Keeping up Appearances

The Use of Roles and Stereotypes in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s
*Lady Audley’s Secret, Aurora Floyd and Married Beneath Him*

"Lucy! tell me that this man is a madman!"

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List of abbreviations

MEB – Mary Elizabeth Braddon
LAS – Lady Audley’s Secret
AF – Aurora Floyd
MBH – Married Beneath Him
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**Introduction**

My interest in Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Sensation Fiction was first aroused when I took the ‘Fallen Women of the Nineteenth Century’ course at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 2001 - 2002. I had never heard of Braddon before I took this course, and after reading and extensively discussing *Lady Audley’s Secret* I became intrigued by M.E. Braddon as a person and by her works.

Upon my return to the Netherlands, I decided to read some of Braddon’s other works, including *Aurora Floyd*. I was fascinated by the heroines in Braddon’s novels and by extension, interested in the role of women in the Victorian era. Thus, I was inspired to write about the topic of stereotypes and roles of mainly women, but also men, in Braddon’s sensation fiction. In this dissertation, I will argue that Braddon’s characters are not as stereotypical as they might seem, and discuss some of the motives Braddon might have had for using stereotypes in her works the way she does.

To prove my statement and reveal some of Braddon’s motives, I will first discuss the historical context in which these novels were written, the role of women in the Victorian era (including the stereotypical Victorian ideal woman), the Victorian genre of Sensation Fiction, Braddon’s life and her contemporary critics. Subsequently, I will analyse and discuss the two novels *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* and the play *Married Beneath Him*, specifically concentrating on the use of stereotypes and roles.

**The Victorian era (1837-1901)**

The Victorian era is a period that still appeals to a great number of people. This can be seen both in the number of modern novels, not only set in Victorian times but often even written in a style that strongly resembles that used by Victorian novelists, and the numerous TV programs and internet sites dedicated to Victorian topics, which make the information easily accessible. Modern novels such as Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith*, Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* and even Michael Cox’s *The Meaning of Night* show clear resemblances to the Victorian genre of sensation fiction, which was mainly popular during the 1860’s and 1870’s. Websites such as “Victorian and Edwardian photographs” offer readers of these novels the opportunity to see what the characters
described in the book they are reading might have looked like. General information about the period and about certain authors can easily be found in books, but also on internet sites. A very good collection of Victorian sites can be found on the site of the Nagoya University in Japan. For much of the information on the Victorian period used in this chapter, I am indebted to Sally Mitchell’s book *Daily Life in Victorian England*.

Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901. During this period, a large number of changes took place that are important as a background to the novels which will be discussed in this dissertation. Before 1837, three historical events occurred that had a great influence on Victorian life: the Industrial Revolution circa 1800, the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 and the Reform Bill of 1832. The Duke of Wellington’s victory over Napoleon created a feeling of national pride; the Industrial Revolution transformed England from an agricultural nation to a nation based on industry and the Reform Bill doubled the number of men eligible to vote. Because of the war between France and England, taxes were raised and less food was being imported, and consequently many people struggled to survive. In the early nineteenth century, charities were founded and in 1833 restrictions were enforced on working conditions. Children under the age of nine could no longer be employed in textile mills. In 1834, slavery was abolished by Parliament in all parts of the British Empire.

The Victorian era was a period of urbanisation. In 1801, most people lived in villages or on farms; by 1851 more than half the population lived in the cities. Most of these industrial cities were not fit for the sudden growth of their population. Houses were overcrowded and several families had to live in one room with no indoor plumbing and little heat or light. During the 1830’s and 1840’s, the Chartist movement inspired the English working classes to political activism. The six demands in their ‘People’s Charter’ were: annual parliaments, voting rights for all adult men, the end of property qualifications for members of the House of Commons, voting by secret ballot, equal electoral districts, and salaries for members of Parliament so that men without private wealth could afford to run and be elected. In 1839, the Charter (with 1,280,000 signatures) was rejected by the House of Commons. Even though there was some protest at first, the Chartist movement in England faded away as prosperity began to increase. However, during the 1840’s, food prices were high, many people were out of work.
because of an economic depression and fifteen percent of the population received public assistance and many more were helped by private charities. The crime rate was higher than it had ever been in that century and the London police force established its first detective division in 1842. The Irish potato famine caused large numbers of Irish labourers to flee to England.

During the 1820’s, the first steam locomotives were used in industry but by the mid-1840’s, the building of the railway transportation system really began; it provided work for thousands of labourers and by 1850, the railway system reached most parts of the country. Communication was facilitated by a cheap and efficient postal service, the invention of the telegraph, and by the development of electrotyping and high-speed presses for mass printing. Gaslights in major streets made it safer to go out at night. Between 1850 and the mid-1870’s, England enjoyed domestic stability, progress and growing prosperity. This period began with the Exhibition in 1851, which celebrated progress, invention and British supremacy in world markets. The new railway network enabled great numbers of people to come and see the Great Exhibition. In a period of only five months, six million people visited the exhibition. The railway network and the developments in communication play an important role in Braddon’s sensation novels. Her characters often escape discovery by travelling to London by rail quickly to erase an important clue (Lucy Audley in *LAS*), whilst Richard Marwood (*The Trail of the Serpent*) is caught because a clever policeman uses the telegraph to send his description to neighbouring towns, where he is recognised and apprehended.

In 1867, the second Reform Bill doubled the electorate again. Most middle-class men and the more prosperous among the working class were allowed to vote. From 1868 to 1885, the government was led alternately by two Prime Ministers: Benjamin Disraeli (conservative) and W.E. Gladstone (liberal party). Both of these parties carried out some measures for social reform, including new laws that prevented people from meddling with food, protected children from abuse and enforced standards of safety and sanitation in housing. The Factory Act of 1874 established a maximum working week of fifty-six hours. Food and other necessities became less expensive because of better transport, and life for urban factory workers improved. These families were now able to buy things beyond the bare necessities, for example newspapers and cheap editions of novels. In
1870, government-supported schools were established and factory workers’ children now had better opportunities of finding work outside the factories. Between 1875 and 1901, more food was imported from other parts of the world (mainly North and South America and Australia), as England could no longer produce enough to feed its own population. More and more rural labourers moved to the cities to find new jobs and by 1901, eighty percent of England’s population lived in urban areas and this number continued to grow rapidly. In 1884, after the third Reform Bill, there were ten times as many voters as there had been in 1831, before the first Reform Bill. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, England acquired new territory in Africa. In 1887 and 1897, Victoria’s golden and diamond jubilee were celebrated. While the Boer war (1899-1902) was being fought, Victoria died in 1901 and King Edward VII came to the throne.

**Women in Victorian times**

The changes that took place during the Victorian era also had their influence on women. Before the Industrial Revolution, very few women had jobs outside their homes. However, it took little (muscular) strength to work the new machines, so women and children became the principal workers in factories; in addition, they were cheaper than male labourers. In the late 1840’s, the first organised movements for women’s rights began to form. Middle-class women wanted better education and more career opportunities. Prior to this, women only learned such skills as piano-playing, painting and social graces at school, and the only ‘career’ open to middle-class women was that of governess. These women’s rights movements started searching for ways to train women for clerical work, which was generally better paid than working as a governess. During the Crimean war (1854 to 1856), Florence Nightingale helped to make nursing a respectable profession for women and nursing schools were established. Even though the 1867 Reform Bill still did not give women the right to vote, single women who owned property could vote for Poor Law officials and school board members. In 1870, The Married Women’s Property Act gave wives some control over their own earnings. Secondary schooling was improved and women could get a formal qualification for teaching. In Oxford and Cambridge, women’s colleges were built, but these two universities did not award degrees to women until after World War I.
In the Late Victorian period (1875-1901), there were significantly more women than men. This difference was caused by the fact that more men than women were leaving England for economic opportunities in the colonies or as emigrants to Australia, New Zealand or North America (Burstyn 34). Because of this difference, a large number of women could not expect to marry, causing a rapid development of new movements for women’s economic and political rights. After the invention of the typewriter and the telephone in the 1870’s, many women took up clerical jobs. After 1876, female physicians could be licensed to practice and in 1880, when elementary education became compulsory, there were many new openings for teachers. Even though women could not vote, they made their political presence felt through local government, charitable organisations, unions, settlement houses, pressure groups, and renewed agitation for full suffrage and legal equality. Of course, there were different ‘classes’ of women. Almost all women of the lower classes had to work to survive. In the middle class, women were not supposed to work, but some of them had to. The women of the highest classes of society did not have to worry about money; even if they did not marry there was no need for them to work.

**The Victorian ‘Ideal Woman’**

The most important and influential woman in Victorian England was, of course, Queen Victoria herself. She was very powerful, reigning over millions of people, but she still managed to present herself as the ideal housewife and mother, an example to her subjects. She created this image herself by being in absolute control of what information and which photographs would be publicised. For the ‘ordinary’ people, there was no other way of finding out what their Queen’s life was like and so, in this manner, Victoria could influence the way people thought about her.

As stated before, most lower class women worked during the Victorian era. Not only in factories, but also at home, on raw materials supplied by their employers. Middle-class women had to remain at home and the amount of leisure they had directly reflected the success of the male members of their family. The middle-class home was a place for women, whilst men and boys spent their time away at work or at school. Victorians believed that women were weaker but also purer than men and in this sense a wife was
her ‘husband’s conscience’. By the middle of the nineteenth century, people felt that women should play an important role in purifying industrial society. As the Quarterly Review put it in 1869: “Let us make use of the engine God has placed in our hands. Pour into the corrupted stream the pure healthy disinfectant of English womanhood” (qtd. in Burstyn 31).

