

Playing Cute: Sensation Villainy and the Aesthetics of Small Things in *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*

Laura Eastlake*

ABSTRACT

In *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), Sianne Ngai defines 'cute' as an aesthetic 'preoccupation with small, easy to handle things . . . an aesthetic that celebrates the diminutive and the vulnerable'. Although Ngai identifies the cute as a predominantly twentieth-century phenomenon, and one which is inextricably bound up with the mass-market commodification, even eroticization and fetishization of the cute object or person, it is difficult to imagine a literary character more enamoured with 'small things' – from tiny, sugary confections to his menagerie of pet mice – than Wilkie Collins's Count Fosco, or a character who so perfectly conforms to the definition of the cute commodity itself as 'appealing specifically . . . for protection and care' than the 'childish, helpless, babyfied' Lucy Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). This article reads Count Fosco and Lady Audley through the characteristics of cuteness to better understand the aesthetic and economic dynamics of their villainy, and to establish for the twentieth-century phenomenon of cuteness identified by Ngai a discernible genealogy in the specific conjunction of print culture, theatricality, commodification, and physical sensation that we now recognize as the sensation fiction of the 1860s.

KEYWORDS: Sensation, cute, cuteness, Collins, Braddon, Ngai, aesthetics, Fosco

When Wilkie Collins published *The Woman in White* (1859–1860) he crystallized not only a new form of fiction – an 'archetype of a genre' that thrilled readers and disgruntled critics with its sensational plots and overt commercial appeal – but also a new kind of villain in the flamboyant Count Fosco.¹ In the weeks following Fosco's first appearance in the serialized text, critics were equally puzzled and charmed by his combining of the seemingly incongruous traits of a vast and villainous intellect with a childish love of sweets and small animals. E. S. Dallas's review for *The Times* remarked on the novelty of this most idiosyncratic of antagonists:

Here he is with his child-like tastes, with his love of tart and cream, with his fondness for birds and mice, with his affection for sugar and water, with his horror of blood, but also with a contempt for human suffering, with a . . . determination to gain his own ends, and with the knowledge that under his childlike tastes and impulsive ways he can easily conceal the most nefarious designs.²

* Edge Hill University, UK, E-mail: laura.eastlake@edgehill.ac.uk

¹ Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: The Sensation Novel of the 1860s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 138.

² E. S. Dallas, 'The Woman in White', *The Times* (30 October 1860), 6.

Reflecting retrospectively on Collins's achievement in 1890, a reviewer for *Temple Bar* also noted that 'no one had before conceived the possibility of a villain who should be fat and comic, and possess pet animals.'³ Eliza Lynn Linton noticed with alarm a parallel novelty in the female villains of sensation fiction. Clearly thinking of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley*, she warned that:

Instead of five foot ten of black and brown, they have gone in for four foot nothing of pink and yellow; instead of tumbled masses of raven hair, they have shining coils of purest gold; instead of hollow caverns whence flash unfathomable eyes eloquent of every damnable passion, they have limpid lakes of heavenly blue; and their worst sinners are in all respects fashioned as much after the outward semblance of the ideal saint as can well be managed.⁴

The contemporaries of Collins and Braddon seem acutely aware of what Patrick Brantlinger identifies as the sensation genre's need for a new and different type of villain: 'Only a well-conceived villain or villainess – Collins's Count Fosco, Braddon's *Lady Audley*, Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* – seems strong enough both to shape circumstances and to rival sensational events in interest.'⁵ Often these villains have been read critically – and usefully – as embodiments of a range of Victorian social anxieties. Critics have regarded these characters, and particularly the sensational female writer-reader-subject, as representing increasingly 'unstable or porous class boundaries', 'potential threat[s] to the presumed stability of patriarchal culture', as manifestations of broader 'Woman Question' and New Woman debates, and as figures of gendered protest.⁶ Yet whilst the 'anxiety thesis' accounts for how villains like Fosco and *Lady Audley* unsettled Victorian readerships with their ability to infiltrate spaces and systems of knowledge to which they traditionally do not belong and where they can potentially do great harm, it far less convincingly accounts for why these new types of villain brought such pleasure to readers. After all, despite their fearful associations, these seminal figures of sensation villainy captivated and endeared themselves, albeit in slightly different and gendered ways, to readerships eager for more of their dastardly deeds, and even to some of the harshest critics of the genre. Margaret Oliphant, despite being one of the decade's most outspoken detractors of sensation fiction, was positively charmed by Collins's Count Fosco:

The sympathies of the reader . . . are, it is impossible to deny, devoted to the arch-villain of the story. The charm of the book, so far as character counts in its effect, is Fosco. He is a new type of the perennial enemy of goodness. But there is no resisting the charm of his good nature, his wit, his foibles, his personal individuality . . . The reader shares in the unwilling liking to which, at his first appearance, he beguiles Marian Halcombe; but the reader, notwithstanding the fullest proof of Fosco's villainy, does not give him up, and take to hating him as Marian does.⁷

³ 'The Novels of Wilkie Collins', *Temple Bar*, 89. 357 (August 1890), 528–32.

⁴ Eliza Lynn Linton, 'Little Women', *Saturday Review*, 25 (April 1868), 545–46 (p. 545).

⁵ Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is Sensational About the Sensation Novel?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), 1–28 (p. 13).

⁶ Andrew Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), p. 87. See in particular Lyn Pykett, *The "improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992); Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Greta Depledge, 'Sensation Fiction and the New Woman', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. by Andrew Mangham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 196–209.

