Simulation and Sartorial Subversion in 19th and 21st Century Sensation Fiction
Emily Corrie

Closely linked in themes and plot devices to the Gothic Fiction of the late 18th century, sensation novels startled Victorian readers by locating crimes, secrets, and sexual deviancy, not in remote European castles and convents, but in seemingly respectable English homes, They became a major venue for women novelists, foremost among them Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In Lady Audley's Secret (1861), Braddon subverts the idealized figure of the domestic 'angel in the house' with the story of an ambitious woman who, abandoned by her first husband, uses her beauty to climb the social ladder—and who will stop at noting to protect her new identity. When her crimes are exposed, she argues that she was driven to them by the limited options available to her as a woman. Is she a villain them, or a victim? Recent feminist scholarship on sensation fiction has emphasized its exposure of the limits on Victorian women's role and the constraints on their economic independence and mobility. In her novel Fingersmith (2002), Sarah Waters rewrites the sensation novel from a feminist perspective, taking a particular interest in the issue of re-fashioning gender identities. In her essay, Emily Corrie focuses on how Braddon and Waters use liberal clothing to invoke these issues of female identity. Clothing can repress individuality and enforce both gender and class conventions, but it also creates the possibility of 'emulation' and this social mobility—a possibility that, as Corrie explores, can generate both anxiety and excitement.

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In "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction," Jonathan Loesberg suggests that sensation novels typically derive their sensational moments from a fear of identity loss—a fear that is class-based rather than psychological: "not a fear of violence from the lower classes precisely but a world made chaotic and a least partially indecipherable by the loss of class identity."[1] In Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and Sarah Water's *Fingersmith* (2002), a woman's class is made visible principally by the way she is dressed. This is evident in both writer's preoccupation with clothing as a necessary form of character development. If Loesberg's assertion is correct, the clothing in Braddon's novel can be held partially responsible for class-infiltration; clothing fashions meanings and expectations on the wearer, enabling Lady Audley to disguise herself amongst the higher social class that she has risen to through her marriage with Sir Audley. The same potential that clothing has to create a persona is present in *Fingersmith*, although here it is portrayed more antagonistically: where Lady Audley benefits personally from the advantages clothing gives her, Water's Susan and Maud are stifled and bound by the restrictive expectations it imposes on them. Both novels present clothing as something that is capable of creating and transcending class distinctions, but where Braddon's negativity is characterized by a generalized fear of class-infiltration, Water's postmodern critique of Victorian society uses clothing to signify all that is depersonalizing and oppressive to the individual within existing gender roles and class distinctions.

Clothing is certainly a preoccupation for Braddon, Like Lady Audley's oft-described golden hair and innocent blue eyes, her dress is consistently introduced to reflect her character in a given scene. The distinction between Lucy and Phoebe's appearance before and after the former's marriage is important, especially when we remember that Phoebe and Lucy are comparable in looks, as Lucy notes when she tells Phoebe that she need only "a bottle of hair dye... and a pot of rouge"[2] to be as attractive as she is. Where the two women were once on the same economic level in Mr. Dawson's household, Phoebe remains drab and without colour, as characterized in her clothing:

> Even her dress was spoiled by the same deficiency; the pale lavender muslin
> faded into a sickly grey, and the ribbon knotted around her throat melted into

the same neutral hue.[3]

Lady Audley, however, who was undeniably beautiful before her newly-acquired social position rewarded her with expensive finery, is "made bewilderingly beautiful by gorgeous surroundings."[4] n contrast to the sallow Pheobe, the Pre-Raphaelite painting in Lucy's chamber focuses on the "crimson dress" that "hung about her in folds like flames, her fair head popping out o the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace."[5] The distinction between Phoebe and Lucy that id afforded by their clothing cannot be more plain.

Braddon's preoccupation with dress, and especially the way in which it distinguishes members of one class from another, can best be explained by Bernard Mandeville's 18th Century Theory of Emulation. Mandeville is most interested in fashion as it drives and develops economic trade; the central crux of his theory is that, because clothing has become a signifier of wealth and taste rather than a mere necessity for survival and maintaining modesty, the wearer is required to continuously consume new styles. By emulating the dress of the higher classes, lower-class people, as long as they can scrounge the money to purchase such fashions, can appear to belong to a social position that is above them because of the way they look. Naturally, members of the upper class that wish to distinguish themselves from their social inferiors adopt new styles and purchase newer and more expensive clothing: "The desire to raise oneself in society, combined with the fear that one is losing ground to others, is the primary cause for fashion's many cyclical changes."[6]Although Mandeville published his theory in 1724, it is still relevant to an analysis of the Victorian period because it is still relevant even today: on might say his theory characterizes the rapid cyclical tendencies of the contemporary fashion industry.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, clothing is presented as something that not only distinguishes a woman of one class from another, but as something that is deceitful because of the mobility it potentially grants. Lady Audley's dress consistently appears in contrast to the mental turmoil and malevolent thoughts that we know this bigamist and attempted-murderess must harbour. After her near-encounter with George Talboys and the ensuing lightening storm that keeps her awake all night in terror, Lucy Audley appears the next morning as if undisturbed, "singling a little Scotch melody, her cheeks tinged with as delicate a pink as the pale hue of her muslin morning dress."[7] Lady Audley's ability to effectively convey innocence is accredited mainly to her "heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks" that make her appear "like a child tricked out for a masquerade, [and] as girlish as if she had but just left he nursery."[8] Even as she commits (another!) attempted murder by setting fire to the Mount Stanning Inn, her magnificent dress and angelic hair

