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Cosmetic Sensations: Lady Audley's Secret and the Democratization of Beauty

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Cosmetic Sensations: *Lady Audley's Secret* and the Democratization of Beauty

by

Rebecca Kling

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

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ABSTRACT

“Cosmetic Sensations: *Lady Audley’s Secret* and the Democratization of Beauty” focuses on the under-discussed issue of cosmetics in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the 1862 best-selling sensation novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is about a working-class woman named Helen who decides to change her identity after her first husband temporarily leaves her to look for gold in Australia because all his money has been spent by his wife and father-in-law. She marries a rich man named Michael Audley and becomes Lucy Audley, playing the part of a supposedly aristocratic lady. Although her crime of bigamy and her latent madness are often thought to be the secrets which novel’s title refers to, I explore the secretive nature of cosmetics in the novel. Because of the stigma surrounding them in Victorian society, cosmetics needed to be worn secretly. Cosmetics were seen as a social evil at the time because they upset the ideal of woman as pure, natural, and artless. Cosmetics were typically associated with prostitutes and actresses in the earlier part of the Victorian era, and even had lingering associations with witchcraft, as women in eighteenth century France could be accused of witchcraft if it was found that they used cosmetics of any sort to seduce a man and procure him as a husband. However, because social class in Victorian England was more about appearance and mannerisms than wealth and lineage and also because women often did wish to improve their chances of marrying into a wealthier class, cosmetics became increasingly popular as consumer culture took off in the 1860s and clandestine cosmetics use was on the rise. I discuss how cosmetics function as a mechanism of class mobility

and , because they can be used outside the scope of surveillance, they are typically more sensational than other material accoutrements such as clothing and jewelry. I discuss not only the novel but also the cultural history of cosmetics and the material production of the novel.

“Artifice is the strength of the world, and in that same mask of paint and powder, shadowed with vermeil tinct and most trimly penciled, is woman’s strength.” –Max Beerbohm “The Pervasion of Rouge” (1896)

The artificially produced beauty that Beerbohm advocates in “The Pervasion of Rouge” in 1896 was largely condemned throughout the Victorian period. In fact, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, diatribes against cosmetics and portrayals of natural and pure female beauty dramatically rose in response to what Beerbohm rightfully identifies as “The Pervasion of Rouge,” which began with the rise of commodity culture in the 1860’s. In “The Beautiful Unbeautiful,” published in the August 10, 1861 issue of *Robin Goodfellow*, the poet reiterates nineteenth-century ideals of female beauty, which so prioritized naturalness and artlessness.¹ He/she paints an image of natural beauty that seems diametrically opposed to Beerbohm’s glorification of artifice. Not only should beauty be pure, the author suggests, but it should also be aligned with the cultivation of inner goodness and virtue: The poet explains:

Wife or maiden, fresh and fair,
What avails thy sunbright hair,
Rolling o’er thy shoulders free,
Like the full tide of the sea,
Kissing the white sands wantonly?
What avail thy glancing eyes,
Blue as nights in Paradise?...
If thou’rt hard of heart and scorn,
Or hast set thyself on high

¹ These ideals are epitomized by the figure of the angel in the house, as described by Coventry Patmore: “She seems the life of nature’s powers/ Her beauty is the genial thought/Which makes the sun shine bright; the flowers,/ But for their hint of her, were nought” (<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/patmore/angel/>).

/For thine own idolatry?
If we search the wide world through,
none can please us but the true.
Beauty is the growth of mind;
None are lovely but the kind.

The poem as a whole also maps out some of the complexities surrounding contemporary ideals. Although the poem's emphasis on external purity seemingly parallels the valorization of moral purity, it also draws attention to a superficiality that potentially undermines the wholesomeness of feminine ideals: "None are lovely but the kind," the poem tells us. But are all the kind lovely? Only those with "sunbright hair" and eyes as "Blue as nights in Paradise," the poem also implies, can reap the benefits of kindness.

Indeed, the contemporary rhetoric of sensibility made women particularly prone to the notion that external appearance should reflect inner self, which was deeply entrenched in nineteenth-century belief systems such as physiognomy. In a later *Robin Goodfellow* article entitled "Those Women—," printed in September 7, 1861 and lamenting the growth of female pickpockets, the author confirms that women are judged on their appearance more so than men: "You are not bound by gallantry to think a man honest unless you have been properly introduced to him; but a lady must be considered a lady, with or without an introduction— especially if she be very good-looking—if you meet her even in so low a place as an omnibus" (287). The statement revises the message of "Beautiful Unbeautiful" to suggest that, in fact, a woman needs only to be good-looking in order to convince others of her good character. Furthermore, this statement shows the extent to which character and appearance could be linked to issues of class, since "the name lady was socially aspired to" as an indicator of respectable status (Ingham 111). As Sally Mitchell notes, social class in Victorian England was more about

appearance and mannerisms than wealth and lineage (17). The link of appearance and class especially applied to women. A good-looking woman, in effect, was assumed to be a lady—even if she were riding on an omnibus.

Although oppressive social commentary of this sort abounded in the Victorian press, these two examples were published in *Robin Goodfellow*, a two-penny magazine that endeavored “to amuse with fiction, and instruct with fact” (3). *Robin Goodfellow* simultaneously published a section of a novel in which a much more controversial response to ideals of female beauty—foreshadowing Beerbohm’s glorification of artifice—is chronicled: *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the best-selling sensation novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, appeared in *Robin Goodfellow* for the whole duration of the periodical’s short run from July 6, 1861 through September 28, 1861. Braddon does not overtly praise cosmetics in her novel, but she illustrates their efficacy in enabling women to achieve and maintain social standing in a shallow world that prioritizes appearances. *Lady Audley’s Secret*, in spite of its immense popularity and success, aroused much controversy in large part because it suggested that a duplicitous woman *could* successfully masquerade as a virtuous lady. In *The North British Review*, for instance, W.F. Rae mentions how very “unnatural” Lady Audley is because “her manner and her appearance are always in contrast with her conduct” (Skilton xviii). Rae’s review demonstrates Braddon’s success in eliciting thrill—he notes that this unnaturalness is also “exciting”—but his insistence on labeling her incongruity “unnatural” shows narrow-mindedness in envisioning the scope of femininity. He contends that such a deceptive figure as Lady Audley could only exist in fiction.

