Won silver medal for best MA Essay.

The Readable Body?: Physiognomy, Phrenology, and the Interpretation of Bodies in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd*

When Walter Hartright first sees Marian Halcombe in Wilkie Collins’s seminal sensation novel, *The Woman in White* (1860), he delays calling attention to himself to better observe her body. As she stands at the window with her back to him, her figure has the appearance of perfection. After Hartright bumps a chair to announce his presence, she walks towards him and her image gradually comes into focus. As she approaches, Hartright’s anticipation mounts: "she left the window—and I said to myself, the lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, the lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), the lady is ugly!" (74). Seen in clear focus, Marian’s ideal feminine form is topped with a mustached face of an "almost swarthy" complexion, a masculine jaw, and a low forehead on which "coal-black" hair grows (74). A contemporary would have read Marian’s low forehead and pronounced jaw as physiognomic signs of degeneracy and low intelligence. The text nonetheless depicts her as a very admirable and intelligent character despite her inferior physiognomy. Indeed, in the novel that is widely cited as inaugurating the sensation genre, Collins repeatedly shows that appearances deceive and that Victorian techniques for reading the body prove unreliable. This depiction of the body as unreadable (that is, as a coding of internal character) tacitly rejects the popular Victorian belief in phrenology and physiognomy. The body’s form, the novel shows us, neither governs nor reveals character. This scene’s severing of the link between appearances and character became a hallmark of sensational literature and is a central theme of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novel *Aurora Floyd* (1863), the novel on which this essay focuses. As I will show, however, *Aurora*
*Floyd* presents an impasse in the sensation genre: although the novel overtly positions itself against the possibility of reading character based on external features, in its key scenes the novel succumbs to exploiting the disabled body as a sign of evil and deviance.

*Aurora Floyd* centers on uncovering the mystery of the eponymous heroine and so represents a text in which the reader is repeatedly compelled to interpret Aurora’s character. Before the novel opens, Aurora elopes with her incredibly handsome groom, James Conyers; their disastrous and abusive marriage ends in separation. When Aurora discovers that Conyers has died in a racing accident (news that turns out to be false), she gets engaged to Talbot Bulstrode. However, Bulstrode breaks off their engagement when she refuses to reveal her secret past, and Aurora marries another suitor, John Mellish, because he trusts her instinctively. At the couple’s new home, Mellish Park, Aurora meets Steeve Hargraves, nicknamed the "Softy," a stable-hand who has mental and physical disabilities. Hargraves is banned from the Park for kicking Aurora’s dog but soon returns as the assistant to the new groom, none other than Conyers. Aurora and Conyers meet; he blackmails her into giving him two thousand pounds to leave the country, and then Conyers is found dead. The murder weapon is Mellish’s pistol, to which Aurora had access on the day of the murder. As Braddon does not immediately identify the murderer, the reader must judge Aurora’s potential guilt for him or herself. Eventually, Hargraves is suspected, and after Bulstrode catches him red-handed with Aurora’s money, he is hanged for the crime.

*Aurora Floyd* was Braddon’s second big success after *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). As they have similar themes and were published concurrently, the novels should be considered in relation to one another; Braddon herself referred to them as her "pair of bigamy novels" (qtd in Wolff, "Devoted" 12). Contemporary critics often compared the two title heroines and almost
unanimously agreed that Braddon depicted Aurora Floyd’s character with more life than she did that of Lady Audley.¹ As many recent critics have noted, both of these heroines challenged the reliability of appearances by looking the opposite of what convention dictated: Lady Audley appeared to be innocent but turned out to be a murderess, while Aurora appeared to be morally dubious but turned out to be a loyal wife and mother.² *Aurora Floyd*, however, took the theme of deceptive appearances further than *Lady Audley’s Secret* by depicting multiple characters with misleading physiognomies (Conyers, for example, has perfect Grecian features but turns out to be evil) and by directly addressing the reader to explain how characters ought to be interpreted. The murder mystery plot that took over the novel in the third book forced the reader to make a judgment about Aurora, a judgment that must be based on the heroine’s actions and character as her physical characteristics proved unreliable and unreadable. To this extent, the novel seems to critique Victorian beliefs that external appearances provide a key to internal character.

