Animals, Biopolitics, and Sensation Fiction: M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*

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Why look for animals in detective fiction? A clue lies in the Victorian sensation genre that so powerfully influenced detective fiction with its plot twists and quests to uncover the bestial secrets lurking behind society's civilized facades. The opening sentence of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's iconic sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) puts the reader in the position of a visitor approaching Audley Court and encountering cattle that look "inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps what you wanted; for there was no thoroughfare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all"[1]. The prospect of knowing about the lives of others that Braddon's novel dangles is bound up from the start with the prospect of knowing animals and being known by them. Indeed, the kind of curiosity that we might see as the defining feature uniting the detective novel reader with the detective figure belongs first to the inquisitive cattle and then to the narrator who tries to interpret their inquisitive expressions. So, well before we get to the matter of Lady Audley's secret, the narrative raises mysteries less exclusively human: What are these cattle thinking when they look at a person, is it possible for people to know what they're thinking, and do cattle ponder similar conundrums about human thought and motives?[2]

If these mysteries imply a ruminative pace at odds with the sensation novel's reputation for pulse-quickening plot, they are no sooner raised than, after the wink of a semicolon, abandoned with the narrator's assertion that the Court rather than this space of animals is where the business of the novel lies. I want to suggest that the novel's initial

move of marking out animal life as significant in its own right only to undermine its significance structures its broader approach to "life" more generally. On one level, Braddon's narrative seems to participate in a biopolitical project similar to the production of bare life as Giorgio Agamben understands it, including animals so as to exclude them, rendering animal life disposable in order to demarcate the human life that is valuable, or at least worth reading about. Central to this dynamic is the novel's key detective figure, Robert Audley, who, we will see, is depicted as a caregiver to and non-harmer of animals. But if Robert is rarely without an animal by his side, he is also rarely far from his next mutton chop. Robert's simultaneous care for animals and complicity in their killing sheds light on his biopolitical role as a detective figure: Robert cares for the social order and for the life of his missing friend George Talboys by tracking down information about the often animalized Lady Audley that will ultimately lead to her incarceration, abandonment, and death in a Belgian *maison de santé*. By exploring relationships with animals, the novel thus tests out how human life might be simultaneously known, cared for, and abandoned. However, this essay will also show that such abandonment of animal life is never complete and must be played out repeatedly, as animals emerge again and again as objects of knowledge, subjects of care, conscious agents, and figures of abandonment. By attending to this dynamic, we not only find Braddon's novel grappling with the biopolitical entanglements of caring for life and abandoning life, but we also discover how Braddon's attention to animals ultimately opens up spaces that resist and refuse the abandonment of life that would seem to structure the book's larger narrative.

The abandonment of life haunts the biopolitics that Michel Foucault describes emerging at the end of the eighteenth century when "the biological existence of a

population" became a key concern[3] and "power" took biological "life under its care"[4]. This emergence shifted the emphasis of state-sanctioned killing from "victory over political adversaries" to the supposed protection of life and included forms of "indirect murder" such as "increasing the risk of death for some people"[5]. Expanding on Foucault's analysis of biopolitics, Agamben argues that the Western political order demarcates itself as a worthwhile "form or way of living" by distinguishing itself from a kind of unqualified bare or "natural" life[6] that, because unqualified, can be treated as "life devoid of value" (139) and even "life that may be killed" (89). For Agamben, bare life is incorporated into the political order in the form of that which is excluded and can be expelled from this order. Along similar lines, Emily Steinlight suggests that the Victorian novel's biopolitical work of "de[aling] out life and death"[7] entailed life "being systematically valued in the very process by which certain bodies and lives came to appear disposable" (116). For Steinlight, as for Foucault, the life pertinent to biopolitics is human life. I want to suggest, however, that *Lady Audley's Secret* poses questions over life's value and disposability most fundamentally at the level of animal life and that Braddon's use of animals is crucially entwined with and essential to understanding her novel's biopolitical treatment of human life.[8]

The nineteenth century, after all, not only saw the rise of human biopolitics but also the entry of non-human animal life into the domains of knowledge and care in new ways. Harriet Ritvo notes that the "beginnings of the animal protection movement in England" can "be traced to the end of the eighteenth century"[9]. The nineteenth century brought the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1824, the passing of the Cruelty to Animals Acts of 1835, 1849, and 1876, and "the rise of

bourgeois pet-keeping", which Keridiana W. Chez argues was "inextricable" from the "humane movement"[10]. But the potential flipside of this care for animals involved new modes of commodification and marginalization. John Berger connects the popularity of pets to the nineteenth-century manufacture of "realistic animal toys", "widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery", and establishment of modern zoos, which he sees as comparable to "sites of enforced marginalisation" such as "prisons, madhouses, concentration camps"[11]. And Jacques Derrida, drawing on the work of Henri F. Ellenberger, suggests that zoos and psychiatric hospitals emerged as parallel institutions that "had the ambition or the pretension to treat, to care for, to take great care (*cura*) of what it was enclosing and objectifying and cultivating"[12].