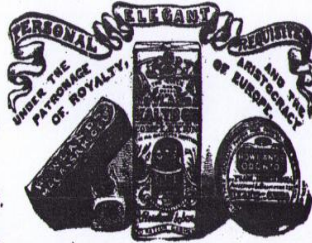
Braddon nonetheless successfully subverts the ideals of proper femininity by cloaking artifice in the guise of nature. With the duplicity characteristic of narrators of sensation fiction, the narrator of *Lady Audley's Secret* initially plays into the idealization of nature by likening Lucy's beauty to flowers and sunshine and informing the reader that "there was nothing whatever in her manner of the shallow artifice" increasingly employed by women (7).² The quality of character that is initially ascribed to Lucy Audley in the novel is inextricably connected to her beautiful appearance. For instance, George Talboys, when reminiscing on his lovely long-lost wife (who, at this point, we only suspect is Lucy Audley), clearly idolizes her because of her looks: "Again the old fancy came back that she was something too beautiful for earth, or earthly uses, and that to approach her was to walk in a higher atmosphere and to breathe a purer air" (57). Lucy's second husband Sir Michael Audley, who also is utterly convinced of her impeccable character, is chastised by his daughter Alicia for thinking his wife refined only "because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating" (103). Alicia's words foreshadow the eventual uncovering of Lucy's veneer of artifice. Not only is it suggested that Lucy uses cosmetics, but also that her mannerisms are similarly fake and affected (7).

While Braddon strategically unveils Lucy's cosmetic subterfuge, the ongoing cultural debate on the production of female beauty raging in society emerge recurrently in *Robin Goodfellow* and in *The Sixpenny Magazine*, the journal in which *Lady Audley's Secret* continued its serialization after *Robin Goodfellow* ceased publication. Both the

² Brantlinger notes that narrators in sensation fiction typically withhold "the solution to a mystery" and become "figure[s] no longer to be trusted" (15).

journals include social commentary that moralizes on female beauty, and *The Sixpenny Magazine* features advertisements that ironically promote the use of cosmetics. For the magazine reader, the result of these interweaving components is a reading experience of simultaneity. Deborah Wynne notes that such an experience was often the case with sensation novels, which were typically serialized in magazines: “Periodicals exist as sites of simultaneity in that they present a cluster of apparently unrelated texts at the same point in time and space, all having the potential to be read in relation to each other” (20). This simultaneity is exemplified, for instance, in the December 1, 1862 edition of *Six Penny* (See Figure 1). Representative of the content in many of the other issues of the magazine, this particular issue features ads for hair dye, Rimmel’s perfume, and Rowlands’ cosmetics that sit alongside *Lady Audley’s Secret* and articles such as “Beauty, What is It?” Rowlands’ and Rimmel’s, two of the leading name brands for toiletries in Victorian England, ran ads in *The Sixpenny* in nearly every issue in which *Lady Audley’s Secret* appeared, making cosmetics a dominant presence in the journal. The social commentary, advertisements and Braddon’s novel treat female beauty and cosmetics differently—the ads endorse artifice, the commentary typically opposes it, and the novel bridges the two positions, exploiting the duplicity of cosmetics but still upholding their potency. Both the stigma and the allure surrounding artificial creations of female beauty can often be linked back to the same phenomenon: cosmetics as a mechanism of identity transformation and hence class mobility.

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THE
SIXPENNY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1, 1862.

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* Subscribers are informed that elegantly designed Col's Cases, for binding Volumes I., II., and III., only One Shilling each, are now ready. Any books for sale insert in these cases the Five Numbers that form a Volume.

Figure 1- Rowlands' and Rimmel's, which were two of the leading name brands for cosmetics in the mid-Victorian period, ran repeated ads and dominated the inner cover of *The Sixpenny*. The table of contents, which includes *Lady Audley's Secret*, is on the right.

The centrality of class mobility emerges not only in *Lady Audley's Secret*, but also in sensation fiction and in the penny-part periodicals in which they were published.

This subject has attracted the attention of many scholars. According to Montwieler, *Lady Audley's Secret* serves as a subversive conduct book, providing “a tell-all manual that instructs poor young women how to charm everyone, how to win rich husbands, and how to create a home” (48). Jennifer Carnell notes that Braddon’s fiction is characterized by “a certain turn of thought and action... an impatience with old restraints, and a craving for some fundamental change in the working of society” (157). Sensation novels as a whole, Jonathan Loesberg claims, “evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity” (120). He further argues that “this common image links up with a fear of a general loss of social identity as a result of the merging classes” (120). The blurring of socioeconomic differences, as Hedgecock has noted, is rooted in the print culture surrounding sensation fiction. *The Sixpenny Magazine* and *Robin Goodfellow*, like many other penny-part periodicals, included advertisements and articles that imitated conventional bourgeois decorum—in spite of their reputation as working class fare and their self-advertised affordability. *Six Penny*, for instance, informed readers that it was one of the only cheap periodicals of high quality and that “other monthly periodicals of merit [are] double the cost,” and it also described *Robin Goodfellow* as an affordable publication of merit when it was in print (490, October 1861). The periodicals and sensation fiction thus fostered class mobility through the democratization rather than the erasure of genteel standards. Gentility became quotidian and, in the eyes of critics, devalued—something thing that everyone, potentially, could achieve.

Despite attention in recent criticism to the democratization of material culture in *Lady Audley's Secret*, cosmetics play an under-analyzed role in mediating class mobility

and promulgation of bourgeois identity.³ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas has aptly noted how Braddon rewrites *The Woman in White*—the first hit sensation novel by Wilkie Collins—to give woman “the pen and brush to make up ‘penciled eyebrows’ (64) and to rewrite her own story;” yet, the singularity of cosmetics, as apart from clothing and other domestic goods, has not yet been fully explored (*Moulding the Body* 132). Because of the emphasis placed on the face as a sign of identity and authenticity, cosmetic transformation was a controversial and exploitative means of striving for class mobility. Makeup destabilized the physiognomic paradigm. Eliza Lynn Linton, writing in 1855, conveys the prevalent belief that people’s “social conditions as their histories, are stamped on them as legibly as arms are painted on a carriage panel;” yet, this notion depended on the naturalness and authenticity of the face to be a reliable marker of class (Pearl 42). Indeed, believers in physiognomy thought that one’s face changed naturally as a result of a change in social station (Pearl 44). Makeup could potentially conceal these supposedly natural signifiers of class and give people control over their own images and hence identities. Because cosmetics use could escape the scope of surveillance, they enabled women to masquerade as natural beauties in a disciplinary society that valorized the authentic face. Cosmetics, in fact, had to be wielded as secret weapons in order to avoid the ridicule and condemnation that accompanied their evident use. Thus, they proved more subversive than other domestic material goods such as clothing or home décor. Kathy Peiss notes that “the ornamentally clothed body and the well furnished parlor were openly acknowledged as sites of commodity culture but the face. . . was deemed outside fashion” (43). Because of their duplicitous use in the Victorian era,

³ Krista Lysack and Montwieler are two critics who have written on material culture in LAS.

cosmetics served as a superlatively sensational means of achieving class mobility and, not surprisingly, became a recurrent trope among sensation novelists such as Braddon, Collins, and Ouida.⁴ Cosmetics were also particularly well-suited to the sensation genre because, as Talairach-Vielmas notes “The construction of the female self lies at the heart of Gothic anxieties” (“Behind the Scenes of Women’s Beauty Parlours” 134).

