

**Challenging the Divisions between  
Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Sarah Grand:  
Conceptions of Authorship in *The Beth Book* (1897) and *The Infidel* (1900)**

**Helen McKenzie**

**Abstract**

In *The Beth Book* (1879) and *The Infidel* (1900), Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Sarah Grand employed fictional writers to question professional authorship, confront contemporary social discourses, and participate in the literary fashion which pervaded *fin-de-siècle* fiction. As this article demonstrates, looking in depth at the resonances between *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* sheds new light on the complex interrelation between these famous authors, their novels, and across the wider Victorian literary marketplace. The unlikely pairing disrupts the divisions that can still interrupt Victorian literary studies and hamper the critical work done in isolation on Braddon and Grand. *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel*, and their fictional authors Beth Maclure and Antonia Thorburn, are a conscious choice to enter the conversations pervading and shaping the social and literary spheres. Through their careers, Braddon and Grand may speak to their readerships in markedly differing styles and time frames but their fictional depictions of the decisions, barriers, and opportunities faced by women writers, including the New Woman, provide a fresh perspective from which to examine these influential women writers' place in the social and literary spheres.

**Keywords**

Mary Elizabeth Braddon; Sarah Grand; New Woman; fictional authors; professional authorship; literary marketplace; *The Beth Book*; *The Infidel*.

**Date of Acceptance:** 27 June 2022

**Date of Publication:** 4 July 2022

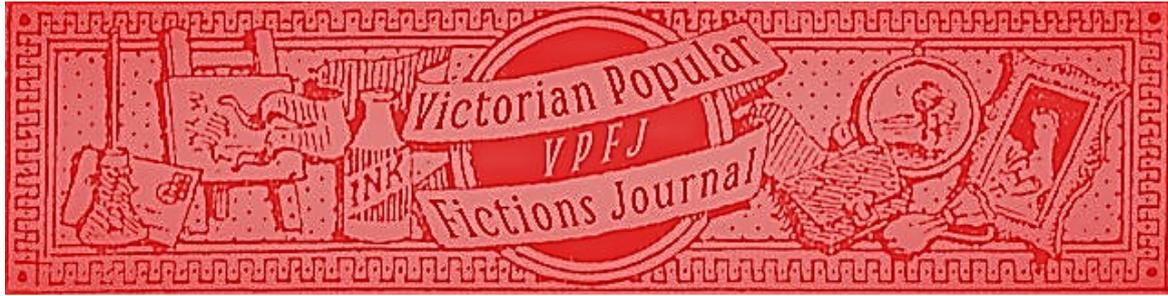
**Double Blind Peer Reviewed**

**Recommended Citation:**

McKenzie, Helen. 2022. "Challenging the Divisions between Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Sarah Grand: Conceptions of Authorship in *The Beth Book* (1897) and *The Infidel* (1900)." *Victorian Popular Fictions* 4:1: 94-110. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/PQEN7887>



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## Challenging the Divisions between Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Sarah Grand: Conceptions of Authorship in *The Beth Book* (1897) and *The Infidel* (1900)

**Helen McKenzie**

### Introduction

In 1904, the *Lady's Realm* announced the Lyceum Club's intention to create an information bureau for its members. According to Dora D'Espaigne,

The hundred and eighteen names on the provisional committee comprise pretty nearly every well-known woman in these special subjects in England; and it would be easier to say who is *not* included than who *is*, in a list which includes the Countess of Aberdeen, Miss Billington, Rhoda Broughton, Mrs. Egerton Castle, Sarah Grand, Beatrice Harraden, John Oliver Hobbes, the Duchess of Leeds, E. Nesbit, Miss Braddon, Mrs. Meynell, L. T. Meade, Mrs. Molesworth, Mrs. T. P. O'Connor, Flora Annie Steel, the Duchess of Sutherland, Miss Sarah Tytler, and Mrs. Humphrey Ward.

("The Lyceum Club" 1904: 607)

Just as these women writers' names were read alongside each other in a list of distinguished professionals, their writing was read in tandem in periodicals just like the *Lady's Realm*; Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Sarah Grand were among these women. In November 1897, short stories by Corelli, Francis, and Mathers, were read alongside Mary Elizabeth Braddon's illustrated historical novel *In High Places* and Sarah Grand's short story "The Baby's Tragedy" and her article "The New Woman and the Old."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the *Lady's Pictorial*, which brought together a disparate and dynamic range of women writers, ran work by Miller, Oliphant, Humphry, and Ella Hepworth Dixon's *Story of a Modern Woman*, first serialised in 1894, in conjunction with Grand's articles and Braddon's fiction, including the latter's children's story *The Christmas Hirelings* (1893).

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<sup>1</sup> Braddon's *In High Places* was continued in a total of twelve instalments (November 1897 – October 1898). Grand's short story "She Was Silent" appeared in the very first volume and the serialised novel *Babs the Impossible* ran from June 1900 to April 1901. Grand may well have written other non-fiction articles.

While many spoke vehemently against the periodical press, New Women often recognised, capitalised on, and powerfully employed the opportunities, one of whom was undisputedly Grand. In 1907, the *Review of Reviews* even quoted Braddon followed by Grand in their article, “Books I Should Like to Have Written”:

Miss Braddon follows with “The Vicar of Wakefield,” for then should know that in wit, honour, and pathos she was the greatest of English novelists. Madame Sarah Grand eulogises “The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table” as the book from which one derives most help and comfort.

(1907: 517)

Although there was a shift towards the one-volume novel, and a more defined concept of a book, late-nineteenth century fiction was nevertheless written, published, and read in conjunction with the periodical press.

