

**Wax Dolls: Shaping a New Identity in
Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret***

By [Anna Royal](#), McGill University

<1> In her novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), Mary Elizabeth Braddon resists the stringent moral expectations for middle and upper class Victorian women.⁽¹⁾ Instead of lionizing the domestic qualities of a Victorian angel in the house, Braddon creates a female character who acts as an ambitious agent of her own socio-economic success. Lucy Audley redefines herself from her humble origins, and rather than become an angel dutifully married and tucked away within the domestic sphere, she strives for ever-increasing social power, relying on her savvy economic skills and ability to keep her true identity a secret at any price. Keeping these secrets not only allows Lucy to live according to societal expectations, it also enables her to realize her own economic and social ambitions. Furthermore, by hiding a secret identity, she creates a sense of mystery and allure about herself that is material rather than spiritual in nature. For the secrets of Lucy Audley become a commodity in themselves, and as these secrets become more desirable, so does the woman who keeps them.

<2> In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon's central character, Lucy Audley, strives for a monopoly on the commodity market to acquire an increase of wealth and power. She begins the novel as Helen Talboys, a struggling young wife whose husband, George, has left to make his fortune in Australia. Believing that he will not return, Helen decides to take financial matters into her own hands, but because she is still married to her husband and legally bound to him, Helen decides to feign a new identity as Lucy Graham to facilitate a rise up the social ladder. Lucy first finds modest work as a governess for a doctor and eventually catches the eye of an old widower and baronet, Sir Michael Audley. Unwilling to refuse a proposal that promises socio-economic gain, Lucy knowingly commits an act of bigamy by marrying him and, as a result, must aggressively guard her secret identity to prevent the discovery of her criminal act. In order to protect herself from suspicion, Lucy uses her material wealth at Audley Court to distract doubts about her origins and questions about her past. Not only does she try to intimidate those around her with wealth and beauty, she capitalizes on the grandeur of her possessions to deflect attention away from her true identity. Because Lucy profits from the things around her to control her false identity, when she marries Sir Michael, she becomes not only Lucy Audley but also a part of Audley Court itself.

<3> At the start of the novel, the house at Audley Court seems to be unaffected by the nascent capitalist market burgeoning around it. By the mid-nineteenth century, Britain's industrial-based economy saw a significant increase in the production and exchange of material goods, and innovations in the railway and the omnibus helped to increase the proliferation of commodities

(Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 92), which were now being consumed at a rate never before seen in Britain (Lindner 4). Uninviting and impregnable, however, Audley Court was situated apart from any main thoroughfare that might bring in commerce and trade, and Braddon further emphasizes the home's disjunction from the public world noting that "unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all" (Braddon 1).

<4> Braddon creates, instead, a gloomy and forbidding mansion in the Gothic tradition. The house's timeless nature is underlined by a primordial-like landscape, which is "everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy, yellow stonecrop, and dark moss" (1). Having survived some "eleven centuries" (3) of history, the Court has withstood the test of time, yet it seems untouched by modern technological developments. Rather than adhere to precise schedules of the new railways lines, at Audley Court, both time and place possess a sporadic, haphazard quality that seem to thumb their noses towards a more efficient and synchronized social order. Braddon goes on to write that the house itself "was very old, and very irregular and rambling" (1), and its "stupid bewildering clock . . . jumped straight from one hour to the next" (1). Furthermore, its isolation "low down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures" (1) separates it from what Mark Girouard calls the competitive world of country houses. As he points out in his work *Life in the English Country House*, capital produced through the industrial revolution by way of ships, warehouses, banks, and cities "created a number of newly rich people who were able to invest in landed property [and] so much new money in both old and new families tended to make the country-house world competitive" (268). The building and renovating of new homes was on the rise (268), and the result was that the landscape of the British countryside was rapidly transforming. Rather than participating in this new culture of home improvement, however, at Audley Court, the ivy and moss were "overgrown" (Braddon 2), the walls were in ruins (2), and the interior was "old-fashioned" (3).

