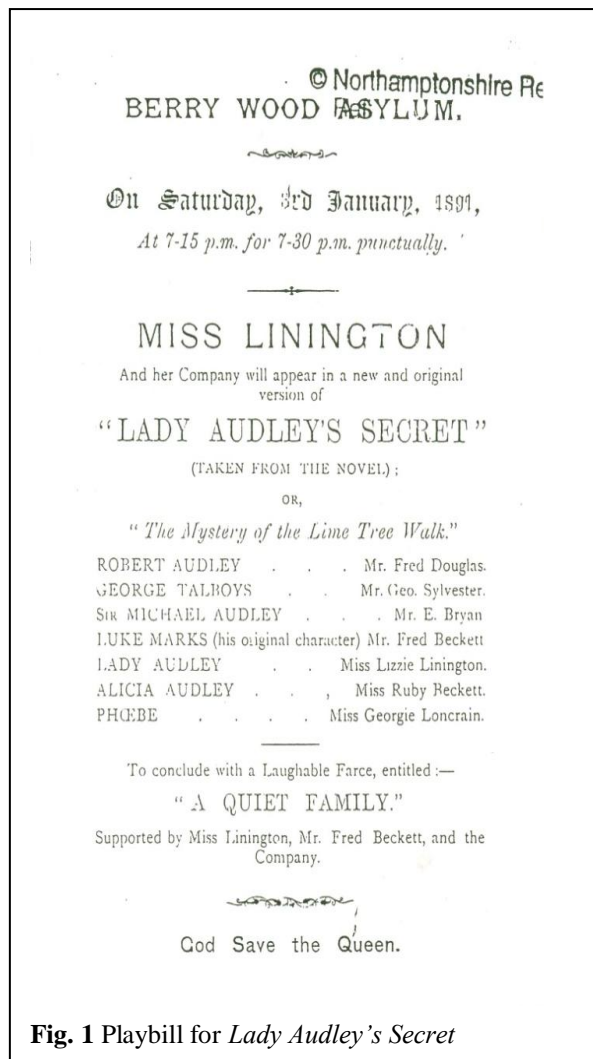


**Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control  
and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret*  
Kate Mattacks**

On Saturday 3 January 1891, Miss Linington's provincial touring theatre company performed 'a new and original version' of *Lady Audley's Secret* to a select audience (see **fig. 1**). Formerly called the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' company in 1879 and the 'L'Assommoir' company in the 1880s, Miss Linington's troupe specialised in popular melodramas.<sup>1</sup> Her company was not critically acclaimed, but clearly made a profit from lengthy tours of small venues and provincial theatres for over thirty years.

Despite her low, itinerant status, Miss Linington advocated an image of respectability seldom associated with actresses, as her frequent adverts for new staff required that 'All must dress well on and off stage'.<sup>2</sup> Her professionalism and attention to detail is evident in the format of the playbill for *Lady Audley's Secret* as the by-line 'taken from the novel' claimed an authenticity to Braddon's 1862 text which distinguished it from previous adaptations in 1863 by William E. Suter and Colin H. Hazlewood. Miss Lizzie Linington played the lead female role of Lady Audley, supported by a small cast of six other performers. To counter the sensational scenes, the company concluded the evening's entertainment with 'a laughable farce' entitled *A Quiet Family*.<sup>3</sup> Without the original playscript, it is impossible to discern the content of



this version, although the cast list indicates the omission of the character of Clara Talboys which was typical of available adaptations by Suter, Hazlewood and George Roberts. Her

absence enables Robert Audley to marry Alicia, an act that re-establishes the Audley family name before these family values were satirised in the afterpiece.<sup>4</sup> What is striking about this performance of *Lady Audley's Secret* is not so much the longevity of a sensational text created by specific cultural anxieties surrounding definitions of madness and femininity, but its setting, for the play's venue was Berry Wood Asylum, Northamptonshire's county provision for the insane.

The adaptation of a sensation novel into therapeutic entertainment for asylum patients is distinctly problematic, particularly given the genre's reputation for dangerously enervating the reader to supply the 'cravings of a diseased appetite'.<sup>5</sup> It raises questions of how the performance of an overtly self-staging heroine was deemed an appropriate form of rehabilitation for the mentally ill, and why Braddon's iconographic heroine in particular was embraced by the theatre. The patients at Berry Wood were allowed to watch mime acts and popular plays such as John Maddison Morton's *Box and Cox* (1847) on a fortnightly basis, in order to entertain and instruct them in the art of bodily representation which paralleled actor training.<sup>6</sup> Here the asylum inmates were shown the importance of the body as a diagnostic tool and, more subversively, by implication how to re-represent or even mask the self through figurative gesture and outward appearance. After being given visual examples of bodily signification, patients were then encouraged to perform in theatricals for the benefit of the public.

Dora Kingsley's role as Isabel Vane in Berry Wood's performance of *East Lynne* on Saturday, 26 November 1892 radically depicted the patient's own potential to restage herself as the angel in the house through the appropriation of suitable gesture and speech.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to Foucault's assertion that Victorian psychiatric practice was marked by its need to manage deviancy through containment at a distance from polite society, theatricals were commonly staged for the benefit of patients and members of the public.<sup>8</sup> The floor plans and interiors of many county asylums, including Hellingly in East Sussex, Westpark in Surrey and Wittingham in North Preston, show stages and proscenium arches within their main buildings.<sup>9</sup> A 'real' audience changed the dynamics of the asylum theatricals, giving the patients the opportunity to display self-control through staged gestures and speeches while indicating the consequences of displaying transgressive behaviour. Miss Linington's choice of *Lady Audley's Secret*, with its added *frisson* of being performed in an asylum,

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***

reveals that Braddon's heroine provided an ideal locus to debate the tension between visual modes of self-expression, social regulation and public surveillance.

