MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON’S establishment of Belgravia: A London Magazine in 1866 marked the concrete fulfillment of the literary goal she had tentatively suggested to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, her friend and mentor, three years earlier: “I want to serve two masters. I want to be artistic and to please you. I want to be sensational, & to please Mudie’s subscribers. Are these two things possible, or is it the stern scriptural dictum not to be got over, ‘Thou canst not serve God and Mammon.’ Can the sensational be elevated by art, & redeemed from all it’s [sic] coarseness?” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 14). With the encouragement of Bulwer-Lytton and the financial backing of publisher and live-in lover John Maxwell, Braddon endeavored to answer her own question about the viability of producing both artistic and popular novels affirmatively in Belgravia by making it the magazine’s mission to establish the popular genre of sensation fiction as worthy of critical praise. In fact, Braddon served both her artistic and financial interests and defended the critical faculties of her target audience of middle-class women readers by creating a magazine that confounded the dominant discourse against sensationalism to support the genre as proper reading for women.

Founded in 1866 as a partnership between Braddon and Maxwell, Belgravia was aimed at what Alvar Ellegård calls “a genteel, middle-class, lady public, of low to fair educational standard” (32). What Braddon considered a rather snobbish title for her magazine was intended as “bait for the shillings” of upwardly mobile readers, who
hoped to signify their arrival into the cultural elite by purchasing a magazine named for one of the most fashionable areas of London (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 138). While this “bait” was no doubt appealing, Belgravia’s most powerful attraction was its sensation fiction, which presented readers with exciting and intricate plots focusing on supposedly respectable, middle-class citizens, sometimes women, who were secretly involved in criminal activities such as bigamy, arson, forgery, and even murder. Belgravia’s readers were presented with an abundance of serialized sensation novels, poems, travel narratives, biographies, and essays on fashion, history, science, and the arts accompanied by lavish illustrations, all for the bargain price of a shilling. The combination of the price, Braddon’s “brand” name, and the exciting sensation fiction allowed the magazine to garner a respectable average circulation of 15,000 in an increasingly crowded field of family literary magazines (Scheuerle 31–32).

However, these were not the only elements of Braddon’s magazine that made it attractive to readers. Indeed, in this chapter I show how Braddon’s agenda to defend both women readers and the genre of sensation fiction from the attacks of literary critics made Belgravia particularly appealing to readers who aspired to be intellectually independent. Like Harper’s and the Cornhill, Belgravia was optimistic about the educability of middle-class women readers and argued that women could contribute to the maintenance of a healthy national culture. However, Braddon’s magazine went well beyond its contemporaries in its assertion that women not only could but also should function as independent readers who were qualified to choose their own reading materials without the guidance of literary critics or magazine editors and without regard to the standard conceptions of high and low culture. At a time when journalists and reviewers typically depicted women as dangerous, corruptible readers in need of guidance and regulation, and defined sensation fiction as a genre that violated acceptable boundaries of morality and taste, my examination of this important but infrequently studied periodical record reveals the ways in which Braddon legitimized both her literary production and women’s enjoyment of sensation novels.

An increasing number of critics—including Anne Cvetkovich, Pamela K. Gilbert, Winifred Hughes, and Lyn Pykett—have discussed Braddon’s sensation novels, and a recent volume of essays on Braddon edited by Gilbert, Marlene Tromp, and Aeron Haynie explores various aspects of her fiction and her career. However, these projects have ignored the crucial role Belgravia played in the development of
Braddon’s literary philosophy and reputation. Jennifer Carnell, in her new biography of Braddon, and Solveig C. Robinson, in her article on Belgravia, have begun to look at the relationship between Braddon’s editorship and the critical reception of sensation fiction, while articles by Cynthia L. Bandish and Barbara Onslow explore the roles of Bohemianism and science in the magazine. However, the cultural significance of Braddon’s periodical deserves more attention. Building on these valuable initial studies, I explore how Braddon created a family literary magazine that would attract a broad middle-class audience, advance her career, and keep her at the forefront of the critical controversy surrounding sensation fiction as she sought to redefine the terms of the Victorian debate over the valuation of literature and culture. I argue that as a result of her efforts, Braddon also managed to revise the genre of the family literary magazine in important ways that offered women more freedom and enjoyment in reading than either Harper’s or the Cornhill allowed by rejecting the standards of critics and validating the public’s taste for sensationalism. Both Harper’s and the Cornhill endorsed the binary opposition between high and low culture while either blending the modes in practice (in Harper’s case) or asserting that low culture was acceptable as long as readers consumed it properly (in the Cornhill’s case). Instead, Braddon’s version of the family literary magazine sought to invert the critical standard by putting the high in the position of the low and the low in the position of the high, thereby introducing an alternative system of classification that was more amenable to women readers and writers.2

M. E. Braddon: The “Name Blazoned Anon on Hoardings & Railway Stations”

The sensation novel presented critics with the most contentious literary issue of the 1860s. The controversy over this genre was a subset—albeit a dominant and domineering one—of the broader struggle to draw distinct lines of demarcation between high and low culture. The predominant thrust of the elite critics who wanted to preserve high culture is typified by Matthew Arnold’s now-familiar refrain that the nation as a whole would be strengthened if citizens focused their attention solely on the most glorifying aspects of culture. This culture, as Arnold speculated in his 1864 Cornhill article, might best be preserved if it were controlled by a body of critics akin to the French Literary Academy.
Although no such institution was to be established in England and the Cornhill itself refused to fully endorse Arnold’s cultural judgments, his conception of the disinterested critic whose job it was to recognize and promote “sweetness and light” endowed literary professionals with an unprecedented authority to serve not only as the guardians of culture, but also as moral educators of the public whose duty it was to teach the nation, and particularly women, what and how to read. For many members of the growing class of professional critics, sensation fiction became the defining issue of their careers, a subject on which they could safely take a stand and make their mark as crusaders whose mission it was to save the nation’s culture by separating the good from the bad, the tasteful reflection of a superior civilization from the barbaric trash produced solely for profit. Sensation fiction was an easy target because it was a wildly popular and artistically dubious upstart genre dominated by women writers and supposedly consumed primarily by women readers.

Sensationalism was problematic because it violated the boundaries critics were drawing between high and low culture by combining elements of each. As Winifred Hughes declares:

> The subject matter of the sensationalists is at once outrageous and carefully documented, “wild yet domestic,” extraordinary in intensity and yet confined to the experience of ordinary people operating in familiar settings. The narrative technique combines a melodramatic tendency to abstraction with the precise detail of detective fiction, an unlimited use of suspense and coincidence with an almost scientific concern for accuracy and authenticity. (16)

In its obsessive concern with “journalistic” or “photographic” details that meticulously represented scenery and physical characteristics of people and objects, the genre relied on a conception of the real that served as an implicit challenge to the core values of realism. The attempts of sensation writers to present scenes that were technically “realistic” in their presentation of an abundance of descriptive details were sneeringly labeled unrealistic or hyperreal because of their lavish excesses and their failure to combine details with characters who were role models and with story lines that taught clear moral lessons. Because the qualities of the new genre brought the conventions of realism into question, Patrick Brantlinger argues that the sensation novel initiated “a crisis in the history of literary realism” (“What Is ‘Sensational’?” 27). Braddon perpetuated this crisis in Belgravia by sensation
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(Im)proper Reading for Women

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world in which low culture was transformed into high culture and the woman reader was constructed as more critically perceptive than the professional critic. Before examining how Braddon challenged the tenets of realism and the cultural authority of critics while peddling her wares, I would like to consider what led up to the critical power struggle that was played out in the pages of Belgravia.

While the three best-selling novels of the decade (and of the century) were sensational—Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White (1860), Ellen Price Wood’s East Lynne (1861), and Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret (1862)—Braddon received the brunt of the critical uproar over the genre. Henry James was one of the first critics to crown Braddon “the founder of the sensation novel,” a title that brought with it more ridicule than accolades.3 The critical focus on Braddon was partly due to her precarious personal life, which alienated her from “polite” society. As a result of her father’s adultery, financial failure, and subsequent separation from the family, Braddon embarked on an eight-year career as an actress to earn money in 1852. This was not a career choice likely to bring respect to a seventeen-year-old girl and her middle-class family. To protect her family name, she adopted the stage name Mary Seton. To further mitigate any damage to her reputation, she was diligently chaperoned by her mother. After shifting her attention to the profession of authorship in 1860 at the age of twenty-four, Braddon developed a scandalous relationship with her publisher, John Maxwell. Braddon moved in with Maxwell and his five children despite the fact that he was legally married to another woman. Maxwell was estranged from his wife, who was apparently insane and living either in an asylum or in Ireland with family members. Maxwell and Braddon proceeded to produce six children of their own, one of whom did not survive. Their socially unacceptable relationship became even more scandalous in 1864, when Maxwell leaked false news of their marriage to the press, hoping to put an end to the gossip they had aroused. However, this news only stoked the fire as counterreports issued by Maxwell’s brother-in-law revealed that his first wife was indeed still living. Not until 1874 were they finally able to marry as a result of the death of Maxwell’s wife. Braddon’s sensational life and her sensational story lines were inextricably linked in the minds of her critics. Her violation of Victorian codes of proper femininity as an actress, writer, and mistress who was thrust into the spotlight when thousands of copies of her books began to sell was compounded when she took on the powerful public position as editor of a literary magazine. While this position gave her the
possibility of reshaping her literary reputation, it also made her an even more visible target for critics.

To illustrate why Braddon’s fiction was targeted, and how her early reputation was established, I briefly examine one of the first and most devastating reviews of her body of work. W. Fraser Rae’s “Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon” (September 1865), published anonymously in the *North British Review*, reveals typical attitudes toward Braddon and exposes the roots of the critical fear of sensationalism. It also illustrates Rae’s desperate attempt to establish himself as precisely the kind of critic Braddon would later oppose so vigorously in *Belgravia*. Even though Rae has frequently been quoted, his response to Braddon has not been viewed in the context of her emergence as a powerful magazine editor. I want to place his comments within this context in order to lay the foundation for the highly charged series of exchanges between Braddon and her critics that played out in *Belgravia*.

