864) has 'abandoned the penny public to court the favour of the circulating library subscribers' (sublimating the vulgar Smith into the aristocratic Smythe), indulges in a rhapsody in the first chapter unusual for him 'in ordinary society'. It begins with the ambiguous statement that 'the women are - what the men make them':

> The lives of the women of the present day are like this drive which they call the Lady's Mile. They go as far as they can, and then go back again. See how mechanically the horses wheel when they reach the prescribed turning point. If they went further, I suppose they would be lost in some impenetrable depth in Kensington Gardens. In the drive the rule has no exception; because, you see, the barrier that divides the park from the gardens is a palpable iron railing, which the stoutest hunter might refuse. But on the highway of life the boundary line is not so clearly defined. There are women who lose themselves in some unknown region beyond the Lady's Mile, and whom we never hear of more ... On this side, the barrier they pass seems so slight a one - a hedge of thorns that are half hidden by the gaudy tropical flowers that hang about them - a few scratches, and the boundary is passed; but when the desperate wanderer pauses for a moment on the other side to look backward, behold! the thorny

> hedgerow is transformed into a wall of brass that rises to the very skies, and shuts out earth and heaven. (Ch. 1, p.6).

The early novels undercut this image, call its bluff as it were and demonstrate the exhilaration of a runaway gallop, after which the spirited horsewoman jumps back on course, probably to the admiration and applause of her more timid sisters. The barriers are not insuperable constructions. However, there is increasing awareness in Braddon's writing, partly I suspect stemming from personal experience and partly from an acute pre-awareness of the realities of rebellion, that prescribed limits are not illusions and that it is foolhardy to imagine they can be vaulted at no personal cost. It may be possible however, to push back the boundaries a little to create more room for manoeuvre and I think this is exactly what Braddon's novels did. Though they recognised the weight for most women of their secure place on the Lady's Mile and did not encourage the ideal of its abandonment, they questioned its construction and the nature of riding thereon.

Of course, the traditional expert horsewomen, 'the pretty little horse-breakers' of the music hall ballad, were, ironically, the 'frail ladies' of the demi-monde:

> Their general notoriety was attained principally by a regular appearance in Hyde Park during the fashionable hours, when the frail ladies were wont to make a sensational entrance, either riding or driving. Later their horses would be pulled up near the Achilles Statue, and the rider or occupant of the smart victoria would hold a kind of levée of her admirers and patrons from the ranks of the jeunesse dorée (and gilded senility, too, for that matter), the while the great ladies, virtuous British Matrons and their conventionally innocent daughters, drove by in their great high rumbling barouches, casting but a contemptuous

> glance or indignant toss of the head at the al-fresco Court of Venus.[21]

In trying to legitimize attractive qualities associated with prostitutes - their recklessness, freedom of movement, frank expression, wit and sharp minds (hardly qualities valued or even tolerated in the conventional Victorian wife and mother) - sensation novels had the potential to alienate the female reader from the heroine and it was in the interests of the status quo to encourage this.

It is exactly the point of Eliza Lynn Linton's notorious essay 'The Girl of the Period' (1868), probably one of the most sensational articles (in terms of the controversy it provoked) ever published by the Saturday Review:

> The Girl of the Period envies the queens of the demi-monde far more than she abhors them... They have all that for which her soul is hungering; and she never stops to reflect at what price they have bought their gains, and what fearful moral penalties they pay for their sensuous pleasures ... It is this envy of the pleasures, and indifference to the sins, of these women of the demi-monde which is doing such infinite mischief to the modern girl. They brush too closely by each other, if not in actual deeds, yet in aims and feeling; for the luxury which is bought by vice with the one is that thing of all in life most passionately desired by the other, though she is not yet prepared to pay quite the same price. Unfortunately, she has already paid too much - all that once gave her distinctive national character. ... If we must have only one kind of thing, let us have it genuine, and the queens of St. Johns Wood in their unblushing honesty rather than their imitators and make-believes in Bayswater and Belgravia. For, at whatever cost of shocked self-love or pained modesty it may be, it cannot be too plainly told to the modern English girl that the net result of her present manner of life is to assimilate her as nearly as possible

> to a class of women whom we must not call by their proper - or improper - name. And we are willing to believe that she has still some modesty of soul left hidden under all this effrontery of fashion, and that, if she could be made to see herself as she appears to the eyes of men, she would mend her ways before too late.[22]

In so far as Braddon's sensational heroines were concerned (with the exception of Lady Audley) they were either oblivious of how they appeared to the eyes of men in general or this was relatively irrelevant. However, the criticism of them took exactly Eliza Lynn Linton's line.

The quality most stressed and attacked apart from their independence was their 'lowness' and (implied sexual) lack of restraint. The New Review article specifically on 'Miss Braddon' in 1863 claimed that the feature to which her novels owed their popularity was

> the strange and piquant attitude in which they represent women, an attitude which chimes in with the theory of 'woman's rights', as advocated at the present day ... Remove a girl, during the most susceptible period of youth, from the influence of brothers and cousins, and all such members of the male sex as are accustomed to talk freely before her, and likewise from the society of women who have experienced this influence, and she may possibly act as Aurora Floyd and Lady Audley did act: not, we hope, so wickedly as the former, but with as much disregard of morality ... All we say is, that such women as are many of Miss Braddon's heroines would have become mistresses just as soon as bigamists, or any other kind of criminal, had the ruling passion led them in that direction.[23]

The article on 'Our Female Sensation Novelists' of the same year cites 'uncontrolled passion' as a 'characteristic of the sensation heroine in common with brute nature; but Miss Braddon enlarges on

it, as a feature of the temper that most interests her... In like manner, instinct is a favorite attitude : reason may be mistaken, but instinct never'.[24] It was clearly vital to stress the connection of this sort of heroine with women with whom, it was hoped, respectable female readers would not feel comfortable about identifying:

> There is nothing more violently opposed to our moral sense, in all the contradictions to custom which they present to us, than the utter unrestraint in which the heroines of this order are allowed to expatiate and develop their impulsive, stormy, passionate characters ... The heroine of this class of novel is charming because she is undisciplined, and the victim of impulse; because she has never known restraint or has cast it aside, because in all these respects she is below the thoroughly trained and tried woman. This lower level, this drop from the empire of reason and self control, is to be traced throughout this class of literature, which is a consistent appeal to the animal part of our nature, and avows a preference for its manifestation, as though power and intensity came through it.

The Christian Remembrancer reviewer then comes clean, and relying on the familiar notion of incredibility, reveals the tip of the really threatening iceberg:

> The very language of the school shows this ... the victim of feeling or passion sinks at once into the inspired or possessed animal, and is always supposed to be past articulate speech; we have the 'cry', the 'smothered cry of rage', the 'wail', the 'low wailing cry', the 'wail of despair' ... The curious thing is, that probably no writer every heard a woman utter this accepted token of extreme emotion, which would indeed be a very intolerable habit in domestic life.[25]

The inarticulate 'animal' cry expresses emotions for which there is no adequate conventional language. In this sense it is a radical

utterance - instinctive, highlighting the failure of the man-made sociolinguistic code. When the sensational heroines of women writers had recourse to this natural language readers were told it was unreal, an invention. Such expression of women's anger, pain and despair was denied because in reality it was very difficult to 'cope with', at best an inconvenience which the male head of the household hoped to avoid.

Braddon was upset, particularly at Margaret Oliphant's article referring to 'women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion'[26], at being placed at the head of the list of those who seemed to encourage instinctive, impulsive behaviour and lack of self-control. She claimed that of all 'horrors' sensuality was that from which she shrank with the most utter abhorrence and that it was utterly foreign to her organization.[27] Most critics read this as protesting too much, as Braddon's heroines are undeniably 'sensual' women but the interpretation being given to this word was almost exclusively sexual and in Oliphant's article in particular author and heroine were conflated to a single, identical target:

> Writers who have no genius and little talent, make up for it by displaying their acquaintance with the accessories and surroundings of vice, with the means of seduction, and with what they set forth as the secret tendencies of the heart - tendencies which, according to this interpretation, all point one way ... What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings is a very fleshly and unlovely record.[28]

It was apparently impossible to admit female desire out of a context of voluptuous concubinage or dependent licentiousness. It was impossible to 'read' female sensuality as a range of responses very

different from what was traditionally understood by female sexuality.

Consequently when Braddon did enter The Girl of the Period controversy with an article entitled 'Whose Fault Is It?' she anathematized the prostitutes whom some modern young women were accused of aping by dying their hair, painting their faces and dressing flauntingly, as 'these odious women'. There is anger in her argument against husbands who bewail the fact that the tastes and manners of their wives are but too identical with their own. Braddon describes the modern young woman too anxious to please as 'poor, giddy, mistaken' when she 'meekly and dutifully copied the model they [men] have set up before her eyes, and at whose shrine she has seen them prostrate and worshipping.' The language she uses in criticism of Eliza Lynn's argument (she assumed the article to have been written by a man) is significant:

> ... he attacks the effect, and either wilfully or unconsciously ignores the cause. The cure must begin where the disease began - amongst the stronger, not amongst the weaker sex ... In the society of virtuous women they [men] seek that mild and somewhat vapid draught which shall quench the fever of palates inflamed by the fiery Parsonian beverage, the soda-water which shall cool their over-stimulated system, and refit them to - return to Parsons. And not finding this, which they had every right to expect they should find, they are angry, and scream wild denunciations against the women who prefer even to be a kind of spurious champagne than the useful vapid soda-water.[29]

The spirit of such women may have been something they had in common with Braddon's heroines but when, as in the case of Florence Crawford in The Lady's Mile for example, she portrays a woman who emulates 'Miss Parsons', she shows this to be poor and potentially very harmful logic. Yet her heroines were categorised as 'fast young ladies' and

they were denigrated and distanced from the women who loved to read about them and who, I suspect, instinctively admired and to a certain extent identified with them.

The difference, the extraordinariness of the sensational heroine was stressed to the point that she invariably came to be represented as a spectacular beauty.[30] Though Braddon's heroines were generally attractive, only Aurora Floyd is described as being strikingly, flamboyantly beautiful. A portrayal of them as Pre-Raphaelite stunners, as occurred on the stage, is an example of the distortion dramatization compounded. One has only to read the most popular stage version of Lady Audley's Secret by C . H. Hazlewood (1863), for example, to see how different was the sensationalism of drama from that of the novel. In the play there is no interest in the heroine's psychology or complex motivation. She is simply an archetypal evil woman whom we see at the end of the first Act striking her husband with the iron handle from the well and pushing his unconscious body down it. In the novel we never see this and are only told details of it when Lady Audley confesses when incarcerated at the end, details which tell of her husband's goading, threats of vengeance and physical violence. The drama allows no possibility of sympathy or ambiguity of character and is full of explanatory monologues or ridiculous dialogue necessary to reveal past actions and crude motivation. The concentration on the sensational scene, rather than its context or the conflict of desires and the particular nature of the woman provoking the action, is accurately summarised by a playgoing contemporary:

> The putting of the superfluous husband into the well follows so closely on the stain of the bigamy, the glow of the arson again

> so closely on the stain of the murder, and the interesting heroine gone mad so immediately, with the glow of the house she has burnt yet on her face, and the man she has burnt in it dying on a stretcher by her side, that the audience has a pudding all plums.[31]

While I think it is demonstrable, particularly in Braddon's case, that the sensation novel derived considerable strength from the theatre, it was not until much later in the century that drama centred on women in the way Braddon's novels do. Though her female readers probably formed an increasing part of the theatre audience, sensation drama still feels to be essentially masculine (both because of the traditional play-going audience and the playwrights) and consequently produced male versions of her heroines.

Louisa Herbert, for example, who played the heroine in stage versions of Lady Audley's Secret and Eleanor's Victory and was painted several times by Rosetti, was described by Ellen Terry as looking like 'the Blessed Damozel leaning out 'across the bar of Heaven' ... her appearance was wonderful indeed. She was very tall, with pale-gold hair and the spiritual, ethereal look which the aesthetic movement loved.'[32] It was precisely the fact that there was nothing spiritual or ethereal about Braddon's tough heroines which undermined notions of attractive femininity. Braddon herself was knowledgeable about painting, a collector and friend of Frith (who painted her portrait in 1865) and an admirer of Landseer, to whom she dedicated The Lady's Mile. She often alluded to particular painters in her novels but never to the Pre-Raphaelites with approval. She describes a painting called The Earl's Death in Eleanor's Victory, focussing particularly on the effects of the lighting within the picture and the interpretation this provokes. It shows a 'preternaturally ugly man lying at the feet of a preternaturally

hideous woman, in a turret chamber lighted by lucifer matches, the blue and green light of the lucifers on the face of the ugly woman ... people went to see it again and again, and liked it, and ... talked of it perpetually all that season; one faction declaring that the lucifer match effect was the most delicious moonlight, and the murderess of the Earl the most lovely of womanhood, till the faction who thought the very reverse of this became afraid to declare their opinions, and thus everybody was satisfied.'[33] Similarly it is the infamous portrait of Lady Audley in the earlier novel which gives rise to the distorted image of her, iconoclastic and as false in its associations as the blond blue-eyed angel Lady Audley appears to be in the flesh.

Braddon sets the picture and its revelation to the two men who most threaten Lady Audley in a context which has a distinctly pornographic feel. They enter her dressing-room and boudoir through a secret passage while she is away and scrutinize the portrait by candlelight:

> She had left the house in a hurry on her unlooked-for journey to London, and the whole of her glittering toilette apparatus lay about on the marble dressing-table. The atmosphere of the room was almost oppressive from the rich odours of perfumes in bottles whose gold stoppers had not been replaced. A bunch of hothouse flowers was withering upon a tiny writing-table. Two or three handsome dresses lay in a heap upon the ground, and the open doors of a wardrobe revealed the treasures within.
>
> (Ch. 8, p.57).

Lady Audley, through her portrait, is an object open to the male gaze like her jewellery, her ivory-backed hair brushes and her exquisite china. Braddon comments on the artist,

> The young man belonged to the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and he had spent a most unconscionable time upon the accessories of this

picture - upon my lady's crispy ringlets and the heavy folds of her crimson velvet dress.

The two young men looked at the paintings on the walls first, leaving this unfinished portrait for a bonne bouche. (p.57)

Robert Audley, whose desire to uncover and expose Lady Audley becomes increasingly imperative and has a clear sexual element, suggests they take turns at locking at the picture and seats himself on a chair in front of it:

> No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blond 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; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there: but it seemed as if the painter had copied quaint mediaeval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had the aspect of a beautiful fiend.
>
> Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest in this strange picture,hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head, peeping out of the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace. Indeed, the crimson dress, the sunshine on the face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips, the glowing colours of each accessory of the minutely-painted background, all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one. (Ch. 8, p.58).

Theatrical representations saw her in the same light and contemporary literary critics saw this as Lady Audley revealed in her true colours but it is not the more complex, ambiguously sympathetic heroine

presented in the novel as a whole.

I think it was necessary to distort, exaggerate and so distance Braddon's heroines in this way not only because they actually did enact desires and fantasies which pleasured women readers and which they might recognise but also because they were unlike previous 'placeable' heroines who may also have done this to a certain extent. Her heroines were not, or did not remain, single but spirited governesses, companions or teachers whose active, independent lives came to an end with marriage at the end of the novel. The radical and most disturbing feature of Braddon's heroines was that they were, had been or were about to be, wives. Referring to what he claimed to be the three most popular books since Pickwick (1836-37) and the novels of Walter Scott one reviewer commented of Lady Audley's Secret, Aurora Floyd and Collins' No Name, (1862),

> very vigorous efforts have been made in these tales to get rid of those faultless monsters (we use the word in its purely philological sense) in white muslin, whose sorrows and disappointments are in exact proportion to their qualities of meekness, patience and endurance, who have suffered time out of mind through three volumes to be made happy at last by the very doubtful process of getting married. The three beautiful ladies whose adventures have been thrilling the novel-reading public of late are no puny specimens of the heroine class, but women of the times, who contrive to know life at an early age, and who are endowed with that sort of courage and self-reliance which in men we are accustomed to call pluck, and who as nearly as possible fight through their inevitable troubles single-handed. In the case of Miss Braddon's creations, so far from marriage being the be-all and end-all of their career, it is mainly in one case and altogether in the other as married women that their lives are presented to the reader.[34].

For Braddon's heroines the sacred institution of marriage never represented uncomplicated fulfilment. It frequently exacerbated and

often caused their problems.

She drew attention to the fictionality of idealised domestic happiness by referring to the conventional fictional structures and the expectations that her novels overturned. For example, in the first half of John Marchmont's Legacy (1863) the hero says to his wife

> 'We have outlived our troubles, Polly, like the hero and heroine in one of your novels; and what is to prevent our living happy every afterwards, like them? If you remember, my dear, no sorrows or trials ever fall to the lot of people after marriage. The persecutions, the separations, the estrangements, are all ante-nuptial. When once your true novelist gets his hero and heroine up to the altar-rails in real earnest, - he gets them into the church sometimes, and then forbids the banns, or brings a former wife, or a rightful husband, pale and denouncing, from behind a pillar, and drives the wretched pair out again, to persecute them through three hundred pages more before he lets them get back again, - but when once the important words are spoken and the knot tied, the story's done, and the happy couple get forty or fifty years' wedded bliss as a set-off against the miseries they have endured in the troubled course of a twelve month's courtship. That's the sort of thing, isn't it, Polly?'
> (Ch. 18, p.179-80).

We are not aware of it at this point in the novel but Braddon is parodying the device she later uses when the hero's second marriage is prevented dramatically in the church by the woman who loves him and who reveals his wife is still alive. The novel concludes with the couple's eventual marriage and the hero is left 'with bright children crowding round his knees, and a loving wife smiling at him across those fair childish heads'. On one level the conventional expectations of fiction are fulfilled but the real centre of interest in the novel is Olivia Marchmont who marries knowing she strongly desires another man and that she is wanted as a step-mother rather

than as a wife. She then finds a sexual rival in her step-daughter.

Marriage could not comfortably contain Braddon's passionate, intelligent, independent heroines and their centrality raised questions about male and female attitudes to the institution, about authority, sexuality and guilt. The inner sanctum of the familiar middle-class home was threatened by the 'criminality' of the heroines since if not actually law-breakers they were involved in some way in crime. Yet because they were, to a degree, sympathetic, it was not the crime itself that was the focus of interest but the conflict between their behaviour and social law. It was not just that this allowed the exploration of moral ambivalence and an exposure of social and sexual attitudes which to some extent justified or explained the crime but that the 'criminality' was sited in middle-class, apparently respectable wives. The context for the female psychology and the complexity of motives which form the pivot of the novels is marriage and the home.

Braddon established the conjugal haven, the inviolable home (the creation of which was supposed to be the natural function of women and that which gave them definition and complete fulfilment) as problematic, or at least for the sort of women her heroines were. She stated and her novels enacted conflicts her mature readers must have recognised as a reality but which fiction conventionally ignored. As, for example, in an early chapter of Aurora Floyd:

> Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to call upon the last act of the play, and that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the shortcomings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the business of the real-life drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the

> register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a life-time? Aurora is married, and settled, and happy: sheltered, as one would imagine, from all dangers, safe under the wing of her stalwart adorer; but it does not therefore follow that the story of her life is done. (Ch. 14, p.137)

This gives the repeated criticism of the independent behaviour of Braddon's heroines a very particular edge because what is meant specifically is their independence from their husbands. Eleanor Vane's behaviour, for example, in Eleanor's Victory (1863) is not criminal though she is determined to revenge the 'criminal' treatment of her father, and her decision not to involve her husband is seen as an absurd contrivance on Braddon's part. One article begins:

> She, undoubtedly, has the art of making her heroines very interesting; and a powerful auxiliary of this natural gift may be suspected to exist in that half-serious, half-smiling curiosity with which the world is at present watching the efforts of the female sex to take up a stronger position than they have hitherto occupied in society. Woman standing alone; woman carrying out some strong purpose without an ally or confidant, and thus showing herself independent of mankind and superior to these softer passions to which the sex in general succumbs, is the attitude in which Miss Braddon loves best to depict her pretty darlings.[35]

Eleanor, like Lady Audley, married her husband 'without loving him, or without any thought of making him believe that she loved him'. He is 'a sober, experienced, sagacious and very wealthy lawyer, of some forty-five years of age'.'Who', asks the reviewer in incomprehension and annoyance, 'could possibly have helped her so well; to whom

could she so naturally have turned as Gilbert Monckton?'[36] The Spectator, similarly irritated, dismisses this as crude plot mechanics and manipulation:

> The obvious course for the wife would have been to explain all to her husband, and there is no reason given for her not doing so; but there would have been an end to that part of the interest of the tale which arises from Miss Braddon's old machinery - a misunderstanding between husband and wife.[37]

The misunderstanding and tension invariably come from an area of the heroine's experience being unknown and deliberately concealed. This withholding, covering of knowledge not available to her husband both gives the heroine power and makes her vulnerable. Its revelation threatens her, as it does conventional social relationships and behaviour which depend on its being maintained. Sensation fiction in general was categorised as 'novels with a secret' but in Braddon it is the secret-keeping of the heroines which is central and novel. They all indulge in a rebellion against the moral values which form the foundation of the society in which they move and they are particularly threatening to its security and assumptions, especially about themselves. What they are, what they know, is forbidden. The secret in a sense represents a hidden self, an externalised symbol of psychological, sexual realities which may not be acknowledged because they will not be tolerated, let alone understood or shared. This as I have suggested has a particularly radical significance when, as in Braddon's novels, the heroines with secrets were wives. In a sense they not only held but were themselves secrets, since not only what they knew but what they were was withheld.

CHAPTER THREE

Through focussing in her novels on the female consciousness Braddon lights the legal reality of the 'feme covert'[1] from the underside. From this angle women look potentially subversive. No longer at best passively protected, at worst crushed by their 'cover', they are empowered by a recognition of themselves as undercover agents, keepers of explosive secrets. Exclusive knowledge had previously been seen to be a male possession. Through the privileges of social status, education, political and financial power, freedom of movement, men naturally had access to areas of experience unknown to women. They might also, for a variety of reasons, remain silent about or positively create 'known' areas which they did not want women, or more specifically their wives and female family members, to share. If women too were recognised as having access to particularly female areas these were seen as either trivial or sacred. Either way men did not want anything to do with them as long as their power was not threatened. There is a tacit acknowledgement, and Braddon repeatedly highlights this in her fiction, that all social relations depend on secrets, on silences. She reveals the conventions operating by showing what happens when the unwritten rules are broken, when an unacceptable secret is held. Her radical practice was to show experience exclusively known to her female characters which was fundamentally disturbing.

It is revealing to look at the development of Braddon's treatment of secrecy between husbands and wives and the different placing of her heroines in relation to this. She began, in a sense

conventionally enough, with three magazine stories appearing in the first half of 1861, all concerned with women marrying men with secrets, yet even here the crucial resolutions are caused by the women's actions. The wives feel increasingly vulnerable because they are ignorant and manipulated but they are all given the capacity to act independently and decisively. The earliest, 'Samuel Lowgood's Revenge,'[2] appearing in The Welcome Guest, prefigures Henry Dunbar (1864) in that it is based on a poor clerk discovering a forgery committed by his privileged and ultimately rich rival. The clerk prevents its discovery but keeps the evidence, intending eventually to use it against the 'irreproachable' gentleman who once courted his wife Lucy. His revenge is thwarted by his wife's action when she discovers the crime and his intentions because he talks in his sleep. When she is dying Lucy confesses to having removed the key to the strong box from under her husband's pillow and taking possession of the incriminating cheque. Her action and influence extend beyond the grave in that the narrator, Samuel Lowgood, gives the cheque back to his rival with the words, 'My wife, when she died, bade me give you this'. The tale contains the embryo of an independent heroine but also elements which Braddon rarely used later: a first person male narrator, the wife even though unhappily married and deceiving her husband, holding the moral high ground, and, as almost never happens in the novels, the central female's death being necessary to the resolution.

Her first serial story, 'The Lawyer's Secret', running during March in the same magazine[3], creates a situation so intolerable for the heroine that she leaves her husband. This is qualified by the end of the story because it is seen to have been based on a mistaken

interpretation caused by her vulnerability and her being deliberately kept in ignorance about her legacy. Nevertheless it is shown as the only meaningful protest she can make. Her marriage within a year had been a condition of her inheriting a large fortune. She was advised to marry by her lawyer and guardian who has, in fact, already gambled the money away. Her husband knows this but she does not and so she believes he is acting meanly and unreasonably by not giving her money. In order to discover the two men's shared secret she must put her own safety in jeopardy. She only learns the truth when she is prepared to travel to an unknown area of Paris to visit an unnamed invalid who turns out to be the lawyer. The conventional ending is that she forgives him and returns to England (alone) at dead of night to her husband who is still working in his chambers trying to earn some money. The story shows the seed of the balance she later strove to maintain between the unconventional, independent action of the heroine and the conventional ending, a pattern of movement away - significantly to Paris, a city for which Braddon had a passion ('I'm always so unhappy', she said in old age, 'because I can't go poking about there - slumming and that sort of thing'[4]) - and a return made possible because of what that separate action has provoked.

The third story, 'Ralph the Bailiff', ran in St. James Magazine for the three months immediately before Lady Audley's Secret began its abortive serialisation in Robin Goodfellow (the new weekly magazine edited by Marie Corelli's father, Charles Mackay, which was intended to replace The Welcome Guest).[5] The story is in the true sensational vein with a female friend arriving, dishevelled and too late, at the heroine's wedding to tell her that the man she has just sworn to love and cherish poisoned his brother. Beyond this, Jenny

Carleon, the 'wife' in question, later discovers that he is already married and has a child by his bailiff's sister, whom he removes to another part of the country. 'Ralph the Bailiff' has all the recognisable qualities of nightmare as the heroine succumbs to the villain's will to 'marry' and then realises that she too is being slowly poisoned. She is imprisoned in her own house and constantly spied upon. When she escapes into the grounds she finds an open drain being dug by the ubiquitous Ralph the Bailiff who has her husband in his power. This presents an impassable barrier and she realises that all communication with the outside world has purposely been cut off. A plot summary cannot give an adequate idea of the social commentary intrinsic in all of these stories but suffice to say she does eventually get out and is assumed by the men on a passing coal barge to be a servant who has been ill-used by her master. The perfunctory resolution is that her frightened husband commits suicide. She never communicates the cause but we are told that she lives to marry happily.

One can sense Braddon manoeuvring to compensate for her heroine's victimisation. Thus, although again there are two men sharing a secret which they conspire to keep her ignorant of, they too are shown to be locked into a power conflict, one needing to assert his strength over the other. The struggle is essentially a class one, between master and man, and there is no doubt of the victor. Ralph the bailiff (and his sister Martha) are placed in possession of the estate, which they sell, and emigrate to Australia, where the man becomes a rich sheep farmer. There is a simple substitution as male servant takes the master's place 'and bids fair to become a wealthy and a respected citizen of that distant world'. There may have been

no tie between him and the middle-class heroine (in fact his tie to his sister, whom he uses to foster his self-interest, partly explains his antagonism) but we feel that he is potentially even more ruthless because he has struggled out of a subordinate position and intends to keep the dominance he has achieved at all costs.

A character like Martha, the sister, would never again be as invisible as she is in this story. It feels almost as though the restrictions of the framework forced a recognition of the areas Braddon was interested in and would have to develop. She did not immediately see that if she altered one crucial detail of the plot structure (giving the secret to the wife rather than the husband) she would radically alter the whole balance and potential of the story but she seems to have known instinctively that she must find a way of giving weight to the women. Consequently in the novel The Lady Lisle[6], which began serialisation in The Welcome Guest at the same time as 'Ralph the Bailiff', she created a situation in which there were three Lady Lisles and at least as many crucial women characters.

