

## STRONG WOMEN AND FEEBLE MEN: UPSETTING GENDER STEREOTYPES IN MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'S *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*

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The usual cliché about Victorian men and women states that men had to be strong and hard-working, prepared to fight a fierce struggle in the outside world, whereas women had to be passive and weak and provide domestic comfort and relaxation for their mates. As several studies have revealed by now, the situation was far from being so simple. Thus John Tosh has shown that a considerable number of men craved domesticity, and Herbert Sussman has demonstrated how difficult it could be to prove oneself a man, while feminist studies like Nancy Armstrong's have emphasised the interaction between women's position in society and their portrayal in literature. In Victorian fiction a considerable number of women who actively take the initiative can be found, but it is rare to find passive men, at least as protagonists. Just that, however, is the case in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret*.<sup>1</sup> Although the title seems to indicate that Lady Audley will be the main character, it is the lethargic Robert Audley who becomes the hero of the story. Interestingly, he does not achieve this through the traditional manly means of muscular strength and bodily exertions, but rather through his powers of ratiocination.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Robert Audley turns into a kind

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. David Skilton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998). Page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> The precept was of course established by E.A.Poe's C. Auguste Dupin in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841). For Braddon's debt to Wilkie Collins cf. Robert Lee Wolff, *Sensational Victorian. The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (New York and London: Garland, 1979), 6. Ronald R. Thomas sees the emergence of the Victorian detective as a response to revolutionary movements ("Detection in the Victorian novel," *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, 170-172). This would provide a wider background for the contest between Robert Audley and Lady Audley.

of amateur detective.<sup>3</sup> Although Braddon probably introduced this element in order to profit from the fashion for crime fiction, she also added a new twist to it by making an intense homosocial relationship its cause (Cvetkovich 45-70). Ratiocination is a male preserve that gives men power over women, and in *Lady Audley's Secret* it is indeed used to subjugate unruly women and to reinforce male bonding. The novel is not, however, a simple story of the power of patriarchy being challenged and reinforced as a number of critics, such as Elaine Showalter and David Skilton have maintained, but rather a subversive deconstruction of gender stereotypes, because men are shown to be essentially weak and therefore in need of a strong woman to take them in hand for their own good. Not just any woman will do, though, as the novel demonstrates.

The story opens with the affluent but elderly Sir Michael Audley getting married to the pretty and impecunious young governess Lucy Graham who as a result becomes Lady Audley. It is made abundantly clear throughout the novel that Sir Michael is completely dependent upon his much younger wife who rules him in every way. With his marriage he gives up all claims to independent activity and even to independent thought. His wife's word or even her slightest whim are law to him and he would never dream of disobliging his spouse. Although this is clearly a case of the elderly besotted husband who submits willingly to this role reversal, it is even more an instance of the endangering of the social and moral order, because Lady Audley not only comes from humble origins but is also a bigamist, an impostor, an absent mother, an arsonist and a would-be murderess.<sup>4</sup> To some degree, Sir Michael becomes implicated in these doings through his trusting passivity. That too much love and compassion for a woman might be a typical male weakness is suggested by the narrator's comment upon husbands who forgive their cheating wives, which declares men's capacity for suffering to be many times greater than women's (284). Hence men are in much greater danger from their sentimental feelings than women. It is a surprising reversal of the stereotype that says that women are more emotional than men and it makes men appear much more vulnerable and also weaker than women. The passage also suggests that men who are not prepared to be strong and even perhaps cruel lose their honor, for which, however, they are more to be pitied than blamed. Undeniably,

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Audley already shows some of the eccentric behavior that will become a stock characteristic of the detective.

<sup>4</sup> For the Victorian fascination with swindlers cf. John Kucich, *The Power of Lies. Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1994).

over-indulgent love for a woman is at the back of most mischief in the novel, but a counter-model to this dangerous male failing is provided by Robert Audley, Sir Michael's nephew and heir apparent.

