

**LADIES' MAIDS, GOVERNESSES, AND COMPANIONS:  
SERVING WOMEN IN THE GREAT HOUSES OF SENSATION LITERATURE**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Sensation fiction was a genre that emerged in England in the 1860's and gained immense popularity among a diverse readership. Novels in the genre featured dramatic plots and "sensational" subject matter, including bigamy, madness, and murder, which led scholars to dismiss sensation as lowbrow pop-fiction from the nineteenth century onward. Only recently has sensation come under scrutiny as a genre that commented in radical ways on Victorian institutions—particularly that of gender, and a woman's place in public and in the home. Many feminist academics have reappraised sensation, regarding it as a bellwether for the changing role of women in literature; and most have confined their investigation to middle-class women in sensation literature, whose concerns are represented most obviously. This project, however, seeks to refocus the gendered critique on figures of serving women in three iconic sensation novels: Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, and M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Examining this figure complicates the idea of "women's concerns" in the genre by adding the issues of working-class women to those of the middle and upper-class. It also reveals the complex ways in which sensational authors use the serving woman to explore and, in some cases, subvert Victorian class anxieties.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 1867, writer and reviewer Margaret Oliphant said that “all our minor novelists, almost without exception, are of the school called Sensational”<sup>1</sup> Sensation literature blossomed in the middle of the nineteenth century; and while its novelists might have been “minor” by Oliphant’s standards, the genre gained immense popularity in the 1860s with texts like M. E. Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*. The craze is generally believed to have declined in the 1870s; however, during its heyday, sensation literature was criticized as widely as it was read. Many Victorians reproached it for dealing with “sensational” subjects (from which the genre derived its name) such as madness, murder, and adultery. They blamed, in part, the increasingly cost-effective print methods and subsequent surge of literacy among the lower classes, which opened up markets for “lower” kinds of fiction appealing to the new readership.

Andrew Radford explains the fear of “contamination” sparked by sensation novels, claiming that the Victorians believed that “the sober rationality associated with middle-class manners was acutely vulnerable to the ‘lower’ appetites characteristic of the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

inner-city proletariat.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to quote an article from the 1864 issue of *The Christian Remembrancer*, in which one writer states “sensation fiction was capable of ‘drugging thought and reason [...] stimulating the attention through the lower and more animal instincts.”<sup>3</sup> The article was called “Our Female Sensation Novelists,” and the connection between female authorship and readership in the sensation genre was one of the driving forces behind its critical reception. Some readers believed it encouraged women to behave in inappropriate ways, since the heroines of sensation literature were frequently bigamists and murderesses. Radford discusses the views of one of sensation literature’s most vociferous opponents, Margaret Oliphant, saying: “Oliphant’s gravest concern is that these narratives may incite women to cultivate other priorities and commitments beyond those of acting as man’s ‘helpmate.’”<sup>4</sup>

It should be said, however, that although sensation literature was often a target of criticism for the duration of its popularity, it was not unique in this. Some of sensation literature’s closest literary cousins also received similarly negative critical response. Those cousins are gothic, newgate, and, later, realist literature. Gothic novels, which originated at the end of the eighteenth century with texts like Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, remained popular throughout the nineteenth century and into the present. They focused on old haunted houses, family curses, secrets, and supernatural forces, as well as real and figurative premature burials. Frequently, these texts took place outside of England, in exoticized

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 88.

countries like Italy and Germany. Newgate fiction was set closer to home, and focused on criminals as protagonists, often heroes, and was also singled out by Victorian critics who accused it of glorifying violence and encouraging consumers—particularly young men—to engage in criminal or otherwise delinquent behavior. Sensation literature can be said to have grown out of these two traditions. Like gothic fiction, its plots circle around questions of secrecy and incarceration. However, sensation took those things and brought them home, into supposedly “safe” domestic spaces in the heart of England, such as the great houses of Victorian aristocracy. And, like newgate fiction, sensation literature emphasizes crime and flawed legal systems or policing forces. But in sensation, the criminal element is refocused on the feminine, as perpetrators as well as victims. More often than not, women in the genre are the criminals—though they are in a more domestic setting, resorting to resources outside the law to solve their problems with marriage and motherhood. Nevertheless, although its progenitors are fairly obvious, the elements that set sensation literature apart from other Victorian texts are harder to definitively discern. The Victorian publication *Fraser’s Magazine* wrote at the height of sensation’s popularity that “a book without a murder, a divorce, a seduction, or a bigamy, is not apparently considered worth either writing or reading; and a mystery and a secret are the chief qualifications of the modern novel.”<sup>5</sup> It is true that plots of murder, mystery, and adultery are traditionally considered markers of the sensation novel. Nevertheless, as Radford points out:

There has always been and still remains an acute difficulty in classifying the genre, enclosing its dimensions and its chief practitioners, as

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2.

evidenced by the frustrations of Victorian reviewers who grappled with tenuous distinctions among a plethora of fictional modes. Charles Reade averred that sensation was the constitutive facet of all compelling fiction: ‘Without [it] there can be no interest.’<sup>6</sup>

And, indeed, the elements frequently believed to distinguish sensation literature from other genres—murders, mysteries, and madness, for instance—can all be found in novels before and after sensation’s mid-century boom. Part of this problem stems from the fact that the novel as a literary form was evolving; and even as critics attempted to classify novels into easily-distinguished genres, those genres were overlapping as authors experimented with different narrative forms and devices.

So how do readers identify a “sensational” novel? Timing certainly has something to do with it. Sensation novels dealt with anxieties that grew out of changes that took place from the 1860’s to the 1880’s. During this period, members of the rising professional class were gaining hitherto unknown amounts of influence over the aristocracy. The professional classes, such as doctors, inspectors, and lawyers, gained access to estate houses, the very symbol of English class privilege, and exerting control over the people within them—people whose positions of authority were previously more stable and unquestioned. As Radford notes:

Given that the 1860s was the decade of a second Reform Bill, with widespread discussion on expanding the Parliamentary franchise, primarily in terms of working-class men, as well as the establishment of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage (1866), it is no surprise that shifting or disintegrating...identity is a core theme of sensation fiction.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

The second Reform Bill enfranchised the urban working-class, and nearly doubled the number of men in England able to vote. The National Society for Women's Suffrage hoped to ride this political wave and laid the groundwork for women getting the vote later in the century. These two important movements represented the changing landscape of class and gender hierarchies in England, particularly as it related to the right to be heard. Having the vote meant having a political voice—something which working-class men fought to gain, and which women desired. Sensation literature distinguished itself by exploring these dissenting voices through sensational scenarios. Wilkie Collins used plots infused with theft and captivity in order to investigate the evolving legal system, and explore the ways in which laws meant to protect citizens could be used against them. Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's plots of murder, madness, and bigamy highlighted the shifting roles of women within the institution of marriage. Sensation literature employed dramatic scenarios, such as adultery and imprisonment in order to explore the transformations occurring in institutions previously believed immutable.

One such institution was the construction of gender—in particular, constructions of femininity and the role of women in Victorian society. The changing nature of gender roles and sensational literature's unique relationship to those changes may be the best clue to what distinguishes the genre from Radford's other "plethora of fictional modes." Sensational literature has garnered a lot of attention from scholars interested in a gendered view of nineteenth-century fiction, and in many ways, it is an ideal site for exploration of women in literature. The first bestsellers of the genre were published in the 1860s, a time when, according to Andrew Radford, the "Woman Question" re-emerged.

Though issues of women's rights had been around since the 1790's, they had retreated into the background of public discourse during the revolutionary decades. In the 1860's, the "Woman Question" resurfaced, with its "debates and claims about female emancipation and about a woman's right to education and training, to earn and keep her own income, and as a British subject who could petition for custody of her legitimate children."<sup>8</sup> This was true, and legal and domestic concerns of the middle-class such as these play an important role in sensation literature's depiction of women. However, Radford falls into the same trap as many other scholars of the genre by looking only at manifestations of middle and upper-class women's issues in sensational fiction. While it can be argued that many sensational authors were middle-class women, and so foregrounded those concerns in their fiction, working-class women are also represented in sensational texts, and their problems form an important part of the genre's depiction of Victorian women's issues in general. Debates over women's rights and shifts in the class hierarchy meant that working-class women's social roles were also in a state of transition. But these women had neither the voice of their working-class male counterparts, nor the leisure to connect with each other as middle-class women did. Thus, it is significant that with issues of female emancipation and class reform occupying a major place in Victorian newspapers and political debates, sensation literature featured both middle and working-class female characters that addressed some of these questions. In spite of the sensational and sometimes exaggerated machinations of plot, this look into the evolving

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 87.

world of women in the Victorian period takes on a more significant light in view of their position within ongoing social debates.

Women in the nineteenth century had a particularly intimate connection with sensation literature from the start, as both readers and writers. This connection instigated a great deal of criticism questioning the alliance between women and a genre notorious for its scandalous subject matter. Femininity was a contested site in the Victorian era, and questions of what qualified permeated writing of the age. One popular feminine ideal in the nineteenth century was, according to Coventry Patmore's famous words, the "Angel in the House," a woman who embodied beauty, virtue, and submissiveness—all passive qualities that were unthreatening to men and women who might have been unsettled by demands of the growing women's rights movement. The term "Angel in the House" originated in a Coventry Patmore poem by the same name, which idealized his first wife Emily as the perfect woman. It was first published in 1854 and expanded in subsequent editions until 1862; however, the virtues embodied in the Angel in the House had been taught to women for many years before the publication of Patmore's poem. In her conduct manual for young ladies, *The Woman of England* (1843), Sarah Ellis wrote that women "must lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence, in short her very self – and assuming a new nature...spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs."<sup>9</sup> Although these "angelic"

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 89.

expectations had been developing in the collective English consciousness for more than a century, they found a new level of widespread expression during the Victorian era.

Catherine Hall traces the development of the “Angel in the House” model back to the rise of evangelicalism in England and the evolution of the new middle-class in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both of which involved a “recodification of ideas about women.”<sup>10</sup> According to Hall, evangelicalism originated as a branch of the Anglican faith dedicated to reform from within the church. One of evangelicalism’s focuses was middle-class women, who in the growing economy were encouraged to remain at home and out of the workforce. Evangelicalism sought to tell those women how they should behave, believing that women were naturally unequal to men, and better suited to domestic roles as wives and mothers than positions of more public influence. These were still important roles to evangelicals, however, who believed that the home was the center of godliness, and the primary arena for man’s struggle against sin. As Hall explains, “women...could act as the moral regenerators of the nation...this emphasis on the religious power of the woman considerably modified [evangelical] emphasis elsewhere on subordination.”<sup>11</sup> From this came the development of the “Angel in the House,” an uncomplaining guardian of domestic virtue that broke off from her evangelical roots and permeated mainstream gender ideologies. This selfless, self-sacrificing “Angel” was reassuring to a dominant Victorian public, who feared the

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine Hall, *White, Male, and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

disruption a women's movement might bring to the social order, and cherished the idealized calm that such a woman would ostensibly bring.

This idealized "Angel" became a popular type of heroine in Victorian literature. Heroines, as defined by Nicola Humble and Kimberley Reynolds, are women who "serve as possible role models for women readers and writers seeking to understand their position in society and to explore alternatives."<sup>12</sup> And in the case of the "Angel in the House," she was undoubtedly meant as an exemplary figure for the female readership to emulate. However, she could not exist alone. With the contradictory notion that women were both the "spiritual guardians" of a domestic Eden and the progenitors of original sin, the "Angel in the House" was only half of the feminine picture. The other half, representing the dangers posed by uncontrolled female sexuality, haunted depictions of women throughout the century. Many contemporary critics stress the double-headedness of Victorian perceptions of womanhood, the "madonna/whore" dichotomy that allowed for an acknowledgement of women's bodies and sexuality through their vilification. Humble and Reynolds describe the duality, saying that: "Victorian woman is either the sexually passive and angelic wife, sister, and/or mother, or she is the sexually charged and demonic mad-woman-in-the-attic."<sup>13</sup> This dichotomy dominated nineteenth-century representations of femininity and the gender criticism that followed. However, Humble and Reynolds believe that this is an incomplete understanding of how the Victorians constructed and experienced gender. "It is assumed," they say, "that public rhetoric

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<sup>12</sup> Nicola Humble and Kimberley Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

surrounding attitudes to femininity represents private experience;” while, on the contrary, it is absurd to presume that actual women of the nineteenth century existed only in those two categories.<sup>14</sup>

That discord between “public rhetoric” and actual gendered experience may be at the root of sensation literature’s extraordinary popularity among women. The genre investigated what it meant to be a woman, and produced something entirely different from the tired and oppressive juxtaposition of virtue and sin. For, as Lynda Hart writes, “the trajectory of “normal” femininity and that of fallen womanhood were not two parallel lines incapable of meeting; on the contrary a slippery slope lay between the two states.”<sup>15</sup> And the heroine of sensational literature occupies that contested space in between, being neither an “Angel in the House,” nor her utterly depraved sister, but some more complicated kind of “other”. Marian Halcombe, the heroine of Wilkie Collins’s bestseller *The Woman in White*, is independent and domestic, eroticized and virginal. She challenges the institutions of class and gender privilege throughout the novel with shocking confidence, and does so with the blessing of both author and audience. Similarly, Lady Audley, of M. E. Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, represents the subversive combination of idealized femininity and monstrous self-interest—the madonna and the whore in a single character. These sensational heroines were upsetting and invigorating because they belied a simplification of women’s experience, and helped debunk the impossible ideal of Angel-in-the-House-hood by rendering her in a critical light as weak and ineffective (Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*) or as entirely

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 89.

fraudulent (Lady Audley). As definitions of femininity were being simultaneously challenged by a movement for women's rights and reinforced by stringent social codes, sensational heroines challenged popular notions of femininity by destabilizing ideas of what it entailed.

Humble and Reynolds consider literature to be one of the major battlefields for women's rights, and call sensational fiction a turning point, saying: "Female protagonists figure prominently in [sensation] fiction—as murderesses, bigamists, swindlers, prostitutes and detectives. In this, sensation fiction represents one of the major contestations of female roles operative in the nineteenth century – and is responsible for initiating significant changes in the representation of women in later fiction."<sup>16</sup>

Sensational literature ushered in a new era of female protagonists, ones who were all the readier to address their dissatisfaction inside and outside of the law—through divorce, prostitution, mistaken or criminal institutionalization—employed in exaggerated ways that recalled and adapted the gothic novels of the century before. Instead of Radcliffe's cold, virginal, victimized heroines, a new kind of woman—the sensational heroine—was taking shape in literature of the mid-nineteenth century.

Margaret Oliphant called this new kind of heroine "fleshy and unlovely," and accused her of being patently unrealistic.<sup>17</sup> She claimed that "one of the earliest results of an increased feminine influence in our literature [has been] a display of what in women is most unfeminine."<sup>18</sup> This idea cropped up frequently among critics of the genre, that

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<sup>16</sup> Humble and Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines*, 99.