This was not her first novel. C. H. Empson, a printer in Beverley, Yorkshire, had agreed to publish what was then called Three Times Dead; or, The Secret of the Heath (1860), suggesting she combine as far as her powers allowed 'the human interest and genial humour of Dickens with the plot-weaving of G. W. R. Reynolds'.[7] The story is clearly derivative in parts, often reminiscent of Bleak House (1853), the Dickens' novel with the most obvious sensational elements and purposely dwelling on 'the romantic side of familiar things', but it is pacy, rich in melodrama and social comment, violence and suspense and one can sense the 'unalloyed pleasure' she felt in its composition. Maxwell thought it worth republishing as The Trail of

the Serpent (1861) and it was serialised in The Halfpenny Journal from 1 August to 28 November, 1864. Braddon writes of the time of its composition, perhaps even more rosy in the light of subsequent experience, as 'the happiest half-year of my life - half a year of tranquil, studious days, far from the madding crowd, with the mother whose society was always all sufficient for me - half a year among level pastures, with unlimited books from the library in Hull, an old farm horse to ride about the green lanes, the breath of summer, with all the sweet odours of flower and herb, around and about us'. She was proud and overjoyed that her story was to be published, not least because a short story 'which contained the germ of Lady Audley's Secret' had just been rejected. Even though 'the miserable little wood block which illustrated that first number would have disgraced a baker's whitey-brown bag, would have been unworthy to illustrate a penny bun' she writes of it with great affection. One has a sense of how careful, in spite of the enormous pressure under which she worked initially, her later writing was and had to be:

> I wrote it with all the freedom of one who feared not the face of the critic; and, indeed, thanks to the obscurity of its original production, and its re-issue as the ordinary two shilling railway novel, this first novel of mine has almost entirely escaped the critical lash, and has pursued its way as a chartered libertine. People buy it and read it, and its faults and follies are forgiven as the exuberances of a pen unchastened by experience; but faster and more facile at that initial stage than it ever became after long practice.[8]

The novel has a villain, a triple murderer called Jabez North who later changes his identity to Raymond de Marolles, and a hero. It is typically self-mocking. At the dénouement, for example, the villain's father complains that it is 'almost as bad as the third

volume of a fashionable novel... I beg to protest against this affair from first to last - it is so intolerably melodramatic' but then 'in melodrama circumstances generally are convenient' (Bk. 6 : Ch. 1, p. 258). It is also typical in that it does have something ambiguous to say about marriage and the relationship of fathers to children born outside of it. At one point, for example, Braddon's narrative voice almost seems to be agreeing with the arch-villain when, using the image of Le Sage's limping demon whose roof-raising activities so intrigued the Victorians, he says to his wife, 'There is nothing on earth to prevent our agreeing remarkably well; and perhaps the marriage, which you speak of so bitterly, may be as happy as many other unions, which, were I Asmodeus and you my pupil, we could look down on today through the housetops of this good city of Paris'. Braddon comments:

> I wonder whether Monsieur Marolles was right? I wonder whether this thrice-sacred sacrament, ordained by the Almighty Power for the glory and happiness of the earth, is ever, by any chance, profaned or changed into a bitter mockery or a wicked lie? Whether, by any hazard, these holy words were ever used in any dark hour of this world's history, to join such people as had been happier asunder, though they had been parted in their graves; or, whether, indeed, this solemn ceremonial has not so often united such people, with a chain no time has power to wear or lengthen, that it has at last, unto some ill-directed minds, sunk to the level of a pitiful and worn-out farce?
>
> (Bk.3 Ch.9, p.145)

However, the villain 's wife, a Spanish American heiress, despite the fact that she 'neither weeps nor faints' but suffers (Bk.3 : Ch.3, p.109), is only a heroine in embryo and not really central. As one review which did later notice the novel commented,

> The heroine especially is only a very budding Lady Audley or Aurora. She has their passions, but she lacks the masculine attribute, the strong will, which is the distinctive characteristic of these ladies. The book, accordingly, though positively overladen with tragic incidents and mysterious complications, is deficient in the one feature of interest, upon which, if we are right, Miss Braddon's popularity depends.[9]

As though to make up for this and because, initially, I think she saw her way forward through centralising and developing the heroine, the structure of The Lady Lisle (1861) depends very much on the three women who bear the title and the lower class mother, Rachel Arnold, whose son usurps the place of the rightful baronet. The cameo portraits of the two legitimate Lady Lisles, the eldest and the youngest women, provide typical examples of Braddon's style and tone and are worth quoting at length.

Blanche Hayward, who eventually succeeds to the title, is the type of modern young woman of whom Braddon approves. She is almost a cliché though I think she is saved from this by the details of her indiscriminate conversation, but she is too clear, too apparently unproblematic to ever be firmly central:

> ... the rector's daughter was no ordinary girl. She had been educated by her father, and would have been stigmatized by ordinary people as a blue stocking, for she was a good classical scholar, spoke half a dozen modern languages, was well read in history, and could write a good lecture or an excellent sermon.
>
> The young ladies of Belminster opened their eyes very wide when Miss Hayward told them, without so much as a blush, that she did not know one note from another on the piano, and that she could not draw so much as a leaf, or a flower, or a ruined castle, or a rustic windmill. She was not what is generally called a pretty girl. Her features were irregular, her complexion pale; but her countenance had a brightness and an ever-varying

> vivacity which would have redeemed the ugliest face that ever nature was guilty of sending into the world, and she had a wealth of dark chestnut hair, which fell about her head in natural curls, and defied any attempt to arrange it. She dressed in the plainest manner; for, as she devoted her time to visiting the cottages of the poor, she had very little need of fine clothes. She had gone to a country ball once, in a plain black silk dress, with a low neck and short sleeves, and without so much - the outraged Belminster ladies remarked - as a flower in her hair ... And she had talked - I am afraid to say how much she had talked - to her partners and to old gentlemen lounging against the walls, and to the girls and to the dowagers, and once very nearly to a waiter, whom she recognised as a reformed drunkard, and a protegé of her father's. But for all this everybody liked her. The young men said she was a 'sensible party', while the old fogies declared her to be a well-informed young woman; and she went home, after a night of the most unalloyed enjoyment, to get up at six o'clock the next morning, dress by candlelight, and go to teach her own peculiar class in the National School.
>
> (Ch. 26, p.214-15).

For the moment, Braddon chose not to pose problems for this educated, single young heroine capable of supporting herself if necessary. She explored them later, anonymously, in Put to the Test (1865) and to a certain extent in Lady Audley's Secret, though here the woman (and she does feel like a mature woman rather than a young one, despite her age and repeated references to her childishness) is a very different type. The issues raised by Lady Audley having to earn her living are quickly resolved and seemingly over-shadowed by her being and becoming a wife. Blanche Hayward may be a potential sensation heroine in her temperament and characteristics but she is not typical in her circumstances. I think it is a combination of strength in the central female characters with a capacity to make crucial 'mistakes' or harbour unacceptable desires not 'containable' in the past or

within their own consciousnesses but which have to be resolved in situations they find very difficult to live with, that characterizes Braddon's central heroines.

It is clear, for example, that unless circumstances demand of the first Lady Lisle responses which do not initially appear to be in her, unless, in effect, she changes radically, she will not be the sensational heroine of the novel either. Claribel Walsingham has all the qualities of the text book wife, for what they are worth. In her relations with her husband,

> Claribel was gentle and tractable, if not affectionate; she went with him if he chose to go abroad: she would drink nauseous waters at German spas, if he asked her to drink them; she would saunter with him through Italian and Flemish picture galleries, through wonderful old churches and cathedrals rich in the rarest treasures of art; neither of them being able to distinguish a Titian from a Teniers, or a Salvator Rosa from a Rubens, without the aid of a guide or a catalogue. If the baronet had asked his wife to ascend Monte Blanc, she would have toiled bravely to the summit, though she had died there. It was scarcely a virtue, this tacit obedience, this smiling assent; it was rather the constitutional indolence of a lymphatic temperament. Anything was less troublesome to Lady Lisle than resistance. She would listen to her husband when he talked; she would read aloud to him on summer evenings ... When Sir Reginald fell ill, she nursed him tenderly and patiently; if he was fretful, she bore with him; if he was low-spirited she did her best to comfort him; and when he died, she was sorry for him - after her own quiet fashion. (Ch. 2, p.23-4)

Once we learn that all Claribel's strong feelings are directed towards her son, it is predictable that she will suffer.

Braddon feels it necessary in this early novel to earmark the heroine for the reader but once she has told us details of Olivia

Marmaduke, the other woman who becomes the Lady Lisle, we can predict that her problems will be of a different order and created to a certain extent by what she is. Her will is more indomitable than her father's (he thinks her 'as good as any son'), she is a fine horsewoman, though nobody is quite sure how she has learned to ride, there not being any horses at her home, 'but rumour said that in her earlier years she had been in the habit of catching spirited colts at grass in the neighbouring meadows, and riding them until they succeeded in throwing her, which was no easy matter' (Ch. 18, p.154). Braddon comments, 'What shall I say of my heroine? for, unfortunately, faulty and imperfect as this young lady may be, she is nevertheless my heroine. What shall I say of her? She has by no means an amiable temper. She is vehement and impulsive. But, on the other hand, she is generous and truthful' (Ch. 22, p.183) and, she might just as well add, she is going to make a mistake. With the hindsight of the later novels we might also predict that this is likely to involve marriage.

Olivia Marmaduke also prefigures the sensational heroines of the better known novels in the characteristic which they all (with the single exception of Isabel Sleaford in The Doctor's Wife, 1864) have in common: their motherlessness. Margaret Oliphant cited it at the time as a common feature not just of Braddon but of 'her school' (among whom she numbered Rhoda Broughton, for example):

> Ill-brought-up motherless girls, left to grow anyhow, out of all feminine guardianship, have become the ideal of the novelist. There is this advantage in them, that benevolent female readers have the resource of saying 'Remember she had no mother', when the heroine falls into any unusual lapse from feminine traditions; but it is odd, to say the least of it, that this

> phase of youthful life should commend itself so universally to the female novelist.[10]

It raises the question with Braddon in particular, whose own mother was extraordinarily supportive and with whom she had a very strong relationship, as to why she never portrayed a mother-daughter relationship and whether she is suggesting that the strength (as well as the 'waywardness') of her heroines stems from the absence of a mother, the father-daughter relationship being the only one which directly affects them. This is the case so consistently that it must be a deliberate decision on Braddon's part, not merely a realistic reflection of mothers' early deaths in the nineteenth century and the fact that many young women were motherless. However, those that were not would have been on a much tighter social and emotional rein than Braddon's heroines, whose fathers tended to be ignorant of their daughters, often careless and frequently, in the later novels, criminal. By choosing not to depict the mother-daughter relationship she gives her heroines the space, some of the freedom of movement and often the education more usually allowed to sons. At the very least she removed the constraints of a parent who viewed her primary responsibility as ensuring the 'marriageability' of her daughter. On the whole her fathers are content to be in a dependent relationship with their daughters, who become their little wives, and are in no hurry to marry them off. In one novel, John Marchmont's Legacy (1863), Braddon does depict a father who is worried about what will happen to his young daughter after his death, but this does not usually seem to be of much concern.

I think Braddon valued maternal sympathy so highly that as a daughter she was very protective and, anticipating the attack on her

heroines, did not want their supportive mothers to be even more harshly criticised - as they surely would have been. To create sympathy for wayward, impulsive, independent young women tested the boundaries of public tolerance. To have portrayed caring mothers who did not attempt to train and restrain their daughters would radically have offended Victorian ideology and notions of maternal responsibility. It would also have changed the whole balance of the novels. The heroines would no longer stand central and alone, acting in isolation, their secrets unknown and threatening to their husbands. Weight would have to be given to their relationships with their mothers, women likely to be as strong and interesting as themselves and from whom secrecy would have been complex and problematic in a very different way. The only alternative was to portray 'weak' mothers or women completely out of sympathy with their daughters. Braddon does this very rarely and only once is such a woman the mother of the heroine. Mrs Sleaford, Isabel's mother in The Doctor's Wife (1864) is also the only mother to survive her daughter's childhood. While Isabel immures herself in a world of fictional romance her mother struggles to bring up her other children on a precarious income 'enough for reckless extravagance sometimes, at others barely enough to keep the wolf from the door' with a boorish husband of whose activities she knows nothing. They are separated when the family are forced to flit from their lodgings and Isabel takes up a position as companion governess to two orphan children. There is almost no interaction between mother and daughter and it is this capacity to immerse herself in fantasy and to block the practical realities of life which cause the daughter's mistakes and unhappiness.

The only other mother of the heroine who figures in these early novels is Eliza Floyd. Braddon both sets up and undermines the idea of Aurora's dubious heredity but she does not allow a relationship between this strong woman and her daughter. Eliza is a 'base intruder' who refuses to be taken up by the county families. Unable to subdue her, they must accept her 'but they were not slow to say that Aurora was her mother's own daughter, and had the taint of play-acting and horse-riding, the spangles and the saw-dust, strong in her nature' (Ch. 2, p.18). There is no doubt that Braddon gives Aurora a mother she intends to be both liked and admired by the reader:

> If they called upon her, well and good; she was frankly and cheerfully glad to see them. They might find her in her gardening gloves, with rumpled hair and a watering-pot in her hands, busy amongst her conservatories; and she would receive them as serenely as if she had been born in a palace, and accustomed to homage from her very babyhood. Let them be as frigidly polite as they pleased, she was always easy, candid, gay and good-natured. She would ... talk about Art, as if all the high-sounding jargon with which they tried to crush her was as familiar to her as to a Royal Academician. When etiquette demanded her returning these stately visits, she would drive boldly up to her neighbours' doors in a tiny basket-carriage, drawn by one rough pony; for it was a whim of this designing woman to affect simplicity in her tastes and to abjure all display. She would take all the grandeur she met with as a thing of course, and chatter and laugh, with her flaunting theatrical animation ...
>
> I wonder whether poor Eliza Floyd knew all or half the cruel things that were said of her! I shrewdly suspect that she contrived somehow or other to hear them all, and that she rather enjoyed the fun. She had been used to a life of excitement, and Felden Woods might have seemed dull to her but for these

> everfresh scandals. She took a malicious delight in the discomfiture of her enemies. (Ch. 1, p.9)

One has the impression that Eliza Floyd would have been very aware of her daughter's emotions and activities and, despite her own background and naturally generous and supportive nature, would have attempted to influence them. She is a unique case in Braddon's sensation novels of a sympathetic mother of the heroine and, brief as her appearance is, there is a sense of her potential for sharing the heroine's place. 'Poor Eliza Floyd' the actress feels likely to have a strong, if problematic, relationship with her daughter but Braddon definitely pulls back from this. Eliza lasts just long enough to give birth to the eponymous heroine and is killed off at the end of the first chapter.

The much less problematic relationship of the heroine with a mother-figure, affectionate but not directly implicated or responsible (often the mother of the novel's 'good' man), frequently acts as a substitute for the mother-daughter relationship. Indeed in The Lady Lisle Olivia Marmaduke appeals to Claribel Walsingham in exactly these terms, 'Let me call you mother, for the sake of that mother whom I never knew' (Ch. 25, p. 201). The two women move towards one another horrified at the actions of Olivia's husband whom they both believe to be Claribel's son:

> 'Sir Rupert has insulted you - O, as to that' she said, as if in reply to a gesture of Claribel's, 'it would scarcely be so unlike him even to insult his mother.' Mrs. Walsingham leaned her head upon her hand, concealing her face from Olivia. 'My dear Mrs. Walsingham' said Lady Lisle, 'I know, I know that I, of all others, have the least right to speak to you like this. Whatever your elder son may be, it is not for me to utter a word against him. I never have done so, and I never will. I am not very

particular in what I say to him, but I will never speak ill of him to others. And now, my dear Mrs. Walsingham, let me implore you not to leave this house because I have come into it. I am not a very amiable girl, I know; but I do not think I should ever have it in my heart to offend you. If you can take pity upon a woman who has never known womanly love - take pity upon me. My sisters have never had one spark of true affection for me. They envy me my brilliant fortune. Heaven help me! Take pity upon me, then, and love me, love me, if you can!'(Ch. 25. p.200)

Braddon comments simply, 'This brief interview had a lasting effect upon the intercourse of the two women'. It feels significant that in this early novel where the power and the secrecy are still very much in the hands of the male characters that the plot resolution is effectively brought about through the women's bonding. Rachel Arnold, mother of the impostor, returns from banishment in America to tell Olivia the truth (even though she is temporarily incarcerated in a lunatic asylum as a result) and Britannia, a gypsy, whose sister has been murdered by the false Sir Rupert Lisle, indirectly causes the deaths of the two major villains. The only men who survive and who are allowed a happy connection with the heroines have been seen to be vulnerable and have themselves been victimised. They respect the strength of Olivia Marmaduke and Blanche Hayward and do not (cannot) dominate them. The conclusion of the novel focusses completely on the women, particularly the working class Rachel, as though to compensate for what to Braddon must have been one of the most abhorrent scenes she ever wrote, where Rachel is shockingly disowned,insulted and struck by her son:

Poor Rachel Arnold came out of the County Asylum, to inhabit the pretty Gothic lodge at the gates of the Lisle-wood once again. And this time she found peace and tranquillity in the simple

> rustic dwelling; for Gilbert Arnold was no longer there to torment and tyrannize over his meek helpmate. She was enfeebled by the trials through which she had passed; but she was at peace, and enjoyed a nearer approach to happiness than anything she had known since her unfortunate marriage. The Lislewood children often lingered at the lodge to talk to the pale-faced mistress of the little dwelling; and the brightest moments of Rachel Arnold's life were those in which Claribel Walsingham's grandchildren clustered round her knees.(Ch. 37, p.305)

In the sensation novels following this, once Braddon has sited the power of secrecy in her heroines, she does not portray idyllic, exclusive relationships between women. Nevertheless she rarely portrays a mother's suffering which is not somehow redressed by the end of the novel. The only exceptions are the unmarried mother of the villain's illegitimate son in The Trail of the Serpent who is driven to suicide, and the more central 'bad' mother in the short story 'Lost and Found',[11] who is deliberately drowned because her husband wants to remarry. She is an alcoholic who pawns her young child's clothes for gin. Her husband abandons her, stealing away secretly with their son of whom she then goes in search. Her re-appearance is inopportune, her refusal to take herself quietly off to Australia intolerable:

> Gervoise found his wife sitting where he had left her, asleep. Her bonnet had slipped off, and her head had dropped upon the cushioned arm of her chair, with all the loose dishevelled hair falling about her haggard forehead.
>
> If anything could have moved Lord Haughton's heart to pity this woman, it might have been the sight of that wan, white face lying helplessly upon the velvet cushion. It had been a pretty face once, and he had loved its fresh young prettiness after his own fashion. But he had no pity for this woman now; he looked upon her only as an impediment to the gratification of his newest

> wish. He had no more merciful feeling towards this miserable woman, who had been his wife, than he would have had for any inanimate obstacle that divided him from the new object of his selfish passion. (Ch. 13, p.240)

Initially Agatha's portrayal is not sympathetic but through her murder Braddon firmly establishes the interpretation she means to prevail. Her father, not knowing the truth about what has happened, comments:

> '... as for my unfortunate daughter, I'm sorry to say she'd taken to drinking before that time, and didn't seem to care what became of her. Not that the blame's all due to her sir, for if she'd had a different kind of husband she might have been a different woman'. (Ch. 17, p. 268)

It is a very common feature of Braddon's novels to link women with weak, often evil, men both through sexual ties (the men are usually their husbands) and family (where the men are frequently their fathers). In Eleanor's Victory (1863) it is the mother of the villain whose pleas dissuade Eleanor from her intended retribution in a way no-one else is able to do. Eleanor's response to maternal suffering allows her 'a proper womanly conquest, and not a stern, classical vengeance. The tender woman's heart triumphed over the girl's rash vow':

> She had never thought that any innocent creature would suffer more cruelly by her vengeance upon Launcelot Darrell than the man himself would suffer ... The widow's agony had been too powerful for the girl's endurance. (Ch. 58, p.396)

The terms in which Braddon comments on the denouement reveal the almost sacred light in which she viewed maternal love. In spite of her comments she did not portray it as instinctive and she took pains

to distinguish it from uncritical dotage and dependence. Wherever it occurs it is accorded profound respect and invariably has a benign influence:

> I think that she was scarcely surprised at what had happened. We sometimes know the people we love, and we know them to be base; but we go on loving them desperately, nevertheless; and love them best when the world is against them, and they have most need of our love. I speak here of maternal love, which is so sublime an affection as to be next in order to the love of God.
> ... It has been demonstrated by practical zoologists that the king of beasts, his majesty the lion, is after all a cowardly creature. It is only the lioness, the mother, whose courage is desperate and indomitable. (Ch. 58, p.395).

I think the dramatisation of this tends towards the conventionally melodramatic and is not as powerful as it is intended to be, partly because the relationship between Eleanor and Mrs. Darrell has not been given enough space in the novel and does not feel to be particularly strong or grow in strength. Eleanor is a typical Braddon heroine in that essentially, or at crucial moments, she stands alone, with no close female friends. Braddon's heroines may feel affection for friends, cousins, mother-figures, maids but it is never close enough to share full confidence. The absence of mothers feels to be part of the absence of communities of women within the novels once Braddon shifts the secret from the men to the women.

The sharing operating in the novels after The Lady Lisle is with and between a community of readers. Absent between the women within the fiction, nevertheless the sense of shared confidentiality in the form of conversation between female writer and reader, operates through and beyond the novels from Lady Audley's Secret onwards. One has a sense, if the novels are read chronologically, of Braddon's

dialogue with herself too, or perhaps one might say, with her heroines. It is as though each heroine provokes the next, highlighting one another through their differences, taking up issues raised by the preceding heroine. Very conscious of her choices, of the particular angle from which she has chosen to focus, Braddon feels stimulated by what has been absent from a particular character, situation or resolution, so that each succeeding heroine is placed in circumstances or herself contains elements excluded in the preceding novel.

She wrote the latter part of Lady Audley's Secret and Aurora Floyd simultaneously. When Robin Goodfellow, a new weekly London magazine, failed after thirteen issues, Braddon abandoned 'Lady Audley's Secret' which had begun its serial publication in the first number on 6 July, 1861. She started work on Aurora Floyd, not intending to finish her earlier story but had so many letters of enquiry about its outcome that she began to publish it again in twelve installments in Ward and Lock's Sixpenny Magazine (January 1862). It was brought out as a three volume novel by Tinsley Bros. in October 1862 (three months before its serial run ended) and went through eight editions by December. It represents a clear break in Braddon's strategy, removing exclusive knowledge from the male character(s) and giving the fundamentally threatening secret to the heroine. However, I do not think Lady Audley's secret is that she is mad or, as in Elaine Showalter's reading[12], that she is not. Nor does Braddon's demonstration that at certain moments under extreme pressure her heroine has the capacity (she implies, like all of us) to cross the boundaries of 'sane' response feel like a gesture, a mere device to save Lady Audley from trial and execution and to

save the reader discomfort at sympathising with a calculating murderess. I think she was reflecting, and herself fascinated by, the contemporary debate about what insanity was and how it could be recognised. If an individual did not, could not, adapt herself/himself to public ethics, did this mean she/he was insane?

The question was raised and provoked enormous interest in the Windham case of 1861-62 where the family of a wealthy young man who had married a prostitute, and made her his heir, had him committed to a lunatic asylum. When he died they contested his will on the grounds of insanity and it became clear that there was no adequate definition of madness, nor of those who had the right or ability to judge it. This made the individual accused of insanity virtually defenceless against evil-wishers, powerless to act on her/his own behalf.

The sensation novelists in general made wide use of wrongful incarceration and Braddon had shown incidents of it in two earlier novels, The Trail of the Serpent and The Lady Lisle, implying doubts about the mental institutions themselves and the easy and legal disposal of sane individuals into them. Even more disturbing was the notion of 'moral insanity', redefining madness, not as a loss of reason, but as deviance from socially acceptable behaviour:

> 'Moral insanity', a concept introduced by James Cowles Prichard in 1835, held madness to be 'a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect, or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any insane illusion or hallucination'. This definition could be stretched to take in almost any kind of behaviour regarded as abnormal or disruptive by community standards.[13]

It also made assertive, ambitious women who were potentially capable of violence particularly vulnerable, not only to being labelled monstrous but also insane.

The Lunatics Act of 1845 required all counties and principal boroughs of England and Wales to provide public asylums. As might be expected the inmate population increased, but more significantly, by mid-century, when change was statistically verifiable, the majority of the institutionalized insane were women, and among them puerperal insanity accounted for 7-10% of the admissions.[14] John Conolly (1794-1866), an exemplary figure of Victorian society and champion of 'moral management', which espoused close supervision and paternal concern rather than harsh physical restraint, encouraged the re-education of women deviating from the ideals of feminine propriety. 'Moral architecture' constructed therapeutic environments which were designed to encourage them in habits of silence, decorum and self-control. Showalter believes the plot of Lady Audley's Secret echoes one of Conolly's case studies of a woman with puerperal insanity. This 'sensitive woman, whose mother had been insane, became deranged and melancholic almost as soon as her poor little child came into the world of want'. Before her confinement, her husband had 'left her, and his home, and his country, to seek employment in Australia'.[15] Braddon certainly sets up the possibility of hereditary insanity. Lady Audley learns at ten years old that the mother she has never known is in an asylum and she suffers nightmares of being attacked by this distraught and violent woman. A visit serves to dispel this haunting idea of her mother but reveals instead a woman very like herself:

'I saw no raving, straight-waist-coated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers, but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us with her yellow curls decorated with natural flowers, and saluted us with radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter.

But she did not know us. She would have spoken in the same manner to any stranger who had entered the gates of the garden about her prison-house. Her madness was an hereditary disease transmitted to her from her mother, who had died mad. She, my mother, had been, or had appeared, sane up to the hour of my birth; but from that hour her intellect had decayed, until she had become what I saw her.

I went away with the knowledge of this, and with the knowledge that the only inheritance I had to expect from my mother was - insanity!' (Ch. 35, p.269)

When Lady Audley's husband abandons her without warning or proper explanation to try and make his fortune in Australia and does not write to her until three and a half years later when he is about to return, she comments:

'I looked upon this departure as a desertion, and I resented it bitterly - I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support ... His father was rich; his sister was living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife, and the mother of his son, was a slave allied for ever to beggary and obscurity. People pitied me; and I hated them for their pity. I did not love the child; for he had been left a burden upon my hands. The hereditary taint that was in my blood had never until this time showed itself by any one sign or token; but at this time I became subject to fits of violence and despair. At this time I think my mind first lost its balance, and for the first time I crossed that invisible line which separates reason from madness'. (Ch. 34, p.272)

I think Braddon is very interested in 'that invisible line' and

sees the crossing and recrossing of it as being allied to circumstances and not necessarily a permanent state. When Lady Audley becomes rich and happy she is able to feel for the first time for the miseries of others and takes pleasure in being able to relieve their hardship and act generously. She says, 'I believe that at this time my mind regained its just balance'. With the return of her first husband she sees the inevitability of everything she values being destroyed: 'My brain was dazed as I thought of my peril. Again the balance trembled; again the invisible boundary was passed; again I was mad'. Whether this is literally true, whether it justifies or explains her actions or whether it is the response of a clever woman seeking escape from trial and probable execution, she does not seem, at the time of this confession, to be mad.

Elsewhere in the novel Braddon appeals to the reader's recognition of frustration, grief, anger, of an inner turmoil which feels unbearable in a context of continuous mundanity. She seeks to involve the reader with herself in the acceptance of the possibility that we are all potentially susceptible to temporary madness:

> We are apt to be angry with this cruel hardness in our life - this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine, which knows no stoppage or cessation, though the mainspring be for ever broken, and the hands pointing to purposeless figures on a shattered dial.
>
> Who has not felt, in the first madness of sorrow, an unreasoning rage against the mute propriety of chairs and tables, the stiff squareness of Turkey carpets, the unbending obstinacy of the outward apparatus of existence? We want to root up gigantic trees in a primeval forest, and to tear their huge branches asunder in our convulsive grasp; but the utmost we can do for the relief of our passion is to knock over an easy chair,

or smash a few shillings worth of crockery-ware.

Madhouses are large and only too numerous; yet surely it is strange they are not larger, when we think of how many helpless wretches must beat their brains against this hopeless persistency of the orderly outward world, as compared with the storm and tempest, the riot and confusion within - when we remember how many minds must tremble upon the narrow boundary between reason and unreason, mad today and sane tomorrow, mad yesterday and sane today. (Ch. 25, p.159-160)

Braddon takes up this refrain again much later in the novel and significantly, in both incidents where she steps out of the novel's smooth narrative, the stimulus and initial reference is to the state of mind of Lady Audley's persecutor Robert Audley:

There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling; mad to-day and sane tomorrow.

... Who has not been, or is not to be, made in some lonely hour of life. Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance? (Ch. 39, p311)

In bidding for the readers' sympathy through an application to self Braddon is encouraging a re-definition of moral responsibility. A more impartial inspection of the integrity of the mind in a hostile context involves if not a suspension of moral attitudes, a strongly relativistic moral vision and a challenge to moral presuppositions.

