

10 *Sensation Fiction*

In Wilkie Collins's *The Queen of Hearts* (1859), the twenty-year-old Jessie goes to stay for six weeks in the country. Her elderly guardian considers how best to amuse her: he hires a piano, borrows a pony, orders a box of novels. He inquires, cautiously, whether the novels are to Jessie's liking, and receives a complaint:

'They might do for some people,' she answered, 'but not for me. I'm rather peculiar, perhaps, in my tastes. I'm sick to death of novels with an earnest purpose. I'm sick to death of outbursts of eloquence, and large-minded philanthropy, and graphic descriptions, and unsparing anatomy of the human heart, and all that sort of thing. Good gracious me! isn't it the original intention or purpose, or whatever you call it, of a work of fiction to set out distinctly by telling a story? And how many of these books, I should like to know, do that? Why, so far as telling a story is concerned, the greater part of them might as well be sermons as novels. Oh, dear me! what I want is something that seizes hold of my interest, and makes me forget when it is time to dress for dinner; something that keeps me reading, reading, reading, in a breathless state to find out the end. You know what I mean—at least you ought.'

Collins, through the vehicle of Jessie's guardian and his brothers, uses this as an opening for launching his earliest tales of sensationalist suspense. More particularly, the demands which he is here recognizing are those which, when fulfilled, most perturbed reviewers faced with the phenomenon of sensation fiction in the 1860s: fiction which deliberately catered to compulsive forms of consumption, and which especially, although not exclusively, the reviewers presented as being devoured by women.

The critical attention paid to the sensation novel in the 1860s makes no bones in showing what it was about these fictions which gave cause for alarm.² Its frames of reference are drawn from familiar suppositions about woman's affective susceptibility. Above all, the presence of sexual desire and sexual energy within the fictions was singled out. This disruptive potential was greeted with particular anxiety when it was located in novels written by women, notably

¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Queen of Hearts*, 3 vols. (1859), i, 95–6.

² For sensation fiction, see Patrick Braninger, 'What is "sensational" about the sensation novel?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), 1–28; Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robert Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837–1883*, 3 vols. (Chicago and London, 1983), iii, 122–44; Winifred Hughes, *The Mania in the Cellar: sensation novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, NJ, 1980); Elaine Showalter, 'Subverting the Feminine Novel', ch. 5 of *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Leavis* (Princeton, NJ, 1977; repr. 1978), 153–81; Jenny Boume Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (1988).

Mary Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, and Mrs Henry Wood. Inevitably, it also reflected on the perceived status of those women readers who borrowed and devoured these fictions so hungrily. Not only did the heroines—or female villains, depending on one's point of view—challenge the ideological premiss that the middle-class woman should be pure, innocent, and relatively passive, and suggest that desire might be directed towards channels other than the family, but their creators exhibited extremely unladylike familiarity with the scenes about which they wrote. E.S. Dallas, in *The Gay Science* (1866) claimed that 'it is curious that one of the earliest results of an increased feminine influence in our literature should be a display of what in women is most unfeminine':³ these novelists transgressed what was expected of a social chaperone. Henry James took Braddon to task on these grounds. She:

deals familiarly with gamblers, and betting-men, and flashy reprobrates of every description. She knows much that ladies are not accustomed to know, but that they are apparently very glad to learn. The names of drinks, the technicalities of the faro-table, the lingo of the turf, the talk natural to a crowd of fast men at supper, when there are no ladies present but Miss Braddon, the way one gentleman knocks another down—all these things—the exact local colouring of Bohemia—our sisters and daughters may learn from these works.⁴

The most serious sources for alarm were succinctly overstated by Margaret Oliphant, writing in *Blackwoods* in 1867, when she claimed that the novels feature women who:

marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion, women who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and homes they hate; women, at the very least of it, who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in a voluptuous dream.⁵

'Marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion': this would readily have been recognized as an allusion to Mary Braddon's Aurora Floyd, daughter of a wealthy banker who, at seventeen, eloped to the continent with her father's groom, Conyers: not a successful or lasting match. Her absence on the continent is covered over by references to time spent in a finishing school abroad; she reads in the paper of her husband's death in a strepocchase, and, much relieved, marries a current suitor: a solid, sensible Yorkshire landowner. Inevitably, however, the groom is not dead, only seriously injured, and turns up again, employed to run her new husband's stable. Conyers blackmails Aurora: it is hardly surprising that she is suspected when he is found murdered. Ultimately exonerated, the woman faces a trouble-free future with her remaining husband, receiving no textual retribution, and expressing no remorse, for her bigamy: 'a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright perhaps,

³ E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science*, 2 vols. (1866), ii, 298.

⁴ Henry James, 'Miss Braddon', (first pub. *Nation* (1865); repr. *Notes and Reviews* (Cambridge, Mass., 1921)), 115–16.

⁵ [Margaret Oliphant] 'Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 102 (1867), 259.

but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born.⁶

Yet it was not the bigamy, distressing though some found it, which most perturbed reviewers, but Aurora's capacity for spontaneous action, and violent anger. The scene which critics found especially shocking was that in which she horsewhips a groom (ultimately disclosed to be her first husband's murderer) whom she finds ill-treating her dog. The *North British Review* condemned Braddon's treatment: 'We are certain that, except in this novel, no lady possessing the education and occupying the position of Aurora Floyd could have acted as she is represented to have done.'⁷ As this remark suggests, one of the further grounds on which this type of fiction was chastized was that it contravened standards of realism as well as of idealism: sensation novels, complained the *Temple Bar's* critic, 'represent life neither as it is or as it ought to be'. The writer made further indignant capital out of the imaginative threat which they offered to the perceived sanctity of the middle-class home:

It is on our domestic hearths that we are taught to look for the incredible. A mystery sleeps in our cradles; fearful errors lurk in our nuptial couches; fiends sit down with us at table; our innocent-looking garden walks hold the secret of treacherous murders; and our servants take a year from us for the sake of having us at their mercy.⁸

Even if this can be read as journalistic hyperbole, this rhetoric of anxiety could be found in other contexts. In 1864, for example, the Archbishop of York spoke against sensation fiction in similar terms, attacking those tales which aim at:

exciting in the mind some deep feeling of overwrought interest by the means of some terrible passion or crime. They want to persuade people that in almost every one of the well-ordered houses of their neighbours there [is] a skeleton shut up in some cupboard.⁹