<5> Representing more than just a physical place but rather a domestic ideal, the Victorian home was seen as a social construct signifying what Ruskin calls a "place of peace . . . [and a] shelter from all terror, doubt, and division" (qtd. in Logan 24). In *Recreations of a Country Parson* (1861), Dr. Southwood Smith goes onto exalt the ideals of the home and housekeeping, stating that "a clean, fresh, and well-ordered house exercises over its inmates a moral" (qtd. in Flanders 77). Finally, in her popular Victorian handbook *Household Management* (1861), Mrs. Beeton underscores this urgency of keeping a spiritually and physically clean environment when she admonishes that a woman's "spirit will be seen through the whole establishment; and just in proportion as she performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly, so will her domestics follow in her path" (qtd. in Flanders 79). However, at Audley Court, a past reference to "quiet nuns" (Braddon 1), tucked away behind its ancient walls, suggests an otherworldly presence that is haunting rather than spiritual in nature, and the Court was once a sanctuary for unmarried and virginal women, not married ones. Critic Aeron Haynie notes further that Audley Court's lack of productivity extends beyond the economic sense, for it is also in a state of domestic disarray (66). Its heir, Robert Audley, is described as passive and aloof, while its current tenants Sir Michael and his daughter Alicia make for poor and negligent housekeepers (66). Thus, both the economic and spiritual aspects of the home have been "stagnant" and "neglected" (Braddon 2), and, in the end, Braddon writes, that it was not a place where you found your true self, but rather "a house in which you incontinently lost yourself" (2).

<6> On first getting to know Sir Michael, it seems that Lucy markets her superficially angelic features and develops angelic character traits to garner a place within its hallowed halls. She begins by first responding to “an advertisement” (5) for a governess for Mr. Dawson in the *Times*, where she sells herself as a single and respectable candidate, for “her accomplishments were so brilliant and numerous, that it seemed strange that she should have answered an advertisement offering such a very moderate terms of remuneration” (5). Having secured a spot at the home of Mr. Dawson, Lucy continues to market her character and her good looks until she catches the eye of the baron of Audley Court. Like a proper angel, she walks to church three times on a Sunday (6) and is such a pleasant and generous benefactor to poor cottagers that they “would burst out into senile raptures with her grace, her beauty, and her loveliness, such [was] never bestowed upon the vicar’s wife” (6). Finally, though Braddon writes that there “was nothing whatever in [Lucy’s] manner of the shallow artifice employed by a woman who wishes to captivate a rich man” (7), when her beauty and character successfully captivate the interest of Sir Michael Audley, Braddon is also quick to point out that Lucy “appeared by no means to dislike the baronet’s attention” (7).

<7> When Sir Michael offers his hand in marriage to Lucy, however, the event is conducted more like a business transaction rather than a declaration of mutual love and affection. She responds to Sir Michael’s devotion by stating that she does “not love any one in the world” (22), failing to exclude him from this declaration. Unhappy with the life of poverty offered by her first husband George (19), Lucy has initially marketed herself as an angel of the house in order to move up the socio-economic ladder; however, her manipulative and selfish character is hinted at, once she has won Sir Michael’s proposal. For Lucy is merely using a socially traditional representation of the private sphere as a means to participate in the competitive economic culture of the public world. Braddon makes Lucy’s financial motives explicit and characterizes her as the calculating agent of her ultimate good fortune. With her “soft and feathery [curls], always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head” (8), Lucy fashions herself into a desirable commodity that is bought both figuratively and literally by Sir Michael for “a bargain” (11). Both consumer and commodity, she successfully sells herself into a position of prestige and power. On marrying Sir Michael, Braddon establishes Lucy in a life of “no more dependence [and] no more drudgery” (12), while declaring Sir Michael to be a “foolish old man” (11) for having been so taken in by her performance.

<8> Once Lucy has installed herself as the newest figure at Audley Court, instead of establishing an air of moral integrity in the space, she introduces a modern spirit of commerce and trade to the estate. Furthermore, lacking in virtue, Lucy relies on external, material things to keep her reputation creditable. She hides her true identity in artifice and performance, and she creates an ideal figure by associating herself with idealized things. Therefore, when Lucy arrives at the Court, she begins to appropriate its riches and amass a wealth of new commodities. In fact, everything in her chambers acts not only as a representation of something else, but also as a valuable commodity. The “cheval glass” (69) hanging in Lucy’s room reflects the gazer’s image, attracting the “vanity, narcissi, and self-indulgence implicated in [the] culture’s ethic of consumption” (Lindner 70). The “two or three empty dresses” (Braddon 69) lying about the room suggest both Lucy’s multiplied, ghost-like presence as well as a subordination of her physical form to those of her commodities. Moreover, although priceless works of art fill up Lucy’s chambers, Victoria Rosner notes that in framing these paintings, they too become

decorative objects and therefore commodities “ready to be integrated into a decorated interior” (22).