Yet Braddon's presentation is ambiguous. Its details encourage both unsympathetic and sympathetic responses, condemnation and admiration, alienation and pity. If hereditary insanity is discounted, and Dr. Alwyn Mosgrave the specialist physician makes the point that 'madness is not necessarily transmitted from mother to daughter', then there is no evidence of madness in anything Lady Audley has done. In an interview with Robert Audley which begins

with a typical Braddon touch in that the barrister is aware that the physician is wondering whether he is the patient, Mosgrave comments,

> 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. (Ch. 37, p.290)

Far fom trying to circumvent the problem of the moral paradox created by the reader's imaginative complicity with a 'corrupt' heroine I think Braddon deliberately created it. She intended that there should be discomfort both with a definition of Lady Audley as sane, and therefore criminal, and as simply mad. Every detail of her state of mind, her character, her responses, undermines the notion of stasis and exposes the destructiveness of framing her exclusively as 'angel' or 'devil', 'sane' or 'insane'. Her volatility, complexity and unpredictability is the very source of her threat. The pressure and desire to permanently place her as a madwoman in an asylum which she will never leave comes from the knowledge that she is dangerous precisely because she has the capacity to break out of an imposed frame. As a key figure in the posse of men who close ranks to capture her Mosgrave comments in the full confidence of power and how it must be used when threatened:

> 'I have talked to the lady', he said, quietly, 'and we understand each other very well. There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a lifetime. It would be a dementia in its worst phase, perhaps;

> acute mania; but its duration would be very brief, and it would only arise under extreme mental pressure. The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary trait in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!
> ... That letter ... is written to my friend Monsieur Val, the proprietor and medical superintendent of a very excellent maison de santé in the town of Villebrumeuse. We have known each other for many years, and he will no doubt willingly receive Lady Audley into his establishment, and charge himself with the full responsibility of her future life; it will not be a very eventful one!
> ... From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that house', he said, 'her life, so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished. Whatever crimes she may have committed, she will be able to commit no more! ... If you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations'. (Ch. 37, p292-93)

In spite of the fact that she has made her heroine guilty of deception, bigamy, arson and attempted murder, Braddon reveals the barbarity of such an awful incarceration, and yet it was often read and responded to with satisfaction. It is as though Lady Audley has come full circle. When her powers of decision and action are removed insanity becomes a very likely reality. She began with the name Helen Maldon, given by her father, and thereafter chose and changed her own identity as Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham, Lady Audley. She finally has to accept a definition given by her conqueror when he informs her jailor that she is Madame Taylor.

Braddon's presentation re-inforces, illustrates the reality of Lady Audley's sense of being involved in a battle. Essentially the struggle is with her fears of poverty, of her mother's inheritance,

of her husband and his friend, her chief antagonist:

> 'I feel as if I were running away secretly in the dead of night to lose myself and be forgotten ... But where could I go? What would become of me? I have no money ... What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old, hard, cruel, wretched life - the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle, and die - as my mother died, perhaps!'
> ... Her attitude reflected the state of that mind - it expressed irresolution and perplexity. But presently a sudden change came over her; she lifted her head - lifted it with an action of defiance and determination.
> 'No! Mr. Robert Audley', she said aloud, in a low, clear voice; 'I will not go back - I will not go back. If the struggle between us is to be a duel to the death, you shall not find me drop my weapon'. (Ch. 33, p.243-4)

Braddon focusses on the fact that all the experience of Lady Audley's life has taught her that what power she has lies in her appearance. At school she 'learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later - I had learnt that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any one of them' (Ch. 35, p.270), Braddon refers to her beauty as 'that fairy dower which had been so fatal in its influence upon her frivolous mind' (Ch. 33, p.238). Lady Audley looks upon her beauty as a weapon and knows the importance when acting of dressing carefully. Having made the comment that 'All mental distress is, with some show or reason, associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments and dishevelled hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady's' (Ch. 34, p.261), Braddon presents a very disturbing final image of the illusion of Lady Audley's faith

in her self-destructive double-edged weapon:

> She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that bright glittering hair, that beautiful nimbus of yellow light which had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty.(Ch. 38, p.302)

Throughout the novel the destructiveness of the angelic image of womanhood by which Lady Audley is categorised and which she seems to personify is emphasized. Her first husband imagines her as 'something too beautiful for earth, or earthly uses, and that to approach her was to walk in a higher atmosphere and to breathe a purer air' (Ch. 7, p.48). During his honeymcon he writes to his sister, 'Ah! how I wish you could see her, Clara! Her eyes are as blue and as clear as the skies on a bright summer's day, and her hair falls about her face like the pale golden halo you see round the head of a Madonna in an Italian picture' (Ch. 29, p.203) Most importantly Braddon reveals that the nineteeth century feminization of angels (previously they had been male or androgynous) involves a diminishing of women. All of the male characters are attracted to Lady Audley's 'childish' characteristics - her dependence, her weakness, the fact that she is easily amused by trivia and the assumption that she is manageable. George Talboys refers to the 'childish Little wife' who watches him as he writes, 'My pretty litle wife! My gentle, innocent, loving little wife!' (Ch. 2, p.18) To Robert Audley she is a 'poor little creature ... the battle between us seems terribly unfair. Why doesn't she run away while there is still time' (Ch. 29, p.195). We learn that,

> the generous baronet had transformed the interior of the grey old mansion into a little palace for his young wife, and Lady

> Audley seemed as happy as a child surrounded by new and costly toys.
>
> ... In spite of Miss Alicia's undisguised contempt for her step-mother's childishness and frivolity, Lucy was better loved and more admired than the baronet's daughter. That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes ... Her fragile figure, which she loved to dress in heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks, till she looked like a child tricked out for a masquerade, was as childish as if she had just left the nursery. All her amusements were childish. She hated reading, or study of any kind, and loved society. (Ch. 7, p.44)

Of course Lady Audley acts and dissembles, dominated by the 'fatal necessities for concealment'. Braddon writes of a 'mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive to the importance of outward effect' and demonstrates 'how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessities of her life' (Ch. 32, p.231) but the results of her assumption of this role of child-woman are cruelly ironic. She knows that it is attractive to the men she must influence because it allows them to enjoy a sense of their own power. She assumes it gives her power to influence and conceal but Braddon shows the awful illusion of this when they act on their very real power to dispose of her:

> 'Where are you going to take me?', she asked, at last. 'I am tired of being treated like some naughty child, who is put into a dark cellar as a punishment for its offences. Where are you taking me?'
>
> ... 'WHAT is this place, Robert Audley?', she cried, fiercely. 'Do you think that I am a baby, that you may juggle with, and deceive me - what is it?' (Ch. 38, p.298)

Her complicity with the role of child-woman makes her disposal all

the easier. I think Braddon highlights it as one aspect of her being reduced to an image, to the point of being objectified.

Lady Audley seems to fulfil in every way the feminine ideal. She has all the valued feminine accomplishments and she is herself, or seems to be, her own highest accomplishment. Braddon does not minimise the attractions of this, especially in the light of alternatives, but she does reveal the static, inanimate image to which Lady Audley is reduced:

> Every evidence of womanly refinement was visible in the elegant chamber. My lady's piano was open, covered with scattered sheets of music and exquisitely-bound collections of scenas and fantasias which no master need have disdained to study. My lady's easel stood near the window, bearing witness to my lady's artistic talent, in the shape of a water-coloured sketch of the Court and gardens. My lady's fairy-like embroideries of lace and muslim, rainbow-hued silks, and delicately-tinted wools, littered the luxurious apartment; while the looking-glasses cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer, multiplied my lady's image, and in that image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber.
>
> (Ch. 32, p.228)

When the angelic ideal is no longer tenable, not because the characteristics which inspired it have changed or no longer exist but because they can no longer be viewed as total, the reality being ccmplex, a label or frame of the opposite extreme is forced on to Lady Audley. Robert Audley dreams of her as a siren, a mermaid beckoning Sir Michael to destruction. She has appeared like the Little Mermaid in Anderson's tale willing to renounce her flexible tail to dance for her prince on bleeding feet, her tongue amputated, her song lost but with the knowledge that she can restore her magic and heal her wounds by murdering him. Lady Audley, unlike the ideal

dependent, mutilated Victorian wife, shows herself capable of violence and this is one of her many characteristics incompatible with the angelic ideal by which she is initially framed. The sympathetic Times review said the novel's artistic and moral problem was how to 'represent a woman in such a position, or with a character capable of such acts; to combine so much beauty with so much deformity; to depict the lovely woman with the fishy extremities.'[16] Braddon revealed how the 'angel' becomes a 'demon' by realizing the implications of her being. Both definitions, constructions, are inappropriate and destructive, the former provoking violence and probable mental instability. This instability is deliberately spoken of as something which might be experienced by writer and readers, yet in terms of male definition it irrevocably turns a woman who has been categorised as an angel into a devil. Even her anger and pride when she dismisses her obsequious jailor, in a gesture allowing her to express some dignity, can be placed as diabolic. The French doctor who has been discussing his charge with Robert Audley 'rubbing his hands and beaming radiantly' 'shrugs his shoulders as he goes out into the lobby, and mutters something about a "beautiful devil", and a gesture worthy of "the Mars".' (Ch. 38, p.301)

Ironically, the violence involved in false and extreme categorization, the need to confine permanently through definitions which deny complexity and the capacity to change, (George Talboys at the beginning of the novel states that he no more expects his wife to change than that the sun will not rise in tomorrow's sky) was reflected in the critical response. The attitudes which Braddon illustrated were not confined to her fictional characters, as this

sadistic response in the North British Review shows:

> The lady is a beautiful demoness, with a slight fairy figure, a mouth like a rosebud, an exquisite complexion, the most innocent and winning blue eyes, wonderful hair of feathery gold which floats round her head like a glory; and every man who approaches her is bewitched by her helpless, appealing style of beauty and her trustful, confiding ways. Mr. Robert Audley, whose work it is to tear away the beautiful mask, is one of those acute and far-seeing individuals whom Mr. Wilkie Collins has brought into fashion ... Still 'Lady Audley's Secret' possesses a certain crude unspiritual fascination, it is not without power of an uncomfortable kind, and the reader has a cruel satisfaction in seeing the beautiful wild cat driven to the wall.[17]

Though Braddon's presentation allows this reponse, I think it is clear that she thought it barbaric, just as her allowing the reader the conventional response of relief that the 'good' characters' lives are not radically altered is undermined. In her description of the asylum she takes up again her image of the seemingly endless reflections of a single 'object' in a context which appears to be what it is not:

> My lady stared dismally round at the range of rooms, which looked dreary enough in the wan light of a single wax-candle. This solitary flame, pale and ghost-like in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, or the window-panes, in the looking-glasses, or in those glimmering surfaces which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries of burnished tin. (Ch. 28, p.300)

The fabric of the safe place is false but Lady Audley is deceived and initially attracted by it, its mirrors reflecting an approved image of herself. The image is not complex and does not contain

contradictions, the only variations possible being its exact reversal and thus it can only be a distortion. But even though her will feels uncontainable the truth is that whether the rooms be in Sir Michael Audley's house or an institution for the insane these 'safe' places have the power to define her (falsely). When she can no longer be confined by the definition imposed by one, she is disposed of to the other, 'so like and yet unlike'. Braddon created a heroine complicit, initially, with the framing necessary to enjoy the comforts she valued. Though she explains this sympathetically, it is clear that for her, unlike for the male characters, Lady Audley is interesting while her attraction is limited. Braddon's sympathy seems to grow in proportion to the tension created by Lady Audley being unable to be held by her imposed frame. She is made to pay dearly for her 'uncontainability' and Braddon would have been well aware that this both satisfied a conventional reading and allowed her to expose some of the ramifications of the power relations between women and men. In this sense the novel, though full of sensational incidents, is realistic, but I suspect Braddon was more uncomfortable at the disposal of her heroine than were many of her readers. Hereafter she allowed fantasy a freer rein and her more obviously unconventional heroines suffered less.

In June 1861 Braddon became pregnant and it is clear that the year as a whole saw the beginning of her extraordinarily productive and innovatory creativity. In February she had begun to work one day a week for St. James Magazine under its new editors Anna Maria and Samuel Carter Hall (the original of Dickens' Pecksniff). By July she was contributing 'The Black Band', the first of several anonymous and pseudonymous novels, to yet another new weekly magazine, The

Halfpenny Journal, owned by Maxwell.[18] She was not always original but she was never merely repetitious, as the variety of her treatment of the potential and implications of (married) women's secrecy in the major novels of this period clearly shows. I think she was more serious about the issues raised by her treatment of her heroines than was generally realised, to the point where she was prepared to sacrifice popularity to a certain extent, as for example in John Marchmont's Legacy (1863), in which she returned to a consideration of 'madness' in the form of obsession. Lady Audley's Secret also feels to have provoked a characteristic immediate response in the writing of a short story for Temple Bar at the end of 1861 in which 'madness' is sited not in the heroine at all but in the hero's double, unacknowledged and secretly inhabiting the traditionally female space of the attic.

'The Mystery at Fernwood'[19] is typical of Braddon's capacity, almost compulsion, to turn, to create a different version of a situation, character, issues which interested her. The story is written in the first person voice of the heroine Isabel, an orphan heiress. After a very brief engagement she stays at her intended husband's home a short while before their marriage and while he is absent at a mess-dinner party encounters his violent double in her room. She is terrified and falls into a fever: 'All the stories I had laughed at might be true, then. I had seen the phantom of the man I loved, the horrible duplicate image of that familiar figure.' All the members of the household know of William Wendale's existence, though Laurence Wendale, the fiancé, describes him as 'a poor relative of my father's'. He is kept and cared for in a separate part of the house by Lucy, their half-sister, and to a lesser extent

by their mother (who seeks escape through fiction). Though it appears that Lucy is his custodian, in effect the double controls his sister, making it difficult for her to leave the house or have friends to stay. She, like the doctor who shares the secret, encourages Isabel not to worry about her encounter, suggesting 'hysteria' or 'an optical delusion' as an explanation. Isabel's future husband has apparently no curiousity about the lodger whom he is not permitted to know - 'To tell the truth I have become so used to his unseen presence in the house, that I have ceased to think of him at all' - whereas the heroine is naturally intrigued and disturbed at the careless indifference of Laurence's manner. Unaware of what she is doing, she releases the double, who then destroys not her, nor even Lucy, his protector, but 'as some wild animal springs upon its reflection in a glass' destroys the man she loved:

> The misery of that time changed me at once from a young woman to an old one; not by any sudden blanching of my dark hair, but by the blotting out of every girlish feeling and every womanly hope. This change in my own nature has drawn Lucy Wendale and me together with a link far stronger than any common sisterhood.
>
> (p.94)

The doppelganger was and continued to be a very potent, largely male, fantasy (possibly with its psychic roots in separation from the mother and identification with the father which may be more disturbing than has been assumed). When the idea is given expression by women, as for example in Frankenstein (1818), it takes on very different resonances, and I think it is an indication of Braddon's originality and 'modernity' that she gives an unambiguously female version. In most of the shadow tales told by male writers, both preceding and succeeding her, women bear the brunt of the double's

violence, and where that violence is turned against the hero himself women are peripheral and have no voice. But Braddon's writing is more akin to re-vision than reversion. She does more than, say, rewrite 'William Wilson' in the voice of the Duchess Di Broglio[20] (though this alone would have been rare in the nineteenth century and feels radical and revelatory in twentieth century women's writing). She shows women's involvement in male violence through their attempts to contain and conceal it, through their own ignorance and desire to protect the men they care about from any real knowledge or confrontation with that everpresent violent potential. She had already shown (and would do again) this violence being directed at sexually desired women, at mistresses and wives, at women who thwarted desires or attempted to enact their own 'unacceptable' ones, at relatives and, once, at a mother. In this particular fantasy Braddon refuses the expected and, one might argue, realistic resolution but she does give expression to the women's guilt and sadness, and this, typically, gives room for an interpretation which minimises or glosses her radical insights.

It raises the question of how ambiguous she intended to be, of how far ambiguity or apparent contradiction, particularly between the implications of the bulk of the story and its ending, was necessary, and in fiction with mass popular appeal possibly always is.

CHAPTER 4

In a discussion of The Woman in White D. A. Miller makes the comment that 'male security ... seems always to depend on female claustration' and talks about the sensation novel's disturbing capacity to contain in that it 'needs to realize the normative requirements of the heterosexual menage whose happy picture concludes it'. In Collins' novel and in Lady Audley's Secret where we witness physical containment in asylums the enclosure of the final ideal is not comfortably reassuring. Miller calls this 'the most banal moment in the text' when the sensation novel renounces its distinction from any other kind of Victorian fiction. Herein, he suggests, 'lies the "morality" of sensation fiction, in its ultimately fulfilled wish to abolish itself.' Its characteristic 'aberrations' are abandoned for a concluding image of the norm, the happy conjugal home, which now 're-contextualized in a sensational account of its genesis' risks appearing as 'monstrous' as anything that has determined its realization.[1]

In Lady Audley's Secret Braddon underlined the framing strategies to which the heroine was subjected and at the same time undermined, exposed, the artificiality of her own concluding domestic tableau. If she herself did not find this family picture sinister, I think there is enough evidence in the text to show that she found its pre-condition, the containment of Lady Audley, monstrous. She shows all too clearly how a woman's deviancy was categorised as 'mad' because it could not be allowed to be 'criminal'. Her awareness of how 'madness', particularly when passed on from mother to daughter,

was much more conveniently contained than a 'criminality' which tainted a husband and his family must have been particularly disturbing knowing as she did that the wife of the man she lived with was incarcerated in a Dublin asylum.[2]

In her fiction she sought an almost simultaneous alternative treatment and resolution. The irony of this is pointed out in an early chapter of Aurora Floyd when one of Aurora's suitors speculates on what is to be the fate of the daughter of a respectable banker who talks with ease about horse-racing and with knowledge, by implication, of its associations:

> 'What will this poor old banker do with her? put her into a madhouse, or get her elected a member of the Jockey Club?'
>
> (Ch. 3, p. 30)

The latter, of course, would be impossible, too drastic to be more than a joke. Braddon's alternative version in Aurora Floyd of the tale of a bigamist with a 'dubious' mother feels almost like a release for Braddon herself, a necessary indulgence in the lighter dark side - with a passionate uninhibited black-haired heroine, traditionally far more likely to be a villainess or scarlet woman. This was a heroine whom her author liked, would 'reward' in spite of her transgressions and with whom she was boldly confident of getting her readers to sympathise. On the whole her confidence was justified. She knew the power of such obvious sexual attractiveness when held by loyalty to the 'right' man, though for some reviewers Aurora's secrecy and independence were still too intolerable in a wife. The Reverend Henry Mansel, for example, had no doubt that 'the moral teaching of the story is more questionable than that of its predecessor', and on the level of Aurora's previous sexual experience

not debarring her from respectable middle-class wifedom and motherhood, perhaps it is. He summarised indignantly:

> She runs away from school to contract a secret marriage with a consummate blackguard of a groom - ... She separates herself from him after a short and bitter experience of his character, comes home and deceives her father by assuring him that 'that person' is dead when she knows him to be alive; afterwards, on the report of his death, deceives two worthy men by accepting one and marrying the other without breathing a word of her previous escapade (we are informed that 'her natural disposition is all truth and candour'): and finally deceives her husband again, by making arrangements for sending the obnoxious individual to Australia and retaining the second and illegal spouse as the more agreeable personage of the two ... Lady Audley is meant to be detested, while Aurora Floyd is meant to be admired. The one ends her days in a madhouse; the other becomes the wife of an honest man, and the curtain falls upon her 'bending over the cradle of her first born'.[3]

Braddon probably anticipated this sort of outrage but on the other hand it must have amused her to see how Aurora's 'sins' were minimised by other male critics because of her attractions. Bigamy and suspicion of murder became almost no more than the high jinks of a red-blooded heroine:

> Aurora is a passionate, wilful creature, acting solely on impulse (and not always the right one), who is continually getting into scrapes; but in spite of all her faults, her masculine manners, her low tastes, her violent temper, Aurora is a woman, - not a fiend, nor a maniac, but a warm-hearted, generous, loving woman, with an earnest desire to do what is honourable and just and true. In this respect, therefore, she is a far more pleasing heroine than her predecessor, Lady Audley; and we cannot help liking her and sympathising with her, in spite of our better reason and judgement.[4]

As far as Braddon herself was concerned, an unproblematic heroine, whom her verve and enthusiastic guiding of response could make attractive to male and female readers, feels at this point to be not just a positive and necessary balance to Lady Audley's 'negative' but also an expression of relief. The tone and the structure of Aurora Floyd are freer, more expansive, or, as Braddon described it herself, 'more boldly written'[5], over-riding the tightness and sense of carefully constructed enclosure of the sister novel. In this one 'anything goes'. There is a sense of Braddon's enjoyment in the writing but there is nothing slack or careless in her treatment or its effects. She gets large numbers of readers to accept the 'going' of attributes of the heroine once thought essential - her chastity, her refined feelings, honesty and even-temper. Even more gratifying than this, there was some critical recognition of the writing skill which made the going so smooth:

> We know that Aurora has low, coarse tastes, that she is imprudent, hasty, and even violent in her temper; that she has deceived her poor old father and her good-natured husband, and she is in the habit of telling lies anything but white; in short, we are perfectly aware that she is very far from being what she ought to be, and yet we cannot resist the wonderful fascination which she exercises over everybody who crosses her path.
>
> We cannot help being a little in love with her, in spite of our better judgement; and in this power of attraction given to a heroine whose actions are at times almost revolting, lies one of the greatest triumphs of the author.[6]

A good deal of this, I think, is achieved through humour, through Braddon's sheer enjoyment of her heroine's lack of inhibition and outspokeness and the fact that she cuts through the bind of

conventional behaviour and hypocritical response as though such pretensions were ridiculous. When the potential hero, Talbot Bulstrode, first sees Aurora at a ball, whether he views her as a divinity 'imperiously beautiful in white and scarlet, painfully dazzling to look upon, intoxicatingly brilliant to behold' or 'but another trap set in white muslin and baited with artificial flowers, like the rest', he expects 'to see the modest drooping of the eyelids peculiar to young ladies with long lashes'. Disappointed to discover she is neither aware of him nor the dancers, he is pre-empted while still wondering what he should say to her by her question, 'Do you know if Thunderbolt won the Leger?' Braddon shows her enjoyment of her characters' responses with all the gusto of a racconteur and this in itself augments the reader's sense of being in company, one of a group which includes the author herself. As readers we become her social familiars comfortably listening to 'a good one':

> Talbot's close-cropped hair seemed to lift itself from his head as he listened to this terrible address. Good heavens! 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. She would teach him to read out of the 'Racing Calendar': she would invent a royal alphabet of the turf, and tell him that 'D stands for Derby, old England's great race', and 'E is for Epsom, a crack meeting-place' etc. He told Miss Floyd that he had never been to Doncaster in his life, that he had never read a sporting paper, and that he knew no more of Thunderbolt than of King Cheops.
>
> She looked at him rather contemptuously. 'Cheops wasn't much,' she said: 'he won the Liverpool Autumn Cup in Blink Bonny's year; but most people said it was a fluke'. (Ch.3, p.30).

It would seem that Bernard Shaw might have learned something from Braddon though he complained over twenty years later of having to

review yet another of her novels for the Pall Mall Gazette with the superior comment that a review of boots, hats and dog carts would be fifty times as useful.[7] This is a novel on one level about male fashioning of the female, of imagining what she might be and of Aurora's apparent 'need of some accomplished and watchful person, whose care it would be to train and prune those exuberant branches of her nature which had been suffered to grow as they would from her infancy' (Ch.5 p.42), but it is unlike Pygmalion (1912) in theme in that the heroine is rich. If she is 'to be trimmed and clipped and fastened primly to the stone walls of society with cruel nails and galling strips of cloth' (Ch. 5, p.42) she is at least clear-sighted enough to cut through the hypocrisy of those who expound moral principles but count them very light weight when balanced against the desire for money:

> 'If I tell the curate that my principles are evangelical and that I can't pray sincerely if there are candlesticks on the altar, he is not the less glad of my hundred pounds. If I inform the lady of fashion that I have peculiar opinions about the orphans of lucifer-match sellers, and cherish a theory of my own against the education of the masses, she will shrug her shoulders deprecatingly, but will take care to let me know that any donation Miss Floyd may be pleased to afford will be equally acceptable. If I told them that I had committed half a dozen murders, or that I had a silver statue of the winner of last year's Derby erected on an altar in my dresssing room, and did daily and nightly homage to it, they would take my money and thank me kindly for it, as that man did just now.' (Ch. 7, p.73)

There is something in Braddon's manner of narration which elicits complicity. She is a very 'sociable' writer, not heavy-handed or obviously reliant on a shared moral superiority. There is instead a very skilful playing of her audience, a leading on made possible

through a sense almost of camaraderie, an assumption of shared knowledge, humour, sympathy and, to some extent, values, though she takes her readers much further in accepting these than they knew they wanted to go. Condescension is completely alien to her. I do not think she intends to flatter but nevertheless that may be partly the effect when a writer implies, 'I know you know this as well as I do, really' or assumes that literary and historical references will probably be recognised by her readers and will afford them some satisfaction. She seems to have assumed the interaction of literature and ideology. If authors authorize ideas, re-inforce or help to create ideals, then literature through its cross-referencing can highlight this, and almost by the act of doing so imply that a truer, less fictional reading is possible. Such a sleight of hand leads to a reading of the particular novel in which it occurs as more authentic, not just another version, because the novel being read is apparently outside the fiction to which it refers, aligned with the reader. This stance of being in the 'same place' as her readers both enhanced Braddon's appeal and her room for subversion. Her 'knowing' quality, conceded even by her critics, consisted partly in an accurate assessment of her readers, of knowing what they already knew and what they wanted to know.

The sensation novel's appeal to a middle class audience meant some acquaintance with past literature and other popular nineteenth century writers could be assumed. Women may have been particularly gratified to have their knowledge recognised since it was one of few prestigious cultural areas open to them. Her reading was an area of Braddon's experience to which she gave real weight and because of its range and her own open-mindedness it contributed to the sense of her

being an 'experienced' writer. Because she was a woman this could have negative connotations but, I think, for women readers the sense of literary awareness being shared was part of her appeal.

Braddon's stories are peppered with mythological, Shakespearean and contemporary literary references. She used cross-referencing to get her readers to join in her undermining of some of the values fostered by familiar literature. In Aurora Floyd, for example, Talbot Bulstrode, with all the sanctimonious prejudice of his old Cornish family, seeks a wife who will reflect honour upon himself and is horribly shaken by the possibility of her 'impurity' which would threaten the traditional values he holds dear. Braddon makes the posturing romantic egoist reveal the fictional roots of his images and the melodramatic absurdity of his response:

> She might have been his, this beautiful creature; but at what price? At the price of honour; at the price of every principle of his mind, which had set up for himself a holy and perfect standard - a pure and spotless ideal for the wife of his choice. Forbid it, manhood! He might have weakly yielded; he might have been happy, with the blind happiness of a lotus-eater, but not the reasonable bliss of a Christian. Thank Heaven for the strength which had been given to him to escape from the silken net! Thank Heaven for the power which had been granted to him to fight the battle! (Ch. 14, p.130)

The enormously popular Idylls of the King with its images of True and False women and their influence on Ideal honourable manhood had been published the previous year in 1862. As Jennifer Uglow notes in her introduction to the 1984 re-publication of Aurora Floyd Tennyson's poetry 'had gripped the national imagination' and 'so in satisfying Bulstrode, Braddon digs at a widely-applauded code'. Spinning the familiar images of the laureate's verses around, Braddon

disorientates the arachnid allusion and has Aurora imagine an appropriate coupling. The only creature likely to be caught by such sticky masculine idylls is a feminine ideal like her self-effacing cousin Lucy:

> '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'. (Ch. 14, p.131)

A similar list of the accomplishments of 'an excellent young person' is preceded in a pseudonymous later novel with the admission, 'As a rule, I don't like your orthodox young persons; they are apt to grow monotonous and pall upon the fancy, or else conceited and so, of course, intolerable' and Braddon concludes with a direct address to the reader:

> I hope you will remark, however, that this is a list of what she does. I do not presume to run off her moral qualities in the same light manner.
>
> Ada Buisson pseud., A Terrible Wrong (1867) Ch. 5, p.63

She mocks the literary antecedents of these gentle creatures who 'love and make no sign' from Shakespeare to Jane Austen with a pseudo-sympathy that must have made her 'educated' readers smile but perhaps with some discomfort:

> How hard it is upon such women as these that they feel so much and yet display so little feeling! ... They sit, like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief; and no one reads the mournful meaning of that sad smile. Concealment, like the worm i' the bud, feeds on their damask cheeks; and compassionate relatives tell them that they are bilious, and recommend some homely remedy

> for their pallid complexions. They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of every-day life. (Ch. 14, p.135)

It is a self-confessed Braddon tenet that 'Virtue is more or less active'[8] and though she does include a satirical picture of Lucy's and Bulstrode's domestic marital bliss she does not picture them as incapable of virtue. Ironically, in the scheme of her values, it is they, rather than Aurora, who need to redeem themselves, and she constructs a plot which allows them to act out of sympathy rather than adhering to the letter of 'proper' conduct.