Robert Audley lives a very quiet and self-sufficient life as a barrister in London, but he has never had a brief and never intends to have one. His choice of profession is solely due to the pressure of his friends which he thought less trouble to comply with than to oppose (32).<sup>5</sup> His outstanding quality is his passivity which—to different degrees—he shares with most men in the novel. In blatant contradiction to Victorian ideals of manliness, he idles away his time without any purpose apart from smoking and novel reading. He has no female contacts except for his elderly char-woman and his cousin Alicia who would like to marry him, but in whom he shows no particular interest apart from a generally friendly disposition. According to his own testimony, he has never been in love, and Alicia does not think him capable of it (56, 139). Even when things come to a head, he never offers her more than “brotherly affection” (363). The narrator stresses this palpable indifference several times, attributing it to an innate insensibility regarding his own feelings (33, 60). Indeed, Robert seems to have no particular affection for anyone, except perhaps for the stray dogs that he gives a home to. Although he has a number of male acquaintances, he leads a solitary, but outwardly contented life. This complacent existence is disrupted and finally shattered by the encounter with his old friend George Talboys whom he has lost sight of since leaving school. This friend is introduced in terms that depict him as a very attractive but rather androgynous individual:

He was a young man of about five-and-twenty, with dark face bronzed by exposure to the sun; he had handsome brown eyes, with a feminine smile in them that sparkled through his black lashes, and a bushy beard and moustache that covered the whole lower part of his face. He was tall, and powerfully built; he wore a loose grey suit and a felt hat, thrown carelessly upon his black hair. (13)

From the moment of their accidental reunion, Robert takes an

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<sup>5</sup> Severe doubts about Robert Audley's attitude towards his profession are raised by his not reporting the apparent murder as well as the other crimes of Lady Audley and her consequent imprisonment without the consultation of any authority but his own. He clearly puts his own family concerns before the demands of society. D.A. Miller argues that this is to be expected in “a male order of things” (*The Novel and the Police*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1988, 170). Elizabeth Langland takes the view that this silent removal of Lady Audley is necessary for maintaining the class system (“Enclosure Acts: Framing Women's Bodies in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*,” *Beyond Sensation*, 13-14). For Robert Audley's self-interest in the removal of Lady Audley cf. Gail Turley Houston, “Braddon's Commentaries on the Trials and Legal Secrets of Audley Court,” *Beyond Sensation*, 21.

extraordinary interest in George, whom he vehemently declares to have never forgotten (35). This interest is converted into solicitude when it turns out that George has just lost the wife that he had abandoned for three and a half years. Robert takes it on himself to soothe the inconsolable George, inviting him to share his rooms, taking him on a trip to Russia and on an outing to Audley court. In fact, for about a year the two are inseparable—a fact that is jealously commented upon by Alicia (85). Robert seems to have found a purpose in life through caring for his friend like a faithful wife, and this obviously means very much to him.<sup>6</sup> From the fatal day when George vanishes mysteriously, though, Robert, to his own surprise, becomes a completely transformed person, obsessed by the sole idea of finding out what happened to his friend:

If any one had ventured to tell Mr. Robert Audley that he could possibly feel a strong attachment to any creature breathing, that cynical gentleman would have elevated his eyebrows in supreme contempt at the preposterous notion. Yet here he was, flurried and anxious, bewildering his brain by all manner of conjectures about his missing friend, and, false to every attribute of his nature, walking fast. (82)