<9> If, according to Dutton, home décor was a “carefully achieved condition” and an act of great consideration (qtd. in Logan 36), then Lucy Audley’s home could conceivably be designed to achieve a false exterior, one that masked a person’s true character. As such, Lucy arranges her new valuable possessions to conceal, rather than reveal, her true identity, trusting that the overwhelming grandeur of her things will avert a closer scrutiny of her. In her work, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes that the empty spaces one fills become an “extension of the self” and “ornament, décor, and ultimately decorum define the boundaries of a . . . place by emptying that space of any relevance other than that of the subject” (qtd. in Logan 97). Thus, when Lucy fills up her home with commodities, she fills it up with herself, too, and not only is she seen in relation to the things around her, she is seen in communion with them as well. Her sense of self extends out towards the things that she chooses for the home, and Lucy, as the home’s chief designer, positions herself at its center. This allows Lucy an increased autonomy over the private sphere, for she is capable of shaping it to her socio-economic advantage. Her good taste might very well signify good morals, but it also suggests a more deliberate representation of how she would like to be seen.

<10> Lucy’s first impression seems to be always already filtered through her material wealth, and critic Krista Lysack adds that “in the age of consumerism, identity . . . was generated through one’s proximity to commodities” (59). Thus, Lucy frames herself amongst her possessions to subsequently reinforce her status at Audley Court. Braddon writes that not only would she love “to dress in heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks” (52), she would often sit “with her jewel box beside her, upon the satin cushions, and Sir Michael’s presents spread out on her lap, while she counted and admired her treasures” (53). In her 1881 book, *The Art of Decoration*, Mrs. Haweis notes further that the ornate furniture like those with which Lucy surrounds herself also function as a kind of “dress, [and her] dress is a kind of furniture; which both mirror the mind of the owner, and the temper of the age” (qtd. in Lysack 61). However, not only does Lucy dress the part of the rich baroness, she also allows these things to perform her identity for her, creating what Marx calls a “fetishism of commodities” (83). According to Marx, this phenomenon encourages the viewer to invest inanimate things with a “life-like agency and autonomy of their own” (qtd. in Lindner 53). Thus, when Lucy’s private rooms intimidate and amaze with its “pictures and gilding, and great looking-glasses that stretch from ceiling to floor” (Braddon 27), she is, in fact, employing her newly acquired things to do the talking for her, and to establish for her a reputation that is both commanding and captivating. As if to filter Robert Audley’s first impression of her through a materialist lens, Lucy requests that he “secure her a set of sables . . . the handsomest that can be obtained” (47) before allowing him to meet her. Furthermore, when Robert Audley does finally lay eyes upon Lucy, not only is he immediately enamored with her, he also conflates her beauty with the beauty of her things, for both Lucy and her adornments function to create a picture of “[s]uch blue eyes, such ringlets, such a ravishing smile, such a fairy-like bonnet—all of a tremble with heartsease and dewy spangles, shining out of a cloud of gauze” (56).

<11> Because Lucy expresses her identity in and through material commodities, not only has she put on artificial airs, but her worth has also become subject to the volatility and change of a