It is, of course, the meaning of the letter, the significance and consequence of socially proscribed behaviour, which Braddon is calling into question. The big capital 'A' with which Aurora signs her letter to Conyers is the initial letter of her name and stands for her but it is also potentially what defines and confines her. It is as though her wild stems had been clipped and fastened into a shape which prevents our seeing the beautiful shrub and we see only a meaning forced on it. Conventional social morality made Aurora become the letter, like Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter (1850), her identity reduced to one constituent. Braddon's readers may not have been familiar with Hawthorne's novel but they would know the biblical associations of the colour, particularly when applied to a woman. If Aurora is to be read in her full significance she must rewrite herself and make her own meaning. In Braddon's case, much more clearly than in Hawthorne's, this is not only a woman determinedly saying what she means, to herself, her family and her physical community but also to the community of her readers. We accede to Braddon's overturning of significance because her heroine's

version is more compelling. She does not embroider but impulsively attempts to cut the 'A' out of her definition. She cannot do this and, as is typical in Braddon's stories, there is no child to tell her so. She can only assert that her past forms only part of her identity, making sense if not the essence of her whole self.

Almost certainly Braddon had read The Scarlet Letter. She makes a clear allusion to it in The Doctor's Wife (1864) when her errant heroine,

> fancied the people pointing at her in the little street at Graybridge; the stern rector preaching at her in his Sunday sermon. She pictured to herself everything that is most bitterly demonstrative in the way of scorn and contumely ... There was no scarlet letter with which these people could brand her as the guilty creature they believed her to be; but short of this, what could they not do to her? (Ch. 26, p.242).

She claimed that she read very few contemporary novels in English and had little time for realists like Trollope:

> English realism seems to me the deification of the commonplace ... Except George Eliot there is no realistic writer I care to read - and she seems to me above criticism[9]

though she did read and enjoy Bulwer Lytton and Dickens and Collins as they appeared serially.[10] She was introduced to Shakespeare, Scott, Byron and Thackeray by her mother when young[11] and thought Charlotte Bronte a genius.[12] It is these popular writers to whose work she refers in her fiction, seeming to take for granted that they would be a part of her readers' general culture, their fictional personages as familiar as neighbours, their lines as well known as commonplace proverbs.

She uses them as reference points in contradictory ways,

sometimes, for example, quoting the responses of characters familiar from other novels to reflect, explain or justify her own characters', thus making the latter, as previously suggested, more 'real'. Sometimes this method is applied to a particular individual. She comments, for example, in John Marchmont's Legacy (1863) that,

> John Marchmont would have been almost as puzzled to account for his objection to his kinsman, as was the nameless gentleman who so naively confessed his dislike of Dr. Fell. I fear that a great many of our likings and dislikings are too apt to be engendered upon the Dr. Fell principle. Mr. Wilkie Collins' Basil could not tell why he fell madly in love with the lady whom it was his evil fortune to meet in an omnibus: nor why he entertained an uncomfortable feeling about the gentleman who was to be her destroyer. David Copperfield disliked Uriah Heep even before he had any substantial reason for objecting to the evil genius of Agnes Wickfield's father. The boy disliked the snake-like schemer of Canterbury because his eyes were round and red, and his hands clammy and unpleasant to the touch. Perhaps John Marchmont's reasons for his aversion to his cousin were about as substantial as those of Master Copperfield.
>
> (Ch. 3, p30).

Sometimes a similar technique is used to give weight, illustration, to a general truism, as in the same novel:

> Every great passion is a supreme egotism. It is not the object which we hug so determinedly; it is not the object which coils itself about our weak hearts; it is our own madness we worship and cleave to, our own pitiable folly which we refuse to put away from us. What is Bill Sykes's broken nose or bulldog visage to Nancy? The creature she loves and will not part from is not Bill, but her own love for Bill, - the one delusion of a barren life; the one grand selfishness of a feeble nature. (Ch. 9 p.78)

It was quite a feat to out-romanticize Dickens while appearing to be illusionless and yet, when it suited her theme, as in The Doctor's

Wife (1864), Braddon would refer to similar fictional characters to undermine her heroine's illusions about their similarity to real people:

> Perhaps during all that engagement the girl never once saw her lover really as he was. She dressed him up in her own fancies, and deluded herself by imagining resemblances between him and the heroes in her books. If he was abrupt and disagreeable in his manner to her, he was Rochester; and she was Jane Eyre, tender and submissive. If he was cold, he was Dombey; and she feasted on her own pride, and scorned him, and made much of one of the orphans during an entire afternoon. If he was clumsy and stupid, he was Rawdon Crawley; and she patronized him, and laughed at him, and taunted him with little scraps of French with the Albany-Road accent, and played off all green-eyed Becky's prettiest airs upon him. (Ch. 9, p.90)

Isabel Sleaford, the young and sentimental heroine of this novel, provides Braddon with a vehicle to satirize extreme romanticism fed by fiction, to which young women were particularly susceptible when they were deprived, as Braddon puts it, of 'the education of association'. On one level Isabel, like her 'grand and gloomy and discontented' fictional heroes, is laughable, and perhaps part of Braddon's purpose was to get readers to laugh at their own exaggerated fantasies. She returns to the familiar bulldog breed to show how her adolescent and isolated heroine,

> pined to be the chosen slave of some scornful creature who should perhaps ill-treat and neglect her. I think she would have worshipped an aristocratic Bill Sykes, and would have been content to die under his cruel hand, only in the ruined chamber of some Gothic castle, by moonlight, with the distant Alps shimmering whitely before her glazing eyes, instead of in poor Nancy's unromantic garret and then the Count Guilliaume de Syques would be sorry, and put up a wooden cross on the mountain

> pathway, to the memory of -, ANATKH; and he would be found some morning stretched at the foot of that mysterious memorial, with a long black mantle trailing over his king-like form, and an important blood-vessel broken. (Ch. 6 p.64)

Braddon was also, of course, laughing at herself, and in her letters and her fiction bids to cut-parody the parodies of sensational writing. In The Doctor's Wife Sigismund Smith is a sensational author before 'that bitter term of reproach' had been invented. He enjoys 'an immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco - very strong', which means there is no limit to the amount of crime and violence presented in his novels and no restraint on his plagiarism to 'combine' the story. He 'had never in his life presented himself before the public in a complete form', 'had never known what it was to be bound' and presented himself for public consumption like a 'pudding - in penny slices' (Ch. 2, p.11).

The other disreputable feature of sensation writing which Braddon was happy to highlight, if not to specify, was its debt to French fiction. Sigismund Smith delares:

> 'What the public want is plot, and plenty of it; surprises, and plenty of 'em; mystery, as thick as a November fog. Don't you know the sort of thing?
>
> "The clock of St. Paul's had just sounded eleven hours"; - its generally a translation, you know, and St. Paul's stands for Notre Dame'. (Ch. 4 p.40.)

Braddon herself could and did read French (and German, Italian and Spanish) as easily as English, though she disclaimed acquaintance with any grammar other than her own.[13] Her letters constantly refer to what she was currently reading and in her autobiographical fragment 'Before the Knowledge of Evil', begun in the last year of her life, she claimed, 'the history of my life is for the most part

the history of the books I have written and the books I have read'.[14] She always claimed to have read more French stories than English and admitted to Joseph Hatton in an interview that she had bought 'almost the whole of Tom Taylor's French library'. The same interview also reveals how purposefully she read:

> She handed me a volume. It was full of carefully-written extracts from books and newspapers. 'Anything that strikes me very much during my reading I preserve in this way'.[15]

This is borne out by her notebooks which contain notes in French from and on Prosper Merimée, Zola, Daudet, George Sand. She seems to have recorded turns of phrase which appealed to her and this too would be consistent with an early practice of reading to improve her style. She wrote to Bulwer Lytton in November or December 1864, for example, saying that she would devote herself to a course of his and of Balzac's books for the next three months 'and it will go hard with me if I do not make some little progress ... - I suppose in style no Frenchman has ever approached him'.[16] Within a matter of days she wrote again to say how painful she found the stories:

> if stories they can be called - ... - so many studies in morbid anatomy ... Balzac seems to have been always peering into the most hideous sores in the social body - so that his novels seem so many preparations. But for a certain grim and ghastly humour he appears to me unrivalled, almost Shakespearian, if I dare say so. Père Goriot for instance gives me exactly the idea of what King Lear might have been - must have been, had destiny made him a city tradesman instead of an early British King.[17]

Sometimes Braddon refers in her novels to what her characters are reading. If this is Byron or Tennyson the implication is likely to be that the character, like, for example, Laura Mason in Eleanor's

Victory (1863) as well as those previously mentioned, is sentimental and 'silly'. Where the characters are reading French novels, a parallel with sensation novels and the novel which her readers themselves are reading is invited. Eleanor Vane finds a novel of Paul Feval's which her father was in the habit of reading over breakfast and, at the very moment when she is wondering what has happened to him, notes that it contains 'mystery and murder enough for half a dozen novels' and begins to imagine that 'the villain in these pictures was like the sulky stranger who had followed her father and the Frenchman away towards the Barrière Saint Antoine' (Ch. 5, p.52). Similarly, and perhaps more subtly because the comparison invited is more ambiguous, when Robert Audley begins to track Lady Audley in earnest:

> He was in no humour even for his meerschaum consoler; the yellow-papered fictions on the shelves above his head seemed stale and profitless - he opened a volume of Balzac, but his uncle's wife's golden curls danced and trembled in a glittering haze, alike upon the metaphysical diablerie of the 'Peau de Chagrin', and the simple pathos of 'Eugénie Grandet'.
>
> (Lady Audley's Secret, Ch. 20,p.122)

Although very often her male characters' reading habits reflected her own, Braddon's references to French novels, as opposed to popular English ones, may have appealed to her female readers because this was an area of experience they would have wanted to know more about. The satisfaction of recognising references, the sense of belonging to a company of readers whose literary awareness could be assumed, might have been pleasurable in the positive feelings it fostered about reading novels which were an acceptable part of English culture but French novels had as condemnatory a critical reception as sensation

novels themselves - and consequently may have had a similar attraction. The link between the two was clearly being stated by mid-decade but much earlier comments comparing English and French novels prefigured exactly what was to be said about sensation novels ten years later:

> The causes or sources of success are obvious enough. The French novelist never suffers the stage business to flag. His drama is immoral, unnatural, if you please, but it is dramatic in the highest degree.[18]

In 1860 William Rathbone Gregg listed what he saw as the characteristics of French novels in an article entitled 'French Fiction: The Lowest Deep' and it is interesting to see how many of the same critical comments were made about sensation fiction.[19] He claimed that it was inspired by a craving for excitement, that it was licentious and that when this species of stimulant began to pall the spice of melodrama and the 'horrible' was superadded to the voluptuous. It worked on 'the indefinite tension of the strained nerve.' When French reviewers later turned their attention to Mary Braddon they stressed her Gothic ancestory:

> Chez les compatriotes d'Anne Radcliffe un retour de mode à mis en faveur le roman a sensation[20]

but her licence was felt to be of a rather different sort. Unhappily, for the French critics, she gave signs of 'an unchastened wit, a great vivacity of mind lacking in balance, and, above all, a certain power to create a type and invest it with animation', but though her novels left the same painful tension as one experienced when attending the law courts she never depicted licentious or repulsive scenes.[21] As has been seen, not all English reviewers agreed and

they certainly did accuse her of the peculiar feature of what Gregg defines as 'the criminal monstrosity phase' of French fiction as typified by Eugène Sue: 'a combination of the morally detestable with the psychologically impossible', and of 'the delineation of the demi-monde' characteristic of Dumas fils.[22] Gregg's criticism of the heroes of French novels was not mirrored in the criticism of Braddon, as might be expected when the heroes of her novels were female, but his final three comments could be, and to a certain extent were, levelled at her clearly more moderate fiction:

> There is some reverence and much gratitude towards God; but little idea of obedience, sacrifice or devotion ... Then, again, there is vast sympathy with the suffering and the poor, - deep and genuine, if often irrational and extravagant; but it commonly degenerates into senseless animosity towards the rich, lawless hatred of settled institutions, and frantic rebellion against the righteous chain of cause and effect which governs social well-being. There are delineations of rapturous, irreproachable, almost angelic, love; but some unhallowed memory, or some disordered association, almost always steps in to stain the idol and to desecrate the shrine.[23]

Far from seeking to disassociate herself from French fiction Braddon's novels and her own admissions reveal her knowledge and indebtedness to it. It was almost as though she deliberately took up the quotation from Thomas Moore with which Gregg concluded his article:

'But the trail of the serpent is over them all',

for when her first novel Three Times Dead, or the Secret of the Heath (1860) was re-issued the following year it appeared under the new title of The Trail of the Serpent.

It was hardly surprising then that she should be specifically cited

in later articles deploring French influence:

> In comparing themselves with French novelists, our writers must feel at a cruel disadvantage, and must often be ashamed of the clumsy experiments they are driven to by punctilio, the necess ities of the publisher, or whoever else feels the pulse of popular morality ... 'Lady Audley's Secret' and 'The Doctor's Wife' lead up very naturally to 'The Lady's Mile' ... which we cannot but regard as a bold, if not impatient, effort in its authoress to cast off trammels which must daily grow more irkscme ... propriety is left for the last chapter or two: the progress of the story is entirely after the French model ... Most of this writer's heroines stand absolutely alone, and have to manage their affairs without feminine aid or hindrance. And this imparts a sort of disreputableness to the whole series of her fictions: independent of the doings and sayings of the isolated beauties it suggests a very queer, rakish sort of society, where young women can come and go with no elder to advise or protect them. The society depicted in these bocks has no resemblance to the received ideas of respectable English society in any class, and on this account alone is very unsafe reading for young people.[24]

Robert Buchanan in a rather patronising counter-argument entitled 'Immorality in Authorship' explained the attraction of the French connection and almost inadvertently suggested the literary and literal areas of experience which Braddon's writing opened, made known and, if only superficially, made available to her readers:

> Setting purely didactic writers aside, we come to a class of writers who are directly under French influence, yet manage dexterously enough to deceive many of our Catos. A notable example is Miss Braddon ... she has seen a good deal of 'life', and she has a readable style ... When Miss Braddon published the public was surfeited with watery works of fiction of the most decorously abominable kind. It gasped for a breath of Bohemia. Anything, anything but the eternal inhalation of platitudes, but

the pitiless phlebotomising of literary doctors.[25]

Braddon's reading of foreign texts is part of the good deal of 'strange' experience she incorporates into her novels. Hence when she refers to her 'villain's' reading habits as a possible clue to his identity in a conversation between Eleanor and a friend who works as a theatrical scene painter in Eleanor's Victory there is a sense of a writer who is familiar with the life and attitudes described in French novels but who also knows the real Parisian context out of which they evolve and into which they are received:

> '... He has some French novels on a shelf in one corner of his sitting-room.'
> 'Yes; but the possession of a few French novels scarcely proves that he was in Paris in the year '53. Did you look at the titles of the books?'
> 'No; what could I have gained by seeing them?'
> 'Something, perhaps ... The fashion of one year is not the fashion of another. If you had found some work that made a furore in that particular year, you might have argued that Launcelot Darrell was a flâneur in the Galerie d'Orleans, or on the Boulevard, where the book was newly exhibited in the shop-windows. If the novels were new ones, and not Michel Lévy's eternal reprints of Sand and Soulie, Balzac and Bernard, you might have learned something from them'. (Ch. 31, p.226)

Braddon's references to slightly risqué French writers might have been part of her attraction and might also have helped to 'normalise' them in the sense that she appears to assume that their names and associations if not the contents of their books formed part of the literary awareness of her readers. She herself certainly had read them and in the light of her admissions in letters and in fiction (through the persona of Sigismund Smith) it was perhaps just as well that much French fiction, especially from the periodicals, was not

available in translation. Frederic Soulié, in particular, was a rich source for her, as she admitted to Bulwer Lytton in 1863.:

> I have read Soulié, at least many of his stories, and have helped myself very freely to some of them for my Anonymous work. He is certainly magnificent for continuous flow of invention - incident arising out of incident.[26]

G. W. M. Reynolds had included a chapter on Soulié in The Modern Literature of France (1839) referring to his first enormously popular novel Les Deux Cadavres (1832), two historical novels - Le Vicomte de Béziers (1834) and Le Comte de Toulouse (1835), Le Magnetiseur (1834), which reflected popular interest in mesmerism, and Un Été à Meudon (1835), the third two volume collection of Soulié's short fiction, which Reynolds thought his best and from which he gave an extract.

An earlier collection of Soulié's stories, Le Port de Creteil (1833), contained the story 'Mlle. de la Faille' which tells of contact between a woman who has died and the fiancé she did not marry.[27] This may have inspired Braddon's early supernatural story 'The Cold Embrace', about an artist haunted by the fiancee he has abandoned who has killed herself rather than have to marry another man.[28] Soulié's story was dramatised in 1843[29], as were so many of his 'roman-drame' (novels published in serial form and written with the requirements of the stage in mind, Soulié himself later writing the play version too) and it is not difficult to see why they appealed to Braddon. In 1835 he had written an operetta called Les Deux Reines in which Christine of Sweden, disguised as a man, and Marie of Denmark, disguised as a servant, met at an inn to prevent war between their two countries. More seriously in Le Conseiller

d'Etat (1835) the heroine Camille faced the hardened self-interest and cool hypocrisy of Parisian society, to which as a womanshe was particularly vulnerable. Soulié presented an impression of society corrupt from top to bottom. His most successful serial publication, Les Memoirs du Diable (1836-8) touched areas of irresponsibility and concealment which Braddon too would weave into her plots - fathers unaware of and uncaring about their illegitimate children, transformations of appearance and name (as, for example, in The Trail of the Serpent, 1861), a banker who enjoys universal esteem but began by robbing his father (as in 'Samuel Lowgood's Revenge', 1861 and Henry Dunbar, 1864) - and others, such as incest, which she would not use. The second nouvelle of Soulié's tri-partite Confession générale (1840-48) is called 'Le Serpent' and is the life story of a cynic named Valvins.

In some ways the span of Braddon's literary output was similar too. Soulié was a prolific writer, producing over a hundred volumes of novels, stories and miscellaneous prose. He founded a monthly magazine Napoleon (May 1833 to April 1835) and then Le Monde dramatique in May 1835 with Gerard de Nerval, another French writer whom Braddon certainly read. In January 1866 she wrote to Bulwer Lytton:

> My strongest desire at this present moment is to write a semi-supernatural novel, a humble and popularized - you will say vulgarized - imitation of 'Zanoni' and the 'Peau de Chagrin' ... I have a very good French translation of Faust 1st and second part, & Lewes's life of & criticisms on Goethe - & I mean to get Michelet's 'Sorcière' but beyond this I know nothing of the diabolical kind.[30]

The French Faust was almost certainly de Nerval's and she

fictionalized details from his life in a later Zolaesque novel, Ishmael (1884), set in Paris during the Second Empire. Not least because of his spectacular suicide in rue de la Vieille Lanterne in 1855, it is quite possible that Braddon knew and read his exploration of 'madness' in Aurelia (Part 1 of which was published in the Revue de Paris on January 1 1855 just before his death and Part II on February 15 just after it), before she wrote Lady Audley's Secret. Nerval's obsession with the theatricality of life, the power of costume, particularly in the context of a mock marriage, the attraction of switching identities and his presentation of feminine archetypes in Les Filles du Feu (1853), especially in 'Sylvie', and 'Les Chimères', were exactly the sort of themes that would interest her.[31] Between 1836 and 1847 Soulie wrote 'feuilletons romans' for La Presse, Journal des Débats and Le Siècle and produced twenty one plays and two volumes of verse. It was common practice in the theatrical world to feed off one another's material and Braddon was no exception. Dion Boucicault, for example, spent four years in France between 1844 and 1848 and on his return made a lot of money from French adaptations. His play The Willow Copse (1849) was based on Soulié's La Closérie des Genêts (1846) and Braddon in turn plagiarised Boucicault's play about the trials of a part-negro slave girl, The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana (1859).[32]

She was also involved in a prolonged and acrimonious public controversy[33] with Frederick Greenwood, editor of The Pall Mall Gazette, over her novel Circe: Three Acts in the Life of an Artist (1867), first published serially in Belgravia under the pseudonym Babington White.[34] It was based on Octave Feuillet's Dalila, a great hit at La Comédie française in 1857 and which had begun publication

in La Revue des Deux Mondes in 1860. Her shift in the title from the debilitating seductress who serves to increase sympathy for the blind hero to that of the classical enchantress who anchors free-booting males in swinish forms did not protect her from the charge of dishonesty from Greenwood, 'A Man's Man.'[35] The accusations continued to such a degree that the Morning Star, the Saturday Review and the Spectator entered the debate, the latter commenting that the author of Circe had done 'in fact, what is done every day upon the English stage, and what is not infrequently done in English literature'.[36] It continued with a reference to her earlier novel:

> Miss Braddon herself would never have written the 'Doctor's Wife' unless she had read 'Madame Bovary'; yet ... it would be utterly unjust to call the 'Doctor's Wife' - the ablest, we think, of her stories - a mere translation of Flaubert's novel.

Her debt to this French source was more generally recognised (though its author not always known or correctly identified) and she was quite open in her admiration. At the beginning of 1864 she was writing to Bulwer Lytton:

> Have you read anything of Gustave Flaubert's, & do you like that extraordinary Pre-Raphaelite style. I have been wonderfully fascinated by it, but I suppose all that unvarnished realism is the very reverse of poetry.[37]

and later in the year:

> Have you read Salambo [sic]? I should so like to know what you think of it. To me it seems a triumph of genius, but people in Paris told me it was a most stupendous failure there, & I never lent the book to anyone who didn't stick in the middle of it.[38]

She takes up the Pre-Raphaelite quality, which, as has been shown, she thought a distortion and did not like in art, in a

straight-forward admission that,

> The idea of the Doctor's Wife is founded on 'Madame Bovary' the style of which book struck me immensely in spite of it's [sic] hideous immorality. There seems an extraordinary Pre-Raphaelite power of description - a power to make manifest a scene & an atmosphere in a few lines - almost a few words - that very few writers possess - & a grim kind of humour equal to Balzac in its way.[39]

Such an appreciation was way ahead of its time. Published only seven years previously Madame Bovary (1857) was known about, because of the trial for immorality, more widely than it was known. It was not easily available in English until Eleanor Marx-Aveling translated it in 1886. It is easy to see why Braddon with her awareness of setting, of costume and 'props' should have been impressed by Flaubert's attention to detail and by his amusement at pretension. However, there is a difference in weight in the two novelists' mocking of 'idées reçues'.

Flaubert is more detached from the barrel-organ repetition of social clichés resonating through his text, whereas for Braddon her stage-struck heroine's run down home in Camberwell and the specific novels she reads too nearly reflect Braddon's own experience for her not to care quite deeply about her heroine's fate. Though she vacillated about what to do with George Gilbert, the husband, and later regretted killing him off, she rejects completely any disposal of Isabel like Flaubert's of Emma. Yet there are obvious parallels in character and situation. George, like Charles Bovary, is the epitome of unquestioning acceptance:

> His nature was very adhesive, and he loved the things that he had long known, because they were old and familiar to him; rather

than for any merit or beauty in the things themselves.
(Ch. 1, p.7).

Braddon stated quite specifically that her intention was 'to show the fatal error of an inconsiderate marriage'[40] and she shows how comfortable traditional roles were for men:

> Mr. Gilbert was quite satisfied. He had never sought for more than this: a pretty little wife to smile upon him when he came home, to brush his hat for him now and then in the passage after breakfast, before he went out for his day's work, and to walk to church twice every Sunday hanging upon his arm. If anyone had ever said that such a marriage as this in any way fell short of perfect and entire union, Mr. Gilbert would have smiled upon that person as on a harmless madman. (Ch. 17, p.161)

Knowing that some women too would like the satisfaction of fitting into a tradition, a socially approved category, Braddon shows that their slipping into position is rather more problematic, not least because the fictions bolstering marriage assume romance and fulfilment, almost as though this were a justification of woman's existence. Given the alternative images of sleeping beauty or crabbed chrysallis the perfect union is an attractive fantasy to which a would-be 'acter' like Isabel aspires, with no incentive to be critical of the fictions on which she voraciously feeds:

> A dull despair crept over this foolish girl as she thought that perhaps her life was to be only a commonplace kind of existence, after all; a blank flat level, along which she was to creep to a nameless grave. She was so eager to be <u>something</u> ... She wanted the drama of her life to begin, and the hero to appear.
> (Ch. 6, p.65).

Braddon shows how the hero tends to be associated with the novel, the new long-awaited sensation, in which the real man is transformed,

obscured by the appropriately romantic situation:

> She didn't like him but she liked him to be there talking to her. The words she heard for the first time were delightful to her because of their novelty, but they took no charm from the lips that spoke them. Any other good-looking, respectably-dressed young man would have been quite as much to her as George Gilbert was. But then she did not know this. It was so very easy to mistake her pleasure in the 'situation'; the rustic bridge, the rippling water, the bright spring twilight, even the faint influence of that one glass of sparkling Burgundy, and, above all, the sensation of being a heroine for the first time in her life - it was so terribly easy to mistake all these for that which she did not feel, - a regard for George Gilbert.
>
> (Ch. 7, p.78).

For Braddon's heroine, unlike Flaubert's, disillusion sets in on the honeymoon because the one dreadful fact which it reveals is that wife and husband 'had very little to say to each other'. Isabel does not yet know why but she is already weary and disappointed and Braddon uses a Flaubertian image to show how her energy and self-respect have plummeted. The rain is everlasting and when they get into an omnibus the only other passenger, a wet farmer, 'wiped his muddy boots on Isabel's dress, the brown silk wedding-dress which she had worn all the week; and Mrs. Gilbert made no effort to save the garment from his depredations' (Ch. 10, p.95). George Gilbert is not a 'bad' man and Isabel feels no special horror or aversion towards him. Neither in Braddon's story is she clearly an adulteress or merely a silly, irresponsible young woman. Thus the awfulness of the end stop of marriage per se, the state which was imagined as a beginning, is undeniable in The Doctor's Wife. Even the attraction of fashioning a home so different from the loose precarious one in which Isabel grew up proves transitory and insubstantial. There is

no need for conjecture about how she feels and how she came to be enclosed in such dreariness:

> Was it to be for ever and for ever like this? Yes; she was married, and the story was all over; her destiny was irrevocably sealed, and she was tired of it already. But then she thought of her new home, and all the little plans she had made for herself before her marriage, - the alterations and improvements she had sketched out for the beautification of her husband's home. Somehow or other, even these ideas, which had begui led her so in her maiden reveries, seemed to melt and vanish now... She had bartered all the chances of the future for a little relief to the monotony of the present, - for a few wedding-clothes, a card-case with a new name on the cards contained in it, the brief distinction of being a bride.(Ch. 10, p.95).

Braddon does not belittle her heroine's yearning for something more, nor the attraction, the very real female needs which are fed by poetry, fiction and the romantic details of famous lives, but she warns against a confusion of sentiment and the sentimental. Isabel's husband's complacency, the difference in their expectations and power to act is not only resented - 'It was all so ugly, she thought, and her mind revolted against her husband, as she remembered that he could have changed all this, and yet had left it in its bald hideousness' (Ch. 10, p.98) - but critically highlighted by Braddon:

> Nobody had ever quite understood Isabel; least of all could George Gilbert understand the woman whom he had chosen for his wife. He loved her and admired her, and he was honestly anxious that she should be happy; but then he wanted her to be happy according to his ideas of happiness, and not her own.
>
> ... He had married this girl because she was unlike other women; and now that she was his property, he set himself conscientiously to work to smooth her into the most ordinary semblance of everyday womanhood, by means of that moral flat-iron

called common sense. Of course he succeeded to admiration.

