

“SHE’S BEAUTIFUL AND SHE’S LAUGHING”:
LAUGHTER AS SUBVERSIVE DISCOURSE IN
LADY AUDLEY’S SECRET AND *DANIEL DERONDA*

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

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My thesis applies the lens of feminist theory, particularly Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” to the subject of female laughter in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. I build off nineteenth-century theories by Darwin and Spencer about female sexuality and the purpose of laughter and more contemporary scholarship by Gilbert and Gubar and Showalter on profeminism in Victorian literature to ask, What are Braddon and Eliot *doing* with their female characters’ laughter? Ultimately, I conclude that Braddon and Eliot consciously endow their female characters with laughter that functions as a type of *l’écriture féminine*, or female writing, which functions outside of phallogocentrism and resists and subverts Victorian patriarchal oppression.

My first chapter on *Lady Audley’s Secret* discusses how Braddon uses Lady Audley’s incessant laughter to subtly subvert the patriarchal norms Braddon herself transgressed. I argue that Lady Audley’s laughter is performative, in that it helps her perform her gender in a

way that seems proper to many of the other characters, and that it also functions as a mask that allows her to follow her desires for wealth and status.

When Lady Audley's nephew, Robert, discovers that she is actually the abandoned wife of his friend George Talboys and that she has pushed George down a well in order to hide her crime of bigamy, Lady Audley defies him with a laugh. Although Robert is finally able to prove his suspicions about his aunt are correct, Lady Audley's claim of inherited madness allows Robert to confine her to a private asylum, where she soon dies. However, because Lady Audley stays true to her identity to the end, I argue that she is the victor of the story because she never allows herself to be psychologically dominated by the men who physically control her.

My second chapter addresses Gwendolen Harleth's laughter in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Unlike Lady Audley, Gwendolen is naïve and believes that performing her gender role through laughter will ultimately enable her to find a husband who will provide for her and her mother. However, Gwendolen's lack of worldliness leads her to imagine that she will gain independence through marriage because she is unfamiliar with the limitations of Victorian patriarchy. Gwendolen's performance of laughter works in the sense that she garners a proposal from the wealthy Henleigh Grandcourt, but, once married to him, she soon becomes acquainted with Grandcourt's domineering and cruel nature. Gwendolen ultimately loses her ability to laugh, and, in the process, loses her identity. Although she remains alive at the end of the novel, readers are left to wonder what kind of life she will have, now that she has lost her laughter and her sense of self.

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Dedication

To my mother, Deede, who laughs often and loudly and taught me how to be a strong, confident, intelligent woman.

To my sister, Emily, whose strength and resilience is an inspiration, who never fails to make me laugh, and who is raising her daughter to be a powerful woman.

To my amazing girlfriends, whose friendship, support, and laughter I could not live without.

To my father and brothers, compassionate and thoughtful men I am so proud of, whose humor elicits uncontrollable laughter from my whole family.

To my dear friend, Rocco, whose laughter and smile have left an indelible image in my mind and who taught me to persevere through anything life throws at me.

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Introduction

In a 1982 lecture at the University of Waterloo entitled “Writing the Male Character,” noted author Margaret Atwood related the following anecdote:

“Why do men feel threatened by women?” I asked a male friend of mine...“I mean,” I said, “men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, strangle better, and they have on average a lot more money and power.” “They’re afraid women will laugh at them,” he said. “Undercut their world view.” Then I asked some women students in a quickie poetry seminar I was giving, “Why do women feel threatened by men?” “They’re afraid of being killed,” they said. (413)

Two years ago, after hearing a paraphrased version of Atwood’s powerful story, I found myself obsessed with the question, “Why are men so threatened by female laughter?” In talking with other women about times they laughed at men, I discovered that many of them, myself included, had encountered situations in which they felt threatened by men and inexplicably burst into uncontrollable laughter, which enraged their antagonizers but also caused them to retreat.

While I am sure this is not a phenomenon that only women experience, hearing these stories piqued my curiosity about the relationship between gender and laughter; however, an opportunity to explore women’s laughter more deeply did not arise until I began researching madness in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and discovered that an enormous amount of scholarly criticism explores gendered madness in the novel, little to no attention is paid to Lady Audley’s seemingly incessant laughter. In fact, Braddon includes so many

scenes of her heroine laughing, I began to wonder if other female-authored novels from the Victorian era depict female laughter as prominently. After discovering Gwendolen Harleth's laughter in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* I decided to write a thesis that would answer the question: "What are Braddon and Eliot *doing* with female laughter?"

Historical and Theoretical Context

Feminist readings of nineteenth-century texts have abounded since the 1970s, when scholars of the "feminist recovery" movement began to reclaim female authors of the past (Gilbert 6). For decades, literary critics have crafted arguments supporting and refuting the idea that some female authors of the Victorian period used particular tactics within their novels to protest their oppression and lack of agency within a patriarchal society. For example, novels portraying madness, confinement, and disorders like anorexia or hysteria are often read as ways in which female authors used narratives to highlight the subjugation nineteenth-century women experienced at the hands of male domination. I agree with these interpretations, but I believe that feminist critics have largely overlooked Victorian women writers' use of laughter in their female characters as yet another way to make protofeminist statements about the plight of nineteenth-century women. In particular, as this thesis will demonstrate, Braddon and Eliot use their female protagonists' laughter in different, but specific, ways that reveal the artifice of Victorian femininity, reverse the male gaze, subvert patriarchal authority, defy social conventions, mask transgressions, and enable agency.

Braddon's sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and Eliot's final work, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), both feature transgressive female protagonists whose laughter at and with men constitutes a powerful form of feminine language, which the authors use to varying

effects. *Lady Audley's Secret* portrays Lucy Audley as a woman, driven to violent criminal acts because of patriarchal oppression, who consciously understands the power of her laughter to play with men's expectations and subvert their authority while hiding behind a facade of proper femininity. Although the novel ends with Lucy dying after being locked away in an asylum, I intend to demonstrate that Lucy is the ultimate victor of the story because she never allows herself to be psychologically mastered by the men who physically control her.

Conversely, *Daniel Deronda's* Gwendolen Harleth lacks the inner strength and defiance of Braddon's heroine, although she outwardly displays these characteristics. Gwendolen's outbursts of laughter are often calculated to assist her in performing gender in ways that enable Gwendolen to find a husband and secure a financially stable future, not only for herself but her mother as well. Gwendolen's performances succeed in garnering her a proposal from the wealthy Henleigh Grandcourt. However, Gwendolen, now acquainted with the harsh reality of patriarchal oppression due to her husband's cruel and domineering nature, loses her power of laughter, and, in the process, her identity. Gwendolen escapes with her life, but readers are left to wonder what kind of life it will be now that she is only a shadow of the vivacious and confident girl she once was.

Although Braddon's and Eliot's novels are drastically different in plot and message, both authors employ laughter in ways that bolster my ultimate argument that female laughter functions within these texts as a *l'écriture féminine* that provides Braddon and Eliot with a means to express themselves outside of phallogocentrism. Additionally, I contend that looking for instances of laughter in nineteenth-century female-authored texts may open up new possibilities for feminist criticism.

I begin by situating my chosen novels in a historical context that delineates the significance of nineteenth century trends in the formation of lasting ideas about gender and sexuality. Before the nineteenth century, scientific views on biological sex had remained largely unchanged since Greco-Roman times. The prevailing hypothesis with regard to male and female bodies was that both sexes had essentially the same sex organs, but the heat of male bodies was able to push those organs out, while the female body, which was thought to be inherently cooler, lacked the heat needed to push the organs to the outside (Martin 27). Hence, while women were still considered inferior to men in intellect, strength, and other aspects, both sexes' bodies were basically seen as harmonious systems of interactions functioning in similar ways (Martin 30).

However, informed by Enlightenment-era thought and facing the emergence of an increasingly industrial society, doctors and scientists began attempts to classify bodies in order to assign them to their proper places within Victorian society. The rise in popularity of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theories, particularly those pertaining to women, seemed to provide "apparently irrefutable authority of evolutionary biology" which proved women's natural inferiority to men and cemented within the medical, scientific, and social discourse of the era the idea that women's primary functions within the natural world were to reproduce (Oppenheim 182). With these changes came a new obsession for pathologizing behavior and bodily functions – especially *female* behavior and bodily functions.

Along with changes in scientific views of gendered bodies came "momentous socio-political shifts" (Martin 125). The rise of industrialization created a greater need for workers. More and more women of lower social standing were leaving their homes and entering a

public workforce, leading to “noteworthy legislative changes, relating to enfranchisement and such matters as marriage, divorce, child custody and women’s property rights” (Davison 125). These changes caused a great deal of anxiety in Victorian England about the country’s social fabric and resulted in “the burgeoning Victorian middle classes compulsively redefin[ing] gender relations by underscoring male and female differences”, now considered by science to be inherent (Davison 125).

During this time of upheaval, Darwin and Spencer’s conclusions about female reproduction were critical in maintaining male dominance. Spencer, for instance, believed that “[s]ince woman’s natural role was reproduction, a process requiring enormous resources of energy, she was incapable of pursuing any other activity that required equally heavy output....women had to choose between reproductive and or intellectual achievements” (Oppenheimer 184). Because their reproductive systems were supposedly so fragile, women *needed* to be confined to a distinctly domestic sphere to prevent them from overexerting themselves. In order to convince the public of the naturalness of this idea, those in power began to claim that “disease, degeneration and addiction” were the result of a decline of “family values and traditional institutions” (125), linking women’s fulfillment of their proper gender roles to England’s survival as a nation. In other words, for England to remain a powerful empire, women must bear healthy, legitimate children and act as moral and spiritual guides to their children (as well as their husbands), in order for them to become productive members of society.

Around the same time that so much emphasis was being placed on the importance of women’s sexuality and reproduction, “theories of female insanity were specifically and confidently linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle – puberty, pregnancy,

childbirth, menopause – during which the mind would be weakened and the symptoms of insanity might emerge” (Showalter 55). Not only were women’s sexual organs fragile, so were their psyches, and this connection enabled patriarchal society to label women who resisted the heteronormative, monogamous, child-producing script deviant or insane. Showalter points out that one doctor, who believed mad women could be cured through clitoridectomy, “operated five times on women whose madness consisted of their wish to take advantage of the new Divorce Act of 1857” (76). In such an oppressive and violent social climate, women who wished to transgress gender boundaries were forced into silence and subversion in order to survive.

Because they refused to remain out of the public eye and dared to believe they might be capable of encroaching upon a patriarchal tradition of authorship, writers like Braddon and Eliot faced public disapprobation for supposedly contributing to the collapse of England’s moral society. In Gilbert and Gubar’s foundational text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), the authors devote a chapter to the female writer’s lack of a literary “foremother” (47) to destroy and her resulting “anxiety of authorship – the radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy *her*” (49, my emphasis). While men have a plethora of male authors to “annihilate” (47) in an Oedipal sense, in order to distinguish themselves as writers, Gilbert and Gubar argue that women, silenced by the tradition of patriarchal hegemony for thousands of years, not only have no such figure to destroy. As women, they do not have a *desire* to destroy her in the first place. Instead, women authors need a “foremother” they can look to as an “example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible” (49). Gilbert and Gubar go on to posit that this “anxiety of authorship” reveals itself in women writers’ use of

“female” illnesses like agoraphobia, hysteria, and madness, a trope I will explore more deeply later, and that “we will have to trace the difficult paths by which nineteenth-century women overcame their ‘anxiety of authorship,’ repudiated debilitating patriarchal prescriptions, and recovered or remembered the lost foremothers who could help them find their distinctive female power” (59). Although I return to *The Madwoman in the Attic* later in this work, I include this brief mention here to show the climate in which Braddon and Eliot were writing, in order to explain why these authors needed to code their subversion in the laughter of their “mad and monstrous” female protagonists.

In order to situate my interpretations of nineteenth-century female laughter more firmly within a historical context, I have turned to primary sources by Darwin and Spencer, as well as philosophers Alexander Bain and George Vasey, in order to provide evidence of how laughter was viewed at the time Braddon and Eliot were writing. I also use Victorian conduct books – such as Eliza Leslie’s *Miss Leslie’s Behavior Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (1859) – which speak specifically about how a “proper” Victorian lady should laugh, especially when in public. I employ these texts to demonstrate that the very fact that Braddon and Eliot’s heroines laugh often and loudly positions these women as transgressive by Victorian standards, that both authors would have been aware of this when writing, and that they made conscious decisions to use these characters’ laughter as a subtle commentary on or in defiance of the patriarchy.

To begin answering my initial question – Why is women’s laughter so threatening to men? – I turn first to Michel Foucault’s theory of the creation of “‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault 138), which explores a new emphasis on discipline in nineteenth-century ideas about how bodies could be “remade” in order to increase their efficiency and obedience to Western

hegemony. Sandra Lee Bartky's feminist response to *Discipline and Punish*, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" (1988), argues that Foucault completely overlooks the different ways that women's bodies are subjected to types of control than are men. Bartky explains that "[t]o overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed" (405). Expanding on Foucault's ideas, Bartky posits her own theories about how women's bodies are made docile, demonstrating how these bodies are controlled by a contemporary consumer culture centered around the minimization of the female body.

Published soon after Bartky's article, Susan Bordo's "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity" (1989) takes a more historical approach, examining more closely the narratives of hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia nervosa in nineteenth-century texts. These three afflictions are related in that they each affect the female body in ways that seemingly reify patriarchal power structures by silencing (in some cases of hysteria), reducing (anorexia), or confining (agoraphobia) women's bodies. Bordo suggests that while these disorders are harmful and potentially life-threatening, a subversive potential lies in the control the women who experience them must exert over their own bodies in order to perpetuate their illnesses.

