Female Supremacy on the Threshold

Investigating the Use of Liminal Space
in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Early Sensation Novels

Master's Thesis

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Samenvatting

Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) staat bekend om haar commentaar op de Victoriaanse samenleving. Echter, Robert Wolff en Eve Lynch beargumenteren dat de kritiek op Braddon's controversiële affaire met John Maxwell haar weerhield van het leveren van commentaar in het begin van haar schrijverscarrière en dat ze in plaats daarvan sensatiefictie is gaan schrijven, wat erg lucratief was in die periode.

Verschillende academici, zoals Lillian Nayder, hebben sporen van sociaal commentaar aangetoond in Braddon's sensatiefictie en dit onderzoek bouwt hierop voort. Het doel van dit onderzoek is om concreet aan te tonen hoe Braddon dit sociale commentaar levert in haar vroege sensatiefictie met de focus op liminale ruimtes. Hiervoor is de volgende onderzoeksvraag opgesteld: hoe gebruiken Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensatieromans, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), *Aurora Floyd* (1863) en *Eleanor's Victory* (1863), liminale ruimtes om commentaar te leveren op de Victoriaanse samenleving met betrekking tot gender en het vrouwelijke ideaal?

Om deze vraag te beantwoorden is een close reading toegepast op verschillende scenes uit de romans met daarin liminale ruimtes. Uit de analyse blijkt dat Braddon het passieve ideaal van de Victoriaanse vrouw ondermijnt door de vrouwen in haar romans juist macht en autoriteit te geven over het raam, de trein en de drempels in en om het huis.

Op basis van dit onderzoek kan geconcludeerd worden dat Braddon toch commentaar leverde in het begin van haar schrijverscarrière en tegelijkertijd een bedreiging vormde voor het Victoriaanse vrouwelijke ideaal door middel van de interactie van haar vrouwelijke karakters met liminale ruimtes.

Keywords: liminality / sensation fiction / gender / Mary Elizabeth Braddon / feminine ideal

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List of Abbreviations

LAS – Lady Audley's Secret

AF – Aurora Floyd

EV – Eleanor's Victory

1. Introduction

> The gleam and lustre of glass surfaces, reflecting and refracting the world, created a new glass consciousness and a language of transparency. (Armstrong 1)

Here Armstrong refers to one of the greatest fascinations of the Victorian age as well as one of the most important topics of this thesis: glass. A combination of an “increase in production, new methods of working, and falling prices [of glass], worked together to change the way cities looked” (Armstrong 1). One of the best examples of the obsession with glass is The Crystal Palace, originally built in 1851 (see fig. 1). Ferrovitreous architecture, constructions using glass and iron such as the Crystal Palace, became more common with the mass production of iron and glass, a result of the development of the railways in the 1830s (“Industrialism” 1581, Murphy 4, 6, 44). The transformation towards transparency and reflectivity was not limited to the urban space, however, and continued into the domestic interior as well (Plunkett 93).

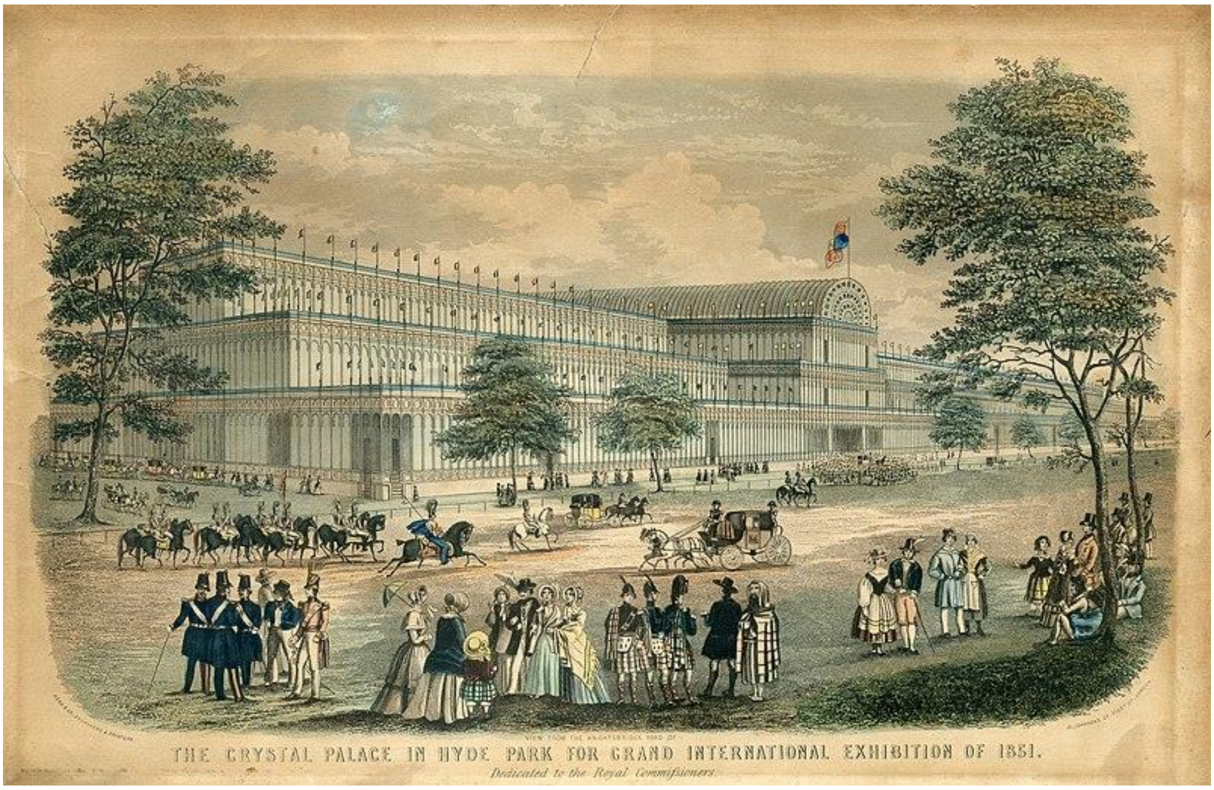
THE CRYSTAL PALACE IN HYDE PARK FOR GRAND INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF 1851.
Dedicated to the Royal Commissioners

Figure 1: The Crystal Palace in Hyde Park (1851)

Armstrong explains that mirrors and mirroring "became an environmental need in the domestic environment" (1). As the cities and environments changed, so did the literature that was written in this period and the fascination with glass and mirroring is reflected in Victorian literature[1] as is illustrated in the 1862 novel *Eleanor's Victory* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon: "Eleanor saw herself reflected in so many mirrors that she was almost bewildered by the repetition of her own auburn hair and white bonnet" (83). *Eleanor's Victory* is a novel considered to be sensation fiction, a genre that emerged around 1860 and made clever use of the increase in glass and transparency, as will be shown in this thesis.

1.1 Sensation Fiction and Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Sensation fiction is a literary genre from the Victorian age and was popular from the 1850s through the 1870s. It is difficult to say what the genre truly entails,[2] but it often features sensational plots containing bigamy, murder and false identities (Pykett 5).[3] The three novels credited with defining the genre are Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (Beller "Sensation" 7). What makes sensation fiction interesting to study, is the "challenge it poses to Victorian class and gender boundaries", specifically the position of women (Cox 8). Sensational novels dissolved "binaries between private and public [and thus] destabilised domestic, gender, and class ideology, shocking the Victorian audience with its alternative approach to character" (Despotopoulou 41). The sensation novel was a "powerful and significant moment in the Victorian literary tradition [and] its capacity for asking important questions continues" (Mangham 6), broadening our understanding of the Victorian age.

Even though research on sensation fiction is abundant in the twenty-first century, in the early twentieth century most sensation novels were no longer in print. Novelists within the genre were little known by the general public and heavily overshadowed by big names such as Dickens, Brontë, and Hardy, both in the academic world and outside of it (Pykett ix). In the late twentieth century, however, sensation fiction started to receive more academic attention with publications such as *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists* in 1962, and *The Sensation Novel: From* The Woman in White *to* The Moonstone in 1994 (Pykett ix). Since then, the academic study of sensation fiction has flourished. Especially the publication of *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* in 2013 marked a "coming-of-age for the academic study" (Beller "Fashions" 461) of the genre.

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[1] Armstrong includes two well-rounded analyses of glass in Victorian fiction. One analyses Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (pp. 239-246) and the other Dickens's *Bleak House* (pp. 246-250). Another interesting study on glass and observation through glass in Dickens can be found in "Knots in Glass: Dickens and the Omniscience from Boz to Bucket" by Clayton Carlyle Tarr.

[2] As is demonstrated in the introduction of the *Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* where the question "what is sensation fiction" (Mangham 1) at the very start of the introduction is never clearly answered.

[3] These themes can also be found in the three novels central to this thesis. Murder and false identities feature heavily in *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* and *Eleanor's Victory*, while bigamy is the main secret in both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd.*

Although more and more sensationalists are being uncovered, there are a few authors that seem to be the most popular among academics. Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1837-1915), sometimes referred to as "the queen of the mid Victorian [sic] literary marketplace" (Beller "Popularity" 245), is one of these authors and is best known for her novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). She is heavily featured in the *Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* and there are several essay collections that focus entirely on her as an author, such as *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context* (2000) and *New Perspectives on Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (2012). Beller states that Braddon is "one of the most successfully "recovered" female popular novelists of the Victorian period" ("Fashions" 467). The academic interest in Braddon is partially due to the fact that she was one of the most influential novelists of her period. She continued writing her entire life, resulting in over eighty novels (Tromp xv).[4] But not only was she popular in her own period, *Lady Audley's Secret* is still read today and continues to make an impact on its readers.[5]

1.2 Status Quaestionis and Research Question

Another reason for Braddon's popularity among academics is that she is known to deliver social commentary throughout her numerous novels, poetry and short stories. Jessica Cox writes that "her tendency towards sensationalism is paralleled by a burgeoning concern with social issues of the day" and that she is now recognized as an "important Victorian social commentator" (Cox 10). The issues Braddon commented on range from gender to authorship. The latter can be read in Anne-Marie Beller's 2016 article on shifting modes of authorship. This study shows how Braddon intervened in contemporary literary debates concerning the popular novelist ("Popularity" 249). Through her analysis of *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) and *Vixen* (1879) Beller argues that Braddon mapped a "changing model of authorship, while implicitly mounting a defence against the attacks on her own prolific output" ("Popularity" 249). By encouraging the reader to identify with her characters, Braddon champions the popular novelist and simultaneously interrogates "the boundaries between the highbrow and the popular" (Beller "popularity" 255)

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[4] Robert Lee Wolff (in Tromp p. xxvii) notes that the sales of *Lady Audley's Secret* outnumbered those of any other novel in the period.

[5] This can be seen on book review sites such as *Goodreads*, where *Lady Audley's Secret* has been rated over twenty thousand times and has more than thirteen hundred written reviews, some as recent as 2020.

However, some critics argue that she did not deliver social commentary continuously through her career. Robert Lee Wolff (qtd in Lynch) argues that Braddon stopped protesting social conventionalities because of the social ostracism she faced regarding her "quasi bigamous liaison with John Maxwell" (Briganti 190), a publisher whom she moved in with in 1861. Braddon lived with him and his children until his wife died in a mental asylum in 1874, after which they got married (Tromp xxi). Braddon received "savage personal criticism" (Lynch 236) because of this relationship and Lynch argues that she returned to sensation fiction, a very popular genre at the time, to secure her career as a novelist instead of risking it with social commentary.

Although Wolff acknowledges that Braddon explored serious social commentary in her novel *The Lady's Mile* (1866) he argues that it was a singular experiment—implying she did not explore such commentary before *The Lady's Mile*—and that she did not return to it until the mid-seventies. Eve M. Lynch does not agree with this. She argues that Braddon did not "abandon her radical social criticism during this period" (236) but kept it in her short ghost stories that could "carry the weight of her critical examination while appearing to deliver the quick thrills of popular sensation that brought her audiences and income" (237). Wolff and Lynch do agree that Braddon abandoned her social commentary in her early sensation novels, favouring "lurid and improbable tales of murder" (236) over radical social criticism. Lynch argues that these "plot-driven page-turners, tied to the 'facts' of highly paced, intricate schemes" allowed little room for "developing overt critical commentary" (Lynch 235). This suggests that there *was* room for covert critical commentary in Braddon's early work.

Lillian Nayder touches upon such covert critical commentary in one of Braddon's early novels in her article "'The Threshold of an Open Window': Transparency, Opacity, and Social Boundaries in *Aurora Floyd*." In her article, Nayder examines how the characters in *Aurora Floyd* relate to windows and other thresholds. She concludes that the window divides "public from private and male from female as well as upper from working class" and that it provides "an image for artistic self-expression and self-containment" ("Threshold" 198). Nayder also argues that Braddon uses the window "to make transparent the contradictions of the feminine ideal" ("Threshold" 198). While Nayder's article is convincing and compelling, it is also rather cluttered with a multitude of themes such as class, identity and gender without diving too deep into any of them. To fully explore one of those themes, this thesis will likewise analyse windows and other thresholds, henceforth referred to as liminal spaces, in Braddon’s early sensation novels with the focus on gender and femininity. This analysis will show whether or not traces of social commentary regarding contemporary gender norms can be seen in Braddon’s early sensation novels. This leads to the following research question: how do Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s sensation novels, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* and *Eleanor’s Victory*, use liminal spaces to comment on contemporary society with regard to gender and femininity?

1.3 Liminality and Gender

Before it is possible to conduct a proper analysis on gender and gender roles in the Victorian period, it is important to assess what gender is and how I will use it in this thesis. Gender is different from sex in that sex is biologically determined while gender is culturally constructed and dependent on social factors such as behaviour and identity (Butler 176-177). This thesis will not concern itself with the sexes, but will instead focus on gender identity and gender roles within Victorian society. The focus will be on women and femininity. However, a small portion of this thesis will be dedicated to men and masculinity because two of the three novels have significant male points of view that cannot be forgotten in a conversation on gender.

The Victorians had a complicated relationship with gender and sexuality. The evangelical revival in the nineteenth century, together with the separation of home and work and thus the creation of gendered ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres were all connected, and all influenced the Victorians’ views on gender (Bashford 8-9). Christopher Parker’s *Gender Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Literature* demonstrates that “any [attempt] to characterize easily the era’s attitude toward sexuality will necessarily be reductive” (Nash 561) and I will be mindful of this. The theoretical framework of this thesis will contain an extensive overview of gender and gender roles in the Victorian Era, as well as the most significant sides of the academic debate surrounding gender in the Victorian Era.