Writing a year before Braddon launched her magazine, Rae set out to assess the seven novels Braddon published between 1862 and 1865 according to what he calls a “purely literary standard.” However, he proceeded to carry out a moralistic attack based on his contention that “That which is in bad taste is usually bad in morals” (181). Thus, Rae contends that “the impartial critic is compelled . . . to unite with the moralist in regarding [Braddon’s novels] as mischievous in their tendency and as one of the abominations of the age. Into uncontaminated minds they will instil [sic] false views of human conduct” by leading readers “to conclude that the chief end of man is to commit murder, and his highest merit to escape punishment; that women are born to attempt to commit murders, and to succeed in committing bigamy” (203, 202). Rae’s conclusion that morality and taste were inseparable provides another reason why Braddon became the primary target of critics: As a controversial woman writer who created unsavory women characters, she was believed to lack both qualities.

Lyn Pykett argues that Braddon attracted criticism for participating in what she calls sensation’s tendency to rewrite the “script of the feminine” by exploring the contradictions inherent in Victorian ideals of femininity and articulating alternatives to these restrictive ideals (“Improper” Feminine 5). Faced with an unstable and shifting definition of middle-class femininity, Rae—along with the majority of elite critics—focused on Braddon’s sex and on her creation of women characters who transgressed gender and class boundaries. When it came to her female characters, Braddon’s personal life often became a subtext that interfered with assessments of her professional work. Rae implied that
a proper, middle-class woman would not create such characters: “An authoress who could make one of her sex play [such a role], is evidently acquainted with a very low type of female character, or else incapable of depicting what she knows to be true” (190). Moreover, it was not only Braddon who was linked to her immoral characters. Her readers, too, were implicitly identified with sensational heroines. As Bernstein contends, the female reader of the genre was not seen as the “thrifty housewife of domestic ideology” but as “the madame monster of the marketplace, the woman dazzled by her desires for material acquisitions and sensual pleasures” (“Dirty Reading” 217). Braddon’s financial success as a novelist and her privileged but scandalous position as the mistress of a powerful publisher of popular literature fueled her image as a “monster of the marketplace” which was transferred to her readers. Thus, Braddon’s fiction represented transgressive femininity, immorality, and profitability wrapped into one dangerously enticing package that was believed to pose a danger to its audience.

It is probable that critics attacked Braddon as a symbol of her genre for other reasons as well. As Andrea Broomfield argues, Victorian editors, journalists, and critics often fomented controversy in order to attract readers. Broomfield claims that critics’ “antagonism was partly staged and their rhetoric exaggerated to promote themselves and to bolster certain periodicals’ reputations and sales. . . . Marketing controversy for profit—a staple modern media practice—was apparently thriving in the 1860s” (“Catch Phrases”). Following Broomfield’s logic, Rae and many other critics depended upon their salacious critiques of Braddon—and the genre of sensation fiction—to attract the public’s interest and establish their own reputations. Attacking Braddon allowed Rae to accomplish both goals while also perpetuating an ideology of literary criticism that would increase the power of critics over popular literature as well as over women readers and writers. But, as I show in my discussion of Belgravia’s tactics, Braddon also relied on attacking the critics to define herself and formulate an agenda for her magazine that would sustain her own readership.

While Rae wanted to attract a wide range of readers for himself, he was apparently appalled that “the unthinking crowd . . . regarded [Braddon] as a woman of genius” (180). This “false” conception, along with Braddon’s “bewitching” popularity, led Rae to make his famous statement that Braddon had “succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room” (204). During the 1860s a number of Punch cartoons humorously illustrated critics’ anxi-
eties about the power of fiction to dissolve class and gender boundaries by, for example, depicting female servants discussing sensation novels with their male employers or expressing concern that their beaus would run off with their female employers. The possibility of such transgressive cross-class and cross-gender behaviors was presumably the result of sensational fiction. To combat an unprecedented phenomenon in which the largest reading public ever known seemed to be gaining control over the nation’s culture and acquiring common ground with members of the middle classes, Rae entreated middle-class readers to exercise the taste appropriate to their class by rejecting the dangerous genre: “It is not enough that a work should interest, it must be capable of being perused without the reflecting reader being induced to lament the time he has lost over its pages. No discriminating reader ever laid down these volumes without regretting that he had taken them up, and that their authoress should have so misemployed her undoubted talents as to produce them” (187). Appealing to a middle-class sense of duty, Rae insists that if readers belonged to respectable society they would reject the genre that threatened the sanctity of the nation’s culture.

However, the idea of preserving an elitist conception of middle-class values did not appeal to the upwardly mobile audience who flocked to Braddon’s *Belgravia Magazine* as a way of signaling their recent movement into the middle classes. Rae was all too aware of the fact that Braddon’s fiction would bring to any “magazine to which she contributes . . . a large circulation” that would “enrich its fortunate proprietors” (180). Braddon almost seems to have taken the idea to launch *Belgravia* from Rae since she used it to contradict critics like him. Considering Braddon’s hold on the public and the general resistance to female power in the public sphere, the establishment of her very own literary magazine was sure to bring with it a heightened sense of anxiety among reviewers like Rae, who would begin to use increasingly hyperbolic language to condemn her work and her readers. Indeed, both sensation novels and *Belgravia* were boundary-breaking texts that revealed the difficulty of making clear distinctions—regardless of whether they were between classes, genders, or cultural modes—within a culture in which the increasing fluidity of boundaries made their strict containment even more crucial to the (ruling class) public’s sense of stability.

Despite the financial and professional advantages of conducting her own magazine, Braddon was aware of the risks. She was (at least outwardly) apprehensive about taking on a public role as defender of
women and sensationalism because she understood that this position would make her an even more obvious target for critics. Consequently, she apologetically announced her bold new literary position as a magazine editor to Bulwer-Lytton: “You will wonder after this—if indeed you honour so insignificant a person with yr wonder—to see my name blazoned anon on hoardings & railway stations in connection with a new Magazine—but I think that it is not me—but some bolder & busier spirit which worketh for me” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 136). Indeed, Braddon had cause to distance herself from the endeavor, which was distinctly unfeminine in its prominent display of the name of its “conductor” on its cover, with the name of her married lover and publisher in a subordinate position, so that the magazine itself became closely allied to the sensationalism that she symbolized as mistress and novelist. Braddon’s anxiety about her literary status and her overly sensational image prompted her at first to belittle her own agenda for the magazine. She explained to Bulwer-Lytton that she was “going in for a strong sensation story for ‘Belgravia’ not because I particularly believe in ‘sensation,’ but because I think the public shilling can only be extracted by strong measures” (ibid., 138–39). However, I argue that the popularity of *Belgravia* and the culmination of criticism directed at Braddon motivated her to articulate a philosophy of sensationalism that reflected more than a desire to make money. She very quickly began to use this new publication genre to champion herself, her readers, and her genre.

“Miss Braddon in Her Daring Flight”: Beating the Critics at Their Own Game

Braddon paid a high price for her ambitious endeavor to turn her sensationalistic tendencies into a sustained critical philosophy. The kinds of critical assaults exemplified by Rae increased and intensified soon after, and, I maintain, as a result of, the successful founding of *Belgravia*. An *Athenaeum* review of Braddon’s *Belgravia* serial *Birds of Prey* (October 1867) reveals concern for her tendency—encouraged by having her own magazine—to palm “off on society this mass of crude and incomplete penny-a-lining, and [call] it ‘a novel in three volumes’” (461). Likewise, attacks by Margaret Oliphant in *Blackwood’s* (September 1867), by Frederick Greenwood in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (September–October 1867), and by *The Saturday Review* (April 1868)
were particularly concerned with Braddon’s increased power and visibility. Robert Wolff remarks that the critical onslaught against Braddon “reached a climax in 1867,” but he does not connect this increased furore with her editorial position (Sensational Victorian 188). Braddon’s role as editor seems to me to be a crucial and overlooked factor influencing her critical reception.

The most graphic depiction of the power of Braddon’s new literary position can be found in a June 1868 cartoon from The Mask titled “Miss Braddon in Her Daring Flight” (Figure 7). While an accompanying article praises Braddon’s work for its ability to hold the public’s attention without corrupting its morals, the illustration portrays Braddon somewhat ridiculously as a circus performer led by ringmaster.

FIGURE 7. “Miss Braddon in Her Daring Flight.” The Mask (June 1868): 139.
John Maxwell. She simultaneously balances on a Pegasus with “Belgravia” printed on its collar and jumps through hoops labeled with the names of her novels, including her recent Belgravia serials, Dead Sea Fruit, Birds of Prey, and Charlotte’s Inheritance. This cartoon undermines Braddon’s authority by depicting her as a performer (rather than an artist) who will do anything to seize the attention of her audience.

By implying that Braddon’s actions are dependent on Maxwell’s direction, the cartoon also portrays her as a puppet rather than an autonomous individual. As Kate Mattacks argues, Braddon herself becomes a spectacle, a “body on display” (77). This body, packaged as it is in a leotard and tutu, also calls attention to Braddon’s illicit sexual relationship with Maxwell; in fact, her hands seem to reach for him as she precariously balances in midair. Despite the combination of these belittling components of the cartoon, Braddon looms large, her position as editor preventing ridicule from diminishing her presence in the literary world. She wears a dignified expression on her face, and her head (from which her ideas and words presumably flow) dwarfs her tiny body (which makes her the personal subject of scandal). Braddon is supported and carried forward by a Pegasus, the mythological figure of poetic inspiration, bearing her magazine’s name. Thus, the cartoon seems to suggest that Braddon’s magazine might ultimately facilitate her success in spite of the critical circus that surrounded her. Regardless of whether Belgravia allowed Braddon to prove she was an artist instead of a circus performer, it certainly furnished her with a major and visible means of defense that many critics clearly saw as a threat.

Though Braddon told Bulwer-Lytton that she intended to disregard her critics, she devoted many pages to refuting them in Belgravia. Indeed, Belgravia was so caught up in debates with Braddon’s critics that the magazine developed an interdependent relationship with them, premised upon the idea that sensation fiction had been unfairly maligned by biased and anonymous literary critics who were more sensational than the sensationalists. Despite her critique of the outrageous tactics her enemies used, Braddon was not afraid to invite the critics she hired to produce equally sensational criticism on her behalf. In fact, she skillfully followed other journalists of the period who, as Broomfield suggests, cranked up the rhetoric in order to increase circulation figures. However, Belgravia was so filled with sensation and Braddon was so invested in increasing her artistic credibility that it would be difficult to claim the magazine’s agenda was manufactured solely for profit. Braddon of course wanted to sell her novels and sus-
tain a hearty readership, but she seems to have sincerely desired to refute her enemies with the force of her own views as well. She also made an effort to refute some of their critical practices, particularly the use of anonymity. Most of the critics who wrote for *Belgravia* revealed their identities in the magazine, thus creating the appearance of a more honest and open forum for literary opinions that did not emanate solely from Braddon. That Braddon used this new periodical format effectively is, I think, indicated by the rising number of attacks launched immediately after the founding of *Belgravia* in November 1866.