Lady Audley's appearance nearly thirty years after the novel's publication signals an enduring engagement with the notion of theatricality grounded in the eponymous heroine's propensity for visual tactics to attract an audience. Braddon's repositioning of the dramatic exchange between actress and audience within the domestic narrative sphere sensitised the reader to the question of diagnosing potentially morally degenerative artificiality whilst involving the reader in the complicit act of encouraging Lady Audley's

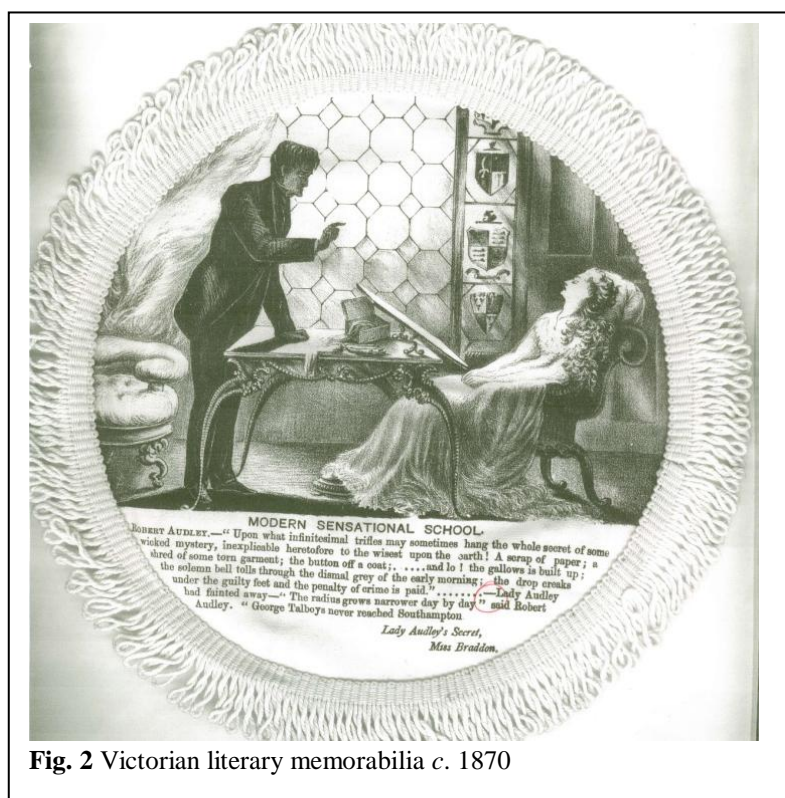


Fig. 2 Victorian literary memorabilia c. 1870

performance through consumer demand for the novel, literary memorabilia and stage adaptations. This complex relationship between consumerism, theatre and society saw Lady Audley's figure assume an iconic status, as Braddon's heroine effectively became public property. Lady Audley was remodelled into a static image adorning postcards and even doilies (see fig. 2)

for the middle classes to own, paralleling the mania for Trilby related goods in the 1890s.<sup>10</sup> Such items indicate not just the commodification of Lady Audley, but more crucially show an increasing remediation of her image that validated Braddon's ironic critique of the materialistic drives that underpin Lady Audley's marriage given her own self-marketing as 'The Author of *Lady Audley's Secret*'. The modern reader can only speculate at the impulse that lay behind the purchase of a doily figuring a scene from *Lady Audley's Secret*; the lower quality of edging in cotton cord rather than lace suggests that it was priced for the lower-middle classes.

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***

Mass-produced as one of a set of doilies representing scenes from Victorian authors including Dickens and Trollope, this curious item of literary memorabilia aligns *Lady Audley's Secret* with a 'modern sensational school' typified by a melodramatic contrast between female passivity and male aggression disguised as moral justice. The costume, posture and dynamics of Lady Audley figure her as the archetypal 'woman in white', repositioning Braddon's allegedly subversive heroine alongside Wilkie Collins' disenfranchised Anne Catherick and Laurie Fairlie. This alignment sits uneasily with the initial twentieth-century critical reclamation of Lady Audley as a prototype feminist typified by Elaine Showalter and Lyn Pykett.<sup>11</sup> In printing a section of the text, albeit in an abbreviated form, underneath the image, this unusual piece of evidence paradoxically claims a loyalty to the multiplicities of Braddon's novel while capturing a static, single image of containment for the public to own. It suggests a public desire to see Lady Audley borne out by the numerous stage adaptations of *Lady Audley's Secret* to appear in 1863.

Initial research reveals that only four adaptations were licensed in 1863. William E. Suter's for the Queen's Theatre premièred on 21 February and was quickly followed by George Roberts' more respectable West End version for the St. James's on 28 February. The most well-known dramatisation of *Lady Audley's Secret* by Colin H. Hazlewood appeared at the Victoria on 25 May, while John Brougham's adaptation *Where There's Life There's Hope* was licensed on 30 June for performance at the Strand. Yet, as Miss Linington's playbill highlights, numerous adaptations which were unauthorised and illegal were in existence on both sides of the Atlantic.

While numerous critics, such as Lynn Voskuil and Andrew King, have engaged with the literary images of Lady Audley, little has been written on the creative interplay between the novel and the theatre itself.<sup>12</sup> Improved access to reviews, photographs, playbills, newly catalogued licensing manuscripts and digitised acting editions significantly contributes to our understanding of the symbiotic relationship between fiction and drama to suggest how Braddon's fiction became a dramatic commodity. The disembodied, fragmentary material now being collated and digitised begins to address the challenge of reconstructing theatrical moments lost from view, but is marked by a fixity that is in stark contrast with the moving, performative mode. This article argues that the theatre's response to *Lady Audley's Secret* was grounded in the conflict between the

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***

liberating mobility of self-expression and the fixity of regulation, ironically validating the use of licensing manuscripts and acting editions as evidence. The theatre's remediation of Braddon's text moves beyond merely capitalising upon the novel's popularity to use Lady Audley's figure as a metaphor for the material conditions of the theatre itself. The bodily containment of the performative heroine within the strictures of feminine roles and, ultimately, within the confines of an asylum, reflected the regulatory processes of copyright and licensing and their effect on dramatic creativity.

Beginning with the way in which aspiring actresses used Lady Audley as a model to display their histrionic variety, I argue that the theatre used her character to engage with the complex connections between drama and commodity culture. Her autophagy in favour of a false identity provided a model for actresses to visualise a practice of self-commodification whilst highlighting the tension between the illusionary material practices of the theatre and the materiality of commodity culture. The drive for regulation and ownership of the theatrical medium finds its locus in the litigation following the various dramatic adaptations of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Using the evidence of the licensing text/published acting edition of William E. Suter's *Lady Audley's Secret*, I move to show how Suter's adaptation, although the fixed product of regulatory statutes in Licence Laws and Copyright Laws, bears witness to a continued debate on the relationship between control and creativity to form a desirable commodity.

