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'Reading Girl' to 'Writing Girl': Erotic transactions and philanthropic reactions in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Mary* (1916)

GARTH WENMAN-JAMES

PENNED IN THE final years of her life,[1] and published posthumously in 1916, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Mary* interrogates various forms of labour: sex work, servitude, and philanthropy intertwine in the text through the focal lens of Braddon's titular protagonist.[2] In this way, Braddon's final novel operates as a post-Poor Law text that dismantles the affective power of the male gaze over poor and labouring female bodies, moving away from the strict surveillance the workhouses and the board of guardians once represented. Specifically, she critiques surveillance strategies that oppress poor and working-class women throughout the novel and argues for the effective power of female-led philanthropic actions in liberating penniless and labouring women from the male gaze.

Braddon penned *Mary* amid major reforms and debates surrounding the Poor Law and, more generally, shifting social attitudes towards poverty. As Michael E. Rose argues, the development of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in 1868 led to the slow disassembly of the Poor Law's parish and workhouse system.[3] The COS regulated and encouraged charities outside government legalisation, which contributed to the growth of philanthropic labour in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1910s, this shift had produced an active debate about the form that slum philanthropy should take: Edward Abbott Parry's 1914 treatise *The Law and the Poor,* for example, interrogates the relationship between poverty and legislation, while Jacob A. Riis's earlier *The Battle with the Slums* utilises the extended metaphor of war throughout the piece to represent the slums as an 'enemy' against which the middle and upper classes

[1] Braddon died on 4th February, 1915.

[2] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Mary* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1916).

[3] Michael E. Rose, *The English Poor Law, 1780-1930* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles), p. 11.

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should 'join forces'.[4] Focusing on impoverished women's experiences under the COS-regulated system of charity, Florence Farr's 1910 text *Modern Women: Her Intentions* argues that women's dependence on men within a patriarchal system directly produces homelessness among women.[5] Farr exclaims that in order to escape this cyclical treatment, women must become 'determined to cry halt and make a fight'.[6] For Farr, the 'battle' is not just with the slum environment – as is argued in Riis's text – but also with unequal gendered structures that entrap female paupers and women generally through the surveillance of their bodies and identities. These structures ultimately lead to a gender gap in the experiences of homelessness that worsened throughout the fin de siècle and early twentieth century.

In *Mary*, Braddon primarily engages with these ideas by problematising and dismantling the philanthropic male gaze. In her pioneering work on the male gaze, Laura Mulvey describes that this form of surveillance is the product of a 'world structured by sexual imbalance' in which 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female'.[7] The male gaze, she argues, 'projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly', and their appearance is 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness'.[8] Although Mulvey is discussing cinema throughout the late twentieth century, this relationship between the 'Woman as Image' and the 'Man as Bearer of the Look' has been recognised and deployed as a conceptual lens by critics of nineteenth-century art forms.[9] Braddon's *Mary* interrogates the male gaze in a way akin to Mulvey's conceptualisation, but in the case in the novel this is contextualised within post-Poor Law attitudes towards impoverished and labour women alike. By opening the text with Austin Sedgwick 'slumming', a leisure pursuit in which the middle and upper classes walk through the slums to find excitement in the poverty surrounding them, Braddon connects the erotic impact impoverished streets have on Austin with his surveillance of

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[4] Edward Abbott Parry, *The Law and the Poor* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co.); Jacob A. Riis, *The Battle with the Slums* (Montclair: Patterson Smith, 1902), p. 1.

[5] Florence Farr, *Modern Women: Her Intentions*. (London: Frank Palmer, 1910), p. 18.

[6] Ibid., p. 21.

[7] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Constance Penley (ed.) *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 62.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

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the novel's title character. Ultimately, Austin's slumming at the beginning of the text entraps Mary in a series of eroticised transactions where she is traded amongst male members of the Sedgwick family in a pseudosexual fashion. At its core, then, *Mary* is a novel concerned with representing the affective power of the male philanthropic gaze and its primary protagonist's personal journey to evade the gaze of the Sedgwick family.

As the narrative continues, Braddon epitomises the concepts of female labour and the fetishising male gaze in her construction of one central spectacle that appears throughout the novel: Pietro Magni's statue *The Reading Girl* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Pietro Magni. 1861. *La Leggitrice,* otherwise known as *The Reading Girl* (National Gallery of Art, Washington) <www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.127589.html.> Credit, with thanks, to the National Gallery of Art, Washington

Popularised in London by its appearance at the 1862 International Exhibition, Magni's statue depicts a young woman in the act of reading. Half undressed and with one bare breast, the figure represents one of Mulvey's 'fantas[ies]' as Magni shapes the young

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woman to illicit a 'strong visual and erotic impact'. As I go on to expand, Braddon deploys Magni's *The Reading Girl* in *Mary* itself as a lens through which to critique the male gaze and, more specifically, the power that such erotic surveillance holds over the female labourer. Braddon first introduces the statue as a facsimile owned by Mary's employer, Conway Field, who takes her in to act as his own 'reading girl', one who will recite novels aloud to Field due to his poor sight.[10] Field suggests that Mary should model herself on his facsimile of *The Reading Girl*, which Braddon uses to draw a parallel with Magni's eroticisation of the woman depicted in the statue. Aligned directly with Mary's employment, Braddon likens the general fetishisation of the female body under the male gaze with their exploitation as a source of labour. The statue therefore acts as the crux of a wider discussion Braddon engages throughout the novel involving female homelessness, the sexualising gaze of the male philanthropist, and the transactional nature of relationships between men (with apparently philanthropic intentions) and destitute women.