According to Joan Burstyn, the ideal woman was to be responsible for organising the household, bringing up the children, and providing tranquillity to which men returned as to a haven of peace from the turbulent world outside (Burstyn 32). Women were expected to stay at home all day and occupy themselves with the household, so that men did not have to be bothered by these details and they had a pleasant place to come home to. By staying at home, the woman was protected from evils such as dishonesty, cheating and other vices, allowing her to remain pure. The ideal woman also had to be clever, not in an educated sense, but in an intuitive manner; indeed she even manipulated men, albeit in an indirect and benign way. However, because of the surplus of women between 1851 and 1871, a lot of women remained unmarried and they had to be supported by their middleclass families. The standard of living for the middle classes was rising, so young men postponed marriage until they had enough money to provide homes for their wives equivalent to the parental homes they were leaving. At the same time, middle-class parents were unwilling to see their daughters marry below their position. Because working entailed a loss of status for a middle-class woman, parents made every effort to make sure their daughter married well.

When a girl accepted a marriage proposal, it meant that forthwith all her possessions belonged to her (future) husband, unless otherwise arranged in a marriage settlement. When a man and a woman married, they became one legal identity. Wife and children were supposed to be obedient to their husband and father, however, there were laws protecting the wife as well. For example, if a woman committed a crime in her husband’s presence she was always found innocent. A husband was also responsible for his wife’s debts and was obliged to support her for as long as she lived with him. He could not ill-use her ‘beyond reasonable chastisement’ and he could not lock her up without being liable for punishment. The law assumed that any child she had during marriage was her husband’s, even if circumstances made it improbable (such as his
absence at the time of conception), unless he could prove adultery with a specific man (Perkin 54) Therefore, even though the patriarchal society did not give women many opportunities to be independent, in a seemingly good marriage it had some ‘advantages’ as well. However, if the marriage was not particularly good there was no way for a woman to get out of it without the co-operation of her husband.

The Sensation Novel

The term ‘sensation novel’ first appeared in 1861 in reviews of Helen Price Wood’s *East Lynne*. Once this term was invented, it was also retrospectively used for novels published before 1861, such as Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (Schipper 22). The sensation genre quickly became popular, and sensational novels were widely read. Sensation novels tended to shock, thrill, and titillate the audience. Sensational elements, including secrecy, bigamy, intrigue, crime, guilt, revenge and murder were presented in a domestic setting, often within a respectable Victorian home. After reading a number of sensation novels, readers can recognise certain features that occur in most of the novels of this genre, such as: secrets from the past, often involving people’s identities; criminal conspiracies; well-to-do women with secrets, and characters who serve as each other’s doppelgänger (“British Sensation Fiction”).

Sensation novels were fascinating because they were in a sense realistic, as their setting was very recognisable to the reader and the events and characters, although stereotypical, were also representations of reality. This domestic setting made the novels even more sensational or, as Henry James wrote in a review of *Aurora Floyd*:

> those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors …Instead of the terrors of Udolpho, we [are] treated to the terrors of the cheerful country house, or the London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible. (qtd. in Lynn Pykett 6)

Not only the sensation novels provided people with ‘extraordinary incidents’, but also the sensation press. Most sensational were the cases in the divorce and criminal courts. These cases were the Victorian equivalents of present-day reality soaps. In the divorce court,
especially cases involving bigamy or adultery were popular subjects, while in the criminal court murderous women were in the news (Pykett 2).

During this period, a growing number of people were reading newspapers. Many regarded these newspapers and especially the sensational ones, as “the means by which the world of the common streets, and the violent or subversive deeds of criminals were carried across the domestic threshold to violate the sanctuary of home”(Pykett 2). The fact that a growing number of people were literate and newspapers became cheaper meant that information was easy to come by. This was not necessarily negative, since reading about criminals or criminal deeds did not mean readers were going to commit crimes themselves. If anything, it would warn them not to because punishments during the Victorian period were far from mild.

Another shocking feature of the sensation novel was the way women and the feminine were represented in it. In most sensation novels, the central character is a woman. Usually two types of women are represented in the novel: the passive, angelic woman, and the ‘femme fatale’. This second variety is also often represented as being dangerous, mostly because of her passionate and assertive behaviour. Of course, assertive women, who show their feelings, are not considered to be a scandal in the twenty-first century, but contemporary reviewers were of a different opinion. Margaret Oliphant wrote several articles on the sensation-phenomenon, and in one of them she stated: “What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshly and unlovely record“(qtd.in Pykett 7). In a different article, she argues that sensation novels had a bad influence on English girls and women since reading about the sensation heroines, with all their passionate feelings, made them want to feel the same way. Oliphant clearly does not approve of this new tendency in society and in reality, women obviously could not be divided into two categories. The angelic, childlike, ideal woman would have been hard to find. However, there are some well-known examples of the ‘femme fatale’, namely actresses and the so-called ‘professional beauties’. Because the actresses and famous beauties had their pictures taken and displayed they were much admired even though they were hardly representative of the (ideal) Victorian woman.
Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was born in London in 1835. When she was four years old, her mother left her father and together with Mary went to live in Sussex, returning to London once more some years later. The reason her parents separated was her father’s infidelity and financial irresponsibility. Mary began writing when she was eight, but in 1857, when her mother’s money ran out, she became an actress, under the name of Mary Seyton. After three years on the stage, an admirer decided to financially support her writing career so she was able to leave the stage. She began writing serial stories for several journals (the first of these being *Three Times Dead* which would later become *The Trail of the Serpent*) and as a result she met John Maxwell, an Irish publisher with whom she lived until his death. Their relationship was controversial, since Maxwell was married and his wife was in an insane asylum, but as soon as his wife died (in 1874) he and Braddon married. They had six children of their own and Braddon also took care of the children from Maxwell’s first marriage.

Braddon gained status as an author thanks to the success of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, first published in 1862 and *Aurora Floyd* (1863). These two books were both bestsellers and made her a very rich woman. During her lifetime, she wrote over eighty novels, but only a few of them were sensation novels. She wrote plays and poems as well as novels, and edited several magazines. She died in 1915, when she was eighty years old (Schipper 14-18).

When Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* was first published in 1862, its review by Eneas Sweetland Dallas in *The Times* of 18 November 1862 was quite positive. Dallas describes the book as:

(…) It is not easy to represent a woman in such a position, or with a character capable of such acts; to combine so much beauty with so much deformity; to depict the lovely woman with the fishy extremities. Miss Braddon would be entitled to rank as the first of lady novelists if she had perfectly succeeded in reconciling these contradictions; nevertheless her portraiture is by no means feeble, and gives promise of great success hereafter. (…) Indeed, it is seldom that one sees a novel so well balanced in the display of power, showing such *even* excellence of plot, of passion, of character and of diction. (Dallas 481).
However, critics soon became more negative and started criticising the supposed immorality of M.E. Braddon’s sensational novels. In 1863, a long review article (“Sensation Novels”) appeared in the Quarterly Review, published anonymously but written by an Oxford philosopher, the Reverend Henry Longueville Manse (1820-1871). In his article he discussed about two dozen novels published since 1858. Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd were numbers one and two on his list. In his article, he claims that sensation novels belong “to the morbid phenomena of literature – indications of a widespread corruption … called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite” (qtd. in Wolff 192). He explicitly states though, that he considers M.E. Braddon a talented author who is “capable of better things”. He questions the morality of sensation novels because they focused on topics like bigamy and murder.

In 1865, the North British Review published a long article entitled “Sensation Novelists – Miss Braddon”. Though the article was published anonymously, we now know that the author was W. Fraser Rae (1835-1905), a journalist and traveller. He claims to judge M.E. Braddon’s novels by “purely literary” standards because “what is bad in taste is usually bad in morals”. By listing some scenes from Lady Audley’s Secret that contain improbable events or include strange descriptions, he wants to convince his readers that M.E. Braddon’s characters are not like living beings and that she herself is “thoroughly ignorant of the ways of the world” (qtd. in Wolff 195). According to Rae, the scene in Aurora Floyd in which Aurora beats ‘the Softy’ shows that M.E. Braddon is “evidently acquainted with a very low type of female character” (qtd. in Wolff 195). He concludes his article by stating that M.E. Braddon “may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” (qtd. in Wolff 197). A few months later, an article was published in The Sun in reaction to Rae’s article. The author of this anonymous publication, Charles Kent, defended M.E. Braddon and found Rae’s article “extremely unfair throughout” (qtd. in Wolff 197), because it only dealt with M.E. Braddon even though it was called ‘Sensation Novelists’. In 1867, another article was published, this time in Blackwood’s Magazine and again anonymously. This one was entitled ‘Novels’ and was actually written by the novelist Margaret Oliphant. She
complained that the English youth read sensation novels and that all English “minor novelists” belonged to the sensational school. She claimed that Lady Audley has:

brought in the reign of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime, which no doubt shows a certain deference to the British relish for law and order. It goes against the seventh commandment, no doubt, but it does it in a legitimate sort of way, and is an invention which could only have been possible to an Englishwoman knowing the attraction of impropriety, and yet loving the shelter of law. (qtd. in Wolff 203)

Here she not only criticises Braddon’s work, but also suggests that Braddon herself knew ‘the attraction of impropriety’. Because of the many references to her private life, this article must have been quite painful for Braddon. What she suggests is that Braddon “might not be aware how young women of good blood and good training feel”.

Contemporary authors, Braddon’s ‘colleagues’, were generally positive about Braddon’s work. Among them were Robert Louis Stevenson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Reade, Henry James and her mentor and friend, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (Schipper 35).

Contrary to Mr. Rae’s prediction, Braddon’s success was not temporary. To this day, she has not been forgotten: after a period of silence her books are being read again, and articles and books on the author and her works are being published. In 1979, a biography was published by Robert Lee Wolff. This was quite remarkable because Braddon was not very well-known at the time. Wolff decided to write this biography because he was fascinated by Braddon’s books. By describing her life, he hoped to shed some light on her fiction and he hoped to find out “how she had learned so much about human nature”. Wolff’s book provides a great deal of background information on Braddon’s life, however, it does not mention the concepts of stereotypes or role-playing. The information on Braddon’s life that Wolff presents is useful when identifying/speculating about Braddon’s possible motives for challenging stereotypes in my conclusion. After this biography, there was a period of silence again, but during the 1990’s her popularity grew on a larger scale. As a result, *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* were reprinted in paperback.