Indicative of the burgeoning celebrity culture, *Women at Home* carried Sarah Tooley’s interviews, “Some Women Novelists” (1897), accompanied by photographs of the writers and their homes, among them Braddon, Corelli, Grand, and Linton. Despite drawing attention to the generational divides between mid-century novelists and New Woman writers by ordering them alphabetically, Tooley’s series questions placing these authors in the strictly chronological order often chosen. Beth Palmer champions uniting fiction and periodical press, challenging how the “distain and hostility displayed by Tooley’s article and by writers like Gissing and Egerton have occluded the rich and complex relationships between the ‘new woman’ novel and press publication until relatively recently” and examines “significant continuities” from mid-century periodicals, such as Braddon’s *Belgravia*, to those edited and contributed to by New Woman writers, including Grand and the *Lady’s Pictorial* (2011: 165). Through the periodical press, scholars have an insight into the connections between writers. Typifying the field of research on the periodical press, a recent collection, *Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture, 1830s–1900s: The Victorian Period*, forms an extensive examination of the Victorian literary marketplace and brings critics together to “demonstrate the expansive landscape of Victorian print media produced by and for women, which gave public shape to women’s interests, issues, and identities in this period” (Easley, Gill, Rodgers 2019: 10). My article is located within this critical environment, continuing to challenge (pre)conceptions of authorship, fiction, print culture, and the dialogue with Victorian social context.

Alongside the periodical press, the figure of the fictional writer was powerfully utilised as a platform for women’s voices through the 1880s and 1890s. Although not a brand-new literary trend, metafiction became closely associated with New Woman fiction and a remarkable number of New Woman writers wrote novels with fictional authors in them: as Sally Ledger explores, “one of the striking features of the New Woman novels is that they are peopled with female writers of feminist fiction” (1997: 27). Fictional authors populated novels throughout the Victorian period but there was a surge towards the end of the century amid the re-shaping of the literary marketplace. Tracing the development, Lyn Pykett posits that:

If women’s sensation novels had proclaimed themselves women’s texts by focusing on women’s sensations, adopting a woman-to-woman address and working within what was perceived to be a feminine genre, many New Woman novels situated themselves as women’s texts by making women and women’s writing their subjects. By foregrounding the figure of the woman writers, such novels foreground the problems of their own production.

(1992: 177)

Many such novels were published at pivotal points in these writers' careers during the renegotiation of women authors' professional roles in the advent of modernism. Importantly, metafictional novels were used to question, undermine, and contradict definitions of femininity and challenge the literary sphere in which women writers worked. Ann Heilmann and Valerie Sanders argue that, "[a]t the very same time at which anti-feminist writers projected their uncertainties into flawed, frail, and failing feminine characters, feminist writers embraced the concept of femininity for their own strategic purposes" (2006: 294). At the *fin de siècle*, the literary trend was not exclusive to New Women writers and the narrative ploy united female authors across the seemingly disparate factions.

Symptomatic of the plethora of fictional writers, a remarkable number appeared in 1894 alone, including Elizabeth Robins' semi-autobiographical novel, *George Mandeville's Husband* (1894), written as she arrived in the literary marketplace (published under the pseudonym C. E. Raimond). Dixon's deliberately political novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), depicts the heroine, Mary Erle, working as a hack writer, thereby providing a realistic portrayal of the choices and financial hardship faced by women striving to achieve a literary career. Similarly, Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus* (1894) depicts a painful conflict between the household and creativity. Penny Boumelha examines the self-contradiction in many such metafictional novels and identifies the interdependence of both "Women of Grub Street" and "Women of Genius" (1997). Fictional writers can also be found in short stories published in periodicals through the 1880s and 1890s. For instance, Annie Holdsworth's "A Cloistered Bohemian," serialised in the *Woman's Signal* (1894), features Jean, a struggling journalist. Unlike many of these metafictional novels, in her notably successful novel *Red Pottage* (1899), Mary Cholmondeley removes her fictional writer, a "woman of genius", from the literary marketplace: as Linda Peterson suggests, "Cholmondeley has decided that her strategy must be to represent the intellectual struggle, not the material conditions, of her work [and] in this fictional realm, Hester's literary genius and devotion to art lead to critical esteem and, eventually, economic reward" (2009: 216). Interestingly, ignoring the hysterical scenes when her brother burns her manuscript, the *Spectator* goes as far as to call Hester Gresley "a most fascinating specimen of the intellectually emancipated modern woman" ("Novels of the Week" 1899). Confirming victory against her brother, Hester's next novel, *Inasmuch*, resurfaced in Cholmondeley's work *Moth and Rust* (1902).

Fictional writers appeared and reappeared throughout Braddon's remarkably long career published across multiple genres, beginning with Sigismund Smith in both *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) and *The Lady's Mile* (1866). Like all of Braddon's oeuvre, her metafictional novels were serialised in a range of periodicals but, strategically, *Birds of Prey* (1867), *Dead-Sea Fruit* (1867–8), *Charlotte's Inheritance* (1868), *Hostages to Fortune* (1874–5) were all published in *Belgravia* whilst she was editor.<sup>2</sup> Fictional writers continued to populate Braddon's fiction in the pages of *Vixen* (1879), *One Thing Needful* (1886), *His Darling Sin* (1899), *The Infidel* (1900), and, finally, *Mary* (1916). Braddon's novels were influential in the ever-evolving trend of metafiction and indicative of her strategic, and self-conscious, perception of the literary marketplace. The fictional writers give a political commentary upon the social and cultural contexts surrounding women's literary careers. As the queen of sensation fiction, and infamous for

