Protofeminist Women in Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret

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Protofeminist Women in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

During the 1800s, England was ruled by a patriarchal society in which men held most of the social and economic power. As a result, men usually held positions of power both in society and within the home while women were relegated to comparatively inferior positions. Men’s belief in women’s inferiority led women to be called the weaker sex, and this was justified by citing women’s lack of physical strength and perceived mental deficiencies when compared with men. Additionally, women were thought to be delicate, emotional creatures incapable of “male” rationality or higher thinking. Part of the rationale for women’s categorization as lesser beings was due to female biology. The assumption that “women’s reproductive function defined her character, position, and value . . . constructed the woman as essentially different from man” (Poovey 37). In essence, women were judged solely on aspects of themselves that only nature could control, and which they could not.

These differences between the sexes were used as the basis to appropriate each sex to its own place in society, and to dictate socio-normative behavior practices. As Poovey argues,

The model of a binary opposition between the sexes, which was socially realized in separate but supposedly equal “spheres,” underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions at midcentury, ranging from a sexual division of labor to a sexual division of economic and political rights. (Poovey 8-9)

These social spheres were clearly defined, consisting of the private domestic sphere of the female and the public social sphere of the male. Each sex was expected to remain and
operate largely within their own spheres, and to behave according to socially prescribed
gender roles. (The fairness of this arrangement was not up for question.) For women,
social expectation dictated that they behave with reserve and be submissive to men. They
often served as wives and mothers as caretakers within the home, and behaved with
deferece to their husbands or other men in their lives. Deviation from this norm was not
only frowned upon; women could be deemed mad if their transgressive behavior violated
societal dictates to a large degree. While women were pressured to conform to social
expectation, this conformity is what led to their restraint.

Women were repressed insofar as they were deprived of power and control over
most aspects of their lives. To a large extent, this repression is reflected in the literature
of the time. However, some works during the Victorian period also featured women (as
either major or minor characters) who deviated from their gender expectations and
demonstrated a great deal of female agency. Although texts portraying proto-feminist
females existed long before the 19th century, that period was a time which saw a great
proliferation of literature on the subject. These works can be seen as important milestones
from which proto-feminist and feminist writing has evolved up until today. As time has
passed, women’s writing has become more progressive.

Feminism is, simply put, the belief that women should have the same rights and
opportunities as men. Protofeminism refers to feminism during a period in history when
the term “feminist” did not yet exist, at a time many critics now consider the advent of
the women’s movement. This thesis will examine how the female characters in two
novels, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Mary Elizabeth
Braddon, can be considered protofeminist for the degree to which they break societal
convention and subvert traditional gender roles in Victorian society. The *Jane Eyre* section will focus on the protagonist Jane Eyre, as well as on the secondary character Bertha Mason. The *Lady Audley’s Secret* section will focus on the titular Lady Audley.

*Jane Eyre* is a bildungsroman novel published in 1847. Bildungsroman novels generally trace a protagonist’s psychological and spiritual growth through their formative years from childhood into adulthood, and are more commonly called “coming of age” stories. In these novels, it is common for the protagonist to initially face some sort of conflict with society, but ultimately be accepted into this society by the end of the novel. This is what happens in *Jane Eyre*. Jane’s conflict with society lies in the fact that she cannot accept the gender inequality perpetuated by the men she encounters, which prevents her from fulfilling her socially-prescribed goal of being a wife. However, upon achieving the equality she desires, she is able to enter into marriage and take her place in the social order.

The use of the bildungsroman structure is integral to *Jane Eyre* because it allows readers to follow Jane’s development and see firsthand the personal obstacles she faces as she matures, thereby engendering a sense of sympathy for her struggles. The novel works well to highlight the recurring oppression she faces as she strives to reconcile her own emerging definition of womanhood with society’s traditional definition. The bildungsroman structure inherently functions to bias readers in Jane’s favor, casting her as the victim and the men as her oppressors, due to the emotional attachment readers may develop in following her journey. Because of this, readers can more readily accept her untraditional assertions of equality, especially in light of her hardships.
Specifically, the bildungsroman structure allows readers to follow the gradual changes within Jane. It is not that she changes completely, but that she better learns how to maintain her ideals while seeming to conform to social expectation. As she grows older, the wildness which characterizes her attack on John Reed as a child, is somewhat tempered as she finds words are a better means of expressing her sentiments (that is to say, more socially acceptable) than violence. It is clear that Jane never loses her belief in equality; she simply adapts to new circumstances. Readers who are not paying close attention will miss this fact, and incorrectly assume she has learned to accept the female role the men in her life are constantly pushing on her.

Ultimately, *Jane Eyre* is “a story of enclosure and escape, a distinctively female Bildungsroman in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome” (Gilbert and Gubar 339). Jane’s case is not singular; rather, it taps into the anxieties of the shared female experience: the feeling of entrapment within society, and the necessity of learning to conform in order to be accepted. *Jane Eyre* differs from other female bildungsroman novels of the period in that it is not a story of conformation, but a story of quiet rebellion. It encourages women to maintain their selfhood, and not forget themselves or the capabilities of their sex as they live their daily lives in a male-constructed society.

*Lady Audley’s Secret* is a sensation novel published in 1862. Sensation novels are a genre of fiction containing storylines meant to shock readers. Subjects covered in these types of novels include, but are not limited to, adultery, kidnapping, bigamy, and murder.
Sensation writing “especially valued passion and assertive action” (Showalter 154). It was a relatively new genre at the time of publication, and it entertained much in the same fashion as tabloids. Because sensation novels primarily take place in domestic settings, Victorian readers were relieved of the notion that these kinds of events could never happen to them. Part of the appeal lay in the fact that the people and events depicted were relatable, allowing readers to wonder what kinds of horrors may lay beneath their own seemingly peaceful domestic lives and the lives of their neighbors.

The propagation of sensation novels was largely made possible by the Industrial Revolution, which greatly improved the efficiency of printing presses and reduced the cost of producing books. Greater access to books made them accessible to even the lower classes. This is one of the reasons for the sensation novel’s popularity. (Jane Eyre was penned during the Industrial Revolution, so it did not benefit to as large a degree.) Like Jane Eyre, the sensation novel tapped into social anxiety, but of a different sort. With the rise of industry and the advent of mass capitalism, both men’s and women’s roles in society began to change. People questioned their identities during this time of change, and often feared loss of identity altogether. The subject of lost identity is one of the issues addressed in Lady Audley’s Secret, featured in Lady Audley herself.

Importantly, sensation novels also brought about a great deal of response from their readers (the very nature of their contents warranting discussion). Because the plots of works such as Lady Audley’s Secret were so shocking, people naturally talked at great length about the novel and the subject matter it dealt with after reading it. The target audience of Victorian sensation novels was middle-class women, and it could be said that the novel’s most important function was not to entertain but to incite discussion on topics
which were not usually discussed because they were taboo—topics such as murder, bigamy, and women carrying out violence against men. *Lady Audley’s Secret* gave women an excuse to open a dialogue on important issues raised in the novel, and perhaps even a chance to express their own sentiments on their own situations.

Lady Audley and her story may be fictional, but the circumstances she finds herself in (poor and abandoned by her husband) may not have been so uncommon. There is an element of relatability in her condition for middle-class Victorian women. Yet the fact that Lady Audley chooses to take initiative to remove herself from an unfavorable situation, and subsequently takes great pains to maintain her secret, makes her unique. She is bold and cunning—the two things men never thought women could be. It is very possible that she may have been seen as a role model by some women. Because society placed women in roles where they were responsible for the constant care for their husbands, children, and the domestic space, for a woman to see another woman (albeit fictional) put herself first would have certainly been refreshing.

*Lady Audley’s Secret* was loosely based on the real life case of a woman named Constance Kent which occurred the year before publication. Constance Kent had confessed to the murder of her three-year-old half-brother Francis when she was sixteen years old. She admitted that she cut his chest and slit his throat with a razor before stashing his body in an outhouse on the property (Magoun 166). Although there are a couple of similarities, such as the heinous crime happening in a domestic setting and the unexpected brutality of a female murderer, the commonalities end there. It seems Braddon used this case as a jumping point for the more intricate tale of murder and deceit weaved in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Admittedly, Lady Audley’s case is much more complex.
It is important to look at women such as Jane Eyre and Lady Audley in Victorian literature, for they demonstrate female agency in a time when it was not the norm. While Bronte and Braddon could not overtly empower women in their works, for obvious reasons, they managed to do it in small ways. For Bronte, Jane’s small, seemingly innocuous comments and actions (hidden within a text which ultimately ends in marriage) can be taken in a way which constitutes a rebellion against the androcentric society in which she lived. Braddon, meanwhile, took advantage of the real-life crime of a woman in order to spin a piece of sensational literature loosely based on it, through which she could make her protagonist as “rebellious” as she wanted.