More recent critics pay more attention to the women in Braddon’s sensation novels, seen from a feminist viewpoint. Jill L. Matus considers madness in *Lady Audley’s Secret* in her 1993 article ‘Disclosure as ‘Cover up’. She argues that Lady Audley uses
madness as an ‘excuse’ to avoid criminal charges. Throughout the novel, Lucy’s (Lady Audley’s) motivation for her actions was the fear of ending up like her mother; ironically, that is exactly what happens. Matus argues that although Lady Audley ends up in a madhouse, she is not insane, but “trapped in her efforts to avoid her mother’s fate” (352). This is a noteworthy point of view since it is so radically different from what Braddon’s contemporaries thought. In my chapter on *Lady Audley’s Secret*, I will also argue that Lady Audley was not insane but unlike Matus, I do not think that her objective was solely to escape her mother’s fate. In my opinion, Helen’s primary motive in becoming Lucy Graham is to survive, and her motive for marrying Sir Michael Audley is that it is an opportunity that is almost too good to be true, even her employers, the Dawsons: “would have thought it something more than madness in a penniless girl to reject such an offer” (Braddon, *LAS* 15).

In her book *The Sensation Novel*, Lynn Pykett does not focus on one specific element in sensation novels, as Matus did, but provides an overview of the most important sensation writers and novels. In her opinion there are two types of women in sensation fiction:

The central female characters of the women’s sensation novel are of two main types: active, assertive women, who convey a sense of the threat of insurgent femininity trying to break out of the doll’s house of domesticity, and passive, dependent women, who are imprisoned by it, unable to articulate their sense of confinement, and driven to desperate measures. (Pykett 49)

These two types of women, stereotypes really, are used (especially by Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood) to “unsettle conventional images of woman by investing sympathy in, and attaching unexpected moral valuations to, particular character stereotypes” (50). What Pykett is arguing here, is that Braddon’s heroines are not what they seem. Regrettably, she does not investigate what Braddon’s motives could have been for this. What is sensational about Braddon’s heroines (regardless of whether they are an example of the first or the second type) is “not her criminality (…) [but] her deviance and transgressiveness” (49). This notion of character stereotypes is further explored by Laurence Talairach-Vielmas. She focuses on *Lady Audley’s Secret* but her ideas can also

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1 All references to this text are to the 1998 Penguin Classics edition
Talairach’s ideas concerning *Lady Audley’s Secret* can easily be transferred to *Aurora Floyd,* since the same stereotypes occur; once again Braddon makes it clear that these stereotypes are so much determined by appearances and behaviour, that they can very easily be copied, and the fact that a woman has the courage to differ from the stereotype makes her unique. Braddon makes this very clear in *Aurora Floyd* when the narrator states: “There are so many Lucys but so few Auroras.” (Braddon, *AF* 88)

In *Becoming Frauds: Unconventional Heroines in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Sensation Fiction,* Jan Davis Schipper focuses on the deviant heroines in *Lady Audley’s Secret, Aurora Floyd* and *Eleanor’s Victory.* All these women are in some way ‘unconventional’, since their actions were not considered ‘normal’ at the time that these novels were published. According to Schipper:

Braddon’s female characters seemingly succumb to the dominant Victorian precept that they must be domestic, conventional and controlled, or they must be insane; in reality, these sensation heroines castigated a society that failed to value women’s intelligence or abilities. These unconventional female characters showed how some women felt compelled to assume multiple identities in order to fit the role expected of them and to avoid punishment, aware that a threat to the dominant social order would mean submission, incarceration, or both. (96)
Schipper here confirms Pykett’s point of view, Braddon’s heroines are not sensational because they commit crimes, but because they have the courage to differ from the social codes. Lucy Audley, Aurora Floyd and Polly Hunstanton are all clear examples of women who dare to differ from the ideal, the fact that the ‘results’ of their deviance are so different makes a comparison worthwhile.

Not only Braddon’s women are deviant, some of her male characters differ from the ideal as well. Whereas critics usually focus on the women in Braddon’s fiction, Richard Nemesvari focuses on Robert Audley’s secret. According to Nemesvari, Lady Audley presents the threat posed by a female to male homosocial bonds and that is why she is ‘taken care of’ by Robert Audley at the end of the novel (Nemesvari 515). He also argues that Robert’s obsession with George’s fate and his eventual marriage to Clara, George’s sister who looks very much like her brother, indicate that what Robert feels for George is more than just male friendship. Robert is the only one of Braddon’s leading male characters in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* and *Married Beneath Him* who is not a stereotypical Victorian man right from the start of the novel/play. In the course of the novel he discovers the threat that femininity poses to the Victorian patriarchal society, while he becomes aware of this, he loses his own feminine traits, and fully grows into his role of the Victorian man at the end of the novel.

In 2000, a collection of fifteen essays on Braddon was published (edited by Marlene Tromp and others). It contains fifteen essays on a number of Braddon’s works, the most relevant of which (to my purpose) is Heidi Holder’s essay on Braddon’s writings for the stage. Not much has been written about Braddon as a playwright, and Holder gives a thorough overview of Braddon’s works and their relevance. She explores the possible reasons for the fact that Braddon’s plays were very often not produced/performe. One of the probable reasons for this might be that Braddon challenged theatrical conventions, particularly those about gender roles (166). *Married Beneath Him* is a good example of a play in which Braddon “inverts audience’s expectations” (171) by playing with roles of gender and class, eventually letting the lower-class wife ‘win’ instead of the upper-class aristocratic husband or, as Holder puts it (not specifically for *Married Beneath Him*, but for all of Braddon’s plays): “the men learn their lessons and the women are vindicated” (178).
What is striking about Braddon’s contemporary critics is that they are generally positive about her qualities as an author. The things that they criticise are the subjects of Braddon’s novels and in some cases her private life. Publications about Braddon since 1979 do not question her capacity as a writer either. Equally, the subjects of her novels are still discussed, but in a different way. Braddon’s novels are now analysed and considered from different points of view. Much attention is paid to the women in Braddon’s fiction, sometimes in relation to the men and often from a modern, feminist point of view. Most of the characters in Braddon’s novels play a certain role. It would be worthwhile to reflect on the reasons why Braddon’s characters choose to play a certain role. The roles they choose to play are often very stereotypical (e.g. the ideal woman, the virtuous man) and when Braddon decides to show the reader the true nature of her characters, it transpires that they are not really like the stereotypical roles that they play. By looking at Braddon’s novels Lady Audley’s Secret, Aurora Floyd and the play Married Beneath Him, I will argue that Braddon’s characters are not as stereotypical as they might seem and in my conclusion I will reflect on some motives Braddon might have had for this.
Chapter One

*Lady Audley’s Secret*

*Lady Audley’s Secret* (LAS) is Braddon’s first sensation novel. First serialised in *Robin Goodfellow* and *Sixpenny Magazine*, and then published in three-volume form in October 1862, it was instantly popular. This novel was sensational in a way that differed from the sensationalism in, for example Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*. *Lady Audley’s Secret* challenged the idea of the Victorian ideal woman. The principal character in the novel, Lady Audley, is in appearance and behaviour everything that the ideal woman should be, but eventually she is proven to be an adulteress and a murderess. Not merely the events in the book shock the reader; the fact that a woman commits all these crimes and almost gets away with it is far more shocking.

It is fascinating to consider the way that Braddon represents traditional male and female roles/stereotypes in this novel. According to Schipper, Braddon was known to criticise the Victorian patriarchal society in her novels. Central in Braddon’s sensation novels are women longing for the freedom to work, pursue an education, control their money and property and live independent lives, free from what they perceived as legally-binding slavery (7). Her sensation novels helped raise questions in society about the position of women.

Helen/Lucy/Lady Audley is the main character of this novel. She seems to be the perfect Victorian woman but she turns out to be a dangerous murderess who succeeds in crossing class boundaries using her perfect looks and manners. She breaks Victorian society’s rules in several ways: she is a bigamist, a murderess and she changes her identity in order to improve her situation. She starts her life as Helen Maldon, daughter of a retired naval officer and a mother who spends her days in an insane asylum. She grows up in poverty and she soon learns that her “ultimate fate in life depended on [her] marriage” (*LAS* 345). Soon she decides that since she is prettier than most other girls she knows, she “ought to marry better than any of them” (345). When she marries George Talboys, she believes she has achieved her goal, since she has married a relatively wealthy man. However, when his father hears of the marriage he disowns George, and consequently Helen and George are left penniless. George decides to leave for Australia,
leaving Helen a note saying he will not come back before he has made a fortune. This leaves Helen few opportunities, as she has a son to look after and in the Victorian period most ‘single’ mothers ended up in the workhouse. After waiting a year for George to come back, Helen decides that she does not want to end up on the streets or in a workhouse and so reinvents herself as Lucy Graham. She leaves her son with her father and finds a job as a teacher and later as a governess. When she marries Sir Michael Audley, she achieves the ideal life and she adapts to it with ease. It is only when her first husband re-appears that people realise she is not who she says she is. Finally, she changes her identity again, this time not by her own choice as she is locked up in a Belgian ‘maison de santé’ through the intervention of her nephew, Robert Audley, who also invents her new name/identity: ‘Madame Taylor’.

The reason why Helen/Lucy decides to change her identity is that she does not want to be poor; the reason she tries to murder George Talboys, and also why she murders Luke Marks is, according to herself, that she is mad. However, this madness is caused by her fear of losing everything she has acquired since her first husband left her, so effectively this is also caused by her fear of being poor. Lyn Pykett makes an interesting point when she states:

The irony is that all of Lucy’s actions are aimed at those ends which were recommended to all middle-class girls: achieving and maintaining a socially acceptable and financially secure marriage, and keeping up appearances. (53-54)

A profitable marriage is really all that Helen/Lucy wants, and she dedicates herself to her goal. Her only problem is that she marries twice and that she is discovered. The way in which she plays the role of the perfect woman is admirable. She is continuously described as being admired by people and being childish:

Lucy was better loved and more admired than the baronet’s daughter. That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley’s fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. (55)

Because of her perfect looks nobody suspects her of being anything else than what she seems to be. People did not expect women, especially not women who looked and acted like Lucy, to be capable of conceiving and executing such a plan. The fact that she ascends into the upper echelons of society - something that every middle-class girl and
woman desires - using these methods, might have provoked jealousy on behalf of her (former) peers, while upper-class women may have felt threatened.