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<sup>2</sup> Palmer and Costantini offer invaluable work particularly on those published in the pages of *Belgravia* (Palmer 2011 and Costantini 2015).

her popularity and prolific production, Braddon's career erupted in the mid-nineteenth century; indeed it cannot be underestimated that Braddon was, as Anne-Marie Beller describes, the "byword for all was lauded and loathed about the female 'sensation novelist'" (2016: 245). However, Braddon deliberately used and capitalised on her renown, whilst redefining her identity as an author and remaining in line with literary fashions and social politics until the very end of her astonishingly long career. Braddon held a continuously prominent presence and influence in the Victorian literary marketplace, providing a distinctive view from within the professional collaborations inherent to authorship.<sup>3</sup> As the century progressed Braddon's work for the *Strand*, Gothic and ghost short stories, and children's literature were central to establishing new facets to her authorship. Crossing genre boundaries, and sharing a specific interest with Grand in writing the supernatural, Braddon parallels New Woman writings in terms of mixed forms, social commentary, and political concerns. The diversity of genres, styles, and readerships of Braddon's writing, as well as the multiplicity of authorial roles she occupied, exemplify the complexity and instability of the Victorian literary sphere. Braddon's fictional writers are fascinating insights into conceptions of authorship and the literary culture in which they were written and published.

Grand's first fictional writer was published in 1888 in *Ideala* where the eponymous heroine is a writer. Her writing, predominantly poetry, is not described in as detailed a way as Beth's and *Ideala* is used more as a voice on Victorian marriage than for charting a career as an author. *Ideala* returns in *The Beth Book* as a minor character, but it is Beth that takes centre stage as a fictional writer. These novels stand in the trilogy forming the core of Grand's literary career, *Ideala*, *The Beth Book*, and *The Heavenly Twins*. Grand's novels and her articles were at the forefront of redefining the Victorian woman writer, first airing the name "New Woman" in "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" published in the *North American Review* (Grand 1894). Nevertheless, the inventor of the New Woman's place in the periodical press resisted many of the emerging literary ideals and the sensational pervades her fiction. Often there is more attention to Grand's non-fiction articles in the periodical press, but many of her short stories and novels were serialised, such as *Singularly Deluded* (1892) in *Blackwood's* and "When the Door Opened" (1897) in *Idler*. Hence, Grand's writing and her place in the periodical press resisted many of the literary ideals promoted by other New Women writers and the accusations being aimed at women writers. This article will use Grand's *The Beth Book*, *Being a Study of the Life of Elizabeth Cardwell Maclure*, *A Women of Genius* and Braddon's *The Infidel: A Story of the Great Revival* to examine how these influential authors determinedly disrupted the divisions exerted on writers and deliberately entered literary and social debates with their fictional writers.

Although only published three years apart, the mode of publication is substantially different as Grand published *The Beth Book* herself but Braddon published *The Infidel* within much more established systems. Particularly in the first few decades of her career, Braddon was subject to the literary marketplace's relentless demands for her novels and *The Infidel* is in many ways still aimed at her well-established readers. However, simultaneously, the status as a one-volume historical fiction set in the mid-eighteenth century distances the novel from the sensational, the 1860s, and Braddon's identity as the

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<sup>3</sup> Indicative of the interdependence and networks at the heart of the literary sphere Rhoda Broughton was a frequent "resident" at Braddon's and Maxwell's home in the New Forest, part of an extensive network of writers and politicians from an array of social spheres, including Mary Cholmondeley, Oscar Wilde, and Wilkie Collins, reflecting Braddon's intimate knowledge of literary trends and political change (Maxwell 1937).

queen of sensation fiction. *The Infidel* follows the journey of its heroine Antonia Thorburn from her work as a hack with her father, through marriage then widowhood, to charity work and becoming a socialite, before finally dying a martyr's death in Ireland. Standing towards the end of her extensive career, *The Infidel* reflects Braddon's continued professional prowess and refusal to relinquish her place in the literary world. Conversely, Grand's novels met with consistent resistance from publishers. Political, sensational, and self-conscious, *The Beth Book* contributed to Grand's fight to enter the literary marketplace and her arrival on the political stage. *The Beth Book* sees a writer move from her childhood and schooling, through a rocky marriage, to publishing her writing, and becoming a political public speaker. The autobiographical elements to both *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* accentuate the questioning of a professional author's career, particularly female writers in the rapidly evolving literary marketplace.

When looking at their careers and their oeuvre, a linear chronological methodology is immensely valuable as Braddon and Grand were undoubtedly from different generations. A common contention is that both sensation fiction and New Woman novels were in intimate dialogue with their social context and a chronological structure allows insightful work on tracing the evolutions in literature through the second half of the nineteenth century. There are critical works opening and closing with Braddon and Grand, most pertinently Colleen Denney (2009) and Greta Depledge (2013) who briefly draw connections between their work and careers. There is however a distinct lack of direct, and fruitful, comparison between Grand and Braddon and their fiction. This article focuses on a thematic reading of *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* to highlight the interconnections between these novels and their depictions of women writers. Taking a directly comparative approach offers a new angle from which to consider Grand's and Braddon's careers and the professional literary marketplace at this point in the century. Among the novels gaining prominence in Braddon scholarship are those containing fictional writers (Beller 2016; Costantini 2015; Palmer 2011). Recent research has uncovered new dimensions to Braddon's career in the final decades of the Victorian era, notably Palmer (2021) unveiling Braddon's final novel *Mary* (1916) and Hatter's work celebrating Braddon's short stories (2014). With *The Infidel*, this article contributes to Braddon research by taking as its focus a critically-neglected work from the turn of the century, and directly compares this novel to that by a writer firmly tied to the rise of the New Woman. Although not as extensively examined as her novel *The Heavenly Twins*, *The Beth Book* is prominent in Grand research: Lauren Simek examines the trilogy focusing on *The Beth Book*, seeing Beth as a development from *Ideala* in terms of an autobiographical voice (2012). Focusing on *The Beth Book* as a metafictional novel and reading Grand alongside Braddon, who is relentlessly associated with the periodical press and popularity, the article draws attention to Grand in relation to the practical elements of the profession. Placing *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* so firmly within the context of the fiction, publications, and society surrounding them, the article draws from scholarship on Braddon and Grand in tandem with research on the cultural, literary, and social contexts.

