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Dangerous Women: Vera Caspary's Rewriting of *Lady Audley's Secret* in *Bedelia*

Laura Vorachek

Abstract. Considering Vera Caspary's *Bedelia* as a reimagining of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* allows for a new critical interpretation that refutes the typical view of *Bedelia* as reinforcing traditional gender roles. Instead, Caspary critiques World War II America by bringing Victorian concerns with female roles into the twentieth century.

A scandalous success during its own time, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1863 novel *Lady Audley's Secret* was an inspiration for many writers who borrowed both its plot and sensational elements.¹ One adaptation that has not received sustained critical attention in this regard is Vera Caspary's 1944 novel *Bedelia*. Considering *Bedelia* as a reimagining of *Lady Audley's Secret* allows one to read against the grain of critical interpretation of Caspary's novel, which tends to see it as reinforcing traditional gender roles. On the contrary, in rewriting Braddon's novel, Caspary brings Victorian-era concerns with female identity and women's limited opportunities into the twentieth century, providing a social critique of World War II America. In addition, the genres in which each author was working—nineteenth-century sensation fiction and twentieth-century crime fiction—were especially suited to questioning the cultural hegemonies of their respective time periods, particularly with regard to gender.

Although *Lady Audley's Secret* has garnered much critical attention in recent years, *Bedelia*, recently reissued by the Feminist Press, is likely less familiar to readers. Caspary's novel focuses on the relationship of a newly married couple, Charlie and Bedelia Horst. The novel is set in a Connecticut country house over a few days in 1913, as Charlie slowly discovers that his perfect wife has not only attempted to poison him but has killed several previous husbands as well. The novel ends with Charlie pressing Bedelia to commit suicide by drinking the very poison she had given him.

Although there is no direct evidence that Caspary read *Lady Audley's Secret*, she was

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well versed in nineteenth-century literature and, as A. B. Emrys has demonstrated, adopted elements of characterization and structure for her most famous novel, *Laura*, from the works of another Victorian sensation novelist, Wilkie Collins.² Moreover, the strong parallels between the two works suggest that Caspary was familiar with Braddon's novel. To begin with, both novels center on female characters with very similar histories, tastes, and secrets. Lady Audley and Bedelia both grew up in poverty but construct histories of well-born fathers who were nonetheless impoverished. Lady Audley tells Sir Michael, "My father was a gentleman; clever, accomplished, generous, handsome — but poor" (Braddon 16). In fact, her father is an impecunious, lower-middle-class naval officer. Bedelia creates a fantasy of a father who "had been an English gentleman" but was penniless since his father had been a younger son of an English aristocrat (Caspary, *Bedelia* 131). These fictions mask the fact that both fathers abandoned their daughters in some manner. Lady Audley's alcoholic father shirks his responsibility to provide for his daughter and grandson, drinking away her wages as a piano teacher. Bedelia never knew her father because he left her mother before she was born. Both protagonists also have suspect tastes in literature: Lady Audley reads risqué French novels, considered inappropriate for women during the Victorian period; Bedelia reads Laura Jean Libbey's dime-novel romances, which her husband finds "hideous" (Caspary, *Bedelia* 131). Both women are also very attractive, raising the specter of extramarital affairs. Robert Audley imagines that he is "falling in love with [his] aunt" (Braddon 94), while Charlie suspects his wife is sleeping with artist-detective Ben Chaney. Both are believed to have murdered their former husbands so as to maintain their financial security and social position. Lady Audley tries to dispose of her first husband to keep her bigamous marriage to a baronet secure, while Bedelia builds a considerable nest egg by marrying and killing several husbands for their life insurance money. Additionally, the possibility of insanity is raised to account for each woman's behavior. Lady Audley attributes her actions to hereditary madness, while Charlie believes Bedelia must be mentally ill. However, the true motivations of each woman ultimately remain inscrutable, as the omniscient narrators of each novel do not give the reader information on this matter.

The novels also share several plot elements, including portraits of the titular characters. The creators of this artwork each represent an avant-garde movement of their respective time periods: the Victorian pre-Raphaelite school in *Lady Audley's Secret* and the early-twentieth-century fauve movement in *Bedelia*.³ Each narrative conveys that the painters see "deeply below the surface," with the result that their work reveals the "sinister" and "evil" nature of their subjects (Braddon 72; Caspary, *Bedelia* 32, 35). Thus, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the pre-Raphaelite-esque portrait hints at Lady Audley's dark side and also enables George to recognize that his wife is not dead, but is in fact Lady Audley. In Caspary's novel, Ben's modern paintings initially seem to serve less as a means of building suspense and more as a means of raising the point that Bedelia does not allow any photographs of herself to be taken). She has been wiser than her predecessor in this regard. But although no previous husband recognizes a likeness of Bedelia, and the action of the novel prevents Ben from proceeding with his painting of her, a reader familiar with Braddon's novel will understand that, as with her precursor, there is more to Bedelia than meets the eye.