(Ch. 11, p.101)

Isabel is shown trying to be good, capable of admiring her husband 'in a calm unenthusiastic manner', sentimentally tender towards him when he is ill because 'he was a much more agreeable person lying faint and languid in a shaded room, and requiring his head constantly bathed with vinegar-and-water, than when in the full vigour of health and clumsiness' (Ch. 30, p.270), and yet ironically she is incapable of keeping the fire burning in the household grate. Consequently her attraction to a gentleman writer 'full of poetic aspirations and noble fancies' is, unlike his desire for her, in response to emotional and imaginative aspirations as much as to her physical needs. She is both self-conscious, watching herself act (as she does literally in the novel too), and unaware of how a fictional tradition has determined her expectations rather than simply reflected them:

> She was beloved; for the first time in her life really, truly, sentimentally beloved, like the heroine of a novel
>
> (Ch. 23 p.214)

which, of course, is exactly what she is.

Towards the end of the novel Braddon made a point of stating 'This is <u>not</u> a sensation novel', and certainly though it has a sensational thread in its resolution, she felt she was writing a different sort of novel and was particularly anxious about it, saying 'it seems to me a kind of turning point in my life, on the issue of which it must depend whether I sink or swim'.[41] There was considerable outrage in the critics' response, but the <u>Spectator</u> applauded what it saw as a change in her treatment of her heroine:

> Miss Braddon, moved perhaps by the incessant criticism upon 'sensation' stories, and the low rank in the world of art to which they stand condemned, has changed her policy, and tried her hand at a regular novel of character ... We are bound to say that in her new walk Miss Braddon has displayed quite unexpected power, that she can create a female character ordinary and yet bizarre, analyze her emotions with delicate skill, and display her action in incidents each of which is a surprise, yet on reflection is pronounced by the reader accurate and natural ... Miss Braddon has at last contributed something to fiction which will be remembered ... every page containing some slight touch, some one of the thousand links which bind together the heroine's active life and her life in dreamland ... Isabel Sleaford is a character, a human being, not like Lady Audley a beautifully modelled lay figure to be placed in wonderful attitudes, lighted up with strangely coloured lights, or hung with ghastly drapery.[42]

Braddon was not actually focussing on a situation she had not dealt with before - the vulnerability of young women to 'inconsiderate marriage' - but she dwelt more on the reality of the misalliance and the role of fiction in fostering a distortion of women's self-images and perception of possibilities. Isabel, like Emma Bovary, is never merely pathetic. The appeal of extravagant romanticism is shown to be connected to a sense of self-worth, 'validation' being conferred only in specific stereotypical ways by specific stereotypical men. Braddon does not take on the constrictions of Flaubert's realism and frees her heroine through the deaths of her husband and lover and through giving her financial independence to move beyond self-dramatisation and dependence. It does not feel too big a claim to site her version, as Christopher Heywood does[43], between two more 'realistic' novels, drawing from Flaubert and pointing to George Eliot, not just because Charles Bray, the Coventry

phrenologist-philosopher was the probable model for Isabel's employer, Mr. Raymond, as well as for Mr. Brooke in Middlemarch (1871), and because Roland Lansdell is in many ways a Ladislaw-like figure. Braddon says of her heroine,

> She would have been contented to be simple Dorothea, washing her tired feet in the brook, with her hair about her shoulders. She only wanted the vague poetry of life, the mystic beauty of romance infused somehow into her existence; and she was as yet too young to understand that latent element of poetry which underlies the commonest life. (Ch. 34, p.309)

Isabel treats the money left her as a sacred trust and establishes model cottages for agricultural labourers, allotments and a school house on what was once Roland Lansdell's estate, and the tone of Braddon's summing up, a sense of some sadness and loss despite the wiser accommodation, finds an echo in George Eliot's final comments about her heroine:

> There is a great gulf between a girl of nineteen and a woman of five-and-twenty; and Isabel's foolish youth is separated from her wiser womanhood by a barrier that is formed by two graves. Is it strange, then, that the chastening influences of sorrow has transformed a sentimental girl into a good and noble woman - a woman in whom sentiment takes the higher form of universal sympathy and tenderness? (Chapter the Last, p.348)

Braddon manages to convey not just the particular experience of particular heroines, who if they do not allow the reader simple identification make space for a release of fantasy and imaginative speculation, but she also communicates a sense of her own experience, part of which, like that of her readers, came from her reading. She allows glimpses of her debt to French realism, restricting her references within the novels mainly to prose writers whose names if

not their fiction would be notoriously familiar. As a woman writer who read such novels she proclaimed and made attractive her pleasure in the wide experience to which it gave her access, albeit 'second hand', but she also shared a 'knowingness' which did not seem to be restricted to fiction. Her familiarity with French literature came in part from her experience of the theatre and English plagiarism of French plays. Her letters admit to wide reading of these[44] and to her use of them as sources for her own fiction. She wrote of Dead Sea Fruit (1868), for example:

> The subject I propose handling is rather a critical one. A man of fifty - dilitante [sic], blaze [sic], unbelieving - a vieux garçon of un-numbered successes in the past, who finds himself at last in love - after a long interval of disbelief in Love - with a girl - and who finds a rival in his unknown son. The idea is taken from the French stage.[45]

She does not make her acquaintance with French drama explicit in the novels but her reading was a source of the reader's sense of her experience in another specific way. She read French novels in particular to learn more of the details of French life, and this she melded with knowledge gained through direct experience and other contacts to amplify the extraordinary, and, when coming from the pen of a woman, shocking authenticity of French scenes in novels like Eleanor's Victory, Put to the Test (1865) Birds of Prey (1868) and Charlotte's Inheritance (1868). Interviews with her in later life reveal that she read deliberately to glean information. Edmund Yates, for example, who knew her well, reported that she rarely wrote for more than two hours a day and that the bulk of her time was devoted 'to reading omnivorously, to thinking out new subjects, accumulating facts, acquiring technical expressions and inventing

illustrations'.[46] A later interviewer commented, 'She reads history as most people read novels. History of all kinds appeals to her but perhaps French history is her favourite literature'.[47] From the very beginning of her career when she was commissioned to write a volume of verses on Garibaldi, hating her own ignorance of modern Italian history and never having seen the Italian landscape, she showed a capacity to appreciate and select detail and rework it so that it felt known at first rather than at second hand. She commented,

> With the business-like punctuality of a salaried clerk, I went every morning to my file of the 'Times', and pored and puzzled over Neopolitan revolution and Sicilian campaign ... I had only the 'Times' correspondent; where he was picturesque I could be picturesque - ... - where he was rich in local colour I did my utmost to reproduce his colouring.[48]

As she became more practiced, she did this so well that it was almost impossible to distinguish in her novels when she was recreating imaginatively from what she had read and when she was writing from experience. The critical assumption that she really did know all about the 'shady' areas, particularly of masculine experience, of which she wrote was as much an assumption about her reading practices and imaginative capacity as a convenient social and sexual placing of her.

The truth was that her knowledge of French literature was as wide if not wider than most male writers' and had a professional as well as pleasurable motivation, as her comments after 'Fifty Years of Novel Writing' clearly show:

> I first began to read French novels seriously many years ago under the inspiration of my old friend, George Augustus Sala, who was a man of wide cultivation and a splendid critic ... It

> was he who introduced me to notre maître à tous, Honoré de Balzac, of whose books since that time I have been a delighted student. I have read most of Dumas' historical novels ... Since the death of Guy de Maupassant I found German and Italian novels more attractive than contemporary French fiction, although I do read occasionally a novel by the younger Daudet and of Marcelle Tinayre. I have read most of Zola's books at one time or another, and although, of course, I admit that they have many faults of taste from an English point of view, I have found them intensely interesting ... I began to read Zola while I was writing my story 'Ishmael', the action of a considerable portion of which you may possibly remember takes place in the French capital. My good friend M. Rolandi, of the library in Berners Street, told me that I must read Zola if I wished to know modern Paris and to get local colour for my own book. I read several of Zola's works at that time in consequence, and since then, till his death, I kept myself acquainted with most that he wrote.[49]

The range of Braddon's cosmopolitan reading, her active engagement with and imaginative use of it, meant she appreciated the importance to women of what they read and her own fiction frequently highlighted this. It was also in part the source of what she 'knew'. The other area of her experience which balanced this, and it might be argued made some acquaintance with French literature inevitable, was her knowledge of the theatre and of the attitudes, techniques and possibilities of direct experience to which stage life gave access.

CHAPTER FIVE

The most important factor influencing Mary Braddon's sense of herself as a writer was her sense of her relationship with her readers. As an ex-actress and, initially, as a woman who wrote for her living, she had a clear sense of being paid to entertain, to give pleasure. A performance implied inter-action with an audience and as a professional she was very much aware of this and appreciative of audience expectation. She knew how to balance reader demand for 'strong meat' against the restrictions libraries would impose on material available to subscribers and she chafed equally against both pressures, but though she certainly would have liked more freedom to determine the nature and subjects of her novels, she recognised that the primary arbiters of this were her readers. There was an element of predictability in the relationship - they expected entertainment and came to expect strong, exciting, transgressive heroines. As far as she could, without alienating them, she gave this on her own terms. Nevertheless, in her early years as a young writer, quite aside from the pleasures of success, she could not afford an early closure, a flop.

Sometimes, as has been seen, Braddon used her fictional 'literary' characters to comment on current literary debates in which she was directly involved. Dead Sea Fruit (1868) contains an affectionate portrayal of a hack journalist, probably based on her friend George Augustus Sala, who warns his young nephew, a would-be poet, to:

'take to heart this one precept throughout your literary career:

> you have only one master, and that master is the British public. For your critics, if they are honest, respect and honour them with all your heart and mind; accept their blame in all humility, and be diligent to learn whatever they can teach. But when the false prophets assail you, - they who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves, - the critics who are no critics but unsuccessful writers or trade rivals in disguise,- be on your guard and take care of your cheese. You know the fable: the fox flattered the raven until the weak-minded bird dropped her cheese. The fox goes on another principle now-a-days, and reviles the raven; but for the same purpose. Remember my warning, Eustace, and don't drop your cheese. The public, your master, has a very plain way of expressing its opinion. If the public, like your book, the public will read it; if not, the public will assuredly let it alone; and all the king's horses and all the king's men, in the way of criticism, cannot set you up or knock you down, unless the reading public is with them'. (Ch.22, p.184)

She had good reason to be wary of the vulpine critics and was not one to bite the hand that fed her. Though superior and essentially rather snide, Henry James' creation of Jane Highmore in 'The Next Time' (1895), a successful novelist 'who bade fair to surround her satisfied spouse (he took, for some mysterious reason, a part of the credit) with a little family, in sets of triplets, which properly handled would be the support of his declining years', is almost certainly a reflection of Braddon's attitudes. The popular writer whom the public 'would have' gives the narrator the sheets of her new novel in the hope that he will write a 'clever little article' praising it and thus ensure its success:

> She impressed upon me that for the last ten years she had wanted to do something artistic, something as to which she was prepared not to care a rap whether or not it should sell ... She yearned to be ... but of course only once, an exquisite failure. There

> was something a failure was, a failure in the market, that a success somehow wasn't.

She would like to be respected, like the 'clever' and 'serious' writer Ray Limbert, struggling to make a success of his magazine. He, in turn, would like her unfailing capacity to please. James' representation underscores her sense of performance, the motivated deception of an actress. She ministers to and apparently manipulates the more naive male just as she does her audience, her customers:

> Save when she occasionally bore testimony to her desire to do, as Limbert did, something some day for her own very self, I never heard her speak of the literary motive as if it were distinguishable from the pecuniary. She cocked up his hat, she pricked up his prudence for him, reminding him that as one seemed to take one's self so the silly world was ready to take one. It was a fatal mistake to be too candid even with those who were alright - not to look and to talk prosperous, not at least to pretend that one had beautiful sales. To listen to her you would have thought the profession of letters a wonderful game of bluff.

The commitment of such a writer to 'Art' would always be subsidiary to her awareness of her sales and to public response. Such an 'immoral' and cynical awareness of earning one's living, of the indispensability of the customer if any communication, exchange, was to take place linked the woman writer to the other female professions of acting and (almost synonymously) prostitution. Male unease at the increasing possibility of writers becoming professional was also to do with trading, with the influence of the market place, but they baulked at compromising their status as artists and relegating total control of what they had to sell. At best granted status rather than being able to assume it, women were more likely to expect loss and that this would involve them personally, involve their bodies. The

commodity they had to sell was not something separate as it might be for men. They themselves had always been involved in the transaction of selling and being sold.

The debate about the immorality of actresses continued throughout the century. F. C. Burnand asked in the Fortnightly Review in 1885 'would any of us wish our daughters to "go on the stage"?' and showed how there was every likelihood of their being thrown into bad company and hearing bad language, while deprived of the protecting care of a chaperon :

> If your well-brought-up daughter does go there one of two things will happen, - she will be either so thoroughly disgusted at all she hears and sees that she will never go near the place after the first week, or she will unconsciously deteriorate in tone, until the fixed lines of the moral boundary have become blurred and faint. If among these surroundings a girl remains pure in heart, it is simply nothing short of a miracle of grace. Would you like to expose your daughter to this atmosphere? Of course not.[1]

This in its turn raised 'a storm in stageland'[2] but Braddon was equally clear when she looked back towards the end of her life in 'The Woman I Remember' that any initiative on the part of young middle class women to widen their experience and earn their own livings 'would have raised the domestic roof and set the whole village cackling':

> Figure to yourself a vigorous chicken in a shell of thick glass, full-grown for life, seeing a wonderful world outside, and hopeless of getting at it! ... Of all those gates which now are open to feminine suitors there were but two open to her. She could go out into the world as a governess, like Jane Eyre, in an age when to be a governess in a vulgar family was worse than the treadmill; or she could go upon the stage, a proceeding which

> convulsed her family to the most distant cousin, a thing to be spoken of with bated breath, as the lapse of a lost soul, the fall from Porchester Terrace to the bottomless pit.[3]

This was of course, the pit of prostitution and even though Braddon's career in provincial theatre from 1857 to 1859 was almost wholly beneficial and a comedietta of her own, The Loves of Arcadia, was accepted for production at London's Strand Theatre in March 1860, there is a clear denigratory allusion in her last letter from John Gilby, the Yorkshire sponsor who believed he was lifting her out of it:

> But my mistake in taking you from your legitimate profession may afford me a not unprofitable lesson - gratitude! why you hardly know the meaning of the word. Honour! Your code of Honour? You have become such an actress that you cannot speak without acting - I have worked as hard and done as much for you as it was possible for a gentleman to do for a woman in your position. But you never can forgive anyone to whom you are under obligations. And I think I shall be the last person that you will forgive! [5]

Braddon, like the heroines she created, was an active woman. Both on and off the stage she acted, and she was extremely aware of how women are acted upon, of how they are compelled to act and of their capacity to do so and to assume, if necessary, various roles which expose them to the charge of falseness and immorality. Rachel Brownstein in Becoming a Heroine (1982) summarises the problem of the actress as creator of herself:

> If the actress stands for doing and not simply being, she does so ambiguously, being dubiously truthful, sincere, virtuous, real. Like the portrait of a lady, the actress is an image of physical beauty, but she is problematically related to spiritual splendour. One might say - people have said - that in the actress, the female body (the locus of a heroine's identity) is

prostituted, rented to house a soul not in fact its own. Is the actress metaphorically, if not actually, a whore?' (Ch. 2, p.155)

Nevertheless, for Braddon, acting was an art which demanded 'a moral courage and an expenditure of physical energy, intellectual power and emotional feeling demanded by no other art'[6] and there were those who shared her appreciation, and for many of the same reasons, as a remarkably supportive article in The Englishwoman's Journal in 1859 shows:

> Perhaps no greater pleasure can exist than that of awakening the sympathies and emotions of a large audience, and receiving their warm, living responses and acknowledgements ... An actress's imagination and affections are constantly exercised, both mind and body are brought into service, she has the free use of all her faculties and limbs, and in the mimic stage-world she fills one condition after another, which diverts her at least from the poverty and monotony of actual life. Then her social wants are satisfied, everyday she goes into society, her work itself is all social, it is the imaginary reciprocation between herself and others of all kinds of duties, passions and relations. And she works, too, at no disadvantage as regards the other sex: her province is to represent her own, and her impersonations of womanhood are quite as important and interesting as any masculine impersonations can be. Travelling and change of place also have certain pleasures and excitements. And when temptations from without, and dangers within the theatre are escaped - the chief amongst the latter being that of losing her moral entity in a confusion of easy sympathies and temporary unions of interest, a danger arising out of the very nature of the work itself - when these are overcome, very helpful and satisfactory women are the result of an actress's training. Their larger experience of life, the way in which they have had to grapple with real, hard facts, to think and work and depend upon themselves, their quiet battles for order and purity, and the constant use of the higher faculties of taste and imagination, raise them far above those

> women who are absorbed by the petty vanities and trifles and anxieties of a woman's ordinary life.'[7]

The richer for their experience, they could not, however, be completely disassociated from more mundane womanhood. There may have been more men in the actress's audience but it was certainly assumed, whether an ideological fiction or not, that the majority of novel readers were women, or more specifically, fragile young women who must needs be protected from the influence of the more experienced novelist. A woman writer's sense of her readership, and particularly Braddon's with her acute awareness of audience, was likely to be different from the male novelists' who increasingly resented the young female's blushing cheek that apparently determined what and how they could write. Less experienced her readers may have been but Braddon could never dismiss them as a race apart.

Certainly this is to comprehend 'experience' in a typically nineteenth century way, to take it in the very 'masculine' sense of the external, the world of physical reality. It emphasises social interaction, verifiable facts, rather than ways of perceiving 'reality', though even the word 'sensation' bridges the two, implying a sense of the senses. Mary Braddon knew the weight of the world of physical detail and appreciated women's desire for wider access to it. At the same time she balanced this by giving weight to the concept of the reading of that reality - which might variously be described as fantastic, melodramatic, idealistic, even romantic - as being the reality. There is a sense in her fiction both of the solidity, the detail, of the external world, and of its meaning, its reality being very much open to interpretation - a direct challenge to the moral and perceptual certainties of a traditional Victorian

world view. A sense of this experience of the world paralleling the experience of dreams, or more precisely nightmares, is extended by a sense of vulnerability, of being in a familiar yet frightening world where anything can happen. It disorientates and disturbs not least because character response is no more predictable than event - it may well be impulsive, irrational, devious, dogged. 'Character' in any traditional sense is very small on this canvas but characteristics are not irrelevant. We may be all at sea but not inevitably wrecked. This is exciting, not overwhelming, because the dream allows wish-fulfilment. Usually it provides an heroic, virtuous woman, melodramatically buffetted by the tempest but struggling not to drown, who asserts herself, survives and achieves recognition. She's inspiring. Virtue triumphant gets her applause and smoothly re-integrates herself into society. She's fantastic - an unambiguously respectable ex-rogue. She's no moll, she's middle-class, but unlike her immaculate melodramatic mother she is in no way innocent.

Part of Braddon's appeal is precisely in this balancing between the outrageous and the acceptable, between the precise substantial detail of a visual, tactile, audible world where minutiae matter and a sense of the drama behind this surface, the struggle of gigantic forces that dwarf the particular. This precarious tight-rope walking between realism and melodrama was and is exciting not just because it was new but because it appeared to be dangerous. Suspense heightens our senses and we are physically involved in this performance. It is not merely a technique or a fantastic but insubstantial concept that is on the line but a body. And that body is female - the female body of writer, heroine and, possibly, reader.

Braddon's experience of theatre fostered her tolerant attitudes and broad interests and meant she assumed a freedom of movement and contact quite naturally. The sense of her confidence and the reader's acceptance of her authority comes from the demcnstration of the breadth of her experience. She realised that readers who did not have access to various 'worlds' would nevertheless be interested in them and she was able to make the details sound authentic because, either at first or second hand, she 'knew' them. She liked to use, to show, what she knew and no doubt realised that acute physical observation increased her plausibility. If we appreciate and concur with her readings of externals we are more likely to accept her presentation of psychological detail. Like many actresses she tended to work from the outside in.

She rarely takes setting for granted, even though most of her contemporary readers would have been able to imagine domestic interiors far more accurately than twentieth century readers can. There is no danger of mis-reading a scene (unless she intends us to) because she makes the visual details speak. This dwelling on specific detail sometimes extends to contrast, to illustrating what is <u>not</u> present, in order to convey the precise feel of a setting, as when Robert Audley takes a significant drive from Brompton to Peckham:

> The square parlour into which Robert was ushered bore in every scrap of ornament, in every article of furniture, the unmistakable stamp of that species of poverty which is most comfortless because it is never stationary. The mechanic who furnishes his tiny sitting-room with half-a-dozen cane chairs, a Pembroke table, a Dutch clock, a tiny lcoking-glass, a crockery shepherd and shepherdess, and a set of gaudily-japanned iron tea-trays, makes the most of his limited possessions, and generally contrives to get some degreee of comfort out of them;

but the lady who loses the handsome furniture of the house she is compelled to abandon and encamps in some smaller habitation with some shabby remainder - bought in by some merciful friend at the sale of her effects - carries with her an aspect of genteel desolation and tawdry misery not easily to be paralleled in wretchedness by any other phase which poverty can assume.

The room which Robert Audley surveyed was furnished with the shabbier scraps snatched from the ruin that had overtaken the imprudent schoolmistress in Crescent Villas. A cottage piano, a chiffonier, six sizes too large for the room, and dismally gorgeous with tarnished gilt mouldings and a slim-legged card-table, placed in the post of honour, formed the principal pieces of furniture. A threadbare patch of Brussels carpet covered the centre of the room, and formed an oasis of roses and lilies amidst a desert of faded green drugget. Knitted curtains shaded the windows, in which hung wire baskets of horrible looking plants of the cactus species, that grew downwards, like some demented class of vegetation, whose prickly and spider-like members had a fancy for standing on their heads.

The green-baize covered card-table was adorned with gaudily bound annuals or books of beauty placed at right angles; but Robert Audley did not avail himself of these literary distractions. (Lady Audley's Secret, Ch. 27, pp.180-81)

The scene then moves into stage-direction, sounds off, enter Miss Vincent and dialogue but not before the working man's room which we have been i vited to visualise, which is different from this room, has triggered the image of another set of contrasting rooms that have already been described in all their luxury, and of which Robert Audley has been thinking on his journey. The details of the school-mistress's tawdry misery feel familiar, a horrid reversal like the topsy-turvy plant life which visually underlines a pathetic and prickly poverty from which Lady Audley has saved herself.

Braddon's details unashamedly assert her access to male society

and smooth the imaginative entry of the reader through a 'knowing' amusement she assumes will be shared. She does not hesitate, for example, to tell that during gossip the deaf matron, secured to 'play propriety for the heroine in The Lady's Mile 'assumed that amiable air of interest which a man who has forgotten the French he learned at some juvenile academy is apt to wear during the recital of some piquant Parisian anecdote'. (Ch. 27, p.299) The impression is definitely of a writer whose own French is 'up to it', who shows elsewhere that she knows Parisian cafe society and the dingy locality and rented rooms where a roué suffers 'a touch of del.trem.' She is very familiar with the Channel crossing and the spectacle of English families 'collected in groups, holding guard over small mounds or barrows of luggage, having made all preparations for landing at first sight of the Norman shore, dim in the distance; and of course about two hours too soon' (Eleanor's Victory Ch.1, p.1) and first presents her fifteen year old heroine making this journey alone. The detail speaks of a writer who is used to freedom of movement - indeed she admitted in an interview towards the end of her life that she wrote Lady Audley's Secret 'wherever I happened to be when the time of publication drew near: in Essex, in Brighton, in Rouen, in Paris, at Windsor and in London'.[8] She communicates her own lively interest and at times gets the reader to accede to her confidence because she is quite unabashed in admitting what she is up to and demcnstrating that her unadventurous male characters are sometimes less au fait:

> I am afraid to say how much George Gilbert gave the cabman when he was set down at last at the bottom of Chancery Lane; but I think he paid for five miles at eight pence a mile, and a trifle in on account of a blockade in Holborn; and even then the driver did not thank him. (The Doctor's Wife, Ch. 1, p.8)

She presents heroines who not only act autonomously and secretly within 'safe' environments, which at least offer the illusion of some security in the known and contained, but who travel alone, regardless of physical threat, and who, at least in one case, were not averse to strong brandy to support them. This occurs in Henry Dunbar (1864), published serially and at greater length as 'The Outcasts' in the rather more down market London Journal (12 September 1863 to 26 March 1864). Margaret Wilmot, the heroine, travels alone by train at night and walks many miles in the darkness after three sleepless nights when she is unable to get transport. This does not cause her to collapse but what she learns about her father does. The doctor's response reveals, typically, how little she is known by the man she is about to marry:

> 'If you could get her to talk to you, she would no doubt be very much benefited. If she were an ordinary person she would cry, and the relief of tears would have a most advantageous effect upon her mind. Our patient is by no means an ordinary person. She has a very strong will'.
> 'Margaret has a strong will!' exclaimed Clement, with a look of surprise, 'why, she is gentleness itself'.
> 'Very likely; but she has a will of iron, nevertheless. I implored her to speak to me just now; the tone of her voice would have helped to some slight diagnosis of her state; but I might as well have implored a statue. She only shook her head slowly, and she never once looked at me'. (Ch.33, p.236)

Henry Dunbar is a detective novel so one would expect it to contain precise and sometimes crucial detail as well as sensational events but it provides a good example of the range of experience and knowledge on which Braddon could draw. Whether she is writing of the subterfuge used by detectives to lead their witnesses to be

garrulous, of how rivers are 'dragged', of the use of stooges who look 'eminently stupid' but are worth their weight in sovereigns, of the particular area of a race course 'where the plebeian bookmen, who are unworthy to enter the sacred precinct of Tattersall's mostly do congregate, in utter defiance of the police', of the particular 'street leading out of Holborn, a very quiet-looking street, where you could buy diamonds enough to set up all the jewellers in the Palais Royale and the Rue de la Paix, and where, if you were so whimsical as to wish to transform a service of plate into "white soup" at a moment's notice, you might indulge your fancy in establishments of unblemished respectability', or of the transport system serving Hull, the detail feels equally authentic. We believe her, we are intrigued because we do not know as much as she does, and she communicates this knowledge confidently as though it were quite natural, ordinary, for her as a woman to have access to this sort of information.

Henry Dunbar clearly combines the physical detail characteristic of nineteenth century realism with the melodrama of conflict - the poor man used and punished, the rich protected and able to prosper:

> 'Atone for the past! Can you make me an honest man, or a respectable member of society? Can you remove the stamp of the felon from me, and win for me the position I might have held in this hard world but for you? Can you give me back the five-and thirty blighted years of my life, and take the blight from them? Can you heal my mother's broken heart, - broken long ago by my disgrace? Can you give me back the dead? Or can you give me pleasant memories, or peaceful thoughts, or the hope of God's forgiveness? No, no; you can give me none of these'. (Ch.7,p.52)

This moves quickly, through murder, to the central melodrama of virtuous heroine, isolated - three times she tries unsuccessfully to

see 'Dunbar' who threatens to report her to the police for harassment and offers her money to leave him alone, only to be confronted by 'a clear ringing voice that vibrated through the hall':

> 'Tell your master ... that I will die of starvation sooner than I would accept bread from his hand. You can tell him what I did with his generous gift'.
> There was another brief pause; and then, in the hushed stillness of the house Henry Dunbar heard a light shower of torn paper flutter down upon the polished marble floor. Then he heard the great door of the house close upon Joseph Wilmot's daughter.
>
> (Ch.17, p.119)

There is the heightening, the exaggeration of stage melodrama. The heroine, subjected to horror, her identity tainted and obscured, struggles to liberate herself from nightmare helplessness and is finally recognised, but it is not black, clear Evil that threatens to overwhelm her and against which she is polarised in pure contrast. The all-but concluding tableau here shows her alliance with and support of a character pressurized by injustice, weakness and circumstance and capable of change. This was a perspective of motivation, a view of character and morality, where character succumbed to plot and melodramatic techniques were made use of while their comfortable predictability was undermined, which was not appreciated by most English critics:

> What becomes of the forger, murderer, thief, on whom Miss Braddon asks her readers to expend sympathy at every turn of his ubiquitous career? Does he pay the penalty of his crimes? By no means ... This respectable villain dies penitent in the same county in which he perpetrated his most heinous crimes ... 'He was sorry for what he had done!' There's a moral for you.[9]

By contrast, in France, the traditional home of 'melodrames', of

public spectacle, this novel was liked better than anything Braddon had previously written and she reported that 'the translator has doubled his terms (which even when doubled are very small) on the strength of its success'.[10] Her response was, significantly, a street gesture, a spontaneous playful symbol which she located in masquerade and transgressive street fair:- 'that - meaning the airiest snap that a Parisian grisette ever gave her fingers in Carnival time - for the critics'.[11]

I do not mean that the open-minded transgression of licensed licence, the claimed 'liberation' of carnival, could ever be anything but problematic for her as a woman but that its manifestation on the stage, the public space where boundaries were more fixed, performance contained and resolution assured, gave her experience of play in a context that was relatively non-threatening. This delight in playing and demonstrating role play is central to Braddon though she shows the wearing of a mask, the assumed identity, to be a strain in life off stage and only tenable when contact is limited to an audience who must be deceived. The whole of Henry Dunbar, in a sense, centres on the very topical subject of 'Keeping up Appearances'.[12] Braddon exposes the 'theatricality' of social interaction and asks us to suspend disbelief, at least during the experience of reading the novel, exactly as we might do in the theatre. When the lower class Joseph Wilmot buys a new suit of clothes - hat, boots, umbrella, a carpet-bag, half-a-dozen shirts, brush and comb, shaving tackle etc., has his beard shaven off, moustache trimmed into an 'appropriate' aristocratic shape and his hair cut, 'the transformation was perfect'. For his social audience this actor was not merely like, 'he was a respectable, handsome-looking gentleman, advanced in middle

age' and their response, the language in which interpretation is articulated, reflects this:

> The very expression of his face was altered. The defiant sneer was changed into a haughty smile; the sullen scowl was now a thoughtful frown. (Ch. 5, p.35)

Because the main motive of the 'villain's' actions is resentment of this double standard, Braddon is both able to criticize it and allow him to use it, to use it herself as a plot device, to advantage. The reader must appreciate the irony when the heroine's future husband, Clement Austin, comments in complete ignorance of the history and identity of the murderer,

> 'If Henry Dunbar had been some miserable starving creature who, in a fit of mad fury against the inequalities of life, had lifted his gaunt arm to slay his prosperous brother for the sake of bread - detectives would have dogged his sneaking steps, and watched his guilty face, and hovered round and about him till they tracked him to his doom. But because in this case the man to whom suspicion pointed had the supreme virtues comprised in a million of money, Justice wore her thickest bandage, and the officials, who are so clever in tracking a lowborn wretch to the gallows, held aloof, and said respectfully, "Henry Dunbar is too great a man to be guilty of a diabolical crime!"' (Ch. 38, p.271).