If the popularity of *Lady Audley's Secret* was based upon the multiplicity of images that co-existed within the narrative framework to resist a single interpretation, Braddon's text could be viewed as a flagrant attempt to appeal to a broad demographic spectrum of readers or as a direct reflection of what Karen Chase and Michael Levenson argue was a 'mass society incapable of controlling its anomalies'.<sup>13</sup> The stage versions by Brougham, Suter, Roberts and Hazlewood indicate the complexities of a theatrical culture that remediated Braddon's heterogeneous novel into plays designed to target a specific audience with expectations of genre, style and plot. What is significant about the later, more well-known adaptations is their common representation of Lady Audley's mental collapse and death, an extra-textual event that problematises the reader's sympathetic response to her containment. When read at a temporal distance from the performance, the licensing and printed acting editions serve as key examples of the contemporary

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***

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difficulties associated with regulating a multi-centred creative culture. Even in a reduced, textual format, the figure of Lady Audley evidently functioned as a site where the state regulation of the theatre was explored and contested. The containment of Lady Audley comes to symbolise not only the regulatory processes of licensing and copyright, but also the commodity culture which dehumanised the theatrical subject through audience demand.

## I

Advertising announcements for 1863 in the major theatrical journal the *Era* indicate a trend for aspiring actresses to promote their careers by associating with Braddon's sensation heroine, ironically illustrating what the critic W. F. Rae had described as Lady Audley's 'style of the advertising female'.<sup>14</sup> The role's demand for the full range of comic and melodramatic modes of expression effectively covered the repertoire of styles, proving ideal material to attract theatrical agents and managers on both sides of the Atlantic. The paradoxical image of female self-staging through theatrical dissimulation that formed Braddon's marketing strategy as 'the Author of *Lady Audley's Secret*' resonated through the images of numerous actresses keen to showcase their histrionic talents. The remediation of Lady Audley into a moving, dramatic persona allowed the exploration and contestation of the materialistic impulse behind self-staging enabled by the material practices of the theatre. The theatrical response to Lady Audley was as illusive and as complex as her narrative image, re-sensitising the audience to its fragile boundaries as her figure came to embody the drives of a commodity culture that Thomas Richards has termed both 'invasive and evasive'.<sup>15</sup>

The American actress Miss Heron announced her arrival in London complete with her own adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret*, further controlling the medium in which her bodily display could be interpreted.<sup>16</sup> A Miss Agnes Burdett declared her intention to debut in Coventry with a new adaptation 'written expressly for her' by William Eburne, who further claimed that his version was dramatised 'by the express sanction and wish of the authoress M. A. Braddon [sic]' and that copies could be obtained from his London Office of the Dramatic, Equestrian and Musical Sick Fund.<sup>17</sup> The audience at the Theatre

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***

Royal, Brighton, experienced the added *frisson* of seeing a real peeress, Lady Don, in the role of Lady Audley.<sup>18</sup> The *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* contained a suitably reserved review of her earlier performances, choosing to focus upon her successful move from comedy to melodrama rather than on the problematic connections between respectability and theatricality with which *Lady Audley's Secret* engaged.<sup>19</sup>

A review from the foreign news column of the *Era* for 11 October 1863 suggests why actresses and audiences alike were attracted to role. The extract from the *New York Albion* concerned the actress and theatre manager Mrs Elizabeth Bowers' performance in John Brougham's pirated version of *Lady Audley's Secret* in October 1863.<sup>20</sup> The reviewer was clearly impressed by Mrs Bowers' ability to reflect the extreme duplicity of Lady Audley as 'a beautiful blonde woman – young, gay, glittering, dangerous, a sleeping volcano of peril [who] alternates from dignity to rage [...] whereby she expresses in natural colour and finished outline, the tiger nature within the womans [sic]'.<sup>21</sup> What is interesting here is language indicative of a dangerous female sexuality lying beneath the archetypal image of accepted femininity. The combination of Mrs Bowers' appearance as a vapid, blonde nullity with the emotional intensity of a tigress figures her as both a commodity and a sexual predator. The juxtaposition between the theatrically-posed 'finished outline' and a 'natural colour' hints that social training in gesture and deportment cannot contain smouldering female passion evidenced in her face. Indeed, William Archer's treatise *Masks or Faces?* (1888) devotes an entire section entitled 'Nature's Cosmetics' to the extreme difficulty of controlling the colour of the face that often necessitated an actor's use of cosmetics to simulate blushing or pallor.<sup>22</sup> While Mrs Bowers had mastered this advanced technique, Braddon's Lady Audley singularly relies upon 'pearl powder' and 'pencilled eyebrows'.<sup>23</sup>

Mrs Bowers' representation of Lady Audley indicates that the dynamic of her figure had changed: where Braddon's novel created tension through the opposing evidence of word and image, the dramatists relied upon the schism between opposing images of femininity. A rare opportunity to witness this dichotomy, albeit in a static form, is offered in the existence of a photograph of Mrs Bowers as Lady Audley (see **fig. 3**).<sup>24</sup> She is pictured in costume sitting astride a chair. Her light-coloured evening dress is in stark contrast to the dark chair, although both are heavily decorated. Her blonde hair is in

**Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley's Secret***

ringlets as Braddon had described, however Mrs Bowers' posture is distinctly duplicitous. Her facial expression and slight tilt of the head indicate a childish appeal to the gaze, but this suggestion of proper, almost infantilised femininity is undermined by her bare hands, throat and shoulder.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the photograph is the relationship between her lower body and the chair: in directly facing the camera she appears to be sitting astride the chair, an action that denotes sexual promiscuity. The position of the chair maintains her modesty, but its contrasting colour also serves to draw the viewer's gaze to the female form's open legs that lie behind it. The careful suggestion of sexual liberation under the guise of modesty is a fascinating anticipation of Lewis Morley's infamous photograph of Christine Keeler, exactly a hundred years later.<sup>25</sup> What Bowers' picture suggests is that actresses in particular embraced Braddon's heroine as a means to articulate their own morally ambiguous position within society. Lady Audley's theatricalised self-commodification projects an image of desire by explicitly artificial means, paralleling the art of the actress.