Tackling the contentions between femininity and professionalism, particularly being an economically-independent woman, was at the heart of New Woman fiction and Beth and Antonia help Grand and Braddon to confront these dichotomies. By juxtaposing the famous authors, the article offers a nuanced view of the context and literary marketplace in which they were publishing, and the intense dialogue with society at the heart of women's writing at this point in the century. The article will first explore how Braddon and Grand consciously enter the literary and scientific fascination with childhood and psychology. I will move to discuss how in *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* nursing,

acting for social good, and charity are sites for interrogating the literary, professionalism, and femininity. As the article will consider, at the heart of both *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* are depictions of the contentious Victorian marriage market. The article ends by examining how Braddon and Grand construct the barriers facing women writers establishing a room of one's own in the Victorian social and literary spheres. *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* can be read as manifestations of Braddon's and Grand's shared participation in social politics and their prominent voices in the literary marketplace. Despite their differences, Braddon and Grand used their novels to consciously enter conversations on female authorship and the literary fashion of fictional writers which pervaded *fin-de-siècle* fiction.

### “Before the Knowledge of Evil”

An extended exploration of the heroine's childhood was a pervasive and controversial characteristic of New Woman fiction. The presentation of a girl's childhood as a formative educational stage in novels reflected women's increasing physical presence in educational institutions, epitomised by the nine women's colleges in universities at the end of the nineteenth century. These changes in the education system provoked criticism of New Women as invading a male-dominated sphere by those who Ledger describes as the “many enemies of the New Woman of her supposed masculinization” (1997: 17). As the nineteenth century progressed, fiction shifted from explorations of the self, insanity and morality, to ideas of psychology, consciousness, and creativity (Shuttleworth 2010: 4). Significantly, in the periodical press, New Women writers' fictional depictions of childhood were written and read alongside scientific developments, especially in post-Darwinian psychology and psychiatry. Crucially, although much of this material was published in periodicals like *Mind*, prominent scientific articles regularly appeared in literary publications, such as James Sully's article “The Dream as a Revelation” (1893) read in the *Fortnightly Review*. Similarly indicative of the unstable division between the scientific and the fictional, the well-known novelist Robert Louis Stevenson's article “Child's Play” was published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1878.<sup>4</sup> Grand's fascination with consciousness, psychic mystery, and multiple personalities is integral to her fiction and evident in the powerful illustrations of birth, sexual awakenings, and dreams.<sup>5</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor examines the significance of *The Beth Book's* subtitle, *Being a Study of the Life of Elizabeth Caldwell Maclure, A Woman of Genius*, arguing that “Grand's title does convey the double sense of ‘Beth's Book’ and ‘The Book of Beth’ with its Biblical connotations, and this ambiguity allows its heroine to be read as both psychological case study and desiring subject” (Taylor 2013: 9).

Braddon's belief in childhood as a crucial period of life can be found more materially in both her personal and professional life. Braddon's evolutions in her writing can be found in her children's story, *The Christmas Hirelings* (1893) and unpublished

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly symptomatic of the blurred line, Sully worked as a journalist in the 1870s and knew Stevenson, as well as George Eliot and Henry Lewes.

<sup>5</sup> Heilmann's and Sanders's work is important in understanding Grand's conceptions of childhood and sexuality, including in *The Beth Book* (2006).

autobiography “Before the Knowledge of Evil,” whilst, as Mrs Maxwell, Braddon carried out extensive charity work centred around children’s physical and psychological nourishment. In *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel*, Braddon and Grand participated in the evolving fictional depictions of childhood through the formation of a child’s mind, education, and, particularly pertinent to this article, the early writing of Beth and Antonia.