Reus and Giffort provide a fascinating discussion on gender in the Victorian era in relation to liminality in their essay collection *Women in Transit Through Literary Liminal Spaces*. They explain that liminality is a “useful conceptual tool with which to examine occasions and locations in which the boundaries between public and private, or worldly and domestic, become blurred and under challenge” (Reus and Gifford 3). I would like to add that liminality is also a useful tool to both examine and challenge the boundary between male and female as Nayder demonstrated in her analysis of thresholds in *Aurora Floyd*.

The theory of liminality was originally developed in the field of social anthropology by ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep in the mid-nineteenth century. It was then further expanded by anthropologist Victor Turner as will be fully explored in the theoretical framework. In his influential work *The Rites of Passage* (originally *Les rites de passage*) in 1909, Van Gennep distinguished three stages in rites of passage: "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (11). Liminal rites signal an in-between stage, something that is still in transition from one position to another. Liminal space, then, is an in-between space. In this thesis, liminal space will be analysed spatially: by looking at literal liminal spaces such as windows, doors and gates.

1.4 Methodology and Chapter Outline

In this thesis I will perform a close reading of three novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. The novels I have chosen are *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), *Aurora Floyd* (1863) and *Eleanor's Victory* (1863). *Lady Audley's Secret* centres around Robert Audley as he investigates the disappearance of his friend George Talboys. It is mainly set at Audley Court, home of Robert's uncle Sir Michael and his much younger wife Lady Audley, who carries a dark secret with her. *Aurora Floyd* tells the story of Aurora Floyd, a young heiress. She, too, carries with her a secret that inevitably comes back to haunt her, resulting in accidental bigamy and murder. *Eleanor's Victory* is slightly different than the other two novels, and has many elements of the detective novel. After Eleanor's father committed suicide, she vows to take revenge on the man responsible for this.

For each chapter in this thesis I have selected two or three scenes from each novel that best reflect the themes present in the chapter. The scenes will be analysed thoroughly through the lens of liminality and gender while keeping mindful of both the textual and the historical context. The chapters in my thesis will first address the historical context relevant for the scenes discussed in that chapter. After, each scene will be analysed in terms of liminality which will then be interpreted and related back to contemporary gender norms. Textual context, the overarching narrative, will only be cited when relevant.

I have chosen these novels because they are among the early sensation novels by Braddon—being the fourth, eighth and ninth novels in her oeuvre, respectively—and were published only one year apart, and three to four years before *The Lady's Mile* was published in 1866. Furthermore, they all feature women in the lead either as heroine or as villain, which is essential in my analysis of the feminine ideal. I am aware that Lillian Nayder already offered an extensive analysis of liminal spaces in *Aurora Floyd*, for which my gratitude will be evident throughout this thesis. However, she only dedicates half of her article to gender norms and the feminine ideal, focussing on identity and class in the other half. I believe there is more to explore in *Aurora Floyd* in terms of gender and more scenes to look at that have been left untouched by Nayder, which is why *Aurora Floyd* is still included in this thesis.

Chapter two will be the theoretical framework of this thesis. It will expand on the theory of liminality and illustrate its relevance to the Victorian age as well as to sensation fiction. Furthermore, it will fully explore gender and femininity in the Victorian age and expose the contradictions of the Victorian feminine ideal. Chapters three, four and five will constitute the analysis of this thesis. Chapter three 'The Woman at the Window' will explore the woman at the window as a symbol for women remaining in the private sphere and will show how Braddon's women subvert this imagery and thus challenge the feminine ideal. Chapter four 'Private Domesticity at the Railway' will show how women in Braddon's novels master the male dominated liminal space of the railway and traverse the boundaries of the public and private sphere. The final chapter 'Mimicking Male Dominance' will investigate how Braddon's women mimic male power over liminal spaces and thus pose a challenge to male dominance and male surveillance.

2. Theoretical Framework

What constitutes the Victorian feminine ideal? Richard Thornton in *Eleanor's Victory* voices the most important quality in the following sentence: "I think I'd rather she should live here for ever and ever, than that her nature should ever be vulgarised by contact with the world" (1: 206-207). The ideal Victorian woman, as Richard states, should remain in the private sphere to avoid being 'vulgarised' by the public sphere. This ideal, however, is often subverted in sensation novels, but the precise nature of the subversiveness of Braddon as sensationalist has never been agreed upon in the ongoing academic debate. This chapter will examine the current academic work on Braddon as a subversive (or not) novelist and position this thesis within that debate. Moreover, this chapter will explore the origins and characteristics of the feminine ideal as well as outline the theories used in this research.

The first section of this chapter will examine the theory of liminality. It will provide an in-depth analysis of liminal spaces and the anxieties surrounding them in the Victorian period. I will then examine gender in the Victorian age and show how the cult of domesticity created the feminine ideal. The end of this section will illustrate the various sides of the academic debate surrounding the subversiveness of sensation fiction regarding gender and femininity.

2.1 Liminality

Arnold van Gennep was the first to develop liminality in his book *Rites of Passage*, first published in 1909. He makes an important distinction between the secular and the religious worlds—between the profane and the sacred. All groups of people have foundations in the sacred sphere, Van Gennep argues, and "in the least advanced cultures the holy enters nearly every phase of a man's life" (Van Gennep 2). This can be seen, for example, in birth, hunting, or marriage (Van Gennep 2). However, Van Gennep argues that the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred is so great, "that a man cannot pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate stage". Thus, a rite of passage is needed.

Rites of passage, as mentioned in the introduction, have three phases according to Van Gennep: "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)" (11). The second phase, or liminal period, has been further developed by Victor Turner in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* published in 1969, which builds on Van Gennep's research. Turner examines the individual during the liminal phase and refers to this individual as a liminal figure.[6] He agrees with Van Gennep that the liminal figure is "necessarily ambiguous" because they are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). Being between these positions in the transitional space, liminal figures do not adhere to any classifications belonging to either position. In the third phase, the individual leaves this ambiguous liminal realm and is reintegrated into their new social structure. The individual is now subject to the cultural conditions belonging to their new position and has the same rights and obligations as others belonging to the same position. The individual is expected to behave in accordance with the norms and ethical standards that come with their new social position (Turner 95). Liminality, then, captures the "in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes" (Horvath et al. 2).

The term liminality is now in broader use and is also applied to literature, including Victorian literature. For example, in her article "Liminality, Anti-Liminality, and the Victorian Novel", Sarah Gilead examines the liminal figure in Victorian fiction. She builds upon Turner's research and argues that, although liminal figures lose their identifying characteristics, they are later inscribed "with a higher, more authoritative set of meanings" (183). This thesis will likewise apply liminality to Victorian literature but instead focus on liminal spaces as opposed to the more abstract liminal figures.

2.1.1 Liminal Spaces

Liminal spaces are in-between spaces that bridge one space with another. A threshold is a good example of this. It is a "transitional object with ritual significance", indicating that "crossing boundaries can be analogous with progression" (Shepherd 205). Thus, a threshold is anything that takes someone or something from one place to another. This includes doors, gates, but also windows. The Victorian mansions that frequently feature in sensation fiction usually had French windows that opened "from floor to ceiling" (*AF* 65) which were used as doors more often than the actual doors. Many characters in *Aurora Floyd* seem to prefer to enter through the window, French or not, rather than using the door.[7] Smaller windows are also seen as thresholds in this thesis. For example, the north lodge's "little lattice windows" (*AF* 454) are used to enter the building by Hargraves, Bulstrode, and Captain Prodder and therefore function as a threshold. Furthermore, the window is an important threshold because it is “a boundary that [can] be penetrated both psychically and visually” (Shepherd 209), but also aurally.[8] When a character is standing, sitting, or otherwise occupying a threshold, they are neither in the one space nor the other, making the threshold a liminal space. So what happens when one focuses on liminal spaces as opposed to liminal figures? That allows for an examination of various boundaries—between public and private, male and female—and would thus investigate how Braddon’s sensation fiction uses liminal space to either blur or reaffirm these boundaries.

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[6] Other terms are liminal personae, liminal entity, or threshold people. This thesis will continue to use the term liminal figure.

[7] Examples can be found on pages 170, 203, 227, 260 and 339

One of the reasons why liminal spaces are interesting to look at in relation to social commentary is because there were certain anxieties surrounding liminal spaces in the domestic household. These worries and concerns can be used in fiction to emphasize social commentary. Liminal domestic spaces, such as windows, doors and gates, “rendered the house permeable, open and thus vulnerable” (Sheeha 1). The liminal spaces represent “the weak points in a household’s spatial boundaries” (Cohen 621) and this was cause for anxiety. Liminal spaces are where intruders may enter the home and disrupt the domestic life.

This worry was amplified by contemporary reports of sensational trials and murders, something sensation fiction itself drew inspiration from. Two examples of such trials are William Palmer and Catharine Wilson. Palmer was convicted in 1856 for the murder of his racing associate John Cook, although he was suspected to have poisoned several others and collected their life insurance (Trodd 30). Catherine Wilson had similar methods. She was hanged in 1862 for the murder of Mrs Soames but was also suspected of having committed many more. She entered the home of a sick person as a nurse, befriended them so that they would include her in their will, and then poisoned them (“Life”). These hangings caused quite a stir in London. As reported in a nearly full-page article in the *Harper’s Weekly* of November 22 1862, thousands came to watch the execution of Wilson:

> [F]rom Southwark and Lambeth thousands came trooping over Blackfriars Bridge, while Bermondsey sent its multitudes over London Bridge, and Saffron Hill and the Seven Dials sent their eager reinforcements, till, joining the stream from Whitechapel, an impetuous and seemingly endless torrent, through Barbican and Smithfield, was absorbed in the great lake by which the gallows was encircled.

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[8] This does not, however, mean that words can be always understood through a closed window even if they can be heard. This can be seen in *Aurora Floyd* when Mrs Powell is spying on Aurora and Conyers through a closed window: “[t]he eager listener could hear her voice, but not her words” (205).

It is not too surprising, then, that novelists were also captivated by and likely took inspiration from these murders. Dickens himself called Palmer “the greatest villain that ever stood in the Old Bailey dock” (269) and Palmer is referred to three times in *Aurora Floyd*.[9]

Moreover, in the 1850s and 1860s there were “panics about street robberies, known then as ‘garrotting’” (Emsley par. 2). Although the numbers of these robberies appeared to be small, the press “created sensations out of minor incidents” resulting in a big press campaign in 1862 against the garrotters (Emsley par. 2). These reports of crime, combined with the thrilling plots of sensation novels being published at the time, likely resulted in an anxiety to keep the household safe and secure. John Ruskin reveals this anxiety in his 1864 lecture “Of Queens’ Gardens”. He writes that when “the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into [the home], and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed […] to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home” (1615).

Contemporary anxieties about the dangers of liminal spaces in the household are also evidenced in the way they are protected and concealed. Doors were locked and bolted (Mayhew 288, 354, 323) and windows were protected with shutters and iron bars (Mayhew 339, 348. Windows were also “draped, tasselled, frilled, ruched, layered with curtaining, as magazines of taste directed” (Armstrong 119) to prevent any outsiders from looking in. It is also evidenced in the novels by Braddon herself, where the household’s primary outlets were protected with “bolts, and bars, and chains, and bells” (*LAS* 250) and windows are “fastened” and “locked” until “all communication between the house and the garden was shut off” (*AF* 209). This fortification of the liminal spaces in the boundaries of the household suggests that they were indeed perceived as weaknesses that may allow entrance to dangers, and thus had to be protected.

Curiously, one of the characters in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Robert Audley, even voices his concerns surrounding liminal spaces and the dangers they pose when he arrives in his apartment and finds the door opening into his dressing-room ajar. Robert locks the door and thinks to himself: “I haven’t read Alexandre Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing. […] I’m up to their tricks, sneaking in at doors behind a fellow’s back, and flattening their white faces against window panes [sic]” (*LAS* 320). In this sentence Robert not only exposes liminal spaces as weaknesses in the boundaries of the household, but he also hints at another sinister intruder in the Victorian home: sensation fiction itself.

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[9] See pages 241, 291 and 299.

The popular genre of the 1860s was not perceived as a positive development by many contemporary critics,[10] as they saw the genre as a "perversion of English fiction" (Nemesvari 19). The main charge against the genre, as explained by Richard Altick, was "that it was written for, and devoured by, a middle-class clientele whose literary taste should be the exemplar of wholesomeness" (153). With plots containing bigamy and murder, sensation fiction was anything but wholesome. The genre mainly used "ingredients of the despised street literature, stories that sold in penny and halfpenny slices" which then found "their way into staid households and [corrupted] the imaginations of susceptible readers" (Altick 153). Robert Audley, in the example, refers to two prominent authors of sensation fiction, Collins and Dumas, and shows how these authors have influenced his way of thinking. All these dangerous intruders, be it murderous doctors or scandalous genres with the power of corruption, entered the household through liminal spaces. The resulting anxieties around liminal spaces are given expression in sensation fiction and may be used to covertly draw attention to contemporary social issues surrounding gender and femininity.

2.2 Susceptible Readers

However, Robert Audley would likely not belong to the group 'susceptible readers' to which Altick refers. Rather, sensation fiction was thought by some to be especially dangerous to young female readers. Francis Paget is one of the critics of sensation fiction that shared this concern. In the afterword of his satirical sensation novel *Lucretia* (1868) he warns about the difficulties a girl might have when she "should take the sensational novel as her guide in the common-place events of everyday life" (qtd in MacDonald 132). Critics worried that "young women reading sensation fiction would become dissatisfied with the commonplace world around them" (MacDonald 132). They feared that women who became attached to romantic and sensational fiction would "reject middle-class domesticity, inevitably compromising their sexual purity and their subservient tractability as they imaginatively indulge their physical and emotional cravings" (Carens 264). In other words, some feared that young female readers might wish to become more like those impetuous heroines about whom they read.

Their fear may have been legitimate, as Reynolds and Humble argue that sensation novels "invite identification with their heroines in their attacks on the propriety, and even the wealth, of the bourgeois patriarch" (103). The influence that novels had on women is also hinted at in Braddon's own novel: "[p]erhaps she formed her ideas of life from the numerous novels she had read, in which the villain was always confounded in the last chapter" (*EV* 1: 189). Despite the fear of the corruption of young women, or perhaps because of it, sensation fiction was still immensely popular among women and had a "largely female audience" (Bernstein 215). This was especially true for Braddon (Reynolds and Humble 101). According to Reynolds and Humble, this popularity of Braddon's sensation novels with women, and the sensation novel's popularity in general, gives "expression to a shared dissatisfaction with the 'feminine ideal' as heroine and role model" (8) and "with codes of reticence" (101) surrounding women.