While both Jane Eyre and Lady Audley face oppression at the hands of the patriarchal society, the specific aspects of it they deal with, as well as their responses, differ. Jane struggles to escape the woman’s social label as a weak, submissive being that is of lesser worth than a man. She attempts to achieve this through her continuous assertions throughout the novel (in both action and speech) that she is the equal of the men she encounters, despite the men’s refusal to acknowledge this. Her struggle for equality with John Reed, Mr. Rochester, and St. John Rivers is motivated by something greater than societal dictates; it is grounded in an inherent and unshakeable belief in the equality of both sexes. Jane rejects the generic social female identity and redefines what it means to be a woman.

Meanwhile, Lady Audley rebels against the patriarchal institution which renders her, as a female, socially powerless. Due to her inability to obtain a divorce from George Talboys, she finds herself confined to her role as a wife and a mother, and she suffers destitution. Instead of resigning herself to her fate, she escapes the situation by assuming
a new identity. In escaping one marriage and entering another to benefit herself, she essentially delegitimizes the institution of marriage altogether. Furthermore, her attempts to kill the men who threaten to reveal her secret demonstrates uncommon female agency and cunning. Lady Audley seizes power in a society where she is afforded none, challenging traditional notions of femininity while highlighting social issues affecting women in society.

Jane Eyre and Lady Audley rebel against patriarchal society in different ways because they are each dissatisfied with a particular facet of this male construct; both attribute their suffered injustices and miseries to these aspects which they largely have no control over, and thus they wish to enact change. The men in Jane’s life always seem ready to point to her femininity as a justified cause for inferior treatment, and Jane suffers as a result (especially at John Reed’s hands). This is why she feels compelled to fight for acknowledgement of her equality. Lady Audley’s first husband abandons her to a life of poverty which she is unable to escape because her status as a woman provides her with no recourse. This is why she is so driven to maintain the livelihood she obtains for herself through any means necessary, including actively subduing any men who pose a threat.

Jane Eyre’s and Lady Audley’s rebellions also take different forms because of the genres their respective authors used when writing their stories. Jane Eyre is a bildungsroman novel, and as such, Jane’s rebellion comes about as a result of her (oppressive) interactions with men at different stages in her emotional maturation. With John Reed, she physically asserts that she is not his inferior. With Mr. Rochester, she verbally asserts that she is his equal. With St. John Rivers, she verbally makes a stand that she is not willing to change herself for any man. Each instance of rejecting male
oppression allows Jane to further develop her conception of what being a woman means. This is how she learns to define her selfhood in relation to society.

Meanwhile, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is a sensation novel, and thus Lady Audley’s rebellion has to be “sensational” in the sense of being groundbreaking and having the ability to evoke a response of shock from Braddon’s readership. Lady Audley must disregard codes for female gender behavior, she must physically and verbally threaten men, and she must attempt to murder men. In short, she must perform all these actions which Victorian society could never conceive a woman of being capable of, for it is the unanticipated quality of these behaviors which function to make Lady Audley stand out. Her actions in pursuing her livelihood as a woman must necessarily redefine womanhood itself in order for the novel to be truly “sensational.” It is the differing genres which allow Jane Eyre and Lady Audley to rebel in their own unique ways.
In Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre*, the title character Jane Eyre can be viewed as a protofeminist character through the small ways in which she asserts her independence and defies female gender norms throughout the text. Jane does not wish to prove herself superior to men, but rather equal to them. Although the text ultimately ends with Jane’s entrance into the institution of marriage, her bold actions and speech in the rest of the novel, as they relate to the men in her life, constitute a rebellion against the androcentric society in which she lives. Jane’s actions break social convention and challenge traditional gender roles of the Victorian era, and thus she can be seen as a character representative of female empowerment during her time.

Jane’s older cousin John Reed is the first male character introduced in the novel with whom she interacts, and he is portrayed as her tormentor. In an early scene, she calls John “a tyrant: a murderer” after he knocks her down. This use of the language of oppression allows the reader to see the nature of the power relationship between John and Jane. John wields authority as the tyrant, and thus Jane is essentially rendered powerless under his “tyranny.” In the same scene, Jane attempts to fight back against John, and the reader is told she “received him in a frantic sort” (Bronte 11). The suddenness with which she attacks John makes it appear as though it is an instinctual reaction, born out of pent-up frustration. Jane’s inability to contain her emotions is shown here through both her action and speech.

Unfortunately, Jane’s physical retaliation only results in her own chastisement. This is important because it establishes the power dynamic between them in respect to sex. It is viewed as unacceptable for Jane to fight back against John, even though she is
defending herself. The lady’s-maid says, “What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son!” (Bronte 12) It is significant that John is called a “young gentleman” because it shows that he is viewed as a man by societal standards. It can be said that even within the Reed household, John is given the status of head of household insofar as he is largely allowed privilege by his mother to do as he wishes. His male status gives him authority to act as he pleases.

Meanwhile, even though Jane is only a child, she appears to already be bound by societal rules for proper female conduct. Her behavior is deemed unladylike and unrespectable by Bessie and the lady’s-maid, these two older women who are well-acquainted with what society expects of a woman. Their chastisement of Jane serves to educate and remind her of her place as a female. This suggests that Victorian attitudes about gender roles extended even to children, and that codes for proper conduct were instilled starting at an early age. Growing up under such conceptions would allow children to learn how to properly conduct themselves within society as adults, to live by the invisible and unspoken rules society has put in place. The general expectation is conformity.

However, Jane demonstrates nonconformity when she immediately takes issue with what she considers to be the unjustness of her reprimand. She says, “No one had reproved John for wantonly striking me; and because I had turned against him to avert farther irrational violence, I was loaded with general unjust opprobrium” (Bronte 15). Jane’s belief in the unfairness of how the situation is handled causes her to feel anger. John escapes without punishment, which serves to perpetuate the double standard regarding behavior for men and women of the time. It is evident that it is socially
acceptable for a man to strike a woman, but not the other way around. Furthermore, the fact that Jane’s challenge to John’s authority as a male does not go unpunished is indicative of the inequality which exists between the sexes.

Jane’s reprimand for her unladylike behavior does not stop her from reacting in a similar manner later on. The next time John attempts to harass Jane, she says, “I instantly turned against him, roused by the same sentiment of deep ire and desperate revolt which had stirred my corruption before” (Bronte 27). Because Jane is continuously being wronged by John, he becomes to her a fixture representative of her own oppression and powerlessness. She is placed in a position inferior to him, a position which she believes she has the capability to escape from. Thus, whether she is conscious of this or not, Jane’s retaliatory actions against John can be seen as a means of “lowering” him so that they stand on equal footing. Her actions constitute a rejection of the idea that women are inferior to men.

In looking at this incident of Jane as a child, the reader is able to clearly see her sentiments and behaviors in their purest form, to a large degree uninfluenced by society or its rules. Generally speaking, adults know to behave with greater reserve (and are expected to do so), while children have yet to learn reserve and thus act more freely on their impulses and emotions. Had Jane had been an adult and attacked John in such a manner, she would have been deemed at best “unwomanly” and at worst “mad”. Jane as a child is guided by her belief that “When we are struck without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should—so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again” (Bronte 57). This intolerance for inequality is a characteristic which she later carries into adulthood.
Also of importance regarding Jane’s retaliatory behavior is the manner in which her aunt Mrs. Reed punishes her. Mrs. Reed imprisons Jane in the red-room, a move which can be viewed as Jane’s symbolic confinement within the female domestic space. To lock her in such a room serves as a reminder to Jane of her place both within the family and within society. Within the family she is viewed as lesser because of the circumstances surrounding her arrival, and within society she is viewed as lesser because she is a woman. It is not Jane’s place to challenge the men in society; her “place” as a woman is within the confines of the domestic space. Jane’s imprisonment serves to punish her for her transgressions, for her break from socially-appropriate behavior.