⁷ Margaret Oliphant, 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 91 (May 1862), 564–80 (pp. 566–67).

Like Dallas, Oliphant acknowledges something ‘new’ about Fosco as a villain and identifies his ‘foibles’ – which refer, among other traits, to Fosco’s peculiar affection for small animals, sugary treats, and outlandish dress – as a key reason for his appeal. Yet Oliphant also traces an important divergence in affection between characters and the reader: where characters must learn of Fosco’s villainy and despise him, the reader, upon learning the same, is able to continue in their affection for him.

This article proposes that aesthetic theory can provide a useful alternative to cultural historicist readings of the sensation villain as a figure of anxiety, and explain the enduring appeal of sensation villainy for readers like Oliphant. By understanding the most novel and incongruous traits of sensation villainy as manifestations of what Sianne Ngai calls the ‘cute’ aesthetic, we not only add to critical understandings of the unease prompted by characters like Fosco and Lady Audley, but also address the more elusive question of how to theorize their appeal. In *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), Ngai defines the ‘cute’ as an aesthetic ‘preoccupation with small, easy to handle things . . . an aesthetic that celebrates the diminutive and the vulnerable’. Cuteness is also inextricably bound up with the commodification, even eroticization and fetishization, of the cute object or person, ‘revolving around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening.’⁸ Whilst Ngai – following Hannah Arendt, Theodore Adorno and others – focusses on cuteness as a product of predominantly twentieth-century capitalist culture, it is difficult to think of a literary character more enamoured with ‘small things’ than the exuberant Count Fosco with his ‘family of white mice’ and love of dainty sweetmeats, nor a character who so perfectly conforms to the definition of the cute commodity itself as ‘appealing specifically . . . for protection and care’ than the ‘childish, helpless, babyfied little creature’ that is Lucy Audley.⁹ I argue that the dual responses of affection and unease that Fosco provokes in readers as well as in the other characters of the novel, go hand in hand when understood via the aesthetics of cuteness. Both Fosco and Lady Audley ‘play cute’ in order to engineer their own personal material gain and to divert suspicion from their crimes. Their cuteness derives from what Walter Benjamin called a kind of ‘false simplicity’ – an aesthetic relationship with small objects which Benjamin had begun to theorize as early as the 1920s in his essays on ‘Old Toys’ (1928).¹⁰ The cute performances of Fosco and Lady Audley, when read through Ngai’s theory of twentieth-century aesthetics, not only establish the deeper roots of the cute commodity in nineteenth-century popular genres, they are also metonymic of how the sensation genre itself functions in the marketplace. Even as the texts ask us morally to condemn these characters at the level of story, there is an aesthetic substructure at work which harnesses the cute appeal of sensation villains to perpetuate the sensation genre as a commodity itself. As readers, we are meant to derive pleasure from their antics, to crave more of it, to consume the next instalment of their story. After all, in the words of Margaret Oliphant: ‘The charm of the book . . . is Fosco’. Sensation novels were by their very nature conceived of as a commercial product. Both Collins and Braddon speak in their correspondence of the professional pressures of producing new instalments to be consumed on a weekly or monthly basis and which,

⁸ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 3; 9.

⁹ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. by Maria K. Bachman (Toronto: Broadview, 2006), p. 242. Further references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text. Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 60; Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, ed. by Lyn Pykett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 121.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Old Toys: The Toy Exhibition at the Märkisches Museum’ in *Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, cited in Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 73.

as H. L. Mansel warned in 1863, were engineered to ‘stimulate the want which they supply.’¹¹ Thus, the explicitly commercial, saleable nature of cuteness becomes a means by which to ‘charm’ the reader, to beguile them into purchasing – into possessing – each new instalment.

1. CUTENESS AND SENSATION: THE CASE OF COUNT FOSCO

From small animals and their plush toy counterparts with oversized eyes, to dainty food-stuffs, Hello Kitty, and the world of kawaii culture, cuteness in Sianne Ngai’s formulation is ‘an aestheticization of powerlessness.’¹² The cute aesthetic – often focalized through small, soft and easily squishable objects – is one which ‘[revolves] around the desire for an ever more intimate, ever more sensuous relation to objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening’ and which, as a consequence, is inextricably bound up with ‘commodities, the act of consumption, and the feminized domestic sphere.’¹³ The cute object, Ngai suggests, evokes a two-pronged aesthetic response: ‘evoking tenderness for “small things” but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further.’¹⁴ What psychological studies have termed ‘cute aggression’ accounts for a range of cultural responses to cute stimuli, from the commonly reported desire to bite a cute baby, to the troubling eroticization of the schoolgirl.¹⁵ ‘Cute things’, Ngai argues ‘evoke a desire in us not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them’, in much the same way a plush toy calls for the consumer to take it home to cuddle and care for it, but only after the necessary act of purchase.¹⁶

The dual responses of appeal and unease elicited by Collins’s Count Fosco, then, make sense when understood via cute aesthetics. Fosco is constantly surrounded by small, sweet, easily consumable objects. As Marian Halcombe reports, his most striking quirk is his affection for his pet mice:

