

POCKETS OF IDENTITY: NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S POCKETS IN *LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET* AND A FASHION PLATE FROM THE *ENGLISHWOMAN'S DOMESTIC MAGAZINE*

Deirdre A. Duffy

Abstract: Copious nineteenth-century novels feature women's fashion as more than passing references or descriptive details for the sake of imagery. In fact, a female character's development is often linked to the style and manner to in which she wears her clothing. One such example of a minor fashion element is the pocket, specifically, the pocket(s) in women's dresses. This essay analyzes the subtle, yet notable presence that pockets occupy for the women characters in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862 Sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, while also examining the placement and function of pockets in a nineteenth-century dresses from a fashion plate featured in an 1864 edition of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. Juxtaposed as fact versus fiction, these two nineteenth-century artefacts share intriguing properties that invite analysis of the novel's female characters by what they sustain or lose from their pockets.

Women's fashion in the nineteenth century is notorious for dramatic transformations in shape, style, detail, and stability. In an era bursting with consumerism, textile availability, and the social elite's hunger for high-fashion trends, women's dresses, specifically, morphed somewhat rapidly among these decades, propagating symbolic statements of identity via the clothes with which a Victorian woman displayed herself. At the same time as this fashion frenzy, the period's authors and artists often utilized the concrete details as well as implied properties associated with women's clothing with powerful symbolism, using the 'awareness of clothing as something that has potential for both restriction of identity as well as expression of it'.¹ Thus this prolific attention to detail and nuance, both in the literature and in the documented fashion, provides for an examination of how subtle clothing details reveal expanded possibilities for critical analysis. One such example of a detail in women's fashion is the pocket, an item which itself embodies a fluctuating identity in women's apparel, particularly from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. Research reveals that throughout the eighteenth century, women wore pockets as separate garments tied beneath their skirts; pockets were not yet stitched into dresses as they were into men's clothing. In the nineteenth century, evidence indicates that while some women still possessed these tie-on pockets as separate garments, the latter half of the century's artefacts show that the more fashionable dresses began having pockets stitched within the garment.² As a pocket provides various practical functions for carrying one's possessions, the location, accessibility, and potential privacy of this clothing item offer a lens with which to investigate the potent symbolic and metaphorical potential the pocket embodies for female figures in nineteenth-century art and literature.

¹ Tara Puri, 'FABRICATING INTIMACY: READING THE DRESSING ROOM IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), 503–525 <<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9004970>> [accessed 27 January 2014], p. 503.

² 'A History of Pockets', Victoria and Albert Museum <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/history-of-pockets/>> [accessed 3 June 2013].

Victorian novels reveal a panoply of female characters who negotiate their identities in various manners, and often their clothing embodies aspects of their flux in status. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862 Sensation novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, features a unique female character that possesses a chameleonic identity on several levels. She is at once the heroine and the villain of the story, transforming herself through four separate names, homes, and occupations during the novel. While iterated in retrospect and referred to as the titular name of Lady Audley or 'My Lady' by the omnipresent narrator, details about her physical appearance and dress punctuate the narrative, alluding to not only elements of the Sensation genre but to elements of Victorian fashion. Early in the novel, Lady Audley's dress pocket becomes a source of intrigue that leads to a significant revelation about her identity. In comparison, an 1864 fashion plate from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* features a drawing of two women and a young girl in the fashionable wide-skirted, crinolined dresses of the time. Two of these figures wear dresses with clearly displayed pockets sewn into the dresses themselves, each with one hand casually tucked into their pocket as if to emphasize them as an accented detail as well as an accessible container for possessions. In Braddon's novel, Lady Audley, Alicia Audley, and Phoebe Marks all discover, place, or remove items from their respective pockets, and each of these specific actions directly link to the sequential discovery of Lady Audley's true identity. In *New Perspectives on Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas contends that the plethora of 'female accessories', such as fashionable clothing, that surround Lady Audley's identity gradually deconstruct her into a "two-dimensional" female character who is more like "a model posing on a fashion plate".³ In this respect, the novel and fashion plate then share a symbiotic connection, allowing these two nineteenth-century artefacts to not simply demonstrate commonalities with the material functions of pockets, but to pose larger questions regarding women's identity in terms of their clothing.