<sup>17</sup> Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

sensational heroines were both dangerous and ridiculous due to what was perceived as their complete estrangement from the “true” nature of women. Cvetkovich quotes a Victorian critic of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, who called the novel “one of the most noxious books of modern times,” and said:

Lady Audley is at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel. In drawing her, the authoress may have intended to portray a female Mephistopheles; but, if so, she should have known that a woman cannot fill such a part. The nerves with which Lady Audley could meet unmoved the friend of the man she had murdered, are the nerves of a Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed, and not those of the timid, gentle, innocent creature Lady Audley is represented as being...All this is very exciting; but is also very unnatural.<sup>19</sup>

The critic expresses perturbation not just that Lady Audley behaves the way she does in the novel, but that her doing so is so at odds with the appearance Braddon attributes her in the beginning—an appearance that conjures up all the goodness, purity, and charity of the “Angel in the House.” What’s more, the critic considers these attributes to be “natural” to a woman, thereby implying that a right and healthy female should find the role of Patmore’s ideal as easy to perform as breathing. The ideal becomes nothing less than the expectation, suggesting the extreme pressure put upon women who, in the average hustle and bustle of everyday life, may find themselves feeling less than angelic. It is little wonder, then, that in spite of the “impossibility” of figures like Lady Audley, sensational literature was primarily written and consumed by women. A kind of savage joy might have taken place at the way sensation literature was able to “mock, decentre

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<sup>19</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 47.

and undermine the passive, angelic female...declar[ing] open season on the Angel in the House.”<sup>20</sup>

However, contemporary critics of the genre disagree about sensation literature’s status as a critique of Victorian gender stereotypes. Although it is undeniable that women dominated the sensation genre both as producers and consumers, how subversive their contributions really were is still a matter of debate. For some, the very fact that they were *able* to dominate the genre suggests a revolutionary strain inherent in sensational literature. According to Radford:

A number of influential women edited family literary magazines, including Braddon who oversaw *Belgravia Magazine* for a decade, mobilizing it to uphold her type of fiction; Emily Davies (1830-1921) and Emily Faithfull (1835-95) *Victoria Magazine*, Anna Maria Hall (1800-81) *St. James’s Magazine*, and Ellen Wood (*The Argosy*). Their involvement with these periodicals and the higher rate of publications by women featured in them contributed to an atmosphere in which women writers could succeed and inflect to some degree the nation’s cultural values.<sup>21</sup>

That at least two of the women listed, Braddon and Wood, were authors of enormously popular sensational novels indicates that the genre was inextricably tied up with the rise of woman authors and editors; and that such a rise was the product of a female literary community helping woman get their work into print and to the public.

This female literary community included not just the publishing industry, but readers of the genre as well. The genre’s popularity among women was both a product of women’s restlessness, and the driving force behind evolving constructions of gender within the genre. According to Elaine Showalter, “the enormous popularity of the women

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<sup>20</sup> Humble and Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 92.

sensationalists reflects the skill with which they articulated the fantasies of their readers, fantasies that they themselves fervently shared.”<sup>22</sup> And the new culture of print, wherein books were cheaper to make and literacy had reached an all-time high, allowed sensationalists to project those fantasies to vast numbers of readers in many different classes. Although contemporary criticism focuses on sensation’s wide middle-class readership, anxieties at the time of working-class sensibilities “infecting” the middle-class through sensationalism suggest that the genre was popular among working-class women as well. This accounts for the important role working-class women play in sensational literature, most frequently as ladies’ maids and other serving women within middle and upper-class households. Showalter takes a page from Leslie Fiedler’s examination of popular literature, saying that “the technology of the novel and its potential for mass distribution make the best seller an art form that embodies the communal unconscious.”<sup>23</sup> More specifically, sensational novelists like Braddon may have tapped into the communal unconscious of the female reading population across class. They did so through the “extreme stylization” of the sensation genre, which they adapted in order to convey their own anger and dissatisfaction. For Showalter, the sensational form is perfect for reconstructions of gender, due to the pervasiveness of secrets within the genre; because, as she asserts:

For the Victorian woman, secrecy was simply a way of life. The sensationalists made crime and violence domestic, modern and suburban; but their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women’s dislike of their roles as daughters, wives and

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<sup>22</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature Of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 159.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

mothers. These women novelists made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction to suit their own imaginative impulses, by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape.<sup>24</sup>

The sensation novel, and in particular the rebellious sensational heroine, appealed to woman readers because they could identify with her, and live vicariously through her.

The problem with this argument is, however, that women were not the only people writing sensation fiction. One of the most famous authors of the genre was Wilkie Collins, which complicates the idea that sensation novels were revolutionary fiction produced by and for women. Elaine Showalter deals with this problem by creating a distinction between sensational literature produced by men, and sensational literature produced by women. For Showalter, the only subversive sensational female characters were written by women, as an appeal to their female readership. Collins' novels, she says, "are relatively conventional in terms of their social and sexual attitudes;" and he ends them "inevitably...with sentimental happy marriages of patient woman and resolute man, marriages whose success is validated by the prompt appearance of male offspring."<sup>25</sup> Showalter dismisses even one of Collins' most famous unconventional females, *The Woman in White's* Marian Halcombe, on the basis that Collins makes her "unfeminine and ugly," and denies her the opportunity to solve the story's mystery herself.<sup>26</sup> Humble and Reynolds negatively suggest that this dismissal of Collins is evidence of Showalter's desire to depict sensational literature as an essentially female tradition, one that should

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 162-63.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

not be “galvanised by male writers.”<sup>27</sup> However, other scholars agree with Showalter’s reservations about Collins. Catherine Peters asserts that “while Collins ‘liked women who were intelligent and gifted and spoke their minds,’ he was ultimately ‘not in the least interested in female emancipation.’”<sup>28</sup>

Humble and Reynolds, on the other hand, do not agree that subversive heroines are the property of woman authors alone. They spend a great deal of time considering Collins’ heroines, particularly Marian Halcombe, and hold several of them up as “at least as active, powerful, sexually attractive and sympathetic as Braddon’s Aurora Floyd.”<sup>29</sup> However, they do agree with Showalter that the depictions of women in sensational literature appeal to a female Victorian readership by defying conventions. They say that “the popularity of Braddon’s novels with women suggests a profound dissatisfaction with [nineteenth-century] codes of reticence...[and]....sensation novels invite identification with their heroines in their attacks on the propriety, and even the wealth, of the bourgeois patriarch.”<sup>30</sup> Characters like Lady Audley are disturbing and appealing, then, because they provide an outlet for the dissatisfaction of their female audience. Women can read Braddon’s novels and enjoy vicarious pleasure from the rage, wickedness, and subverted expectations of gender.

Other critics are not so sure of the genre’s revolutionary status, however. Andrew Radford asks, “did the controversial formulations of gender and sexuality and the broader critiques of Victorian society erode mainstream values? Or is the narrative structure of

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<sup>27</sup> Humble and Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 106.

<sup>29</sup> Humble and Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-103.

sensation fiction geared towards suppressing and diluting anti-establishment rhetoric in resolutions that portray the ‘moral’ characters married, inheriting wealth and living contentedly?”<sup>31</sup> Although the lines between good and evil are blurrier in sensational literature, the characters still primarily fall into categories of hero and villain; and the novels end with rewards for the former and punishments for the latter. Whatever revolution the texts offer at the beginning, sensational fiction usually finishes along the moralizing lines expected by a Victorian readership. Marian Halcombe may be both brave and independent-minded, but she still ends the novel as a nanny and a servant. And while Lady Audley may sometimes behave in outrageously individualistic ways, she does so in order to secure the things which the Victorians prized—wealth and status, in a woman’s case through marriage. Furthermore, Braddon’s novel ends with Lady Audley locked away in a mental institution, while her persecutor marries well and is reunited with the man Lady Audley had tried to murder. Even Showalter says that “the sensationalists could not bring themselves to undertake a radical inquiry into the role of women. The novels of the 1860s, and 1870s, pregnant with their inchoate rage, generally miscarry. Anger is internalized or rejected, never confronted, understood, and acted upon.”<sup>32</sup>

Some scholars believe that this “miscarriage” of anger is the secret purpose of sensational literature. Ann Cvetkovich views the “sensational” part of the genre, the physical and emotional responses inspired in its readers, as a way of containing women’s dissatisfaction rather than encouraging them to express it. She writes “a discourse about

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<sup>31</sup> Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 180.

affect serves to contain resistance, especially from women. Rather than leading to social change, the expression of feeling can become an end in itself or an individualist solution to systemic problem.”<sup>33</sup> According to Cvetkovich, sensational literature’s effect on women is a way of controlling their response to unpleasant situations, by suggesting that sympathetically sharing the turmoil of sensational heroines is a solution in and of itself to their own unhappiness. She highlights the fact that the novels still focus on marriage as the central institution of a woman’s life, and punish those women who try to defy it. For her, and many other critics, sensation literature engages in what Radford calls an “ideological sleight-of-hand...the radically ambivalent treatment of gender norms and those who violate them.”<sup>34</sup> However, in spite of its connections with a “low” literary tradition and the “radically ambivalent” way it approaches Victorian institutions, sensation fiction does engage in a complex debate about the nature of women, their roles, and their rights within the Victorian social structure. Therefore, an exploration of the genre should, as Lyn Pykett writes, treat sensation literature “not simply as either the transgressive or subversive field of the improper feminine, or the contained, conservative domain of the proper feminine [but rather as] a site in which the contradictions, anxieties, and opposing ideologies of Victorian culture converge.”<sup>35</sup>

Many scholars, regardless of their opinions on sensation’s iconoclast status, see those anxieties converging on issues of femininity. However, as previously mentioned, most of the gender critique of sensation novels focuses only on the middle or upper-class

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<sup>33</sup> Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 106.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

women in the texts. These are frequently the heroines, the “women with a secret” whom critics like Showalter believe represent all Victorian women who hid their dissatisfactions and ambitions. However, there is another figure within the sensation novel that complicates any reading of that heroine, complicates even an understanding of “woman” within the sensational text, and represents the intersection of Victorian concerns about gender and developing ideas about class. For if, in the context of sensational literature, the heroine is a woman with a secret, then there is another character who frequently acts the role of secret-keeper—the serving woman.

The serving woman has a particular resonance in sensational literature. She appears in almost every novel, in a variety of roles from confidante to villain to either aid or disrupt the novel’s flow of events. More than just a plot device, however, she also serves as a kind of double for her employer, manifesting another side to the institution of class privilege that her mistress represents. That relationship between her and her mistress creates a kind of co-dependent community that reflects, in the case of female authors, the literary community utilized by writers like Braddon and Wood to get and keep their work in print. Although the intentional subversiveness of sensational fiction is up for debate, the act of carving a female publishing niche out of the male-dominated industry is a transgressive act; and it is one that finds its echo in the pockets of female community to be found between mistress and maid in the patriarchal great houses of the genre.

Additionally, this relationship between maid and mistress is a place to explore changing expectations for women within the evolving social structure of Victorian

England. As discussed previously, many of the political and social debates of the nineteenth century focused on class and gender rights and responsibilities. And although most scholarship concerned with expressions of “the Woman Question” in sensational literature focuses on middle-class women, working-class women were also engaged in debates over what rights they should have in an era of expanding suffrage and calls for reform among the working class. They were determining their possibilities in society even as the middle-class attempted to rewrite social codes to accommodate their growing dominance of Victorian culture. Catherine Hall notes that “in defining their own cultural patterns and practices, the men and women of the middle class had a significant impact on working-class culture. The middle class was fighting for political and cultural pre-eminence. In rejecting aristocratic values and the old forms of patronage and influence they sought to define new values, to establish new modes of power.”<sup>36</sup> The middle class built schools and charitable venues for the local working-class populations, which gave them the power to transmit to the working-class population middle-class ideas of “the proper place of working-class women...as servants in the homes of their betters, or as respectable and modest wives and mothers in their own homes.”<sup>37</sup>

But while some constructions of women as keepers of virtue and comfort within the home spread into working-class ideology, the expectations were not always the same. Because middle-class women were encouraged not to work outside of the house, ideas of femininity focused on moral goodness and the ability to oversee the running of their

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<sup>36</sup> Hall, *White, Male, and Middle-Class*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

household. Working-class women rarely had that luxury of wealth and leisure, and so ideas of working-class femininity stressed practical skills. Hall writes that:

While middle-class ideologues stressed the moral and managerial aspects of womanhood, for wives were to provide moral inspiration and manage the running of their households, working-class blueprints for the good wife and mother emphasized the practical skills associated with household management, cooking, cleaning and bringing up children. For the wife to manage the family finances seems to have been a very widespread pattern in both town and countryside, a distinctive difference from their middle-class counterparts with their exclusion from money matters.<sup>38</sup>

This interaction of evolving middle and working-class ideas of femininity is explored in part through the relationships between mistresses and their maids in sensational fiction. Through the sensational plot mechanisms, the reader sees maids and mistresses negotiating their roles within the household and in relation to each other. In some cases, their relationship allowed for a thinning and, sometimes, a dissolving of the class boundaries between them. For instance, although Marian Halcombe is poor, her connection to the Fairlies enables her to receive a lady's education and escape the necessity of working for her living in another home as a governess. And Phoebe's connection with Lady Audley leads to her mistress offering money for her marriage and her husband's public house, even without blackmail. The sensational heroine's challenge to traditional gender roles is disturbing enough to a nineteenth-century readership—the image of maid and mistress together threatening the class hierarchy as well suggests a two-pronged attack on Victorian institutions.

However, in spite of the transgressive nature of these relationships between maid and mistress, the figure of the serving woman is still a figure of suspicion in many

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 145.

sensational novels. Although Marian is innocent of wrongdoing in *The Woman in White*, her character is still punished—she is discredited, stricken with illness, and subjugated by the end into a nurse and domestic servant. And Phoebe and Lady Audley’s relationship, although strong and apparently co-dependent at the beginning of the novel, is never altogether positive. Phoebe blackmails Lady Audley, and turns on her at the end to save herself. It is also important to note that in both these cases, the mistresses themselves are “tainted” with lower-class blood and connections. Lady Audley is a poor governess before marrying Lord Audley. And Laura Fairlie’s father had an affair with a servant in his home, making the impoverished, working-class Anne Catherick Laura’s half-sister—a connection which makes the terrible events of the novel possible.

The heroine of the sensational novel has long been the subject of scrutiny from critics, and is regarded by many as the primary site of sensation literature’s subversive powers. This paper, however, aims to redirect that gaze to the figure of the serving woman within the texts, suggesting that the serving woman is another important site of the genre’s exploration of Victorian class and gender anxieties, and that a full understanding of the sensational heroine necessitates an understanding of her relationship with her working-class double.

In order to reassess gender critiques within sensational literature through an exploration of the serving woman, I have chosen several representational texts written by the genre’s leading novelists: Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. I will focus on two of Collins’ most popular novels, *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. *The Woman in White* is a good subject for this kind of study because Marian Halcombe is

both its heroine and the primary serving woman. Furthermore, the relationship between mistress and maid evolves over the course of the novel into a complex triad between poor but ladylike Marian Halcombe, her beautiful, heiress Angel-in-the-House sister Laura Fairlie, and the mad, working-class Anne Catherick. Scholars interpreting *The Woman in White* through a gendered lens have frequently focused on Marian as the strongest female character in the novel; however, most have neglected the impact class and her role as lady's companion have on a complete reading of her character. Likewise, *The Moonstone* has been a popular subject for study, particularly with regard to the effect imperialism has on class and the changing nature of the servant structure within great houses. However, studies of this kind have focused on Betteredge, the steward of the house, and largely neglected another important character—the maid and ex-criminal, Rosanna Spearman, who represents a more complicated view towards servants, particularly during times of familial conflict. Additionally, both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are written as collaborative novels, in which several different characters offer their own sides of the story to form, when compiled by the “editor” (in both cases the hero of the novel), a complete narrative. And in both novels, the serving woman figures (Marian Halcombe and Rosanna Spearman) are given a voice with which to tell their own stories. This unique structure offers the double benefit of allowing the reader to experience part of the narrative through the maid's perspective, and analyze how the voice of that female servant is constructed by a male author.

