

## **The Power to Love: Heterosexual and Homoerotic Relationships in *Lady Audley's Secret***

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*Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret (1862) was a best-selling Victorian "pot-boiler." It is an example of sensation fiction—a mid-century genre that exploited common fears, featuring scenes of adultery, theft, insanity, bigamy, forgery, and murder amidst ordinary and familiar domestic settings. In her essay "The Power to Love: Heterosexual and Homoerotic Relationships in Lady Audley's Secret," Rebecca Hazell builds on recent scholarship that delineates a homoerotic relationship between two male characters in Braddon's novel. By comparing and contrasting the various romantic unions of the novel, Hazell astutely points out that the homoerotic relationship is, in fact, "the strongest, most compatible, and most devoted," because it is underpinned by the men's "financial security, independence," and "freedom ... from the responsibilities of familial life." In contrast, the imbalance of power in the heterosexual relationships dooms them to fail, and they are shown as "dysfunctional, passionless, and even bigamous." Hazell's essay suggests that Braddon's novel is a corrective to the sentimentalization of family in much Victorian literature and a compendium of a variety of relationship types.*

- Dr. Vicky Simpson

The contemporary ideal that romantic love transcends boundaries of social and economic class, age, and lineage is inapplicable in the context of Victorian society, an environment where social distinctions rule relationships, shape public and private spaces, and govern the terms of romantic love. In her 1862 sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon critiques the Victorian domestic idyll and the institution of marriage through the portrayal of a successful male homoerotic relationship and the failure of several heterosexual relationships. An analysis of the novel's romantic unions reveals that the strongest, most compatible, and most devoted partnership is between Robert Audley and George Talboys. The success of this homoerotic romance is held in contrast to the dysfunctional, passionless, and even bigamous heterosexual relationships. The endurance of Robert and George's unconsummated homoerotic relationship is the result of their socio-economic power as gentlemen in a patriarchal Victorian society. This environment is one in which gender dictates an individual's reasons for entering a romantic relationship and also affects his or her mobility, financial dependence, and domestic life once married. An examination and comparison of the factors that contribute to the success of the homoerotic relationship in *Lady Audley's Secret* and the elements that contribute to the dysfunction of the heterosexual relationships emphasize the pervasive influence of patriarchy in granting individuals the power to love.

In order to understand the success of the homoerotic relationship between Robert and George, one must consider the foundation of their bond and that of similar homoerotic relationships in Victorian era Britain. The initial encounter between the two men occurs in their youth at the prestigious Eton College, an English boarding school for the privileged sons of aristocrats and the elite of the British Empire. Robert and George's experiences at Eton synchronize their emotional development as young men in an

environment where “homosexuality and homoeroticism were condoned among the boys” (Kushnier 61). Robert and George’s possible sexual experimentation and self-discovery among the other male students at Eton establishes a similar pattern of growth during their formative adolescent years. As adults, their relationship is strengthened by the attachment of their public school friendship, a bond understood to be rapturous, blissful, tender, absorbing, and passionate (Kaplan 103). Their experience together at Eton not only indicates their elevated status as aristocratic members of Victorian society, but also establishes the intensity of the friendship that founds their eventual homoerotic relationship.

Robert and George’s elevated status increases their compatibility due to the similarity of their upbringing, customs, and standards of living. Robert’s luxurious and decadent lifestyle earns him the title of a “sybarite” – a lover of luxury and sensual pleasure – from his cousin, Alicia (Braddon 148). Robert “enjoys the luxuries afforded by inheritance and indulges in ... a lifestyle of leisure” (Heinrichs 104). Before the misfortune of being disinherited, George seeks financial provision from his father, Harcourt Talboys, a member of the “ruling aristocratic class” (103). Both Robert and George are accustomed to the luxury and leisure of unearned, inherited wealth, a standard of privilege that makes them excellent companions. This economic compatibility renders their renewed companionship carefree, and the two lovers have the resources to afford the lifestyle of their similarly privileged upbringings. Robert’s sybarite habits of “smoking his German pipe, and reading French novels” are familiar to his fellow Eton alumnus, George (Braddon 71). The two are also alike in behaviour: Robert’s “quiet humour [and] dawdling, indifferent, irresolute manner” common to a life of leisure matches George’s contemplative and melancholic behaviour (71). These similarities of custom, education, and wealth lead to a carefree temperament that supports a shared domestic life that is peaceful and unburdened by conflict or want.