consumer market. Though Lucy has capitalized on her own commodification, she also runs the risk of being discarded for something more valuable once her material worth has depreciated. Therefore, not only must she create a spectacle that people want to see, but also one for which they are willing to pay any price. It is interesting to note, then, that Lucy keeps her most prized possessions locked away in her boudoir. She limits access to the extravagant things that represent her, and, in doing so, she stimulates an increased desire for these things and, consequently, for her. Like a savvy economist, Lucy knows how to increase the demand for her “self” by limiting access to the supply. Furthermore, although Lucy’s primary interest is to conceal her identity, it is imperative she hints that she is also withholding a part of herself. In so doing, she ensures an insatiable interest and curiosity about herself, and by being the subject of continual local gossip, she positions herself as the center of the surrounding society. Thus, Lucy’s rise from a governess to a baroness causes a stir upon her arrival at Audley Court, and the novelty of her position causes her to be “better loved and more admired than [even] the baronet’s daughter” (52). Not only is she deemed a “wax-doll” (57) by Alicia, Lucy also “looked like a child tricked out for masquerade” (52) when she enters society. In fact, Lucy becomes a spectacle not only because of her “fair face” and “liquid blue eyes” (52), but also because she gives herself an air of inscrutability, captivating those around her and leaving some, such as Phoebe Marks and Robert Audley, to take a closer look by trespassing into her private rooms.

<12> Lucy turns the private sphere into a kind of public forum, for her private chambers function more like a shop window that stimulates desire rather than a personal sanctuary. Therefore, though Lucy’s rooms are ostensibly part of the private sphere, she has designed them to invite a covetous gaze. With an oppressive atmosphere filled with “the rich odours of perfumes [and] hothouse flowers” (69), Lucy’s rooms advertise a version of femininity that stimulates sensual and material longing rather than spiritual piety or physical restraint. Her rooms are an assault to almost all the senses, for not only is there an impressive visual display of fine dresses, jewels, and paintings, when Robert Audley later slips into her room, he longs for a taste of this mysterious woman as well, leaving “the unfinished portrait [of Lucy herself] as a *bonne bouche*” (69). In Lucy’s hands, her private rooms become a public stage upon which she exhibits her desirability and its corresponding commodities for public pleasure and consumption. Therefore, just as the objects within a shop window offer the consumer fantasies of great fortune, the things within Lucy’s room offer Robert a fantasy of the good fortune of feeling in love with her, and Phoebe the good fortune of being just like her.

<13> Lysack explains further that there were increasingly striking similarities between the home and the newly emerging department stores of the mid-nineteenth century:

In the department store, the diminishing role of the shopkeeper or assistant as mediator between buyer and merchandise meant a greater access to goods, as these were more openly displayed or more available to touch. In the department store, which often included waiting rooms and other services meant to recall the comforts of home, many women were not only getting comfortable while they shopped but also getting closer to the goods. . . . this proximity to commodities was altering shopping practices and producing new identifications with merchandise. (49)

The spaces within Lucy's home operate much like a display case for her possessions, and the objects inside it excite a sense of envy and desire for the unwitting visitor and spectator. As Lysack notes, not only was the consumer invited to identify with the objects on display, he or she was invited to handle the merchandise, stimulating both the sense of touch and sense of sight. In her work, *Just Looking*, Rachel Bowlby adds that the mere gaze itself can turn a spectacle of goods on display into a commodity to be consumed in its own right (6). Upon entering Lucy's home, a visitor's gaze consumes the panoply of things deployed in its rooms, and he or she leaves the home with a stimulated imagination and an increased desire for its objects. What the gazer experiences are "elaborate fantasies of consumption [and] sensuous experiences of imagined acquisition" (1-2) which, according to Andrew Miller, were similar to the feelings produced by looking through a shop window. Lukacs explains further that when a consumer gazes at the commodities on display, in this case the "wax doll" (Braddon 57) that is Lucy Audley, he simultaneously exalts them, and the result is that these objects actually stimulate and control the consumer's desire for them (qtd. in Lindner 54). Baudrillard calls this a "process of entrapment" (qtd. in Lindner 60) because the visual exchange between the proffered object and the consumer is also an invitation to a real, monetary exchange later.