In *The Beth Book*, Grand intimately portrays Beth’s physical and metaphorical birth, childhood, and education. Grand’s fascination in the formation of consciousness is embodied in Beth beginning life as “unconscious as a white grub without legs” (33). Throughout Beth’s childhood, there are tensions between order and creativity, powerful emotion and pain, and restrictions and liberation, and intertwined with her becoming a writer. Beth is first a verse maker, writing in secret in the night, but at school she becomes a performer reading her stories aloud. Beth declares that the Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray read aloud in the classroom is “such silly stuff! Why I could tell you a better story myself” (319). Beth takes to the stage looking around the room and capturing the imagination of her audience. Her shows do not necessarily alter her misery, but have powerful emotional effects on the audience, who “were shaken with awe, and sat silent for a perceptible time after she stopped” (320), and give her an almost celebrity status in the school. Interestingly, her stories also implicitly stimulate invented illness and bereavements to escape the school’s imprisoning regime. Beth assumes the role of both actor and playwright improvising in the moment, although later her performances become Bible readings. The idea of influencing her audience’s behaviour unquestionably foreshadows Beth’s didactic motivation and tone at the end of the novel as a feminist activist.<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting Braddon’s background as an actress, fascination in drama, and eagerness to write plays, her fictional writer’s literary career revolves arounds the theatre. Antonia grows up working with her father, Mr Thornton, as Grub Street Hacks producing successful dramas and eloquent reviews, alongside gossip columns, poems, and political diatribes. When her future husband Lord Kilrush suggests that she is too young to be a playwright, Antonia fiercely defends her literary education replying, “I wrote plays when I was five years younger [...] and gave them to Betty to light the fire’ [...] ‘she was a fool to burn her trash,’ said Thornton. ‘I might have made a volume of it’” (I: 51). Her father’s mercenary motives are persistently reiterated and Antonia’s destruction of the manuscript is an act of protecting her early writing from the publishing sphere. Reflecting the binary between public and private running through her childhood, Antonia’s truest friend is an actress cast in her father’s comedy *How to please her*; Miss Patty Lester and Antonia met in the wings. *The Infidel*’s actress stands within the spectrum filling New Women writing, as well as amid the broad range of depictions of the theatrical in Braddon’s novels, which were used, Beller argues, “as a potent symbol for the anomaly between semblance and reality” (2012: 28). She may stand in the wings and

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<sup>6</sup> Beth becoming a leader at school for a time is one of the autobiographical moments in the novel as at school Grand set up a club for the repeal of the “Contagious Diseases Act.” Later in life, Grand was a member of Rational Dress Society, the Pioneer Club and Women’s Writers Suffrage League, Vice-President of the Kent division of the Women’s Constitutional Suffrage Society, President of local brand of the National Association of Women, and of the local branch of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (Taylor 2013).

burn her writing, yet both Antonia's literary education and friendship are born in the dramatic sphere. While Beth is closer to the role of actor and Antonia a playwright, their places on the edge of the dramatic sphere during their childhood and education bestows a degree of performativity on their writing and their identity. Both women's early roles typify the unstable division between the public and private, a dichotomy running through both *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel*.

### **“The Thousands of Those Who Suffer”**

Religion is also key to Beth's and Antonia's childhoods and each has an epiphany or conversion. Christian faith and acts of charity pervade *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* and both Grand and Braddon write extended passages in which their fictional writers explore and interrogate their faith. Mr Thornton, “the unfrocked priest, the audacious infidel” (I: 8), gave his daughter a Voltairean education combined with her reading of Shakespeare, Fielding, and Richardson's *Clarissa*. Later in *The Infidel*, Antonia's work in a Methodist charity challenges nineteenth-century understandings of nursing and social responsibility. Likewise, in *The Beth Book*, Beth's care for the suffering sparks a religious epiphany which then paves the way for her transition from an author to a public speaker. For both heroines, speaking, listening, and preaching are integral to their philanthropy and their faiths, and intimately tied with their authorship. Antonia listens to the “poor creatures [who] like tell me their troubles” (II: 281) and Beth speaks so that those who hear her voice “would raise their heads once more in hope” (541). Both *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* use religion and charity to expose the fault lines in Victorian social politics, constructing an intimate dialogue between duty, compassion, morality, and didacticism.

For Grand, religion is a gateway for exploring charity, didacticism, and social purity feminism. As early as 1888, Grand uses religious language to convey political activism in *Ideala*. The novel ends with the heroine speaking as a fierce campaigner for women's fight against inequality in Victorian society. Similarly, in *The Heavenly Twins* Ideala embarks on a campaign for a new religion, which, as Heilmann examines, “is equated with social purity feminism, the same way as the next generation of feminists was to equate it with the suffragist movement” (2004: 53). When she reappears in *The Beth Book*, Ideala aids Beth in finding her new career in female suffrage. In childhood, Beth receives order and security in Christianity, in tandem with education, by her substitute mother figure, Aunt Victoria. For her, religion is a source of comfort in her isolation after rejecting social conventions: we are told that, had she belonged to Beth's generation, Aunt Victoria would have moved to London and “joined a progressive women's club” (209). Grand's novels also align religious faith with desire for social equality, particularly in bestowing hope on the lower class. Drawing together religion and charity, the role of nurse replaces the role of writer and acts as a bridge to Beth's public speaking, extending the idea of writing for the good of people, rather than for the aesthetic pleasure of well-tuned prose. To establish her position as nurse, for Arthur Brock, Beth creates the essential room and, “while the kettle was boiling, she cut bread and butter, and lighted the fire” (512). The image of her giving her bread and

going hungry herself bestows a Biblical dimension to Beth's nursing as an object of her sacrifice. Beth's constant wrestling with her Christian faith climaxes when she discovers "her vocation," becoming a "heavenly vision" but with a political motivation to perform social duty. In an intensely autobiographical scene, *The Beth Book* closes with detailed depictions, imbued with religious language, of Beth speaking in front of crowds, educating, rescuing, and improving these suffering women's lives, implicitly making Beth a preacher as well as a suffragist, political campaigner, and even politician.