> Distracted an observer's eye from her pallid face. All mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and disheveled hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady's."[9]

Without question, it is the clothing and the richness that surrounds her that allow Lady Audley to disguise her true mad and conniving self. And it is not prescriptive to accredit this connection to the novel's distrust of class conflation. In her study of female clothing in eighteenth-century literature, Jennie Batchelor quotes Daniel Defoe who writes in *Every-body's Business, is Nobody's Business* that "[i]t is hard Matter now to know the Mistress from the Maid by their dress."[10] Braddon makes this same anxiety evident when Phoebe dresses in one of Lucy's gowns for for her wedding with Luke: she is described as looking "quite the lady"[11], but when Luke comments on her dress he complains "[w]hy

can't women dress according to their station?"[12]Braddon's preoccupation with the replacement maid from London is further evidence of this fear. On every occasion that she is mentioned, the maid is introduced as wearing black satin gowns and red ribbons in her cap "and other adornments which were unknown to the humble people who sat below the salt in the good old days when servants wore linsey-woolsey."[13] Such a description depicts the novel's fear of class mobility, as characterized by Loesberg, and suggests that the anxiety is provoked by one's dress.

The same potential to create an identity for oneself through clothes in *Lady Audely's Secret* is also seen in *Fingersmith*. When Gentleman first outlines his thieving plan to Sue and tells her that her reward for participation will be two thousand pounds, all three of the ladies present demonstrate a similar preoccupation with clothing: Dainty immediately thinks about "all them frocks and jewels" that the money will buy, Mrs. Sucksby tells her that she will look like a lady, and Sue believes she will "come back dressed in a velvet gown […] [w]ith gloves up to here and a hat with a veil on."[14] Evidently, it is money that buys clothing, and clothing that makes a woman a lady. . When Gentleman gives Sue a lesson on how to properly dress her mistress, Dainty asks "[w]hy don't she wear the kind of stays that fasten at the front, like a regular girl?" and Gentleman replies that then "she shouldn't need a maid. And if she didn't need a maid, she shouldn't know she was a lady."[15] It is indeed common in *Fingersmith* for women to be reduced to nothing but the clothing that they wear. When Sue practices dressing up the kitchen chair it dies not matter that the human Maud Lily is absent, because she is simply replaced by the piece of furniture that models her clothes: "Miss Lilly sat before us with her corset tied hard, her petticoats spread out about the floor, smelling fresh as a rose."[16] Even Mrs. Sucksby is reduced to the dress that she wears when she is hung from the gallows and Sue sees "not Mrs. Sucksby at all, but what might have been a dangling tailor's figure, done up like a woman, in a corset and gown."[17] Clothing plays a seminal role in the novel's sensational plot as well. It is only by putting on a plain brown dress and chastely pinning her hair at the back of her head that Sue can disguise herself as a lady's-maid rather than the fast borough girl that she is. The novel's main sensational scene—when Sue is substituted for Maud and committed to the insane asylum in her place—is made possible by the two women switching their dress. It is essentially because Maud adopts the dirty, drab dress of a lady's-maid and Sue the clean, silken dress of her mistress that the plan succeeds in fooling the madhouse doctors. Through its preoccupation with dress and the liberties (and subsequent threats) it affords the wearer to advance and disguise herself within and between social classes, *Fingersmith* mimics nineteenth-century sensation fiction.

Water's modern rewriting of the sensation genre, however, involves an explicit feminist critique that considers gender a mere theatrical performance—a dimension that Braddon's novel only latently addresses. Clothing in *Fingersmith* is more often than not characterized as something that binds the wearer. It is Sue's dress in conjunction with Gentleman's plot that commits Sue to the insane asylum, and it is her dress that, in a way, keeps her there. Sue reflects on her image while circling the garden with the rest of the patients in the asylum and asserts she has been duped, that she is in fact sane, and that she was mistaken for someone else. Her companion replies:

> 'I thought the same thing, once. But you see, I'm afraid you must be mad, since you are here. There is something queer about us all. You need only look about you. You need only

look at yourself,'[18]

It is when Sue looks in the window's glare and sees her reflection that she realizes that her wild hair, her absurd rubber boots and tartan dress do, indeed, make her look like a lunatic.