I find Bordo's argument pertinent to a discussion of Lady Audley and Gwendolen Harleth because in different ways, both characters, subjugated by nineteenth-century male dominance, internalize their despair: Lady Audley claims she has been driven mad by the society that has forced her to commit crimes in order to survive, and Gwendolen Harleth becomes so isolated as a result of social expectations and her mentally and emotionally

abusive marriage that, by the end of her story, she has lost her ability to laugh, smile, or voice her true feelings. The problem I find in reading illnesses like hysteria and agoraphobia as subversive behaviors is that they encourage not an escape from power structures but instead an extreme adherence to them. In developing a theory about female laughter and its subversive potential, however, Bordo's theory is helpful because it opens up new ways to read historical texts and bodies for instances of resistance. For example, if we think of sound, in this case the sound of laughter, as having the ability to transcend the physical limitations imposed on the female body, the power of female laughter to disrupt systems of patriarchal oppression may become more understandable.

Thinking of laughter as a beginning is helpful in an exploration of laughter's disruptive potential. For example, laughter is often referred to as contagious: one person's laughter induces laughter in another person or even multiple people. The *beginning* of laughter leads to more laughter. Neuroscientist Robert Provine devotes a section of his book *Laughter* (2000) to this phenomenon, writing that laughter begins "a behavioral chain reaction" that "strips away our veneer of culture and language and challenges the shaky hypothesis that we are rational creatures in full conscious control of our behavior" (129). Provine's explanation of contagious laughter is focused on the brain, more specifically on what he calls "an auditory laugh-detector – a neural circuit in our brain that responds exclusively to laughter" (149). Yet while Provine locates the physical response to another person's laughter within a material object – the brain – Provine's language when he describes contagious laughter as an entity that disrupts and removes the facade of cultural norms refers to a much more abstract view of laughter. In other words, there seems to be a relationship between the corporeal and intangible that Provine himself may not even recognize.

Although Karen Gindele's "When Women Laugh Wildly and (Gentle) Men Roar: Victorian Embodiments of Laughter" (1994) is concerned more with Victorian comedy than specifically with female laughter, her insights about the power dynamic situated in laughter is also valuable. Gindele uses Freud's theory that "the pleasure of a joke comes from subverting authority" (141) to posit the idea that the person laughing "appears to have control...to have the power of criticism of the object," which "places the hearer in the passive position: he...not only receives but is acted on" (142-43). Gindele's argument that the act of laughing places the laugher in a position of power reveals why female laughter has the potential to reverse patriarchal power structures. Additionally, Gindele's chapter devotes several pages to the discussion of laughter in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), wherein she ties Becky Sharp's laughter to the figure of the Medusa.

While the theorists and scholars I have discussed have all contributed in different ways to my study of female laughter, Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) has been, by far, my primary source of inspiration. In her essay, Cixous returns to theories by Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, which she views as being influenced by patriarchal ideas and which she seeks to destabilize. Cixous argues that women have traditionally been placed in the position of being, in Saussurian terms, the signified without a signifier. If women have no signifier to place them within a linguistic structure, they have no power within the culture. Cixous writes that women are traditionally signified with no signifier because they have "always functioned 'within' the discourse of man" (15). So how do women break out of the phallogocentric discourse? One means of escape might be through the power of female laughter to disrupt the structure of phallogocentric language. To Cixous, laughter is a feminine text, a female language that exists outside of male-dominated language; it is

performative, it does things, it begins a revolution. Considering the body's role in the production of laughter – the brain's response to an external stimulus, which causes vocal cords to vibrate and bodies to shake – I ask, how can one *not* consider laughter a form of feminine writing? Laughter is an “impregnable language”, one that resists the subjugation of the female body that Bartky and Bordo discuss by refusing to take up as little auditory space as possible and breaking out of confining power structures (Cixous 14).

If women's laughter causes such uneasiness in men and contains the power to subvert social order, what are the implications? How might we reexamine literary texts of the Victorian era, especially those authored by women, that feature laughing female characters? By combining the previous scholarship on laughter with historical views of laughter and close readings of my chosen texts, I intend to show how these female Victorian authors employ laughter as a subversive language through which their female characters are able to exert agency and reverse gender roles, if only for a moment. Although the heroines of both novels never fully escape the bonds of patriarchy, the instances of their laughter reveal gaps in hegemonic structures that show the instability of those structures, and thereby the potential for their dismantling.

To begin, I turn to two novels written decades earlier than Braddon's or Eliot's to examine how other authors, Charlotte Brontë and William Makepeace Thackeray, use the laughter of their female characters. For instance, one of the most famous literary laughs of all comes from Brontë's Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and is used to indicate her evil madness. The inspiration for the title of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Bertha, the “villain” of *Jane Eyre*, is a compelling figure whose diabolical laugh creates a sense of unease throughout the novel. Bertha's “demoniac laugh – low, suppressed, and

deep” (Brontë 153), not only establishes her as an evil presence but is also the first indication of her existence. Gilbert and Gubar consider Bertha “Jane’s dark double,” arguing that “every one of Bertha’s appearances – or, more accurately, her manifestations – has been associated with and experience (or repression) of anger on Jane’s part” (360). However, Showalter observes that though modern feminists, including Gilbert and Gubar, have made Bertha a “paradigmatic figure,” projecting onto her “all the repressed creative anxiety of the nineteenth-century woman writer,” *Jane* does not recognize herself in Bertha, and “Brontë has no sympathy for her mad creature” (Showalter 68, 69).

Instead, Showalter argues, because Brontë implies that Bertha inherits her insanity from her mother, Bertha reflects nineteenth-century beliefs that “since the reproductive system was the source of mental illness in women, women were the prime carriers of madness, twice as likely to transmit it as were fathers” (67). Additionally, she claims, Bertha’s insanity is connected with “female sexuality and the periodicity of the menstrual cycle,” due to the fact that “[h]er worst attacks come when the moon is ‘blood-red’ [chap. 25], or ‘broad and red’ [chap. 27]” (67). Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar fail to point out, however, that Bertha has not produced a child and fulfilled her supposed primary biological function and is, therefore, even further outside the hegemonic script. Yet whether we read Bertha as Jane’s repressed ego or Brontë’s own internalization of Victorian psychiatric discourse, the fact remains that Bertha and her “strange” laugh that Jane finds so mysterious *must* be destroyed before Jane can fulfill her place in heteronormative society by marrying Rochester.

Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, published in 1848, follows the life of his antiheroine Rebecca “Becky” Sharp, as she schemes her way up the social ladder, gaining notoriety and,

at times, wealth, over the course of the novel. Becky's laughter enters the narrative early on, during a rant in which Becky expresses her hatred for her school's headmistress, Miss Pinkerton. Becky laughs at her saintly friend Amelia's shocked admonitions and tells her, "I'm no angel" (24). This not only sets a tone for Becky's character, but in this instance, we also understand that the narrator, who follows Becky's remark with the aside, "And to say the truth, she certainly was not" (24), is not objective. In fact, when Becky confronts Miss Pinkerton, who calls her a "viper" (31), just a few pages later, the narrator tells us she "laugh[s] in her face, a horrid sarcastic demoniacal laughter" (31). Later, in the midst of a telling us how Becky "convert[s]" Rawdon Crawley into a "submissive" (305) husband by "laugh[ing] at all his jokes" (304), the narrator claims that "the best of women...are hypocrites" (304) whose "blank smiles...are traps to cajole, elude, or disarm" (304-305). Here, laughter is associated with women's deceitfulness, yet although the *narrator* seems to be passing judgment upon Becky, Lisa Jadwin argues that *Thackeray* is not. She posits that because *Vanity Fair* is a parody of nineteenth-century society, we must also read the narrator's opinions as such. Jadwin believes that Thackeray uses the previous passage to show that the oppression of patriarchy leads women to develop what Jadwin calls a "female double-discourse" (664) in order to subvert the system.

In his book *Laughter and Despair* (date), U. C. Knoepflmacher writes, "Even laughter of a vindictive and demonic kind can be channeled for purgative purposes: Becky Sharp punctures Amelia's illusions" (xiv). Knoepflmacher's claim is interesting in that it supports my previous argument that laughter (especially female laughter) is disruptive, but also because he shares Jadwin's positive view of Thackeray's portrayal of the "ever-adaptable Becky Sharp" (Knoepflmacher 69), whose laughter both charms and disturbs

others while also enabling her to pursue wealth and social status. Indeed, we see Becky's calculated laughter in action even in the novel's last chapter, in which we learn that

Jos's house never was so pleasant since he had a house of his own as Rebecca caused it to be. She sang, she played, she laughed, she talked in two or three languages, she brought everybody to the house, and she made Jos believe that it was his own great social talents and wit which gathered the society of the place round about him. (612)

Becky exits *Vanity Fair* shunned by her friends but secure in her fortune and identity. In fact, we are told she “scream[s] with laughter” (619) just a few pages from the end of the novel. Contrast her fate to those of Lady Audley and Gwendolen Harleth, whose laughter is silenced – Lady Audley's because she is locked in an asylum and Gwendolen's because her identity crumbles beneath oppressive patriarchy.

While both Brontë and Thackeray use laughter in ways that subvert the oppressive patriarchy of their time, I do not believe they necessarily *intend* to do so – or if they do, it is not a protofeminist attempt to possibly enact change – as I later argue Braddon and Eliot do. Instead, I agree with Showalter that Brontë's use of Bertha's laughter upholds Victorian psychiatric discourse, though I also find value in Gilbert and Gubar's argument that Victorian women authors use the madwoman as a “dark double” (360) to express their characters', as well as their own, repressed desires and feelings. On the other hand, I find Thackeray's satirical commentary on women's plight due to nineteenth-century cultural hegemony an indicator of his awareness of their oppression, yet still a decidedly masculine take on how women subvert norms: as a man, Thackeray, unlike Braddon and Eliot, has the freedom to give his transgressive, laughing heroine a happy ending.

Chapter Organization

My first chapter, “I Would Laugh at You and Defy You if I Dared!”: Laughter as Masquerade in *Lady Audley’s Secret*,” examines how Braddon, whose own life was considered transgressive during the time she was writing, due to the fact that she defied Victorian conventions by becoming an actress and living with a man not her husband, allows Lady Audley to mask her true intentions and feelings through laughter. The novel centers around Lady Audley, a beautiful, scheming bigamist who uses deception and violence to create the life she wants for herself after being abandoned by her first husband and left without resources to care for their child. Contemporary audiences saw Lady Audley as a wicked woman so desirous of wealth that she would leave her own child behind and commit bigamy. However, a close reading of the text reveals an underlying language of subversion in the form of laughter. As the novel progresses, Lady Audley’s laughter evolves to serve different purposes. Initially, she laughs to charm those around her with her femininity, while later in the story, she uses laughter to hide her true emotions or motivations. Yet the third, and arguably most transgressive, function of Lady Audley’s laughter is defiance. Because of Victorian culture, Braddon cannot allow her transgressive heroine to escape punishment, and Lady Audley is ultimately confined to an asylum, where she soon dies. However, Braddon subtly demonstrates how the male gaze can be resisted and reversed, and I will argue that even though she physically succumbs to patriarchal power, the power of Lady Audley’s laughter succeeds in psychologically overpowering the men in her life.

Next, I move to my second chapter, “‘Laughter Became Her Person So Well’: Performativity and Identity in *Daniel Deronda*.” In many ways, Gwendolen Harleth

resembles Lady Audley. Like Braddon's protagonist, Gwendolen is driven mainly by her desire to live a luxurious and uncommon life and uses laughter as a way to perform femininity in such a way that enables her to hide her anti-heteronormative desires, though Gwendolen's ambition eventually leads to her unhappiness. However, Eliot's authorial intent is not as clear as Braddon's, which has led some critics to see Gwendolen's fate as Eliot punishing her transgressive character. Although she does not die like Lady Audley, I argue that Gwendolen suffers almost as much as Braddon's fallen heroine. After losing her ability to laugh, or even smile, Gwendolen can no longer express her deepest feelings and desires because she has lost the "language" that enables her to hide her true self and in the process has lost her identity. Like Braddon, Eliot denies her heroine a happy ending, assigning Gwendolen to live without her laughter, which consequently leaves her without a voice, without agency, but I disagree that this is a result of anti-feminist sentiment on Eliot's part. Instead, I argue that Eliot, a realist, has insight into Victorian patriarchal oppression and gives her heroine what she sees as the only realistic future a "deviant" woman during the era could expect.

In my conclusion, I briefly explore other potential avenues of analysis that may be useful to explore in connection to Braddon and Eliot's novels, even though they lie outside the scope of this project. Because Victorian female laughter has been so overlooked in literary criticism of women-authored novels of the time, I point to a couple of possibly valuable lines of research in connection to the novels. For instance, Medusa and lamia imagery is present in both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Daniel Deronda*, and I believe that linking laughter to these images, especially alongside Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," might be useful in further studies on laughter. Additionally, the presence of trauma in both

novels leads me to find that newer studies on trauma theory and laughter therapy should be considered by scholars in their future explorations of the texts, as I believe this type of critique may open up new possibilities for interpretation.

I believe my thesis will contribute to Victorian studies and feminist literary criticism because although there has been extensive scholarship on how nineteenth-century women writers use madness, confinement, and illness as ways to call attention to their feelings of being trapped and oppressed by patriarchal systems, very little study has been devoted to the laughter in nineteenth-century women's writing and how female authors may have hidden subversive language within codes of laughter. Additionally, a study of laughter as *l'écriture féminine* creates a space for thinking about how we might currently use laughter – in literature and in everyday life – in the ongoing fight against patriarchal oppression.