Such nineteenth-century slippages and overlaps between, on the one hand, interest in and care for animal life, and on the other hand, domination, commodification, and marginalization of such life, mean that animals offer a vital lens through which to consider the period's biopolitics, and one that reveals that questions about animals are crucially entangled with biopolitical conceptions of human life. In *The Open,* Agamben developed his ideas about bare life by aligning it more explicitly with animal life, suggesting that it is "possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the [. . .] economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like an animal life has been separated within man"[13]. In a comparable fashion, *Lady Audley's Secret* seems to incorporate animals in order to mark animal life as that which is excluded and excludable from its narrative, and to similarly mark those "animalistic" humans who have not sufficiently separated themselves from an animal life within them. Such marking helps us understand detective fiction's simultaneous reliance

upon and disavowal of criminality as an animalized state of humanity that must be exposed and vanquished.

Victorian critics of sensation fiction sometimes dismissed it as an animalistic genre. For instance, an 1863 article titled "Our Female Sensation Novelists" expressed concerns that sensation fiction stimulates readers'—and particularly female readers'—attention "through the lower and more animal instincts"[14], and an 1866 review of Wilkie Collins' *Armadale* (1866) complained: "bigamy has been Miss Braddon's big black baboon, with which she has attracted all the young girls in the country. And now Mr. Wilkie Collins has set up a big black baboon on his own account"[15]. Similarly, in his 1863 article, "Sensation Novels", Henry Mansel condemned "this ravenous appetite for carrion, this vulture-like instinct which smells out the newest mass of social corruption, and hurries to devour the loathsome dainty before the scent has evaporated"[16]. Ann Cvetkovich points out that, "[a]ccording to his discourse, the sensation novel is deplorable because it reduces its readers to the condition of animals who are driven by instincts"[17]. And Susan D. Bernstein, noting the influence of Darwinian ideas on sensation fiction and reactions to the genre (Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859), argues that such responses convey "contemporary fears of evolutionary transformation not as progress but as degeneration"[18]—hence the image of the big black baboon. But what if we go beyond acknowledging concerns over sensation fiction as an animalistic genre capable of producing animalizing affects to contend with the complexities that arise when we pay attention to the actual animals that inhabit the pages of this fiction? I will accept the Victorian critics' point about sensation fiction being an animalistic genre, but I will take the point in a more positive and literal sense: sensation

fiction is a genre that tests out the relationship between humans and animals. Under its influence, detective fiction developed an obsession with criminality that we might understand as an obsession with locating, establishing, or even problematizing the threshold where "the human" meets "the animal."

If part of what Victorian critics found troublingly animalistic about sensation fiction was an association of the genre with narrative "Action, action, action!" and the resulting nervous "excitement"[19], Braddon's initial depictions of nonhuman animal life share neither of these qualities, instead aligning such life with stasis and tranquillity. After glimpsing cattle at the outskirts of Audley Court, we enter for a tour of the place—"a place that visitors fell into raptures with; feeling a yearning wish to have done with life, and to stay there for ever, staring into the cool fish-ponds, and counting the bubbles as the roach and carp rose to the surface of the water"[20]. While the cattle at the opening of the novel emerged as life that must be passed over before arriving at the true "business" of the story, here, at the purported centre of this business, we encounter abundant animal life reconfigured as the absence of life, a pond full of animated fish recast not merely as a site of tranquillity but as a lulling pool of non-being. Two chapters later, Braddon compounds the association between animals and the absence of life:

> The lowing of a cow in the quiet meadows, the splash of a trout in the fish-pond, the last notes of a tired bird, the creaking of wagon-wheels upon the distant road, every now and then breaking the evening silence, only made the stillness of the place seem more intense. It was almost oppressive, this twilight stillness. The very repose of the place grew painful from its intensity, and you felt as if a corpse

must be lying somewhere within that grey and ivy-covered pile of a building—so deathlike was the tranquillity of all around (26).

