

The “Dead” Mind of the 19th Century Woman

Lady Audley's Secret has received an overwhelming amount of criticism ever since it was first published in 1862. Most commonly Braddon's work is examined in the context of the possible homosexuality of Robert Audley or the feminist view of treatment of women during the 1800s. Other critics have aimed for more obscure angles, such as Rachel Heinrichs in *Critical Masculinities in Lady Audley's Secret*, a study of the masculinity of characters such as Robert Audley and Luke Marks. Others chose a more technical approach, such as Lynn Voskuil in *Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity*. In *On the Track of Things: Sensation and Modernity in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret*, Eva Badowska focused more on the novel as a move away from gothic literature. In *Reconsidering Reparation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret and Critical Reading Practices*, Emily L. King treats the novel as a detective story in which Mary Elizabeth Braddon trains her audience to be “reader-detectives.” Louisa May Alcott's “A Whisper in the Dark” did not have the same overwhelming reaction as *Lady Audley's Secret*. Lynette Carpenter's “*Did the never see anyone angry before?: The Sexual Politics of Self-control in Alcott's “A Whisper in the Dark”*” analyzed the short story in terms of the self-control instilled in Louisa May Alcott by her mother. Elizabeth Lennox Keysor studies the short story as representative of Alcott's common theme of women's trying experiences (Rigsby 157).

Both *Lady Audley's Secret* and “A Whisper in the Dark” are complex stories which can be criticized in many different manners. Often left unconsidered, though, is what causes the women in these stories to go “mad,” and what the authors' motives were in writing the stories in this way. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and Louisa May Alcott's “A Whisper in the Dark” are two incredibly similar stories, both written in the 1860's. One of the most obvious parallels between these two stories is the concern with

madness, particularly in women. This obsession with women's sanity speaks strongly to the treatment of women at that time. Lucy Audley, Sybil, and their mothers are all victims of a male determining the state of their mental health. The level of sanity for all of these women, however, is up to the interpretation of the reader. Both Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Louisa May Alcott aim to show their readers that men in the 19th century used madness as an excuse to assert dominance over a woman, regardless of the actual state of her mind.

One of the overriding triggers of women's madness in the two works seems to be childbirth. Lucy, her mother, and Sybil's mother all appear to begin their decline into supposed insanity shortly after giving birth. As Lucy admits to Robert and Michael Audley, her mother "had been... sane up to the hour of [Lucy's] birth, but from that hour her intellect had decayed" (Braddon 298). New mothers having mental issues is not a foreign concept to modern readers; cases of post-partum depression are widely common. More popular in the 1860's, however, was the idea of puerperal mania – that after childbirth women were susceptible to "paroxysms of madness and violence" (Mangham 23). This sensation was often used to explain why women murdered their children, but also explained the overall violent impulses of new mothers. None of the three mothers caused any physical harm to their children; strangely enough, the children were actually taken away and told that their mothers were dead.

Though it is obvious that motherhood was thought to affect the mental health of these women, it is not likely that it was the only cause. For Sybil's mother, her child was taken from her and she lost her husband (Alcott 61). She was lied to by Sybil's uncle and possibly by her own husband, these men taking away the things she loved most. Lucy Audley was also abandoned by her husband shortly after having a child (Braddon 24). George left to try to find success for himself and was ignorant enough to expect his wife to wait for him for three years. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Lucy claims that her mother's madness was a "hereditary disease transmitted to her from her mother" (Braddon 298). She hid this fact all her life for fear of facing the same mental illness as her female ancestors. The characters in *Lady Audley's Secret* and "A Whisper in the Dark" seem to

believe that madness is caused both by circumstances of living and by nature. Sybil does not give birth throughout the course of “A Whisper in the Dark.” She is, however, left behind by her lover when Guy runs away (Alcott 44). Aside from giving birth, losing a man seems to be the most common predecessor to going mad.

Psychiatrists in the 19th century did not have a firm understanding of mental illness. Some believed it to be a sanguine disease that could simply be strained out, others assumed there was a separation between mind, body, and soul (Voskuil 627). Henry Maudsley, however, thought that the body and mind were dependent upon each other, and that a person who was mad showed his or her madness “to his [or her] fingers’ ends” (Voskuil 627). These views coincide with the process by which Dr. Mosgrave inspects Lucy Audley’s mental health. As Mosgrave determines, Lucy simply “ran away from her home... in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that” (Braddon 321). If Mosgrave can come to the conclusion that Lady Audley is not mad by using the same methods as a well-respected 19th century psychiatrist, it is conceivable that she was in fact completely sane by the standards of the time. Interestingly, Louisa May Alcott once had a phrenologist examine her head on a visit to New York (Stern & Bicknell 277). If Alcott believed in the conventions of phrenology, she likely also accepted the conventions of Henry Maudsley.

