When Robert Audley is eventually convinced of his aunt’s guilt in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, he constructs the eponymous heroine as a text that the detective knows how to read. His association of the guilty female character with written material highlights the mid-Victorian construction of femininity sensation novels debunked by hinging their plots upon heroines well versed in the art of applying make-up and polishing their faces. Often fervent consumers of beauty products, the sensational heroines of the 1860s present the modern woman as a collage of accessories which help them cloak their crimes, and they hoard sables, furs, muffls or shawls in the same way as they frenetically collect artworks and curios. Braddon’s Lady Audley, Wilkie Collins’ Magdalen Vanstone in *No Name* (1862) and Lydia Gwilt in *Armadale* (1864) are scheming actresses who illustrate the perfect lady as a mere façade— as a series of ciphers of fashion. Though Braddon’s and Collins’ heroines look naturally beautiful, the allusions to Madame Rachel’s beauty shop which obsessively pepper sensational narratives function as so many clues to the heroines’

2 In *Armadale*, Lydia Gwilt’s closest adviser is Mrs Oldershaw, a minor character shaped after the model of Rachel Leverson (or Levison), who owns a beauty parlour. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, a direct reference to Madame Rachel appears at the end of the novel: “[A lady’s maid] knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for – when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist – when the
deceitfulness. In Lady Audley’s boudoir, crammed with bottles of perfume, hairbrushes and other womanly luxuries, the female character increasingly changes dresses as the detective comes closer to the truth.

Further, whilst creams and female accessories become incriminating motifs for the alert reader, the clues the detective gathers are mostly written material. Lady Audley’s handwriting, on a letter sent to her stepdaughter or on a note left to her father, on the dedications written in her books or on the railway labels pasted on her bonnet-box, reveals the fraudulent female character in a glass darkly, reflecting her crimes as a mirror would reflect her body. Gradually seen as two-dimensional by the detective and constructed as a surface by the trendy frills and flounces behind which she hides herself, the female character, like a model posing on a fashion-plate, becomes a discourse of fashion and can, indeed, be read as a text.

However, the secret of Braddon’s eponymous heroine is ultimately and surprisingly not to be read on the surface of her body. In fact, it lies deep inside, as Lady Audley tells Robert in her final confession. At the end of her novel, Braddon revises the Gothic motif of buried writing, transforming the concealed manuscript which records the crimes of the past into a physiological text which the female character nurses in her womb: her hysteria, which she has inherited from her mother and which, it seems, has urged her to commit her crimes. The physiological text her mother has transmitted to her is a script only a physician can decode, and Lady Audley is sent to a Belgian asylum and rewritten as Madame Taylor so that she may no longer endanger the Victorian status quo.

At the opening of Thou Art the Man (1894), published over thirty years after Lady Audley’s Secret, the physical description of Sibyl, Countess of Penrith, “wrapped in dark fur, with a proud, clearly cut face showing pale between the sable of her close-fitting toque and the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living; and she knows other and more sacred secrets than these. She knows when the sweet smile is more false than Madame Levison’s enamel, and far less enduring – when the words that issue from between gates of borrowed pearl are more disguised and painted than the lips which help to shape them” (Braddon, Lady Audley’s Secret, 336).