On one level, Braddon associates animals here with a kind of unnarratable or subnarratable pastoral that the sensational plot will disrupt.[21] In this respect, the corpse reference foreshadows the murderous story that will unfold. But, more than this, Braddon configures animal life as a space of non-life, or one where life is suspended. It is not just that this scene is so still that we might long for the intrusion of plot in the form of a murder, but also that the deathlike tranquillity here already is like a corpse and prefigures the appearance of any actual corpse to come. The subnarratable life that might be intruded upon by narratable murder is already positioned with death. Animal life here represents life that has not begun to qualify as life, whose status *as* life is perpetually suspended. Ivan Kreilkamp suggests that "animal characters are fundamentally 'minor,' in the sense defined by Alex Woloch"[22]—that is "subordinate," "delimited," and functional[23]. But Braddon seems to go beyond this and make animal life the vanishing point of life itself.

Braddon also uses animals to mark out valueless human life, particularly when animals become figurative or function as comparisons for humans. Robert Audley's cousin Alicia complains: "To have only one cousin in the world, [. . .] my nearest relation after papa, and for him to care about as much for me as he would for a dog!"[24]. This might appear an odd comparison because Robert is particularly fond of dogs and Alicia herself has an ongoing interest in the animals that surround her. She is introduced as "an excellent horsewoman" who "spent most of her time out of doors, riding about the green lanes, and sketching the cottage children, and the ploughboys, and the cattle, and all

manner of animal life" (10). And her dog Cæsar is "the sole recipient of the young lady's confidences" (92). But this love of animals only brings into relief her perceived deprivation of the love that she really wants, that of her father and that of her cousin. Her very valuing of animal life becomes a way of showing how she is barred from the life of "real" value: significance within the human social world that for a woman in her position might entail either "reign[ing] supreme in her father's house"—something she no longer does since her widowed father Sir Michael Audley has married the titular Lady Audley (10)—or entering into a conjugal life with her romantic interest and cousin Robert. The animals in her life emerge as mere consolation for the life she cannot have: "She had her favourite mare, her Newfoundland dog, and her drawing materials, and she made herself tolerably happy. She was not very happy" (249). Yet, for Alicia, animal life eventually changes from consolation into failed consolation, from better than nothing into nothing itself: "It seemed very hard to be a handsome grey-eyed heiress, with dogs and horses and servants at her command, and yet to be so much alone in the world as to know of not one friendly ear into which she might pour her sorrows" (249). Her dog Cæsar has transformed from her companion and confidante into something "at her command" that only serves as a painful reminder that she now seems to have *no* confidante at all. And, even if such command would seem to confer power, that power appears relatively empty at a point when she feels that her father has now "accepted a new ruler" in Lady Audley (249). In his vacillation between being a friend signifying an absence of friends and an object of power signifying an absence of power, Cæsar reveals animal life in *Lady Audley's Secret* as the crucial site where life converts into valueless life. Moreover, the

lumping together of servants with such devalued life as worthless objects of command shows how animals are used to mark out disposable life in the human world.

Luke Marks, the husband of Lady Audley's maid Phœbe, provides an even more striking example of how animalization marks out disposable human life. Like Alicia, Luke compares his treatment to that of a dog. Late in the novel he says of Lady Audley: "Whatever she give me she throwed me as if I'd been a dog. Whenever she spoke to me, she spoke as she might have spoken to a dog" (367). But if he uses this animal comparison to show his feeling of degradation, the narrator introduces him in a way that suggests that such a comparison is not unjust, describing him as a "stupid-looking clodhopper" with a mouth that is "coarse in form and animal in expression" and adding that "he was not unlike one of the stout oxen grazing in the meadows round about the Court" (28). Where bovine life at the edges of Audley Court once, briefly, signalled inquisitive consciousness, now a bovine comparison comes to signal coarse stupidity. And while the cattle at the beginning of the novel are abandoned in narrative terms, and the fish in the fishpond are reconfigured as an absence of life, the animalized Luke Marks is ultimately ejected from the novel through his actual death. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, not only animal life, but also animalistic human life, appears disposable.

