

# A Marriage of Inconvenience: Bigamy and the Sensation Novel

## INTRODUCTION

The great eighteenth century jurist William Blackstone described bigamy as a “violation of the public economy and decency of a well ordered state.”<sup>1</sup> Such was the severity of the crime, it was once punishable by hanging. His thinking was still influential during the early nineteenth century, when Britain's global dominance was thought to be predicated on social stability. Matrimonial practices were seen as an indicator of civilisation and “civilised monogamy” was believed to make Britain superior to those countries that either allowed easy access to divorce or practised polygamy.<sup>2</sup> The significance of marriage ensured that it became an area of increased regulation, although with very different implications for men and women. The concept of coverture, originally described in Blackstone's *Legal Commentaries*, decreed that the very being or legal existence of the wife was suspended during marriage. A single woman was known as a *feme sole* and a married woman as a *feme covert*, thus indicating that her identity was subsumed into that of her husband.<sup>3</sup> Davidoff and Hall, in their examination of gender differences during this period, argue that “marriage became both institution and symbol of women's containment.”<sup>4</sup> They see the middle class as divided into separate public and private spheres which delineated the appropriate realms of masculine and feminine activity. However, the very complexity of the lives they describe in their study subverts their argument, and subsequent critics have shown that the spheres represented a conservative ideology rather than a fundamental organising characteristic. Wharman goes further by claiming that the idea of “middle-classness” itself represented a shifting set of values, variously defined in different discourses, rather than a discrete group of people.<sup>5</sup> Vickery sees the separate spheres ideology as a “defensive and impotent reaction to public freedoms already won” and argues that the perpetuation of the model ignores the “unpredictable variety of private experience.”<sup>6</sup> Colley believes that women largely accepted that their role was predominately in the domestic sphere, but saw this arrangement as “profoundly contractual”, assuming this subordinate

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1 “Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England, Book IV, Chapter 13”

<<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/blackstone/bk4ch13.htm>> [Accessed 21/09/2008]

2 Gill, Joanne, 'The Imperial Anxieties of a Nineteenth-Century Bigamy', *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (2004), 58-78 (p66)

3 Steinbach, Susie. *Women in England 1760 - 1914: A Social History*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004) p250

4 Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2002) p451

5 Wahrman, Dror. "Middle-Class Domesticity Goes Public: Gender, Class and Politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria." *The Journal of British Studies* 32.4 (1993): 396-432.

6 Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993):383-414 (pp414, 390)

position in return for protection.<sup>7</sup> The notion of separate spheres, therefore, was subject to challenge and negotiation from within the institution that was its embodiment.

The findings of the 1851 Census disputed the existence of the domestic ideal of middle-class marriage and instead identified what Nead calls a “clear hierarchy of sexual behaviour,” with married couples at the top and unmarried mothers at the bottom.<sup>8</sup> As Chase and Levenson argue, the need for this classification “exploded the myth of neat family units.”<sup>9</sup> Although marriage was supposed to be central to a woman's life, the Census showed there were 1,407,225 unmarried women aged 20-40 and 359,969 over 40,<sup>10</sup> who had collected into a “disruptive vortex”.<sup>11</sup> This epiphany put gender at the centre of Parliamentary debate and subsequent legislation can be seen as an attempt to regulate this area of such vital national importance. Vickery sees it as a “conservative response to an unprecedented expansion in the opportunities, ambitions and experiences of women.”<sup>12</sup> The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, popularly known as the Divorce Act, was part of a wider programme of reform initiated by Lord Brougham, which gradually removed legal authority from the Church, placing it in the hands of the state. This gave the Government greater latitude, as they were able to put national interest above Christian doctrine. Under the terms of the Act, men could divorce their wives on the grounds of adultery alone, whereas for a woman her husband's adultery had to be “aggravated” by bigamy, incest or cruelty. The Act therefore established the double standard: female infidelity was a more serious crime and should therefore be more easily punishable. During the Parliamentary debate, Lord Cranworth declared that it would be harsh to punish a husband for being “a little profligate”.<sup>13</sup> This was at odds with the seventh commandment which viewed adultery as equally sinful for both parties, and also ignored Christ's teaching of forgiveness. On these religious grounds, Gladstone argued that divorce should be denied to both men and women,<sup>14</sup> but Wynn, the Whig Secretary at War believed the newly-enfranchised middle classes should have access to divorce, citing an increase in bigamy cases.<sup>15</sup> Parliament also failed to respond to pressure from the Unitarians and Owenite Socialists, groups who were pushing for greater gender equality in marriage.

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7 Colley, Linda. Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837. (London: Vintage, 1996) p277

8 Nead, Lynda. Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) p35

9 Chase, Karen, and Michael Levenson. The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) p3

10 Jalland, Pat. Women, Marriage and Politics 1860-1914. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) p254

11 Chase & Levenson, p183

12 Vickery, p400

13 Gleadle, Kathryn, and Sarah Richardson, eds. Women in British Politics, 1760 - 1860: The Power of the Petticoat. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000, p86

14 Poovey, Mary. Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p61

15 Stone, Lawrence. Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) p365

The Act established a London-based Divorce Court, presided over by the “incarnate omnipotence” of the splendidly-named Sir Cresswell Cresswell.<sup>16</sup> In theory, this made divorce more readily obtainable through a judicial process, as hitherto a final and irrevocable separation could be achieved only by a lengthy and expensive Parliamentary Bill. Although *The Times* described the reform as “one of the greatest social revolutions of our time,”<sup>17</sup> there was only a small increase in the subsequent divorce rate in the following decade – an annual average of 200-300 petitions, in comparison with 170,000 marriages – and this remained fairly constant as a proportion of the population until the late 1870s.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the number of bigamy cases doubled during the second half of the century, with the Old Bailey alone hearing 1,024 cases between 1858-1900.<sup>19</sup> This surprising statistic suggested that the Act had exacerbated the very problem it set out to solve, and *John Bull and Britannia* thundered that it was an “Act for licensing bigamy”.<sup>20</sup> The *Times* felt duty bound to report divorce cases in full, subscribing to the Benthamite view that “publicity is the very soul of justice.”<sup>21</sup> The repeal of the stamp duty on printed material in 1855 led to a proliferation of weekly newspapers preying on the more sensational cases. Consequently, rather than serving to release the unhappily married, the Divorce Court simply made marital problems more visible by holding them up to public scrutiny. Thompson states that “[t]he immediate effect of forensic divorce was to expose the sanctity of the middle-class hearth to the public gaze.”<sup>22</sup> Desperate to avoid such exposure, the middle classes faced a domestic crisis as the institution of marriage itself was effectively placed on trial.

Novelists seized upon this rich new source of information, and marital conflict became a popular theme in the sensation novels of the 1860s. Whilst marriage had formed the basis of many a novel, “divorce erupted into imaginative life without any coherent metaphors.”<sup>23</sup> The fictional response that followed, however, was not an outpouring of divorce plots, rather a flurry of bigamy novels, literature thereby articulating the confusion of the population. The Matrimonial Causes Act implied that marriage was not indissoluble, and people were seeking a new definition. Henry Mansel complained that eight out of twenty four novels he was reviewing were about bigamy, hoping this was due to its

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16 Leckie, Barbara. Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857-1914. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) p77

17 'The suitors in our Courts of Law and the public.' *The Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1867: 11

18 Horstman, Alan. Victorian Divorce. London: Palgrave, 1985, p85

19 'The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913' <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>> [Accessed 20/09/2008]

20 'The Skeleton in the House Brought into Court', *John Bull and Britannia*, 27 November 1858: 1

21 Humpherys, Anne. "Breaking Apart: The Early Victorian Divorce Novel." Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question. Ed. Nicola Thompson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p227

22 Thompson, F M L. The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900. (London: Fontana, 1988) p445

23 Chase & Levenson, p187

“peculiar aptitude...to serve as a vehicle of mysterious interest or poetic justice,”<sup>24</sup> rather than any real desire to challenge the sanctity of marriage. He hoped the new Divorce Act would render the bigamy plot “as clumsy and obsolete an expedient for the relief of discontented partners as the axe was in Juvenal's day.”<sup>25</sup> He was to be disappointed, however, with the bigamy convention persisting well into the 1870s, reflecting and shaping the concerns with and attitudes towards marriage and divorce. Geraldine Jewsbury, a morally conservative voice, was forced to conclude that “there is a great deal of latent sympathy with this state of things, with the certainly of exciting the reader's lively interest.”<sup>26</sup> Like Mrs Oliphant, who thought bigamy did at least show a “certain deference to the British relish for law and order,”<sup>27</sup> Jewsbury saw bigamy as a less morally-abhorrent alternative to outright adultery and more socially acceptable than divorce. The statistics and the proliferation of fictional bigamists would seem to suggest that many people shared this view.

Whilst contemporary critics were thankful for the equivocal nature of bigamy, modern critics are less impressed. Brantlinger claims that “rather than striking forthright blows in favour of divorce-law reform and greater sexual freedom, sensation novels usually merely exploit public interest in these issues.”<sup>28</sup> Brantlinger is attacking the genre and ignoring what it is trying to do. The sensation genre is able to subvert gender roles in a way that more traditional forms cannot. Showalter sees it as “transitional literature...still in the framework of feminine convention,” and concludes that “the sensationalists could not bring themselves to undertake a radical enquiry into the role of women.”<sup>29</sup> These are monovalent readings of a multivalent form. Such an approach sees sensation fiction as an homogeneous genre, ignoring that fact that “sensation” was often a convenient label suggesting a sense of “otherness” and marking a text as deviating from the more traditional domestic plot. Although the aim of some writers, such as Charles Reade, was simply to “[electrify] the nerves of the reader,”<sup>30</sup> Brantlinger and Showalter overlook the novelists who seized the unique possibilities of the genre to explore the profound social changes facing their readers.

This paper will argue that the sensation novelists Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda Broughton were not simply riding the crest of the bigamy wave. Rather, they used the narrative possibilities of bigamy

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24 Mansel, H L. "Sensation Novels." *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863): 481-514 (p490)

25 Mansel, p490

26 *Athenaeum*, 3 December 1864, p743

27 Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwood's* 94 (1863), 168-83, p169

28 Brantlinger, Patrick. *The Reading Lesson: Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) p159

29 Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. (London: Virago, 1982) p28-29

30 Mansel, p488-9

to question the role of women within both marriage and society as a whole. Braddon and Broughton's novels hold up their heroines to the gaze of the reader, thereby making what Pykett calls a "spectacle of femininity".<sup>31</sup> Their women are not merely wives or mothers, defined only in terms of their relations with men. In defiance of the law that denies and defines their existence, they are presented as autonomous individuals who are not constrained by or limited to the domestic sphere. Throughout their experiences, the reader is confronted with the ways in which women's lives were circumscribed – legally, socially, and economically – and how they attempted to transcend the conventions that constrained them. Braddon uses bigamy not to challenge the notion of separate spheres, but to demonstrate that the "contract" suggested by Colley did not work in practice. Broughton also uses bigamy to contest this contract, but questions the spheres themselves and argues that women should be pushing for greater freedom and control over their bodies. The complex structure of these novels, and the genre as a whole, reflects the discomfiture of both their readers and their authors. The *Pall Mall Gazette* warns that "[t]here are novels now in circulation that will certainly bewilder the future students of the Victorian era as to the morals of our time."<sup>32</sup> This caveat will be borne in mind.

