It is not always want, insanity, or sin that drives women to desperate deaths: often it is a dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and fiends, worse than starvation, a bitter sense of wrong in being denied the tender ties, the pleasant duties, the sweet rewards that can make the humblest life happy; a rebellious protest against God, who, when they cry for bread, seems to offer them a stone.¹

The transatlantic scholarship of Winifred Hughes and Christine Doyle provides a basis for comparing the work of British sensationalist Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the thrillers of American writer Louisa May Alcott. Both Hughes and Doyle highlight the sensational aspects of influence. Inspiring Alcott with visions of women who were both angels and actresses, mothers and murderers, sensationalism unveiled the complex, and frequently contradictory, nineteenth-century social roles for women, and their often deleterious effects on the female psyche. Sensationalism, then, did more for Alcott than excite visceral delights. It more importantly incited social change, hence appealing to Alcott’s social consciousness.²

Two hypotheses point to why Mary Elizabeth Braddon, specifically, might have influenced Alcott’s depiction of a distinctively American\(^3\) sensation heroine, Jean Muir of “Behind a Mask”. First, Braddon’s popularity peaked around 1863, the year in which Alcott began writing sensational fiction, and three years before her publication of “Behind a Mask”. Second, given the transatlantic success of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which Alcott “likely had read”,\(^4\) it seems plausible to posit Jean Muir as both an extension and revision of Helen Talboys, the subversive heroine of Braddon’s popular novel.

Both women are lower-class females who aspire to escape poverty. Both are bewitching actresses and seemingly deferential governesses, who strive to control patriarchy before patriarchy succeeds in controlling them. Throughout their struggles, the women battle various forms of homelessness – ranging from literal dispossession to metaphorical disconnection from the domestic spaces that house them.

Both Jean and Helen suffer unstable environments as a result of oppressive patriarchal mores. When fragmented relationships erode the women’s domestic space, they are dispossessed, stigmatized and left socially adrift. Rather than submit to their homelessness, both women act their way into new abodes, hiding the marital wreckage they leave behind. Yet it is not clear that their new roles bring relief, or that the replacement spaces provide adequate shelter. Not only are their identities structured on a facade, they are enacted in a space that is not their own – a space they have won through their husbands’ misinterpretation and misidentification of their characters. Beleaguered by the breakdown of space and identity, the women suffer a homelessness of the mind that instigates mental illness. It is my suggestion that unstable domestic spaces and their subsequent dissolution produce an ultimate breakdown of the female mind.

To understand women’s homelessness, it is useful to consider the narratives’ cultural contexts as well as the psychology of homelessness. Alarmingly, women’s homelessness was, until recently, a largely unrecognized social concern. Barbara Arrighi notes that for

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\(^3\) As Elizabeth Schewe points out, the novella appears distinctively American despite its setting “among British aristocracy” (Elizabeth Schewe, “Domestic Conspiracy: Class Conflict and Performance in Louisa May Alcott’s ‘Behind a Mask’”, *American Transcendental Quarterly*, XXII/4 [December 2008], 577).