It is not that Jane does not know what is expected of her; on the contrary, she is aware of exactly how she must behave in order to win her aunt’s acceptance. She says, “I know that had I been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child—though equally despondent and friendless—Mrs. Reed would have endured my presence more complacently” (Bronte 16). The fact that Jane does not change her behavior to conform to her aunt’s expectations of a proper young girl reveals her desire to be true to her own nature, even at such a young age. She refuses to become somebody she is not, even if doing so will make her life easier. Her championing of individuality above conformity is a trait she carries into adulthood, as seen later on.

Furthermore, it is significant that it is Mrs. Reed who locks Jane in the room because she is the most prevalent female character in the beginning of the novel. It can be said that she is the “ideal” woman insofar as she embodies the characteristics of a woman who conforms to societal dictates. For example, even though Mrs. Reed’s partial treatment of John seems to undermine her own authority within the household, she
continues to establish and foster within him a sense of male entitlement and privilege, of elevated status above women. Therefore, Mrs. Reed’s punishment of Jane is a perpetuation of society’s way of thinking about gender norms. Because Jane’s actions fall outside the realm of appropriate female behavior, Mrs. Reed sees it as her duty to rectify the situation.

However, Jane in turn manages to wield patriarchy as a weapon against Mrs. Reed. Before her departure from Gateshead, she tells her aunt what she truly thinks of the treatment she has received in “an extraordinarily self-assertive act of which neither a Victorian child nor a Cinderella was ever supposed to be capable” (Gilbert and Gubar 343). Since Mrs. Reed is essentially a temporary stand-in for her dead husband, her influence can be said to be limited. When Jane challenges her, asking, “What would Uncle Reed say to you if he were alive?” she evokes the memory of her dead relative in order to assume power over her aunt. (Bronte 27) Jane inadvertently shows that Mrs. Reed (a woman herself) is also subject to the “rules” of a patriarchal society, in this case the duty to honor her dead husband’s wishes.

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Because Jane Eyre is a bildungsroman novel, it allows readers to trace Jane’s life through her formative years. As the story progresses, the reader is able to follow along in her emotional development, and see which aspects of herself she attempts to get rid of or retain. Unsurprisingly, Jane’s demonstrated intolerance for inequality as a child does not fade even as she enters adulthood (though her means of dealing with it do change). This is most clearly seen in her interactions with other men such as Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers. In these instances, it is always Jane’s inherent belief in her shared equality with
the men which prevents her from allowing herself to be demeaned or subjugated by them, regardless of the holds they have over her.

Similar to John Reed, Mr. Rochester initially believes himself to possess authority over Jane, a belief grounded not in the fact that he is her employer, but in the fact that he is a man and she is a woman. He demonstrates this belief throughout the novel in different ways. According to Poovey, “Rochester wantonly teases Jane with his power: in chapter 20 he teases her that he will marry Blanche Ingram, and in chapter 21 he refuses to pay her her wages, thereby underscoring her emotional and financial dependence” (Poovey 138). In doing so, he bullies her, but in a different way than John Reed. Mr. Rochester’s actions serve to highlight the things he possesses that Jane does not, in a manner that is more taunting than provocative. Yet, Jane never considers herself inferior to him.

When Jane confesses her love for Mr. Rochester, she says, “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh:—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit, just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal—as we are!” (Bronte 253) Jane realizes customs and conventions are barriers to equality because they necessitate that people governed by them behave in a certain manner, and thus are prohibitive to honest behavior and speech. In stripping Mr. Rochester and herself to their essences, Jane bypasses societal constructs of artificial elevation such as wealth or connections to maintain that on the most basic level, man and woman are the same. She is able to place her worth on the same level as Mr. Rochester’s.
As Jane believes herself to be Mr. Rochester’s equal, she struggles against being bound by him in any manner in which she is relegated to a lower position. In the same scene, when Mr. Rochester entreats her, “Just this promise—‘I will be yours, Mr. Rochester,’” Jane replies, “Mr. Rochester, I will not be yours.” (Bronte 316) By using language of possession, Mr. Rochester is treating Jane like an object, or as something to be owned, such as a piece of property. Jane objects to this classification. By refusing him, she retains her independence, and at the same time places herself in a position of relative control. Because Mr. Rochester is desirous of her, to deny herself to him is to hold him in her power. Jane not only reverses the sentiments Mr. Rochester wants her to repeat, she reverses their positions as well.

By her words, Jane is able to force Mr. Rochester to understand that he wields no authority over her that she does not willingly give to him herself. Mr. Rochester says,

*Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage—with a stern triumph. Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature!...Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling-place.*

(Bronte 318)

His understanding that he cannot force Jane to do anything reveals the extent of his own powerlessness, since she is what he wants the most. He realizes that although he may physically force Jane to remain at Thornfield, it would do him no good because while her body may be imprisoned, her will is still her own. Nothing can avail Mr. Rochester of Jane except her own decision to do so.
It appears that Jane can only be with Mr. Rochester when he is in a position similar to her own. She initially refuses to stay with him because there are too many ways in which she is not his equal. Jane cannot stand to be Mr. Rochester’s mistress, viewed as “low” in her own eyes. This shows that Jane respects herself too much to compromise her moral integrity for him—she understands that she can never truly hold the status of wife while Bertha is still alive. Furthermore, she would only end up being a dependent on Mr. Rochester since she has no money or connections of her own to speak of. Since agreeing to stay with him at that point would simultaneously devalue her self-worth and compromise her independence, Jane makes the decision to part ways.

When Jane ultimately returns to Mr. Rochester, it is on her own terms. The fire at Thornfield Hall eliminates the barriers to their union. Bertha is dead, so she can lawfully become his wife. Also, because Mr. Rochester has cut himself off from society, he no longer has the societal connections he previously possesses. In the interim, Jane has obtained both a small fortune of her own as well as a few connections (in the form of family). Therefore, socially, Jane can now be considered Mr. Rochester’s equal. Moreover, because Mr. Rochester has become deformed, he is physically dependent upon Jane. Being needed places Jane in a position of power—one she does not abuse. This demonstrates that Jane is content with equality and seeks nothing more.

Mr. Rochester’s dependence upon Jane is nothing new. In fact, throughout the story, Jane is always useful to Mr. Rochester in one way or another. For example, she supports him after he falls off his horse, she rescues him from his burning bed, and she helps take care of his friend Mason after he is attacked by Bertha. In each of these situations, Mr. Rochester welcomes Jane’s help, even though doing so lessens his
authority (insofar as revealing his limitations). If not a demonstration of equality in itself, these instances can at the very least be interpreted as Mr. Rochester’s acknowledgement of Jane’s value to the extent that she is useful to him. However, as becomes evident, this kind of value is not enough for Jane, and it is only when the other obstacles to their equality are eliminated that she is content.

Jane’s aversion to inequality can also be seen in her brief time with St. John Rivers. When he asks Jane to marry him, she refuses partly because she cannot stomach the idea of having to conform to his desires. She says, “But as his wife—at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital—this would be unendurable” (Bronte 407-8). Jane feels being St. John’s wife would rob her of her selfhood. To repress her true nature and mold herself into what he wants her to be, to give herself up entirely, is a sacrifice she is unwilling to make. It would be tantamount to admitting that St. John’s desires are more important than her own. Because Jane sees that she and St. John can never be true equals, she refuses.

Upon refusing St. John’s offer of marriage, Jane is met with disapproval. She says, “I read well in his iron silence all he felt towards me: the disappointment of an expected submission—the disapprobation of a cool, inflexible judgment, which has detected in another feelings and views in which it has no power to sympathize” (Bronte 409). Jane’s refusal to comply with St. John’s request displeases him because she is not behaving as the submissive, obliging woman he expects her to be (which society has taught him to expect). She does not meet St. John’s idea of a “proper” woman, so she is met with
disapproval. Yet, because Jane remains steadfast in her refusal to join herself to someone who would never appreciate her in the way she believes she deserves, and she does not submit to St. John’s will, she comes across as bold.

Mr. Rochester and St. John Rivers both take on the role of Jane’s oppressor at different points, similar to her cousin John Reed from childhood. However, Jane’s reactions to these males as an adult differ from when she is a child. Instead of resorting to name-calling and violent actions, Jane wields words as her weapon. It is evident that as Jane has matured, her nature has become calmer, and she is better able to express her feelings. While Jane is at times quite forward in her speech, it is not to the point of being outright disrespectful. Using words, Jane is able to distance herself from situations which would have resulted in her subjugation. Ultimately, she stands out as a symbol of female empowerment in a time when social and gender role conformity was the norm.