His white mice live in a little pagoda of gaily-painted wirework, designed and made by himself. They are almost as tame as the canaries, and they are perpetually let out like the canaries. They crawl all over him, popping in and out of his waistcoat, and sitting in couples, white as snow, on his capacious shoulders. He seems to be even fonder of his mice than of his other pets, smiles at them, and kisses them, and calls them by all sorts of endearing names. . . . the Count, apparently, sees nothing ridiculous in the amazing contrast between his colossal self and his frail little pets. He would blandly kiss his white mice and twitter to his canary-birds amid an assembly of English fox-hunters. (p. 243)

¹¹ Braddon wrote to Edward Bulwer-Lytton in December 1862 that ‘I have never written a line that has not been written against time – sometimes with the printer waiting outside the door. I have written as conscientiously as I could; but more with a view to the interests of my publishers than with any great regard to my own reputation.’ Cited in Robert Lee Wolff, ‘Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862–1873’, *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 22 (1974), 5–35 (p. 10); [H. L. Mansel] ‘Sensation Novels’, *Quarterly Review*, 113 (1863), 482–83. For more on Victorian anxieties about novel reading as a compulsive consumption frequently described by detractors as an unhealthy habit akin to dram-drinking or imbibing *eau-sucrée* see: ‘The Novel Reading Disease’, *Examiner*, 26 August 1871, 848–49; ‘The Vice of Reading’, *Temple Bar*, 42 (September 1874), 251–57.

¹² Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 64.

¹³ Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Oriana R. Aragón, Margaret S. Clark, Rebecca L. Dyer and John A. Bargh, ‘Dimorphous Expressions of Positive Emotion: Displays of Both Care and Aggression in Response to Cute Stimuli’, *Psychological Science*, 26 (2015), 259–73.

¹⁶ Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 4.

As well as being small, soft and physically ‘frail’, particularly by contrast with Fosco’s large frame, the mice exist in a feminized domestic sphere – the ‘little . . . pagoda’ – of Fosco’s own creation. In his relationship with his animals, Fosco also displays signs of a kind of mimesis that Ngai identifies as part of the cute aesthetic, whereby cute traits get ‘repeated in the compulsion to imitate the “soft” properties of the object in our speech.’¹⁷ Thus Fosco ‘kisses’ and ‘twitters’ to the animals that he himself later refers to as ‘My innocent pets! my little cherished children!’ (p. 588). Indeed, as Ngai observes about the same word, ‘if “twittering” is how we imagine the language of cute beings, cuteness seems to have a similar effect on the speech of the aesthetic judge.’¹⁸ It is a transferal of cute, feminine characteristics that Marian Halcombe notices when she describes the count as having ‘all the fondness of an old maid for his cockatoo’ (p. 243). Fosco becomes cute by association, but always in ways which feel incongruous or slightly unnerving to his fellow characters, even if they cannot fully articulate their unease. When first confronted with the sight of Fosco and his mice, for instance, Marian notes:

He put the pagoda-cage on his lap, and let out the mice to crawl over him as usual. They are pretty, innocent-looking little creatures, but the sight of them creeping about a man’s body is for some reason not pleasant to me. It excites a strange responsive creeping in my own nerves. (p. 254)

Marian’s unease here is in part an aesthetic one – she has little else to inform her suspicions of Fosco at this point in the novel. Far from emphasizing the difference between Fosco and the small, soft mice, the sight of this interaction, with its transferal of cute characteristics, seems to collapse it into uncanny similarity. To articulate her disquiet, Marian makes her own semantic/aesthetic equivalence, between the ‘creeping’ and ‘crawling’ mice and a ‘responsive creeping’ of her own nerves: a response which evokes the notion of one’s skin crawling or of being ‘creeped out’. During the writing up of her narrative in her journal, Marian takes the time to reflect further on the episode, and tries to unpack the cultural associations which underpin her initial aesthetic revulsion:

It seems hardly credible, while I am writing it down, . . . that this same man, who has . . . all the small dexterities of an organ-boy in managing his white mice, can talk, when anything happens to rouse him, with a daring independence of thought, a knowledge of books in every language, and an experience of society in half the capitals of Europe, which would make him the prominent personage of any assembly in the civilised world. This trainer of canary-birds, this architect of a pagoda for white mice, is (as Sir Percival himself has told me) one of the first experimental chemists living, and has discovered, among other wonderful inventions, a means of petrifying the body after death, so as to preserve it, as hard as marble, to the end of time. (p. 243)

Here we see her struggling to reconcile Fosco’s cute characteristics with what she has learned of his vast intellect. The cultural connotations of helplessness and vulnerability which should be transferred to the ‘trainer of canary-birds’, the ‘architect of a pagoda for white mice’ in accordance with the cute aesthetic, are at odds with the more active, ‘daring’ feats of intellect

¹⁷ Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 67.

¹⁸ Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 60.

required to establish oneself as a formidable force among the leading social and scientific circles of Europe. Furthermore, Marian has subconsciously focused on the two facets of Fosco's vast knowledge which he will deploy most directly to pursue selfish material gain, and which make him an especially dangerous villain: his gift with languages and his knowledge of chemistry. Fosco later admits that the appeal of chemistry lies in 'the enormous, the illimitable power which the knowledge of it confers' (p. 594) and uses his knowledge to drug Laura prior to having her incarcerated in an asylum. His skill with languages not only serves to help him infiltrate polite society and to access families like Laura's who might be manipulated for his own financial gain, but also affords him an easy charm which is useful for averting suspicion. Even Marian, despite her initial aversion to the sight of Fosco with his mice, succumbs to the count's captivating powers of conversation at certain moments, confessing in her journal that:

His manner and his command of our language may also have assisted him, in some degree, to establish himself in my good opinion. He has that quiet deference, that look of pleased, attentive interest in listening to a woman, and that secret gentleness in his voice in speaking to a woman, which, say what we may, we can none of us resist. Here, too, his unusual command of the English language necessarily helps him. (p. 242)

Ultimately, Marian's unease comes from a growing suspicion that Fosco's association with the cheerful helplessness of the cute aesthetic is, in part, a performance intended to disguise his villainy. It is a performance enacted not only through association with small animals, but also with sugary confections.