Both novels also feature the attempted murder of a husband. Lady Audley pushes her first husband into an abandoned well, leaving him for dead. Bedelia gives her latest husband small doses of poison under the guise of treating his indigestion and, according to Ben, has done away with three previous husbands in a similar manner.⁴ Both women attempt to kill the male detectives who threaten them with exposure. Lady Audley sets fire

to the inn where Robert is staying, while Bedelia endeavors to poison Ben's favorite gorgonzola cheese. Finally, both women meet the same fate once their murderous deeds are known — incarceration and death. Lady Audley briefly considers suicide to escape her fate, but ultimately Robert commits Lady Audley to an insane asylum, which she recognizes as "[her] grave" (Braddon 396). Sure enough, she dies within a year. Bedelia's end comes more quickly — Charlie locks Bedelia in her bedroom and demands she drink poison. In both cases, these men act as judge and jailer of deviant women, determining their guilt and punishment. Thus, the endings of both novels could be interpreted as endorsing the suppression of transgressive women.

Whereas much scholarship on *Lady Audley's Secret* counters this reading by highlighting the subversive aspects of Braddon's novel, critical reception of Caspary's work almost uniformly understands *Bedelia* to reinforce traditional gender roles.⁵ Contemporary reviewers described Bedelia as a femme fatale, terming her a "beautiful Borgia," a "female Bluebeard," "Lady MacBeth," "psychopathic," or "pure evil" — much as her Victorian counterpart was considered "a monstrosity" and a freak of nature by nineteenth-century reviewers.⁶ Later twentieth-century literary critics have argued that Bedelia is justly punished for her transgressions. For example, Jane Bakerman contends that "Caspary denounces the 'Little Woman'" and "strikes back" at her character by Charlie's demand that she commit suicide (48). Similarly, Gary Storhoff suggests that "Caspary's women characters [... have] internalized society's definition of power relations between the sexes" (54). Only Emrys finds Bedelia to be a "perversely sympathetic" villain ("Afterword" 203).

No contemporary reviewer was sympathetic to Bedelia's plight, but several found something to admire in Charlie's fortitude in the face of his discovery that his beloved wife is a murderer (see, for example, Du Bois [12] and "Bedelia"). Indeed, a radio reviewer in 1945 saw the novel as Charlie's personal tragedy (Steel). The criticism does not comment on Charlie acting outside the legal system and bringing about the death of Bedelia and their unborn child.

Given the likelihood that Caspary was drawing on *Lady Audley's Secret*, it is implausible that the novel indicts Bedelia while supporting her similarly murderous husband. Instead, Caspary, like Braddon, depicts a female character that turns gendered power relations and social expectations on their head. As we will see, both novels critique marriage and notions of ideal femininity while raising questions about identity during periods of social upheaval.

Lady Audley's Secret and *Bedelia* critique marriage by presenting female characters that have few other opportunities available to them.⁷ Lady Audley learned as a child "that [her] ultimate fate in life depended upon [her] marriage" (Braddon 359). Her outcome does indeed depend on this union, as her husband abandons her and their infant son to seek his fortune in Australia. To support herself and her family, she gives piano lessons and works as a governess, but no employment for women at this time offers the financial and social stability that marriage does — and that she finds in her second marriage to Sir Michael Audley. Likewise, for Bedelia "being a wife was her life's work" (Caspary, *Bedelia* 183). This career consists of marrying and, after each takes out a large life insurance policy in her favor, killing her husbands. She thereby establishes financial security for herself and indirectly exposes the precarious situation of women who must rely on husbands for support. This message was so important to Caspary that she objected "vehemently" against changing the setting for the movie version of the novel from 1913 to the contemporary 1940s. She writes in her autobiography, "I'd written the book about a period when 'nice girls' expected husbands to support them and 'working girl' was a term of derision." This dichotomy, she states, is

"the basis of the heroine's character and crimes" (*Secrets* 225–26). Thus, both Lady Audley and Bedelia demonstrate the dangers of marriage as the only way for women to achieve financial security and respectability.