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The second female character in *Jane Eyre* who does not conform to social expectation is Mr. Rochester’s first wife, Bertha Mason. Although she is a secondary character and does not often appear in the course of the novel, her existence plays an important role in the text. Firstly, Bertha’s imprisonment in the attic of Thornfield Hall is yet another example of female confinement within a domestic space. This is reminiscent of the incident with Jane and the red-room. Bertha is confined to her room in the attic because she is deemed “mad,” and is thus unfit to associate with other members of the household or society. In her case, her confinement is not at the hands of another woman, but at the hands of a man, her own husband.
The reader is never expressly told the nature of Bertha’s madness, and the most troubling aspect is that her madness is entirely defined by the men in her life. There initially exists only Mr. Rochester’s testimony that Bertha is mad, and she is subsequently diagnosed as mad by a male doctor (her own brother). Bertha’s madness is characterized in part by her strange behavior, namely her unnerving laughter and tendency to attack men. On separate occasions, she attacks her own brother and sets Mr. Rochester’s bed on fire. But not once does Bertha attack her female caretaker, Grace Poole. It appears Bertha only lashes out against those who she knows are primarily responsible for her imprisonment. This female entrapment by male-defined boundaries can be taken as a microcosmic representation of patriarchal society.

Bertha’s madness is partly characterized by her outward appearance. When she is finally revealed to Jane, Jane’s first impression is of something inhuman. She says, “The clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet” (Bronte 293). By using the word “hyena” to describe Bertha, she is likened her to a wild animal; this functions to characterize her as uncontrollable and dangerous. Here, Bertha’s appearance is thought of as being so far from the norm that she does not even resemble a human, much less a woman. Furthermore, the fact that she is a “clothed hyena” suggests that clothing (used to distinguish one as a member of society) fails to disguise the animal within. It can be said that the act of clothing Bertha is an attempt to re-humanize and domesticate her, to return her to being a proper Victorian woman.

The focus placed on outward appearance draws attention to the ways in which attire and countenance are used as factors in judging what is and is not socially acceptable. There is a point where Mr. Rochester compares Bertha’s appearance with that
of Jane, in order to justify his rationale for keeping the former secret and wishing to marry the latter. He says, “Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder—this face with that mask—this form with that bulk” (Bronte 294). By juxtaposing the two women, Mr. Rochester draws a greater contrast. Bertha and Jane appear to be complete opposites; Jane is petite, quiet, reserved, and obedient, while Bertha is none of these things. In using grotesque and unflattering imagery to describe his wife, Mr. Rochester vilifies Bertha.

Moreover, Bertha’s behavior certainly does not conform to what society considers appropriate for a woman. When she attacks Mr. Rochester, it becomes evident that she not only looks like an animal but behaves like one as well. The reader is told, “The lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek” (Bronte 293). It is evident that Bertha is confined because her behavior deviates from the norm to such a large degree. Even her own husband cannot, either by authority or physical force, exercise any degree of meaningful control over her. In this way, Bertha subverts the traditional male-female power dynamic between husband and wife; she not only offers resistance to her constraint, but chooses to do so in a display of savagery.

To Mr. Rochester, Bertha’s madness places her in an unreachable place, and thus he seeks to distance himself from her. The most obvious method of distancing involves her imprisonment in a room in the attic (apart from the rest of the house), and in a residence which is situated in relatively remote location. Another way this distancing is seen is with naming. Throughout the text, Bertha is never referred to as “Mrs. Rochester,” but rather retains her own maiden name. She is not defined as an extension of her husband because Mr. Rochester does not desire it to be so. To him, her behavior is ill-
befitting of a wife, and it brings him great shame. To a large extent, it can be said that
Bertha’s madness functions to grant her independence.

Bertha’s imprisonment can also be construed as the symbolic repression of female
sexuality. While confined in the attic, she is continually kept separate from her husband,
and her only company is that of another woman. Even though Bertha’s status as Mr.
Rochester’s wife gives her the right to sleep with him, he denies her the possibility of
doing so. By locking Bertha in the attic, Mr. Rochester effectively represses the
expression of her sexuality. He may do this as a form of revenge for Bertha’s previous
“unchaste” behavior. In relating his tale to Jane, Mr. Rochester tells her that Bertha’s
actions caused him “hideous and degrading agonies” (Bronte 306). In light of this
information, one purpose of Bertha’s imposed chastity may be to punish her for her prior
sexual liberties.

Besides being an example of a woman who does not conform to society, Bertha
Mason serves another important function in this novel. She can be seen as Jane’s
double— a representative who acts out on Jane’s suppressed desires. Just as Bertha is
hidden away in the attic, kept under constant lock and guard, so are Jane’s desires. There
are instances where Jane finds herself with sentiments which are not appropriate for her
to express, or which she may find hard to express. In such times, Bertha escapes from
confinement and makes her appearance in the lower chambers of Thornfield Hall.
Bertha’s appearance is always accompanied by some sort of violent outburst which tallies
with what Jane is either consciously or subconsciously feeling at the time.

For example, the night after Mr. Rochester recounts to Jane his sexual exploits
during youth, Bertha sets his bed on fire. These physical flames are symbolic of the
flames of sexual desire which one can assume awakened within Jane upon hearing his tale. However, Jane herself is unaware of the extent of the feelings she harbors for Mr. Rochester, or even perhaps unwilling to voice such matters because to do so would go against proper decorum. Therefore, this suppressed desire manifests itself in Bertha’s actions instead. Indeed, the flames consuming Mr. Rochester’s bed are wild and uncontrollable, similar to how Bertha herself is characterized. And as is the case with suppressed emotions, Jane’s come out stronger than before. Here, the flames provide Jane with a metaphorical release.

Interestingly, after Bertha sets the bed on fire, Jane almost immediately works to put it out (also metaphorically extinguishing the flames of her passion). Taking water, Jane “baptized the couch afresh” (Bronte 148). This choice of words is interesting because baptism generally refers to a process whose end goal is to cleanse and purify. It is possible that in dousing the flames, Jane is trying to metaphorically cleanse herself of impure thoughts. The fact that the two actions (setting the bed on fire and trying to put out the flames) are so contrary to each other is further indicative of Jane’s dual nature. There exists the “controlled” Jane who is presented to the public and the “uncontrolled” Jane (in the form of Bertha) who must constantly be kept locked away.

Bertha’s next appearance occurs two nights prior to Jane’s wedding to Mr. Rochester. Jane is nervous about the wedding, claiming, “A sense of anxious excitement distressed me” (Bronte 281). This, coupled with her reservations about marrying Mr. Rochester, is what occasions Bertha’s second emergence downstairs. Recounting the event, Jane says that after trying on the veil, Bertha “removed my veil from its giant head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them” (Bronte 284). Not
coincidentally, Bertha’s actions seem to disparage the institution of marriage at a time when Jane is most hesitant to marry Mr. Rochester. Because Jane has not achieved equality with Mr. Rochester at this point, she cannot marry him.

Bertha’s third appearance happens soon after Jane leaves Thornfield Hall. “Jane’s profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester’s mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the home and destroys herself in the process, as if she were an agent of Jane’s desire as well as her own” (Gilbert and Gubar 360). Jane’s departure frees her both physically and metaphorically, and it is an act which is mirrored by Bertha. Bertha not only escapes the room in the attic, but also achieves her own freedom through death. Just as Jane leaves Thornfield behind by choice, Bertha jumps from the burning building by choice. Both of these are acts of rebellion against Mr. Rochester’s authority—he wants Jane to remain and for Bertha to not jump, but ultimately neither of these wishes is granted.

It is only in instances where Jane is not “present” that Bertha appears. With the instances of the burning bed and the torn wedding veil, Jane is asleep or semi-asleep, and therefore she is not consciously present. With the burning of Thornfield, Jane is physically not present. It is the case that in whenever Jane experiences an extreme emotion that remains unvoiced or an internal conflict which remains unresolved, Bertha shows up. Furthermore, there is a direct correlation between the extremity of Bertha’s actions and the strength of Jane’s suppressed feelings. She is not only Jane’s double but also her freed self, insofar as the acts she carries out provide Jane with a sense of catharsis. Most importantly, Bertha’s actions constitute a rejection of patriarchal society and its institutions, a stronger but still similar sentiment to what Jane feels.
While reading through Jane Eyre, there is a small section in the text which immediately draws the reader’s attention because it seems very out of place. This section requires particular focus because of the nature of its contents. When Jane is pacing on the third floor of Thornfield Hall soon after her arrival, her thoughts wander as she stares off into the hills in the distance. She (as the narrator) says,

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Bronte 109)

This passage is especially interesting because of its seemingly radical insight into women’s minds. Firstly, it points out how society expects women to always behave with restraint. There is an implication that under the current social arrangement, women feel as though they are suffocating because of restrictions in what they can and cannot do. The speaker also maintains that women are the same as men, and continues by bringing up the question of why they cannot be treated in an equal manner.