Robert is not only extremely disturbed by his friend's disappearance, but he also develops qualities that nobody (including himself) would have suspected in him. He reveals the capacity for very strong emotions and attachments as well as a quite unexpected pertinacity and decision (88-89). Most importantly, though, he uses his brain—probably for the first time in his life. In fact, Robert turns into a detective who tenaciously follows tracks, meticulously unearths evidence and rationally puts two and two together. This new personality does not diminish with the passage of time: Robert misses his friend intensely and becomes obsessed with the search for him, which becomes the sole purpose of his life (151, 158, 161, 172-173).<sup>7</sup> No hardship is too much when he believes it might lead to the clearing up of the mystery of his friend's vanishing. It soon becomes apparent that Lady Audley is very much implicated in George's disappearance and Robert concentrates his efforts on finding out about her past, unearthing bit after bit of evidence until he can confront her with the truth. It is in these encounters that the previously weak and indolent Robert most demonstrates male supremacy, indeed even savageness, until he has vanquished his foe—the person who has wronged his friend and

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<sup>6</sup> It is tempting to see this as a homoerotic if not homosexual relationship, but this must remain pure speculation. It is doubtful whether George returns Robert's feelings in the same way, although he is obviously also happy with their relationship so that they actually end up in a sort of *ménage à trois*.

<sup>7</sup> Houston calls this "monomaniacal homosocial desire" (27).

his uncle. In fact, for the first time in his life Robert takes on an active role and asserts himself as a man through the particularly masculine means of using his powers of ratiocination. These allow him eventually to best the archetypal female, Lady Audley who, though very cunning, is no match for him on this field (119-120).

From the moment that Robert detects George's disappearance up to their reunion, Robert's whole life is devoted to his quest. Twice, though, does Robert believe he has come to the end of his search. The first time when he seems to be stalled in his inquiry, and the second time when he believes George to be lying dead at the foot of the well. In the first instance he is made to continue his efforts by George's sister Clara, although he already believes her brother to be dead, whereas in the second instance he feels that part of his own life has come to an end (395). The eventual clearing up of George's disappearance is therefore not due to Robert's efforts—or at least only indirectly, and his final reappearance is quite unconnected with them. Nevertheless, the experience has changed Robert completely: he has not only indefatigably worked on the uncovering of the mystery, but at the end he has also become an active and respected member of society.

George Talboys, the cause and object of Robert's remarkable change, may at first glance appear to be quite different from Robert, perhaps even his opposite: he quite clearly takes an interest in women and he works hard in Australia to make a fortune. But when looked at more closely, it appears that he is reacting towards events rather than acting himself: it is obvious that he has been "caught" by Helen Maldon who had been looking for just this chance to better her fortune. Her complaints after she has realised that her dreams will not be fulfilled are what make him run away without confronting her face to face, and he runs away again after she has married another man and intended to do away with her first husband. In his relationship with Robert he is also rather passive, mostly acting upon the other's suggestions.

At the bottom of all the trouble is of course Lady Audley herself who outwardly possesses all the signs of femininity and thereby is able to enchant practically all men, but not quite all women. She is very pretty, somewhat childish, and behaves nicely to everyone. She represents at least one Victorian ideal of womanhood: the child-bride who appears to be entirely subservient to her husband to whom she gives the feeling that he is her master and protector (52).<sup>8</sup> Lady

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<sup>8</sup> For the significance of Lady Audley's childish appearance cf. Katherine Montwieler, "Marketing Sensation," *Beyond Sensation*, 49-50.

Audley exerts an almost magical sexual attraction over men that is even felt by Robert. Her alluring exterior and childish ways, however, hide a cunning and intriguing, even criminal personality. Her gifts enable her to make an astounding career from semi-genteel daughter of a retired marine to admired first lady of the county. This is due to her ruthless ambition to leave behind her sordid life and the unremitting selfishness with which she pursues her goals (347-357). It takes a man like Robert to see through the disguise: his general disinterest in women allows him to observe her dispassionately as an object on which to exercise his powers of ratiocination. He even takes a grim pleasure in demonstrating this to her, thereby proving the superiority of male logic over female wile. Lady Audley who has transgressed social, legal and moral boundaries is finally contained and put into place by the combination of male homosocial solidarity and male intellect. Symbolically, it is a victory of the male over the female principle. If this were all, though, the novel would just be an affirmation of Victorian gender stereotypes. The case is complicated, however, by the respective qualities of the other gender relationships in the novel that point in a different direction.