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[10] Notably Henry Mansel and Margaret Oliphant.

2.2.1 The Angel in the House

But what is this feminine ideal that Victorian readers of sensation fiction were so dissatisfied with, and how did it come into existence?

Coinciding with the industrial revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism, the Victorian age became an age of transition in which nothing was constant. The Victorians "debated whether the machine age was a blessing or a curse, whether the economic system was making humanity happier or more miserable" ("Industrialism" 1580). The rapid social and economic changes happening throughout the Victorian period were thus a source of pride but simultaneously a source of tension, doubt, and anxiety (Gorham 3), causing a need for refuge. Refuge was found in home and family and created a cult of domesticity: "an idealised vision of home and family, a vision that perceived the family as both enfolding its members and excluding the outside world" (Gorham 4). This, in turn, resulted in an idealized and sharp division between the public and private sphere. The public sphere was predominantly male and concerned with business, politics and professional life. In contrast, the private sphere was the sphere of love, domesticity and women (Gorham 4). These spheres would ideally exist separately from each other, the domestic sphere being a refuge in which a man could recharge from "his rough work in the open world" (Ruskin 1615).

The idealisation of the home and the creation of the separate spheres had a "profound impact on the way in which women were perceived in the Victorian period" (Gorham 4). As centre of the private sphere, they were idealised as 'the angel in the house'.[11] Alina Pintilii summarizes the ideal Victorian woman as emanating a "quiet and beneficial influence over her husband and children by displaying a wide range of positive moral qualities and feminine virtues, such as purity, innocence, sensitivity, gentleness, submissiveness, love, self-sacrifice, altruism and devotion" (113). Gorham adds to this that she would have "a preference for a life restricted to the confined of home" and would possess "no ambitious strivings" (4-5).

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[11] Echoing the title of Coventry Patmore's popular poem about courtship and marriage written between 1854 and 1862.

We can see this feminine ideal reflected in Talbot Bulstrode's description of his ideal woman in *Aurora Floyd*. Talbot's ideal woman is a "shrinking being" with a "timid soul with downcast eyes" (*AF* 40), implying her submission to and dependence on men. He pictures her "crowned with an aureole of pale auburn hair" (*AF* 40) alluding to the 'angel of the house' ideal. Furthermore, he wishes her to be as "spotless as her own white robes" (*AF* 40) signalling that she is, as Gorham describes, 'free of any trace of anger or hostility'. Most importantly, however, he wishes her to excel in "all womanly graces" but to only exhibit them "in the narrow circle of a home" (*AF* 40). She is not to leave the private sphere.

However, such an ideal could hardly exist and Reynolds and Humble conclude that "the Victorians' angelic feminine ideal is entirely suspect" (3). John Ruskin touches upon this in his essay "Of Queens' Gardens". After explaining in-depth what powers and qualities a good woman ought to have, he concludes: "[b]ut do not you see that, to fulfil this, she must—as far as one can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of error?" (Ruskin 1615-1616). Ruskin seems to hint at the impossibility of the Victorian feminine ideal. And indeed, as Gorham shows, there were many ambiguities and complications surrounding this feminine ideal.

One complication that Gorham highlights is that the ideal Victorian woman was to remain in the private sphere. The reality was that these spheres could never be completely separate, except perhaps for the upper half of the upper class. Women from the working class often laboured alongside men because "employers preferred to hire women and children, who worked for even less money than men" ("Industrialism" 1581). In the Victorian middle class, the private sphere was not separate from the public sphere either, but rather reflected it (Gorham 12). This contradiction of a feminine ideal that could not really exist, created complications for women. Gorham explains that "the duties of female members of the middle class did include the enhancement of the family's social status, even though the ideology associated with the cult of domesticity barred them from the inevitable competitive struggles involved in that enterprise" (Gorham 12). Here Gorham shows that the two spheres overlapped in reality and that the equation of 'public = male' and 'private = female' was misguided.

It is important to note that the feminine ideal as described above mainly reflects the feminine ideal of the middle class during the 1830s through 1850s. As previously established, the Victorian age was an age of transition, and this was especially true for women. Reynolds and Humble summarize it elegantly and write that the Victorian period “began by inventing the fetishistic cult of the domestic angel and ended with the ‘angels’ in bloomers, in offices, in higher education, and driving motorcars” (4-5). Education for girls was significantly improved in the 1860s, as well as occupational patterns for middle-class girls (Gorham 24, 26-27). Moreover, the development of the railways in the 1830s and 1840s offered women “the opportunity to participate in the wide, freely visitable world, a world that normally men were entitled to” (Despotopoulou 3). However, although the cult of domesticity had its greatest influence in the early-Victorian period, the feminine ideal shaped by this cult resonated through the entirety of the Victorian period.

Recently, academics have moved away from the distinction of bounded areas such as public and private spheres, and have become more “interested in the shifting of boundaries” (Janet Wolff qtd in Reus and Gifford 2) and more “attracted by the liminal, the permeable and the structurally undetermined” (Reus and Gifford 2). Whereas in the second half of the twentieth century the critical discourse of much feminist scholarship focused on the social and cultural implications of the separate spheres, the focus has now shifted towards ambiguity, thresholds and porosity (Reus and Gifford 2). For example, the in 2020 published study *Victorian Touring Actresses: Crossing Boundaries and Negotiating the Cultural Landscape* by Janice Norwood focuses on a large group of forgotten ‘mid-tier’ performers and thus brings attention to women’s experience of working in Victorian theatre. This study of the Victorian actress shows how, despite the dominant ideology which “insisted on separate spheres of activity for men and women […] the women were themselves the agents of change” (Norwood 1).

Another example of a study more focused on boundaries and liminality rather than the two spheres is *Women and the Railway, 1850-1915* by Anna Despotopoulou from 2015. She looks at texts and illustrations representing women in literal transit in the train and at the railway station (2) and argues that the artificiality of the private and public spheres is highlighted by the railway’s ambiguity. She also demonstrates how the railways give rise to women’s impulses to traverse boundaries. These studies are only two examples of the recent academic work relating to gendered liminal spaces and women’s breaking of boundaries.

So, although the two separate spheres and their implications were pivotal in the creation of the Victorian feminine ideal, this thesis will follow the current academic trend by moving away from the spheres and instead looking at liminal spaces and boundaries. The focus will be on liminal spaces that function as passageways, such as (French) windows, doors, and the railway. In doing so it will contribute to the existing body of academic work and shed new light on the use of liminal spaces as boundaries in Victorian literature.

2.2.2 Impetuous, Frivolous and Impressionable Creatures

Sensation fiction's representation of female characters and interrogation of the institution of marriage provoked contemporary controversy (Cox 6). This controversy was partially due to the fact that the female characters in sensation fiction did not (often) adhere to the feminine ideal. Whereas the ideal woman of the domestic cult is 'dependent on men', 'innocent, pure, gentle and self-sacrificing' without 'ambitious strivings', the typical sensation heroine is "resilient, independent and determined to get what she wants" (MacDonald 127). Sensation heroines in Braddon's novels are especially ambitious, like Eleanor in *Eleanor's Victory* who will stop at nothing to avenge her father's death, or like Lady Audley who goes as far to create a new identity and leaving her son behind to ensure a better life for herself.

Sensation novels often feature women in prominent roles with complex backgrounds and identities, while men were often secondary to the story (MacDonald 127). These transgressive heroines "registered contemporary anxieties about what it meant to be a woman" and "prompted debates about the relationship between fictional characters and real women" (MacDonald 132). Due to this, sensation fiction is by many critics considered to contribute to the subversion of the feminine ideal.

Especially Braddon is often read as a subversive or quasi-feminist novelist.[12] Cox explains that "the revival of interest in Braddon's work since the 1970s has been marked by the repeated portrayal of Braddon as sensation writer with pseudo-feminist sympathies" and notes that one of the key critical debates that have emerged from this revival is the "question of Braddon's subversion of or adherence to Victorian gender ideologies" (7). In particular, *Lady Audley's Secret* has "come to be regarded as a paradigmatic protest text against the carceral position of women in Victorian society" (King 60). One of the main arguments to read Braddon as quasi-feminist is because of her subversive heroines like Lady Audley and Aurora Floyd, who "challenged the boundaries of Victorian respectability and undermined nineteenth-century gender ideologies through their subversion of the image of the "angel of the hearth" (Cox 6).

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[12] See, for example, Briganti, Hart and Showalter.

However, other critics have questioned the subversiveness of Braddon's sensation fiction. One such critic is Andrew King, who argues that the fact that "high-status reviewers condemned Lady Audley is not a sufficient reason for arguing that the novel *in itself* is 'subversive of patriarchy' and offers a new form of liberatory heroine" (61). King does state multiple times that he does not "seek to undermine the gender politics of such readings" (61). Instead, he seeks to determine what readings of *Lady Audley's Secret* are available in the cultural world outside that of the high-status reviewers; specifically the world of penny fiction. He argues that aspects of the supposed subversiveness of Lady Audley "would have constituted a familiar constellation of tropes in the penny fiction world" (72).

Another critic to contest the subversiveness of *Lady Audley's Secret* is Lillian Nayder. In her article "Rebellious Sepoys and Bigamous Wives: The Indian Mutiny and Marriage Law Reform in *Lady Audley's Secret*" Nayder claims that Braddon "acknowledges the need for marriage law reform, [but] simultaneously criminalizes it" ("Rebellious" 36). She argues that instead of subversive, the novel is a conservative affirmation of the rights of men under the marriage laws. She analyses the novel's racial imagery of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and exposes how *Lady Audley's Secret* poses men as the real victim and compares disobedient wives to mutinous Indian sepoys. Braddon, according to Nayder, willingly supports "the patriarchal norms and traditions that she criticizes in certain portions of her work" and "[embraces] the sexual double standard" ("Rebellious" 36) of Victorian England.

As the critics mentioned above demonstrate, there is much to be said for either side of the debate concerning Braddon's subversiveness and much still to discover. Cox concludes as follows:

> In many respects, then, Braddon's work defies easy categorization. She participated in various literary genres, and her work is frequently simultaneously highbrow/lowbrow, subversive/conservative, and quasi-/anti-feminist. It is, therefore, perhaps inevitable that the fiction of Braddon exhibits an overarching concern with the issue of boundaries - both literal and figurative. (8)

The analysis in the following chapters of this thesis will investigate the presence of Braddon's social commentary on contemporary issues surrounding femininity and gender through the lens of literal boundaries: liminal spaces. In doing so do, it will contribute to the ongoing debate on the subversiveness of Braddon's sensation fiction and shed some light on it from a different angle.

3. The Woman at the Window

There is a distinct difference between the window and its visual field. After all, "we might own a window and even land outside it, but not the visual field" (Armstrong 119). The visual field belongs to the person that gazes from within the window because they claim "ownership of the space not only in the room behind but also of the optical field of the street or park beyond the window" (Armstrong 7). This ownership of the visual field grants the viewer agency and power when watching the right events at the right moment, which is exactly what the female characters in Braddon's novels do, which will be illustrated in this chapter.

The previous chapter provided an overview on liminality and the Victorian feminine ideal in relation to sensation fiction. The ideal Victorian woman is submissive, innocent, altruistic and only exists in the private sphere. Sensation fiction is said to challenge this ideal, and Braddon is often used as example. However, as the chapter showed, critics have not yet agreed about the subversiveness of Braddon's early novels, as many of them appear to be simultaneously subversive and conservative. To contribute to that debate, this chapter will explore in what way liminal spaces, specifically windows, function in relation to women. It will answer the following sub-question: how does female power over windows challenge the feminine ideal and stretch the boundaries of the private space?

The first section of this chapter will explore the window as gendered space and look at how the imagery of the woman at the window functioned as a reminder for women to remain indoors while men ruled the outside world. It enforced the Victorian feminine ideal as angel in the house. However, novelists also used this imagery of women at the window to subvert it, giving women power over the window that rivals that of men. I will argue that Braddon's early work may be read in the same way. The women in *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* and *Eleanor's Victory* claim power over the windows and thus challenge the ideal of the confined angel in the house.

The second section of this chapter will illustrate how women use windows and sometimes doors as places of identity (re)construction. They claim agency by manipulating those around them and creating situations that are beneficial to them. The third and last section will look at how women use the window for surveillance and thereby claim power. It will examine various scenes where women are either spying or merely looking out of the window, seeing events that give them an advantage in various ways. The use of windows highlights female agency and ambition and thus challenges the passive and innocent feminine ideal.

3.1 Representing the Woman at the Window

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, Victorian spaces were strictly coded as outdoor / public / male and indoor / private / female. Women "only had power inside the home, the power of the hearth" (Zeleny 65) whereas men controlled the outside world. This division was encouraged in various media of the time, such as art. In many paintings, the angel in the house was "featured indoors, in proximity to a window, as a reminder that the outdoor world belonged to men" (63). Figures two and three, by George Elgar and John Callcott Horsley respectively, give just two examples of the "hundreds of [Victorian] paintings with this motif" (Shefer 14). In each of these paintings, the woman sits at or looks out of the window, sunlight illuminating her features. Paintings and images such as these functioned as a reminder that a "woman's work is inside the home, while the active work in the outside world remains a male preserve" (Barringer 142).