A specific pocket reference appears in the opening chapter of *Lady Audley's Secret*, which commences not by introducing Lady Audley, but by introducing her stepdaughter, Alicia Audley. The narrator intimates that the eighteen-year-old Alicia is displeased with her stepmother's presence in Audley Court because, as a child, she had 'reigned supreme in her father's house' and had 'carried the keys, and jingled them in the pockets of her silk aprons' as she believed 'she had been keeping the house'. While the keys represent Alicia's formerly felt ownership and independence as young mistress of the estate, her pocket is what allows her to possess and carry those keys and 'jingle' them as a reminder that she was, in a sense, the estate's 'Lady Audley'. Thus her pocket, now empty of those sacred keys she delighted in jingling, acts as a metaphor for her retrograde transition from the lady who once 'reigned supreme' to the child unwillingly relegated to stepdaughter. The narrator goes on to point out Alicia's refusal to submit to her role as docile stepdaughter as she 'set her face with a sulky determination against any intimacy between herself and the baronet's young wife' because, by marrying the girl's father, Lady Audley had 'made one of those apparently advantageous matches which are apt to draw upon a woman the envy and hatred of her sex'.⁴ The 'match' of Lady Audley to Alicia's father effectively makes Alicia the defeated mistress, causing her to view her stepmother as a rival, which continues throughout the novel. This also marks one of the early possibilities that Lady Audley's character is in some way suspicious.

³ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, "'If I Read Her Right': Textual Secrets in Thou Art the Man (1894)", in *New Perspectives on Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, ed. by Jessica Cox (Amsterdam - New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2012), pp. 195–210, p. 195.

⁴ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 1998 edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1862), p.4-5.

As the novel begins to disclose aspects of Lady Audley's character, the narrator frequently refers to the character's clothing and accessories. Posing as the governess Lucy Graham, she wears 'a narrow black ribbon round her neck, with a locket, or a cross, or a miniature, perhaps, attached to it; but whatever the trinket was, she always kept it hidden under her dress'.⁵ When Lucy Graham becomes the married Lady Audley, her wardrobe increases, as does the distance from her true identity as Helen Talboys. She accrues a plethora of fashionable dresses and jewels, thereby procuring a new identity for herself as a wealthy woman of the upper class. Another early clue that she harbors a deep secret is discovered in the exact luxurious clothing with which she adorns herself, and a pocket-to-pocket exchange ensues. When Phoebe Marks takes her fiancé into Lady Audley's dressing room through the 'fairy-like boudoir', she discovers while folding the 'heap' of 'rustling silk dresses' that her mistress has forgotten take the keys 'she always keeps herself' which unlock her massive jewel collection.

As she was shaking out the flounces of the last, a jingling sound caught her ear, and she put her hand into the pocket. 'I declare!' she exclaimed, 'my lady has left her keys in her pocket for once in a way; I can show you the jewelry [. . .]'.⁶

Once again, keys jingling in a pocket mark a transition of identity: the jingling keys from young Alicia's pocket figuratively inherit a new form as the keys Lady Audley keeps in her dress pocket, which then jingle to pique Phoebe's curiosity. Barbara Burman contends that the pocket is 'literally at the edge' of clothing and that the interiority of pockets 'suggests a particular intimacy [. . .] of the few permissible breaches of the clothed space between the private body and the public world.'⁶ This 'breach' then causes the pocket to function as a threshold to Lady Audley's privacy, a place of transition between her identity as Lady Audley and Helen Talboys. The pocket ultimately prompts Phoebe to literally unlock a piece of Lady Audley's secret by discovering the 'baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of [. . .] hair, evidently taken from the baby's head'. Now a portion of Lady Audley's background has been unearthed and, similar to the transfer of power from Alicia to her stepmother, Phoebe seizes power by 'putting the little parcel into her pocket' for future aid in blackmailing her mistress.⁷

The pivotal pocket in Lady Audley's dress summons ideas of where and how women wore pockets in their dresses during the time period of the novel. Talairach-Vielmas writes that the novel features Lady Audley as a 'fashionable artefact designed for visual stimulation', thus this invites the ability to compare and analyze Braddon's use of female characters' pockets in relation to primary sources of 1860s fashion.⁸ The 1864 fashion plate from *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* showcases two women and a young girl modeling the current dresses in contemporary women's high fashion.