Although sensation novels play upon various contemporary anxieties surrounding cosmetics, *Lady Audley’s Secret* in particular capitalizes on cosmetics’ subversive potential in enabling class mobility. *Lady Audley’s Secret*, probably the first sensation novel to incorporate cosmetics, appeared at the same time that advertising campaigns for cosmetics were undergoing unprecedented growth. In the novel, Robert Audley confirms the incipency of the cosmetics industry by referring to the face-enameling of Mme. Rachel as a “new art” (405). “Although such advertising campaigns marketed cosmetics as a genteel commodity, the pre-existing stigmas made secrecy paramount. As “cosmetics became more prevalent in the 1860’s,” Tammy Whitlock notes, “the clandestine use of cosmetics was on the rise” (33). Braddon exploits the paradox of cosmetics’ popularity and disrepute, ultimately suggesting that the secret dynamism it enables creates tools through which women can perform “genteel” identities.

Cosmetics both enabled and necessitated secrecy, as their use was stigmatized among women of *all* classes— not only because the face was idealized for being natural,

⁴ *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which was one of the first mass-market sensation novels (following *The Woman in White*), was the first sensation novel to incorporate cosmetics. Wilkie Collins soon followed suit, modeling the villainous Mother Oldershaw of *Armadale* on criminal cosmetician Madame Rachel Levison, whom Braddon also references (although at the time Braddon is writing Madame Rachel is not quite as notorious). Collins also includes the use of cosmetics in novels such as *The Law and the Lady*. Later sensation novelists such as Ouida link cosmetics to class mobility.

but because of lingering taboos as well. In the earlier years of the Victorian era it was associated with the suspect professions of prostitution and acting and, in the eighteenth century, women who were discovered to use cosmetics to seduce husbands could be hung for witchcraft. In his 1845 treatise on beauty, Alexander Walker aligns cosmetics solely with prostitutes and actresses, who were known for wearing visible cosmetics: “[Paint] is now used only by meretricious persons and by those harridans of higher rank who resemble them in every respect, except that the former are ashamed of their profession and the latter advertise it” (Walker 333).⁵ Earlier Victorian fiction corroborated these associations of cosmetics. *Mary Barton*, published in 1848, suggests that cosmetics are an evident signifier of feminine immodesty, describing the prostitute Esther’s “vivid circle of paint” (111). As commodity culture attempted to revolutionize cosmetics, these stigmas were stubbornly harped upon by critics. In “The Mask of Beauty,” for instance, an article that appeared in Harper’s Bazaar in 1887, the author evokes the bygone connection of cosmetics with witchcraft:

“In the time of Louis XV, France, there was issued a decree announcing that whatsoever by means of red or white paint, perfumes, or essences, or other arts of the toilet, should seek to entice into marriage any of his Majesty’s male subjects, should be prosecuted for witchcraft, and declared unfit for matrimony; and the same runs as an unwritten decree in all men’s minds today.” (638)

Although by this point in the nineteenth-century the cosmetics industry had firmly established its unshakable presence, critics clung anxiously to old stereotypes.⁶ Through aligning cosmetics with witches, prostitutes, actresses and other scandalous/inferior

⁵ Braddon’s previous career as an actress most likely meant that she herself had worn cosmetics, as most stage actresses did.

⁶ Although this particular author is rather extreme in condemning perfumes and essences, which by this point were largely accepted, he represents popular opinion in his denunciation of face paint.

social types, numerous critics attempted to relegate cosmetics and to prevent their association with gentility.

This depiction of cosmetics as degenerate is echoed through social commentary in *Robin Goodfellow* and *Six Penny*. In “Beauty, What Is It?,” printed in the December 1862 edition of *Six Penny*, the author attempts to negate the mobility of cosmetics by linking their use within Western culture to self-adornment in more “savage” nations:

The belles of some barbarous climes perceive great beauty in painting their teeth black. The ladies of other uncivilized nations have depending from their noses huge brass ornaments, while those of more civilized (?) countries spread rouge on their cheeks. Taste, in its figurative application, is equally vitiated. (235)

The author’s problem is not the aesthetic ideal of Western culture—the article ironically parrots the descriptions of cosmetic advertisements or the appearance of Lucy when describing the key elements of beauty: “Colour, design, delicacy, smoothness, motion, and their associated properties” (232). Rather, the author objects solely to the use of cosmetic artifice and even suggests that it could threaten the civility of Western culture. Indeed, as Kathy Peiss notes, critics often used the face-painting of indigenous cultures as justification for condemnation (32). In an article entitled “Bucks, Beaux, Dandies, and Swells” in the August 31, 1861 issue of *Robin Goodfellow*, the author implies the common belief that face-painting is a less civilized art: “Even in the earliest stages of civilization, before the ‘noble savage’ has any very definite ideas as to wardrobe, he is yet proud of his war paint, and probably nice about the patterns of his tattooing” (257). The association of makeup with savagery, as with witchcraft and prostitution, was another means of attempting to distance cosmetics from bourgeois culture. “Beauty,

What is It?” links the “savagery” of cosmetics to “the degraded qualities of mind [that] distinguish the nineteenth-century” (235). Although the author does not directly criticize *Lady Audley’s Secret*, he/she views popular literature as another example of this “degraded quality of mind,” thus aligning cosmetics and best-selling novels as corrupt: “Some would bow at the shrine of the common novels of the day, and ecstatically read the rhapsody of some love-sick soul, dying for the light of a dark-eyed maid, as delineated by some; and they would leave the choice gems of literature to be swallowed in the stream of Lethe” (235). Yet, the author’s claims sit awkwardly amongst a mass-produced magazine advertising cosmetics and publishing popular literature. The article’s very presence within such a cheap journal seems to attest to the futility of its calls for reform. The author’s concluding statement that education is necessary in training the intellect to behold and understand beauty acquires an ironic subtext when considered in juxtaposition to *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Sixpenny’s* advertisements, which suggest that a very different type of education—in skillfully and seamlessly using artifice—can help one to master and manipulate the production of such beauty.