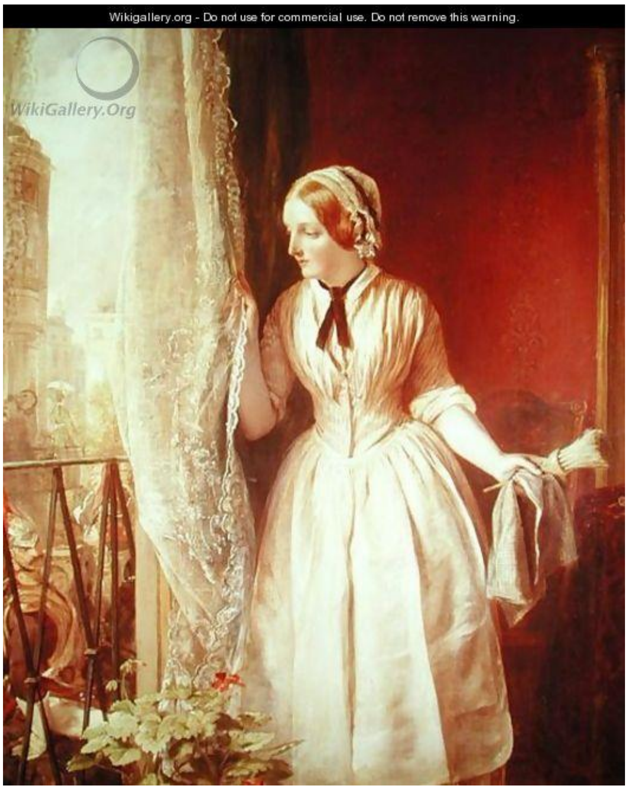
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Figure 2: "The Soldiers Farewell" by John Callcott Horsley

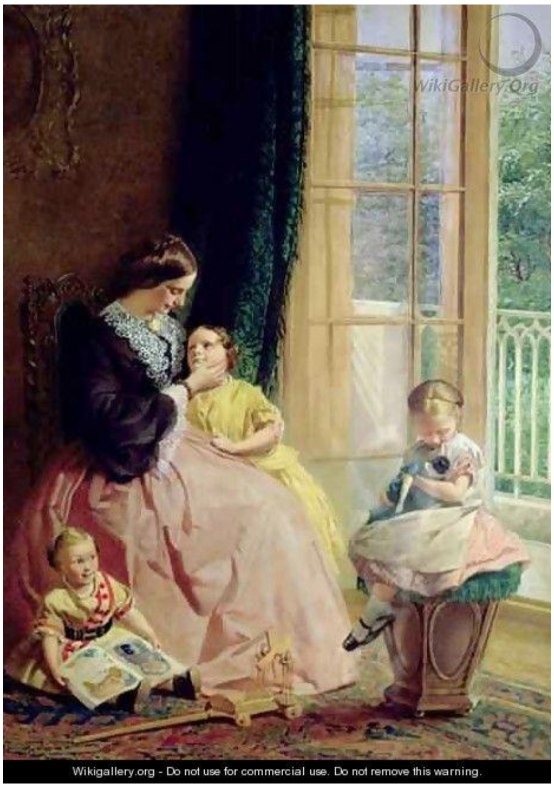
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Figure 3: "Mrs Hicks Mary Rosa and Elgar" by George Elgar

It may be noted that in both paintings the window is open. However, as Shefer argues, "the Victorian window, even when open, did not offer freedom" (14). The woman remains indoors in her own private domain. Zeleny states that "representations of the window in the nineteenth century were used as a shorthand symbol for reminding women of where they should and should not be" (66) and that since the motif of the woman at the window was so common in the Victorian age, the representation of this space "would have been recognized by a Victorian reader" (69).

Seeing that the window was so typically associated with the angel in the house, it can be seen as a gendered location. This carried over into literature, where gendered locations were used by novelists to "amplify their character's genders" (Mountford 42). In her analysis of windows in 1990s Austen adaptations, Julianne Pidduck argues that the woman at the window may be read as condensing a number of layered qualities of desire: "a passive desire for romance and marriage; an acquisitive desire for property and the wealth and rights it imparts; and a class-based desire for social mobility and individual freedom" (393). These layers of desire can also be seen in the written versions of these scenes of women at the window, as will be shown further on in this chapter.

Zeleny investigates the use of the window as a gendered location in her article "'She Left the Window': Challenging Domestic Ethos in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*". She analyses how a character's use of windows may highlight and critique the Victorian feminine ideal and the doctrine of the public and private sphere (64). Specifically, she investigates how Marian Halcombe's relation to windows challenges traditional conventions of femininity. It is not unlikely that Braddon used windows to challenge the feminine ideal in a similar way. Braddon admitted herself that her "admiration for *The Woman in White* inspired [her] with the idea of 'Lady Audley' as a novel of construction and character" (Hatton) and that Wilkie Collins was "assuredly [her] literary father" (Hatton). Furthermore, just like Collins, Braddon relies on a "Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic for the construction of Lady Audley" (Zeleny 76). When Lady Audley's portrait is viewed by Robert and George, the narrator remarks that the painter "must have been a pre-Raphaelite" (*LAS* 57).[13] This is why I will apply an analysis similar to Zeleny's analysis of *The Woman in White* to Braddon's early work and investigate how Braddon used women's relation to windows to challenge the feminine ideal.

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[13] See Clair Hughes's "Lady Audley: The Woman in Colour" for a detailed study of Braddon's relation to the Pre-Raphaelites and her use of colour in the many conflicting images she paints of Lady Audley.

3.2 (Re)constructing Her Identity

"Throughout [*Aurora Floyd*], Braddon associates windows and doors with the artful construction of social identity, as characters purposefully redefine themselves to better succeed in life" (Nayder "Threshold" 190). In one scene, Braddon compares the figure in the window to a "kit-cat", a bust-length-portrait named after the Kit-Cat Club of the late seventeenth century (*AF* 244). In this section I will examine how Aurora Floyd and Lady Audley (re)construct their identity in door and window frames and how Braddon enforces this with godly imagery.

3.2.1 The Pretty Tyrant

In her article "The 'Espaliered' Girl: Pruning the Docile Body in *Aurora Floyd*" Jeni Curtis argues that both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* achieve harmony through a kind of violence (78). Whereas the harmony in *Lady Audley's Secret* is achieved at the cost of "incarceration and death", in *Aurora Floyd* it is the "reshaping of the temptress Aurora into a Madonna figure" (Curtis 78) that concludes the story. Part of the evidence for this claim is given in the way Aurora and John's marriage is described. The rhetoric of the "bliss of domesticity [is] undermined by the images of constraint in which it is couched" (Curtis 85). And indeed, Aurora is said to happy in her "stronghold" where she is "fenced about and guarded", separated "from every other man in the universe", leaving her alone with her "protector and shelterer" (142) John Mellish. Curtis concludes from this that "Aurora is […] incarcerated as effectively as Lady Audley. Her state only appears to be one of freedom. She is, in fact, domesticated, tamed" (85). However, when looking at Aurora's relation to windows and doors it can be seen that she may not be as incarcerated as Curtis claims. Instead, I propose that she herself rules the stronghold through her power over thresholds, windows in particular, and uses them to manipulate those around her.

Aurora repeatedly tyrannizes her second husband, John Mellish. She is twice referred to as "the pretty tyrant" (*AF* 143 and 201) binding him in "floral chains" (*AF* 142). She would "alternately ridicule, lecture, and tyrannize over him" (*AF* 145). Even though the narrator cruelly remarks that John "could break [Aurora's] tiny wrist with one twist of his big thumb and finger [should] such measures become necessary" (*AF* 143) he never actually follows up on this. John simply "submits to the pretty tyrant" (*AF* 143). In her domination of those around her, specifically John Mellish, Aurora consciously makes use of thresholds. After she gets locked out of her own house in the rain by Mrs Powell, John asks her what she was doing outside. She tells him the explanation will be given upstairs and the following scene unfolds:

> She swept towards the door, trailing her wet shawl after her, but not less queenly, even in her dripping garments; […] On the threshold of the door she paused and looked back at her husband.
>
> “I shall want you to take me to London to-morrow, Mr. Mellish," she said. Then with one haughty toss of her beautiful head, and one bright flash of her glorious eyes, which seemed to say, "Slave, obey and tremble!” she disappeared. (*AF* 213)

Aurora asserts her dominance on the threshold, indicating her departure out of the room and alluding to a possibly more permanent departure should John disobey her orders. It is important to note here, that Aurora is not financially dependent on her husband, something John laments as well: “his chief grief was that she was a wealthy heiress, and that she wanted so little at his hand” (*AF* 170). In this scene, with Aurora standing like a queen on the threshold, she asserts herself as the actual ruler of the stronghold that is Mellish Park.

Another way that Aurora uses thresholds to construct her identity is through windows. Nayder observes how Aurora carefully positions herself in various window frames to her own benefit. In one particular scene, Aurora leans “against the *framework* of an open window” as she laughs “at [John’s] embarrassment” (*AF* 170, emphasis added). She is described as “the very *picture* of careless gladness as she lean[s] in one of those graceful and unstudied *attitudes* peculiar to her […] with the trailing jessamine waving round her in the soft summer breeze” (*AF* 170, emphasis added). Braddon describes Aurora as if she were a painting within a framework, assuming an artful pose seemingly unstudied. Nayder cleverly recalls Talbot Bulstrode’s wish to have an “opera-glass” (*AF* 47) to watch Aurora with, “recognizing her behaviour as a performance” (“Threshold” 190).

Aurora’s artfulness at the window may also be seen in her connection to the goddess Hecate. Throughout the novel there are several possible allusions to the Goddess in relation to Aurora[14] with the following two scenes being the most evident. In the first scene, she is directly compared to Hecate by the narrator: “[s]he looked like Hecate, as she stood on the threshold of the French window, lingering for a moment with a deep-laid purpose in her heart and a resolute light in her eyes” (*AF* 277). This is when Aurora steals away from her company into the woods to make a deal with James Conyers, her first husband. She uses the window to her benefit, taking the reins and settling the matter of her accidental bigamy on her own. In the second significant scene, she appears once again on the threshold to Bulstrode, standing "between him and the sunshine" and "darken[ing]" the window opposite to him (*AF* 41). Her darkening of the window and taking away the sunshine may be an allusion to Hecate's underworld characteristics as a chthonic goddess (Marquardt 252, Boedeker 79).

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[14] Notably in her entangling blue-black hair and enchanting black eyes (*AF* 20, 75, 164, 220) as well as in her relation to sorcery (*AF* 132, 152).

Furthermore, Hecate is often related to dogs (Boedeker 79) and is said to have "fierce hounds" (Doroszewska 15). We can see this mirrored in Aurora's mastiff who is often by her side and appears with her on the threshold in this particular scene: "the banker's daughter paused on the threshold of the open window, holding the collar of an immense mastiff in both her hands" (*AF* 41).

The comparison to Hecate is significant as Hecate is "regularly connected with crossroads, doors, and gates" (Doroszewska 16). In both scenes she is literally on the threshold of an open window, and metaphorically she can be seen to be on a threshold as well. In the first scene, she is on the threshold of a life without the encumberment of James Conyers. In the second scene, she meets Talbot for the first time after the ball. In the conversation that follows, he asks her if she knew his cousin who attended the same finishing school that Aurora left very quickly to marry her groom, James Conyers. This gives the readers, and Talbot, one of the first hints about Aurora's big secret. Her connection to Hecate further signifies the importance Braddon draws to thresholds.

Aurora asserts herself as a goddess and ruler of John Mellish's stronghold, artfully framing herself in windows and doorframes and presenting herself as a work of art to be admired, adored, and above all obeyed.

3.2.2 Why, She Was His Destiny!

Similar to Aurora, Lady Audley uses the window to reconstruct her identity after the feminine ideal for her own personal gain. Lady Audley changes identity multiple times throughout the book. She starts off as Helen Talboys, the wife of George Talboys. After his desertion, she changes her name to Lucy Graham and starts working as a governess for Mr and Mrs Dawson. There, she meets Sir Michael Audley and marries him, thus becoming Lady Audley. The last transformation happens when she is committed to an insane asylum by Robert Audley, her nephew by marriage, under the false name Mrs Taylor.

The most telling instance of how she uses windows to her benefit can be seen when she transforms from governess Lucy Graham to Lady Audley. As Lucy Graham, she positions herself at the window so she might be seen by a rich, old widower who happens to pass by the window. Here one can see the layered qualities of desire that Pidduck referred to, concerning women at the window, specifically the desire for social mobility, wealth and freedom.

The rich, old widower who passes by is Sir Michael. The narrator remarks that his "wakeful nights and melancholy days [were] gloriously brightened if he chanced to catch a glimpse of [Lucy's] sweet face behind the window curtains as he drove past the surgeon's house" (*LAS* 8). Were it not for her visibility at the window, Sir Michael would likely not have made her Lady Audley. The relevance of the window in their union is further reinforced when he asks her to marry him while sitting "at a window in the surgeon's little drawing-room" (*LAS* 10). Lucy does not look at Sir Michael when he proposes to her. Instead, Lucy looks "straight out into the misty twilight and the dim landscape far away beyond the little garden" (*LAS* 10). The narrator tells the readers of the "yearning gaze" in her eyes "which seemed as if it would have pierced the far obscurity and looked away – away into another world" (*LAS* 10). The other world she is looking at through the window might be the world of riches and status she has been working towards since childhood. By having Lucy favour the window instead of Sir Michael's gaze as he proposes to her, Braddon highlights the distance between them and simultaneously hints at Lucy's ambition.

It may be argued that she did not seduce him on purpose. However, in one of the last chapters Lady Audley tells Sir Michael about her past and explains that when she was sixteen, she already realized her beauty could bring her good fortune. She says: "if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any of them." (*LAS* 278). This wish to marry rich is once more expressed when she compared her love for George Talboys, her first husband, to her love for Sir Michael, her bigamous second husband. She tells Sir Michael that: "I think I loved [George] as much as it was in my power to love anybody; not more than I have loved you, Sir Michael […] for when you married me you elevated me to a position that he could never have given me" (*LAS* 279). Sir Michael lifted her "into the sphere to which [her] ambition had pointed ever since [she] was a schoolgirl" (*LAS* 280). It can be concluded that seducing Sir Michael with glimpses through the window was something planned rather than coincidental and shows how she utilized the window to transform herself from Lucy Graham into Lady Audley.

Lucy Graham, eventually Lady Audley, is introduced as the ideal Victorian woman. Characters in the books observe her to have an "amiable and gentle nature" and to always be "light-hearted, happy, and contented under any circumstances" (*LAS* 7). Furthermore, she adheres to the "permanently childlike" (Gorham 6) characteristic of the feminine ideal as she is often compared to children or even babies. For example, Robert Audley describes her as a "childish, helpless, babyfied little creature" (*LAS* 111) and Alicia Audley calls her "irretrievably childish and silly" (*LAS* 40). However, Sasaki states that "Lady Audley was clearly meant as a protest against the passive and angelic heroines of the period" (xii) and this passage is one of the first places where liminal spaces highlight this protest. Lucy's use of and connection with the window betrays her as a "craftswoman constructing an elaborate identity, a living, breathing, display-window doll" (Montwieler 50).

3.3 Female Surveillance Through the Window

The following section will look at how women use the window for surveillance to claim power and agency. This challenges the view of the passive and innocent woman at the window ideal and stretches the boundaries of the private sphere. To illustrate how women did this, this section will examine how the servants Mrs Powell from *Aurora Floyd* and Phoebe Marks from *Lady Audley's Secret* extort the ladies they serve with information gained through the window. Lastly, Eleanor from *Eleanor's Victory* will be examined in the scene where she spies on the two convicts, Launcelot and Victor, as they commit a crime, giving Eleanor the evidence and leverage she needs to fulfil the purpose of her life.