⁵ Braddon, p. 8-9.

⁶ Barbara Burman, 'Pocketing the Difference: Gender and Pockets in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Gender and History*, 14 (2002), 447-469 <<http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2111/swoc-web/linkingDetails.html?openURL=false&issn=0953-5233&eissn=0953-5233&volume=14&issue=3&page=447>> [accessed 29 July 2013], p. 460.

⁷ Braddon, pp. 27-30.

⁸ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels*, Bodleian Library Electronic Book (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2007) p. 124.



Figure 1: Fashion Plate Print from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, Goubaud & Fils (publisher) and Legastelois (printer), 1864, lithograph on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.⁹

The woman on the left models the dress style that became popular in the 1860s: a skirt with a flatter front and the fullness moved toward the back using a bustle as well as triangular panels to aid in allowing the skirts to lie smoothly over the crinolines, or hooped petticoats, formed underneath. The dress distinctively highlights a pocket in the jacket bodice and the woman's inserted hand implies that this pocket would certainly be fitting to hold small possessions, such as keys or a secret parcel. Based on actual dresses still intact at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the fashion plate's image is most certainly a realistic example of what an upper-class Victorian woman would wear. The following dress from the museum's collection is extremely similar in shape and style, and also features pockets:

⁹ Goubaud and Fils (publisher), and Legastelois (printer), Fashion Plate Print from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 1864, Victoria and Albert Museum Department of Prints and Drawings and Department of Paintings, Accessions 1959 <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O121369/print-goubaud/>> [accessed 27 January 2014]. This hand-coloured lithograph is displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum Department of Prints and Drawings and Department of Paintings collection. In 1860, the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine's* publisher, Samuel Beeton, added hand-coloured fashion plates from French fashion to the publication along with paper patterns to appeal to the ever-growing audience of women readers who owned personal sewing machines.



*Figure 2: Dress, artist unknown, 1868, silk trimmed with braid, satin, linen, beads, bobbin lace, and silk fringed, lined with cotton and boned, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*¹⁰

The museum's description provides extensive detail of this surviving fashion artefact, such as the 'green silk with a woven horizontal stripe', the hem being trimmed with a 'deep flounce bound with darker green satin' and a 'watch pocket inside the centre front waist band' as well as a 'white glazed pocket in a seam on the right-hand side.' The similarity of this dress to that featured in the fashion plate suggests the existence of more discreet pockets sewn into women's clothing; not only are pockets part of the garment itself, but one might have to be familiar with the dress in order to locate the pockets.

Much like fashion today, Victorian women's clothing evolved, and is categorized, by decade. Distinctive changes can be particularly evinced in the skirt shape of a dress, which may account for where pockets, if included in the dress, were located. Dresses in the 1840s and 1850s featured skirts with crinolines made with layers of petticoats covering whalebone hoops, but by the 1860s and 1870s, bustles changed the shape of dresses by flattening the sides and pushing the fullness to the back of the skirt.¹¹ These details are significant in the novel as to how Phoebe discovers Lady Audley's keys in her pocket. As she folds the aforementioned 'heap' of 'rustling silk dresses' she hears the jingling keys as she is 'shaking out the flounces' of the dress before putting her hand into the pocket. A flounce – a strip of material sewed at its top to a woman's skirt as a decorative feature – is also noted in the description of the museum's 1868 dress, and dress patterns from the 1840s through the 1860s exhibit pockets sewn into dress seams, eventually becoming more frequent than the tie-on pockets popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹² While cultural realism is not necessarily vital in a Sensation novel, these

¹⁰ 'Dress | V&A Search the Collections' <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O115849/dress-unknown/>> [accessed 30 January 2014].

¹¹ 'Fashion Trends', University of Washington Libraries Digital Collections <<http://content.lib.washington.edu/costumehistweb/fashion-trends.html>> [accessed 27 January 2014].

¹² Burman, p. 451.

subtle details grant Lady Audley's 1860s dress some validation as a believable representation of a Victorian-era women's fashion artefact.