Through being protected by the heroine from having to cope with the truth, Austin benefits as much as anyone when hypocrisy is turned back on itself.

But this is not the only successful impersonation in the novel and Braddon does not always allow the reader to feel so comfortably 'in the know'. The 'villain's' assumption of a higher class persona is balanced by, in many ways, a more provocative change of identity when in a cameo scene, a piece of theatrical deception within the

bigger drama, the heroine performs the part of a servant - and does it so well that she deceives the detective. This is typical both of Braddon's playfulness and her habit of lighting an issue from an 'alternative' angle purely to show and to see how it looks. It very quickly became commonplace in crime fiction for servants to be seen as weak and hence crucial links in the chain that ensured the respectability of the middle/upper class family. This reflected a fear of their 'low' morality which had to be strictly controlled lest it corrupt and of their knowledge of what was really going on in the privacy of the home, which in their malevolence they might divulge to outsiders. In Aurora Floyd in a typically 'balanced' response Braddon had captured the common fear of employers of being spied on in their own homes by employees who probably had little loyalty or affection for them but much cause for resentment:

> Your servants ... watch you while they wait at table, and understand every sarcasm, every innuendo, every look, as well as those at whom the cruel glances and the stinging words are aimed. They understand your sulky silence, your studied and over-acted politeness. The most polished form your hate and anger can take is as transparent to those household spies as if you threw knives at each other, or pelted your enemy with the side-dishes and vegetables, after the fashion of disputants in a pantomime. Nothing that is done in the parlour is lost upon these quiet, well-behaved watchers from the kitchen ... You don't allow them followers, you look blacker than a thunder-cloud if you see Mary's sister or John's poor old mother sitting meekly in your hall; you are surprised if the postman brings them letters, and attribute the fact to the pernicious system of over-educating the masses; you shut them from their homes and their kindred, their lovers and their friends; you deny them books, you grudge them a peep at your newspaper; and then you lift up your eyes and wonder at them because they are inquisitive, and because the

staple of their talk is scandal and gossip. (Ch. 16, p.149)

Though they appeared comparatively rarely in novels other than the sensational, servants in fact were the largest occupational group in the economy except for agricultural labourers, accounting in 1881 for one person in every twenty-two of the population. Perhaps even more significant than this, they made up by far the largest occupational group of working women, a high proportion being young women, and their numbers were growing rapidly. Already three-quarters of a million women were employed as residential domestic servants by the 1850s and within forty years this number had almost doubled, with roughly 40% being under twenty years old.[13] There was increasing concern amongst the middle classes with how to 'manage' this potentially hostile and certainly 'knowledgeable' group of women with their access to both 'inside' and 'outside' worlds (significantly parallel to sensation novels themselves).[14] They had influence over young children (their 'dark' knowledge being, apparently, particularly contaminating for the male child) and were vulnerable to that other group of working class 'snoops', the police, whose back-door access and male authority made them particularly threatening to middle class women. Anthea Trodd in Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel (1989) suggests that the female novelists, like their male counterparts, tended to 'join battle on class lines; the triumph of the middle-class heroine over the male, but working class, figure of authority is a familiar scene.'. The policeman may have some success below stairs and glean information from the more vulnerable and probably less hostile female servant but he is 'shown as completely incapable of reading genteel female character'.[15] In a sense the scene referred to above in Henry Dunbar where the detective

interrogates the heroine disguised as a servant and where he treats her as a servant, actually locking her into a room to get the information he wants, substantiates this. She is able to deceive him, ironically, not through the social defences of the middle class but by assuming the persona of the less resistant working class woman whom he is supposed to be particularly adept at manipulating. Braddon underlines the sex rather than class conflict when she has him admit:

> 'I've been sold, sir - sold by a young woman too, which makes it three times as mortifying, and a kind of insult to the male sex in general!' (Ch. 46, p.337)

Braddon had given prominence previously to middle-class fears of professional servants being spies and potential blackmailers, as, for example, in the very different treatment of Phoebe Marks and Mrs. Powell, but I do not think she expressed class hostility towards her male detectives. In her first novel, on the contrary, the detective Peters is given very positive weight in his fostering of the abandoned son of the arch-villain, himself the son of a marquis. Peters, an almost Gaskellian surrogate father, is treated humorously, but when he and the son, Slosh (named after the river out of which he was fished), finally track down the literal father, Braddon's guiding of sympathy and allegiance with the working-class detective is almost shockingly clear:

> 'What did you think of him, Slosh?'
> 'Which', says the "fondling", 'the cove in the red velvet breeches as opened the door, or the swell ghost?'
> 'The swell'.
> 'Well, I think he's uncommon handsome, and very easy in his manners, all things taken into consideration', said that elderly

juvenile with deliberation.

'Oh, you do, do you Slosh?'

Slosh repeats that he does.

Mr. Peters's gravity increases every moment. 'Oh, you do, do you Slosh?' he asks again, and again the boy answers. At last, to the considerable inconvenience of the passers-by, the detective makes a dead stop, and says, 'I'm glad you thinks him easy which, all things considered, he is, uncommon. In fact, I'm glad he meets your views as far as personal appearancegoes, because, between you and me, Slosh, that man's your father'.

...

'Is there any reward out for him, father?' He always called Mr. Peters father, and wasn't prepared to change his habit in deference to any ghostly phenomenon in the way of a parent suddenly turning up in Lombard Street .

(Trail of the Serpent, Bk. 5, Ch. 2, p.210)

Braddon's novels abound with weak, ignorant, violent and sometimes criminal fathers and husbands. Thus I disagree completely with Trodd's conclusion that 'as working-class male figures of authority they [the police] are a more permissable target for resentment than the heroines' fathers and husbands; this is clearly the case in Braddon's novels'.[16]

Braddon's pleasure in dialogue, in 'dramatic' narration, down to present-tense commentary which almost amounts to direction, is even more clear in the scene in Henry Dunbar where she is stating the theatricality of the deception. She does not use the more common scenario of lady's maid acting the lady but provocatively shows there is no intrinsic 'quality' in her heroine which shines through and prevents her being, albeit temporarily, accepted as a servant by a professional scrutineer. If she can act, a woman can be whatever circumstances demand. Braddon shows both the benefits and the burden of this - Margaret's 'real tears' are both 'appropriate', in that

they make her terror of her master seem genuine, and indicative of the strain her deception creates. Braddon intends us to appreciate Margaret's success, as she intends us to appreciate her own when she in turn deceives the reader through allowing us to be privy to her heroine's deception. She knows that we will then complacently assume that we, unlike the professional detective, are not deceived by appearances. Through her acting, her control of the deceptive narrative, she can play her audience and show not only that we are so deceived but that realisation can be both salutary and pleasurable.

Braddon's debt to Balzac is most obvious in Henry Dunbar, in the story of an alienated man who believes that if he is to succeed he must perform, must make of his life an outward sign, a show of what he wants it to become. This concept of life as theatre, where clothes, confident delivery, deportment, are of the utmost importance in determining how a character is regarded and how s/he regards herself, gives rise in a fiction which is constantly interrogating appearance to a sense of contrast between centre stage, what the audience is meant to see and hear, and the world behind the scenes. The wings too are a threshold, a borderland on the periphery of two worlds and Braddon made use of her unsentimental knowledge of the literal backstage of theatre as a context for much of her fiction.

As a young woman she had been attracted by the possibilities of representation, power in a public place, and I think part of the purpose of her use of the theatre in her fiction, particularly as regards its attraction for her young female characters (and readers), was to de-romanticize it without denying its fascination. She understands the appeal of the fantasy but does not condone the part fictional representations more usually played in fostering ridiculous

notions of the realities of theatrical life. The romantic Isabel Sleaford, for example, in The Doctor's Wife enters into these completely but though Braddon intends to provoke affectionate laughter at her she saves her from acting out her fantasies other than in her imagination:

> Sometimes, when the orphans were asleep, Miss Sleaford let down her long black hair before the little looking-glass, and acted to herself in a whisper. She saw her pale face, awful in the dusky glass, her lifted arms, her great black eyes, and she fancied herself dominating a terror-stricken pit. Sometimes she thought of leaving friendly Mr. Raymond, and going up to London with a five pound note in her pocket, and coming out at one of the theatres as a tragic actress. She would go to the manager and tell him that she wanted to act. There might be a little difficulty at first, perhaps, and he would be rather inclined to be doubtful of her powers; but then she would take off her bonnet, and let down her hair, and would draw the long tresses wildly through her thin white fingers - so; she stopped to look at herself in the glass as she did it, - and would cry, 'I am not mad; this hair I tear is mine!' and the thing would be done. The manager would exclaim, 'Indeed, my dear young lady, I was not prepared for such acting as this. Excuse my emotion; but really, since the days of Miss O'Neil, I don't remember to have witnessed anything to equal your delivery of that speech. Come tomorrow evening and play Constance. You don't want a rehearsal? - no, of course not; you know every syllable of the part. I shall take the liberty of offering you fifty pounds a night to begin with, and I shall place one of my carriages at your disposal'. Isabel had read a good many novels in which timid young heroines essay their histrionic powers, but she had never read of a dramatically-disposed heroine who had not burst forth a full-blown Mrs. Siddons without so much as the ordeal of a rehearsal. (Ch. 6, p.66)

Against this she sets the known realities of theatre life: the

appearance and re-appearance of the pitiful supernumerary John Marchmont 'always buffeted, or cajoled, or bonneted, or imposed upon ... and all for - a Shilling a night!', the naive hopefulness of Lucy Alford in Dead Sea Fruit (1868) who at nineteen comes to London at the 'fag-end of the year' after some provincial success and is used by a self-opinionated local celebrity in his attempt to take London by storm. The audience, crunching apples and sucking oranges, is sparse in spite of the free admissions. Long delays between the falling and rising of the act-drop contribute to the dismal atmosphere and she is, as her would-be protector puts it, dependent 'on the approbation of chimney sweeps' (the 'king of the gallery'). On stage she is deliberately eclipsed and far more frightened by the watchers in the wings, in particular one Mrs. M'Grudder who tells her that if she had seen Helen Faucit act her part she would go home and cut her throat, than by the audience. She walks home through London at night after the performance, having collected her father from the nearby public house, improvises her own costumes and for twenty-five shillings a week is prepared to sing parodies on 'Sam Hall' and the 'Cat's-meat man' and dance a 'cellar-flap breakdown' in a burlesque of 'Lucrezia Borgia' in Market Deeping. She travels to rehearsals for this in the parliamentary train at a quarter past five in the morning because it is much cheaper. Despite the hardship, when she naively reveals some detail of this journey, there is a sense of Braddon's knowledge and affection for the broader contact which this life makes possible:

> 'One meets most respectable people, generally with large families of children and canary birds; and sometimes people even play cards, if one can get something flat - a tea-tray, or a picture - to play on. One has to hide the cards, of course, when the guard

> ccmes round, unless he happens to be a very good-natured guard, who pretends not to see them. Oh, I assure you, it is not at all disagreeable to travel by the parliamentary train'.
>
> (Ch. 18,p.157)

Yet Lucy's livelihood is shown to be precarious. She is arbitrarily superseded by the arrival of Miss Ida Courtenay in her brougham and pair, who sweeps in on high-heeled boots, dressed in an expensive French costume, and can apparently call rehearsals when she likes. Without a chaperone after her father's death Lucy Alford has to accept that she cannot continue moving about from town to town without becoming either Mrs. M'Grudder ('too bitter a martyrdom') or Mlle. Pasdebasque patronised by the 17th Prancers, 'them milingtary coves a-tryin' it on to get behind', as the stage-door keeper defines them. Braddon emphasized the realities by describing the illusions very coolly:

> The guardian of the gate of this theatrical paradise, inhabited by fairies at a guinea a week, and baronial retainers at a shilling a night, is ordinarily a very inflexible individual, not to be corrupted by any mortal persuasion, and scarcely corruptible by the more potent influence of gold or silver.
>
> (John Marchmont's Legacy, Ch. 1, p.11)

She knew first hand that 'Lancashire salaries barely paid for the physical wear and tear of early rehearsals and long performances' so when she gives 'inside' detail about the lives of characters in the theatre whom she intends the reader to respect, her own lack of illusion makes her affection clearer, as for example, when she tells us that Eliza Floyd 'wore white satin and spangles, the spangles sewn upon the dirty hem of her dress, in the firm belief, common to all provincial actresses, that spangles are an antidote to dirt' Aurora

Floyd. Ch. 1, p.11)

Braddon's appreciation of characteristics she knew to exist among 'theatrical' people tends towards the sentimental. She uses this technique of balance, demonstrating two apparently contradictory extremes in a pseudonymous short story, 'At Daggers Drawn'[17], for example. A leading London comedian can act venomously towards a new signing from the provinces, even though he is no real rival -

> 'Ill, is he?', said he; 'I think I can guess the nature of his indisposition. The new farce, "Coals and Potatoes" - a literal translation from the last Palais Royal absurdity, "Un Marchand de Charbon", by the way - was a failure, sir ... when the houses pick up again, Mumford will pick up again; mark my words.'

But Braddon insists 'he little knows the heart of a comedian who fancies that Tayte's hatred endured when the object of it had such need of tenderness and compassion'. The story ends with the two men in tears as Mumford realises how much his one-time rival has been prepared to do for him:

> 'James Tayte', he cried, 'I did not think there was so good a man upon this earth!'
> He groped feebly for the hand of his benefactor, found it, pressed it to his lips, and, kissing it, died.

This is a thoroughly theatrical story, an actress's, a racconteur's story, told largely in dialogue, about the sort of fellow-actors she loved and knew. She delivers it almost as an anecdote, knowing that there is something entertaining, perhaps satisfying, in its neat encapsulating of peculiar theatrical behaviour.

Similarly because she gives a particular sense of the theatre community amcng whom Richard Thornton works in Eleanor's Victory we accept their (and her) evaluation of him even though it feels

sentimental. It may be an actress's performance on the page and so we expect colouring but there is enough authentic-sounding detail to encourage credibility:

> He was the only man in the theatre who neither abused nor flattered his employers. The carpenters and gasmen touched their caps when they talked to him, though he was shabbier than any of those employees; the little ballet girls were fond of him, and came to tell him their troubles when the cruel stage-manager had put their names down for shilling fines in a horrible book which was to be seen on the treasury table every Saturday morning. The old cleaners of the theatre told Mr. Thornton about their rheumatic knee-joints, and came to him for sympathy after dreary hours of scouring ... They knew that when other men made light of sacred things, and were witty and philosophical upon very solemn subjects, Richard Thornton would leave the assembly gravely and quietly, how eloquent or lively soever he might have been before. People knew all this, and were respectful to the young scene-painter, in spite of the rainbow smears of paint upon his shabby coat, and the occasional fringe of mud upon the frayed edges of his trousers'. (Ch. 6, p.55)

Braddon delights in the particulars of the stage world, including its language, as for example in 'M. Deschappelles'' comment, 'That's rather a strong case of coals, a'nt it? ... coals - nuts - barcelonas. The gorger's awful coally on his own slumming, eh?' which is explained to the middle-class editor (and reader) to mean 'to say that our friend the manager is rather sweet upon his own acting'.[18] She is fascinated by the creation of illusion but also with the gap between appearance and reality, two worlds co-existing on the stage itself, more likely to be saddening when the public performance is comic, amusing when the drama is 'officially' tragic:

> The easy-going comedians with whom Eliza acted made friendly remarks to each other on their private affairs in the intervals

> of the most vengeful discourse; speculated upon the amount of money in the house in audible undertones during the pauses of the scene; and when Hamlet wanted Horatio down at the foot-lights to ask him if he 'marked that', it was likely enough that the prince's confidant was up the stage telling Polonius of the shameful way in which his landlady stole the tea and sugar.[19]

For Braddon 'unofficial' information is significant and often amusing. She recognised that if it sounded authentic, if it could be credited or thought possible, it would have the fascination of revelation.

Sometimes she made her 'fascinating' theatrical knowledge work as a plot device, as in The Trail of the Serpent where her villain shares her knowledge that amongst the supernumeraries at the Italian Opera in Paris there is likely to be a mimic. As readers we accompany him to the innards of the backstage world. Braddon's technique is cinematic, present tense, more than descriptive scene-setting and stage-direction here. As our destination becomes more obscure, further from the safe 'official' world but still in a public domain where ladies have no place, what we are shown becomes increasingly specific:

> Raymond Marolles follows the doorkeeper down dark passages and up innumerable flights of stairs; till, very high up, he stops at a low door, on the other side of which there is evidently a rather noisy party. This door the porter opens without ceremony, and he and Monsieur Marolles enter a long low room, with bare white-washed walls, scrawled over with charcoal caricatures of prima donnas and tenors, with impossible noses and spindle legs. Seated at a deal table is a group of young men, shabbily dressed, playing at dominoes, while others look on and bet upon the game. They are all smoking tiny cigarettes, which look like damp curl-papers, and which last about two minutes each.
>
> (Bk. 3, Ch.4, p.113)

If in the involvement with our own sensations we have forgotten, the damp curl-papers are a reminder that it is a woman who has brought us to this place. Once here, in terms of the plot and compulsive tension, there is no turning back.

'French' detail, as discussed earlier, probably had a particular fascination because it was felt to be risqué. Braddon showed that the English theatres were prepared to 'pinch' plays direct from the Porte St. Martin - Richard Thornton in Eleanor's Victory is in Paris 'to pick up the music, sketch the scenery and effects and translate "Raoul l'Empoisonneur"'(Ch. 5, p.45). She also showed exactly how this was done and that though the plagiarism was wholesale, 'sugaring' and moral hypocrisy were deemed necessary for an English audience. Her capacity to involve the reader in Thornton's model-making consists in not only allowing us to see precisely what he is doing but to see the sketch as he transforms it into a miniature working set. The activity itself is particular, unusual, the authenticity of the detail of the revelation again fascinating. Braddon is a very practical writer. When she imagines a character devoting a stretch of time to a task, it is natural to her, and she makes it feel natural to her character, to think about eating. When Thornton foregoes the two courses and dessert 'to say nothing of half a bottle of sour claret, for fifteen pence' he knows he can get in the Palais Royal and decides on coffee and rolls, this sets the mood for his patient, craftsmanlike work on 'Raoul' which he continues carefully, smoking as he works, until past five in the afternoon:

> He ... pushed a table to the window, which looked out into the quadrangle of the hotel, and sat down with a battered tin box of

> water-colours and a few squares of Bristol board before him ... he worked at a careful water-coloured copy of a rough pencil sketch which he had made a couple of nights before in the pit of the theatre ... The scene was a street in old Paris, the houses very dark and brown, with over-hanging latticed windows, exterior staircases, practicable bridges, and all sorts of devices which called for the employment of a great deal of glue and pasteboard in Richard's model. This scene was only one out of eight, and the young scene-painter wanted to take perfect models of all the eight scenes back to the Phoenix. He had M. Michel Levy's sixty centimes edition of the new play spread open before him, and referred to it now and again as he painted .. He got up with a sigh of relief when the pasteboard presentment of the old Parisian street stood out upon the little table, square and perfect. (Ch. 6, p.56)

Paradoxically Braddon makes it feel as though there is something neat and respectable in this crafty copying whereas 'charming little adaptations' like that of 'Côteletes sautées chez Vefour' referred to by a genial manager in Dead Sea Fruit feel to demonstrate a far more dishonest craft in their apparently necessary transmogrification:

> 'I find there are six young ladies in the caste - 'ces dames' of the Quartier Breda, I believe, in the original, but very cleverly transmogrified by Bovisbrook into school-girls from a Peckham academy, who go to dine with an old West-Indian uncle at Verey's'. (Ch. 16, p.132)

She was familiar with a world which both assumed 'sisters under the skin' and knew this was anathema to the society it sought to entertain, a society where appearances were as important as they were on the stage and yet which could not admit performance. Only Braddon's villains, and occasionally she herself at her most bitter, consciously treat life theatrically and assume it to be a melodrama or a farce where they play as well as they can against an arbitrary

Destiny, succeeding in so far as they maintain the appearance of respectability. For her the most disturbing evil lies in a sang-froid which refuses to acknowledge the strong passions of melodrama outside the tableaux of popular theatre. The response to hatred and denunciation of an evil character like the Marquis de Cevennes in The Trail of the Serpent is, for example,

> 'Don't be violent ... Since it appears you are my son, what then?' (Bk. 6 Ch. 2, p.262)

He can read an account of his son's trial and subsequent suicide without mourning, 'indeed it is doubtful if five minutes after he had thrown aside the journal he had any sensation whatever about the painful circumstances therein related' (Bk.5, Ch.7, p.320). At the other end of the social scale, theatre and life are much less distinct, both provoking an emotional response, which amuses Braddon at times but which she values. At a re-meeting of two young lovers in John Marchmont's Legacy:

> there was another little love scene, over which Mrs. Pimpernel ... wept fresh tears, murmuring that the Capting was the sweetest young man, sweeter than Mr. Macready in Claude Melnock; and that the scene altogether reminded her of that 'cutting' episode where the proud mother went on against the pore young man, and Miss Faucit came out so beautiful. They are a play-going population in Oakley-street, and compassionate and sentimental, like all true playgoers. (Ch. 16, p.156)

Braddon makes exactly this comparison herself in Henry Dunbar where she treats the fictional farewell scene she is representing as life and appeals to the reader's experience of theatre to give it greater emotional weight. She seems to assume, as she does with cross-references to novels and poetry, that her readers will be as

aware of recent stage productions and contemporary actresses and actors as she is and she breaks into the dialogue with allusion:

> If my readers have seen 'Manfred' at Drury Lane, let them remember the tone in which Miss Rose Leclerq breathed her last farewell to Mr. Phelps, and they will know how Margaret Wilmot pronounced this mournful word - love's funeral bell, - 'Farewell, Clement!'
>
> (Ch. 34, p.243)

For her, as for the fictional Mrs. Pimpernel, theatrical performance is as legitimate a touchstone as fictional performance because what she is appealing to is a recognition of interaction, of the response produced by particular scenes or characters (or writers or actresses) on the reader/audience. I think, too, there is an element of deliberately seeking to give weight, authority, to the impermanent performance, careless of posterity in the sense that the reference will not work for future readers in the same way. However, the effect of this use of theatrical reference, rather than creating an awareness of common experience, is to highlight Braddon's knowledge of the theatre.

Significantly, whenever she uses stage acting and the theatre as a metaphor she always has a sense of audience, of two components whose perception of what is happening is different. All the world is not a stage, though it may be a theatre in which we are both player and audience to others. For all her appreciation of the power of acting she has a strong sense of the vulnerability of performers. The player's perception may be more limited than the watcher's: 'we, the spectators, can make vague guesses at the plot, and predicate the solemn climax. It is only the actors who are ignorant of the meaning of their several parts, and who are stupidly reckless of the obvious catastrophe'.[20] Theatre makes the gap between sufferer and observer

physically undeniable. While appearing active the actor is seen to be acted upon. Braddon knows the inter-play is reciprocal, that the audience is played upon by the performer, but she has a keen sense of the active essence of audience, the activity of receivers and the extent to which the player, the producer, must suffer manipulation, and this underlies her attitude to writing, at least, to writing for a living. She accepted, I think, that for effective communication to take place the addressee must, to a certain extent, determine the address, though at times she feels cynical and demoralised by audience response and her own role in providing the entertainment:

> Is not life altogether a long comedy, with Fate for the stage-manager, and Passion, Inclination, Love, Hate, Revenge Ambition, by turns in the prompter's box? A tiresome comedy sometimes ...; or a 'sensation' comedy, with unlooked-for tableaux, and unexpected dénoûements; but a comedy to the end of the chapter, for the sorrows which seem tragic to us are very funny when seen from the other side of the footlights ... What can be funnier than other people's anguish? Why do we enjoy Mr. Maddison Morton's farces, and laugh till the tears run down our cheeks at the comedian who enacts them? Because there is scarcely a farce upon the British stage which is not, from the rising to the dropping of the curtain, a record of human anguish and undeserved misery. Yes, undeserved and unnecessary torture - there is the special charm of the entertainment.
>
> (Aurora Floyd, Ch. 6, p.56)

She moves easily across the stage boundary, imaginatively equally able to be performer and audience, and knowing the importance of place, the distinctiveness of what occurs in people differently placed. This sense of person and the personal as place feels very modern and I think her imaginative generosity was in part a gift from, a capacity developed by, her theatrical experience.

More specifically, apart from fostering a broad moral tolerance, providing cross-reference, metaphor and material for contexts which she enjoyed revealing and whose 'inside' detail was relatively rare in fiction, the theatre also informed her concept of narrative. Sometimes her language points up her sense of narrative structured around a series of scenes as in the theatre. 'There is a lapse of three years and a half between the acts', she says at one point in John Marchmont's Legacy 'and the curtain rises to reveal a widely-different picture' (Ch. 5 p.37). It is also likely to rise on a variety of places or on characters introduced into the story some time previously and kept off stage so long that they have almost been forgotten. The pace of the highly sensational Trail of the Serpent, for example, is tremendous, the scene shifting rapidly from Slopperton-on-the-Sloshy to Paris, to the East and West Ends of London, Liverpool and South America, the narrative reading at times exactly like stage direction: 'The brother and sister are seated in the little, warm, lamp-lit drawing room. He is speaking.' Dialogue dovetails into plot and there is use of and speculation about dialect, as in Aurora Floyd: 'Yorkshire is so pre-eminently a horse-racing and betting country, that country folk who have never wagered a sixpence in the quiet course of their lives say "I lay" where a Londoner would say "I dare say"' (Ch. 21, p.209). Occasionally Braddon attempts to reproduce accent:

> 'I mean that I mayn't go inside yon geates,' muttered Stephen Hargreaves; 'I mean that I've been toorned oot of yon place that I've lived in man and boy, for forty year, - toorned oot like a dog, neck and crop'. (Ch. 16, p.150)

She has an ear for the emphasis and economy of natural speech and a

sense of speech as action, combining posture and words at times in a way that makes a gesture of an image. Aurora's vulnerability, for example, the sense of a shadowy condition threatening her prosperous and respectable surface world is crystallized in the three words and physical stance of Matthew Harrison as she waits alone in a carriage for her aunt to finish shopping:

> He was a broad-shouldered, bull-necked, sandy-whiskered fellow, wearing a cut-away coat, and a gaudy neckerchief and smoking a huge cigar, the rank fumes of which struggled with a very powerful odour of rum-and-water recently imbibed ... he walked deliberately up to the carriage, and, planting his elbows upon the door, nodded to her with friendly familiarity.
> 'Well', he said, without inconveniencing himself by the removal of the rank cigar, 'how do?'
> After which brief salutation he relapsed into silence, and rolled his great brown eyes slowly here and there, in contemplative examination of Miss Floyd and the vehicle in which she sat'.
>
> (Ch. 3, p.24)

As so often in Braddon surface reality is both dramatic in itself and masking a more illusive conflict, frequently involving male sexual power.

