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# “Art Has Well-Nigh Spoiled You”: The Overwhelming System of Things and the (Dis)embodied Woman in *Lady Audley’s Secret*

Han-ying Liu

## ABSTRACT

As one of the most controversial characters in late nineteenth-century literature, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley* is apparently an angel in the house and in reality a cold-blooded murderess. While reception of this sensation novel centers on the issue of Lady Audley’s madness and her culpability, it is hard to overlook her identity’s deep rootedness in things. This essay aims to discuss the overwhelming system of things in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, things upon which she struggles to construct her identities and yet which prove to metaphorically (de)limit, dismember, and devour her body. The essay consists of five parts, each discussing one system of things surrounding Lady Audley’s body. The first part examines the issues of vanity, consumerism, and commodification via discussing glass objects within the text. The second part continues the deliberation upon glass by exploring the imageries of conservatory and hothouse flowers. The third part contemplates the themes of imprisonment and display via Braddon’s imagery of “iron and glass,” which also echoes the 1851 Crystal Palace. The fourth part discusses domestication and domesticity via imageries of wax dolls and doll houses. The fifth part observes how paper enwraps and carries both Lady Audley’s secrets and her actual body parts, metaphorically dismembering her.

**KEYWORDS** *Lady Audley’s Secret*, sensation novel, things, materiality, materialism, Cinderella

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**Han-ying LIU**, Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Chinese Culture University, Taiwan

On June 1, 1859, actress Mary Elizabeth Braddon appeared onstage as Mrs. Popples in *The Man of Many Friends*, a comedy written by J. Sterling Coyne. While Peter Popples, the nouveau rich ex-doll-maker, is disillusioned with the “many friends” who want to take advantage of his newly inherited fortune, his wife is intoxicated by the novelty and excitement of high society. When Mrs. Popples exclaims, “nature, I suppose, formed me for fashionable life,” her husband retorts,

Don’t blame nature. . . . [N]ature formed you for a good sensible little wife, but art has well-nigh spoiled you. Nature never taught you to turn day-light into wax-light, to risk your money at a card table, or to lose your complexion at night in a ball room, and buy a fresh one in the morning at a perfumer’s. (Coyne I.i)

It is worthy of note that Mr. Popples emphasizes particularly the difference between “nature” and “art,” for he exclaims that, whenever he hears his wife’s laughter, he is reminded of “the happy days when she wasn’t afraid to be natural” (I.i). It is quite obvious that here what Mr. Popples refers to as “art” is a life of fashionable society and artificial beauty—a world of consumerism, pretentious mannerism, and vanity. The term “art” denotes both artificiality and artificial things. Mrs. Popples desires a fashionable life. She not only changes her own appearance, manners, and social circles accordingly, but demands her husband to abandon—and hide—his old occupation as they move into a villa, casting their old life into oblivion. According to Heidi J. Holder, the roles Braddon played on stage “evidently made a long-lasting impression on Braddon,” especially those “disruptive women who must be put in their place in the end” (177). Three years later—two since she abandoned the stage—Braddon’s renowned sensation novel, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, was published. Like the theatrical character she assumed in 1859, Braddon’s fictional heroine interrogates the relationship between “nature” and “art,” between a woman’s supposedly intrinsic characteristics and what lies outside her inborn self—namely what she chooses to have bestowed upon her by her social life, especially the things and lifestyle money can purchase. Central to the heroine in both texts is a new identity forged by consumerism. However, while Mrs. Popples is finally shorn of her “art” by forfeiting the fashionable lifestyle and domestic harmony is thus reestablished, Lady Audley is never able to do so. This essay thus aims to answer a question: How does “art” “spoil” Lady Audley? That is to say, how do the things Lady Audley uses to formulate her identity overwhelm both her

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body and this very identity, eventually rendering the integrity of the domestic order impossible?

Like Mrs. Popples, Lady Audley establishes and fortifies her identity by means of consumerism—by buying things fitting to her new social status. Such consumerism is not lost on critics. Krista Lysack, for example, observes that the text delineates “the unsettling affect of shopping through Lucy Audley’s proximity to goods and her compulsive consumption,” and that it “obsessively serializes . . . the commodity objects displayed in her boudoir” (47). Lysack argues that Lady Audley’s kleptomania and compulsive shopping, juxtaposed to the emergence of various shopping disorders and “lady shoplifters” specific to the mid-nineteenth century, illustrate a new relationship between humans and things. Lysack states that, in the age of consumerism, “identity had no existence prior to the marketplace but was generated through one’s proximity to commodities, objects that were to be encountered in the department store and bourgeois home alike” (59). In this light *Lady Audley’s Secret* can be seen as a text that highlights the “constructed nature” of both femininity and social class (47). This essay partakes in this discussion of consumerism, yet it pursues the question of art further by ruminating on things—both purchasable and non-purchasable—surrounding Lady Audley, at once strengthening and jeopardizing her identity.

On the other hand, reading into the 1960s debates over the femininity of Bradon’s “fair-haired demon” (Oliphant 263),<sup>1</sup> Lynn M. Voskuil reexamines the text’s Victorian reception by tackling the problems of authenticity and theatricality in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In “Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity,” Voskuil argues that “theatricality and authenticity, the visible body and its interior . . . were conceptually paired and mutually determinative, not irrevocably polarized, in Victorian England” (613). *Lady Audley’s Secret* was thus “threatening” not only because it challenged the Victorian protocol of female nature, but also because “in the controversial figure of Lady Audley, the Victorian logics of authenticity were pushed to their conceptual and ideological extremes—thereby exposing the cruel paradoxes that authorized middle-class constructions of its own superiority” (613). Voskuil aims to investigate “authenticity” and “theatricality” within the specific historical milieu.

With these criticisms in mind, this essay explores how the female body is visually represented, or rather staged, in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. While Voskuil contemplates the theatricality of Lady Audley’s body, I intend to explore the relationship between her body and the things surrounding it, things she uses to establish her

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<sup>1</sup> For such late nineteenth-century criticism, see Oliphant; Dallas; Rae.

image and identity. While Voskuil contends that the Victorian public was admittedly, though reluctantly, aware of the fact that women intentionally assume roles, I focus instead on how the means adopted to achieve such a role eventually overwhelm the role and even the actress herself—to put this in terms of Voskuil’s analogy. This essay also examines the consumerism in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, yet, unlike Lysack, who considers consumerism the very axis of the formulation of bourgeois female identity, I argue that, even if Lady Audley actively establishes her identity through purchasing exterior things, the activeness of such measure is eclipsed under the overwhelming system of not only consumerism but also materialism—or rather, materiality. Things that are originally used to verify facts or to create social status become ever-present and ever-threatening, betraying the fragility of social identities.

Prior to the discussion of the text, a problem in terminology must be addressed. Many thinkers have considered the difference between “object” and “thing.” For example, Martin Heidegger points out that, etymologically, the word “object” entails oppositions: “that which stands before, over against, opposite us” (115). Here, the object is defined against the subject, for it is only in relation to the subject that the object exists. The thing, on the other hand, denies the subject-object hierarchy and stands independently, exempt from the necessity to exist in relation to the subject. Bill Brown further emphasizes the thingness of things, taking A. S. Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale* (2000) as an example. At the outset of Byatt’s story, Brown notes,

Fed up with Lacan as with deconstructions of the Wolf-Man, a doctoral student looks up at a filthy window and epiphanically thinks, “I must have *things*.” He relinquishes theory to relish the world at hand: “A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*.” (Brown 139)

Brown points out the specificity of objects and the unspecificity of things by highlighting that “the interruption of the habit of looking *through* windows as transparencies enables the protagonist to look *at* a window itself in its opacity,” so we “begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us” (140). It is only when the window loses its function as a window that its being a “thing” becomes obvious to us. This essay does not distinguish “things” from “objects” as Heidegger and Brown do, yet it does examine things as exterior to and independent from their functionality. Focusing on not only the symbolic meaning of objects/things but also the very material of which they are made, this essay aims to participate in the conversation on the thingness, and even activeness, of things. This essay agrees with what Arjun Appadurai points out in *The Social Life of Things*:

“Even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (5). Furthermore, while such theorists as Bruno Latour contend that the dichotomy between the subject and the object, the thing and the human being, is something artificially fashioned by modernity,<sup>2</sup> this essay tackles precisely the moments when such distinction becomes problematic, when boundaries collapse, and when the relationship between the subject and objects/things becomes both mutually-defining and precarious.