For example, Oliphant’s “Novels” combines anxieties about Braddon’s personal life with anxieties about her public visibility and power over the reading public. Oliphant assails Braddon personally by declaring that she could not know “how young women of good blood and good training feel” (260). She is particularly concerned about what she characterizes as Braddon’s “intense appreciation of flesh and blood,” which is recklessly presented as “the natural sentiment of English girls” (259). Like Rae, Oliphant links Braddon’s unconventional life with her fiction, implying that her inappropriate behavior prevents her from depicting proper women in her novels. Declaring that “It is a shame to women so to write,” Oliphant reprimands Braddon on behalf of womankind (275). In fact, Oliphant suggests that Braddon’s immorality could infect her otherwise presumably innocent readers. According to Oliphant, Braddon’s readers were in danger of turning into Braddon or one of her heroines. Oliphant tries to prevent this by scolding readers with the same tone and language she uses to scold Braddon: “[I]t is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them” (ibid.). Thus Oliphant makes the writers and readers of the genre as sensational as the fiction itself and cites Braddon as the root of the problem.

Oliphant’s “sermon,” as she appropriately calls it, may have characterized Braddon’s personal life as sensational, but it was followed up by a smear campaign in the *Pall Mall Gazette* that effectively made Braddon’s career sensational as well. In a series of articles printed between September 16 and October 9, 1867, Frederick Greenwood, the *Pall Mall* editor, relentlessly attacked Braddon and her magazine by accusing her of plagiarizing *Circe*, a *Belgravia* serial published under the pseudonym of Babington White. Greenwood claims the “right to protect a proceeding so fraudulent” and implicates Braddon, despite her use of a pseudonym, by naming both *Circe* and Braddon’s novel *The Doctor’s Wife* as examples of unethical adaptations that “should be publicly
acknowledged and formally placed upon record” (“‘Dalila’ and ‘Circe’” 9). Greenwood crossed the line of professionalism when he forged a letter from Braddon claiming that the “discovery of the theft” had “fallen like a thunderbolt” on her senses and offering to refund the magazine’s subscription costs to readers for the atrocity (“Mr. Babington White’s New Novel” 3). Though Braddon refuted this statement in her own letter to the editor on September 20, the Pall Mall continued to ridicule her, stating that “most people . . . will very much prefer the [letter] that is said to be forged” as it expressed “a proper sense of mortification and regret at the appearance in her magazine of an imposture” (“Mr. Babington [sic] White’s ‘Circe’” 4). Greenwood’s sensational stunt came to a climax with the publication of evidence that Maxwell had wrongly attributed a quotation used to promote Circe in his advertisements to the prestigious Edinburgh Review rather than the unknown Daily Review, in which it was actually printed. The controversy surrounding these events was quite distressing to Braddon. In a letter to Bulwer-Lytton she confessed that she was “most deeply stung” by the “uncalled for and unjustifiable” charges. She believed she had been selected “as the scape goat for the sins of this generation of second & third rate novelists” by these critics who had “at last stung [her] into a most savage state of mind” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 142–45).

Braddon relieved her “savage state of mind” by responding to these attacks in “A Remonstrance” (November 1867). Here Braddon mocks Greenwood, the Pall Mall Gazette, and the shroud of anonymity that enabled such cutthroat critical practices by taking on the guise of Captain Shandon. Under the gentlemanly persona of Shandon—editor of the fictional Pall Mall in Thackeray’s Pendennis, after which the real periodical had been named—Braddon sought to protect her own credibility while refusing to admit that she was in fact Babington White. In this article Braddon draws a distinction between adaptation and plagiarism, defending both White’s writing practices and “his” anonymity in the face of similarly false and anonymous critics. “Captain” Braddon accuses the Gazette of going beyond the limits of legitimate criticism to “carry on a crusade, not against the writer of the work you dislike, but against the lady who conducts the Magazine in which the work appeared.” Identifying her position as editor as the cause of the attacks, Braddon declares Greenwood “guilty of a paltry and cowardly proceeding, eminently calculated to bring lasting discredit” to his own magazine (81). She offers a reward for the discovery of the person who forged a letter in her name, thereby placing her editorship in peril in a very unchivalrous manner that is “more characteristic of the disap-
pointed author of two or three unappreciated novels than of the gentleman editor who writes for gentleman readers” (86). Braddon suggests that Greenwood, a minor novelist who had failed to achieve the wild success that she had won, was motivated more by professional jealousy than by strict moral and literary standards.

A few years earlier, Braddon had responded in a similar manner to Rae’s attack. In a letter to Charles Kent, who had made himself known to her as a repeat defender of her work in *The Sun*, she attributes Rae’s vehement dismissal of her work to his own failure as a writer:

The Post has this moment brought me *The Sun* for this evening in which I discover your most kind, most disinterested, and able defense of me against the furious onslaught of “The North British Review.” I had heard of the latter, but I have been and indeed am still too busy . . . to send for the Review or to trouble my head with an attack at once so virulent and malignant. I have been informed that the criticism in question is written by a novelist whose failure to excite public attention should at least have made him more charitable to a fellow labourer. (September 12, 1865)

Once she became editor of her own magazine, Braddon was no longer dependant on the chivalry of kind reviewers like Kent. Instead, she was able to use her editorial clout to accuse her attackers of professional jealousy, to defend popular writers as professional craftspeople, and to hire other critics to defend her.

That Braddon grew accustomed to asking for critical support is apparent in a letter to George Sala, who was one of her most frequent and vehement defenders in *Belgravia*:

I am becoming gradually more & more irritated by a stupid little paragraph wh. has gone the rounds of the papers to the effect that Miss Braddon has realised her ambition and made £ 100,000 by her pen . . . now I cannot imagine any statement more calculated to bring contempt & ridicule on a writer than this. . . . I have written for the love of my work quite as much as for money. . . . If you wd say a word to exculpate me . . . I should be greatly obliged. (no date)

Despite her initial statement to Bulwer-Lytton that a major goal of her magazine was to make a profit, she ultimately set forth an agenda intended to transform the critical landscape. Once she had attained popularity, Braddon hoped her magazine would help her achieve
respect. As a result, the magazine’s most forceful salvos were reserved for those who had established critical standards at her expense. She enlisted Sala and others to carry out a full assault on the values and skills of the critical elite, who she believed resented her success and impeded her attainment of respectability.

In “The Cant of Modern Criticism,” Sala did in fact follow Braddon’s directive by blaming the critical assault against sensation’s reigning queen on “Hatred and jealousy and spite towards one of the most successful novelists of the age” (55). He casts aspersion on what he characterizes as the elitist profession of criticism as a whole for providing legitimacy to “dunderheaded libeler[s]” whose own lack of success leads them to attack others (“Cant” 55). J. Campbell Smith’s “Literary Criticism” (April 1867) offers another typically Belgravian characterization of Braddon’s opponents by sensationalizing the antisensationalists: “Critics are self-elected judges—men who consider themselves endowed with greater discernment, a purer taste, and a judgment superior to the rest of mankind. . . . If criticism were always fair and unbiased, it would exercise a genial and purifying influence upon literature; but when dictated by either favouritism or malice, or when the offspring of ignorance or conceit, it is productive only of evil” (226–27). The charge of bias could, of course, be made against Belgravia’s own critics; however, Braddon encouraged them to enter the critical fray armed to win the battle, and the only way to do that was to match the intensity of the charges lodged against her. In “Literary Bagmanship” (February 1871), T. H. S. Escott, a seasoned Belgravia veteran, portrays critics as mere quacks, as traveling salesmen of sorts who have unskillfully imitated “the cant jargon of the craft” of literary criticism and are full of “inflated ignorance and arrogant ability” (508–9). Escott wonders how the untrustworthy, uneducated, and inexperienced “literary bagman of to-day” can so jauntily presume “to pass judgment on men who have devoted their lifetime to authorship” (509). A supreme example of the bitter, vengeful, arrogant, and unskilled criticism described in Belgravia was displayed in the Saturday Review’s scathing analysis of Braddon’s Belgravia serial Charlotte’s Inheritance, which inspired its own counterattack within Braddon’s magazine.

The Saturday reviewers focused on the character of Valentine Hawkehurst, who is cast as Braddon’s literary alter ego in the novel. Though Hawkehurst begins as an associate of a con artist, he reforms himself and becomes one of the novel’s heroes. Braddon characterizes him as a hard-working professional writer whose success has caused
him to be metaphorically pelted with mud by “nameless assailants hidden behind the hedges.” Hawkehurst’s only consolation from his critics is an “indulgent public” that enables him “to accept the mud which bespattered” him “in a very placid spirit, and to make light of all obstacles in the great highway” (January 1869, 442). Braddon describes Hawkehurst’s (and implicitly her own) critics as literary stalkers: “And, O, to be sure the critics lay in wait to catch the young scribbler tripping! An anachronism here, a secondhand idea there, and the West End Wasp shrieked its war-whoop. . . . The critics were not slow to remark that he worked at a white-hot haste, and must needs be a shallow pretender because he was laborious and indefatigable” (September 1868, 475–76). Clearly intended to defend Hawkehurst—and Braddon—as hard workers who had been unfairly accused of literary crimes, this comment was instead used by the Saturday Review as proof of Valentine’s—and by implication Braddon’s own—plagiaristic practices. The Saturday turned Braddon’s commentary on Hawkehurst’s critics against her by claiming that her struggling literary hero was

a professional blackleg, who . . . turns author, and exhibits his predatory propensities by a series of audacious plagiarisms. Miss Braddon shows a wonderful fellow-feeling with this literary freebooter, and is very noisily angry with the imaginary critics who set their faces against him. . . . In an ideal state of society, where ignorance reigned supreme, and sensation novels were the highest development of literature, the energy which he displayed in concocting and giving to the world his little hodge-podge of untrustworthy and slip-shod trash would no doubt have received its due recognition from the critics of the day. (459)

The reviewer ridicules what he sees as Braddon’s effort to use Belgravia to create “an ideal state of society” in which “sensation novels were the highest development of literature.” It seems that the Saturday’s response was inspired not only by Braddon’s latest novel, but also by the power and visibility accorded to it as a result of its place within the writer’s own periodical, a periodical her critics saw as devoted to “educating her admirers, and preparing them by a gradual renunciation of all their critical faculties for the ultimate enthusiastic reception of a thoroughly bad novel” (ibid.).

