

The Loves of Arcadia

By Miss Braddon

Introduction

M.E. Braddon has become a figure of fascination for literary critics over the last few years and, more recently, for theatre historians.¹ This is no wonder since Braddon's vast published oeuvre encompasses many different genres and spans nearly the entire Victorian era. She wrote over eighty novels, worked under more than one stage and pen name, published in the whole gambit of periodicals on offer in the second half of the nineteenth century and edited *Belgravia* magazine for several years. In addition, Braddon's biography is titillating: her novels were arguably more successful than Dickens's, she worked as an actress for nearly ten years before becoming the best-selling sensation novelist of the 1860s, and she lived with her publisher, John Maxwell, for several years, bearing him several children before marrying him. One of the most fascinating aspects of Braddon's life and work is her ability to take on and shrug off different careers (actress, author, editor) and different identities (suspect woman of the theatre, sensation novelist, respectable woman of letters, wife and mother) almost in the blink of an eye. Braddon was keenly aware of the constant shape-shifting required in order to balance all of these different forms of work and competing public or personal roles. As a result Braddon's life and work is coloured by an intriguingly playful complexity and contradictoriness. She often seems to take a given role seriously at one moment only to undermine its legitimacy in the next. We therefore must always approach Braddon's work with a degree of scepticism, for it is often almost impossible to determine when she is serious, when she is laughing at herself and when she is laughing at us, her readers.

Indeed, there are a number of uncertainties surrounding Braddon's first licensed and publicly performed play, *The Loves of Arcadia*. Even though Braddon presumably wrote this play during the final years or months of her acting career, it was not billed under her stage name, Mary Seyton. Rather the manuscript clearly identifies the author as 'Miss Braddon,' a name virtually unknown at this time. Furthermore, even though *The Loves of Arcadia* enjoyed a successful run at the Strand Theatre, it was never published and Braddon did not see another

¹ Jennifer Carnell's biography *The Literary Lives of M.E. Braddon* is without doubt the most significant publication in this area of recent years and it is particularly relevant given that Carnell devotes ample time to researching both Braddon's theatrical and literary careers (Hastings: Sensation Press, 2000). Other work on Braddon usually deals with her work in the context of 1860s sensation novels, such as Andrew Mangham's recent book *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007). Articles on Braddon's writing for the stage include those by Ruth Burridge Lindemann, 'Dramatic Disappearances: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the Staging of Theatrical Character,' *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 25.2 (1997), 279-91 and Heidi J. Holder, 'Misalliance: M.E. Braddon's Writing for the Stage,' in *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, ed. by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert and Aeron Haynie (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). More recently, Ian Henderson has explored the adaptation and production of Braddon's most famous novel for the stage: 'Looking at Lady Audley: Symbolism, the Stage and the Antipodes,' *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 33.1 (2006), 3-26. Gabrielle Malcolm has also recently provided a transcription of one of Braddon's presumably rejected script fragments in 'The Revenge of the Dead: Mary Braddon's Unpublished Script Fragment,' *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 33.2 (2006), 62-70.

one of her plays performed in London until 1868 when *The Model Husband* was performed at the Surrey Theatre.² Further obscuring this text is the lack of information available about this play and its performance. Braddon is one of the few female Victorian authors whose work is supplemented by a number of substantial archives. However, as Jennifer Carnell speculates, Braddon seems to have deliberately decided in later life to distance herself from her public stage career, leaving virtually no first-person observations on her time as an actress.³ Archival material relating to *The Loves of Arcadia* is also scant: perhaps Braddon wished to obscure her connections with this theatre as well. It was very soon after *The Loves of Arcadia* was performed that the sensation novels Braddon became notorious for took the literary market by storm, possibly making her an unattractive candidate to write for middle-class theatres. Or she may have simply temporarily lost interest in the stage.

From Actress to Playwright.