Central to the subject-object relation in *Lady Audley's Secret* are the ways in which Lady Audley's body is commodified by objects or things, a theme already explored by many critics. Elizabeth Langland, for example, reads Lady Audley's body and her garments as parallel to Audley Court and its decor: both are characterized by their visibility. Katherine Montwieler juxtaposes both Lady Audley and *Lady Audley's Secret* with advertisements, arguing that Braddon's novel serves as “an alternative domestic economy manual” (48) that instructs women to acquire a higher taste so as to “pretend to be members of a class into which they were not born” (43) and eventually marry into a higher social class. Lady Audley and her way of life are thus not only examples for covetous girls yearning to climb the social ladder, but also a media that advocates and induces consumerism.

In this light, there are significant similarities between the storylines of Lady Audley and Cinderella, a story too familiar for the 1860s reading public: Lady Audley escapes poverty and marries into aristocracy by changing her identity, an identity established through material means. She moves both horizontally, to a distant place, and vertically in social status. Furthermore, both Cinderella and Lady Audley are censured for advocating consumerism. For example, one of the correspondents of *The Guardian of Education*,<sup>3</sup> called *Cinderella* “one of the most exceptionable books that was ever written for children” because it delineates malevolent human emotions such as “envy, jealousy, a dislike to mothers-in-law and half-sisters, vanity, a love of dress, etc., etc.” (qtd. in Lam). Here not only are “vanity” and “a love of dress” directly associated with consumerism, but “envy” and “jealousy” are also derived partly from the ability to acquire expensive garments. While Lady Audley is characterized by her almost compulsive shopping behavior, Cinderella is identified by the fashionable goods surrounding her.

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<sup>2</sup> Latour goes as far as to argue that, instead of subjects and objects, the world of meaning consists of “quasi-objects” and “quasi-subjects,” terms he borrows from Michel Serres. See Latour.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Trimmer, the founder of *The Guardian of Education*, claimed in 1802 that this is a magazine aiming to “contribute to the preservation of the young and innocent from the dangers which threaten them in the form of infantine and juvenile literature.” See Lam.

This essay takes Cinderella's story as a vantage point, inspecting how Lady Audley's body, like that of Cinderella's, is shaped by exterior things: things whose very materiality, I argue, not only generates cultural meanings but also eclipses and overwhelms the body, threatening its integrity. I begin with glass, of which the Perraultian Cinderella's slippers are made, and mirrors, in front of which both Cinderella and Lady Audley are constantly situated. These glass things highlight the degree of consumerism in both Cinderella and Lady Audley's stories. Eventually Lady Audley is also situated behind glass—the consumer is also turned into a piece of merchandise on display. Furthermore, the sense of imprisonment and exhibition created by the glass space reaches its point of crisis as Lady Audley is physically incarcerated in the asylum, a space metaphorically associated with glass and iron, oddly reminiscent of the Crystal Palace in 1851, inside which the Victorian public was visually inundated. Other materials figuratively or literally surrounding Lady Audley's body—iron, wax, and paper—will also be discussed. Iron serves not only to imprison Lady Audley, but also to corrode her identity with its malleability. Wax as imagery not just fetishizes Lady Audley but eventually problematizes the integrity of the domestic space, which the endings of both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Man of Many Friends* attempt to uphold—albeit with different degrees of success. Meanwhile, paper as a material preserves traces of Lady Audley's identities, wrapping around parts of her body and thus disintegrating her. This essay aims to ruminate over these things not merely on a symbolic level: their very physicality or materiality, I argue, is quintessential in terms constructing the cultural significance of what Mr. Popples calls “art,” which eventually overwhelms Lady Audley and “spoil[s]” her. Thus glass's transparency and frailty, its dividing and reflecting qualities, the malleability of wax, the life-like or even death-like characteristics of waxworks, and the irreversibility of traces left on a piece of paper will all be discussed in detail.

### **Glass Slippers, Mirrors, and Windows: Vanity, Consumerism, and Commodification**

Marrying into wealth and aristocracy, Lady Audley echoes Cinderella. It is far from surprising that a Cinderella reference appears opportunely in *Lady Audley's Secret*. The day after Lady Audley sets the Castle Inn on fire with the intention of killing Robert Audley, her husband's nephew and her former husband's best friend, she waits anxiously for the horrible news to arrive at Audley Court. As she retires into her boudoir and dismisses her maid, the narrator ponders over a maid's role in a household:

[A] lady's-maid has the highest privileges. . . . She has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress' secrets . . . ; she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for—when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist—when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living . . . ; when the lovely fairy of the ball-room re-enters the dressing-room after the night's long revelry . . . and drops her mask, and like another Cinderella loses the glass-slipper, by whose glitter she has been distinguished, and falls back into her rags and dirt, the lady's maid is by to see the transformation. (III.57-58)<sup>4</sup>

While Lady Audley awaits the result of her murderous attempt to maintain her status as Cinderella, the analogy emerges, highlighting the thematic significance of material *things*. Cinderella's glass slipper is here lumped together not only with items of clothing, but also corporeal parts such as "ivory complexion," "pearly teeth," and "glossy plaits," which can obviously be "bought and paid for." While the fashionable garments wrap around the body, concealing and disguising it, the false complexion, teeth, and hair mark the artificiality and even commercial availability of the body itself, as Mr. Popples also suggests toward the beginning of *The Man of Many Friends* (I.i). Cinderella's glass slipper here sums up this prolonged analogy, highlighting the very point of transition between the woman herself and the identity fashioned by "art."

It is only appropriate that this blurring of boundaries between intrinsic values and culturally constructed identities is marked by a pair of slippers made of *glass*. Braddon is here referring to a version of Charles Perrault's account of the Cinderella story in *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé, avec des Moralités: Contes de Ma Mère l'Oye* (1697). Among the many adaptations of Cinderella's story, Perrault's is the first to introduce the element of glass slippers (Armstrong 205). The English versions of the Cinderella story circulating in the nineteenth century were mostly derived from Robert Samber's 1729 translation of Perrault rather than from the Brothers Grimm's version, in which the slipper is "embroidered with silk and silver" (see Margaret Hunt's translation). According to Isobel Armstrong, in the nineteenth century glass's "origins in inorganic debris, sand, would be known" to the general public, and glass was "dead matter transformed by human labour and by breath"; it was "a kind of hybrid, the residues of sand and human corporeality" (207). Just like the transformation of a plant (pumpkin) into an inorganic thing

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, London: Tinsley Brothers, 1862. All further references are to this edition.

(stagecoach) and animals into other species of animals, glass as a material transformed through human breath is forever reminiscent of the fragility of boundaries. Furthermore, Braddon here presents the glass slipper as the object “by whose glitter [Cinderella] has been distinguished (III.57-58).” Glitter, a phenomenon caused by the reflective nature of glass, characterized by transiency and accidentality, becomes for Cinderella the sole source of identification. Furthermore, not only is Cinderella grammatically situated in the passive position, but this identification—in the form of “distinction”—depends more on what she is not than what she is. The passivity and negativity thus created is not to be overlooked. Whereas, as footwear, the glass slippers serve as a token of social class and wealth and should be regarded as such, their transparency nevertheless renders the covered body visible and, as a result, vulnerable. Thus the boundary the slippers create between the body itself and the external world—a boundary necessary as a means of differentiation and, thus, distinction—becomes visually non-existent. Validated only through tactual means, the slippers and the identity they carry only exist when the slippers are removed from the wearer’s body, marking the wearer’s identity by means of her absence. Furthermore, the brittleness of glass threatens the frailty of identity itself. Here, with such fluidity of boundaries, the assuming of an identity by donning external objects threatens not only this identity but also the integrity and quintessence of the person assuming it.

