This article discusses the ways in which London was represented and navigated in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Belgravia*, a shilling monthly magazine, during the ten years of her editorship between 1866 and 1876. Using Braddon's serialised novels and the diverse articles over which she had editorial control as evidence, I argue that by deploying a sensational discourse to represent London -- in contradistinction to discourses of professionalism, politics and business -- Braddon made potentially alienating territory accessible to her primarily female readership.

By the time she took on her author-editorship Braddon was already famous for having written hugely popular 'sensation' novels including *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863). Elite critics deplored the farfetched plotlines and maniacal heroines that made the texts compulsively readable to the general public. They were perceived to be particularly appealing and particularly damaging to easily influenced young women readers.[1] The *North British Review*, like many other journals, grudgingly admitted Braddon's overwhelming popularity: 'By the unthinking crowd she is regarded as a woman of genius. The magazine to which she contributes is almost certain to have a large circulation, and to enrich its fortunate proprietors.'[2] The proprietor of Belgravia magazine was John Maxwell, Braddon's lover, and their publishing partnership was indeed a very profitable one. Belgravia gave Braddon a steady income and a regular vehicle in which to serialise her stories.

*Belgravia* articles such as ‘Whitehall to Somerset House’ by the journalist Frederick Monro or ‘St. Paul’s To Piccadilly’ by the writer (later librettist) W.S. Gilbert were typical of a glut of articles during the 1850s, 60s and 70s that sought to narrate the city. Monro asks ‘How little do we Londoners know of London!’ and speculates:

> What stores of interest and knowledge lie under the stones we daily tread on! What stories of romance and chivalry, of sensation and horror, of self-devotion and piety ...[3]

The article goes on to narrate some of the ‘stories’ of London’s streets in exactly these terms. Amongst other sensations, he touches on political ‘intrigue’ in the royal palaces, and juxtaposes ‘secret marriages’ at court with ‘public executions’. Monro, following the trend for representations of London brought about, in part, by G.M.W. Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London* (1844) and Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), re-writes the city’s geography to uncover stories of sensation, mystery and romance. His article ties in with the sensationalising and story-telling ethos of Belgravia.

Magazines like Belgravia reflected their obsession with the city not just through their contents, it was manifest in their very titles. Some, like *Cornhill*, were named with reference to the location of their publisher’s offices. While others, such as *Temple Bar, Pall Mall, St. James’s or St. Paul’s* borrowed the names of famous London landmarks to invoke their prestige. Prominent literary men edited some of these journals, such as W.M. Thackeray (*Cornhill*) and Anthony Trollope (*St. Paul’s*), and this compounded their cachet. Lynda Nead has argued that magazines of this mid-Victorian period were like the London streets in their cosmopolitanism, they ‘gathered diverse social constituencies within the inclusive embrace of their readerships’. While reliable readership figures are hard to come by, the shilling monthly magazine was affordable to a diverse range of potential reading groups.[5] However, the titles of many of the magazines did not necessarily connote this idea of diversity. They most often invoked financial, professional or otherwise male-dominated parts of the city in their titles. Mark Turner’s comment on St. Paul’s that the ‘title suggests a distinctly male part of London poised between the city and the courts, in the heart of the publishing world’ holds true for many of the other shilling monthlies.[6]

Barbara Onslow aligns *Belgravia* with magazines like *St. Paul’s* and Temple Bar by seeing in it a ‘prevailing tone of witty, urban sophistication.’[7] *Belgravia* does indeed approximate this cosmopolitan tone but it is also differs from its competitors. In the nineteenth-century, as today, Belgravia, situated in the City of Westminster, was exclusive and fashionable. It was though a
residential rather than a professional part of London, and so was not already aligned with a male
readership. It signalled a different kind of London to its readers, I argue, a more feminised one.

Braddon produced her magazine with a female urban experience (or lack of experience) in mind. As Judith Walkowitz has written, men and women experienced the Victorian city differently. ‘The fact and fantasy of urban exploration’, she writes, ‘had long been an informing feature of nineteenth-century bourgeois male subjectivity.’ Victorian London was a space in which women might not wander with such indiscrimate freedom as the male flâneur-figure without risking their respectability. Braddon, well aware of the Victorian limitations of female autonomy (her novels addressed the theme repeatedly), co-opted some of her sensational narrative tactics into editorial strategies to mediate the city for her middle-class women readers. Belgravia opened up the locus of nineteenth-century empire, culture, politics, and finance — the city of London — to navigation by middle-class women.