Critics have long identified Braddon's critique of the male gaze throughout her oeuvre. Lynette Felber highlights Braddon's deconstruction and critique of the male gaze in *Lady Audley's Secret*, particularly through the male response to a pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley that features in the narrative. Felber argues that Braddon illustrates the 'fetishisation' of the female body under the male gaze, revealing the 'powerlessness of Victorian women subordinated by the male gaze' and exposing the 'dissimulation of those Victorian men who create empty fantasies, unable to confront the real objects of their desires and the true nature of their fears'.[11] In *Lady Audley's Secret,* the male gaze is illustrated by Robert Audley's rejection of Lucy's self-constructions and his desire to gain knowledge of the truth surrounding her ex-husband.[12]

In *Mary*, however, escaping the penetrative male gaze is specifically linked with the post-Poor Law context of the novel due to the increased accessibility for women to engage with each other via philanthropic communities. While the female body is still

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[10] *Mary*, p. 33.

[11] Lynette Felber, 'The Literary Portrait as Centerfold: Fetishism in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's "Lady Audley's Secret"', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35.2. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 477.

[12] *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. 285.

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'fetishised', as it is in Field's fascination with *The Reading Girl*, Braddon's argument against the male gaze is rooted strongly in the epoch from which she writes. Following the dismantling of the (primarily male) board of guardians, as Deborah Epstein Nord notes, sisterly communities of women engaged with philanthropic activities from the 1880s onwards, allowing them to 'live outside the sphere of the family' and join women's communities where they were able to actively rewrite and influence the impoverished environments around them.[13] In the second half of *Mary*, Braddon articulates this belief that, by enacting their own professional identities and undertaking philanthropic acts, women can liberate themselves from the male gaze: for example, after Field's death, Mary uses the inheritance she receives from her employer to 'build almshouses for the fishermen's widows'.[14] Mary's creation of a homosocial community thus leads her to form her own sense of agency: it also allows her to re-furnish her own sense of selfhood, referencing back to a time from before she meets Austin Sedgwick out slumming in the East End.[15] Mary's disruption of Austin's male gaze parallels the cultural shift in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of 'invasion of fiction by the feminine' which interrogated and reconstructed the definition of womanhood via narratives which refocussed women's agency and identity.[16] Participating in this moment, Braddon's female aesthetic mode develops during these points of 'invasion'; likewise, by 'authoring' a philanthropic community of her own apart from the Sedgwick family, Mary disrupts her surveillance under the eyes of the male philanthropist.

In this way, Mary creates a new form of female-oriented labour for herself, subverting her identity as a 'Reading Girl'. Braddon intensifies this by representing Mary's professional identity as a philanthropist through her ability to 'write' down of the needs of the women in her community and turn them into action. As such, Braddon uses the act of writing to signify Mary's subversive self-creation of her own self apart from her passive role as a 'reading girl'.[17] Following the death of Conway Field, Braddon

[13] Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 181.

[14] *Mary*, p. 231.

[15] Specifically, through a symbolic return to her birthplace in Cornwall. I discuss this further later in this article.

[16] Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 4.

[17] *Mary*, p. 285.

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describes that *The Reading Girl* statue he owns loses its 'soul'.[18] The loss of the statue's 'soul', coupled with Field's death, indicates the male gaze's reduced power over labouring women in the time between the statue's physical creation in 1861 and her penning of the novel in the mid-1910s. In dismantling the affective power of the statue in the novel in this way, Braddon seems to celebrate women's philanthropic efforts and turn away from their restriction under the male gaze while also reflecting Olive Schreiner's closing remarks to her seminal 1911 feminist work *Women and Labour*:

> It is because so wide and gracious to us are the possibilities of the future; so impossible is a return to the past, so deadly is a passive acquiescence in the present, that today we are found everywhere raising our strange new cry – "Labour and the training that fits us for labour!"[19]

Aligning herself with Schreiner's argument for the emancipatory nature of women's labour, Braddon celebrates charitable efforts performed *by* women, *for* women, and argues that philanthropy is a form of labour in itself. This reflects a key shift that occurred at the fin de siècle; by 1893, over half a million women in Britain were 'occupied continuously' or 'professionally' in philanthropic work, and as such it was seen as a labouring identity in and of itself.[20] Breaking the entrapping power of male surveillance, Mary can rebuild herself by creating a decidedly female-only philanthropic community and by crafting a space for her self-defined labour practices.

Braddon's final novel is the culmination of her thoughts and critiques on the male gaze and role of labouring women in a post-Poor Law age; particularly, Braddon illustrates that the androcentric, quasi-erotic transactions Mary experiences can be dismantled via a series of self-defining philanthropic reactions. Tracing Mary's journey from penniless woman subjected to the male philanthropic surveillance through to her self-created philanthropic identity, Braddon emphasises both the entrapment of

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[18] Ibid., p. 206.

[19] Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labour* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1911), p. 299.

[20] Particularly as, in most philanthropic sisterly communities like the Salvation Army, the philanthropic actors were quite often made of a mixture of middle and working-class women. For more on philanthropy as labour and the crossing of class lines via philanthropic work, see Andrea Geddes Poole, *Philanthropy and the Construction of Victorian Women's Citizenship: Lady Frederick Cavendish and Miss Emma Cons*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 3.

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penniless and labouring women as well as their ability to dismantle the male gaze through their own professional agency.

The Erotics of Slumming and the Pauper Woman's Body

Braddon opens *Mary* with a description of Austin Sedgwick slumming in the East End, utilising the practice of slumming to epitomise the objectification of the female labourer under the male gaze. The narrator describes how:

> It may have been a caprice of Austin Sedgwick's which brought him through Sanders Street […] after a night spent curiously, the first half at a smart card-party, and the later hours in the East End, where this young man varied the monotony of a government office and the banalities of modern society by an occasional descent into nethermost depths, where people who, having known him first as a queer sort of bloke, who came prying about, and asking questions, had gradually learnt to look upon him as a friend and helper.[21]

Although the narrator indicates Austin's philanthropic efforts by describing him as a 'friend and helper', the reader is fully aware that he is partaking in a leisure pursuit. Slumming is conflated with the 'smart card-party': the slums themselves contrast Austin's 'banal' middle-class activities as they are described as a space into which he must 'descen[d]' to escape 'monotony'. In *Mary*, Braddon deliberately encodes Austin's slumming as a sexual and bodily activity, eroticising this particular philanthropic activity as one that provides personal, and aesthetic, excitement. As Seth Koven notes, the 'forbidden pleasures and dangers' experienced by the middle and upper classes during slumming are sexualised through their connections with equally socially forbidden 'queer' sexualities.[22]

This sense of queerness is visible through Braddon's description of Austin's perception of the slums. Braddon's employment of the balanced phrases 'common things strange and ugly things beautiful' illustrates an inversion of concepts of attractiveness, echoing nineteenth-century sexologist Havelock Ellis's positioning of

[21] *Mary*, p. 1.