Furthermore, the speaker takes issue with fact that a woman’s range of entertainment and activity was largely restricted to domestic chores and hobbies. Here,
there exists the implication that women are allowed to do only these things because men do not think they are capable of doing anything which demands greater strength or mind power. Additionally, the speaker points to the social stigma which exists if women wish to perform activities that men have not deemed acceptable for them to do. Overall, the passage is arguing that women are capable of doing more than men credit them for, that men treat them far too inferiorly and have too little confidence in their abilities. The reader leaves with the feeling that conformation to social norms is extremely stifling for women of this period.

Although Jane does seek equality of the sexes in the novel, she never otherwise so explicitly states her opinions. Therefore, it is much more likely that this passage is an instance where the author’s thoughts creep their way into the narrative, resulting in a blurring of the distinction between Jane the narrator and Charlotte Bronte the narrator. It would make sense that the sentiments expressed in this passage are actually Bronte’s; ultimately, Bronte is the one writing this novel about a woman seeking gender equality. Although the appearance of this passage is unexpected to readers, it does not in any way detract from the novel. Instead, it can be said to actually complement the work insofar as it clarifies the meaning behind Jane’s insistence on being treated equally. The character of Jane Eyre carries not only the burden of her own wants and desires, but also those of all the women during this period who may feel trapped in the same situations but were unable to speak out.
Chapter 3: *Lady Audley’s Secret*

In Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novel *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the protagonist Lady Audley can be called a protofeminist character for the many ways in which she works to undermine male authority and for her various deviations from female gender norms throughout the text. By utilizing her capability for rational thinking, she takes advantage of social perception to misrepresent herself to others, she undermines the institution of marriage, she ventures outside the domestic female sphere, and she brings physical harm to men. Although ultimately Lady Audley’s freedoms are curbed by her confinement in a mental institution, her actions in the rest of the novel can be construed as a direct challenge to Victorian female social norms and demonstrate great female agency for her time.

Lady Audley understands how society judges people, and she utilizes this knowledge to her advantage. During this time period, outward appearances were frequently used (and are still used today) as a means of determining people’s personalities and attributes, especially of those with whom one is not well acquainted. However, this often leads to generalizations and social misconceptions. Those who see Lady Audley equate her beauty with a good heart, believing that one is naturally linked to the other. Yet in reality, outward appearances may reveal very little about one’s interiority. The ugly may be kind, or the beautiful may be wicked (as is the case here). The superficiality of these determinations is what allows Lady Audley to construct this image of herself as a kind and innocent woman.

Lady Audley is outwardly the picture of the ideal woman, possessing grace, beauty, and kindness, and excelling at tasks such as piano playing. Therefore, those who
are acquainted with her think of her as an angel who can do no wrong, including her husband Sir Michael. This is why it is so difficult for Sir Michael to accept the truth about Lady Audley later on; there exists incongruence between her outward appearances and what is being said of her. It is these social conceptions about who Lady Audley is which lend her credence when she attempts to cast suspicion away from herself under Robert’s accusations. Such focus is placed on exterior appearances that very little consideration is given to what lies on the inside. Lady Audley uses this to her advantage, such as when she plays up her “feminine weaknesses” in order to influence Sir Michael.

The true nature of Lady Audley’s character is revealed when the circumstances surrounding her previous marriage come to light. Because the destitution she suffers in her first marriage does not suit her, she decides to take matters into her own hands. However, by starting a new life under a new identity and marrying Sir Michael for his money, she makes a mockery of the institution of marriage. Although it was common for women to marry for financial security and social betterment during this period, Lady Audley’s case is problematic due to the deceptive nature of her actions. She knowingly marries Sir Michael even though she is technically still married to George Talboys, simply because it is the easiest and most convenient path to self-gain. Through her actions, Lady Audley comes across as very calculating.

Lady Audley’s marriage to Sir Michael is one indicator of her shrewd nature. To her, marriage is a way to raise herself out of poverty. Upon accepting his proposal, she bluntly tells him, “I do not love any one in the world” (Braddon 16). To Lady Audley, love does not factor into the equation. She knows what she wants, and she acts in a manner which will allow her to obtain it as soon as possible. In a sense, this is what she
does throughout the novel. This quote is also important because if Lady Audley truly
never loved anyone, then her previous marriage to George Talboys is also one of
financial convenience. Because her first husband’s funds run out, he is no longer useful to
her and thus becomes disposable. She views both of these men’s usefulness as a direct
product of their financial benefit to her, so in this sense she is “using” them for their
value, much like goods in commerce.

As a result of being married to Sir Michael, it becomes exponentially harder for
Lady Audley to tell the truth, since it would mean risking the loss of her newfound
fortune as well as her elevated status in the eyes of the community. George Talboys’s
return poses a direct threat to the lifestyle Lady Audley has built for herself, necessitating
her to find a way to rectify the situation in her favor. It is not altogether surprising that
she turns to murder as a solution, since concealment has failed and this new option is the
quickest means by which she can attain her goal. Needless to say, this is not an option
most women would have chosen. Lady Audley differs from other women in that she is
characterized by action instead of passivity. This is what gives her a uniquely masculine
quality.

There is a scene in the novel where Lady Audley boards a train to London by
herself in order to prevent her secret from being found out. This act demonstrates her
boldness because she leaves the domestic space of Audley Court, by her own admission,
“without my dear darling’s knowledge” (Braddon 127). Previously, her excursions from
Audley Court consisted mainly of a social nature, and Sir Michael always knew her
whereabouts. Or, as is the case when Lady Audley receives a letter purportedly from her
former employer Mrs. Vincent, she is accompanied by Sir Michael. Therefore, it appears
that before this point, Lady Audley never leaves Audley Court without either her husband’s knowledge or the company of her husband himself. It was considered unsafe for ladies to travel by themselves.

In going to London by herself, Lady Audley demonstrates her own confidence. She neither wants nor needs accompaniment on her journey because she believes she is capable of resolving the issue on her own. Also, it must be noted that her decision to go to London is made without hesitation. Sensing danger from Robert’s investigation, Lady Audley is quick to take action, which exhibits her decisive character. Importantly, this incident also shows that Lady Audley is not confined to the domestic space like other women; rather, her actions seem to say that she can come and go as she wishes. This not only reveals her independent spirit, but also a seeming disregard for the social laws governing proper female behavior. She acts in ways which are convenient to her.

Lady Audley’s time in London is also significant because it is suspected that she enters into some sort of business transaction with the local locksmith. Though never proven, Robert believes she bribes the locksmith to meddle with the locks in George Talboys’s room at Fig-tree Court in order to remove damaging evidence. In engaging the locksmith’s services, Lady Audley enters the world of commerce. This is noteworthy because commerce was traditionally relegated to the male public sphere, and it was very uncommon for a woman of her time to be involved in such matters. In many ways, Lady Audley appears hermaphroditical in conduct. Although she can be this domestic woman, when pressured she also shows great initiative in seeking and obtaining the fulfillment of her goals.
Another instance of Lady Audley’s boldness can be seen when her nephew Robert threatens to dig up the grounds in search of George Talboys’s body. Because Lady Audley fears the consequences she faces should the body be found, she verbally retaliates against him. “‘You shall never live to do this,’ she said. ‘I will kill you first’” (Braddon 235). These words are shocking because Lady Audley is threatening the use of violence against a man, a behavior which can be considered bold in its breakage of appropriate gender behavior for the time. Also, because at this point Robert possesses knowledge of Lady Audley’s deeds, he holds power over her. Lady Audley seeks to verbally intimidate Robert in order to regain some of the control she has lost, as well as to empower herself to take action. This is similar to Jane’s situation with her cousin John.