### **MISS BRADDON'S BIG BLACK BABOON**

The Westminster Review proclaimed that bigamy was "Miss Braddon's big black baboon, with which she has attracted all the young girls in the country."<sup>33</sup> The implication was that she was simply courting controversy, rather than attempting any serious consideration of the nascent Woman Question which had emerged from the gender debate. Mrs Oliphant further charged Braddon's novels with being full of the "lurking poison of sensuality" and thought that she "knew too much about bigamy for her own good," a reference to Braddon's long-term relationship with a married man.<sup>34</sup> However, Braddon uses bigamy not to titillate nor to promote extra-legal unions, but to explore the barely charted territory of female subjectivity and agency, building on the legacy of earlier women writers such as the Brontës and Mrs Gaskell.

Braddon referred to *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* as "my pair of bigamy novels"<sup>35</sup> and uses them in different ways to subvert conventional portrayals of fictional heroines. Mansel held that "Lady

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31 Pykett, Lyn. *The Improper Feminine*. (London: Routledge, 1992) p91

32 "Peculiarities of Some Female Novelists", *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 January 1870:8

33 "Belle Lettres", *Westminster Review*, 30 July 1866: 126

34 Wolff, Robert Lee. *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979) p203

35 Wolff, p108

Audley is meant to be detested, while Aurora Floyd is meant to be admired,”<sup>36</sup> but such a polarised view belies the moral complexities of Braddon's characterisation. Mansel does concede that she was “the first female novelist to create heroines who clearly and reprehensibly defied the accepted roles allotted to women.”<sup>37</sup> Although obviously not intended as a compliment, it challenges Showalter's belief that Braddon was “careful” and always ensured her heroines were “punished, repentant, and drained of all energy by the end of the novel.”<sup>38</sup> Nayder further argues that “Braddon largely defends the institution of marriage against subversion and reform,”<sup>39</sup> which is at least partially true. A close reading of these two novels within their historical context shows that they certainly defend marriage, but at the same time make a powerful argument against its limitations for both men and women and expose the inadequacies of the contract implicit in the ideology of the separate spheres.

### **What a bitter thing it is to be poor: Lady Audley's Secret**

Published in three volumes in 1862, *Lady Audley's Secret* can be seen as a response to the idealised portrait of Laura Fairlie in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, often cited as the first sensation novel. The opening paragraph of Collins' novel describes the story “of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve.”<sup>40</sup> Lady Audley's experiences lead her to prove that she requires more resolution than patience. Winifred Hughes describes it as a parody of the ideal,<sup>41</sup> and it can be seen as such in terms of both its portrayal of women and of marriage. Helen Maldon, later Lady Audley, is described as a “fair-haired paragon”<sup>42</sup> and she seems “at least on the surface, to be contained within the boundaries of the proper and respectable feminine.”<sup>43</sup> She realises at an early age that her “ultimate fate depended on her marriage,” and her father sells her to “the highest bidder”, George Talboys, to relieve his financial responsibility.<sup>44</sup> He conforms to the popular trope of the irresponsible father who fails to protect his daughter from the harsh realities of life but sees her as a potentially remunerative commodity. Talboys soon deserts Helen and their child in order to seek his fortune in Australia, leaving them penniless and dependent upon her uncaring father. She learns “what a bitter thing it is to be poor”, later revealing:

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36 Mansel, p432

37 Mansel, p490-91

38 Showalter, p97

39 Nayder, Lillian. "Rebellious Sepoys and Bigamous Wives: The Indian Mutiny and Marriage Law Reform in Lady Audley's Secret." *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*. Eds. Marlene Tromp, Pamela K Gilbert and Aeron Haynie. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000) p34

40 Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p5

41 Hughes, Winifred. *The Maniac in the Cellar*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) p127

42 Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. *Lady Audley's Secret*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp42, 51

43 Pykett, p88

44 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p18

I looked upon this as a desertion, and I resented it bitterly—I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support...I recognised a separate wrong done me by George Talboys. His father was rich; his sister was living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife, and the mother of his son, was a slave allied for ever to beggary and obscurity.<sup>45</sup>

Nayder questions why Helen Talboys did not simply seek a divorce or a legal separation.<sup>46</sup> Even though Talboys abandons her shortly before the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act, she could not have divorced him on grounds of desertion alone; she would also have had to prove adultery. This would have been extremely difficult since he was now 10,000 miles away. A legal separation would have achieved some resolution for her, but would have brought no financial support and left her unable to remarry. Erring husbands were not required to pay alimony until the third Matrimonial Causes Act was passed in 1886, and desertion was not always taken seriously in the regional courts. Shortly after the passing of the first Act, the *Exeter Flying Post* reported on the case of Mrs Catherine Bond, whose husband deserted her and subsequently made a second, bigamous, marriage. He returned after five years, expecting to resume relations with his legal wife, who promptly tried to divorce him. The magistrate, the appropriately-named Mr Bastard, ruled that she had to take him back. Braddon's plot was therefore reflecting the ideology behind judgements made in real life cases, demonstrating that the contractual nature of the spheres was flawed. There was no legal mechanism to ensure that men provided protection in return for female subordination. Helen sees little alternative but to reinvent herself as a *feme sole*. Talboys has broken the contract by failing to provide for his family. She leaves the child with her father and seeks employment in what she calls the "dull slavery of a governess," one of the few employment opportunities open to women in her position.<sup>47</sup> She is fully aware of her actions and why she has taken them, writing to her father:

I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dis severed from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune. Forgive me if I have been fretful, capricious, changeable. You should forgive me, for you know why I have been so.<sup>48</sup>

The law is unwilling to dis sever her from these links, so she must effect the divorce herself. Appropriately, she achieves this end by announcing her own death in *The Times*, the organ of the

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45 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, pp349, 353

46 Nayder, Lillian. "Rebellious Sepoys and Bigamous Wives: The Indian Mutiny and Marriage Law Reform in Lady Audley's Secret." *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*. Eds. Marlene Tromp, Pamela K Gilbert and Aeron Haynie. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000) p31

47 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p353

48 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p350

Divorce Court. Significantly, the date given of 24<sup>th</sup> August 1857 is just one week before the Matrimonial Causes Bill became law. She sloughs off the identity of Mrs Helen Talboys to become Miss Lucy Graham. As a governess, Lucy Graham would not have enjoyed much greater freedom. There would have been “no security of employment, minimal wages, and an ambiguous status, somewhere between servant and family member.”<sup>49</sup> Although in receipt of a salary, she would have in many ways simply swapped dependence on her father for dependence on an employer, and still within the restrictive domestic sphere. Like Jane Eyre, her only chance of improving her social status is through marriage.

The negotiations surrounding her bigamous marriage with the elderly Sir Michael Audley emphasise the fact that this is, at least from her point of view, a profoundly financial arrangement. Sir Michael knows he could “hardly expect to be the choice of a beautiful young girl,”<sup>50</sup> but chooses to ignore her honest admission that she does not love him, declaring “I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy?”<sup>51</sup> Her happiness is unnecessary for the purposes of the contract, she need only agree. For Lucy/Helen this is not so much a bargain as a necessary expedient. Although she is securing protection for herself, she is aware that she will be relinquishing her freedom in return, “her hands clutching at the black ribbon about her throat, as if it had been strangling her.”<sup>52</sup> Braddon makes it very clear that she commits bigamy out of necessity – even had she possessed the funds and grounds to divorce Talboys, Sir Michael certainly would not countenance marriage with a divorcee. Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* in 1861 had shown in realistic, if melodramatic, fashion how disastrous the consequences of divorce could be for a woman. Lady Audley does not voice her frustration with her situation, accepting her role as a dependent woman now that she has been given protection in return. She is, in fact, acting the part of the “proper” feminine in making a good, if illegal, marriage and deferring to the wisdom and authority of her husband. There is nothing in the narrative to suggest that she is anything other than a good wife to Sir Michael – she fulfils her role as a demure ornament and tolerates the lonely existence of Audley Court. She is described as a “childish, helpless, babyfied little creature,” therefore unlikely to pose a threat to male hegemony.<sup>53</sup> It is only when Talboys returns from Australia after three years that Lady Audley is prompted to once more transgress the boundaries of feminine propriety. His sense of male privilege leads him to believe that she will be waiting for him and he confides to his friend Robert Audley, nephew of Sir Michael, that

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49 “The Victorian Age” *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Ed. M H Abrams et al. Fifth edition. Vol. 2 (New York: W W Norton, 1987) p1903

50 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p9

51 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p11

52 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p11

53 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p138

they shall take a villa on the banks of the the Thames and his “little wife” will play her guitar and sing songs to them.<sup>54</sup> Despite the fact that he abandoned his wife and child with no means of existence, he is placed on a pedestal by Robert Audley and held up as a fine example of masculinity. This is in sharp contrast with the fate suffered by Isabel Vane in *East Lynne*, whose desertion of her family results in her utter ruin. Braddon, like Wood, exposes the double standard.