[22] Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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homosexuality as a 'sexual inversion'.[23] As Sarah Parker argues, throughout the late nineteenth century a common association was made between synaesthesia, the confusion of senses and impressions, and 'sexual perversity'.[24] By reflecting this association in the conflation of 'common/strange' and 'ugly/beautiful', Braddon presents the space as liminal or between conventional binary categories. As such, Braddon represents Sanders Street as a queered space through her representation of its liminality.

The queerness of Austin's slumming experience is exaggerated by the temporality of the scene, as Braddon indicates that Austin is slumming at a time between nighttime and sunrise. The description of 'dim [...] streetlamps' coexisting with the transitional 'greenish-blue' skyline during Austin's travels places his exploration within a liminal temporal space.[25] Loren March argues that this kind of temporal liminality encourages 'queer ways of thinking through unboundedness, spillage, fluidity, multiplicity, and processes of contingent, non-linear becoming, as well as the relations of power and regulation that seek their stability or closure'.[26] This kind of liminality as a method of presenting queerness is present elsewhere in the nineteenth-century novel, meaning that Braddon's employment of queer liminality partakes in a lively conversation with other writers of the period: Deborah Denenholz Morse, for example, argues that *Jane Eyre* utilises liminal spaces and times to represent Sapphic relationships and queered gender norms.[27] Queer temporalities were also prevalent in decadent fiction of the fin de siècle. As Kate Flint notes, the 'shadowy ambiguities of twilight have an important part to play, albeit a metaphorical one, in the final fifteen years of the nineteenth century' as decadent fiction used the twilight hour as a synecdoche for same-sex desires painted as liminal 'inversions'.[28] Twilight, as a liminal

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[23] Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (London: Wilson and Macmillan, 1897), p. 23.

[24] Sarah Parker, 'Bittersweet: Michael Field's Sapphic Palate', in Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (eds.) *Decadence and the Senses*. (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), p. 122.

[25] Mary, p. 1.

[26] Loren March, 'Queer and trans geographies of liminality: A literature review', in *Progress in Human Geography*, 45.3 (2021), p. 445.

[27] Deborah Denenholz Morse, 'Brontë Violations: Liminality, Transgression, and Lesbian Erotics in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre', in *Literature Compass*, 14.12 (2017), p. 10.

[28] Kate Flint, 'The "hour of pink twilight": Lesbian Poetics and Queer Encounters on the Fin-de-siècle Street' in *Victorian Studies*, 51.4 (2009), 689-694.

temporality between light and dark, thus became an apt metaphor for same-sex desires in literary decadence.[29] In engaging with the twilight hour in this opening section to *Mary*, Braddon further forges a connection between same-sex erotics, decadent art, and Austin's slumming. By sexualising Austin's experience of Sanders Street, Braddon positions his slumming gaze in connection with erotic pleasure.

Braddon constructs the Sanders Street slum in a decadent style through its liminality, representing the evocation of new 'perceptions and emotions' key to literary decadence.[30] Braddon describes the queered temporality of Sanders Street as an 'hour in the twenty-four that has magic in it', indicating a new 'magical' perception of the London cityscape.[31] Referring again to the 'magic […] hour' between nighttime and sunrise, the narrator describes how

> That strange light lent a certain artistic beauty to the decadence of Sanders Street, which once had dignity and even fashion, but was now a place of tenement houses and squalid shops – a street that had been slowly withering for a century, but had been the pink of respectability, though a little off colour as to fashion, a hundred years ago.[32]

By using the phrase 'artistic beauty' in conjunction with the 'decadence of Sanders Street', Braddon intensifies her allusions to the decadent art movement. The 'magic[al]' and 'enchanted' nature of these slums also conjures decadence: as Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé posit, spiritualism, mysticism, and magic often appear in decadent works as one method that the artist uses to conceptualise the relationship between the subject and their senses.[33] At the same time, the indication that Sanders Street is in a state of decay positions decay itself as another decadent motif that focuses on the 'decompos[ition]' and degeneration of artistic beauty.[34] In this initial passage of the novel, then, Braddon heavily encodes Austin's slumming with sexualised and decadent implications.

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell, *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 7.

[31] Mary, p. 1.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (eds.), *Decadence and the Senses*, p. 7.

[34] Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Plon, 1884), p. 180.

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The erotic decadence of Austin's travels comes together in Braddon's explicit and implicit references to a key decadent figure: Oscar Wilde.[35] In 1895, Wilde was found guilty of 'Gross Indecency' in the now-infamous Queensbury Trials. In the immediate years that followed, the trials led to major debates surrounding whether decadent and other innovative artforms might be one of the causes of moral and sexual 'degeneration'.[36] Braddon's reference to both inversion and synaesthesia, in conjunction with the references to decadent art in Austin's sensual experience of Sanders Street, create a connection between Austin's slumming and Wilde as a figure who represented discourses of both sexuality and art. Furthermore, the slippages between 'beauty' and what is perceived to be 'ugly' is evocative of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890): Dorian remains a 'graceful young man' while his portrait becomes 'old and wrinkled and ugly'.[37] In the preface to *Dorian Gray*, Wilde declares that 'those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming' while 'those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated'.[38] In Austin's experience of the slums, 'ugly things [are made] beautiful'; this illustrates a reversal of Wilde's statement on ugly meanings, yet also further connects Wilde and Austin as he 'find[s] beautiful meanings' in Sanders Street. While there is much in the novel to distinguish Austin from Wilde, the perceived perversity of Wilde's decadence following the 1895 trials further connects his slumming with concepts of eroticisation. As such, Austin's decadent slumming is fundamentally presented by Braddon as a pseudo-sexual practice.