Chapter 1: “I Would Laugh at You and Defy You if I Dared!”:

Laughter as Masquerade in *Lady Audley's Secret*

In a narrative that ricochets from a fickle spouse to a faked death, arson to attempted murder, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's wildly successful sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), reflected and played upon Victorian anxieties and fears about changing gender roles so well that the novel earned her widespread fame and wealth in a short period of time.

Sensation novels differ from Gothic fiction of the past in that they are generally set within the confines of the middle-class domestic sphere instead of exotic locations, literally bringing social and moral taboos into the proper English home. Because the fairly new sensation genre was becoming quite the rage at the time of the novel's publication, its popularity is not surprising; *Lady Audley's Secret* contains many of the elements of sensation fiction - the most titillating being madness, bigamy, and murder - that simultaneously repulsed and titillated nineteenth-century audiences.

In this chapter, I focus on the less-studied instances of laughter in the novel that demonstrate Braddon's subversive intent as a female author, and how she highlights oppression experienced by nineteenth-century women through her characterization of Lady Audley. Having made a case, in this project's Introduction, for laughter's value to women as a type of bodily language that resists phallogocentrism, in this chapter I demonstrate how Braddon uses the language of Lady Audley's laughter to fashion for her protagonist a mask, of sorts, that enables her to transgress norms in order to survive, while still appearing to adhere to Victorian standards of proper femininity. Furthermore, by calling attention to the

performativity of Lady Audley's femininity, Braddon, in the words of Judith Butler, "reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (175).

Braddon's novel tells the story of Lucy Graham, a lowly governess who marries the much older Sir Michael Audley and becomes Lady Audley in the process. Meanwhile, in London, Sir Michael's nephew Robert Audley is reunited with his friend George Talboys, who, having left his wife and child without a word for two years to seek his fortune in Australia, has just returned to find his wife has recently died. After George spends a year in grief, Robert persuades his friend to accompany him on a visit to Sir Michael's home, where George has a strange reaction to a portrait of Lady Audley.

Soon after, George disappears without a trace, and Robert sets out to find out what happened to him. During his investigation, Robert begins to suspect that Lady Audley is actually Helen Talboys, George's supposedly deceased wife. Lady Audley, always the picture of perfect femininity, eludes Robert throughout the book by staying one step ahead of him – until she attempts to murder him by setting fire to his hotel. When Robert confronts her about the crime, she confesses to having faked her death to become Lucy Graham. Believing she was abandoned by her husband, Helen/Lucy committed bigamy by marrying Sir Michael in order to support herself. She tells Robert that when George discovered her, she murdered him by pushing him into a well. However, Lady Audley claims that she has inherited insanity from her mother and is not responsible for her actions. In order to prevent a family scandal, Robert whisks her away to Belgium, where he commits her to an asylum. Upon his return, Robert learns that George survived his fall down the well and is still alive. The novel wraps up neatly for everyone but Lady Audley, who, we are told, dies in the asylum within a year of her confinement: George returns alive and well; Robert marries Clara, George's sister; and

the book ends with Robert, Clara, and George residing peacefully together in the country. The “evil” woman having been punished, the remaining characters can now live happily ever after.

At the time of *Lady Audley's* publication, reviews were mixed. Though not the first publication in the sensation genre, Braddon's three-volume work, which originally appeared as a serial in the periodicals *Robin Goodfellow* and *Sixpenny Magazine*, was certainly one of the most successful (Carnell 143-44). Yet while sensation fiction was extremely popular, the reviews of *Lady Audley's Secret* reveal dissenting opinions on the quality of Braddon's novel. One unnamed author of a review published on January 31, 1861, in *Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, writes that while the book initially seems interesting, Braddon never develops her characters, concluding that, overall, the story is trite (“New Publications”).

In 1862, another anonymous writer, this time for *The Times*, calls it “a good galloping novel” and says readers will find it entertaining enough to overlook its unoriginality (“*Lady Audley's Secret*”). This same reviewer goes on to laud the fact that, as a female author, Braddon sheds light on “the most hidden feelings of the fair sex which would have made our fathers and grandfathers stare” and which lie beneath Lady Audley's angelic “mask” (“*Lady Audley's Secret*”). This review is particularly interesting in the way that it sheds light on the (presumably male) writer's discomfort with Lady Audley's disguise as a “perfect angel” that hides what he terms a “heartless creature” (“*Lady Audley's Secret*”). The *Times* review is an insightful glimpse not only into masculine anxieties of the time, and it supports Marlene Tromp, Pamela Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie's claim that “Victorian critics responded with alarm to what seemed to them a frightening new manifestation of female aggression and

cultural decay” (Tromp et al. xviii). The *Times* reviewer bemoans Lady Audley’s treatment of George, whom he lauds for “sacrific[ing] an excellent position in order to marry her” and who, “[a]doring her with all his soul” was *forced* to leave his family in order “to recover himself in Australia” (“*Lady Audley’s Secret*”). It is not the abandoned wife we should pity, then, but the “adoring” husband this “lovely woman with the fishy extremities” so mistreats (“*Lady Audley’s Secret*”).

While these two reviews suggest that Braddon’s novel may not be particularly notable for its plot, character development, or originality, I argue that *Lady Audley’s Secret* is an important text because of its subversive undertones, which were possibly inspired by Braddon’s own transgressive life. Before the “feminist recovery” period began in the 1970s (Gilbert 6), this life appears to have been largely forgotten. Yet as the movement sparked interest in lesser-known authors, Harvard professor Dr. Robert Lee Wolff published the first biography of Braddon in 1979 in order to bring attention to an author he believed had been underappreciated even at the height of her fame (3). Wolff argues that Braddon’s life cannot be separated from her work and seeks to show his readers how Braddon’s life intersected with her fiction, devoting an entire chapter to her secret relationship with the married John Maxwell, whose wife was confined to an asylum for years (102). Wolff contends that the public reaction to Braddon and Maxwell’s long-term affair once it was out in the open shaped Braddon’s views of “the self-righteous Victorian social world” (108), which repeatedly showed up in her novels, and he is unreserved in his opinion that Braddon was not only unfairly vilified in her own time but that she was also a “master of ambiguity” (16) as a matter of necessity.

A more recent biography by Jennifer Carnell provides even more insight into Braddon's life by examining the years she spent as an actress, a profession certainly considered transgressive by Braddon's contemporaries. I will return to the importance of Braddon's acting career later on in this chapter, when I discuss mask imagery on connection with Lady Audley in greater detail, but suffice it to say that I believe Braddon's refusal to comply with nineteenth-century norms in her own life supports the claim that she deliberately subverts these norms in her fiction.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars suggest that Braddon employed the image of the beautiful, ultra-feminine madwoman to undermine the image of "The Angel in the House," the idealized, properly-behaved woman popularized by Coventry Patmore's 1851 poem of the same name (Gilbert 35), which was so pervasive in the Victorian era. Madness, they argue, is a condition relegated to the transgressive woman who must be controlled and, ultimately, removed from society, and an enormous amount of the criticism surrounding *Lady Audley's Secret* chooses to focus on Braddon's portrayal of madness as subversive, arguing that she uses the trope to comment on the oppression of women in the nineteenth century and possibly to subvert popular ideas of the time about gender and insanity.

Published in the same year as Wolff's biography, Gilbert and Gubar's now classic feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic* sets out to provide evidence of a "distinctively female literary tradition" (xi) that uses recurring imagery and narratives of confinement, doubles, and insanity to demonstrate the plight of women in nineteenth-century patriarchal culture. The authors argue that the image of the madwoman permeates literature by female

Victorian authors, who, consciously or subconsciously, use that image as a way to try to escape oppression.

Tellingly, in this 700-page volume that looks at everything from classical myths to fairy tales to *Jane Eyre*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon is mentioned only once in passing, when the authors use her as an example of a female novelist employing heroines who use deception to subsist in a patriarchal society (473). That Braddon is almost completely ignored even as the canon begins to be reconsidered lends credence to Wolff's belief that she has traditionally been disregarded as an author. However, Gilbert and Gubar's acknowledgment of the importance of deception as a survival tool for Braddon's characters, coupled with their ideas about madness as a metaphor for women's oppression, sets the tone for years of scholarly conversation centered around Lady Audley's supposed madness.

In 1985, Elaine Showalter published *The Female Malady*, arguing that nineteenth-century ideas about insanity were linked with women because of prevailing ideas about femininity, reason, sex, and domesticity, among others. Showalter makes a brief mention of *Lady Audley's Secret*, when Showalter discusses a case study by Victorian doctor John Connolly regarding puerperal insanity in a new mother recently abandoned by her husband (71-72). Pointing out the similarities between the case study and the novel, Showalter then asks if the secret Braddon's heroine hides is her "hereditary insanity" or whether madness is "simply the label society attaches to female assertion, ambition, self-interest, and outrage" (72). Her belief appears to be that insanity is a term placed on women who go outside of the roles nineteenth-century society assigns them, as is the case with Lady Audley. In a later chapter, Showalter alludes to an answer to her own question when she suggests that as more

women began acting out against the patriarchy, there was a rise in the diagnoses of what were termed “nervous disorders” (121).

In an examination of the pathologization of mental illness in the nineteenth century, Jane Ussher examines forms of misogyny in various historical and cultural contexts before using theories by Adrienne Rich, Michel Foucault, and Simone de Beauvoir to show the link between female insanity and oppression. Ussher outlines how views about those considered insane changed in the Victorian era. Instead of seeing the mentally ill as animals, Victorians began to pathologize madness, to look at it as a disease. With that change, Ussher explains, came insanity’s adoption into the male-dominated scientific world (70), and she argues that as women were committed to public asylums instead of being confined in the privacy of their homes, people began to view madness as related to femininity (71). She goes on to point out the issue of class within the discourse of nineteenth-century female madness, highlighting the fact that the women of the lower class were “controlled through the dual oppression of class and gender” because their lives were consumed with eking out an existence and caring for their children (90). In other words, there were implications of privilege in being considered a madwoman, which we see when Lady Audley escapes criminal prosecution and is whisked away to a private asylum.

In a similar vein, Fiona Peters states emphatically that Lady Audley is not mad in her 2004 article “Mad, Bad, or Difficult? Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret and the Enigma of Femininity.” Instead, Peters says, Lady Audley must *claim* madness – not only as a way to escape legal punishment but also because Braddon is making a statement about the patriarchal system that makes it necessary for women like Helen Talboys to take desperate measures in order to survive. In an interesting shift in focus, Peters also discusses

how Lady Audley adopts a feminine front in order to secretly operate in what is viewed as a masculine sphere. Lady Audley's false hyperfemininity is a threat to Robert Audley, argues Peters, who, like the *Times* reviewer, cannot understand how she can be a beautiful, ladylike woman on the outside and conceal her inner wickedness (202). Peters goes on to look closely at the use of "masquerade" as a means of gaining power¹, arguing that by masquerading as a madwoman, Lady Audley simultaneously manages to save herself from being tried for murder and gives Robert Audley the justification he needs to get rid of a problematic woman. By making this choice for her novel, Peters says, Braddon was able to comment on social issues and "punish" her heroine, thereby making the book acceptable to her contemporaries. I see Braddon's compliance with morality standards of the time as a mask similar to the one Lady Audley wears, one that enables her to survive financially in a culture still unsettled by the existence of female authors.

Like Peters, Marion Charret-Del Bove concludes that Robert Audley endeavours throughout the novel to reconcile Lady Audley's appearance with her criminality because her mask of femininity is so successful. In her essay, Bove uses Wilkie Collins' Lydia Gwilt and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley as examples of female protagonists who outwardly display characteristics - namely, charm and passiveness - that make them seem like ideal Victorian women while concealing their criminal secrets (33-34). The author argues that both characters underscore contemporary notions that underneath women's feminine exterior lies the capability for violence (35). She also believes it was easier for Victorian society to label women mad than to accept their criminal potential, and she explores the links made by the medical community between female biology and insanity, including the idea that mothers could transmit madness to their daughters (40). Bove goes on to look at the legal implications

¹ See Joan Rivere's "Womanliness as Masquerade."

of Lady Audley's actions, concluding that she would not have been found guilty of attempted murder under English law but that she must still be "Buried Alive, (to quote the name of the chapter) in a mental institution so the Audley family can avoid public disgrace (45-46).

Preventing a public scandal is what June Sturrock believes was of great concern to female authors like Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Using examples from fiction by Braddon, Margaret Oliphant, and Charlotte Yonge, Sturrock demonstrates how each author reflects social concerns of the period regarding "gender, privacy, and transgression" (73) in her work. She argues that the three authors' real fear is of their middle-class heroines' exposure to public scrutiny in a court of law. Sturrock adopts the popular opinion that Braddon has to punish her heroine in order to sell books, but she also argues that Braddon's concern with the shame that comes from "the public gaze" (81) leads her to forgo a trial by banishing Lady Audley to an asylum, where she will never be a victim of the public gaze again.

