PART II

BEYOND

LADY AUDLEY’S SECRET
“Drink It Up Dear; It Will Do You Good”: Crime, Toxicology, and The Trail of the Serpent

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The Trail of the Serpent (1861), Braddon’s first and formative novel, has had a surge of interest in recent years. Academics, in particular, are beginning to notice the text’s importance in laying down the long-standing literary interests of its author. In 2003, for instance, Sarah Waters wrote that “The Trail of the Serpent occupies a fascinating place in relation both to Braddon’s sensational œuvre and to the criticism that greeted it”.¹ Despite being a “lurid, improbable story”, she adds, the text “retain[s its] power to unsettle and impress”.² In this essay I agree with Waters’ claim that The Trail of the Serpent is an important book. Rather than concentrating on its place within the literary career of its author, or sensation fiction more broadly, however, I aim to show how the text is very useful in studying a Victorian change in attitude regarding crime and its links with science. More specifically, the mid-nineteenth century witnessed a cultural panic over the criminal use of poison. At the time there appeared to be a dramatic increase in murders committed with deadly chemicals. Scientists responded with new ways of detecting and treating the effects of poison and the new science of toxicology became a discipline that Braddon’s text, which itself features a number of criminal poisonings, could draw on in telling and fascinating ways.³

Poisoning in fiction was nothing new – since the Ancients (and most notably in Shakespeare and new-wave Gothic texts), poison had been a staple part of fictional narratives. As I intend to make clear,

² Ibid., xvi, xxiii.
³ Ian Burney has discussed the rise of toxicology in Poison, Detection and the Victorian Imagination, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.