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**Fig. 3** Cabinet Photograph of Miss Bowers as Lady Audley

Mrs Bowers sustained a lucrative career with John Brougham's unauthorised version of *Lady Audley's Secret*, as programmes for performances at Smith's Opera House, Decatur, Illinois for 25 November 1878 show.<sup>26</sup> That aspiring actresses were able to remediate their ambition through unauthorised adaptations of a literary icon signals the specific conditions created by a commodity culture that exploited the lack of copyright protection. Brougham's American adaptation *The Mystery of Audley Court* (1863) avoided

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***



litigation due to the lack of transatlantic cooperation concerning copyright until the Berne Convention of 1880, and his later version for the Strand Theatre, *Where There's Life There's Hope* (1863), was significantly altered in terms of plot, character and genre.<sup>27</sup> When the first version of *Lady Audley's Secret* by Suter was printed by T. H. Lacy, however, Braddon and her publisher, Tinsley, sued him, making the novel and its heroine synonymous with the conflict between creativity and regulatory bodies in an arena that termed art a commodity.

## II

William E. Suter, long regarded as a minor hack playwright by modern critics, is presented in a very different light by the evidence of the licensing manuscript and Lacy's Acting Edition of *Lady Audley's Secret*. An image emerges of a consummate professional adept at writing manuscripts that served as both working scripts and licensing texts.<sup>28</sup> Suter's *Lady Audley's Secret* was licensed on 17 February 1863, ten days before George Roberts' version for the St. James's in the West End. In order to obtain copyright protection for the first stage adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Suter sent his manuscript to the prominent theatrical publisher T. H. Lacy, an ironic act given his unauthorised use of Braddon's novel. Although Lacy did not date his Acting Editions, the numbering system acts as a chronology, indicating that Suter's manuscript was simultaneously in rehearsal and on the printing press. Suter's inclusion of detailed stage directions, particularly gestures and stage business, was uncommon for a licensing manuscript, but served to economise upon time and copyists. It would also suggest that the adaptation was commissioned and therefore guaranteed a publisher, and Suter had often collaborated with Lacy to create new 'versions' of popular plays such as *The Angel of Midnight: A Legend of Terror* (1861) and *The Outlaw of the Adriatic; or, The Female Spy and the Chief of Ten* (1859).<sup>29</sup>

These texts provide evidence of the material practice of staging *Lady Audley's Secret*, albeit in its initial format. Lacy's editions of Suter and Hazlewood's adaptations were taken from scripts that arguably bear witness to the initial shaping of the performance by the playwright, stage manager, technicians and actors. Yet the fixity of the

text belies the shifting nature of the theatrical medium, as alterations and audience participation shaped each performance into an individual experience. Hazlewood's version added a ballet to the end of the first act after only its first week on stage at the Victoria, immediately outdating the manuscript that Lacy was given to publish.<sup>30</sup> What concerns me here is how Suter's play concerning the bodily regulation of Lady Audley examined the commodification of the dramatic form and came to be synonymous with the conflict between theatrical expression and statutory control. The play's thematic concerns with generic conventions and the issue of censorship were, however, overshadowed by the public legal battle for ownership of Braddon's commodified heroine through the complex, emergent laws on literary copyright.

The Literary Copyright Act of 1842 protected dramatic and literary works from cases of domestic plagiarism, but singularly failed to prevent transatlantic piracy or the unauthorised adaptation of novels for the stage. The Victorian theatre perpetually translated the fixed literary text into an unstable form, which changed according to the creative input of the playwright and the actor, the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain's Office and the practical exigencies of the stage manager and technical staff. The various agencies involved in the theatrical medium destabilised the legitimacy of a single author's claims to copyright ownership. The resulting variable script was shaped by a creative process embedded in a culture which failed to distinguish between adaptation, piracy and originality in order to minimise the financial risks involved. This led to the practice of theatre managers commissioning journeyman playwrights to adapt popular novels in an attempt to guarantee revenue from an established market, effectively trading upon the author's reputation while dispensing with the costs involved in obtaining copyright permissions.<sup>31</sup>

The popularity of *Lady Audley's Secret*, coupled with the dramatic possibilities afforded by the multiplicitous central character, gave rise to a number of unauthorised adaptations in the season following the initial serial run. Three major adaptations obtained a license from the Lord Chamberlain's Office in 1863, but Braddon's response to the first two dramatisations differed significantly.<sup>32</sup> Suter's version appeared at the Queen's Theatre on 21 February 1863, a week before George Roberts' version was staged at the St James's Theatre.<sup>33</sup> Braddon clearly approved of the mediated respectability that Roberts'

**Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley's Secret***

infused into Lady Audley's character, to the extent that she wrote to its leading actress Miss Ruth Herbert to offer her congratulations on embodying her vision of Lady Audley's 'mingled madness and despair'.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, her reaction to Suter's version was as extreme as his trademark brand of sensationalist melodrama.

To maximise the impact of her legal action, Braddon and her publisher Tinsley sued for breach of copyright despite the potential for secondary sales from audience members needing to 'fill up from memory [the] many dramatic gaps in the story'.<sup>35</sup> The initial application for an injunction on 23 April 1863 was postponed due to an absence of the defendant's response.<sup>36</sup> By the second hearing on 4 July, Tinsley was also able to present Lacy's Acting Edition of Suter's *Aurora Floyd* (1863) as further evidence of a serious copyright infringement.<sup>37</sup> Tinsley's action was successful on the basis that Lacy's printed text had broken literary copyright law, as Suter's dramatic plagiarism in performance was technically inadmissible. However, the permanent injunction against Lacy prevented not only the reprinting of the edition, but also any subsequent performances, as Lacy automatically owned the performance rights after purchasing the manuscript. Tinsley waived the costs, claiming a moral victory for authors that served as a precedent for similar cases. The injunction prevented the single issues of Suter's adaptation being sold, but the text appears to have still been available when complete runs of Lacy's List were purchased. Furthermore, Lacy had also published Hazlewood's adaptation and this version has been more consistently available than the novel.<sup>38</sup> The case of *Tinsley v. Lacy* became a landmark in the history of copyright, irrevocably linking *Lady Audley's Secret* with a subversive creative product that could only be partially managed through statutory regulations. What is most interesting about Suter's version is his own internalised debate on the creative possibilities perpetuated by the tension between control and expression.

