

FEMINIST AMBIVALENCE IN MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'S
*LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET*¹

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Abstract

The sensation genre in the 1860s stirred fierce discussions regarding scandalous, sensational and unconventional representations of women in fiction. This is because the 1860s sensation novels appealed more to a female readership, and thus potential influences of adulterous, bigamous and/or criminal women characters on women readers alarmed literary circles of the said period. On the other hand, feminist literary critics in twentieth century tended to read such unusual and controversial fictional representations in women's writing as a sign of resistance and feminist revival in Victorian literature. There were opposing views too, though. They rather focused on anti-feminist and at times disciplinary treatment of women characters, who transgressed rooted sexual, social and cultural norms. The approach in this study is closer to the latter view in that the article aims to reveal the ambivalent nature of such narratives by paying attention to the contradiction between feminist and subversive content and its anti-feminist treatment. To do this, the article offers a detailed analysis of one of the best examples of the sensation genre, which is *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Keywords: Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, sensation novel

MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'UN *LADY AUDLEY'NIN SIRRI* BAŞLIKLİ
ROMANINDA FEMİNİST ÇELİŞKİ

Özet

1860ların sansasyonel romanları, alışılmadık ve sıradışı kadın karakterleri nedeniyle yazıldıkları dönemde hararetli tartışmaların çıkmasına neden olmuştur. Çünkü, bu romanlar daha çok kadın okur kitlesine hitap etmiş ve zina yapan, iki eşli ya da bir şekilde suça bulaşmış kadın karakterlerin kadın okurlar üzerindeki olası etkileri edebi çevreleri endişelendirmiştir. Öte yandan, yirminci yüzyıl feminist edebi eleştirmenler bu olağandışı ve tartışmalı kadın temsiliyetini feminist uyanışın dönem edebiyatındaki

¹ This article is an abridged version of the fourth chapter of my unpublished PhD dissertation entitled "Ambivalence in Victorian Women's Writing: Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Margaret Oliphant's *Hester*."

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yansıması olarak yorumlama eğilimi göstermişlerdir. Fakat, bunun tam tersi yaklaşımlardan bahsetmek de mümkün. Örneğin, cinsel, sosyal ve kültürel normların dışına çıkan kadın karakterlerin romanlarda cezalandırıldığı ve disipline edildiğine vurgu yapan farklı okumalar de bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın yaklaşımı ikinci görüşe daha yakındır. Bu makale anlatılardaki feminist içeriğin aslında anti-feminist bir bakış açısı ile ele alındığına vurgu yapmayı amaçlar. Bunun için sansasyonel roman türünün en iyi örneklerinden kabul edilen Mary Elizabeth Braddon'ın *Lady Audley'nin Sırrı* (1862) başlıklı romanının detaylı okuması sunulacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley'nin Sırrı*, sansasyonel roman

Introduction

The Victorian society can be described as a bifurcated society as the Victorians were living in an age of transition and doubt because of achievements (and also detrimental outcomes) of the Industrial Revolution, enormous technological developments and various social-political movements. The Victorians were rigid, religious and disciplined but signs of resistance could also be seen especially in the literature of the period. Much of the literature produced in this period can hence be regarded as a battle-field, where emancipatory discourses meet and compete with repressive discourses. This can be observed in Victorian women's writing, too. In spite of scholarly trends to classify women's writing as feminist or anti-feminist, many works by women display what this paper will call 'feminist ambivalence,' which occurs mostly as a result of the contradiction between feminist undertones in the texts and their anti-feminist treatment. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's (1835-1915) *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) is one of such works with its controversial portrayal and cautionary treatment of a bigamously married woman character.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* was an instant success when it was published in 1862 and it secured a lasting place in circulating libraries of the Victorian era before it was slowly pushed to oblivion after Braddon's death in 1915. *Lady Audley's Secret* is considered as a paragon of sensation novel, which marked 1860s as sensation decade because "there was a fascination with sensation in all spheres: art, literature, theatre, actual murders and high profile court trials" (Carnell, 2000, p. 142). Before looking at the novel closely, let us first make a revision of how Victorian sensationalism flourished in 1860s.