Lady Audley's dress pocket continues to act as a symbol for the exposure of her true identity. Upon hearing the name 'George Talboys' as the companion to her visiting nephew, Robert Audley, she hurriedly orchestrates a sham for needing to leave Audley Court and flees just before the men visit. The narrator describes her as being in a 'haste', yet, prior to exiting, she pauses 'deliberately' at the door of her dressing room, 'double-locked it, and dropped the key into her pocket. This door once locked cut off all access to my lady's apartments.'¹³ Though Lady Audley's truth is still mysterious to the reader, she seems to, at this moment, command protection over her identity by placing the key in her pocket, suggesting that the pocket is a space she deems safe and secure. Whereas she carelessly leaves her keys in her dress pocket before her knowledge of George Talboys's visit, this 'deliberate' locking of her door and pocketing of her keys illustrates an augmented alertness for Lady Audley, motivating her to concoct yet another false story in order to explain her absence while her nephew and companion visit the estate. By persuading Phoebe to deliver the telegram in London, Lady Audley creates a kind of one-dimensional image of herself, figuratively assuming a similar property of the woman in the fashion plate because she is 'first and foremost an aesthetic composition.'¹⁴ With hand in pocket, Lady Audley clings to something hidden from the reader and other characters, and instead presents the aesthetic, idealized version of herself that she has assembled.

As her secret begins to unravel, pockets continue to function as more than subtle details. During her stepmother's feigned absence, Alicia shares a letter with Robert Audley and George Talboys where Lady Audley specifically inquires as to how long the men plan to visit, and demands that Alicia write back in order to 'answer my question about Mr. Audley and his friend, you volatile, forgetful Alicia!' Alicia produces this letter 'from the pocket of her riding-jacket' and Robert's attraction to Lady Audley propels him to inspect the letter. He remarks that her handwriting is the 'prettiest, most coquettish little hand I ever saw' and that, even if he had never laid eyes on her, he should 'know what she is like by this slip of paper [. . .] the flaxen curls [. . .] the winning, childish smile; all to be guessed in these few graceful up-strokes and down-strokes'.¹⁵ This scrutiny of Lady Audley's handwriting foreshadows a piece of Robert's evidence in revealing her past through use of another letter by her hand. Though the letter is the actual clue, it is Alicia's pocket that possesses and produces this vital information, thereby once again granting her a level of power in her home, much as she had as a child, jingling the keys in her pockets.

Alicia's pocket plays a pivotal role here as, several pages later, she invites the men to view her stepmother's private rooms. Lady Audley's pocket again echoes within the plot; since the keys to her locked rooms are with her in her pocket, Alicia prompts the men to gain access to the dressing room by crawling through a secret passage. This metaphorical violation of Lady Audley's privacy mimics that of Phoebe reaching into the dress pocket to retrieve the keys; in a sense, the men are almost climbing into Lady Audley's pocket by entering her most private and supposedly secure space. Once again, a pocket, or, in this case, the lack thereof, is revelatory as not only do Robert and George seize a voyeuristic view of Lady Audley's 'glittering toilette apparatus', 'ivory-backed hairbrush', and 'treasures within' the 'open doors of a wardrobe', but George identifies his presumed-dead wife by the Pre-Raphaelite portrait with its 'crispy ringlets

¹³ Braddon, p. 60.

¹⁴ Talairach-Vielmas, p. 133.

¹⁵ Braddon, p. 61.

and the heavy folds of her crimson velvet dress'.¹⁶ Her identity via the painting compares with the fashion plates in its literal form as a one-dimensional object and her 'ideal femininity' becomes 'more and more artificial'.¹⁷ Yet George's recognition of his wife posing for both the portrait and *as* Lady Audley in life personifies the image, creating a climactic transcendence of her many falsities and fueling Robert to unveil her true identity.