Many sensation texts of the 1860s mapped their boundary breaking narratives onto the city. Charles Dickens's Bleak House, for example, utilises the geography of the metropolis to structure Inspector Bucket’s frustrated chase of Lady Dedlock and Walter Hartright in Wilkie Collins’s The Woman in White uses London as a base whilst attempting to regain his beloved Laura’s stolen identity. The metropolis promised the anonymity on which many sensational plots depended; the city-dweller could be a respectable professional, a bigamist, and a murderer, without these several lives impinging on one another. Simultaneously, London’s status as a transport hub and social centre facilitated the coincidental meetings on which so many sensational plots hinged. Henry James famously asserted that the sensation novel had proved more alarming than its gothic predecessor by highlighting the ‘mysteries that are at our own doors’ and treating us ‘to the terrors of ... the busy London lodgings.’

The city was also implicated in generating what was seen as a worrying need for ‘sensation’ as a means of imaginative escape from the turbulence of modern metropolitan life. An 1869 article in Belgravia asserts that ‘No one can be indifferent to it [the subject of madness] who considers his own liability to become insane in this crowding and jostling age, where men tread so closely upon each other’s heels, where every nerve-fibre is at its highest tension, and the social wheels are made to revolve at the most terrific speed.’ Indeed Nicholas Daly’s analysis of the genre argues that the anxiety elicited by reading a sensation novel galvanised its contemporary readers against the real shocks of the modern city. Belgravia gave its editor the space to further explore these connections between the city and sensationalism in order to make London readable to a female audience through the formulae of sensation.

Braddon entitled the first chapter of Birds of Prey (the sensation novel with which she began Belgravia) ‘The House in Bloomsbury’. The chapter dissects the respectable urban residence to set up the novel’s central themes of isolation and impenetrability within the populous city. Braddon marks out ‘No.14 Fitzgeorge-street’ as ‘Sealed with the seal of respectability’. It is the ‘one spot of cleanliness’ in a ‘dingy thoroughfare ... that lies between Holborn and St. Pancras Church.’ The narrator describes the ‘effect produced by [the house’s] white doorstep, scarlet geranium, green blind and brass-plate’ as ‘obtrusively brilliant’, in that it blinds the neighbours to the moral darkness of the householder within. On his arrival, Philip Sheldon, the tenant of this house and the anti-hero of the story, makes no effort to befriend his neighbours and they keep their distance, thinking ‘A householder with such a step and such muslin curtains could not be other than the most correct of mankind.’ Despite living in such close proximity, Sheldon’s neighbours, Braddon writes, ‘had no more knowledge of his thoughts and fancies than they would have had if he had been an ... Abyssinian chief.’ Immediately Braddon makes the city intriguingly inscrutable even as she highlights its quotidian particulars. She sets herself up as the arbiter of the city, the keeper of its mysteries — an authorial role that she mirrors in her editorial strategies.

Braddon goes on to tell us in Birds of Prey that Philip Sheldon has moved to London from a northern village to start business as a dentist. Unfortunately his practice fails and bankruptcy threatens. When Sheldon’s old sweetheart and her new husband (Georgy and Tom Halliday) visit him, he uses his knowledge of the mysterious city to exercise power over his provincial visitors. Sheldon tells his servant:
... as Georgy and he [her husband] would be about as capable of taking care of themselves in London as a couple of children, I have recommended them to take up their quarters here. [16]

Isolated from their family and true friends, and ignorant of the workings of the city, the couple are at Sheldon’s mercy. The homicidal dentist takes devilish advantage of London’s allure by persuading Halliday to drink, gamble and over-stimulate himself in its unhealthiest haunts until he falls ill. When he does, Sheldon pretends to make every effort to cure him from ‘low fever’ while slowly poisoning him to death. He then swiftly marries the widowed Georgy for her life-insurance money. Sheldon eventually gets his comeuppance but not until the readers have followed his increasingly desperate machinations through Braddon’s sequel to Birds of Prey, Charlotte’s Inheritance. By representing London as a space of sensational mystery and danger in her magazine’s first serialised novel, Braddon invites her readership to extend the practices with which they consume sensation fiction throughout the magazine. In doing so she provides access for the predominantly female sensation readers to the seemingly impenetrable city.

Braddon wrote in private correspondence that she chose the title of Belgravia as ‘the best bait for the shillings of Brixton and Bow’ (two much less salubrious districts in the mid-nineteenth-century.)[17] This has led critics, such as Robert Wolff, to argue that Belgravia was the first magazine to ‘make to the lower-middle-class reader … the direct snobbish suggestion that when he opened its pages he would be moving into the fashionable world of the aristocratic rich.’[18] The title does hold obvious appeal to the aspirations of Braddon’s mainly middle-class readers. However, close reading of the magazine reveals a consistent critique of the upper classes rather than an uncomplicated reverence. Braddon uses her magazine and the specific London location with which it is connected not only to open out her city to her female readers, but in particular to re-assure the middle-class woman of her moral superiority to the upper-class Belgravians.