On Braddon’s behalf, Edward R. Russell dealt the ultimate Belgravian blow to the Saturday reviewers by announcing that they were the founders of a kind of criticism that had become “as sensational in
motive as the most sensational novel” (“‘Thorough’ in Criticism,” November 1868, 39). Russell dubs this a “thorough” criticism that is unsociable and uncritical and intentionally severe: “The thoroughness is thorough recklessness; the sensationalism is at the expense of truth. Whether sensation be a good or a bad element in creative literature, it must be dangerous in criticism” (41). The only positive side effect such criticism can have, he argues, is if it convinces readers to “regard as merely entertaining articles which have hitherto been for a great portion of the middle classes absolute canons of literary judgment” (43). *Belgravia’s* critical arguments urged its readers to disregard the biased proclamations of reviewers and instead trust their own judgments. By emphasizing the wrongs of the critics of sensation, Braddon’s magazine effectively shifted the blame for the corruption of literature from the supposedly scandalous women writers and uncritical women readers to the critics of respected journals. In this way Braddon did exactly what the *Saturday Review* accused her of doing: She encouraged women readers to create alternative literary canons that would include women sensation novelists like herself and magazines like *Belgravia*.

"I Should No More Think of Dictating . . . What Kinds of Books She Should Read": Dispelling the Myth of the Diseased Woman Reader

In addition to defending herself against personal critical attacks, Braddon set out to reshape the critical discourse surrounding sensationalism by creating a positive image of those who were perceived to be sensation’s primary victims: women readers. Indeed, these dual goals were inseparable due to their incessant link in contemporary reviews. Given the audience and subject matter of family literary magazines, one would expect a defense of women’s reading skills in *Belgravia*. However, Braddon’s defense of women readers was a necessary component of her defense of the sensation novel. *Belgravia*’s discourse was therefore more spirited than *Harper’s* or the *Cornhill’s* and more focused on establishing women’s independence from critics. Braddon’s agenda to promote the acceptance of independent women readers while continuing to debunk the critics of sensationalism was explicitly set forth in T. H. S. Escott’s article “Vagueness” in the May 1868 issue of *Belgravia*.

Escott spoke out against the charge that women were uncritical—
and therefore corruptible—consumers of print by claiming that those who were most in danger of “a habit of slovenliness . . . which is absolutely destructive of all mental improvement or discipline” were not women but critics “who believe they see everything at once and feel they can grasp complexity and think that nothing can be hidden from their view” (412–13). “Vagueness,” a concept equivalent to the “disease of reading,” is defined as an indistinct view of the world caused by an overwhelming abundance of literature, which turns readers into “skimmers” and “skippers” who lack a full comprehension of what they read. Escott laments that dizzying proliferation of print since “every morrow brings with it . . . fresh newspapers to be read, fresh magazines to be skimmed, new works of fiction or science or politics through which [readers] must gallop at express rate, without cessation or pause” (410). In mentioning newspapers and scientific and political treatises, Escott implicates a male, rather than a female, audience, particularly one that quickly consumes texts for professional purposes. He makes it clear that professional men are the most likely victims of “vagueness” because they read under harried circumstances for money. The inherent arrogance of professionals—especially critics—and the intense pressure to make a reputation for themselves and their magazines put them in a more vulnerable position than amateur (women) readers who could take a more leisurely approach to the consumption of print. According to Escott, leisure allows thorough digestion of information and results in the formation of more thoughtful opinions. With this argument Escott acquits women of the slanderous charges frequently lodged against them and legitimates them as more skilled consumers of print (and implicitly of sensation) than critics themselves.

Belgravia not only elevated the reading practices of women above those of critics, but also argued that women readers could independently make good reading choices. Unlike Harper’s and the Cornhill, Belgravia insisted that women’s reading should be conducted apart from and without the guidance of men. Affirming this idea, George Augustus Sala maintained the right of women to choose their own books without the masculine regulation of critics, fathers, or husbands. He claims that “Novels are written for grown people and not for babes and sucklings”; therefore, “grown women should be free to choose whatever reading material they desire.” He speculates that if he had a daughter, “When she came to be one and twenty, or got married, I should no more think of dictating to her as to what kinds of books she should read, than as to what kinds of stays she should wear—if she wore any at all” (“The Cant of Modern Criticism” 54). Referring to women’s
undergarments as equivalent to her reading material is a very clever strategy because it excludes men from having any say in the matter at all. Furthermore, it maintains that what women read is their own business and even that a man’s intervention is somewhat unseemly. Under Braddon’s leadership, the magazine legitimized women as autonomous readers who could read what they wanted, by themselves, in any way they chose. Unlike Harper’s, which insisted its readers accept its definition of proper reading material, or the Cornhill, which endorsed a certain amount of Arnoldian regulation to ensure that women could distinguish between high and low cultural texts that they chose for themselves, Belgravia maintained that the opinions of the critics about cultural divisions were inherently flawed and should in fact be disregarded.

Belgravia’s support for the independence of women readers is most striking in its illustrations. Just as Sala argues that what women read is their own business, Belgravia’s illustrations consistently depict women who read alone or with other women. Not only are these women reading independently, they are doing it for their own personal benefit rather than for the good of others. Braddon’s magazine provides images of women who experience self-gratification and the development of intense female bonds as a result of reading. In each case, the magazine’s depiction of what critics would consider dangerous reading practices leads to an outcome that remains compatible with the behavior expected from a proper, middle-class woman. The magazine thus enhanced its textual arguments in support of women readers with the positive visual images it displayed, emphasizing that reading was not so threatening after all.

The ability to read independently allows the woman reader in “In the Firelight” to explore her fantasies in a healthy manner through reading as she falls asleep with a book on her lap, the visions of her imagination swirling around her head (Figure 8). This woman reader lounges in a chair, one arm dangling at her side, one arm still clutching the oversized book. Her dream visions of dramatically costumed figures, just barely visible in the background, hover around her as she rests. As Sally Mitchell notes, women’s daydreams are often pleasurable mental stories that “provide expression, release, or simply indulgence for emotions or needs which are not otherwise satisfied either because of psychological inhibition or because of the social context” (“Sentiment and Suffering” 32). “In the Firelight” presents reading as just such an emotional outlet that is satisfying but also safe because the final result of this self-indulgence, as we are told in the accompanying
(Im)proper Reading for Women

poem, is a socially acceptable dream about marriage. In the poem the woman imagines two lovers being torn apart against the background of the French Huguenot War. After witnessing the bloody turmoil of war, the scene brightens, and the separated couple happily emerge at the wedding altar. The vision ends when the woman unexpectedly awakens to recognize herself and Frank, presumably her real-life beau, as the main characters of her fantasy.

Surprisingly, the poem itself does not mention reading as the impetus for the dream. Instead of reading, the woman sits alone at night gazing into the fire. However, the fireplace is only a bit player in this illustration—we can just see the edge of the mantle at the left-hand margin of the picture. The fire is replaced by what many nineteenth-century critics saw as an equally dangerous element: a book. While Charles Dickens's Louisa Gradgrind notoriously gets into trouble by gazing into the fire and “wondering,” Belgravia’s independent woman reader shows that such fancy can be healthy and normal, even when the flames are replaced with printed words. Whether the book in the woman’s lap is a gothic romance (a forerunner of the sensation novel) or a historical account of seventeenth-century France, she is able to read it on her own without dangerous results. In fact, her imagination transforms a chaotic scene of death and destruction into a conventional courtship narrative that reinforces society’s expectations for her as a woman. This image suggests that even if women allow their minds to

wander into dangerous territory, they are not likely to present a real threat to patriarchal society.

Another potentially scandalous reading experience occurs in “The Elopement-Door,” an illustration and poem in which the main character reads her beau’s letter at the bottom of the same staircase that another legendary woman walked down to elope with her lover (Figure 9).11 The reader’s downcast eyes, her hair (which appears red as it is “dyed” in the “sunset glow”), and her position at the foot of the stairs suggest that she too might be “fallen.” However, the narrator—who is the woman’s male admirer—maintains that while she is caught up in the “glamour” of the “ghostly” locale “In a languorous dream of loving bliss,” a “Less fortunate omen might well befall / Than that love’s letter
should thus be read" (115). It soon becomes apparent that the woman
is engaged in a harmless reading activity that does not imply that she
will follow through with an elopement herself. This picture and the
accompanying poem attest to women’s abilities to read thoughtfully
and to make moral judgments about what they’ve read without being
guided by critics or other male overseers. The main point here is that
women can learn from the scandalous situations of others without
being compelled to copy them. In fact, “The Elopement-Door” implies
that the woman is better off reading alone; if her lover were present
she, too, might be more likely to be led astray. The real threat is not the
words on the page or the memory of a legendary fallen woman, but
rather the threat of male interference at the woman’s scene of reading.
Though the poem is narrated by the letter writer himself as he imag-
ines the scene that Blanche has described to him by return post, his
vision of the scene is based on what she chooses to tell him. He remains
secondary, outside of the boundaries of the illustration, and, most like-
ly, out of the consciousness of the Belgravia reader, whose focus is
directed toward the image of an independent reader able to enjoy male
admiration while still resisting male temptation.
CHAPTER 3

“In the Firelight” and “The Elopement-Door” both illustrate women’s self-control in the face of potentially corrupting influences. However, along with “One Summer Month” (Figure 10), they also represent the ways in which reading can figure as a satisfying but safe, imaginative rebellion against repressive social structures (as the first woman envisions death and destruction before converting to marriage and the second imagines the possibility of elopement without acting on it). In “One Summer Month,” a story accompanied by an illustration of the same name, Miss Royes, a self-denying governess, dreams of the satisfaction of reading a book for her own pleasure but never actually does so. Instead, she remains devoted to her ungrateful pupil and her aloof employer. Even after falling in love with a man who proposes to her, she sacrifices the opportunity to escape her drudgery by refusing the proposal. Instead, Miss Royes selflessly reunites her potential fiancé with his first love, from whom he has been estranged. In the story Miss Royes’s sole pleasure stems from the fantasy of acting on her own will instead of someone else’s by escaping from her oppressive duties to read something other than a textbook as she relaxes on the beach. It is as if merely imagining the fulfillment of independent reading is enough to prevent her from shirking her duties. Even though she does not take the opportunity to escape her servitude in the story, this pleasurable reading scene at the beach becomes the only visual representation of Miss Royes included in the magazine. Thus, Belgravia figures the enjoyment of reading—even if it is only imaginary—as productive rather than destructive, permitting the possibility of the healthy self-indulgence that Miss Royes otherwise goes out of her way to avoid.