Later on, when Lady Audley is trying to persuade Sir Michael that Robert is insane, it is said, “She had been transformed from a frivolous childish beauty into a woman, strong to argue her cause and plead her own defence” (Braddon 245). The word “strong” is used here because what Lady Audley is doing is uncommon for most women to do. The phrasing of the sentence makes Lady Audley sound like an attorney, which is ironic because that was not a profession women were allowed in at the time. Moreover, she is able to utilize language to persuade her husband of Robert’s insanity, even though the usage of rhetoric was largely attributed to men in the public sphere. In this way, Lady Audley demonstrates that she possesses some masculine qualities.

Fearing what would happen should Robert reveal the truth to her husband, she feels compelled to take direct action and go to the inn at Mount Stanning by herself. This is the second instance in which she ventures out of Audley Court without Sir Michael’s knowledge or accompaniment. Yet even in a state of anxiety, Lady Audley demonstrates
that she can be logical in her planning. She takes great pains to sneak out of the house unnoticed. She says, “To have attempted to leave the house by any of the principal outlets would have been madness” (Braddon 268). Lady Audley is able to use her knowledge of the servants’ routines in locking up the property, as well as her husband’s sleeping habits, to facilitate her plan. If no one sees her leave Audley Court, it is easy for her to deny that she is ever at the inn.

Lady Audley further demonstrates her capability for logical thinking at the inn. Firstly, she takes advantage of the fact that Luke and the proprietor are drunk and are not very aware of their surroundings, or her actions. Secondly, she utilizes the knowledge Phoebe provides her that the building almost catches fire several times in the past due to carelessness and the inn’s cheap structure. Next, she locks the door to the room she believes Robert to be sleeping in, to prevent any chance of escape. Finally, she goes upstairs, secretly and strategically placing the candle close to some lace so that “the starched muslin seemed to draw the flame towards it” (Braddon 276). By doing all of this, Lady Audley is able to make the fire at the inn seem accidental, and is able to eliminate her greatest obstacle at the same time. Once more, her calculating nature is shown.

As in Jane Eyre, the fire in Lady Audley’s Secret functions to cleanse and release. This fire is a physical manifestation of Lady Audley’s passion—a passion which emerges in times of great inner turmoil and desperation. By unleashing fire, she is able to achieve a form of emotional release. For a while after the fire, Lady Audley believes herself rid of two sources of ire: Luke Marks and her nephew Robert. Fittingly, the single act of burning down the inn serves to rid Lady Audley of the two men who have the most power over her. Luke holds secrets about Lady Audley’s doings over her in order to
extort money from her. Robert has the power to ruin her life if she reveals the truth about her past to Sir Michael. Furthermore, the destruction of the inn is significant because it eliminates the only physical reminder of Lady Audley’s “debt” to Luke. The intentional arson of the inn not only shows her boldness, but also serves as an example of how she subverts male control over her.

Lady Audley is also shown to be cunning. When left with no other alternative but to confess to her crimes, Lady Audley is able to seek a way out of her situation. She says, “I killed [George Talboys] because I AM MAD!” and claims that “[her] mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance” (Braddon 294). The focus should not be on whether or not Lady Audley is actually mad, but that she utilizes this supposed madness to her advantage. By claiming that she is mad, she places herself in an unreachable place, much like Bertha Mason. She understands that by claiming insanity, she is no longer bound by society’s rules for behavior, and that her actions cannot be judged as harshly by society. It would no longer matter if she behaved inappropriately for a woman, because the plea of madness largely excuses her from reprimand and punishment. Her actions would be attributed to illness instead of malice, thus providing her with a convenient excuse.

Lady Audley further demonstrates her cunning when she later explains the rationale behind her confession to Robert. She says, “You see I do not fear to make my confession to you . . . you dare not use it against me, because you know it would kill your uncle to see me in a criminal dock” (Braddon 336). Lady Audley understands that by telling Robert the truth, she is shielded from punishment by law. She is aware that Robert’s consideration for the feelings of his uncle prevents him from divulging the
details of her actions; therefore, her case will not be made public and she will not be judged by society. The only retribution she suffers is being institutionalized in a madhouse, but since the terms of her confinement involve her identity being kept a secret, her social image does not suffer.

According to Jonathan Loesberg, “Although Lady Audley plays the role of villainous conspirator for most of the novel, she becomes a figure of sympathy at the end because it is she who has experienced a loss of place, from aristocrat to fictionally named occupant of an insane asylum” (Loesberg 120). While is true, Loesberg fails to adequately acknowledge the significance behind Lady Audley’s loss of name. Throughout the novel, Lady Audley is constantly redefining herself. She obtains fluidity of identity through the different names she assumes. At different times she is Helen Maldon, Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham, and Lady Audley. A large part of her authority is derived from the power to determine her name, whether through marriage or simply for an alias. She does not have to be anyone she does not want to be, either to herself or to society.

When comparing *Lady Audley’s Secret* with *Jane Eyre*, it becomes apparent that Lady Audley and Jane share similarities in how they use aliases. Upon leaving Thornfield Hall and meeting St. John Rivers for the first time, Jane introduces herself as Jane Elliott. This discarding of her old name is symbolic of discarding a past which she wishes to forget, the same as in Lady Audley’s case. The use of an alias provides these women with a degree of freedom insofar as it gives them an opportunity to start anew, having escaped from their respective oppressive males. However, while Lady Audley easily adapts to her new identity every time, Jane is not comfortable with assuming a different identity. Jane
admits, “It is not my real name, and when I hear it, it sounds strange to me” (Bronte 348). Because Jane is not used to switching identities to deceive others, she has trouble getting used to it.

Regarding the acquisition of a new name through marriage, Lady Audley marries Sir Michael and takes his last name because it is convenient for her self-gain. She acquires wealth and status, but does not truly lose her autonomy because she can discard him easily (she thinks about poisoning Sir Michael at one point). Meanwhile, when Jane becomes Mrs. Jane Rochester, she is defined as an extension of her husband, and she loses the autonomy she maintains up until that point because she needs her husband in an emotional way which Lady Audley does not. Yet, it is important to note that both these women are the ones who decide to enter into marriage, so they are the ones determining who they want to be. In this way, they possess a degree of authority over themselves through naming.

However, Lady Audley’s situation is unique because she loses this power to name herself as soon as Robert places her into a madhouse. Robert robs her of this privilege by granting her the name Madame Taylor, the name Lady Audley is to be known by until her death. He exercises a degree of control over her in doing this. As a consequence, her identity becomes static. In light of Lady Audley’s duplicitous character, the irony of her last identity being false is not lost. Furthermore, in granting Lady Audley the name of Madame Taylor, he gives her a fictive husband (as the title Madame was reserved for married women), tying her down metaphorically in the social institution of marriage whereby the female identity is lost. This action can be seen as an attempt to transform Lady Audley into a socio-normative female.
Throughout the novel, Robert is a figure always in active pursuit of the truth. His ultimate goal is to prove Lady Audley’s guilt, with one of the rewards being the power to determine her punishment. This chase of the erring woman transforms him into “a pitiless embodiment of justice, a cruel instrument of retribution” (Braddon 231). This description likens him to a higher being, and in a sense that sort of control is what Robert is after. In actively working to bring Lady Audley to justice, he is essentially trying to “lower” her so that he is the one in control and she is at his mercy. Robert’s actions can be construed as an attempt to restore the male-female power dynamic to its pre-corrupted state, and his pursuit of justice provides a convenient excuse to do this.

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As in Jane Eyre, duplicity also appears in Lady Audley’s Secret. Lady Audley’s duplicity is hinted at towards the middle of the novel. The most prominent example of this can be seen in the portrait of her which is kept in her quarters. While Lady Audley is generally considered to be beautiful and kind by those acquainted with her, the portrait depicts something entirely different when viewed by Robert. He sees “a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange sinister light to the deep blue eyes,” believing the artist has given her “pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look” (Braddon 65). It is unclear whether it is the artist’s rendering which captures a darker side of Lady Audley unseen by others, or if the sinister aspect is simply a product of Robert’s own impression. However, Robert attributes the darkness to the artist and not the lady.

It can be said that the painter of the portrait sees Lady Audley in a different light than those who surround her in daily life. An artist is tasked only with rendering a likeness of the subject, and while working, is generally not engaged in conversation with
the subject. Therefore, it is interesting to wonder what the artist reads in Lady Audley’s countenance during the absence of speech (one of the tools of Lady Audley’s charm). It was widely thought during this time period that a person’s physiognomy was a gateway through which one’s true inner self could be seen. One must wonder if Lady Audley’s portrait contained “something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend” because that is what the artist saw within her. (Braddon 65) Nevertheless, the painting functions to foreshadow Lady Audley’s later actions.