However, Braddon proves inconsistent in critiquing the legibility of bodies in *Aurora Floyd*. Despite the novel’s criticism of phrenology and of the reliability of appearances generally, the deformed appearance of Hargraves proves to be an exceptionally accurate indication of his moral corruption. In this essay, I refer to Hargraves’s body as “deformed” to emphasize his representation as an aberrant body in the nineteenth century. As scholars of disability studies have shown, the distinction between aberrance and normalcy is socially constructed and historically contingent. This fact informs my analysis of Hargraves’s body and the conservative development of the narrative in theatrical adaptations as well as later editions of the novel. As I will suggest, the many Victorian stage productions of *Aurora Floyd* take the

¹ *The Times* asserted that *Aurora Floyd* was "in every sense an advance on its popular predecessor" ("Aurora Floyd" 5). H.L. Mansel argued that Braddon’s characters in *Aurora Floyd* are "drawn with greater skill" than those in her previous novel (257).
² See Nemesvari and Surridge (Introduction 18-19), Ofek (107-108), and Tatum (504).
readability of Hargraves’s body further than the novel by signalling his degeneracy with heavy makeup and by foregrounding his guilt, thus strongly connecting his appearance with his immorality.

Critics have noted this internal contradiction in Braddon’s narrative but have not seen it as a fundamental inconsistency. Lisa Hopkins insightfully points out the narrative’s disparate stances towards the body—specifically the supposed reliability of Hargraves’s body vis-à-vis the unreliability of Conyers’s; however, she quickly dismisses the contradiction that Conyers’s superb physiognomy poses as an exception in a novel where appearances are generally a "good guide" to character (64).³ Hopkins thus attempts to maintain a coherent reading of *Aurora Floyd* by making exceptions while upholding a general rule. By contrast, I argue that *Aurora Floyd* is fundamentally inconsistent in its treatment of the body’s legibility, therefore making a coherent reading impossible. Braddon demands incompatible readings of her characters’ bodies: Hargraves’s guilt is clearly legible on his deformed body, while the narrative emphasizes the illegibility of other characters’ appearances. This incoherence, as I will argue, reflects the disruption of stable identity categories that came to a head in the 1860s. Yet, as Braddon’s narrative evolves through stage adaptations and subsequent editions of the novel, this inconsistency is minimized and the focus shifts conservatively to favor a legible body.

Disability Studies: Interpreting the Body

The emerging field of disability studies offers the framework necessary to examine Braddon’s depiction of bodies in *Aurora Floyd*. Disability theorists, such as Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Lennard J. Davis, help us to understand the culturally constructed significance of

³ Hopkins’s reading of the novel does not distinguish between direct narrative address and free indirect discourse, which causes her to conflate the narrator’s genuine attack on phrenology in relation to Conyers’s body with Aurora’s conflicting emotions upon first encountering Hargraves (Braddon 368-69; 189-90).
the body—in particular, of the body when perceived as aberrant, different, abnormal, and thus socially significant. First, and most importantly, they argue that disability is socially constructed rather than an innate physical state. This theory allows for an investigation of historical conventions, restrictions, and ideals through an analysis of those whom society deems to be disabled. Disability theorists focus particularly on the nineteenth century because the period saw immense changes in the conception of the body in relation to the social order. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder point to the nineteenth century as a key moment for disability studies: no longer ascribed to wickedness or sin, as in previous eras, the disabled body was largely understood by Victorians as a deviation from normality within a medicalized discourse (121). As I will show, the 1860s constitutes a pivotal moment in this development and marks the collision of two ways of understanding the body.

Davis argues that in the nineteenth century, industrialization and the need for social statistics created the idea of the average human being; moreover, because identifying the norm necessitated identifying the abnormal, the nineteenth century also represented the moment at which disability was constructed as a statistical outlier (24-29). As Davis argues, the concept of disability as outside the norm equated it with other forms of deviance that society attempted to keep in check: "the loose association between what we would now call disability and criminal activity, mental incompetence, sexual license, and so on established a legacy that people with disabilities are still having trouble living down" (37). However, in its position as an outlier of the norm, the disabled body also signified the disorderly nature of bodies generally and social classification's inability to account fully for the body. In their analysis of disability in literature, Mitchell and Snyder have argued that the disabled body foregrounds the body’s corporeality as
antithetical to societal ideals: "disability acts as a metaphor and fleshly example of the body's unruly resistance to the cultural desire to 'enforce normalcy" (48).

By theorizing narrative's use of disability, Mitchell and Snyder offer a framework for understanding Braddon's inconsistency in rejecting physiognomy while at the same time upholding the narrative function of Hargraves's disabled body. They argue that literature often relies on disability as an unknowable otherness that creates the impetus for narrative; yet, paradoxically, literature overdetermines the disabled body with metaphorical significance. As Mitchell and Snyder argue, only extraordinary subjects demand a story (54); it is thus precisely the disabled body's exclusion from the norm that compels its prevalent inclusion into that society's literature. Mitchell and Snyder also argue that disability in literature points to the disorderly nature of the body that "serves as a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse," a function they term the "materiality of metaphor" (47-48). They argue that narrative's metaphorical use of disability relies on physiognomy for its signification (58). Braddon's use of Hargraves's body as a material metaphor for his internal degradation as well as general social disruption in the novel demands a physiognomic reading of his body that contradicts her theme of deceptive appearances. In order to understand those scenes in which Braddon subverts readers' expectations of characters based on appearances as opposed to those in which she adheres to them, we require a foundational knowledge of the nineteenth-century sciences of physiognomy and phrenology.