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[35] Braddon and Wilde were close friends. Her post-Wilde-trials novels often feature veiled references to Wilde and his treatment in court (Cox, 2012), p. 224. In 'Entirely Fresh Influences in Edwardian Wildeana: Queerness in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Rose of Life* (1905) and Julia Frankau's *The Sphinx's Lawyer* (1906)', Ana Markovic (2019) argues that Braddon's later works also feature a notably Wildean and decadent style (p. 107).

[36] Richard Dellamora, 'Productive Decadence: "The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought": Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde', in *New Literary History*, 35.4 (2004), 529-46 (p. 533). This primarily results from the publication of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) a few years before the trials, which resurfaced as a major centre for debate post-Queensbury trials. For more on this discussion and the responses of artists such as Vernon Lee and George Bernard Shaw, see Dellamora.

[37] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. LTD, 1891), pp. 28 – 29.

[38] Ibid., p. 5.

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Braddon makes these connections far more explicit after Austin meets Mary following her escape from a brothel, in which Austin asks Mary about her experiences at the home for 'fallen' women. They discuss her sense of entrapment, and Mary states that she

> "Tramp[s] round the yard every morning, and think[s] of the prisoners in Reading Gaol."
> "You know that poem?"
> "I know every heart-breaking word of it. My father knew the man who wrote it."
> "Was your father by way of being literary?"
> "He was steeped to the lips in literature."
> He longed to question her more, but refrained.[39]

This reference to Wilde's poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, written after his release from prison following the Queensbury trials, further connects Austin and Wilde.[40] By intentionally making this connection with Wilde, Braddon allows the connotations of literary decadence with 'sexual perversity' and 'queer[ness]' to cross-pollinate with the pleasure Austin takes in partaking in slumming as a leisure pursuit. As a result, Braddon implies that Austin's travelling through Sanders Street is akin to a practice that is simultaneously pleasurable and artistic – as such, she taps into the aspects of the male gaze which seek a 'strong visual and erotic impact'.[41]

By constructing Austin's slumming as an erotic conduit for the male gaze, Braddon positions his initial meeting with Mary as a sexual transaction. When Austin first meets Mary, he discovers

> A girl [...] sitting on the doorstop, fast asleep, with her head drooping forward upon her knees, and her face hidden. The hand that hung limp and pale by her side was small – a lady's hand, Austin thought. She was not the kind of night-bird he expected to find upon a doorstep. [...] "Fashioned so slenderly, young and so fair." Slender she was assuredly, of a willowy slenderness as she leant against the railings, faint and wan. And she was young; but for the rest there was only the delicate modelling of her features, and the pathetic expression of grey

[39] *Mary*, p. 20.
[40] Oscar Wilde*, The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1898).
[41] Mulvey, p. 62.

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> eyes with long black lashes, to promise that under happier conditions she might be beautiful.[42]

Braddon borrows the direct quotation 'Fashioned so slenderly, young and so fair' from Thomas Hood's 1844 poem 'The Bridge of Sighs', which describes the suicide of a homeless woman from Waterloo Bridge.[43] As is stereotypical for the 'fallen woman' genre, Hood passes judgement on the woman, denouncing her suicide as 'weakness' and 'evil behaviour'.[44] The speaker repeatedly iterates a desire to know more about the woman, particularly in the stanza which asks

> Who was her father?
> Who was her mother?
> Had she a sister?
> Had she a brother?
> Or was there a dearer one
> Still, and a nearer one
> Yet, than all others?[45]

By referencing Hood's poem in this way, and particularly through the invasiveness of its speaker into the imagined world of the 'fallen' woman, Braddon further emphasises Austin's desire to gain an intimate knowledge of Mary's life. It also places him within a literary tradition of a male gaze that positions women, in this case particularly poor women and perceived sex workers, under surveillance. Austin and Mary's initial meeting also features repeated instances of bodily imagery: the narrator refers to her 'hand[s]', 'face', 'knees', 'head', 'eyes' and 'long black lashes' while also using the physical descriptors of 'pale', 'slender', and 'wan'. This imagery implies a power relationship between the two. Mary is 'sitting' while Austin stands above her and surveys her body: as such, Austin's observations are absorbed into the narrative perspective, feeding directly into Braddon's textual engagement with the critical male gaze. The erotic language used to construct his slumming practices, and the pleasure he derives from

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[42] Mary, pp. 2-3.

[43] Thomas Hood, 'The Bridge of Sighs', in Arthur Quiller-Coach (ed.) *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Reprint. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1844), pp. 758-64.

[44] Ibid., ll. pp. 103-104.

[45] Ibid., ll. pp. 36-42.

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discovering more about Mary, characterises their conversations as a pseudo-sexual transaction.

As noted, Braddon further illustrates an awareness of gender inequality in experiences of homelessness and labour. Mary's fetishisation as a passive object, as such, derives both from her poverty and her femininity. In this way, Braddon critiques Austin's male gaze by depicting Mary's aggressive self-policing under his surveillance. Austin uses the imperative 'tell me your story', to which Mary responds with the exclamation that it 'is too horrible to be told' and states that 'there are many such women in London – going about like Satan, seeking whom they may devour. Not like roaring lions, but like creeping snakes. Loathsome, loathsome, loathsome!'[46] Mary is pressured into sex work by a woman who initially treats her kindly: she escapes to the streets, which is where she meets Austin.[47] Her description of 'such women' as 'creeping snakes', and her impassioned repetition of 'loathsome', characterises Mary's self-policing under Austin's gaze. Furthermore, Braddon constructs Mary's direct speech to reflect the language used by William Acton in his 1857 report on women's sex work, demonstrating an internalisation of male judgements and attitudes, further underpinning this self-policing.[48] Acton describes

Such women, ministers of evil passions, [that] not only gratify desire, but also

[46] *Mary*, p. 4.

