

Shame and Queer Desire: A Storied Reading of *Lady
Audley's Secret*
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When I was thirteen, I told my mother that I was bisexual. “Well, that’s ok, honey,” she said, “But unless you really fall in love with a girl, you should probably keep that sort of thing to yourself. Otherwise, your life is going to be a lot harder.” Then she told me about how she had a crush on her best friend in middle school. “It didn’t mean I was a queer,” she said. “You’re too young to know who you are. You don’t need a label.”

Sometimes, literary critics sound like my mother. In his essay “Robert Audley’s Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley’s Secret*,” Richard Nemesvari says “I am not arguing something so simplistic as that he is homosexual...” as if queerness is a thing to be justified, an otherness that requires concrete proof. All of his words run together—something about the danger of generalizations and remembering the historical context, like he’s scolding me for looking for an image of myself. How reductive, how simplistic of me to read a character in Victorian literature as queer, to think that people like me could ever have a clearly defined place in history.

I spent so many years trying to keep it quiet until I knew who I was for certain, waiting for some objective proof. Somewhere in there, my queerness and my silence grew together into a shame that has always kept me in its shadow. And in that shadow, I found the forbidden romance of George Talboys and Robert Audley.

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Lady Audley’s Secret is a sensationalist novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon that was published in 1862. It’s got everything scandalous—murder, love affairs, mental illness, homosexual undertones, etc. These days, critics seem to be interested in it mainly for feminist reasons—Lady Audley is terrible and wonderful all wrapped into one, just as empowering as she is problematic. She’s hysterical and unhinged, though rightfully so. Today’s critics seem to be cheering when she pushes her terrible estranged husband into a well, and honestly, I can’t say

that I disagree—stories that center men's narratives often (even and especially when those men are implied to be queer) push women's voices to the side. And yet, there's something unusually compelling about Robert and George.

The plot of the book goes something like this: there's this man, George Talboys, who leaves his wife for three and a half years (three and a half years!) in the hope of making a fortune. He comes back to find that she has died. He is devastated, unable to cope, but then he is found by Robert Audley, his old schoolmate. Meanwhile, far away, a beautiful young lady named Lucy Graham marries a much older rich man—Sir Michael Audley, Robert's uncle. Robert and George roam the world together with George always being depressed and listless, and Robert being more loving, cheerful, and patient than even a lover might be. They visit Sir Michael and his new wife, and George goes missing. It eventually comes to light that Lady Audley—Sir Michael's new wife— is actually George's 'dead' wife. And when George confronts her, she pushes him into a well.

George disappears mysteriously at the end of chapter 12—barely a third of the way into the book—and yet the sweetness that existed between him and Robert is woven through the rest of the narrative. The purity of Robert's obsession with finding out what happened to his friend drives the plot of the novel forward. All of the romance, the illicit affairs, and lies and deceit in the novel are carried along in the forward motion of Robert's desire. His love for George is a single, unstoppable stream, seemingly unrequited while George was present and only stronger in his absence.

Nemesvari posits that Robert was looking for something in himself more than he was looking for George. Some answer to his homosexual desires, he says, some resolution. I like my version better, but I still don't know why it can't be both.

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As far back as I can remember, my desire was always intertwined with shame. The moment anyone beautiful would catch my eye, I'd immediately feel guilty for wanting them. I remember the first time I met Elaine. I found my eye wandering to her in class—her smile, the curve of her jeans—and hastily looking away again. She had the short hair, the long gay girl

earrings, but maybe she wasn't like me. And it shouldn't matter anyway, I told myself—I had a boyfriend. But then she sat next to me and said hi, and I said hi back.

By the end of the semester, she was sitting on the desk in front of me while I cried about how I might leave my boyfriend. “I have a pumpkin muffin,” she said. “Would that make it better?” She wiped my tears away with her sleeve and let me cry on her shoulder. I clung to her, felt her fingers trace the back of my neck. I wanted to stay there forever, held in the space between her cheek and her shoulders, my face pressed against her furry winter coat. I wanted to stay in the absolute comfort and safety that I found there, a thing so vastly unlike the love I'd known before.

When we said goodbye, she slipped one of her gloves into my hand. “For whenever you feel alone,” she said, “So you know I'm there for you.” I still have that glove. I still slip it onto my hand sometimes, just to remember what her fingers felt like against mine.

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Another literary scholar—Jennifer Kushnier, who I like a lot more—posits that the homoerotic/homosocial undertones of Robert and George's relationship was founded in their history as schoolboys. In her essay “Educating Boys to Be Queer: Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*,” she says that it was likely Eaton where they studied together. This school had a scandalous subculture of “fagging”—older boys enslaving younger ones—and the boys were left largely unsupervised in the evenings. This gave rise to a homosexual subculture, which would have been a relevant scandal when Braddon published *Lady Audley's Secret*. It's unknown how much of this subculture was based in those broken and strange power dynamics and how much of it was something else. But regardless, it was in this odd, isolated place where queerness was almost mainstream that Robert and George found each other.