If clothing literally keeps Sue locked within the asylum, then it is also something that metaphorically keeps both Maud and Sue ensnared, bound like the Chinese slipper Maud often thinks about, that keeps her within "a form [she] should otherwise outleap."[19] Even as a child, Maud believes that she must be like the cat that is kept in the madhouse she grows up in, "a thing to be a pet and dress with ribbons."[20] But at Briar the dressing-up is not nearly as pleasant as being a pet like a cat, for Maud's body is shoved and buckled into corsets that hold her "like a fist,"[21] her hands stitched into kidskin gloves that are so tight they bruise her. In "Adornment," George Simmel suggests that new, "stiff" clothes, which are "particularly elegant," do not reveal the wearer's personality in the same way that worn clothes, which "are pulled and pinched by the peculiar movements of the wearer"[22] do. The same observation, I think, can be applied to the stiffness of the corsets and gloves that Maud is forced to wear in her life at Briar. In the same way that Mandeville suggests (and Lady Audley demonstrates) that clothes can be harnessed for the expectations they generate and the social assumptions that are attached to them, clothes signify social possibilities in *Fingersmith*, too, but this potential is portrayed as a negative one for it denies the wearer any identity of her own. Clothes are consistently presented as repressive, stifling Mrs. Sucksby's shudders and death-kicks as she hangs on the gallows[23] and forcing Maud to keep from exerting herself and sweating so that the arsenic that is in the dye of her green dress won't run and kill her.[24] Clearly, clothing is surrounded by a fear of losing one's own identity, even losing one's own life, in contrast to the more latent fear of class conflation that is addressed by Braddon's novel. *Fingersmith* explicitly considers dress capable of fencing one's ideas of gender into constructed confines.

In *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Fingersmith*, there is most assuredly an obsession with clothing. Braddon floods her novel wit constant references to the clothing that character's wear; even when Robert Audley tries to sleuth out Lucy's true identity, Mrs. Vincent cannot name the year that Lucy began working at her establishment, only that "it was ages ago, for it was the very summer I had my peach-coloured silk."[25] But clothing is not only a preoccupation; it is considered the perpetrator of the much-feared class mobility that Loesberg notes and Braddon displays. By harnessing the power that clothing has to project certain expectations on the wearer, Lady Audley disguises herself within the higher social class of her husband's house, hiding her murderess heart behind a front of silken flounces and babyish innocence afforded by her particular style of dress. In *Fingersmith*, clothing allows the wearer the same mobility within and between classes, but, conversely, it is something that is characteristically repressive, binding the wearer to certain gendered expectations and forcing her to sacrifice her own identity. When Maud is brought back to the Lant Street house, and becomes encaged in its walls like Sue is within the asylum, Mrs. Sucksby denies her shoes because "shoes are for walking in. Where've you to walk to?"[26] Mandeville writes in 1724,

> The World has long since decided the Matter; fine Feathers make fine Birds, and People
> where they are not known, are generally honored according to their Cloaths […] from the

richness of them we judge at their Wealth and by their ordering of them we guess at their Understanding.[27]

Whether clothing is seen as something that liberates, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, or as something that simultaneously binds, as in *Fingersmith*, it is portrayed as something that grants the wearer a new identity─be it good or bad. When Gentleman explains to Sue that Maud will surely not guess her true identity he presumes that "[s]he will be like everyone, putting on things she sees the constructions she expects to find there."[28] Dress is not mere necessity; it disguises, shrouds, and ultimately shapes our identity.

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[1] Jonathan Loeserg "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction." *Representations* 13 (Winter 1986): 115-138, 121.

[2] Mary Elizabeth Braddon. *Lady Audley's Secret.* 1862. Ed. Natalie M. Houston. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 95.

[3] *Ibid.,* 65.

[4] *Ibid.,* 308.

[5] *Ibid.,* 165.

[6] Bernard Mandeville. "Pride." 1724. *The Rise of Fashion: a reader*. Ed. Daniel L. Purdy. (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2003), 95.

[7] Braddon, 143.

[8] *Ibid.,* 90.

[9] *Ibid.,* 348.

[10] Jennie Batchelor. *Dress, Distress, and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, 8.

[11] Braddon, 143.

[12] *Ibid.,* 165.

[13] *Ibid.,* 325.

[14] Sarah Waters. *Fingersmith*, 2002. (London: Virago Press, 2007), 31.

[15] The rough borough speech of the Lant Street inhabitants stands in ironic contrast to the lady-making activity taking place. *Ibid.,* 37.

[16] This image of Maud reduced to the chair that sports her clothes is revisited when Maud is brought to the Lant Street house with Gentleman and John Vroom announces: "I liked you better ... when you was a chair" (320). *Ibid*., 37.

[17] *Ibid.,* 524.

[18] *Ibid.,* 432.

[19] *Ibid.,* 206.

[20] *Ibid.,* 180.

[21] *Ibid.,* 190.

[22] George Simmel. "Adornment." 1908. *The Rise of Fashion: a reader.* Ed. Daniel L. Purdy. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2004, 82.

[23] Waters, 525.

[24] *Ibid.,* 355.

[25] Braddon, 253.

[26] Waters, 354.

[27] Mandeville, 24.

[28] Waters, 227.