Philanthropy also forms an autobiographical dimension to *The Infidel*. After achieving financial security, Mrs Maxwell carried out extensive charity work organising school trips to the countryside and school meals in poverty-stricken areas of London.<sup>7</sup> While reflecting her dual identity, many of Miss Braddon's novels share a fascination with Christian faith, wealth, and charity. Intimately tying philanthropy to religious beliefs in *The Infidel*, Braddon interrogates the motivations for Antonia's behaviour, which fluctuates between lavish spending, particularly on fashion, and a recurrent desire or guilty compulsion to undertake charity work. Interestingly, in direct opposition to reviews in the 1860s disparaging her knowledge and exaggeration, the accuracy and respect of Braddon's historical depictions were commended as remarkable: as the *London Quarterly Review* says, "[s]he reproduces the people, the scenes, the atmosphere, the spirit of the eighteenth century, and she describes the work and the influence of Methodism with insight and sympathy" ("Methodism in Recent Fiction" 1904: 57–75). Notwithstanding the nuance in Braddon's depiction of and respect for religious faith, *The Infidel* does not unequivocally support this branch of Christianity and narrative sympathy is with the heroine's social politics and intellectual independence. Throughout the novel, Antonia consistently resists the prescribed behaviours and beliefs that come with Methodism, but passionately expresses her desire for the hope faith can bring. Antonia tells her cousin George Stobart: "If to love Jesus is to be a Christian, why then I am a Christian. But if a Christian must think exactly as you do, or as Mr. Wesley does, I am outside the pale" (II: 256). However, after inheriting her fortune, Antonia enters a business arrangement with Stobart and establishes a Methodist charity providing care and Christianity to the poverty-stricken in London: "All the strength of [Antonia's] heart and intellect were engaged in those good works to which the Methodists attached only a secondary merit" (II: 250-1). Despite remaining immensely wealthy, Antonia dies a martyr's death nursing a village in Ireland in a small-pox outbreak. Crucially, Antonia's authoritative position as the patron and financial manager confronts the division between the business and domestic spheres by granting her authority. Although intensely patronising, Wesley's illustration of Antonia taking to the stage follows his announcement of their first female preacher, immediately associating her with the beginnings of women's presence in Methodism. Unlike Beth, Antonia is not explicitly didactic; however, in *The Infidel* Braddon tentatively constructs a version of the political public speaking Grand showcases in *The Beth Book*.

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<sup>7</sup> The ventures, including trips to the countryside and free school meals, typify Braddon's implicit campaign for children's welfare to be a social duty. Maxwell tells of a time that he went to the schools with his mother as well as declarations of her progressive stance and work on children's charity (Maxwell 1937). Braddon's social politics were questioned, even ridiculed in the periodical press, including "Miss Braddon's School Days" in *Punch* (1880) and a cartoon, "Boarding Schools for the Million" in *Funny Folks* (1880), laughing at her campaign for school meals. Braddon, though, was more incisive about the personal and political impulses to philanthropy than this lampoon suggests.

## “I am Not for Sale”

In tandem with Grand and Braddon strategically using religious discourses in the service of women’s professional independence, constructions of marriage in *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* carry immense symbolic weight. In their novels, Braddon and Grand, along with all New Women writers, are faced with negotiating a line between capitulating and sacrificing when constructing romance plots. Pykett sees marriage as key in the continuation from sensation to New Woman fiction, arguing that, “although sometimes more experimental in form and almost always more didactic and overtly polemical than the sensationalists, the New Woman writers shared many of the predecessors’ preoccupations [engaging] in a probing exploration and critique of marriage and the family” (1992: 15).<sup>8</sup> When depicting female fictional writers, the endings are inevitably centred on the reconciliation, or irreconciliation, between artistic expression or genius, and marriage or domestic responsibility. As Peterson explores, significantly, many metafictional novels closed with lost ambitions instead of a romantic conclusion (2009). One of many writers experiencing constraints from their husband’s financial failings, Charlotte Riddell’s *A Struggle for Fame* (1883) ends with her heroine rejecting marriage as incompatible with literary success reflecting those shared struggles. The Victorian marriage market is central to Braddon’s whole oeuvre; these concerns had not waned by the *fin de siècle* and *The Infidel* can be seen as contributing to her social criticism and comment. Similarly, marriage was at the forefront of Grand’s political work and she wrote multiple articles explicitly posing questions to her readers and Victorian society more generally: “Marriage Questions in Fiction” in *Fortnightly Review* (1898) and “At What Age should Girls Marry?” in *Young Woman* (1899).<sup>9</sup> These questions are also asked in *The Beth Book*, exemplifying the intimate interactions between New Woman fiction and the periodical press.

Like many contemporary novels, *The Infidel* and *The Beth Book* organise their weddings early in the narrative in order to dramatise the reality and consequences of marriage. Beth’s marriage is characterised as unhappy, even abusive, with Daniel Maclure repeatedly declaring that she would be incapable of having a career in writing as a woman. However, in *The Beth Book* Grand does not straightforwardly reject marriage but unequivocally criticises the husband’s domination, desire for a mistress, and use of the wife’s money to pay his own debts. Throughout the novel, Beth determinedly retaliates against Maclure making a vehement case for women’s right to monogamous marriage with loyalty, equality, and financial control, cementing the dialogue with debates on New Women’s ability to gain independence while still maintaining their femininity. Once Beth has found peace in her new role as public speaker and political campaigner, she is to accept romance without capitulating. *The Beth Book* ends with a sense of harmony as Beth “reached out her hands towards him as if to welcome him [...] the Knight of her long winter vigil—Arthur Brock” (542). Crucially, Grand opts to reconcile a working woman, in the form of an orator, with a feminine romance.

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Depledge briefly draws connections between Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and Braddon’s *Thou Art The Man* (1894), seeing later sensation novels as containing “traits of New Woman and *fin-de-siècle* feminism [...] with writers tackling issues central to the social purity campaigns of the late nineteenth century such as marriage” (2013: 196).