The novels themselves drew attention to the frisson produced by the idea of deceptive façades, as when Robert Audley remarks: 'What do we know of the mysteries that may hang about the houses we enter? . . . Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs; terrible crimes have been committed amid the fairest scenes, and have left no trace upon the spot where they were done.'¹⁰

In many ways, this fiction's most disruptive potential lay not on the emphasis which it placed on woman's capacity to express powerful, emotional reactions, but in the degree to which it made its woman readers consider their positions within their own homes and within society. Either, albeit in a symbolic fashion, it suggested exactly what hypocrisy, manipulation, and concealed desires lay

present behind the socially respectable façade of decorum; or the structures of anticipation and abrupt revelation which characterize the novels served to show up the very boredom of this existence. A critic writing in the *Christian Remembrancer* of 1863 makes this explicit, tying in his fears about women's mental impressionability with assumptions about their physiological constitutions. He complained that the sensation novel played on the nerves, rather than on the heart; that it drugged thought and reason, and acted instead on woman's power of intuition. It took advantage, in other words, of an assumed innate faculty which might under certain circumstances be regarded as one of woman's strengths, but which should not be exploited at the expense of her simultaneously held rational capabilities, and, above all, at the cost of the necessary exercise of self-control. For in the case of sensation novels, the reviewer believed, the attention was stimulated 'through the lower and more animal instincts'. Chief among the dangers of this fiction was the fact that, for its young woman readers, it could 'open out a picture of life free from all the perhaps irksome checks that confine their own existence'. The novels were seen by him as a sign of the times, 'of impatience of old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society'.¹¹

It was indeed the case that a striking, often-remarked on feature of the sensation novel was its contemporaneity, unlike the settings of earlier Gothic fiction. Henry James made this point in relation to *Lady Audley's Secret*:

The novelty lay in the heroine being, not a picturesque Italian of the fourteenth century, but an English gentlewoman of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph. The intense probability of the story is constantly reiterated. Modern England—the England of to-day's newspaper—crops up at every step.¹²

But although the *Christian Remembrancer's* critic did not elaborate on precisely what constituted contemporary change, 'husbands and fathers' were advised to act as guardians of their own family futures, to begin to:

look around them and scrutinize the parcel that arrives from Mudies, when young ladies are led to contrast the actual with the ideal we see worked out in popular romance; the mutual duties, the reciprocal forbearance, the inevitable trials of every relation in real life, with the triumph of mere female fascination, before which man falls prostrate and helpless.¹³

Unacknowledged, but evident here is an expression of anxiety at men's own inability to control their emotions should ever woman start to act like the independent-spirited, passionate heroine of a sensation novel.

The threats to domestic order which, according to this critical rhetoric, these novels posed were not just perceived as existing, however, in relation to gender

⁶ Mary Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (1863; repr. 1984), 384.

⁷ W. Fraser Rae, 'Sensation Novels: Miss Braddon', *North British Review*, 43 (1865), 98.

⁸ [Alfred Austin] 'Our Novels: The Sensational School', *Temple Bar*, 29 (1870), 424.

⁹ Quoted by Fraser Rae, 'Sensation Novels', 203. There is a full report of the Archbishop's talk to the Huddersfield Church Institute in *The Times* (2 Nov. 1864), 9.

¹⁰ Mary Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862; repr. Oxford, 1987), 140.

¹¹ 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', *Christian Remembrancer*, NS 46 (1863), 210, 212.

¹² James, 'Miss Braddon', 112–13.

¹³ 'Our Female Sensation Novelists', 234.

relations: they extended into the arena of class propriety.¹⁴ This is particularly understandable when one recalls the frequency with which the comparison between reading the right books, and keeping the right company, was made. Such concern was made apparent in various ways. Sometimes it was expressed metaphorically, suggesting a disruption of domestic hierarchies through the transgression of tacitly demarcated reading spaces: thus Mary Braddon 'may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room', claimed Fraser Rae.¹⁵ 'Unhappily, the sensational novel is that one touch of anything but nature that makes the kitchen and the drawing-room kin', complained the *Temple Bar*, as if its perpetrators were disrupting the workings of evolution.¹⁶ This is the other side of the coin to warnings in servants' manuals against borrowing their employers' fiction. A *Punch* cartoon of 1868 (Fig. 18), showing a maid-servant asking a (male) lodger about the ending of a particular story which she had been reading on the quiet, is indicative of an acceptance, at a popular level, of the cross-class (and, for that matter, the cross-gender) appeal of such novels.¹⁷

Yet despite the convenient target which the startling subject-matter offered, sensational novelists were not without their defenders. G. H. Lewes, writing in the *Cornhill*, claimed that one should be thankful for any novel which, like *Lady Audley's Secret*, amused the vacant or wearied mind without developing any kind of sympathy with crime or criminals. Not mentioning the gender of such fiction's readers, Lewes seemed to take the presence of such minds for granted in current society.¹⁸ Justin MacCarthy, in the *Westminster Review*, commended sensation novelists (on this occasion George Meredith, with *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *Emilia in England*, Caroline Norton's *Lost and Saved*, and an anonymous novel, *Recommended to Mercy*) for maintaining a type of psychological realism:

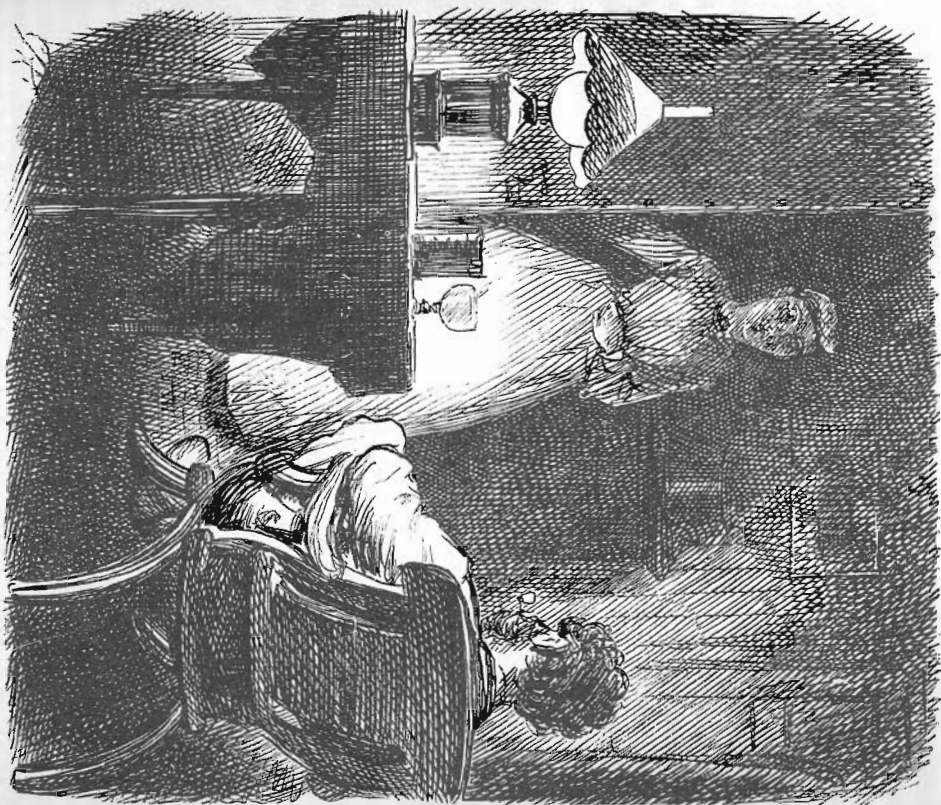
¹⁴ Jonathan Loebberg's linkage of the discourse of sensation fiction with the debates surrounding the Second Reform Bill draws attention to the possible connections between these novels and political instability: 'The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction', *Representations*, 13 (1980), 115-38.

¹⁵ Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon, 204.

¹⁶ Our Novels: The Sensational School, 424.

¹⁷ This cross-over happened not just among readers, but among writers. Mary Braddon, as well as composing her well-known three-decker novels, turned out endless stories for cheap magazines. As she put it in a letter to Bulwer-Lytton: 'I do an immense amount of work which nobody ever hears of, for halfpenny and penny journals. . . . The amount of crime, tragedy, murder, slow poisoning and general infamy required by the halfpenny reader is something terrible. I am just going to do a little partridge for this week's supply.' Quoted by Robert Lee Wolff, 'Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862-1873', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 22 (1974), 11. The widespread presence of servants who act as observers and interpreters of sensational events in Victorian fiction has been analysed by Anthea Trodd, who sees them as being 'convenient to the writer seeking to use sensational material while acknowledging his own, or his readership's, doubts about the sensational vision of the home', *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (Basingstoke, 1989), 95.

¹⁸ [G. H. Lewes] 'Our Survey of Literature and Science', *Cornhill Magazine*, 7 (1863), 135.



SENSATION NOVELS.

Mary. "PLEASE, SIR, I'VE BEEN LOOKING EVERYWHERE FOR THE THIRD VOLUME OF THAT BOOK YOU WAS READING."

Lodger. "OH, I TOOK IT BACK TO THE LIBRARY THIS MORNING, I —"
 Mary. "OH! THEN WILL YOU TELL ME, SIR, IF AS HOW THE 'MARKIS' FOUND OUT AS SHE'D POISONED 'ER TWO FIRST 'USBANDS?!"

18. *Punch* cartoon, 28 March 1868

There is no good end attained by trying to persuade ourselves that women are all incorporeal, angelic, colourless, passionless, helpless creatures, who are never to suspect anything, never to doubt anyone, who regard the whole end and passion of human life as ethereal, Platonic love, and orderly, parent-sanctioned wedlock. Women have especial need, as the world goes, to be shrewd, self-reliant, and strong; and we do all we can in our literature to render them helpless, imbecile, and idiotic.¹⁹

Others went so far as to claim that certain lessons might be learnt from reading this type of fiction, or, at any rate, that its contents were going to add little circumstantial knowledge to women already familiar with certain other sorts of printed material. Thus the *Medical Critic's* correspondent wrote of Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* that 'the whole novel may be regarded as an admonition to young ladies not to let their fancies run away with them', and continues:

although a sensation novelist must step a little over the bounds of probability, although clandestine marriages with groomers are unfrequent, and although, when contracted, they usually involve a totally different chain of consequences from those imagined by Miss Braddon—still, young ladies who read newspapers will not, on the whole, learn much previously unknown evil from the romance.²⁰

In general, the writer claimed that it was not just in the novel alone that standards were changing: 'the popular craving for excitement' was pandered to in the columns of the daily papers, fast 'becoming formidable rivals to quiet novels'.²¹ Contemporaries would have recognized in this an allusion to the fact that since 1857, detailed reporting of divorce cases had been allowed in the newspapers, and dead-pan descriptions of bigamy, domestic violence, forced marriages, and marriages contracted under false pretences could be read alongside accounts of other crimes.²²

¹⁹ Justin MacCarthy, 'Novels with a Purpose', *Westminster Review*, NS 26 (1864), 48.

²⁰ 'Sensation Novels', *Medical Critic and Psychological Journal*, 3 (1863), 519.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 514. Other critics occupied themselves with offering reasons why standards seemed to have changed so rapidly. In the *Temple Bar*, for example, the hypotheses were advanced that the 1851 exhibition gave an impetus to British communications with the Continent; the Limited Liability Act encouraged financial speculation in those who would previously have shown caution, and the Divorce Bill 'familiarized the public mind . . . with conjugal infidelity'. [Alfred Austin] 'Our Novels: The Past School', *Temple Bar*, 29 (1870), 179.

²² For sensationalism and newspaper reportage, see Thomas Boyle, *Black Spine in the Seniors of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism* (1990). The 1861 Yelverton bigamy-divorce trial in particular, attracted a great amount of publicity, and after the revelations of this case the public became aware of a complicated accumulation of laws which made bigamy—just—legally possible. See Jeanne Fahnestock, 'Bigamy: The Rise and Fall of a Convention', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 36 (1981), 47-71; Arvel B. Erickson and John R. McCarthy, 'The Yelverton Case: Civil Legislation and Marriage', *Victorian Studies*, 14 (1971), 275-91; Mary Lyndon Shanley, 'One Must Ride Behind': Married Women's Rights and the Divorce Act of 1857', *Victorian Studies*, 25 (1982), 355-76. The topicality of the subject is reflected not just in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), in Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862) and *Man and Wife* (1870) and in a number of less-well-known texts, but in the 'Hon Mrs Yelverton' (as she called herself) *Martyrs to Circumstance* (1861): she turned her private difficulties into further active capital by hiring herself out to give readings from this.