Shifting notions about the potential of cosmetics initially emerged in the extensive advertising campaigns led by entrepreneurs such as Madame Rachel and Rowlands’, who marketed cosmetics to respectable women and pitched them as upper-class goods. Madame Rachel, whom Braddon refers to at several points in the novel, typically addressed her lady patronesses as “the aristocracy and nobility generally” in advertisements, and she countered the derogatory associations of cosmetics with non-European cultures by making such exoticism sound luxurious by using product names such as “Royal Arabian Cream” and “Magnetic Dew of Sahara” (Miller 10). She claimed

the patronage of Queen Victoria, the Sultana of Turkey and other notable figures, opened a shop on the upscale new Bond Street with a bold storefront sign that read “Beautiful Forever,” and tried to conceal her own Jewish working-class identity through a false name and claims of French noble ancestry (much as Braddon’s Helen Talboys concealed her identity). Not surprisingly, the media frequently launched attacks on Rachel and lampooned her ads, which they deemed to be full of puffery. *Punch* Magazine, in an 1859 article “Stucco for the Softer Sex,” went so far as to liken Madame Rachel to Frankenstein and to deny the notion that cosmetics can create any authentic change: “Imagination pictures Madame Rachel’s patronesses as having been fashioned out of that plastic material and animated with a faint life by a disciple of Frankenstein...” (124). Yet, by suggesting that cosmetics can create new *life*, the article simultaneously reveals underlying fears about cosmetics’ potential for identity transformation and ironically attests to the power of artifice. As in “Beauty, What is It?” the point of contention is not the aesthetic end-product, for the author notes that “Pretty women, indeed, [Madame Rachel’s patronesses] probably are” (124). Rather, as the Frankenstein allusion suggests, the artifice inherent in cosmetics is a threat to concepts of the self. Madame Rachel was seen to embody that threat. Robert Audley, towards the end of the novel, similarly expresses his fears that Madame Rachel’s face-enameling falsifies females’ identities. While observing country folk coming from the theater, he nostalgically remembers how, before the cosmetics craze, actresses authentically expressed emotions on their faces and he laments that modern actresses “scarcely feel their stage wrongs so keenly; or, perhaps those brightly indignant blushes of today struggle ineffectually against the new art of Madame Rachel, and are lost to the public beneath the lily purity of priceless enamel”

(405-406). By alluding to acting, Robert Audley suggests that, even when engaged in the most supposedly performative of professions, women's emotions and appearance still must be pure and natural.

Braddon ultimately, however, champions the efficacy of artifice in enabling women to manipulate their personas. She reinforces Madame Rachel's claims that cosmetics can enable one to appear genteel. For instance, towards the middle of the novel, while describing how bewitching Lady Audley is while preparing tea, a traditionally bourgeois activity, the narrator declares:

“To do away with the tea-table is to rob woman of her legitimate empire... Imagine all the women of England elevated to the high level of masculine intellectuality; superior to crinoline; above pearl powder and Mrs. Rachel Levison; above taking the pains to be pretty; above making themselves agreeable; above tea tables... what a dreary, utilitarian, ugly life the sterner sex must lead. (223)

There is an element of satirical irony in Braddon's stereotyping of femininity, as women in the novel are not only “elevated to the high level of masculine intellectuality” but can in fact strategically *garner* their power to trump masculine “intellectuality” through cosmetics and other artifice. Read literally, this passage also can seem oppressively conventional in terms of gender and sexuality, but Lucy dramatizes throughout the course of the novel how women can engage such stereotypes strategically and acquire power with the limited means that society offered them. Lucy is clearly playing a role at this point in the novel, as she is trying to convince Robert Audley of her perfect decorum so as to diminish his suspicion of her guilt. Such subversive performativity is an intrinsic factor shaping the subject of feminism, which Judith Butler notes “is produced and

restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (2). Although, as Miller argues, cosmetics appear to be “a troubled signifier of women’s emancipation” because they reproduced conventional female norms, they were potentially empowering in enabling women to navigate social hierarchies and acquire cultural legitimacy (8).

Because secrecy was necessary for the woman using makeup to navigate social hierarchies, the cosmetics industry was shrouded in an air of mystery and suspicion that

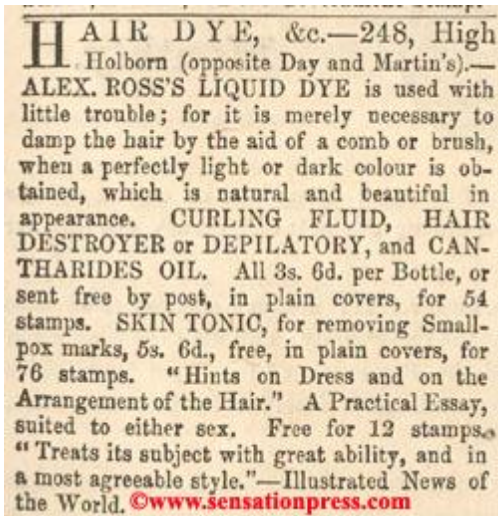


Figure 2-Magazine Advertisement from 1860--note the plain covers the individual is promised to receive their product in.

using cosmetics in order to avoid embarrassment and maintain their good name (Peiss 77). Madame Rachel’s business modeled such secrecy. Despite the publicity of her ads and the bold sign out on the storefront that read “Beautiful For Ever,” the private consultations promised in ads and the dark heavy curtains that remained drawn intrigued

made it an ideal source of Gothic horror. Cosmetics advertisements often ensured anonymity by the promise of private rooms for in-person consultations and plain covers for those ordering by mail (see figure 2). According to Helen Rappaport, “The confidentiality of the cosmetician’s parlour was, it seemed, equal to that of the doctor’s surgery and the lawyer’s office” (46). Women often denied

the public with its undercover operations.⁷ Notes Rappaport, “The secrecy surrounding Rachel’s practices at her New Bond Street salon and exactly what was on offer—perhaps beyond perfumes and cosmetics—to the ladies who patronized it...fir[ed] the literary imaginations of contemporary writers” (50). Her outrageous prices, the puffery of her ads, and her recurrent appearances in court (which were just beginning at the time that Braddon was writing) threw her reputation—and the cosmetics industry in general—into further disrepute. In 1868, several years after *Lady Audley’s Secret* was published and Madame Rachel faced her most serious criminal trial to date—for massive fraud and charges of prostitution—newspapers likened Rachel’s case to Braddon’s novel: “For here is sensation and plot quite as thrilling as *Lady Audley’s Secret*, with situations and morals nearly as offensive as those which the purveyors, both foreign and domestic, of fornicating literature probably venture upon” (Bachman & Cox 116). Although the media emphasized Madame Rachel’s downfall as sensational and this indeed parallels Lucy’s downfall, Braddon’s text also significantly sensationalizes the controversy of Madame Rachel’s success in the cosmetics industry. Despite opposition, Madame Rachel still managed to run a remarkably successful business that attracted both aristocratic customers and women who were willing to spend enough, or even pawn jewels and other valuables, to secretly obtain a “ladylike” appearance.