<sup>9</sup> Mona Caird, author of *Daughters of Danaus* (1894), also wrote an article entitled “Marriage” in 1888 which led to debating in the correspondence column in the *Daily Telegraph*. Caird, Mona. 1888. “Marriage.” *Westminster Review* (August): 186–201.

Partly in light of her own marital situation, Braddon's treatment of marriage is one of the most fascinating and hotly-debated aspects of her fiction. Across her career, explorations of marriage and household management in Braddon's metafiction questioned the practicalities of daily life concurrent with the literary profession, perhaps most powerfully in *Hostages to Fortune* (1874-5), serialised in *Belgravia* during her editorship. A key moment in *The Infidel* is when Braddon's fictional author radically undermines the stereotype her future husband places on her. Lord Kilrush initially asks Antonia to be his mistress, as her father "A Grub-Street hack could have no straight-laced ideas" (55). Antonia refuses, proclaiming that "[t]he price you offer is extravagant, but I am not for sale" (102). Like many New Woman fictional writers, Antonia initially sacrifices marriage, remaining a 'spinster' and later, as a widow, she rejects her cousin's marriage proposals, adhering to her moral codes. Antonia's determined independence and profession as a writer lie behind her refusal to passively conform to romance narratives. Significantly, neither Grand nor Braddon choose the career of professional writing as culminating closure for their heroines, entering the conversations central to New Woman novels and tackling the contentions surrounding romantic plots, professionalism, financial freedom, and domestic security.

## A Room of One's Own

In alliance with their construction of marriages, Grand and Braddon also use physical spaces within the home, including the writer's study, as a site for dramatising the conflict between independence, isolation, and creativity. Through the nineteenth century, women writers were caught between their professional and domestic responsibilities and identities, and many of the most prominent Victorian authors, including Oliphant and Braddon, were writing to support their family and alleviate their husbands' financial incapability (Easley, Gill, Rodgers 2019). By the 1880s and 90s, women writers were gaining a more visible presence in the urban sphere, and young women could establish a greater sense of individuality and independence. However, financial and social barriers still confronted women writers. As a result, a woman having their own space often designated her as a spinster or outsider in Victorian society: Emma Liggins addresses how women writers were confronted with the choice between the "unfeminine" invasion of urban spaces and the traditionally feminine marital sphere (Liggins 2006: 144). Grand participated in the debate in her own article, "Should Married Women follow Professions?" (1899) warning of the costs of combining the domestic and the professional. Reflecting this social tension, spaces are integral to depictions of women writers, and have been central to criticism on New Woman fiction, such as Heilmann's examination of the room and the womb (1995). Across the generational and genre divides, in *fin-de-siècle* novels such as Riddell's *A Struggle for Fame* (1883), Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* (1899), and, most overtly, Ethel F. Heddle's *Three Girls in a Flat* (1896), dramatise the ability for young women to live and write in defined or individual spaces as both liberating and restrictive. These novels unashamedly confront the conflict between the public and the private, the professional demands and the domestic responsibilities inherent in authorship. For Grand, *The Beth Book* traces Beth's journey from a secret room in a stifling marital home, to a poverty-stricken garret, and finally to the public, political stage. In *The Infidel*, Antonia's spaces also shift from a London garret to a palatial marital home, and finally ending at a remote country estate. These spaces are used practically but also conceptually as constructions of the women writer's unstable place in the social and literary spheres.

After Beth's marriage, Grand provides her with an emphatically secret room in an attic within the constrictive home and medical practice controlled by her husband, a space in which Beth's creativity both liberates her and makes her suffer. As Heilmann argues, with the intimate dramatisation of Beth's marital home, "Grand manipulated patriarchal notions of domestic housekeeping into powerful feminist polemic about the need for social and political regeneration" (2004: 35). At different stages in *The Beth Book's* narrative Beth leaves the secret room to work at the kitchen table, and also enters the spheres of solitude at the seaside and a crowded urban community, suffering from adrenaline and exhaustion in both spaces. Beth returns with a yearning to escape to her safe room but, almost immediately, experiences a powerful sense of exclusion, loneliness, and entrapment. The corporeal cost of writing in the room of her own expresses the cost of Beth's genius and the exclusion from her marital sphere. As the novel progresses, Beth finds a sense of home in her friends' living rooms. These spaces offer a community who both read her work and listen to her voice, providing a bridge between the room of her own within the marital sphere and her own room in the urban sphere. Beth finds Grand's earlier fictional writer Ideala in her friend's living room, an environment at the heart of a community of political women and where they are given the stage to speak. Ideala exposes the failure and sacrifice "art for art's sake" that authors often make, ending their careers, even lives, in "the asylum, the prison, and the premature grave" (476). Ideala and Beth, and implicitly Grand, reject these physical and emotional costs which often come to fruition, although they do not value money or popularity in quite the way that Braddon does. In these rooms Grand's fictional writers champion writing with a didactic tone and for the good of their readers.

Reflecting Grand herself, Beth rejects the marital home and forges a new identity in London. The attic encases the tension between the working woman and the feminine woman. In the garret the dynamic between domesticity, femininity and professionalism is contended or questioned; for Grand's fictional author, pleasure and comfort in writing is muddled by the publishing process. A division between Beth's act of writing and the books exists in each of her rooms; however, both rooms are characterised by a fear of failure which, as the narrator tells us, protects Beth from seeing herself as a genius. Marking her entry into the urban sphere, Beth begins a new book which is "'more of a task than the pleasure it used to be'" (507). As in the majority of New Woman novels, with independence and freedom comes work and financial hardship. Despite the old pleasure and intense experience of writing, Beth feels detached from the success and "the career of the book gave her no more pleasure than if it had been the work of a friend" (532). Interestingly, "the book" is personified and becomes its own entity rather than Beth having entire control or possession of it. Remaining in her London garret, Beth increasingly moves from writing fiction to giving didactic speeches learning that, "The writing had come of cultivation but this – the last discovered power – was the natural gift" (540). *The Beth Book* accepts political campaigning as the answer to the conflict between Genius and Grub Street, and between independence and suffering. For Beth, the rooms reflect her constant fluctuation between joy and suffering, community and exclusion.