Although Collins was a major part of Victorian sensational literature, no study of the genre would be complete without an examination of Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Braddon was not only a novelist whose popularity rivaled Collins's; she was also part of that community of writers and editors who helped make possible women's widespread contributions to fiction, sensational and otherwise. This project will focus on her bestseller, *Lady Audley's Secret*, which set the stage for many of the sensational texts to follow and depicts female figures that disrupted Victorian ideas of gender and "proper" femininity. *Lady Audley's Secret* also features a predominant and contested relationship between a lady (who was once a governess) and her maid, depicted literally as a pale reflection of her employer. The nature of this relationship is complex—scholarly arguments include assertions of homoeroticism, demonic possession, and extra plotlines imperfectly edited out by Braddon before publication. This paper hopes to synthesize those arguments and reach a conclusion about their relationship that keeps the ambiguity of their class relations in mind. Additionally, academic work on the maid, Phoebe Marks, has focused primarily on her as a doppelganger of her more vibrant and contested mistress, Lady Audley. I hope to rectify this by examining Phoebe not just in her function as double, but also as a distinct and individual character.

Both Collins and Braddon deal with the intersection of class and gender issues, though they approach it from different angles. Collins gives his serving women voices, and explores the powerlessness of their position through the systematic undermining and silencing their narratives undergo by men in the text—even those men ostensibly meant to be heroes. And Braddon uses the discourse of gender inequality and women's dissatisfaction as mothers and wives to shed light on the frustrations of female servants that might drive them to turn on their employers. Both authors build much of their

“sensation” on these doubly-vulnerable women attempting to protect their interests against more powerful men in the text.

By investigating these iconic sensation novels, I hope to shed light on an aspect of the genre that has been largely overlooked by prior studies—namely, the impact class has on the women’s issues explored within these novels, and how that finds expression in the figure of the serving woman both as an individual, as a representative of working-class women’s concerns, and in conjunction with other female characters.

## Chapter 2

### WILKIE COLLINS: *THE WOMAN IN WHITE* AND *THE MOONSTONE*

Wilkie Collins is perhaps the best-known of all the sensational novelists, and one of the few authors to have remained an object of academic attention. Other authors of the sensation genre, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood, were disregarded for much of the twentieth century, and only in the last thirty years or so have been recovered as subjects of study. Part of this inconsistency might have been due to affiliation—one of Collins' closest friends and mentors for much of his writing career was Charles Dickens, a giant in the canon of Victorian novelists. This connection kept Collins in the minds of scholars, if only as an object of comparison—and, in truth, much of the scholastic work on Collins before the resurgence of interest in the sensation genre identified him as a lesser protégé of the great Dickens.

Now, however, Collins has become a subject of study in his own right. Combining tightly-plotted novels with incisive social critique, Collins is a favorite example of dissenting voices in Victorian fiction. Although raised in a stable, middle-class home, Collins' adult life belied his traditional upbringing. He eschewed his parents' monogamous marriage model and built two separate homes with two separate women, neither of whom he married: one with widow Caroline Graves and her daughter; another

with Martha Rudd, with whom he fathered three children.<sup>39</sup> Collins' reservations about marriage, apparent in his domestic life, are reflected in many of his novels, wherein marriage is frequently pursued for mercenary means, and matrimony becomes a legal prison for the people (usually the woman) inside. Collins seems interested in the development of women within institutional bondage such as marriage and domestic service; and whether Collins intended it or not, his female characters cross class boundaries to demonstrate the dangers inherent to a life spent bowing to the "Angel in the House" expectation—to being always in the service of others, and never in the service of one's self. For Collins, such a perilous condition is found most frequently in marriage; and one of Collins' most famous novels to address this risky institution is *The Woman in White*.

In *The Woman in White* (1860), beautiful heiress Laura Fairlie is married to Sir Percival Glyde, who imprisons her under a false name in order to secure her fortune to alleviate his debts. The novel is told through several different points of view, including that of the hero—Walter Hartwright, a poor art tutor who falls in love with Laura—and Laura's half-sister Marian Halcombe. Initially, Laura seems to be the heroine of the novel, as she is both the hero's love interest and the character around whom most of the plot revolves. She also embodies many of the qualities associated with ideal Victorian femininity—beauty, loyalty, virtue, and submissiveness. Like the "Angel in the House" model, she sacrifices her own desires to satisfy her duty to her family—she marries the man her father chose before his death, despite her misgivings. And, as middle-class

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<sup>39</sup> Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991).

consumer culture dictates, she is a good match—well-bred, and heiress to both a fortune and the Limmeridge estate. To all appearances, Laura is everything to be desired in a Victorian heroine, a blend of poetic and economic advantage.

Collins, however, destabilizes the anticipated heroine by introducing two other women who complicate the heroine model. They are compared and contrasted with Laura Fairlie, highlighting the deficiencies inherent in this “perfect” woman. The character that emerges instead as Collins’ superior model of a heroine is, in fact, a serving woman—Marian Halcombe. Although a popular subject for academic study, Marian is rarely examined in the light of a serving woman. Nevertheless, her role within Limmeridge House is that of a lady’s companion, however unconventional. She and Laura had the same mother, but different fathers: Marian’s was poor, and Laura’s was wealthy. Therefore, Marian is financially dependent upon the Fairlies, particularly Laura, for her livelihood. And he earns her keep at Limmeridge House by acting as attendant and chaperone for her more affluent half-sister.

Collins establishes from the beginning a comparison between Laura and Marian. In her first conversation with Walter Hartwright, the novel’s hero, Marian makes the comparison herself, explaining that:

My father was a poor man, and Miss Fairlie’s father was a rich man. I have got nothing, and she is an heiress. I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am—Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartwright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 36.

On the surface, Marian's description sets up the dynamic expected between a mistress and her dependent: rank versus obscurity, wealth versus poverty, beauty and charm versus ugliness and utility. But even as Marian invokes this juxtaposition, the narrator refutes it. She may claim to be "crabbed and odd," but Hartwright has already written that her lively conversation was "accompanied by an unaffected naturalness and an easy inborn confidence in herself and her position, which would have secured her the respect of the most audacious man breathing."<sup>41</sup> And although she stresses her social inferiority to Laura, she also moves and speaks "with the easy, unaffected self-reliance of a highly-bred woman."<sup>42</sup> Hartwright meets Marian in the gloom of Limmeridge House, after having stumbled across a woman escaped from an insane asylum the night before. Marian's amicability is a relief to both Hartwright and the reader after the sensational happenings of the previous chapters, but this relief masks an unsettling social ambiguity in both her manner and her position within Limmeridge House.

As a dependent of the family, the way Marian confidently and aggressively runs the house and its inhabitants is odd. She introduces Hartwright to the inhabitants of Limmeridge, and frames his understanding of the Fairlies with her initial descriptions. Her unusual power in the house reflects the class irregularities which have allowed distinctions between Marian and Laura to start dissolving. When Marian discusses how she came to live at Limmeridge Court with Laura and her uncle, she says that: "I won't live without her, and she can't live without me."<sup>43</sup> The syntax suggests that Marian has a

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 35

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 37

choice in the matter, whereas Laura does not. And, indeed, Laura is very dependent upon her half-sister. Whereas Marian eagerly describes their differences, Laura seems too willing to conflate her identity with Marian's. Hartwright notes that Laura dresses:

unpretendingly and almost poorly...in plain white muslin...it was the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn; and it made the heiress of Limmeridge House...look less affluent to circumstances than her own governess.<sup>44</sup>

In spite of all the privileges coming from her social and financial position, Laura actively seeks to disguise her identity as an heiress—a choice that comes back to haunt her when Glyde and Fosco incarcerate her under a poor woman's identity. However, when she first meets Walter, she is rejecting the outward appearance of her rank rather than being stripped of it. Hartwright says she does this out of a “natural delicacy of feeling and natural intensity of aversion to the slightest personal display of her own wealth”<sup>45</sup> But Collins encodes another message in her desire to look poorer and plainer than Marian—the recognition that her wealth makes her prey, and that she *is* poorer than Marian, who is rich in qualities ultimately more desirable than Laura's “Angel in the Home” virtues.

This is one of the many “sensational” claims Collins makes in *The Woman in White*—that Marian represents a superior type of heroine than Laura. Marian is intelligent, courageous, and kind-hearted. But she also defies the boundaries established by the Victorian institutions surrounding her. She is both maid and mistress—devoted to Laura and her wellbeing, while simultaneously recognizing Laura's emotional and intellectual dependence on her. May attributes the effectiveness of Marian's narrative to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 59

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

this in-between class status, saying, “but for the accident of her poverty and her dependence on the Fairlie fortune, [Marian] would be a solid member of [Laura’s] class by virtue of her breeding. It is this circumstance of being positioned between classes which allows her such keen observations and commentary on what transpires within the rank and file.”<sup>46</sup>

Marian is also both man and woman, a juxtaposition stemming from a description that begins with the perfect femininity of her body, and ends in the ugly masculinity of her face. Marian’s first appearance in the novel is a detailed narrative strip-tease given by Hartwright, starting with an examination of her perfect form and ending, comically, with the shocking realization that she has an ugly face. Hartwright says:

The instant my eyes rested on [Marian], I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays....The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!<sup>47</sup>

Marian’s body—described in painstaking detail by Walter, who “allows himself the luxury of admiring her” from across the room—is the perfect expression of natural womanhood. As Walter points out, her torso is “undeformed by stays;” the first

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<sup>46</sup> Leila Silvana May, “Sensational Sisters: Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 30, no. 1 (1995): 82-102.

<sup>47</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, 33-34.

indication of Marian's unwillingness to contort either her body or her mind to the social expectations of her gender.

The second indication is much more obvious: her head, ugly in a way that is distinctively masculine. Walter describes it thus:

The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead. Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent—appeared, while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete.<sup>48</sup>

Marian will prove the predictions of her appearance true, encompassing throughout the novel a combination of “womanly” loyalty and sensitivity combined with “manly” resolve and fortitude in the face of Glyde and Fosco's scheming. Humble and Reynolds identify this androgynous combination as an advantage, saying that “it is [Marian's] partial masculinity that allows her to occupy her curious dual role as both Laura's girlish confidante and Walter's detective side-kick. Her remarkable physiognomy allows her to reject some, at least, of the constraints of her feminine role without being compromised in the novel's terms.”<sup>49</sup> Just as her in-between class status gave her access to education with fewer constraints of social expectations, her masculine face gives her access to more freedom of behavior and disposition.

These juxtapositions—man and woman, maid and mistress, loved by and loving Laura—make Marian a complete figure, in need of nothing to give her form and little to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 34

<sup>49</sup> Humble and Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines*, 54.

give her purpose. Marian's juxtapositions, particularly regarding that of class, also save her from Laura and Anne's fate. Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick suffer from their stable class identities: Laura's wealth and rank make her a target for unscrupulous men, like Glyde. And Anne's penniless, working-class status makes her easy to exploit; she is an obvious choice for Laura's substitute not just because they bear a resemblance, but because she will never be missed. Marian escapes both these fates. Her connection to the Fairlie family in general and Laura in particular permitted her a lady's education and upbringing, while her poverty (and ugliness) freed her from having to dedicate that education to the accomplishments most likely to secure a husband. The ugliness is also an important part of this—Anne and Laura look alike, and are both wronged. Marian does not look like either of them, does not fit the “type” that translates in Laura as an “Angel in the House” and in both of them as evidence of weakness. Collins suggests that there is something inherent in the physical as well as social type of the “Angel in the House” that makes her susceptible to victimization—perhaps the paleness, the frailness, the spectacle of childishness. Marian does not share this physical type, and is consequently safe from both madhouse and marriage.

After meeting Marian, it is difficult for a contemporary reader to understand why Walter should fall in love with Laura. Laura's descriptions, though complimentary, are catastrophically vague. Collins leaves her as a figure upon which Hartwright (and, by extension, the reader) can inscribe his desire. As Reynolds and Humble note:

Despite the ideal nature of her beauty, [the] description of Laura is notably imprecise: her beauty of body and soul is represented synecdochally only by her eyes, which are remarkable mainly as conduits to a better world – the light shines *through*, not *from* them. Further, the figure itself is

imprecise – her hair ‘melts’ into the shadow of her hat....precisely because she *is* an ideal, her body functions as a blank canvas on to which the observer’s desires and fantasies can be sketched.<sup>50</sup>

This is a potent attribute of the “Angel in the House,” whose sole purpose was the comfort and wellbeing of her children and her husband. Laura is the means to comfort, to transcendence through love, to wealth and rank. She is a doll to be moved around and dressed up, and she is an easy target for Glyde and Fosco’s schemes because she hardly has an identity of her own to begin with—it is not hard to scrub out the faint personality inscribed on Laura Fairlie’s body and substitute another in its place. As May points out:

[Fosco and Glyde’s] successful conspiracy obliterates the identities of both women, one lying dead with a tombstone marked with the name of the other, and the other locked away in an asylum, mocked for being the madwoman she is fast becoming as she pleads that she is really a noblewoman. (The final irony here emerges when we discover that in fact she is *not* whom she believes herself to be—namely, Lady Glyde, for there never was such a person, as the man to whom she is married has usurped his title).<sup>51</sup>

It is harder to eradicate Anne Catherick, the working-class madwoman who must be killed in order to take Laura’s place—suggesting that Laura is the true “Woman in White” all along: a pale, insubstantial ghost who can barely define herself, much less make a heroic impression on the plot.

In fact, within the trio of women that Collins establishes—Marian Halcombe, Laura Fairlie, and Anne Catherick—Marian is the only complete character. Anne Catherick, the working-class woman who bears a striking (and ultimately fatal) resemblance to Laura, is mad. Laura, as stated earlier, is weakened by her adherence to

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>51</sup> May, “Sensational Sisters,” 86.

the Angel in the House mold. This parallel that Collins draws between madness and Victorian ideals of perfect womanhood are not coincidental. From the first, Hartwright perceives that something is off about Laura Fairlie. He says that:

mingling with the vivid impression produced by the charm of her fair face... was another impression, which, in a shadowy way, suggested to me the idea of something wanting. At one time it seemed like something wanting in *her*; at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought. The impression was always strongest, in the most contradictory manner, when she looked at me; or, in other words, when I was most conscious of the harmony and charm of her face, and yet, at the same time, most troubled by the sense of an incompleteness which it was impossible to discover. Something wanting, something wanting—and where it was, and what it was, I could not say.<sup>52</sup>

After Marian uncovers information about Anne Catherick in her mother's old letters, Hartwright discovers that the "something missing" is Laura's likeness to Anne, the madwoman who is her half-sister on her father's side, the product of Mr. Fairlie's illegitimate liaison with a servant. In the midst of falling in love with Laura, Hartwright cannot recognize how closely she resembles a person who represents madness and poverty. Collins uses Laura and Anne's likeness to set up a destabilization of Hartwright as a hero—a destabilization that begins with Hartwright's narrow-minded inability to recognize physical similarities between two women of different classes, and ends with a brutal subjugation of Marian Halcombe's identity as heroine.

Laura and Anne's likeness also makes possible *The Woman in White's* sensational plot—a plot that hinges, as scholars have noted, on the destruction of class boundaries between women. In order to steal her fortune for himself and Glyde, Count Fosco sends

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<sup>52</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, 55.