As gentlemen in a patriarchal society, Robert and George have an economic and social freedom that allows them to maintain an idyllic, comfortable, and nurturing domestic space. Immediately after returning from fortune seeking in Australia, George learns of the death of his beloved young wife and he falls into a deep and selfish grief. When George’s life melts away and “the big dragoon [becomes] as helpless as a baby,” Robert receives “him with open arms” in his chambers in the Temple (Braddon 77, 85). During their year of co-habitation, Robert rises “to act for another” and makes sacrifices for his companion’s comfort, becoming the hand “which ... guided [George] through the darkest passage of [his] life” (78). Robert’s chambers are decorative and comfortable, complete with “a stand of flowers and two or three birds in cages,” as well as an Irish housekeeper (77). The year that the two men spend in shared domesticity is uncomplicated by financial stress, as both are wealthy enough to afford the domestic comfort that requires “good furniture, certain amenities, and decorative objects regarded as essentials of tasteful living, and, perhaps above all, servants” (Calder 83). Their ability to afford a housekeeper ensures the opportunity of travel to the then Russian capital of St. Petersburg and to “the straggling, old-fashioned, fast-decaying village of Audley” (Braddon 89). Without the responsibility of caring for a family, the two men are able to live a life of privilege and leisure, building a stylish and nurturing domestic space.

Robert and George's independence demonstrates the privilege afforded to their gender in Victorian society. As unmarried gentlemen, Robert and George have "a good deal of objective sexual freedom" due to their evasion of the "great cult of the family and, with it, much of the enforcing machinery of [their] class and time" (173). The pleasant preservation of their bachelorhood allows them to enjoy the courtly romance of their homoerotic relationship, as well as their lifestyle of "money, privilege, [and] internationalism" as men in a male-dominated society (173).

The couple's relationship is so strong that it even manages to thrive despite Robert's heterosexual marriage to George's sister, Clara. The relationship marks a convergence between the homoerotic and the heterosexual, emphasizing that male power dominates and governs romantic relationships in the Victorian era. The heterosexual couple's relationship begins in George's absence and is encouraged by Robert's frequent acknowledgement of Clara's similarity to her brother, particularly her asexual "calm brown eyes" (437). Her similarity to George convinces Robert to consider her a loyal companion early in their acquaintance: "She was so like the friend whom he had loved and lost that it was impossible for him to think of her as a stranger" (224). It is important to note that Robert's affection for Clara increases as he sees more of George in her appearance and temperament (Kushnier 68). This familiarity infuses the heterosexual relationship with the intimacy of Robert and George's homoerotic relationship. The manner in which Robert acknowledges his romantic feelings for Clara is gradual and greatly influenced by their common interest: George. Robert seeks Clara as a replacement for George, noting that their similarity to one another would ensure that either one of them would be good company on a lonely night (Braddon 230).

Robert and Clara's union, like that of Robert and George, is uncomplicated by differences of wealth or social position because of their privileged status. Robert's love of luxury and decadence is satisfied at Clara's family home, an environment that celebrates a sybarite view of human enjoyment associated with his boyhood at boarding school (436). Clara and Robert's eventual domestic life is idyllic, copying the domestic fantasy that George proposes to Robert earlier in the novel: "I shall take a villa on the banks of the Thames, Bob ... for the little wife and myself; and we'll have a yacht, Bob, old boy, and you shall lie on the deck and smoke while my pretty one plays her guitar and sings songs to us" (75). This idyll is realized in Robert and Clara's cottage at Teddington where there is "a pretty rustic smoking room over the Swiss boat-house, in which the gentlemen sit and smoke in the summer evenings" (445). Importantly, in both the villa and the cottage, the female characters are distracted by music or restricted from entrance into the male-dominated space of the "smoking room" (446). In marrying Clara, "a feminized version of George," Robert ensures the everlasting companionship of his homoerotic lover (Kushnier 69). The triumph of this heterosexual and homoerotic convergence demonstrates the resounding influence of patriarchy in determining the conditions of romantic relationships.

The shared power of the novel's homoerotic partnership is held in stark contrast to the dysfunctional imbalance of power between partners in heterosexual relationships. This imbalance of power begins at the foundation of the heterosexual union, which is

often developed by lustful and unmediated male initiative. Robert's uncle, Sir Michael Audley, pursues the villainess, Helen Maldon, because he is unable to "resist the tender fascination of those soft and melting blue eyes; the graceful beauty of that slender throat and drooping head, with its wealth of showering flaxen curls" (Braddon 48). Sir Michael is "bewitched by her beauty and bewildered by her charms," allowing his attraction to her physical appearance to determine his impression of her character and her value as a partner (49). Sir Michael's courtship is sudden, and his romantic feelings are unknown to Helen until she hears a rumour of his intention to propose. Sir Michael's unmediated adoration of Helen exemplifies the impulsive male initiation of the heterosexual relationship, in comparison to the mediated and steady foundation of Robert and George's bond.

The danger of determining compatibility through the impulsive evaluation of physical beauty is evident in Miss Morley's anxiety upon returning to her fiancé after a fifteen-year long absence. In conversation with George, Miss Morley reveals that her fiancé may "retain all the old feeling until the moment of seeing me, and then lose it in a breath at the sight of my poor wan face, for I was called a pretty girl" (57). Miss Morley's anxiety about her faded beauty reflects her belief that physical appearance determines a heterosexual man's perception of compatibility and romantic attachment. George and Sir Michael's hasty attraction to the bigamous villainess Helen Maldon also addresses the danger of founding a relationship on infatuation. Both men are deceived and eventually betrayed because her perfect appearance blinds them to the faults in her character. Even though Sir Michael has a "vague feeling of loss and disappointment" after proposing to Helen, he ignores his suspicion and falls into a devoted subordination to his new bride (360). The love that Sir Michael and George hold for Helen is described as, and attributed to, sickness: "the terrible fever called love" (48).