Robert Audley, an indolent lawyer who has never actually taken on a case, is initially admiring of Lady Audley's feminine charms, but is prompted to uncover her secret when he senses her underlying strength and mystery. Her tenacity and strong-mindedness make him appear feminine and inert by comparison, thereby challenging his natural masculine supremacy. He “shuddered as he thought how unequal the struggle might be between himself and his uncle's wife,” a woman who was clearly not what she seemed.<sup>55</sup> Lady Audley's physical strength is tested when she is confronted by her estranged husband. Critical responses, both contemporary and modern, have focussed on her infamous and unwifely act of pushing him down a well, overlooking the reason for her peremptoriness which becomes apparent shortly afterwards when Robert notices a bruise on her wrist:

It was not one bruise, but four slender, purple marks, such as might have been made by the four fingers of a powerful hand that had grasped the delicate wrist a shade too roughly.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than committing a wicked and impetuous crime, Lady Audley is actually defending herself against a violent husband. She later expresses her fear of this encounter, as she had expected Talboys to hunt her down if he ever returned from Australia: “I knew the energy of his character well enough to know this.”<sup>57</sup> Her words suggest that he is more interested in reclaiming his legal property than in pursuing marital felicity, and he does not want her to have an existence beyond him. He does this in the knowledge that he has the law on his side. Again, Lady Audley's circumscribed position leaves her with few options:

If I were to run away and disappear—as George Talboys disappeared. But where could I go? What would become of me? I have no money; my jewels are not worth a couple of hundred pounds... What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old, hard, cruel, wretched life—the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle, and die—as my mother died, perhaps.<sup>58</sup>

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54 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p35

55 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p274

56 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p88

57 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p353

58 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p316

The only viable choice is to perpetuate her bigamy and thereby retain her precarious position. She would have no recourse to the law. Quite apart from the fact that she is now guilty of bigamy, husbands reserved the right to physically chastise their wives as they saw fit. It was not until 1878, when the tireless campaigning of Frances Power Cobbe proved the prevalence of marital violence across all classes, that battered wives were able to seek legal redress through the Second Matrimonial Causes Act.<sup>59</sup> The theme of marital violence is mirrored by the experiences of Phoebe Marks, Lady Audley's maid, who lives in fear of her alcoholic and aggressive husband. Unfortunately, in true sensation tradition, Talboys makes a second inconvenient return, and even manages to survive Lady Audley's attempt to burn down his lodgings, her arson evoking images of Bertha Mason, that other inconvenient spouse.

Even Lady Audley's resourcefulness is ultimately no match for Robert's determination to undermine her position. Although a man of law, he shows little concern for the arson and attempted murder, preferring instead to affirm his masculine superiority and return Lady Audley to her proper sphere.. He has no sympathy for the plight which drove her to such extremes and is intent only on restoring patriarchal rule. He concludes that since she has transgressed the boundaries of the acceptable femininity, she is not a woman: "Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer and feel; I look upon you henceforth as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle."<sup>60</sup> The worst of her crimes is a lack of womanly contrition, but she believes she acted out of necessity. Her experience as an abandoned and impecunious wife and mother left her with few options and no legal protection, with bigamy the only means of achieving financial stability and security. She commits bigamy not through wickedness, but out of frustration and economic necessity.

Have I ever been really *wicked*, I wonder?... My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply-laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime.<sup>61</sup>

Braddon uses this self-reflexion to demonstrate that Lady Audley's actions are motivated by real injustices and she is not simply a stereotypical sensation novel villain. Her apparent strength of character obscures her womanly vulnerability, and she makes it clear to Robert that his sense of

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59 Bland, Lucy. *Banishing the Beast*. (New York: Tauris Parke, 2002) p150

60 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p345

61 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p297

triumph after having overpowered her is misplaced:

You have used your cool, calculating, frigid, luminous intellect to a noble purpose. You have conquered—a MADWOMAN!<sup>62</sup>

He has enjoyed all the advantages of an education, and allowance, and a profession, but can channel them only into destroying a vulnerable woman in order that he might shore up his own fragile masculinity. Lady Audley rejects penitence and thereby the opportunity to become more acceptable. She is sorry only that she has been found out, rather than sorry for her crimes. Her repeated failure to conform to the feminine ideal means that she must be quarantined from society in a Belgian maison de santé, with yet another new identity: Madame Taylor. The chapter is entitled 'Buried Alive' and she refers to having been brought to her "living grave".<sup>63</sup> The "law could pronounce no worse sentence than this, a life-long imprisonment in a mad-house."<sup>64</sup> The doctor who is employed to commit her declares: "From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that home... her life so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished."<sup>65</sup> Ironically, her life as Lady Audley before Talboys' reappearance was devoid of variety and action and the sanatorium can be viewed as an extreme embodiment of the domestic sphere. As Miller argues, the patriarchal expediency of woman's carceral condition "takes priority over whatever human considerations may or may not be invoked to rationalise it."<sup>66</sup> The domestic or feminine sphere can only survive if women are prevented from challenging it.

Nayder claims that "rather than celebrating the newly won right of Englishwomen to sue their husbands for divorce under certain circumstances, or of legally separated wives to possess their own property, Braddon tells a story about a wife's bigamy and greed, associating such rights with female lawlessness."<sup>67</sup> The suggestion is that Braddon is concerned with sensation rather than reform, but she is clearly showing how the law fails a woman in Helen's position. Dates are explicitly given throughout the narrative to firmly place the main action shortly before the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act and immediately afterwards. As Boyle writes, "Braddon is, in effect, casting the law of historical truth back into the lawmakers' faces" and "develops a subversive social theme about the reality of life in England in 1861."<sup>68</sup> Nayder and Showalter have cited the concluding paragraph as evidence of Braddon's adherence to convention, with Robert married to Talboys' sister and the three of them living together

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62 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p345

63 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p391

64 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p394

65 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p381

66 Miller, D A. *The Novel and the Police*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) p171

67 Nayder, p36

68 Boyle, Thomas. *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead*. (London: Penguin, 1989) pp150, 149

in a riverside idyll. This overlooks the sardonic tone of the narrator who tells us that the good always prosper and the wicked are always punished. This is, therefore, a fairytale ending in more than one sense. The reader is left with a far more forceful and realistic image of the “wretched woman who was wearing out the remnant of her wicked life in the quiet suburb of the forgotten Belgian city.”<sup>69</sup> The prescribed marital ideal can be achieved only by removing from society that which disproves its existence, and by labelling it mad. As Miller argues, such diagnosis “lies in wait to 'cover' – account for and occlude – whatever behaviours, desires, or tendencies might be considered socially deviant, undesirable, or dangerous.”<sup>70</sup>

In repeated references, Braddon compares Lady Audley's revolt against societal norms with that of the Sepoys of the Indian Mutiny, which also occurred in 1857. Nayder argues that in comparing defiant Englishwomen with the mutinous Sepoys, Braddon is evoking the racism it generated and using it to defend the patriarchal status quo. This “calls into question her status as a feminist.”<sup>71</sup> Braddon would certainly not be termed a feminist in the modern sense of the word, but she makes the comparison with the Sepoys to show that white male supremacy and the ideology on which it is based also faces a challenge closer to home. Alicia Audley dismissively refers to the British troops in Oudh as “nothing but a pack of boys...crammed up to the eyes with a lot of senseless schoolmasters' rubbish, and dressed in...calico helmets,”<sup>72</sup> Braddon here suggests that men are unprepared for the modern world, either at home or abroad. The narrative shows that the parlous state of the marriage laws threaten men too, as women will eventually rebel against unreasonable constraints. The Mutiny was being debated in Parliament at the same time as the the marriage laws, one Member referring to the “extreme ferocity” of the Sepoys and marvelling that it “might have been supposed from such conduct that they had been long suffering under some grievous oppression.”<sup>73</sup> Women, who were suffering under “grievous oppression” were also ultimately suppressed.

Nayder further contends that Braddon “associates marriage law reform with a wife's bigamy, and Lady Audley with Eve, and treats adultery as if it were solely a female transgression.”<sup>74</sup> However, Braddon is very careful to show Lady Audley as a bigamist, rather than as an adulterer. She is portrayed as entirely lacking in passion, and she makes a bigamous marriage to protect herself financially and socially, rather

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69 Houston, Gail Turley. “Braddon's Commentaries on the Trials and Legal Secrets of Audley Court”, in Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context, ed. by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K Gilbert and Aeron Haynie (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p28

70 Miller, p169

71 Nayder, p32

72 Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p329

73 *Hansard* (3rd series) 147 (11 August 1857), col 1400

74 Nayder, p36

than to indulge her sexual urges. A contemporary psychologist, William Acton, expounded a popular view that “[t]he majority of women are not very much troubled by sexual feeling,” although he does concede: “It is too true, I admit, as the divorce courts show, that there are some few women who have sexual desires so strong that they surpass those of men and shock public feeling by their exhibition.”<sup>75</sup> This apparent contradiction meant that women who did commit adultery could be proven to be unfeminine, thereby protecting the feminine ideal and pathologising female sexuality. In Lady Audley's case, it was far easier to believe that the unnatural behaviour she exhibits is a manifestation of her unfeminine desires, rather than a response to perceived injustices. Had Talboys instead committed adultery as well as desertion, Lady Audley would have had grounds for divorce. Braddon wanted to show that marriage could be a carceral condition from which the law offers no escape or protection. Instead of being released from her marital bonds by the Matrimonial Causes Act, Lady Audley is further constrained by the extra-legal forces of patriarchy but denied its protection. For her, the domestic sphere is a prison rather than a place of safety.

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75 Taylor, Jenny Bourne, and Sally Shuttleworth, eds. Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p269

## The Amicable Bigamist: Aurora Floyd

Aware that her vivid portrayal of Lady Audley had drawn criticism, Braddon in some ways employed a lighter touch with *Aurora Floyd*, published in 1862-3. The bigamy is this time completely inadvertent and Aurora negotiates the appropriate feminine role rather than challenging it outright. Henry Mansel acknowledged, "Aurora, with all her faults, is a woman and not a fiend."<sup>76</sup> He goes on to declare that the surprise is not that she becomes a bigamist, "but that she is an amicable one."<sup>77</sup> In creating a more likeable heroine Braddon enabled her readers to engage with her more closely. While still in her teens, Aurora elopes with her dastardly groom, John Conyers. After he deserts her and is reportedly dead, she falls in love with the aristocratic Talbot Bulstrode, who subsequently ends their engagement when she refuses to reveal her murky past. She consoles herself by marrying rugged Yorkshireman, John Mellish, and all is well until her first husband reappears. After a campaign of blackmail and threatening behaviour towards Aurora, Conyers is murdered, and suspicion falls upon her. The labyrinthine denouement shows Aurora exonerated and rewarded with a happy marriage and domestic tranquility.

