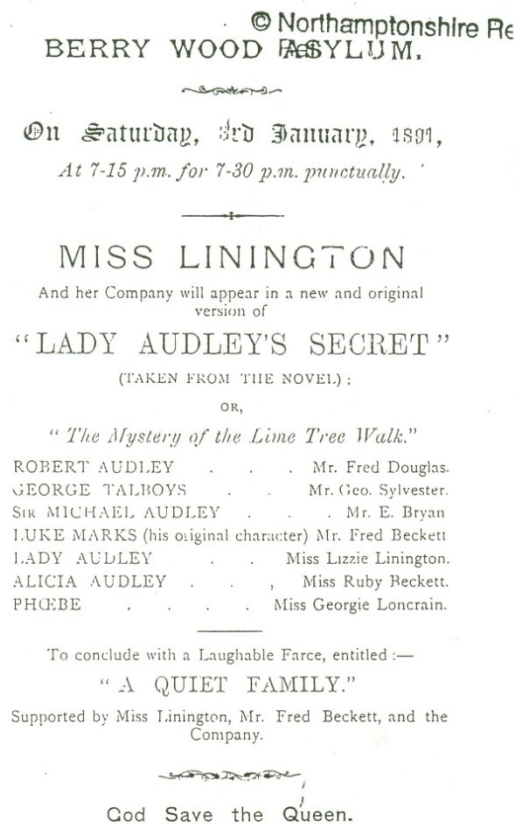


Regulatory Bodies: Control, Creative Expression and The Drama of *Lady Audley's Secret*

On Saturday 3 January 1891, Miss Linington's provincial touring theatre company performed 'a new and original version' of *Lady Audley's Secret* to a select audience [Fig. 1]. Formerly called the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' company in 1879 and the 'L'Assommoir' company in the 1880s, Miss Linington's troupe specialised in popular melodramas.¹ Her company was not critically acclaimed, but clearly made a profit from lengthy tours of small venues and provincial theatres for over thirty years.² Despite her low, itinerant status, Miss Linington advocated an image of respectability seldom associated with actresses, as her frequent adverts for new staff required that 'All must dress well on and off stage'.³ Her professionalism and attention to detail is evident in the format of the playbill for

Lady Audley's Secret as the by-line 'taken from the novel' claimed an authenticity to Braddon's text which distinguished it from previous adaptations in 1863 by William E. Suter or Colin H. Hazlewood. Miss Lizzie Linington played the lead female role of Lady Audley, supported by a small cast of six other performers. To counter the sensational scenes, the company concluded the evening's entertainment with 'a laughable farce' entitled *A Quiet Family*.⁴ Without the original playscript, it is impossible to discern the content of this version, although the castlist indicates the omission of Clara Talboys' character which was typical of available adaptations by Suter, Hazlewood and Roberts. Her absence enables Robert Audley to marry Alicia, an act that re-establishes the Audley family name before these family values were satirised in the afterpiece.⁵ What is striking about this performance



**Fig. 1. Playbill for
*Lady Audley's Secret***

of *Lady Audley's Secret* is not so much the longevity of a sensational text created by specific cultural anxieties surrounding definitions of madness and femininity, but its setting, for the play's venue was Berry Wood Asylum, Northamptonshire's county provision for the insane.

The adaptation of a sensation novel into therapeutic entertainment for asylum patients is distinctly problematic, particularly given the genre's reputation for dangerously enervating the reader to supply the 'cravings of a diseased appetite'.⁶ It raises questions of how the performance of an overtly self-staging heroine was deemed an appropriate form of rehabilitation for the mentally ill and why Braddon's iconographic heroine in particular, was embraced by the theatre. The patients at Berry Wood were allowed to watch mime acts and popular plays such as John Maddison Morton's *Box and Cox* (1847) on a fortnightly basis, in order to entertain and instruct them in the art of bodily representation which paralleled actor training.⁷ Here the asylum inmates were shown the importance of the body as a diagnostic tool and more subversively, by implication how to re-represent or even mask the self through figurative gesture and outward appearance. After being given visual examples of bodily signification, patients were then encouraged to perform in theatricals for the benefit of the public. Dora Kingsley's role as Isabel Vane in Berry Wood's performance of *East Lynne* on Saturday 26 November 1892, radically depicted the patient's own potential to restage herself as the angel in the house through the appropriation of suitable gesture and speech.⁸ Contrary to Foucault's assertion that Victorian psychiatric practice was marked by its need to manage deviancy through containment at a distance from polite society,⁹ theatricals were commonly staged for the benefit of patients and members of the public.¹⁰ The floor plans and interiors of many county asylums, including Hellingly in East Sussex, Westpark in Surrey and Wittingham in North Preston show stages and proscenium arches within their main buildings.¹¹ A 'real' audience changed the dynamics of the asylum theatricals, giving the patients the opportunity to display self-control through staged gestures and speeches whilst their context indicated the consequences of displaying transgressive behaviour. Miss Linington's choice of *Lady Audley's Secret*, with its added frisson of being performed in an asylum, reveals that Braddon's heroine provided an ideal locus to debate the tension between visual modes of self-expression, social regulation and public surveillance.