The Sensation Genre

Sensational incidents and writings in 1860s made themselves apparent first through the newspapers of the period. This is important to note because it is agreed today that the roots of sensation fiction can be found in sensational journalism, which is why sensation novels were also called “the newspaper novel” (Purchase, 2006, p. 188). In his *Victorian Sensation OR the Spectacular, the Shocking, and the Scandalous in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Michael Diamond (2004) draws attentions to the flourishing of journalism and its impact on the rising popularity of the sensation novel:

The Victorians had more opportunity than any of their predecessors to enjoy sensations, due principally to the unprecedented development of the press. National sensations were comparatively few until the middle of the nineteenth century, when the removal of ‘taxes on knowledge’ made newspapers affordable for the first time to the less privileged—who were particularly sensation-hungry. In 1853 the tax on newspaper advertising was abolished; 1855 saw the repeal of stamp duty on newspapers, which had hindered their distribution, and in 1861 paper duty was dropped. At about the same time the development of railway transport meant that national newspapers could reach an infinitely wider public (p. 1-2).

In the same work, Diamond (2004) also states that sensation novels bear a striking resemblance to sensational newspapers of the same period both stylistically and thematically. He adds that this is because there was a growing demand in the market for everything that was scandalous: “Shootings, poisonings, adultery and bigamy all sold newspapers, so it is hardly surprising that novels too should exploit the same themes” (2004, p. 189). This can be observed best, approximately two decades later, in the Whitechapel Murders that took place in the late 1880’s in London, which is mostly referred to as the Jack the Ripper case. Still unidentified today, the Whitechapel murderer victimized five prostitutes between August and November in 1888. Though both earlier and later Whitechapel women killings are today linked to this case, only five victims fostered curiosity for the heinous event in the fall of 1888, which is popularized in the twentieth century through horror movies. Tabloid journalism of the period displayed chopped up bodies of victim prostitutes and common readers devoured those newspapers. The Victorians were so craving for scandals that names of some respectable figures, the novelist Lewis Carrol, the Royal surgeon Sir John Williams and Prince Albert Victor (Queen Victoria’s grandson and an heir to the throne) were also listed among suspects, perhaps to make the outrageous event even more sensational and shocking. What should further be stressed at this point is that if women partook in such scandalous events, this created even more shock and thrill. This is true for both real

sensational events and sensation fiction. Lyn Pykett's (1994) interpretation about shocking women in the mid-Victorian press and their relation to the reception of the sensation novel is worthy of note in this respect:

Murderous women were especially in the news, most notoriously Madeline Smith, who poisoned her lover by putting arsenic in his cocoa (1857), and Constance Kent the sweet 16-year-old who was accused of stabbing her 4-year-old brother in 1860. The details of all of these cases of bigamy, divorce, and murder were communicated to the ever-widening readership of a rapidly expanding newspaper press by the sensational reporting then enjoying a vogue. Sensational journalism (like sensation fiction) was seen by many as a form of creeping contagion, the means by which the world of the common streets, and the violent or subversive deeds of criminals were carried across the domestic threshold to violate the sanctuary of home (p. 2).

In addition to sensational journalism, legal changes regarding Victorian marriages and divorces were also influential in the formulation of thematic structures of the 1860s sensation novels: "divorce was impossible before 1857 except by a private Act of Parliament, which only the very rich could afford" (Williams, 1984, p. 7). In 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act was passed and "enabled any man to divorce his wife for adultery, but a woman had to prove adultery aggravated by other circumstances, such as cruelty or desertion. It is unusual for nineteenth-century novelists to show a wife obtaining a divorce" (Williams, 1984, p. 7). That is why, as Pykett (1994) comments, legal concerns about Victorian marriages and divorces were "frequently articulated in the form of the bigamy plot" in sensation novels (p. 45). Such were the cultural, social and historical circumstances under which sensation novels flourished and dominated circulating libraries in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Explanations of generic features of sensation fiction generally emphasize remarkably shocking aspects of sensational narratives. The following excerpt succinctly explains the most notable characteristics of the sensation novel and gives an idea about how characterization, intriguing themes, and other generic qualities concurrently create sensations:

These exciting and disturbing novels of modern life were remarkable for their devious and dangerous villains, or more usually villainess/heroines, and for their extraordinarily complicated plots usually involving suspense, concealment, disguise and duplicity, fraud, forgery (often of a will or occasionally of a marriage certificate), deception, illegal imprisonment (usually of a young woman), blackmail, bigamy, and even murder or attempted murder. As far as their form was concerned sensation novels were something of a generic

hybrid, mixing realism and melodrama, the journalistic with the fantastic, and the domestic with the exotic (Pykett, 1998, p. 166-7).