<14> It is no surprise, then, that after witnessing the treasures of Lucy's boudoir, even Phoebe, the servant, begins to crave and identify with its "merchandise." Although Lucy later remarks to her, "some people say that you and are alike" (Braddon 57), with her "waxen" white cheeks and "the pale insipidity of her eyebrows and eyelashes" (25), Phoebe seems to function as a kind of "negative" for Lucy Audley. Her dull and plain features enable Lucy's radiance to shine a little brighter, and whereas Lucy is often referred to as an angel, Phoebe is mistaken for an "evil spirit" (25). Moreover, while Lucy extends her presence outwards and uses material accessories as a means of self-definition, Phoebe was "[s]ilent and self-contained . . . [and] seemed to hold herself within herself, and take no colour from the outer world" (131). However, when Phoebe sneaks into her lady's boudoir at the start of the novel, she also begins to appropriate her lady's spaces, acting very much like a shopper in a department store. Perhaps in an attempt to increase her own worth in the eyes of her betrothed, Phoebe also invites Luke to watch her, as she puts away Lucy's things (29) and takes the center spot on Lucy's stage. While Luke simultaneously looks at Phoebe and the "painted ceilings . . . that cost hundreds of pounds" (27), his wish for both Phoebe and the surrounding riches increases accordingly. In addition to freely handling Lucy's "rustling silk dresses" (29), Phoebe encourages Luke to look at not only what was in her Lady's rooms, but also at the "diamonds, rubies, pearls, and emeralds" hidden in a "massive walnut-wood and brass inlaid casket" (29). After experiencing the "splendour of [Lucy's] room" (29), Phoebe and Luke start to picture themselves in her position of wealth and grandeur, and as Katherine Montwieler notes, "shared spectatorship was the first step towards shared desires and mass consumerism" (44).

<15> Lucy, for her part, has made herself just vulnerable enough to maintain a continual fascination in her, inspiring her servants to dig deep into her "fairy-like boudoir" (Braddon 29). However, she has also attempted to make herself impenetrable by hiding the most incriminating evidence about herself away in her jewel box. However, like a consumer lulled into the promise of a purchase, Phoebe is not content to be a mere witness to her clandestine grandeur. To uncover Lucy Audley's secrets is to share in its premium value; once Phoebe uncovers Lucy's secret identity, she can use it to blackmail Lucy out of a portion of her wealth. And, as argued

above, this desire is only heightened by the sense of spectacle she witnesses within her lady's private rooms. Thus, Phoebe does not hesitate to open Lucy's locked jewel box when she fortuitously find its key, nor does she stop there, handling a brass knob that opens "a secret drawer lined with purple velvet" (30). Seizing upon Lucy's most "dear" of possessions, Phoebe quickly takes not her "diamond things which would set [Luke and her] up for life" (30) but rather "baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair" (30), for she knows that the market value of Lucy's secret is worth far more than the "mercantile value" (30) of her jewels.

<16> In the same way that Phoebe and Luke have been mesmerized and tempted by Lucy's splendid possessions secretly tucked away in her private rooms, Alicia Audley also wishes to share in this scene with her cousin Robert and his friend George Talboys. Although Elizabeth Langland argues that "Phoebe does not intend to expose her mistress, and it is not Alicia's intention to expose her new stepmother" (9), as I have argued above, the secret spectacle hidden behind Lucy's locked doors, in fact, begs for exposure. Like the servants before them, these men sneak into Lucy's rooms and are filled with the promise of seeing not only "the best pictures of the house" (Braddon 68) but also that beauty of "her own portrait" (68). Montwieler calls these break-ins into Lucy's boudoir a series of "metaphorical rapes that function as violations of Lady Audley's identity" (53), for according to Langland, what we observe is "the seamless interpenetration of the house and its lady" (9). However, I have argued that Lucy actually encourages these types of violations, for to keep her real identity a well-known secret, as it were, is to promote a kind of manic fascination over her. By limiting access to her true identity and the material things that define it, Lucy also artificially increases her social value. Moreover, Lucy does not seem to mind these trespasses, for she merely "chid Miss Alicia in a playful, laughing way, for her boldness in introducing the great two men into [her] rooms" (Braddon 77).

<17> Significantly, Lucy's half-finished portrait takes center stage and appears to be the most valuable object in her rooms, for behind the painting lies the coveted secret to her real identity. To the knowing eye of George Talboys, Lucy's unfinished image reveals her true identity, but even to the untrained eye of Robert Audley, there is something about the painting that is "so like and yet so unlike" (70), hinting at Lucy's secret self. When unframed and unfinished, Lucy's portrait emits "something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend" (71) that belies her current role as that of the angel in the house. Moreover, the "green baize" (69) that carefully covers Lucy's image points to her humble origins, for as Mark Girouard notes, in large country houses like Audley Court, the green baize was used to distinguish the master's quarters from that of the servants' (286). By capturing her image in a painting, Lucy seeks not only to be in communion with the material objects around her but also to capitalize on her own self-commodification; however, it is interesting to note that the painting is worth more to these men half-finished and hidden away than it does hanging "in the post of honour opposite the window, amidst the Clades, Poussins, and Wouvermans" (Braddon 215).