Dickens, writing in *All the Year Round*, was, however, among those who pointed out that there is nothing new about sensation—he proffers as early prototypes Oedipus, Satan in *Paradise Lost*,

Additionally, the writer of this article acknowledged the popular view that these fictions offered escapism and vicarious excitement: 'girls and women who are restrained by the fear of consequences from giving the rein to their own passions, still find a fictitious excitement in reading about, and also imagining, the gratified passions of others.'²³ Excitement, indeed, but not without its own self-imposed limitations. For other contemporary reviewers felt obliged to stress that however undesirable the subject-matter of the sensation novel might be, the resolution of its plot invariably supports prevalent social and moral values and formations. Winifred Hughes, in her thorough study of the sensation novel genre, usefully brings in Peter Brooks' discussion of the fact that the plotting of sensation fiction tends to be characterized by a consolidation of social norms. In *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), albeit largely writing about the development of melodrama in France, Brooks suggests that the form is particularly appropriate to a time of rapid and confusing social change:

Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue . . . it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to 'prove' the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence.²⁴

Lady Audley may exhibit an unusual, fascinating degree of powerful assertiveness as she pushes her first husband down a well, sets fire to an inn in which the man who threatens to unmask her calculating nature is staying, and contemplates poisoning her second husband. But ultimately she goes, or pretends to go, mad, and is sent to an asylum in Belgium where she eventually dies. This fate suggests a form of moral retribution working from within Lady Audley's own constitution rather than being imposed by the judiciary. Hence it is ultimately completely inescapable. Isabel Vane, the more directly sympathetically presented heroine of *East Lynne* (1861), is made to die (although whether of a broken heart at the prolonged stress of looking after her children without being able to make herself known to them, or of the consumption which kills

Raphael's *Massacre of the Innocents*, and Macbeth, with his 'bold, bad woman for his wife'. None the less, he refers to the 'vulgar species of sensationalism', 'the halfpenny tales of murder and felony' which currently proliferate, and which have only a tenuous relationship with those who treat thoughtfully of 'the psychology of crime and terror'. [Charles Dickens] 'The Sensational Williams', *All the Year Round*, 11 (1864) 14-16. An article in the same magazine some six months earlier had also pointed out that there was little novelty in sensationalism *per se*, looking back some seventy years to the popularity of Matthew Lewis's play *The Castle Spectre*, and Thomas Holcroft's *Tales of Mystery*: 'Not a New "Sensation"', *All the Year Round*, 9 (1863), 519-20.

²³ 'Not a New "Sensation"', 517.

²⁴ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, Conn., 1976), 20. These words of Brooks are quoted in part in Hughes, *The Mantle in the Cellar*, 176.

her son, is not entirely clear). This is both a extrication from an awkward domestic situation involving bigamy, and the culmination of a warning in which the woman reader has earlier been forcefully addressed:

Oh, reader, believe me! Lady—wife—mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awaken! Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, *resolve* to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them; pray for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon that would urge you so to escape; bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on to it, will be found far worse than death!²⁵

Nell, the extremely likeable heroine of Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), also is killed off by the author, for death seems the only means by which she can be saved from committing adultery. By the same means the reader is also mildly rebuked for enjoying the daring of going along with the impetus towards illicit passion.

But, as we shall see, the fact that a reader may be implicated, placed in a position of complicity with a heroine's transgressive, yet highly understandable desires, confirms that sensation fiction in fact did not take the stability of this moral universe entirely for granted. This is particularly true of many of the novels written by women. In these, the ready equation of the moral world of the novel (despite the exaggeration of some aspects of the action) with that of the reader is brought home not just by the broad contemporaneity of the fictions, but by the allusions which they contain, and which are used to establish a specific cultural ambit shared by both reader and central characters.

A common accusation levelled against the sensation novel was that it encouraged a taste only for more of the same: that it jaded the palate for more demanding works. Yet the writers of these novels, especially Mary Braddon and Rhoda Broughton, firmly did not limit their own literary frames of reference to contemporary fiction, nor did they expect those of their readers to be thus limited.²⁶ The novels of these two writers in particular are studded with quotations from writers ranging from Shakespeare to Victor Hugo, Chaucer to Milton, Longfellow to Frances Ridley Havergal. To them may be attributed the desire not to have their literary productions dismissed as utterly frivolous, particularly when one considers their prolific quoting alongside the advice manual writers's exhortations to the Victorian girl reader to check all unfamiliar

²⁵ Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, 3 vols. (1861), ii, 107–8.

²⁶ Categorizing Rhoda Broughton as a 'sensation novelist' is not as easy a piece of pigeon-holding as it is in the case of Braddon, or Ellen Wood, or their male counterparts, such as Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade. But her early novels, especially *Not Wotsey But Too Well* (1863) and *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) unmistakably employ sensationalist elements, such as potential bigamy, and words of the 1870s certainly presented women more daringly critical of men than many of their fictional contemporaries. This factor, coupled with the reputation of her earlier novels, probably ensured that critics continued to refer to her as a sensationalist.

quotations that she comes across. Simultaneously, of course, this employment of quotations acts as a means of flattering the reader, tacitly assuming her acquaintance with this relatively wide range of references. The references to shared reading material certainly functions as a means of reinforcing the effect of the characters and readers occupying the same cultural space.

The visual arts are employed in an analogous way. Although not usually given to paraquotation, Ellen Wood intensifies the emotion towards the end of *East Lynne* when the sick William tells Madame Vine (whom he knows not to be Isabel Vane, his true mother) that he has seen the bright flowers of heaven in John Martin's pictures of *The Plains of Heaven* (which had toured England in 1855 and 1857). She thus invokes a familiar concretization of celestial beauty not just as an indicator of William's impending destination, but to occasion a poignant dialogue about whether or not his mother is to be found there. More provocatively, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon describes the portrait of Lady Audley as being painted with the exaggeration of colour and expression associated with Pre-Raphaelitism. This allows her to suggest that the techniques of an artist of that movement, emphasizing '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',²⁷ bring out a hard, almost wicked look in the sitter. Relying on the reader's familiarity with current art in order to describe the effect created by Lady Audley, she also draws on the moral equivocation of art critics commenting on the unorthodox attractions of Pre-Raphaelite female models.