Of particular interest is the moment in which she locks the door to Robert’s room at Mount Stanning. It is said, “A horrible expression came over her face, and she turned the key in the lock; she turned it twice, double locking the door” (Braddon 275). It is no coincidence that a “horrible expression” appears on her face right before she carries out the deed most likely to result in Robert’s death. This expression is reminiscent of the one Lady Audley wears in her painting, which appears to depict a darker side of her. It seems to be the case that this darker part of herself emerges in times of great emotional turmoil, such as in response to situations where she feels especially trapped and powerless. The appearance of this “evil” face is necessarily accompanied by an “evil” act.

Perhaps the question which lingers even at the end of the novel is whether or not Lady Audley is mad. Simply put, she is not mad; rather, her at times outrageous behavior can be attributed to a unique panic response. When she is trapped in situations she cannot escape from, she behaves in an erratic manner very different from her usual behavior. This is when the darker side of Lady Audley makes its appearance. For example, her first husband’s reappearance presents a huge problem for Lady Audley, for several reasons. Cornered, she pushes George Talboys down a well. Although it is an act of violence, it is
more a conscious act of self-preservation than of intentional harm. The reason Lady Audley never feels murderous urges in daily life is because she is usually not driven to such extremes in emotion.

It is these acts brought about by a sense of entrapment which Lady Audley herself attributes to madness, and which Robert believes is madness as well. When Robert consults Dr. Mosgrave for professional advice, he is told the exact same thing. Dr. Mosgrave concludes, “When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that” (Braddon 321). It is hard for Robert to accept this because he would rather think Lady Audley mad than think her capable of committing such unspeakable crimes. Because those kinds of acts do not tally with the image of the proper woman he has in mind, he rejects them completely and seeks an alternative solution (one more comfortable to him).

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Just as in Jane Eyre, Lady Audley’s Secret contains an instance in the text where it seems the author takes over the narrative and inserts her own opinion. This takes place when Robert Audley is musing to himself over dinner one night. He thinks, “To call [women] the weaker sex is a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, soldiers, legislators—anything they like” (Braddon 178). Here, it is being acknowledged that women are not as weak or helpless as society portrays them to be. Their qualities are
being championed as being greater than those of men in many ways, something which is not usually heard of for that time.

Furthermore, this passage is advocating for women’s right to practice professions they are traditionally not allowed in, professions society generally delegated to men. This quote is saying that contrary to popular belief, women possess the intelligence and capacity for rational thinking to be able to do these jobs. At the same time, this quote also functions to highlight the restraints which are placed on women of the time, insofar as it juxtaposes what women are capable of doing with what they are actually doing. To some extent, social conceptions of gender roles act as a veil which shields women by portraying them as incapable of doing more than the simplest domestic tasks (such as sewing, drawing, or raising children). It is this misconception which is played upon in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

It seems quite improbable that Robert Audley would be so familiar with the desires of women in the face of their social constraints, or that he would be advocating for women’s rights. Rather, it is more likely that Braddon is using her character’s philosophical musings as a way to express her own beliefs on the matter within the text. In so doing, Braddon does not come across to her contemporary readers as holding or expressing these sentiments herself, but can hide behind the fictive status of her narrative. Viewing the quote in this light, one can draw certain conclusions about how Braddon herself felt about women’s roles during the Victorian era, namely that they are capable of more than men credit them for, and that they possess aspirations which are curbed by social tradition.

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Sensation novels such as *Lady Audley’s Secret* function to highlight the severe limitations women had to endure under the patriarchal legal system. Under the 1857 Matrimonial Clauses Act, there existed two types of divorce. The first was divorce *a mensa*, which equates to what would be called a “legal separation” today. In this form of divorce, “Three grounds were recognized—adultery, sodomy, and (physical) cruelty; the procedure cost from £300 to £500 (when uncontested); and if granted, the divorce relieved the two parties from the obligation to cohabit but forbade remarriage by either party” (Poovey 55). The second was divorce *a vinculo* (what we consider divorce today) which involved longer proceedings but allowed both husband and wife to remarry. This type of divorce was estimated to cost around £1000.

Regardless of the form of divorce, it was still easier for men in England to obtain divorces than it was for women. A man only had to claim his wife committed adultery, but a woman had to show her husband had committed adultery in conjunction with other wrongdoings such as those listed above. This law was evidently biased against women, being itself a product of a patriarchal society. Although it can be argued that this Act afforded women greater rights than they had previously, the fact remains that women were still at a great disadvantage socially. Helen Talboys (not yet Lady Audley) does not have the legal power to obtain a divorce because her situation does not satisfy any of these conditions, and she evidently cannot afford to pay these kinds of exorbitant costs. As a consequence, she is trapped in a situation where she must contend with poverty while stuck trying to supporting a family on her own.

Furthermore, even if Helen could obtain a divorce, it was not likely that she would have done so. At the time, divorces were considered to be scandalous, and the
women involved in them were always left with a bad reputation, whether or not they were actually guilty of any wrongdoing. Thus, Helen is essentially left helpless, and George Talboyes’s promise that he will return after he makes his fortune does absolutely nothing to aid her with her current situation. Because she has no legal power, she chooses to empower herself and start a new life using the resources available to her, namely her own intelligence and cunning. Yet, it is ultimately in trying to preserve this new life she creates (out of necessity) that she is deemed insane by social standards. Either way, it seems the same problem persists: she is trapped by society due to her status as a woman.

Additionally, sensation novels presented a new type of woman which starkly contrasted with the traditional wife or mother. In Lady Audley’s Secret, Lady Audley’s rejection of motherhood is a key point. As Helen Talboyes, she finds herself unable to love her own child because he serves as a physical representation of her inability to escape her situation. She says, “I did not love the child, for he had been left a burden on my hands” (Braddon 300). Having to be a caretaker for her son is restricting for Helen, so she sheds this label of “mother” through an act of child abandonment. Even after she becomes Lady Audley, she does not ever take on this label again. In no way does she attempt to behave as a mother to Alicia, or even interact with her beyond what is necessary for civility. Because this behavior distances Alicia, Alicia can never see Lady Audley as any sort of mother (which may be the goal). Thus, Lady Audley is successful in her escape from motherhood.

Lady Audley also rejects traditional wifehood to a certain extent, especially when considering her first marriage. Helen is happy to be George Talboyes’s wife as long as he has money and can provide her with whatever she wants. However, as soon as the money
runs out, her attitude changes. When George leaves to seek a fortune, instead of waiting for him, Helen marries another man. She completely disregards and delegitimizes her marriage vows in the process. Even when accepting Sir Michael’s proposal, she says, “I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance” (Braddon 15). Evidently, she marries him for his money and social status, and not out of love. The patriarchal system encourages marriage, but Lady Audley manages to twist it to use for her own advantage. She distorts society’s definition of wifehood for personal gain; there is no fidelity and no love.

Moreover, Lady Audley is a character who casts off female restraints. In considering the text as a whole, a pattern begins to emerge concerning Lady Audley and the males in the novel. It appears that she bears some sort of antagonism against the opposite sex. The child she abandons is male, she pushes her husband George Talboys down a well, and she sets fire to the Castle Inn where two men (Luke Marks and Robert Audley) are residing. What these males have in common is that they are all responsible for hindering Lady Audley in some manner. Her son ties her down to traditional motherhood and the domestic life she wishes to leave behind, George Talboys binds her to the marriage she wishes to escape from, and Luke Marks and Robert Audley both threaten her newfound lifestyle.

It is unknown whether or not Lady Audley’s Secret was written with male oppressiveness in mind, or if it was intentional that Lady Audley tends to demonstrate particularly unfeminine behavior and engage in acts of rebellion specifically against these “oppressors.” Nevertheless, the obstacles she faces, caused by the males in the novel, function to portray the male sex as a barrier to true female freedom. There is this idea that
it is not only male constructs such as female social expectation which work to inhibit a woman’s happiness, but the males themselves. Lady Audley’s actions pose a threat to masculinity and the male tradition. She makes a strong statement that she does not need to be a mother, a wife, or a perfect angelic creature in order to be a woman.