3.3.1 Weary of Dull Dependence

Phoebe Marks is Lady Audley's lady's-maid and confidante. She is an interesting character because of her similarities to Lady Audley and Braddon herself "underscores their similarities" (Montwieler 57) throughout the novel: "under the shrouded avenues in the garden, you might have easily mistaken [Phoebe] for my lady" (*LAS* 85). The similarities are not only physical, however. Montwieler argues that "in addition to working hard for goals they want, both women also act craftily, unethically to further their own materialistic desires through bigamy or blackmail" (57). Lady Audley notices this as well and thinks that Phoebe is "like herself, inwardly as well as outwardly—like herself, selfish, and cold, and cruel, eager for her own advancement, and greedy of opulence and elegance; angry with the lot that had been cast her, and weary of dull dependence" (*LAS* 237). And indeed, much like Lady Audley, Phoebe manages to use the window to her advantage.

We can see Phoebe's cold and ambitious nature when she takes Luke, her fiancé, to see Lady Audley's chambers. They manage to open Lady Audley's secret drawer and there they find “a baby’s little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby’s head” (*LAS* 26). Although Luke thought it was “queer rubbish”, Phoebe cleverly remarks that she would “rather have this than the diamond bracelet [Luke] would have liked to take” and promises Luke that he “shall have the public house” (*LAS* 26) that he always wanted. Unlike Luke, Phoebe recognizes the value of the items and knows she can extort Lady Audley with it. However, this proved not to be enough to extort Lady Audley with. Luke recalls Phoebe lamenting the fact that Phoebe’s “misses was selfish and extravagant, and [that they] might wait a long time before [they] could get what [they] wanted from her” (*LAS* 341).

Thankfully for Phoebe, the window offers her a solution. She “can see the well from [her] bedroom window” (*LAS* 22) and it is from there that she witnesses Lady Audley push George Talboys into the well, presumably murdering him. Shortly after, she meets with Lady Audley and tells her that she had been “altering the blue dress” and that she “took it up to [her] own room and worked at the window” (*LAS* 64). An understanding passes between the two women and eventually Lady Audley replies that, while she lives and is prosperous, Phoebe “shall never want a firm friend or a twenty-pound note” (65) effectively giving in to the blackmail before Phoebe could demand anything. When Phoebe meets with Luke not long after, he forces her to share her knowledge. When she does, she eagerly tells him that “[Lady Audley] is in my power, Luke, […] and she’ll do anythin’ in the world for us if we keep her secret” (*LAS* 342).

Phoebe gains powerful knowledge through the surveillance out of her bedroom window and uses this throughout the novel to her advantage. Together with Luke, she blackmails Lady Audley to give them enough money to buy a public house and multiple times to pay the rent. And though it may appear that Luke is doing most of the blackmailing, it is actually Phoebe who retains the power over Lady Audley. Robert Audley recognizes this when he says to Luke: “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” (*LAS* 109, emphasis added). It can be seen that Phoebe’s surveillance through the window granted her the means to secure a future for herself and her husband.

3.3.2 The Windows of the Room in which the Dead Man Lay

When Eleanor reads the letter left to her by her father, she swears to avenge him. This vengeance becomes something that consumes her every thought and eventually "her whole life fashioned itself to fit that unwomanly purpose. She abnegated the privileges, and left unperformed the duties, of a wife—true to nothing except to that fatal promise made in the first madness of her grief for George Vane's death" (*EV* 2: 152). However, Eleanor struggles to fulfil this purpose she gave herself and most events that bring her closer to her purpose happen purely by chance. It is by chance that she comes across Launcelot, the man responsible for her father's suicide, but still finds herself unable to avenge her father and is forced to watch the culprit walk free and court her friend Laura. There are, however, a few key moments where Eleanor does act herself. One of these moments is when she spots two men, Victor and Launcelot, break into Mr De Crespigny's study to replace the real will with a fake one. Although there are multiple moments where Eleanor could leave, she chooses to remain and turn the situation into her favour by cleverly using the dead man's windows.

When Eleanor realizes the two men, Victor and Launcelot, are moving to the windows, she draws back and stands "motionless, almost breathless, close against the blank wall between the long French windows" (*EV* 3: 36). Although she is initially scared and 'breathless', she does not leave. Instead, she eavesdrops on their conversation and watches their movements: "Eleanor, with the Venetian shutter a very little way open, and with her face close against the window, stood looking into the lighted room, and waiting for Launcelot Darrell to appear" (*EV* 3: 42). She uncovers their plan and sabotages them by sneaking inside while Victor is checking for spies: "reckless in her excitement, she rose from her crouching position, and slid rapidly and noiselessly across the threshold of the open window into the study, before Victor Bourdon had finished his examination of the shrubs on the right" (*EV* 3: 49). She steals the real will that the culprits left on a chair in the study and replaces it with another document before sneaking out again. The two men then burn the document, thinking they are burning the real will and thus destroying the only evidence of their crime. Soon after, the seemingly victorious Eleanor and a small group, including Launcelot and Eleanor's husband, gather in Mr De Crespigny's living room where she plans to denounce Launcelot and claim her vengeance once and for all.

Although Eleanor soon learns that she lost the real will, and thus lost her only evidence against Launcelot, for little over ten pages in the novel she holds the power over everyone in the room. She refuses "to sit down in the chair which Miss Sarah offered her" (*EV* 3: 63) and literally looks down onto the group. Her husband Gilbert aptly describes her as "no longer an ordinary woman, only gifted with the earthly charms of lively womanhood: she was a splendid Nemesis, radiant with a supernatural beauty" (*EV* 3: 64) which was granted to her by the triumph she thought to have achieved. Launcelot, too, finds himself "fascinated by some irresistible power in the beautiful face before him" (*EV* 3: 69).

For a short moment, Eleanor rules the room and the company in it. The information and evidence she gathered by spying on Victor and Launcelot through the window granted her enough power to demand the attention of everyone in the room and tell them her story. Although the moment leads to an anti-climax when Eleanor realizes the will is gone, the information she gained through her surveillance is still crucial to her eventual victory over Launcelot at the end of the novel.

3.3.3 The Household Spies We Call Servants

> "Remember this, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, when you quarrel. *Your servants enjoy the fun*. […] Your servants listen at your doors, and repeat your spiteful speeches in the kitchen, and watch you while they wait at table […] Nothing that is done in the parlour is lost upon these quiet, well-behaved watchers from the kitchen" (*AF* 177-178)

Mrs Powell, hired as the finishing governess and companion of Aurora in *Aurora Floyd*, is one of the best examples of such a resentful spying servant that Braddon's narrator warns the readers about. The narrator informs the readers that, despite Aurora's best intentions of "giv[ing] Mrs Powell something to do" after she got married, Mrs Powell still hates her. She hates her exactly "for the very benefits she received, or rather because she, Aurora, had power to bestow such benefits"; she hated her "as envy will for ever hate prosperity" (*AF* 133). Thus Mrs Powell quickly becomes one of Aurora's "two enemies" one being Stephen Hargraves and the other being Mrs Powell, who was "forever nursing discontent and hatred within the holy circle of the domestic hearth" (*AF* 141).

This hatred, Steere argues, comes from the façade she must maintain. She "must submit to being called an equal in name while acting as a servant in actual practice in order to maintain her position as servant" (112). This eventually develops into a criminal side she must conceal because, as the narrator says, "it is not for a dependent to hate, except in a decorous and gentlewomanly manner—secretly, in the dim recesses of her soul; while she dresses her face with an unvarying smile" (*AF* 133) Mrs Powell does not remain idle, however, and through clever use of windows and surveillance she is able to change her situation, although briefly, in her favour.

Mrs Powell watches her employers at every chance she gets, eavesdropping when able. When Aurora has first met Mrs Powell, she compares her to a "grim, pale faced watch-dog" (*AF* 51) and Mrs Powell lives up to this comparison. She seats herself in windows (*AF* 53, 198, 202) and "lurks amidst the bed-curtains, soft of foot and watchful of eye" (*AF* 114). In one particular scene, Aurora finds herself "arrested on the threshold by Mrs Powell, who was standing at the door, with the submissive and deferential patience of paid companionship depicted on her insipid face" (*AF* 263) and essentially catches Mrs Powell spying. Later in the novel, Aurora herself laments Mrs Powell's watchfulness and thinks to herself that Mrs Powell "is all eyes!" (*AF* 276).

Mrs Powell's watchfulness gains her an advantage over Aurora and consequently John Mellish. Through her spying, specifically through the window at the North Lodge when Aurora is speaking with Conyers (*AF* 205), Mrs Powell eventually learns the secret of Aurora's bigamous marriage. This knowledge gives her the "power to stab the heart of the man who has affronted her" (*AF* 343) as well as power over her own mistress. Furthermore, as Steere observes, "blackmail also has the added bonus of ensuring that a servant cannot be dismissed, lest she reveal her employer's damning secret" (100). Mrs Powell realizes this advantage herself when she thinks: "[Aurora and John are] both in my power; and I'm no longer a poor dependent, to be sent away, at a quarter's notice, when it pleases them to be tired of me" (*AF* 337). Besides satisfying her envious nature, Mrs Powell's surveillance through the window also ensures her future.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter set out to investigate how female power over windows challenges the feminine ideal and stretches the boundaries of the private space. It has shown that in Victorian art and literature, the window functioned as a symbol to illustrate where women should and should not be. It confined them to the private sphere, only able to look out and catch glimpses of the public sphere outside. Braddon uses the image of the passive woman at the window and subverts it by giving her female characters significant power over the window.

The scenes in this chapter have shown how the window offers Braddon's women freedom and extends the borders of the private sphere. Firstly, they use the window to artfully (re)construct their identity within the frame. They manipulate those around them, thereby claiming power and elevating their status. While Aurora tyrannizes over her husband from door and window frames and thus makes herself the ruler of Mellish Park, Lady Audley uses the windows to carefully transform herself from governess to lady. Secondly, Braddon’s women use the window for surveillance which grants them advantages and opportunities. Mrs Powell and Phoebe both gain power over their mistress and secure their future through blackmail, while Eleanor briefly holds the power of her long-awaited vengeance in her hands.

Because of their proximity to windows and ability to gain power and advantages through surveillance and identity construction, Braddon’s women reveal the window as gendered space and challenge the innocent and passive feminine ideal.

4. Public Domesticity at the Railway

"The Romans were the great Road-makers of the ancient world—the English are the great Railroad-makers of the modern world" (549) writes R. Dudley Baxter in his 1866 article "Railway Extension and its Results". The Victorian world was changing with the rise of the Railway in the 1830s. As a result, "railways and other new communication technologies collapse[d] the boundaries between the public and private spheres, creating a new and decidedly proximate spatiality (Lee 135). This proximate spatiality may in turn be used by women, specifically female characters from sensation fiction, for their own benefit.

The previous chapter focused on the woman at the window as a symbol for women remaining in the private sphere and showed how Braddon's women subvert this imagery and thus challenge the feminine ideal. They use the window as gendered space to manipulate, blackmail and manoeuvre themselves to freedom. This chapter will focus on a different kind of liminal space: the railway. Although this liminal space is male dominated, Braddon's novels show that women actually master these spaces instead. This chapter will investigate how female control over the railway allows Braddon to critically comment on contemporary society with regard to the feminine ideal. This leads to the following question: how do female characters use the railway for their benefit and how does this challenge the division between the public/male sphere and private/female sphere?

Section one gives contextual information about women and the Victorian railway. It explores the railway and train compartment as liminal spaces and explains the stigma around women at the railway. Section two will look at how the railway provides the female characters in Braddon's novels with agency and mobility. Without escort, they freely move out of the private sphere and use the railway for their own purposes, further blurring the division of the public and private sphere.

4.1 Women and the Railway

For the Victorians, the railway "stood as both agent and icon of the acceleration of the pace of everyday life; it annihilated an older experience of time and space, and made new demands on the sensorium of the traveler" (Daly 463). The sensation genre, Daly argues, shows an "attempt to register and accommodate the newly speeded-up world of the railway age" (464). As a result, the railway is frequently featured in sensation novels where it was used "not only as a setting in which they could develop original and modern plots, but also as a way of life, producing stories which appropriated its speed, fast transitions, and liminality" (Despotopoulou 41).

The railway, specifically the train compartment, can be seen as a liminal space for two reasons. Firstly, its occupants are physically between their place of departure and their destination, making the train an in-between and thus liminal space. Secondly, the Victorian train compartment functioned as both public and private sphere. They were comfortably furnished and bore resemblance to the drawing room, creating what Amy Richter calls "public domesticity—a social ideal that was neither as private as a home, nor as socially unruly as a public street" (60), further enforcing the liminality of the train compartment.

As a semi-private space, it promised "familiarity and security" but as it was also semi-public, it "eventually becomes uncanny because the random intimacies that it promotes may become uncontrollable and ultimately dangerous" (Despotopoulou 35). Despite the fact that the railway was accessible to all, women's occupancy was "fraught with dangers and threats which compromised the emancipatory potential of high-speed travel" (Despotopoulou 23). Women in the train were, according to reports, subjected to "embracing, kissing, fondling, molesting, violating, and beating, or, in milder cases, to language described as disgusting, disgraceful, indecent, or brutal by passengers deemed maniacs, ruffians, drunkards, or scamps" (Despotopoulou 23).

On top of this, they were ridiculed in the media for their supposed ineptitude at train travel. Because of their ideal confinement to the domestic and private space, they were thought to be unable to "deal with the intricacies of urban or national networks" (Despotopoulou 25). Women were portrayed in the media as unintelligent and "unable to deal with simple tasks such as buying tickets, managing their luggage, and boarding the right compartment" (Despotopoulou 25). This is not unlike how, nowadays, people still make fun of women for driving a car. 'Thankfully', men—well-adjusted to the complexities of the public sphere—were there to offer them a helping hand. That is, when they were not molesting, violating, or saying indecent things to them. This male patronage can be seen in fiction as well, where "most fictional women in train stories seek and even enjoy the patronage of male companions or co-travellers" (Despotopoulou 26).