Laura to an insane asylum under Anne Catherick's name; and buries Anne in a grave identifying her as Laura. May emphasizes the social implications of Fosco's plan, saying that the likeness between Anne and Laura "allows for the potential subversion of class difference, as the confounding of their identities leads Anne to be elevated to the level of a noblewoman, and Laura to be reduced to that of the working class."<sup>53</sup> When the trappings of class privilege are eliminated—the stately home, the servants—a working class woman and an heiress may be swapped out with relative ease. And, what's more, a third woman who defies class categorization can attempt to and nearly succeed at protecting her persecuted sisters. A large part of Fosco's convoluted plan is finding a way to separate Laura from Marian and Anne from them both. As a result, the purpose of the scheme is not just to secure Laura's fortune, but also to dismember the dangerous female community, lead by Marian, that threatens to stop them. This communal cohesiveness of women transcends class boundaries and makes them less vulnerable—although, ultimately, it is not enough to stop Glyde and Fosco. Justice must be meted out by Hartwright, who eventually assumes patriarchal authority over both Laura and Marian.

Hartwright is also the first person in *The Woman in White* to interrupt the central female community. Marian and Laura's relationship suffers a heavy blow when Hartwright arrives and introduces heterosexual desire into their lives. Although Laura was engaged to be married to Sir Percival Glyde before Walter's introduction to Limmeridge House, it was an arranged marriage to which Laura consented out of respect for her father. As Marian says to Hartwright when she tells him of Laura's betrothal: "I

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<sup>53</sup> May, "Sensational Sisters," 87-88.

don't say...that her engagement has ever had a strong hold on her affections. It is an engagement of honour, not of love; her father sanctioned it on his deathbed, two years since; she herself neither welcomed it nor shrank from it—she was content to make it.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it was not an impediment to Marian and Laura’s homosocial community, as Marian had no emotional rival for Laura, and they expected to live together at Glyde’s house, Blackwater Park. Hartwright, on the other hand, splinters Laura’s love for Marian and creates a rift between them. And although Hartwright is ostensibly the hero of the novel, his intercession becomes, like Glyde and Fosco’s later, a bid for power.

When Marian first tells Hartwright about Laura’s upcoming marriage, she stresses that he must leave “for [Laura’s] sake, as well as for your own,” and does not conceal from him that his feelings for Laura are reciprocated.<sup>55</sup> In spite of this honesty and professed respect for Hartwright, however, Marian makes very clear in her speech that he is an outsider. Although she claims she will not “enter into the...hard and cruel question...of social inequalities,” she does, and at length.<sup>56</sup> She says:

Circumstances which will try you to the quick, spare me the ungracious necessity of...any humiliating reference to matters of rank and station....It is my duty to say that to you; and it would be equally my duty to say it, under precisely the same serious necessity, if you were the representative of the oldest and wealthiest family in England. You must leave us, not because you are a teacher of drawing....but because Laura Fairlie is engaged to be married.<sup>57</sup>

By explaining to Hartwright that social inequality between him and Laura is not their greatest obstacle, she draws attention to the fact of its existence. Marian cannot say that

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<sup>54</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, 79.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 78

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Walter's position as a drawing tutor does not matter; she can only say that it matters less than Laura's engagement. And in doing so, Marian asserts her power over both Hartwright and Laura, through the privilege of her position within Limmeridge House. In spite of her financial inferiority, Marian combines the cultural capital gained from her upbringing with her own liberty of mind to dominate the circumstances of her dependence. Marian speaks warmly and amiably to Hartwright, calling him a friend and avowing that she trusts him. But when she tells him that he has "had the misfortune to forget" his relation to Laura as a pupil and a woman of breeding, she is marking the boundaries that place her with Laura, and Hartwright firmly on the outside.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, Hartwright's mission later in the novel to regain Laura is also a mission to displace Marian from her side. Glyde and Fosco, whose plans are also threatened by Marian's position of privilege related to Laura, take advantage of Marian's illness and separate them through deceit. In this case, the female community opposing them is portrayed as a positive thing, trying to protect Laura from Glyde and Fosco's pursuit of her money. Hartwright, on the other hand, is the hero of the novel whose usurpation of Marian's guardianship of Laura is initially framed as both desirable and inevitable. After Laura is rescued from the madhouse, but before Glyde and Fosco are defeated, Hartwright, Laura, and Marian live together under assumed identities in London lodgings. During this time, Hartwright rewrites the narrative of Laura's maturation. Her time in the asylum renders her even more helpless than before, a child in their care. This time, however, Hartwright plays the triple roles of father, brother, and champion,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 79

securing his position as Laura's guardian. Marian's time for heroism is over. As Hartwright says:

[Laura was] alive, with the poor drawing-master to fight her battle, and to win the way back for her to her place in the world of living beings [...]  
The house-work, which, if we had dared trust a stranger near us, would have been done by a servant, was taken on the first day, taken as her own right, by Marian Halcombe. "What a woman's hands ARE fit for," she said, "early and late, these hands of mine shall do." They trembled as she held them out.<sup>59</sup>

Hartwright is the hero now, the one who will take credit for defeating the conspirators and bringing Laura back from the dead. Marian is condemned to servitude: a role she trembles to undertake.

Collins launches a subversive social campaign through Marian's transformation in the second half of the novel by undermining his own hero. The reader expects Glyde and Fosco to sweep away Marian's power and self-sufficiency—they are villains. That Hartwright fails to return it to her exposes the conscious or unconscious desire for power that motivates his actions towards the restoration of Laura's identity. Marriage to Laura means upward social mobility, so Hartwright concentrates his efforts on the restoration of her legal identity. He makes no attempt in the other direction to restore Marian's lost identity as a heroine. Collins weakens his character by putting him in indirect opposition to Marian and revealing selfish behavior described as a matter of course. The audience remembers Marian's sensational battle against Glyde and Fosco; and although Marian has resigned herself to a servant's duties ("what a woman's hands are fit for"), she has not forgotten the adventures of the past either. She says to Hartwright: "I am not quite

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 501

broken down yet... I am worth trusting with my share of the work... And worth trusting with my share in the risk and the danger too. Remember that, if the time comes!”<sup>60</sup> But although Hartwright claims that “[he] did remember it when the time came,” Marian is excluded from the hands-on detecting for the remainder of the novel.<sup>61</sup>

This motif of heterosexual desire interrupting and normalizing a female community is repeated in another of Wilkie Collins’ popular novels: *The Moonstone*. In *The Moonstone*, a precious jewel with a bloody imperial history is stolen from an aristocratic family, the Verinders. A relative and friend, Franklin Blake, helps to lead an investigation of the theft—in part, because it was stolen from Rachel, the cousin whom he wished to marry. The novel is considered one of the first examples of detective fiction, and demonstrates the effect crime in a great house has not just on the family, but the “downstairs” structure of servants as well. One of the suspects is Rosanna Spearman, a second housemaid who was once a thief—a secret known only by her employer and the steward of the house, Mr. Betteredge.

Before the jewel (a diamond called the Moonstone) is given to Rachel Verinder as a birthday gift, Franklin Blake comes as a guest to the Verinder’s house, and Rosanna falls in love with him at first sight. This passion is hopeless, not just because of her class position, but also because Rosanna is ugly and disabled; but it still curtails the plans she had made with a friend in the village known as Limping Lucy. When Blake finally meets Lucy, she subjects him to a bone-chilling scrutiny:

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 502

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

An apparition advanced towards me, out of a dark corner of the kitchen. A wan, wild, haggard girl, with remarkably beautiful hair, and with a fierce keenness in her eyes, came limping up on a crutch...and looked at me as if I was an object of mingled interest and horror, which it quite fascinated her to see...I inspired her with the strongest emotions of abhorrence and disgust....“No,” said the girl, speaking to herself, but keeping her eyes still mercilessly fixed on me. “I can’t find out what she saw in his face. I can’t guess what she heard in his voice.” She suddenly looked away from me, and rested her head wearily on the top of her crutch. “Oh, my poor dear!” she said, in the first soft tones which had fallen from her, in my hearing. “Oh, my lost darling! What could you see in this man?”<sup>62</sup>

Lucy and Rosanna were close friends; the text suggests that they were the only friends each other had. Lucy tells Blake that they were going to go to London together and live “like sisters,” by their needles. As a community of women, Rosanna and Lucy would have lived and earned an independent income together in comfort. It would have also given her a way out of the service of the Verinders and into a life of freedom, self-sufficiency, and respectability, as well as love. But Rosanna’s passion for Franklin Blake eliminates her way out of servitude by highlighting her inability to fit a heteronormative model. Instead of going with Lucy to London and constructing her own narrative, Rosanna embraces the only example of heterosexual desire open to her, and kills herself for unrequited love.

This tragedy is compounded by the fact that, aside from Lucy, Rosanna has no other woman friends. She is unpopular with the other maids in the Verinders’ house, save Penelope: Betteredge’s daughter and Rachel Verinder’s lady’s maid. Penelope takes pity on Rosanna, but does not form a closer bond with her than that. Rosanna herself is only a second housemaid, and not a lady’s maid, governess, or companion. Therefore, she has

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<sup>62</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (Ontario: Broadview, 1999), 370-71.

no opportunities to make close connections with the ladies of the house, although Lady Verinder took her from the reformatory herself, and (according to Betteredge) occasionally offers her “a friendly word...in private, to encourage her.”<sup>63</sup> Sergeant Cuff mistakes a connection between Rosanna and Rachel, suggesting that they are in cahoots with one another over Rachel’s theft of the diamond. They are only accidentally connected, however: both love Franklin Blake (so, on Rosanna’s side at least, their relationship is that of rivals), and both know that he took the Moonstone (leading both to the conclusion that Blake was responsible for the theft). Therefore, although the two of them are incidentally affiliated through Blake’s theft of the Moonstone, they do not communicate and do not qualify as a female community.

Rosanna tries to create a community with Franklin Blake through what she mistakenly perceives as a shared criminality. As she has neither the beauty nor the rank to be a viable choice for wife, Rosanna can only offer her criminal background. And she does offer it, in a failed attempt at accompliceship that only really comes to light in the narrative she leaves for Franklin Blake to read along with the incriminating evidence that she hid for his sake. Jerome Meckier writes that:

Rosanna Spearman illustrates most poignantly the harm one does to one’s own person and to others if not on good terms with all facets of the self...It is not Rosanna Spearman’s past, her former career as a thief, that drives this servant of Lady Verinder’s to suicide. Inability to cope with her inner self—an unrequited love for Franklin Blake—proves the fatal cause, not suspicion of theft...ironically, Rosanna perishes because [Franklin Blake] fails to know himself in time to forestall her despair with a kind gesture. Yet her fate is destined to illuminate his condition. Hiding Blake’s paint-smearred gown, ostensibly an act of love on Rosanna’s part,

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 75

postpones the solution of the crime. The servant impedes Blake's recognition of his interior self and drowns her own.<sup>64</sup>

Although Rosanna incorrectly interprets Blake's involvement with the theft of the diamond, she does reveal a side of Franklin Blake's "secret self." And, in this sense, Rosanna is unlike other maid figures in sensation literature because she is concerned with the secrecy surrounding a man's identity, rather than a woman's. Like Marian and Hartwright from *The Woman in White*, Collins uses Rosanna to call Blake into question as both a narrator and a hero. Her letter reveals Blake to be the Moonstone thief and exposes him as an unreliable narrator. And by questioning Blake, the reader begins to question the things Blake represents. Complicating the narrator's reliability is a key aspect of the text, and perhaps of sensation literature as a whole. Though he is the hero of *The Moonstone*, Rosanna Spearman exposes the callousness and weakness inherent in the privilege derived from his class position. The exposition originates before Rosanna's actual narrative, in the way Collins depicts Blake's treatment of Rosanna and those who care for her. In his second narrative, Blake recalls a conversation with Lucy where she interrogates him, asking:

"Can you eat and drink?" she asked.  
I did my best to preserve my gravity, and answered, "Yes."  
"Can you sleep?"  
"Yes."  
"When you see a poor girl in service, do you feel no remorse?"  
"Certainly not. Why should I?"  
She abruptly thrust the letter (as the phrase is) into my face.  
"Take it!" she exclaimed furiously. "I never set eyes on you before. God Almighty forbid I should ever set eyes on you again."

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<sup>64</sup> Jerome Meckier, *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism, and Reevaluation* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 141-45.

With those parting words she limped away from me at the top of her speed. The one interpretation that I could put on her conduct has, no doubt, been anticipated by everybody. I could only suppose that she was mad.<sup>65</sup>

Blake has to keep himself from laughing at a situation that is not all that humorous. And he accuses Lucy of madness even as he claims to be entirely mystified by her behavior, which makes his own intellect suspect. The knowledge that Lucy was a friend of Rosanna's, and that she is in possession of a letter written by Rosanna before her suicide, coupled with Lucy's audible assessment of him upon their meeting, should have been enough for even Franklin Blake's amateur detection to resolve. That he remains willfully in the dark reveals a sad want of feeling in the man for whom so many women within the text seem eager to sacrifice their lives and dignities.

This callousness manifests itself most obviously in Franklin Blake's readiness to do injustice to Rosanna even after her death. When he sees the letter from Rosanna accompanying his incriminating nightgown, he leaps to the conclusion that she must have framed him:

As I read [Rosanna's] name, a sudden remembrance illuminated my mind, and a sudden suspicion rose out of the new light.

"Stop!" I exclaimed. "Rosanna Spearman came to my aunt out of a reformatory? Rosanna Spearman had once been a thief?"

"There's no denying that, Mr. Franklin. What of it now, if you please?"

"What of it now? How do we know she may not have stolen the Diamond after all? How do we know she may not have smeared my nightgown purposely with the paint – ?"

Betteredge laid his hand on my arm, and stopped me before I could say any more.

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<sup>65</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, 371.

“You will be cleared of this, Mr. Franklin, beyond all doubt. But I hope you won’t be cleared in *that* way. See what the letter says, sir. In justice to the girl’s memory, see what it says.”<sup>66</sup>

For all his worldliness, Blake is still a consummate English gentleman. And, as such, he is all-too ready to transfer the blame of theft from himself to the second housemaid. He ignores, in this rush of suspicion, the senselessness of framing a person for theft and then hiding the evidence that incriminates them—particularly in someone with a history of successful thievery. It takes Betteredge, the aging and frequently ineffectual servant, to point out the heartlessness of Blake’s assumption.

If Collins is using Rosanna to craft a personal critique of his hero, there are also political implications of Rosanna’s unrequited love for Blake. Collins constructs a significant class criticism in *The Moonstone*, signifying that the way of life the Verinders’ possession of the Moonstone symbolizes is coming to an end. Franklin Blake’s investigation of the theft of the diamond is an attempt to maintain the institutions of class hierarchy and imperial privilege that put the Moonstone into Rachel’s hands to begin with. By loving Franklin Blake and thereby hiding his guilt, Rosanna both protects and undermines that system. She protects it by shielding the family from the knowledge that they are both guilty in their own right and susceptible to the manipulations of other guilty parties—as Blake was susceptible to being drugged by Dr. Candy and Blake’s rival cousin, Godfrey Ablewhite. And she undermines it not just by harboring romantic inclinations towards a member of the family she serves, but by pursuing him through the rudimentary detective work she uses to try to win his confidence. She recognizes the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 379-80

master of the house as a thief, and uses her knowledge of crime to forge a connection between them.