While Miss Royes fantasizes about solitary reading pleasures, “Summer Reminiscences” (Figure 11) accompanies a poem in which two women form a communal reading relationship. The women’s friendship is solidified when they read and ridicule a letter written by a male suitor, a “rival” whom they will not allow to “intrude” on their “single-hearted” souls (258). The illustration depicts two young women intimately huddled together over a letter, one woman’s hands lingering on the other woman’s lap as they read. However, the poem—subtitled “From Dora’s Letter to Blanche”—signals a betrayal of confidence, a sensational event that is counteracted by the wholly positive image of intense female friendship—or even lesbian love—provided by the picture. The poem and the picture actually represent a period in these women’s lives that has ended. The first verse reads like a love poem: “O Darling, What is there between us? / What shadow has fall’n on our loves?” (ibid.). The use of the plural form for love diverts attention away
from the fact that the poem seems to be a love letter from one woman to another and is not really about their separate “loves.” After reminiscing about the previous summer, when they “deserted each he-side / And wandr’d with interlocked hands,” vowing not to entertain male rivals who might separate them, Dora speculates that Blanche has not contacted her because she has broken their vow and “taken a lover” (ibid.).

Despite the potential subversiveness of a relationship that involves both a communal resistance to women’s traditional roles through reading and a love vow between women, any danger is subsumed by the fact that one of the women has been conquered by a male lover or, even worse (from Dora’s perspective), has become engaged to be
married: “For ’tis certain mere distance could never / Have parted us, darling, like this” (ibid.). It is clear that the intense and youthful connection between the women has been broken by a more appropriate romantic relationship. While the women bonded by reading in opposition to a man, the man triumphs in the end. Once again Braddon’s magazine highlights the positive aspects of women’s reading while also acknowledging and assuaging public fears about its dangers. Braddon hoped that those who feared the boldness of women’s independent reading would be appeased by the pictures they saw, for it would seem that women, given a bit of room to make their own decisions, would willingly use them to improve, rather than overturn, their traditional roles.

Unlike the *Cornhill*’s repeated use of images of women who read within a family setting, *Belgravia*’s illustrations depict middle-class women whose reading occurs apart from the family as it displays either an individual or communal feminine identity that empowers them both to think independently and to enjoy themselves while reading. In the pages of *Belgravia*, women saw illustrations that showed them how pleasurable and empowering reading could be if they could make their own choices and develop their own active reading skills that were not reliant on the interpretations of the men around them. Kate Flint argues that in nineteenth-century paintings “Reading . . . provided the means not only, on occasion, for the Victorian woman to abnegate the self, to withdraw into the passivity induced by the opiate of fiction. Far more excitingly, it allowed her to assert her sense of selfhood, and to know that she was not alone in doing so” (330). This claim applies equally well to *Belgravia*’s illustrations. However, *Belgravia*’s message is that while the reading material offered in its pages may have an element of escapism and fantasy that absorbs women as well as an element of self-assertion that empowers them, reading is a harmless and necessary way for women to maintain their proper selves.

While Braddon more boldly overturns acceptable cultural norms and with them popular notions about the dangers of women’s reading, the magazine’s images of women are more benign than those presented in the *Cornhill*. Even though *Belgravia*’s women are alone and able to experience personal satisfaction through reading, they are less threatening than the intellectual women with whom the *Cornhill* concerns itself. But Braddon’s defense of her novels relied on proving that reading would not result in making women more dangerous. In fact, it was crucial for her to show that her novels—and her magazine—could actually produce better (and therefore safer) readers.

CHAPTER 3
Demonstrating that women readers were capable of reading potentially corrupting material in ways that were socially acceptable allowed Braddon to argue that sensation fiction was suitable for women. She went beyond claiming that sensation was harmless to argue that by studying sensational plots and characters women could become more, rather than less, skilled at reading critically. Braddon most likely would have agreed with Flint’s claim about the function of sensation in nineteenth-century culture. Flint argues that authors of sensation fiction goaded critics by mocking “the belief that women read uncritically” and refuting “the idea that a woman reader is mentally passive and accepting of what she consumes.” Instead, Flint notes that the general emphasis of sensation novels is on women’s “capacity for self-awareness and social analysis and judgment” (15). Braddon attempted to both goad critics and highlight women’s capacity for critical thinking in the most prominent serials the magazine featured: Birds of Prey and its sequel, Charlotte’s Inheritance. In these two novels, which dominated Belgravia’s first five years with an almost continuous run from November 1866 to February 1869, Braddon forcefully argued that sensation fiction taught women readers to be active and therefore productive and healthy readers. Nevertheless, before examining how she did this, it is important to understand the context in which this strategy for her Belgravia serials emerged.

Detecting the Birds of Prey and Protecting Charlotte’s Inheritance: Sensationalism and the Production of Independent Women Readers

Before taking her post at Belgravia and establishing herself as the primary defender of sensation, Braddon attempted to navigate an alternative route to critical success with her 1864 novel, The Doctor’s Wife. She said of The Doctor’s Wife that it was a “turning point” that would determine whether she would “sink or swim” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 25). She told Bulwer-Lytton that she had done her best to create a work of art that would appease “that set of critics” who “pelted” her “with the word ‘sensational’” (ibid., 22–25). In her effort to change critics’ assessments of her, Braddon wrote what she hoped would be seen as a realistic novel. However, she may have distracted critics from her purpose by also using the novel to poke fun at the dangerous reading practices of the heroine, Isabel Gilbert, and the outrageous writing
practices of Isabel’s friend and sensation novelist, Sigismund Smith. In contrast to the savvy women readers later depicted in Belgravia, Isabel’s uncritical reading habits and her preoccupation with leading the life of a novel heroine fulfill the worst nightmares of the high cultural critics as they nearly result in adultery and suicide. Though The Doctor’s Wife was Braddon’s rewrite of Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Braddon’s desire to pen a novel that would be acceptable to English critics led her to alter the tragic ending of her French model. Upon the deaths of both Isabel’s mundane husband (George Gilbert) and her Byronic suitor (Roland Lansdell), she becomes a benevolent widow who devotes her life—and the inheritance she receives from the wealthy Lansdell—to helping others. Isabel begins as an ominously bad reader but turns out to be a respectable and charitable member of society. Though two men must die first, she is transformed into a sophisticated and mature reader whose life is far from sensational. In the end, then, Braddon tones down the rhetoric of anxiety about women readers at the same time she increases the sensational elements of the story that relate to the male characters.

Despite her contention that The Doctor’s Wife was to be a “turning point” in her career, Braddon admitted to Bulwer-Lytton that she could not avoid inserting the element of coincidence in the novel that leads to a sensational turn of events in which Isabel’s father kills Lansdell, who turns out to be an old enemy. Apparently prompted by criticism from her mentor, Braddon tentatively defends her decision to turn to this sensational secondary storyline near the end of the novel by stating that the “question about the inadmissibility of accident in art is always perplexing to me... I know of so many tragedies that seem to have arisen out of accident, and yet I feel that you are right, & that art must be something above the experience of life” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 26). Bulwer-Lytton’s response to the conclusion of the story probably prompted Braddon to realize that the “turning point” she had hoped for was more likely to cause her to “sink” than to “swim.”

Though The Doctor’s Wife may have resulted in what Tabitha Sparks calls “an ultimately confused compendium” of sensationalism, sentimentalism, and realism that make it “an extraordinary document of competing epistemologies at work in Victorian fiction” (198), I contend that Braddon hoped to show that she could write realistically even while playfully engaging with elements of sensation. However, Braddon’s critics did not agree, and her plan to recast herself as a realist novelist ultimately failed. In his assessment of The Doctor’s Wife, Rae
claims that while there are “fewer artistic faults in it” than in any of her other novels, it proves “how very nearly Miss Braddon has missed being a novelist whom we might respect and praise without reserve. But it also proves how she is a slave, as it were, to the style she created. ‘Sensation’ is her Frankenstein” (197). It may in fact have been more truthful to say that the critics were enslaved by their conception of Braddon as the embodiment of sensationalism. Nonetheless, Braddon was disappointed to find that the stigma against her was not lifted as a result of her efforts and that her work was still characterized as a monstrosity. Furthermore, she was displeased with the sales of The Doctor’s Wife compared to her more sensational works (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 28). For her next novel Braddon insisted that she would “make the story one of character—& incident also—but I must write for my own public which demands strong meat” (ibid.). Braddon here articulates a new goal: to combine character and accident, realism and sensationalism in her own way to please her public and herself. It seems that the unfulfilling outcome of The Doctor’s Wife precipitated a shift in the maturing writer’s thinking that led directly to her Belgravian strategy to redefine the relationship between women readers and sensationalism rather than try to live up to the standards of realism.

With the serialization of Birds of Prey and Charlotte’s Inheritance, Braddon abandoned Isabel Gilbert to create an independent woman who could read more skillfully and critically than anyone around her. This time, instead of attempting to please her critics, Braddon pulled out all the stops, writing a story that relied on the typical sensational themes of deception, theft, hidden identity, poisoning, and murder to prove that a woman could read the most outrageous situations critically and realistically. Braddon cast sensationalism as both pedagogical and realistic because it revealed the potentially disastrous consequences of middle-class respectability and female passivity through a detailed description of events that were intensely real, if rare, occurrences. Braddon used sensationalism to alert readers, women in particular, to the restrictive nature and devious possibilities that underwrote accepted class behavior and gender roles. Thus, her strategy was to subtly teach critical-thinking skills to women and to deflate the notion that readers of sensation would be easily corrupted.