From sugar-water and sugar lumps to bon-bons from a 'pretty little inlaid box' and 'fruit tart, submerged under a whole jugful of cream' (p. 308), Fosco is a constant consumer of sweet treats. It is a habit which, as Wendy Woloson details in *Refined Tastes* (2002), was part of a network of cultural 'connections made between confections, women, and children'.¹⁹ The connotations of sweet-eating as a juvenile, feminine or – fittingly in the case of Fosco – a foreign pastime remain in place as late as 1893, when Lord Arthur Somerset writes that:

An Englishman who confesses to a partiality for sweets is generally looked upon as a "duffer". Fondness for sweets is allowable in children, but for a grown man to like them is held to show that there is something amiss with him.²⁰

The incompatibility of the count's sweet tooth with conventional codifications of masculinity and intellect is explicitly remarked upon by Sir Percival Glyde. When Fosco declines Sir Percival's offer of brandy and water in favour of 'Eau sucrée, my friend—nothing more', Percival experiences as masculine frustration with his friend the aesthetic disorientation that Marian feels as a vaguer, 'creeping' unease. 'Sugar-and-water for a man of your age!' Percival retorts 'There! mix your sickly mess. You foreigners are all alike' (p. 338). Even in the eyes of his accomplice in crime who knows the count's underlying motives, Fosco's taste for sugary drinks and dainty confections is at once effeminizing and infantilizing, unbecoming of 'a man' of Fosco's age, and marking him out as conspicuously foreign.²¹ Yet rather than refute any of

¹⁹ Wendy A. Woloson, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 11.

²⁰ Arthur Somerset, 'A Sweet-Eating Nation', *The Leisure Hour* (August 1893), 665.

²¹ For more on the long-standing cultural associations of sugar with women and children see Woloson, *Refined Tastes*.

these charges, Fosco gleefully embraces them. 'A taste for sweets . . . is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them' he remarks, seeming to acquiesce to his own relegation into the 'feminized domestic sphere' of the cute, as well as playing to the role Joanne Ella Parsons identifies as the 'jolly fat man' of the nineteenth-century imagination.²²

Fosco, then, is a conspicuous consumer of the cute. He is, as Parsons writes, 'a conscious eater rather than a man who is subject to chaotic disordered consumption.'²³ Yet readers are invited to understand that his overt displays of affection and indulgence, codified according to this minor aesthetic category as feminine or childlike but always unthreatening, are in part a deliberate performance engineered to avert suspicion by manipulating the aesthetics of sweet, small things. This 'playing cute' is enacted even at a corporeal level, since the constant consumption of sweetmeats has made Fosco so fat as to be conveniently unrecognizable to Pesca and the members of the Italian secret society who are hunting him. He is, by extension, most sinister in those moments where characters or readers glimpse the edges of that performance, or become aware of its aesthetic incongruities. Marian, for instance, is once again unsettled by the realization that 'Fat as he is and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women' (p. 242). She senses that his fat body, far from encumbering him, may actually serve to distract others from his skills as a covert operator.

Equally, when confronted with the groom's vicious bloodhound, Fosco 'la[ys] his plump, yellow-white fingers, on which the canary-birds had been perching ten minutes before, upon the formidable brute's head, and look[s] him straight in the eyes' (p. 244). Collins harks back to the birds and Fosco's feminine 'twitterings' in order to hint by contrast at a power, authority, and capacity for malevolence which are disturbingly out of step with the performance of cuteness he cultivates elsewhere. Fosco's resentment of the dog seems motivated in part by the dog's preying on smaller creatures, but also by a kind of disdain for a creature who wears his power so overtly on his body:

You would kill a poor cat, you infernal coward. You would fly at a starving beggar, you infernal coward. Anything that you can surprise unawares—anything that is afraid of your big body, and your wicked white teeth, and your slobbering, bloodthirsty mouth, is the thing you like to fly at. (p. 244)

Where the dog's brutishness is overt and detectable in his build, his bared teeth, and his outward demeanour, Fosco here betrays a moment of egotism, revelling in the apparent undetectability of his own villainy, masked as it is by his acts of playing cute. At the end of this encounter, Fosco therefore resumes his performance, changing tone and lamenting that 'Some of that brute's slobber has got on my pretty clean waistcoat'. He re-enters the world of the feminized domestic by drawing attention to his love of flamboyant fabrics and costume. Once again, though, the memory of witnessing this encounter prompts Marian to comment that 'His tact and cleverness in small things are quite as noticeable as the singular inconsistencies in his character, and the childish triviality of his ordinary tastes and pursuits' (p. 244). Marian's growing awareness that Fosco is here being 'clever' and that his cleverness is somehow connected to the manipulation of 'small things', signals her increasing suspicion of the count and her own credentials as his worthy adversary.