My analysis so far suggests that Braddon's treatment of animal life in narrative terms is similar to the political order's simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of bare life as described by Agamben. Yet, if Braddon uses animal life to mark out life that can be abandoned, she also makes it a privileged site of care. The novel introduces Robert Audley, like Alicia, partly through his relation to animals. Before the disappearance of his friend George Talboys (later revealed as husband to the bigamous, identity-disguising

Lady Audley) rouses him to active sleuthing, Robert Audley appears as an idle, non-practicing barrister, "a handsome, lazy, care-for-nothing fellow" (32). But this care for "nothing" turns out to be a care for animals: we find that Robert's barrister's chambers "were converted into a perfect dog-kennel by his habit of bringing home stray and benighted curs" (33). Robert's initial inactivity and non-participation in the practice of law seems synonymous with him opening up his legal chambers as an animal refuge. Robert also appears to be a practitioner of non-violence towards animals, someone "who would not hurt a worm" and who spends "the hunting season at Audley Court" but who "keep[s] at a very respectful distance from the hard riders; his horse knowing quite as well as he did that nothing was further from his thoughts than any desire to be in at the death" (33). Robert's much commented on non-normative or incomplete masculinity[25] initially manifests as a conglomeration of passivity, a lack of interest in the law, and a kindness to animals. He therefore seems to sidestep the "*carno-phallogocentrism*" that Derrida sees as structuring Western humanist conceptions of male subjectivity that connect *logos*—the command of language, meaning, and knowledge—to "carnivorous virility" and a willingness to sacrifice life[26].

The problem is, Robert likes his meat. Whether eating mutton chops[27] or ham and eggs (116–17), complaining that his duck dinner is cold (73–74), or attending a "luxurious eating-house" because tired of the dishes served by Mrs. Maloney, "whose mind ran in one narrow channel of chops and steaks" (176), Robert not only consumes animal flesh, but is something of a connoisseur. Sitting down to "the familiar meal" of a mutton chop, Robert recalls "his uncle's cook with a fond, regretful sorrow", thinking "sentimentally" of how her "cutlets à la Maintenon made mutton seem more than mutton;

a sublimated meat that could scarcely have grown upon any mundane sheep" (132). And in the same speech where he insists that, despite spending the hunting season at Audley Court, he doesn't "care for" shooting and "never hit a bird in [his] life", Robert remarks that he only visits his uncle's house for "the change of air, the good dinners, and the sight of [his] uncle's honest, handsome face" (48). Robert disavows animal killing while praising what are almost certainly meat meals. The issue is not simply that Robert eats meat and cares about animals (many Victorian and present-day farmers and pet owners, for instance, would find no contraction here) but that the novel draws our attention to both Robert's explicit relish for meat and a care for animals that is specifically framed in terms of non-killing and non-violence. Paired and highlighted in this way by the novel, Robert's carnivorous appetite and care for animals together suggest the ease with which animal life is abandoned to death; even those who care most about animals are often complicit in their killing.

Braddon's representation of Robert and his treatment of animals shows how the abandonment of life is built into the structure of the biopolitical care for life. Robert not only feeds his own carnivorous appetites, but those of others, including animal others. Robert, for instance, sits down to breakfast "with one of his dogs at each side of his armchair, regarding him with watchful eyes and opened mouth, awaiting the expected morsel of ham or toast" (120). For Robert, caring for animals means feeding them animals. While looking after the missing George Talboys' son Georgey, Robert connects childcare with both animal care and eating animals. We learn that he "had catered for silk-worms, guinea-pigs, dormice, canary birds, and dogs, without number, during his boyhood, but he had never been called upon to provide for a person of five years old" and

that his memory of his own five-year-old diet is "of getting a good deal of bread and milk and boiled mutton" (153). However, Georgey turns out to be even more of an "epicure" than Robert is, "reject[ing] milk and bread and ask[ing] for veal cutlets" (154). The irony that this child's meat of choice is the meat of an animal child is furthered when we consider that, as Kathleen Kete observes, there was a nineteenth-century imaginative "link between animals and children"[28]. It is as though Georgey elevates himself from mere child to "little gentleman"[29] in an act of sacrificial sophistication that distinguishes his child's life from the animal life of the child that he eats. And Georgey ends up with a meal nearly as abundant in animal life as Robert's childhood was, eating "stewed eels, a dish of cutlets, a bird, and a pudding" (154). In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the designation of some life as bare, unqualified, disposable, killable, or edible seems necessary not only for feeding life but also for marking out the life that is not bare, the life of quality and value that is worth caring for. Earlier in the novel, Robert cares for Georgey's father at Audley Court as George grieves the (reported) death of his wife (who turns out to be the woman going by the name Lucy Graham, now Lady Audley), and this care is largely oriented around taking George fishing (49, 57–58, 69–71). Even if the purportedly non-violent Robert prefers fishing to shooting because "you've only to lie on a bank and stare at your line; I don't find that you often catch anything, but it's very pleasant" (49), the pastime relies on the status of fish as life that may legitimately be killed. Through Robert's acts of care and consumption we see the sacrificial abandonment of life to death as itself a form of care—as both self-care and care for others.