Both novels similarly critique contemporary conceptions of ideal femininity. Lady Audley initially appears to be the epitome of Victorian womanhood. Others remark on her beauty, "childishness and frivolity," and the narrator notes that "wherever she went she seemed to take sunshine and gladness with her" (Braddon 55). However, Braddon challenges the notion that childish innocence is women's natural state by indicating that Lady Audley is a capable actress and by presenting another incarnation of this type of womanhood in Lady Audley's mother—from whom she believes she has inherited her madness. Her mother is "no raving, strait-waistcoated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers [as she had expected to find her]; but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us with her yellow curls decorated with natural flowers, and saluted us with radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter" (Braddon 344). The description of her insane mother bears close affinities with that of Lady Audley. Thus, this model of femininity is called into question, both as a role played by a woman and as a manifestation of insanity.

Likewise, Bedelia embodies the feminine ideal of the early-twentieth century. Like Lady Audley, she is a bit childish in her mannerisms and in her fear of the dark. But she is the perfect cook, homemaker, and lover—"a man's woman," as one character describes her (Casparry, *Bedelia* 50). Interestingly, like *Lady Audley's Secret*, Casparry's novel was originally published serially, appearing in *Good Housekeeping* in September and October 1944. Casparry's seemingly perfect housewife is thus found in a magazine aimed at homemakers, among ads for Youngstown pressed-steel kitchens and Miracle Whip, and in between articles titled "Susan Poaches Eggs" and "Keeping Warm with Your Fuel Ration." Ironically, Bedelia uses her superior homemaking skills to attract and deceive the many men she lures into marriage. Indeed, it is her good housekeeping that deflects suspicion from her real career as a serial husband-killer.

As these disparities between appearance and reality suggest, both novels raise questions about the nature of identity. Lady Audley begins life as Helen Maldon, the daughter of a naval officer, becomes Helen Talboys when she marries George, and changes her name to Lucy Graham when she becomes a governess. She then becomes Lady Audley when she marries Sir Michael and finishes her life under the name "Madame Taylor" in the insane asylum. Bedelia, with her multiple aliases, matches Lady Audley in number of name changes. Born Annie Torrey, she reincarnates herself after each marriage with a new name and a new history—as Annabel Godfrey, Chloe Dinsmore, Maurine Cunningham, and Bedelia Cochran. The relative ease with which these women assume new personas and discard previous ones indicates that identity is neither fixed nor transparent. Although their serial reinventions are an economic survival strategy predicated on the performative nature of femininity, in both cases these rebirths are quashed by male interference, suggesting the limits of women's ability to define themselves in a male-dominated culture.

Several critics have demonstrated that the anxieties raised by *Lady Audley's Secret* and sensation fiction in general are products of its time. Jonathon Loesberg, for example, has argued that Lady Audley's unstable identity reflects mid-nineteenth-century concerns with class structure and the potential loss of class distinctions that might follow from proposed voting reforms. Whereas Braddon's novel raises the specter of class fluidity, Casparry addresses women's shifting gender roles during the 1940s. Despite her insistence that the screen adaptation retain the novel's original 1913 setting, the novel does, in fact, reflect the

time period in which it was written. Women became part of the World War II workforce in record numbers to replace men serving in the war, creating anxieties about women's traditional identity as homemakers. *Good Housekeeping* readers would have been continually reminded of this, as Caspary's story is set among ads peppered with references to World War II and working women. For example, one ad recommends Elizabeth Arden all-day foundation cream for women who do "volunteer work," have "a job in defense," or "pursue a career" (169). An ad for Bigelow Weavers features "Ensign Anne Hawe" who met her husband "at the Base" (219). The copy for another ad reads, "Getting a war job is easy ... doing it is what really counts," urging readers to "call on Midol" to get the job done (233). These ads, in a magazine devoted to housekeeping, serve as a reminder that women's roles were expanding beyond the home. As we have seen, Caspary offers indirect encouragement for women in the workforce by suggesting that Bedelia's murderous activities are a direct result of the lack of socially approved avenues to support herself.