It may be assumed that Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and thus her heroines as well, would have been aware of the ridicule and dangers many train-travelling women had to face, as this was regularly reported and increasingly sensationalized by the media (Despotopoulou 23). As a result, many female characters in sensation fiction went actively against the stereotype of the inept woman at the railway station (Despotopoulou 28). Braddon’s sensational heroines are often remarkably familiar with train travel and make clever use of the liminal qualities of the train compartment. As a liminal space, the train compartment “could not be attached to distinct social or gendered identities; instead it offered opportunities for destabilising social boundaries, for complicating and even overturning hierarchies” (Despotopoulou 39). Furthermore, the liminal space opened up “fresh possibilities for self-exploration and growth as they challenge women’s sense of identity” (Despotopoulou 3). Because of this, the railway may be viewed as “the space par excellence to be associated with the liminal types of femininity constructed in sensation novels” (Despotopoulou 42). The following examples will show how Braddon’s heroines subvert the Victorian feminine ideal as they master the liminal train carriage and traverse the boundaries of the private and public sphere with remarkable ease.

4.1.1 Aurora’s Flight

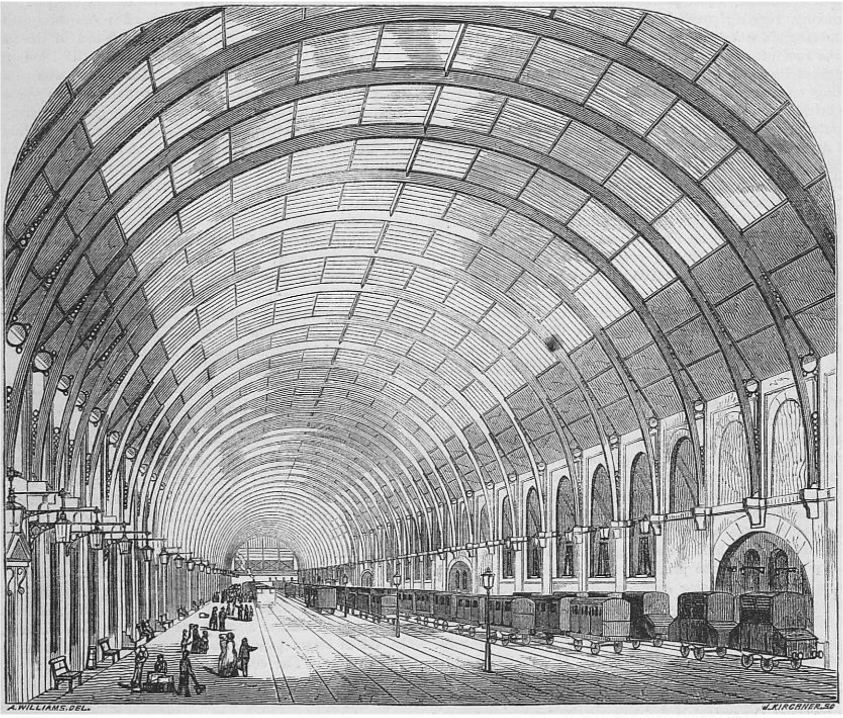
During the investigation of the murder of Aurora’s second husband, James Conyers, Aurora is approached by Hargraves. He tells her that the police have discovered her bigamy and will inform John Mellish of it that afternoon. This prompts Aurora to flee from her house, leaving John a letter to explain herself: “I cannot remain here to see you after the discovery which has been made to-day. […] The pain of leaving you for ever is less than the pain of knowing that you had ceased to love me” (*AF* 330). She decides to go to Talbot Bulstrode as she trusts him to “advice [her] what to do” and “break this discovery to [her] poor father” (*AF* 331) so she can avoid this herself.

In order to get there, she must take the train by herself. Without further thought, she looks at her watch and instantly knows that “there is an express that leaves Doncaster at five” (*AF* 331) showing her familiarity with the timetable and implying previous experience with train travel. Again at the railway station, Aurora shows no signs incompetence. She simply finds a railway official who is “ready to take a ticket for her and find her a comfortable seat in an empty carriage” (*AF* 344). The carriage does not remain empty, however. Aurora is quickly joined by a “couple of sturdy farmers” that take their seats “upon the spring cushions opposite Mrs Mellish” (*AF* 344). Besides their wearisome talk of agriculture and their powerful stable yard odour, they do not bother Aurora.

This might be because she took measures to prevent men from bothering her by drawing a veil over her face. This prevents men from becoming enchanted by her oft lauded black eyes, once compared by the narrator to “the stars of heaven” (*AF* 20). It happened at least once before that a stranger became enchanted by her eyes, staring with “open-mouthed admiration at Miss Floyd’s black eyes” (*AF* 56). Knowing the risks of harassment in the train compartment, it would not be unlikely that Aurora donned the veil exactly to prevent such situations from happening. The rest of her four-hour journey is uneventful, and she arrives at the final station without any trouble. The final step of her journey is to get from King’s Cross station to where Talbot and Lucy are staying. When arriving at King’s Cross, Aurora finds herself “alone amidst the bustle and confusion of the King’s Cross terminus” (*AF* 347).

At the time Aurora visits King’s Cross, the station is only roughly five years old as it opened its doors in 1852. Even then, the station was large and crowded: “built close to the junction of five of the principal highways of London” the station covered nearly “eighty acres of land” (“King’s Cross” 282). The building itself fit in perfectly with the glass architecture of the 1850s, with a mighty arched glass roof that “strongly remind[ed] the observer of the transept of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park” (“King’s Cross” 283). Figure four, illustrated by the artist of *The Illustrated Magazine of Art* in 1853, shows the interior and impressive glass roof of the departure shed in King’s Cross. Aurora does not let the massive station intimidate her, however, and sends “a porter for a cab, and order[s] the man to drive to Halfmoon Street” (*AF* 347).

Braddon gives her readers a heroine that knows her way around the railway. Aurora is shown to take the necessary steps in order to travel safely to her destination. The help she gets from the porter and the railway official is not male patronage, but simply Aurora taking charge of the situation.


A. WILLIAMS. DEL.
J. KIRCHNER. SC.

THE GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY TERMINUS, KING’S CROSS.—INTERIOR OF THE DEPARTURE SHED.

Figure 2: The Great Northern Railway Terminus, Kings Cross.

4.1.2 You Will Think Me Very Foolish

“You ought to have been a detective police officer”, Lady Audley says to Robert one morning, to which Robert replies that he sometimes thinks he “should have been a good one” (*LAS* 113). Robert Audley indeed has the role of amateur detective in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. MacDonald states that the amateur detectives are “positioned in opposition to sensation villains, who are typically characters whose hidden past or previous identity needs to be unearthed” (136).

However, as amateur detective, Robert Audley does not always make the smartest decisions. He appears particularly fond of telling Lady Audley about the proof he has, leading her to prevent him from using it, which is exactly what is happening in the remainder of this conversation. Despite already suspecting Lady Audley, Robert tells her about his intent to investigate the letters that George left in his chambers. He specifically mentions the old letters from Helen, George’s wife who was believed to be dead. These letters would help prove that Helen and Lady Audley are the same person. Robert himself hints at this, by telling Lady Audley that “very few write so charming and uncommon a hand as yours” (*LAS* 114). Robert even goes as far as telling Lady Audley exactly when he is going to see to the letters, giving her just enough time to travel to London to remove the incriminating evidence, which is exactly what she does. When her coachman returns and Robert asks if he has taken Lady Audley back home, the man replies: “no, sir, I’ve just come from the Brentwood station. My lady started for London by the 12:40 train” (*LAS* 114). This prompts Robert to travel to London earlier than planned, thinking he will “know where to find her” (*LAS* 114).

Once at Shoreditch station in London, Robert runs into a lady who has “evidently only just arrived at the station” (*LAS* 116). The lady is no other than Lady Audley, who is just on her way back to Audley Court after taking care of the letters. When she recognizes Robert, Lady Audley wastes no time and orders him to open the carriage door for her, because the train “will start in two minutes” (*LAS* 116). This is a slight repetition of the scene where Robert blocks her entrance to her own home. At the station, however, Robert is too puzzled by her presence to do anything but comply to her wishes. Thus, Robert opens the door for her and “help[s] her to settle herself in her seat, spreading her furs over her knees, and arranging the huge velvet mantle in which her slender little figure was almost hidden” (*LAS* 116). Here Lady Audley deploys a similar strategy as Aurora Floyd. They both use a piece of clothing—Aurora her veil and Lady Audley her velvet mantle—to hide their enchanting beauty from any unwanted onlookers.

When Lady Audley is all settled, she tells Robert: “you will think me very foolish to travel upon such a day, without my dear darling’s knowledge, too” (*LAS* 116) hinting at the stigma of women at the railway. However, like Aurora, Lady Audley shows herself to be very capable when it comes to train travel. She uses the information Robert gives her and travels to London and back, without her husband knowing, to remove the incriminating letters from Robert's chambers. She experiences no troubles on her journey and is "familiar with the use of the railway" (James 593). Interestingly, in the novel Lady Audley is never shown directly at the railway, except for this scene. "Apparently freed from the humdrum impedimenta of modern travel, Lady Audley is never shown […] poring over train timetables, missing trains, or even (heaven forbid) waiting for late ones" (Lee 135). As Louise Lee summarizes, "Speed, mental acuity, and a precise grasp of the modern world around her makes this crinolined malefactor more than a match for her male pursuers" (135).

Here Braddon shows that "the railway has been mastered by Lady Audley better than by Robert Audley" (Despotopoulou 50) and that the only fool in this scene turns out to be Robert himself. When Lady Audley has gone, he asks himself: "has she baffled me by some piece of womanly jugglery? […] Why did she come to London?" (*LAS* 116-117). The amateur detective appears completely ignorant of Lady Audley's scheme, despite having served her the information on a silver platter.

4.1.3 The Benefits of a Mercenary Marriage

Much like Aurora, Eleanor leaves her house and husband, Gilbert, behind and travels by train to London, albeit for different reasons than Aurora. Whereas Aurora leaves in fear and shame of the way her husband would look at her knowing about the bigamy she committed, Eleanor leaves out of anger and pride.

From the moment they got married, jealousy took hold of Gilbert Monckton. Due to lack of communication between Eleanor and him, he mistakes Eleanor's obsession with Launcelot Darrel as love and starts to resent her for it. This eventually drives him to leave Tolldale Priory, where he lived together with Eleanor. He takes Laura with him and together they travel to Torquay, leaving only an explanatory letter for Eleanor. In that letter he calls her the "most cruel of women" for having made a "mercenary marriage" to be close to her "former lover, Launcelot Darrell" (*EV* 3: 151-152). After Eleanor reads the letter she is not sad or heartsick, instead, all she feels is "unmixed indignation" (*EV* 3: 155). She tears "the letter into a hundred fragments" wanting "to annihilate its insulting accusations" (*EV* 3: 155). Suspected and deserted by her husband, Eleanor refuses to stay at Tolldale: "I will leave Tolldale to-morrow morning [and] will at least prove to Mr. Monckton that I do not wish to enjoy the benefits of a mercenary marriage. I will leave this place and begin the world again." (*EV* 3: 158-159).

Eleanor packs "her plainest dresses and the necessaries of her simple toilet" (*EV* 3: 158), using a similar strategy as Aurora and Lady Audley. She dresses plainly as not to draw attention to herself in the train and beyond. A young girl such as Eleanor, with "glossy ripples of auburn hair" (*EV* 3: 30) and "bright grey eyes" (*EV* 1: 13) would likely have drawn a lot of attention of other passengers had she accentuated it with expensive clothing and accessories.

Eleanor's journey is only briefly described in the novel. She tells her maid she is "going alone" (*EV* 3: 159) and does not seek male patronage or company. She simply leaves early in the morning and goes "to the station at Windsor in a pony carriage which had been reserved for the use of her herself and Laura Mason. She [takes] with her only one portmanteau, her desk, and dressing-case" (*EV* 3: 159). The train journey may be assumed to be uneventful. What the reader does get to know is that "during her journey between Windsor and London" Eleanor determines "what to do" when she arrives (*EV* 3: 164). Having only "a few pounds in her purse" (*EV* 3: 164) she travels to an institution for governesses. During her journey Eleanor also realizes that, in order to hide herself from Gilbert she "must call [her]self by a new name" (*EV* 3: 164). Despotopoulou argues that the train enabled women "to take advantage of the anonymity and ephemeral connections it fostered, falsifying identities or inventing alternative ones" (50-51) which is exactly what Eleanor does. She enters the train carriage as Eleanor Monckton and exits it as Miss Villars.

The indignant Eleanor is shown to master train travel as she leaves her house and all its riches behind. She takes matters in her own hands and leaves on her own terms, vowing "never return to Tolldale until [her] truth has been proved" (*EV* 3: 163).

4.2 Conclusion

This chapter set out to show how Braddon's female characters use the railway for their own benefit. Despite the railway being "related to masculinity and to social institutions aimed at subordinating women" (Despotopoulou 50) the examples from this chapter have shown that this male dominated liminal space is actually mastered by women. Being in the liminal space of the train carriage allows them to re-invent their identity and traverse the boundaries of the public and private sphere, further subverting the Victorian feminine ideal.

Aurora, Eleanor and Lady Audley use the railway without male companionship or patronage, without the knowledge of their husbands, and travel without encountering any trouble. They appear to be aware of the risks and dangers of the railway and act accordingly, showing remarkable familiarity with timetables and crowded stations like King's Cross.

What is striking here, is that Braddon does not put any emphasis on these scenes at the railway and in the train compartment. The focus often lies on the stream of consciousness within the female character and not on their actions at the railway and in the case of Lady Audley, the focus lies on Robert Audley's perspective. In doing so, despite the stigma it is surrounded by, Braddon rightfully makes it feel natural that a Victorian woman should know her way around the railway.

5. Mimicking Male Dominance

Much like the window and the railway, the door functions as passageway and thus as liminal space. The door, however, is "not merely an opening that allows for passage. [It] is framed [and] operates to bring a space to a beginning and an end" (Shepherd 205). Characters in the novels use doors to spy on others, traverse rooms and close out unwanted visitors. Furthermore, it is a threshold that can be controlled, as will be explored in this chapter.

The previous chapters have shown how women in Braddon's sensation novels take claim over the window and master the railway. They traverse the boundaries of the public sphere and pose a challenge to the Victorian feminine ideal. The empowerment of these characters, I argue, lies mainly in the subtlety by which Braddon gave it to them. The window and railway scenes are understated, making it feel normal that Victorian women should master the railway and gain agency and power through the artfulness of the window frame.

This chapter will look at another subtle way in which Braddon empowers her female characters. It will investigate who controls the liminal spaces in the novel, specifically the doorways, both physically and through the gaze. This leads to the following question: how do female characters mimic male power over liminal spaces through the gaze as well as physical control over a liminal space and how does this challenge male dominance and surveillance?