The Readable Body: Victorian Views on Physiognomy and Phrenology

In the nineteenth century, the sciences of physiognomy (which linked character traits to bodily characteristics, particularly facial features) and phrenology (which mapped character traits on the brain based on protrusions of the skull) seemed to offer knowledge of internal subjectivity
through a classification of external characteristics. Both sciences were believed to bring the shadowy world of internal subjectivity into the light of scientific investigation. The discourses of phrenology and physiognomy contributed to the Victorian creation of the norm that Davis articulates. The perceived ability to read internal characteristics through physical appearance or the contours of the skull seemed, for example, to allow Victorians to delineate boundaries between normal and deviant subjectivities. Illustrated books and manuals often portrayed well-developed heads or an ideal physiognomy next to examples deemed inferior (see Fig. 1). Such texts associated "inferior" physiognomy (such as a low forehead, large mouth, wide-set eyes, and sloping profile) with animalistic features, which were believed to indicate degeneration in the individual and in turn to result in subhuman behavior.

![Large and Small Intellects](image)

**No. 43. Bacon.**  
**No. 44. Idiot.**

Fig. 1. Engraving of comparative intellects from Lorenzo Niles Fowler, *The Illustrated Self-instructor in Phrenology and Physiology* (New York, 1857; Print; 42).
Aurora despite her inferior physiognomy. Readers of the stereotyped edition no longer need to trust Aurora; they know she is innocent and that Hargraves committed the murder, a guilt that his physical appearance confirms. The overwhelming success of melodramatic adaptations of *Aurora Floyd* and Braddon’s subsequent alterations of the text to a more conservative approach to the body indicate that there were a wide range of opinions during a time of rapid and fundamental change in the way bodies were understood. Though the paradigm was shifting away from a readable body and stable identity, the evolution of *Aurora Floyd* seems to indicate that the public still held on to the belief that bodies were readable.

**Conclusion**

In the serial and early volume editions of the novel, Braddon challenges the reliability of appearances by attacking assumptions underpinned by the normative sciences of physiognomy and phrenology; yet, at the same time, she uses Hargraves’s aberrant body as a metaphor for his internal degradation. Braddon thus demands that her readers understand characters in utterly contradictory ways: she exposes Aurora and Conyers’s appearances as unreliable while at the same time relying on Hargraves’s disabled body to signify his guilt. Hargraves’s body thus survives as a trace of an earlier way of viewing the body as physiognomically readable, a mode of understanding largely rejected by sensation writers because of the epistemological certainty it promises. Stage adaptations of *Aurora Floyd*, however, largely exaggerated Hargraves’s deformity and made his role as the villain central to the production, thus eliminating the viewer’s need to read and interpret Aurora as a suspect of the crime. These productions took the sensational element of ambiguous moral positions out of the narrative and converted *Aurora Floyd* into melodrama. The immense popularity of stage productions of *Aurora Floyd* that
normalized Hargraves as a villain likely affected Braddon’s revisions that created a more conservative text by making Aurora’s innocence obvious.

*Aurora Floyd* can be read as a product of the debate surrounding the conception and rights of the subject in the 1860s, and the conservative shift in theatrical adaptations and later editions of the novel might indicate the conservatism of the general public. The period immediately surrounding the publication of *Aurora Floyd* witnessed huge shifts in the concepts of identity and society that formed the cultural milieu in which Braddon wrote *Aurora Floyd*. High-profile court cases such as the Palmer Trial and divorce cases after the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1857 broke down class-related conceptions of criminality and morality. Jonathan Loesberg argues that sensational plot structures were formed by the ideological climate leading up to the second Reform Act of 1867, which effectively doubled the voting population by opening up voting rights to laboring-class males. He asserts that the central obsession of the malleability of identity in sensation plots is a product of a larger, ambiguous cultural fear of a loss of class distinction and hence the potential for anarchy (122). Braddon’s attack on the accuracy of appearances similarly disrupts distinctions that are used to maintain the illusion of a stable and innate class system. However, Braddon’s deployment of ambiguous character is more positive than Loesberg suggests. By denying phrenology’s and physiognomy’s normative hierarchies, Braddon gestures towards a more democratic view of society in which behavior is not determined at birth and people are capable of change. The deep internal contradiction in Braddon’s text thus indicates that the concepts she explores were still being defined, and the popularity of conservative theater adaptations seems to indicate that a lower-class audience still held on to an idea of the subject as a fixed identity.
Works Cited


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