With Birds of Prey (November 1866–October 1867) and Charlotte’s Inheritance (April 1868–February 1869), the serial anchors of Belgravia, Braddon also—apparently accidentally—ventured on a new experiment in form. These two connected works were conceived as a solution to a problem. When the original novel began to overrun its allotted
space, Braddon halted its serialization and announced that it would be continued in an upcoming sequel to be commenced after the completion of *Dead-Sea Fruit* (August 1867–September 1868), which had overlapped with *Birds of Prey* for two months and was intended to be the next major serial featured in the magazine. However, Braddon’s editorial note to her readers indicates that the conclusion to the series was in such high demand that she was obliged to apologize for a six-month delay between the conclusion of *Birds of Prey* and the beginning of its eagerly awaited sequel. To appease impatient readers who wanted to know how the series would end, the magazine was increased by thirty-two pages per issue to accommodate *Charlotte’s Inheritance* even while Braddon was still completing *Dead-Sea Fruit* and beginning another new serial, *Bound to John Company* (July 1868–October 1869). Braddon characteristically seized the opportunity to turn a problem into a boon by assuring the public that despite the alteration of the magazine’s familiar format, “all the characteristics which have won for *Belgravia* its recognition as ‘the best shilling magazine that England possesses’ are preserved in their fullest integrity.” She skillfully promoted the fact that the alteration allowed the magazine to include “the greatest quantity of printed matter ever offered in any monthly magazine, however high its price; and it is hoped that the quality of its literature will sustain the critical opinion—‘Briskest of all the magazines is *Belgravia*’” (“Editorial Note to *Charlotte’s Inheritance*,” April 1868, 244). Since these novels are out of print and rarely—if ever—read today, I provide a brief plot summary before explaining how the novels worked to achieve *Belgravia’s* goal of defending sensation as appropriate reading for women.

In *Birds of Prey*, Braddon contrasts the appearance with the reality of accepted class and gender roles when she tells the story of the “eminently respectable” Mr. Philip Sheldon, who murders Tom Halliday, the husband of his former girlfriend Georgina, so that he can marry her and gain control of her dead husband’s money. After Sheldon slowly poisons his rival, he quickly marries the ultrapassive widow and receives guardianship of her equally submissive daughter, Charlotte. The other “birds of prey” of the novel’s title, Captain Horatio Paget and George Sheldon, are only mildly corrupt compared to the murderous Philip Sheldon. “Captain” Paget is a swindler who gains access to the rich through lies and deceit, using his former position, from which he has fallen, to gain access to free dinners and lodging as well as a line of credit large enough to support his lifestyle. George Sheldon conceals his brother’s criminality and occupies his time searching for the heir to an unclaimed fortune, hoping to strike it rich by either
fraudulently collecting the money or profiting from his services to the unknown inheritor. George’s race to discover the missing heir entices both his brother and Paget to begin their own investigations into the matter. When all clues lead to Charlotte as the lucky heiress, it quickly becomes apparent that she will be the next target of her stepfather’s murderous greed.

In *Charlotte’s Inheritance*, Philip Sheldon begins to slowly poison his stepdaughter after he has duped her into taking out a life insurance policy that names him as the beneficiary. Meanwhile, Horatio Paget discovers that the real heir to the mysterious fortune is actually Charlotte’s secret French cousin, Gustave Lenoble. Paget introduces Lenoble to his daughter Diana with the hope that the Frenchman will be overwhelmed by her beauty (which he is) and will propose to her (which he does) so that Paget can live out the rest of his life in comfort on Lenoble’s inheritance (he dies before he is able to capitalize on his daughter’s advantageous marriage). Valentine Hawkehurst, who is engaged to Charlotte, eventually discovers Sheldon’s murder plot, and, with the help of Diana and those who suspected Sheldon of the earlier murder, he rescues Charlotte from imminent death by eloping with her, thus eliminating her stepfather’s control over her finances. Paget belatedly discloses his knowledge of the true heir, and Philip Sheldon escapes to America but later returns to die in a snowbank in front of his stepdaughter’s home.

As this brief sketch of the complex plot suggests, one of the major messages of these novels is that extreme respectability and gentlemanliness should not be trusted because they could mask impending danger and deceit. Despite Philip Sheldon’s reprehensible acts, he maintains his public respectability well into the second novel in the series. Based solely on his appearance, his home, and his position, everyone in the community assumes that he must be irreproachable: “Of course he was eminently respectable. On that question no [one] had ever hazarded a doubt. A householder with such a doorstep and such muslin curtains could not be other than the most correct of mankind” (November 1866, 6). As we see in this example, the omniscient narrator, who sometimes takes on the voice of the public, maintains a running commentary full of misjudgments that must be recognized as ironic to be understood. Thus, readers would have to read critically in order to learn the true lesson of the tale. The fact that the comprehension of Braddon’s moral messages required careful reading made even critics like Henry James, who admired her style, doubt the moral effectiveness of her claim that sensation was in fact a subtle form of didacticism.
The murder Sheldon commits goes unnoticed primarily because those who suspect him are afraid to come forward against such a “respectable” man; readers are meant to learn to separate themselves from the passive community through the lessons of the novel, which teach them to speak up for justice regardless of potential social embarrassment. George Sheldon is aware of his brother’s plan to kill Halliday, but, even though the victim is a longtime friend of his, he fails to act, in part because he fears that his word will not prevail over his brother’s reputation. Likewise, the doctor and the maid who attend the ill-fated Halliday are silently forced into compliance with Sheldon’s recommendation that they take no action on the dying man’s behalf due to their comparably low status in the community. Furthermore, the passive acceptance of appearances allows Horatio Paget to swindle wealthy patrons who believe he must be honorable because he is a captain. The narrator conveys a biting criticism of ignorant passivity in the description of Paget as “a gentlemanly vulture, whose suave accents and perfect manners were fatal to the unwary” and as a man involved in “those petty shifts and miserable falsifications whereby the birds of prey thrive upon the flesh and blood of hapless pigeons” (December 1866, 160). Braddon’s motley crew of deceivers and criminals exemplifies the dangers of judging individuals solely on their outward appearances and apparent social positions. Her novels instead encourage the careful discrimination of character based on behavior rather than class status.

Even more importantly, Braddon encourages the development of active and independent women readers by illustrating that feminine passivity keeps women ignorant and unable to combat wrongdoing. She turns the critical assumption that women need to be protected from sensation fiction on its head by urging that her magazine and, in particular, her brand of fiction can cure feminine passivity and its concomitant susceptibility to corruption. Instead of employing an actual woman reader like Isabel Gilbert, Braddon uses metaphorical women readers to implicitly argue that the knowledge women gain from sensational themes will teach them to be more active, critical readers. First, Braddon illustrates the result of coddling women readers through the example of the docile Georgina Halliday. Georgina is so inept at reading events for herself that she unknowingly assists gold-digger Philip Sheldon in the murder of her husband. As if that were not enough, she marries her deceased husband’s murderer and passively sits by as he proceeds to poison her daughter. Once Georgina marries Sheldon, she
allows him to control every aspect of her life: “[S]o completely did Mr. Sheldon rule his wife that when he informed her inferentially that she was a very happy woman, she accepted his view of the subject, and was content to believe herself blessed” (January 1867, 279). The disastrous effects of Georgina’s weakness carry on to the next generation, when Charlotte’s submissiveness predisposes her to accept blindly a life-insurance plan that transforms her into easy prey for her stepfather. Charlotte literally refuses to read what is in front of her and, as a result, becomes the victim of attempted murder. Similarly, Mrs. Paget, described as “one of those meek, loving creatures who are essentially cowardly,” is so passive that she does not even have the will to live under the dominant rule of her swindling husband, Captain Paget. Instead of resisting him by acting on her accurate readings of his duplicitous behavior, she withers away and dies, leaving her daughter Diana to be brought up in “the nest of vultures” that “every day . . . brought its new lesson of trickery and falsehood” (January 1867, 260). Significantly, it is only Diana who is able to break free from the destructive forces of feminine self-effacement and call attention to the criminal activity that she understands is taking place around her. Diana’s scandalous life of deception strips away her passive femininity and enables her to become the strongest, most active woman in the series, reading clues that enable her to save her friend Charlotte from a slow death. By juxtaposing the helpless Charlotte with the independent Diana, Braddon suggests that the “ideal” of the inactive and dependent women is actually a threat to society.

Diana is essentially Braddon’s proper woman reader of sensation: While she has knowledge of undesirable things that erode her innocence, she is better off than the innocent women in the story because she is able to detect the evil around her and is equipped to deal with men such as her father and Philip Sheldon. Diana illustrates Braddon’s contention that women who read sensation novels were made aware of the possible gap between appearance and reality and therefore had a greater chance of detecting and preventing unrespectable behavior. Braddon opposed the assumption that women would be more moral if they maintained their innocence by pointing out that innocence is merely ignorant vulnerability. Braddon in effect argues that the education and simulated worldly experience provided by sensation fiction would allow women to become active readers of life and fiction who could make informed moral choices. By depicting feminine passivity as a naive and destructive ideal, Braddon encouraged women to think for themselves and implied (with the successful marriage of Diana to the
noble French heir) that they would be rewarded for it. By debunking the ideal of innate gentility and reinforcing the concept of earned respectability Braddon allowed women readers to prevail over the eminently respectable critics who disparaged them. She attempted to create the same sense of independence for herself by redefining sensationalism as a respectable literary form despite the contrary proclamations of critics.

“Henceforward I Refuse to Bow the Knee to Their Narrow Rule”: Sensation Fiction as a Bold, New Form of High Art

As Tabitha Sparks argues about The Doctor’s Wife, “Isabel’s claim that she wants to be a heroine corresponds to Braddon’s own claim that she wants to be a realist writer. Both character and author already are what they aspire to be” (208). Braddon set out in Belgravia to prove that she was what she wanted to be: a new kind of realist writer. In Birds of Prey and Charlotte’s Inheritance, Braddon abandoned her attempt to write a novel that suited critics’ typical definitions of realism and instead began to forge what she characterized as a new form of realistic fiction intended to remedy the “deification of the commonplace” exemplified by traditionally realist writers such as Trollope and Thackeray (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 134). Despite her antagonism toward these realist icons, upon reading a negative review of Trollope’s Miss Mackenzie in the Saturday Review, Braddon decided she had had enough of the fickle allegiances of critics who unhesitatingly turned on even the most revered writers. She darted off a curt letter to Bulwer-Lytton in 1866 stating that

The realistic school has been written up so perseveringly of late—always to the disparagement of every thing romantic & imaginative—that I was beginning to lose all courage, & to bow my head to the idea that the subject of a respectable novel is bound to be all that is trite & commonplace. But I find that when these reviewers have made their Gods they turn upon them & rend them—and henceforward I refuse to bow the knee to their narrow rule. (ibid., 132)

In this letter Braddon reiterates her intense distrust of critics and rejects what she sees as their capricious standards. At the same time she
indicates that, as she was undertaking the editorship of a new magazine, she was formulating an alternative definition of realism that incorporated sensational themes and techniques to expose what she thought was a less idealized reality. Her bold presentation of the harsh realities of life was closely allied with the French novelists whose work Braddon admired, translated, and sometimes copied. In the tradition of French realists like Gustave Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac, Braddon hoped to expose society’s evils through what she defined as a new and previously misunderstood form of art.