The magazine opens up an interrogative space in which privilege and prestige can be questioned without fear of recrimination. In the very first issue an article on ‘Swells’ ridicules the pretentious dress and vanity of aristocratic young Londoners. The anonymous writer (possibly Braddon) tells the reader that ‘Swells’ are ‘like ants set loose from their hibernation, swarm[ing] about the paths of gaiety with the same interest in the pursuit of idleness and inanity that these other tiny animals show in the maintenance of their lives.’[19] Diminished in size, de-individualised and likened to pests, the article clearly questions the pursuits of the idle rich. These tactics continue throughout the early years of the magazine and the interrogative space is often given physical embodiment in the urban locale of Belgravia itself. For example, John Baker Hopkins, in ‘A Very Charming Hostess’ describes the extravagance of Belgravian parties, reaching the conclusion that they are more a process of ‘human mangling’ than enjoyment.[20]

Braddon also published poetry in her magazine and carried over the critique of the London rich into some of the poems she commissioned. ‘Belgravian Prose Ballads’, a series of poems by Charles Smith Cheltenham, running through the early editions of the magazine, satirise obtuse Belgravians. The first poem, ‘The Chaperone’, ironises upper-class gender conventions using the voice of a rich woman, who is desperate to marry her daughters to aristocrats. The woman, an inhabitant, of Belgravia, is not happy with her situation and looks to the aristocracy with quasi-religious fervour:

I can forgive them if they forget me; for does not the halo that plays round their coronets take me out of darkness?
Do I not warm myself in their ermine, and shelter me from rude2 blasts of vulgarity under their strawberry leaves?[21]

The narrator is a social climber whose ignorance outside her narrow world is both amusing and alarming. Her insularity means she does not even know where the nearest cab-stand is located. ‘Belgravian Prose Ballads III: Honeymoonshine’ also records anxieties about the marriage market but from the perspective of a young honeymooner. He has been disappointed in the match made for him and even thinks of emigrating to be rid of his new wife.[22]

This process of satirising the stereotyped views of Belgravian inhabitants, and therein asserting and assuring middle-classes values, continues in the fictional pieces of the magazine with which Braddon bolstered her own novels. For example, a short sensational story tells of the impoverished but refined
middle-class protagonist’s tribulations at the hands of the ‘cold and critical penetralia’ of Belgravia. A case of mistaken identity leads an upper-class femme fatale to take him up, thinking him a rich aristocrat. She soon discovers the truth and the story ends by displaying how closely class, wealth and prejudice are interwoven. [23] Similarly, the first instalment of the serial novel *Stern Necessity* by Frederick Robinson opens with a scene of dire poverty in the ‘fever-haunted streets’ of Spitalfields market. [24] Braddon links this fictive representation to the idea of shirked social responsibility more explicitly in the penultimate article of the same number, where the journalist George Stott writes of wealthy people ignoring the ‘scenes of distress, such as prevailed last winter in the East End of London.’ [25]

Braddon also employed the famous roving reporter George Augustus Sala to satirise the socially harmful inwardness of what he calls ‘superfine’ Belgravians who are unable to conceive of the grinding poverty of the East End. [26] As Lynda Nead has noted in *Victorian Babylon*, Sala had updated and popularised the literature of the metropolis by writing ‘the temporal geography of London’ in his *Twice Around the Clock: Or the Hours of the Day and Night in London*, a series of articles originally published in the *Welcome Guest*. [27] But his ‘Pantomime and Pandemonium’ article in *Belgravia* distorts space rather than time as it opposes the exclusivity embodied by the locale of Belgravia to enact what can be read as an editorial policy of urban inclusion. Sala argues that very little, apart from the modulations of the policeman’s voice, truly separates the ‘worst’ parts of London from the ‘best’. He takes a walk through ‘the Cut’, a reputedly rough area of London, and peers into the ‘black seething masses’ with enough sympathy to differentiate the individuals. Not only are those individuals deemed worthy of attention, but their crowding impulses and complicated psyches are also recognised. Sala writes on those

who stand on a boundary-line between the sempstress and the street-walker, the costermonger and the thief, occasionally diverging to the right or to the left, as necessity or inclination prompt them. [28]

He sympathises with these dividing impulses brought about by the complexity of urban social life and encourages the same impulse in *Belgravia*’s readers. For those middle-class, particularly female, readers who would not, or could not, venture into ‘the Cut’, articles like Sala’s were an indispensable cultural mediator.