²² Joanne Ella Parsons, 'Fosco's Fat: Transgressive Consumption and Bodily Control in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*', in *The Victorian Male Body*, ed. by Joanne Ella Parsons and Ruth Heholt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 215–33 (p. 217).

²³ Parsons, 'Fosco's Fat', p. 227.

Collins's structuring of the paragraphs in Marian's diary reveals her subconscious piecing together of her suspicions of Fosco. She moves directly from the incident with the dog, to a recognition of Fosco's 'cleverness', to a further recollection of his treatment of Mme Fosco, by which point she is convinced of the performative dissonance in Fosco's behaviour:

His management of the Countess (in public) is a sight to see. He bows to her, he habitually addresses her as 'my angel,'" he carries his canaries to pay her little visits on his fingers and to sing to her, he kisses her hand when she gives him his cigarettes; he presents her with sugar-plums in return, which he puts into her mouth playfully, from a box in his pocket. The rod of iron with which he rules her never appears in company—it is a private rod, and is always kept upstairs. (p. 244)

Marian makes an immediate distinction here between the count's affable behaviour 'in public' and what she speculates to be his more disturbing 'private' demeanour. Collins has Marian slip into the vocabulary of the theatre to articulate a growing sense of tension between what she suspects to be Fosco's performance, and a distinctly less endearing world behind the scenes. In Marian's eyes Fosco has become a 'manager', who enacts a series of performative gestures, bowing and addressing lines to his wife as a member of his 'company'. Even the word 'playfully' serves a double function, suggesting on the one hand the affable nature of Fosco's conduct in public, but also hinting that it is in itself the act of a 'player'. Here Collins mentions once more the canaries and the sugary confections, giving them a reprise to indicate Marian's recognition of them as props in Fosco's performance. The 'rod of iron' comes as a startling contrast, then, to the soft, cute performance Fosco has cultivated in public. Not only does its function as a weapon hint at a troublingly violent dynamic behind the scenes of the Fosco marriage, but for the reader, who has just witnessed Fosco's physical brutality and menacing goading of the bloodhound in the paragraphs immediately preceding this one, it also implies that Fosco's 'management' of his wife may follow a similar pattern.

The unease that characters feel in the story, and which Marian comes closest to detecting and rationalizing, is comprehensible to the novel's readers at an aesthetic level. Fosco unsettles Marian because in these moments he is both cute object (with his sweet, feminized associations and soft, fat physique) and 'cute aggressor'. By presenting himself as the cute object, Fosco disguises his intentions to accrue and control commodities, from Laura's fortune to his own wife's person. The reader, however, occupies a different and more privileged position in the cute dynamics of the novel. Indeed, to return to Margaret Oliphant's observation, "The reader shares in the unwilling liking to which, at his first appearance, [Fosco] beguiles Marian Halcombe; but the reader, notwithstanding the fullest proof of Fosco's villainy, does not give him up, and take to hating him as Marian does."²⁴ This is because for the reader, unlike Marian or any of the characters in the world of the story, Fosco's 'playing cute' is a performance we ourselves are invited to enjoy and consume as part of the commodity dynamics of sensation fiction. We must continue to crave and enjoy it in order to return to consume future instalments.

2. LADY AUDLEY AND CUTE COMMODITY FETISHISM

Count Fosco is able to manipulate the aesthetics of the cute from a position of gendered and economic privilege. As a man of means, education, and social cachet, he can play at being the cute object when to do so helps to obscure his villainous motives, whilst also occupying the

²⁴ Oliphant, 'Sensation Novels,' p. 567.

position of consumer of cute things, and even the startlingly brutal role of the ‘cute aggressor’ as required. Lady Audley, by contrast, has no such privilege. Beginning the novel in possession of ‘nothing but poverty and misery’, limited in her access to travel and the employment market, abandoned by her husband and with an infant son, Helen Talboys’ strategy for survival is to enact a bravura performance of cuteness in order to evoke in those who might protect her what Ngai calls the ‘kind of commodity fetishism’ characteristic of responses to cute objects.²⁵ Certainly when Sir Michael proposes to Lucy, her performance of economic, social, and gendered vulnerability is so extreme that he attempts to protest “‘No, Lucy; no, no! ... not here, not here!’” when she ‘f[alls] on her knees at his feet’ (p. 15). Her motives for such supplication are clear and confessed in a moment of private, behind-the-scenes introspection of the kind we never get from Fosco in Collins’s narration. She desires above all: ‘No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations’ (p. 16). In order to attain such protection, Lucy behaves towards Sir Michael in the same way that Ngai (following conventional Marxism’s voicing of the commodity in order to understand its function) imagines the cute object to behave in relation to its consumer.²⁶ The cute object, Ngai writes, ‘flatteringly seems to want us and only us’. Equally, ‘in a perfect mirroring of its desire, as if we had already put ourselves in its shoes, we as adoptive “guardians” seem to “choose” it’. Sir Michael’s ‘choosing’ Lucy on account of her cute appeal is unsettling in light of the literalism of this exchange and its underlying commodity fetishism: Lucy is styling herself as a young and vulnerable bride to be desired and consumed both legally and sexually within the context of marriage. Lucy invites both the ‘loving molestation’ and ‘aggressive protection’ of the consumer towards the cute object in Ngai’s formulation.²⁷