<18> Just as Lucy Audley's identity has been defined by the commodities that surround her, her secret has also been commodified. Lucy's secret is represented by material things such as a trinket of hair or a half-finished painting, and the fewer people who uncover this secret, the higher these seemingly inconsequential items are worth. Although Phoebe's discovery of Lucy's secret provides her with an influx of wealth, as more people uncover Lucy's hidden identity, its

overall value (and concurrently her material value) will fall, for not only is the supply to the secret compromised, the profits from it are now shared. Therefore, whereas Lucy has successfully peaked Robert Audley's curiosity and admiration by her material wealth and angelic beauty, she must quickly dispose of George Talboys once he, too, shares knowledge of her secret. And although George has seemingly violated her identity by crawling through a "secret passage" (68) into her private boudoir, Lucy, like an alluring Siren, later deliberately baits him into a trap. His subsequent return to Audley Court does not result in his hope of receiving Lucy as his wife, but rather in his untimely fall into one of the property's seemingly innocuous holes, the old "stagnant well, which . . . hid itself way in a shrubbery behind the property" (2).

<19> Whereas Lucy is able to conveniently distract and dispose of the "two great men" respectively, it is another case altogether with the servants. Braddon writes that Lucy's familiarity with her servant Phoebe caused the upper class bred Alicia Audley to withdraw "in disgust" (58). Later in the novel, she writes that servants are, in fact, the eyes and ears of an aristocratic household, attending not only to their patrons' needs, but also to their comings and goings. She writes more specifically of the lady's maid:

Amongst all privileged spaces, a lady's maid has the highest privileges. . . . She has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress's secrets. She knows by the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hair-brush, or chafes at the gentlest administration for the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast—what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain. (*LAS* 337)

Phoebe becomes the keeper of Lucy's secret identity in a way that Robert and George fail to because she has, as it were, a backstage pass to the show.

<20> As argued above, Phoebe is lulled into fantasizing about a lifestyle of wealth and riches promised by her lady's display. Therefore, once she finds proof of Lucy's secret identity, she does not hesitate to use it to her own economic advantage. For Phoebe has also turned into a smart investor, acquiring Lucy's secret to raise funds for purchasing "the public house" (31) for Luke. Furthermore, in investing in Lucy's valuable secret, Phoebe has also improved her own socio-economic status, for she has been able to leave her job as Lucy's maid to open her own business. When Robert Audley approaches Phoebe and Luke about Lucy's secret, he acknowledges the significant value it also holds for this former servant, conceding that trading the secret for a few pounds would be a poor economic decision and remarking, "What, indeed, is a hundred pounds to a man possessed of the power which you hold, or rather which your wife holds, over the person in question" (135). As "a woman who could keep a secret" (131), Phoebe continues to profit from secret trade, and much like Lucy hordes valuable objects to increase her material worth, Phoebe hordes secrets to do the very same thing. One can argue further that Phoebe soon becomes quite adept at consuming confidential information in order to sell it and strategically positions herself as witness to Lucy's apparent murder of George Talboys, placing Lucy in her power "to the last day of her life" (43).

<21> Chipping away at Lucy's riches, Phoebe blackmails her till her "jewel-case has been half emptied" (302), causing Lucy to finally lament, "I suppose when my purse is empty and my credit ruined, you and your husband will turn upon me and sell me to the highest bidder" (302).