Not only men, but women are also unscrupulously manipulated and used by Lady Audley. Only towards her maid Phoebe does she seem to possess some feeling:

There were sympathies between her and this girl, who was like herself inwardly as well as outwardly - like herself, selfish, 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. My lady hated Alicia for her frank, passionate, generous, daring nature; she hated her step-daughter, and clung to this pale-faced, pale-haired girl, whom she thought neither better nor worse than herself. (299)

Ironically, it is Lady Audley's confidant Phoebe who blackmails her. Phoebe, whose resemblance to Lady Audley is several times remarked upon, mirrors her ambition on a lesser scale and without quite the same unscrupulousness. She is far less successful in manipulating men, although she also gets married in order to gain a better social position. But she is actually afraid of the physically brutal Luke Marks and seems to retain some moral scruples, which do not, however, stop her from searching through her lady's possessions and availing herself of incriminating evidence in order to blackmail her. She also betrays her lady's apparent murderous deed to Luke, whereas he in turn does not tell her of George's escape. So, although outwardly and to some degree in character she resembles Lady Audley, she is far more subject and even loyal to her husband than the latter, although she desperately tries to control him. Still,

she has no affection for her husband and his death will set her free to pursue her own course.

Sir Michael's daughter Alicia has been the ruler of her father's household and his affections since the early death of her mother. With his marriage to Lucy Graham she loses this position to regain it only after the downfall of Lady Audley. Alicia's almost masculine appearance is juxtaposed to Lady Audley's archetypically feminine one—and they both battle over the same man. Her enmity towards her stepmother probably adds force to her wish to get married to Robert, but her quite open and determined attempts to catch him are foiled by his passivity. One might say that Alicia acts a man's part in courtship, but fails to evoke the desired response. Her masculine traits are emphasized by her directness, her sporting activities and her bouncing gait, which are negatively commented upon by Robert (116, 125). Not only with regard to Robert, but also to Sir Harry Towers, who appears to be quite her slave, she is the stronger partner. But whereas the latter admires her masculine qualities, the former prefers them to be tempered with some admixture of conventional femininity, although he is really afraid of women.

Robert's remarkable lack of interest in women is turned into fear and loathing by his trying to solve the mystery of George's disappearance. He comes into closer contact with women than ever before, because: "It's all woman's work from one end to the other" (207). Indeed, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, women appear mostly as unscrupulously selfish and jealous persons: thus Robert comments upon the willingness of the teacher, Miss Tonks, to give destructive evidence against Lady Audley:

"How pitiless these women are to each other," he thought, while the teacher was absent. "This one knows intuitively that there is some danger to the other lurking beneath my questions. She sniffs the coming trouble to her fellow female creature, and rejoices in it, and would take any pains to help me. What a world it is, and how these women take life out of our hands. Helen Maldon, Lady Audley, Clara Talboys, and now Miss Tonks—all womankind from beginning to end." (237)

"All womankind" appears to be evil and dangerous, even Clara Talboys. This is not the only passage where Robert talks negatively about the moral qualities of women. It is hardly any wonder, then, that the thought of marriage fills him with anxiety, since it is almost impossible to choose the right partner:

"Who is to say which shall be the one judicious selection out of nine hundred and ninety-nine mistakes! Who shall decide from the first aspect of the slimy creature, which is to be the one eel out of the colossal bag of snakes?" (204)