If the very materiality of the glass slippers underscores the danger inherent in establishing an identity upon external objects, another item made of glass marks both the incentive and downfall of Lady Audley. In both Cinderella’s and Lady Audley’s stories, mirrors serve as prominent metaphors. In Samber’s version, Cinderella’s “grace,” which is said in the moral to be the main reason of her “happy ending,” is illustrated by the patience with which she bears the contrast between her fallen social status and the luxurious life her stepsisters lead; this contrast is established upon the stepsister’s mirror reflections. While Cinderella does all the chores and sleeps in a garret, her stepsisters “lay in fine rooms . . . where they had looking-glasses so large, that they might see themselves at their full length, from head to foot” (Perrault 79). While Cinderella is divested of all luxuries associated with her former identity as the only daughter of a “gentleman,” her stepsisters spend their days looking into huge mirrors. Furthermore, before the prom the Misses taunt Cinderella for not being suitable to attend such an occasion, and again she takes it gracefully, for “[a]ny one but Cinderilla would have dressed their heads awry, but she was very good, and dressed them perfectly well” while they spend two whole days being “continually at their looking-glass” (Perrault 81). It is quite conspicuous that what Cinderella is deprived of is symbolized by/reflected

in this huge mirror: her stepsisters have taken over her place in front of the mirror, the spot that bears evidence of her former social identity. Furthermore, her grace is established upon her endurance of the dispossession of this place. In this household dominated by a strong female presence, Cinderella's "grace" cannot be dissociated from the element of vanity that a mirror readily invokes, from the rights to have her self reflected in this huge mirror.

Lady Audley's boudoir is likewise characterized by "great looking-glasses that stretch from the ceiling to the floor" (I.55). A Victorian home is likened to an organic part of the woman, an extension of her own body, a component of her nature. The interior design, the furniture, and the arrangement of objects within a woman's boudoir tend to represent her intrinsic qualities.<sup>5</sup> However, as the glass slippers give Cinderella's body a precarious boundary, so through the reflection of mirrors the lady's boudoir and all the objects within become overwhelming for, instead of representative of, her self. The mirrors both reflect her body and frame it, confining her within a space filled with artificial things. In the Lady's boudoir, placed in tandem with "my lady's piano," "my lady's easel," and "my lady's fairy-like embroideries," "my lady's image" is "multiplied" by "the looking-glasses, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer," and in this very image "reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber" (II.283-84). Here through reflection Lady Audley becomes an integral part of the interior space, "the most beautiful *object*" (*emphasis added*). These luxurious items not only embody her consuming habits and expensive taste, but also indicate her commodification—as a consumer, she is also consumed, assimilated by other commodities. Her "multiplied" image here further intimates her exchangeability. Reflected in the mirror, surrounded and assimilated by things owned by "Lady Audley," the woman fails to assume individuality. This mirror-reflected reversal of a master-slave relationship echoes her early days, in which she "had first looked in the glass and discovered that she was beautiful." She went on to consider her beauty a "boundless possession" that would eventually bring her wealth and status. This reflection also marks the beginning of her enslavement, for the "master-passions" of her life—"Vanity, Selfishness, and Ambition"—have become her "rulers" and claim her as their "slave" (II.288-89). Lady Audley's world, like that of Cinderella's, is governed by vanity, which is manifested in the mirrored space.

While glass slippers both create body boundaries and threaten to dissolve them and mirrors reflect the heroine's vanity and commodification, the windows—

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<sup>5</sup> For Victorianist criticism on the relationships between the domestic space and the mistress of the house, see Cobbe; Orrin Smith; Wolfe; Logan; Douglas and Isherwood; and Fuss.

again made of glass—throughout *Lady Audley's Secret* drive the element of commodification even further. According to Isobel Armstrong, in nineteenth-century British cities, “commercial glass” had a “sensuous optical allure,” which “conferred what Trollope called a ‘double lustre’ on goods, giving aura to ordinary objects and multiplying the allure of luxury goods” (121). Covered by a glass front, Victorian store windows strengthen the value of goods, “multiplying” their allure, as the huge looking-glasses in Lady Audley’s boudoir multiply her image and strengthen her desirability, commercial value, and merchantability. Armstrong discerns the appeal of merchandise behind store windows, which prevailed in Victorian streets due to the prosperity of the glass industry: “Provoked by the prohibitive aura of glass, the consumer encounters a deliberate barrier generating wants, and manipulating unfulfilled desire for possession. It is the *thwarted gaze* that seduces” (122). Things behind commercial glass exude charm precisely because they are untouchable yet available, charged with the aura of unattainable artworks while displaying the possibility of their possession. The heroine of *Lady Audley's Secret* is likewise found most desirable when she is behind glass: as Sir Michael falls in love with Lucy Graham, he undergoes many symptoms of lovesickness which can only be relieved “if he chanced to catch a glimpse of her sweet face behind the window curtains, as he drove past the surgeon’s house” (I.14). Finally, he finds his way to the other end of this store window and proposes, in front of this very window, to take Lucy home by making her “an *offer* of his hand,” while Lucy looks, not at Sir Michael, but “straight out into the misty twilight and dim landscape” (I.20; emphasis added), as she ponders over the offer. Again, it is through this window that Lucy contemplates this transaction. The deal is struck. The baronet takes home the commodity behind the window, while Lucy is “bought and paid for” with the title of “Lady Audley.”

Windows delimit outside and inside, a barrier that is at once non-existent and substantial. With panels of glasses, however, windows are both transparent and reflective, allowing one to look in with desire or look out with longing; either way one’s gaze is more often than not met with its own reflection: the yearning gaze falls not only upon the things behind glass, but upon itself at the same time. Sir Michael’s lovesickness, for example, comes in the form of regret for the insufficiency of his own image. He harbors a “sick hatred of his white beard”; a “frenzied wish to be young again, with glistening raven hair, and a slim waist, such as he had twenty years before” (I.13-14). Although here Sir Michael is not literally looking at his own reflection, it is worthy of note that this contemplation of his own body image is followed directly by his longing to catch a glimpse of Lucy Graham behind

the window. As far as windows are concerned, glass not only strengthens the desirability of the objects behind it but also reflects the viewer as a desiring subject, a reflection that returns the gaze to the viewer and thus inevitably renders the viewer self-conscious, vulnerable, and incomplete. Walter Benjamin's contemplation upon the display windows in nineteenth-century Parisian arcades suggests a similarly inversed voyeurism, by which the consumers are in turn consumed by the voyeuristic gaze beyond the glass: "Pedestrians in the arcades are so to speak inhabitants of a panorama. . . . They are observed from the windows but they themselves cannot see in" (qtd. in Lungstrum 146). For Benjamin, consumerism turns the viewers of shop windows into a faceless mass, whereas here, as the sole consumer of a piece of valuable merchandise, Sir Michael observes his own reflection. However, the vulnerability involved in such gaze is similar: Benjamin's consumer cannot see beyond the displayed objects, and Sir Michael cannot see beyond his own desire.<sup>6</sup>

This precarious gaze of the consumer looking at his or her own desiring reflection can also be applied to Lady Audley in front of a looking-glass, for her identity as merchandise is inseparable from her self-identity. As a self-made commodity, her gaze is doubly disintegrating, for she is her own consumer. She purchases and amalgamates herself those things that turn her from mere "Lucy Graham" into "Lady Audley." The following section extends the discussion of her subjugation to things by exploring the specifically Victorian spaces defined by glass: the hothouse and the Wardian case.

### **Hothouse Flowers and the Wardian Case: Unnaturalness and Perpetual Babyism**

Surrounded by mirrors, windows, and metaphoric glass slippers, Lady Audley lives in a narrative world in which her intrinsic value is eclipsed by a body image created by reflective, transitive, and circumscribing glass surfaces. Even when her person is described directly, such description is carried out in such a fixed way, through so many reiterations, that she becomes nothing more than a token of golden hair and blue eyes. The most outstanding trait of her personality, on the other hand, is her childishness. Throughout the text, the narrator uses the term "childish" so profusely that it gradually becomes peculiar:

That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and

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<sup>6</sup> For more discussion on this, see Lungstrum.