Lucy has everything a woman could want, the novel even lists all the things she owns, including brands and the names of the shops where she purchases the articles. The way her possessions and actions are described in detail almost render the book into a manual on how to become an upper-class lady. It shows that being a true lady is not something hereditary but something that can be learnt, a role that can be played. More than likely, this vexed the establishment, because it disturbed their image of the ideal woman. It showed that even the ideal woman can transpire to be something very different, indeed that the ‘ideal woman’ is one role that can be played, among other possible roles (Pykett 90). Lucy seems to adapt to every Victorian ‘rule’, but in reality she refuses to accept her fate and crosses class and gender boundaries to escape poverty. Her ultimate excuse is her madness, that she supposedly inherited from her mother. However, when examined by a doctor, his first reaction is that she is not mad at all:

“When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that.” (370)

When the doctor hears what Robert Audley thinks Lucy has done, he changes his mind. He decides she is not mad, but dangerous, and has to be locked up somewhere far away. Even though the doctor thinks she is dangerous, he does not believe that she has killed George Talboys, or at least he thinks there is not enough proof.

In due course, it becomes apparent that Lucy did not succeed in killing George Talboys. The only crimes she did actually commit are the murder of Luke Marks (which nobody really seems to remember) and bigamy, the latter having been committed out of poverty as well. After the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, it became possible for a woman to obtain a divorce when her husband had deserted her. However, obtaining a divorce was very expensive, so Helen simply did not have the means to secure a legal end to her first marriage (Schipper 40). Consequently, like her husband, she leaves her family. Nobody blames George for leaving his wife and child behind in poverty, but when Helen decides to change her life, nobody seems to understand.
The ‘rules’ were very different for men and women; some women were able to resign themselves to this difference, but others decided not to put up with it. It was almost impossible to combine being an ideal woman with being a successful/wealthy woman. Nevertheless, Helen was an ideal woman for George Talboys, even in poverty. Only when he returns after three and a half years does it dawn on him that he has not heard from her in all that time; but he does not stop to consider that he gave her no way to contact him, and he has not contacted her either. Despite all this, he expects her to wait for him indefinitely.

The only female influence in Helen/Lucy’s life is that of her mother. Helen/Lucy does not know her mother well but does know that she is in a mental asylum because she is mad. The fate of her mother influences Helen/Lucy in so far that she does not want to suffer the same fate. Ironically, at the end of the book Lady Audley is locked up in a Belgian mental asylum, but the question remains if she really is mad, or just seen as a danger by/to the men around her. Rather than being able to be herself – and despite her constant struggle to achieve her aspirations to better herself by dint of her beauty, which is the only option that society leaves her with (and one that is completely acceptable today!) - ultimately she finds herself having to acquiesce to the pressures of a patriarchal society and adopt the stereotypes imposed upon her. Hence, instead of striving to better herself through her talents – something women are also able to do today – she is forced to act like an ideal/angelic woman in order to secure a rich husband; likewise, since her role and the means to achieve this are impressed upon her by society, one could argue that her choice to commit crime is in part due to social pressure - indeed her modern counterpart may have chosen to express her character traits (e.g. ruthlessness, determination, etc.) and goals in life (e.g. an improvement in status, class, material wealth/well-being), through her career.

In stark contrast with Lady Audley, her stepdaughter Alicia is very different from the feminine ideal, as she does not look like her stepmother at all and her interests are very unusual for a woman. Her main pursuits are horses and dogs and she does not seem to care much about dresses or decorum. She is very un-girlish, but at least she does not break any rules, and finally she marries and transforms into a ‘proper’ woman. In many ways, Alicia is very much like Aurora Floyd, the heroine in Braddon’s second sensation
novel. Alicia is interesting because although she does not behave exactly like the perfect woman, she is still accepted into society, as she is from the right family. Furthermore, it is remarkable that she is the first person to see through Lady Audley. She calls her a ‘wax doll’, not a real person, since she notices immediately that there is something wrong about her new stepmother.

As is the case with Alicia, Robert Audley (Sir Michael’s nephew) also does not seem to comply with the Victorian ideal. He initially lives in a state of almost feminine laziness, but subsequently adopts a very masculine ‘pater familias’ role. In the beginning, he seems almost afraid of taking on responsibility, and although he studies law, he nonetheless passes his time smoking German pipes and reading French novels, which is not very masculine or very English. Although “it was not uncommon for young men of good family to study law (…) without ever intending to practice” (Mitchell 67), it seems that the only reason Robert is studying law is to avoid being called ‘lazy’. This changes after he meets George Talboys, his old school friend. Robert seems surprised to hear that George has got a wife, but when they discover that she is dead, Robert decides to try and cheer George up. George disappears when they are at Audley Court, visiting Sir Michael and his new wife, and from that moment on Robert has a purpose in his life: to find out what happened to George. Robert’s new detective career could just be motivated by friendship, but some critics argue that there is more to it than that. George and Robert went to Eton together, an all-boys school, and it is known that attachments formed there were often more than platonic (Nemesvari 515-528). Furthermore, Alicia, who also sees through her stepmother before anybody else does, makes a very telling remark about Robert and George after George has disappeared:

“What a dreadful catastrophe!” said Alicia maliciously, “since Pythias, in the person of Mr. Robert Audley, cannot exist for half-an-hour without Damon, commonly known as George Talboys”. (87)

Pythias and Damon form a classical example of male friendship, and since it is an ancient Greek story, the reader can suppose that there may have been a sexual element to their friendship too. In light of this, Alicia’s comparison acquires an extra dimension. The reason Alicia is interested in Robert is that she is in love with him herself. However, Robert seems to be afraid of women, making several misogynistic comments that reflect
his attitude to the opposite sex: “I hate women [...] They’re bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors” (208). This quote illustrates Robert’s fear of women. Tellingly, it is preceded by a paragraph in which Robert states that women, exemplified by historical characters such as Cleopatra, Joan of Arc and Catharine the Second, are obviously the stronger sex and very dangerous. Indeed, it is remarkable that he does not underestimate women, as most men did in the Victorian period. He realises what women are capable of and seems to have some fearful respect for them. In a sense this is strange, because he is very feminine himself, or at least very un-masculine. It is ironic that Lady Audley, a woman who does things that are very ‘un-feminine’ should be exposed by a man so un-masculine. According to Lyn Pykett:

His insight into Lady Audley’s secrets is also associated with his own feminised identity. The Robert Audley of the early stages of the narrative is a version of the improper masculine, that is to say, he has not been properly socialised into an acceptable masculine role. (103)

When Robert meets Clara Talboys for the first time, all he notices is that she is young and like George Talboys, and she is the reason he continues his investigations. Richard Nemesvari argues that Robert is afraid to discover the truth about himself i.e. that he is homosexual, but now he has found a safe way to express the feelings that he has for George; this also makes it possible for him to continue his search (Nemesvari 523). At the end of the novel he marries Clara and even works as a barrister for the first time in his life, thus ultimately he has become a very masculine man in every way. Even in this new masculine role, he is able to preserve his ‘friendship’ with George Talboys, for George comes to live with Robert and Clara, and in a sense together they form a ‘family’.

It can be said that the characters in Lady Audley’s Secret are not what they seem to be. All characters play a certain role, and can adapt their role too if that is required. The best example of this statement is of course Helen/Lucy/Lady Audley. She has a very convincing way of adapting to her circumstances. On the one hand, she is a very likeable character because the reader is presented with all the reasons for her actions. I, myself could not help but admire her for escaping her hopeless life and for succeeding in acquiring a very desirable position. On the other hand, she is a criminal: she commits bigamy, attempts to murder one man by pushing him into an old well and succeeds in
killing another by setting fire to his house. The reason she does all this is because she apparently had no other choice, since as a woman there are not many careers open to her, nor can she divorce George Talboys. The fact that this, otherwise very ideal woman, has to resort to crime to stay alive can be seen as a comment on the rights of women in a patriarchal society. She is completely subject to the power of the men in her life, making it almost impossible for her to make her own decisions. At the end of the book, she is locked up by men who see her as a threat to their patriarchal society, because she tried to bend the rules to her own advantage.

The man who discovers Lady Audley’s secret has many feminine characteristics. In the course of the novel however, he develops this role into a more mature, male role. During this transitional stage, he is able to discover Lady Audley’s Secret. This is probably caused by the fact that Lady Audley herself transgresses the boundaries between the male and female space. Alicia Audley is a lot like Braddon’s later heroine, Aurora Floyd. She has very un-feminine interests, such as horses and the outdoor-life. This is accepted because she is Sir Michael Audley’s daughter. But even she has to adapt to the role that is expected of her, namely that of marriage and motherhood, and at the end of the novel we see her as a married woman.

Overall, it can be concluded that in this novel the limited possibilities open to women are criticised and questioned. The way Braddon attempts to do this is by presenting gender as a role that can be played. Depending on the role that her characters play, their possibilities change, and the rules regarding their behaviour change too. This would certainly have been ‘food for thought’ for contemporary readers and critics, and in a way it still is nowadays. All the main characters present themselves as a certain stereotype, or at least they choose to play a certain role. Ultimately, they develop into characters quite unlike the stereotype that the reader first perceived them to be. Both Helen/Lucy and Alicia Audley are very good examples of this.
Chapter Two

Aurora Floyd

*Aurora Floyd* was published at the end of January 1863, only a few months after the publication of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. It was first serialised in *Temple Bar*, a monthly magazine, in thirteen instalments from January 1862 to January 1863 (Edwards xxiii). It is a story about a rich banker’s daughter whose mother was an actress who died not long after Aurora’s birth. When Aurora is eighteen, her father sends her to a French finishing school but she runs off with her handsome groom and marries him. When she finds out that her husband was only after her money, she returns to her father and tells him that her husband (James Conyers) is dead. Shortly after her nineteenth birthday, Aurora reads a newspaper report announcing that Conyers was killed in an accident. After reading this, she accepts an offer of marriage from Talbot Bulstrode, a Cornish gentleman. During their engagement, Talbot discovers that Aurora did not spend a year at finishing school, but ran away. When Aurora refuses to tell him what she did during this year, he breaks off the engagement because he wants to marry an honourable woman. Subsequently, Aurora falls ill and after her illness she accepts a proposal from her second suitor, John Mellish, a Yorkshire squire, who was her companion during her illness. Aurora lives with John on his Yorkshire estate, but it transpires that Conyers is not dead, and is even hired as a groom on the Mellish estate. Aurora arranges to pay Conyers a large sum of money to leave her alone, but soon after he receives the money, Conyers is murdered. Aurora is the prime suspect and during the investigation her secret is revealed. Thanks to the help of her friend Talbot Bulstrode and her husband, she is found innocent and this time she marries Mellish legally. The story ends with Aurora as a happy mother.