The metaphoric equation of women with snakes makes them appear unredeemably evil creatures, and it hardly improves matters to find an eel among the “slimy creature[s].” This eel, presumably, is Clara Talboys and she fills Robert with dread as well, although he acknowledges her to be “a noble and beautiful woman” (204). Nevertheless, he is afraid of what she will force him to do: “I see her, and she forces me onward upon the loathsome path - the crooked by-way of watchfulness and suspicion” (204). He goes on to reflect upon the evil influence women have had upon men throughout history and traces its roots to their restless ambition to triumph over others and to use men as their tools to this end. He consequently comes to the conclusion that the general view of women is quite mistaken: “To call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex” (207). No wonder that Robert states that he hates women and that he would much rather not marry his cousin Alicia, although she is apparently only “a nuisance” (208). Given this diatribe against all womankind it is somewhat surprising that Robert has no stronger term for marriage than “petticoat government” (206). As he delves ever deeper into the mystery of George’s disappearance and Lady Audley’s past he even equates women with witches who bind men with their spells (247), and remembers “... the horrible things that have been done by women, since that day upon which Eve was created to be Adam’s companion and help-meet in the garden of Eden” (273-274). These thoughts make him afraid not only of Lady Audley, but of all women, and it is the more surprising then that he finds it desirable to be married to Clara Talboys.

After the first encounter with Clara, Robert feels that “She was different to all other women that he had ever seen” (200). The first thing Robert notices about Clara Talboys is her astounding outward resemblance to George, which soon makes him feel a strong familiarity with her (187, 196-197, 202), so that she and her brother quickly become interchangeable (208). In one point, however, she differs from her brother, namely in her strength of character and decidedness of action. Although Clara appears outwardly obedient to her father as long as she is dependent upon him, she demands further search for George without her father’s knowledge and against his express wish. Robert recognizes this strength when he sees her handwriting for the first time: “Yes, from Clara Talboys, most decidedly; I recognized a feminine resemblance to poor George’s hand; neater than his, and more decided than his, but very like, very like” (209). The strong attachment that Robert had felt for George, he now transfers to his sister, with the difference that whereas he had been the more



active one in the relationship with George, the one who made plans and suggested activities, it is now Clara who clearly determines the course of his life. She is adamant in bringing the destroyer of her brother to justice. Robert has already given up the search for George when Clara makes him promise to continue, and the thought of her spurs him on whenever he is in doubt:

“What am I in her hands?” he thought. “What am I in the hands of this woman, who has my lost friend’s face and the manner of Pallas Athene? She reads my pitiful, vacillating soul, and plucks the thoughts out of my heart with the magic of her solemn brown eyes. How unequal the fight must be between us, and how can I ever hope to conquer against the strength of her beauty and her wisdom?” (258)

Robert falls for Clara Talboys, because she is outwardly so much like George, but also because she tells him what to do. This not only concerns the search for George, but also increasingly the way he spends his life and he is even glad “to humiliate himself and depreciate himself before her” (436). One might say that in Clara he finds the man he had been looking for in George. Already at an early stage of their acquaintance he forms hopes that she will think well of him—always with his lost friend as the common point of reference (371). When they eventually become engaged, it is under the premise that they will continue the search for George together (440-441), and when Robert finally marries her, he practically also marries George, since the three of them will live together (444). In fact, this is fulfilling an old dream of George’s who already at their very first reunion had planned almost exactly the scheme that Robert will carry out:

“I shall take a villa on the banks of the Thames, Bob,” he said, “for the little wife and myself; and we’ll have a yacht, Bob, old boy, and you shall lie on the deck and smoke while my pretty one plays her guitar and sings songs to us. She’s for all the world like one of those what’s-its-names, who got poor old Ulysses into trouble,” added the young man, whose classic lore was not very great. (35)

The roles of the men have been reversed and the nefarious woman has been exchanged for a benign one, but the male idyll remains almost the same. This does not mean, however, that male supremacy has been reasserted, but rather that the men have contentedly resigned themselves to “petticoat government.”