Although I find her research into Victorian women and their concern for privacy valuable, I am not in complete agreement with Sturrock. For instance, I do not believe Braddon chooses to eschew the drama of a trial to spare Lady Audley embarrassment. Instead, I posit that there were likely many readers who sympathized with a lower-class woman forced to commit immoral or even violent acts in order to survive in a world dominated by rich men. In fact, Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie suggest that Braddon's fiction not only appealed to the middle class but "somehow seemed to reflect an intimate appeal to those who laboured in those households" (xvi). Therefore, I believe it is possible that by ending her charismatic heroine's story by shutting her up in a Belgian asylum and quickly killing her, Braddon is attempting to draw attention to the injustice of a patriarchal system that keeps women subjugated and punishes those who operate outside that system. However,

because Braddon is herself a prisoner of the patriarchy, she must be subtle in communicating her agenda. If we pay attention to the artificiality of Lady Audley's behavior, which Braddon gestures towards in a scene following George's discovery of a portrait of his hostess that reveals her to be his supposedly deceased wife, we begin to see Braddon's strategy. The morning following the portrait incident, Lady Audley, who knows George has found her out, brushes off Sir Michael's concern for her seeming distress over a lightning storm the night before:

[Lady Audley] told him, laughing, that she had always been a silly, frightened creature—frightened of dogs, frightened of cattle, frightened of a thunderstorm, frightened of a rough sea. "Frightened of everything and everybody but my dear, noble, handsome husband," she said. (112)

This passage, though not the first in which we see Braddon's heroine laughing, shows how Lady Audley plays upon Victorian ideas about women's delicate nerves and penchant for madness in order to simultaneously perform gender and mask her true feelings.

While I have found that an overwhelming amount of scholarly material written about *Lady Audley's Secret* comments on gendered madness, none of the criticism I have come across speaks directly to what I consider one of the novel's most prevalent occurrences: Lady Audley's laughter. Out of the 63 times Braddon uses the word "laugh" and its variations throughout the novel, the word is used in connection with Lady Audley 30 times, as we either see her laughing or hear accounts of her laughter from other characters. What, then, is Braddon *doing* with laughter?

Throughout the later half of the nineteenth century, conflicting ideas about laughter and its causes and purposes were being bandied about. One hypothesis about the purpose of

laughter, “relief theory,” emerged around 1865, as a result of a discourse between two philosophers of the era, Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain (Billig 86). Relief theory posits that humor, and the laughter resulting from it, “often accompanies a release from constraint” (97) by expelling “surplus nervous excitement” (Spencer 7572). Several years later, in 1872, Charles Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, a study on the physical and mental characteristics of emotions. Darwin devotes a section of one chapter to the subject of laughter, first studying its manifestation in children and the mentally handicapped, then moving on to adults, in whom he claims “laughter is excited by causes considerably different from those which suffice during childhood” (198). He supports relief theory, citing Spencer, but also writes that “something incongruous or unaccountable, exciting surprise and some sense of superiority in the laugher...seems the commonest cause” of laughter (198).

Darwin also discusses the function of laughter as a way to “conceal or mask some other state of mind, even anger” – bringing mask imagery into the conversation yet again – before turning back to his description of the physical results of various types of “forced” laughter (212). Three years after Darwin’s publication, George Vasey’s *Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling* rails against laughter and “[h]abitual laughers” (65), claiming that it is “the worst of characters, the depraved, the dissipated, the criminal” who are “generally much addicted to laughter” (98). As I will demonstrate, all of these ideas come into play in examining the laughter in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

More recently, R.D.V. Glasgow, in *Madness, Masks, and Laughter*, builds on previous theories by Freud, Bakhtin, Hobbes, and others to explore what it is about comedy that causes us to laugh. Although Glasgow does not address *Lady Audley’s Secret*, his

chapters on “Mask and Repetition” and “Mask and Acting” have proven extremely valuable in crafting my argument that Braddon’s acting experience informs the way she portrays Lady Audley using laughter to mask her transgressive behavior. Glasgow begins “Mask and Repetition” by explaining how masks and “comic repetition” play upon our familiarity with an identity and “reduc[e] us to babies cooing with satisfaction at the predictability of the world...as if the structure of our experience is drawing attention to its own structuredness” (33). For example, Glasgow explains how 16th-century Italian theatre often employed the “demoniacal half-mask of...Harlequin” (33) in comedic productions because it allowed the audience familiar with the Harlequin figure to experience the “comic pleasure of predicting and recognizing his standard behavioral patterns” (33). While Glasgow assigns positive feelings to this recognition of “structuredness,” I recall Judith Butler’s assertion that drag undermines gender identities by reproducing those identities in an obviously false way that causes us to confront the inherent artifice of gender (174-175).

On one hand, I agree with Glasgow that humans take comfort in being able to assign meaning to a certain set of traits represented by masks; we certainly see how desperately the men in *Lady Audley’s Secret* cling to their assumptions that Lady Audley is an ideal woman based solely on her flawless imitation of proper Victorian behavior. However, I also believe Butler’s theory also comes into play in Lady Audley’s over-the-top performance of femininity, namely because when the mask finally comes off, exposing Lady’s Audley’s true nature, Braddon’s characters – and possibly her readers – are unsettled by the idea that she was able to perform her gender so authentically.

Yet Glasgow does not limit his discussion of masks to the corporeal, explaining that stereotypes create figurative masks that caricature or satirize certain groups of people and

that “such satire constitutes a form of comic repetition dependent largely...on being *identified*” (35 emphasis in original). There is a power component in this type of comic repetition “which consists in the selection and reproduction of repeatable facets from the victim’s conduct of appearance with the intention that these facets should be recognized – and in turn derided – by a third person or by the victim himself” (35). This idea hearkens back to Freud’s theory, which I mentioned in the introduction, that the person doing the laughing has “the power of the criticism of the object” (Gindele 142). Glasgow elaborates on this notion, writing, “Laughter is a gesture of self-applause...the recognition of patterns, the ‘getting’ of a joke, in itself produce[s] a sort of self-approving laughter” (42). If we view Lady Audley’s laughter as a figurative mask that satirizes femininity by playing off her audiences’ stereotypical views about female gender roles (as she does in the previously-referenced passage when Lady Audley excuses her supposed fear of lightning as her being a “silly, frightened creature”), her reversal of the patriarchal system of signification, where man is the subject and woman the object, becomes clearer. In “Mask and Acting,” Glasgow posits that

The comedy of watching people act a part or don a disguise lies above all in the recognition of the difference between appearances and what is assumed to be really the case. Aware (smugly) of the true face behind the false mask, moreover, the onlooker’s laughter testifies to a cognitive superiority over those who are taken in by the acting, the fools and gulls who are deceived by the masks of the knaves and rogues. (45)

Applying Glasgow’s theory to Braddon’s text, I posit that because only Lady Audley knows she is constantly caricaturing femininity, she is at once the masked figure *and* the onlooker.

The “certain [group] of people” (35) she satirizes is her own gender, and because she is the only one who “gets” the joke, Lady Audley occupies the subject position, laughing at the duped men who surround her.

In the beginning of the novel, Braddon’s narrator provides an account of how Sir Michael won Lucy Graham’s hand in marriage. Explaining Sir Michael’s feelings as the result of “fall[ing] ill to the terrible fever called love” (Braddon 48), the narrator goes on to hypothesize that “throughout his courtship the baronet [never] once calculated upon his wealth or his position as a strong reason for his success” (49) in wooing Lucy. In fact, we are told, “[i]f he ever remembered these things, he dismissed the thought of them with a shudder. It pained him too much to believe for a moment that anyone so lovely and innocent could value herself against a splendid house or a good old title” (49). Sir Michael’s assumptions about gender allow him to be easily fooled by Lucy’s performance because his culturally-constructed ideas about how a woman should behave render him incapable of believing such a beautiful and seemingly innocent woman could be influenced by materiality. Sir Michael’s ego and worldview convince him, as well as his neighbors, “that whenever [he] proposed, [Lucy] would quietly accept him” (51). This, however, is not what happens.

Notably, it is during Sir Michael’s proposal to Lucy that we see the first occurrence of her laughter. Sir Michael, unsettled by Lucy’s (decidedly *not* quiet) outburst, in which she seems to lament the fact that she “cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance” (52), asks if she is in love with someone else. Lucy “laugh[s] aloud at his question” and responds, “I do not love anyone in the world” (Braddon 52). Though Sir Michael is relieved, he is also disturbed, her “strange laugh jarr[ing] upon his feelings” (52). While Sir Michael ultimately gets what he wants from Lucy – her acceptance of his proposal – he is left “carr[ying] the

corpse of that hope which had died at the sound of Lucy's words" (53). The negative effects of Victorian expectations for masculinity are evident here, as we, having figured out too late that his assumptions about Lucy were wrong, yet too proud to rescind his offer, resolves himself to "be contented, like other men of his age, to be married for his fortune and his position" (53). Lucy, meanwhile, has succeeded in finding a way to survive in a world ruled by Sir Michael and others like him, and she declares, "No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations" (53) in the privacy of her bedroom.

It is important to note that Lucy laughs "aloud," implying a high level of volume, as this outburst would have been considered unladylike behavior at the time (Leslie 124). In an 1859 conduct book entitled *Miss Leslie's Behavior Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies*, Miss Eliza Leslie instructs women on a wide variety of topics, including proper ways in which to dress, maintain hygiene, converse in public, write letters, and conduct themselves "in gentlemen's society" (Leslie 3). In one section, she gives young ladies insight into the correct way to behave when dining out, writing that they must be sure to "[r]efrain from loud talking, or loud laughing" because "the truly genteel are never conspicuously noisy at a public table, *or anywhere else*" (124, my emphasis). It is because Lucy's mask of femininity seems to be the picture of perfect womanhood, as outlined by books such as these, that Sir Michael finds her loud laughter "strange" (Braddon 52). Sir Michael's confusion foreshadows the difficulty he and Robert Audley will face later in the story in reconciling Lady Audley's charming façade with her criminal actions.

Once Lucy Graham becomes Lady Audley, some time passes before we see her laughing again. Instead, her maid, Phoebe, and Sir Michael's daughter, Alicia, discuss their opinions on Lady Audley's laughter with the men in their lives. Phoebe seems to be quite

enamored of her mistress as she describes Lady Audley's charm to her brutish fiancé Luke. "You should have heard her laugh and talk with them; throwing all their compliments and fine speeches back at them," gushes Phoebe (Braddon 67). Because Phoebe, like Lady Audley, is of the lower class and understands what it feels like to be subservient to others, she recognizes the power in Lady Audley's laughter and the way it turns the tables on men who shower her with flattery "as if they had been pelting her with roses" (67). However, Phoebe's admiration of Lady Audley's laughter is in stark contrast to Alicia's aversion to it.

At first, Alicia Audley appears to be significantly more spirited than the seemingly serene, demure, and hyperfeminine Lady Audley. This is due in part to Alicia's tendency to speak her mind, as she does when she writes to her cousin Robert Audley early on in the novel, describing her new stepmother as "a wax-dollish young person, no older than...herself, with flaxen ringlets and a perpetual giggle" (Braddon 72). Interestingly, Alicia is the only character who ever uses the word "giggle" to describe her stepmother's laughter, a derogatory choice of words that we see her use again later to paint a picture of Lady Audley as "a practiced and consummate flirt...not contented with setting her yellow ringlets and her silly giggle at half the men in Essex" (136). As a young, aristocratic woman, Alicia may be familiar with conduct books like the one by Miss Leslie, who writes that it "grieve[s]" her to see a woman "keeping up a continual laugh about nothing" in the presence of men (114) and is bothered by her stepmother's perceived lack of decorum. We should also consider that Alicia sees past Lady Audley's mask because she, too, understands the artifice of Victorian femininity.

Described by Sir Michael and Robert as "genial" and "amiable" (Braddon 341), with "no nonsense about her" (72), Alicia possesses qualities considered admirable by nineteenth-

century standards (Chapone 125). However, for most of the novel, Braddon does not portray Alicia as the stereotypical passive and silent woman. She makes her feelings towards Lady Audley well known, especially to her cousin Robert. Likewise, she shows her frustration at Robert's lack of romantic interest in her, at one point verbally attacking him by calling him a "selfish, cold-hearted Sybarite" (148). Yet the narrator tells us that just when "Robert was most prepared to encounter his cousin's violence, and when Miss Alicia seemed about to make her strongest attack, the young lady broke down altogether and burst into tears" (148). Unlike Lady Audley, whose laughter masks her capability for actual violence, Alicia is unable to follow through with her attack on Robert – be it verbal or physical – because of her inability to fully reject Victorian norms.

In light of this incident, I would argue that in addition to being jealous of the attention Lady Audley is receiving from her father and cousin, Alicia also envies her ability to laugh freely at the men around her without incurring reproach. It seems that Alicia considers the men in her life – Sir Michael, Robert Audley, and Harry Towers – foolish in different ways, perhaps because at first, none of them are able to see past Lady Audley's ultra-feminine performance. While Alicia attempts to express her frustration at times, as she does when alludes to Robert's "heartless, lazy, selfish, supercilious indifference" (156) towards her, Alicia does not feel at liberty to openly laugh in their faces as Lady Audley does. Perhaps it is out of envy, then, that Alicia ridicules Lady Audley's "never-ending laugh" (Braddon 93), shows contempt for her stepmother's "frivolity" when she sees her laughing with Phoebe (95), and later tries to portray her as an unfeeling monster who "laugh[s] at the pain she inflict[s]" (136) on Sir Michael. However, Alicia not only feels contempt for her tittering

stepmother, she also despises how easily the men in her life have been “fascinated” (136) by Lady Audley².