The novel in which Braddon deals most clearly with inadmissable female sexuality, John Marchmont's Legacy, ironically involves an attempt at masking, 'a marble mask', which is so fierce a suppression that both she and her heroine recognise it as madness. In this novel Olivia Marchmont tries to do her duty but loathes the narrow, unchanging existence which leaves her prey to obsession for a 'bright-faced boy' with whom she has nothing in common:

> Her powerful mind wasted and shrivelled for want of worthy employment. It was like one vast roll of parchment whereon half the wisdom of the world might have been inscribed, but on which

> was only written, over and over again, in maddening repetition, the name of Edward Arundel. If Olivia Marchmont could have gone to America, and entered herself amongst the feminine professors of law or medecine, - if she could have turned preacher, and cried to the lost souls wandering in darkness; if she could have set up a printing-press in Bloomsbury, or even written a novel, - she might have been saved. The superabundant energy of her mind would have found a new object. As it was, she did none of these things. She had only dreamt one dream, until by force of perpetual repetition the dream had become a madness.
>
> (Ch.13, p.117)

Braddon traces the way in which this proud self-reliant woman, scornful of weakness and 'slow to comprehend feelings that were utterly foreign to her nature' is in turn vulnerable and manipulated to the point where she turns her frustration violently against a weaker woman. This is another version of the wicked step-mother, paradoxically the strong-minded woman who may be mad. Though Braddon has not changed her feeling that in 'violent and concentrative natures the line that separates reason from madness is so feeble a demarcation that very few can perceive the hour in which it is passed' (Ch. 31, p.301) this dark heroine's sexuality is much clearer than Lady Audley's. Unattractive in male terms, she is equally vulnerable to scrutiny. Though the misogyny in this case comes from a different point on the sexual spectrum, Braddon's language reveals the basis of the power conflict to which both women are exposed:

> He anatomized the wretched woman's soul. He made her tell her secret, and bare her tortured breast before him; now wringing some hasty word from her impatience, now entrapping her into some admission, - if only so much as a defiant look, a sudden lowering of the dark brows, an involuntary compression of the lips. He <u>made</u> her reveal herself to him ... Olivia writhed under the torture of that polite inquisition, for she knew that her secrets

> were being extorted from her; that her pitiful folly - that folly which she would have denied even to herself if possible - was being laid bare in all its weak foolishness. She knew this; but she was compelled to smile in the face of her bland inquisitor, to respond to his commonplace expressions of concern about the protracted absence of the missing girl, and meekly to receive his suggestions respecting the course it was her duty to take. He had the air of responding to her suggestions, rather than of himself dictating any particular line of conduct. He affected to believe that he was only agreeing with some understood ideas of hers, while he urged his own views upon her.
>
> (Ch. 19, p.188)

However complex or sophisticated the means, the essence of victimization is a crude imbalance of power. Hence perhaps it is not possible to present it without sounding melodramatic, though conventionally what is seen as exaggerated polarisation is placed as 'theatrical', associated with fantasy and the 'unreal'. As opposed to trying to avoid this, Braddon seems to assert the place of melodrama in reality and stress the appropriateness, the validity at times of a simple appeal to the emotions.

At the other end of the dramatic scale she insists on the importance, the potential weight, of the apparently trivial and the primacy of accident. She admits in Put to the Test (anon. 1865) that she likes 'tracing cause and effect as far as I can. If it were possible to trace one's life carefully to its very commencement, perhaps we should find a mere trifle to be the primary cause of all the wonderful chain of events that form it'. In this novel she refers to life as 'a track of trifles', stating quite simply, 'her dress was too long, so other events took place' (Ch. 19, p. 281). She does not mean to completely deny responsibility for choices since she adds wryly, 'besides, it's so pleasant to find that if you do go

wrong, it's not your fault and you can't help it' but this sense of the dramatic potential of the 'insignificant' tends towards a view of the motives for human behaviour as often being absurd. Such a subversive attitude to characterisation may have stemmed from her familiarity with comedy and farce in the theatre. Nevertheless, it feels again very modern in a novel and more a twentieth century than a common Victorian response. Braddon would have been absolutely in tune with the attitudes discussed in a 1983 review of Fay Weldon's 'Action Replay':

> Ms. Weldon is examining the nature of personal choice and the way life-transforming actions and decisions can be experienced as utterly arbitrary. We recognise the accuracy of a statement such as Shirley's,
>
> 'I think she married him because she trod on a jellyfish' ...
>
> A Portuguese man-of-war can have a lot to answer for.[21]

Perhaps the suspicion of this 'secret' underlying the most prestigious of social relations was (and is?), for men at least, the most inadmissable of her subversive suggestions.

CHAPTER SIX

Braddon's experience of theatrical life enriched her and shaped her writing but it may not have been so positive, or even possible, if it had not been for her mother's support of her in this still dubious profession. Fanny White, daughter of 'mixed' Irish parents, brought up her daughter on her own from 1839, when she separated from her unfaithful husband, and accompanied her daughter when Braddon toured in rep. between 1857 and 1859.

A sense of the strength of the relationship is communicated most clearly in Braddon's extraordinary autobiographical manuscript 'Before the Knowledge of Evil'[1] - extraordinary because, though nearly eighty years old when she wrote it, she was still in vital contact with her past and communicates a vivid sense of herself as a child. There is a directness, an immediacy of tone which she never attempts to qualify even when describing disturbing reactions which no doubt, as an adult, she saw in rather a different light. Sometimes she balances the child's view with adult irony, as in passages relating to her father, for example, but more often there is a clear, vibrant sense of a 'happy child, youngest and smallest, and so tenderly cherished', excited by coloured beads in pink and gold oval boxes and slices of 'thunder and lightening' (slabs of bread thickly covered with clotted cream and dashed with bold streaks of dark treacle), adventurous and ashamed of her fears, at times contentedly self-possessed, at times devastated by the absence of her idolised mother.

In effect she was brought up as an only child. Her sister Margaret, eleven years her senior, was with her grandmother and aunts in Cornwall, her brother Edward was away at school. Occasionally play-mates are mentioned, as at Chiswick on the Thames where they moved when Mary was eight and where 'Mamma's only and adored son' came for the holidays. She remembers him telling her a story at bedtime 'about demons in a mine, and all the strange things they did, and I was somewhat puzzled, for I thought they were diamonds - never having heard of the other creatures: but I listened respectfully till slumber overtook me', and on an earlier occasion he shut her in a toy cupboard because she would not give up her white currants spread on a cabbage leaf acquired for a penny from the market:

> The closet was dark, but I was not afraid of darkness, and I do not think I was kept there long, or that I lost many of those currants.

There is a sense of a little girl often overwhelmed by her emotions but rarely fearful, and resentful at being assumed to be so. She says that she burst out crying on her first visit to a theatre and was sent home because her mother thought she was frightened. Her only consolation was a cake made in the shape of a pig with two currants for his eyes 'instead of the lights and the music and dogs and monkeys, and all the wonder of the theatre: just because people jumped at conclusions and thought that burst of excited tears meant abject terror. I had to live a few years longer and go into dark rooms and sit in tossing boats before grown-up people knew that I was not easily frightened.' Much better able to contain her thoughts than her emotions she admits, 'I was always silent about things that interested me profoundly - silent even with my mother.' It becomes

very clear from the memoir that most of what interested her and the sensations she recalled strongly were associated with the women she knew as a child.

There was her black nurse Sarah Allen, 'second only to my mother in my affection', on whose lap she used to sit and watch the sparks die out of a bit of tinder or gaze at a room in a house opposite where the vivid carpet seemed to go uphill - 'my infantile idea of heaven' because no-one was ever seen there and 'the room gave me an idea of something strange and remote.' Together in the afternoon they would trudge about the streets of London buying curds and whey in St. James Park and nasty soft sweet caraway seed biscuits. Later 'Piccadilly ... was our beat' with its 'ascending or descending perspective of golden lamps.' In 1839 Mary and her mother moved from Soho Square to St. Leonards-on-Sea, Sussex. Mrs. Allen temporarily disappeared and her mother's friend, Mrs. Walden, 'who had also disburdened herself of an impossible husband', lived with them. Mary was unhappy and bored:

> Oh, those cruel mornings of wide-awakefulness while the two ladies lay like statues in their French bedsteads: mornings that were always getting longer. That was my first experience of the 'Star in lette e non dormire' which has been one of the trials of my long life.

A later reference to her insomnia is accompanied by a rare criticism of her mother who bade her 'sleep as if slumber were within the compass of human will'. She knew by experience before she was nine years old that it was not 'and the knowledge that Mamma would reappear at eleven o'clock and be very disappointed and almost angry at finding me wide awake, helped to keep me so.'

She remembers being taught to read by Mrs. Walden from 'some of the most unamiable of the Psalms' and the seeds of her dislike of judgmental religion were early sown:

> It seemed as if I should never get away from the wicked man and the green bay tree, and how he contrived to be so wicked and to undergo such a variety of punishment in one syllable is a mystery to me when I look back upon the book.

This contrasts with what she learned from the English mistress of her sister's school, Miss Parrott, who agreed to begin her education and whom she says gave her her first idea of religion. Like most of her heroines Mary Braddon reveals a personality which resists and hardens at threat but will admit error in response to kindness. She remembers there was no fire and brimstone in Miss Parrott's teaching, no tremendous pictures of lost souls in hell but favourite chapters of St. John, particularly the 14th, which she told her six year old pupil was:

> the most beautiful chapter in the New Testament, and even in those childish days I think I felt the music of the Divine words, as I have never ceased to feel it, 'Let not your heart be troubled' - across the long years of strenuous work and perhaps too eager a desire for success.

This reflection echoes the final words of her last novel Mary, the end of which was still in manuscript when she died in February 1915. Mary 'Smith', the heroine, is the daughter of a Cornish father who cares little for her. Her real name is Tremayne, the original name Braddon chose for the family in The Story of Barbara (1880) which in many ways was like her own. At the end of her life in 'Before the Knowledge of Evil' she chose to record her memories of women who had been important to her as a child, women like Mrs.

Cayne, mother of her 'first real playfellows':

> I look back upon her kindness to a little neighbour with an aching regret at the thought that I can never see her again, never tell her that I was grateful and fond of her. Most vividly I remember how proud I felt sitting by her side in the candlelight when my playfellows had been sent to bed, and she would keep me in honour of my superior years to share her light supper, after looking at fashion plates and old magazines, which she produced for my amusement and seemed to enjoy as much as I did.

In this mood of acknowledgement she gave the novel she was writing her own Christian name. Her heroine's false surname was the same as the fictional sensation novelist whom Braddon had used to represent herself, a mouthpiece in some ways for her own experiences and opinions. Her heroine's real surname was one Braddon had considered substituting for her own in an earlier novel. (The comments about Mr. Trevornock and the descriptions of his daughters' visit to his office in The Story of Barbara, Ch. 9, pp. 66-67, is similar in many ways to the 'friendly calls upon Papa' to 'ask him for largesse' described in the memoir. In both, the father who was 'nobody's enemy but his own' 'would sit there behind the kneehole desk, trimming his superior nails' and ask his daughter 'if she wanted the teeth out of his head'.) The fictional Mary's secret, like Mary Braddon's at the time when she was writing sensation novels, and in direct contrast to most of her sensational heroines, is that she is not married and that she has had a child. Her greatest sorrow is that the child has died. On the last page of this last novel she reveals a child's grave and the novel closes after the confession with words from the Preface to the Mass, 'Sursum corda!' - Lift up your heart. The memoir, I think, makes it clear that these words express for Mary Braddon the essence

of Christianity.

It is also apparent that the women with whom she had contact as a child, apart from being associated with culinary delights 'to be remembered for a life-time', were often lovers of books, of tales and accounts, and lively, informed conversation. Her aunt Mary's letters contained criticism of the new books she had read and thought about. She describes her as a wit and accomplished mimic, familiar with Shakespeare and Byron which she would quote 'not formally but in scraps and amidst talk by the fireside.' The landlord's daughters at Hampstead, the Miss Greens who were to be her life-long friends, had been 'educated by a somewhat eccentric father upon peculiar lines by a tutor rather than a governess.' This learned gentleman had imparted 'much of real culture' and:

> he had imbued one or two of them with democratic opinions and a dislike of the privileged classes, from the Queen downwards. All that was generous and tender in their nature had been enlisted in the cause of the nameless poor against the titled rich and that warmth of heart gave a bitterness of speech in argument which I remember a few years later - when I was old enough to listen to grown-up conversations.

She records that in the evening she sat up with stolid Sarah Hobbs, the cook-general, waiting for her mother to come home, listening to her ballads and watching her needlework 'just as David sat with Pegotty.' Sarah, an 'amateur of corpses' and frequenter of the Chiswick inquests, was also a great reader of the Family Herald and Reynolds Magazine and loaned Mary a condensed version of Bulwer Lytton's The Last Days of Pompeii. When Mary heard her mother's double knock she would rush upstairs to open the door, forgetting everything else:

> There was no Mr. Murdstone to see her home, thank God, never

> living man to come between her and me - memories she may have had, memories which she told me later, of far off days before her loveless marriage but of living man not a thought.

Her mother began to teach her French when she started to attend a nearby day school and then took over her education 'in real earnest'. Before her ninth birthday she was reading Maria Edgeworth and 'Mamma had opened the gates of that wide region of romance and history, chivalry, tragedy and comedy, which Sir Walter Scott created.' She wrote of her mother's generosity, candour, utter absence of vanity or envy - and her quick temper which occasionally resulted in boxed ears. Mrs. Braddon had a tendency to suspect others and impute motives to them that was 'sometimes disconcerting' but 'she was generally right'.

She was also a writer, contributing to Ainsworth's Magazine. Wolff suggests she could be the 'Mrs White' who wrote, among other pieces, a short story called 'Wanted a Governess' in which she asssumed the voice of a young, poverty-stricken girl called for interview by a 'lady of luxury' for a governess post in London.[2] The girl makes the journey up from the Essex coast and finds she cannot return the same day because the time of the appointment is after the last ferry has left London Bridge, so she is forced to add the expense of staying at an inn overnight. Shown no basic courtesy and expected to be a 'general dogsbody', she learns that there are thirty-six other applicants, one of whom, assuming her reference is satisfactory, has already been offered the post. The story invites comparison of the situation, behaviour and values of the two women and, as might be expected, invites sympathy and respect for the would-be employee.

When Mary Braddon decided to centre a novel on the vulnerability of an intelligent young woman forced to earn her living as a governess she did so anonymously. Put to the Test was first published by Maxwell in 1865 and reprinted in 1876 'by Ada Buisson. Edited by the author of Lady Audley's Secret.' Braddon did revise novels by other authors for publication by Maxwell, including, if Wolff's supposition is correct, A Modern Sphinx (3 Vols., 1881) by Ebenezer Rogers, who claimed to have shared a cabin with James Barry, the notorious female army surgeon, on whom his book was based. Braddon's 'edited' one-volume revision (undated) was entitled Madeline's Mystery[3]. However, when identifying her contributions to Belgravia, Montague Summers stated that Ada Buisson was one of Braddon's pseudonyms[4] and though Put to the Test lacks her usual tight plot structure the crucial 'confrontational' scenes certainly seem to bear her mark. She comments on 'the exposed position of a governess' but unlike Mrs. White she does not focus only on vulnerability to callous thoughtlessness in the lady of the house. She could see that the corollary of this was a much more threatening power relationship with the master:

> Perhaps you would answer all women are exposed to the like temptation. A governess only among the rest.
>
> If you knew the solitude of a governess' life, the falseness, the ennui, the weariness of such a position, you would not wonder that I place it above any as exposed to temptation. Kind words are very welcome to a heart worn and weary with slight neglect. Wounded vanity revives wonderfully at a very slight touch, and when there is such a scarcity of affection, even the crumbs that at another time would have been rejected scornfully are gathered with care and gratitude. (Vol. 1, Ch.14, p.181)

She dramatises what she means by describing her heroine's arrival among the strangers for whom she will work, 'for the first time in her life utterly alone'. The chapter is titled 'Will you Walk into my Parlour? said the Spider to the Fly.' The mistress is out and Hester is shown to her room where she waits in the cold unable to light a fire. 'She had not expected this utter indifference and neglect on her first arrival, and it chilled her' (Ch. 9. p.115). Not knowing what to do, she goes into the passage but does not dare to open any doors. There is no bell-rope so she cannot ring and just has to hope that someone will eventually come. An hour passes. She takes courage, walks down the passage and encounters the master of the house whom she asks, abruptly, to tell her where the schoolroom is:

> It was a very discourteous way of commencing an acquaintance, and Hetty looked very cross and disdainful the meanwhile; much more disdainful and cross than a governess under any circumstances has a right to look. (Ch. 9, p.115)

Doctor Thornton shows her into a comfortable room, stirs up the fire and sits down opposite her, telling her that it is wonderful how the physical condition acts upon the mental. 'I was not only cold', she says and the good Doctor invites her to dinner. When she realises what she assumes to be the reason for his very much more formal behaviour in front of servants she is angry, haughty and silent and sweeps past him when he opens the door for her after their meal. Braddon comments:

> Ay, Hetty, you have a great deal to learn! The Doctor smiled most complacently.
> 'One moment, Miss Whittiker', he said, in a low voice; 'let me give you a word of advice. Act the angry goddess to me as much as you like, but beware of Mrs. Thornton - beware of the ladies.

> Governesses should be humble.'
> She stopped short; she hated him for that familiar tone, those daring words. A thought did flash across her then of how dangerous her path would be. She looked him calmly in the face, gathered up all her self-control, and said, 'Thank you, I will remember, not only that, but all your lesson of this evening. Good night.' (Vol 1, Ch. 9 ,p.125)

She sounds like a sensational heroine and this novel certainly has very disturbing sensational elements but it is much closer in tone, and in date of composition, to the sad realism of The Lady's Mile (1866), in which the heroine, like Hester, is wiser for her mistake but has to live with it.

Mrs. White too wrote of women humiliated because of their vulnerability to men's manipulation. In an article on the street markets of Shoreditch and Spitalfields she describes a woman with a child in her arms, reduced to seeking out the pawn shop:

> She has passed and re-passed half-a-dozen times without having found the resolution to enter, she fancies that presently the crowd of applicants will lessen, whereas as the light deepens and the hour approaches at which the last hope of poverty closes with the premises their numbers increase. It is, however, her only alternative, and she adventures some relic of gentility that has escaped the rapacious hand of a husband, bankrupt in principle as in circumstances ... and she takes for it 'anything', whatever the pawnbroker's assistant pleases, and rushes forth with a lightened heart, turning the first corner lest anyone should have seen her come out.[5]

Similarly Mary Braddon would demand much more than sympathy for such women. She demanded respect, and disdain of any self-righteous respectability. I think part of the foundation of Braddon's 'world view' was established through her contact with the women who

influenced her as a child. Her mother provided her with a positive role model, an introduction to literature and a female heritage which she gratefully acknowledged by taking her grandmother's and her mother's maiden names, Babington White, as a pseudonym.[6]

Her own fiction often allowed women a fierceness, moments of dramatic clarity larger than was common in life and she sets their declarations against conventional ideals which look hollow and hypocritical. In Put to the Test her heroine is 'discovered' by her sister and brother-in-law in Paris where they are spending a rather weary honeymoon. He is still attracted to Hester and in fact has secretly gone in search of her, though he asserts his authority to separate the two sisters:

> Hetty let go her arm; she almost threw it from her. 'And you', she said turning to Mr. Haliday: 'you come here to talk to me of your love, of your friendship, and you have told your wife to find no mercy for her sister. You would have her treat me as an outcast.'
> 'It was but just to my wife', said Mr. Haliday coldly. 'It is my duty to look to her interest before any other.'
> 'Then do your duty still and take her from hence', was Hetty's answer, in the same quiet but slightly tremulous voice; 'and learn one thing, that however erring I may be, I do not believe that before God I stand more sinning than you and she in this moment.' (Vol. 2, Ch. 3, p.33)

It feels almost as if Braddon has given her heroine a stage within the novel for this controversial denunciation which she then sets against a private and public picture of approved coupledom:

> Neither husband nor wife ever talked of it, even privately; but I doubt if either forgot it. It had given a bitter memory to the honeymoon which the wife certainly could not forgive.

> To all appearances, however, Mr. and Mrs. Haliday were a most loving and happy couple. No jarring was ever heard in their pretty cottage-villa, like as at the Rectory. Percy made an attentive husband, and Rachel a quiet, orderly wife.
>
> (Vol. 2, Ch. 3, p.38)

In spite of the image she usually presents at the end of her sensation novels, the conventional happy home was as much a mirage for Mary Braddon as it was for Eliza Lynn Linton. She was more than happy with her single parent and as an old woman nearing the end of her life there is still a note of scorn in her references to her father which are very different in tone from anything else in the memoir. She gave several of his specific characteristics to the villains of her sensation novels and/or to her heroines' fathers.

Her novels reveal almost a horror of the 'appearance of respectability, which, in a world where appearance stands for so much, is in itself a kind of capital.'[7] When she says that 'the unsullied snow of Mr. Sheldon's shirt-fronts retained its primeval whiteness' in the first chapter of Birds of Prey (1867), for example, it is a sure sign of a very grubby character. All her villains, like her father, are 'well-groomed':

> I know from mama that he was proud of his small foot and arched instep, and very particular about his boots. I have even heard him called handsome - but never by Mama who said his large brown eyes were like the eyes of oxen. She was not a student of Homer, and did not mean this for praise.

Braddon also implies that like Captain Paget, the other deceitful and parasitic father in Birds of Prey, her own father was vain and utterly self-centred. She used to see him in his office on a Sunday morning because he was not often to be found there on a 'lawful' day:

> Papa had nice hands, and his nails were a source of amusement which never seemed to fail. He had not much conversation on these visits, and after he had asked us 'How's your mother' - he called Mamma by that vulgar name - and if we had any news from the West, he had exhausted himself. He always spoke fondly of the West, poor prodigal, meaning the old house in the valley, and the little market town on the hill where his brother lived; but I do not think he ever went there or saw Gradmamma after his self-enmity became developed in fatal ways.

By self-emnity she meant delusion, the sort of convenient optimism which involves others in loss as that shown by Launcelot Darrell and the weak father he tricks in Eleanor's Victory,

> that fatally hopeful temperament common to men who are for ever going to do great things, and forever failing to achieve even the smallest. He was one of those men who are perpetually deluding other people by the force of their power of self-delusion. (Ch. 19, p.153)

Such men are successful in deceiving others in proportion to their appearance of respectability and they are often aided by apparent good-nature, another characteristic of Braddon's father. Her consummate villains tend to be very self-aware. Hence a character like Major Granville Varney, a cross between Iago and Count Fosco in The Lady Lisle, another 'good' man who has the eyes of one 'who has a clear conscience, and is not afraid of the world', can reveal:

> I am not a good man; but I am a good-tempered man. This gives me some influence over the rest of the world. A good-tempered man is always mistaken for a good man. He has a pleasant smile and a joyous laugh. He may be plotting the ruin of his fellow-creatures, but he will look at them without a frown. Good temper is an accomplishment, like good singing or good card-playing, and it is an accomplishment which may be possessed by any man who will take the trouble to acquire it.(Ch. 20, p.173)

This is very calculating and also, ironically, feels oddly feminine. Apparently to gain more power it helps to cultivate a pleasant, easy-going, amiable disposition, not least because it raises the self-esteem of others. I think Braddon nevertheless was quite clear about the ultimate difference between men's and women's use of this tactic, the difference, for example, between an ostensibly feminine woman like Lady Audley and the most feminine man of the sensation novels, Paul Marchmont in John Marchmont's Legacy:

> He took counsel with his womankind; not telling them his thoughts, fears, doubts, or wishes - it was not his habit to do that - but taking their ideas, and only telling them so much as it was necessary for them to know in order that they might be useful to him. Paul Marchmont's life was regulated by a few rules, so simple that a child might have learned them: indeed I regret to say that some children are very apt pupils in that school of philosophy to which the master of Marchmont Towers belonged, and cause astonishment to their elders by the precocity of their intelligence.
>
> ... 'Always conciliate', said this philospher. 'Never tell an unnecessary lie. Be agreeable and generous to those who serve you. N.B. No good carpenter would allow his tools to get rusty. Make yourself master of the opinions of others, but keep your own counsel. Seek to obtain the maximum of enjoyment with the minimum of risk.' (Ch. 32, p.305)

Braddon implies that this is dubious counsel even for the weak embattled or attempting to negotiate with the strong. Adopted by an already more powerful male, 'one of the nice men who are always nasty men', it is much more objectionable and dangerous than open aggression or dismissiveness.

That she thought in terms of power structures is clear from her use of the same metaphor to describe the different responses of

institutionalised power to master and workman. As has been seen she used the difference in official punishment of rich and poor repeatedly as a plot device in her early fiction and felt strongly about it. A clever man like Major Varney is shown to be only too aware of the law operating on class lines and he exploits the inequality:

> 'Life is a drawn battle between the adventurer and the law; and it is only by finding out the weak points of his enemy that man has any chance of becoming victor. But the enemy has its weak points. Yes', said the Major, shaking his reins gaily, 'the law has its weak points, and I have made them my especial study. The law punishes the tool, and not the workman who employs the tcol. The law is fond of a scapegoat; and you have but to throw the meaner villain into the Old Bailey dock, and blind stupid pig-headed and self-satisfied criminal law pounces upon its pitiful victim, while the master scoundrel looks on from the ranks of the spectators and laughs at the sacrifice.'
>
> (The Lady Lisle : Ch. 35, p.283)

I think this recognition too was connected with a very clear sense of how women were involved in this structure and affected by its operation. She knew from experience that however generous her father might have seemed, 'a man who would give his last five pound note to a hard-up friend', the reality was that he left his clerks without wages on Saturday and left his wife to tell them their employer had gone out of town and would not be home till Monday. Her mother, 'endowed by nature with a delicate and scrupulous honesty' was the first in a long chain who 'must needs suffer' in consequence. Several times when she is depicting male irresponsibility, most commonly in the early fiction when she is referring to dishonesty about money but also, notably in Dead Sea Fruit (1868) when she

focusses on men's sexual treatment of women, Braddon deliberately sketches the web of relationships and innocent people affected by the initial selfish act:

> The commercial gentlemen who make awkward mistakes in the City, the devotees of the turf whose misfortunes keep them away from Mr. Tattersall's premises on a settling-day, can make innocent women and children carry the weight of their sins, and suffer the penalties of their foolishness. Papa still smokes his Cabanas at fourpence-halfpenny a piece, or his mild Turkish at nine shillings a pound, and still dines at the Crown and Sceptre ... But Mamma must wear her faded silk, or have it dyed, as the case may be; and the children must forego the promised happiness, the wild delight, of sunny rambles on a shingly beach ... And not only Mama, and the little ones, but other mothers and other little ones, must help in the heavy sum of penance for the defaulter's iniquities. The baker may have calculated upon receiving that long-standing account, and may have planned a new gown for his wife, and a summer treat for his little ones, to be paid for by the expected money; and the honest tradesman, soured by the disappointment of having to disappoint those he loves, is likely to be cross to them into the bargain; and even to grudge her Sunday out to the household drudge who waits at his little table. The influence of the strong man's evil deed slowly percolates through insidious channels of which he never knows or dreams.
>
> (Aurora Floyd : Ch. 22, p.214)

Quite simply, Mary Braddon as a young writer recognised that women were marginal in terms of obvious power structures but felt them to be central to her concept of humanity. She invites a questioning of respectability and apparent success, particularly when embodied in well-dressed, affable, seemingly affluent men, who care only for their own pleasure and will recognise no connection or responsibility to the less privileged. She is not really interested in women's

romantic connections with these men, though inevitably her heroines are sexually vulnerable. Her weak and vicious male characters are just as likely to be the heroines' fathers as their husbands and in the notable absence of mothers this relationship takes on an even more sinister weight. It might be argued that the novels centre on daughters' negotiations of the problematic situations their fathers' actions provoke. They suffer but not willingly, not passively, and it is in their assertive, 'innocent' activity that their attraction lies.