In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Elizabeth Braddon describes men that do not conform to the usual stereotypes of manliness but yet are portrayed sympathetically. They have their faults, but most of them mean well. Even the brutish Luke Marks shows gratitude and a sort of repentance on his death-bed (although expressly only towards another man, Robert, not towards his wife). Both George and Sir Michael appear to be hapless victims of female malevolence, whereas Robert

apparently only escapes the same fate through his lack of interest in women. This de-sexualised individual finds his arousal to activity and to participation in human society first through the relationship with another man and, at least initially, through his animosity towards a woman. It is only later in the novel that the two impulses are turned into different channels: Robert's affection for George is transferred to Clara as is the impetus to pursue and destroy her brother's nemesis. The successful completion of this task eventually enables Robert to become an integrated member of society. As a matter of fact, unbeknownst to himself, he has been acting as the avenger of society all along in unearthing Lady Audley's anti-social crimes.

Although most women in *Lady Audley's Secret* are not quite as strong and powerful as Lady Audley herself, they still appear stronger than the men so that one might even speak of a role reversal: Robert is passive and compliant, George and Sir Michael are absolutely dependent and incapable of decisive action (even after they have learnt the truth). Ironically, the lethargic Robert turns out to be the most energetic of them, and interestingly enough, he is the one who possesses the greatest number of feminine traits. Women, indeed, rule the novel. It is their actions that determine the course of things, most remarkably of all Lady Audley who from an early age on had decided on shaping her own destiny. This *femme fatale* is able to manipulate all men (and quite a few women) who come into contact with her in her favour until she comes up against the sexually indifferent (or possibly homo- or bisexual) Robert Audley. He, in turn, is kept to his objective of unravelling the mystery by Clara Talboys. Thus the two most important women are clearly able to dominate and manipulate men for their own purposes, and they both possess an iron will and determination. Men are allowed to feel that they are their protectors, but actually they are no more than tools.

That women are more active and cleverer than men in this novel seems indisputable, but there is a licit and an illicit way in which they may exert their power. The illicit one is mainly represented by Lady Audley who offends not only against moral but also against criminal law in order to achieve her ends. As Lucy Graham, she pretends to be content with her situation as governess, but is really ambitious of climbing the social ladder. Her legend of being a poor helpless orphan evokes Sir Michael's protectiveness, while her apparent passivity in courtship gives him the illusion of being active. During their marriage she pretends to be submissive and docile, while she is really headstrong and domineering. Her ostensible sociability and considerateness hide her unflinching self-centeredness. Lady Audley gives Sir Michael the illusion that she conforms to the Victorian ideal

of womanhood and that he can play the ideal Victorian male, but in reality she violates gender, social and moral boundaries. She cunningly practices deception and commits crimes wherever it is in her interest and is consequently punished in the end by being removed from society forever. Interestingly, Phoebe Marks, who is repeatedly described as her counterpart and who commits the crimes of theft and blackmail as well as becoming a silent accomplice in the case of George's apparent murder, is finally rewarded by being rid of an obnoxious husband. This may be seen as a kind of compensation: after all she had been forced into this marriage and borne up under it remarkably well. On the other hand, her husband might be seen as her punishment for her crimes, because he takes advantage of them and forces her to do things against her will. Essentially, both Lady Audley's and Phoebe's motive is to gain a respected place in society and they both use matrimony to achieve this end.

Matrimony is also the aim of Clara and Alicia, but they go about it in different ways. Whereas Alicia is rather aggressive in her hapless attempts to catch Robert and therefore only gets the wealthy but obtuse Harry Towers, Clara appears to be quite passive as regards her matrimonial intentions. It is her adamant will to find out about her brother (and her outward resemblance to him) that makes Robert find the brother in the woman. More tenacious and more determined than any man in the novel, Clara nevertheless never transgresses the conventional boundaries of her sex: she does women's work, she is an accomplished musician and she stays under her father's roof and completely obeys his wishes until she marries Robert. No less unswayable in the pursuit of her aims than Lady Audley, she never violates the bounds of decorum—not to mention the law.