As a matter of fact, the sensation genre is extra-ordinary not only because of scandalous events and unconventional characters. The Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century and the Newgate novel of the early nineteenth century also had similar features. Yet, different from them, Winifred Hughes (1980) writes that “the sensation novel dispensed with the traditional Italian castles or underworld hideouts to locate its shocking events and characters firmly within the ordinary middle-class home and family” (p. 261). Likewise, as Ann Cvetkovich (1992) stresses, the sensation novel differs from “its precursors because its crimes and mysteries occur, not in foreign countries or wild landscapes, not among the lower classes or the inhabitants of monasteries and convents, but in the stately homes of the aristocracy, whose lives are depicted in realistic detail” (p. 45). In short, it would not be wrong to say that the sensation novel sensationalized the domestic novel, which is the dominant and respected literary genre of the Victorian era. This is particularly significant because the middle-class setting in sensation narratives “suggested that terror began at home” (Purchase, 2006, p. 190).

What should be stressed more at this point is the unconventional heroine because feminist readings of sensation novels focused basically on the representation of the heroine. As the myth of ‘the angel in the house’ suggests, the heroine in the Victorian novel is emblematic of altruism, morality, domesticity and sanctity. However, in sensation novels, the heroine is scandalous and shocking mainly because she is represented as an angelic figure at the start of the novel but turns out to be a wrong-doer, a sinner as the novel slowly proceeds: “At the center of the home, inevitably, there was a woman—wife and mother, the proverbial angel in the house. At the center of the sensation novel was the same woman, who ran the household, often quite efficiently, while dabbling in bigamy, adultery, or murder on the side” (Hughes, 2005, p. 262). Such features of women characters, which were hitherto unknown to Victorian readers, were indeed cornerstones of the sensation novel. In these respects, sensation fiction is “responsible for initiating significant changes in the representation of women in later fiction” (Reynolds and Humble, 1993, p. 99). This ‘change’ considering how the heroine is represented in fiction is exactly what concerned feminist literary critics, who tended to read women’s sensation novels as a field of resistance and a sign of feminist revival in fiction:

The production and consumption of sensation fiction, and its contemporary critical reception were closely linked, not only to general ideas about ‘the feminine’, but also to various aspects

of the Woman Question: to debates about women's legal and political rights, women's educational and employment aspirations and opportunities, and women's dissatisfactions with and resistance to traditional marital and familial patterns (Pykett, 1994, p. 41).

Feminist interpretations of the sensation genre emphasize different forms of female agency inherent in the novels. Saverio Tomaiuolo (2010), in his *In Lady Audley's Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Genres*, interprets this as "female assertiveness," which concerns feminist critics most because they tend to read sensation novels as subversive texts (p. 7). This sounds plausible, because, as Hughes (2005) writes "sensational women act for themselves, without waiting for the sanction or assistance of men. That action, for some Victorian critics, was in itself already tantamount to crime" (p. 262). That is, sensation narratives picture active women characters who assertively attempt to change the situations which do not satisfy them. While changing their lives, these women characters generally find themselves in a dilemma, because the desired change does not occur without getting involved in intrigue. For this reason, sensation novels were found "provocative" and "controversial" because, as Purchase (2006) thinks, they "contained unconventional, highly physical and often adventurous women" (p. 189). He further elaborates:

Far from simply reinscribing the 'angel in the house' role assigned to women by Victorian patriarchy, the novels suggested that middle-and upper class women led furtive but impassioned lives in which they were no longer simply the victims of men, but their antagonists. It is in this respect that, time and again, women in sensation fiction break up the cherished Victorian institution of the family; women flee the home, have illicit desires and exciting relationships, they lie, steal, murder and they are generally spectacularly bad mothers (p. 189).

Besides feminist readings of sensation novels, there are also opposite approaches, which stress the anti-feminist nature of these narratives. Although the changing nature of the sensation heroine is emphasized by feminist literary scholars, how she is treated within the narrative and what happens to her at the end are interpreted in a different way by the opposite approach. For example, Tomaiuolo (2010) argues that the sensation novel is "one of the most complex and ambiguous literary phenomena of mid-to-late nineteenth century" (p. 5). Likewise, Maureen Moran (2006) asserts that these novels "ambivalently undermine and reinforce mid-Victorian views about stability of identity and social boundaries" (p. 90). The approach of this study is closer to this second way of looking at the sensation novel, with a strong emphasis on the controlling and disciplinary function of these narratives. As the

analysis of *Lady Audley's Secret* will illustrate, moralistic tone of the novel and unsympathetic treatment of the erring heroine could be taken as feminist ambivalence.

***Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)**

Lady Audley's Secret opens with elaborate descriptions of the Audley Court, which is paradoxically depicted as secure and precarious at the same time. The narrator says the place "had been a convent, the quiet nuns had walked hand in hand," (p. 1) yet she also states that "in such a house there were secret chambers," (p. 3) and nearby the fish-pond there is a convenient place "for secret meetings or for stolen interviews; a place in which a conspiracy might have been planned" (p. 3). Such descriptive details are typical of sensation novels and they function to prepare readers for shocking twists of the story, whose sensational heroine Lucy Graham³ is welcomed to the Audley Court as the wife of Sir Michael Audley, "one of the noblest men in Christendom" (p. 219).

In the opening pages of the novel, Lady Audley is portrayed as an angelic woman, who has an enchanting beauty: "Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Everybody loved, admired, and praised her" (p. 6). When the novel opens, Lady Audley has already married Sir Michael Audley, who is indeed an old suitor for her; his daughter Alicia Audley is close to Lady Audley in age. It is openly stated in the novel that she accepts his proposal because of social and economic advantages the marriage would bring into her life (p. 9). When Sir Michael proposes to Lady Audley, she honestly offers the following speech, which evinces the austere conditions of her past life:

From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. My father was agentlemen; clever, accomplished, generous, handsome—but poor. My mother—But do not let me speak of her. Poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations! You cannot tell; you, who are amongst those for whom life is so smooth and easy; you can never guess what is endured by such as we. Do not ask too much of me, then. I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot! (pp. 10-11)

These are important details to note in that they reflect the motives behind Lady Audley's marriage to Sir Michael Audley. Though such details can be read as a criticism directed

³ A brief note about the heroine's names is necessary here. The heroine's real name is Helen Maldon. After she marries her first husband George Talboys, she becomes Helen Talboys. When her first husband George leaves for Australia to seek his fortune for an uncertain time, she decides to start a new life and disguises herself as Lucy Graham. At the time of the narration, she has already bigamously married her second husband Sir Michael Audley, so when the novel opens she is introduced to the reader as Lucy Audley (Lady Audley). That is why, she will be referred to as Lady Audley in this study.

against the corrupt nature of Victorian marriages, this passage also highlights the mitigating circumstances of Lady Audley's bigamous second marriage. This is because her first husband George Talboys abandons her with no explanation, though with good intentions of becoming rich in Australia and coming back to take better care of his family. Not having heard from George for a long time, Lady Audley finds herself in a quagmire with a baby boy. Hence, though bigamous, marriage looks like her only alternative to live humanly and with dignity. When Lady Audley moves to the Audley Court, she faces a problematic relationship with Sir Michael's daughter Alicia, but because she is a very self-confident woman, her experience with Alicia does not bother her. However, Lady Audley has difficulty in managing the conflict she has with a misogynist male character, Sir Michael's nephew Robert Audley. Robert comes to the Audley Court accompanied by a close friend of his, George Talboys, who has just come from Australia only to face his (now late) wife Helen Talboy's⁴ death. Lady Audley learns that Robert Audley and her first husband George Talboys are visiting the Audley Court; she feels alarmed, finds excuses and avoids seeing the visitors. When Sir Michael and Lady Audley are away in London, Alicia shows Robert Audley and George Talboys a secret passage that takes them to Lady Audley's room. There, they see a picture of her, painted by a Pre-Raphaelite⁵ artist, which makes George Talboys melancholic, contemplative and depressed. Back from London, Lady Audley finds a glove in her room and understands that Robert and George have been to her place. The following day, George Talboys is last seen with Lady Audley in the garden and he disappears after that. Robert Audley feels very uneasy and grows suspicious about the sudden disappearance of his friend George. He is determined to make every effort to find out what has really happened to him and devotes all his time to the detection of George Talboys' whereabouts.

A considerable part of the novel is devoted to Robert Audley's meticulous search. Finally, Robert discovers the shocking reality about Lady Audley by means of what he calls "the theory of circumstantial evidence"⁶(p. 119). He is now sure that Lady Audley is indeed Helen Talboys, who faked her death, disguised herself as Lucy Graham, left her baby son

⁴ Helen Talboys is now Lady Audley, the new wife of Sir Michael Audley.