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candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. . . . Her fragile figure, which she loved to dress in heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks, till she looked like a child tricked out for a masquerade, was as girlish as if she had but just left the nursery. All her amusements were childish. (I.104-05)

Her infant-like “innocence” and “candour” seemingly align her with the angelic type so prominent in Victorian literature, for it was a prevalent social tendency to preserve women in what Mary Hays accusingly called, in *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798), a state of “perpetual babyism” (97): an imagined state in which women can stay innocent forever. Yet through these repetitions it gradually becomes obvious that such childish quality is far from natural. The abnormality of this childishness is highlighted by the sight of Lady Audley’s mad mother, whom she visits once in an asylum:

I saw no raving, strait-waistcoated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers; but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us with her yellow curls decorated with natural flowers, and saluted us with radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter. (III.84)

Institutionalized in the asylum and eventually dying there, her mother’s childlike aspects never subsides. The similarities are striking: the golden hair, the blue eyes, and the girlish attitude can equally be adopted to portray Lady Audley herself. Whether the similarities indicate Lady Audley’s own madness is beside the point; what is deemed Lady Audley’s most affable quality is here marked problematic and anomalous.

This visit again echoes Cinderella’s relationship with her mother, though with a twist. In Bonnie Cullen’s summary of Marian Roalfe Cox’s research, which analyzes more than 300 European and Asian versions of the same story, these “Cinderella” stories share several themes: an abused child, rescue through some reincarnation of the dead mother, recognition, and marriage (Cullen 58). In the case of Lady Audley and Helen Maldon, not only is the mother alive, but her very existence is the reason of Helen’s misery: hereditary madness threatens Helen’s future happiness. Cinderella’s rescuer is here turned into the very plight from which Helen is to be rescued. Thus in lieu of the “rescue” through a “reincarnation of the dead mother,” Helen rescues herself from the doom that her extant mother represents, by means of a “reincarnation” of herself—one that includes not only faking her own death but abandoning her role as a mother. This reincarnation turns her

into the dead mother.

A sense of reincarnation again emerges when Robert Audley and George Talboys enter Lady Audley's boudoir. The first thing they notice is that the atmosphere is "oppressive" because of the "rich odours of perfumes in bottles whose gold stoppers had not been replaced." Then they see "a bunch of hothouse flowers . . . withering upon a tiny writing-table" (I.137). The oppressiveness of the air is seamlessly paired with the hothouse flowers, whose presence replaces the absence of their female owner. Emanating rich odors, the perfume bottles mark a moment of transformation. Made with substances concentrated and distilled from flowers and animal secretions, perfume not only functions by turning solids into liquids and then to gas, but also embodies a transformation from the natural to the artificial. Here the withering hothouse flowers are accompanied by the odors of perfumes, which are made from natural flowers. The dying, unnaturally bred flowers replace, or are replaced by, dead flowers reincarnate. In the room filled with the Lady's traces, these flowers again replace her. Here, I argue, the image of the hothouse flowers, whose entire existence depends upon artificial means, is perfectly consistent with Lady Audley's childishness, and such an association should be discussed via the mid-nineteenth-century botanical sensation of glass houses: the conservatory and the Wardian case.

The botanical culture in Victorian England can be exemplified through the designs of Joseph Paxton, the leading horticulturist whose projects of glass houses revolutionized the relationship between man and nature in urban environments. Paxton acknowledged the importance of horticultural profit by way of spectacle; in his designs of glass houses, and by extension that of the Crystal Palace, the world enclosed by glass is subjugated by the viewer's possessing eye (Armstrong 167-203). Furthermore, the space within a conservatory is necessarily a space controlled through artificial means. Armstrong argues that, based on "experiments with the hybridity and cross-fertilization of flora," the conservatory is "a nursery and a forcing house," and its "perfect transparence" "was predicated on violence and nurture, beauty and coercion" (167). With its arbitrary compression and extension of time and space, the hothouse is never exempt from violence. The seemingly natural world within is created via unnatural measures. Compared to hothouse flowers, Lady Audley is likewise unnatural: Her innocence and candor, though seemingly a manifestation of the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house," is gradually rendered suspicious and out of place throughout the narrative. Her childhood is unnaturally prolonged, and, like exotic plants, she is uprooted from her natural habitat and blooms in a world to which she does not belong, the traces of her past conveniently cast into oblivion. However, while hothouses usually

**Things and the  
(Dis)embodied  
Woman in *Lady  
Audley's Secret***

compel flowers to blossom at untimely seasons or in strange lands, a more diminutive type of Victorian glass house, the Wardian Case, served not only to move plants from continent to continent, but also to preserve and prolong the life span of these plants, keeping them at the prime of their lives. In order to tease out the “perpetual babyism” that Lady Audley seems to embody, I think it is essential to ruminate upon the Wardian Case.

In 1829 Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward created by accident a horticultural innovation that was to become sensational among the middle and upper classes, and a popular symbol of perpetual beauty and youth in the Victorian imagination. In order to observe the metamorphosis and growth of a sphinx moth, Ward buried a chrysalis in a little soil in a shut glass bottle. To his surprise, a fern and a few blades of grass burgeoned from the soil and kept growing despite the sealed environment and the lack of additional water. Living among the industrial fumes of 1820s-40s London, where the lives of plants and human beings were jeopardized by the very air they breathed, Ward discovered a way to sustain a miniature garden without the worries of exterior pollution. In his 1842 book, *On the Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases*, he writes about this self-sustaining world, made possible because the moisture, arose from the soil during the heat of the day, is “condensed on the internal surface of the glass” and returns to the soil (26). The plants inside the bottle lived more than three years, and in the meantime no water was added, nor was the lid removed. After several experimental attempts, the “Wardian Case,” as it was and is still called, soon became popular. Due to its convenience, it became an important means of transporting exotic plants through long voyages, significantly lowering their mortality. In the 1840s some manufacturers began to produce these Wardian cases as decorative objects. These cases were so successful that they soon found their way into middle- and upper-class households as well as into the general Victorian imagination.

Victorians romanticized the Wardian case, as they did the angel in the house. One of the common nineteenth-century misunderstandings concerning the Wardian case was its perceived ability to stop time. One of the cases that Ward created was for spring flowers. Inside it, they miraculously bloomed for months (Ward 34). In the still air, free of disturbances, time seems to stop. “A lady once called upon me,” Ward playfully records in his book, “imagining that I had invented a case in which half-blown Roses or other flowers would remain *in statu quo* for an indefinite period” (38). As far as popular speculation was concerned, the Wardian case became simultaneously a manifestation of man’s power over space and time and an illustration of the anxiety over change, modernization, and the loss of innocence. The Wardian case’s symbolic dimension—the image of a space in which

time is stopped and beauty, youth, and innocence can be preserved—was thus deeply rooted in the nineteenth-century imagination.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the Lady herself seems raised in a Wardian case: she is physically transported from poverty to aristocracy, removed from her natural habitat; her beauty is artificial, and her youthfulness is unnaturally prolonged. Not to mention that her boudoir, with its oppressive air and the odors of perfumes, resembles a sealed glass case. The fact that Braddon always describes her in diminutive terms—her hands are “small” (II.239, III.54), her features “tiny” (I.111, I.280), her demeanor “fairy-like” (II.139, II.288, III.3, III.57)—further associates her with the miniature world inside the Wardian case. Furthermore, like a flower inside the case, her beauty and innocence are for show: she perpetually inhabits a space of exhibition, and very knowingly so. Lady Audley is an artificial curiosity, and, paradoxically, her innocence and childishness are readily linked to her abnormality and artificiality. Through the imagery of the Wardian case and hothouse flowers, the impossibility of her prolonged childishness threatens to invalidate the body image upon which her identity as Lady Audley depends. Embodying the perpetual babyism thus rendered unnatural and problematic, Lady Audley's body image itself becomes precarious.