Conformity to the female stereotype thus seems to be rewarded in the novel, deviance from it punished. This outcome seems to strengthen patriarchal power, but paradoxically the woman who gives the impression of being the most conformist, namely Clara, is the one who exerts most power in the end. Doubtless this is due to the masculine traits that she exhibits both outwardly and inwardly. Without her, Lady Audley would not have been punished and Robert would not have become active in his profession. Clara is thus the one who not only passively upholds but actively enforces the values of society. This is the more surprising as this is the role that Sir Michael should fill: the scion of an ancient family, he should by rights be not only the representative but the defender of society. Quite to the contrary, he is the one who becomes the dupe of an unscrupulous adventuress who represents the opposite of what he stands for. Only due to the combined efforts of his heir apparent and the daughter of a squire

can this threat be averted, but, although his house is prevented from tumbling down, it is eventually shut up and the younger generation prefers pleasanter surroundings. The old oppressive order is thus symbolically destroyed and a new, apparently more pleasing one, established.

The over-all winner is thus Clara who has her brother returned to her, has his undoer punished, and gains a prestigious (and after Sir Michael's death rather rich) husband whose actions she presumably controls completely. The runner-up is probably Alicia who regains her former influence over her father and also makes an advantageous and prestigious marriage to a man who is absolutely devoted to her. Third place goes to Phoebe Marks who is rid of an intolerable husband and will make her own way in the world. Women, however, are not generally shown in a positive light in this novel—quite to the contrary: women continually appear not only as the suppressors or even the destroyers of men, but also as mutual enemies: Lady Audley, of course, unscrupulously uses other women as tools to achieve her own ends, but these women are only too glad to harm her in their turn. Alicia takes an instant dislike to her stepmother who in turn hates her, and the two only keep an uneasy truce. Phoebe avails herself of all opportunities to blackmail Lady Audley, and Clara is her deadly foe who will stop at nothing to avenge her brother (199-200). All these women appear to possess a surprising amount of strength, initiative and aggression.

The negative picture of women is complemented by unflattering portrayals of men, at least as regards conventional ideas of masculinity: Sir Michael, although outwardly quite the patriarch, is first under the rule of his daughter, then of Lady Audley, then of Alicia again. George Talboys runs away whenever he is in difficulties and does not seem to be able to take his life into his own hands. Robert Audley is a wimp until he is forced into action by the loss of his friend and eventually reformed by a woman. Even the brutal Luke Marks is only physically strong, but is really guided in most matters by Phoebe. Fathers come off especially poorly in this novel: Sir Michael is by turns an over-indulgent, an insensitive and a dependent father. Lady Audley's father, "Captain" Maldon, is by nature a weak character and apparently afraid of his daughter, but also devoted to her. He implicitly obeys her commands and tries to protect her. Mr. Talboys appears to be stern and decided, but is made to look ridiculous and is quite ineffectual: his outwardly obedient daughter makes Robert continue the search for George against her father's express wish, the banishment of his son is taken back on his reappearance, and Clara conducts her marriage campaign under his nose without his being

any the wiser until he is confronted with the facts.

Despite their obvious failings, men on the whole fare somewhat better than women in this novel, and this is due to the fact that they are often given characteristics that are usually thought of as feminine. Thus not only love and care but also passivity and docility mainly characterise men, whereas most female protagonists possess qualities thought of as masculine like aggression, perseverance, dominance and initiative. Paradoxically, the woman who possesses these qualities in the highest degree, Lady Audley, is also the one who outwardly appears to be the most feminine. Sir Michael, on the other hand, has the manliest appearance but may also be said to be the most womanish man in the novel as he gives up all independence to his wife and is completely passive and docile. Apparently, this explosive mixture of gender traits can only be overcome by the combined efforts of a man who in some ways behaves like a woman, and a woman who not only looks like her brother but is even more of a man than he. In fact, these two achieve a harmonious relationship and become successfully integrated into society because they are able to mutually balance the masculine and feminine parts of their personalities. Lady Audley's secret thus seems to be that happiness is to be found in the joined transgression of gender stereotypes.

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