And yet this unsettling dynamic is also where Ngai identifies the tenuous power of the cute commodity which, ‘for all its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands.’²⁸ The next time we encounter Lucy she is ensconced in her new role as Lady Audley. Braddon emphasizes Lucy’s elevated status in the household and in the community, reaffirming the notion that it is maintained through perpetual and perfected performance of cuteness both publicly and in private. In this sense, Lucy ensures that she is valued more highly even than Alicia Audley, who refuses to play cute to the same degree:

In spite of Miss Alicia’s undisguised contempt for her step-mother’s childishness and frivolity, Lucy was better loved and more admired than the baronet’s daughter. That very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley’s fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness. She owned to twenty years of age, but it was hard to believe her more than seventeen. Her fragile figure, which she loved to dress in heavy velvets, and stiff, rustling silks, till she looked like a child tricked out for a masquerade, was as girlish as if she had just left the nursery. All her amusements were childish. She hated reading, or study of any kind, and loved society. (p. 50)

²⁵ Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, p. 23. Further references will appear in parentheses in the text. Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 59. For more on Lucy’s precarious legal position at the start of the novel see Gail Turley Houston, ‘Mary Braddon’s Commentaries on the Trials and Legal Secrets of Audley Court’, in *Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 17–30 (esp. p. 27).

²⁶ See Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, pp. 60–65.

²⁷ Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, pp. 64; 4.

²⁸ Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories*, p. 64.

Here Braddon not only offers us a description of the contrasting mannerisms of Lady Audley and her stepdaughter, but also of the effect of Lady Audley's performance on her intended viewers and protectors when compared to Alicia's. There is a direct correlation between the 'childishness' and 'frivolity' of Lady Audley's manner and the affection she prompts in those who might help bolster her position. Braddon is heavy-handed in emphasizing Lucy's cute characteristics, including her small figure, 'large and liquid blue eyes' and doll-like appearance, and in noting how such a performance has resulted in Lucy's being 'better loved and admired' than the girl who more literally occupies the role of child in the family. Even the reader at this point in the text is co-opted into consuming and revelling in Lucy's cuteness by means of that cute mimesis we saw with Fosco and his birds. Here the alliteration in Lucy's 'childishness' and 'charm', her 'fragile figure' and her 'stiff, rustling silks', as well as the pouting petulance of 'hated reading, or study of any kind' encourage the reader to take on the twittering tone through which this performance is enacted.

That Alicia is sceptical of her stepmother is unsurprising. On one level Braddon offers us the archetype of the princess threatened by a wicked stepmother. But in terms of the deeper, underlying aesthetics of commodity fetishism, Alicia also feels alienated because she is not the target audience of this performance, having little to offer to Lady Audley by way of protection since she will not inherit Sir Michael's estate. Nor has Alicia – from her position of tremendous economic and social privilege – had to perform cuteness herself to such an exaggerated degree in order to achieve security in the world. It is Alicia who therefore seems to see through this act of playing cute and to feel frustrated at the susceptibility of her male guardians to its effects, particularly when that gullibility manifests as sexual attraction. To Sir Michael Alicia protests that 'You think her sensitive because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating' (pp. 92–93). Interestingly, Alicia's frustrations echo the obduracy of Eliza Lynn Linton who complained in her 1868 review of the manipulative capacity of Lady Audley's 'four foot nothing of pink and yellow'.²⁹ Here too we see the 'quasi-pejorative' response typically provoked by the cute object, but also the fear and suspicion of those who are not its intended consumers or who, in Linton's case, refuse to advocate for increased readerly consumption of the sensation novel more broadly.

By contrast, Lady Audley's playing cute must be enchanting not only to Sir Michael but also to Robert Audley, who will inherit Sir Michael's estate over Alicia and who has the potential to expose Lucy through his investigation of her past. Braddon structures the encounters between Lady Audley and these men to underscore the effect of her cute performance and the power (however precarious) it affords to the novel's heroine. Upon first being introduced to Robert, Lady Audley is anxious to avoid meeting his friend and her former husband, George Talboys and 'so complete was the dominion which Lady Audley had, in her own childish, unthinking way, obtained over her devoted husband', that it takes only 'the faintest elevation of Lucy's eyebrows, with a charming expression of weariness and terror, to make her husband aware that she did not want to be bored by an introduction to Mr. George Talboys' (p. 52). Her 'childish' and ostensibly 'unthinking' demeanour seem incongruous with the power she wields over her husband in this scene, except when considered through the lens of cute aesthetics. It is through power rooted in a performance of powerlessness that she hereby avoids the encounter with her first husband: a meeting which would shatter once and for all the performance of her new identity as aristocratic lady and the relative securities it affords her.

²⁹ Linton, 'Little Women', p. 545.

Even in his role as detective uncovering Lady Audley's crimes, Robert Audley's interactions with Lucy continue to be enacted according to the dynamics of the cute commodity long after he is convinced of her guilt. When Lady Audley visits Robert unexpectedly after he questions her about the disappearance of George Talboys, the narrator remarks that 'She looked a childish, helpless, babyfied little creature; and Robert looked down upon her with some touch of pity in his eyes'. In the same exchange: 'Lucy Audley spoke with that peculiar childish vivacity which seemed so natural to her, Robert looking down almost sadly at her bright, animated face' (p. 122). Here each sentence follows a two part structure: a description of her diminutive, child-like behaviour followed by a statement of its effect upon Robert. In both cases Lady Audley elicits reactions from Robert which directly correspond to Ngai's description of cute commodity response. She prompts 'pity' and 'sadness' and a desire to protect her which he has been wrestling with (and mistaking for love) for much of the early part of the novel. Yet these exchanges are also framed in terms of the cute consumer's desire to 'diminish further' the cute object, with Robert persistently 'look[ing] down upon' her in a way which is literal because of her small stature, but also unsettlingly figurative in so far as he is reminded of his own power to protect or crush her.