Initially, William E. Suter's adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret* would appear to be a simplified example of the conventions of melodrama which reduces the text to a series of sensational events to sustain interest. The programme of scenery and incidents for the play was reproduced in Lacy's Acting Edition of the play and acts as a template for the melodramatic dynamics that construct Lady Audley as a villainess (see **fig. 4**) in juxtaposition with comic scenes played by the servants. The moralistic overtones and

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***

scenes of sympathy are gendered, however. In constructing George Talboys and Luke Marks as ‘the outraged husband’ and ‘an unfortunate individual’, Suter appears to mobilise the audience against Lady Audley. Here George Roberts’ and John Brougham’s sentimental victim is remediated into an anti-religious figure whose contaminating presence requires divine intervention for its exorcism. In paraphrasing a line from Braddon’s novel, ‘a hand stronger than my own is beckoning me onward upon the dark road’, the playbill reminds the audience of the moral structure of melodrama that posits good against evil.<sup>39</sup> The penultimate heading ‘The Last Crime!’ refers to Lady Audley’s suicide, effectively criminalising her final act of desperation.

Suter further relocated *Lady Audley’s Secret* within the melodramatic genre by

First Performed at the Queen's Theatre (under the management of Mr. C. J. James), on Saturday, the 21st of February, 1863.  
A new Drama of extraordinary interest, founded on the celebrated Work of the same title.

## LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET!

CHARACTERS.

SIR MICHAEL AUDLEY ..... ROBERT AUDLEY ..... GEORGE TALBOYS ..... LUKE MARKS ..... BIBBLES ..... BUBBLES ..... LADY AUDLEY ..... ALICIA ..... PHEBE MARKS ..... MARTIN .....	Mr. DEVILLE. Mr. CHARLES SENNETT. Mr. THOMAS SENNETT. Mr. J. GREEN. Mr. W. H. WHITTON. Mr. W. SEYMOUR. Miss MARISS JACKSON. Miss EMILY SLADE. Miss BLANCHE FORDE. Miss JENNY SLADE.
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Programme of Scenery and Incidents.

### THE INTERIOR OF AUDLEY COURT.

Bubbles caught—what a butler is expected to be—Bubbles in the way—Phoebe and her lover—Luke's advice—Bubbles's dignity hurt.

#### ROBERT AND GEORGE ARRIVE AT THE COURT.

The first blow—what a brave heart can do—Bubbles fishes for a compliment, but gets the reverse—a woman's smile.

#### THE RECOGNITION!

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**THE LINE TREE WALK.      THE MEETING.**

Husband and wife—an outraged husband's wrongs cry for vengeance.

### HALL IN AUDLEY COURT.

Bubbles won't be discharged—Bubbles loses his courage.

#### LADY AUDLEY'S BOUDOIR.

The bribe—Robert seeks Lady Audley—the warning—a duel to the death.

### THE CASTLE INN AT MOUNT STANNING.

"This building was built of nothing but the feeblest and most flimsy material"—Luke an unfortunate individual—Bubbles down in the world.

Lady Audley comes to the Inn.      THE FIRE!      An Apartment.

Poor Bubbles—a great loss—Phoebe's discovery—a terrible suspicion—a surprise—Robert Audley you have conquered.

#### A CHAMBER.

Poor Alicia—strange love making—Bubbles thinks of not the last blow struck—a surprise—"A hand stronger than my own is beckoning me onward upon the dark road."

### THE LAST CRIME!

"BURIED IN THE GRAVE WILL BE

## LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET."

Fig. 4 Playbill for Suter's *Lady Audley's Secret* reproduced by permission of The Victorian Plays Project

using the standard device of a comic subplot, whose key themes of marriage and social mobility would have been expected by the audience of the Queen's Theatre. According to Braddon and Tinsley's lawyers, the original addition of the comic duo Bubbles and Bubbles who compete for the affection of Phoebe signalled a degradation of

Braddon's original text.<sup>40</sup> Yet these scenes were where the darker threats of violence, male

Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley's Secret*

sexual desire, mercenary marriages, alcoholism and blackmail could be explored. In displacing these elements onto Lady Audley's paler double Phoebe, Suter undercut the polarised image of Lady Audley as a 'bigamist, an incendiary and a murderess' required by the melodramatic formula.<sup>41</sup> Rather, her criminal actions are carefully contextualised in terms of a desire to escape the traditional role of the victimised female.

Lady Audley's containment in legal and social terms extends to the rigid classification of character as defined by the melodramatic form, for Suter continually reminds the audience of her liminal class status as a former governess and her propensity for transgressing into the male sphere of action. Her social mobility becomes not just a threat to the privileged upper-class status quo, but more significantly to the melodramatic format itself. The play remediates Lady Audley's narrative into a recognisable melodramatic format, retaining the significant events of the text, albeit in a heightened form. Lady Audley's attempt to murder George is premeditated, as she stabs him before he falls down the well, and she conveniently disposes of herself by consuming poison to allow a dramatic tableau of shocked characters looking over her body as the curtain falls.

Suter retains the subversive ethos of the sensation genre through his skilful blend of histrionic devices and a character development that would come to typify the works of Tom Robertson and Ibsen. Here, the stage directions printed by Lacy from the prompt-scripts enable a partial reconstruction of the way in which Suter directed the audience's response to Lady Audley's problematic image before it was withdrawn from circulation. She colludes with the audience in asides which openly display her duplicity as authenticity. There is no schism between word and image: rather Lady Audley's difficulties in suppressing her emotions are exhibited as bodily evidence. Her use of gesture is wide-ranging, from '*violently agitated*' to '*laughing lightly – having quite subdued her emotion*'.<sup>42</sup> The audience witnesses the theatrical method by which Lady Audley constructs herself as she alternates between authentic gesture and controlled masquerade. This spectacle occupies the centre of the stage, but its frequent positioning at the front of the stage privileges the gaze of the audience over that of the characters. Although Lady Audley is guilty of falsity, she never hides her true status as an actress from the audience, creating a sympathetic connection that transcends the mere attraction of criminality.

**Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley's Secret***

As one might expect of an adaptation, the visual mode of expression is legitimated through the dynamics of performance, aligning Lady Audley with theatrical material practice. To further underline the primacy of the visual, Lady Audley's transitions between agitation and repression are carefully contextualised as Suter foregrounds the 'secret' of mental instability. This disclosure allows the interchanges between real and false gesture to form a composite bodily image of social theatricality and fragmented identity as consequence. Through the device of madness, Suter reinvests the body as a source of authenticity, enabling the figure of Lady Audley to literally embody the conditions of the performative in terms of its insistence upon the validity of the visual medium and its transient, adaptive nature. The theme of insanity that signalled containment in Braddon's novel was used by Suter as a means of expression, legitimising not only Lady Audley's spectacular range of expression, but also his manipulation of the melodramatic mode in response to the changing cultural trends.

Lady Audley's adapting display for self-advancement becomes symptomatic of the theatrical world's need to adjust to the new mode of sensationalism following the success of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860). For these texts located their debates on the socio-legal conditions of the mid-Victorian era within the realms of the feminine, an area which, as Tracy Davis has argued, was largely excluded from the theatre.<sup>43</sup> Even the eponymous heroine of Douglas Jerrold's *Black Ey'd Susan* (1829) is spatially restricted to less than half the play and is even absent from the crucial court-martial scene in which her husband is tried for killing the officer who had assaulted her. Given this context, the popularity of an emergent, female-centred drama with audiences and aspiring actresses is hardly surprising. Suter's adaptation reinvested the figure of Lady Audley with a deeper cultural significance, as her search for a mode of expression in rapidly changing financial circumstances echoed the Victorian theatre's own necessarily adaptive nature in response to changing attitudes towards the ascribed gender roles outlined by melodrama. Lady Audley's criminality, tempered by self-defence and latent insanity, enabled Suter's heroine to embody different modes of expression typified by both melodramatic heroines and villains, destabilising the boundaries between gendered images of power/passivity and their corresponding moralities. Her duality was observed by one of the sensation genre's

**Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley's Secret***

harshest critics, W. F. Rae, who found her ‘at once the heroine and the monstrosity of the novel’. Interestingly, he situated this conflict within the wider question of the visible traits of gender, declaring an unnerving contrast between ‘the timid, gentle, innocent creature’ and ‘a Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed’.<sup>44</sup>

For Suter, Lady Audley’s assumption of the role of villain in order to transcend the image of beleaguered heroine is articulated visually in her gestures. The stage directions for Lady Audley’s representation detail the need for rapid alternations between powerful, declamatory acts and a gestural lack. The end of the first Act signals the tension between a defensive, traditionally masculine act of ‘drawing herself up’ and the image of a feminine susceptibility to hysterical collapse: ‘Lady Audley utters a wild shriek of agony, presses her hand to her heart, staggers back and falls senseless to the ground, one arm resting on the couch, which she could not entirely reach’.<sup>45</sup> The movement of her hand to her heart indicates a crisis of conscience, while her failure to find to support emphasises her isolation. This image of the solitary, powerless Lady Audley is the finale of Act I and prefigures the end of the play in which her lifeless body provides the central focus of the tableau. This doubling of affect allows a subversive engagement with the dynamics of sympathy normally the preserve of virtue in distress.

### III

The ending of Suter’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* reflects how the figure of Lady Audley moved beyond concerns over rigid definitions of gender, genre, class and morality to debate over how subversion was socially and legally managed. The heroine’s visual combination of female passivity, masculine action and social mobility, maintained through criminality, was increasingly difficult to contain within the ideological framework of melodrama. Her death in the final moments of the play operates as a physical containment but her destabilising influence remains as the characters gather round her corpse in a tableau of sympathy. Sir Michael watches from the wings as George Talboys ‘kneels beside her, covering his face with his hands’ and Robert ‘raises his hands towards heaven’.<sup>46</sup> This dramatic picture partly reasserts the dynamics of the playbill, with the wronged husband typifying despair and Robert’s appeal to God underlining his role as the Christian avenger.

**Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley’s Secret***

Yet his application for divine intervention is distinctly problematic: perhaps this gesture is a symbolic appeal for forgiveness, both for his actions in pursuing Lady Audley despite George's ability to forgive her, and for her doomed soul – doomed because suicide was still considered a mortal sin.

Certainly, the visual method suggested by the stage directions undercuts the moralistic ending, indicating that the judgement against Lady Audley is necessary for social and generic cohesion rather than a higher moral purpose. Indeed, Lady Audley's dying words – 'you will not give my memory to infamy' – resonate with the tension between melodrama's ideological need to punish transgression and the preservation of the Audley family name.<sup>47</sup> A public courtroom scene would have been a double assault upon standards of respectability, as the Lord Chamberlain forbade the representation of execution scenes and the act of revealing Lady Audley's masquerade would clearly implicate a society grounded in the theatricality she manipulated.<sup>48</sup> Suter's resolution is paradoxical: verbally, the ending appears to adhere to the moralistic framework of melodrama; visually, it resists the necessary closure through the use of gesture.

Having legitimised the visual mode through Lady Audley's legible bodily text, the dynamics of the tableau engage directly with the relationship between the play and the audience. The complicity between actor and viewer that allowed the playwright's transaction of performance as temporary reality sat uneasily with the constraints of generic frameworks, particularly the stock ending required by the censor. Lady Audley's singular failure to rewrite her history and stage-manage the consequences by attracting an audience through gestural display represented a larger discourse on the creative limitations placed upon the playwright by the licensing process. However, in allowing Lady Audley to stage-manage her suicide, Suter fulfilled the didactic punishment of transgression that was required by the melodramatic form, while retaining the sympathetic connection between the social actress and the audience. This subversive refusal to manage the issues that Lady Audley's figure represented is part of a cultural response to the increasingly unstable mid-Victorian definitions of gender and class.