[47] It is worth noting that this attempt to entrap Mary and force her into sex work is thwarted. Mary's first sexual encounter with a man, who initially bursts in while she is sleeping and 'trie[s] to kiss her' (p. 27), ends with him taking pity on her as a 'poor creature' (p. 27). After releasing her from his 'vice'-like grip, the man helps Mary escape from the brothel and takes her 'near King's Cross' (p. 29), roughly three miles from the Sanders Street slum where Mary meets Austin.

[48] William Acton, *Prostitution: considered in its moral, social, and sanitary aspects, in London and other large cities and garrison towns: with proposals for the control and prevention of its attendant evils* (London: John Churchill and Sons, 1857). Acton's work was highly respected, and resulted in the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864. The Act 'provided that women suspected of prostitution in specified garrison and naval towns be arrested by plainclothes police, compelled to undergo a medical examination, and detained in a lock hospital if found to carry a venereal disease' (Shalyn Claggett, 'Victorian Pros and Poetry', *Prose Studies,* 33.1 (2011), 19-43, p. 20). Claggett argues, however, that Acton's study 'offered its nineteenth-century readers some highly persuasive misinformation – or, put another way, it was a fiction able to contour the reality it claimed to represent' (p. 19). Acton's text used false scientific facts to enforce misogynistic views of female sex workers, which had a strong hold on legislation and the Victorian public.

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> arouse it. Compelled by necessity to seek for customers, they throng our streets and public places, and suggest evil thoughts and desires which might otherwise remain undeveloped.[49]

The phrase 'such women' and the predatory language of them 'suggest[ing] evil thoughts' and 'seek[ing] for customers' are directly reflected in Mary's direct speech, showing both an ideological and textual internalisation of these ideas. Directly after Mary's exclamation, the narrator notes that Austin 'persuaded her to eat, and he persuaded her to talk – to talk of that saddest of all subjects, her own history'.[50] By following Mary's self-policing with Austin 'persuad[ing]' her to reveal more of her history, Braddon parallels Austin's 'long[ing]' for knowledge with a sexual transaction, further likening their communications to Mary's brief period in a brothel.

Braddon initially illustrates this through the sexual and decadent encoding of the slum space, emphasising this further in Austin's use of food as a form of currency that he promises Mary in exchange for knowledge of her background. Later in the text, rumours circulate amongst Austin's social circle regarding his relationship with Mary, and one member states they 'heard they go slumming together'.[51] Through this statement, Braddon suggests their shared slumming also acts as a sexual transaction worthy of secrecy or rumour, further emphasising the erotic nature of Austin's slumming practices and engagement with Mary. Under Austin's knowledge-seeking male gaze, Mary is forced to aggressively self-police her behaviour while also being coerced to enact pseudo-sex work by fulfilling Austin's eroticised desire for knowledge.

Through Austin, Mary comes under the employment of his uncle Conway Field and is also introduced to his cousin, George, whom she eventually marries. The initial meeting between Austin and Mary initiates an ongoing cycle of transactions between Mary and the male members of Austin's family, enabling her body to be repeatedly subjected to an oppressive male gaze throughout the narrative.[52] As the novel

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[49] Acton, *Prostitution*, p. 186.

[50] *Mary*, p. 5.

[51] Ibid., p. 284.

[52] To a lesser extent, Mary is also subjected to a critical female gaze. Miss Field, Austin's aunt, is initially shocked by Mary's 'pale refined face, the grave grey eyes with dark lashes and arched brows, the soft silk gown, and delicate lace guimpe, the tout-ensemble [which] took her breath away' (p. 102). Mary's beauty leads Miss Field to distrust her, as she believes that her beauty will lure Conway Field into giving

continues, Mary's containment within patriarchal structures therefore becomes indistinguishable from her engagement in various forms of labour.

Sexual Labour / Sexualised Labour: The Reading Girl

Braddon positions Mary as an item of trade between Austin's male family members, which ultimately entraps her within various forms of domestic labour. Following Mary's introduction to Austin's family, sexualised conceptualisations of literature and reading become integral to how she, and her ability to perform labour, are perceived under the male gaze. Braddon encodes the act of 'Reading' with sexualised connotations through her employment by Conway Field, the oldest male in Austin's and George's family. Austin takes her to view the gallery at the entrance to the house before she meets with Field, causing Mary to note the 'wealth and rank' and 'early Georgian' aesthetic of Field's home, and further embedding the power relations between her and her place of employment.[53] In the middle of the gallery is a statue, described by the narrator as

> the figure of a girl seated on a rush-bottom chair, reading. She was only half dressed, as if she had stopped in the midst of her simple toilet, to read some absorbing book. A long plait of hair hung over her naked shoulder, and her shift and corset suggested the humblest rank of life. The face was thoughtful and sweet, of a pensive beauty, a face in repose, but a living face. The charm of the statue was its reality – a page out of the simple life. The girl, the chair she sat upon, the coarse shift and common stays, the scanty petticoat, all were the things seen every day in humble dwellings. The statue had made a sensation in the International Exhibition of 1862, and had been discovered later in Florence by Conway Field.[54]

Field's statue is a facsimile of Pietro Magni's *The Reading Girl*. The image here is highly sexualised: she is a 'half dressed [...] pensive beauty' with a 'naked shoulder'. The verb 'seated', and the repetition of the adjective 'humble', recall Austin's initial meeting with

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her a share of his will. Despite this, Mary's displacement from the home for fallen women, into Conway Field's employment, and into her marriage with George is unaffected by Miss Field's surveying gaze; her physical movement is confined within male dialogues and transactions.

[53] *Mary*, p. 36.

[54] Ibid., p. 38.