By 'innocent' I do not mean 'without knowledge'. Braddon's heroines, like their creator, knew their own desires and knew much about the real social context in which they were operating. What they are innocent of is any concept of those desires, of that knowledge, being 'wrong', either in the sense of harmful or inappropriate. They are free to act, initially liberated by their ignorance of what is designated sinful or unnatural behaviour in a woman. The very idea of women's knowledge being guiltless is potentially radical when she does not recognise the conventional confines of what she is allowed to know and do. As has been seen, the mother or older woman who traditionally mediates, who knows and warns her daughter of what she will not be allowed to 'get away with', is notably absent in Braddon's fiction, as she was in the 'original' Biblical story, and it is tempting to conclude that this itself makes transgression possible. On the other hand, for a woman-orientated woman (writer) the father's prohibitions are clearer and contestable because other, separate. Before Braddon's young heroines take on the mother's knowledge of evil they taste forbidden fruit and wander beyond a pale of which they are oblivious. Their

extravagance is recognised as deviance but it does not feel like an error and certainly not the depravity which it was labelled, though ultimately, sadly, the combination of knowledge with innocence proves untenable.

Mary Braddon's plotting of the narrative of these free agents on the loose is exciting (or ridiculous or threatening, depending on how the reader sees her/himself in relation to them). The goal towards which the heroine's actions are structured is release, freedom from a patriarchal plot in which they have unwittingly become entangled. This makes a single 'proper' ending consistent with the narrative which has preceded it an impossibility, the ending provided being a contradiction of the pleasure of the adventure in which we have been involved. Perhaps, though, it acted as a necessary safety net, making enjoyment of the heroine's hazardous quest possible. It is both risky and ultimately 'safe'. There is no real satisfaction in seeing the heroine netted because this must be preceded by a fall from the graceful performance we want to continue, but we do want her to reach the end platform safely, if only because this means that she or another woman will be able to do it again. This can never be 'only' a performance. It is as much a part of the experience of audience and performer as the knowledge that most of the time they both have to function at a lower level, their feet on horribly solid ground. Braddon's sensational heroines and their narratives excite and provide repeated but not final pleasure, operating perhaps as an inspiration, the exact effects of which on an individual reader are unknowable as well as immeasurable. To return to Frederick Jameson's comments on the way mass art transforms social and political anxieties and fantasies, I think it is important that while it

'strategically arouses fantasy content within carefully symbolic containment structures which defuse it', it gratifies 'intolerable, unrealizabled, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can be laid to rest.'[8]

Braddon's imaginative energy, her enthusiasm for life and the pleasure it gave her to present heroines capable of acting out their own desires are evident throughout her early 'sensation' novels. She enjoyed fantasizing but she was also a realist, precisely the 'woman of the world' she was thought to be. She was also beccming a mother, taking on the mother's knowledge of evil with its element of fear, more concerned with the precariousness of the ground beneath her feet and looking up less often. Within five years disillusion about how far women would be allowed to act independently and what would be their punishment if they did began to appear in her novels - notably the anonymous Put to the Test (1865) and The Lady's Mile (1866). This coincided with the beginning of crisis in her personal life - she lost a child, was publicly pilloried for plagiarism and for Maxwell's pretence that they were married, her only sister died in Naples before being able to return to England and her brother seems to have refused to have anything to do with her. At the end of 1868 after her mother's death - 'the bitterest hour of my life' - she suffered a complete nervous collapse, followed by puerperal fever. Ironically, there were fears for her sanity. The pressure of writing so many sensation novels had cost her dear and she had run out of optimism and energy - for a while. But she did continue to perform. Other acts felt more appropriate, less precarious perhaps, more matronly. She knew that her daughters' perception of daring would be different.

NOTES

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. Mrs. W. K. Clifford to Mrs. Maxwell, Chilworth St., 25 July [1911], Wolff Collection. Quoted in Robert Lee Wolff, Sensational Victorian. The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon (New York and London, 1979), p.15

2. Richard D. Altick, The English Common Reader. A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800 - 1900 (Chicago, 1957), Ch. 15 and Appendix C

3. William E. Suter's at the Queens Theatre, George Roberts' at the St. James' (with Louisa Herbert as Lady Audley) and C. H. Hazlewood's, probably at the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton (East End). By April there were also four stage versions of Aurora Floyd. See Wolff, p143 and Nineteenth Century Plays, edited by George Rowell (Oxford, 1972), p.234

4. Frank Singleton, Tillotsons, 1850-1950. Centenary of a Family Business (Bolton and London, 1950), pp.8, 16, 17-18. Wolff also refers to the files of Tillotson Newspapers Ltd. to which he had access, p.239

5. J. A. Sutherland, Victorian Novelists and Publishers (London, 1976), p.64

6. W. B. Maxwell, Time Gathered (London, 1937), pp.284-85

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9. Christopher Heywood, 'Flaubert, Miss Braddon, and George Moore', Comparative Literature 12 no. 2 (Spring 1960),151-58.
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10. Kathleen Tillotson, 'The Lighter Reading of the Eighteen-Sixties', Introduction to Wilkie Collins, The Woman in White (Boston, 1969), p.ix

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13. Walter C. Phillips, Dickens, Reade and Collins - Sensation Novelists (New York, Columbia U.P., 1919)
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Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"', Nineteenth Century Fiction Vol. 37, No. 1 (June 1982), 1-28
Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, William Veeder, The Woman Question. Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837 - 1883, 3 vols (New York and London, 1983).
Ellen Miller Casey, '"Other People's Prudery" : Mary Elizabeth Braddon' in Sexuality and Victorian Literature edited by Richard Dcn (Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp. 72-82.
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Anthea Trodd, Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel (London, 1989)

14. Edmund Yates, 'Miss M. E. Braddon (Mrs. Maxwell) at Richmond', Celebrities at Home Vol. 3 No. 25 (London, 1877), 317 - 24

15. John Coleman, Charles Reade as I Knew Him (New York, 1903), p265

16. Braddon to Bulwer-Lytton, No. 29, October 10 [1867], R. L. Wolff, 'Devoted Disciple : The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862-1873', Harvard Library Bulletin 22 (1974), 5-35, 129-161 (p.144-45)

17. Joseph Hatton, 'Miss Braddon at Home', London Society (January, 1888), 22-29

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23. [John R. de C. Wise], 'Belles Lettres', Westminster Review n.s. 30 (July 1866), 268-80 (p.270)

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25. 'Miss Braddon', The New Review 8 (December 1863), 563-75 (p.574).

2 . 'Miss M. E. Braddon "Just as I am"', Punch's Fancy Portraits N . 21, Punch, 5 March 1881, p.106

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2. Frederic Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', Social Text 1 (1979), 130-48.

3. Radway, p.70.

4. 'Mrs. Wood and Miss Braddon', from The Examiner in Littell's Living Age 77 (15 April 1863), 99-103 (p.103).

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6. Montague Summers, 'The Black Band Scandal', Times Literary Supplement No. 2246 (17 February 1945), p.84 identified Braddon's contributions to the Halfpenny Journal:
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'The White Phantom', (26 May 1862 to 12 January 1863).
'The Factory Girl; or, All is not Gold that Glitters. A romance of Real Life', (12 January 1863 to 26 October 1863).
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'Three Times Dead; or, The Trail of the Serpent', (1 August 1864 to 28 November 1864).
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10. 'Lady Audley's Secret', The Spectator, p.1197.

11. [Alfred Austin], 'Our Novels. The Sensation School', Temple Bar 29 no. 3 (June 1870), 410 - 424 (p.417).

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16. 'Belles Lettres', Westminster Review, p.269.

17. [Rev. Henry Longueville Mansel], 'Sensation Novels', Quarterly Review 113 (April 1863), 481-514 (p.482).

18. 'Mrs. Wood and Miss Braddon', Littell's Living Age, p.99.

19. 'Miss Braddon', The New Review 8 (December 1863), 564-75 (p.569).

20. [Margaret Oliphant], 'Novels', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 102 (September 1867), 257-80.

21. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton, No. 28 [n.pl., n.d. - early September 1867], HLB, 142.

22. 'John Marchmont's Legacy', The Athenaeum 1885 (12 December 1863), 792-93 (p.793).

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25. [W. Fraser Rae], 'Sensation Novelists : Miss Braddon', North British Review 43 no. 85 (September 1865), 180-205 (p.199).

26. Henry James, 'Miss Braddon' in Notes and Reviews, edited by Pierre de Chaignon la Rose (New York 1968), 108-116 (pp 115-16). Reprinted from The Nation (9 November, 1865).

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29. 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', from The Christian Remembrancer in Littells Living Age 78 (22 August 1863), 352 - 69.

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33. 'Eleanor's Victory', The Spectator 1838 (19 September 1963), 2522-23.

34. [Geraldine Jewsbury], 'Lord Lynn's Wife' by John Berwick Harwood, Athenaeum 1936 (3 December 1864), 743 - 44.

35. The Court Journal, 17 No. 1826, 16 January 1864, p.56, The Sun, 18 January 1864, p.2, The Morning Advertiser, 19 January 1864, The Guardian 19 No. 946, 20 January 1864 and Public Opinion 5 No. 122, 23 January 1864, p.107 told their readers that 'Miss Braddon, the novelist, was recently married to Mr. Maxwell, the publisher'. Richard Knowles through The Guardian 20 No. 947, 27 January 1864, p.95, Public Opinion No. 123, 30 January 1864, p.125, The London Review 8, 30 January 1864, p.130, The Sun, 1 February 1864, p.3 and The Court Journal 17 No. 1829, 6 February 1864, p.128 stated that this was untrue. Details from R. L. Woolf, p.431.

36. [Margaret Oliphant], 'Novels', p.263.

37. 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', p.353.

38. [W. Fraser Rae], 'Sensation Novelists : Miss Braddon', p.197.

39. 'Novels and Life', Saturday Review 17 (13 February 1864), 188-89.

40. 'Sensation Novelists : Miss Braddon', p.191.

41. H. A. Page [A. H. Japp], 'The Morality of Literary Art', The Contemporary Review 5 (June 1867), 161-189 (p.178).

42. 'Eleanor's Victory', The Spectator, p.2522.

43. 'Novels, Past and Present', p.439.

44. 'Sensation Novelists : Miss Braddon', p.190,

45. 'The Popular Novels of the Year', Fraser's Magazine 68 (August 1863), 253-69.

46. [Charles Kent], 'Miss Braddon's New Work. Sir Jasper's Tenant', The Sun 17 October 1865, editorial page, column headed 'Literature'.

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49. 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', p.357

50. 'The Popular Novels of the Year', Fraser's Magazine, p.259

51. Our Female Sensation Novelists', pp.367-68

52. 'Miss Braddon', The New Review, p.571

53. 'The Doctor's Wife', The Athenaeum 1929 (15 October 1864), 495

54. 'The Lady's Mile', Saturday Review 21 (12 May 1866), 565-66

55. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 22 [n.pl., n.d. - March 1866], HLB, 135

56. 'The Lady's Mile', p.566

57. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 12 [November or December 1864], HLB, 27

58. 'Only a Clod', Saturday Review 19 (27 May 1865), 639-40

59. 'Miss Braddon's New Novel', The Spectator 1895 (22 October 1864), 1214-15

60. Paget, p.304

61. 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', pp.364-65

62. op. cit., p.366

63. op. cit., pp.364-65

64. 'The Doctor's Wife',The Athenaeum p.495

65. All references in this paragraph are to Radway, p.113

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. I refer to them elsewhere as 'sensation heroines' because this was the accepted critical term used by contemporaries. However, they were very much 'female heroes' in the sense that Lee R. Edwards uses the term in Psyche as Hero, Female Heroism and Fictional Form (1984), questioning the conventional associations of gender and behaviour and as such emblematic of patriarchal instability and insecurity

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3. [Anne Ritchie], 'Heroines and their Grandmothers', Cornhill Magazine 11 (May 1865), 630-40 (p.631)

4. 'Lady Audley's Secret', The Spectator 1791 (25 October 1862), 1196

5. 'Lady Audley's Secret', Athenaeum 1826 (25 October 1862), 525-26

6. [W. Fraser Rae], 'Sensation Novelists : Miss Braddon', p.186

7. 'Aurora Floyd', Athenaeum 1840 (31 January 1863), 144-45

8. 'Sensation Novelists : Miss Braddon', p.190 and p.195

9. 'Mrs. Wood and Miss Braddon', p.100

10. Gerard Genette, 'Vraisemblance et motivation' in Figures II (Paris 1969), p.73, 'translated-adapted' by Nancy K. Miller, 'Emphasis Added : Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', PMLA 96 (1981), 36-47

11. 'The Yelverton Case', Saturday Review 11 (9 March 1861), 240-41

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13. 'The Yelverton Case', Saturday Review (30 July, 1864)

14. Duncan Crow, Theresa. The Story of the Yelverton Case (London, 1966), p.226

15. 'The Yelverton Case', Saturday Review (30 July, 1864)

16. Zanita, A Tale of the Yo-Semite (New York, 1972)
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19. op. cit. p.133

20. Illustrated London News, 28 May 1864, p.526

21. A Mid-Victorian Pepys. The Letters and memoirs of Sir William Hardman, annotated and edited by S. M. Ellis (London, 1923), p.212 Note

22. 'The Girl of the Period', Saturday Review 25 (1868), 339-40

23. 'Miss Braddon', The New Review, p.572-74

24. 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', p.354-55

25. op. cit., p.353-54

26. [Margaret Oliphant], 'Novels', p.259

27. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 28 [n.pl., n.d. - early September 1867], HLB, 142

28. 'Novels', p.258 - 59

29. M. E. Braddon, 'Whose Fault Is it?', Belgravia (July 1869), 214-16

30. I am indebted to Harriet Adams Transue, 'The Sensation Years : The Literary Character of England in the 1860s' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1973), p.45 for information about the representation of sensation heroines on the stage.

31. Henry Morley, Journal of a London Playgoer, From 1851 to 1866 (1866), p.262.

32. A Mid-Victorian Pepys, p.152 Note 1

33. Eleanor's Victory (1863), Ch. 59. p.398

34. Illustrated London News, 7 February 1863, p.159

35. 'Miss Braddon', The New Review, p.565

36. op. cit., p.572

37. 'Eleanor's Victory', The Spectator 1838 (19 September 1863), 2522-23

NOTES TC CHAPTER THREE

1. William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England (London, 1765), I,XV :
   By marriage, the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended, or at least incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, or cover she performs everything, and she is therefore called in our law a 'feme covert'.

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3. 'The Lawyer's Secret', The Welcome Guest 2nd.ser.3, no.75 (2 March 1861) 603-9, no. 76 (9 March 1861) 631-8, no.77 (16 March 1861) 677-83. Reprinted in Ralph the Bailiff (1867),pp.111-159.

4. Mary Angela Dickinson, 'Miss Braddon at Home', Windsor Magazine 6 no. 33 (September 1897), 415-418

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   'Lady Audley's Secret' began serialisation in Robin Goodfellow also owned by Maxwell, on 6 July 1861 and ran for 13 weeks.

6. The Lady Lisle, originally serialised in The Welcome Guest 2nd. ser. 4 (6 April - 24 August 1861), published as a novel in 1862.

7. 'My First Novel', The Idler III (February 1893), 19-30. Reprinted in My First Book, edited with an introduction by Jerome K. Jerome (London, 1894).

8. op. cit.

9. 'Miss Braddon', The New Review no.8 (December 1863), 564-75 (p.565)

10. [Margaret Oliphant] 'Novels', Blackwoods 102 (September 1867), p.265.

11. Originally this formed the underplot of 'The Outcasts' which appeared serially in The London Journal (12 September, 1863 to 26 March, 1864). Part of that story was revised and became Henry Dunbar (1864). The excised underplot was published separately as 'Lost and Found' in Ralph the Bailiff (1867), pp.171-307

12. Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (1977), 166-7.

13. Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980 (1985) p.29. The definition is quoted from Eric T. Carlson and Norman Dain, 'The Meaning of Moral Insanity', Bulletin of the History of Medicine 36 (1962), 130-140 (p.131)

14. Op. cit. p.52. Statistics taken from J. Mortimer Granville, The Care and Cure of the Insane 2 vols. (1877), I,p.142 and 2, p.230

15. op. cit. p.71. Details of the case are taken from John Conolly, The Physiognomy of Insanity (1858) p.55 [no ref. in BLC] quoted in Sander L. Gilmamn ed., The Face of Madness : Hugh W. Diamond and the origin of Psychiatric Photography (1976), p.45.

16. Review of 'Lady Audley's Secret', The Times (18 November, 1862) p.4.

17. [Alexander Smith], 'Novels and Novelists of the Day', North British Review 38 (February 1863), 168-190

18. 'The Black Band; or, The Mysteries of Midnight' (1 July 1861 to 23 June 1862) First 11 installments published under pseudonym Lady Caroline Lascelles.

19. 'The Mystery at Fernwood', Temple Bar 3 (November, 1861) and 4 (December, 1861). Reprinted in Ralph the Bailiff (1867), pp.70-95.

20. Edgar Allen Poe, 'William Wilson'. First published in Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, 1839, revised for publication in the Broadway Journal (30 August, 1845).

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. D. A. Miller, The Novel and the Police (1988) Ch.5, 'Cage aux folles: sensation and gender in Wilkie Collins' "The Woman in White" ',p.165

2. Mary Anne Crowley married John Maxwell in 1848. She had seven children by him, of whom five survived. She entered an asylum near Dublin after the birth of the seventh at a date which cannot have been very long before 1860, when Maxwell and Braddon first met. Details from Woolf, Sensational Victorian, p.105, who also records Maxwell's alleged brutal response when questioned about her: 'She is de-funct.' (p.103)

3. [Rev. Henry Longueville Mansell] 'Sensation Novels', Quarterly Review 113 (April 1863), 481-514 (p.492)

4. 'Aurora Floyd', Athenaeum 1840 (31 January, 1863), 144-45

5. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton, No.1 [n.d. December, 1862], HLB, p.10.

6. 'The Popular Novels of the Year', Fraser's Magazine (August, 1863) 253-69

7. Michael Holroyd, Bernard Shaw, Vol. I (London, 1988), p.214

8. Ada Buisson (pseud.), A Terrible Wrong (1867), Vol.II Ch.2, p.19 : 'Virtue is more or less active, and any being who contents himself with remaining negative cannot well avoid selfishness; and, my dear reader, don't you think heroically virtuous people are rather bores? -I do.'

9. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 21 [March 1866, within a few days of No.20], HLB p.134

10. See, for example. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton, No. 14 [December 1864, after the 13th], HLB, p.30.

11. Clive Holland, 'Fifty Years of Novel Writing. Miss Braddon at Home', Pall Mall Magazine 48, no. 223 (November 1911), 697-709

12. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton, No. 32, (June 21) [n.y. 1872], HLB, p.150

13. Mary Angela Dickens, 'Miss Braddon at Home', Windsor Magazine 6 Pt.33 (1897), 415-8

14. Before the Knowledge of Evil, memoir written March 2nd, 1914. Henry Maxwell, Mary Braddon's grandson, kindly let me read his copy of this and lent me one of his grandmother's notebocks.

15. Joseph Hatton, 'Miss Braddon at Home', London Society (January, 1888), 22-29 (pp.27,28)

16. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 12 [November or December 1864], HLB, p.27

17. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 13, (December 9, 1864), HLB, p.27

18. 'English Novels', Fraser's Magazine 44 (October 1851), 375-91

19. [William Rathbone Gregg], 'French Fiction: The Lowest Deep', National Review 11 (October 1860), 400-427

20. M. G. Devonshire, The English Novel in France (1929), p.399 refers to E. D. Forgues, 'Miss Braddon', Revue des Deux Mondes (Juin 1863), p.953

21. Devonshire, p.401 refers to anonymous reviews in Review critique des livres nouveaux of 'Le Capitaine du Vautour', 'Lady Lisle', 'Aurora Floyd' (Decembre 1863, pp.419, 434, 436), 'Le Secret de Lady Audley' (Fevrier 1864, p.57), 'Le Tricmphe d'Eleanor' (Mars 1864, p.97), 'Le Testament de J. Marchmont' (Mai 1864, p165) and 'Henri Durbar' (Avril 1865, p.109)

22. 'French Fiction : The Lowest Deep', pp.414, 416

23. op. cit, p.426

24. 'Youth as depicted in Modern Fiction', Christian Remembrancer 52 (July 1866), 184-211 (pp.185, 195)

25. [Robert Buchanan] 'Immorality in Authorship', Fortnightly Review 6 (15 September 1866) 289-300 (p.298)

26. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton, No. 14 [December 1864 after the 13th]. HLB, p.30

27. Details of Soulie's work from Harold March, Frederic Soulie(1931)

28. 'The Cold Embrace' orig. in The Welcome Guest no.54, (29 September 1860) 25-28. Reprinted in Ralph the Bailiff (1867), pp.55-62

29. Translated by Anicet Bourgeois and Gustave Lemoine. Detail from March, p.112

30. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton, No. 19 (January 16 1866), HLB, p.130

31. Lilian Feder in Madness and Literature (1980) p.252 translates from Aurelia, edited by Pierre Georges Castex (Paris, 1971) in which the narrator wonders whether it is possible to 'dominate his sensations instead of submitting to them, ... to master this fascinating and terrible chimera, to impose order on these spirits of the night which play with our reason.' For further discussion of Nerval's work see Claire Gilbert, Nerval's Double; A Structural Study (1979)

32. 'The Octoroon: or, The Lily of Louisianna', The Halfpenny Journal, 18 November 1861 to 17 March 1862

33. Details in R.L. Wolff, Sensational Victorian (1979), pp.207-16

34. 'Circe', Belgravia 2 and 3 (March to September 1867) 2 : 113-30, 236-56, 361-82, 480-503. 3 : 108-30, 240-56, 302-326. Published in book form 2 vols., London, 1867

35. Pall Mall Gazette, 18 September 1867, p.4

36. Spectator, No. 2048 (28 September 1867), 1083-4

37. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 7 (January 17 1864), HLB, p.20

38. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 9 [n.pl., n.d. - summer, 1864], HLB, p.22

39. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 10 [incomplete] [n.pl., n.d. - summer, 1864], HLB. p.22

40. No.10, HLB, p.23

41. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton Nc. 11 (September 7 1864), HLB, p.25

42. 'Miss Braddon's New Novel', The Spectator 1895 (22 October, 1864),1214-5

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44. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 21 [n. pl. March 1866]. HLB, p.134

45. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 22 [n. pl., n.d. - March 1866], HLB, p.135

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47. Mary Angela Dickens, 'Miss Braddon at Home', Windsor Magazine Vol. 6 Pt.33 (1897), 415-8

48. M. E. Braddon, 'My First Novel', The Idler III (February 1893), 19-30

49. Clive Holland, 'Fifty Years of Novel Writing. Miss Braddon at Home', Pall Mall Magazine 48 no.223 (November 1911) 697-709

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1. F. C. Burnand, 'Behind the Scenes', Fortnightly Review n.s. 37 (January 1885) 84-94

2. William Archer, 'A Storm in Stageland. The Ethics of Acting' in About the Theatre. Essays and Studies (London, 1886) pp. 211-33.

3. M. E. Braddon, 'The Wcman I Remember' in The Press Album edited by Thomas Catling (London, 1909) pp.4-5

4. For details of Braddon's stage career see R. L. Wolff, Sensational Victorian, pp. 45-78.
Clive Holland, 'Fifty Years of Novel Writing - Miss Braddon at Home' Pall Mall Magazine Vol. 48, No. 223(November 1911), 697-709 with reference to her writing for the stage also mentions "Griselda", a blank verse play written for the beautiful Mrs. Rousby, and produced at the Princesss's Theatre; "The Missing Witness", a frankly melodramatic effort, which had a succesful run in the English provinces and United States of America; and many unacknowledged farces'.

5. Gilby letter from Beverley, Yorks (20 February 1861) in Wolff Collection, quoted in Sensational Victorian, p.95

6. Dead Sea Fruit (1868), Ch. 14, p.108

7. 'A Few Words about Actresses and the Profession of the Stage' by "S", The Englishwoman's Journal 11 (February 1859), 385-398 (p.396)

8. Clive Holland, p.707.

9. 'Henry Dunbar : the story of an Outcast', The Athenaeum 1908 (21 May, 1864), 703-4

10. Braddon to Bulwer Lytton No. 8 (June 24th) [n.y. - 1864], 20-21

11. ibid

12. An article in The Cornhill Magazine IV (September, 1861), 305-18 with this title, for example, responded to the debate in The Times about early marriage and the importance of the Domestic Ideal in influencing men's choices: '... such considerations as these apply rather to men than to women ... the range of her choice depends upon the attractions which she presents to others, not upon the attractions which others have for her'. (p.316).

13. Figures and detail from Lecnore Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', Journal of Social History Vol. 7 no. 4 (Summer 1974), 406-28, and 'Class and Gender in Victorian England' in Sex and Class in Women's History, edited by Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan and Judith R. Walkowitz (London, 1983), pp.17-71

14. See, for example, the series of articles in the Cornhill Magazine, 1874),
[Leslie Stephen],'Housekeeping', Vol.29 (January 1874), 67-79
[Eliza Lynn Linton],'On the side of the Maids', Vol. 29 (March 1874), 298-307
[J. M. Capes] 'On the side of the Mistresses', Vol.29 (April 1874), 459-68
[Anne Ritchie] 'Maids of All Work and Blue Books', Vol. 30 (September 1874), 281-96

15. Anthea Trodd, Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel (London 1989) p.7

16. Trodd, p.43

17. Babington White, 'At Daggers Drawn', Belgravia (January 1867), 335-45

18. Dead Sea Fruit (1868), Ch. 14, p.113 'In the Green Room'

19. Aurora Floyd, Ch. 1.p.11

20. John Marchmont's Legacy, Ch. 1, p.1

21. Jill Burrows' review of Fay Weldon's 'Action Replay', Times Educational Supplement (30 September, 1983)

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

1. The quotations in this chapter from 'Before the Knowledge of Evil' are all from Henry Maxwell's typewritten copy of his grandmother's memoir. I am indebted to him for the loan of this and for permission to quote from it.

2. 'Wanted a Governess', Ainsworth's Magazine 6 (1844), 226-31
See Wolff, p.420 Note 11.
However, the Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals 1824-1900, Vol 3, p.919 identifies 'Mrs White' as Caroline Alice White. She contributed articles to Ainsworth's Magazine from July 1844 to November 1850 and to the New Monthly Magazine from October 1846 to July 1849. These are appropriate dates for Fanny White Braddon's writing but if the reference to file 1371 of the Royal Literary Fund, County Hall, London, which states that Caroline Alice White was still alive in 1877, is correct, Wolff's supposition must be wrong.

3. See Wolff, Appendix 10., p.496

4. Montague Summers, 'Miss Braddon', Times Literary Supplement, 16 September 1944, p.456 and 'Mr. Babington White', T.L.S. 30 September 1944, p.480. Ada Buisson's contributions to Belgravia were 'My Aunt's Pearl Ring' (November 1867)
'A Story Told in a Church' (Christmas Annual 1867)
'The Ghost's Summons' (January 1868)
'The Baron's Coffin' (September 1869)
'My Sister Caroline' (February and March 1870)
'The Sins of the Fathers' (October 1870)

5. 'Saturday Night in London', Ainsworth's Magazine 10 (1846), 137-40, 211-14 (p.140)

6. Braddon used the pseudonym Babington White for her contributions to Belgravia which she edited from 1866 to 1876:
'At Dagger's Drawn', Belgravia 1, No. 3 (January 1867), 335-45: reprinted in Under the Red Flag and Other Tales (London [1886]), pp.239-52
'Circe: Three Acts in the Life of an Artist', Belgravia 2, No. 1 (March 1867), 113-30; No. 2 (April 1867), 236-56; No. 3 (May 1867), 361-82; No. 4 (June 1867), 480-503; Belgravia 3, No. 1 (July 1867), 108-130; No. 2 (August 1867), 240-56; No. 3 (September 1867), 302-26; published in book form (2 vols, London, 1867)
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'A Great Ball and a Great Bear', Belgravia (January 1868); reprinted in Under the Red Flag, pp.253-66
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'The True Story of Don Juan', Belgravia Christmas Annual, 1869
'Violets', Belgravia 11, 2nd ser., No. 1 (April 1870), 260
'Sir Philip's Wooing', Belgravia Christmas Annual, 1870: reprinted in Under the Red Flag, pp.207-23

7. Birds of Prey (London, 1867), Bk. 1, Ch. 2, p. 17

8. Jameson, op. cit.

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