Section one of this chapter will examine how the gaze gives men power over liminal spaces, such as windows, and how women defy this by returning the gaze. In doing this, they challenge the sexual double standard that contemporary society had concerning transparency in women and men. The second section will examine how women take control over thresholds in the boundaries of the home. As the examples from the novels will show, women are often first blocked by a male character and thus controlled by him before they find a way to reverse the situation and take control over the threshold themselves.

5.1 The Male and Female Gaze

"Consider a window. Is it simply a void traversed by a line of sight? No. In any case, the question would remain: what line of sight—and whose?" (209), Lefebvre asks his readers in his oft-lauded work *Production of Space*. It is an important question which directs the attention to the transparent quality of the window. Lefebvre points out that "as a transitional object [the window] has two senses, two orientations: from inside to outside and from outside to inside" (209). Anyone who looks out of the window may be observed by someone outside of it. Furthermore, it provided an "almost invisible layer of matter between the seer and the seen" (Armstrong 3). As a see-through barrier that both connects and separates, it becomes a complex liminal space, especially when focusing on the gaze.

In sensation fiction it often happens that one character is being observed by someone else without them being aware of it. *Eleanor's Victory* provides multiple examples of this and one such example is when she plays the piano. Her two friends they wonder "at her grace and beauty" as "their admiring eyes" follow her every move (*EV* 1: 203). Even when Eleanor does nothing but sit "near the open window, looking very beautiful and virginal in a loose white muslin dressing-gown" her two friends still watch her "furtively, observant of every change in her countenance" (*EV* 1: 203). As she plays the piano or looks out of the window, it is unlikely that she is aware of her devoted observers.

However, despite the uneven relationship between the observer and the observed, Leah Henderson stresses that "while the gaze affects people individually, it is essentially a collective interaction" (2). In her article "Wilkie Collins and Oscar Wilde: Challenging Intersections Between the Male and Female Gaze in Victorian Popular Literature" Henderson reveals how Collins and Wilde use the male and female gaze to "denounce the patriarchal Victorian system, which renders the act of gazing a power that is both objectifying and degrading" (1). She shows how both Wilde and Collins criticize not only the objectifying male gaze but also the objectifying female gaze. Furthermore, Henderson underscores the importance of reciprocation: "sometimes the one who is being looked at looks back" (2). This is something explored not only by Wilde (Henderson 2) but also by Braddon.

In the three novels analysed in this thesis we can see how Braddon's women imitate the male gaze as well as reciprocate it. Much like Wilde and Collins, Braddon uses the female gaze to subtly denounce the patriarchal Victorian system and pose a challenge to male surveillance.

5.1.1 From Between its Artfully-Adjusted Folds

Out of all the characters in the three novels discussed in this thesis, Eleanor appears to be the most watched and observed by others. She draws attention from both female and male characters alike, who watch her from behind newspapers, through windows, as she walks on the street or sits at a window. The reason for this, as indicated by the novel, seems simple; she is simply too “luminous”, “beautiful”, “innocent” and “fearless in her ignorance” (*EV* 1: 4) not to look at her. However, taking on the role of amateur detective, Eleanor is obligated to become a careful observer herself.

That Eleanor is a desirable girl to watch and observe, is established early on in the novel. When Eleanor is traveling to meet her father in Paris, a gentleman offers to accompany her. Once in the train carriage, the gentleman only has eyes for Eleanor: “the grey-headed gentleman felt a quiet pleasure in watching that earnest, hopeful, candid face; the grey eyes, illuminated with gladness; the parted lips, almost tremulous with delight, as the sunny panorama glided by the open window” (*EV* 1: 12). The gentleman is a nice man in every regard and helps Eleanor get to her father. Yet, the way he looks at her, especially his focus on her parted lips and tremulous delight, objectifies her in an almost sexual way. This calls to mind the risks women were exposed to when traveling by rail.

The scene in the train is only one example from the endless scenes where Eleanor is the object of someone’s gaze, seemingly without her realizing this. Perhaps the character with the biggest fixation on Eleanor is her husband Gilbert Monckton. It starts on their way back to Tolldale Priory after their honeymoon in the North. Gilbert thinks she is glad to be going home because there she will see her former lover Launcelot again, not knowing that Launcelot is the man Eleanor hates the most. Driven by his jealousy, he starts observing her: “Mr. Monckton, with a cambric handkerchief thrown over his face, kept a covert watch upon his wife from between its artfully-adjusted folds” (*EV* 2: 146). He deliberately hides his gaze with the ‘artfully-adjusted’ folds of his handkerchief, essentially spying on his wife.

There are no instances of Eleanor deliberately reciprocating a male gaze or otherwise challenge it as in *Aurora Floyd*,[15] which may be due to the fact that Eleanor is a different type of sensational heroine when compared to Aurora and Lady Audley. Eleanor is still the ambitious heroine with a secret, which is “her ‘unwomanly’ desire for revenge and her active pursuit of the man who has driven her father to suicide” (Pykett 85). However, the biggest difference between Eleanor and the two other heroines, is that the readers know Eleanor’s secret. Although Eleanor keeps her purpose and identity a secret from other characters throughout the novel, the reader knows from the beginning. Instead of being the object of scrutiny, Eleanor acts as amateur sleuth detecting on her father’s behalf (Johnson 255), which creates a different kind of sensation and allows for a different use of the female gaze. The readers are invited to observe together with Eleanor as she searches for evidence. Joseph A. Kestner argues that "the specific nature of the female detective narrative is to address the practice of the woman having the power of the gaze as she executes her professional—private or official—responsibility of surveillance" (17). Naïve and innocent as she may be in the ways she is observed by others, Eleanor executes her responsibility for surveillance by carefully watching Launcelot whenever she can.

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[15] Further research and analysis may be required to fully investigate this.

Eleanor does this by cleverly using liminal spaces, windows in particular. Chapter three already gave an elaborate example of this, showing how Eleanor discovered that Launcelot and Victor were swapping the real will with a fake one. Another important scene where Eleanor uses the window to gaze upon Launcelot and make a discovery happens much earlier in the novel. In the crucial scene at the start of volume two, Eleanor has just left Hazlewood on Mrs Darrell's request. They pass Launcelot in a pony-carriage and Eleanor watches him closely through the window in the carriage, despite the speed with which they pass him. She observes that he stands "upon the edge of the curbstone, with his back half turned to his companion, kicking the pebbles on the road with the toe of his boot, and staring moodily before him" (*EV* 2: 51). Eleanor observes him neutrally, assigning no extra value to his looks or actions. The only thing she does assign value to, is his gaze. She notices he is 'staring moodily', which is exactly what tells her that "this man, Launcelot Darrell, was the sulky stranger, who had [been] waiting to entrap her father to his ruin" (*EV* 2: 51). If not for her careful attention to his face and mood, she may never have had this realisation.

While Wilde and Collins both portray "the male and female gaze as objectifying" (Henderson 2) and most male gazes in *Eleanor's Victory* are indeed shown to objectify women and only focus on their beauty or lack thereof, Braddon shows how the female gaze through the window may be used to look further than that. Instead of observing Launcelot as the handsome man he is described as by others, Eleanor as amateur detective uses liminal spaces to her benefit and searches his gaze for faults in his personality, a secret she might uncover, anything to help her prove his involvement in her father's suicide.

5.1.2 A Pale Face

Like most Victorian sensational heroines, Aurora is the subject of scrutiny for the better part of the novel. When she is not watched and admired for her beauty, she is spied upon by people jealous of her wealth or suspicious of her actions. Nevertheless, in some scenes, Aurora is not merely the object of someone's gaze but becomes the gazer herself. She reverses the roles and takes control of the situation.

One character that is especially observant of Aurora is Steeve Hargraves, or "the 'Softy' as he was politely called in the stables" of Mellish Park (*AF* 136). Just like Mrs Powell, Hargraves resents Aurora not only for the whipping she gave him, but also for her wealth. Hargraves is captivated by money, as John Mellish says: "Steeve's a little too fond of the brass to murder any of you for nothing" (*AF* 135) as is confirmed later in the novel, when Hargraves murders James Conyers to steal the money that James had extorted from Aurora. The narrator provides ample foreshadowing by telling the reader that "when any creature inspires you with this instinctive unreasoning abhorrence, [as Hargraves did for Aurora,] avoid that creature. He is dangerous" (*AF* 136).

Hargraves is known for his pale face, caused by a fall to the head which removed all colour from his face and reduced his voice to a whisper. Throughout the novel, his pale face appears at the window numerous times to spy on Aurora or to give her a message from James Conyers (*AF* 138, 209, and 327). Pale faces at a window foreboding bad events appears to be a motif that recurs in sensation fiction, as it is mentioned by Robert Audley who remembers the white faces against windowpanes in the fiction of Collins and Dumas (*LAS* 320). It certainly is true for Aurora, for whenever Hargraves's pale face appears at a window, something bad usually follows for Aurora.

The first and most telling example of this happens right after she meets Hargraves. Shortly after recognizing "the white face of Steeve Hargraves at one of the windows of the harness room" she is arrested on "the threshold of the gates opening from the stables into the gardens […] by a howl of pain from the mastiff Bow-wow" (*AF* 138). Aurora rushes over and repeatedly hits Hargraves with her horsewhip. Afterwards, Hargraves is sent away by John Mellish and starts "plotting ruin and revenge" (*AF* 141) on Aurora. Thus, the image of a pale face is quickly established in the novel as conveying "class resentment" and reveals the threat "it poses to the status quo" (Nayder "Threshold" 193). For Aurora, it functions as an omen for misfortune.

However, she does not just accept the misfortune that Hargraves's pale face brings on her, and meets his gaze with her head held high. This can be seen in the scene where Hargraves is tasked by James Conyers to bring Aurora a letter. Interestingly, the pale face in this scene belongs to Aurora, who has not yet recovered from the shock of her first husband being alive.

Her face was “almost as pale as her white dress” (*AF* 194) as she stands by the iron fence that separates the gardens from the woods. She looks up “at the sound of the shambling footstep, and […] encounter[s] the gaze of the ‘Softy’” (*AF* 194). She makes use of the iron fence as liminal space and barrier to keep her “separated from the ‘Softy’” (*AF* 196), not allowing him to enter the gardens. When he gives her the letter, Aurora takes it “without removing her eyes from his face” (*AF* 195). She watches him “with a fixed and earnest look that seemed as if it would have fathomed something beneath the dull red eyes which met hers. It was a look that betrayed […] a vague desire to penetrate [his] secrets” (*AF* 195). Here Aurora is not the one that is observed. She reversed the roles and instead becomes the observer, trying to unearth Hargraves’s secrets.

A little earlier in the novel she encounters another pale face in the window, but it does not belong to Hargraves. At the racecourse in York, Aurora becomes aware “of a pale face and a pair of grey eyes earnestly regarding her from the threshold of an open window two or three paces off; and in another moment both she and her father had recognized Talbot Bulstrode” (*AF* 148). Talbot may initially not seem like a threat to Aurora, as he has declared his love for her earlier in the novel. Yet, the similarity to Hargraves’s pale face, as Nayder points out, “makes Bulstrode’s preoccupation with Aurora seem sinister” (“Threshold” 194).

Indeed, when taking a closer look, Bulstrode can be seen to have some misogynistic tendencies. Even while he was in love with her, he always thought of Aurora as a “black-eyed siren” that he allowed to “intoxicate” him (*AF* 47). However, after their meeting at the racecourse, his perception of her changes for the worse. He then thinks of her as a “soulless siren” and “wicked enchantress” who never loved him and is “good for nothing but to wreath her white arms and flash the dark splendour of her eyes for weak man's destruction; fit for nothing but to float in her beauty above the waves that concealed the bleached bones of her victims” (*AF* 152). In this scene at the racecourse Aurora reversed the roles again because, as Nayder points out, Braddon identifies “Bulstrode as the object of Aurora’s gaze, not simply as the gazer” (“Threshold” 195).

The window as liminal space allows for perception “from the outside as well as from within” and as such enables Braddon to “represent mutual perceptions or recognitions and to develop a counterpoint between them” (Nayder “Threshold” 195). By having Aurora return both Bulstrode’s and Hargraves’s gazes, Braddon empowers Aurora and thus challenges male surveillance throughout the novel.

5.1.3 No One but a Pre-Raphaelite

With Robert Audley as main protagonist in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lady Audley does not star in an abundance of scenes. However, even when she is not physically present, she often still dominates the scene.

One such example is when Robert and George break into Lady Audley's chambers, with help from Alicia Audley, to view Lady Audley's portrait. This is the vital scene in which George makes the discovery that Lady Audley is actually his wife, Helen Talboys, who was presumed to be dead. Having such an important role, the portrait is described in immense detail:

> Yes; the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. […] No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a *lurid* lightness to the blonde complexion, and a *strange*, *sinister* light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a Pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the *hard and almost wicked* look it has in the portrait. (*LAS* 57 emphasis added)

Firstly it has to be noted that, at this time in the novel, the painting is not finished (*LAS* 56). Still, the painter managed to capture the dual nature of Lady Audley. They gave her a 'pretty pouting mouth' and at the same time gave it a 'hard and almost wicked look'. Furthermore, the 'sinister light' in the eyes makes it appear as if Lady Audley was looking directly back at them.

In this scene, Lady Audley is present not in corporeal form but in the portrait that is simultaneously "so like, and yet so unlike" her (*LAS* 57). This constitutes the liminal performance of the portrait. Sue Broadhurst defines liminal performance as emphasizing "a certain shift-shape style, content is pointed to only indirectly" (para 9). Although the painting is nothing more than a portrait of Lady Audley, it indirectly points to the secrets she carries with her. The portrait seems to shape-shift before the viewer. It is beautiful yet lurid and wicked. Lefebvre offers a similar statement regarding images which may be read as liminal performance. He writes that occasionally "an artist's tenderness or cruelty transgresses the limits of the image. Something else altogether may then emerge, a truth and a reality answering to criteria quite different from those of exactitude, clarity, readability and plasticity" (Lefebvre 97). In the case of Lady Audley's portrait, the painter appears to have seen the truth about Lady Audley and painted her without the mask of feminine innocence, capturing her true nature—specifically in her expression.

Furthermore, Broadhurst argues that pieces with such liminal performance often elicit "a feeling almost of awe somewhat akin to discomfort" (para 9). Both Alicia and Robert agree that there is "something odd about [the painting]" (*LAS* 58). However, only Alicia recognizes the liminal performance of the portrait. She confesses that she thinks that "sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally part of it, though not to be perceived by common eyes" (*LAS* 58). Robert disregards her, saying that she should not "be German"[16] (*LAS* 58). When she protests, he brushes her off, arguing that "the picture is—the picture; and my lady is—my lady" and that she should not "unsettle" him (*LAS* 58). He repeats this statement "several times with a terror perfectly sincere" (*LAS* 58), implying that he may believe Alicia but refuses to acknowledge it.