Lady Audley's Secret resonates with a sense of theatricality grounded in the eponymous heroine's propensity for visual tactics to attract an audience. Repositioning the dramatic exchange between actress and audience within the domestic sphere sensitised the reader to the question of diagnosing potentially morally degenerative artificiality whilst involving the reader in the complicit act of encouraging Lady Audley's performance through

consumer demand. This complex relationship between consumerism, theatre and society saw Lady Audley's figure assume an iconographic status, appearing in commissioned illustrations for the *London Journal* serialisation, literary memorabilia, such as the doily in [Fig. 2] and dramatic adaptations. Whilst critics such as Lyn Voiskull and Andrew King have engaged



Fig. 2. Victorian literary memorabilia c. 1870: A doily featuring an illustration of Lady Audley and Robert Audley accompanied by a section from the novel.

with the literary images of Lady Audley, little has been written on the creative interplay between the novel and the theatre itself.¹² Improved access to reviews, photographs, playbills, newly catalogued licensing manuscripts and digitised acting editions significantly contributes to our understanding of the symbiotic relationship between fiction and the drama. This disembodied, fragmentary material begins to address the challenge of reconstructing theatrical moments lost from view, but is marked by a fixity that is in stark contrast with the moving, performative mode. However this article argues that the theatre's response to *Lady Audley's Secret* was grounded in the conflict between the liberating mobility of self-expression and the fixity of regulation, ironically validating the use of licensing manuscripts and acting editions as evidence. The theatre's remediation of Braddon's text moves beyond merely capitalising upon the novel's popularity to use Lady Audley's figure as a metaphor for the material conditions of the theatre itself, as the containment of the performative heroine within the confines of an asylum reflected the regulatory processes of copyright and licensing.

Beginning with the way in which aspiring actresses used Lady Audley as a model to display their histrionic variety, I argue that the theatre used her character to engage with the complex connections between drama and commodity culture. Her autophagy in favour of an illusionary identity provided a model for actresses to visualise a practice of self-commodification whilst highlighting the tension between the illusionary material practices of the theatre and the materiality of commodity culture. The drive for regulation and ownership of the theatrical medium finds its locus in the various dramatic adaptations of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Using the evidence of unlicensed versions, ****a licensing text of John Brougham's *Where There's Life There's Hope* and the published acting edition of William E. Suter's *Lady Audley's Secret*, I move to show how these scripts, although the fixed product of regulatory statutes in Licence Laws and Copyright Laws, bear witness to a continued debate on the relationship between control and creativity. The versions by John Brougham, William E. Suter, George Roberts and Colin Hazlewood indicate the complexities of a theatrical culture which remediated Braddon's heterogeneous novel into plays designed to target a specific audience with expectations of genre, style and plot. What is significant about the later, more well-known adaptations is their common representation of Lady Audley's mental collapse and death, an extratextual event that problematises the reader's sympathetic response to her containment. Even when read at a temporal distance from the performance, the licensing and printed acting edition serve as a key example of the contemporary difficulties associated with regulating a multi-centred creative culture. Even in a reduced, textual format, the figure of Lady Audley functions as a site where the state regulation of the theatre is explored and contested. The containment of Lady Audley comes to symbolise not only the regulatory processes of licensing and copyright, but also the commodity culture which dehumanised the theatrical subject through audience demand.