The first thing I thought was that I wanted a prequel. Not the prequel that Braddon would have written, but a really fanfictiony one—one full of stolen glances and passionate sex in the library at night. Cute boys slowly falling for each other in a world that tells them that everything that exists between them must be temporary. I want college-age Robert and George

laughing in the autumn leaves, Robert pulling George in by the scarf to kiss him on the lips. I want everything that falls in the space between Braddon's words to spring to life, fully present and so undeniably queer that not even the most doubtful literary critics could dispute it.

But then I realized that I want it to be more than fanfiction, because all of this and more is already there in the text. The chance meeting that brought the two men back together. The immediate linking of their arms, so reminiscent of their boyhoods. George's fainting spell after learning about the death of his wife, with "Robert Audley's handsome face looking at him full of compassionate alarm." Then George waking up next to Robert, them listening together to the birds singing. Robert's steady hand giving George an opiate, telling him to rest, tucking him into bed. Just in the text that's already there, Braddon's written an entire love story. It carries within it all the tenderness and intimacy of a life already lived together and lost.

I know how George felt, letting himself be held and cared for by the right person at last; the collapse of every dusty year coming to bear on that moment, and the deliciousness of those arms being there to catch him. The obnoxious critic, the one who sounds like my mother—what does he think George was looking for when he went away? Lady Audley's beauty was supposedly irresistible, yet he left her behind and went an ocean away. And sure, he said he did it for her. That he wanted to give her everything she deserved. But was it love for her that drove him away, or was it the shame of his boyhood dreams? The forbidden romance never quite forgotten, that strong, handsome face of his friend?

Perhaps I'm making broad generalizations, a reductive argument. But goddamn, I still want that prequel.

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To this day, I bet Elaine would say that she never cheated on her boyfriend. Maybe because to her I wasn't really a boy, and boyfriends are almost always convinced that girls don't count, or maybe because we never actually kissed before they broke up. But even if she did cheat, it felt almost predetermined that she would. We always seem to find each other when we don't mean to—on

street corners, in classrooms and parking garages and every space in between. It's always unlikely, but it just keeps happening.

The music at the bar was loud and harsh, but Elaine's smile was soft around the edges. My entire body was turned toward her, waiting for the moments when she'd turn and press against me. I closed my eyes, buried my face in her hair, and wound my arms around her shoulders from behind until she pulled me around to face her, one arm draped lazily over my shoulder. "Hey," she said, stroking my cheek. "What are you thinking about?"

And suddenly I was talking, telling her everything that I swore I never would. That she should leave her boyfriend. That I've always loved her, always been an option. That I would have left my boyfriend for her in a heartbeat from the first day we met. All of the silence and restraint those long years of longing had pounded into me was gone, my desire laid bare in front of her. "I think it's time to go home," she said.

We went back to my place, opened a bottle of chocolate wine, and put *Rent* on the TV. She accidentally spilled wine across my lap, so I kicked off my jeans. Giggling, she kicked off hers, and then we were slow dancing forehead to forehead, almost kissing—her arm soft across the small of my back, hips pressed toward mine. We almost kissed so many times, but she always pulled away at the last moment. She fell asleep against my chest that night, clutching at my shoulders and whispering that the world wouldn't stop spinning. It's ok, I told her. I've got you. My arm fell asleep, but I never moved her at all except to touch that perfect, delicate cheek with the single curl draped across it.

I don't know how much I slept and how much I didn't, just that I woke up in the morning sober enough to drive her home. But I spent what felt like an eternity just watching the rise and fall of her breathing, worrying that I should have made her drink more water and wondering if this was all we would ever get.

I wished more than anything that we could be real. That she'd kiss me on the mouth, or at least admit that she wanted to. That loving her could be more than subtext.

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I would have agreed with critics who thought the

representation in *Lady Audley's Secret* not quite overt enough to be canonized as queer representation. Despite the sheer volume of novels that include exclusively straight characters without even the shadow of an intention of queerness, I would have let them have this one too. After all, Robert did eventually fall in love with a woman. It's right there in the text, clearly defined.

It completely disregards Robert's continued dispassion for women. Early in the text, he thinks "I hate women... They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors." And the woman he eventually ends up with is Clara Talboys, George's sister, who has eyes exactly like his. In almost every passage about Clara, Robert is thinking either about how much Clara resembles George or about how much he wants to be dominated by her—humiliated, even. But I guess if you look only at what's on the page and not at all at what wasn't allowed to be, then Robert could have been straight. I would have given into that logic if not for the book's ending.

When George fell down the well, he didn't die. He pulled himself out, one queer hand after the other across the irregular well-rock, and he escaped that place. He lived in New York for a while, friendless and alone. But something brought him back to Robert, as it always seemed to. "I yearned for the strong grasp of your hand, Bob," he said, "the friendly touch of the hand which had guided me through the darkest passage of my life."