Suter's adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret* gives an indication of how the melodramatic form was continually evolving to depict the social ambiguities created by the self-made man in an industrialised age. In investing gestures with a legible truth,

**Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley's Secret***



Suter's play further suggests the methods by which theatre propagated subversive theories despite the censors. Although his characterisation of Lady Audley is a complementary fusion of speech and gesture, it would appear that the schism between word and image manifest in Braddon's novel is potentially a symptom of the performative mode. Without recourse to the visual past, this division between quantifiable records and the theatrical moment punctuate our reading of Victorian drama. Suter's stage directions suggest the presence of subversion, the performance of which can only be estimated in terms of weight and affect on the audience. His careful stage-management of the act of Lady Audley's containment that Braddon had removed from view retained the subversive ethos of the novel, effectively re-sensationalising an already familiar text. Yet his reclamation of Lady Audley as a metaphor for the theatre's adaptability and self-commodification was at odds with Tinsley's marketing vision of Braddon as the future 'queen of the circulating libraries'. So whilst Suter's *Lady Audley Secret* resisted the formulaic closure of a melodrama, the act of containment was effected by Tinsley's legal proceedings and subsequent permanent injunction against the play, virtually effacing this complex example of adaptation from view. Ultimately, however, Tinsley's lawsuit only served to deepen the cultural association between Lady Audley, materialism and the material practice of the theatre.

The unauthorised images of Lady Audley conveyed through the repertoire of aspiring actresses and numerous stage adaptations reveal that Braddon's heroine functioned as a metaphor for Victorian theatre's exploitation of the creative tension between expression and regulatory controls. Her propensity for self-staging and the visualised moment of containment suggests a profound engagement with issues of licensing and copyright laws that constrained the theatrical commodification of Braddon's novel. Yet Suter's dramatic remediations of Lady Audley's figure indicate how theatrical practitioners circumvented the regulatory bodies of the Lord Chamberlain's Office and copyright statutes, creating a complex image of commodity culture and its effects. What emerged was an enduringly iconic figure that performed the interplay between self-regulation, state control and the influence of consumer demand.

**Kate Mattacks, *Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of Lady Audley's Secret***

**19:** *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 8 (2009) [www.19.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk)

### Illustrations:

**Fig. 1:** Playbill for *Lady Audley's Secret* performed at Berry Wood, Northampton County Asylum, item NCLA/2/25/1 reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Record Office.

**Fig. 2:** Victorian literary memorabilia c.1870 is from the author's own collection.

**Fig. 3:** Cabinet photograph of Miss Bowers as Lady Audley reproduced by permission of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, PH Coll 75.

**Fig. 4:** Playbill for Suter's *Lady Audley's Secret* reproduced by permission of The Victorian Plays Project.

### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Miss Linington continually changed the name of the troupe in line with the latest craze in drama. Her advert for 'coloured ladies' for the 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' company appeared in the *Era*, Sunday 31 August 1879, Issue 2136. The company name changed to the 'L'Assommoir' company a year later, to capitalise upon the success of Zola's 1877 novel.

<sup>2</sup> See her advert for a new troupe for the 'L'Assommoir' company in the *Era*, Sunday 18 January 1880.

<sup>3</sup> Presumably William E. Suter's *A Quiet Family*, first performed at the Royal Surrey Theatre in 1857.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the recent ITV production of *Lady Audley's Secret* also removed Clara Talboys. At the Braddon Conference at Birkbeck in 2000, the director Donald Hounam argued that she is only necessary in terms of Robert Audley's geographical position and subsequent detective work.

<sup>5</sup> H. L. Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 113 (April 1862), p. 483.

<sup>6</sup> John Maddison Morton's *Box and Cox* (1841) was shown on Saturday 4 April 1891. See uncatalogued and unfoliated volume *Entertainments at Berry Wood* [n. d.] from the records for St. Crispin's Hospital file in box NCLA/ located at the Northamptonshire Record Office. The book is a scrapbook of pasted in playbills covering the period 1882–1899, several including handwritten comments on the quality of performance.

<sup>7</sup> See *Entertainments at Berry Wood 1882–1899* [n. d.], box NCLA/2/25/1. The programme for *East Lynne* is different to that of *Lady Audley's Secret* in that no theatre company is associated with the performance. No revenue for the tickets appears in the General Ledger but it records that £30 a quarter was spent on entertainments. Dora Kingsley's name does not appear in any of the theatrical journals of the period. Due to the sensitivity of mental health records, Northampton Record Office refused access to the patient records despite their being outside the 75-year exclusion period; therefore I have been unable to categorically confirm her status. Asylum patients can only be traced through the Public Record Office at Kew if the year of entry is known.

<sup>8</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* [1961] (London: Routledge, 1995). Indeed the practice of staging theatricals at Berry Wood continued until the asylum moved to the St. Andrews site, where amateur companies still regularly perform open-air performances of Shakespeare. John Crammer indicates that Buckingham County Asylum held theatricals, see *Asylum History: Buckingham County Pauper Lunatic Asylum – St. Johns* (London: Gaskell, 1990), p. 84, as did Dr. John Conolly's Middlesex Asylum at Hanwell. See *Illustrated London News*, 55 (1843), reprinted in Denis Leigh, *The Historical Development of British Psychiatry: Vol. I* (London: Pergamon, 1961), pp. 253–59 for an account of the fancy fairs and masked balls which were a common feature of Conolly's policy of inclusion.

<sup>9</sup> The website for Urban Decay at <<http://www.urbandecay.org.uk/>> contains a huge number of stunning photographs depicting the declining state of Victorian asylums. Architectural features such as proscenium arches and stages are still discernible in these atmospheric photographs of derelict buildings.

<sup>10</sup> The date of manufacture for the doily is difficult to pinpoint. The attribution of the text to 'Miss Braddon' suggests a date of around 1870, as the autograph edition of her mid-career novels such as *Hostages to Fortune* (1875) use this attribution. Before the 1870s Braddon's novels were often marketed as 'by the author of *Lady Audley's Secret*' whilst the late Victorian and Edwardian novels used 'M. E. Braddon'. Braddon's letters to her peers during the 1880s occasionally sign the name 'Miss Braddon' under her signature of Mary Maxwell.

<sup>11</sup> See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* [1977] (London: Virago, 1987), *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (London: Virago, 1987) and Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and The New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> See Lynn Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2004) and Andrew King, *The London Journal, 1845–83* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> W. F. Rae, 'Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon', *North British Review*, n.s. 4 (1865), p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Era*, vol. XXV, Sunday 17 May 1863, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Era*, vol. XXV, Sunday 5 April 1863, p. 1. Neither adaptation was licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office. I am grateful to Dr. Caroline Radcliffe for clarifying this point.