The duplicity of cosmetics made it a source of great anxiety and enabled it to be exploited in a way that dress and other accoutrements could not. Both *Lady Audley’s Secret* and the social commentary in *Robin Goodfellow* and *The Sixpenny* reflect the more

⁷ Madame Rachel, the famous cosmetician referenced by Braddon, promised clients that “all communications are strictly confidential,” (Rappaport 53) and countless other ads notified customers that beauty products would be delivered in plain covers.

straightforward (although not necessarily more efficacious) manner in which extravagant dress was addressed. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lucy's cosmetics use remains largely undetected—with the exception of Robert Audley's shrewd detection of Lucy's "penciled eyebrows" and Alicia's claims that her young step-mother is like a wax-doll (64, 54). Dress, on the other hand, is openly criticized on several occasions. The novel's working-class women who dress in fancy clothes face the greatest disapproval and ridicule. Lucy's maid Phoebe is repeatedly criticized by her fiancé/husband Luke for dressing too ostentatiously. On the day of their wedding, when she is wearing "a rustling silk of delicate grey" that makes her look "quite the lady," he upbraids her: "'Why can't women dress according to their station? You won't have no silk gowns out of my pocket, I can tell you'" (112). Dress is further criticized by the narrator when she notes the new maid's flashy clothes: "The bell which Lady Audley rang was answered by the smart lady's-maid, who wore rose-coloured ribbons and black silk gowns, and other adornments which were unknown to the humble people who sat below the salt in the good old days when servants wore linsey-woolsey" (313).⁸ Dressing above one's station is similarly condemned in an article in *Robin Goodfellow* entitled "The Gouty Philosopher's Expatiation Upon Mockery, Apery, and Cowardice": "The cook and scullery maid, when they go out on Sundays, or other holidays, flaunt in hoops as huge, ugly and uncomfortable as those of their mistresses; wear silks, and satins, and parasols... all this mockery and apery has its origin in, and is nothing but, cowardice: rank, fetid,

⁸ As with the earlier passages discussed, the narrator's tone is often satirical and unreliable and her criticisms can only be taken so seriously.

unendurable, and detestable” (15).⁹ Criticisms of dress extended to bourgeois women as well. When Braddon’s narrator ridicules Lucy as appearing like “a child tricked out for masquerade,” she references not her cosmetics use but the “heavy velvets and stiff rustling silks” with which she loves to adorn “her fragile figure” (52). In an article entitled “Why the Men Don’t Marry,” published in *Robin Goodfellow* on July 13, 1861, the author briefly mentions the pitfalls of women’s “excessive toilets” but dwells on extravagant dress as a “*formidable* obstruction to the advance of suitors.” He continues, “Let them reduce the cost and dimensions of their dress. It has grown up into a gigantic evil, from whatever point of view it may be regarded –outlay, convenience, or taste” (40). The author ironically might even encourage the use of cosmetics, suggesting that it is not the dress but the wearer that the men are interested in. Another column of “The Gouty Philosopher” from September 21, 1861 also ironically encourages cosmetics use, as it encourages women to forgo “abominable and ungainly crinoline, and the still more abominable and ungainly hoop [skirt]—both of which “are not essential either to health or beauty.” Consequently, he claims, women may be rewarded by “the rosiness of cheek” and “redness of lip” that they can gain from being able to exercise and go more easily for walks (356). The author fails to consider, however, how easily one can artificially create rosy cheeks and red lips with cosmetics, despite the fact that such possibilities are repeatedly being insinuated in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

Whereas proponents of extravagant dress could do nothing but boldly withstand the criticism, proponents of cosmetics mimicked nature both through their rhetoric and

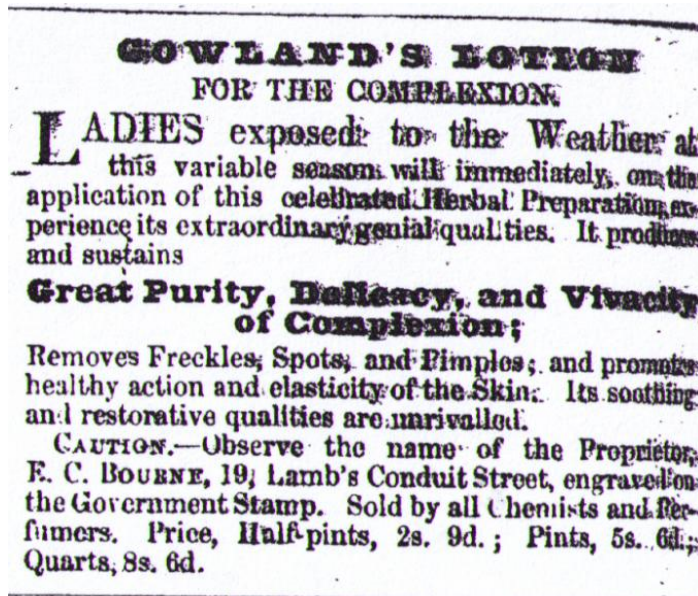
⁹ The noticeable increase in women dressing above their station became so considerable, in fact, that it was proposed (unsuccessfully) that previous laws from the eighteenth-century barring individuals from dressing above their station be reinstated.

artistic technique, thus enabling individuals to seamlessly improve their social status.¹⁰ Conduct books warned against visible artifice. In *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility*, Emily Thornwell lays out the protocol for acceptable cosmetics use: "A fair skin and rosy cheek are calculated to excite admiration, but if it be discovered that they are entirely produced by paint that admiration becomes disgust" (11). Just as Braddon praises Lucy's beauty and goodness at the beginning of the novel, describing her as "looking as fresh and radiant as the flowers in her hands," advertisers often cloaked artifice through natural images (76). For instance, in her 1863 pamphlet "Beautiful For Ever"-- which was more like an extended advertisement than a conduct book-- Madame Rachel begins her treatise on cosmetics by depicting the natural beauty and goodness of women: "lovely as the bright sunshine at morning's dawn": 'beautiful as the dew-drops on the flowers'" (Rappaport 72). She plays upon the notion that external beauty should reflect inner qualities and further eulogizes on the angelic nature of woman. She provides homilies on Florence Nightingale, Queen Victoria and the nurses in the Crimean War. Cosmetics play such a noble role in improving women's appearance and hence helping them fulfill their proper feminine duties, Madame Rachel concludes, that her own work rivals that of Dr. Jennings, who recently discovered the vaccination for smallpox. She reveals her manipulative strategies at the end by linking cosmetics and appearance to class mobility and the possibility of marrying wealthy, as women's hopes of finding future happiness and fulfilling their potential "may depend on [their] first appearance in society" (Rappaport 74). Her more straightforward rhetoric proves the extent to which the claim