Aurora Floyd, the main character of the novel, is the only daughter of the wealthy banker Archibald Floyd and the former actress Eliza Prodder. Eliza dies when Aurora is still a baby, so she is raised by her father and her governesses. To Archibald Floyd, Aurora is the most important thing in the world and so she is allowed to do and have whatever she wants. Of course, this turns her into a very spoiled young woman. The real story begins when Aurora celebrates her nineteenth birthday. The reader is told that she returned from a French finishing school shortly before her birthday, and on the occasion
of her birthday and her return to Felden Woods, a birthday ball is held. This is where we
first hear Aurora described by one of the other characters in the novel, Talbot Bulstrode:

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

He later calls her a Cleopatra and compares her to notorious women in history, known for
their passion. It is notable to look at the way that the men see and describe Aurora and the
way the narrative voice describes Aurora. The men see her as a temptress, goddess,
something dangerous; the narrative voice describes Aurora in imagery of nature. A much-
quoted example is the passage that compares Aurora to a plant that has not been properly
trimmed:

We do not say a flower is spoiled because it is reared in a hot-house where no breath of
heaven can visit it too roughly; but then, certainly, the bright exotic is trimmed and
pruned by the gardener’s merciless hand, while Aurora shot whither she would, and there
was none to lop the wandering branches of that luxuriant nature. (20)

This particular comparison is noteworthy because it also tells us something about why
Aurora is who she is. In this hot-house comparison, Aurora is the flower and her mother,
who, as we were told earlier, was fond of gardening and could be found “busy amongst
her conservatories” (10) would have been her gardener. In other words, Aurora needed
her mother to be her ‘gardener’, and make sure she grew properly, but since her mother
died when Aurora was a baby, she was never properly ‘trimmed’. This was a common
topic in sensation fiction; heroines were often motherless, and therefore not properly
’socialised’ (Pykett 51). This imagery of nature also suggests that Aurora is not playing a
role. Her mother was an actress, and played a role in order to fit into the neighbourhood;
Aurora does not play a role and is therefore different. To the contemporary readers, being
motherless was an extenuating circumstance in itself. Aurora has governesses to take care
of her, and ‘trim her wandering branches’ but like her father, they allow Aurora to have
her own way. Later in the novel Mrs. Powell is engaged to be Aurora’s companion but
she cannot make Aurora conform to her rules either. Even Aurora herself uses her
motherlessness as an excuse. When Talbot discovers that she has a secret she throws
herself at his feet and says: “I was motherless from my cradle, Talbot (...) Have pity upon me” (104).

Talbot Bulstrode eventually proposes to Aurora, but it is almost against his nature. Earlier in the novel his ideal woman is described:

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

For Talbot the honour of his family is the most important thing in the world. To ensure that this honour is maintained, he needs a wife that meets all the qualifications of the ideal Victorian woman. In proposing to Aurora, he throws almost all his principles overboard, but he still cannot marry a woman with a secret that will perhaps damage his family’s reputation. Aurora will not tell him about what happened after she ran away from her French finishing school, and therefore Talbot chooses not to marry her. He discovers Aurora ran away from school by pure coincidence; his cousin, Constance Trevyllian, returns from that same school to visit Talbot’s mother, and it is through his mother that he hears this. When Aurora refuses to give an explanation he breaks off the engagement. When Talbot and Aurora have their conversation about the year after Aurora left finishing school, he asks her if her father knew and approved of the reason she left school. In other words, he needs to know whether Aurora’s behaviour is considered acceptable by another man. He does not trust Aurora, the woman he loves, but has to rely on another man’s judgement. The fact that her father does not approve of the way Aurora spent this year is reason enough for Talbot to end the engagement. The only reason Aurora accepts Talbot’s second proposal is because of a newspaper report Aurora has just read that James Conyers, (her first husband) is dead. She genuinely believes that she is not breaking any laws, however she knows that the fact that she ran away as a girl, and married a groom, is considered breaking the laws of society. To a woman, however rich she may be, these rules were equally important as the ‘real’ laws. Finally, it transpires that Aurora has committed bigamy. However, because she is rich, has the right connections and an adoring husband, she is able to escape punishment.
There are many ways in which Aurora does not fit into the role of the ideal Victorian woman. The first aspect the reader notices is that she, like her mother, does not look like the angelic type of woman that was popular during this period. Aurora has black hair and black eyes, and is not beautiful in the conventional meaning of the word. We are told that her nose is too small for her face, and her forehead is too low, but all this is compensated by her dark eyes and white teeth (20). The men around her compare her to Cleopatra, or an Eastern empress and she makes a very un-English impression on people, especially men. Like Alicia Audley in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Aurora is fond of horses and horse-riding. Her father does not mind this, and he even hires a good-looking groom especially for her. This interest in horses would be very meaningful to Victorian readers. The introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Aurora Floyd* (by P.D. Edwards) alludes to ‘Skittles’, who was the mistress of Lord Hartington, and was known for driving an expensive pony carriage along the Lady’s Mile. Skittles, like Aurora was ‘dark’ and they also shared an interest in horses. People reading all about Skittles in their newspapers, would almost certainly see Aurora’s likeness to this real-life character. The fact that Aurora likes horses is suspicious in itself; the well-known reviewer and novelist Margaret Oliphant pronounced that for a woman being ‘horsey’ was synonymous with being immoral (Qtd. in the introduction to *Aurora Floyd* xi-xii).

What negatively influences Aurora’s respectability most is the fact that she ran away with her groom and married him. When she returns to her father, she chooses to tell him Conyers is dead - why did she choose to do this? After all, her father is rich enough to help her obtain a divorce and break all ties with Conyers. The explanation is most probably that Aurora tries to avoid negative publicity, and consequently only Aurora and her father know that Aurora was married to her groom. She has not always done her best to conform to society’s rules but this shows nonetheless that she is still aware of these rules, and wants to preserve her respectability.

The scene that was considered to be the most shocking by contemporary readers is the one in which Aurora horsewhips ‘the Softy’. ‘The Softy’, whose real name is Stephen Hargraves, is a stable-helper who has been on the Mellish estate since his youth. After a fall off a horse he became a bit ‘different’, which is why people call him ‘the Softy’. He kicks Aurora’s favourite dog ‘Bow-wow’ and she is so angry that she horsewhips him on
the spot. John walks in on this scene, tells Aurora to return to the house and selects a whip of his own. Eventually he does not use the whip but only tells ‘the Softy’ to go away and even pays him a very generous amount of money to do so. There are several theories about this scene. According to Marlene Tromp the fact that John selects a whip but does not use it on Hargraves suggests that he selected it to use on Aurora (98). She also points out that Aurora and Bow-wow are linked in significant ways, as is the case with John and ‘the Softy’. If the reader sees this similarity this gives new meaning to the whipping-scene (Tromp 99-100). Aurora seems to be the most influential person in the marriage, and John will do everything she asks of him, as he adores her without any reserve. However, of course, John is the one with the real power. He is physically stronger than Aurora but since he is her husband he also has a legal power over her. A relevant question is of course why Aurora decides to differ from the ideal woman. Of course, she cannot change the way she looks, but she could choose to play a role, as her cousin Lucy does. Does Aurora deliberately rebel against the rules that women had to comply with, and against the differences between men and women? According to Jan Davis Schipper, Aurora does not obey her father, not because she revolts against the Victorian feminine ideal but only lives her life according to her desires, without really thinking about what is expected of her (Schipper 62). I do not completely agree with her, since there are a few instances in the book where Aurora herself makes it clear that she finds it hard to understand some of the differences between men and women. One example is the scene in which Aurora has to ask her father for money to pay her ex-husband James Conyers. She says:

“How difficult it has been to me to get this money! (…) If I had been the wife and daughter of two of the poorest men in Christendom, I could scarcely have had more trouble about this two thousand pounds.” (231)

There is also the scene in Brighton where Aurora expresses the wish to leave England because she does not wish to be:

“(…) chained to one set of ideas, fettered to one narrow circle of people, seeing and hearing of the persons we hate for ever and ever, and unable to get away from the odious sound of their names? I should like to turn female missionary.” (52-53)
What Aurora describes here is exactly the life that most middle and higher class ladies had to lead. Not all of them hated this life as much as Aurora says she does but it was very hard to escape. Braddon uses Aurora to express an opinion on the differences between men and women, even though it is not very explicit. What Aurora says is very true since Victorian women, even those from higher classes, lacked most social freedoms and opportunities that men had. They were subjected to many of the same restrictions that were forced upon poor women (Schipper 61). Aurora manages to lead a relatively ‘free’ life, as she can more or less do whatever she wants, but even for her there are some restrictions. Therefore, on the one hand, Braddon uses Aurora to show the boundaries that Victorian women were limited by; on the other hand, Braddon encourages women to value marriage, and not be jealous of women like Aurora. In a passage near the end of the novel, when Aurora is afraid to lose John’s love, she says:

Ah, careless wives! Who think it a small thing, perhaps, that your husbands are honest and generous, constant and true, and who are apt to grumble because your next-door neighbours have started a carriage, while you are fain to be content with an occasional airing in a hired fly, - stop and think of this wretched girl, who in this hour of desolation recalled a thousand little wrongs she had done to her husband, and would have laid herself under his feet to be walked over by him could she have thus atoned for her petty tyrannies, her pretty caprices! (345)

In her book *The Sensation Novel*, Lynn Pykett describes this passage as meant to ‘talk up’ the value of ordinary marriage (59). This is certainly true but there is more to it than that. As is the case with *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* is set in grand houses, and it gives readers the opportunity to ‘spy’ on the lives of higher social classes. Readers may be jealous of Aurora Floyd, who apparently has everything, and does not appear to be very heavily punished for what she did wrong, or jealous of their neighbours’ possessions. However, from this ‘Ah, careless wives!’-passage, readers can gain some satisfaction. At last they are given a reason for Aurora to be jealous of them instead of the other way around. Their lives may be simpler but are actually better than Aurora’s, because they do not have to live with any of the secrets Aurora has to live with, nor is there anything threatening their happiness.