For the reader, however, one of the key delights of Braddon's villain comes from the subtle slippage of omniscience in these exchanges where Lucy's performance is in peril. If Lucy 'looks' and 'seems' helpless to Robert, who takes her childishness at face value in their early meetings, envisioning himself as her suitor and protector, for the reader these words feel more double-edged. We are invited to recognize and enjoy the crumbling edges of Lucy's cute performance both in terms of plot tension and aesthetics and to appreciate that Lucy's cuteness and helplessness may exist in appearance only. She may be neither and may be affecting both. As with Marian's growing suspicion of Fosco, we witness here a divergence between the character's growing unease and the reader's invited glee in suspecting villainy at play. The 'unthinking' nature of Lady Audley's cuteness is, we come to suspect as readers, part of a performance designed to ensure her continued safety.

Within the world of the story, however, Lady Audley's performance and its currency in the dynamics of gendered commodity exchange are so compelling that, even when Robert is in possession of almost all the facts of her guilt and has finally understood the full extent of her crimes, he is still enmeshed in the power dynamic whereby Lady Audley's playing cute prompts an instinctive desire to protect. He laments: 'Poor little creature; poor unhappy little golden-haired sinner; the battle between us seems terribly unfair. Why doesn't she run away while there is still time?' (p. 215). Now that he is fully able and even required by familial, masculine, and class loyalties to act against her – effectively to crush her – he wishes she would run away and save herself. Lady Audley, however, finally concedes defeat and this surrender is marked by a sudden end to her cute performance, having reached the very limits of her precarious power as cute commodity. When she is beaten and *en route* to the asylum, with no further capacity to elicit protection from her male guardians, she rails against Robert's infantilizing treatment of her: "I am tired of being treated like some naughty child . . . Where are you taking me?" . . . What is this place, Robert Audley?" she cried fiercely. "Do you think I am a baby, that you may juggle with and deceive me—what is it?" (p. 329). Being babyfied is now a frightening and frustrating experience, reminding her only of her powerlessness, rather than her power. The image of her being juggled – handled, manoeuvred, and manipulated as a small object – is maddening as she tries in vain to recover some agency through 'fierceness' rather than frailty.

Masking ‘fierceness’ with frailty has previously been the key to Lucy’s security and success. This moment in the carriage with Robert represents the final removal of Lucy’s theatrical mask and the end of her performance as cute commodity. Yet, as Katherine Montwieler notes, ‘Helen does not don the mask perfectly’ during her tenure as Lady Audley. Braddon signals these key foreshadowing moments with a pattern of aesthetic slippage which graduates over the course of the novel from cute aesthetics into a more Gothic mode. Such slippage in turn draws attention to the precarious power dynamics of Lucy’s carefully curated persona.³⁰ The most famous of these moments is the ekphrastic scene with the portrait, where Robert, having broken into Lady Audley’s private boudoir with George Talboys, encounters a painting of her:

Yes, the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets, with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

It was so like, and yet so unlike. It was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady’s face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. (p. 65)

Braddon describes once again the key physical traits that Lucy styles as signifiers of her own cuteness: the blonde and gold ringlets, the blue eyes, the rosebud mouth. However, the cute aesthetic is here overwritten by the Gothic, since this painting is external to Lady Audley; it exists as an art object for commodification and consumption at a remove from her styling of her own person. She therefore has far less control over its capacity to, in a Marxist sense, speak to its consumer. Her control over this image is limited to her attempts to conceal the painting in her private apartments and keep it covered. It is a loss of control of her own person which Montwieler and others have read in terms of the spatial dynamics and symbolism of the scene – and alongside the parallel invasion of Lucy’s boudoir by Luke Marks – ‘as metaphorical rapes that function as violations of Lady Audley’s identity.’³¹ The aesthetic logic of this scene echoes and reinforces its troublingly gendered power dynamics. The usurping of control over Lady Audley’s carefully styled cute features by the male artist of the portrait results in her image acquiring a ‘lurid’, ‘strange’, and ‘sinister’ aspect. Her appearance, which is so predicated on smallness, softness, and child-like innocence, has here become ‘hard and almost wicked’ (p. 65). Combined with Braddon’s reference to the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, with its ‘emphasis on expression rather than beauty and . . . fascination with *femme fatales*’, this ekphrastic moment signals a slippage of aesthetic mode from cute feminine performance to what Emily E. Auger identifies as ‘male gothic detection.’³² We are reminded of the precarious

³⁰ Katherine Montwieler, ‘Marketing Sensation: *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Consumer Culture’, in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert, and Aeron Haynie pp. 43–61 (p. 53).

³¹ Montwieler, ‘Marketing Sensation’, p. 53.

³² Sophia Andres, ‘Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Ambivalent Pre-Raphaelite Ekphrasis’, *Victorian Newsletter*, 108 (2005), 1–7 (p. 2); Emily E. Auger, ‘Male Gothic Detection and the Pre-Raphaelite Woman in *Lady Audley’s Secret*’, *Clues*, 26 (2008), 3–14. For more on Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics in *Lady Audley’s Secret* see Brian Donnelly, ‘Sensational Bodies: Lady Audley and the Pre-Raphaelite Portrait’, *Victorian Newsletter*, 112 (2007), 69–91.

nature of Lady Audley's power, built as it is on a performance of vulnerability, even while, as readers/consumers of the novel as commercial object we are being unsettlingly co-opted by this foreshadowing scene into a desire to see her further exposed and belittled as the villain of the piece.