Jennifer Carnell has recently brought to light the extent and relative success of Braddon's acting career via painstaking original research in her critical biography, *The Literary Lives of M.E. Braddon*. In a previous biography, Braddon's career as an actress was documented as extending only two years from 1857-1859, but Carnell has traced her stage appearances back to 1852.⁴ Braddon went on the stage partly due to financial need. After her father's abandonment of her family, Braddon found it necessary to generate income to support herself and her mother, who seems to have wholeheartedly supported her acting career, travelling with her to every provincial performance to act as a chaperone. In fact, Carnell speculates that Braddon's mother Fanny may have secured her first walk-on opportunity in London in the early 1850s via her friendship with Mr. Hooper, then manager of the Strand Theatre.⁵

Braddon's meagre beginnings at the Strand were apparently a success. From approximately 1853 to 1857, Braddon toured the provinces with a number of acting companies, appearing in places such as Winchester, Southampton, Glasgow, Beverley, Hull, Doncaster, and Leeds.⁶ This was a typical career path of an actress at this time, which might culminate, as it did for Braddon, with an opportunity on a London stage. In 1857, Braddon was the leading lady at the Surrey Theatre, acting in *The Sailor of France* and *How We Live in the World of London*, both by J.B. Johnstone; *Sarah's Young Man* by W.E. Suter; *Your Life's in Danger* by John Maddison Morton; as well as the proven and reliable successes *Jack Sheppard* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*.⁷ However, Braddon's stint as leading lady at the Surrey was not successful enough, for the following summer she was back on the provincial circuit. Another break soon appeared however, when Braddon was apparently spotted by the manager of the Theatre Royal, Brighton, Henry Nye Chart, who was also touring with his Brighton company in the

² Carnell, pp. 399-400.

³ Carnell, p. 14.

⁴ See Robert Lee Wolff, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (London: Garland, 1979); and Carnell, p. 15.

⁵ Carnell, p. 24.

⁶ Carnell, p. 15.

⁷ Carnell, pp. 38-39.

summer. By August 1857, and for the following two years, Braddon had stable employment and reliable wages as a member of Chart's Brighton company.⁸

Given that Braddon's first walk-on opportunity took place at the Strand, it is tempting to assume that she used this previous connection to interest the theatre in *The Loves of Arcadia*. However, this does not seem to have been the case. By 1860, the Strand Theatre had changed management and was now under the direction of a newly widowed woman, Louisa Swanborough.⁹ At some point in the final stages of Braddon's acting career, it was decided that Braddon would leave the stage to fully pursue her writing career with the financial aid of a patron named John Gilby. Carnell speculates that Braddon may have been admired by and become acquainted with Gilby while acting in Beverley or Hull.¹⁰ He appears to have managed all correspondence and business arrangements with Louisa Swanborough, suggesting that the connection originated with him rather than Braddon's previous experience at the Strand. Gilby appears to have been a controlling and jealous patron, referring to Swanborough in one letter as 'oily' and 'slippery.'¹¹ A letter from Swanborough to Gilby advises that Braddon join the Dramatic Authors' Society in order to ensure appropriate payment from 'country managers.'¹² However, Gilby pressed Braddon to wait to write to the society until her play had been 'well criticized.'¹³ Gilby did not seem to appreciate interference from outsiders. However, Braddon did not appear to have taken well to such determined management of her career since the arrangement with John Gilby was short-lived.

At any rate, the exact process of securing a performance of *The Loves of Arcadia* at the Strand remains relatively obscure, but the manuscript itself provides an interesting clue. The two acts of the play are written in two different hands. The second act is written by an identifiable theatre copyist, who signed his name 'Chater Sripsit' on this and other plays submitted for license by the Strand.¹⁴ The first act, however, is written in an unidentified hand that does not recur in other submissions from the Strand in 1860 and this hand may belong to Mary Braddon or perhaps her mother, who often helped with Braddon with her writing endeavours. Tantalizingly, a sketch similar to some of those that appear in Braddon's manuscripts has been drawn on the title page but the writing of the title page resembles Chater Sripsit's.¹⁵ Although the hand of act I would be an uncharacteristically neat one for

⁸ See Carnell for a more detailed account of these events, pp. 39-43.