Rosanna's criminal background is portrayed throughout the novel as a kind of spiritual blemish which taints perceptions of her character throughout the text. This "deformity" manifests itself in Rosanna's physical appearance as her hunched back. Like her reputation, Rosanna's unprepossessing appearance makes her an object of pity as well as suspicion, and isolates her from the people around her. She is, as Betteredge describes her, "the plainest woman in the house, with the additional misfortune of having one shoulder bigger than the other."<sup>67</sup> Her disability signifies her old life of crime, the flaw in her character which she perceives wearing like a mark throughout her time at the Verinders' house. Betteredge says in the beginning of his first narrative that "not a soul was told [Rosanna's] story, excepting Miss Rachel and me....none of the servants could cast her past life in her teeth, for none of the servants knew what it had been."<sup>68</sup> However, Rosanna still suspects that the servants know the truth, and believes this to be the root of their dislike for her. In her letter to Franklin Blake, Rosanna says: "It was my duty, I know, to try and get on with my fellow-servants in my new place [at Lady Verinder's]. Somehow, I couldn't make friends with them. They looked (or I thought they looked) as if they suspected what I had been."<sup>69</sup>

Betteredge explains this dislike in the servants another way. He says that Rosanna was shunned by the other maids in the house because of her solitary ways. He said that

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 75

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 382

this detachment would have been bad enough alone, but was augmented by the fact that “there was just a dash of something that wasn’t like a housemaid, and that *was* like a lady, about her. It might have been in her voice, or it might have been in her face. All I can say is, that the other women pounced on it like lightening the first day she came into the house, and said (which was most unjust) that Rosanna Spearman gave herself airs.”<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to note that between the two explanations—Rosanna’s fears about her past and Betteredge’s perception of that “dash of something”—Collins links “ladylike airs” with a spotted past and a history of thieving.

However, this guilt for her past and spiritual “deformity” is unlike Rosanna’s physical disability because it does not come naturally. Rosanna learns to be ashamed of her former life through participation in “respectable” Victorian society. She reveals this in her letter to Franklin Blake, saying:

But there is one thing which I have got it on my mind to tell you first. My life was not a very hard life to bear, while I was a thief. It was only when they had taught me at the reformatory to feel my own degradation, and to try for better things, that the days grew long and weary. Thoughts of the future forced themselves on me now. I felt the dreadful reproach that honest people – even the kindest of honest people – were to me in themselves. A heart-breaking sensation of loneliness kept with me, go where I might, and do what I might, and see what persons I might....I don’t regret, far from it, having been roused to make the effort to be a reformed woman – but, indeed, indeed it was a weary life.<sup>71</sup>

Readers can debate whether or not Rosanna tells the truth when she says that she does not regret having the chance to reform—she still seems very familiar with the tricks she learned and contacts she made in her other life, and embraces the chance to join in

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 382

criminal accompliceship with Franklin Blake with an enthusiasm which may not be entirely attributed to love. But either way, she is a serving woman whose natural physical disability reflects an unnatural personal disability created by the values of mainstream Victorian society. And, as Collins makes clear, that society helped shove Rosanna into thievery in the first place. Rosanna explains the root of her criminal life in her letter to Blake, saying that: “Lady Verinder took me out of a reformatory. I had gone to the reformatory from the prison. I was put in the prison, because I was a thief. I was a thief, because my mother went on the streets when I was quite a little girl. My mother went on the streets, because the gentleman who was my father deserted her. There is no need to tell such a common story as this, at any length. It is told quite often enough in the newspapers.”<sup>72</sup> As Rosanna points out, her family is not unique; and the criminality that society condemns so readily was necessitated by the lack of options that same society offered her and her mother.

Franklin Blake represents that society; however, it is important to note that Rosanna’s passion for him does not translate to a passion for rank. When she appraises her privileged rival, Rachel, she criticizes her for hiding her faults behind the advantages of class, saying: “suppose you put Miss Rachel into a servant's dress, and took her ornaments off....It can't be denied that she had a bad figure; she was too thin. But who can tell what the men like? And young ladies may behave in a manner which would cost a servant her place. It's no business of mine....But it does stir one up to hear Miss Rachel called pretty, when one knows all the time that it's her dress does it, and her confidence in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 381

herself.”<sup>73</sup> Rosanna points out that Rachel can act the way she does because of the advantage of birth; and although her words are motivated by jealousy, she makes the point that wealth and rank (symbolized in Rachel’s clothing) make the women who possess them more attractive. Because Collins uses clothing to symbolize desirable social position, he suggests that rank is largely performative—not an integral part of the person themselves, but something added on through the enactment of social rituals and the wearing of particular clothing. A maid, with access to all these signifiers of wealth and privilege, would know the best how shallow they really are.

Unable and unwilling to compete with Rachel socially or physically, Rosanna tries to satisfy her passion by drawing Blake down to her. She is overjoyed when she concludes that he is the thief, saying that: “the bare thought that YOU had let yourself down to my level, and that I, in possessing myself of your nightgown, had also possessed myself of the means of shielding you from being discovered, and disgraced for life—I say, sir, the bare thought of this seemed to open such a chance before me of winning your good will, that I passed blindfold, as one may say, from suspecting to believing.”<sup>74</sup> Rosanna becomes the keeper of Franklin Blake’s secret as well as her own, and these attributes of Rosanna—concealment, drawing in, physical repulsiveness, and an outward dullness broken by periods of unsettling excitement—connect her to the place she has the closest affinity with: the Shivering Sands.

The Sands are a sensational—almost gothic—landscape for the text, which Betteredge describes as “the most horrible quicksand on the shores of Yorkshire. At the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 382

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 387

turn of the tide, something goes on in the unknown deeps below, which sets the whole face of the quicksand shivering and trembling in a manner most remarkable to see, and which has given to it, among the people in our parts, the name of the Shivering Sand.”<sup>75</sup> This is the place where Rosanna goes in her solitary hours; and it is well suited to someone with secrets, who hides things deep underneath which manifest themselves in strange agitations on the surface. She cries for her past there, and the “stain” it has left upon her—although the nature of this stain and her feelings towards it are left ambiguous. She also looks at the Sands with an almost preternatural sense of her future, and admits to Betteredge in the beginning of the novel that “something draws me to it....I think that my grave is waiting for me here.”<sup>76</sup> Rosanna sees her fate in the Sands—and, indeed, she commits suicide there, and consummates her connection with Blake as he retrieves her narrative from within them.

When Blake goes to dig up the tin box, as yet unaware of its contents, he admits to a superstitious fear of the Sands and what they might contain. He says: “I saw the preliminary heaving of the Sand, and then the awful shiver that crept over its surface – as if some spirit of terror lived and moved and shuddered in the fathomless deeps beneath.”<sup>77</sup> And it doesn’t take long for Blake to name that “spirit of terror” upon which his fears rest:

A horrible fancy that the dead woman might appear on the scene of her suicide, to assist my search – an unutterable dread of seeing her rise through the heaving surface of the sand, and point to the place – forced itself into my mind, and turned me cold in the warm sunlight. I own I

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 78-79

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 374

closed my eyes at the moment when the point of the stick first entered the quicksand.<sup>78</sup>

The “spirit of terror” manifests itself as Rosanna Spearman, a fitting choice because of her physical and emotional connection to the Sands. That Blake identifies her as such suggests a guilt on his part that implies a connection to the dead maid and belies his ignorance of Lucy’s rebuke. There is also a morbid intimacy in Blake’s discovery of Rosanna’s legacy—penetrating the Sands with his stick to find the box in which she’s hidden her secrets.

Although in *The Moonstone*, Rosanna’s intimacy with Franklin Blake exists only through her letter and the secret of his theft, the question of Marian Halcombe’s sexuality within *The Woman in White* is a far more complicated manner. The debate concentrates as much on her class position and role as a serving woman as it does on the question of her physical desirability. Some critics identify lust in the novel in general as being a product of social conditioning. In his first narrative, Walter Hartwright expresses dismay that his profession simultaneously allows him within the society of desirable young ladies and “gelds” him by marking him as an unacceptable target for their interest. Ann Cvetkovich explains this compartmentalization of desire as an expression of the fact that sexuality is constructed by society. She says:

Rather than being natural, the bodily sensations of desire are constructed by the exigencies of social position, since Walter’s “situation in life [is] considered a guarantee against any of [his] female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in [him]” (89). These passages reveal how class differences are secured by the management of sexual desire....rather

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 375

than being forbidden or repressed by social restrictions, desire or sensation does not even appear when the social configuration is inappropriate.<sup>79</sup>

In this sense, the sexualized is the socially acceptable. An interesting analysis, but one which does not take into consideration the late Mr. Fairlie's affair with Mrs. Catherick—a situation in which the social configuration was most certainly not appropriate. A more likely explanation for why Hartwright prefers Laura over Marian is that what men really sexualize in the novel is power. The late Mr. Fairlie pursued Mrs. Catherick because he was in a position to exercise control over her in a sexual relationship. Hartwright has no class with which to assert his superiority over Marian; and she is not a person easy to dominate personally. So Hartwright instead turns his attention to Laura, made weak-minded and dependent by her rank. This is perfect, for Cvetkovich says that: “the link between sexuality and class identity suggests that what is forbidden is not sexuality in and of itself but the class transgression that love between an instructor and his pupil might represent,” identifying Walter as someone who lusts after position and power more than the women who have it.<sup>80</sup> And, true to this, Walter does not just stop at recovering Laura from the madhouse—he fixates on restoring Laura to her place as heiress of Limmeridge, thereby securing himself a place at the head of the fortune.

Nevertheless, from his lengthy physical description of her when they first meet, Walter clearly has some erotic interest in Marian, though it may have lasted only until he became acquainted with her place within Limmeridge House. And although the most potent example of Hartwright's interest is his description of Marian before realizing that

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<sup>79</sup> Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*, 78.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

she is ugly, Humble and Reynolds argue that Marian's unattractiveness is what makes her eligible for Hartwright's erotic gaze. They say that: "it is precisely because she is ugly – and therefore not textually available as a wife for Walter – that she can be seen as an erotic spectacle."<sup>81</sup> She is not the meek marriageable heiress, and is thus an acceptable object for erotic voyeurism. And for the foreign and feminized Count Fosco, she is a legitimate target for sexual (and textual) assault.

Although Marian's diary makes up a large portion of the text of *The Woman in White*, it ends in the shocking "Postscript by a Sincere Friend," where Fosco steps in and reveals that he has stolen, read, and possibly edited the manuscript that the reader has just finished. D.A. Miller's analyzes this moment, saying that:

By far the most shocking moment in the reader's drama comes almost in the exact middle of the novel when the text of Marian's diary, lapsing into illegible fragments, abruptly yields to a postscript by the very character on whom its suspicions center....It is not just, then, that Marian has been "raped," as both the Count's amorous flourish ("Admirable woman!" [258]) and her subsequent powerless rage against him are meant to suggest. We are "taken" too, taken by surprise, which is itself an overtaking....to being the object of violation here, however, there is an equally disturbing alternative: to identify with Fosco, with the novelistic agency of violation. For the Count's postscript only puts him in the position we already occupy. Having just finished reading Marian's diary ourselves, we are thus implicated in the sadism of his act, which even as it violates our readerly intimacy with Marian reveals that "intimacy" to be itself a violation.<sup>82</sup>

That Fosco's invasion of Marian's literary space is at least a *kind* of rape there is no doubt. And it is a rape that ups the sensationalism of the novel. Since, if sensation is a genre that calls into question earlier modes of discussing class and gender, Collins is here

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<sup>81</sup> Humble and Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines*, 54.

<sup>82</sup> D. A. Miller, "Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," *Representation*, no. 14 (1986): 107-136.

using Fosco's "Postscript" as a way to destabilize what appears to be the novel's most reliable narrative. However, Miller's assertion that the reader's intimacy with Marian up to that point is also a violation is problematic—primarily because of the supposed nature of the text as a compilation. If the novel is an accumulation of solicited narratives, then by the time the reader experiences that intimacy with Marian, she has already surrendered the diary to the story. When Fosco reads Marian's diary, he reads it unedited and uninvited. When the reader reads Marian's diary, he or she reads a version yielded up willingly and edited for the novel by Marian or with her guidance. The reader's intimacy with Marian is one to which she voluntarily consents. Fosco's violation, however, is a shocking moment for the reader, who sees a narrative voice established and presented as reliable and relatable, then stifled in a moment of violence by a man within the text. Since sensation literature can be distinguished by its willingness to question social norms through exaggerated and "sensational" scenarios, it follows that one of the most famous authors of the genre should use something as thrilling as Fosco's "Postscript" to undermine the reliability of Marian's account.

For this and other reasons, the narrative setup of both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are important to the understanding of both Marian and Rosanna's stories, particularly in the recognition that they are both texts framed and edited by men. As in the case of Marian's diary, this structure instigates questions of editorship and the reader's relationship with the narrator—because both texts are "edited" by the male protagonists (Walter Hartwright and Franklin Blake), the serving women do not have complete control over their narratives from the start. This tension is only aggravated by

events within the text, such as Fosco's "Postscript," that underscore the tampering these stories go through by men in the novels—tampering that happens, more often than not, because the stories have something to say that threatens the existing social order. Collins uses this to criticize a system that silences the voices of women with important things to say. And the serving woman's fate, when read in the context of vocalization and silencing, represents an alternative reading of the surface story.

The reasons for compiling the narratives of each novel also suggest something in the way that Collins treats class—and the story of the serving woman—over the course of the novel. In *The Woman in White*, Hartwright claims that the text has been put together because of shortcomings in the English legal system, asserting that:

If the machinery of the Law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of public attention in a Court of Justice. But the Law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long purse and the story is left to be told, for the first time, in this place.<sup>83</sup>

Hartwright introduces the text of *The Woman in White* as a separate law, and suggests that such a narrative collection transgresses class limits. However, the conclusion of the novel (and chronologically, the place from which Walter Hartwright writes this introduction) appears to reaffirm the institutions that *The Woman in White* criticizes. The price of Walter and Marian's subversive journey is that, by the end, they become what they fought against. As Judith Sanders explains:

the cost...of [the novel's] happy ending [is]...the characters's...very identity. Feisty, sexy Marian is gelded into a nanny, nursemaid, and angel-

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<sup>83</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, 3.

in-the-houses; artsy Walter's been brutalized into the domineering macho man he'd just tried to roust, and sweet Laura – well, her identity had to be destroyed in order to save it.<sup>84</sup>

The subversion reveals itself to be an unconventional means to the same socially-acceptable end, part of which is the subjugation of the primary serving woman. It revokes Marian's power over the members of Limmeridge House, and relegates her to the role of a domestic. This could be read as a punishment for the transgressive acts Marian commits over the course of the novel—such as leading a female community against ideas of male privilege within the home, and reversing the voyeuristic gaze by sneaking onto the roof and eavesdropping on Glyde and Fosco.