Fitting, then, that Robert's major acts of care entail transforming Lady Audley into bare life. George Talboys' disappearance spurs Robert from passive, animal loving

"care-for-nothing fellow" to active detective, now focusing the majority of his care on his missing human friend. His quest for knowledge about what happened to George leads him to discover that not only is Lady Audley responsible for his disappearance but also that she is hiding her identity as his wife while married to Robert's uncle Sir Michael Audley. Robert's pursuit of Lady Audley now also becomes about protecting his beloved uncle and the patriarchal social order that Sir Michael stands for. Critics such as Pamela K. Gilbert and Steinlight have argued that the text links Lady Audley's problematic femininity to a biological or biopolitical threat. Gilbert sees Lady Audley as a figure of "women's sexuality" that is "represented as a contagious disease"[30], a dangerous open body that must be "contained" (93) with the help of Robert, the narrative's "sanitary policeman" (105). And Steinlight reads her as "an ungovernable female body" that "incorporate[s] specters of mass population"[31]. Lady Audley is certainly a figure of uncontainable life, but little serious attention has been paid to how this excess life becomes synonymous with animal life. The narrator describes her feelings "t[earing] at her like some ravenous beast"[32], compares her stealthy "footfall" to "that of some graceful wild animal" (268), and characterizes the "flame" in her eyes as a light "such as might flash from the changing hued orbs of an angry mermaid" (273). And Robert dreams

> he saw Audley Court, rooted up from amidst the green pastures and shady hedgerows of Essex, standing bare and unprotected upon that desolate northern shore [. . .]. As the hurrying waves rolled nearer and nearer to the stately mansion, the sleeper saw a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it

was my lady, transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction (209–210).

Both Robert and the narrator imagine Lady Audley's threat in terms of animal life lurking within or intermingling with human life. While the novel's opening sentence gave us animals in their proper place, cattle grazing in enclosed land, looking over "high hedges" from meadows that "bordered" the avenue (1), Lady Audley shows animal life breaching the borders of propriety and property[33]: she embodies all at once the hungry animal that tears at the human, the wild animal that sneaks through and out of houses, and the aquatic animal that merges with the human, ripping Audley Court away from the very pastures and hedgerows that seemed to mark animal life as essentially docile and containable.

Yet if the containability of the cattle that begin the novel is part of what makes them appear so immediately disposable in a narrative sense, it is the uncontainable animal life within Lady Audley that seems to guarantee her ultimate social and narrative disposability. Upon exposing Lady Audley, Robert, despite inconclusive medical evidence of her madness, has her confined to a Belgian institution where she can be locked away without recourse to a legal trial that could ruin his uncle's good name. In the chapter titled "Buried Alive"[34], Lady Audley likens her fate to living death in a "living grave" (333). Lady Audley, in other words, comes to inhabit the position of suspended life that animals in the novel so often occupy. It is here, abandoned to a supposed institution of care (an institution, we recall, that Derrida links to the zoo), in an extraterritorial space beyond Britain at the murky threshold between law and medicine, as bare life caught between life and death, that Lady Audley ultimately dies and is expunged from the novel.

As a narrative and biopolitical solution, however, Lady Audley's incarceration and death proves insufficient. Despite the excision of Lady Audley's story from the "narrative of the healthy social body" in "order to maintain its unity and health," Gilbert suggests that novel's ending "cannot negate the subversive insistence of the Lady's voice"[35]. And Steinlight argues that removing "this supposedly abnormal specimen from the English population" can "scarcely remedy the larger problem [of surplus population] that she instantiates" and that the narrative ultimately "erodes the conventional boundary between the self-regulating individual and the unmanageable multitude"[36]. The narrative problem that Lady Audley poses, in other words, is less that she is an abnormal specimen of femininity than that she points to Victorian concerns about the potential disruptive excess of womanhood in general and fears that, as Lyn Pykett puts it, "women cannot be contained within dominant definitions of 'woman', or of normal femininity"[37]. Such concerns stem partly from nineteenth-century beliefs that women were "driven by their bodily processes"[38] and that they, like children, were "closer to nature" than "bourgeois men"[39].