Although Alicia is said to be “a jolly girl” (72), we see her laugh only twice in the novel. The first time, she is alone with Lady Audley, making Alicia’s laughter acceptable because it is unseen by men. The only other time Alicia laughs is after Lady Audley (unbeknownst to Alicia) has confessed her offenses. This time, Alicia laughs in front of Robert, who quickly tempers her smugness by telling her that Sir Michael “has just endured a very great grief” (368). Instantly, Alicia’s “arch, laughing face” transforms into “a tenderly earnest look of sorrow and anxiety” (368) for her father. Significantly, the one time Alicia dares to laugh in a man’s face, he cuts her laugh short, which reasserts his dominance. This marks a change in Alicia’s narrative. Robert uses his influence over the girl to instruct her on how she is now expected to behave towards her father, telling Alicia to fulfill her role as his “natural comforter” (369) and not to mention the cause of Sir Michael’s distress. Robert also implies that the spiritedness we have previously seen from Alicia has had much to do with her anger at Lady Audley, and is not her “natural” behavior, when he says, “Try and be to [Sir Michael] *what you were before* the woman in yonder room came between you and your father’s love” (369, my emphasis). Note that Robert does not tell Alicia, “Try to be...*who* you were” but “what you were” (369), a minute – but important – choice that further subjugates Alicia by referring to her as merely an object, void of identity.

It is the transgressive Lady Audley, then, who Robert believes is responsible for Alicia’s quick tongue and defiant attitude, and his words have a great effect on the girl, who does not respond by questioning her cousin or demanding to know the cause of her father’s unhappiness: “‘I will,’ murmured Alicia, ‘I will.’” (370). Her voice literally reduced to a

² I address the implications of Braddon’s use of “fascinate” and its variants in my conclusion.

murmur, Alicia's suppressed laughter represents her silencing by the patriarchy, in this case represented by Robert, and she soon apologizes to Robert for her previous "foolish and wicked" (370) behavior towards him. As evidence that Alicia has been restored to her proper role as a loving daughter, the last words we hear her speak are "[y]ou may trust me to take care of papa" (374), and towards the end of the novel, we are told she intends to marry the previously ridiculed and rejected Sir Harry Towers, presumably to become the devoted wife she is expected to be.

In addition to the two opposing views we receive from Phoebe and Alicia, there is a third, less obvious voice that contributes an opinion on Lady Audley's laughter: the narrator's³. The first interjection of the narrator's opinion occurs when she relates Alicia's reaction to Lady Audley. "I am sorry to say," writes the narrator, "that Miss Audley's animus caused her so to describe that pretty musical laugh" (Braddon 72). Throughout the rest of the book, the narrator uses terms such as "playful" (112). "pretty, gushing" (149), and "gay, triumphant, silvery" (305) when illustrating Lady Audley's laughter. While other characters are unsettled or annoyed by them, the narrator consistently uses favorable terms to reference these outbursts. Even at the conclusion of the book, after we are aware of the extent of Lady Audley's sins, the narrator tells us that Audley Court has been shut up and that only "a grim old house-keeper reigns paramount in the mansion which my lady's ringing laughter once made musical" (445-446). There is a wistful tone to this phrase, as if, with the departure of Lady Audley's laughter, all color and excitement left the house. I find this interesting because the novel seemingly restores order to the domestic realm with its resolution, but the

³ While there is no way to definitively declare the gender of this omniscient speaker, I contend that the voice is female, due to its favorable descriptions of the heroine's persistent laugh, and will refer to the narrator through feminine pronouns for the remainder of this chapter.

mysterious narrator prevents the story from being simply a moralistic tale in which the evil, masculine, transgressive woman is defeated, neatly disposed of, and forgotten.

Just before Robert finally comes to Audley Court to meet his new aunt, we are given a description of the new Lady Audley that, on the surface, seems to confirm Alicia's claim that she is childish. However, I read the following passage as depicting a drag-like performance of femininity:

The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness. She owned to twenty years of age, but it was hard to believe her more than seventeen. 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. She hated reading...and loved society (my emphasis). (90)

The portrait of Lady Audley the narrator paints could hardly be a more ideal picture of Victorian femininity. Not only is she fair, blue-eyed, and blonde, she also projects a childlike innocence (and ignorance) of the world; she is the Angel in the House personified. Compare, for instance, the narrator's description of Lady Audley's "innocence and candour of an infant" (90) with Coventry Patmore's exultation of his love interest in "The Angel in the House":

...she grows

More *infantine*, auroral, mild,

And still the more she lives and knows

The lovelier she's express'd a child' (my emphasis). (Book I, Canto V, Idyll I, Lines 17-20).

In addition to displaying childlike traits, Lady Audley dresses in “heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks” which inhibit and confine her movements, a detail that illustrates Lady Audley’s commitment to performing the role she knows is expected of her. However, the narrator’s remark that Lady Audley “look[s] like a child tricked out for a masquerade” not only emphasizes the absurd juxtaposition of a young girl wearing such elaborate and grown up clothing, but also suggests that the performance is over-the-top, even by Victorian standards. Therefore, I read Lady Audley’s hyperbolic presentation of femininity as a form of drag-like “gender parody” in which “we see sex and gender denaturalized by a means of performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (Butler 175).

In her study of depression in Victorian England, Janet Oppenheim explains that due to a “consensus” among nineteenth-century scientists that women’s brains were smaller than men’s, and that “[i]n those missing ounces lay all the mental vigor that women lacked,” a discourse developed within the scientific and medical community that “posit[ed] a fundamental similarity between women and children...In their uncurbed emotions, craving for sympathy, gifts of mimicry, and ‘deep sense of dependence,’ among other traits, ‘the feminine and the child-mind’ were analogous” (86). Remarkably, not only does Lady Audley seem to be aware, throughout the novel, of this equation of femininity and childishness, Braddon’s narrator explicitly connects her performance to masquerade decades before Joan

Riviere makes the same connection and more than a century before Butler's *Gender Trouble* highlights the performative aspects of gender.

Even though his first encounter with Lady Audley is extremely brief, Robert is immediately won over by Lady Audley's beauty and "fairy-like bonnet" (94) and even fancies himself in love with her. At dinner, Robert even muses that she "professe[s] the the most bewitching capacity for carving the pheasant" (120), and we are told that she laughs throughout the process. Susan Lanser claims that "the condition of being a woman in a male-dominant society may well necessitate the double voice, whether as conscious subterfuge or as a tragic dispossession of the self" and that "deployment of decorum in staid and elegant drawing-rooms...actually challenges the ideology of manners" (qtd. in Barreca 119). With this in mind, it is fitting that the first time Robert sees Lady Audley laughing is within this domestic setting, since he will eventually discover the existence of her so-called "double voice." Later on, when Robert is involved in his investigation of Lady Audley, Braddon's narrator describes another seemingly blissful scene of domesticity, but this time her tone is remarkably different. As Robert watches his aunt preparing tea, the narrator takes the opportunity to launch into what I consider a scathing indictment of patriarchal oppression.

At first, the narrator claims that "a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea" and proceeds to wax poetic about how it is "the most feminine and most domestic of all occupations," describing the "floating mists" and "scented vapour through which she seems a social fairy" (Braddon 242-243). Women are the "witch president[s] of the tea-tray," claims the narrator, and "[t]o do away with the tea-table is to rob woman of her legitimate empire" (243). Initially, this description seems perfectly in line with contemporary "Angel in the House" imagery. However, the tone soon shifts:

Better the pretty influence of the teacups and saucers gracefully wielded in a woman's hand, than all the inappropriate power snatched at the point of the pen from the unwilling sterner sex. Imagine all the women of England elevated to the high level of masculine intellectuality; superior to crinoline...above taking pains to be pretty; above making themselves agreeable; above tea-tables, and that cruelly scandalous and rather satirical gossip...and what a dreary, utilitarian, ugly life the sterner sex must lead. (243)

For me, this remarkable passage is performative, in that it does literarily exactly what Lady Audley does with her mask of laughter – it lulls us into a sense that we know what is coming. We have read these types of saccharine descriptions before: women are goddesses of the home, who perform magic as they adeptly master domestic tasks and make life beautiful for their husbands. Yet just as the discovery of Lady Audley's sins disrupts Robert's worldview, the passage abruptly disrupts our sense that there is an order to things when it suddenly takes what appears to be a protofeminist stance on the limiting effects of separate gendered spheres on women's lives. Are these Braddon's personal views, is Braddon ridiculing women who desire such freedom, or are both of these questions moot because we cannot confuse Braddon with her narrator? Peter Capuano declines all of these options, arguing that these are *Robert's* "extended thoughts" which stem from his insecurity (226). Eva Badowska agrees, claiming that the passage "expose[s] Robert's misogynistic delusions" about domesticity (164). However, Barbara Onslow finds that "the narrative voice is ambivalent," though she does contend that the description's "hyperbolic rhetoric" (466) undercuts ideas about traditional femininity. I tend to disagree with these critics and argue that our narrator's diatribe is *not* ambiguous. Not only is the tone of the scene rife with sarcasm, the narrator specifically

points out that women liberated from the tea table might not just be “above” concerning themselves with beautification and amiability, they might also lose interest in the gossip that perpetuates panoptic discipline within their groups. The insight of this statement seems astute in a way that suggests the person writing is well acquainted with and angered by patriarchal oppression. In a way, it is as if we get a glimpse of what lies behind the narrator’s own literary mask.

Instances of Lady Audley’s use of laughter as a mask abound throughout the novel. When Robert inquires about a bruise on her wrist, Lady Audley laughs it off (123), yet we find out later she obtained the mark during her attempted murder of George. Later, when Robert “intently” watches her and remarks on the lengths to which some women would go to marry as well as she has, Lady Audley “laugh[s] aloud” once again, dismissing his implications (150). A 1902 treatise by James Sully, entitled *An Essay on Laughter: Its Forms, Its Causes, Its Development and Its Value*, addresses this type of laughter as a “turning of the tables on masters by those in subjection” (267). He comes across as amused by what he calls “woman’s retort on man’s contemptuous treatment” and says that “[s]he has again and again managed to outwit him...and has had her full laugh at his cumbrous attempts to manage her” (267). We see this very thing enacted throughout the book, as Lady Audley continually laughs away the veiled accusations Robert makes against her – she laughs when he tells her he is going to investigate the items George left behind (171), when he returns from making inquiries of George’s father-in-law (her father) (278) and when points out her “nervous” demeanor during their walk to the well (281). It is at that well, however, that Lady Audley’s laughter begins to serve a different function: defiance.

Indeed, our narrator tells us Robert “start[s]...recoil[s]” when, having accused Lady Audley of being Helen Talboys, she tells him that she “do[es] not choose to do anything but laugh at [his] ridiculous folly” (Braddon 289). Our omniscient narrator goes on to write, “I do not say Robert Audley was a coward, but I will admit that shiver of horror, something akin to fear, chilled him to the heart” upon hearing Lady Audley’s mocking reply. Nevertheless, Robert continues his accusations, finally accusing her of murdering George and telling her he plans to search the property for his body. It is at this point that she does more than threaten to laugh. With “her white face gleaming through the dusk, her blue eyes glittering and dilated” (291), Lady Audley reacts:

You shall never live to do this...*I will kill you first*. Why have you tormented me so? Why could you not leave me alone? What harm had I ever done *you* that you should make yourself my persecutor, and dog my steps, watch my looks, and play the spy upon me? Do you want to drive me mad? Do you know what it is to wrestle with a madwoman? No,” cried my lady, with a laugh, “you do not, or you would never –. (291, emphasis in original)

Here she stops, realizing the force of her outburst. Yet it is too late. The mask is off, and the boiling rage that Lady Audley has suppressed for so long has finally come to the surface. Helene Cixous believes this is the natural result of years of masculine oppression. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” she avows that “[w]hen the repressed of their culture and society [return], it’s an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed” (1952, emphasis in original). Lady Audley’s “explosive” outburst, then, is a reaction to the injustices she has suffered as a woman abandoned by her husband and left without any means by which to support herself.

When she finally confesses the extent of her sins to Robert and Sir Michael, Lady Audley describes George Talboys' "cruelty in having allied a helpless girl to poverty and misery" and the resentment and hatred his "desertion" inspired within her (Braddon 360). Because of her status as a now seemingly unmarried, lower-class woman in a patriarchal culture of oppression, she is driven to become the transgressive, "wretched creature" (367) the men consider her. And because of her transgressions, she must be punished.

In a chapter entitled "Buried Alive," Robert finds a doctor who will agree with Lady Audley's self-diagnosis of hereditary madness, so he can confine her to a private asylum in Belgium (387). This is necessary to avoid blemishing the family name and damaging Sir Michael's reputation. He does not tell Lady Audley where he is taking her, but upon arriving at the institution, and being told she must "repent," she refuses. "I would laugh at you and defy you if I dared...I would kill myself and defy you if I dared. But I am a poor, pitiful coward, and have been so from the first" (396-7). What she does not realize is that she has done just that. She has laughed in Robert Audley's face all along, masking it as charm or silliness, and because of her laughter, she is a danger to him. She has reversed the gaze and placed him in the uncomfortable position of having to "look at the Medusa straight on" (Cixous 1951). Unfortunately, precisely because Lady Audley is "beautiful and...laughing" (1951), as Cixous describes the Medusa in her essay, she must be hidden away, kept out of sight of the men she threatens – in essence, buried alive.

**Chapter 2: “Laughter Became Her Person So Well’:
Performativity and Identity in *Daniel Deronda*”**

Published in 1876, George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* is a sprawling account of two disparate protagonists, the titular Daniel and headstrong Gwendolen Harleth, whose lives become entwined after a chance encounter. The relationship Gwendolen and Daniel form impacts each of their lives in immense, though vastly different, ways, as the characters travel from England to France to Jerusalem to Italy, but although Eliot names the novel after Daniel, it is Gwendolen and her “musical laugh” (Eliot 73) that I find most captivating. Gwendolen is a young, beautiful, upper-class Englishwoman both adored and feared by her acquaintances and even her mother, Mrs. Davilow, because of her “strong determination to have what was pleasant” and “total fearlessness in making [herself] disagreeable or dangerous when [she] did not get it” (Eliot 43). In many ways, Gwendolen is an unlikeable protagonist. She is selfish, haughty, and self-absorbed and shows no real affection for anyone but her weak, melancholy mother and laughs at those who she deems inferior to herself. So why does Eliot choose to make her heroine an essentially unlikable character, and why does she show Gwendolen laughing so often?