Due to the lack of evidence against any of the female characters created by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Louisa May Alcott, there is reason to believe that all of these women were perfectly sane. In Braddon’s story, Lady Audley is scarcely a trustworthy character, making it hard to believe her story about her mother being mad. It is just as likely that Lady Audley made up this story in an attempt to escape punishment for her wrongdoings and avoid the madhouse. She even tells the Audley men that she is sharing the story of her life so that they can understand why she had “become the miserable wretch who has no better hope than to be allowed to run away and hide in some desolate corner of the earth” (Braddon 296). Puerperal madness was often used as a defense in cases against violent women in the 19th century (Mangham 21). A smart and social woman like Lucy would likely have known this and thought to use it to her advantage.

Also, Dr. Mosgrave tells Robert Audley that Lucy herself is not insane, just dangerous (Braddon 323). A similar issue arises in “A Whisper in the Dark,” where the reader and Sybil are forced to take Sybil’s uncle’s confessions as true despite the fact that he is a manipulative character. As Carpenter states, “evasion and secrecy are hallmarks of the uncle’s relationship with Sybil” (32). Sybil’s uncle avoids admitting to Sybil that her mother is still alive while simultaneously leading her to believe her mother is dead.

The characters of both Lucy Audley and Sybil are revealed greatly in their respective stories. “A Whisper in the Dark” is written in the first person point-of-view, giving the reader a direct view into Sybil’s mind. For this reason, it is easiest to judge the sanity of Sybil. Her thought process remains clear throughout her experience in the private house, despite her actions appearing to be those of a madwoman. Even immediately after discovering that the other guest in the house was her mother, Sybil manages to discreetly procure the lock of hair from the dog’s collar. She pretends to be “lamenting over the poor beast” and bites off the hair and messages (Alcott 61). Despite the shocking events of the day, Sybil still thinks quickly and rationally – a fortune that may have saved her life. While it could be argued that Sybil was beginning to decline, she managed to escape the grip of madness when she made it out of the house.

The reader is not given this luxury of point-of-view in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, left to determine Lucy’s sanity based on her actions. While Lucy remains mostly well-reserved as she attempts to get herself out of sticky situations, her actions become desperate. She goes so far as to attempt murder twice, a clear testament to her instability. Lady Audley reaches a point where she loses “all self-control, all power of endurance, all capability of self-restraint” (Braddon 291). Instability, though, does not correlate directly with insanity. Lucy’s actions are not entirely questionable until somewhere around four years after she gives birth and is deserted by her husband. This gap in time makes it difficult to associate her supposed insanity directly with her motherhood, as puerperal mania was thought to occur directly after birth. Lucy Audley found herself in a helpless situation and did what she felt was necessary to make it out alive.

Neither Lucy nor Sybil’s mothers are encountered in the stories while alive, making

the state of their mental health more difficult to ascertain. Lucy Audley's mother is present in *Lady Audley's Secret* only through Lucy's portrayal of her. Based solely on Lucy's story, it can be assumed that her mother was, in fact, insane. However, this claim comes from Lucy's father and caretakers (Braddon 296-297), who may very well have lied to her for her father's benefit. Lucy has to trust that the woman she is taken to see is truly her mother, and the reader has to trust that Lucy's story is genuine. There is little evidence working against Lucy, aside from her lack of virtues.

The reader is given slightly more insight into Sybil's mother in "A Whisper in the Dark." Although the only physical interaction Sybil has with her mother is through the walls of the private house and her mysterious whispers, her notes are left behind after she dies. In her first note, Sybil's mother writes that she has deduced that Sybil is young, and also explains her process for planning to leave a note in the dog's collar (Alcott 61). In the second letter, her mother attempts to make sense of why her plan has not yet worked; "you fear the dog, perhaps, and my plot fails" (Alcott 62). These notes display a clear use of reasoning on Sybil's mother's part, suggesting that she was in a right state of mind near the time of her death (Carpenter 34). That being the case, a perfectly sane woman was locked up in a private house for eighteen years solely because a man wanted her to be.

Regardless of whether or not any of these women were actually insane, their sanity was determined by men. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert was the one to request that Dr. Mosgrave came to see Lucy (Braddon 316). If Robert could prove that Lucy had lost her mind, he could finally have an explanation as to why his dear George was gone. Mosgrave then put Lucy's fate in Robert's hands when he provided Robert with the option to send Lucy to a madhouse, despite the fact that Robert's mental health at the time seemed questionable as well (Braddon 324). His suspicion about Lady Audley causes Robert to become a "reader-detective," paranoid throughout the novel about all things regarding the lady (King 57-58).