As a fashion detail, nineteenth-century women's pockets reveal layers of possibilities for the portrayal of identity. If clothing in general is indeed 'one of the most consistently gendered aspects of material and visual culture', then the visual details in the novel and the visual details in the fashion plate conjure a synthesis of importance. Pockets and their functions create an ancillary lens for analysis on both a literal and figurative level; the women's pockets in the fashion plate convey a sense of desired style while the characters' pockets operate to portray their desired status in life. In particular, the power struggle that ignites among Lady Audley, Alicia Audley, and Phoebe Marks can all be tied to what they carry, find, or lose via their pockets. Thus an exterior detail morphs into a symbol of interior space with vast potential, proving the importance of the intimacy associated with women and their clothing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- '19th-Century Fashion - Victoria and Albert Museum', Victoria and Albert Museum <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/0-9/19th-century-fashion/>> [accessed 27 January 2014]
- 'A History of Pockets', Victoria and Albert Museum <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/history-of-pockets/>> [accessed 3 June 2013]
- Allingham, Phillip V., 'The Victorian Sensation Novel, 1860-1880', *The Victorian Web* <<http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/sensation.html>> [accessed 27 January 2014]
- Braddon, Mary Elizabeth, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 1998 edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1862)
- Buck, Anne, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories* (New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1961) <<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015000671456;view=1up;seq=9>> [accessed 31 January 2014]
- Burman, Barbara, 'Pocketing the Difference: Gender and Pockets in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Gender and History*, 14 (2002), 447–469 <<http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2111/swoc-web/linkingDetails.html?openURL=false&issn=0953-5233&eissn=0953-5233&volume=14&issue=3&page=447>> [accessed 29 July 2013]
- --, 'Pockets of History', VADS: The Online Resource for Visual Arts, 2008 <<http://www.vads.ac.uk/collections/POCKETS>> [accessed 14 August 2013]
- --, and Carole Turbin, 'Introduction: Material Strategies Engendered', *Gender and History*, 14 (2002), 371–381 <[http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1468-0424](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1468-0424)> [accessed 8 August 2013]
- Chico, Tita, *Designing Women: The Dressing Room In Eighteenth-century English Literature and Culture* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2005)

¹⁶ Braddon, pp. 64–69.

¹⁷ Talairch-Vielmas, p. 133.

‘Corsets & Crinolines in Victorian Fashion - Victoria and Albert Museum’
 <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/corsets-and-crinolines-in-victorian-fashion/>>
 [accessed 27 January 2014]

‘Dress | V&A Search the Collections’ <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O115849/dress-unknown/>> [accessed 30 January 2014]

‘Fashion Trends’, University of Washington Libraries Digital Collections
 <<http://content.lib.washington.edu/costumehistweb/fashion-trends.html>> [accessed 27 January 2014]

‘Flounce’, *Oxford English Dictionary*
 <http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2277/search?searchType=dictionary&q=Flounce&_searchBtn=Search> [accessed 4 February 2014]

Goubaud and Fils (publisher), and Legastelois (printer), Fashion Plate Print from the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, 1864
 <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O121369/print-goubaud/>> [accessed 27 January 2014]

‘Introduction to 19th-Century Fashion - Victoria and Albert Museum’
 <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/introduction-to-19th-century-fashion/>> [accessed 30 January 2014]

Macdonald, Tara, ‘Sensation Fiction, Gender and Identity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 127–140

Piehler, Liana F., *Spatial Dynamics and Female Development in Victorian Art and Novels: Creating a Woman’s Space*, Bodleian Library Electronic Book (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003)
 <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/bodleian/docDetail.action?docID=10128827>> [accessed 31 January 2014]

‘Pocket’, *Oxford English Dictionary* <<http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2277/view/Entry/146402?rskey=iIzpKk&result=1#eid>> [accessed 12 August 2013]

Puri, Tara, ‘FABRICATING INTIMACY: READING THE DRESSING ROOM IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), 503–525
 <<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9004970>>
 [accessed 27 January 2014]

Talairach-Vielmas, Laurence, “‘If I Read Her Right’”: Textual Secrets in *Thou Art the Man* (1894)’, in *New Perspectives on Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, ed. by Jessica Cox (Amsterdam - New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2012), pp. 195–210

-- --, ‘Investigating the Books of Beauties in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) and M.E. Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862)’, in *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels* (Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2007)
 <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/bodleian/docDetail.action?docID=10211206>> [accessed 27 January 2014]

Tomaiuolo, Saverio, *In Lady Audley’s Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Genres* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010)
 <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/bodleian/docDetail.action?docID=10433754>> [accessed 27 January 2014]