However, the way in which Collins depicts Marian over the course of the novel suggests that the author does not endorse her regression. Collins calls into question the agents responsible for Marian's degeneration—Glyde and Fosco are clearly villains, and Collins describes Hartwright as increasingly problematic, for in fighting Fosco and Glyde he espouses the institutions of class and gender privilege that he initially claimed to reject. Furthermore, Collins calls into question the need to stifle Marian at all. He presents her unreservedly as a heroine, fighting what Collins clearly establishes as a corruption of cultural and legal privilege. And perhaps most importantly, Collins' depicts Marian's regression as a sensationally brutal process. In the beginning, Marian is a serving woman who has utilized the cultural capital gained through her relationship with her mistress (Laura) to take possession of the house and power over its inhabitants. Over

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<sup>84</sup> Judith Sanders, "A Shock to the System, a System to the Shocks: The Horrors of the 'Happy Ending' in *The Woman in White*," in *From Wollstonecraft to Stoker: Essays on Gothic and Victorian Sensation Fiction*, ed. Marilyn Brock (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 2009), 62-63.

the course of the book, her account of what transpires is called into question (through Fosco's invasion of her diary), her "erotic" body is mortified through illness, and her influence over her mistress is made secondary to the hero's. Marian is transformed into an unthreatening spinster aunt and housekeeper, but Collins depicts this less as a triumph of the hero's will to ascend the steps of class privilege, and more as a travesty of class warfare, a casualty in Hartwright and Glyde's campaign to fight their way to the top.

The narrative setup of *The Moonstone*, on the other hand, seems almost the opposite of *The Woman in White*. Instead of working-class Walter Hartwright, the editor of *The Moonstone* is Franklin Blake, member of a prominent English family. He creates the record in order to defend his family against suspicion. Gabriel Betteredge, the family retainer, recalls Blake asking him to write his narrative because:

"In this matter of the Diamond," [Blake] said, "the characters of innocent people have suffered under suspicion already – as you know. The memories of innocent people may suffer, hereafter, for want of a record of the facts to which those who come after us can appeal. There can be no doubt that this strange family story of ours ought to be told."<sup>85</sup>

The "innocent people" to which Blake refers can be inferred to mean Rachel Verinder—Blake's cousin and wife who was accused of stealing the Moonstone. It also includes Blake himself, an unwitting instrument of the diamond's disappearance. Like Hartwright in *The Woman in White*, Blake compiles the narrative to ensure justice for himself and the wronged woman who is now his wife. However, in the case of *The Moonstone*, it is almost entirely a family affair—a wealthy, landed family who brings Sergeant Cuff, the detective, on the case and remunerates him for his efforts. Contrary to Hartwright's belief

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<sup>85</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, 60.

in *The Woman in White*, however, the “long purse” suffers from a police investigation, even one sponsored by the family itself. Detectives, first the incompetent Superintendent Seegrave, then Sergeant Cuff of Scotland Yard, invade the Verinder’s estate and upturn the household—both upstairs and downstairs. The resulting narrative is a chaos of perspectives that believe they are telling one story even as they combine to reveal something very different. And the most tragic example Collins gives of this is Rosanna Spearman’s story.

Rosanna’s story is a tapestry of conflict between expectation and reality. At first, Rosanna’s story promises a progress narrative, as the former thief is taken in by her betters and given the chance at a more respectable life. However, when Rosanna falls in love with Blake, Collins invokes the fears and suspicions of Victorian upper and middle-class society by suggesting a regression narrative instead: a kindly matriarch takes in a former thief, who repays her by instigating havoc—pursuing the son, scheming against the daughter, and assisting the theft of valuable representations of English imperial power. These fears are based on how insecure the middle and upper classes were with the presence of servants in their homes. Servants like Rosanna had access to everything, and therefore potentially had the means to undermine their employers from the inside. However, Collins eventually reveals both narratives as false—Rosanna had no part in the taking of the diamond, and (by Betteredge’s account) had earned the trust placed in her by the Verinders. Blake is the thief; and, what is more, his carelessness towards Rosanna deprived her of the opportunity to make a respectable life for herself with Lucy.

Critics have cited texts like *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* when criticizing Collins for never taking his female characters far enough to make a truly feminist statement. What he does in these texts instead is gives women control of the narrative and then takes it away again—seemingly at the very moment when their stories hold some key to the readers’ understanding of the novel. The resolution of the book’s conflicts always goes to the central male protagonist, the person also wielding editorial control over all the other narratives. The domination in the narrative of the male voice over the female seems like a stumbling block to considering Wilkie Collins a true ally of women in the nineteenth-century. However, it can be read as one way in which Collins conveys his subversive message. He does not just move women around the text as his plot demands. Collins gives some of them a voice, a personal stake in the narrative, and a way to connect with the reader. Then, when the plot is the thickest and the reader is faced with more questions than ever, men in the text squelch the woman’s narrative and silence her for good. Once Marian and Rosanna’s contributions to the text are finished, they are *finished*. Unlike Hartwright or Blake, the female voices get no reprisal: Rosanna is dead, and although in the final scene of *The Woman in White* Hartwright says “let Marian end our story,” Miller points out that, “these are the text’s last words, as well as Walter’s—what follows is dead silence.”<sup>86</sup>

By giving the reader a female narrative and then silencing her at a point of high drama, Collins draws attention to the act of silencing. Both Marian and Rosanna’s narratives come to an abrupt end, and the men who cut them off are spotlighted by the

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<sup>86</sup> Miller, “Cage Aux Folles,” 136.

aftermath: Marian's ends with her illness and the shocking "Postscript by a Sincere Friend," while Rosanna's ends with her suicide because of Blake. It is no coincidence, either, that Collins chooses serving women to silence in this way. The upper-class women in the text do not get narratives of their own. Laura and Rachel never have voices like Marian and Rosanna do, because they are not as threatening. Marian and Rosanna have unique access to information in the novels, which is why their narratives are included to begin with—both Blake and Hartwright say that narratives were chosen for the compilation based on first-hand experience of what transpired. But that information makes Marian and Rosanna dangerous. They live in close proximity to the upper class (in Marian's case she is nearly a member) and therefore have access to secrets—as Rosanna had access to the paint-stained nightgown that proved Blake had stolen the diamond. Therefore, their voices have to be silenced within the text.

However, Collins makes it clear that the men who silence these serving women's voices are guilty. Fosco deserves Marian's suspicion, and Blake did steal the Moonstone, although his name is later cleared of malicious intentions (a development *also* facilitated by an outsider with a freckled past, the racially ambiguous Ezra Jennings). These are not serving women sneaking around to destroy upstanding English citizens. They are serving women able to expose real crimes within the domestic space. As McCuskey writes, "servant surveillance" does not always deserve to be the target of middle and upper-class anxiety, since "[servants'] snooping uncovers guilty secrets and past crimes; their gossip brings those secrets and crimes to the attention of public opinion and even the law [...]" From this point of view, the effect of servant surveillance is normative rather than

subversive, facilitating the restoration of law and order in the community.”<sup>87</sup> Marian and Rosanna have information vital to the exposition of crimes within the text; and the men who stifle their narratives are not innocent. Moreover, being serving women in particular gives them the opportunities to collect this information and puts them at the mercy of men in the text who wish to silence them. These new voices given to serving women in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are part of the sensation of these novels, as it is sensational to make serving women like Marian and Rosanna visible within the text, and then demonstrate how violently they are suppressed by men.

By ignoring the figure of the serving woman, scholars have missed out on a major way in which authors draw attention to class issues in sensational literature by undermining characters within the text. Focusing on the middle and upper-class women has revealed much evidence of women’s dissatisfaction from the 1860’s into the 1880’s. However, these women still come to the plot in a position of power, and their victimization is mitigated by the advantages they enjoy as people of rank. Serving woman, on the other hand, do not have that kind of power, and are therefore more easily persecuted by the text with less options for remedy. Therefore, the actions of men within texts like *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are crueler when directed towards lower-class women, since those women are more vulnerable, and have fewer means of defending themselves.

The maltreatment of serving women is an integral part of the “sensation” of sensation fiction. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one definition of sensation

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<sup>87</sup> Brian W. McCuskey, “The Kitchen Police: Servant Surveillance and Middle-Class Transgression.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28, no. 2 (2000): 359-375.

is: “an exciting experience; a strong emotion (e.g. of terror, hope, curiosity, etc.) aroused by some particular occurrence or situation.”<sup>88</sup> The more dramatic the situation, the more sensation evoked, hence sensation fiction’s reliance on fast-moving, high-tension plots. And a big part of the drama is how woman in vulnerable class positions attempt to protect themselves against the violence of men. And, as Collins demonstrates, one of the ways in which these women are able to expose the wrongs of powerful men is through their narratives. Marian’s diary, cut off at its dramatic height by Fosco and not restored by Hartwright, illustrates how a serving woman’s voice can be sabotaged by men. And Rosanna’s narrative demonstrates how unfairly class anxiety is targeted at serving women within the household by casting Franklin Blake in a new light of suspicion. And although Blake’s identity as a jewel thief is eventually explained away, Rosanna’s narrative—and Blake’s reaction to it—raises questions about Blake’s character that are not dispelled by the end of the book. These major sources of sensation and class criticism run the risk of getting lost when the reader neglects the serving women in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

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<sup>88</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “sensation, *n.*,” <http://dictionary.oed.com> (accessed 25 April 2010).

### Chapter 3

#### MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON: *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

In *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the hero—Robert Audley—believes that his aunt (the eponymous Lady Audley) has murdered his best friend. Determined to prove it, Robert uncovers a hidden history that reveals the perfect and beloved Lucy Audley as both mad and a murderess, a monster in angel's form who has infiltrated his uncle's estate, Audley Court, and attacked anyone who stood in her way. The novel was Braddon's first, and a runaway bestseller, linking her name forever with the sensational novels of the mid-Victorian period. This was both a blessing and a curse—as a writer of sensation, Braddon was able to support herself and her family with the proceeds of her popular novels. And she was incredibly prolific: according to one biographer, Robert Wolff, she published over eighty novels in her lifetime.<sup>89</sup> However, critics often dismissed her talents as a writer and scrutinized her personal life because of her close connection with sensational fiction. As Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie say in their introduction to a collection of critical essays on Braddon's work, “Although Braddon was neither glamorous nor criminal, reviewers assumed that

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<sup>89</sup> Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie, “Introduction,” in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, Aeron Haynie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), xxvii.

the attractive and unconventional heroines/villains of Braddon's sensation novels were based on the author's own experiences and character."<sup>90</sup> And Margaret Oliphant insinuated in a review that, in writing *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon had "brought in a reign of bigamy...an invention that could only have been possible to an Englishwoman knowing the attraction of impropriety, and yet loving the shelter of the law."<sup>91</sup>

Braddon's life was often not as sedate and middle-class as some of her contemporaries. Braddon's parents separated when she was five, and she moved with her mother and siblings to a poor London suburb. After her brother joined the Indian civil service and her sister got married, Braddon went on the stage as an actress to support her mother. In 1860, however, she began writing, and by 1866 she had published nine three-volume novels. In 1864, she began living with the married publisher William Maxwell, whose wife lived in an Irish insane asylum. She supported the Maxwells with her writing, caring for both her own children and the five from William's first marriage. When Maxwell's wife died in 1874, he married Braddon. However, as Tromp says, "despite attaining this formal seal of respectability, Braddon again faced the condemnation of public opinion: when her servants found out that their employers had been unmarried, many of the staff left the house."<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, Braddon remained popular and productive throughout much of the remainder of her life. She ceased writing only after a stroke in 1908, and her last novel, *Mary*, was published in 1916, a year after her death.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., xxi

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., xxiii

In spite of Braddon's early economic hardships, her attitude towards the working class is unclear in her fiction. She is not holistically sympathetic to the plight of the lower-class, particularly servants. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, servants are treated with suspicion; and often live up to the expectations of cruelty and betrayal established by the texts. Phoebe Marks, Lady Audley's maid, repays her mistress' trust with blackmail. And Lady Audley herself, the eponymous villain, began as not just a governess, but a full-fledged member of the impoverished working-class. To Victorian audiences, her ascension to the role of mistress of Audley Court was a sensational account of class mobility, the worst-case scenario of a lower-class infiltration of the aristocracy. Elizabeth Steere cites Victorian class anxiety as the reason for such suspicion of servants, particularly ones with special access to members of the household, such as ladies' maids. Likewise, Humble and Reynolds, in their analysis of serving figures in sensation literature, assert that although "servants are not themselves the source of the primary threat" in Braddon's sensational novels, they are "spies ever alert to the manifestations of enmity and violence that Braddon presents as the natural state of the domestic environment."<sup>93</sup> A passage in *Lady Audley's Secret* makes a famous comparison between domestic service and espionage, saying:

Among all privileged spies, a lady's-maid has the highest privileges....She has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress's secrets. She knows by the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hair-brush, or chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast—what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain. That well-bred attendant knows how to interpret the most obscure diagnosis of all mental diseases that can afflict her mistress; she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for—when the

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<sup>93</sup> Humble and Reynolds, *Victorian Heroines*, 127.

pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist—when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living; and she knows other and more sacred secrets than these.<sup>94</sup>

This passage describes the intense familiarity a maid has with her mistress, and suggests that the mistress may not have a choice in the intimacy. The lady's maid, by the very nature of her profession, is able to dissemble her mistress' moods and discover her secrets—cosmetic and otherwise.

This privilege enjoyed by servants, and in particular by lady's maids, is a significant source of fear for middle-and-upper-class Victorians, as reflected in the household management tomes of their time. *Masters and Mistresses of the house* were warned of their servants' tendency to gossip; and servants, in their turn, were advised to take no notice of anything their employers did that might be worthy of comment. Brian McCuskey quotes an 1877 handbook for ladies' maids which says: "If your master should be unfortunate in his temper, or in any of his habits, if you should hear harsh words, or see your mistress in distress, you are bound in honour to be as silent upon the whole matter...as if it were a secret committed to your keeping."<sup>95</sup> Without the labor-saving devices developed in the twentieth century, servants were a necessary part of domestic life; however, they were still outsiders, to be guarded against from all possible fronts.

As evidenced by the passage in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon's novels were not exempt from this anxiety towards members of the lower order. In an article on Braddon's ghost stories, Eve M. Lynch says that:

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<sup>94</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Ontario: Broadview, 2003), 346.

<sup>95</sup> McCuskey, "The Kitchen Police," 360.

Braddon's tales are filled with characters culled from the lower orders, especially servants from the region "below stairs" whose social position in the house was analogous to the spectral apparition that haunted it: like the ghost, the servant was *in* the home but not *of* it, occupying a position tied to the workings of the house itself, isolated from the free bonds of communication and felicity of the family. Like the spectral spirit, servants were outsiders in the home secretly observing the forbidden world of respectability. And like the supernatural influence quietly imposing its own order on the will of the domestic inhabitants, the servant in the house suggested a bilateral, silent estate of discontent and dis-ease cohabiting the same physical space as the family but imagined by that family as immaterial and invisible.<sup>96</sup>

Although Lynch refers to Braddon's later ghost stories, the comparison between the servant and the "spectral apparition" cannot help but recall Phoebe Marks, Lady Audley's pale and ghost-like maid who is described by her fiancé as "an evil spirit"—a description which Elizabeth Steere takes literally, identifying Phoebe as the driving force behind the novel's conflict.

Steere makes a compelling argument for Phoebe's identity as a malevolent spectre. Upon first meeting her, Robert Audley describes her as "a woman who could keep a secret;" and the narrator says that she is "silent and self-constrained...seem[ing] to hold herself within herself, and take no color from the outer world."<sup>97</sup> This colorlessness is a remarkable feature of Phoebe's, a manifestation of her strangeness and unworldliness. She is described for the first time as:

not, perhaps, positively a pretty girl; but her appearance was of that order which is commonly called interesting. Interesting it may be, because in the pale face and the light grey eyes, the small features and the compressed lips, there was something which hinted at a power of repression and self-

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<sup>96</sup> Eve M. Lynch, "Spectral Politics: M. E. Braddon and the Spirits of Social Reform," in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, Aeron Haynie. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 237-38.