⁹ Traci Davis, *The Victorian Actress as a Working Woman* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 51.

¹⁰ Carnell, p. 106.

¹¹ John Gilby to Braddon. 11 March 1860, University of Texas, Henry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, Wolff collection. See also Carnell's account of Braddon's involvement with Gilby. Carnell, pp. 105-114. My thanks to Jennifer Carnell for providing me with copies of these letters.

¹² Louisa Swanborough to John Gilby, 18 March 1860, UT, Henry Ransom HRC, Wolff collection.

¹³ John Gilby to Braddon. 11 March 1860, UT, Henry Ransom HRC, Wolff collection.

¹⁴ Chater Sripsit was identified by Caroline Radcliffe during her work for the Lord Chamberlain's Plays Project. Manuscripts in this period were often copied by a designated copyist employed by the theatre or written by the manager herself. A number of the manuscripts collected in the same bound volume for March 1860 were written in the same hand as the second act, suggesting that Chater Sripsit had regular work from the Strand in 1860. In addition, 'Sripsit' is Latin for 'wrote it', suggesting that 'Chater Sripsit' was a pseudonym for a professional copyist.

¹⁵ My thanks to Kate Mattacks for helping me to make this judgment about Braddon's handwriting. A scan of the title page can be viewed by [clicking here](#).

Braddon, it has been established that she did indeed send portions of manuscript plays to theatre managers hoping to receive a commission for a full production.¹⁶ The fact that the second act is written by the Strand theatre copyist suggests that perhaps this strategy was employed with *The Loves of Arcadia*, the first act being sent by Braddon to Gilby, then forwarded by Gilby to Swanborough. Braddon's play therefore may have been altered or contributed to by Swanborough or other members of her theatre company and these alterations would have been taken down by the theatre copyist.

Run and Reception.

No matter what Braddon's connection with the Strand was, *The Loves of Arcadia* had a successful run there, premiering on 12 March 1860. By this time, Braddon had ceased acting professionally, having made her last appearances in Robert Soutar's *Quicksands and Whirlpools* as well as a benefit night for three actresses (including Braddon) at the Theatre Royal, Brighton in February 1860.¹⁷ According to Jennifer Carnell, these sporadic last performances suggest Braddon had already arranged to leave the Theatre Royal and was busy developing her writing career.¹⁸ While the circumstances of the writing and producing of *The Loves of Arcadia* may now be obscure, 1860s reviewers and audiences received the comedietta enthusiastically. A review of 17 March states:

The piece appears to have been remarkably successful, and deservedly so, for it is admirably written, although not quite true to the history, as we had generally read it. The whole of the performers played their parts to perfection; and Miss Swanborough and Mr Parselle were each night most enthusiastically received. Crowded audiences have attended every evening.¹⁹

Louisa Swanborough played Desirée de Launay, the lead female role. If John Gilby thought Swanborough was 'oily,' the public certainly did not agree. The review cited above went on to call the play a 'very excellent little comedietta' and credited Miss Swanborough's reappearance with generating much of its success: 'The interest attached to [*The Loves of Arcadia*] is considerably enhanced by the fact, that Miss Swanborough has selected it for her first appearance this season.'²⁰ Another reviewer agreed that part of the enthusiasm was a result of Miss Swanborough's 'reappearance this season' in this 'elegant piece.'²¹ Indeed, Miss Swanborough's management appears to have been very successful. A later review after the reopening in September commends her: 'Miss Swanborough's management is

¹⁶ In her introduction to her transcription of a script fragment by Braddon, Gabrielle Malcolm explains that this piece was written while Braddon was temporarily residing in Aberdeen while on tour in the early 1850s. Malcolm, p. 62.

¹⁷ Carnell, pp. 71-73.

¹⁸ Carnell, p. 71.

¹⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum, Theatre Collections, Strand Theatre Press Clipping 17 March 1860, Box 2214 (clipping a). Because Box 2214 contains two clippings of the same date with no other identifying details, I have labelled one 'clipping a' and the other 'clipping b.'