Lucy Floyd is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Floyd, Alexander being Aurora’s father’s nephew. She and Aurora are approximately the same age and have been
friends since their childhood. Lucy is everything that a young, Victorian woman should be: she is blond, pale and ‘mercilessly well educated’ (26); equally she is described as being “ladylike” and as “ignorant as a baby” (48). Both she and Aurora are extremes, stereotypes (Pykett 106). Considering the description of Talbot Bulstrode’s ideal woman, Lucy seems to be exemplary, and Talbot immediately notices this too, but still “There are so many Lucys, but so few Auroras” (48). Braddon describes a woman that meets all the qualifications of the Victorian ideal woman, but also makes it very clear what the disadvantages are. Lucy is everything she should be, and beautiful too, but she does not have many admirers. She is not special, she is like all the other young women.

Something that Braddon keeps emphasising is the fact that Lucy never shows her feelings; she often contrasts Lucy with Aurora, who always does. Aurora is the one with a big secret, but in a sense Lucy keeps all her feelings a secret, and consequently is more secretive than Aurora (Curtis 90). For no apparent reason, Braddon more than once calls Lucy “the little hypocrite” (348). One example of this is when Lucy admires (or pretends to admire according to Braddon) Talbot when he recites Homer to her (in Greek, which she cannot understand). Lucy is very much in love with Talbot, and the way she acts in this passage reflects her submissive personality perfectly; so why would Braddon call her a hypocrite? Lucy is not the novel’s most likeable character, she is a bit boring and the reader can grow tired of her for never saying what she means. The reason for this is probably that Braddon tries to undermine the image of the ideal woman. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, she already did this in a more extreme way - Lucy Floyd does not turn out to be murderous or dangerous - but it is clear to the readers that what she does is play a role. She has feelings inside, but hides them; she has her own interests, but only does what is socially accepted. When Aurora comes to London after John has found out about her marriage to Conyers, Lucy wants to go and comfort her, but Talbot will not let her. She protests, which surprises Talbot, and he explains “mildly” why she cannot go. But then she asks:

“Is it wrong of Aurora to come alone, Talbot, dear?” Lucy asked, meekly. “Is it wrong?” repeated Mr Bulstrode, fiercely. “Would it be wrong for you to go tearing from here to Cornwall, child?” He was irritated by the mere imagination of such an outrage, and he looked at Lucy as if he half suspected her of some such intention. (349-350)
Therefore, even though she always “obeys submissively as a child” (350), her husband still feels that there might be something more underlying all this submissiveness. Lucy is treated like a child (Talbot often calls her things like “my poor little Lucy”) and acts very much like one too; unsurprisingly, since Talbot acts more like her father than her husband.

I will look at Talbot Bulstrode and John Mellish simultaneously because Braddon uses them as opposites, they are both presented as stereotypical men, whilst both are also in love with Aurora Floyd. Talbot Bulstrode is Aurora’s first admirer in the novel and Braddon describes him in great detail, his most important characteristic being his ‘pride of birth’. He is the eldest son of a wealthy Cornish baronet, his family not only being extremely wealthy but also very noble. His goal in life is to do honour to the name of Bulstrode and since he applies a high standard to his own behaviour, he expects his future wife to be at least as virtuous as he is. He is:

one of those people who will not pass in a crowd. Tall and broad chested, with a pale whiskerless face, aquiline nose, clear, cold, grey eyes, thick moustache, and black hair worn (…) closely cropped. (33)

He and Aurora are both proud, and they would have suited each other well, but Talbot breaks off the engagement after he discovers Aurora has a secret. However much he loves her, he is not willing to run the risk of disgracing his family name. Talbot complains that everybody respects him, but that nobody loves him, not even his own mother; indeed, it is difficult to love someone who is so critical, proud and convinced of his own perfection. When John Mellish eventually tells Talbot that Lucy has loved Talbot all along, the latter marries her.

The man Aurora marries, John Mellish, is a Yorkshire squire. He is in many ways the opposite of Talbot Bulstrode. Braddon describes him as a:

big empty-headed Yorkshireman (…) a big man (…) youthful and innocent joyousness in his face (…) a big hearty, broad-chested young Englishman, with brown hair brushed away from an open forehead, and a thick auburn moustache bordering a mouth for ever ready to expand into a laugh. (57)

He is fond of horses and horse-racing and he is “as unsuspicious as a child” (59); he trusts people because he himself is so pure, innocent and honest. Braddon even compares him to Prince Albert, who had just died at the time Aurora Floyd was serialised (60).
Bulstrode then, is a man who is very aware of what is appropriate and what is not. He embodies Victorian values while Mellish represents the more ‘natural’ values as he does what he thinks is right and he listens to his feelings. Although Mellish is not as proud as Bulstrode, he is very well aware of differences in class for instance between him and his servants:

John Mellish was entirely without personal pride; but there was another pride, which was wholly inseparable from his education and position, and this was the pride of caste. He was strictly conservative; and although he was ready to talk to his good friend the saddler, or his trusted retainer the groom, as freely as he would have held converse with his equals, he would have opposed all the strength of his authority against the saddler had that honest tradesman attempted to stand for his native town, and would have annihilated the groom with one angry flash of his bright blue eyes had the servant infringed by so much as an inch upon the broad extent of territory that separated him from his master.

(335)

Therefore, even though John does not seem to be too much attached to the rules of Victorian society, there are some rules that he does value, and those are the rules that he has ‘inherited’; the rules that go with his ‘education and position’.

In *Aurora Floyd* the characters seem to be more straightforward and ‘natural’ than the characters in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Even though they seem natural, it transpires that most of the characters in *Aurora Floyd* are playing a role too. Aurora has been motherless since she was a baby, and because her rich father adores and spoils her she can do whatever she wants without considering what society expects from her. Her mother was an actress, and when she came to Felden Woods after her marriage to Archibald Floyd, she was able to play the role of rich wife perfectly. Aurora is not an actress and refuses to adapt to the rules of society and lives her life the way she wants to. Despite being relatively free there are some difficulties for her too: she cannot manage her own money, and it is hard for her to divorce her first husband. Although she already knows how ‘limiting’ marriage can be, she chooses to marry again, this time to a man who allows her to pursue her own interests. Nevertheless, marriage makes her his property and to remain respectable and fit in she has to play a role. The final paragraph of the book describes these changes:
So we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, (...) I doubt if my heroine will ever again care so much for horseflesh (...) as she had done in days that are gone. (459)

These changes may not sound very profound, but for Aurora who had always been able to make her own decisions, who was free, this is an important change: she is clearly no longer free.

In summary, Aurora’s cousin Lucy has never been free as she was raised by a mother who knew what was expected of young ladies. As with Lady Audley, she looks and acts like the perfect Victorian lady, but, also like Lady Audley, this is only a role she is forced to play. Lucy is forced to hide her feelings, so she has more secrets than Aurora! She never complains of the limited possibilities open to her, yet we know that she has feelings, and even Talbot seems to realise that there might be something more hidden underlying all this submissiveness. Talbot and John seem to be very different from each other, but they are both typically Victorian men. John may not seem to be very strict, but he does expect people to follow the rules he sets for himself. Talbot is very proud and plays the role of an ideal Victorian man to perfection but is not very well-loved for this since he scares people with his perfectionism. Lucy recognises the role he plays, and it fits hers perfectly.

In this novel (as in Lady Audley’s Secret), Braddon presents gender as a role that can be played. The main difference with the earlier novel is that people do not change roles as often as they do in Lady Audley’s Secret. Braddon criticises the limited possibilities open to women by showing that even Aurora, who is a rich heiress, cannot be totally independent. Lucy Floyd shows the disadvantages of the ideal Victorian lady. As for Victorian stereotypes, Braddon certainly identifies and challenges a few of these: Lucy, the ideal Victorian woman/little hypocrite; Aurora, the exotic, dark, dangerous woman/happy mother and wife; Talbot, the ideal Victorian man/unhappy little boy craving for someone to love him; and John, unsuspecting, not very smart Yorkshire squire/very class-conscious who eventually subjects the wild Aurora to his ‘rule’. Braddon uses these stereotypes to make her characters recognisable to contemporary readers and perhaps to raise certain expectations. When, after first introducing her characters as stereotypes, she challenges these stereotypes, and readers’ expectations are
proved wrong, this might have made her readers reconsider some of their own stereotypes.
Chapter Three

*Married Beneath Him*

*Married Beneath Him (MBH)* is a comedy in four acts, written by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and published in 1882. Even though it was published about twenty years after *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* and it is not a sensation novel, it is still relevant to look at the way Braddon uses stereotypes in this play. Since Braddon probably based this play on T.W. Robertson’s *Caste* (Holder 171), it enables us to discern how Braddon adapted the characters and the storyline to get her message across. Also, the fact that this is a play, and the main characters are circus people/artists could add a fresh perspective on the concept of role-playing/performance in Braddon’s novels.

Like many of Braddon’s plays, *MBH* was never performed. One reason for this was that it was harder for female playwrights to have their plays performed, but according to Heidi Holder another reason for this might have been that theatre managers were afraid of causing a scandal, since Braddon’s “plays reveal a decidedly combative attitude towards the theatrical conventions of their time, particularly as regards gender roles” (Holder 166). This conservative attitude probably also influenced Braddon’s success as a playwright in another way since Braddon’s personal lifestyle might also be in question. This did not influence the publication of her novels and short stories, since the man she lived with was also her publisher, but the fact that Braddon lived with a man who was still married to another woman might have put off theatre managers.