Mary Braddon and Rhoda Broughton's novels are particularly notable in their references to literary reading, however, since they encourage their consumers not just to take cultural references as part of a social backdrop, but to enter into an active process of interpretation which invites recognition of their own active, rather than passive, role as readers. At times, it is implicitly suggested to them that they would surely be more discriminating readers than the heroines themselves. Thus Kate, in Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wotsey, But Too Well* (1863)—its very title drawing attention to its metatextuality—has most foolishly fallen in love with a clearly unsuitable man, Colonel Dare Stamer. The naïveté of her responses to his practised flirtatious strategies are heavily underscored by Broughton. Returning home after taking a walk with him, she turns to her books, but soon lets drop Lamb's *Essays*—'too healthy and wholesome to tempt a diseased palate'—and instead chooses a familiar narrative which takes the dangers of reading as its subject-matter, Byron's translation of Book V of Dante's *Inferno*, 'Francesca of Rimini':

That exquisite tale of hopeless, boundless passion spoke to her soul a language that it loved, and she never thought of taking to herself the warning—

²⁷ Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 70.

'How many sweet thoughts, what strong ecstasies,
Led these their evil fortune to fulfil?
'He who from me shall be divided ne'er'

was the line that she took to herself; and she said it over softly, with a confident smile.²⁸

More reprehensibly presented than the foolishly preoccupied Kate, Emma, the would-be literary woman at the centre of Broughton's much later novel, *A Beginner* (1899), reveals the shaky ground of her pretensions by chatting over dinner to the author of a book of essays she's admired:

'Where do you get your snatches of out-of-the-way verse from?—quotations that set one hunting for days? Where does "Blind Orion hungry for the morn" come from?'

'That is not so very out-of-the-way.'

'Is not it? I searched almost all through Milton for it. I thought it had a Miltonic cadence.' She makes use of this last phrase with a certain self-satisfaction.

'It was no use searching Milton for what belongs to "bright Keats,"' replies he a little bluntly.

'Keats! How dull of me not to have thought of him!'²⁹

With little subtlety, Broughton is positioning her reader against this over-confident author of *Miching Mallecho*, a 'New Woman' novel dealing with 'hereditary vice', a genre and fashion for which Broughton evidently felt little sympathy.

Inevitably, in sensation fiction, sensitivity to poetry, and the ability to have an apposite quotation spring to one's lips, is equated with sensitivity to life in general. In Broughton's *Corneth Up as a Flower*, the fact that the autobiographical prose of the heroine/narrator Nell is as studded with pertinent quotations as a well-compiled commonplace book is a certain guide to her own worth. After her handsome, but penniless army suitor, Richard, says goodnight to her in the lane at evening: 'Then, like a blast away I passed | And no man saw me more.'³⁰ When she considers her family's declined financial fortunes, and the absence of an heir, it is an apt moment to comment: 'The old order changeth, giving place to new, | And God fulfils himself in many ways.'³¹ The frequency of poetic references; the enjoyable, self-conscious employment of 'literary' vocabulary; the occasional insertion of a *recherché* French phrase, all contribute to a bond of shared culture. This serves to emphasize, for example, quite how wrong Sir Hugh is for Nell as a husband. As she drives back with him, reluctantly, from a picnic, he exclaims:

'Jolly and big the moon looks, doesn't it like a Cheshire cheese!'

The moon, the sacred moon, the be-sunged, be-sonneted moon, the moon that Romeo sware by, and that Milton saw 'Stooping thro' a fleecy cloud,' like a *Cheshire cheese!*

²⁸ Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely, But Too Well*, 3 vols. (1863), i, 161.

²⁹ Ead., *A Beginner* (1899), 40.

³⁰ Ead., *Corneth Up as a Flower*, 2 vols. (1867), i, 124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

'How poetical,' I said, sardonically.

'No, it isn't poetical, I know. I'm not up to the dodge of poetry. I don't go in for these kinds of things.'³²

None the less, financial pressures force Nell—unhappily, and tragically—to marry him.

Similar assumptions concerning poetic sensibility are employed in a range of other contemporary texts. Not all of these are, strictly speaking, sensation novels. Matilda Hays's *Adrienne Hope* (1866), reviewed as a sensation novel, and influenced by prevalent fashions in some of the elements of its plot (Adrienne unwisely enters into a secret marriage with a man who subsequently publicly marries another woman) is actually far more overtly feminist than the novels of Braddon, Broughton, and Wood, with the two women eventually finding mutual support in one another after their husband's death.³³ But it, too, incorporates a sustained section indicating how foolish Adrienne is to believe in the plausible flatteries of her deceiver, whilst ignoring the real sensitivity and devotion of the crippled, and deliberately feminized Lord Horton. The latter at length declaims and proclaims the beauties of Longfellow's 'Evangeline' and Clough's 'The Botchie of To-per-na-Fuosich', a poem which might be recognized as acting as a tacit warning to Adrienne, if she had been alert enough to its tale of seduction. The attraction between Cecil, the heroine of Mary Braddon's *The Lady's Mile* (1866), and her cousin Hector Gordon is cemented by the fact that they read poetry, especially Tennyson, together. However, Hector is already engaged to another woman in India whom he had met before encountering Cecil, and dutifully leaves to marry her, although not without reading Tennyson's 'Love and Duty' to his cousin in tones of 'deep feeling':

Should my shadow cross thy thought

Too sadly for their peace, remand it thou

For calmer hours to memory's darkest hold,

If not to be forgotten—not at once—

Not all forgotten.³⁴

When Cecil marries the successful, hard-working lawyer Laurence O'Boynerville, she does it because she acknowledges and appreciates his love for her, but he is not a kindred spirit:

After telling him about a new book—a fresh view of Mary Queen of Scots, by a French historian, an anti-Carlylean essay on Frederick of Prussia; a passionate, classic tragedy, by a new poet—Cecil would look hopefully for some answering ray of interest in her husband's face, and would behold his eyes fixed and staring, and hear his lips murmuring faintly to himself, 'The defendant seems to me to have no case, and the

³² *Ibid.*, 302–3.

³³ Matilda Hays was strongly influenced in her attitudes towards men and society by her membership of the Langham Place circle: she jointly edited the *English Woman's Journal* with Hester Kayner Parkes.