²⁰ V&A, TC, Strand Theatre Press Clipping 17 March 1860, Box 2214 (clipping a).

²¹ V&A, TC, Strand Theatre Press Clipping 17 March 1860, Box 2214 (clipping b).

distinguished for consistency and good judgement, and its prosperity appears to be permanently secured.’²²

The Loves of Arcadia seems to have had a considerable run. Playbills for the Strand boast that it was performed thirty-one times between March and May 1860.²³ The playbills of 19 and 26 March announce the ‘immense success of *The Loves of Arcadia* in which Miss Swanborough will appear.’ In addition to featuring Swanborough, *The Loves of Arcadia* seemed to fit perfectly into the standard range of performance offered by the Strand. At this time, the Strand primarily offered a variety of light comic performances including farce, comedietta, as well as burlesque, and generally finished a night’s performance with one of a variety of short ballet parts from successful plays featuring the dancer, Rosina Wright. In fact, *The Loves of Arcadia* appears to have been intended to take the place of a similar comedietta, *Sisterly Service*, also based on French court intrigues of centuries past. *The Loves of Arcadia* was performed alternately with the farce, *A Frightful Accident* (as this play was phased out of the company’s repertoire), the comedietta, *Sisterly Service*, and the ‘screaming farce,’ *The Goose with the Golden Eggs*. Although the success of *The Loves of Arcadia* was not comparable to some of the most popular pieces of the time—the most successful plays were often performed over seventy times—it is curious that she did not write more plays in the 1860s.²⁴ Perhaps Braddon was more interested and more dazzled by the immense success in novel-writing she was soon to experience.

Aristocratic Affairs and Myths of Desire: Setting and Allusion.

As one of the reviewers notes, *The Loves of Arcadia* was ‘not quite true to the history.’²⁵ Indeed, authenticity arguably was not the point in representing the eighteenth-century French court on the mid-nineteenth-century stage. Rather, Braddon probably selected the court of Louis XV as the setting of *The Loves of Arcadia* because it offered a space where secret affairs and racy allusions were more acceptable than the typical contemporary settings of domestic comedy and farce. Carnell notes that Braddon was interested in revolutionary France in the late 1850s and that she was reading about French history at that time.²⁶ But this play looks back to the period of ostentatious indulgence before the aristocracy was called to account in the revolution. In fact, Braddon selects the period where Madame du Barry, rather than Madame de Pompadour, was royal mistress. Madame du Barry, though accounts differ, was reportedly an illegitimate child of lower class parentage who found her way to court through her stint as a courtesan. In *The Loves of Arcadia*, Braddon’s characters do not carry

²² V&A, TC, Strand Theatre Press Clipping 15 Sept 1860, Box 2214.

²³ Previously, Carnell has identified a run of only a few days (p. 114), but the convention of continuous runs of plays did not yet exist at this time. Therefore it was common practice for a comedietta such as *The Loves of Arcadia* to alternate with others in the company’s repertoire, causing a number of short breaks in the longer, overall run of the piece.

²⁴ Braddon’s next acknowledged play was *The Model Husband*, first performed at the Surrey on 28 September 1868. However, Carnell notes in her introduction to her edition of *Married Beneath Him* that Braddon wrote a number of anonymous farces in the 1860s and 1870s. M.E. Braddon, *Married Beneath Him*, ed. by Jennifer Carnell (Hastings: Sensation Press, 2000), p. 1.

²⁵ V&A, TC, Strand Theatre Press Clipping 17 March 1860, Box 2214 (clipping a).