### **Glass and Iron: Display and Imprisonment**

Even in Lady Audley's last days at the *maison de santé*, glass still serves to reflect and display; yet it becomes clear here that such reflection and display is inseparable from imprisonment and objectification. Once she is within the perimeter of the institution, she looks anxiously up at the windows:

One of the windows was shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, the shadow of a woman with a fantastic head dress, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backward and forward before the window. (III.158)

The casement no longer resembles a store window, behind whose “double lustre” objects become ever more desirable. From the shadow of “a woman with a fantastic head dress” to the shadow of “a restless creature,” this narrative turns the window into a freakish show of shadow puppetry, through which the contour of the woman is merged with an object and then again with other species. Here the glass as a mediating material recalls the glass slipper in Cinderella's story: the magic that brings the glass slippers into being also turns plants into objects and animals into

other species. This moment resonates with that other moment when Sir Michael Audley sees Lady Audley behind glass. The sense of voyeurism still prevails, but the spectator's gaze no longer seeks a desirable object behind glass; such a possessive gaze is replaced by a voyeuristic peep of curiosity. Furthermore, instead of looking behind the glass, the gaze lingers on its shadowed surface—as when one looks into the mirror. Indeed, Lady Audley looks at the shadow of the woman as if she were looking into a mirror: their resemblance, at least as far as their situation is concerned, is here rendered inevitable. Through the window/mirror, Lady Audley realizes her upcoming situation as the centerpiece of a freak show.

In the narrative that follows, the imagery of mirrors again surfaces. Entering the room arranged for her, the institutionalized Lady Audley again sees reflections everywhere:

My lady stared dismally round at the range of rooms, which looked dreary enough in the wan light of a single wax candle. This solitary flame, pale and ghostlike in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, or the window panes, in the looking-glasses, or in those great expanses of glimmering something which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries of burnished tin. (III.163)

This time it is the ghostly candlelight that is “multiplied,” and the “wretched mockeries of burnished tin” fail to strengthen her image like the mirrors in her stately boudoir used to do. Among these dreary objects she is destined to pine away, to die as “Mrs. Taylor,” a name bestowed upon her by Robert Audley against—or rather regardless of—her will, after she had spent most of her life attempting to construct her own identities. It is only appropriate that the lady sees reflected everywhere a “solitary flame” where her own reflection should be, for it is precisely a flame that marks the threshold of her last days. Earlier on, as her coach approaches the *maison de santé*, Lady Audley, now realizing where she might be taken, “gave a little scream as she looked out of the coach-window,” where “the gaunt gateway was lighted by an enormous lamp; a great structure of iron and glass, in which one poor little shivering flame struggled with the March wind” (III.157). Through the reiterated imagery of the feeble flame, Lady Audley is here metaphorically imprisoned within a space of “iron and glass,” a puny replica of the Crystal Palace.

Here the allusion to the Crystal Palace is by no means accidental. According to Dehn Gilmore, the content of Lady Audley's 1862 boudoir seems to be borrowed

“directly from that year’s International Exhibition” (86), and in Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd* (1863), Mr. Floyd treats “charity children” to “excursions to a Crystal Palace on a hill” (bk. 3, ch. 7), which should be referring to the 1851 Crystal Palace, relocated to Sydenham (Gilmore 86). The grand structure of iron and glass, with its ready representativeness of a space of display, is so deeply rooted in the mid-to-late Victorian imagination, so readily embodying both the prosperity of empire and the social problems that rapid industrialization and modernization necessarily bring forth, that any reference to it would inevitably summon up anxiety: an anxiety of overwhelming *things*. Among the many reactions to and critiques of the Exhibition were sarcastic remarks against the mixed styles and the overwhelming cluster of visual stimuli. A writer for *The Ecclesiologist* (1841-1869),<sup>7</sup> for example, mocks the “naked gods, demi-gods, heroes, muses, graces, in plaister of Paris or marble, which are placed between Manchester wares and Sheffield cutlery, Birmingham buttons, Persian carpets, ploughs, and circular saws” (*Ecclesiologist* 386). This seemingly random amalgamation of objects creates disorientation and anxiety, gnawingly debilitating with the glamour, novelty, and wealth that seemed to be ubiquitous and thus inevitable. Mid-to-late Victorian writers, Braddon included, were invested in the fascination and anxiety that the Crystal Palace summoned. Charlotte Brontë, for example, recorded her own visit to the 1851 Great Exhibition in her letter to her father on June 9, 1851: “It is a wonderful place,” writes Brontë after her second visit, “vast, strange, new and impossible to describe. Its grandeur does not consist in *one* thing, but in the unique assemblage of *all* things” (Brontë 2: 215). Similarly, *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal* claims that “nothing has ever struck us as more preposterous than an attempt to convey by language any adequate description of the Crystal Palace,” for the space is crowded with objects of art, among which are “the streaming, the loitering, the sitting and standing crowds of well-dressed people from all quarters of the globe” (337). Here the boundary between the spectators and the spectacle collapse, so that “well-dressed people” are listed alongside other “objects of art.” The gazing subject is also gazed upon, and overwhelming things instigate overwhelming gazes inside the transparent space. Living thus far in a Wardian-case-like state, Lady Audley’s life finally culminates inside another glass house, the allegorical crystal palace, where fantasies and commodities amalgamate, where excessive display becomes formidable, and curiosity cannot be exempt from a degree of anxiety.

Like any other glass house, the Crystal Palace alters the sense of time and space.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Ecclesiologist* was the newsletter of The Cambridge Camden Society, an architectural society founded in 1839 at Cambridge University to study Gothic architecture and Ecclesiastic antiques. It was later known as the Ecclesiological Society.

As the *Illustrated London News* stated at the opening of the Great Exhibition, the “practical annihilation of space and time” is achieved through “the railway system,” the infrastructure that changed the sense of distance, enabling the exchange of commodities and the advancement of urbanization—all made possible through iron. William Whewell also lectured about the Great Exhibition: “By annihilating the space which separates different nations, we produce a spectacle in which is also annihilated the time which separates one stage of nation’s progress from another” (6). Celebrating the opulence of an empire that could not have been constructed without iron, the great iron-and-glass structure is to contain objects from all over the world, completely altering the sense of time and space. Surrounded by iron and glass, the space is at once fantastic and commercial, containing things brought together by iron ships and the railway, things so overwhelming in amount and diversity as to defy categorization.

While the iron railroad brings together the things in display, it is also through the railroad that Lady Audley does her shopping—here iron plays an essential role in Lady Audley’s mobility and self-fashioning. Another moment in Lady Audley’s life is directly associated with iron. Prior to Robert Audley’s decision to send Lady Audley to the *maison de santé* and after Lady Audley confesses her crime, she sits listlessly in her boudoir, devoid of the will to fight, considering herself “[a] second Iron Mask, who must be provided for in some comfortable place of confinement” (III.131). She considers herself another Iron Mask, the renowned French prisoner whose identity remained a secret. Here the iron mask marks one’s body boundary the way glass slippers do: it covers the surface of the body, creating another superficial layer; while it becomes the extension of one’s body, it also creates identity. However, although glass slippers transform Cinderella into a princess and later into the queen, a mask made of iron creates a blank identity, an identity so conspicuously false and so opaque that it nullifies any possibility of penetration. The transparency of glass slippers endangers the very identity it creates, while the opacity of iron renders the wearer’s identity problematic. This blank identity is nonetheless not without surface value. According to Alexandre Dumas, whose version of the story had been so popular since the 1840s that it was most likely the version Lady Audley is referring to, the man in the iron mask was the twin brother of Louis XIV, and—as Lady Audley suggests here—deserves to be treated as such. Here the function of the mask is both to erase and affirm hereditary resemblance. In this analogy, anonymity itself becomes an identity, and concealment becomes an outward display. Through the iron mask, imprisonment and display converge. Here, as in the case of the glass slippers, the person wearing the exterior item becomes interchangeable: whoever wears it assumes its identity. Conversely, the meltability

of iron also has its part in the peril of the identity. According to legends, after the prisoner wearing the iron mask died, every metal item of his was melted down, and so his identity was destroyed after his body (Cataldo). This melting down echoes Lady Audley's exclamation after she accepts Sir Michael Audley's proposal. She mutters, "No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations . . . every trace of the old life melted away—every clue to identity buried and forgotten" (I.24-25). In the world of Lady Audley, identities are established through things covering/surrounding the body instead of through intrinsic values, so these identities always threaten to disintegrate, even when cast in iron.