³⁴ Braddon, *The Lady's Mile*, 3 vols. (1866), i, 110.

plaintiffs will be entitled to recover if Giddles and Giddles can show them that the letter was posted on the twenty-first. . . .'³⁵

The reader is left in no doubt which of the two men is the more attractive, the fitter partner for Cecil, and is left somewhat disappointed when the author's propriety provides a twist of circumstances which prevent him running off with Cecil on his return to London.

If *The Lady's Mile* is, strictly speaking, a society novel with a melodramatic near-elopement in it which could readily belong to sensation fiction, Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* is, as my earlier summary indicates, sensational from beginning to end, and was frequently taken as a paradigm of the genre. The entire text is underpinned by paraquotation, from Thackeray, Dickens, Macaulay, a variety of Shakespeare plays, *Frankenstein*, Victor Hugo, Tennyson, George Eliot, Charlotte M. Yonge. Precisely what level of literary competence Braddon is anticipating is unclear. On occasion, one has the impression that she is encoding references likely to be picked up only by those whose range of reading goes beyond that customarily expected of young girls. Chapter 16, for example, ends with Mrs Powell, Aurora's sinister housekeeper-companion, sneaking a look at a letter which her mistress had written to the stable manager—the man who was, of course, Aurora's legal husband: 'It was this second page which Mrs Powell saw. The words written at the top of the leaf were these:—"Above all, express no surprise.—A.' There was no ordinary conclusion to the letter; no other signature than this big capital A.'³⁶ Braddon is surely referring to the badge of adultery in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel which, even if quite widely noted in England (Margaret Oliphant, for example, had written of 'the unwholesome fascination of this romance'³⁷) was hardly recommended to the young woman reader. *Aurora Floyd* does, however, contain plenty of side-swipes at such a reader's presumed diet of leisure material, and at the dullness of both High Church novels and conventional romances, especially those in which the pattern is for the curtain to drop on the heroine's marriage. For, asks Braddon:

is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a courtship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a lifetime? Aurora is married, and settled, and happy; sheltered, one would imagine, from all dangers, safe under the wing of her stalwart adorer; but it does not therefore follow,

adds Braddon ominously, promisingly, 'that the story of her life is done.'³⁸

This type of reference offers a bond between narrator and reader which is composed of presumed shared literary knowledge and tastes. Fiction plays an important part in determining this particular narrative's frame of reference, yet

³⁵ *The Lady's Mile*, ii. 110.

³⁶ *Aurora Floyd*, 155.

³⁷ [Margaret Oliphant] 'Modern Novelists—Great and Small', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 77 (1855), 563.

³⁸ Braddon, *Aurora Floyd*, 137.

the hint is offered that despite its sensationalism, this novel will be somewhat more true to the actual world which the reader inhabits. This reader is assumed, moreover, to be an alert interpreter, not one who will be content with passive consumption, but whose literary knowledge is called upon, and challenged, in the process of unravelling the complexities of the text. She is allowed to pick up on references to the familiar, and then has her expectations undermined. For example, Aurora is frequently compared to Cleopatra, called 'that Egyptian goddess, that Assyrian queen, with the flashing eyes and the serpentine coils of purple black hair'.³⁹ But she is hardly the sexual temptress, leading a noble man to his ruined doom, as Cleopatra was presented on the Victorian stage of the time.⁴⁰ Nor does she meet a tragic, if dignified end herself, but is last seen, still happily married, on her husband's comfortable Yorkshire estate. Similarly, the novel is full of references to *Othello*. Both Aurora's first and second husbands feel agonizing pangs of jealousy and bitterness, and Braddon makes the parallel with Shakespeare's play in both cases. Yet unlike Othello, Mellish refused to think 'ill of his wife. He resolutely shut his eyes to all damning evidence. He clung with a desperate tenacity to his belief in her purity.'⁴¹ The first husband envies the satisfaction of revenge that 'the chap in the play' got 'for his trouble when the blackamoor smothered his wife', but is murdered himself. Mrs Powell also harbours lingo-like resentment, but, unlike lingo, meets only defeat. Some of these subverted parallels between play and novel have been noted by Robert Wolff, who comments that 'most important, Desdemona is innocent and yet is killed; Aurora is guilty but gets away scot-free'.⁴² Literary allusions, in other words, need not necessarily lead in the direction which they would seem to anticipate. They can be used, as here, to ensure that the reader is alert to the dangers of taking the familiar for granted: a didactic formula relevant to the wider dynamics of sensation fiction.

Women sensation novelists, like many of their contemporaries, employed the convention of the French novel as an instant signifier of immorality, yet the very levity with which they treated it threw into question the tendency for more solemn commentators to condemn it out of hand. Robert Audley, the hero of *Lady Audley's Secret* is used to receiving his stimulation from yellow-backed French novels. But once he becomes embroiled with the facts of his close friend's disappearance and presumed murder, he is not only haunted by the implications of the situation which, he says, appear the more sinister when viewed in the light of Alexandre Dumas and Wilkie Collins, but 'the yellow papered fictions on the shelves above his head seemed stale and profitless'.⁴³

³⁹ *Ibid.* 182.

⁴⁰ See Margaret Lamb, 'Antony and Cleopatra' on the English Stage (Toronto and London, 1980), ch. 4.

⁴¹ *Aurora Floyd*, 265.

⁴² Robert Wolff, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (New York and London, 1979), 151.

⁴³ Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 156.

Rhoda Broughton, in *Red as a Rose is She* (1870), exploits the topos even more subversively. Here Esther, the heroine, staying with old family friends, is found by Gerard, the handsome son of the house:

deeply buried in the unwonted luxury of a French novel.

He looks at the title, and a slightly shocked expression dawned on his features: men are always shocked that women should *read about* the things that they *do*.

'Where did you get this?' (Quickly).

I climbed up the ladder in the library; pleasant books always rise to top shelves, as the cream rises to the top of the milk.'

'Will you oblige me by putting it back where you took it from?'

'When I have read it?'

'Before you have read it?'

'Why should I?' (rather snappishly.)

'Why should you,' he repeats, impatiently—not much fonder of contradiction than are most of his masterful sex. 'Why because it is not a fit book for a—*a child* like you to read.