Whereas Lady Audley sought financial security in marriage, Aurora Floyd is from a wealthy background and therefore able to marry for desire. She consequently becomes a target for John Conyers, who, rather like Lady Audley, sees himself as "ill-used and trampled down in the battle of life" and seeks to elevate himself by finding a wealthy spouse.<sup>78</sup> Just as Lady Audley constructs herself as the proper feminine in order to attract a wealthy husband, Conyers presents himself as the "prince in disguise"<sup>79</sup> who Aurora's nurse tells her she is destined to meet. In reality, he is violent and adulterous, and deserts her when he realises that her father has protected her inheritance from importunate husbands by placing it in a trust fund. Aurora has little choice but to return to the authority of her father, which she does with great reluctance. A legal separation would have been easily obtained by a woman in her position, but would have left her in a state of legal limbo, somewhere between *feme covert* and *feme sole*. She would have been unable to remarry and any assets would remain the property of her estranged husband. The narrator, perhaps anticipating her critics, explains:

Had she, upon the discovery of her first husband's infidelity, called the law to her aid—she was rich enough to command its utmost help—she might have freed herself from the hateful chains so foolishly linked together, and might have defied this dead man to torment or assail her.<sup>80</sup>

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76 Mansel, p492-3

77 Mansel, p492-3

78 Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. *Aurora Floyd*. (Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p353

79 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p353

80 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p393

Aurora answers them all by revealing:

I wrote to James Conyers, telling him I had discovered that which, coupled with his brutality to me on more than one occasion, gave me the right to call upon the law to release me from him, and that if I refrained from doing so, it was for my father's sake, and not for his.<sup>81</sup>

Aurora is well aware of the likely publicity attending the daughter of a wealthy banker divorcing her groom. Carnell cites as possible inspiration an article from the *Brighton Guardian* entitled 'Elopement of a Lady of Fortune With a Groom from York', demonstrating the public appetite for such adventures. Braddon infuses the story with allusions to real-life sensational cases, as if to prove that she is dealing with fact, rather than fancy.<sup>82</sup> As in *Lady Audley's Secret*, episodes are dated precisely to show that she is commenting on contemporary issues, the action beginning in August 1857 to coincide with the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act. Aurora's dilemma shows that divorce was not necessarily a viable option for wronged wives, even if they had the necessary grounds.

In contrast with the protean identity of Lady Audley, Aurora remains relatively stable throughout. She is the physical opposite of Lady Audley, with her dark hair and flashing black eyes. This, twinned with her penchant for horses, places her clearly beyond the realm of the feminine ideal: "before Miss Floyd emerged from the nursery she evinced a very decided tendency to become what is called 'fast.' At six years of age she rejected a doll, and asked for a rocking-horse."<sup>83</sup> Despite her refusal to conform to societal norms, men find her beauty irresistible. She is contrasted with Lucy Floyd, Aurora's golden-haired, blue-eyed, angelic cousin, who works hard at her accomplishments and confines her reading to High Church novels. Men want to marry Lucy, but they are sexually attracted to Aurora, who represents the real rather than the ideal.

Talbot Bulstrode is initially bewitched by her charms, temporarily abandoning his quest to find:

some gentle and feminine creature crowned with an aureole of pale auburn hair; some timid soul with downcast eyes, fringed with golden-tinted lashes; some shrinking being, as pale and prim as the medieval saints in his Pre-Raphaelite engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of a home.<sup>84</sup>

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81 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p355

82 Carnell, Jennifer. *The Literary Lives of M E Braddon*. Hastings: The Sensation Press, 2000, p158

83 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p21

84 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p40

He is confronted with the reality that the woman to whom he is actually attracted is: “A Cleopatra with a snub nose two sizes too small for her face, and a taste for horseflesh!” and not one who confines herself to the home.<sup>85</sup> He presciently likens her to Lola Montes, an infamous actress of the day who was arrested for bigamy and accused of murder. He proposes marriage despite his belief that his name should never be “dragged through the mire of a divorce court by a guilty woman,” his assumption being that only women can ever be guilty.<sup>86</sup> Such is his confidence in his mastery, he thinks he can impose his authority on her, even where her father has failed. He is quickly disabused of this belief when he chastises her for spending her own money. Aurora responds angrily:

This cross-questioning is scarcely pleasant, Captain Bulstrode. If I choose to give a five-pound note to any person who may ask me for it, I expect full license to do so; and I will not submit to be called to account for my actions – even by you.<sup>87</sup>

Aurora cannot understand why she should relinquish her financial autonomy, but the failure of Parliament to pass the Married Women's Property Bill in this very year meant that wives still ceased to hold assets in their own right upon marriage. Although the Bill acknowledged that the law of property was “unjust in Principle”<sup>88</sup> with respect to women, some MPs felt that the gentle sex lacked the mental faculties necessary to manage their own affairs.<sup>89</sup> Aurora's inheritance, like that of many other wealthy daughters, was held in trust, an extra-legal arrangement which circumvented the ideology of the separate spheres. The implication of the law was that the husband should control the purse strings, but the monied classes found ways to protect their interests.

Bulstrode demands to know the reason for her enigmatic and assertive behaviour and is enraged when she declares: “This is my secret, which I cannot tell you.”<sup>90</sup> Aurora believes she has a perfect right to a private past, but Bulstrode must have a wife with a “stainless purity of soul.”<sup>91</sup> He ends their engagement in a fit of pique, and the reader is informed that this event takes place in January 1858, which is when the newly-established Divorce Court started sitting. It is as though Bulstrode sets himself up to emulate the “incarnate omnipotence” of Sir Cresswell Cresswell, as he effectively puts her on trial for crimes against the feminine ideal. His verdict is damning: she is “no fit wife for an

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85 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p35

86 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p33

87 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p88

88 *Bill to amend Law with respect to Property of Married Women* (1857)

89 *Hansard* (3rd series) 146 (15 July 1857), cols 1515-23

90 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p103

91 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p31

honourable man.”<sup>92</sup> Such behaviour vindicates Aurora's decision not to seek a divorce from Conyers, as this blurring of the boundaries between husband and judge suggests the collusion of patriarchal power in divorce cases. Bulstrode's attempt to quarantine her resembles Robert Audley's action towards Lady Audley, but declares her “unfit” rather than mad. He then proposes to Lucy Floyd, who is:

exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife. She had been educated to that end by a careful mother. Purity and goodness had watched over her and hemmed her in from her cradle.<sup>93</sup>

He is thereby establishing the feminine ideal alongside his own embodiment of the masculine ideal. The reader catches a glimpse of domesticity which embodies the appropriate spheres: “Lucy Bulstrode read a High-Church novel, while her husband sat with the 'Times' before his face.”<sup>94</sup> Bulstrode is astonished when an old schoolfriend, John Mellish, proposes to Aurora and is accepted. He is fascinated and in admiration of her horsewomanship, rather than threatened or repelled by it. A physically imposing man who is not afraid of manual labour, he has no need to establish his masculinity in relation to his wife's femininity. Aurora, conversely, is provoked into displaying her own power over one of husband's employees when he mistreats her dog. She is incensed when he abuses his superior physical strength and uses hers, in turn, to chastise him:

Taller than the stable-man by a foot and a half, she towered above him, her cheeks white with rage, her eyes flashing fury, her hat fallen off, and her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, sublime in her passion.<sup>95</sup>

Her behaviour appears unwomanly in contrast with that of her cousin, who has been carefully tutored to suppress her natural instincts. Aurora's outburst represents the pent-up frustrations of women who are trained to be proper – the Laura Fairlies and the Lucy Bulstrodes. Braddon's repeated references throughout her fiction to real-life murderesses, such as Madeleine Smith and Maria Manning remind the reader that not all women are able to contain their madwoman in the attic. In this respect, Hartman describes the exploits of such heroines as Aurora Floyd as a “safety valve” which allowed women to vent their frustrations vicariously.<sup>96</sup> Showalter writes that “earlier women novelists had learned to conceal and repress their own protest,”<sup>97</sup> but in Aurora Floyd, Braddon creates a heroine who is able to appropriate masculine power and express herself forcefully. She challenges the idea that men alone

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92 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p105

93 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p48

94 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p399

95 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p138

96 Hartman, Mary S. *Victorian Murderesses*. (London: Robson Books, 1977) p84

97 Showalter, p174

reserve the right to use violence, women being expected to endure it passively.

Mellish, although understandably surprised by her outburst, does not admonish her. She rewards his understanding, and “from the first hour in which she laid her head upon his broad breast she was true to him – true as a wife should be...”<sup>98</sup> and she had “never for one moment regretted her marriage with John Mellish”<sup>99</sup> They are happily married until the unfortunate reappearance of the not-dead Conyers. Like George Talboys, Conyers does not seek to reclaim Aurora out of a sense of love and moral probity, rather he wants to get his hands on her £50,000. He sees himself as having been “plotted against and thwarted by a woman's cunning at every turn,”<sup>100</sup> but Aurora's crime is inadvertent, as she genuinely believed Conyers to be dead when she married Mellish. As Tatum argues, she “does not commit criminal, treacherous acts as much as she is acted upon by signifiers beyond her control.”<sup>101</sup> Unlike Lady Audley, she does not perpetrate wicked deeds – her crime is to act instinctively, without giving consideration as to whether her behaviour would be deemed proper and within the appropriate sphere.

Conyers expects Aurora to unquestioningly submit to his authority, in spite of aggressive behaviour. She refuses to do so, demanding: “Would you have me love you? or respect you? or tolerate you?”<sup>102</sup> He expects all of this by right, without having done anything to earn it, other than having married her through greed. Like Lady Audley, she is challenging the contract of the spheres when there is no protection offered in return for feminine subservience. Braddon shows that marriage vows are hollow unless accompanied by love and respect. Aurora refuses to be cowed into wifely submission, the narrator remarking that such a display of defiance is rare:

Have you ever seen this kind of woman in a passion? Impulsive, nervous, sensitive, sanguine; with such a one passion is a madness—brief, thank Heaven! and expending itself in sharply cruel words, and convulsive rendings of lace and ribbon, or coroners' juries might have to sit even oftener than they do.<sup>103</sup>

Braddon and her readers would have had in mind the high-profile trial of Madeleine Smith, accused of murdering her lover after a violent confrontation. When Conyers is subsequently found murdered, Bulstrode initially believes Aurora to be guilty of the deed and takes it upon himself to investigate.