As a material, iron is mentioned profusely throughout the text, and at crucial moments it pinpoints both crime and its corresponding punishment. Robert Audley, for example, repeatedly refers to the clues of criminal deeds as the "links of iron" in the chain "forged by the science of the detective officer" (I.244). Lady Audley commits mariticide by drawing away a loose iron spindle so that George Talboys falls into a well (III.173). Later on she successfully sneaks out of the Audley Court through a door guarded by "a slender iron bar, light enough to be lifted by a child" (III.14), and set the inn on fire. In both cases, iron, the supposedly reliable, steadfast, and safeguarding material, creates a weak spot for Lady Audley to take advantage of. Furthermore, while Cinderella both physically travels to the palace and metaphorically climbs the social ladder in her glass slippers, Lady Audley does so through the railroad, replacing glass with iron. Throughout the text iron becomes the milepost of Lady Audley's crime, foreshadowing her final confinement in the state of the Iron Mask. When Lady Audley's fate comes to a point of crisis at the gate of the *maison de santé*, when she is to suffer the consequences of her crime, iron bars are once again replaced by a metaphorical iron-and-glass structure, as Robert decides to send her to the sanitarium instead of the prison. Legal execution is replaced by a specific space in which imprisonment and display synchronize, and the name "Mrs. Taylor" becomes Lady Audley's iron mask, an identity bestowed upon her until the day she dies.

Lady Audley's final imprisonment seems to be Braddon's attempt to reestablish the domestic order: like Mrs. Popples, among other roles that Braddon impersonated, this particular "disruptive woman" is finally "put in her place in the end." However, while the identity of iron consumes Lady Audley, the meltability of the material itself threatens, metaphorically, the dissolution of the identity and thus the integrity of the Lady-Audley-free domestic space. As a matter of fact, Lady Audley's death in the sanitarium comes in the form of a letter that, as the substantial forged evidence throughout the text indicates, is far from reassuring. At the same time, another material, wax, equally meltable, further threatens the domestic

order, which Braddon attempts to uphold by the end of the novel.

### **Wax Doll, Fairy, and Playing House: Artificiality and Domestication**

*Ex-position*  
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While Lady Audley the self-made Cinderella's ascent in social status cannot be separated from her space behind the exhibition glass, a crucial "glass" moment in the original Cinderella story brings out another metaphor that bespeaks the tropes of transformation and artificiality inherent in Lady Audley's story. In Samber's version, as the gentleman sent by the Prince puts the glass slipper on Cinderella's foot upon her request, he "found it went on very easily, and fitted her, as if it had been made of wax" (Perrault 89-90). From glass to wax, from a solid yet fragile material, itself transformed from sand, to a material characterized by its pliability, the moment refers both retrospectively to the physical transformation of material things around her and prophetically to the transformation of her identity. As if made of wax, Cinderella is now molded into the future Queen. In A. E. Johnson's 1921 version of the story, which was translated from Perrault's original French version, it is Cinderella's foot that is "molded" to the slipper's shape "like wax" (Johnson 75). Although this version comes after Braddon's time, the ambivalence involved in the original version's ready equivalence of foot to slipper further bespeaks the shaping of Cinderella's body by exterior objects. In either case, the characteristics of wax—its mutability by human hands—becomes inseparable from Cinderella's transformation.

Likewise, in Lady Audley's case, a symbol associated with wax is constantly deployed to describe her. In many occasions she is referred to as a wax doll (I.66, I.112, II.221, II.222). When Alicia Audley mistakes Robert's close inspection of Lady Audley for infatuation, she sneers at the fact that Robert is enchanted by a "blue-eyed wax-doll," and that his "ideal of beauty" is "to be found in a toyshop" (II.222). This analogy does not just appear in Braddon's literary work. Mrs. Polly Popples, the role Braddon assumed on stage, physically resemble a wax doll: "[M]y earliest love was for a splendid wax doll, with joints and turning eyes," reminisces Mr. Popples; "she was sent to Russia . . . and I afterwards married Polly, because she was like that doll" (I.i). With "soft flaxen hair curling round their little pink cheeks," and "beautiful blue eyes" (I.i), the dolls are characterized by descriptions that fit both Mrs. Popple and Lady Audley perfectly. Furthermore, in *The Man of Many Friends*, the domestic dispute, which the entire play centers on and finally resolves, is caused precisely by a doll. As an ex-doll-maker, Mr. Popples is unable to let go of his passion, even though Mrs. Popples "can't abide the sight of a doll . . . lest people . . . should suspect the fact of [his] having been a doll maker" (I.i). He

therefore works stealthily on a doll in his studio. When Mrs. Popples and her lady friends hear the doll call “mamma” behind the locked door, they become convinced of his infidelity. The misunderstandings are resolved in the end, and Mrs. Popples retreats from this fashionable circle and lives with her husband in domestic harmony. The “sensible little wife” returns to her previous state, unspoiled by art. The domestic order in both Mrs. Popples and Lady Audley’s worlds seems to be reestablished in the end, but the imagery of the wax doll remains disruptive, for the materiality of wax betrays a sense of uncertainty and mutability, and the wax doll’s visual allure further conjures another popular yet unsettling nineteenth-century curiosity: waxwork exhibitions.

As waxwork exhibitions flourished in the nineteenth century, it became inevitable that some of them were operated under a limited budget. As a result some wax figures were reused over and over, each time assuming different roles. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for example, Charles Dickens writes humorously of Mrs. Jarley’s wax figures, which are reused as different characters with only the slightest alteration. In a similar observation, Albert Smith wrote, in 1846, about his visit to an exhibition near Greenwich Fair:

In the recess of a window were placed two figures, evidently intended, originally, for Amy Robsart and the Earl of Leicester, but which represented, we were informed, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, enjoying the retirement of private life, apart from the pomp of royalty. . . . All the characters of the exhibition were, however, old friends. . . . At all events, if they were not the identical ones, the artist had cast two in the same mould whilst he was about it. . . . Sir Robert Peel was, unmistakeably, Mr. Buckstone grown a foot taller, and wearing a light flaxen wig. Lady Sale we once knew as Queen Adelaide. . . . In one point the artist had excelled Nature. He had preserved the apparent dryness and coolness of the skin, whilst the folks looking on were melting with the heat. (130-31)

Nineteenth-century spectators were used to such recycling of wax figures, and it is no surprise that the hilarity involved in this lackluster aspect of show business finds its expression in literary works, especially in those authored by someone so familiar with the operations of theatricality. Hidden behind Lady Audley’s wax-doll beauty is the fact that she, like the reused wax figures, changes her identity constantly. On her bonnet-box, her new identities cover her old ones, layer by layer, in the form of railway labels (II.170). Like a waxwork on exhibit, her identities are mutable as her label changes, her body always remaining the same, a piece of blue-

eyed, golden-haired curiosity, simulating humanness without complete success. Smith's juxtaposition of spectators who "melt with the heat" and the relatively dry and solid form of the waxworks betrays a nineteenth-century fascination with the differentiation—and the lack thereof—between human beings and waxworks. For example, Mrs. Jarley, the most renowned fictional counterpart of Madame Tussaud, thus says, "I won't go so far as to say, that, as it is, I've seen waxwork quite like life, but I've certainly seen some life that was exactly like waxwork" (Dickens, *Old Curiosity Shop* 203). Such ambiguity, along with the fact that not only are waxworks constantly reused to play other roles, but they are made of a material that can be melt down and repurposed, makes waxworks and, by analogy, Lady Audley's body, mercurial and disconcerting. While the analogy of a doll seems to objectify, subjugate, and domesticate Lady Audley's body, the analogy of wax threatens to disfigure it. Likewise, her identities, though molded by herself, are always ready to disintegrate, to be liquefied and reshaped as convenient. Like her blue eyes and golden hair, "wax doll" as a trope is used repeatedly, not only turning Lady Audley into a token, but also making her ubiquitous. Mutable and ever-present, wax as a metaphor infiltrates the entire text, and thus the world in *Lady Audley's Secret* is never entirely free of her, with the danger of her tentative return as another reincarnated character.