Braddon draws upon but also parodies such associations of women with bodily and animal life through Robert Audley's exuberantly misogynist meditation on the slim chances of happiness in marriage. He wonders: "Who is to say which shall be the one judicious selection [. . .]? Who shall decide from the first aspect of the slimy creature, which is to be the one eel out of the colossal bag of snakes?"[40]. For Robert, women as potential mates are only ever "creatures", and the choice of whom to marry constitutes the choice between more and less appealing (and perhaps edible) varieties of animal. Robert's animalization of women as marital prospects (in conjunction with his

foregrounding of sliminess) chimes with Kete's point that women were seen as particularly close to nature largely because of their association with reproduction[41]. Such an association brings us to a key biopolitical problem that haunts *Lady Audley's Secret* (and has repercussions well beyond the novel): Victorian women occupy a privileged biopolitical position as reproducers of the population, but in this position, tied so closely to biological bodily functions, they also occupy a place imagined as close to animal life and are thus more susceptible to slipping (or being forced) into the position of bare life that animals occupy. To put it differently, the life animalized and expelled through the figure of Lady Audley is not ultimately separate or separable from the regenerative life envisioned at the end of the novel where the renewal of the social body plays out in the reproductive marriage plot with the union of Robert and George's sister Clara bringing forth a "baby who has just begun to toddle"[42].

Throughout her narrative, Braddon draws attention to rather than merely relies on the paradox of treating life as simultaneously valuable and disposable. So while Agamben's understanding of bare life is useful up to a point in clarifying the biopolitical workings of *Lady Audley's Secret*, his model does not allow for the complexity with which Braddon's narrative poses questions about life and its treatment. If Braddon draws on a sacrificial mode throughout her narrative, she also exposes the workings of this mode and the cruel ironies inherent in it. Consider, for instance, Braddon's association of Lady Audley with aquatic animal life in conjunction with the treatment of actual aquatic life throughout the narrative. We might recall Robert's propensity for fishing and his commitment to sharing his hobby with the grieving George Talboys; the novel asks us to imagine the consciousness of fish at precisely the moment that it conjures them as

disposable life: “Those were happy fish in the stream on the banks of which Mr Talboys was seated. They might have amused themselves to their heart’s content with timid nibbles at this gentleman’s bait, without in any manner endangering their safety; for George only stared vacantly at the water” (71). While the fish partly serve as a backdrop to George’s troubled mental state, their consciousness is also a remainder that troubles the seemingly straightforward equation of animal life with bare life. In this regard, rendering someone or something animalistic in the novel might seem to legitimize their transformation into disposable life, but Braddon casts this model as an insufficient one designed to provoke unease.

Such unease amplifies when we note further connections between aquatic life and the mermaid-like Lady Audley. The bank of the stream is George’s initial site of disappearance, “the fishing-rod lying on the bank” the first sign that he is missing (73) (it turns out that Lady Audley pushes him down a well). In the chapter directly following the exposure of Lady Audley’s double identity and bigamy, Alicia, ever at odds with the lady, hungrily announces a fish dinner: “*Is* papa coming to dinner? [. . .] I’m *so* hungry; and [. . .] the fish will be spoiled. It must be reduced to a species of isinglass soup by this time, I should think” (306; italics in original). Finally, sentences before we learn of Lady Audley’s death, we read that her son Georgey—who now, in the novel’s ostensibly happy ending, makes up part of an extended family consisting of his father, Clara, Robert, and the baby—spends his time “fish[ing] for tadpoles” (379). The sacrificial position of the now-caught fishy Lady Audley is mirrored in the fate of the novel’s other aquatic creatures.