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Mary where she is described as a 'girl [...] sitting on the doorstop'.[55] The Georgian exterior of Field's home, as well as his ownership of a statue made popular fifty-three years before *Mary*'s publication, emphasises the archaic nature of his gaze. Directly after this description, Austin declares that the piece is his 'uncle's "Reading Girl", one of his most cherished acquisitions'.[56] The statue is sexualised in its depiction of a partially naked woman from a humble background and is also given economic and artistic value as Field's 'acquisition': it is also continuously conflated with Mary as she is repeatedly referred to as Field's 'reading girl' following her employment – that is, via her labour, which Field similarly acquires.[57] After the interview, Field encourages Mary to 'look at [his] reading girl as you go out', and notes that his previously employed women were 'officious, troublesome, [and] stupid' compared to the values embodied in the statue.[58] In suggesting that Mary should model herself on *The Reading Girl*, Field implies that she should continue self-policing in a manner akin to her comments on 'loathsome' sex work. *The Reading Girl*, therefore, represents an objectified, masculine ideal of a working woman that is recycled throughout time and amongst the male members of the Sedgwick family. Through Braddon's deliberate conflation of Mary and Magni's statue, Braddon highlights the patriarchal 'customs' and 'manners' that underly the gendered expectations present in Mary's labour for Field.

The parallels made between Mary and *The Reading Girl* further illustrate the power that the male gaze holds over female bodies and labour, particularly through Field's control over Mary's literary consumption. Mary feels as if she 'could have no secrets from [Field] – no choice of how much of her dismal story to tell or to withhold from him', and notes that Field 'could read her pitiful record as if her mind were an open book'.[59] Mary is surveyed to the extent that she feels her psyche and background is visible to Field, illustrating the power of his gaze in the narrative. The simile of the

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[55] The statue's humble appearance also recalls the pre-Raphaelite fascination with transforming poor or working-class women into art forms. See Patricia Pulham, *The Sculptural Body in Victorian Literature: Encrypted Sexualities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021) for more on the objectification of the female body in statuary.

[56] *Mary*, p. 38.

[57] Ibid., p. 33; p. 35; p. 39; p. 40; p. 41; p. 51; p. 61; p. 64; p. 97; p. 102; p. 103; p. 106; p. 143; p. 157; p. 160; p. 167; p. 170; p. 188; p. 189; p. 200.

[58] Ibid., p. 36.

[59] Ibid., p. 38.

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'open book' semantically connects her sense of being scrutinised with the act of reading, again creating a link with Magni's passive, sexualised *Reading Girl*. Through Field's characterisation and his direct speech, discussions of reading, surveillance, and labour appear alongside each other in the novel. Austin promises Mary that in her position with Field she will have to read 'dull books, sometimes perhaps, but never stupid or vulgar books'.[60]

This scrutiny over what is read by Mary continues in Field's interview: he asks Mary if she has ever read 'sensation novels', and responds positively to her statement that she is more familiar with the 'critic[al] and political' literature that was consumed by her father.[61] As a result, Field concludes that she exhibits 'intelligence and refinement' and asks 'will you give me a taste of your quality?' before offering her the position.[62] The verb 'taste' emphasises a sexualised, predatory element to Field's desires. This further contextualises the labour of the reading girl as one filtered through masculine values and gazes, as the sexualisation of *The Reading Girl* sculpture initially indicates. Through the presentation of Field's treatment of Mary, Braddon critiques a male gaze that sexualises a labouring woman, and she connects this with the aggressive subjection of the female worker to patriarchal expectations and norms. *The Reading Girl* statue therefore becomes a central metaphor to the novel, symbolising the objectification of Mary's labour under the gaze of Field and the wider Sedgwick family.

Philanthropic labour and social empowerment: The Writing Girl

Through the key spectacle of the writing girl, Braddon also lays the foundations for the dismantling of Field's and the Sedgwicks' male gaze. Over the course of the text, Mary's relationship with her own labour and self-identity changes alongside the disempowerment of the male gaze. After Field's death partway through the novel, he leaves Mary his estate to thank her for acting as his 'reading girl who saves [his] sight and soothes [his] ear'.[63] The power dynamics here have already shifted: Field refers to his own body, rather than Mary's, and describes her active agency in 'sav[ing]' his sight.

[60] Ibid., p. 34.

[61] Ibid., p. 36; p. 39.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., p. 143.

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Although she is still described by Field as 'my reading girl', her conflation with Magni's statue becomes unravelled after his death. The narrator notes that

> All the splendour of the things [Field] had loved, pictures and statues, seemed to look at Mary and Austin with a cruel irony. They had helped him to bear that long disease – his life – and now he was gone it seemed as if the soul had gone out of them. They, too, were dead.[64]

As such, the artworks experience a metaphorical death of the 'soul', removing the 'splendour' these pieces once held. The statues also now 'seem [...] to look' rather than being gazed at, indicating a lack of human spectatorship despite the presence of Mary and Austin. *The Reading Girl*, therefore, loses both its 'soul' and the surveillance enacted upon it by Field. The metaphorical death of the statue aligns with Mary's growing agency and removal from the role following her inheritance and the death of Conway Field. The link between this and the scrutinising male gaze is accentuated by Austin's direct speech, where he notes that

> It is the finest private collection in London, perhaps in Europe, [...] for it is the knowledge of the man who buys and not just the money he spends, that makes a collection valuable; and I believe my uncle's all-round knowledge of Art was unequalled. He had nothing else to think about for thirty years of his life, poor soul![65]

As noted, a desire for knowledge of Mary's life underlies Austin's slumming earlier in the text. Austin acknowledges that Field's knowledge, though economically valuable as a 'private collection', is not valuable at all in a personal or social sense: his collection is merely the result of having 'nothing else to think about'. This accentuates Mary's movement away from being a 'passive' labourer as a reading girl, undercutting the knowledge-based power system that underlies the gazes of Austin and Field. The uprooting of this system after Field's death in the novel mirrors a dismantling of these similar power relations by 1916, reflecting Farr's contemporaneous suggestion that labouring women should be 'determined to cry halt and make a fight'.[66] Braddon's presentation of *The Reading Girl*'s lost 'soul' thus indicates the male gaze's reduced

[64] Ibid., p. 206.
[65] Ibid., p. 207.
[66] Farr, p. 18.