One might begin to find answers in Gilbert and Gubar’s discussion of “the anxiety of authorship” in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in which the co-authors hypothesize that similarly “uncongenial characters” in female-authored Victorian fiction express the “self-dislike” and “dis-ease” nineteenth-century female writers feel as a result of their transgression into the patriarchal literary sphere (69). However, despite, or perhaps *because* of, her flawed character, in a repressive culture that celebrates the kind of woman represented

in the figure of Mirah – meek, quiet, and selfless – Gwendolen’s confidence in herself to get exactly what she wants out of life is fascinating. Gwendolen’s belief “that she [is] well-equipped for the mastery of life,” coupled with her sense of “power” and “general superiority” (41) over others leads Gwendolen to erroneously assume she is capable of attaining the pleasurable life of ease and material comfort she desires.

Whereas I have previously demonstrated how Mary Elizabeth Braddon uses Lady Audley’s laughter as a mask that allows her to operate *outside* of Victorian social norms in order to survive and defy patriarchal oppression, in this chapter, I will argue that while George Eliot also appears to use her heroine’s laughter as a type of mask, Gwendolen’s laughter simultaneously gives her a false sense of agency and helps her more easily *conform* to gender roles in order to further her wealth and social standing, instead of to transgress them. Using Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, I intend to demonstrate how, like Lady Audley, Gwendolen uses laughter to artfully perform Victorian femininity; but, unlike Braddon’s heroine, Gwendolen is psychologically destroyed and silenced by her conformity because Gwendolen’s constant performance ultimately causes her to lose her identity.

Perhaps one of the reasons for Gwendolen’s eventual destruction and loss of selfhood is Eliot’s complicated approach to representations of female oppression; on one hand, she appears to critique the patriarchal systems that make it necessary for women like Gwendolen to subjugate themselves through marriage, yet on the other, she seems to feel the need to maintain social norms by punishing her female characters for their attempts to escape those constraints. Susan Meyer, for instance, argues that in *Daniel Deronda*, “Eliot is trying to resolve the tension between self- fulfillment and fulfillment of a societal role that has created the discontentment in her heroines’ lives” but that she “displaces the conflict between self

and society, and the mark of ‘alien’ race that signifies it, onto a man [Daniel Deronda],” which ultimately “expunges female impulses to transgress social boundaries” (734). In fact, Meyer’s assertion is that “the general impulse of the novel is to re-establish social hierarchies, to restore men and women to their traditional social roles” (734) and uses the figure of Daniel’s mother, the Princess Alchirisi, as an example of the “suppressed impulse of the novel, its critique of women’s difficulties in oppressive societies” (742-743). Meyer points out that though the Princess is a woman who “voices, with a passionate rage, a resistance to the subordinate position of women” (742) and “escape[s] from a gender role she found constraining” (743), Eliot’s novel “judges her escape harshly” (743) and condemns her to a miserable death. Although Gwendolen escapes the same fate, I intend to show how, by the end of the novel, Eliot has silenced not only her persistent laugh, which dissipates after her marriage to Grandcourt, but also her speaking voice, removing her ability to express any discontentment she feels at being once more trapped at Offendene, “which she had entertained such a restless longing to leave” (736).

While Meyer deems Eliot’s maintenance of norms an indication of her “harsher – and more anxious – politics” (755), Eileen Sypher reads Eliot’s treatment of Gwendolen as “proto-feminist” (507), arguing that Eliot “powerfully refuses to construct Gwendolen as a character capable of being known and so subjected by anyone” (508). Sypher claims that neither the reader, nor any of the male characters of the novel, including Deronda and Grandcourt, are able to place Gwendolen “within the existing patriarchal social order,” which “strategically disrupts Gwendolen’s *characterization*, compromising her (and so too the reader) as a subjected, unified, and so acquiescent subject” (508). In other words, Gwendolen never really has an identity to begin with. Sypher points to the changing nature of Victorian

society as a possible cause for Eliot's inscrutable characterization of Gwendolen, suggesting that "[t]his new economy, Eliot seems to sense, would, in the twentieth century, install a different kind of subject from classical realism at its center, a fragmented, incoherent subject" (521), though Sypher does not necessarily read Gwendolen's eventual return to Offendene as positive, even though she is free of Grandcourt and returned to a safer feminine sphere. In fact, Sypher sees a "terrible stillness" in Gwendolen's fate, arguing that the "only virtue of her protracted regret and guilt is that they have convinced her not to gamble where men are concerned, that life with mother is preferable" and that "Gwendolen remains...still only a potential, a cipher, mute, inglorious" (521). Perhaps, though Eliot has resisted making Gwendolen a traditional realist character, she has given her heroine the most realistic ending a nineteenth-century British woman could expect.

In "*Daniel Deronda* and George Eliot's Female (Re)Vision of Shakespeare," Marianne Novy sheds further light on Eliot's portrayal of Gwendolen. Novy argues feminists' claims that Eliot's admiration for and emulation of Shakespeare is an indication of "alienation from her sex" are too uncompromising (671). Instead, Novy posits Eliot "enjoyed Shakespeare partly because she saw him as a creator of powerful women, and that she saw herself as writing both in his tradition and from a female viewpoint" and suggests she "emphasized his female characters' autonomy" (672). Relying heavily on Eliot's own letters, Novy provides multiple examples of Eliot's enduring identification with Shakespeare, including with his "portrayal of unconventional, frankly passionate women" (674). For Novy, *Daniel Deronda* is a sort of rewriting of Shakespeare, namely *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*, where Daniel becomes a reimagining of Hamlet and Gwendolen an "ironical" version of Rosalind (679). In a brief, but interesting, commentary on performativity, Novy juxtaposes

Shakespeare's Rosalind, who pretends that her strong reaction to finding out the man she secretly loves has been attacked by a lion is merely a performance, with Gwendolen's feigned concern for her cousin Rex. While Rosalind must explain away her genuine reaction as acting because she is masquerading as a man, and, therefore, cannot be perceived as having such strong feelings towards Oliver, Eliot "emphasizes Gwendolen's lack of feeling for Rex, and for other people in general" by showing her efforts to affect sympathy because it is the "proper" reaction, especially for a nineteenth-century woman (Novy 681). While Novy mentions Gwendolen's performance only in passing, it gestures to me that Gwendolen's laughter is performative; despite her desire for independence, Gwendolen often consciously uses laughter to mask her struggle to conform to Victorian ideals of femininity.

In addition to showing the complexity of Eliot's attitudes towards gender, Novy's article may help readers and critics understand why Gwendolen seems justified in her desire to live independently of a husband on the one hand, but seemingly is punished for that transgression on the other. In a discussion about Eliot and the important role sympathy plays in both her personal and professional lives, Novy once again references Eliot's letters to reveal her feelings of "uncertainty about identity" (677): "My nature is so chameleon I shall lose all my identity unless you keep nourishing the old self with letters" (Eliot qtd. in Novy 676). Later, Novy includes a passage written by Eliot's husband, J.W. Cross, towards the end of his collection of her letters and journal entries, in which he claims that Eliot's "wide sympathy...[t]his many-sidedness...makes it exceedingly difficult to ascertain, either from her books or from the closest personal intimacy, what her exact relation was to any existing religious creed or to any political party" (Cross 307). While readers should not blindly accept Cross's interpretation of Eliot as truth, this passage is helpful in understanding why *Daniel*

Deronda cannot be read as straightforwardly feminist, or even proto-feminist, and why conflicting sympathies often seem to be at play throughout the novel. Cross goes on to write that Eliot was “keenly anxious to redress injustices to women, and to raise their general status in the community” (308), and I contend that while Eliot’s intentions are not as clear-cut as, perhaps, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s are, in *Daniel Deronda*, she attempts to point out the oppressive effects of Victorian patriarchal structures on women, as well as the destruction of identity resulting from women’s efforts to conform to those structures.

Cross’s collection of Eliot’s personal writings repeatedly mentions Herbert Spencer, the nineteenth-century philosopher and biologist with whom Eliot was friends for decades. Eliot’s acquaintance with Herbert is notable for at least two reasons. Nancy L. Paxton suggests that Eliot’s novels, especially *Daniel Deronda*, “demonstrate her resolute feminist resistance to many aspects of Spencer’s biological determinism, especially as it found expression in his developing analysis of female sexuality and motherhood” (5) as the ultimate goal for women. She reads Gwendolen’s complicated relationship with her mother and “resistance to heterosexual love and desire” as “Eliot challeng[ing] the assumptions that Spencer and Darwin made about the natural developments of the sexual instincts which predetermined woman’s place in the family” (205). However, as Paxton points out, Eliot’s relationship with Spencer was complicated; although Eliot’s initial admiration for Spencer’s work turned to “angry criticism,” Paxton claims that later in her career, Eliot “achieved a more good-humored perspective on Spencer and regarded her friend’s intellectual crochets with more indulgence” (6).

Therefore, even if Eliot’s writing was a reaction against some of Spencer’s anti-feminist ideas, we cannot assume she disagreed with him entirely. What I find particularly

interesting about Eliot's relationship with Spencer, at least in the context of my study of Gwendolen's laughter, is that Eliot was likely familiar with Spencer's "The Physiology of Laughter" in which Spencer presents his "relief theory" of laughter, to which I referred in the previous chapter. Spencer's article does not reject the Darwinian theory that laughter results from feelings of incongruity, but it does postulate that laughter acts as a physical release of pent up emotions. He writes that "the suppression of external signs of feeling makes feeling more intense" (7565) and that the body seeks to dispel these feelings through physical expression. For Spencer, "[s]trong feeling, mental or physical" is "the general cause of laughter" (7566). If we presume Eliot was acquainted with Spencer's theory and apply it to Gwendolen's laughter throughout *Daniel Deronda*, it is possible to see Gwendolen's laughter as both a performance of gender and evidence of her feelings of superiority.

Perhaps, as Spencer suggests, some instances of Gwendolen's laughter stem unconsciously from her inability to fully express through language her repressed anti-normative feelings and desires for autonomy and power in a patriarchal society. If so, Eliot anticipates Hélène Cixous' claim that women "must write through their bodies" ("Medusa" 886) in order to break out of the prison phallogocentric language has kept them trapped within. Eliot allows Gwendolen to "invent for herself a language to get inside of" (887), a "language" of laughter that, while simultaneously conforming to and resisting Victorian society's expectations of femininity, is nevertheless transgressive for the simple fact that, as Cixous contends, "[a] feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive" (888).

Gwendolen's longing for power and independence is evident from the beginning of the novel, when we are first introduced to her in the gambling parlor as she conjures "visions of being followed by a *cortege* who would worship her as a goddess of luck and watch her

play as a directing augury” and wonders, “Such things had been known of male gamblers; why should not a woman have like supremacy?” (Eliot 7). Later, Eliot’s narrator reveals that Gwendolen “will not rest without having the world at her feet” and intends to experience “a more ardent sense of living” than she believes other women, her sorrowful mother included, are able to achieve (40). Yet while her desire for power is, perhaps, subversive simply due to her status as a woman, Gwendolen does not reject social norms in order to achieve it. In fact, the narrator tells us that “[w]hatever was accepted as consistent with being a lady she had no scruple about” (324); so although love does not factor into Gwendolen’s plans, she knows “she [can] not look forward to a single life” and therefore views marriage as a vehicle for the “social promotion” (40) necessary to obtain the wealth and status she considers vital to her happiness. Eliot thus uses Gwendolen’s laughter to highlight her resigned acceptance of norms and performance of femininity while also making a subtle statement on the oppressiveness of those norms. Just by explaining that Gwendolen cannot “look forward” to a future where she does not have to marry, Eliot points to a future that *could* allow Gwendolen to live a “single life” if only she stepped out of the patriarchal script of Victorian norms. For Braddon’s Lady Audley, laughter enables her to transgress this script. Yet Gwendolen is so unaware that her adherence to society’s expectations means she is already trapped within the confines of patriarchal power, and so convinced of her ability to “manage her own destiny” (41), that she blindly accepts her present reality and uses laughter to perform her gender in a way that upholds those expectations in order to obtain comfort, certain she will not be inhibited by marriage and will be able to exert her will over the husband she chooses.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler challenges the idea of any correlation between biological sex and gender, claiming there is, in fact, no actual “gender.” Building on Foucault and his theory of Panoptic discipline, Butler argues that the “disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender” in order to maintain the hegemony of “heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain” (172). People believe that there are gender norms, so anything that does not fit with their ideas about those norms is considered other, unnatural, or taboo, even though there are no norms to begin with. Butler says that by continually performing gender, we affirm the idea that gender norms exist. Gender norms have to be upheld because when “abnormal” behaviors “disrupt the regulatory fiction” of a heterosexual norm, the falseness of the norm is exposed, but the more we repeat gendered actions, the more solidified the idea that gender exists becomes (173). Butler continues by explaining that the “acts, gestures, [and] enactments” associated with gender are “*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications” upheld and seen as truth because of the continual repetition of the performances (173, emphasis in original). However, Butler argues, gender performances taking the form of drag deconstruct the whole notion of gender by calling attention to the fact that gender norms can be performed by a person whose body does not “match” the gender they are mimicking (174). Yet Butler is quick to point out that just because drag parodies gender, it does not mean there is an “original” gender being parodied. Instead, the parody originates with the illusion that there is an original gender, and Butler writes that “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (175). The parody, then, shows how the idea of gender is constructed by the dominant discourse, even though the performances of gender are the creations of that

discourse. While Gwendolen certainly does not perform drag, she nonetheless performs femininity in ways Eliot uses to show gender's falsity.