*MBH* is the story of Polly, the daughter of a lady and an adventurer. Her mother died when she was four years old, and her father decided to try to make his fortune in Australia. Since her father is not a very trustworthy character, the circus people that Polly and her father are staying with at the time of the death of Polly’s mother, offer to take care of Polly. Her father signs a contract, relinquishing all claims upon his daughter and the circus couple, Mr and Mrs. Nangle, then raise her as their own daughter and Polly becomes a member of their equestrian troupe. When Polly is twenty years old, she has an accident; she falls into a pond and is rescued by Lord Hunstanton and his friend, Captain Leschellas. Hunstanton likes her immediately but is repulsed by Polly’s coarse language and behaviour. He offers to pay for her education, and when Mr and Mrs. Nangle agree,
Polly leaves “to acquire the grace and refinement which education alone can give” (15). In the next act, Polly has become Lady Hunstanton and the story then focuses on a visit from one of Lord Hunstanton’s relatives, the Duchess of Flamborough. Lord Hunstanton wishes Polly to conceal her background; unfortunately Polly’s adoptive parents also decide to make an appearance and Polly is forced to pretend that the parents she loves are just “county people”. The Duchess meanwhile has decided to bring a friend; his name is Paddington Jones, and he turns out to be Polly’s long-lost father. He discloses this information to Polly during a private conversation and asks her to kiss him, which she does. Hunstanton sees this and immediately presumes that Polly is unfaithful to him. He confronts her with his assumption in the presence of all his friends after which Polly walks away humiliated and angry. When Jones tells Hunstanton what his relation to Polly really is, Hunstanton apologises to his wife. Instead of just accepting his apology, Polly tells her husband:

“But don’t you think, Hunstanton, that when a man marries beneath him he ought to have the courage of his opinions; and, that instead of trying to hide his wife’s humble origin, it would be better for him to face society boldly and say – Yes, I found my wife in a circus, but I chose her because I loved her, and I was not afraid to marry her, because I knew she was an honest woman.” (52)

After this episode Polly is accepted even by the Duchess; the story is concluded with Jones’ leaving and all the other characters going back to the house.

This play is not very exciting in itself, it is fairly predictable and there is not much depth to the characters. What makes it pertinent is the play’s resemblance to a play by T. W. Robertson: *Caste*. *Caste* is the story of the son of a Marquis (D’Alroy) who marries a dancer from the corps de ballet (Esther Eccles). D’Alroy went to India to fight and when D’Alroy is reported dead, Esther is forced to go back to her father, who is always drunk. The report of D’Alroy’s death turns out to be false, the lovers are re-united and Esther is accepted in upper-class society. The characters in *Caste* very much resemble the characters in *MBH*. There is D’Alroy that Braddon presents as Hunstanton; there is no equivalent of Esther in Braddon’s play, but her sister Polly is similar to Braddon’s Polly, Captain Hawtree becomes Captain Leschellas, the Marquise becomes the Duchess and Mr Eccles becomes Mr Nangle. In Robertson’s play Esther has good manners from the
start, and her manner of speech is perfectly befitting the circles in which D’Alroy is accustomed to live; consequently, she does not have to change or be educated in order to please her husband. Her sister Polly, however, is a lot more common and is used as the “comic second-lead female” (Holder 171). Braddon uses her Polly as ‘first-lead female’, and even though she is just as common as Robertson’s Polly - who ends up marrying a gasfitter - Braddon’s Polly marries a lord. Although he likes Polly immediately, Hunstanton is at first repulsed by her coarse language:

> What a bright, open face it is! – fairer, fresher, franker than any face I saw through the London season. And what a lovely smile! How gracefully she moves about her humble avocations! (POLLY puts down a mug, and winks at SAM) Even that wink becomes her, dreadful as it might be in any other woman. But her language is certainly a little outside the boundary line of elegant manners. She reminds me of the girl in the fairy tale, out of whose mouth dropped toads and scorpions. (11)

Even though Hunstanton does not like Polly’s language, he sees other ladylike qualities in her: “I can’t help thinking that Nature meant you to be a lady” (13). Polly’s reply to Hunstanton’s offer to educate her is very telling:

> “But when you’ve made a lady of me, what are you going to do with me? (…) Now, I’ve heard people say that’s the flaw in your system of modern education. You are always making ladies and gentlemen, and, when you’ve made ‘em, you don’t know what to do with ‘em; so you just let ‘em quietly starve.” (14)

Esther Eccles in Robertson’s play is made into a lady, and then when she loses her husband, has nothing to fall back on. She cannot go back to her old job as a dancer, so she is forced to live in poverty with her father. Even Polly’s own mother is a good example of what Polly tells Hunstanton (even though Polly is not aware of this); her mother is a lady who marries beneath her and when her husband turns out to be a scoundrel, she dies poor and miserable amongst circus people. The fact that she is a lady does not change anything, let alone help her; if anything, it probably caused her to be in this situation in the first place. Something similar happens to Helen/Lucy in Lady Audley’s Secret after her first husband leaves for Australia, only she decides not to accept her fate but to try and change it.

> Braddon’s Polly is sometimes compared to Aurora Floyd, since both are impulsive and both are keen horsewomen. The main difference between the two is that
Aurora is brought up to be a lady, but breaks many rules (marrying her groom, horsewhipping a servant, committing bigamy, etc.); Polly, on the other hand, is not a lady - at least, she does not behave like one – as her language is coarse and she grew up in a circus, but she is definitely not morally-flawed. Furthermore, Aurora is more or less forced to change at the end of the book while Polly is allowed to stay the way she is.

In *Caste*, Esther Eccles, the well-mannered and well-adapted dancer is eventually accepted into society, however her sister Polly would never have been accepted by her husband’s relatives and friends. In *MBH*, anyone in the audience would be able to see that Polly’s manners clearly require improvement before she could hope to move up into higher circles. Initially, their assumptions would be confirmed by Hunstanton’s offer to educate Polly. However, in the second act, Polly is Hunstanton’s wife, but still uses the same sort of vocabulary as in her time in the circus: “How sweet of them to absquatulate!” (21). Unlike the heroine in *Caste*, and the heroines in Braddon’s novels for that matter, Polly does not change. The reason for her success and her victory at the end of the play, is the fact that she is honest and stays herself. To a contemporary audience this would be surprising, especially since Polly and her ‘family’ used to run a circus. During the Victorian period actors, dancers, circus people, etc. were considered to be even ‘lower’ than people from the lowest class. It is intriguing that Braddon chooses not only to challenge any prejudice, but the prejudice about theatre-people. The reason for this might be that she used to be an actress herself. The audience would expect a lower-class circus girl to have to change considerably to be accepted by, for example, a Duchess or Marquise; in Polly’s case, it is the people around her that have to change their points of view. Indeed, Lord Hunstanton, the Duchess and her son all have to admit that they were wrong about Polly.

Mr Paddington Jones, who is highly esteemed by the Duchess (though this is mainly because he is going to make her “A pot of money” [53]), turns out to be quite a shady character. This is not such a surprise to the audience because Braddon chooses to inform them of this fact before the characters in the play know. The only characters that are aware of the fact that Jones cannot be trusted are Mr and Mrs Nangle, the circus people. In this situation, Braddon again demonstrates that even though they are lower in class, the Nangles are right in their opinion about Paddington Jones.
In Robertson’s play, the contrasts between the different social classes are clearly visible; however, there is no class conflict, since the play does not challenge the status quo. In contrast, in MBH Braddon clearly presents the class conflict within a marriage, and most interestingly it is the lower class wife that wins. Not because she turns out to have been a lady’s daughter all along, but because she turns out to be morally superior to her husband. Even though her language might not sound like that of a lady, she demonstrates that honesty and confidence are much more important traits. While Robertson’s characters fulfil the audience’s expectations, Braddon, on the contrary surprises her audience by once again disproving Victorian stereotypes of people that have a special place in her heart.

With regard to role-playing/performance, it is significant to see that even though this is a play, and some of the main characters are artists, there is not much role-playing. The fact that none of the characters chooses to play a role and that Polly, even though she agrees to be educated, does not change and refuses to play a role – even if it might help her to marry a rich husband – is significant. In the two novels discussed in the previous chapters, the main (female) characters choose to, or are forced to play a (stereotypical) role. Braddon presents this partly as being a sacrifice, but also as something that is logical, necessary even, to fit into the Victorian society. In MBH, written twenty years later than both Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd, this is no longer the case. This could be because society had changed, or because Braddon no longer found it useful or essential to write about this topic in this way. At any rate, the contrast between Braddon’s earlier novels and this play is remarkable, and certainly provides food for thought.
Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to prove that Braddon’s characters are not as stereotypical as they might seem and, if possible, to discover what Braddon’s motives for this could have been. After discussion of Lady Audley’s Secret, Aurora Floyd and Married Beneath Him, it is possible to come to a conclusion concerning these issues.

The first difficulty was to define the difference between a role and a stereotype. It seems that the two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably. However, I prefer to see a role as something that is adopted in a certain situation, in the sense that most people have one or two main roles (in society), and often a combination of roles leads to (a) stereotype(s). For example: the stereotypical ideal Victorian woman comprised some characteristic virtues, such as chastity, along with the role of mother; she represents the purity of a safe haven for her husband to come home to and where he could find solace from life’s trials and tribulations and the ills of society. In addition, there is the difference between consciously and artfully playing roles i.e. being deceitful, purely for one’s own (financial) benefit and to the detriment of others, compared to fulfilling socially-imposed and expected roles for the benefit of society and/or in order to survive on an individual level. Braddon’s characters do both; Helen Maldon in Lady Audley’s Secret is a clear example of the latter as she chooses her roles purely in order to be able to survive, while Aurora’s first husband in Aurora Floyd is a good example of the former. The examples of these two types of characters are strongest in Braddon’s first novel The Trail of the Serpent, which was first published in 1860 as Three Times Dead. Elements from The Trail of the Serpent were later used by several other writers, including Wilkie Collins in The Moonstone. Jabez North, who is one of the main protagonists in The Trail of the Serpent, is the ultimate example of a man who has a range of roles at his disposal. He chooses the one that suits him best and since his purpose in life is to make money at the cost of others, he does not mind if he has to kill someone to reach his goal. The detective that eventually exposes Jabez, Mr. Peters, is in every way his opposite. He also chooses to play roles, but with the sole purpose of discovering who murdered Mr. Harding and in the process clear the name of Harding’s nephew, who was falsely accused of committing
this crime. Unfortunately, it was impossible to take *The Trail of the Serpent* into detailed consideration, since it was not available when this dissertation was written.