People like me don't get happy endings. If Robert's search for George wasn't really about George and was instead about fitting into heterosexual standards, he would have stopped when he met Clara. George could have easily stayed dead—it would have been an easy write-off—but instead he came back. With Clara there, the happy ending feels overfull, like Clara's just there to keep us from watching Robert and George too closely. But despite that, somehow, impossibly, Robert and George were reunited.

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I understand how Robert felt. Back when I thought I was a girl, I dated a boy. I threw myself at him to be dominated, humiliated, whatever he wanted. I thought it would make me normal. The first night we spent together, he begged me to touch him until I finally said yes because I didn't know what else to

say. After it was over and I had washed him off of my hands, he put his arm around me and said “See? It happened, and there’s nothing different. Nothing different at all.” But no matter how many times I brushed my teeth, I still couldn’t wash away the taste. When he touched me, it was heavier somehow, laden with sweat and memory. There was no more tenderness left, no mystery.

Then there was the time I had the big fight with my mother and I showed up at his house crying. He held me against his chest and it felt good. Then he held me tighter and with less clothes on, and it was still better than being alone, so I let him. He stripped me down and claimed every part of me with his mouth, and I lay as still as I could, imagining that it made me whole. I let him sleep in my bed. I signed a lease with him. I learned how to need him. I never felt anything that a person in love should feel. But all of the faking it, all those strained I love you’s didn’t stop my eyes from meeting Elaine’s from across that classroom—and when she gathered me into her arms that day, I felt more intimacy than I had in two years with him.

I used to stare out my bedroom window and think about her while he did whatever he wanted to do to my body. I used to imagine getting in my car and driving somewhere far, far away where he couldn’t find me, where my mother couldn’t find me, where even my own shame might fade into the distant sunrise, even if only for a moment. Maybe that’s too different from Robert’s situation; maybe I read too much of myself into him. But I know what might compel a person to board a ship and decide never to return until things made sense again.

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I still don’t know how this trans body can mean so many different things to other people when it doesn’t even feel like it belongs to me. Straight men see the clash of my boy-name and boy-clothes against my girl-body and are horrified that they used to flirt with me. Straight women make out with me when they’re drunk because they think it’s funny or because they’re curious (and ashamed of their curiosity). Even when I’m with a woman, I don’t feel straight. This is complicated. All of it disappeared when Elaine kissed me.

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It started when I grabbed her hand on the drive back to my place. She was halfway through all her it's-been-so-long-how-are-you's when I reached for her. Her hand was small and steady in mine, our fingers lacing together with an aching familiarity. Holding tight to me, she said that she still wasn't over her boyfriend. That she left him, but she's still recovering. "That's ok," I told her, and really thought I meant it. As soon as I'd parked, her mouth was on mine.

The details of that night ran together—her messy-drunk again, sprawled out on the kitchen floor. Me lying across her stomach, listening to the smooth music of her laughter. Us tumbling into my bed, holding each other with all the tenderness we could manage through the drunken haze. But I do remember the way we kept pausing to ask each other questions: Do you like this? and are you ok? and what do you want? I remember saying yes and meaning it. I remember crying after it was over because no one had ever asked me what I wanted before. More than anything, I remember her arms around me, holding me close into the morning light.

When I went to work the next day, I kept my scarf on the whole time, kept the memory of her tucked away with the purple bruises that peeked out at the edges. I knew that when they faded, the last trace of her would be gone. We were real, but not for long. We loved like boys at Eaton—all youth and haste, waiting for some need inside of us to be filled, to disappear. We always knew how that story would end.

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Even among queer scholars, it's a constant push and pull between the innate queerness of how we see the world and the compulsory nature of the culture we were raised in—the need to say of course things are a certain way. To take for granted our deviation, our otherness. To warn of stereotypes and too-broad generalizations every time we see ourselves reflected in anything.

I won't settle for an ambiguously queer reading of *Lady Audley's Secret*. I won't participate in the discourse about how queer is queer enough. I won't accept the projection of Robert's love onto George's sister as anything more than Braddon's need to make

Robert and George's dedication to one another less overt. Straight people can have anything else that they want. They can take *A Picture of Dorian Gray*—that little queer book of shame—and make it their own for all I care. I'd sooner do without it than without Robert and George.

The last thing Elaine said was to write about her. Maybe it was narcissism, or maybe it was that same aching desire to exist, but it was the best gift she could have given me. I didn't understand that until I read *Lady Audley's Secret* and saw our story written there, our own potential reflected in those pages. At the very end of the book, Braddon says "I hope that no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace." It's wonderful to know that nestled safely beneath the layers of heterosexual red-herring happy endings, somewhere in that tangle of intentions and censorship, Robert and George got their happily ever after.

Maybe Elaine and I will never be brought back together by the loving hand of fate as Robert and George were. Maybe I will never see or talk to her again, or maybe even if we did, it would never be the same. But seeing Robert and George and knowing what's possible, what's always been possible—that makes it easier to keep pulling myself out of the shadows one queer hand at a time.