Like Beth's, Antonia's room are contentious sites of emotional and corporeal pain, joy, secrecy, and writing. *The Infidel* begins in a London Grub Street garret both a place of security where Antonia expresses her love of literature and of working painfully hard with her father as professional writers, arguably recalling Braddon's early career living in Camberwell, Brighton, and Mecklenburg Square with her mother. Very differently to Beth, Antonia works more explicitly as a professional writer and,

just as Mary Erle wrote at her “ink-stained desk,” Antonia wrote with “ink-stained fingers” (I: 50). Alongside many *fin-de-siècle* fictional writers, Braddon’s writer is illustrated entering the urban literary world walking along those roads synonymous with the publishing industry, including Grub Street itself. In George Paston’s *A Modern Amazon* (1894), Regina Haughton is depicted walking confidently down Fleet Street. For Antonia, corporeal pain comes from walking the streets and writing constantly to meet the demands of the literary marketplace. Importantly, the garret is also a place of comfort where Antonia experiences her joy in reading. The juxtaposition of love for literature and pressure of demand is surely an autobiographical detail. Antonia’s writing room is tied more firmly to the literary marketplace, indicative of the way in which Braddon’s fictional writers confronted conflict between a woman’s literary ambitions and domestic responsibilities running throughout the nineteenth century. In *The Infidel*, the home slowly becomes a romantically-charged space with Antonia and her father joined by Lord Kilrush to speak directly on literature, share their enjoyment of reading, and work together on plays. Yet, similarly to how Beth escaped to her room from her husband, when threatened by Kilrush, Antonia “left him, and took refuge in her garret” (125). Antonia’s motivations for writing take a radical shift on her discovery that Kilrush intended for her to be his mistress; the melodramatic tone arguably draws Antonia, and by extension Braddon, closer to New-Woman writing and characterisation: “The facile pen had lost its readiness [and] often in these sorrowful days she had pushed aside her manuscript to scribble her recollections of Kilrush’s conversation upon a stray sheet of foolscap” (127-8). When romance fails and Kilrush leaves, her writing changes to express emotional pain. Just as in *The Beth Book*, *The Infidel*’s writing study holds tension between comfort and the physical pain of writing. In New Grub Street, Antonia is divided between her professional journalism and her love of literature, as well as between her joyful response to writing and the cost of professionalism.

Echoing Braddon’s own move from living in Bloomsbury with Maxwell, to owning large houses in London and the New Forest, Antonia leaves Grub Street but remains in London, in St. James’s Square, occupying rooms in a wealthy social sphere in which she assumes a more stereotypically feminine status. With her marriage Antonia becomes Lady Kilrush, but within two hours becomes a widow inheriting a vast fortune and multiple properties. Within her new rooms Antonia assumes the role of a more conventionally wealthy woman, and simultaneously an isolated woman without a husband or children. As Lady Kilrush, Antonia became an immensely popular woman in London, gaining an almost celebrity status: she was “intoxicated by the brilliance of her new existence, and the sense of unbounded power that wealth gave her” (I: 220-1). Antonia inhabits the social sphere yet the physical language foregrounds the ensuing cost. As the novel progresses, Antonia detaches herself from society: “I have taken a hatred of all company [...] Here I am as safe as in a prison” (II: 193-4). In the end, “Lady Kilrush was forgotten” (II: 192). *The Infidel* dramatises the gap between public social display and personal suffering, and is indicative of Braddon’s social commentary revealing the pain behind the fashionable front which evolved throughout her career. Antonia’s restlessness heightens through *The Infidel* for, despite travelling to Italy to find her family, she must reject their home and struggles to secure a peaceful space, ending alone in Ireland. Antonia’s homes were both liberating and restricting: however, undoubtedly her happiest is the garret in Grub Street. Symptomatic of the political edge to these novels, in *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel*, Beth and Antonia inhabit multiple rooms of their own used to confront the interplay between domestic, marital daily life, and a professional literary career.

## Conclusion

The direct comparative approach in this article sheds new lights on Braddon and Grand and their novels' concurrent place in the literary marketplace. Crucially, the thematic reading of *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* highlights the intimate relationship between these two novels and their depictions of women writers. *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* are both a conscious and political choice to enter the conversations pervading and shaping the social and literary spheres. The parallels between Beth and Antonia provide new insights from which to consider these influential authors' careers and the professional literary marketplace at the turn of the century. Braddon and Grand are repeatedly used to stand for distinct genres and time frames by which other authors' inclusion and exclusion are measured: *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* resist, even undo, those divisions. *The Beth Book* and *The Infidel* may depict different spheres of Victorian society and branches of the literary marketplace, and be written at vastly different stages in their careers, but these novels and their portraits of a woman writer form a bridge between Grand and Braddon. This article therefore demonstrates that the interconnections between Grand and Braddon and their novels should be recognised, explored, and celebrated. These fascinating fictional writers, Beth and Antonia, are a window into the work and lives of Grand and Braddon.

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