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98 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p142

99 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p169

100 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p247

101 Tatum, Karen E. "Bearing Her Secret: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*." *Journal of Popular Culture* 40.3 (2007): 503-26 (p516)

102 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p281

103 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p282

When she comes to his house to seek assistance, he again assumes the role of a judge and effectively puts her on trial again, declaring her to be a “guilty creature”.<sup>104</sup> His interest is concerned more with proving that he made the right decision in breaking off their engagement, rather than in ensuring that justice is done. His masculinity is again in the ascendant, as he declares when grappling with the real culprit:

You'd better not trifle with me... I've been accustomed to deal with refractory Sepoys in India, and I've had to struggle with a tiger before now.<sup>105</sup>

Again, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, we have the image of the white man faced with insurrection both abroad and at home. His struggle with women seems to present him with far more problems than the refractory Sepoys. When the hitherto submissive Lucy questions his judgement, he stares in “blank amazement at his mutinous wife.”<sup>106</sup> He idealises a woman with a “transparent soul” which can be “freely unveiled to him”. However, “as a proper lady, Lucy has been *trained* to be opaque, hiding her feelings from view.”<sup>107</sup> Aurora's soul has been transparent throughout, and the danger implied by her assertive behaviour turns out to be benign. She is not a murderer, her bigamy was accidental, and she eschewed divorce in order to avoid upsetting her father. She is a good wife to Mellish, and at the end vows there should be “no more unhappiness, -- only love, and peace, and union for all of us,” an unequivocally appropriate feminine statement.<sup>108</sup>

Pykett concludes that “Aurora's story is the story of the gradual taming of the wild beast of the improper feminine.”<sup>109</sup> However, Aurora is scarcely more “proper” by the novel's conclusion, despite being more domesticated:

So we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born; and though there are alterations being made at Mellish, and loose-boxes for brood mares building upon the site of the north lodge, and a subscription tan-gallop being laid across Harper's Common, I doubt if my heroine will ever again care so much for horseflesh, or take quite so keen an interest in weight-for-age races as compared to handicaps, as she has done in days that are gone.<sup>110</sup>

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104 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p351

105 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p454

106 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p428

107 Nayder, Lillian. “The Threshold of an Open Window.” *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*. Eds. Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006) p196

108 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p365

109 Pykett, p88

110 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p459

Critics invariably excise the sentence about the alterations being made to indulge Aurora's passion for horseriding and stress the fact that she is "less defiantly bright". Mitchell argues that "Before a [heroine who rides horses] can reach a happy ending, she must suffer enough weakness, illness and humiliation to melt her down into chastened femininity."<sup>111</sup> This ignores the teleological experience of Bulstrode who discovers that his arrogance and pursuit of the ideal has lost him the woman to whom he was so attracted. His male gallantry was "a cover for aggression against and distrust of women."<sup>112</sup> He admits his error, feeling that he had "grievously wronged, insulted, and humiliated a woman, whose worse fault had been the trusting folly of an innocent girl."<sup>113</sup> He is, no doubt, even less defiantly bright than Aurora, and more changed by his experiences. Eventually, Aurora is able to see him as "a wise judge, to whose sentence she would be willing to submit."<sup>114</sup> He has learned the facts of her case rather than making a peremptory judgement.

Aurora is now a mother and therefore has changed priorities from when she was an impetuous youth. She has matured, rather than weakened. She has recognised the need to moderate her behaviour, but does not sublimate her true character or, as Schipper suggests, display "casual indifference to her eventual enforced submission to male power."<sup>115</sup> She has negotiated a role for herself which is different from but equal to that of her husband. When she finds a man she can trust, she feels able to relinquish some of her power, just as Mellish is sufficiently secure in his masculinity to give her considerable latitude, assimilating rather than incarcerating her. Schroeder argues that "paternalistic Victorian society robs [Aurora] of her vital energy and uniqueness"<sup>116</sup> but this has more to do with elopement, a broken engagement, calumny for murder, and childbirth – all before the age of twenty. Braddon's reference to the novel as a "simple drama of domestic life" indicates that the reader should not interpret the concluding scene too literally.<sup>117</sup> Braddon was very careful this time to create an "amicable bigamist", but her message regarding the realities of marriage for women remains undiminished.

Braddon illustrates in the two novels how the contract implicit in the separate spheres is often broken

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111 Mitchell, Sally. The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981) p75

112 Nayder, *The Threshold of an Open Window*, p194

113 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p399

114 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p360

115 Schipper, Jan Davis. Becoming Frauds: Unconventional Heroines in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Sensation Fiction. (New York: Writers Club Press, 2002) p8

116 Schroeder, Natalie. "Feminine Sensationalism, Eroticism, and Self-Assertion: M. E. Braddon and Ouida." Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 7 (Spring, 1988): 87-103 (p99)

117 Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, p457

by husbands. Both Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd suffer at the hands of men who wish them to be subordinate without offering them any protection in return. They can prove their manliness only by subjugating their wives. As Tatum identifies: “what turns out to be the danger lurking under the surface is not the engulfing feminine, but the very slippery nature of masculine identity.”<sup>118</sup> Masculinity and femininity were established as opposites that defined one another, and challenges to those definitions resulted in a bid to establish clear polarities in the prevailing ideology. As social constructs, they required continual buttressing against the forces of societal change. Poovey writes that:

The epistemological term “woman” could guarantee men's identity only if difference was fixed – only if, that is, the binary opposition between the sexes was more important than any other kinds of difference that real women might experience. And this depended... on limiting women's right to define or describe themselves.

Braddon allows her heroines to define themselves: Aurora seeks more independence than the prescribed gender roles allow, whilst Lady Audley seeks the protection they supposedly afford and herself breaks the “contract” in so doing. Showalter and Nayder criticise Braddon for her conservatism, but as Terry writes: “Complying, as she had to comply, with the Victorian code for novelists, she became a master of ambiguity.”<sup>119</sup> High profile obscenity trials involving Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1857 and Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt* in 1866 showed that authors had to tread carefully when it came to adultery. Braddon's use of bigamy ultimately allows for a more powerful argument. Had she allowed Lady Audley and Aurora to divorce their unsatisfactory first husbands, she would have had no choice but to show them ruined and repentant like Isabel Vane in *East Lynne*. Braddon indicated in an article that coincided with the serialisation of *Lady Audley's Secret* that her novels were intended as more than just a good read: “if these books do not teach them better things than to lie on the sofa all day reading them, and to spend all the rest of the day talking of them, they do not read those books aright.”<sup>120</sup> Her superficial conservatism ensured that her work appeared in the circulating libraries; more overtly radical writers, such as Rhoda Broughton, found themselves excluded.

## **NOVELIST OF REVOLT: RHODA BROUGHTON**

Whilst Braddon was a “master of ambiguity”, Rhoda Broughton was far more direct in her approach, provoking moral outrage in Mrs Oliphant, who saw herself as “the proper novelist in opposition to

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118 Tatum, p510

119 Wolff, p16

120 'My Daughters', *Welcome Guest*, 3 (1861), 79-82 qtd in Flint, Kate. *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) p181

Miss Broughton.” Geraldine Jewsbury, reader for the publisher Bentley's and self-styled guardian of the reading public's sensibilities, was similarly appalled. Where she was unable to prevent publication of one of Broughton's novels, she would attempt to condemn it through her reviews in the *Athenaeum*. Broughton later parodied her as Miss Grimston, reviewer in *The Porch*, a literary journal to which “the sheeplike race of circulating-library readers look in order to make their minds up for them.”<sup>121</sup> An unsuccessful novelist and a reformed feminist, Miss Grimston “confined herself to tomahawking others.”<sup>122</sup>

Despite the vehement criticism Broughton's novels attracted, they were highly popular and Captain Markham of HMS Alert christened a remote Arctic mountain 'Mount Rhoda' in “grateful acknowledgement of the pleasure which her books had given the officers of the ship on their perilous voyage.”<sup>123</sup> Although banned by the circulating libraries until the mid 1870s, Broughton enjoyed sales in the thousands. Her work is largely overlooked by modern critics who often consign her to the footnotes with other forgotten women novelists. She deserves, however, to be recognised as a daring voice that articulated the anxieties of her readers. As the *Spectator* observed, she was a “novelist of revolt.”<sup>124</sup>

As a female author prepared to tackle contemporary gender issues, Broughton was often likened to Braddon. Indeed, when she moved to Oxford in 1878, many of the local academics refused to speak to her, believing her to be the infamous Miss Braddon. Broughton and Braddon, however, were very different novelists. Although Broughton is often classified within the “sensation school”, her novels lack the mistaken identities and skeletons in the cupboards of that genre. Rather it is the passionate nature of her heroines that provides the sensation. Pykett observes that “Braddon's women seem remarkably uninterested in sex; Broughton's exist in a permanent state of throbbing palpitation.”<sup>125</sup> She was arguably the first woman writer to focus on the female body and its desires. Broughton was able to grant herself more license; unlike Braddon, she had an income independent of her writing and no family to support. Commercial success, therefore, was not an overwhelming consideration, and she was able to test the parameters of acceptable morality.

### **Unreal and repulsive: Not Wisely But too Well**

Broughton's first novel was begun in 1862 and serialised in *Dublin University Magazine*, edited by her

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121 Broughton, Rhoda. *A Beginner*. (London: Macmillan and Co, 1899) p131

122 Broughton, *A Beginner*, p142

123 Black, Helen. *Notable Women Authors*. (London: Maclaren, 1906) p42

124 “Novels.”, *The Spectator*, 1 October 1867, p1173

125 Pykett, p57

uncle, Sheridan le Fanu. Confident of its wider success, he encouraged her to submit it to Bentley's. Geraldine Jewsbury promptly rejected it as "the most thoroughly sensual tale I have read in English for a long time."<sup>126</sup> Broughton revised it substantially, "hoping *this* tale may avoid offending your reader's delicate sense of propriety."<sup>127</sup> However, subsequent negotiations broke down and the book was eventually published in 1867 by rivals Tinsley's, who realised that sensuality sold books.

In the three-volume version, Kate Chester falls in love with the rakish and athletic Dare Stamer, only to discover that he is already married. He implores her to elope with him, but, after some equivocation, she resists. He dies following a road accident, and Kate joins a convent and throws all her energies into good works in the community. In the earlier serialised version, Stamer shoots Kate when she refuses to elope with him, and he then turns the gun on himself. Although the plot was substantially bowdlerised, *The Times* still found Kate "unreal and repulsive" and they could "scarcely say a civil word about her."<sup>128</sup> Kate does not entirely extricate herself from Stamer when she discovers he is already married and, unlike the unfortunate women of the more conventional bigamy plot, she knowingly advances towards her fate. In *Jane Eyre*, bigamy is averted thanks to several timely *dei ex machina*, but Kate must stand or fall by her own judgements.

Kate is absolutely central to the narrative, with most of the other characters merely ciphers. Her consciousness is the focus and the scenes are dominated by her emotional responses. Although the male narrator provides a moral voice, occasionally interrupting the narrative to alert the reader to Kate's transgressions, he undermines his objectivity by revealing his unrequited love for her, describing his narrative as a "threnody".<sup>129</sup> The *Athenaeum*, at any rate, was not convinced by his role and what it referred to as these "misplaced attempts at sermonising," declaring that they "simply disgust".<sup>130</sup> Such contiguity of right and wrong apparently compromised Broughton's duty to provide a morality tale for her impressionable readers. In employing this potentially unreliable narrator, Broughton provides the necessary commentary on her heroine's morality, but at the same time ensures that it is ambiguous, thereby leaving the reader to judge and draw their own conclusions.