The 'Style of Advertising Female': *Lady Audley's Secret* as Commodity.

Actresses – what was clear is that MEB's heroine was assimilated into all classes, ironical given MEB's critique of materialism – Frith 'my lady Audley' ! - evidence of doily – visual evidence of the Brougham approach to the text – Suter's take on restrictions, containment of LA as metaphor for the position of the theatre – watched, expected to perform and marginalised (feminised form yet actresses most reviled)

Advertising announcements in the major theatrical journal *The Era* for 1863 indicate a trend for aspiring actresses to promote their career by associating with Braddon's sensation heroine, ironically illustrating what the critic W.F. Rae had described as Lady Audley's 'style of the advertising female'.¹³ The role's demand for the full range of comic and melodramatic modes of expression effectively covered the repertoire of styles, proving ideal material to attract theatrical agents and managers on both sides of the Atlantic. The paradoxical image of female self-staging through theatrical dissimulation that formed Braddon's marketing strategy as 'the Author of *Lady Audley's Secret*' resonated through the images of numerous actresses keen to showcase their histrionic talents. The remediation of Lady Audley into a moving, dramatic persona functioned as a site where the materialistic impulse behind self-staging enabled by the material practices of the theatre could be explored and contested. The theatrical response to Lady Audley was as illusive and as complex as her narrative image, re-sensitising the audience to the fragile boundaries

as her figure comes to embody the drives of a commodity culture which Thomas Richards has termed both 'invasive and evasive'.¹⁴

However, whilst the artist William Frith referred to her as 'my Lady Audley' in his letters, she was separated artistically and financially from her creation by the numerous unlicensed stage adaptations made by ambitious actresses.

The remediation of Lady Audley's image as an icon for female ambition ironically negated the potential for female community,

The American actress Miss Heron announced her arrival in London complete with her own adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret*.¹⁵ A Miss Agnes Burdett declared her intention to debut in Coventry with a new adaptation 'written expressly for her' by William Eburne, who further claimed that his version was dramatised 'by the express sanction and wish of the authoress M.A.[sic] Braddon' and that copies could be obtained from his London Office of the Dramatic, Equestrian and Musical Sick Fund.¹⁶ The audience at the Theatre Royal, Brighton experienced the added frisson of seeing a real peeress, Lady Don, in the role of Lady Audley.¹⁷ *The Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* contained a suitably reserved review of her earlier performances, choosing to focus upon her successful move from comedy to melodrama rather than on the problematic connections between

respectability and theatricality that *Lady Audley's Secret* engaged with.¹⁸ However, a review from the foreign news column of *The Era* for 11 October 1863 suggests why actresses and audiences alike were attracted to role. The extract from the *New York Albion* concerned the actress and theatre manager Mrs Elizabeth Bowers' performance in John Brougham's pirated version of *Lady Audley's Secret* in October 1863. The reviewer was clearly impressed by Mrs Bowers' ability to reflect the extreme duplicity of Lady Audley as 'a beautiful blonde woman – young, gay, glittering, dangerous, a sleeping volcano of peril [who] alternates from dignity to rage...whereby she expresses in natural colour and finished outline, the tiger nature within the womans [sic]'.¹⁹ What is interesting here is the language indicative of a dangerous female sexuality which lies beneath the archetypal image of accepted femininity. The combination of Mrs Bowers' appearance as a vapid, blonde nullity with the emotional intensity of a tigress figures her as both a commodity and a sexual predator. The juxtaposition between the theatrically-posed 'finished outline' and a 'natural colour' hints that social training in gesture and deportment cannot contain smouldering female passion evidenced in her face. Indeed, William Archer's treatise *Masks or Faces?* (1888) devotes an entire section entitled 'Nature's Cosmetics' to the extreme difficulty of controlling the colour of the face that often necessitated an actor's use of cosmetics to simulate blushing or pallor.²⁰ Whereas Mrs Bowers had mastered this advanced technique, Braddon's Lady Audley singularly relies upon 'pearl powder' and 'pencilled eyebrows'.²¹