<sup>18</sup> Playbill for New Theatre Royal, Brighton dated 18 September 1869, item UKC/POS/BTN NR: 0594895 from the Playbill Collection at the Templeman Library, University of Kent at Canterbury Library.

<sup>19</sup> *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 25 April 1863, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Many adaptations used different titles, including John Brougham's *The Mystery of Audley Court*, advertised in the *Era*, vol. XXV, Sunday 19 April 1863, p. 1, which was the American pirated version of

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*Lady Audley's Secret*. This play may be a variant of Brougham's *Where There's Life There's Hope* performed at The Strand and reviewed by *Reynold's Newspaper* on Sunday 12 July 1863.

<sup>21</sup> *Era*, 11 October 1863, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> See Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting* and William Archer, *Masks or Faces?*, ed. by Lee Strasberg (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 159–71.

<sup>23</sup> M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* [1862] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), vol. II, ch. VII, p. 223 and vol. I, ch. IX, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> This image is from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Actors collection at Washington Library. There is another cabinet photograph of Miss Bowers as Lady Audley in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, ID TH-27758, housed at the New York Public Library. It can be viewed at the New York Public Library Digital Gallery at <<http://images.nysl.org/?id=TH-27758&t=w>>. This is a full-length photograph and can be identified as Miss Bowers in the same costume.

<sup>25</sup> See the bromide print of Christine Keeler by Lewis Morley taken in 1963 at the National Portrait Gallery's website <<http://www.npg.org.uk>>, print NPG P512 (13). This photo of Keeler sitting astride a Habitat chair became one of the most iconographic images of the 1960s due to the ambiguous nature of Keeler's pose that displays both objectification and liberation.

<sup>26</sup> A flyer promoting Bowers' tour of *Lady Audley's Secret* by Brougham 'after the powerful novel by M. E. Braddon' at Smith's Opera House, Decatur, Illinois for 25 November 1878. Located in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>27</sup> See Add. 53023 P in the LCP Collection at the British Library.

<sup>28</sup> See Add. 53020 H in the LCP Collection at the British Library.

<sup>29</sup> Suter's *Angel of Midnight: A Legend of Terror* (1861) was listed by Lacy as a new adaptation of T. Barrière and É. Plovier's play, but it appears to be an example of Lacy's policy of piracy as no manuscript version of the Suter/Lacy collaboration exists in the Lord Chamberlain's collection. It is more likely that it was an adaptation of G. Conquest's *Angel of Death* which was licensed between May and June of 1861, see Add.53004F of the Lord Chamberlain's Office Collection housed at the British Library. Lacy did send dramatists over to France to transcribe plays for the English market, but the costs were generally borne by the stage manager who had requested it. Suter's *The Outlaw of the Adriatic* was a standard 'version' of Victor Séjour's *Les Noces Vénitiennes* (1852).

<sup>30</sup> See the *Era*, 31 May 1863, p. 11. It is difficult to ascertain how the ballet formed the end of Act I given that the first act ends with Lady Audley's triumphant dispatch of George. The ballet was perhaps more likely located earlier in the act, where Lady Audley introduces Morris dancers as part of Sir Michael's birthday festivities in Act I, Sc. I, p. 239 of George Rowell (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

<sup>31</sup> See Kate Mattacks, 'Acts of Piracy: *Black Ey'd Susan*, Theatrical Publishing and the Victorian Stage', in Grace Moore (ed.), *Pirates and Mutineers in Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. to be confirmed.

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***

**19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century**, 8 (2009) [www.19.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk)

<sup>32</sup> Only the versions by William E. Suter, George Roberts and Colin H. Hazlewood obtained a licence from the Lord Chamberlain's Office in 1863. See Add. 53020 H, Add. 53020 I and Add. 53022 W of the LCP Collection. A number of illegitimate, unlicensed versions were staged after Suter and Roberts' versions. An unattributed, 'strangely compressed' version of *Lady Audley's Secret* was performed at the City of London Theatre on 26 June, and reviewed in *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*, 30 August, 1863, p. 8. A 'new drama' of *Lady Audley's Secret* was staged at the Grecian Theatre in the week beginning 26 April, but the *Era's* reviewer fails to attribute it.

<sup>33</sup> The play appeared under Roberts' stage name of Robert Walters.

<sup>34</sup> See Jennifer Carnell, *ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>35</sup> See the *Daily News*, Monday 2 March 1863, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Era*, vol. XXV, Sunday 26 April 1863, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Details of the case were reported in *The Times* and in the *Glasgow Daily Herald*, Saturday 4 July 1863, p. 3. William E. Suter's adaptation of *Aurora Floyd* (1863) was performed at the Queen's Theatre on 4 April and appeared in Volume 58 of Lacy's List of Acting Editions. It is also available at <<http://victorian.worc.ac.uk>>.

<sup>38</sup> *Lady Audley's Secret* was made into a film, directed by Jack Denton, in 1910 and the play was still being performed until World War One. Hazlewood's version was reprinted in George Rowell (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). Brian Burton's *Lady Audley's Secret or Death in Lime Tree Walk* (New York and London: Samuel French, 1966) ran to three editions. Constance Cox's one-act melodrama *Lady Audley's Secret* (London: Samuel French, 1976) is still readily available. All of these predate the novel's reappearance.

<sup>39</sup> The line from the eighth revised edition is 'A hand which is stronger than my own beckons me on'.

Braddon, vol. II, ch. III, p. 172.

<sup>40</sup> See R. L. Wolff, *Sensational Victorian* (New York: Garland, 1979), p. 145.

<sup>41</sup> W. E. Suter, *Lady Audley's Secret* (London: T. H. Lacy, 1863), Act II, Sc. 4, p. 33. Full text available at <<http://victorian.worc.ac.uk>>.

<sup>42</sup> Suter, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Act I, Sc. 1, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> See Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>44</sup> Rae, p. 186.

<sup>45</sup> Suter, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Suter, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Suter, *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> See Jim Davis (ed.), *The Britannia Diaries of Frederick Wilton 1863–1875* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1992), p. 12. There were evidently ways around this prohibition. J. S. Jones' *Carpenter of Rouen; or, The Massacre of St Bartholomew* (n. d.) displayed a shadow of the gibbet upon which the villain had been executed.

**Kate Mattacks, Regulatory Bodies: Dramatic Creativity, Control and the Commodity of *Lady Audley's Secret***