Besides the imagery of wax doll, another diminutive trope is again applied to delineate Lady Audley. She lives in a "fairy-like boudoir" (I.59), wears a "fairy-like bonnet" (I.113), writes a "fairy-like note" (I.127), uses "fairy-like" scissors to trim her hot-house flowers (I.155), hoards garments with "fairy-like embroideries" (II.283), and struts the "fairy dower of beauty" (II.288, III.3); furthermore, she is considered a "social fairy" (II.139), captivating everyone with her charisma. According to Susan Stewart, since the late Renaissance period, fairies in England have been depicted as "miniature human beings," and as "figures of great beauty and perfection" (111). Stewart clearly states the particularities of their imagery:

The fairies have the attraction of the animate doll. . . . [They] present the animate, human counterpart to the miniature. . . . [T]he fairy is depicted as a socialized being. . . . Rather, like the miniature world of the dollhouse, the world of the fairies is a world of ornament and detail. (112)

Fairies are here likened to dolls, and their lives are animate versions of those within dollhouses. Furthermore, as in the case of dolls, accounts of fairies center on the wonderful garments they wear. In Emily Watson's *Fairies of Our Garden* (1862), for example, the manufacture of undergarments is depicted in minute details. The

makings of “linen” from “thistle-down,” “silken tissue” from “silky-weed,” and “stockings” from “that gossamer-like stuff which floats among the bushes in the autumn days” are painted vividly (Watson 141-42). It is thus not surprising that Lady Audley and the objects around her are considered fairy-like. Besides her small body figure, the life in the fairydom is a fashionable life of ornament and detail. Although, at first glance, fairies are creatures of the natural world, their lives cannot be separated from materialism, made perfect through miniaturization. Together, the imageries of wax doll and fairies further highlight Lady Audley’s petiteness and childishness, situating her within the domestic realm of objects.

This domestic space is further undermined by the action of “playing house.” In the world of Lady Audley, everyone is playing house, including men. Sir Michael acquiesces to—or rather barter for—the marriage with a woman who can never love him back, and his love for her is oddly similar to his love for his daughter. For Alicia Audley, that “dear father” of hers “over whom she had once reigned supreme with the boundless authority of a spoiled child” had “accepted another ruler and submitted to a new dynasty” (II.280). The ready replacement of daughter by wife is not merely disturbing; it invalidates the significance of domestic order as easily as roles are interchanged in children’s games. Robert Audley’s final marriage to Clara Talboys, the female-version of his beloved friend George Talboys, whom many critics have deemed his object of homoerotic interest,<sup>8</sup> also denotes the interchangeability of nuptial interests. Furthermore, George Talboy’s impulsive marriage to Helen, followed by his quick abandonment of both mother and son, is another example of an irresponsible marital decision. In each case, the sincerity of establishing a family is undermined by the imprudent and naïve entry into marriage, as if characters were children playing house. Furthermore, given the similarity between fairies and dolls—the two analogies used simultaneously to refer to Lady Audley—the ending of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, according to which George Talboys lives happily ever after in a “fairy cottage” (III.261, 274, 275) with Clara, Robert Audley, and their baby, seems especially telling. In this Lady-Audley-free cottage, after the pathological Cinderella story has finally come to an end, familial order seems re-established; yet the fairy-tale element remains. Indeed, the beginning of the last chapter reads like the setting of a fairy tale:

Mr. Audley’s dream of a fairy cottage has been realized . . . where, amid a little forest of foliage, there is a fantastical dwelling place of rustic woodwork. . . .

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<sup>8</sup> For examples, see Nemesvari; Kushnier.

Here, among the lilies and the rushes on the sloping bank, a brave boy of eight years old plays with a toddling baby. . . . (III.274)

This deliberate fairy-tale trope characterizes the “fairy cottage” in which the story ends. While the anxiety of domestic disruption seems resolved by the death of Lady Audley, this final re-establishment of order is by no means based upon solid ground, but rather set in a “fairy cottage *ornée*, whose rustic casements should glimmer out of bowers of myrtle and clematis to see themselves reflected in the purple bosom of the lake” (III.261). Hovering over gossamer flowers with its “glimmering” windows, this light, sparkling, miniature house and its waterborne double epitomizes a land of fantasy exterior to, and thus undercutting, the domestic realm of stability and security.

### **Paper: Dismemberment**

If ultimately Braddon’s text aims to reestablish the domestic order by incriminating, imprisoning, and eliminating Lady Audley, then such a task is carried out by Robert Audley in his search for Lady Audley’s real identity. By collecting circumstantial evidence, Robert traces Lady Audley’s history; however, the inevitable victimization of the Lady through such process is not lost on critics. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, for instance, points out that Robert’s “policing male gaze” “anatomizes” Lady Audley:

*Lady Audley’s Secret* deals with the detective’s struggle to . . . make up a seamless realistic narrative where the female body parts will no longer be threatening and where these detached incriminating parts which tell a sensational story will be silenced and contained. . . . And the investigation does collect female body parts. (126-27)

Indeed, the most important “circumstantial evidence” comes in the form of female body parts. The first clue he finds is a lock of hair, similar in every way to the Lady’s golden locks, in a book belonging to George Talboys, and then he finds the inscription in the book, written by Helen Maldon in a “hand” very similar to that of Lucy Audley (II.10-11). The same “hand” again surfaces upon paper when Robert sees a note written by Helen Talboys (II.193-95). The “hair” and “hand” indirectly connect Lady Audley to Helen Talboys. As the detective collects these objects, he is also literally collecting the remnants of anatomical parts.

The most decisive evidence of the association between these identities, however, comes in the form of railway labels—labels pasted one over the other upon a bonnet box belonging to Lucy Graham, the first of which bears the name of Miss Graham, and, after it is removed, the next layer carries the name of Mrs. George Talboys (II.239). This bonnet box has been wrapped in paper since Lucy Graham left it behind. It is noteworthy that all the objects carrying traces of Lady Audley's past, including those not found by Robert Audley, are wrapped in or written on paper. These sheets of paper record the history of Lady Audley's crime, exposing her traces, threatening to render her identity as Lucy Graham/Lady Audley invalid while figuratively dismembering her by wrapping up bits of her remnants.

One example is the lock of golden hair presented to George Talboys, allegedly from the head of the "deceased" Mrs. Talboys, but it is actually the hair of Matilda Plowson, the terminally ill girl Lady Audley paid to pass for her (I.84). This lock of hair—the memento of death—is wrapped in silver paper. According to Carolly Erickson, Queen Victoria often sealed her letters with silver paper, which, due to its fragility, would render any attempt to open the letter obvious (153). Heather Hind thus infers from this custom that, in Lady Audley's case, silver paper might have been used as a "false signifier of the lock's authenticity" (189n16). The very physicality of the silver paper emphasizes both the emotional value and authenticity of the memento it encloses. However, the memorabilia's lack of authenticity is later disclosed, and thus it loses its value. The contrast between the alleged significance of the lock of hair, strengthened by the materiality of the silver paper, and its actual insignificance creates a dramatic irony that problematizes the identity that Lady Audley has created. Furthermore, the lock of hair, as a false signifier of the identity of the deceased, refers back to the interchangeability of Lady Audley's body. This interchangeability is emphasized not only by the imagery of wax doll and wax works, but also by the Lady's own account of the similarity between herself and her maid: "You are like me," says the Lady to Phoebe, "it's only color that you want. . . . Why, with a bottle of hair-dye . . . and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I, any day, Phoebe" (I.115-16). The possibility of both Phoebe and Matilda to pass for the Lady fragments the body imagery that she strives to maintain throughout the text.

In another incident associated with Phoebe, again valuable items—items of both economic and sentimental value—are wrapped in paper. As Phoebe and Luke enter their mistress's boudoir to steal a look at her resplendent belongings, they open the secret drawer by chance, in which lie "a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby's head" (I.61-62). Immediately comprehending the value of

such a secret, Phoebe takes these objects away in order to blackmail Lady Audley. Thus, throughout the text the Lady has to exchange, one by one, her own luxurious items in order to protect this secret. She exclaims to Phoebe in her despair:

Do you know, Phoebe Marks, that my jewel-case has been half emptied to meet your claims? Do you know that my pin money . . . has been overdrawn half a year to satisfy your demands? What can I do to appease you? Shall I sell my Marie Antoinette cabinet, or my Pompadour china, Leroy's and Benson's ormolu clocks, or my Gobelin tapestried chairs and ottomans? How shall I satisfy you next? (II.300-01)

Here Lady Audley has to exchange commodities for identities. Hidden in the deepest, innermost recess of the Audley Court, the baby's worsted shoe and lock of hair marks Lady Audley's identity as a mother, and in order to keep such old identity hidden, she must give up objects that constitute her new identity. As mentioned before, in this exchange system she is not only a consumer, but also constantly consumed by others. She is always cast between identities, identities formulated by objects and thus always threatening to disintegrate. Furthermore, the worsted shoe is wrapped in paper, which serves as an indicator of its secrecy and emotional value. Were the shoe and lock of hair lying around casually in Lady Audley's boudoir, Phoebe would have never gauged their meaning. Paper as a wrapping material highlights the value of the items thus hidden, yet its frailty makes it impossible to protect the items from external tampering.