Mrs Bowers' representation of Lady Audley indicates that the dynamic of her figure had changed, for whereas Braddon's novel created tension through the opposing evidence of word and image, the dramatists relied upon the schism between opposing images of femininity. A rare opportunity to witness this dichotomy, albeit in a static form, is offered in the existence of a photograph of Mrs Bowers as Lady Audley [Fig. 3].²² She is pictured in costume sitting astride a chair. Her light-coloured evening dress is in stark contrast to the dark chair, although both are heavily



Property of MSCUA, University of Washington Libraries. Photo Coll 75

Fig. 3. Cabinet Photograph of Miss Bowers as Lady Audley in John Eburne's 1863 New York production of *Lady Audley's Secret*.

decorated. Her blonde hair is in ringlets as Braddon had described, however Mrs Bowers' posture is distinctly duplicitous. Her facial expression and slight tilt of the head indicate a childish appeal to the gaze, but this suggestion of proper, almost infantilised femininity is undermined by her bare hands, throat and shoulder. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the photograph is the relationship between her lower body and the chair. For in directly facing the camera she is sitting astride the chair, an action that denotes sexual promiscuity. The position of the chair maintains her modesty, but its contrasting colour also serves to draw the viewer's gaze to the female form's open legs that lie behind it. The careful suggestion of sexual liberation under the guise of modesty is a fascinating anticipation of Lewis Morley's infamous photograph of Christine Keeler, exactly a hundred years later.²³ What this picture suggests is that actresses in particular embraced Braddon's heroine as a means to articulate their own morally ambiguous position within society. That aspiring actresses were able to remediate their own ambition through a popular literary icon signalled the particular conditions by which appropriation and piracy flourished in the mid-Victorian period.

After its first complete serialisation in the *Sixpenny Magazine* from January to December of 1862, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* effectively became public property. Her heroine was remodelled into a static image adorning postcards and even doilies [Fig. 2] for the middle-classes to own, paralleling the mania for Trilby related goods in the 1890s.²⁴ Such items indicate not just the commodification of Lady Audley, but more crucially show an increasing remediation of her image that validated Braddon's critique of the materialistic drives that underpin Lady Audley's marriage whilst problematising Braddon's own self-marketing as 'The Author of *Lady Audley's Secret*'. The modern reader can only speculate at the impulse that lay behind the purchase of a doily figuring a scene from *Lady Audley's Secret*, the lower quality of edging in cotton cord rather than lace suggests that it was priced for the lower-middle classes. Mass-produced as one of a set of doilies representing scenes from Victorian authors including Dickens and Trollope, this curious item of literary memorabilia aligns *Lady Audley's Secret* with a 'modern sensational school' typified by a melodramatic contrast between female passivity and male aggression disguised as moral justice. The illustration juxtaposes the dark, accusatory figure of Robert Audley with the pale, unconscious Lady Audley to form a picture loaded with the suggestion of sexual danger. Although the table separates Robert from Lady Audley, the slant of the easel and his forward posture both imply the nature of his threat. Her powerlessness is emphasized by her lack of mobility in a gesture that is taken directly from the novel: 'Sitting quietly in her chair, her head fallen [sic] back upon the amber damask cushions, and her little hands lying powerless in her lap'.²⁵ In the interest of brevity, this section of narrative is omitted from the accompanying extract. The costume, posture and dynamics of Lady Audley figure her as the archetypal 'woman in white', repositioning Braddon's allegedly subversive heroine alongside Wilkie Collins' disenfranchised Anne Catherick and Laurie Fairlie. This alignment sits uneasily with the initial twentieth century critical reclamation of Lady Audley as a prototype feminist typified by Elaine Showalter and Lyn Pykett.²⁶ In printing a section of the text, albeit in an abbreviated form, underneath the image, this unusual piece of evidence displays a more sympathetic link with Braddon's original than many of the dramatic adaptations. More importantly however, it reveals that the popularity of *Lady Audley's Secret* was based upon

the multiplicity of images that co-existed within the narrative framework to resist a single interpretation. Braddon's text could be viewed as a flagrant attempt to appeal to a broad demographic spectrum of readers or as a direct reflection of what Chase and Levenson argue was a 'mass society incapable of controlling its anomalies'.²⁷ Whilst recent critics have focussed upon the context and nature of sensation fiction, what concerns me here is the cultural response to Lady Audley's variety. The specific conditions created by a lack of copyright protection enabled dramatists to remediate *Lady Audley's Secret* according to the desires of the public rather than the original author. What emerges is a complex renegotiation of Lady Audley's image in line with the specific agendas of the theatre managers keen to attract an audience and budding actresses keen to

LA model used by actresses to show how they could regulate themselves, self-stage themselves in a variety of guises as repertoire – ironically mirroring of self-commodification LA critiqued for.