According to Patrick Brantlinger, “The plots of sensation novels lead to the unmasking of extreme evil behind fair appearances. In doing so, they threatened their first readers’ cherished assumptions about women, marriage, and the fair appearances of the Victorian scene” (Brantlinger 11). Indeed, Lady Audley is nothing like what she appears to be on the outside. This text and others like it were important because they worked to shatter preconceived notions their contemporary readers held about women, while also highlighting several problems women faced under the patriarchal society. It could be said that texts such as *Lady Audley’s Secret* are at least partly responsible for changing perceptions of women, allowing them to come across as capable beings in their own right.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

In *Jane Eyre* and *Lady Audley’s Secret*, both Jane Eyre and Lady Audley subvert traditional male authority and establish their own claims to a new female authority. However, they do this in different ways since each feels especially limited by different aspects of the patriarchal society. While Jane actively strives to maintain her equality (and by extension all women’s equality) with the opposite sex in her relations with men, Lady Audley challenges the male-constructed institutions which make it difficult for women to rise out of poor conditions and escape female social constraints. Ultimately, through their actions, both women not only achieve what they strive for, but also demonstrate great female agency. Thus, they can be called protofeminists for their role in constructing and perpetuating the idea of the “progressive woman” during the Victorian period.

It is likely that female authors such as Charlotte Bronte and Mary Elizabeth Braddon featured such strong female characters in their works in order to express their own opinions on the status of women in Victorian society. “Tracing subversive pictures behind socially acceptable facades, they managed to appear to dissociate themselves from their own revolutionary impulses even while passionately enacting such impulses” (Gilbert and Gubar 82-83). The act of writing in itself may have been cathartic for Bronte and Braddon, as it provided them with a means to express excitement and rebellion in their lives without breaking social norms themselves. Protected by the guise of fiction, these authors were able to take greater liberties with their characters and their representations.
Still, Bronte and Braddon could not present overtly protofeminist women in their writings, or else they might have faced public outrage and never have gotten published. Yet by writing instances of female agency into their novels, they were able to voice their opinions without appearing openly critical. These authors’ works draw attention to condition of women in Victorian society and highlight an underlying dissatisfaction with existing gender hierarchy. It is no coincidence that both texts contain short passages where the narrative switches to thoughts whose contents would have been considered radical for the time. It is in these very instances that the reader can distinguish the true intentions of the authors. Undoubtedly, Bronte’s and Braddon’s works are more than what they appear on the surface.

When *Jane Eyre* was first published, it was not published under Charlotte Bronte’s own name. Instead, she used the male pseudonym Currer Bell. One reason Bronte assumed a male persona may have been the discrimination which existed against female writers, as the field of literature was primarily male-dominated at the time. Or, just as likely, because Bronte’s novel contained a female who challenged the idea of the “traditional woman,” she thought it would not be accepted due to its content. By this way of thinking, if the story about the untraditional woman was written by a male, it would less likely be accused of trying to subvert the patriarchy and would not incite as great an outcry compared to if it was written by a female like Bronte. This is the first layer of veiling.

The second layer of veiling comes with the novel’s status as a work of fiction. The use of the bildungsroman genre largely veils the protofeminist aspect of the story, since when viewed as a whole, *Jane Eyre* is a story of a young girl who grows up, learns
to control her emotions, and enters into the social institution of marriage. There is nothing rebellious about that. It is only when readers look closer and consider that Jane’s subversive actions and speech may not actually be only in response to her own situation that the problem emerges. Victorian women did not challenge men as Jane challenges John Reed, Mr. Rochester, and St. John Rivers. One might suspect that the author was trying to implant ideas into female readers’ minds about ways in which they could (and should) fight against male oppression.

Braddon also utilized veiling techniques in writing *Lady Audley’s Secret*. The first way her subversive text was veiled was through the framework of credibility. The Constance Kent case laid the groundwork for Braddon’s novel. Because the events which occurred were widely reported, the public was familiar with the details and thus would see Braddon’s work (published relatively soon after the case was settled) as a fictional and highly exaggerated form of the story. Braddon capitalized on the outrageous nature of Kent’s behavior in order to fashion her own revolutionary character. The actual case unsettled the public because it was unexpected that a female could or would display violence or cause physical harm to another in such a manner. By portraying the same cold-blooded characteristics in her protagonist, Braddon was able to build off Kent’s established notoriety.

Similar to Bronte, Braddon also used genre as her second veiling technique. Her use of the sensation novel genre allowed her to make Lady Audley a more groundbreaking female than any other previous genre would permit. The aim of the sensation novel was to shock its readership, and that is exactly what Braddon did. She managed to alarm her readers not only by portraying Lady Audley’s attempts at
murdering men, but also the extreme degrees she goes to in order to guard her secret. It would have been impossible to accuse Braddon of pushing any sort of protofeminist agenda at the time, for the entire story was simply too inconceivable. Lady Audley shatters the notion of the traditional woman by showing that women are capable of action if necessary, and she shatters the preconception that all women are docile angels.

*Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, while *Lady Audley’s Secret* was published in 1862. It is certain that Braddon drew inspiration from Bronte’s work, for she once described Bronte as “the only genius the weaker sex can point to in literature” (Showalter 154). Evidently, Braddon viewed Bronte as a role model in the field of literature for her innovative portrayals of women. When compared, Braddon’s work comes across as more radical than Bronte’s. While this can partly be attributed to the content of Braddon’s novel, it must be noted that Bronte’s work enabled Braddon to fashion her own protofeminist female character, one capable of reaching for something more than equality. Braddon’s Lady Audley not only demonstrates that a woman can match men in intelligence, but that she can challenge the society men have created.

There are striking similarities between *Jane Eyre* and *Lady Audley’s Secret* which cannot be ignored. Firstly, the protagonists in both stories are initially poor governesses who eventually raise their social status through marriage. Secondly, the theme of bigamy arises in both as well; it comes very close to happening in *Jane Eyre* and actually does happen in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Thirdly, both texts also feature “madness”: Bertha Mason’s in *Jane Eyre* and Lady Audley’s in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. It seems that Braddon was not only inspired by Bronte’s work, but that she also copied these elements. However,
the narrative Braddon spins has a comparatively more protofeminist feel to it, as there is greater emphasis on female agency and rebellion against patriarchal institutions.

It is significant that both Bronte and Braddon choose to feature women who are initially governesses in their works, for governesses carried a special status within society. Governesses were similar to “the middle-class mother in the work she performed” as well as “both a working class man and woman in the wages she received” (Poovey 127). The governesses’ line of work blurred the boundaries between what is traditionally male and what is traditionally female. In this way, it could be said that Jane and Lady Audley’s roles as governesses give them an aspect of duality, which is fitting since doubleness features prominently in both texts. Ultimately, it is unsurprising that female gender roles are challenged by these two women who at the outset already do not fit the idea of the “traditional woman.”

In further comparing the texts, readers will notice that in *Jane Eyre*, the deviant “madwoman” Bertha Mason only exists as a secondary character and is not given much attention. However, in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the “madwoman” Lady Audley is one of the main characters. Furthermore, it could also be argued that *Jane Eyre* contains sensationalist aspects, such as the existence of a madwoman in the attic, and the revelation of shocking plot twists such as Mr. Rochester already being married or the all-consuming fire at Thornfield Hall. Of course, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is riddled with plot twists. Braddon’s work contains several elements of Bronte’s work, but they feature in a seemingly more exaggerated fashion. For all these reasons, one must consider *Jane Eyre* as a precursor or sorts to *Lady Audley’s Secret*. 
Importantly, Bronte and Braddon possessed the ability to write fiction which resonated with their female readers because they were themselves aware of the shared female experience. It can be argued that characters such as Jane and Lady Audley are the manifestations of the deepest desires of the Victorian woman. Women during this period were restricted in their speech, behavior, hobbies, and professions, and faced great difficulty in reconciling their desires with what society dictated they should be. While they may have wished for the greater freedom of movement and expression their male counterparts had, the gap between dreams and reality was far too wide. However, Bronte’s and Braddon’s works allowed them a glimpse into what was possible for them.

As Showalter says, “Women beginning their literary careers in the 1840s were seeking heroines—both professional role models and fictional ideals—who could combine strength and intelligence with feminine tenderness, tact, and domestic expertise. At the same time, they perceived themselves and their fictional heroines as innovators who would provide role-models for future generations” (Showalter 100). Jane Eyre and Lady Audley’s Secret presented women who broke social norms and were unapologetic about their words and actions. These women were bold, and they represented what Victorian women wished they could be. Jane and Lady Audley are innovative because they challenged perceptions of the so-called “weaker sex” and redefined what it meant to be a woman.
Works Cited