¹⁰ Warnings about the poisonous properties of cosmetics were also prevalent and created fear about cosmetics use for an entirely different set of reasons. These fears were oftentimes legitimate. See Peiss for more on this.

to nature serves as a veil to make cosmetics appear acceptable. Not only can the discourse of nature conceal the use of cosmetics, however, but cosmetics can also veil the realities of nature. As Madame Rachel implies in a later ad, *true* nature in fact often needs covering up: “Even a slight blemish on the face can occasion a sad and solitary life of celibacy, unloved, unblessed, and ultimately unwept and unremembered” (Rappaport 42). The fact that Madame Rachel *can* so easily adopt stereotypes and twist them to her advantage suggests how superficial and narrow such tenets are in the first place and how one-dimensional the notion of the perfect lady is.

This exploitation of nature also occurs repeatedly throughout the ads in *The Sixpenny* and in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In an ad for Gowland’s Complexion Lotion, which appeared recurrently in *The Sixpenny* while *Lady Audley’s Secret* was being published,



gentility and naturalness are simultaneously emphasized (see Figure 3). The ad states that “ladies exposed to the weather at this variable season” will find themselves in need of such lotion, thus playing upon the stereotypes of the genteel woman as fragile and vulnerable to the elements,

especially considering that the weather is not usually all that brutal in May (when the ad was featured). The ad thus reveals that women must in fact be *removed* from nature to achieve a ladylike appearance. However, rather than suggesting that there is anything artificial

about producing a ladylike appearance, the ad ironically creates its appeal by suggesting how very natural the lotion is. In fact, the product seems to promise a *more* natural appearance, if anything, boasting “soothing and restorative qualities” and the removal of “freckles, spots, and pimples.” Although the ad claims that the product “promotes healthy action,” there was nothing natural about removing freckles and the product must have contained some sort of bleach or whitening agent that manipulated rather than enhanced nature. The “great purity, delicacy, and vivacity of complexion” that is promised implies that one can appear more ladylike through a return to a more natural state; though paradoxically one must fight weather and the elements to achieve this so-called natural beauty.

But Braddon similarly creates an initial illusion of the naturalness of Lucy’s beauty, she eventually suggests that Lucy conceals her *true* nature, at least in part. Lady Audley possesses awareness that she must not simply be governed by nature if she wishes to maintain the power associated with being a lady, and she likely would have purchased a product such as Gowlands’ lotion to protect her from the elements. When out walking on a chill Autumn day, she confesses to her lady’s maid Phoebe: “How I hate this desolate month!... Everything dropping to ruin and decay, and the cold flicker of the sun lighting up the ugliness of the earth, as the glare of gas lamps lights up the wrinkles of an Old woman...Will my hair ever drop off as the leaves are falling from those trees, and leave me wan and bare like them?” (105). The thought of growing old and losing her loveliness makes her shiver more than the cold wintry breeze and, as is later suggested, she will resort to any methods of artifice in order to maintain her ladylike beauty. The dangers of not maintaining a ladylike appearance are portrayed through the horrified

response of Michael Audley after seeing his wife without her rosy cheeks and lips when she is awake during a storm in the middle of the night. When she comes down to breakfast the next morning looking refreshed, he declares,

My pretty one,... my darling, what happiness to see you your own merry self again! Do you know, Lucy, that once last night, when you looked out through the dark green bed-curtains, with your poor white face, and the purple rims round your hollow eyes, I had almost a difficulty to recognize my little wife in that ghastly, terrified, agonized-looking creature, crying out about the storm. Thank God for the morning sun, which has brought back the rosy cheeks and the bright smile! I hope to Heaven, Lucy, I shall never again see you look as you did last night. (76)

Michael is incredulous about her appearance during the night and suggests that she is no longer a lady but rather a *creature* when she appears “ghastly, terrified, [and] agonized-looking” (76). He depicts her as a Gothic monstrosity of sorts, aligned with Burke’s definition of the sublime. He fails to recognize her unseemly appearance as the undoing of her masquerade and insists that his “little wife” possesses permanently rosy cheeks and a bright smile. Michael thus defines and disciplines femininity through his failure to recognize the fluctuations of her appearance as normal as well as his belief that her character is nothing but refined. Madame Rachel’s claim that cosmetics help women fulfill their feminine duties is thus ironically corroborated. Braddon places this passage directly after mentioning Lucy’s penciled eyebrows and insinuates in all likelihood that rouge rather than sunshine that brought back her rosy cheeks. Lucy’s bright smile is also most likely similarly fake, as Alicia Audley commented with disdain on the superficiality of Lucy’s perpetual giggle. Considering the horror that Lucy experienced the previous night on discovering that her first husband George Talboys broke into her chamber and

has probably learned that she is alive with a false identity, it seems likely that she would need artifice to help her conceal her fright and maintain a ladylike appearance.

Braddon plants further suspicions of Lady Audley's cosmetics use by depicting how unnatural, in fact, her typical appearance is. Although rosy cheeks and red lips might evoke images of nature, they seem unnatural when they remain so permanently. The narrator remarks in passing how Lucy's face remains beautifully colored even when the cold weather plays games with the faces of others: "Other people's noses are rudely assailed by the sharp fingers of the grim ice-king, but not my lady's; other people's lips turn pale and blue with the chilling influence of the bitter weather, but my lady's pretty little rosebud of a mouth retained its brightest coloring and cheeriest freshness" (138). Lucy appears as if she could be using a product such as Gowlands', to maintain her vivacious complexion in spite of the weather. Lucy's facial color is cited as contributing to her particularly radiant appearance that morning and implied to be a necessary accessory of sorts. Clearly, based on Michael's previous fright about seeing his wife as a "ghastly, terrified, agonized-looking creature" because of her white face and the purple rims around her eyes, it is evident that the perpetual color of cosmetics helps to comprise contemporary ideals of female beauty.