To summarise, in *Lady Audley’s Secret* even gender is presented as a role that can be played and the roles that characters choose or are forced to play determine (the rules that govern) their behaviour. By presenting the link between characters and roles in such a way, Braddon criticises the limited possibilities open to (especially) women in Victorian patriarchal society. She places a great deal of emphasis on the fact that women’s lives were governed by men, making it impossible for them to make their own decisions. Braddon’s heroine in this novel cannot better herself through her talents – something women are able to do today – but she is forced to act like an ideal/angelic woman in order to secure a rich husband. The crimes she commits later in the novel (bigamy, attempted murder, murder) are in part due to social pressure as she is trying to protect the ‘career’ that she has made for herself. Modern women who are ruthless and determined are often (considered) very successful; Victorian women who possessed these traits on the other hand, were considered to be dangerous since these traits were associated with men, and not with women, and a distortion of both their roles could undermine the social structure and the fabric of society. Lady Audley transgresses gender boundaries in more than one way and remarkably enough, she is eventually exposed by a man who has quite a few feminine traits. When the novel starts, all the characters seem straightforward and stereotypical (Lucy/Lady Audley is the ideal Victorian woman, Alicia Audley is the girl who only likes horses and dogs and will never marry, Robert Audley is the lazy young man who will never achieve anything, etc.), but in the course of the novel Braddon shows the reader that all is not as it seems; this is one of the characteristics of sensation fiction, but *Lady Audley’s Secret* might also have forced readers to question their own stereotypes.

In *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon makes the same point as she once more raises the issue of the limited possibilities open to women. She challenges a number of stereotypes and emphasizes that even gender is a role that can be played. The main difference between *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* is that people do not change roles as often in *Aurora Floyd*. The heroine of this novel is a rich banker’s daughter, yet even she cannot be totally independent, even though she has a very indulgent father and a tolerant
husband. Her cousin, Lucy Floyd, is the prototypical ideal Victorian lady, but she is not happy as she is never able to reveal her true feelings, and the fact that she is so perfect also makes her boring and not a very likeable character. Victorian readers might be programmed to recognise these stereotypes and to like an ideal woman better than a woman who transgresses borders. However, Braddon writes this novel in such a way that the ideal woman is not the most likeable character, and the reader in fact starts to understand Aurora, and therefore can be less judgemental. At the end of the novel, even the ‘wild’ Aurora is subjected to the rules of the patriarchal society, but the reader does not have the impression that she is punished for what she has done. The fact that Braddon challenges the stereotypes of both the ideal Victorian woman (Lucy Floyd vs. Aurora Floyd) and the Victorian man (Talbot Bulstrode vs. John Mellish), might have made her readers reconsider some of their own stereotypes.

Braddon’s play *Married Beneath Him*, which was probably based on T.W. Robertson’s *Caste* (Holder 171), provides an important contrast to this; the characters (mostly artists!) in this play consciously choose not to play a role, even when it would be to their own benefit to do so. Unlike Robertson’s play, Braddon uses the events in the play to challenge the social status quo. She presents the class conflict within a marriage, and most interestingly it is the lower class wife that wins. She turns out to be morally superior to her husband, and demonstrates that honesty and confidence are much more important traits than being able to behave in a so-called civilised manner.

Having summarized the main arguments of this thesis, let us now consider the reasons Braddon might have had for questioning Victorian stereotypes and Victorian patriarchal society. Women longing for the freedom to work, to pursue an education, control their money and property and live independent lives are central in Braddon’s novels. As a result of her sensation novels, questions were raised in society about the position of women. Braddon’s contribution to this debate may have had its origins in her own life, for she had experienced the influence of stereotypes and a patriarchal society. Her parents’ marriage was an unhappy one and after her father had lost all the family’s money (there was no legal way for his wife to prevent this), Braddon and her mother had to find a way to make some money. Mary Elizabeth Braddon started her career as a professional actress, then started writing plays, poetry and short stories. As an actress she
must have experienced people’s prejudices since actresses were considered to be little better than prostitutes. Later, when she earned her money as a writer, she lived with publisher John Maxwell while he was still married to someone else. Again, this is a situation which would surely have generated discussion. Braddon and Maxwell got married as soon as his first wife passed away, so apparently they did want to adhere to conventions in that sense. Nevertheless, just as the heroines in her novels (who also often have connections with the theatre world), Braddon did not always follow society’s rules and her actions caused controversy. Aurora Floyd and Polly Hunstanton both end up happily married, as Braddon did eventually.

However, it is a known fact that Braddon also wrote to make a living. Most of her readers were women and one way of ensuring that a book would be successful was to address the topic of women’s discontent with society. Braddon could not be too critical, since books were paid for by men and circulating libraries were not very liberal. Another of Braddon’s tactics to make sure that women enjoyed her books, was by showing that the lives of the heroines in her books were not necessarily something to be jealous of. On the one hand, she described the lives of Aurora, and especially Lady Audley, in great detail, almost as a type of manual on how to become a lady; on the other hand, she also advised her female readers to be happy with the life they had, for example the ‘Oh careless wives’ passage in *Aurora Floyd*. With *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon showed that, although stereotypical life as a wife might seem dull, there were many inherent dangers for women who did not fully adhere to the system/society and its roles; she also demonstrates that the stereotypical wife may have more to be thankful for than meets the eye!

Both *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* were first published in instalments. This requires a different style of writing than the one classically used in a novel that would only be published in one piece; each instalment has to end with a cliff-hanger, so that people will buy the next issue, but there might also be people who miss an instalment or two. This meant that the story and the characters in it had to be easily accessible. People recognise stereotypes, and therefore they are often used in stories that are published in instalments (sensation novels and soap operas alike). The fact that Braddon often challenges these stereotypes could to some extent undermine the aforementioned
claim. In any case the combination of stereotypes and instalments ensured that Braddon reached a wide audience with her views.

Nevertheless, in *Married Beneath Him* we do not see these motives as strongly. Since this play was written twenty years later than the novels, when Braddon was no longer as dependent on the income of her plays and books, it could be inferred that Braddon initially did indeed simply write about these topics (stereotypes and the Victorian patriarchal society) to attract female readers to her books, and earn more money. However, this is hard to prove, since the setting of *Married Beneath Him* is radically different to that of *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*. It describes class conflict within a marriage and although the wife wins, I cannot imagine readers (or theatre-goers) identifying with Polly, or wanting to be like her. The idea of a circus girl marrying a lord is quite revolutionary in itself, but then finally it transpires she was a lady’s daughter all along.

Finally, a modern reader could be tempted to think that Mary Elizabeth Braddon was a forerunner of women’s social emancipation, in the sense that she examines women’s plight and because she sometimes expresses anger at the fact that they are trapped in a role or a stereotype. However, there is no definite evidence that Braddon aimed to promote women’s emancipation by commenting on stereotyping and the patriarchal society in her books. It would be safe to say that, irrespective of the differences between the two novels and the play, in all three works Braddon challenges stereotypes. Braddon probably uses the stereotypes of the ideal Victorian man and woman – and their correlation – both in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and in *Aurora Floyd* to criticise the limited number of possibilities open to women in a Victorian patriarchal society.

In the wider context of the sensation novel in general (not only limited to M.E. Braddon’s works) or even to sensationalism on the whole, there are numerous questions that still wait to be answered. Firstly, it would be noteworthy to consider if the same stereotypes that Braddon uses are also used by other sensation writers; this research could for instance be focused on the contrast between male and female sensation novelists. Secondly, considering the concept of sensationalism as such, it would be worthwhile reflecting on the development of this concept through the ages: what made a book or a
play sensational in Victorian times and to what extent have these sensational elements or criteria evolved or indeed changed completely? In the same vein, it would be worth contemplating the comparative factors – for example contemporary political climate, social values, collective and individual beliefs and goals, etc. – leading to the public’s need for sensationalism and whether this need (indeed, nowadays one could speak of ‘craving’) for sensationalism is similar or has grown. Although it is likely that the concept ‘sensation’ and what is considered sensational has changed between 1860 and now, why for example, are Sarah Waters’ books, that are based on Victorian sensationalism, so successful in this day and age? Another approach regarding the concept of sensationalism, would be to consider other media such as newspapers (Victorian and modern), TV programmes (for example RTL-Boulevard, reality soaps, etc.) and films – and compare/contrast these to Victorian sensation novels. How are they similar? What are the differences and can we identify a clear line of development?

Regarding this point, it is significant to suggest the resemblance between Victorian sensation novels and a programme such as Sex and the City – not only in terms of the sensationalistic factors – but also specifically in terms of the approach to publication; namely, both were first published/broadcast as instalments and were subsequently released as one volume i.e., a novel and dvd-box/film, respectively. In my opinion, one of the important questions that might arise is why this formula is popular, not only in terms of benefits including income, ratings, etc. to writers, publishers and media companies; but also in terms of how this approach generates elements such as suspense, voyeurism, the ability to join the latest instalment at any given moment, etc., all of which lead to a sense of frenzied viewing and sometimes improbable avidity that the reader/viewer shows for such a genre.

Undoubtedly, there are many other possible avenues to explore regarding the wider implications, apart from the aforementioned. Equally, the arguments and examples I have presented concerning how Braddon’s characters are less stereotypical than one would expect, and the underlying motives for this are by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, I believe that I have given an initial insight into these issues and have hopefully provided material for further discussion.
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Signatures

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