Moreover, Caspary portrays Ellen Walker, the only middle-class working woman in the novel, in a sympathetic light. Ellen had hoped to marry Charlie before he met Bedelia, but Ellen is not the sort of woman who "exists only for her man" (Caspary, *Bedelia* 50). She enjoys earning her own living and is described as having "spunk" and a "real aptitude" for her job as a journalist (Caspary, *Bedelia* 27). In fact, she is the first to suspect that Ben did not come to Connecticut to paint. However, she is aware that "men don't like a girl to be independent.... They don't feel that she's really female unless she needs a man to take care of her" (Caspary, *Bedelia* 185). Thus, she articulates the dilemma faced by working women: Do they sacrifice their femininity for financial independence? Bedelia's unorthodox means of maintaining both demonstrates that this identity problem — a "working girl" versus a "man's woman" — is not easily resolved.

This was an issue that Caspary, a single working woman herself for much of her life, encountered as well.⁸ In an article in the *Brooklyn Eagle* about the film adaptation of *Bedelia*, Caspary claims she does not have practical homemaking skills, yet she enjoys hosting parties and making dollhouses for her friends' children. Journalist Margaret Mara notes that although Caspary is "one of the most prolific writers in Hollywood ... writing doesn't interfere with her endless entertaining of guests," downplaying Caspary's career and emphasizing her role as a hostess. Caspary is quoted as saying, "Don't ask me to sew a shoulder-strap, ... but I will spend an entire day quilting a cover for a doll's bed!" (Mara). That this highly productive author and champion of working women felt it necessary to portray herself as domestic, if only on a miniature scale, indicates the social pressures felt by women who were moving beyond traditional gender roles at this time.⁹

Finally, both novels suggest that circumstance, and not character, is responsible for these women's misdeeds. Lady Audley finds that wealth makes her kind and benevolent, and she resolves to be a true and faithful wife to Sir Michael. When forced to explain her actions, she says, "I think I might have been a good woman for the rest of my life, if fate would have allowed me to be so" (Braddon 362). Fate prevents this possibility by returning her missing first husband to England and by propelling nephew Robert's investigations, thereby compelling her to attempt murder.¹⁰ In a letter Caspary wrote to the Motion Picture Association in 1946, protesting its censoring of *Bedelia's* suicide, she indicates that "Bedelia's tragedy" is her discovery that her husband's love is "the one thing worth living for" just when she has been caught and her suicide to escape the "suffering of remorse," not to evade the law (Letter to Joseph I. Breen). Caspary's defense of her novel and screenplay as expressly *Bedelia's* tragedy indicates she intended the reader/viewer to sympathize with Bedelia and raises the possibility that Bedelia might have had a happy marriage if fate

in the form of an inexorable husband had not intervened. Thus, both novels blame social structures such as the lack of employment opportunities and artificial gender roles for creating these murderous women.

The similarities between the two novels indicate a correspondence between nineteenth-century sensation fiction and twentieth-century crime fiction; and indeed, critics have argued for a genealogy of crime fiction from the sensation novel to the noir fiction of the 1940s and beyond (see Emrys, “*Laura*” and Knight). Martin Priestman, however, contends that such a focus “imposes a model of quasi-evolutionary striving on a past which was often interested in other things entirely” (3). Although Caspary’s intent may not have been to bring the 1860s sensation novel up to date in the 1940s, she, like Braddon, was interested in marriage, ideals of femininity, and the lack of opportunities for women. The affinities between the genres in which they chose to write, including an emphasis on crime and punishment, provided each with an opportunity to address cultural issues and anxieties that were of concern during the period in which they were writing. With the certainty of retribution and containment for offenders, authors have greater latitude for challenging social conventions while still producing socially acceptable and marketable literature. For Braddon and Caspary, each genre provided opportunities to subvert the dominant gender ideology of their respective time periods with appealing yet dangerous women.

But whereas Braddon ended her novel by reaffirming male privilege, Caspary hints at a different future for “deviant” women. *Lady Audley’s Secret* closes with Lady Audley’s off-stage death; the return of George; the marriage of Robert Audley to George’s sister, Clara Talboys; and the birth of their child. Although the idyllic final scene of family life is undermined by the adjectives that describe the home as a “fairy cottage” and a “fantastical dwelling” (Braddon 444), suggesting the resolution is a fantasy (Pykett 105), the transgressive woman whose actions challenged marriage and Victorian femininity has been eliminated.