This act of female self-commodification often involved specially commissioned, unauthorised dramatic adaptations of Braddon's novel, exploiting the lack of copyright protection that also necessitated the need for playwrights to continually produce scripts in an era before royalty payments – John Brougham version as eg of the numerous, hidden versions, in addition to the ones I can't find a licence for! .

However, the remediation of her character into a moving, dramatic persona functioned as a site where the materialistic impulse behind self-staging enabled by the material practices of the theatre could be explored and contested. The theatrical response to Lady Audley was as illusive and as complex as her narrative image, as her figure comes to embody the drives of a commodity culture which Thomas Richards has termed both 'invasive and evasive'.²⁸ This article assesses the ways in which Victorian theatre practitioners explored the tension between creativity and financial necessity through the figure of Lady Audley.

Suter – first one – problem of using a text, particularly when the notion of primacy of visual over the written is at stake...specific moment in time and need to recognise it as evidence of the legal processes to obtain a licence or copyright. Challenge of recreating material practice which is not tangible as evidence – easier by using Suter as his licence scripts were more developed than contemporaries – uses image of Lady Audley to embody the protean qualities of melodrama that questions our notion of the genre as polarised characterisation, fixed moral codes and rigid plot structures. Figure of LA invested with new meaning as her protean creativity is moulded into expected histrionic – social regulation becomes emblem of state regulation of the theatre. How self-regulating is LA/theatre ? Control v. repression

In reducing the complexities of the novel to suit the exigencies of mid-Victorian melodrama and the demands of licensing, these dramatic adaptations have been accused of lacking in literary merit and have been largely ignored. However, Suter's writing style included stage directions and evidence of the material practice involved in order to present the script for licensing and publishing simultaneously.

Conc. her figure embodied the illisitory nature of the Victorian theatre which creates such a challenge for us today – her character's destabilising protean qualities are those of the theatre itself. Dehumanising effect of capitalist drives & self-commodification, what Victorians found difficult about LA is the paradoxical materialism in opposition to material practice that allows to her become a moving target. In a world of commodity culture where the material is paramount – ie great exhibition, the theatre destabilises the material with a conscious illusion through material practice. Failure to contain the ghostly figure of LA is about the difficulty in regulating the performative mode that exists in the memory. What we find difficult about theatre and why it is so neglected ? texts that remain are a fragment of the complex affinities between cultural mediums (ie art, drama etc) – how to record what is seen, performative is everything that isn't on the page.

¹ Miss Linington continually changed the name of the troupe in line with the latest craze in drama. Her advert for 'coloured ladies' for the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' company appeared in *The Era*, Sunday 31 August, 1879, Issue

2136. The company named changed to the 'L'Assommoir' company a year later, to capitalise upon the success of Zola's 1877 novel.

² The *Ipswich Journal* for Saturday 13 August 1898, Issue 9666 carried an article on her company's benefit at the Cottage Hospital, Southwold, at which the hospital was presented £10. Later that year, the company played at the Theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds. See *The Era* Saturday 29 October, 1898.

³ See her advert for a new troupe for the 'L'Assommoir' company in *The Era*, Sunday 18 January, 1880.

⁴ Presumably William E. Suter's *A Quiet Family*, first performed at the Royal Surrey Theatre in 1857.

⁵ Interestingly, the recent ITV production of *Lady Audley's Secret* also removed Clara Talboys' figure. At the Braddon Conference at Birkbeck in 2000, the director Donald Hounam argued that she is only necessary in terms of Robert Audley's geographical position and subsequent detective work.

⁶ H.L. Mansel [anon.], 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 113 (April 1862), p. 483.

⁷ John Maddison Morton's *Box and Cox* (1841) was shown on Saturday, 4 April 1891. See uncatalogued and unfoliated volume *Entertainments at Berry Wood* [n.d.] from the records for St. Crispin's Hospital file in box NCLA/ located at the Northamptonshire Record Office. The book is a scrapbook of pasted in playbills covering the period 1882 – 1899, several have handwritten comments on the quality of performance.