Esther daringly challenges Gerard, letting him know that she is going to continue reading—'Do you suppose that Eve would have cared to taste the apple if it had been specially recommended to her notice as a particularly good, juicy, Ribstone pippin'—though once he has left the room, Broughton, in language which foregrounds the connection between certain types of reading and sexual transgression, has her deposit it 'in the hole whence she had ravished it, between two of its fellows, as agreeably lax and delicately indelicate as itself'. Esther repairs to Gerard's study, where, Broughton pointedly indicates, French novels are much in evidence, to boast of her obedience. The narrator leaves the reader to weigh up whether less harm might have come from the inexperienced Esther continuing with a course of not uneducational reading, rather than inviting a tête-à-tête with this young man. At the close of the scene, the couple are left conversing with heads close together over the petals which they are glueing to the centre of a geranium flower which Esther will wear to a ball that evening.⁴⁴ The knowingness of the tone of this passage would seem to presuppose not just a familiarity with the contents of French fiction from Broughton's own readers, but plays on their acknowledgement of the ridiculous and hypocritical nature of masculine prohibition in this area.

It is, however, in Mary Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) that we meet with the most sustained investigation of reading in relation to sensation fiction. As has already been noted, the plot of this novel owes something to *Madame Bovary*. A respectable, morally worthy, yet eminently dull young country doctor falls in love with Isabel, a suburban girl with a haphazard formal education (although she had picked up 'a little Italian, enough French to serve for the reading of novels that she might have better left unread'),⁴⁵ notwithstanding a large number of tastes and assumptions picked up from her membership of the

nearest circulating library. Her own life was 'altogether vulgar and commonplace, and she could not extract one ray of romance out of it, twist it as she would . . . She wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine'.⁴⁶ She waits 'for the prince, the Ernest Maltravers, the Henry Esmond, the Steerforth—it was Steerforth's proud image, and not simple-hearted David's gentle shadow, which lingered in the girl's mind when she shut the book'.⁴⁷

It is unsurprising that her marriage to George Gilbert, the doctor, whilst apparently more attractive than being a governess for ever, fails to satisfy her. Even his swift, matter of fact proposal and wedding preparations are inadequate by her internalized standards, for 'were there not three volumes of courtship to be gone through first?'⁴⁸ It is not just that she wishes to postpone as long as practically possible the moment which her romance reading has taught her should be the apex of a young girl's life, mimicking the prolongation of desire on which romance reading depends. Braddon foreshadows Nancy Miller's understanding of a nineteenth-century woman's plot being one in which closure is resisted as long as possible in order to allow heroine, and reader, a sense of power and autonomy,⁴⁹ when Isabel reflects, glumly, that 'Her life had never been her own yet, and never was to be her own, she thought.' First ruled over by her stepmother, she now must acknowledge George, 'with his strong will and sound common-sense,—oh, how Isabel hated common-sense! . . . as her master'.⁵⁰

The reader is never encouraged to identify directly with Isabel: it is assumed that she will be wiser, with a far more self-critical attitude towards the fiction she reads. It is not that Braddon is putting forward a hypocritical diatribe against novel-reading in general. The overall stance of the novel is encapsulated in the views of Sigismund Smith, a writer of hack sensation fiction, whose experience at cobbling together plots from other writers and doubling their exaggerations and improbabilities seems to owe a great deal to Braddon's own career writing for the penny novelette market: 'A novel's a splendid thing after a hard day's work, a sharp practical tussle with the real world . . . No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their lives are to be paraphrases of their favourite books'.⁵¹ Yet we are never directly told that Isabel should submit willingly to life with George. A kind, sympathetic doctor he may be, but so traditional in his way of life, so convinced that the ways of his father's generation were right, that he has no understanding of Isabel's attempts to

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 57, 56.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁴⁹ Nancy K. Miller, 'Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction', *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York, 1988), 34.

⁵⁰ Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*, 1, 239.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 60–1.

⁴⁴ Broughton, *Red as a Rose is She*, 3 vols. (1870), 1, 278–83.

⁴⁵ Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*, 3 vols. (1864), 1, 53.

brighten their home, 'to infuse some beauty into her life—something which, in however remote a degree, should be akin to the things she read of in her books.'⁵² When she reads him poetry, he yawns; when she places flowers on his dressing-table, he complains that the blossoms are liable to generate carbonic acid gas. The novel just predates *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), but it can be used as a comment on the fact that following *The Complete British Family Housewife* is unlikely to provide a recipe for domestic happiness unless one's husband is as caring as a John Harmon. To Isabel the making of pastry 'was a wearisome business. It was all very well for Ruth Pinch to do it for once in a way, and to be admired by John Westlock, and marry a rich and handsome young husband in next to no time.'⁵³ But in any case, Gilbert has his long-standing housekeeper, Mrs. Jeffson, so Isabel is as likely to be bored and dissatisfied within the home as Isabel Vane, who found, in her turn, that all the ordering of East Lyme was executed by her resident sister-in-law. It is hardly surprising that Isabel should come very close to being seduced by Roland Lansdell, master of Lansdell Priory and author of some exaggeratedly world-weary poetry ('a sort of mixture of Tennyson and Alfred de Musset').⁵⁴ None the less, the reader's understanding rather than sympathetic identification is sought, since Lansdell's selfishness, and inability to appreciate Isabel's innocence of real life, as opposed to fiction, is increasingly exposed. Indeed, we are told unequivocally that he is 'a beautiful useless, purposeless creature; a mark for manoeuvring mothers; a hero for sentimental young ladies,—altogether a mockery, a delusion, and a snare.'⁵⁵ Isabel's own standards of judgement are mocked, particularly since she finds herself only able to describe her sensations through reference to fiction. Thus when Roland first talks with her, 'she was stricken and dumbfounded . . . a Pamela, amazed and bewildered by the first complimentary address of her aristocratic persecutor.'⁵⁶

Yet Isabel is not deprived of the hand of the novelist intervening to rescue her. The reader is warned, repeatedly, against the dangers of confusing fiction with reality, as Isabel is shown lost in daydream: 'It was better than reading; to sit through all the length of a hot August afternoon thinking of Roland Lansdell. What romance had ever been written that was equal to this story; this perpetual fiction, with a real hero dominant in every chapter.'⁵⁷ She learns painfully that Roland is far from a romance hero, and that being in love with a live, experienced man is quite different from loving a nobleman in a novel. Moreover, she comes to see that melodrama provides a destructive rather than a welcome factor in life. When her father re-emerges after many years' absence,

