SENSATIONALISM ON TRIAL: COURTROOM DRAMA AND THE IMAGE OF RESPECTABILITY IN HIS DARLING SIN

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Why don’t you bring notices of boots, hats, dogcarts and so on? They would be fifty times as useful and interesting as reviews of the latest novel by Miss Braddon, who is a princess among novel manufacturers. There ought to be legislation against this sort of thing – on the line of the Factory Acts.¹

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s consistent output and formulaic style was a profound source of irritation for George Bernard Shaw who had the unenviable task of reviewing the mass of new fiction appearing on the market.² In drawing the analogy between Braddon’s output and the manufacturing process, Shaw relegates Braddon to the position of literary hack rather than a creative writer. His surprise and awe at her productivity is still a common reaction to Braddon’s catalogue of works, and critics such as Andrew Maunder, and Andrew King are now beginning to explore the diversity of cultural resonances in her

This article is dedicated to the prominent Braddon scholar Chris Willis. The desire to re-investigate little-known novels by prominent sensation novelists is hers; the mistakes are mine alone.

² Although Shaw was clearly not so critical of Braddon’s writing that he avoided her plots or ideas. See Sara Moore Putzell, “Another Source for Pygmalion: G.B.S. and M.E. Braddon”, Shaw Review, XXII/1 (January 1979), 29-32.
fiction, her significance as a literary icon and her contributions to the periodical press.3

By the time His Darling Sin was published in 1899, Braddon was still mass-producing novels, and had consistently capitalized upon her reputation to sustain a career in writing. Her brand of sensationalism rested upon her ability to manipulate cultural anxieties into fictional forms, marketing fear to an eager public readership. Braddon’s continued output ensured her financial stability but the act of repetition and the pace she worked at denied the possibility of adapting to new styles. As “the author of Lady Audley’s Secret” Braddon was an identifiable brand with a loyal following, 4 but the consequence of such marketing was that her reputation was associated with the heyday of Victorian three-decker novels and serialized magazine fiction. As R.L. Wolff notes, her novel Sons of Fire (1895) was one of the last books to appear in the three-decker format, although the third volume of All Along the River (1893) contained short stories providing evidence of Braddon’s experimentation with shorter novels whilst characteristically still making a profit.5

Press descriptions of Braddon from the 1890s onwards refer to her as the quintessential Englishwoman, the “Queen of the circulating libraries” and the “doyenne of English novelists”. However, Braddon’s later fiction clearly continued to engage with the familiar issues of artificiality, theatrical display and respectability. On one level, this could be seen rather unfavourably as further evidence of Braddon’s inability to adapt to the emerging modernist style. Her use of the figure of the actress, spectacularized bodies and sensational devices rather than developing psychological character studies in realism is clear throughout her career. However, the devices that served to attract her early readership crucially enabled Braddon to engage with the dynamics of that relationship between author and

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4 John Maxwell encouraged Tillotsons to use “by the author of Lady Audley’s Secret” on the title page of her novels.