The novel poses further questions about the treatment of life and the intersections between care and killing surrounding Lady Audley's relationship with Alicia's dog Cæsar. During a meeting of Lady Audley and Alicia, "[t]he dog, which had never liked my lady, show[s] his teeth with a suppressed growl" (72). On one level, Cæsar's reaction aligns with one of the main roles of animals in melodrama, which, according to John MacNeill Miller, is to function as figures of goodness with an access to "the cosmic moral order" that aids them in "hunting down villains"[43]. Cvetkovich and Pykett note the sensation novel's important roots in and adaptation of stage melodrama[44], and, in this context, Cæsar's dislike of Lady Audley functions as an early clue; sniffing out her moral corruption, Cæsar shows an animal playing a vital role in what Patrick Brantlinger describes the sensation novel's crucial work of "stripping away surface appearances"[45]. Yet, Pykett observes that women's sensation fiction is "more conflicted and ambiguous" than stage melodrama[46], and Lady Audley's reaction to Cæsar suggests something less straightforward than the dog occupying either a position of bare animality or one of melodramatic goodness: "Bah, Cæsar; I hate you, and you hate me; and if you met me in the dark in some narrow passage you would fly at my throat and strangle me, wouldn't you?"[47]. Neither just a revelation of moral truth nor a sign of purely animalistic instinct, Cæsar's "suppressed growl" points to restraint and perhaps, as Lady Audley suggests, the all-too-human feeling of hatred. But if this hate is at once mutual between the lady and the dog and tied to bared teeth and suppressed growls, then the text also dissolves any absolute distinction between animalistic violence and more seemingly sophisticated human feelings. Lady Audley's address to Cæsar suggests that she sees herself and him,

underneath their present disparity in social power, as uncannily close to being on even ground.

Sir Michael Audley's response to this interaction draws particular attention to the fine and shifting line between the care for life and the disposability of life. When Alicia tells her father that if she "had not had hold of his collar", Cæsar would indeed "have flown at [Lady Audley's] throat and strangled her" Sir Michael answers, "Your dog shall be shot [. . .] if his vicious temper ever endangers Lucy" (93). While dogs throughout the novel are figured as subjects of care and we know that Cæsar, in particular, is Alicia's companion, any right he has to live gets nullified in the name of protecting the life of Lady Audley. But as soon as Sir Michael utters this threat, Braddon spends a whole paragraph hinting at Cæsar's mental and emotional life:

> The Newfoundland rolled his eyes slowly round in the direction of the speaker, as if he understood every word that had been said. Lady Audley happened to enter the room at this very moment, and the animal cowered down by the side of his mistress with a suppressed growl. There was something in the manner of the dog which was, if anything, more indicative of terror than of fury, incredible as it appears that Cæsar should be frightened of so fragile a creature as Lady Audley (93).

If Lady Audley will, on the one hand, prove far from fragile in her two attempted murders in the narrative, her eventual fate, on the other hand, shows her finally having no more claim on life than her fellow creature Cæsar does. Braddon uses animal life to apparently legitimize but ultimately problematize the demarcation of disposable life akin to bare life. She does so not only by evoking the inner lives of animals, whether

inquisitive cattle, happy fish, or frightened dogs, but also by frequently evoking them in the very moments that such life is threatened or marked as disposable. So, despite employing a sacrificial mode where caring for life cannot be separated from abandoning life, Braddon hints, on another level, at an ethics of non-abandonment.

What would such an ethics look like? It can only be glimpsed in the actual narrative of *Lady Audley's Secret* as a series of possible or virtual lives, a menagerie of the unnarratable. Caring for these lives might mean stopping, for instance, with the cattle that begin the novel and the fish that seem initially only to signify tranquillity; it might mean staying with Lady Audley after Robert's final visit to her until the moment of her death. D. A. Miller has memorably characterized the sensation novel-reading experience as one of page-turning, nerve-tingling "physicality"[48], a plot-driven pleasure that Cvetkovich observes led Victorian critics to fear "the prospect of a reader reduced to a body reacting instinctively to a text", to "the condition of animals"[49]. But paying attention to the animals in *Lady Audley's Secret* means discovering that, for Braddon, animal life is no mere reduction but an opening of possibility disguised as life's vanishing point. Braddon ultimately suggests that animal life is not some pure, unqualified bare life or raw physical material despite its frequent treatment as such. And if Braddon's animals aren't disposable matter but life we cannot abandon, then it is harder than ever to imagine that her fiction's agenda is the reduction of readers to reactive bodies carried by propulsive plot.