Bedelia similarly ends with the aberrant woman dispatched and the element of fantasy introduced. In the closing scenes, Ellen plays a “game” while Charlie is distracted by the knowledge that his wife’s death will soon be discovered (Caspary, *Bedelia* 182). She remembers Charlie’s house as it was before he left for the trip in which he met Bedelia, when marriage between he and Ellen seemed imminent. However, the novel ends not with the patriarchal family re-established, as in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, but with a broken Charlie sitting on the loveseat while Ellen stands next to him. This scene echoes the one that opened the novel: Charlie and Bedelia sitting on the loveseat before their holiday guests arrive. Viewing these parallel scenes as bookends, we can see that the era that *Bedelia* represented is ending, soon to be terminated by the advent of World War I—in which millions of women lost their husbands, lovers, fathers, and brothers and thus had to be independent—and the Nineteenth Amendment establishing women’s right to vote.¹¹ The “man’s woman” has been killed off, but the “working girl” is still standing.

Considering *Bedelia* as an adaptation of *Lady Audley’s Secret* allows a view of *Bedelia* as a challenge to hegemony rather than a reinforcement of it. *Bedelia* provides a cautionary tale of the dangers of women’s total reliance on men for income and social status, highlighting the precarious nature of this arrangement for both women and men. Through the novel’s critique of marriage and socially approved models of femininity and its exploration of the tension between available identities for women in the first half of the twentieth century, *Bedelia* paves the way for the ascent of the career woman.

Keywords: adaptation; *Bedelia*; Braddon, Mary Elizabeth; Caspary, Vera; *Lady Audley’s Secret*

NOTES

1. After its initial serialization in *Sixpenny Magazine*, *Lady Audley's Secret* went through eight editions in the first three months of its publication in volume form. It was also adapted for the stage and serialized again in the *London Journal*. For more on the publishing history of *Lady Audley's Secret*, see Houston (16–18). For novels based on Braddon's, see, for example, Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask* (1866).

2. WorldCat and the Library of Congress list more than 20 editions of *Lady Audley's Secret* published by sixteen different publishing firms in the United States between 1863 and the 1910s, indicating that Caspary would have had access to the novel. Caspary records in her autobiography and letters reading Jane Austen, J. M. Barrie, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, George Bernard Shaw, and Anthony Trollope, and references Ellen Ward in the novel itself (*Secrets* 22, 33–34, 110, 195; Letter to Faith Logotheth; *Bedelia* 14). See Emrys's "Laura, Vera, and Wilkie" for the parallels between *Laura* and *The Woman in White*.

3. Caspary nods to the pre-Raphaelite movement in describing Ellen Walker as a "Burne-Jones virgin" (8).

4. According to her own account, *Bedelia* has killed four previous husbands, the first accidentally.

5. See, for example, Fisk, Gilbert, Nemesvari, and Pykett (87–95) on the subversive nature of *Lady Audley's Secret*.

6. See Mara, Blood (376), Cuppy (14), W., and Du Bois (12) for these appellations in reviews of *Bedelia*. The *Spectator* described *Lady Audley* as "a monstrosity, — a moral Julia Pastrana [a famous Victorian sideshow artist] — a *lusus naturæ*" in its review of *Lady Audley's Secret* (483).

7. Emrys likewise finds that *Bedelia* "embodies the dilemma of women who have few, if any, opportunities — except marriage to improve their financial position and live well" ("Afterword" 203–04).

8. Braddon and Caspary share many biographical similarities. Both women worked to support themselves and their mothers, Braddon as an actress and a writer and Caspary as a copywriter, editor, and author. Both lived with married men for many years before marrying them. Braddon lived with editor John Maxwell (his wife was in an insane asylum), and Caspary lived openly with movie producer Isidore Goldsmith (his wife was in England). Braddon married Maxwell in 1874 after his wife's death, and Caspary married Goldsmith in 1949 after he divorced his wife. Both women also contributed substantially to their household finances. Braddon wrote prolifically to support her six children with Maxwell, and Caspary continued to be the couple's primary breadwinner after their marriage. See Wolff and Caspary, *Secrets* for more on the lives of these women.

9. Caspary published 19 novels, more than 20 screen synopses, and four plays during her career. She addresses women's opportunities in *Laura* and *Evvie* as well and is decidedly in favor of women working in her autobiography.

10. Robert repeatedly notes that Providence, or "a hand which stronger than [his] own," directs his investigation (Braddon 197).

11. As Caspary writes of this era in her semi-autobiographical novel *Evvie*:

A war had freed us and given women a new kind of self-respect. The adjective *poor* no longer preceded the once disreputable *working girl*. It was honorable, it was jolly, it was even superior to be a *career girl*.... We held jobs, we voted, we asserted equal independence with men, equal privilege. Best and most decisive in the reshaping of our lives was the money in our pocketbooks. (25; emphasis in original)

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