⁵² Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*, 263.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, ii, 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, i, 299. In subsequent additions, the name of Edgar Allen Poe was added to the list of authors.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ii, 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, i, 316.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, ii, 104.

he is revealed to the reader as a forger: moreover, one who was jailed due to the evidence of Roland Lansdell, and who emerges from prison determined to gain his revenge. Roland dies from the injuries Isabel's father inflicts just at the moment when she would have been free to marry him, George having fatally caught typhoid fever from the villagers he had been nursing. Isabel is left a rich woman (Roland had bequeathed his estate to her, falsely assuming that she would have been prepared to elope with him to the continent), but Braddon determinedly refuses to show her receiving any ultimate satisfaction based on romantic premisses. Instead, she is finally seen an excellent manager of her estate, erecting model cottages and a substantial schoolhouse, the 'chastening influence of sorrow' having 'transformed a sentimental girl into a good and noble woman—a woman in whom sentiment takes the higher form of universal sympathy and tenderness.'⁵⁸

Isabel is still alive, even happy in her widowed, yet thoroughly useful state at the end of the novel. Novel-reading remains uncondemned as an activity in itself: what is seen to matter is the cultivation of a self-knowing, responsible attitude towards it. Despite all that has happened to her as a result of her misplaced assumptions, there is no admonitory conclusion, in contrast, say, to the sermon which follows the almost parodic catalogue of disasters which befalls the romance addict at the centre of the Reverend Paget's parodic, overstated Christian diatribe against the sensation genre, *Lucretia* (1865). But as well as debunking the expectations of any contemporary reader who might be attempted to put her trust in romance fiction (although Braddon's novel clearly predicates a reader who, although well enough versed in nineteenth-century novels and poetry to pick up the many allusions she makes, would not fall into the trap of assuming that her life could parallel their plots), *The Doctor's Wife*, like other fictions by Braddon and Broughton, raises questions which throw into contention current commonplace about sensation fiction.

D. A. Miller, in his stimulating essay '*Cage aux folles*: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*' sees the mode of reading which the genre encourages as depending on a 'hysterical' response, mobilizing our sympathetic nervous system at the expense of our rational faculties, reinforcing a bodily split between *psyche* and *soma*. Miller's late twentieth-century terms are, in fact, uncomfortably close to the physiological explanation of sensation fiction's effects which was put forward in the 1860s. Moreover, he describes the genre as 'obsessed with the project of finding meaning—of staging the suspense of its appearance—in everything except the sensations that the project excites in us.'⁵⁹ But whilst this may be true in terms of the male writers of the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, iii, 300.

⁵⁹ D. A. Miller, '*Cage aux folles*: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*', in Jeremy Hawthorn (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (1986), 96. Interestingly, Miller notes (p. 100) that the text of *The Woman in White* explicitly assumes that the reader is male, hence someone who 'falls victim to an hysteria in which what is acted out (desired, repressed) is an essentially female "sensation"':

genre, especially Collins and Charles Reade, the idea that the uncovering of meaning is unequivocally at the centre of the female sensation novel cannot be upheld. Certainly, some of Mary Braddon's works, especially *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, depend on the narrator withholding information from the reader which she only later fully comprehends: what is it that Lady Audley whispers to Phoebe that was 'so simple that it was told in five minutes', and why does George show no sign of recognition when he sees his wife's portrait? But Rhoda Broughton's novels, although they contain potential bigamists, betrayals, and the possibility of elopement, derive their sensationalism from explicit situation, rather than from mystery.

Above all, the women sensation writers invite their readers to join in a process which involves the active construction of meaning, rather than its revelation. This construction does not necessarily depend on the validation of the narrator, for their fictions often leave one with moral, interpretative problems. Lady Audley may herself suggest that her greedy, selfish, murderous nature is something which she has inherited, and may—indeed must—be classified as insanity. But is madness a sufficient explanation for her actions, particularly since (as Miller points out) the bigamy, arson, and attempted murder are 'motivated . . . by impeccably rational considerations of self-interest'?⁶⁰ May the crimes, at least at a symbolic level, not have something to do with the social and economic position of women in mid-Victorian England? Does the neat narrative uniting of the novel's benevolent characters at *Lady Audley's* close act as a sufficient bulwark against the threat that disruption and disorder may lie inside the most apparently happy homes? Can the independence, the enjoyment of manipulative skills, and the self-awareness of sexual magnetism associated with Cleopatra remain perpetually subdued when a woman possessing these characteristics is none the less apparently happily married, as in the case of Aurora Floyd? What are the implications of the fact that two men have to die in *The Doctor's Wife*—the worthy doctor and the rakish Byronic would-be seducer—in order for Isabel, unworthy in many ways, to achieve a far happier fate than that of Emma Bovary, who is consumed by her own romantic preoccupations rather than rescued by the narrator for an independent woman's life?

In all these, and many other examples of women's sensation fiction, external proprieties are maintained, enabling their authors' indignant self-defence against charges of immorality. But as Laura Mulvey has commented in relation to Douglas Sirk's movies of the 1930s: 'Ideological contradiction is the overt mainspring and specific content of melodrama, not a hidden, unconscious thread to be picked up only by special critical processes.'⁶¹ It is difficult to read

these fictions without becoming aware of the tensions which are built up between those social assumptions which structure the facts of the plot, and the sympathies which are called out towards the transgressive heroines. Sometimes these sympathies are invoked spasmodically, as in the case of Lady Audley, sometimes across the grain of overt authorial comment, as in the case of Isabel Vane, represented on the surface as carrying a cross through life because of her adultery. But what these novels share is a posing of moral questions, rather than a dictating of the answers. Whilst the manipulation of a reader's desire, through the suspended outcome, the concealment of clues, the frustration of a heroine's wishes is a continual part of the fictions, so, too, as we have seen, are both references to literature, and addresses to a reader's presumed knowledge of life. The reader is habitually acknowledged as possessing a wider, more subtle interpretative system than that granted to the heroine. The ability to read literature carefully is equated (as in so many advice manuals) with the ability to read life. This attention which is demanded on the part of the reader, not to mention the command which she is implicitly expected to uphold over a wide range of literary references, goes some way towards giving the lie to the dangerously uncritical mindlessness which so many critics chose to present as being induced by the opiate of sensation fiction.

⁶⁰ Miller, 'Cage aux folles', 110.

⁶¹ Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', *Movie*, 25 (1977-8); repr. Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (1987), 75.