Braddon drew a natural parallel between her work and French literature—both of which were considered by English critics to be morally suspect. Just as Braddon defended women readers to justify sensation fiction as proper reading material in Belgravia, she also defended French literature to support her redefinition of sensationalism as high art. In French romances like the interpolated tale of Gustave Lenoble (apparently named after Flaubert) in Charlotte's Inheritance and in articles such as “French Novels” (July 1867), “Glimpses at Foreign Literature” (April 1868), and “Baudelaire” (October 1871), Belgravia denies “that the moral condition of the world which French novelists portray is so vastly different from” English society (“French Novels” 78). The magazine refuses the idea that the English have a monopoly on morality and instead insists that there are immoral people in England as well as moral people in France. In case readers persisted in their distaste for all things French, Belgravia returns to the topic of women readers, claiming that the responsible reading practices of French women diminish the dangers of reading their own nation’s novels. Belgravia explains that in France the lack of circulating libraries and the expense of novels ensured that these books were read by educated adult women who could make informed judgments rather than by girls who might be more strongly influenced by what they read. Once again, the magazine acknowledges a difference between child and adult readers in order to defend middle-class women’s rights to read whatever they desire. By expanding the minds of the public beyond the narrow confines of British moralism and its limited definition of realism, Braddon hoped to create an atmosphere more amenable to sensation.

Despite her attempts to change attitudes toward the French, Braddon was somewhat conflicted about the appropriateness of advertising the fact that she used French novels as literary models. In her correspondence with Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon expressed her doubts in discussions of Flaubert and Balzac. Although Braddon is fascinated by the “unvarnished realism” of these writers, she fears that their work is “the
very reverse of poetry” because it dangerously peers “into the most hideous sores in the social body” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 20, 27). Braddon’s desire to please Bulwer-Lytton may have influenced her reluctance to endorse the reviled French novelists in her letters, but she also hesitated to overtly ally herself with them in *Birds of Prey*.

In the novel, the murderer, Philip Sheldon, classifies realist novels as “senseless trash” because “he had found that the heroes of them were impracticable beings, who were always talking of honor and chivalry, and always sacrificing their own interests in an utterly preposterous manner” (January 1867, 277). However, once he reads Balzac he is “riveted by the hideous cynicism, the supreme power of penetration into the vilest of wicked hearts; and he had flung the book from him at last with an expression of unmitigated admiration” (January 1867, 277). Sheldon’s rejection of the extreme idealism and moralism of supposedly realist fiction articulates Braddon’s own conception of it, though it is safely distanced from her by the fact that it is spoken by the villain of her tale. To further complicate matters, Sheldon’s “flinging away” of the novel seems to contradict his feeling of “unmitigated admiration.” Braddon’s cautious handling of this scene indicates the hazards she faced by allying her work with the French realists. She was clearly concerned that this line of reasoning might fail to win the hearts and minds of both the public and the critics.

Braddon’s mixed feelings about an “unvarnished realism” devoid of morality are also evident in the character of Valentine Hawkehurst, who expresses his wariness about French fiction. Despite Hawkehurst’s birdlike name, he is not one of the novel’s “birds of prey.” Like Braddon, his name may insinuate something negative, but he (and she) are shown to be rather heroic within the pages of the magazine. Indeed, Hawkehurst closely echoes Braddon, as he proclaims that “There is an odor of the dissecting-room pervading all my friend Balzac’s novels, and I don’t think he was capable of painting a fresh, healthy nature” (March 1867, 9–10). The image of the dissecting room is reminiscent of the typical critical equation of both French and sensational fiction with the horrifying sights and pungent smells of a place in which living things are reduced to specimens (and monsters like Frankenstein’s are created). However, Braddon’s use of this metaphor is not wholly negative. Dissection rooms do not necessarily produce monsters; they can ultimately lead to scientific discoveries that are useful for humanity. According to Braddon’s fictional philosophy, unpleasant dissections were required to build knowledge, and she was committed to violating the borders of respectability in order to do just that.
So, despite her qualms about embracing French realism, Braddon persisted in redefining her own style upon the French model.

Braddon's endorsement of French fiction was ultimately used to market her novel. In an October 5, 1867 *Athenaeum* advertisement for the three-volume edition of *Birds of Prey*, the *London Leader* is quoted as stating that the novel is written “with the true tact of an artist” in a moral style that is “pure and healthy. . . . Miss Braddon, at her best, unites all that is subltest and most thrilling in the French school with all that is purest in the English” (446). Though the *Athenaeum* ad touted the novel as Braddon’s best work, the *Athenaeum*’s own reviewers remained unconvinced of her “purity” and “tact.” Both *Birds of Prey* and *Charlotte’s Inheritance* elicited fervent responses in the journal. The first novel was characterized as empty and audacious, a work that “contains next to nothing worth the toil of reading.” The reviewer reminds us that “Audacity is [Braddon’s] *forte*” and asks whether “it [is] wise to draw the boundary-line of unscrupulousness nowhere?” (461). As for the sequel, the reviewer admits that the tale “is told with force and reality” but concludes that “the general impression left by the book is painful and repellant” because “the reader feels only disgust, and no interest or sympathy” (418). As these reviews indicate, Braddon’s attempt to ally herself with the French novelists was not well received. However, she had already told Bulwer-Lytton in 1866 that she would no longer be influenced by critical rejection: “I believe that if I listened to the howling of the critics and abandoned what they call sensation I should sink into the dullest namby-pambyism” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple” 130). In her magazine Braddon held fast to her goal of legitimizing sensation as an acceptable form of realism that did not require the slavish adherence to morality and acceptable class and gender roles that she conceived of as dull “namby-pambyism.”

*Belgravia* took multiple approaches to establish respect for the genre of sensation fiction that were tangential to the genre’s own merits: It questioned the validity of critical opinions, argued that women could enjoy sensation fiction without harming the social order, and allied sensation fiction with French realism as a way of broadening the nation’s narrow definition of the real. However, the magazine also attempted to debunk the basic assumptions that relegated sensation fiction to a marginalized position within British culture. George Sala played a major role in the campaign to establish the genre as part of the English literary tradition. In “The Cant of Modern Criticism,” Sala challenges Oliphant’s claim that the English novel since Scott had been characterized by a tradition of “sanity, wholesomeness, and cleanliness”
that was suitable for all members of the family (“Novels” 257). Sala instead connected Scott to a countertradition of English literature that included the wild, ghastly, and immoral elements of writers such as Anne Radcliffe and Monk Lewis. By doing this, he implied that sensationalism was the true heir to the throne of British literature and that the boundaries Oliphant drew between the high and the low were not as stable as she imagined. Indeed, Sala argues that some of the best novels of the day, including Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, and Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*, are superior to Oliphant’s supposedly wholesome canon because they are novels of “life and character and adventure” that are “outspoken, realistic, moving, breathing fiction, which mirrors the passions of the age for which it is written” (52). Thus, for Sala as for Braddon, sensationalism provided a real connection to contemporary life that conventional realist novels ignored.

In “On the Sensational in Literature and Art” (February 1868), Sala goes on to establish a high cultural heritage for sensation novels. He proclaims that the genre has a royal lineage of works by critically accepted writers such as Shakespeare, Ruskin, and especially Dickens, whom he characterizes as “the most persistently ‘sensational’ writer of the age” (454). Braddon herself continued the strategy of establishing the relationship of sensation to its respectable ancestors in “The Mudie Classics” (March and April 1868). This two-part series, published under the pseudonym of Babington White, playfully employs the wholesome reputation of Mudie’s Circulating Library and the reverence for classical literature to defend sensation novels. The series satirically promises to be a mini-Mudie library that will deliver stories modeled on “the highest exemplars of art,” the tales of classical Greece. These works are said to be offered in deference to those “wise” authorities whose “critical contempt for all stories of a sensational character has of late become a fact so notorious that the conductor of this magazine would be wanting in deference to those great Teachers who preside over the Literary Journals of this country, if she failed to recognize the necessity of an immediate reform in the class of fiction provided for the indulgent readers of BELGRAVIA” (March 1868, 41). In a mock attempt to reform the contents of the magazine, the series promises to include classic Greek dramas, which—it is ironically noted—are filled with bribery, adultery, assassination, matricide, bigamy, and murder. By humorously pointing out the predominance of such sensational events in classical literature, Braddon drew attention to inconsistencies of literary valuation and connected her fiction with well-respected lit-
erary traditions. As Robert Wolff notes, Braddon “proved her point: Indeed, she may have overproved it, since” the series “stopped short after two installments” (Sensational Victorian 217).

In addition to asserting sensationalism’s connection to a high cultural tradition, Belgravia set out to prove that the genre outdid the current critical darling, the realist novel, in its honest depiction of reality. To accomplish this task, the magazine had to show that the reliance of realism on idealized morality weakened its social power. In contrast, sensationalism proclaimed that its supreme goal was to copy the details of life without the taint of idealism. Belgravian critics noted that the seemingly outrageous occurrences in sensation novels were based on real events that the newspapers often reported. Indeed, Sala defines sensationalism as a heightened form of realism that is no more harmful to readers than the daily news: “[I]n all these novels the people walk and talk and act . . . like dwellers in the actual, breathing world in which we live. If we read the newspapers, if we read the police reports . . . we shall take no great harm by reading realistic novels of human passion, weakness, and error” (“Cant” 53). He boldly declares that the public deserves such thrilling and real presentations and that adult readers—even women—can handle such fiction: “[W]e want novels about that which Is, and not about that which never Was and never Will be. We don’t want pap, or spoon meat, or milk-and-water, or curds-and-whey, or Robb’s biscuits, or boiled whiting, or cold boiled veal without salt. We want meat; and this is a strong age, and we can digest it” (54). In this passage Sala tacitly declares that realist fiction is no more than a bland and lifeless idealization of human behavior (cold boiled veal without salt). Sensation fiction, on the other hand, is a heartier, stronger version of life that is nevertheless closer to “reality.” For Sala and Braddon, realist novels were not “real” but “ideal” representations of life that did not deserve to be valued over sensation novels. Far from destroying the minds (or the digestive tracts) of readers, sensationalism, Sala argues, provides readers with a better understanding of the world as it is, rather than as it should be.