One of the first instances in which readers see Gwendolen simultaneously performing Victorian femininity while also using her performance to mock its conventions occurs in one of *Daniel Deronda's* earliest scenes, when Gwendolen attends a social function at the neighboring Quetcham Hall. We are told Gwendolen considers the party's hostess, Mrs. Arrowpoint, "ridiculous" (Eliot 46), but, because of her overriding desire to be "agreeable" to people who might, in turn, "make life agreeable to her" (46), Gwendolen attempts to converse with her about literature, having learned that Mrs. Arrowpoint has written a book. Believing also that Mrs. Arrowpoint is "wanting in penetration" (46), Gwendolen assumes she will be able to subtly make fun of the woman while being perceived to behave in a respectful and ladylike way. However, the moment Gwendolen realizes that Mrs. Arrowpoint "sees the perilous resemblance to satire" in her disingenuous flattery, Gwendolen changes her behavior to enact "girlish simplicity" (47). As Gwendolen endeavours to maintain the appearance of proper femininity, she affects genteel ignorance in response to Mrs. Arrowpoint's offer to let Gwendolen read her work, saying, "Thanks. I shall be so glad to read your writings. Being acquainted with authors must give a peculiar understanding of their books: one would be able to tell then which parts were funny and which serious. *I am sure I often laugh in the wrong place*" (47, my emphasis). In addition to demonstrating how deftly Gwendolen navigates the performance of her gender, through this passage, Eliot also establishes a connection between Gwendolen's laughter and her ability to perform femininity.

Another moment of insight into Gwendolen's knowledge about the performativity of gender comes soon after the instance at Quetcham Hall, when Mrs. Davilow, responding to Gwendolen's inquiry about her similarity to Rachel, a famous actress, tells Gwendolen that her "voice is not as tragic as [Rachel's]: it is not so deep" (Eliot 57). Never to be outdone, Gwendolen replies, "I can make it deeper if I like...I think a higher voice is more tragic: it is more feminine; and the more feminine a woman is, the more tragic it seems when she does desperate actions" (55). This exchange foreshadows the tragedy which will eventually befall Gwendolen, it also informs readers that she is aware that certain behaviors make her appear more or less feminine and that she can control those appearances to her advantage.

Because she has spent a sheltered life surrounded by women, Gwendolen does not understand that her position as a woman living in a male-dominated society means she will always already be subjugated by men. Indeed, not having had much experience with men besides her stepfather, who spent most of his time away from her mother before his death, and her uncle Gascoigne, whom Gwendolen easily manipulates, it is not surprising that Gwendolen imagines she will not only be left to her own devices but also able to influence her future husband to her own advantage. Similarly, the only encounters we see between Gwendolen and potential suitors in the beginning of the novel occur with mild-mannered and boring Mr. Middleton and sweet, hopelessly romantic Rex, who both annoy Gwendolen while also reinforcing her lofty self-perception. When Gwendolen's cousin, Anna, gushes about her brother Rex, saying "[h]e is so clever, and such a dear old thing...Rex can do anything" (Eliot 57), Gwendolen scoffs: "I don't the least believe in your Rex, Anna," said Gwendolen, laughing at her. "He will turn out to be like those wretched blue and yellow water-colours of his which you hang up in your bedroom and worship" (58). Not only does

this scene reveal the sense of superiority Gwendolen feels to Anna, whom she laughs *at*, it also shows how limited Gwendolen's view of men is, since the idea that Rex might be smart, kind, and capable is literally laughable to Gwendolen, who has never encountered such a man and is bored with men in general. As a result, Gwendolen comes to assume that her charm and wit are remarkable enough to place her in a position of power over men, since she may imagine the four male figures in her life reflect the characteristics of the entire male population. However, with the introduction of Grandcourt, whose presence ushers in a budding consciousness of patriarchal oppression, revealing that the idyllic life Gwendolen conjures in her mind will never materialize.

In the first half of *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen laughs quite often. In fact, we learn from the narrator that Gwendolen “value[s] herself on her superior freedom in laughing” and that “laughter [becomes] her person so well that her opinion of its gracefulness [is] often shared by others” (Eliot 83). Gwendolen's laughter sets her apart from the novel's other female characters. In fact, apart from one “little laugh” from Mirah, Gwendolen is the only woman who readers ever see laughing. Aware that her laughter is attractive to others, Gwendolen consciously uses it to express her self-confidence and perform femininity to charm men and then deflect their unwanted advances. For instance, we hear from her cousin Ann that Gwendolen is the only person to ever laugh at Mr. Middleton, the clergyman in love with her, and when Rex seems to be about to express his feelings for her, Gwendolen's “musical laugh” (73) attempts to undermine his seriousness. Laughing at and with men confirms Gwendolen's sense of superiority, and she seems somewhat aware of her laughter's capacity to disarm men, but it is also important to note that she also laughs to express feelings outside of the sphere of proper femininity. For instance, Gwendolen's “musical

laugh” in the aforementioned scene not only defuses Rex’s romantic attempts, it also follows Gwendolen’s response to Rex’s claim that she will never be able to surprise him: ““Yes I could. I should turn round and do what was likely for people in general,’ said Gwendolen, with a musical laugh” (73). Gwendolen’s statement reflects her knowledge that she is always performing – whether she *wants* to do what is “likely” for people or not, she knows that in order to maintain her attractive aura of feminine mystique, she may have to alter her behavior. Gwendolen’s laughter here also helps ease the possible offense her next declaration – “MY plan is to do what pleases me” (74) – might cause in Rex and nineteenth-century readers alike. However, the narrator’s next aside to “any young lady incline[d] to imitate Gwendolen” that in doing so, she must understand that if Gwendolen had tilted her chin or turned her head in a slightly different manner, her “words would have had a jar in them,” but because she knows *just* how to perform femininity, “everything odd in her speech was humour and pretty banter” (74). We might read this laughter, then, as the language of femininity Gwendolen uses to conceal the actual subversiveness of her stated intent to do whatever she wants.

However, Gwendolen also laughs when the agreeable scenarios she has imagined are threatened. For instance, when she first meets Klesmer, a renowned musician, Gwendolen imagines that he will be captivated by her singing voice. However, when Klesmer responds to her performance, saying, “[Y]ou produce your notes badly” (Eliot 51), Gwendolen “gradually turn[s] her inward sob of mortification into an excitement which lift[s] her for the moment into a desperate indifference about her own doings, or at least a determination to get a superiority over them by laughing at them as if they [belong] to somebody else” (52). In a similar situation, as she gets dressed for the Archery Meeting where she expects to be

introduced to Henleigh Grandcourt, a visiting bachelor who stands to inherit his uncle's sizeable estate, Gwendolen's security in her beauty and ability to enthrall both men and women leads her to boldly state that the other single women who will be in attendance "have not a shadow of a chance" (102) in winning Grandcourt's love. But when her mother uncharacteristically challenges Gwendolen's statement by reminding her that Gwendolen has a potential rival in Miss Arrowpoint, their neighbor, Gwendolen responds,

My arrow will pierce [Grandcourt] before he has time for thought. He will declare himself my slave – I shall send him round the world to bring my back the wedding-ring of a happy woman – in the mean time all the men who are between him and the title will die of different diseases – he will come back Lord Grandcourt – but without the ring – and fall at my feet. I shall laugh at him – he will rise in resentment – I shall laugh more. (102)

Once again, Gwendolen uses laughter to reassure herself of the power she has to not only control men but also herself, although this time her confidence is not convincing. Perhaps what has changed is that Gwendolen does not *actually* laugh but only says she *will* laugh. This is especially of note because later, as she gradually succumbs to Grandcourt's cruel dominance, readers witness numerous occasions in which Gwendolen thinks about how she might once have laughed but now forces herself to be silent. Hints of this future immediately follow Gwendolen's previous statement, when the narrator lets readers know that something in Gwendolen's tone has changed, explaining that "[t]he irony of this speech was of the doubtful sort that has some genuine belief mixed up with it" (104) and that it causes uneasiness in Mrs. Davilow. If we read laughter as an indicator of Gwendolen's belief in herself and confidence in her identity, the absence of Gwendolen's laughter might be seen as

the indicator of her growing self-doubt. Significantly, Gwendolen, realizing she has upset her mother, now experiences “the nearest approach to self-condemnation and self-distrust that she had known” (104). This scene foreshadows the eventual destruction of Gwendolen’s identity, as Grandcourt, a symbol of masculine power, will, and oppression, is already beginning to silence her laughter and negatively influence her sense of self.

When Gwendolen finally meets Grandcourt, we receive another hint that his embodiment of patriarchal dominance disrupts Gwendolen’s sense of power, when, in a moment of “shock which flush[es] her cheeks and vexatiously deepen[s] with her consciousness of it” (Eliot 117), she realizes that “Grandcourt could hardly have been more unlike all her imaginary portraits of him” (117). Recognizing that her imagination has failed her seemingly for the first time, Gwendolen outwardly rallies herself, but, notably, does not laugh. Instead, Eliot provides the following exchange, sparked by Grandcourt’s statement that he has always found archery “a great bore” (118):

‘Are you converted today?’ said Gwendolen.

(Pause, during which she imagined various degrees and modes of opinions about herself that may be entertained by Grandcourt.)

‘Yes, since I saw you shooting. In things of this sort one generally sees people missing and whimpering.’

‘I suppose you are a first-rate shot with a rifle.’

(Pause, during which Gwendolen, having taken a rapid observation of Grandcourt, made a brief graphic description of him to an indefinite hearer.)

(118)

Eliot's narrative style in this dialogue is markedly different from that of the rest of the novel and continues for several pages, as Gwendolen attempts to regain her mental footing after being surprised at her total failure to anticipate Grandcourt's response to her. Tellingly, the form Eliot uses is strikingly reminiscent of that of a script, where Gwendolen is the actress and the bracketed pauses are her stage directions. Considering that scripts are written by playwrights who control the narrative and, therefore are at the top of the power hierarchy; directed by someone with almost, but not quite, the same amount of power; and, finally, acted out by someone with no control over the direction of their character, I argue it is no coincidence that as soon as she meets Grandcourt, Gwendolen is unable to laugh her way back in control and instead begins *literally* following a script "written" by patriarchy and "directed" by its representative, Grandcourt. In fact, it is within the bracketed text that Gwendolen simultaneously considers the impression she is making upon Grandcourt, begins to convince herself of his suitability as a husband, and silences her laughter. As Eliot masterfully demonstrates through only a shift in narrative form, Gwendolen is unknowingly an actor in a world written and directed by oppressive systems of patriarchal dominance.

As Gwendolen and Grandcourt's relationship develops, the narrator demonstrates how Gwendolen's ability to laugh diminishes as Grandcourt's patriarchal dominance over her grows. During a seemingly romantic walk, for example, readers learn that "[i]f the situation had been described to Gwendolen half an hour before, she would have laughed heartily at it, and could only imagine herself returning a playful, satirical answer. But for some mysterious reason...she dared not...she had begun to feel a wand over her that made her afraid of offending Grandcourt" (Eliot 130). Later, during a horseback ride, Gwendolen's "pleasure d[oes] not break forth in girlish unpremeditated chat and laughter" as she once did:

she laughs, “but with a lightness as of a far-off echo” that she denies has anything to do with “any subjugation of her will by Mr. Grandcourt” (141). At another point, the narrator even asks, “How was it that Gwendolen did not laugh?” (144) Although we see instances of Gwendolen attempting to preserve her capacity for laughter, as she practices her customary form of laughing in order to deflect uncomfortable attention from Grandcourt (responding to his advances “laughingly” (158) in one rare instance) he quickly regains his control over her by “me[eting] her laughing eyes with a slow, steady look” so unnerving to Gwendolen that “she [is] quite shaken out of her usual self-consciousness” (159). However, Gwendolen’s naivete about the nature of men and the world she inhabits deludes her into thinking that Grandcourt’s “extremely calm, cold manners” means he “might be less disagreeable as a husband than other men, and not likely to interfere with his wife’s preferences” (119). Gwendolen’s lack of worldly knowledge and preoccupation with herself thus leads her to make an assumption about Grandcourt that results in the eventual dismantling of her identity.

As her courtship with Grandcourt progresses, Gwendolen seems to gradually become aware that she has entered a world unlike those in her imagination, a very real world that operates entirely differently than the one in which she has previously believed she could operate independently of male domination. Knowing that Grandcourt may soon propose, Gwendolen experiences an unfamiliar uncertainty about how she might respond to him:

Even in Gwendolen’s mind...was one of two likelihoods that presented themselves alternately...as if they were two sides of a boundary-line, and she did not know on which she should fall. This subjection to a possible self, a self not to be absolutely predicted about, caused her some astonishment and

terror: her favourite key of life – doing as she liked – seemed to fail her, and she could not foresee what at a given moment she might like to do. (146)

In this passage, just as her laughter is dissipating, the weak foundations of Gwendolen's identity are beginning to crumble, as she is faced with the knowledge that "with all her perspicacity...her judgement [is] consciously a little at fault with Grandcourt" (147).