The intense passion of a heterosexual relationship initiated by infatuation is held in contrast to the other foundation of heterosexual unions present in *Lady Audley's Secret*: the foundation of passionless practicality. The practicality is guided by financial need and women involved are often transformed into commodities, traded and exchanged for purposes of inheritance. According to Sir Michael, his relationship with his first wife was not founded on love, but was "a dull, jog-trot bargain, made to keep some estate in the family" (48). This particular matrimonial arrangement presents Victorian men choosing "their wives for their value, whether it was economic, moral or decorative" (Calder 33). This possessive value reflects a Victorian woman's "vulnerability [because of a] lack of economic status" (17). A Victorian woman's decision to enter a loveless yet practical relationship is also motivated by a desire to avoid the stigma and discrimination that faced unmarried women at the time. Single women were referred to as "surplus," "redundant," or "superfluous," were understood as having failed at woman's sole profession of married life, and were considered candidates for exportation to the colonies (Yeo 41). The threat of this social discrimination contributed to a Victorian woman's acceptance of a man's practical proposal of marriage.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the relationship between servant Phoebe and labourer Luke is an example of the heterosexual pursuit of practical unions devoid of passion.

Unlike the heterosexual relationships founded on intense infatuation, Phoebe and Luke are “first cousins, and had been play-fellows in childhood, and sweethearts in early youth” (Braddon 66). Their bond is not founded on intense and impulsive attachment, but on the assumed compatibility of those who are related and close in age. Their relationship is determined by their future as owners of a profitable public house rather than as husband and wife. Luke does not assure Phoebe of any added domestic comfort or elegance, stating that “when [she’s his] wife [she] won’t have over-much time for gentility” (66). It is evident through the couple’s interaction that they have little in common: Luke is rough, verbally abusive, and cruel, while Phoebe is mild-mannered and soft-spoken. Their lack of eye contact and the prevalence of silence in their conversations indicate their indifference to each other. In one telling scene, Phoebe sits with “her face averted from her lover, her hands hanging listlessly in her lap,” observing the sunset’s “last low streak of crimson dying out behind the trunks of the trees” (67). This imagery suggests that Phoebe is simultaneously accepting the presence of a larger and brighter life as well as acknowledging its disappearance. Despite her awareness and thirst for happiness beyond marriage to her cousin, Phoebe maintains her promise to marry Luke for practical purposes. Phoebe’s freedom to choose and govern her life is limited by her powerlessness as a woman in a male-dominated society.

Robert and George’s domestic life is idyllic because of their freedom, independence, and financial security as aristocratic men in Victorian society. However, for a heterosexual Victorian couple, power within the domestic sphere is far from shared. In the private sphere, the domestic responsibilities of the two genders dictate their power within the home. While female domestic duties include running the household and caring for the children, the male is responsible for finances, using money that “was his and only his” to support the house “he owned ... in which the family resides” (Calder 83). The man holds control over the house as well as everything and everyone in it. This power dynamic determines the woman’s lack of freedom and lack of financial independence in her own home, a private environment in which she allegedly has influence. For Victorian women, the promise of a private sphere merely “disguised the disappearance of autonomy and control from her life” (Langland 78). The concepts of “privacy and the private sphere are often meaningless for women” and the home was an environment governed by the same social distinctions that governed the public sphere (90). In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the influence of patriarchy pervades space, making the domestic environment a space “configured in ways that fostered and maintained existing power alliances” (90). Although Lady Audley has a key to lock her private chambers, entrance is easily gained through trap doors or sets of extra keys. The domestic space promised to Phoebe after marriage is a public-house under the control of her brutish husband. In comparison to Robert and George’s care-free and idyllic domestic life, a Victorian woman’s chance of achieving the same independence and satisfaction from the private sphere would be impossible.

Braddon’s popular sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* presents an accurate critique of the success of the homoerotic relationship and the failure of heterosexual relationships in Victorian era Britain. An analysis of the formation and development of these partnerships attributes the long lasting devotion and compatibility of the male

homoerotic bond to the power held by Robert Audley and George Talboys as men in a patriarchal society. Their aristocratic status provides them with financial security, independence, freedom, and the ability to enjoy each other's company without the responsibilities of familial life. Failure of heterosexual relationships within the novel is the result of an imbalance of power that favours the male partner and limits the female's freedom and satisfaction. In contemporary Western culture, "the experience of marriage (and romantic love) is often idealized ... and is conceptualized as a state of transcendent bliss" (Carr 62). This idealistic belief is held in contrast to sensation fiction's presentation of marriage as a problematic institution and a source of trials and deceit. Through the study of the romantic relationships in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the pursuit of romantic love in Victorian society is revealed not to be a transcendent state of bliss, but rather a quest firmly grounded and strictly guided by the privilege of male power.

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