Although the balance of power seems to have shifted between these two women, one can argue that Phoebe is, in a way, merely doing what Lucy has done: reaping the benefits of her newly acquired material “wealth” and using it to increase both her allure and her power. Phoebe decorates her room with looking glasses and “festooned draperies” (322) much like Lucy has done, causing Lucy to be reminded of the “the costly elegance of her own apartments” (322). Like her lady before her, Phoebe is the deliberate agent of her own good fortune, and just as Lucy has invested wisely in Audley Court, Phoebe invests well in Lucy. Montwieler argues further that with the proper accoutrements, “knowledge and know-how” (57) anyone can be Lady Audley, for not only is Lady Audley merely the sum of her material possessions (as I have argued), she represents a socio-economic state of being rather than an authentic living, breathing person. Anthea Trodd adds that the secret of the title is “the fact that [Lady Audley] is not even a lady at all, but really rather common like Phoebe” (qtd. in Montwieler 57), for as Braddon writes, even Lucy Audley once wore “shabby clothes” (27).

<22> As argued above, because Lucy seems to lack moral and spiritual integrity, she relies instead on artificially boosting her value by surrounding herself with material things. By electing to identify herself through the value of her things rather than the value of her person, Lucy’s character, like the commodities around her, is dependent on a stable market economy to maintain its value structure. Therefore, she must work hard to keep herself viable and her market value soaring by not only creating a spectacle worth looking at, but also by limiting other people’s access to her. In other words, in order to give herself an air of mystery, Lucy must lead others to speculate that she is hiding something about herself even more valuable than her material things. However, in fashioning together a display of attractive possessions to increase her own desirability, she also unwittingly stimulates a similar desire for personal prosperity in Phoebe and, one can argue, Robert Audley as well.(2)

<23> While Phoebe follows Lucy’s example and profits from the business of keeping secrets, Robert exposes Lucy’s façade and, in doing so, ruins her social reputation and reduces her personal “value” to nearly nothing. In his desperate search to discover the *woman* behind Lucy Audley, what Robert finds instead is merely a series of *names*, one superficially pasted on top of the other, but with no sense of substance to the person underneath. Braddon writes further that upon Robert’s discovery of Lucy Audley’s true identity, he wipes away several labels from “a dilapidated paper-covered bonnet box” (237), with seemingly nothing inside. Moreover, it appears that Lucy Audley’s most personal secret, that of her “heredity insanity” (377), is no secret at all, for the doctor who examines her remarks at last, “I do not believe that she is mad” (377). Thus, the secrets used to define Lucy’s false identity—and her true one—become dismantled one by one, and so too does Lucy Audley.

<24> In the end, “[i]t was only by selling his poor little bits of furniture that could get him out of my place” (151) Mrs. Barkamb confesses of her delinquent tenant, Mr. Maldon. In the same way, once Lucy’s secret is exposed, she becomes both morally and financially bankrupt. She follows the current and flow of her things out of Audley Court, and our last scenes are of her packing her trunks and preparing to leave the manor. Knowing full well that without her material possessions, Lucy Audley herself cannot survive, she “would have taken the pictures from the walls . . . had it been possible for her to do so” (383). Once the secret is out, her wealth and riches are taken out of their context, and they, like the furniture at Mrs. Vincent’s cottage,

turn into emblems of “genteel desolation” (232) and “the shabby remainder” (232) of a life that no longer exists. As Susan Stewart notes, these things out of context become, not objects “arising out of need or use value” (135), but rather carriers of memory and symbols of nostalgia —in short, souvenirs. However, because souvenirs serve “as traces of authentic experience” (135), and Lucy Audley’s life has been anything but, her valuable commodities become, in the end, like stage props in a closet, representing nothing and worth very little. Without her home and the things within it available for public display, Lucy Audley dies, and, ironically, we are left with only the headstone of Helen Talboys to remind us that she ever existed.

Endnotes

(1)For more on the Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s role and the rise of the sensation novel, the sensation novel and its relationship to commodity culture, and Braddon’s analysis of the anti-heroine see Robert Lee Wolff’s *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*. New York: Garland Pub., 1979; Patrick Brantlinger’s “What is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel?’” *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37 (1982): 1-28; and Winifred Hughes’ *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.(^)

(2)One can also argue that this visit to Lucy’s rooms inspires a similar yearning for material wealth by Robert Audley and that his anxious search for George Talboys is actually a pretense for his anxious desire to possess of Audley Court. It is interesting to note that over the course of the novel, Robert Audley grows increasingly sentimental towards Audley Court and his uncle, and he wonders what would happen when day “the oaken shutters would be closed . . . , and the sunshine shut out of the house he loved” (214).(^)

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