Therefore, Gwendolen's willingness to immediately cut all ties with Grandcourt upon learning of the existence of his mistress, Mrs. Glasher, as well as his four children, is not surprising: in order to return to her fantasies of independence, and regain her sense of self, Gwendolen must excise Grandcourt's threatening presence.

Although she flees to Germany to avoid seeing Grandcourt again, Gwendolen cannot escape for long, as it is in Germany that Gwendolen first meets Daniel Deronda. Their initial meeting actually occurs in the first several paragraphs of the novel, but soon afterwards, Gwendolen learns of her mother's financial ruin and returns to England to marry Grandcourt, wherein Eliot goes back in time to recount the narrative I have explored in the previous pages.

The opposite of both Gwendolen and Grandcourt in almost every aspect, Daniel is described as having "a subdued fervor of sympathy, an activity of imagination on behalf of others" that is "continually seen in acts of considerateness" (194). Quiet and reserved, Daniel's influence over Gwendolen, though different than that of Grandcourt, has the same capacity to destroy Gwendolen's identity. Drawn to Daniel for reasons she does not understand, Gwendolen begins confiding in him after her marriage. Unfortunately, Daniel projects onto Gwendolen his image of the "good" woman, shaped in part by his image of the angelic Mirah, and in doing so, he causes her to eschew the rebellious, proud part of herself

that might help her escape her miserable and demeaning marriage. It is, in fact, during one of Gwendolen's earnest conversations with Daniel that we see her final laugh.

Trapped in an abusive marriage, Gwendolen becomes obsessed with what she perceives to be her most heinous sin of the past: marrying Grandcourt even after she has promised his mistress, Mrs. Glasher, she would not. Ironically, Gwendolen's obsessive "dread of wrong-doing" (324) is what leads her to accept Grandcourt in the first place, as she wonders what people will say about her if she refuses him, and is conscious that her refusal will condemn her mother to a life of poverty. When given the opportunity to escape an undesirable marriage to Grandcourt by obtaining a governess position, Gwendolen is *so* averse to the prospect of poverty and discomfort that she mistakenly sees "the rescue from helpless subjection to an oppressive lot" (329) in Grandcourt's proposal and agrees to marry him. However, as Gwendolen dons her wedding dress, the narrator interjects: "Poor Gwendolen...with her erect head and elastic footstep she was walking amid illusions" (389). Acquainted with the machinations of nineteenth-century British patriarchy, Eliot, through her narrator, lets her readers know that their heroine's misguided trust in the rewards of conforming to cultural and social expectations will ultimately be her downfall.

Once Gwendolen becomes Mrs. Grandcourt, we see how Eliot uses her marriage to illustrate women's subjugation to patriarchal ideology, as Gwendolen, now completely subject to her husband's will, becomes a shell of the woman she once was. Describing Gwendolen's and Grandcourt's seemingly idyllic yachting trip in the Mediterranean, the narrator reveals that even though Gwendolen has, by all appearances, achieved the happiness she believed wealth would bring, she is instead "at the very height of her entanglement in those fatal meshes which are woven within more closely than without" and conceal her

“inward torture” (738). Having “paid the strict price” to ensure her mother’s livelihood, Gwendolen, we are told, has “sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that [Grandcourt] held them throttled into silence, collared and dragged behind him to witness what he would, without remonstrance” (740). The violence of Eliot’s rhetoric in this passage reflects the violence she sees in a patriarchal ideology that does not allow women to act with agency in order to create their own identities but instead forces them to survive by willingly placing themselves under the control of a husband who can act as cruelly as he wishes without fear of repercussion. Eliot ultimately uses Gwendolen’s acceptance of and complete conformity to Victorian gender roles to show the overriding power of the patriarchy – since Gwendolen’s adherence to societal expectations eventually destroys her. In order to maintain the appearance that she is happily married, Gwendolen internalizes her hatred for Grandcourt so vehemently that even though she is seemingly free at the novel’s conclusion, Grandcourt having drowned after falling out of his boat, the narrator tells us that “[s]he had never smiled since her husband’s death. When she stood still and in silence, she looked like a melancholy statue of the Gwendolen whose laughter had once been so ready when others were grave” (853). Having lost her ability to laugh or even smile, Gwendolen has also lost the sense of identity she was once so sure of, and without her flawed and grandiose, but somewhat empowering, sense of self, she exits the narrative without a voice, her last words relayed through a letter to Daniel Deronda instead of through direct speech. Though Christine Sutphin argues that the letter “may seem like an expression of traditional feminine submission, but the fact that she...must live without her rescuer, indicates that she has unique opportunities for moral independence” (360), I cannot read this passage as anything but evidence that Gwendolen has finally been muted, trapped once again within the confines of

phallogocentric language her now silenced laughter once allowed her to unconsciously resist. Nevertheless, Eliot leaves open the possibility of a new beginning for Gwendolen, who writes, “I may live to be one of the best of women, who makes others glad that they were born” (899).

According to an 1877 article appearing in *The Woman’s Journal*, a women’s rights-focused publication, “readers and not a few of the critics” of *Daniel Deronda* were unhappy with the story’s ending and “object[ed] to having anything left to the imagination” (N.Y. Tribune). Apparently in response to her readers’ frustration, the editorial claims that Eliot herself “has been kind enough to telegraph us...as to the fate of her principal characters” (N.Y. Tribune). According to the utopia Eliot imagines, Gwendolen “master[s] Hebrew...reads the Talmud daily, and gives [Daniel] some valuable ideas in connection with the great work of his life” before eventually marrying Daniel and moving with him to Jerusalem, where “[t]heir lives are very harmonious”(31 March 1877). The future that Eliot gives Gwendolen in her response suggests that although the *novel* does not leave us with the sense that Gwendolen will go on to live a life of contentment, the author imagines a narrative *outside* of the book’s confines that simultaneously gives Gwendolen what she wants while still suggesting that it is only after Gwendolen becomes the woman *Daniel* wants her to be that she is able to achieve this future. Whether or not she is aware of the implications of such a resolution, Eliot’s imaginary narrative still leaves Gwendolen trapped within the patriarchal sphere, ultimately having shed her original nature in order to conform to male desire and patriarchal norms.

Conclusion

Laughter within female-authored Victorian texts is worth examining through a lens of feminist criticism. Both Braddon and Eliot are conscious of the power their protagonists' laughter holds – Braddon because she understands the power structures inherent in the idea of masquerade and Eliot because she is familiar with Spencer's (and perhaps Darwin's) theories regarding laughter's "purpose." However, since laughter within the two novels I have examined has been so overlooked until now, I feel I have barely scratched the surface of the potential for new lines of criticism that could stem from a closer exploration of female characters' laughter in nineteenth-century literature. Unfortunately, the scope of this project does not allow me to delve as deeply into *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Daniel Deronda* as I would like, but to conclude, I point to two possible directions in which future studies of laughter might proceed.

In both novels, the authors use Medusa and lamia imagery in connection to their protagonists. For example, in the same instance in which Alicia derides her stepmother's "never-ending laugh" (Braddon 93), she also addresses Robert "snappishly," asking him, "I suppose you are fascinated as well as everybody else?" (136). Of note here is Alicia's use of the word *fascinate*, which also appears just prior to Alicia's complaints, when the narrator explains Lady Audley's fatigue as resulting from her having "been the chief attraction of the race-course, and [being] wearied out by the exertion of fascinating half the county" (136). In fact, *fascinate*, or some variant, is used several times in the novel, mostly in connection with Lady Audley, who the narrator describes as "blessed with that magic power of fascination, by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile" (48). The recurrence of

the word is important, especially in connection to Lady Audley, because while in the nineteenth century, *fascinate* was used in connection with people considered charming and/or attractive, the OED tells us that the word was also tied to the ability to prevent “escape or resistance, as serpents are said to do through the terror produced by their look or merely by their perceived presence” (“Fascinate”).

Notably, Lady Audley is linked with snake imagery twice, but only after she has attempted to murder George Talboys (and believes she has succeeded). As Robert admires his aunt’s “pretty fingers” and notices that one is “encoiled by an emerald serpent” (Braddon 122), he sees a bruise on Lady Audley’s wrist that she obtained in her altercation with George. Later, in a passage absent from all of the book forms of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, but present in the *Sixpenny Magazine* version, Robert dreams that Lady Audley’s “beautiful golden ringlets [are] changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her fair neck” (Braddon 34), an image that easily calls to mind the figure of Medusa⁴. That Robert is the character who links Lady Audley with snakes is fitting, given his anxieties about and struggles with Victorian masculinity, which are evident throughout the novel⁵.

Eliot’s connection with Gwendolen’s laughter and her powers of fascination is even more intriguing. In the scene where Gwendolen laughs at Rex’s accident, where readers learn she “rather value[s] herself for her superior freedom in laughing” and that “laughter bec[omes] her person so well,” readers are told that “it...enter[s] into her uncle’s course of thought at this moment, that it [is] no wonder a boy should be fascinated by this young witch” (Eliot 83). Gwendolen’s *laughter* inspires these thoughts in her proper Victorian uncle

⁴ It is worth noting that Robert’s connection between Lady Audley’s hair and snakes was not an uncommon one for the era. In fact, Bram Dijkstra includes a discussion of *fin-de-siecle* fetishization and demonization of women’s hair on pages 229-231 of *Idols of Perversity*.

⁵ For more on masculinity, see Ellen Rosenman’s “Mimic Sorrows”: Masochism and the Gendering of Pain in Victorian Melodrama;” Rachel Heinrich’s “Critical Masculinities in *Lady Audley’s Secret*,” and Richard Nemessevari’s “Robert Audley’s Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.”

and is explicitly linked with the snake-like power of fascination. Indeed, in the novel's first few pages, Gwendolen is described by onlookers as having "got herself up as a sort of serpent...all green and silver...wind[ing] her neck about" with "long narrow eyes" and "a sort of Lamia beauty" (9). Shifra Hochberg suggests that because Gwendolen "winds her neck about" in hopes of spotting Daniel Deronda, Eliot is "prefigur[ing] Daniel's monitory role in enabling Gwendolen...to escape from the representational stereotypes of cultural myth and Darwinian developmental status and to achieve a measure of moral regeneration" (Hochberg 10). However, I do not agree with this analysis. We must keep in mind that the narrator explicitly tells us that Gwendolen has no intention of "carry[ing] out the serpent idea" (Eliot 10) and that she is curious about Daniel because earlier, "Deronda's gaze seem[s] to have acted as an evil eye" (7) that has ruined her winning streak at the gambling table and from which "she [is] still wincing" (10). It is not Eliot, then, who associates Gwendolen with the Lamia or serpent, as Hochberg erroneously claims⁶, nor even the narrator, but the men and women looking at Gwendolen.

Therefore, I find that just as Braddon makes it clear that Robert projects Medusa-like imagery onto Lady Audley because of his own anxieties about masculinity, Eliot locates Lamia and serpentine imagery in the minds of those gazing upon Gwendolen, reflecting *their* anxieties about female sexuality; one onlooker says about her, "Woman was tempted by a serpent: why not man?" (9). Indeed, in her essay "Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller," Eliot seems to confirm that in *Daniel Deronda*, she is attempting to highlight the subjectivity of women in Victorian England, writing, "Men say of women, let them be idols, useless absorbents of precious things, provided we are not obliged to admit them to be strictly fellow-beings" (qtd. in Dijkstra 24). Cixous echoes Eliot's sentiments in the aptly-titled "The

⁶ On page 9, Hochberg writes, "Eliot describes her thus: 'she has got herself up as a sort of serpent....'"

Laugh of the Medusa,” in which she claims that men have denied women their identities by projecting male fear of castration, or “lack” (884), as in lack of a penis, onto women. It is only through *l’écriture féminine*, Cixous argues, that women can escape:

the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...) (880)

For Cixous, the Medusa, with her phallic hair, is a stand-in for menacing femininity because her gaze upon men turns them to stone, in a reversal of the same male gaze that causes Gwendolen to wince. However, Cixous triumphantly declares, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885). When men cease to make women the subject of their fear, female laughter will cease to be so threatening.

Yet the snake/Lamia and laughter connection is not the only possibility for future study I see with regard to *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Daniel Deronda*. Contemporary criticism on trauma theory and Victorian literature, such as Jill Matus’ *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*⁷, coupled with emerging studies on the effectiveness of laughter therapy⁸, could also lend themselves to explorations of the trauma experienced by Lady Audley (from being abandoned by her husband) and Gwendolen Harleth (from implied

⁷ See also Matus’ “Historicizing Trauma: The Genealogy of Psychic Shock in *Daniel Deronda*.”

⁸ See JongEun Yim’s “Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter in Mental Health: A Theoretical Review.”

molestation by her stepfather⁹) and laughter's role in helping both characters cope with their trauma.

Additionally, I believe that looking at male laughter within these novels and others might be useful in exploring concepts of masculinity within Victorian culture. However, I hope that throughout this thesis, I have succeeded in demonstrating that the largely overlooked laughter in female-authored Victorian literature deserves at least a closer look. After all, "the woman who writes is also a witch; she has the power to change the ways we think and feel. She is patriarchy's most formidable femme fatale" (Williams 103). By more closely examining what the authors *do* with laughter, we open up a new vein of criticism that may enable us to locate the coded acts of resistance Victorian women were engaging in, leading us to a better understanding not only of the texts themselves but the women behind the writing as well.

⁹ See Margaret Loewen Reimer's "The Spoiled Child: What Happened to Gwendolen Harleth?"; Leila Aouadi's "Transgression in *Daniel Deronda*"; and Judith Wilt's "'He Would Come Back': The Fathers of Daughters in *Daniel Deronda*."

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