Although the novel was much castigated for its sexual depravity, it is relatively tame with most of the action centred on Kate's attempts to resist the "mad wild-beast passion" of Stamer, who urges her

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126 Heller, Tamar. "That Muddy, Polluted Flood of Earthly Love': Ambivalence About the Body in Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But too Well*." *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*. Eds. Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006) p87

127 Terry, R C. *Victorian Popular Fiction 1860-80*. (London: Macmillan, 1983) p39

128 "Not Wisely But too Well." *The Times* 25 December 1867: 4

129 Broughton, Rhoda. *Not Wisely but Too Well*. (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1993) p5

130 "Not Wisely But too Well." *The Athenaeum* 2088 (1867): 569

towards a quasi-bigamous union.<sup>131</sup> Kate is placed in a highly problematic situation: as a woman, she is expected to defer to male authority, but what should she do when that authority is misused? She acknowledges: “[y]ou are my right and wrong, Dare, now,”<sup>132</sup> and he takes advantage of his apparent apotheosis, imagining her to be completely malleable: “How soft and downy she is, like a kitten! I am morally certain that she would never scratch.”<sup>133</sup> He is “morally certain” because he is subscribing to the conventional view of female subservience. To him Kate is a “docile little creature” like a “Circassian slave at the market of Constantinople.”<sup>134</sup> She realises that Stamer is “in every respect unlikely to prove a satisfactory object for that passion which forms the main plot of a woman's life,”<sup>135</sup> but is initially intimidated by his “superior intelligence” and “powerful figure”.<sup>136</sup> Unlike Mellish in *Aurora* Floyd, Stamer uses his masculinity to manoeuvre Kate into a subordinate position. He attempts to control Kate through a mock marriage, trying to convince her that a verbal vow will suffice to unite them, without the need for an official service: “I want to hear you yourself bind yourself to me; it will seem to me then a knot that neither man nor God can untie.”<sup>137</sup> It is clear, however, that he has no regard for the sanctity of marriage, having already broken the vow he made to his first wife. He seals their relationship with a kiss:

he bent down his head from its stately height to her small uplifted face, nearer, nearer, till their lips met, and were joined in a wedlock so fast, so long enduring, so firm, that it seemed as if they never could be divorced again.<sup>138</sup>

Broughton here removes marriage from its traditional religious context, enabling her to examine it as a civil contract rather than a sacred covenant. In so doing, she shows that this contract is not equally binding for both parties. Stamer takes advantage of Kate's passionate love for him, and tells her “You'll never repent of your bargain, child,”<sup>139</sup> as though she has made a Faustian pact, rather than a marriage vow. It is reminiscent of the “bargain” Lady Audley makes with Sir Michael. Stamer clearly only wants to “marry” Kate so they can have sex and he offers her this sham marriage in return for the surrender of her chastity, believing that bigamy will prove morally superior to adultery. Repent she does, however, finally renouncing Stamer and his specious morality. He is outraged that she has broken her oath to him, expecting her to be bound by the terms of the marriage contract, without enjoying any

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131 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p271

132 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p114

133 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p39

134 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p96

135 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p45

136 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p28

137 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p118

138 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p102

139 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p121

of its protection. She realises that instead of being a god, he is a devil who has “dragged another soul down to hell” with him, thereby continuing the Faustian allusion.<sup>140</sup> Stamer expects Kate to remain within her appropriate subordinate sphere, but offers nothing in return. The “contract” is shown to be one-sided.

Kate removes herself from temptation by setting up home with her sister and brother. Whereas her brother is able to sow his wild oats, her existence is far more restricted and she must confine herself to domestic activities. She resists the traditional marriage market and the suggestion that she should instead concentrate her charms on Stamer's brother, the slow-witted and spindly Sir Guy, “heir to a rent-roll of a clear £15,000 per annum.”<sup>141</sup> Kate was never a “good hand at this sort of world's arithmetic,” and cannot countenance marriage as a commercial transaction.<sup>142</sup> Broughton shows here that the domestic sphere is a profoundly commercial, rather than protective, environment and it proves to be unsafe for Kate when she becomes the focus of her cousin George's attentions. Although an unattractive specimen, he believes she should be grateful to him and tries to touch her. She responds to his complacency by declaring: “You think, I do not doubt, that I'm to be had for the asking. That's the way men always think about women.”<sup>143</sup> She struggles free of his presumptuous embrace, “as the remembrance of Dare's solemn charge flashes over her.”<sup>144</sup> The social conditioning of the prevailing gender ideology ensures that Kate remains loyal to her mock marriage vow.

Her loyalty is shown to be misplaced during a chance encounter with Stamer at the Great Exhibition, where he is entertaining a married woman. He describes his companion as a “bad woman”, thereby exposing the double standard that sees her adultery as a greater sin than his.<sup>145</sup> The scales fall from her eyes and “the room seemed to be going round and round with her, the statues tumbling off their pedestals.”<sup>146</sup> Her “fighting gladiator” also falls off his pedestal. Just as Braddon's male characters often discover their feminine ideal to be very different from reality, Kate realises her masculine ideal has feet of clay. He tries to remind her of her “marriage vows” to him and uses emotional blackmail to persuade her to return to him. She is expected to do so out of a sense of duty, rather than because he is offering her anything in return. However, she renounces the idea of female dependence, informing him: “I can live without you, Dare... I have done it now for a year and a half, and I'm not dead; I'm not

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140 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p255

141 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p32

142 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p32

143 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p230

144 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p231

145 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p244

146 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p243

even sick or ailing.”<sup>147</sup> She has no need of a husband who refuses to assume the responsibilities implied by the contract. He responds in desperation: “just say, 'I will'. Those two shorts words will marry us so effectually in the sight of God. Say them, Kate, say them.”<sup>148</sup> He sets himself above both the law and the church, and believes Kate should accept his authority in preference to that of those other hegemonic institutions. Broughton shows that the law is enforcing obedience rather than offering protection.

Kate is resolute and effectively “divorces” herself from him, becoming an independent woman again. She sees the contract as being null and void, Stamer having failed in his duty to her. In an attempt at redemption, she throws herself into distributing religious tracts in the local dockyard community, a place “where no respectable woman dare put her nose.”<sup>149</sup> The narrator informs the reader that she “had a mortal fear of men of the lower orders generally” and the implication is that she fears sexual attack.<sup>150</sup> The irony is that she feels most at risk while traversing the public sphere among the working classes, whereas the real threat is posed by the aristocratic Stamer and his fellow club members who see women as “fair game”.<sup>151</sup> He is serially unfaithful, posing a risk to his wives, both legal and bigamous. Broughton shows that the protection implicit in the ideology of the spheres was misleading. *Not Wisely But too Well* was written against the backdrop of the Contagious Diseases Act, a series of measures during the 1860s that forced women suspected of being prostitutes to undergo medical examinations and reinforced the double standard instituted by the Matrimonial Causes Act. The Metropolitan Police wanted to extend the Acts to cover “any woman who goes to places of public resort,” and Walkowitz sees the acts as part of a “grand plan” to create a “moral and sanitary utopia.”<sup>152</sup> Whereas the Matrimonial Causes Act regulated women within marriage, the Contagious Diseases Acts can be seen as an attempt to curtail women's movement in the public sphere.

Kate returns to the apparent “safety” of the home, where her dubious status is perceived as a problem by her sister, who is now married to George. She has been publicly linked with Stamer but is unable to legitimise the relationship. Stamer, after having been seriously injured in a carriage accident, makes one last bid to regain her. He emphasises that his strength is diminished and that she will therefore be less subordinate: “Kate, you are not afraid of me now, are you? I shall never be able to do you harm any

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147 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p248

148 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p251

149 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p166

150 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p180

151 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p29

152 Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp70, 79

more; the lion has had his teeth and claws drawn.”<sup>153</sup> Like Mr Rochester, he is emasculated, but there is to be no revelatory “Reader, I married him.” The “kitten” is resolute and renounces men altogether, deciding instead to become a Protestant Sister of Mercy, declaring: “I must go and find some work in the world to do.”<sup>154</sup> Her sister is horrified by her decision, questioning as it does the centrality of marriage and also suggesting that women can exist without men:

Kate, I always hated those sisterhoods; they have been a curse to numberless families, I am certain; a number of women huddled together, cut off from their lives, and their friends, and all their prospects in life. Why cannot women keep to their right functions of marrying and being happy?<sup>155</sup>

What she describes, however, is the situation in which many women found themselves within marriage, rather than only outside of it. Kate responds with a damning indictment of loveless marriage:

Be happy if they can, by all means; people's ideas about happiness differ, you know. We had better not get upon a definition of happiness; and marry also, by all means, if they can have your luck, and get the man they are in love with, otherwise marriage would be a punishment hardly inferior to being tied to a dead body.<sup>156</sup>

Not only does Broughton expose the shortcomings of traditional gender ideology, she attacks the institution of marriage itself. A woman of Kate's passionate nature cannot understand why someone should marry for any reason than that of love, and she does not accept that women's work is marriage. By becoming a nun, she contributes her labour to society but protects her body, her relationship being a spiritual one with God, rather than a physical one with a husband. Like the thousands of other “surplus” women of the period, there are few alternatives open to Kate. Unlike Lady Audley, who remains within the appropriate feminine domestic sphere by becoming a governess, Kate adopts a role that places her in an ambiguous place that brings some of the opportunities of the public space within the safety of the domestic sphere. In her depiction of Kate's desire to control her own body and labour, Broughton prefigures some of the later work of Sarah Grand and Olive Schreiner. Broughton refuses to resolve the plot neatly with either traditional marriage or prostrated repentance. Instead of being released by Stamer's death for a legitimate marriage and therefore a return to normative behaviour, Kate rejects the model entirely. She is “unreal and repulsive” because she exposes the double standard and refuses to accept the inequity of the spheres.