In other scenes throughout the text in which paper serves to envelop secrets, the tenacity of paper makes it a perfect medium that carries and narrates history, which in turn unveils Lady Audley's secrets. The wedding ring that Lady Audley wears upon her chest, for example, supposedly the wedding ring that marks her as Mrs. Talboys, is wrapped in a piece of paper "partly written, partly printed, yellow with age, and crumpled with much folding" (I.25). The traces left on this paper are indestructible, for a piece of paper cannot recover from ink and folding. The writing on the paper indicates its value as a memento, while "much folding" suggests the repeated unwrapping and inspection of the item within. And then there is the "twisted piece of paper" that "lay half burned upon the hearthrug," carrying the telegraphic message from Lady Audley to Captain Mortimer (I.191), which again connects her indirectly to Helen Maldon. In the world of Lady Audley, paper serves to carry secrets that, through the very materiality of the paper, cannot be kept as such. While Lady Audley is symbolically surrounded by glass and iron, here it is paper that both signifies her identity and literally wraps around parts of

her body, threatening to disclose and dismember her with both its fragility and ineffaceability.

It was an established nineteenth-century public knowledge that paper, as Thomas Carlyle pointed out in the same year when Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne, is “made from the rags of things that did once exist” (28). The sense of rebirth inherent in the manufacture of paper makes it an apposite medium for Lady Audley, both carrying her constructed identities and wrapping around the body parts that point to her identification with a woman that “did once exist.” Like glass, which is transformed from sand, paper is given a new life from recycled rags. The cycle of production/re-production marks the consumerist world of plenitude, a world of overwhelming things with a life of their own, regardless of their place in human civilization. Contemplating paper-as-currency in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens illustrates the Victorian anxiety toward the overabundance of paper:

That mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows gyrated here and there and everywhere. Whence can it come, whither can it go? It hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught flying by the electric wire, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails. (144)

Although here Dickens’s subject seems to be money, it is the very materiality of paper that marks the sense of ubiquity: paper is light, so it flies and flutters everywhere; it is malleable, so it appears in every crack and crevice. Furthermore, here paper is dynamic; it is delineated in the active voice, and it drinks, cowers, and shudders. It threatens with its omnipresence, its ability to transform both from and into waste.

Besides being the medium that distributes message and symbolizes value, paper as a material was more extensively used than we might imagine. Asa Briggs points out in *Victorian Things* that paper was used to make not only “playing cards or wallpaper,” but also “trunks and saddles, innumerable articles in papier-mâché, including not only boxes or trays for articles as different as teacups and pens, but chairs, tables—and pianos.” Even “[l]ampstands, candlesticks and parts of metal bedsteads” were “adorned in papier-mâché,” and paper could be made to resemble “malachite,” “Moroccan leather,” and “pigskin” (Briggs 290-91). More so than any other material, paper was made to look like other substances, substances more durable, more valuable, and less flammable. As paper is already the reincarnated form

of rags, it is again transformed, if only in appearance, into other things. The artificiality and falsity involved in the paper industry thus makes it an even more appropriate material that encloses Lady Audley's body. However, in the mid-to-late Victorian period, the sense of wrapping and covering-up inherent in paper does not stop here. In his 1878 *Art Industry: Furniture, Upholstery and Home Decoration*, G. W. Yapp states that by laying "sheet after sheet" of paper "upon the object to be modeled, a coat of glue being given to each sheet," such decorative objects as "toy masks," particularly those "grotesque, gigantic specimens which figure in our pantomimes," can be produced (qtd. in Briggs 291). The function of theatricality in the products thus fashioned cannot be strange to former actress Braddon, and the "laying of sheet after sheet" does bring to mind here Lady Audley's railway labels. As the grotesqueness of paper-made "specimen" parodies the objects being modeled, Lady Audley's artificiality is laid bare through her proximity to paper.

In the Victorian publication industry, paper as a medium is as controversial as it is within the text—especially for sensationalists. Carol Poster points out that the works of best-selling Victorian women writers such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ouida, and Marie Corelli were "printed on acid paper" and are "currently oxidizing." If they are not recovered soon, warns Poster, they will "physically disintegrate and be permanently unrecoverable" (287). Thus, not only do Lady Audley's secrets threaten to disintegrate through the medium of paper, the very text itself, printed on a material that is far from permanent, is always in danger of physical obliteration. Both inside and outside the text, the reliability and convenience of paper become perilous, threatening to both hide and reveal, protect and disintegrate.

Used in wrapping, in *Lady Audley's Secret* paper is characterized by both its mortality and indestructibility. It is perishable and can be "yellow with age, and crumpled with much folding" (I.25), so as to indicate the history of the objects thus wrapped; yet because of its lightness and pliability it can also escape fire, with only its top half destroyed (I.192). Due to its fragility, once written upon or folded, paper is left with an irreversible trace, forever threatening Lady Audley with a past that she wishes to destroy. Layer by layer, paper circumscribes Lady Audley's body, dismembering her identity, fetishizing her as glass and wax do, illustrating her covertness by covering her up, parodying her transformation by its ability to transform.

It is only fitting that, in the end of the text, Audley Court is shut down and turned into an exhibition space "often shown to inquisitive visitors" who "admire my lady's rooms, and ask many questions about the pretty, fair-haired woman who died abroad" (III.276-77). Voyeurism prevails through the text. Embodied by her painting, which is now covered by a curtain and thus hidden from view, while still

being the center of attention, the Lady finally becomes literally a thing meant to be looked at yet forever bereft of its function. Paradoxically, this thing's value remains regardless of its invisibility. While Mrs. Popples gives up the fashionable life created by material things and returns to her original status as a sensible little wife, Lady Audley returns as a thing, forever haunting—as well as trapped within—the once domestic space. The overwhelming quality of things, across a space of display and imprisonment, a space forsaken yet still overflowing with things, becomes self-evident.

All the materials discussed thus far—glass, iron, wax, and paper—are characterized by their transformative potential. From sand to glass, from a mineral substance to the pillar of a whole nation, from one shape to another, and from rags to wonder, these substances not only signify the success of industrialization, its power to produce and reproduce, but also its pitfalls, embodied in the superabundance and ubiquity of objects with the potential of rebirth. While the transformation in Cinderella's story is engendered via supernatural means, in Victorian England the magic comes from advancements in the manufacturing industry, set into action by fire. Glass, iron, and wax can all be metamorphosed through fire, which echoes Lady Audley's self-transformation, while paper, supposedly the material most susceptible to destruction by fire, adamantly keeps her traces throughout the text. Fire fails to erase the history of Lady Audley's transformation. As a symbol of civilization and industrialization, fire here is central to the manufacturing of the things that both establish Lady Audley's identity and overwhelm her body.

By examining the things surrounding Lady Audley, this essay deliberates on how, as Victorian industrialization reached its peak, artificial things affect, change, and interact with human beings. These things amplify Lady Audley's value as a commodity, turning the consumer into accessible goods. They imprison her, turning her into a displayed merchandise or specimen of madness and crime; they dismember her body; they fetishize her image, turning her into an icon that can be readily exchanged or disposed of. It is only apt that the character exclaiming "art has well-nigh spoiled you" is a doll-maker, for no one understands the peril of artificial things better than a man who manufactures objects that resemble human beings but are intended to be toyed with feigned sincerity. This essay explicates how Lady Audley is well-nigh spoiled by art—spoiled in the dual sense of "pampered" and "destroyed"—via a close reading of the overwhelming system of artificial things, the pursuit of which begins with vanity but ends in a total disintegration of both corporeal integrity and cultural identity, as well as a collapse of domesticity.

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