Such life instead invites something closer to Miller's more recent practice of "Too Close Reading"—one "drawn to details that, while undeniably intricate, are not noticeably important"[50] and that, if attended to, halt "narrative flow" (125), derailing the

plot, or at least putting it "on pause" (114). But while Frances Ferguson celebrates Miller for enabling an approach in which the objects of readerly attention are "merely and, supremely, personal"[51], Braddon's animals call readers to step beyond the personal and towards a responsibility to other lives that seem, almost emphatically, not to matter. This call for non-abandonment reveals the sensation novel harbouring a countercurrent to the very protocols it helps develop and that inform detective fiction's impulse "to restrict and localize the province of meaning"[52] and the detective figure's promise of knowledge as mastery[53]. If we can risk a reading that loses the plot, these animal lives will lead us gloriously astray, and not just to passed-over details buried in the text but to the cusp of the stories they might tell if the narrative would let them. What if one of the principal authors of a genre supposedly all about plot were drawing us all along to the lives that take us to and past plot's edges? Perhaps the supposedly animalizing speed of the sensation novel is itself a wrong turn from the animals at once included in and excluded from it, beckoning us, often with nothing more than a look, a bubble, or a roll of the eyes, to slow or stop and re-imagine disposable life as something we cannot turn away from.

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[1] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

[2] For a highly influential meditation on the animal gaze, see Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), particularly Derrida's discussion of being looked at by

his cat in the opening chapter, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", 1-51.
[3] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 137.
[4] Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 253.
[5] Foucault, *"Society"*, 256.
[6] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.
[7] Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018), 142.
[8] I thus follow in the footsteps of critics such as Nicole Shukin and Cary Wolfe who call for more dialogue between biopolitics and animal studies.
[9] Harriet Ritvo, *Noble Cows and Hybrid Zebras: Essays on Animals and History* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 74.
[10] Keridiana W. Chez, *Victorian Dogs, Victorian Men: Affect and Animals in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 2.
[11] John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 26.
[12] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* Volume 1, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 300.
[13] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 15–16.
[14] "Our Female Sensation Novelists", *Christian Remembrancer* 46 (1863): 210.
[15] Review of *Armadale*, by Wilkie Collins, *Westminster Review* (October 1866): 269.
[16] Henry Mansel, "Sensation Novels", *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863): 502.
[17] Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 20.
[18] Susan D. Bernstein, "Ape Anxiety: Sensation Fiction, Evolution, and the Genre Question", *Journal of Victorian Culture* 6, no. 2 (2001): 259.
[19] Mansel, "Sensation Novels", 486.
[20] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 8.
[21] I borrow the term "the unnarratable" from Gerald Prince, "The Disnarrated", *Style* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1988), 1, and Robyn R. Warhol, "Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film," in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 221. Warhol describes the variety of the unnarratable she calls the *"subnarratable*" as that which is "too insignificant or banal to warrant representation" (222).
[22] Ivan Kreilkamp, "Dying Like a Dog in *Great Expectations*", in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 82.
[23] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 27.
[24] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 60.
[25] See for example Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 11, Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*, 57, Pamela K. Gilbert, *Disease,*

Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 100–101, and Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 103–104.

[26] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject", in *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 280.

[27] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 207–209.

[28] Kathleen Kete, "Introduction: Animals and Human Empire", in *A Cultural History of Animals in the Age of Empire*, ed. Kathleen Kete (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011), 7. See also Tess Cosslett, "Child's Place in Nature: Talking Animals in Victorian Children's Fiction", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 23, no. 4 (2002): especially 479–80.

[29] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 154.

[30] Gilbert, *Popular Novels*, 8.

[31] Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, 141.

[32] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 241.

[33] See also Elizabeth Langland, who suggests a relationship between the containment of women in the text and the agricultural enclosure acts. "Enclosure Acts: Framing Women's Bodies in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*", in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

[34] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 325.

[35] Gilbert, *Popular Novels*, 105.

[36] Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, 147.

[37] Pykett, *Improper Feminine*, 95.

[38] Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2007), 13.

[39] Kete, "Introduction", 8.

[40] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 175.

[41] Kete, "Introduction", 8.

[42] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 379.

[43] John MacNeill Miller, "When Drama Went to the Dogs; or, Staging Otherness in the Animal Melodrama", *PMLA* 132, no. 3 (May 2017): 531.

[44] See Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*, 24 and 45, and Pykett, *Improper Feminine*, 74–76.

[45] Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 144.

[46] Pykett, *Improper Feminine*, 76.

[47] Braddon, *Lady Audley*, 72.

[48] D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 147.

[49] Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*, 20.

[50] D. A. Miller, "Hitchcock's Hidden Pictures", *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2010): 126.

[51] Frances Ferguson, "Now It's Personal: D. A. Miller and Too-Close Reading", *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 540.

[52] Miller, *Novel and the Police*, 34.
[53] See for example Yumna Siddiqi, *Anxieties of Empire and the Fiction of Intrigue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 19.