The scene echoes those moments in *The Woman in White* where Fosco's playing cute becomes increasingly perceptible to both Marian and the reader in the way it couches that increasingly visible performativity in the language of the theatre. The 'strange-coloured fires' in the portrait scene above, for instance, are not merely a Gothic trope but would undoubtedly have evoked for Victorian audiences the spectacular worlds of melodrama, pantomime, and burlesque theatre in which Braddon began her own career. On the popular stage and before the widespread use of limelight from the 1860s, chemical compounds such as copper oxide, mercury sulphide and strontium nitrate were burned to produce coloured flames used for special effects. As Michael Booth notes, 'Green and blue fire was traditional for the appearance of ghosts and spirits, red fire for villains and demons, and other colours such as white, yellow, purple and crimson for prettier and less supernatural effects.'³³ The figurative coloured fires which illuminate Lady Audley's 'crimson dress, the sunshine on the face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips' (p. 65) produce a reading in which references to the colour red not only evoke the Victorian discourses of blood and hysteria that have been widely discussed by Lyn Pykett, Andrew Mangham and others, but also the visual signifiers of villainy according to theatrical convention.³⁴ Lady Audley in this scene has been thrust out of her cute performance in the 'secret theatre of home' and exposed more overtly as a villainess of the popular stage.³⁵

The final failure of Lady Audley's cute performance, then, produces a fittingly Gothicized punishment. Upon her arrival at the asylum where she will spend the rest of her days Lucy notices a figure who is both heir to Brontë's Bertha Mason and prefigures the protagonist of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* in her female Gothic confinement: 'One of the windows was shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, the shadow of a woman with a fantastic head dress, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backward and forward before the window' (p. 329). Lucy's incarceration is equated in the chapter title with being 'Buried Alive', encompassing the combined Gothic peril of entrapment and death.

The collapse of cuteness into the Gothic mode in *Lady Audley's Secret* is an aesthetic turnaround we do not see in Collins's depiction of Fosco. Where Braddon's third-person narration allows the reader to identify where and why Lady Audley plays cute, Fosco, as Parsons observes, 'is never fully exposed.'³⁶ The reader is not afforded sufficient insight into his thoughts and motives to establish with any certainty the degree to which Fosco's cute characteristics are sincere or cynically performative. Fosco seems, for instance, genuinely upset at the prospect of leaving 'My cockatoo, my canaries, and my little mice' (p. 588) when he is forced to flee England, even as the more public performance of this same affection served its purpose in diverting suspicion from his crimes. Even when his body is laid out on a mortuary slab as

³³ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 90.

³⁴ See especially: Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction*; Pykett, 'The Improper Feminine'; Jill Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

³⁵ On psychology and domestic performance in Collins's works, see Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1988). The phrase itself is taken from Collins's *Basil* (1852).

³⁶ Parsons, 'Fosco's Fat', p. 230.

a grim spectacle and for post-mortem identification and investigation, Fosco continues, as Parsons notes, ‘to defy explanation and understanding.’³⁷ Fosco’s cute appeal is therefore not closed down for the reader and replaced with an alternative aesthetic in the way Lady Audley’s is. The edges of his cute performativity remain blurred and the pleasure that his love of ‘small things’ affords to readers remains open beyond the end of the novel rather than being invalidated as mere villainous artifice.

There is a well-established critical interest in Fosco and Lady Audley as essentially *performative* villains – often, the most sinister aspect of their personalities is understood to be their capacity to deceive, to infiltrate social spaces in which they do not belong, and to undermine the social order from within. Reading them through the characteristics of cuteness, however, allows us to go further in understanding the aesthetic and economic dynamics of their performances, and to establish for the twentieth-century phenomenon of cuteness identified by Ngai a discernible genealogy in the specific conjunction of print culture, theatricality, commodification, and physical sensation that we now recognize as the sensation fiction of the 1860s. Fosco and Lady Audley are such accomplished and dangerous infiltrators specifically because they both appear to be so completely harmless, soft, and endearing. They are villains who are not simply adept at ‘play acting’, but terribly capable at ‘playing cute’. These characteristics help to explain why a critic like Margaret Oliphant could draw such a stark distinction between the unease and revulsion of the characters in the story world towards a villain like Fosco, and the continued enjoyment and appeal of the reader who ‘does not give him up, and take to hating him’ in quite the same way.³⁸ The cute performativity of Fosco and Lady Audley demands our readerly affection but also prompts a desire to see these figures diminished or defeated in the course of the plot. It is a desire which for Victorian readerships could only be gratified by continued participation in commodity exchange and by the purchase of the next instalment of the sensation novel as consumer product.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Laura Eastlake is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Edge Hill University. She is the author of *Ancient Rome and Victorian Masculinity* (2018, Oxford University Press) and has published on Victorian classical receptions, masculinity, and the works of Wilkie Collins. Her current project explores the aesthetics of sugar in the nineteenth century imagination.

³⁷ Parsons, ‘Fosco’s Fat’, p. 230.

³⁸ Oliphant, ‘Sensation Novels’, p. 567.