_Preventing “Universal Darkness”: Sensational Nonfiction and the Progress of Society_

Despite Belgravia’s disdain for idealism in fiction, the magazine argued that sensationalism could ultimately move society toward a more ideal state. Belgravia claimed that sensationalism—whether in fiction or non-
fiction—was a remedy for the entrenchment and stagnation of the cultural values of the past. Sala saw sensation as vital to the modern experience of living in a rapidly changing, industrial nation. Thus, the elimination of sensation would mean the elimination of experience as well as the end of interest in contemporary literature and life: “Don’t let us move, don’t let us travel, don’t let us hear or see anything . . . and then let Dullness reign triumphant, and universal Darkness cover all.” As he sensationally puts it, “In the opinion of dolts and dullards and envious backbiters, everything is ‘sensational’ that is vivid, and nervous, and forcible, and graphic, and true” (“On the Sensational in Literature and Art” 457–58). Understanding the progressive message of nonfiction discourse within the magazine helps to explain how Sala was able to make the proclamation that “Belgravia is a sensational magazine, and Miss Braddon is a dreadfully sensational novelist” ring with victory rather than with defeat (ibid., 457). This victorious tone pervades Belgravia’s sensational nonfiction, which calls attention to positive societal changes facilitated by sensational discourse.

Mortimer Collins strikes a tone of triumph in “Mrs. Harris” (December 1870), an article about an eighteenth-century writer in whose letters Collins locates the origins of sensationalism, which he sees as part of an inevitable evolution of feminine forms of writing. He contends that with the decline of women’s letter writing and the advent of the penny post and the telegraph, “you are supposed to see everything in the paper. But then you don’t see everything in the paper; journalists are not behind the scenes. They tell you, rather tardily, that one man has discarded his wife, and that another has disappointed his creditors; but they fail to furnish the true causes of such occurrences” (159). The woman letter writer, on the other hand, is the only one who can truly describe behind-the-scenes events in detail and offer explanations for the causes of things, but “publishers have found her out,” and she now “devotes herself to three-volume novels” (ibid.). Collins claims that women’s superior skills of observation and analysis that had been displayed for decades in the private and respectable form of the letter have recently been transformed into the public form of the sensation novel.

Even though Collins is nostalgic for the old letter-writing style, he endorses sensation novels as more detailed and comprehensive than the male-dominated news media because they delve beneath the surface to provide an in-depth analysis of contemporary life. Whereas most critics of the day bemoaned the abundance of women writers and
readers of sensation, Collins celebrates the genre’s “feminine” attention to detail and its superior ability over masculine forms to penetrate the truth about human relations. Naomi Schor argues in *Reading in Detail* that, since at least the eighteenth century, the detail has been seen as feminine, while the sublime has been characterized “as a masculinist aesthetic designed to check the rise of detailism which threatens to hasten the slide of art into femininity” (22). However, Collins here uses the detail to empower rather than diminish women’s artistic abilities. Indeed, Collins promotes this “feminine” skill as a sign of progress that is essential to creating believable novels as well as truthful analyses of modern society.

Just as Collins links sensationalism to the intimacy and accuracy of letter writing, the author of “A Day in the Telegraph Office” (September 1869) links it to more modern forms of communication. The author argues that being a telegraph operator made him aware of the sensational elements of real life: “I do not suppose that if I were to chronicle the messages of grief, despair, entreaty, telling of crime, remorse, poverty, and death . . . that passed before me [at the telegraph office], I should be credited. But there it was, attested to by their signatures and in their own handwriting. Believe me, there is no romance like reality” (318). Like the genre of sensation fiction, telegraph messages, which were high-tech versions of the letters written in the previous century, described extreme events that were nonetheless real. More advanced technologies in the printing and publishing industry were at the root of mass culture, symbolized by sensation fiction, and were thus prime targets for the high culture critics, who feared the effects of rapid change on the literary and cultural traditions of the country. Technological progress, then, was equated with the threat of popular culture and with sensation. *Belgravia*’s articles, however, usually characterized such progress as not only inevitable but also as salutary.

Despite the magazine’s generally positive outlook on technological progress, its articles acknowledge that scientific developments could threaten society if not thoroughly understood. Articles such as “Before the Mirror” (July 1867), “Cosmetics” (December 1867), “Beautiful Forever” (April 1868), and “Cosmetics for the Hair” (May 1868) uncover the health hazards that commonly worn fashions and beauty products presented, while “The Pitman’s Perils” (February 1867) publicizes the hidden causes of coal-mining deaths and “The Gorilla as I Found Him” (August 1867) explores potentially false scientific claims about gorillas and the implications of Darwinian theory. Such articles turn a more critical eye on new developments, urging the public—as *Belgravia* urged
women readers—to become actively involved in learning how to avoid potential threats to their health, their lives, and their beliefs. Most notable for exposing and critiquing scientific theories is Robert Patterson’s series “Sensationalism in Science,” which not only points out that respected scientists used sensational techniques, but also indicates the role sensation plays in initiating critical thinking about important epistemological issues.\(^1^8\) This series opens ominously with the claim that

> It is often said as a reproach that literature, as a whole, and especially fiction, has become “sensational”—that it loves to produce excitement by descriptions of imaginary crimes and unnatural incidents. But what are all the startling scenes portrayed in novels—though we question if there is any of them which has not had its counterpart in real life—to the dreadful catastrophes predicted for us and for all creation in the pages of science? (June 1868, 555)

Patterson supports Braddon’s agenda by claiming that sensation fiction has its roots in the real world, whereas a supposedly more objective and professional discourse like science might not reflect reality at all. The “Sensationalism in Science” series freely explored disastrous scientific predictions such as the depletion of the nation’s coal supply (“Our Coal Fields” June 1868), the death of the sun (“Is the Sun Dying?” July 1868), and the existence of life on other planets (“More Worlds Than One” October 1868). These articles were intended to both titillate readers with the possibility of terrifying phenomena and convince them to think through the theories and reach their own conclusions about whether to place their faith in modern science to divert such catastrophic events or to dismiss the wild speculations on the grounds of faulty reasoning.\(^1^9\) For example, “Is the Sun Dying?” begs readers to “gather [their] startled senses” in light of the claims of some “modern high-priests of science” that the sun will eventually burn itself up and “ray out darkness” because the fact is that “even if their theory of combustion was right, the basis of their calculations is entirely wrong” and the sun “will last as long as Matter itself endures” (71–81). Such “reasonable” conclusions to outrageous claims reinforced the magazine’s contention that sensationalism stimulated thought and discouraged the blind acceptance of “the authorities,” whether they happened to be scientists or literary critics.

Investigative journalism was another sensational discourse that

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Belgravia claimed both questioned authority and encouraged advances in the scientific community that would benefit society. For example, “An Adventurous Investigation” (November 1866) uncovered the need to research new treatments for the insane. Written in a sensational style that included adventure and suspense, the article’s investigation was even inspired by a sensation novel, Wilkie Collins’s Cornhill serial, Armadale. The article’s narrator and his companion, Smith, examine the exact location where “Wilkie Collins introduced Allan Armadale and Midwinter to the wreck of La Grace de Dieu. . . . And near to which . . . you may see the veritable cottage where the lunatic was confined whose shriek so horrified the Armadales on that terrible night.” The investigator tells Smith that he has set out to find the lunatic featured in Armadale and to spend time with him, studying the causes of mental disease. Smith is at first skeptical about his friend’s claims: “But that’s all nonsense, you know . . . Pooh! The empty creation of a sensation novelist” (57). However, the narrator insists that he has already successfully identified the lunatic and written a newspaper article about him. Upon discovering this fact, Smith responds with fear: “Look here; if you, alone and single-handed, attempt such a mad thing as exploring the ins and outs of this island, and hunting up lunatics by day and night, why, you’ll get stuck in a bog, or stabbed, or something else as bad or worse” (ibid.). Despite Smith’s anxieties and his inference that the narrator may himself be “mad,” the narrator persists in pursuing his “adventurous investigation” in order to “stir up the public interest to provide remedies for [lunacy]; to alleviate the misery and neglect of such poor unfortunates, to, if possible, ultimately create for them a proper and commodious system” of treatment (57–58).

“An Adventurous Investigation” indicates that some seemingly fictional events that take place in sensation novels are actually based on real-life occurrences and can, as Mortimer Collins claims, give readers a deeper understanding of society as well as bring about positive social change. Likewise, another Belgravia article on “Insanity and Its Treatment” articulates a rationale for exposing the horrors of insane asylums that coincides with the magazine’s rationale for exposing women to sensational subjects in everyday life:

We have taken the readers of Belgravia for a while out of their own geographical district to . . . places and subjects which are hardly congenial, however important they may be. But it is good for us sometimes to see the “night-side” of things—to have laid bare our social
scourges both of the moral and material kind, in order that we may with one heart and mind unite in striving to rectify those evils which madden peoples and hurry nations to premature decay. (478)

Belgravia's articles stress that although sensationalism dwells on the “night-side” of life, taking readers away from the safety of their homes into the brutal world, the genre prevents rather than causes cultural decay. In both Belgravia's fiction and nonfiction, then, sensationalism was defined as a legitimate force for education and reform that could make the public aware of societal problems that might otherwise be hidden or ignored. As a genre associated with modernity and social progress, sensation was touted as a sign of the nation’s cultural health and of women’s centrality to the progress of the nation.

Under Braddon’s leadership, Belgravia articulated a critical assessment of sensationalism that appreciated its ability to be simultaneously entertaining, educational, and artistic: to, in Braddon’s words, serve both God and Mammon well. While Harper's and the Cornhill each appealed to women readers to demonstrate their ability to master the differences between the high and the low in order to prove their critical abilities, Belgravia asked women readers to overtly reject those critical divisions because they were established by untrustworthy critics. Harper’s and the Cornhill were interested in using the critical divisions to their advantage and in teaching women to follow suit. Belgravia, on the other hand, championed women readers and sensation fiction as a way of moving Braddon’s own professional agenda forward. As a result, Braddon created a popular family literary magazine that refused to safely parrot the more elite journals while attempting to replace them for middle-class readers. Braddon had nothing to lose and was therefore able to dispense with the literary knowledge and authority of the elite critics altogether and establish an alternative ideology of literary valuation. The discussion carried out in Belgravia was explicitly meant to transform attitudes toward women readers and popular literature by imagining the woman reader as independent, free, and informed and by redefining the genre of the sensation novel as realistic, artistic, and instructive. Both of these rhetorical moves aimed to bring women readers and writers into the public and professional realms while preserving their sense of propriety.