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power over labouring women in the time between the statue's physical creation in 1861 and her penning of the novel in 1915.

The deconstruction of the male gaze that occurs following Field's death enables Mary to engage in philanthropic labour while also re-establishing her sense of self. On inheriting Field's estate, Mary is removed from her objectification under his gaze and can reject the three marriage proposals she receives from the men around her.[67] She also shifts fully away from the poor economic status by which she is characterised at the beginning of the text. Rather than curate art and literature like Field, Mary chooses to 'build almshouses for the fishermen's widows, and a home for their fatherless children, on the ground that was well situated for such a purpose' in her birthplace in Cornwall.[68]

Mary's geographical movement from Field's estate near London to Cornwall signifies a return to a self that existed before her impoverishment, and Austin's discovery of her, at the beginning of the text. As Ann C. Colley argues, nostalgic returns to birthplaces and origins appear in the Victorian novel as symbolism for a change in identity or restoration of the authentic self.[69] Colley argues that nostalgia is a longing not only 'for the past but also for the self that was once able, unconsciously, to scramble among the hills and walk in the streets with the people one knew and who, in turn, recognized one'.[70] Nostalgia 'stabilizes and names what had once been familiar so that a picture of a previous moment stands out like a relief from the unshapely and confusing mass of the past'.[71] In line with this conceptual framework, Mary's return to Cornwall marks a return to self and an attempt to break away from her poverty while also enacting philanthropic labour. The sense of relief derived from her return home is symbolised by her literal charitable relief, as Mary desires to provide homes to alleviate these poor women and their children from poverty. The desire to exist 'unconsciously' is present in Mary's return to Cornwall, as she 'refuse[s] to be presented' at London social events while enacting her charitable work. As such, she also rejects the

[67] Ibid., pp. 176; p. 289; p. 292.

[68] Ibid., p. 231.

[69] Ann C. Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in the Victorian Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. 212.

[70] Ibid., p. 211.

[71] Ibid., p. 211.

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suppressive, surveying male gaze in escaping to a space built purely for poor women where she does not have to be 'presented'.[72] Reflecting on her choice to act philanthropically, Mary states that she

> was able to make Field's afflicted life just a little happier, and he flung his riches into my lap; but his death left me a lonely woman. For me a great fortune can be only a great responsibility. I came here because I wanted to see the people I had known when I was a child, and who had been kind to me, for my own sake, when I was a lonely girl, the old servants who took care of me, and some of the fishermen's wives that I knew, and I hope somehow I may be able to make their old age a little easier.[73]

Her nostalgic return to her childhood community in Cornwall signifies an attempt to remedy her loneliness whilst also undertaking charitable acts. In revisiting and remaking spaces from her childhood, Mary reinvents her agency whilst enacting her sense of responsibility by creating a form of philanthropic labour for herself.

In building almshouses for Cornish widows, Mary creates a female-orientated community and promises to 'find room for them all'.[74] The home for 'fallen' women is somewhat evoked in Mary's creation of a space that enacts philanthropy for women, yet Mary's homes are not built to 're-train women on how to fit "appropriately" within society by encouraging [re]marriage' or to mark them as 'depraved'.[75] In returning to her birthplace and rejuvenating the space for the women to 'make their old age a little easier', Mary offers a different charitable model for female homelessness that is not built on a judgmental male gaze. Mary's philanthropic labour thus creates an environment for the protection and care of exclusively-female paupers and their children. Throughout this section of the narrative, Braddon intimately ties Mary's philanthropic agency to the act of writing: the narrator states that Mary 'took little notes in her pocket-book of the things that were wanting in the shabby house and the clothes that were needed for the starved bodies', and describes that a 'day or two afterwards the children thought a fairy had been there, and the weeping mother talked of one of

[72] Ibid., p. 283.
[73] Ibid. p. 231.
[74] Ibid., p. 233.
[75] Oudshoorn et al, p. 8.

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God's angels'.[76] Mary's 'little notes' as well as the comparisons between Mary and mythical or religious creatures provide her with a philanthropically-rooted power. This marks a departure from her conflation with *The Reading Girl*, as Mary actively writes and is described as a supernatural surveyor. This newfound power is created through Mary's self-created philanthropic labour. As such, *Mary* illustrates the capacity of female labour to be a liberating force for women, further reflecting Schreiner's sentiment that labour creates 'wide' and 'gracious' possibilities for the future.'[77]

Braddon illustrates this change in Mary's agency via the use of free indirect discourse, which comes to the fore following Mary's inheritance of Field's wealth. Mary wishes to write George a letter, remarking that 'he would know her hand perhaps [...] he had seen letters she had written' as she 'was sometimes writing girl as well as reading girl'.[78] As Lyn Pykett argues, Braddon's heroines can be characterised by their ability to deconstruct masculine surveillance strategies: indeed, Braddon's oeuvre represents the key role that writing played in empowering women during the sensation decade of the 1860s and at the fin de siècle.[79] As such, the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries act as moments of 'invasion of fiction by the feminine' which interrogated and reconstructed the definition of womanhood.[80] Participating in this moment, Braddon's female aesthetic mode develops during these points of 'invasion', indicating her awareness of the subversive power of writing. The fact that Mary's self-made labour allows her to write, as well as read, further aligns Braddon's aesthetic mode with Schreiner's argument: that female work creates liberating 'possibilities for the future.[81] In allegorising Mary's newfound independence through her active writing in addition to her reading, Braddon plays with concepts of 'life and fiction' to draw her reader's attention to the potential of 'social and cultural empowerment' that can come from labour.[82] Until this point in the text, the narrator and the male characters place a strong

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[76] *Mary*, p. 285.
[77] Schreiner, *Women and Labour*, p. 299.
[78] *Mary,* p. 186.
[79] Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. ix.
[80] Ibid., p. 4.
[81] Schreiner, *Women and Labour*, p. 299.
[82] Arlene Young, *From Spinster to Career Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Victorian England* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), p. 100.