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153 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p349

154 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p355

155 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p330

156 Broughton, *Not Wisely But too Well*, p330

## Uncleanly Suggestions: Cometh up as a Flower

*Cometh Up as a Flower*; although written after *Not Wisely But too Well* in 1862-3, hit the literary scene first in 1867. The heroine, Nell LeStrange, is forced by her scheming sister into a financially advantageous marriage with rich aristocrat, Sir Hugh Lancaster. She yearns for her handsome but impecunious former suitor, Dick M'Gregor, and fantasises about eloping with him to India, but he is reluctant to commit bigamy. She ultimately expires from consumption after losing the will to live. The critical reception was mixed, with some confusion as to the gender of the author. Geraldine Jewsbury in the *Athenaeum* declared that it must be a man, who "shows himself destitute of refinement of thought or feeling, and ignorant of all that women either are or ought to be."<sup>157</sup> Unlike Kate in *Not Wisely But too Well*, Nell tells her own story and her experiences are not mediated through a male narrator. She makes it clear that she is soliloquising and that there will be no "marks of dissent" from others - we will be witnessing her subjectivity alone.<sup>158</sup> She is also relating her story retrospectively and with little remorse, in a style reminiscent of the more traditionally male bildungsroman. This "portrait of the modern young woman as presented from her own point of view" struck terror into the heart of Mrs Oliphant, who thought it inappropriate for a heroine to control her own narrative.<sup>159</sup> To compound matters further, she is also motherless and rejoices in this lack of restraint:

It was to me a matter of unfeigned and heartfelt gratulation that my mother had died in my infancy. As often as I came in contact with well-drilled daughters, nestling under the wing of a portly mamma, I hugged myself on my freedom...If I had had a mother, I should have had to mend my gloves, and keep my hair tidy, and practice on the piano, and be initiated into the mysteries of stitching.<sup>160</sup>

There is no mother on whom she can model herself and she grows up in the absence of the traditional gender dichotomy. Later on she declares: "if it is a sin to disobey a parent, it is also a sin to break one's word, and when one must commit one of two sins, one may as well choose the pleasantest."<sup>161</sup> It is evident, therefore, that Nell considers herself autonomous, relying on her own judgement and interpretation rather than being influenced by the example of others. The *Times* decided that Nell's "flippancy...revolts the reader,"<sup>162</sup> shocked by a heroine who lacks respect for the boundaries of feminine propriety.

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157 Casey, Ellen Miller. "Edging Women Out?: Reviews of Women Novelists in The "Athenaeum," 1860-1900." *Victorian Studies* 39.2 (1996): 151-71, p155

158 Broughton, *Cometh Up as a Flower*; p217

159 Oliphant, Margaret. "Novels." *Blackwood's* 102 (September 1867): 257-80 (p265)

160 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p239

161 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p303

162 "Cometh up as a Flower." *The Times* 6 June 1867: 9

The reader follows Nell's progression from naïve orphan to woman with awareness of the inequities, and indeed iniquities, of marriage. Broughton again moves marriage from the domestic to the commercial sphere and shows that courtship rituals were often nothing more than ruthless business transactions. Nell makes an entirely cynical and mercenary union, echoing that of the eponymous heroine of Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory*. Pykett argues that earlier fiction satirised marriage through commercial metaphors, whereas the women's sensation novel directly examined the institution as a commercial transaction.<sup>163</sup> It is this very directness that makes such treatment sensational and Broughton is making a bold and unequivocal statement by using the language of commerce literally rather than metaphorically. Unlike Eleanor Vane, Nell does not learn to love her husband, and her real marriage is contrasted unfavourably with her spiritually bigamous marriage with Dick.

Although Nell is greatly moved by her dying father's wish that she should bring the family back into its "right position" by marrying Sir Hugh, it is only when Dolly forges a letter to Dick, calling off their engagement, that she agrees to go ahead. The traditional Victorian daughter would have been expected to immediately defer to her father in matrimonial matter, her marriage effectively a transaction between him and her future husband. Dolly reminds her of the material benefits of the match and the advantages of the "little, dark, middle-aged baronet" over the "great beautiful fair dragoon".<sup>164</sup>

I'd swear to love, honour and obey, not *him*, not *him* (with a gesture of contempt), but his £12,000 a year, his French cook, and his opera-box, and I'd keep my vow, too!<sup>165</sup>

The emphasis is on marriage as a financial contract. Dolly urges Nell to make an effort with her appearance to ensure that Sir Hugh will fall for her charms, but she refuses to ignore the mercantile connotations:

I won't be made up for sale; if he chooses to bid for this piece of goods, he shall see all the flaws in it. I don't want to cheat him in his bargain.<sup>166</sup>

Concerned by Nell's recalcitrance, Dolly contrives that she is injured in a carriage incident in order to make her more compliant, a reversal of Dare Stamer's fall in *Not Wisely But too Well*. Sir Hugh appears at her bedside, hoping to take advantage of her weakened state, but she is recalcitrant and utterly

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163 Pykett, p65

164 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p243

165 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p161

166 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p211

repelled by the way in which he tries to infantilise her. He persists in his suit and finally proposes marriage. Nell's response, like Lady Audley, is to immediately ask him for some money, as it seemed the "most matter-of-fact piece of barter in the world; so much young flesh and blood for so much current coin of the realm."<sup>167</sup> Feeling no love for him, she is unable to express herself in anything other than commercial terms. She imagines "years of bondage" as though she is about to be indentured rather than married.<sup>168</sup> It is evident that they lack any mutual interests or understanding. Dick longs to share ideas with her as his intellectual equal, whereas Sir Hugh admits: "I never can make out what women can have to think about, except their crochet work; what are your pleasant thoughts about, I wonder?"<sup>169</sup> His interest in horticulture is restricted to discussing dwarf espaliers with Nell's father, suggesting his desire to constrain nature, and that of Nell in particular. She resigns herself to her fate, making no attempt to feign affection for her husband-to-be: "I mean to be your wife, and I suppose we shall manage to rub on pretty much as other people do.' But to my own heart I say that 'I would that I were dead!'"<sup>170</sup>

After the ceremony, she reflects:

I said "I will" also; but said it with as much life and animation as a doll shows when she opens her eyes, the string at her side being pulled.<sup>171</sup>

The doll analogy suggests an automaton programmed to perform only one task, in this case dutiful obedience. She is required to make appropriate responses, rather than any expression of free will. She views her marriage to Sir Hugh as nothing more than legalised prostitution. Broughton here evokes Mary Wollstonecraft's earlier views, and also the more contemporary Marxist idea, that bourgeois marriage was an exchange of sexual access for financial gain and therefore no different from prostitution. Outside of radical literature, no other writer at this time would have expressed such a forthright opinion. Nell's emotional and physical response to Sir Hugh's embrace is vividly portrayed, and there is no narrator to admonish her. She "shudders at his proximity" and wants chloroform to deaden her senses, confessing that she wishes he could make sexual demands on someone else:

I was his chattel as much as his pet lean-headed bay mare, and I felt that he had justice on his side. If he might not insinuate his arm around my *wązł*, round whose waist might he? Sometimes I will confess to you that I wished he would transfer his amities to some other person, even it if were the

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167 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p211

168 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p216

169 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p212

170 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p224

171 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p229

cook.<sup>172</sup>

She expresses frustration that her husband's "other servants" are able to give notice, but she is a "fixture for life".<sup>173</sup>

Nell becomes aware of the limitations of marriage, and realises that, contrary to popular belief, women are not born with the innate ability to remain faithful to their husbands in both thought and deed. The marriage service does not exert a "cabalistic charm" to stop her thinking of Dick rather than Sir Hugh:

I found that I thought of Dick infinitely more; more regretfully, passionately, longingly, now that I was Lady Lancaster; and it was criminal of me so to think, then I had done as Nelly Lestrangle, when it was only unwise and unworldly.<sup>174</sup>

She acknowledges that "only very bad wicked women ever cared for anybody but their husbands after they were married," but this insight does not precipitate any obvious contrition.<sup>175</sup> She merely accepts that she must belong to that "naughty band" and continues to indulge in her spiritual bigamy.<sup>176</sup> In an interesting use of self-reflexion, Nell looks to fiction to guide her. She reads a novel "about a married woman, who ran away from her husband and suffered the extremity of human ills in consequence."<sup>177</sup> Showalter identifies the novel as *East Lynne*, and claims that it convinces Nell to decide against eloping with Dick.<sup>178</sup> However, Nell rejects the moral of the story, believing she would not have been miserable had Dick taken her with him. Instead, she fantasises:

When we meet next, shall we be two bodiless spirits, sexless, passionless essences, passing each other without recognition in the fields of ether? God forbid that it should be so.<sup>179</sup>

Nell's frankness provoked conniptions in Mrs Oliphant, who described this scene as "disgusting in the fullest sense of the word."<sup>180</sup> This interpretation possibly says more about the critic than the author, as Broughton was unlikely to be making a direct reference to sex, rather using "sexless" to mean "genderless". Nell believes that the sexes are different but equal, and imagines that the inequity of the spheres will be redressed in heaven. Oliphant deems this emotional outburst as being far worse than

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172 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p244

173 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p244

174 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p244

175 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p244

176 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p244

177 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p265

178 Showalter, p173

179 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p78

180 Oliphant (1867), p267

the wicked deeds of Lady Audley:

A woman, driven wild by the discovery of domestic fraud and great wrong, might propose any sin in her frenzy, and yet might be innocent; whereas a woman who makes uncleanly suggestions in the calm of her ordinary talk, is a creature altogether unendurable and beyond the pale.<sup>181</sup>

Lady Audley's bigamy, murder and arson are more acceptable than a sexual fantasy, presumably because her sins are all committed in order to preserve her precarious position within the domestic sphere. In *The Woman in White*, Laura Fairlie continues to think of Walter Hartright after her marriage to the rebarbative Sir Percival Glyde, but legitimises these feelings through their eventual marriage. Nell is expressing desire in the knowledge that she can reach Dick only through the "billows of sin or the floods of death."<sup>182</sup>

Nell is contrasted with her sister Dolly, who is only too aware of the benefits of a wealthy husband, and is prepared to fight her way through the marriage market in order to obtain one. Although content to fulfil her filial duty by marrying for financial advantage, she has to act in a distinctly unfeminine way in order to do so. Nell compares her unbridled happiness with Dick with the unemotional response of Dolly to the death of her fiancé, the "three-quarter-witted young Croesus," which are confined to wishing he had lived a little longer in order that she might instead have been his widow.<sup>183</sup> Whereas Nell has "carrotty locks" and a wide mouth, Dolly is more obviously designed to appeal to male admirers:

Dolly was a very fair woman to look upon; a small oval face, liquid brown eyes that had a way of looking up meekly and beseechingly, that no man less self-contained than St. Senanus could resist, a little sharp cut nose absolutely perfect, a sweet grave mouth, and an expression nun-like, dove-like, Madonna-like[.]<sup>184</sup>

Dolly's beauty is entirely specious and she is designed merely to attract a husband, as a brightly-coloured flower attracts a pollinating insect. Although Nell is the spiritual bigamist, Dolly is more overtly sexual and it has nothing to do with love. She deliberately flirts with Dick and "plays with the wide-open iris flowers, with the stiff wet iris stems that lie in her lap."<sup>185</sup> The rather transparent sexual imagery must have gone over Mrs Oliphant's head, as she reserves her censure for Nell and overlooks her predatory sister. Dolly is likened to a large cat:

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181 Oliphant (1867), p267

182 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p229

183 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p76

184 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p14

185 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*, p140

If Dolly had ever pre-existed, it must have been in the shape of one of the feline tribe; not a comfortable old tabby sitting staid beside the hearth...but a tigress or a panther, sleek, lithe, beautiful, stealthy...she lay in wait to pounce on deer, and kid, and man.<sup>186</sup>