<sup>97</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 163.

control not common in a woman of nineteen or twenty. She might have been pretty, I think, but for the one fault in her small oval face. This fault was an absence of colour. Not one tinge of crimson flushed the waxen whiteness of her cheeks; not one shadow of brown redeemed the pale insipidity of her eyebrows and eyelashes; not one glimmer of gold or auburn relieved the dull flaxen of her hair. Even her dress was spoiled by this same deficiency; the pale lavender muslin faded into a sickly grey, and the ribbon knotted round her throat melted into the same neutral hue.<sup>98</sup>

Phoebe's preternatural self-control and pallor does call to mind the ghosts Lynch identified with servants in the middle-class home. But, to Steere, Phoebe is more than a ghost—she is a ghoul, and a vampire. This is contrasted with the image we get of Lady Audley, particularly the portrait Robert Audley and George Talboys find of her in the gallery that depicts her as a “beautiful fiend”: “Her crimson dress...hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head peeping out of the lurid mass of color 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 colors of each accessory of the minutely painted background, all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one.”<sup>99</sup> If Phoebe is the hungry, bloodless vampire, than Lady Audley is one who has gorged to excess. The use of color in the description, combined with the famous appellation of the “beautiful fiend” reveals Lady Audley as a kind of monster. Jennifer Hedgecock says of the painting's colors that:

Red conjures up images of blood, the color of life, and fire, here mixed with aggression, vitality, and strength. Red alludes to love, life, passion, or anger, to houses of prostitution, a symbolic warning, a fatal sign. Described as if trapped in a furnace, Lady Audley figuratively symbolizes

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 65

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 107

pain and death, destruction and terror, the color of hell, or even the devil.<sup>100</sup>

In contrast, Phoebe is the cold shadow of Lady Audley's colorful, demonic image, a ghost or a succubus. In this sense, Braddon sets up Lady Audley and Phoebe to represent two constructions of socially "low" women. Lady Audley is the fallen woman, a symbol of destructive beauty, a bigamist and a pretender. Phoebe, conversely, is the sneaking, reptilian servant who sees all and waits to exploit it.

Connections of Phoebe and Lady Audley to "beautiful fiends" are reinforced by a passage included in the first published run of the novel in *Sixpenny Magazine*, but edited out of subsequent editions. It is a description of Robert Audley's dreams:

Once, [Robert] was walking in the black shadows...with Lady Audley hanging on his arm, when suddenly they heard a great knocking in the distance, and his uncle's wife wound her slender arms about him, crying out that it was the day of judgment, and that all wicked secrets must now be told. Looking at her as she shrieked this in his ear, he saw that her face had grown ghastly white, and that her beautiful golden ringlets were changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her fair neck.<sup>101</sup>

Here, Lady Audley turns "ghastly white"—a transformation that would make her look all the more like her pale maid. Steere describes this scene, saying that: "It is significant that in this vision it is Lady Audley's skin and hair that are transformed—the only two physical characteristics that separate the lady from her maid. Lady Audley, so often associated with mirrors, could not be a true gorgon herself, but her paler doppelganger could."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Jennifer Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>101</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 34.

<sup>102</sup> Elizabeth Lee Steere, "'I Thought You Was an Evil Spirit': The Hidden Villain of *Lady Audley's Secret*," *Women's Writing* 15, no. 3 (2008): 305.

Whether or not Phoebe is a figure of temptation and sin is uncertain, but the transformation of Lady Audley into Phoebe Marks (whether Robert recognizes it or not) into a Medusa-like gorgon with the power to turn men to stone is a compelling image.

The similarities between Lady Audley and Phoebe are unsurprising, for the text makes clear that they are the same kind of person. Lady Audley prefers to spend time with Phoebe because she recognizes that, “there were sympathies between [Lady Audley] and [Phoebe], who was like herself inwardly as well as outwardly—like herself, selfish, and cold, and cruel, eager for her own advancement, and greedy of opulence and elegance, angry with the lot that had been cast her, and weary of dull dependence.”<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, Phoebe’s appearance as a pale imitation of her mistress initially seems to represent her inability to seize the opportunities that Lady Audley has, her failure to launch any plans as daring as her mistress.

This is not necessarily the case, however. The impression given by Braddon is not just that this colorlessness is involuntary, a permanent fixture in her person that nothing can fix or alter, but that it is *chosen*. Lady Audley protests that with a little makeup, Phoebe could be as lovely as she. But Phoebe remains Lady Audley’s pale twin for the duration of the novel, and never (onstage, at least) attempts to rectify her pallor. Furthermore, if her paleness is to be read as a representation of her relationship to Lady Audley’s more colorful existence, Phoebe manages to follow a course similar to her mistress’ without similarly disastrous consequences. Phoebe, as “selfish, and cold, and cruel” as Lady Audley, uses her particular strengths—in Phoebe’s case, the ability to

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<sup>103</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 313.

keep a secret—to escape from domestic servitude. Then, when this proves unsatisfactory (as Lady Audley discovered in her marriage to George Talboy), she devises a way to escape. Steere points out how suspiciously Phoebe paves the way for Lady Audley to burn down Castle Inn, stressing how flammable the place is, then: “put[ing] the candle in her mistress’s hand, fully aware of what must happen next.”<sup>104</sup> She asserts that “by allowing Lady Audley to believe she is meting out her own justice when she burns down the inn, Phoebe demonstrates insidious cunning. Not only does she remain free of blame for the deed, she need not go to the trouble of performing the ‘dirty work’ for herself.”<sup>105</sup> Even more, Phoebe succeeds where Lady Audley failed: at the end of the novel, the doctor assures Robert Audley that Luke Marks is dying. George Talboys, on the other hand, survives.

There can be little doubt that Phoebe is a complex figure; and in spite of her apparent goodness at the end of the novel towards Robert Audley, her virtue (by Victorian standards) remains in question. However, a reading of her character as merely an evil spirit within the text is an incomplete one. Steere characterizes Phoebe as the manifestation of the supernatural in sensational literature, claiming that: “Phoebe...fuses the domestic evil of the sensation novel with the occult intrigue of the Gothic as a means of furthering the novel’s social agenda.”<sup>106</sup> However, Steere does not make clear what the “social agenda” of *Lady Audley’s Secret* might be. Judging from an assessment of Phoebe as a vengeful doppelganger, the social agenda reads as a warning against attempts to defy

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<sup>104</sup> Steere, “The Hidden Villain,” 314.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 303

class boundaries. Shake the hierarchy, it says, and you will be destroyed not just by policing forces from without, but by demonic manifestations of your own degeneracy from within.

*Lady Audley's Secret* does not seem to be so simplistically moralistic a novel, however. Scholars argue over the social message of the text, particularly as regards to gender—whether, as Showalter asserts, *Lady Audley* is representative of all women's struggles against patriarchal oppression and an object of sympathy in the novel; or if the novel is an enactment of male incarceration fantasies, ending with the transgressive female deconstructed and locked away. A reading of *Lady Audley* as subversive text is complicated, of course, by the troubling class anxieties expressed in working-class Helen Maldon's transformation into Lady Audley, achieved through criminal and sometimes outright malicious means. Also complicating a straightforward reading is the relationship between Lady Audley and Phoebe Marks, which cannot be read simply as the interactions between a person and her doppelganger, but as a relationship between two women created by and living in a particular structure of class and gender norms. For the truth is, evil spirit or no, female servants like Phoebe are treated with a suspicion by the text that belies a clear-cut assessment of where *Lady Audley* stands in the realm of gender and class criticism.

The relationship between Lady Audley and Phoebe Marks is clearly an important one in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Not only does Phoebe's accompliceship help maintain and further the plot, but Braddon reiterates the connection between the two women several

times over the course of the novel. Early on, the narrator explains how Phoebe came to be so close to her mistress:

Phoebe Marks was exactly the sort of girl who is generally promoted from the post of lady's-maid to that of companion. She had just sufficient education to enable her to understand her mistress when Lucy chose to allow herself to run riot in a species of intellectual tarantella. . . . Phoebe knew enough of the French language to be able to dip into the yellow-paper-covered novels which my lady ordered from the Burlington Arcade, and to discourse with her mistress upon the questionable subjects of those romances.<sup>107</sup>

Braddon emphasizes not just the physical similarities between the two women, but the intellectual similarities as well—particularly manifested in the reading and discussion of scandalous or “questionable” novels. Considering that Braddon was considered to have written novels appealing to both women in “the kitchen” (servants) and “the drawing room” (the upper and middle-class), the passage suggests that sensational novels themselves, as scandalous English kin to French romances, might contribute to developing relationships between women and their maids. This, in turn, suggests that there is something integral about this cross-class connection to an understanding of *Lady Audley's Secret*—something that finds its expression in the relationship depicted between Lady Audley and Phoebe Marks.

Scholars such as Steere and Natalie Schroeder consider the relationship homoerotic. For Steere, this homoeroticism is wrapped up in the sadomasochistic tendencies she identifies as part of Phoebe's “demonic” identity. Steere asserts that Phoebe has an “unusual appetite for chaos, death, and murder,” of which the strangest

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<sup>107</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 138.

aspect is “the erotic allure [murder] seems to hold for her.”<sup>108</sup> As an example, she points to Phoebe’s explanation as to why she must marry Luke:

I daren't refuse to marry him. I've often watched and watched him, as he has sat slicing away at a hedge-stake with his great clasp-knife, till I have thought that it is just such men as he who have decoyed their sweethearts into lonely places, and murdered them for being false to their word. When he was a boy he was always violent and revengeful. I saw him once take up that very knife in a quarrel with his mother. I tell you, my lady, I must marry him.<sup>109</sup>

In spite of Steere’s assertion that this is “bloodshed and sadomasochism in the same breath,” Phoebe’s speech in context seems to express more fear than desire.<sup>110</sup> And while she surpasses Luke in planning and intelligence, her fears about Luke’s temper are not unfounded. A more likely reading of any homoeroticism between Lady Audley and Phoebe is that of Natalie Schroeder, who sees their relationship as an expression of “feminine self-love” which, as Schroeder says, “emerges in sensation fiction as an outgrowth of the essentially artificial, supposedly passionless age that encouraged women to worship their youthful beauty and to become passive, angelic child-wives, perfectly innocent and sexless. Ironically, vanity, which increases self-confidence, becomes one way for a woman to assert power in her limited social sphere.”<sup>111</sup> Vanity and self-love, in the case of Lady Audley, frees her from the passions that “assail and shipwreck” other women; and “the mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in [Lady Audley’s] madness...the vice of heartlessness became the virtue of constancy.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Steere, “The Hidden Villain,” 309.

<sup>109</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 141.

<sup>110</sup> Steere, “The Hidden Villain,” 309.

<sup>111</sup> Natalie Schroeder, “Feminine Sensationalism, Eroticism, and Self-Assertion: M. E. Braddon and Ouida,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 7, no. 1 (1988): 90.

<sup>112</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 362.

Men are valuable to Lady Audley only as the means to position and material comfort; she feels no sexual desire for them. Instead, Schroeder argues, her sexuality is “sublimated into her self-adoration and the aggressive behavior that eventually results from it.”<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, since her sexuality is contained within her ambition, and she is unable to thwart men like George Talboys and Robert Audley on her own, it is only natural that she should form an erotic attachment to a girl who both acts as her accomplice against the men who threaten her, and looks so much like herself. Schroeder says:

In a novel where the heroine is not interested in men, Braddon is unable to titillate the reader with veiled suggestions of heterosexual love. In one particularly sensual scene, though, she provides instead an erotic description of the two women together. After Lady Audley enlists Phoebe's aid as her accomplice, she "retired into her bedroom, and curled herself up cozily under the eiderdown quilt. She was a chilly creature, and loved to bury herself in soft wrappings of satin and fur. 'Kiss me, Phoebe,' she said, as the girl arranged the curtains"(LAS, p. 39). Lady Audley's self-indulgent manner of attaining warmth—by wrapping herself in luxurious covers and by demanding a caress from Phoebe—suggests both masturbation and lesbianism.<sup>114</sup>

The relationship between Lady Audley and Phoebe represents a type of female rebellion, a sexual partnership that both transgresses norms of sexual expression, and is a product of the Victorian emphasis on both female beauty and sexlessness. Moreover, Schroeder suggests that the lesbianism between Lady Audley and Phoebe is an integral part of the novel's identity as a sensational text, since the mix of feminine sexuality and conspiracy evokes “sensation” in the reader, as a perhaps more potent substitute for the thrill of heterosexual desire.

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<sup>113</sup> Schroeder, “Feminine Sensationalism,” 90.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92

However, the erotic desire suggested by Schroeder comes from Lady Audley alone. It is she who wraps herself up in furs and demands kisses from Phoebe; she whose picture reveals fire, blood, and passion. Phoebe remains a cold, pale counterpart to this erotic exchange. Part of this may be because of the inequality implicit in their relationship. As mistress, Lady Audley sets the tone for their partnership, determining what is acceptable. Phoebe must follow and abide by the parameters established by her employer. Additional tension is added, however, by their unusual history within the Victorian class hierarchy. When they met, Phoebe and Lady Audley were both low on the social totem pole: while Lady Audley was a governess, Phoebe was a nursemaid in the same house. Lady Audley chose Phoebe to be her maid after she married Sir Michael, and the text implies that although Lady Audley has not forgotten their shared history, she has dismissed her past more readily than Phoebe. For Phoebe remains bitter about Lady Audley's upward mobility. When she shows Luke around Audley Court, she says:

Why, what was she in Mr. Dawson's house only three months ago... What was she but a servant like me? Taking wages and working for them as hard, or harder than I did. You should have seen her shabby clothes, Luke—worn and patched, and darned, and turned and twisted, yet always looking nice upon her, somehow.<sup>115</sup>

Phoebe is jealous of her mistress' good fortune, and not particularly thankful for Lady Audley's open-handedness towards her. While she might not be Steere's demon, Phoebe shares Lady Audley's avarice for social standing and material finery; and, like her mistress, she's willing to go around the law to get it.

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<sup>115</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 67.