Cosmetics, which as we soon discover are indispensable to Lucy, ironically allow her the multiplicity to perform the one-dimensional and static identity that others associate with being a lady. While her true nature is dynamic and shifting—as the image of her in the bedroom confirms—cosmetics give her the tools to pretend that it is not. The mobility and flexibility that makeup allows her is aligned with the idea behind class

mobility—one can climb the social ladder by performing a genteel identity that is seemingly static. Although contemporary feminist critics and patriarchal Victorian critics alike have discounted artifice as an indicator of ontological deficiency, Lady Audley exemplifies how cosmetics can enable an extension of one’s self-image and enhance the *capacity* to perform.¹¹ Because Lucy utilizes makeup as a self-conscious stratagem in a manipulative fashion similar to her climbing of the social ladder, she remains in control of her own autonomy.

Many cosmetics advertisements, in order to prove the efficacy of their products, de-emphasize *mobility* of status and address the readers as if they are already members of the gentility. The following ad for Rowlands’ Cosmetics, which ran in multiple issues of *The Sixpenny*, creates its rhetoric of appeal by luring consumers with the promise of not only a static appearance but a fixed social identity:

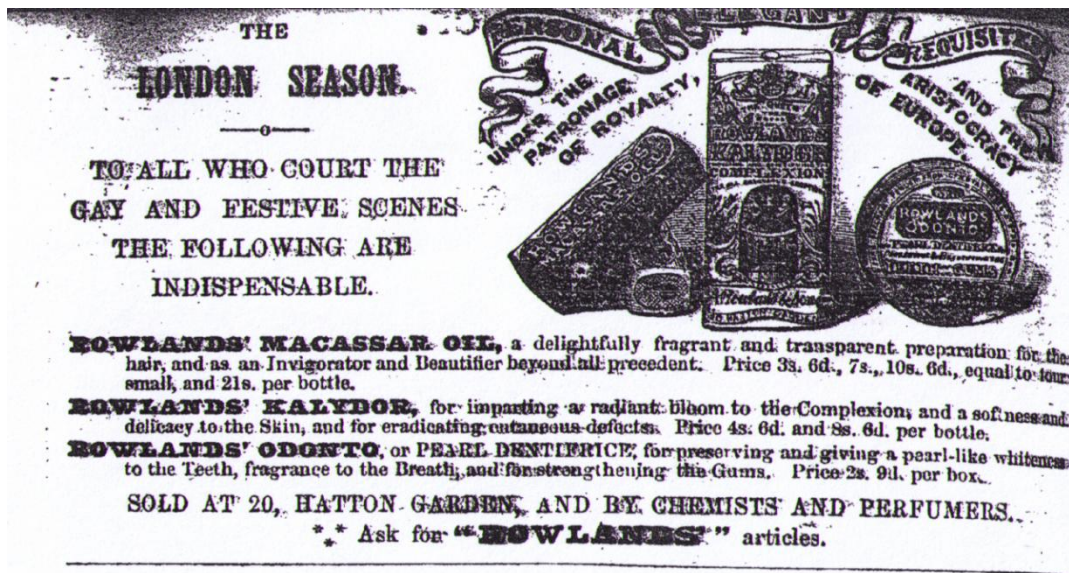


Figure 4

¹¹ Naomi Wolf and Jacqueline Lichenstein are two contemporary critics who have condemned the limitations of cosmetics. See "The Phenomenology of the Powder Room" for a more extensive discussion of this.

Rowlands' products are immediately affiliated with gentility through the words "Under the Patronage of Royalty, and the Aristocracy of Europe," which are framing the image of the products. The advertisement also issues the words "Personal Elegant Requisites" on fancy scroll at the top. The advertisement states that Rowlands' products are indispensable "to all who court the gay and festive scenes" during the London season, which was traditionally associated with the aristocracy. As the use of the word "indispensable" suggests, one *must* have cosmetics in order to appear worthy of the "gay and festive" London season. The guarantee of luxury is reiterated through the names and descriptions of the various items listed: Rowlands' Macassar Oil, Rowlands' Kalydor and Rowlands' Odonto. The Macassar Oil is described as a "fragrant hair beautifier and invigorator beyond all precedent," Rowlands' Odonto "gives a pearl-like whiteness to the teeth and a fragrance to the breath" (a fancy sounding toothpaste), and Rowland's Kalydor—much like Gowlands' Lotion—promises to create a natural beauty through unnatural means. The Kalydor will impart a permanently "radiant bloom to the complexion and a softness and delicacy to the skin, and eradicate cutaneous defects," thereby creating an image that appears more pure. The illusion of an unchanging natural beauty is parallel with the illusion of a static genteel identity. The reality—that the advertisement is actually fostering bourgeois imitation in working-class consumers—is apparent not only through the venue in which the advertisement is issued but the affordable prices included at the bottom. The changing structures of capitalism, as the Rowlands' ad portrays, incited the dynamism that paradoxically made fixed genteel identities seem attainable to the masses. Braddon suggests through Lucy, however, that

even ladies who are already considered genteel are dependent upon the dynamism of cosmetics to maintain that semblance.

As the novel progresses, Braddon increasingly exchanges the presentation of Lucy's beauty as natural and static to reveal the ontological mobility that is at work behind-the-scenes. The morning after Lucy burns down Mt. Stanning and she is once again stricken with "a very pale face...with half-circles of purple shadow under her eyes," Braddon depicts how cosmetics can help her to resume her performance as lady (328). Lucy refuses to go to luncheon and sends her new maid Theresa away with the hopes of dressing herself. She must be careful whom she lets "backstage" in her dressing-room, for that is where she secretly and magically employs her artifice:

" [The lady's-maid] knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for-- when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist -- when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living...when the sweet smile is more false than Madame Levison's enamel, and far less enduring -- when the words that issue from between gates of borrowed pearl are more disguised and painted than the lips which help to shape them. When the lovely fairy of the ball-room re-enters her dressing room after the night's long revelry... and like another Cinderella... falls back into her rags and dirt; the lady's maid is by to see the transformation." (336-337)

By not specifically referring to Lady Audley in this passage, Braddon suggests that *all* women who are assumed to be ladies are frauds. She debunks the Cinderella myth to suggest that the lady's true self is characterized by the "dirt and rags" of her natural state. "The lovely fairy," on the other hand, is re-envisioned as a dehumanized composite of fake pearly teeth, fake hair, Madame Levison's enamel, painted lips, and a veneer of false smiles and words. This description harkens back to *Punch's* lampoon of the made-up lady

as a creation of Frankenstein and further embellishes it with Gothic imagery, suggesting that the lady's "glossy plaits are relics of the *dead*" (emphasis mine) and depicting cosmetics as a sort of skeleton in the closet. Braddon mimics and exploits the rhetoric of cosmetics diatribes but ultimately champions the powers of cosmetics' duplicity. She also revises the notion that cosmetics are the sole source of falseness, as suggested in the Frankenstein metaphor, and suggests that they complement and facilitate ladies' superficial mannerisms. Ladies' smiles are "*more* false than Madame Levison's enamel" and their words are "*more* disguised and painted than the lips which help to shape them" (emphasis mine). This emphasis on internal artifice also revises Robert Audley's lamentation that cosmetics obscure women's emotions, for Braddon suggests that women can convincingly veil the fakeness of their emotions with the help of cosmetics. Indeed, ladies repeatedly conceal their internal and external naturalness so that the artificial self they put forth is mistaken as natural. Earlier in the novel, a lady's unnaturalness is suggested by the exorbitant energy that Lucy must expend in performing the role of lady—Braddon describes how exhausted Lucy is after charming half the county. Yet, now the extent of artifice this production entails is exposed. Cosmetics are not only the physical embodiment of feminine artifice; they make apparent that the pre-existing ideals of femininity are dependent on such artifice.