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emphasis on Mary's role as the reading girl, a form of servitude into which she is placed by the male members of the Sedgwick family. By establishing herself as both the writing girl and the reading girl, Mary reconstructs a sense of self beyond the male gaze while asserting a new form of philanthropic labour.

Mary's more positive experiences of urban environments at the end of the narrative result partially from her change in social class. Her inherited wealth means that, at this point, she has become a member of the upper-middle classes. At first glance, this seems to restore the class-based power dynamics of slumming, as she shifts from being gazed *at* during her poverty to being the middle-class spectator, gazing at others. Yet, by presenting her creation of almshouses for female widows as the antithesis of the house for 'fallen' women, the reader is reminded of her initial animalisation as a 'night-bird' and her internalised belief that she is 'loathsome'.[83] As such, Braddon highlights the inequality occurring between the treatment of female homelessness and the activity of the middle classes. As Grace Wetzel notes, Braddon's works often engage with concepts of 'homelessness ranging from literal dispossession to metaphorical disconnection from the domestic spaces that house them' and highlight the additional threat posed to homeless women by masculine gazes.[84] Braddon emphasises that Mary has reconfigured herself as a surveyor of her philanthropic community rather than an eroticised object passively existing under the male gaze, symbolising a dramatic shift from her 'sitting' position under Austin's surveillance at the beginning of the text. In addition, Braddon also illustrates the potential for women to act philanthropically and to contribute to making the lives of other women a 'little easier' if given the chance to climb the social scale.

At the dénouement of the narrative, Braddon illustrates Mary's agency over her body as well as her subsequent disassembly of the male gaze. George's second proposal to Mary takes place after he journeys to Mary's home in Cornwall:[85] Mary agrees, and the narrator notes that

[83] *Mary*, p. 4.

[84] Grace Wetzel, 'Homeless in the Home: Invention, Instability, and Insanity in the Domestic Spaces of M.E Braddon and L. M. Alcott', in *DQR Studies in Literature*, no. 50, (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2015), p. 76.

[85] The first proposal takes place at Field's estate, which Mary quickly rejects (pp. 170 – 182).

> The wedding was to be very quiet – so quiet, indeed, that most people would only hear of it afterwards – no fuss or frills of any kind, by special request of the bridegroom.[86]

While Mary agrees to the marriage, she has control over the extent to which the wedding is surveyed. Braddon again emphasises Mary's desire to avoid the public gaze and her successful fulfilment of evading surveillance: the phrase 'no fuss or frills' indicates a desire to negate aesthetic pleasures from the wedding. Braddon explicitly aligns this with a shift in George's male gaze when the narrator indicates that

> Beauty was no longer paramount in his estimation of a woman. It was no longer beauty that could hold him. He had known a charm more subtle, an attraction not to be defined in words.[87]

This statement rejects the emphasis placed on aesthetic beauty seen in Austin's earlier visit to the slums and in Field's pleasure in gazing at *The Reading Girl*. Empowered by her philanthropic labour that allows her to work 'unconsciously', Mary negotiates the relationship to move away from surveying gazes as evidenced in the 'no fuss' wedding. The final paragraph of the text indicates that 'Mary felt an exquisite thrill of pleasure' as the 'change in George had begun', and the narrator describes that 'life had for her a new purpose [...] the days of fear and doubt were over'.[88] The beginning of the narrative fixates intensely on Austin's pleasures as he travels the slums; the ending changes this to focus on Mary's own 'thrill' as she escapes hostile male surveillance and takes agency over her body.

Conclusion

Braddon begins *Mary*'s narrative by directly critiquing the erotic and decadent surveillance strategies of male philanthropists, subsequently developing her criticisms to encompass artistic and literary gazes. The male gaze attempts to construct Mary through Victorian archetypes of poor women and women's labour: *The Reading Girl* and the early reference to Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs' all illustrate examples of the novel's male characters attempting to place Mary within their preconceived

[86] Mary, p. 334.
[87] Ibid., p. 317.
[88] Ibid., p. 336.

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understandings of poor women. Yet, Mary breaks these constructions by creating a philanthropic role for herself, taking pleasure in evading surveillance and opening up 'possibilities of the future' in the process.[89] Braddon thus emphasises the potential for poor women to succeed in developing their agency and to make philanthropic changes themselves if given the chance. Throughout the novel, Braddon further argues that the frameworks of male surveillance that aim to possess the female labourer's body, either sexually, artistically, or as a financial 'product', are archaic remnants from the mid-nineteenth century that must be deconstructed for poor women to be liberated. Braddon's *Mary* therefore operates as a post-Poor Law text that dismantles the affective power of the male gaze over labouring female bodies, moving away from the strict surveillance that the workhouses and the board of guardians once represented. Braddon post-Poor-Law titular heroine utilises her newfound wealth to negotiate her marriage, take control over her body, and to create a new form of philanthropic labour that supports widowed, pauper women: in this way, surveillance appears in Braddon's novel as a system of power in need of subversion and change, but unlike her earlier works, this subversion is not reversed, and the previous social order is left unrestored.

BIOGRAPHY: Dr Garth Wenman-James completed his AHRC-TECHNE funded PhD project at the University of Surrey in 2022. His thesis, entitled *Poverty Porn in Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Spectacle, Space, Surveillance, and the Victorian Imagination*, interrogates the representation of the East End slums in the works of Charles Dickens, Arthur Morrison, Margaret Harkness, Israel Zangwill, Vernon Lee, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Garth is currently the Senior Research Development Manager for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Southampton.

CONTACT: G.M.R.Wenman-James@soton.ac.uk

[89] Schreiner, *Women and Labour*, p. 299.