She is reminiscent of the hideous panther-like figure, that symbol of dangerous female sexuality, created by H G Wells' Dr Moreau, and is motivated by success rather than happiness or a sense of morality. When Nell confronts her with the letter she forged to prevent her marriage with Dick, she declares herself to be guided by the eleventh commandment - "Thou shalt not be found out."<sup>187</sup> Dolly's ultimate triumph occurs when she secures an even richer husband for herself, prompting Nell to lament:

a young woman who has told lies, has forged, has wrecked the happiness of her sister's whole life, and she is punished; how? - why by marrying a lord with £80,000 a year.<sup>188</sup>

Dolly's cupidity and cynicism is rewarded and she flourishes, yet Nell's genuine love is punished and she suffers. The domestic sphere that is supposed to protect the weaker sex is shown to be a dangerous environment. Their struggle can be seen in terms of Spencer's theory of the "survival of the fittest", later popularised by Darwin. In naming one of the characters Lancaster, Broughton is perhaps making a reference to Edwin Lankester, a great admirer of Darwin, whose botanist wife published *Wild Flowers Worth Notice* in 1861. Broughton uses Darwinian and horticultural references throughout the novel. Dolly, described as a "tall garden lily" is resilient, whereas Nell is ill-suited to her environment.<sup>189</sup> She cometh up as a flower and then withers. Dolly taunts her that Dick has transferred his affections to Amaryllis Coxe, another tall flower with distinctly phallic overtones. As an idealist, Nell would rather die than have to resort to her sister's tactics. She considers revenge on Dolly by scuppering her marriage plans but cannot bring herself to do it. She lacks the ruthlessness necessary for survival. Faber sees Dolly as "a successor to the quintessential femme fatale of sensation fiction: Braddon's Lady Audley."<sup>190</sup> However, whereas Lady Audley's machinations are eventually punished, Broughton allows Dolly to succeed. The fact that the good perish and the wicked prosper clearly indicates that Broughton was attempting no morality tale in this novel. *The Times* was disappointed, declaring: "we

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186 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p157

187 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p268

188 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p267

189 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p193

190 Faber, Lindsey. "One Sister's Surrender: Rivalry and Resistance in Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh up as a Flower*." *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*. Eds. Kimberley Harrison and Richard Fantina. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p150

like our plays and stories to end happily.”<sup>191</sup> Broughton wanted to stress that marriage did not always mean happily ever after.

When Nell learns of Dick's death, she has to accept that their “marriage” has also ended. There is now nothing to live for on the temporal plane and, with a sense of relief, she reveals: “I am dying, and the great smith who strikes off all fetters, is striking off mine.”<sup>192</sup> Faber sees her dying moments as a “confession” and her story as “an admission of her sins against conventional morals.”<sup>193</sup> This interpretation implies a sense of guilt which she certainly does not appear to feel. There is only sorrow that she has lost the chance of happiness with Dick. She briefly terrifies herself with eschatological imagery but then quickly focuses on the blazing sun, with “youth, joy and love” dominating her thoughts.<sup>194</sup> She admits that “Not even the consciousness of having made a sacrifice... not even the consciousness of having been 'high heroic' supported me much,” and she merely “tries” to be sorry for her sin.<sup>195</sup> Although apparently conforming to the criticisms that sensation heroines are ultimately punished and weakened, it is left to the reader to interpret Nell's fate. She is not rewarded with the man she so desires, but is released from the unhappy bondage she so despises, and is spared becoming like Dolly. Having been treated as a commodity to be traded on the marriage market, she finally takes control of her own body by not fighting for survival, thereby ensuring that she does not adapt to her hated environment.

Although Broughton's heroines do not end happily, neither do they weakly submit to the constraints of femininity. They do not repress their protest or try to effect passivity. As Heller argues, “Broughton's full-bodied heroines are female Oliver Twists, asking for more of everything they are not allowed – sexual, intellectual, and emotional fulfilment.”<sup>196</sup> The *Times*, originally revolted by Nell Lestrage, later dismissed the novel in Broughton's obituary as a “superlatively sentimental romance” and thought “the youthful novel-reader of today might really learn something of the history of manners by turning to *Cometh up as a Flower* to see the kind of book that was forbidden to her grandmother.”<sup>197</sup> In a more generous and thoughtful retrospective, Walter Sichel concluded that “Miss Broughton spans the distance between *The Girl of the Period* and the 'New Woman'.”<sup>198</sup> The fact that so many subsequent

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191 "Cometh up as a Flower." *The Times* 6 June 1867: p9

192 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p281

193 Faber, p157

194 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p48

195 Broughton, *Cometh up as a Flower*; p220

196 Heller, p88

197 "Miss Rhoda Broughton: A Novelist of English Character." *The Times* 7 June 1920: 17

198 Wood, Marilyn. *Rhoda Broughton: Profile of a Novelist*. (Stamford, Lincolnshire: Paul Watkins, 1993) p116

women writers assimilated her ideas and were able to take them further has meant that her work has been seen as tame in comparison with the New Woman novels of the following decades. As she said herself: "I began my career as Zola, and finish it as Charlotte M. Yonge."<sup>199</sup> It was society, rather than her style, that changed, and she was a seminal part of that progression.

## CONCLUSION

In her novels, Broughton removes marriage from the domestic sphere and subverts the traditional courtship plot through her use of bigamy. Nell's spiritually bigamous marriage shows the companionate ideal, whereas her real marriage is nothing more than legalised prostitution. In *Not Wisely But too Well*, Kate discovers that the gender ideology implicit in the marriage contract is one-sided and she rejects it altogether. They both show the blurring of boundaries between the spheres, as the commodification of women in the marriage market forces them to behave in an unfeminine way. Kate and Nell are seeking happiness, rather than a bargain. In her less radical approach, Braddon upholds the institution of marriage, but shows how the separation of the spheres can result in women being both subordinate and without the concomitant protection. Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd accept the contractual nature of marriage but are provoked into action when the bargain is not fulfilled. Both authors reveal that the gender ideology did not work in practice, and that the division was not reflected in people's actual lives. The boundaries between private and public spheres were constantly shifting, rather than being absolute and immutable.

The need to regulate the spheres through legislation demonstrated that they were not innately held beliefs. This very regulation provoked a discourse concerning gender roles, and the bigamy novel created a context within which men and women's concerns and experiences could be articulated. The gender dichotomy relied on imposing a definition of acceptable femininity on women, but Braddon and Broughton asserted a feminine subjectivity through their portrayal of strong heroines who were prepared to break out of their appropriate sphere, challenging the way in which male authority was imbricated with judicial authority. Helen, Aurora, Kate and Nell all impugn the cultural expectation that they should serve and endure.

Brantlinger is wrong in labelling the sensation novel as "a minor subgenre of British fiction that flourished in the 1860s only to die out a decade later."<sup>200</sup> The morally and metaphorically ambiguous

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199 Elwin, Malcolm. *Victorian Wallflowers*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937) p231

200 Brantlinger, Patrick. "What Is "Sensational" About The "Sensational" Novel?" *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37.1 (1982):

nature of bigamy allowed writers to examine a number of different marital dynamics, and the use of sensational devices enabled inconvenient spouses to pop up and then disappear down wells. Chase and Levenson see the bigamy device as the “imaginative manifestation of the postdivorce culture because it is the preferred 'quiet' alternative to divorce.”<sup>201</sup> Braddon and Broughton, however, are actually participating in the “pandemonium” of divorce and using bigamy to make themselves heard. As Fahnestock writes, it is a “unique response to a particular moment in history.”<sup>202</sup> Its powerful legacy was long-lasting and influenced the development of the domestic novel. Trollope used the bigamy plot in his 1879 novel *John Caldigate*. This time male sexuality is on trial and Caldigate's right to a sexual past is examined, thereby challenging the double standard – an inversion that would have been unthinkable twenty years earlier. Women writers were able to be more daring in the following decades, and sensational themes were assimilated into the mainstream. In 1880, Ouida's *Moths* showed a divorced woman happy and enjoying a new life, something never before attempted in fiction. Earlier writers had bowed to convention, ensuring that divorcees were repentant or ruined.

The 1880s witnessed a wider marriage debate, and Mona Caird's 1888 article *Is Marriage a Failure?* attracted 27,000 respondents, the vast majority of whom expressed profound dissatisfaction.<sup>203</sup> Bland argues that “nineteenth century novels had already prepared the ground [for this debate] in their exploration of the contradictions and conflicts in women's lives.”<sup>204</sup> Readers were not necessarily arguing in favour of more freely available divorce, they wanted happier and more equal marriage, on a companionate rather than a patriarchal model. In order for such reform to take place, the gender ideology of the period underpinning much of the social legislation needed to be destabilised. The work of Braddon and Broughton contributed to this process. As Pykett writes: “They reproduce, rework and negotiate – or afford their readers an opportunity to negotiate – the contemporary discourses on 'woman'.”<sup>205</sup> Mrs Oliphant prophesied in 1856 that “woman's rights will never grow into a popular agitation” and feared that “any real redress of grievances would do more harm to the literary world than it would do good to the feminine.”<sup>206</sup> These two novelists were able to do good to both.

This discourse exposed the widening gap between ideology and reality, and two subsequent Matrimonial Causes Acts in 1878 and 1886 provided financial support for battered and deserted wives. The Married Woman's Property Bill, quietly shelved in 1857, was resurrected in 1870, finally giving

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24-38 (p37)

201 Chase & Levenson, p203

202 Fahnestock, Jeanne. "Bigamy: The Rise and Fall of a Convention." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 36.1 (1981): 49-91 (p71)

203 Bland, p124

204 Bland, p126

205 Pykett, p10

206 Pykett, p60

women control over their own finances; a second Act in 1882 recognised women as individuals in their own right, thereby ending the practice of coverture. Although these reforms did not present a substantial threat to patriarchy, stopping a long way short of redressing the inequality of the sexes, they did at least give married women in the protection they hitherto had only theoretically. Braddon's heroines would have achieved the justice they deserved; Broughton's would have to wait for the advances of the following century, when equal divorce was finally possible and personal fulfilment in marriage was a reasonable expectation. The law was unable to impose its ideology on people's lives, and eventually it had to instead respond to the reality that women were resisting their containment. *The Times* saw Sir Cresswell Cresswell and his Divorce Court as “holding up a mirror to the age” but women novelists were refracting that image, interpreting and redefining its meaning.<sup>207</sup>

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207 “Editorial.” *The Times* 12 December 1859: 8

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