For both Phoebe and Lady Audley, the person who receives their affection and (conditional) obedience is often also the target of their schemes and violence—the person who determines their social position. So both of them become the best and worst-case scenarios—Lady Audley is both the perfect “Angel in the House” wife and a bigamous murderer. Phoebe Marks is a good and loyal maid even as she snoops and blackmails. Jennifer Hedgecock discusses this domestic adroitness, saying that:

The fatal Victorian woman must...depend upon domestic activities that set the national tone of middle-class British life, in order to hide her predatory nature and her sexual history; her more licentious characteristics, nevertheless, show through this façade of decency when moral codes become hindrances to her success and eventually thwart her from the sanctity of the hearth.<sup>116</sup>

Although this passage is ostensibly focused on Lady Audley, it could just as easily apply to Phoebe, who is exemplary at her job—but only until it stifles her ambition or she sees another, better way to profit. As Hedgecock goes on to say: “the femme fatale’s ambition is not to become equal to men, or to campaign in favor of radical views, but simply to mobilize her status imperceptibly within the higher ranks of the social classes.”<sup>117</sup> And insofar as “imperceptibly” goes, nothing is more imperceptible than Phoebe when she glides about the house, able to sneak up on people as “still and sudden” as a ghost.<sup>118</sup> So, as Jennifer Hedgecock identifies Lady Audley as *femme fatale* who succeeds by utilizing the values of her oppressive society, she also inadvertently identifies Phoebe as one as well. Phoebe takes advantage of the ambiguousness of her relationship with Lady Audley in order to further her own interests, shuffling between maid and confidante as

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<sup>116</sup> Hedgecock, *Femme Fatale*, 110.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 113

<sup>118</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 65.

circumstances require. When she sneaks her cousin Luke into Audley Court in order to show him Lady Audley's rooms and jewels, she simultaneously plays the obedient and snooping servant, enacting the worst of Victorian anxieties towards domestic help:

"Why, one of those diamond things would set us up in life, Phoebe," he said, turning a bracelet over and over in his big red hands.  
"Put it down, Luke! Put it down directly!" cried the girl, with a look of terror; "how can you speak about such things?"  
He laid the bracelet in its place with a reluctant sigh, and then continued his examination of the casket.... "Look ye here!" cried Luke, pleased at his discovery... It was only a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby's head. Phoebe's eyes dilated as she examined the little packet.  
"So this is what my lady hides in the secret drawer," she muttered... The girl's thin lip curved into a curious smile.  
"You will bear me witness where I found this," she said, putting the little parcel into her pocket.... "I'd rather have this than the diamond bracelet you would have liked to take," she answered; "you shall have the public house, Luke."<sup>119</sup>

Phoebe expresses a virtuous maid's sense of horror at the thought of stealing one of Lady Audley's diamond bracelets, and rebukes her lover accordingly. However, she expresses no compunction about pocketing the contents of Lady Audley's secret drawer. Although Luke calls her a fool for preferring the seemingly worthless parcel over a diamond bracelet, Phoebe recognizes that blackmail will be a more lucrative path in the long run. Theft would be easily detected and readily punished—blackmail would (and does) have Lady Audley emptying the jewelry case herself on their behalf. But when Lady Audley discovers that Phoebe has revealed her secret to Luke, Phoebe falls upon the recourse of merciful friendship.

Lady Audley rose from her seat, looked the man steadfastly in the face till his determined gaze sunk under hers; then walking straight up to her maid,

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<sup>119</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 70.

she said in a high, piercing voice, peculiar to her in moments of intense agitation:  
"Phoebe Marks, you have told *this man!*"  
The girl fell on her knees at my lady's feet.  
"Oh, forgive me, forgive me!" she cried. "He forced it from me, or I would never, never have told!"<sup>120</sup>

Aware that she is in danger of losing a useful position as Lady Audley's friend, Phoebe pleads for forgiveness and appeals to sisterhood, to be united with Lady Audley against "this man," who forced the confession from her—playing on Lady Audley's need for a female accomplice against the threatening male. In her confidences with Lady Audley, she has already established Luke's character as violent and dangerous—that fear of him forces her to do things against her will (such as marry him). Whether this is true or not, it is an effective story for maintaining Lady Audley's goodwill in the face of Phoebe's betrayal.

Hedgecock identifies this double-faced relationship as inherent to interactions of transgressive Victorian female characters, saying that some women have to rely on:

the support and mutual understanding of other women...this is where such a bond exists between Phoebe and Lucy, especially when Phoebe confesses her part in blackmailing her mistress. Lucy confides in Phoebe, venting her frustration, as her maid and companion commiserates with her lady...in defense of Phoebe, whom [Lucy] also considers a friend, she fears not only losing her as a companion, but that her maid also risks her life by being with such a violent man [Luke] capable of murder.<sup>121</sup>

This adds another dimension to Lady Audley's attachment to Phoebe, who becomes an important ally against Robert Audley, and is necessary for Lady Audley to maintain her sham of perfect domesticity. Although both women are established as heartless and

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<sup>120</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 142.

<sup>121</sup> Hedgecock, *Femme Fatale*, 129-30

ambitious, they need one another in order to survive a life “in the power of . . . men who determine their value.”<sup>122</sup>

Pamela Gilbert agrees that it is the social dependence on men—and the threat of their power—which prompts Lady Audley and Phoebe’s reactive, morally-suspect decisions in the novel. However, she disagrees with the supposition that they are making those decisions in order to gain power of their own. Gilbert asserts that “one characteristic of sensation literature [is] the location of crime and intrigue in the idealized domestic setting,” and describes such crime in *Lady Audley’s Secret* as being explicitly associated with male violence and abandonment.<sup>123</sup> She says: “The women who really do evil in *Lady Audley’s Secret* – Lady Audley and Phoebe – do not do so out of a desire for leadership, but out of a desire to avoid the pain inflicted by an active masculine element (Lieutenant Maldon, Luke) and to seek passive comfort in the social and financially secure role of wife.”<sup>124</sup> And, for sure, Lady Audley only attacks those people who threaten the security she has struggled to obtain.

Phoebe’s motivations, however, are more difficult to tease out. Her position at Audley Court is a cushy one, and her ascension from nursemaid to lady’s maid was “a wonderful piece of good fortune for Phoebe, who found her wages trebled and her work light in the well-ordered household at the Court.”<sup>125</sup> The narrator even expresses surprise at her decision to leave Lady Audley’s service, saying that “it was strange that Phoebe Marks should wish to leave her situation; but it was not the less a fact that she was

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 129

<sup>123</sup> Pamela Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 94.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 96

<sup>125</sup> Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, 65.

anxious to exchange all the advantages of Audley Court for the very unpromising prospect which awaited her as the wife of her cousin Luke.”<sup>126</sup> Compared to being Lady Audley’s maid, life as Luke’s wife proves as miserable as the text anticipates: Luke is drunk and abusive, and Castle Inn is a flimsy, drafty, unpleasant building. However, Phoebe is her own mistress there, out of the power of anyone but her husband—whom Lady Audley’s convenient fire dispatches early.

Like Lady Audley, Phoebe wished to be free from service, from “dependence...drudgery...humiliation.”<sup>127</sup> However, for Lady Audley, these are represented by poverty, and alleviated by advantageous marriage. For Phoebe, all the advantages of being Lady Audley’s maid are outweighed by the reality of servitude—hence her continued bitterness towards Lady Audley’s changed circumstances, and her willingness to turn on the mistress who trusted her. In this way, Braddon’s text reflects some of the arguments Collins makes in favor of serving women, but takes it to another level. Collins created sympathy for the serving woman by calling into question the people for whom she worked. In the case of characters like Rosanna Spearman, the fact of their employer’s callousness and untrustworthiness makes their frustrations serving them understandable. Braddon takes this a step further with Phoebe Marks, and suggests that it is the very nature of subservience that makes people restless and dissatisfied. It does not matter that Lady Audley has been good to Phoebe; she is still a mistress who by the nature of her position exercises power over Phoebe and restricts her autonomy. As the women in Braddon’s novels try to take revenge upon the husbands that have clapped

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 140

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 53

them into the social chains of matrimony, so do servants like Phoebe strike out at the women who control them.

Moreover, this reimagines the eroticism between Lady Audley and Phoebe as an enactment of their social union. Lady Audley says at the end of the novel that she had learned what all girls learn: “that [her] ultimate fate in life depended upon [her] marriage.”<sup>128</sup> However, for a girl in Phoebe’s position, her first “marriage” was to the woman for whom she worked. Lady Audley becomes her first “husband”—the person who dictates her social position, financial security, and material comfort. And so, over the course of the novel, Phoebe follows her employer’s example by focusing (for good and for ill) on the person who defines her class-wise. For Lady Audley, this is her husband, Sir Michael, whom she manipulates into submission, but would undoubtedly turn upon should he stand in her way (as she turned upon George Talboys and Robert Audley). In Phoebe’s case it is her mistress, whom she both rails against and flatters in order to maintain what she has. When she sees the opportunity to have more, she takes it—at the expense of her “husband.” This husband-as-social-determinant is the motivating factor behind the eroticism of Phoebe and Lady Audley’s relationship—they play out a spousal relationship within the power structure that makes Lady Audley Phoebe’s *de facto* husband.

Therefore, it is true that Braddon’s representation of Phoebe as a lady’s maid still reflects the anxieties of the Victorian middle and upper classes towards the intimate knowledge gained by servants in their homes. However, she also acknowledges that

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 359

working-class women may desire the same kind of autonomy and rights from their employers as middle-class women sought from their husbands. And Braddon demonstrates this most obviously in the relationship between Phoebe and Lady Audley, whose similarities are not just an accident of plot, but a reflection of the relative closeness of their desires. By ignoring Phoebe, or reading her only as Lady Audley's doppelganger, the reader misses out on a major source of sensation in the novel. Like Collins, Braddon uses Victorian class anxieties to establish an anticipated drama and then twists it. The way Phoebe behaves towards her mistress in order to climb the social ladder and escape subservience is sensational. But even more sensational is the way in which Braddon sets up her readers to identify and sympathize with Phoebe, by drawing parallels between the frustrations of women confined without rights to a domestic space, and the frustrations of serving women who are doubly powerless as both females and members of the working class.

## Chapter 4

### CONCLUSION

Lynn Pykett says that sensation literature is “a site in which the contradictions, anxieties, and opposing ideologies of Victorian culture converge.”<sup>129</sup> A popular subject for debate in the Victorian era was the Woman Question, as people attempted to question and codify gender expectations in the changing landscapes inside and outside the home. Sensational authors tapped into this debate, and explored possibilities for women beyond the angel/whore dichotomy that dominated certain ideas of femininity in the nineteenth century. However, many contemporary scholars who explore this changing gender construction within sensation literature do so only through an examination of middle and upper-class characters. In doing so, they neglect the presence of other women in sensational literature, particularly serving women who represent the intersection of changing ideas about women and the growing public voice of the working class.

Sensational novels are excellent mediums for exploring the figure of the serving woman, for the effect of the genre lies in part in the keeping and revealing of secrets. Serving women’s livelihood depends upon secrets, with their access to the household in general and, in the case of ladies’ maids and companions, their access to the ladies of the

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<sup>129</sup> Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, 107.

house. Manuals for servants acknowledge the existence of middle and upper-class misbehavior even as they stress the importance of silence and discretion. The effect is a vain attempt to keep servants loyal and obedient to their employers while reaffirming the middle and upper-class's consummate imperfection, thereby raising the question as to whether or not they deserved to be obeyed.

Collins taps into this issue through the narratives of serving women in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Although he has been criticized for not going far enough with his female characters, ultimately Collins comes down in favor of women in his texts; and he does so by subverting the methods of control employed by the institutions of class and gender privilege. Collins gives Marian Halcombe and Rosanna Spearman voices with which to tell their stories, inviting the reader's sympathy and identification. Then, he silences them in such a way that calls negative attention to the silencing, and to the men who stifle Marian and Rosanna's voices. In the case of Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*, the brutality of her regression is astounding; and her degradation into a submissive "Angel in the Home" is haunted by the memory of her former independence and high-spirits. With Rosanna in *The Moonstone*, Collins toys with Victorian fears about the link between criminality and class, then undermines them by drawing the circle of guilt around Franklin Blake instead. Rosanna's suicide is a tragedy; and Limping Lucy's accusation that Blake is responsible for her death lingers long after he is cleared of stealing the Moonstone. In both cases, the narratives undermine the heroes of the novels—Walter Hartwright and Franklin Blake—who frequently embrace troubling Victorian ideologies of class and gender in spite of their ostensible virtue.

Braddon, on the other hand, treats the working class in *Lady Audley's Secret* with more uneasiness. In spite of the author's own working-class background, several passages of the novel describe the kind of "servant-as-spy" stereotype that haunted the ruling classes with regards to their domestic help; and the text sometimes seems to treat Phoebe's betrayal of her mistress and Lady Audley's climb from obscurity as worst-case scenarios of cross-class interaction. Lady Audley's class mobility and ruthless interest in marrying into status makes up a large part of the novel's sensation, and the imagery Braddon evokes to describe both her and Phoebe is frequently monstrous: Lady Audley is a she-demon, and Phoebe is a morbidly pale spectre.

Nevertheless, Phoebe is a consistently complex character in spite of Braddon's obvious discomfort with servants and the power of ladies'-maids over the women they served. She is a manifestation of Victorian anxieties over servants, a ghost who haunts Audley Court, seeing everything and stealing unscrupulously in order to blackmail her mistress later. However, Braddon still sets her up to be pitied by the reader, for her dependence on the abusive Luke, and for her desire for personal freedom over the comparative safety, but subservience, of working for Lady Audley. For, ultimately, Phoebe's striking paleness represents the relative invisibility of working-class women's concerns, eclipsed by the issues of middle-class women in pursuit of emancipation, but are no less potent—or potentially dangerous—for it. Elaine Showalter praises *Lady Audley's Secret* for revealing women's hidden hatred of the social pressures inherent in wife and motherhood. However, she neglects Braddon's acknowledgement that servants, too, may resent being subservient—particularly when the very nature of their position

within the household makes them intimately aware of the imperfections of their employers.

The list of subjects frequently associated with sensational literature includes murder, madness, secrets, detection, the limits of the law, and bigamy. I would add another issue to that list—the issue of class, as explored by the figure of the serving woman. There is a serving woman in a place of prominence in many sensational novels, including three of the most famous and iconic texts of the genre: *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone*, and *Lady Audley's Secret*. That she is common in each of the texts suggests that there is something about the serving woman that is an implicit part of the sensational genre. For one, sensation literature was interested in exploring social problems through dramatic and often outrageous situations, and the serving woman represents the intersection of two major social tensions in the nineteenth century—class, as demonstrated in the growing clamor for the working-class to have a say in politics through issues like the second Reform Bill; and gender, as evidenced by the resurrection of the “Woman Question,” and new debates over where a woman’s place was in the changing landscape of English public and private life.

But there is something else, something sensational in the very nature of the serving woman. She is a liminal figure, operating in the space between classes. She is not a member of the middle or upper classes, but she has access to the most intimate details of their lives. This gives her a certain degree of power over her employers, as evidenced by Phoebe Marks’ discovery of the baby shoe in Lady Audley’s jewelry case—which, in turn, makes her the subject of some of the strongest Victorian anxieties. However, the

serving woman is also a doubly vulnerable figure—she is a woman, and she is lower-class. She comes to the plots of sensational novels in a position of powerlessness, and must either defend herself against what is frequently a violent assault on her independence, or go on the offensive to achieve autonomy and independence in the first place. She is at the mercy of both men and women in the house, and must navigate the thorny sensational plots with not just her own secrets, but those of the people she serves. In short, serving women, like Collins's Marian Halcombe and Rosanna Spearman, and Braddon's Phoebe Marks, are very sensational characters in and of themselves. And they contributed to sensation literature's contested status through the authors' criticism of class and gender institutions that keep such serving women the powerless objects of paranoia

The scope of this project was much bigger than even a year's worth of work on the subject could handle. With more time, I would examine more novels by Collins and Braddon, as well as other texts by sensational authors of the period—including *East Lynne* by Ellen Wood and *Dangerous Remedies* by Thomas Hardy. I would also look more closely into the implications of racialized language used within these texts to denote otherness, particularly in relation to class in general and serving women in particular. Additionally, a survey of Neo-Victorian novels would be an interesting supplement to explorations of nineteenth-century texts. In particular, an analysis of Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* would make a fascinating point of comparison. *Fingersmith* is a Neo-Victorian text in the sensational tradition that fuses Victorian and contemporary anxieties of class, gender, sexuality, and the relationships between women and the written word.

Drawn from Wilkie Collins, particularly *The Woman in White*, but featuring a complex maid/mistress relationship and female authorship that reflects Braddon and *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Fingersmith* would be an interesting look at how the sensational form has developed and evolved over the past 150 years, and how it has become intimately connected with contemporary construction of Victorian society.

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