⁸ See *Entertainments at Berry Wood* [n.d.], box NCLA/. The programme for *East Lynne* is different to that of *Lady Audley's Secret* in that no theatre company is associated with the performance. No revenue for the tickets appears in the General Ledger (also box NCLA/) but it records that £30 a quarter was spent on entertainments. Dora Kingsley's name does not appear in any of the theatrical journals of the period. As Northampton Record Office has refused access to the patient records despite their being outside the 75-year exclusion period, I have been unable to categorically confirm her status. Asylum patients can only be traced through the Public Record Office at Kew if the year of entry is known.

⁹ See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1995)[1961]. Indeed the practice of staging theatricals at Berry Wood continued until the asylum moved to the St Andrews site, where amateur companies still regularly perform open-air performances of Shakespeare.

¹⁰ John Crammer indicates that Buckingham County Asylum held theatricals, see *Asylum History: Buckingham County Pauper Lunatic Asylum – St. Johns* (London: Gaskell, 1990), p. 84, as did Dr John Conolly's Middlesex Asylum at Hanwell. See *The Illustrated London News*, 55 (1843), reprinted in Denis Leigh, *The Historical Development of British Psychiatry: Vol. I* (London: Pergamon, 1961), pp. 253-9 for an account of the fancy fairs and masked balls which were a common feature of Conolly's policy of inclusion.

¹¹ Many site plans and original drawings of county asylums are now available online at www.countyasylums.com The website for Urban Decay at www.amerlieriis.co.uk contains a huge number of stunning photographs depicting the declining state of Victorian asylums. Architectural features such as promescenium arches and stages are still discernible in these atmospheric photographs of derelict buildings.

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¹³ W.F. Rae [anon.], 'Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon', *North British Review*, n.s. 4 (1865), p. 183.

¹⁴ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851 – 1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 3.

¹⁵ *The Era*, vol. XXV, Sunday 17 May 1863, p. 1.

¹⁶ *The Era*, vol. XXV, Sunday 5 April 1863, p. 1. Neither adaptation was licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office. I am grateful to Dr Caroline Radcliffe for clarifying this point.

¹⁷ Playbill for New Theatre Royal, Brighton dated 18 September 1869, item UKC/POS/BTN NR: 0594895 from the Playbill Collection at the Templeman Library, University of Kent at Canterbury Library.

¹⁸ *The Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 25 April, 1863, p. 8.

¹⁹ *The Era*, 11 October 1863, p. 5.

²⁰ See Lee Strasberg (ed), Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting* & William Archer, *Masks or Faces?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 159-171.

²¹ M.E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)[1862], Vol. II, Ch. VII, p. 223 and Vol. I, Ch. IX, p. 79.

²² There is another cabinet photograph of Miss Bowers as Lady Audley in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, ID TH-27758, housed at the New York Public Library. It can be viewed at the New York Public Library Digital Gallery at <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org> at <http://images.nypl.org/?id=TH-27758&t=w>. This is a full-length photograph and can be identified as Miss Bowers in the same costume.

²³ See the bromide print of Christine Keeler by Lewis Morley taken in 1963 at the National Portrait Gallery's website <http://www.npg.org.uk>, print NPG P512 (13). This photo of Keeler sitting astride a habitat chair became one of the most iconographic images of the 1960s due to the ambiguous nature of Keeler's pose that displays both objectification and liberation.

²⁴ The date of manufacture for the doily is difficult to pinpoint. The attribution of the text to 'Miss Braddon' suggests a date of around 1870, as the autograph edition of her mid-career novels such as *Hostages to Fortune* (1875) use this attribution. Before the 1870s Braddon's novels were often marketed as 'by the author of *Lady Audley's Secret*' whilst the late Victorian and Edwardian novels used 'M.E. Braddon'. Braddon's letters to her peers during the 1880s occasionally sign the name 'Miss Braddon' under her signature of Mary Maxwell.

²⁵ M.E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)[1862], Vol. I, Ch. XV, p. 120.

²⁶ See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1987)[1977], *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830 – 1980* (London: Virago, 1987) and Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and The New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992).

²⁷ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 207.

²⁸ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851 – 1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 3.