Although Lady Audley is not physically there when Robert and George gaze upon her portrait, the portrait gazes back on her behalf. Yet Alicia is the only one that sees the truth hidden in that gaze. Where Robert only sees a disagreeable painting of Lady Audley, Alicia recognizes that although she and Robert "have never seen my lady look as she does in that picture; [Alicia thinks] that she *could* look so" (*LAS* 58). Without fully realizing it, she discovers the underlying meaning hidden in the painted gaze of Lady Audley.

5.2 On the Threshold

The following section will show that, although men often control the threshold of the home, women mimic that male power and manage to reverse these roles and take power over the thresholds for themselves.

5.2.1 Between the Coward and the Door

When Eleanor visits Mr de Crespigny's house, at the start of the third volume, she does not know he has already passed away. She arrives at the door with the purpose to denounce Launcelot Darrell and ensure he does not inherit Mr de Crespigny's fortune. The entrance to the house is described as "handsome" and the "plate glass which formed the upper halves of the doors appeared a very slight barrier between the visitor waiting on the broad stone platform without, and the interior of the house" (*EV* 3: 23). This echoes the divide between the public and the private spheres. Although the barrier seems 'very slight', it soon proved to be impenetrable for Eleanor. The butler that answers the door opens only "one of the hall doors, a very little way, and suspiciously. He took care to plant himself in the aperture in such a manner as would have compelled Eleanor to walk through his body before she could enter the hall" (*EV* 3: 25). The butler physically prevents Eleanor from entering the house with his body, keeping her on the other side of the 'very slight barrier'. Only when Miss Lavinia enters the scene, does the butler let her into the house. In that moment, the butler held the power over the threshold and Eleanor could do nothing but submit to him. A couple scenes later, however, Eleanor mimics this display of power.

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[16] To be unnecessarily speculative (*LAS* 358n10)

This is from the same scene discussed in chapter three, where Eleanor believes she has the real will in her pocket and thus believes she has triumphed over Launcelot, the man she has been after for two volumes now, the man responsible for her father's death. In that scene, Eleanor holds the power over everyone in the room including Launcelot. She refuses to sit and positions herself in the middle of the room. This is significant because not only does Eleanor demand all the attention in the room, but she also blocks Launcelot's escape route: "Eleanor stood between the coward and the door. He could not pass her" (*EV* 3: 69). Here Eleanor mimics the power the butler had over the threshold when she wished to enter. By blocking the exit, she ensures Launcelot cannot leave the room and thus forces him to hear her entire story and accusation.

5.2.2 Shut All Windows and Close the House for the Night

In *Aurora Floyd*, a similar power shift happens with Mrs Powell. There is no clear repetition in scenes as in *Eleanor's Victory*, but implicitly Mrs Powell can still be seen mimicking male power over thresholds—namely that of John Mellish. John is the master of the house and thus master of the thresholds, as all of Mellish Park is "John's Domain" (*AF* 157). Of course, chapter three has already shown that although it is technically 'John's Domain', it is Aurora who asserts herself as the ruler of Mellish Park. Besides Aurora, Mrs Powell as a "deputy-mistress" (*AF* 210) can also be seen to take control over the thresholds not unlike the master and mistress of the house would. There are multiple instances of Mrs Powell on the thresholds, some of which have already been analysed in chapter three. There are, however, two more scenes to look at with relevance to this chapter, as they demonstrate how Mrs Powell takes control over the thresholds of Mellish Park in order to thwart her master and mistress.

The first scene is where Mrs Powell stands in the doorway and blocks John from closing the door until he asks her. "Allow me to shut the door, Mrs Powell, if you please," John says to Mrs Powell, "who did not seem inclined to leave her post upon the threshold of the drawing-room" (*AF* 293). Mrs Powell does leave her post after this is asked of her. Still, although it is short-lived, Mrs Powell briefly had control over the threshold.

The second scene happens after Aurora speaks with Conyers in the woods, a conversation spied upon by both Hargraves and Mrs Powell. Mrs Powell makes sure to get home before Aurora does, in order to have Aurora locked out and caught in the rain. When one of the servants, Wilson, expresses his concern about Aurora still being outside, Mrs Powell lies that "Mrs Mellish came in half an hour ago" and orders him to "shut all windows, and close the house for the night" (*AF* 209). The servants then fasten all windows and lock all doors until "all communication between the house and the garden [is] shut off" (*AF* 209). Both scenes display not only Mrs Powell's power over liminal spaces, but also that of Wilson and other servants. They have the keys to open or lock a door, which ultimately gives them the power to shut Aurora out of her own house.

Mrs Powell's control over thresholds mimics and at the same time rivals that of Aurora and John. She uses this control to spy on them and thwart them whenever she can. A servant having this power poses a challenge to the division between public and private because it allows her to use this division to her own benefit. By locking Aurora out in the rain, Mrs Powell denies her entry to the private domain Aurora ideally belongs to and is not to leave.

5.2.3 She Turned it Twice, Double Locking the Door

The most unambiguous example of a woman mimicking male power over the threshold can be seen in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Similarly to Eleanor, Lady Audley gets blocked at the door by her nephew Robert Audley. When Robert wishes to speak to Lady Audley about his suspicions of her being responsible for George's disappearance, he blocks the entrance to the house. Lady Audley "lingered with her stepdaughter upon the threshold of the turret-door, waiting until Robert should be pleased to stand aside and allow them to pass" (*LAS* 208). Except Robert is not pleased to let them pass, despite Lady Audley's pleading. "I am going to a diner party, Mr Audley", she tells him, "please let me go in" (209). He denies her and blocks the entrance to the house until she agrees to go with him to the lime walk, effectively extorting her.

In the lime walk, after listening to Robert for what she claims was "nearly half an hour" (*LAS* 215) and Lady Audley stoops to begging, Robert still denies her. "I must beg that you will release me, and let me go and dress for dinner", Lady Audley pleads, but Robert cruelly tells her that "womanly prevarication will not help [her]" (*LAS* 215). Finally, when the duo returns to the house, he still does not grant them entrance to the house right away: "[Robert] looked from his cousin to Lady Audley, who stood near the gateway, waiting for him to stand aside and let her pass him" (*LAS* 219).

After this scene, there are two key moments where Lady Audley mimics his possession and claim over the threshold, standing guard over who goes in and who goes out. The first moment is when Lady Audley goes to the inn Robert told her he was staying at. She goes to the room that Robert is allegedly sleeping in and "stood for a few moments trembling thus, with her hand still upon the key; then a horrible expression came over her face, and she turned the key in the lock; she turned it twice, double locking the door" (*LAS* 256). After locking Robert in his room, she deliberately places a candle next to the "lace furbelows" in Phoebe's room at the inn, "so close that the starched muslin seemed to draw the flame towards it" (*LAS* 257). As Lady Audley locks the door, she takes back the power over the threshold. She prevents Robert from leaving his room and, had he actually been in his room, condemns him to a death by fire.

The second scene where Lady Audley mimics Roberts power over the threshold is right at the end of the novel. After discovering her crimes and surviving the fire by simply not being there, Robert commits Lady Audley to an insane asylum in a small town in Belgium. Once there, Lady Audley blocks the door and keeps Robert from leaving the room: "she still held her place by the door, as if determined to detain Robert as long as it was her pleasure to do so" (*LAS* 311). This is nearly a direct recreation of the scene where Robert detains her and forces her to speak with him in the lime walk.

Here, Lady Audley forces him to stay and listen to her story which she knows would hurt him. She confesses to what is perhaps her most heinous crime: the murder of her first husband George Talboys, who, she tells Robert, "lies at the bottom of the old well" (*LAS* 312). Robert is horrified and wishes to leave, but Lady Audley blocks the only exit: "had there been other means of exit from the room, [Robert] would gladly have availed himself of it. He shrank from even a momentary contact with this creature" (*LAS* 313). When he asks her to "let me pass, if you please" (*LAS* 313) she still denies him. Only when she has said all she wanted to say, does she move aside to let him pass. Despite being committed to an insane asylum and essentially imprisoned, Lady Audley continues to find ways to claim power for herself within the liminal space of the doorway.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter investigated how female characters mimic male power over liminal spaces and pose a challenge to male dominance and male surveillance. Thresholds are generally governed by men in the novels and the male gaze objectifies women through all of sensation fiction. However, as the examples in this chapter have shown, Braddon's early sensation heroines manage to reverse the roles and take control over the liminal spaces themselves, granting them agency and power while simultaneously denouncing the patriarchal Victorian system.

When Eleanor and Lady Audley find themselves blocked by a man on the threshold, they are initially unable to do anything against it. Mrs Powell, too, seems powerless in her role as servant. Yet she is revealed to literally hold the keys to Mellish Park and is shown to be in power over the thresholds. For Eleanor and Lady Audley, too, the roles get reversed: both women can be seen mimicking male power over the threshold and blocking men from crossing it. It is especially clear when Lady Audley blocks the exit for Robert, forcing him to listen to her story just as she was forced to listen to him earlier in the novel.

Similarly, although Aurora, Lady Audley and Eleanor are under scrutiny of various men and women, they subvert this by meeting their gaze and unearthing secrets hiding within these gazes. Both Aurora and Eleanor are actively seeking for secrets in the gaze of Hargraves and Launcelot respectively, while Lady Audley's portrait defiantly gazes back at Robert and George. Robert does not seem to want to accept the truth about Lady Audley's portrait, and only Alicia Audley appears cunning enough to recognize and acknowledge the liminal performance of the portrait.

Braddon shows that, although the gaze often objectifies women and sometimes men, it can also expose the secrets that lie deep within a character. Male characters, especially Robert Audley, seem blind to this while the female characters actively search for it. When looking at the way Braddon uses the male and female gaze, in addition to the female characters mimicking male dominance, Braddon thus poses a challenge to both male dominance and surveillance in the Victorian era.

6. Conclusion

This research was conducted to answer the question: how do Mary Elizabeth Braddon's early sensation novels, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* and *Eleanor's Victory*, use liminal spaces to comment on contemporary society with regard to gender and femininity? In order to formulate an answer, each chapter investigates a sub question. In chapter three I explored female power over windows and how this challenges the feminine ideal. In chapter four I examined how Braddon's sensational heroines use the railway for their benefit and how this challenges the traditional division between the public and private sphere. In chapter five I illustrated how female characters mimic male power over liminal spaces through the gaze as well as through physical control over a liminal space and argued that this challenges male dominance and male surveillance.

The analysis shows that Mary Elizabeth Braddon's early sensation novels use liminal spaces to comment on contemporary society with regard to contemprary anxieties about gender and femininity, specifically the feminine ideal. As outlined in this thesis, Braddon's novels do this through various uses of liminal spaces. The proficiency of Braddon's heroines at the railway stretches and collapses the boundaries of the public and private sphere, defying the ideal of the confined Victorian woman in the private sphere. Even when women are inside the home, they claim ownership of the window and its visual field, acquiring knowledge that gives them power over other characters in the novel and agency for themselves. Braddon's heroines also make use of the liminal qualities of the railway, the door and the window frame, as well as the threshold to artfully reconstruct their identity for their own benefit. By giving her heroines power over liminal spaces that would otherwise be male dominated, Braddon poses a challenge to contemporary gender norms.

The close reading of these works has allowed me to carefully observe the use of liminal space in Braddon's novels which has provided many valuable insights which I will outline in the following two paragraphs. In the Victorian era, the image of the woman at the window was a symbol to illustrate where women should and should not be. The window thus functioned as both gendered and liminal space. Women's proximity to windows, especially in paintings, signalled that women were to remain inside the private sphere, inside the home. As shown in chapter three, Braddon took this symbol and subverted it in her fiction by giving her heroines significant power over the window. Aurora Floyd especially uses windows to frame herself and construct herself as the true ruler of her husband's stronghold, while the window provides Eleanor and Phoebe with crucial information to further their goals.

Besides the window, the railway as liminal space was also thoroughly examined in this thesis. The Victorian railway was associated with masculinity while women were thought to be incapable of dealing with the complexities of the railway. The three novels tell a different story, however, and show how Eleanor, Aurora and Lady Audley make clever use of the railway and appear to be aware of the risks and dangers of the train compartment. Similarly, Braddon's heroines mimic male power over thresholds, specifically doorways, posing a challenge to male dominance as well as the passive feminine ideal. Something that was not anticipated but arose from the analysis was the effect of the male and female gaze through liminal spaces, especially windows. The female gaze in Braddon's novels meets the objectifying male gaze in an act of defiance and in turn seeks for secrets in that male gaze. The challenge that this poses to male surveillance is also seen in the way Lady Audley's portrait functions as liminal space and gazes back at Robert and George as they observe the painting.

This thesis is not without its limitations as it only investigated three of the roughly eighty novels published by Braddon. Furthermore, in utilizing close reading techniques in the analysis of these three novels there was no room left to focus on Braddon as an author. For further research, it would be interesting to investigate the response to the subversive writings of Braddon in terms of liminal spaces, either by intertextual means or in the critical and popular response to these novels around the time of their publication. Another idea for further research that came to mind while writing this thesis is to look at liminal spaces in the works of other sensationalists such as Ellen Wood or Rhoda Broughton. It would also be intriguing to see if the use of liminal spaces changed throughout Braddon's oeuvre and compare one of her early novels to later novels such as *Vixen* (1879) or *Thou Art the Man* (1894). Lastly, sensation fiction was often published in magazines with accompanying illustrations. I think it would be very insightful to compare the textual to the illustrative use of liminal spaces in both sensation fiction and outside of it.

Despite the ostracism Braddon faced regarding her liaison with John Maxwell and the savage personal criticism she received because of it, she did not stop delivering social commentary as is argued by Wolff and Lynch. Instead, she covertly delivered her social commentary through the interaction of her heroines with liminal spaces. Through the analysis of *Eleanor's Victory*, *Aurora Floyd* and *Lady Audley's Secret* this thesis was able to uncover details hitherto left untouched by the ongoing academic debate around Braddon and show how she subtly subverted male power over thresholds and made it seem natural for women to hold that power instead. This proved that, at least in her use of liminal spaces regarding gender, Braddon can be read as a subversive novelist. As this thesis comes to an end, I hope to have opened the doors (and windows) to further research into liminality in Victorian literature.

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