“A class of literature has grown up around us, … playing no inconsiderable part in moulding and forming the habits and tastes of its generation.”¹ This new class was that of sensation fiction, plot-driven novels of crime and detection rooted in a contemporary context, featuring insubordinate women, unstable class boundaries, and incorporating elements of popular melodrama and penny dreadfuls. Greeted with immediate success amongst both middle- and lower-class readers in the early 1860s, this birth was surveyed with suspicion by the critics, who erected within the influential reviews and journals a cordon sanitaire of policing discourse aimed at containing the dangerous upstart.² Mary Elizabeth Braddon, co-founder of the genre, rose to celebrity with Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) and, more than her fellow-sensationalists Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade or Mrs Henry Wood, offered self-reflexive work that acknowledged the prevailing critical laws whilst questioning them. Much of the ongoing revival of interest in her having focused on the potentially subversive feminist content of her fiction,³ Braddon’s constant attempts to wrestle

¹ H.L. Mansel, “Sensation Novels”, Quarterly Review, 113 (April 1863), 482.
³ As well as Gilbert, Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels, see Lyn Pykett, The “Improper” Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing, London and New York: Routledge, 1992; Kate Flint, The Woman Reader 1837-1914, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993; Ann Cvetkovich, Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture and Victorian Sensationalism, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992; Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977. This essay was written in 2005; since then, more work has been done on Braddon and the status of sensation fiction, including essays in
for authority with professional men (and a few women) of letters has received less attention. Indeed, through her strong awareness of the strategies deployed to control her creations as both morally and aesthetically transgressive, Braddon reproduces within her novels her opponents’ language in order to (sometimes ambivalently) contest it, creating a space for herself to participate in contemporary endeavours to regulate the category of the “literary”.

Whilst contributing to a contemporary overproduction of fiction, Braddon’s novels addressed the Victorian proliferation of common and expert readers. As striking as the surfeit of murder and bigamy which unsettled the critics is her depiction, unnoticed by her reviewers, of a society in which characters (taken from every social class and both genders) are partially defined by their literary preferences. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Lady Audley, her nephew Robert and maid Phoebe enjoy French novels, which Robert later rejects. Individuals in *Aurora Floyd* (1863) gather according to reading taste: Aurora’s husbands, the lower-class Conyers and wealthy Mellish, share her interest for sporting magazines, as Lucy, reader of High Church novels, draws closer to philosophy-reading Talbot. In *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864), characters are grouped and separated as readers (Isabel, Roland, Smith, Jeffson) and non-readers (George). Literature is constantly discussed in the novels, enabling Edith and Herman’s courtship in *Hostages to Fortune* (1875) and becomes an inexhaustible source of reference against which experience is measured. Lady Audley predicts her fate through that of a fictional criminal and “suffered agonies that would fill closely printed volumes”, and Mellish laments that he does not “look as if [he]’d walked out of a three-volume novel”.

Critics reacted strongly to the explosion of socially heterogeneous readers and available reading-matter in post-1850 society, with one writer commenting in 1866 that “our literature – like our commerce, our house-building, or our railway system – grows and spreads at a