²⁶ Carnell cites one of Braddon’s notebooks where her reading is listed as evidence, p. 102.

out similarly scandalous actions, but the setting does allow for assumptions to be made about certain events in the play. The duel between Merrilac and Charloi at the end of act II, for example, is caused by Charloi's insinuation about the nature of Desirée and Louis's private meeting in a separate chamber, suggesting that neither Louis nor Desirée are free from suspicion about their intents. Reviewers, and presumably also the audience, were aware of this. One reviewer explains that Merrilac 'is wrought up to a pitch of agony by [Louis and Desirée's] departure, at the lady's request, into a more private apartment.'²⁷

Braddon's use of this historical setting also allowed her to make a number of allusions that significantly heighten the sense of libertinism. The scene of Merrilac and Desirée's meeting in the forest is particularly rich with these references. The larger plot of the play is based on the simultaneous but separate escape of these two courtiers to the forest of Versailles to become simple rustics, distant from the demands of court life and an impending arranged marriage. Each searches the forest for the object of a less complicated love affair. Merrilac quickly finds a comically large and coarse milkmaid and attempts to seduce her by forcing kisses on her. Thus 'Arcadia' in this play refers not only to an idyllic, rustic life, but also to a fictional space where such urges can be acted out with impunity. Further to this effect, both Merrilac and Desirée take on fictional names to suit their Arcadian roles. Merrilac tellingly chooses the name Narcissus, which foregrounds his arrogance, but also transforms him into the ultimate representation of unrequited love—potentially for both male and female admirers.²⁸ Desirée christens herself Daphne, the name of a mythical nymph and the object of Apollo's affections. The implications of sexual license associated with such a name were in circulation at the time, and, as in other examples of her work, Braddon here seeks to place the extent and expression of female sexual desire on a par with male sexual desire, providing her male and female leads with equally evocative names.²⁹

The liberating effect of this role-playing is also enhanced with costumes 'à la Watteau,' as we are informed in the stage directions in Act I. Antoine Watteau was famous for depicting eighteenth-century courtiers in the roles of *comedia dell'arte* in pastoral settings. The play is identified by one of the reviewers as a 'pleasant and somewhat poetic Watteau spectacle on a somewhat larger scale than usual.'²⁹ The effect here is to press the reducible identity of those that take part in this spectacle to a further and further distance from questionable actions. The characters Merrilac and Desirée play the roles of Narcissus and Daphne, whose identity is further obscured—and made comical—through dress as figures of *comedia dell'arte*. Layer upon layer of theatricality, spectacle and comedy serve to make obscene references

²⁷ V&A, TC, Strand Theatre Press Clipping 17 March 1860, Box 2214 (clipping a).

²⁸ Some accounts of Narcissus identify his spurned lovers as being both male and female, but I have as yet been unable to confirm which accounts the Victorians were familiar with. However, there is a recognized precedent for the use of Greek texts as a mode of theorizing male sexuality as recently documented by Stefano Evangelista in "'Lovers and Philosophers at Once": Aesthetic Platonism in the Victorian Fin de Siècle,' *Yearbook of English Studies*, 36.2 (2006), 230-44.

²⁹ Nymphomania, a recognized form of female insanity at this time, is discussed in the widely circulated textbook by William Acton, *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Life* 5th ed. (London: Churchill, 1871), p. 115.

²⁹ V&A, TC, Strand Theatre Press Clipping, 17 March 1860, Box 2214 (clipping b).

laughable rather than damnable. Part of the thrill of watching a performance of *The Loves of Arcadia* was surely due to the fact that it tread a fine line between entertaining and outraging its audience, necessitating continual reminders of the fictional status of its expressions and events.

In any case, *The Loves of Arcadia* anticipates Braddon's other work of the early 1860s by pressing the limits of popular middle-class discourse, particularly with respect to the expression of sexual desire. In this play, Braddon uses allusion and analogy to bring in the suggestions about male and female sexuality that would soon cause such a frisson in her sensation novels. The reaction to this play was overwhelmingly positive, but hardly controversial. In her characteristically elusive manner, Braddon has left the reasons for her break with the Strand, and with theatre writing generally, to be a mystery. *The Loves of Arcadia*, however, marks a turning point in Braddon's career. Before, Braddon was a carefully chaperoned actress, eagerly seeking first opportunities in the literary market. Not long after, she was arguably the most popular and the most notorious author in Britain and had begun an affair with her publisher, John Maxwell. Perhaps the thrill of scandal was more exciting than respectable success.