Lucy appears to bring up the question of Robert's sanity to help her own situation out, but her accusations are well founded. His preoccupation with George Talboys'

disappearance turns him into a brooding recluse, focusing his energies on nothing else. These obsessive actions were considered to be feminine qualities in the 19th century (Heinrichs 104). While Michael Audley is willing to believe Lucy, Robert's sanity never becomes a serious question (Braddon 245). Part of the reason for this may be that madness was thought of as an inherently feminine trait, made clear by Heinrichs when she states "[m]onomania is the ultimate violation of manliness because it represents not only a loss of mental control but also a loss of independence" (109). While Lucy tried to prove Robert mad for her own benefit, she was not as successful as the men of these stories.

In "A Whisper in the Dark," Sybil is drugged by her uncle and taken to the private house against her will. Her uncle then takes it upon himself to assert that she has gone mad (Alcott 50). As a reader in the 21st century, these events are horrifyingly ludicrous, but these behaviors were presumably less out of the ordinary in the 1860s. As stated by H.L. Mansel, sensation novels, "be [they] mere trash or something worse, [they are] usually a tale of our own times" (qtd. in Badowska 157). Sybil's uncle was able to make life choices for her, despite the fact that he was not technically a blood-relative. Once she's locked away, her uncle brings a lawyer to see that she is indeed not in the right state of mind to receive her inheritance (Alcott 58). Through Sybil's situation, Alcott shows how easy it was for a man to claim a woman was insane in order to benefit from her being locked up. It was presumably much more difficult to prove a man was mentally unstable and have him sent to a madhouse, especially considering the previously mentioned feminine stigma placed on madness in the 19th century, and Lucy's lack of success in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Not only was man's opinion taken more seriously, there was also more emphasis on the value of his life and the importance of his role in society. While a woman's role was purely domestic, the man was expected to be successful (Mangham 27).

On page 58 of "A Whisper in the Dark" Sybil states that "death of the body was far more preferable than that of the mind." This statement alone is a powerful display of how intense the stigma was around mental health issues in the 19th century. That stigma

is clearly present in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and in Louisa May Alcott's "A Whisper in the Dark." Sybil, Lucy, and their mothers were all taken away from society at the smallest hint of possible madness. There is also a sense of pity for Sybil when she is believed to have gone mad; the lawyer that her uncle brings to see her in the private house refers to her as a "poor thing" (Alcott 58). Alicia's reaction to Lucy's assertion that Robert has gone mad is to immediately disagree, stating that such a thought could not possibly be true (Braddon 238). The characters, even the female ones, were much less willing to place the label of insanity on men than on women. The men in both of these stories cause the female characters to be sent away, which is another way of taking their lives from them.

Like Sybil and her mother, Louisa May Alcott was unable to avoid male oppression in her lifetime. Alcott was once given lesser pay after signing her full name instead of "L. M. Alcott," the male publisher providing the excuse that pay was always less for women – needless to say, Alcott took great pride in refusing to work with that man again (Talbot 736). She was also raised by a very misogynistic father, urging her to always use self-control (Carpenter 39) and often putting his own pleasure before her basic human needs, such as a coat to wear during the cold weather (Talbot 735). Mary Elizabeth Braddon, like Lucy Audley and her mother, was no stranger to madness. The first wife of John Maxwell, Braddon's eventual husband, went insane after the birth of their seventh child and was admitted to an asylum. Mary herself also experienced issues with her mental health during pregnancy (Mangham 29). Braddon's husband was less than ideal, referring to his first wife as "defunct" once she could no longer provide him with children (Mangham 28). Presumably, Mary Elizabeth Braddon was treated in this same manner during her marriage to him.

While *Lady Audley's Secret* and "A Whisper in the Dark" are both dense with differing ambiguous statements and possible interpretations, they are overwhelmingly similar stories. The way that Alcott and Braddon develop the action of their stories, the twisted love triangles, the mystery, and the characters are all comparable in a number of ways. Because of this, it is conceivable that some of the many possible statements made by

their stories coincide with each other. Both Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Louisa May Alcott aimed to bring to light issues with male dominance and with the mental health of women in the 19th Century. Through male characters such as Sybil's uncle and Dr. Karnac in "A Whisper in the Dark" and Robert Audley and Dr. Mosgrave in *Lady Audley's Secret*, these women displayed clearly the abuse of male power over their female counterparts. As Barbara Rigney points out to be common in 19th century feminist fiction, "the disaster... lies in the encounter with the male authority figure... who decides the question of insanity and... assumes the power to incarcerate or destroy" (qtd. in Carpenter 36). These two female authors were not alone in their quest to expose such issues. More importantly, Alcott and Braddon wrote their female characters in such a manner as to make their level of sanity unclear to the reader in the 1800s. By combining these two elements, these authors were able to plant a seed in the mind of their readers, forcing them to think not only about what it truly meant to be mad, but about the frivolity in the use of the word when applied to women of the 19th century.

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