Whereas the image that a lady performs becomes misinterpreted by others as her true identity, Braddon suggests that the *knowledge* of the inner workings of her performativity can provide the key to understanding her. A lady's maid not only knows the extent of her lady's artifice through her role in dressing her, but she can discover the authentic nature of her lady as well. Writes Braddon, "A lady's-maid has...a hundred

methods for the finding out of her mistress's secrets. She knows from the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hairbrush, or chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast—what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain” (336). Such insights are not possible merely by *seeing* the lady unadorned, as Sir Michael proves earlier when he fails to recognize the naturalness of his wife's appearance during the night. Rather, those who find a way to extend their surveillance into the secret realm of cosmetic transformation—such as the lady's maid, namely Phoebe in Braddon's novel—can realize wherein her authenticity lies. Braddon thus rewrites the physiognomic paradigm rather than subverting it entirely, offering a new permutation based on multiple identities rather than one fixed, authentic self. Cosmetics can “sever surface from the soul,” as Beerbohm excitedly suggests, but they consequently create multiple surfaces and enable the lady to exist on a continuum between nature and artifice (62). *If* she can convince others that her artifice is natural, then she can subvert the traditional physiognomic paradigm. Those that see her unadorned and recognize it as her natural state, however, can still potentially understand her through the traditional physiognomic paradigm. Robert Audley and Alicia, although initially to lesser extents than the lady's maid, suspect her character in part because they detect her penciled eyebrows and waxdoll appearance.

Although Lucy's criminal subterfuge is ultimately exposed and cosmetics are not able to prevent her reversion to an un-genteel status, Braddon persistently portrays, to re-quote Beerbohm, that the “mask of paint and powder, shadowed with vermeil tinct and most trimly pencilled, is woman's strength.” Cosmetics carve a space for female agency by facilitating both class mobility and the successful maintenance of genteel identity.

Braddon depicts the pitfalls of duplicity when Lucy is punished for her crimes, but she nonetheless confirms their potency as a visual signifier of social class. Braddon emphasizes the power of makeup by characterizing some of the working-class women as relegated to the peripheries of the text by their colorlessness. After Lucy is sent to the asylum and has been stripped of her aristocratic title, for instance, Braddon emphasizes her “white lips” and pallid appearance—which she no longer bothers to conceal with makeup-- as an indicator of her diminished status (368). Phoebe, Lucy’s first maid, is also marked by her colorless appearance. Braddon introduces Phoebe by stating that she is someone who “might have been pretty... but for the one fault in her small oval face. This fault was an absence of color” (25). Phoebe’s unassuming appearance grants her certain advantages in secretly manipulating and blackmailing Lucy without suspicion, but she cannot aspire to gentility with her drab and colorless appearance. As Montez in her 1858 conduct book *The Art of Beauty* advises, “The features of a Juno with a dull skin would never fascinate” (89). Even on Phoebe’s wedding day, when she is “arrayed in a rustling silk of delicate grey” and looks “quite the lady,” she is still described as nearly invisible and ghostlike, “with eyes, hair, complexion, and dress all melting into such pale and uncertain shades that, in the obscure light of the foggy November morning, a superstitious stranger might have mistaken the bride for the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church” (110). Here Braddon suggests not only that her colorless appearance makes her blend into the background as if she were a non-entity, but that she has consequently entered a marriage that offers her little opportunity to cultivate gentility (although she and her husband do bribe Lucy for money to start a public-house). Phoebe is further marginalized through eponyms such as “a dim and

shadowy lady,” and Braddon suggests that her *failure* to paint her face is, at least in part, responsible for her relegation (74).

There is a moment in the text where Lady Audley indicates to Lucy that cosmetics are all that is needed to turn her from “a poor plain creature” into a beautiful ladyship. Color, in fact, seems to be the main distinguishing mark between lady and maid, as Lucy suggests through her dialogue with Phoebe:

‘Do you know, Phoebe, I have heard some people say you and I are alike?’

‘I have heard them say so too, my lady,’ said the girl quietly, ‘but they must be very stupid to say it, for your ladyship is a beauty, and I’m a poor plain creature.’

‘Not at all, Phoebe,’ the little lady superbly, ‘you *are* like me, and your features are very nice; it is only colour that you want. My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, and yours is drab; my eyebrows and eyelashes are dark brown, and yours are almost-- I scarcely like to say it, but they’re almost white, my dear Phoebe; your complexion is sallow, and mine is pink and rosy. Why, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you’d be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe.’ (58)

Braddon lays out the class mobility at work in the cosmetics advertisements that surround her text in the penny-part periodicals, exposing the artifice and dynamism that critics so disdained in all their glory. Lucy started out a working-class woman much like Phoebe, and based on her comment and on her physical perfection at the beginning of the narrative, she quite possibly used cosmetics before she was a lady. She speaks about her appearance to Phoebe as if she were naturally that way, but we definitively learn that her eyebrows at least are penciled and that her complexion is not always “pink and rosy.” Lucy thus also models the code of conduct for using cosmetics by concealing their use as

much as possible, even in conversation with her lady's maid. She maintains the semblance of a lady but has an edge on the critics because she recognizes that feminine ideals are nothing more than a semblance. As *Lady Audley's Secret*, the advertisements and even some of the diatribes imply, to varying degrees, cosmetics ushered in an age where working class could not just fantasize about the non-limitations of the body but create new identities and lives through the democratization of beauty. Lucy Audley's encounters with gentility may have come to an end, but Phoebe and countless other working-class women reading the novel in *Robin Goodfellow* and/or *The Sixpenny* have learned that if they purchase the readily available cosmetics and can wield them wisely, then they potentially can map out their own fates in the social hierarchy.

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