Similarly W. S. Gilbert’s article on the walk from ‘St. Paul’s To Piccadilly’ revels in describing an ‘infinity’ of types of people. ‘Every 100 yards of metropolitan street’, he argues ‘has a distinguishing quality of its own entirely apart from that which it derives from its architectural properties.’ He describes all those he would meet in a stroll through the West End from the ‘gin-flavoured, red-nosed’ betting men and the barristers who walk through Temple Bar, to the journalists in Fleet Street with their ‘long hair and unkempt beards’ and the theatricals who people the pavement around the Adelphi. [29] Giving each ‘type’ equal prominence and refusing to evaluate between them gives Gilbert’s piece a similar tone of comic sympathy to Sala’s. He too opens up some of the exclusively gentlemanly enclaves of West End London to the female reader of *Belgravia*.

Walter Thornbury’s series ‘London Squares’, part of a long running sequence written for Braddon on the capital’s landmarks, also functions similarly in satirising the very idea of snobbish exclusivity in London. In the July 1867 article, featuring ‘Belgrave-square’, Thornbury strips back the layers of respect that have accreted to wealth by showing that in Regency times Belgravia was ‘a miserable, disreputable, and rather dangerous locality known as “The Five Fields”’ where you were likely to be robbed or stabbed, or both. It was, he says, a ‘dreary tract ... beloved by the bull-baiters, badger-drawers, and fox-fighters.’ [30] Thornbury invites the reader to meditate on how much, or how little, has changed since then. He suggests that the current Belgravian past time of marketing young women for marriage has as little worth and dignity as those ‘sports’. Following Braddon’s sensationalising example, he employs a vocabulary of bodily violence, and hyperbole that mocks the present pretensions of Belgravia as it simultaneously sensationalises its past.

These articles make it clear that Braddon wanted her magazine to key into an idea that Roy Porter has much more recently theorised in his history of London. He writes:
... in an unplanned and (in major respects) ungoverned city where commerce was kin, social order was always elusive and exclusivity precarious. From Belgravia to Bloomsbury, there was hardly a classy enclave that did not have a colony of the lumpen proletariat just a stone’s throw away.\[31\]

Braddon’s magazine makes London’s diverse demography clear. Moreover Belgravia uses the city’s invigorating and sensational heterogeneity as a means to ridicule the pretensions of upper-class exclusivity.

London was not a sequential, ordered territory in the nineteenth century, its Victorian inhabitants had to stamp on it what autonomy they could, and the periodical press was a useful discourse for doing so. Christopher Kent sees ‘the intrinsically fragmented mode of the [Victorian] periodical press, with its variety, flexibility, and open-endedness’ as a ‘particularly appropriate vehicle ... to capture the complexity and contingency of modern life.’ In the rapidly changing world of the 1860s where new forms of public behaviour, modes of transport, and codes to regulate the crowded city spaces were emerging, ‘the press helps maintain and update’ these new forms of knowledge and itself ‘becomes part of the code’.\[32\] The form of periodical publication, each part separated, fragmented and read in haphazard conjunction with disparate materials encouraged a mode of reading that could be likened to the modus operandi needed to navigate the city. Indeed, Walter Bagehot compared London to a giant newspaper in which ‘everything is there and everything is disconnected ... there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the list of “births, marriages and deaths”’.\[33\] If, as Lynda Nead argues, the characteristic experience of urban modernity between 1855 and 1870 ‘was one of disorientation’, Belgravia offered a framework with which its readers might negotiate this new, urban experience.\[34\] More than this though, Braddon’s magazine differentiated itself from competing periodicals by offering its middle-class female readership alternative and accessible ways of knowing and navigating the London cityscape.

Endnotes

[1] See for example, Margaret Oliphant, ‘Sensation Novels’, Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine 91 (1862), 564-584 or H. L. Mansel, ‘Sensation Novels’, Quarterly Review 113 (1863), 481-514. [•]

[2] [W. Fraser Rae], ‘Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon’, North British Review 44 (1865) 180-204 (p. 195). [•]


[8] Belgravia signals its relevance to female interests through its content and on several occasions points explicitly to its predominantly female readership. George Augustus Sala flatters, for example, ‘I am happy to believe that a vast number of the subscribers to this magazine belong to the gentler sex’. ‘Poetry and Water’, Belgravia 21 (1873), 343-350 (p. 345). [•]


[16] Ibid., p. 12.


[22] [Charles Smith Cheltnam], ‘Belgravian Prose Ballads III: Honeymoonshine’, *Belgravia* 1 (1867), 462-463.


[28] Sala, p. 166.


[34] Nead, pp. 4-5.