⁵ Purchase writes that Pre-Raphaelite paintings "are characterized by their vividness, clarity, their often brilliant color" (p. 109) and such paintings are preoccupied with "sensuous, rose-lipped, tragic-looking women" (p. 152). That Lady Audley's portrait is painted in Pre-Raphaelite style is an important detail as it implies that George Talboys can recognize his *late* wife easily even though he catches a glimpse of her painting in dim light.

⁶ These evidences are important because they contribute to the unravelling of events and slowly push the heroine to her tragic end. Robert's description of the "circumstantial evidence" can give an idea about how Robert discovered the reality about Lady Audley. Robert says that a circumstantial evidence can be "a scrap of paper; a shred of some torn garment; the button off a coat; a word dropped incautiously from the over-cautious lips of guilt; the fragment of a letter; the shutting or opening of a door; a shadow on a window-blind; the accuracy of a moment; a thousand circumstances so slight as to be forgotten by the criminal" (pp. 119-120).

behind and married Sir Michael Audley for money, security and status. Robert also thinks that she killed her first husband George Talboys after seeing George in the Audley Court. He then confronts Lady Audley and forces her to confess everything. Sir Michael Audley is called in and Helen/Lucy (she is no lady anymore) “falls on her knees” (p. 347) and confesses the realities of her past life. This confession scene is important in that here Helen says that she has done everything because she is mad. Meanwhile, it appears that George Talboys is not dead and he has managed to rescue himself from Helen's attempted murder. Even though the physician Dr. Alwyn Mosgrave thinks that Lady Audley is not actually mad, he considers her very dangerous (p. 379). She is sent to an asylum in Belgium and dies there.

The representation of Braddon's heroine is significant because feminist readings of *Lady Audley's Secret* generally underline the contradiction between how perfect the heroine looks and what terrible things she does. For many literary scholars that will be referred to hereafter, this contradiction is what makes Braddon's novel a subversive narrative. Considering the sensation fiction, Pykett (1994) writes that “one of the genre's most distinctive features was the way in which it displayed women and made a spectacle of femininity, whether of the passive, angelic variety, or in the form of the *femme fatale*” (pp. 6-7). As a matter of fact, Lady Audley definitely falls in the second category; however, at the same time, Braddon describes her as a child-woman whose fascinating beauty is hard to escape one's notice. That is, Braddon combines contradictory features in the character of Lady Audley and makes this apparent through the voice of the main male character, Robert Audley: “I believe that we may look into the smiling face of a murderer, and admire its tranquil beauty” (p. 141). The shocking effect of the paradox between the heroine's appearance and her criminality attracted the attention of many scholars, who have discussed the unconventional nature of the heroine. Not surprisingly, latent criminal personality of a woman character is much more shocking if she is depicted in the following way in the opening chapters of the novel: “The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness” (p. 52). Such flawless descriptions of heroines are typical of sensation novels of the period, yet it should be noted that in *Lady Audley's Secret* the heroine's enthralling beauty is over-emphasized.

Such over-emphasis on the heroine's bewitching beauty can have different functions. First, it can increase the effect of shock and thrill at the end of the novel:

Lady Audley's Secret pleases, thrills, shocks and undermines its readers with the fact that this personification is simpering, charitable, childlike, genteel femininity is, in fact, a cold, calculating, resourceful woman, who abandons her child and is capable of murder, all in the interests of self-preservation (Pykett, 1994, p. 53).

Second, it can defamiliarize and subvert the image of middle-class angelic woman in respected Victorian houses. Lady Audley's representation, for instance, undermines Victorian myths about perfect womanhood.

Apart from her bewitching appearance, Lady Audley is also pictured as a woman who is very strong, determined, and thus reigns over the domestic sphere. Her power in the house is first felt through the voice of the narrator. In the following brief quote, the narrator denotes how the power dynamics in the house change after Lady Audley settles in the Audley court: "Miss Alicia's day was over; and now when she asked anything of the housekeeper, the housekeeper would tell her that she would speak to my lady, or she would consult my lady, and if my lady pleased it should be done" (p. 4). Another example depicting her influence in the domestic sphere is the tea-making scene, which is narrated from the perspective of Robert Audley. In the following passage, Robert Audley watches Lady Audley as she prepares tea for him. Here, Lady Audley is presented as an epitome of domestic perfection:

She looked very pretty and innocent, seated behind the graceful group of delicate opal china and glittering silver. Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance. The floating mists from the boiling liquid in which she infuses the soothing herbs, whose secrets are known to her alone, envelop her in a cloud of scented vapour, through which she seems a social fairy, weaving potent spells with Gunpowder and Bohea. At the tea-table she reigns omnipotent, unapproachable. (p. 222)

Lady Audley perfectly meets the expectations of Victorian middle-class values as the mistress of the house. Still, the passage also implies that she might have secretive (and perhaps dangerous) powers. Hughes (1980) interprets this perfect depiction of her by ironically writing that she "has no objection to conventional middle-class values of domesticity and respectability; in fact she commits bigamy in order to get them, and murder in order to keep them" (p. 127). In short, the paradox between the heroine's appearance and her actions suggests that sensational descriptions of the heroine are too perfect to be true and behind such perfection there can be shocking secrets.

Feminist interpretations of *Lady Audley's Secret* generally stress the implicit aggressive nature and the criminality of the heroine. Anthea Trodd (1989) calls such heroines "the criminal angel in the house" (p. 9) and adds that how they behave "offered a dramatic way of formulating concerns about women's relations to the domestic environment, and about the dependence, dissatisfaction and dissimulation variously associated with her role" (p. 9). Similar concerns which lead Lady Audley to criminality can easily be seen in the novel, particularly when she explains the details of her miserable life before she changes her identity. In the following letter she writes to her alcoholic father, Lady Audley briefly tells her dissatisfactions and disappointments in life:

I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out in the world, dis severed from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune. Forgive me if I have been fretful, capricious, changeable. You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* which is the key to my life. HELEN TALBOYS (p. 250).

What makes Lady Audley particularly extraordinary is that she does not regret but only feels sorry as she cannot reach her aspirations and all her criminal attempts to live a prosperous life fail in the end. The following dialogue takes place between Robert Audley and Lady Audley in the chapter titled "Buried Alive," which implies that the erroneous heroine is doomed to be buried alive in an asylum, where she later dies:

'Live here and repent; nobody will assail you, nobody will torment you. I only say to you, repent!'

'I cannot!' cried my lady, pushing her hair fiercely from her white forehead, and fixing her dilated eyes upon Robert Audley, 'I cannot! Has my beauty brought me to this? Have I plotted and schemed to shield myself, and lain awake in the long deadly nights trembling to think of my dangers, for this? I had better have given up at once, since this was to be the end' (p. 391).

Though the heroine does not repent, she is doomed to hate herself for failing to reach her ambitions. The narrator observes and denotes her emotional state in the following way:

She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair; that beautiful nimbus of yellow light that had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty (p. 392).

Also worthy of a brief note about the unconventional nature of Lady Audley is her indifference to her child as a mother. She is so careless that she did not even love her son:

“People pitied me; and I hated them for their pity. I did not love the child; for he had been left a burden upon my hands” (p. 353). Apparently, contrary to her delusive depiction as an angel, she is far too radical as a Victorian heroine, which is what feminist literary critics paid attention to.

So far, it has been mentioned that feminist readings of *Lady Audley's Secret* cherish the paradox between the heroine's appearance and her phenomenal actions, her subversive nature, criminality and unconventional traits. In addition to feminist readings of the novel, there are opposite views, which tend to read the novel as an anti-feminist narrative. For instance, in her article “Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Secret: An Antifeminist Amongst The New Women,” Kate Mattacks (2009) refutes feminist approaches to Braddon's novel and claims that the “complexities of her sensation fiction” make it hard to call Braddon a feminist novelist (p. 219). Feminist readings of Braddon's fiction basically focus on the existence of criminal women in Victorian fiction, which is rare. However, as Cvetkovich (1992) maintains, female criminality cannot be “intrinsically subversive; it can be deployed both to challenge and to reinforce ideologies of gender and affect” (p. 55). What this study suggests is that beside female criminality in the Victorian novel, how the criminal woman character is treated throughout the narrative should also be a point of interest, which marks the novel's ambivalence.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon is very unfavorable towards the heroine in that, as Virginia Morris (1990) writes, “she switches the protagonist of the novel from Lucy to Robert Audley partway through the story,” and, what is more, “the narrator's original sympathy for Lucy gives way to open antagonism” (p. 98). As a matter of fact, it is not only the heroine that is treated unjustly. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the narrative perspective is very unsympathetic and sometimes even hostile to the female sex as a whole. This is because the story is mostly told from the perspective of Robert Audley, who openly declares that he hates women (207). Also, it is Robert Audley that controls the narrative perspective in the novel. Throughout the novel, the narrator frequently dives into the inner world of Robert Audley and discloses his misogynistic thoughts. Considering the way Robert addresses women, the most remarkable example is the one where he ironically explicates that women are indeed the stronger sex:

To call them the weaker sex is to utter a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the most self-assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, soldiers, legislators—anything they like—but let them be quiet—if they can. (207)

The details of this passage make it clear that Braddon touches on the demands of the women's movement of the time through the inner voice of a misogynist male character, Robert Audley. This part might be offering that woman should be elevated to positions which are only available to men at the time of the novel's publication. However, later it is suggested that women should be silenced, which might be interpreted as a backlash against the outspoken precursors of the Victorian feminism. Even though the female sex is presented as the stronger sex in this part, the sarcastic tone is evident, and it would be a mistake to consider these statements genuinely progressive or frankly feminist. In the later parts of the novel, Robert Audley sounds even more vengeful towards the female sex. As the following section will indicate, women are presented in an evil way, causing only damage and destruction to the good ones. What is more, in contrast to the above excerpt in which women are sarcastically called "the stronger sex," men are taken as women's superiors in the following excerpt:

'I hate women,' he thought savagely. 'They're bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at the business of poor George's! It's all woman's work from one end to the other. He marries a woman, and his father casts him off, penniless and professionless. He hears of the woman's death and he breaks his heart—his good, honest, manly heart, worth a million of the treacherous lumps of self-interest and mercenary calculation which beat in women's breasts. He goes to a woman's house and is never seen again' (p. 207-8).

What should be noted at this point is that although the heroine is the real victim of the economic and social structures of the Victorian society, in this quote, her first husband George is presented as a victim in the hands of his crafty wife. It should be remembered, however, that George abandons her in the middle of the night, leaves for Australia for years without ever writing to her. He might well have been dead and she had no resources as a poor mother, who had to live with a pathetic alcoholic father. Regarding these details, *Lady Audley's Secret* presents all the restrictions Victorian women could face in similar situations. Yet, the novel also privileges and victimizes male characters while trying to control and discipline the females. This can be seen best in the narrator's distance to women characters and sympathy for the males:

I do not say that Robert Audley was a coward, but I will admit that a shiver of horror, something akin to fear, chilled him to the heart, as he remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since that day upon which Eve was created to be Adam's companion and help-mate in the garden of Eden. What if this woman's hellish power of dissimulation should be stronger than the truth, and crush him? (p. 274)

Evocative of 'the original sin,' this quote underlines the morally corrupt human nature that is liable to commit sin. As a matter of fact, Robert Audley has enough reasons to be afraid of Lady Audley because it is true that she is represented as an aggressive and assertive woman. This makes itself particularly evident in the following part, where Robert confronts Lady Audley, who strikes him back:

I will kill you first. Why have you tormented me so? Why could you not let me alone? What harm had I ever done you that you should make yourself my persecutor, and dog my steps, and watch my looks, and play the spy upon me? Do you want to drive me mad? Do you know what it is to wrestle with a madwoman? (p. 275)

Having seen the heroine presenting herself as a madwoman in this brief excerpt, this can be the right place to continue with how the issue of female madness and asylum function in the novel. Just before she confesses the realities of her life, Lady Audley talks about her madness. She addresses the following passage to Robert Audley after he forces her to confess:

You have conquered--a MADWOMAN! . . . When you say that I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! Because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me; and reproached me, and threatened me; my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and *I was mad!* (p. 346)

In this confession scene, the main stress is on the hereditary madness Lady Audley possibly inherited from her mother, who also inherited madness from her mother. This is how Lady Audley explains her mother's madness, which also influenced herself:

Her madness was a hereditary disease transmitted to her from her mother, who had died mad. She, my mother, had been, or had appeared, sane up to the hour of my birth; but from that hour her intellect had decayed, until she had become what I saw her . . . the only inheritance I had to expect from my mother was—insanity (p. 350).

So, this means that in Lady Audley's family three generations of women were mad and they all ended up in mental hospitals. How female madness is treated in the novel and why it occupies so large a place particularly in the last part is discussed by many critics. Such discussions are significant because they also question the ending of the novel. Morris (1990), for example, raises the following questions concerning how the novel ends: "As a killer . . . she is a failure: neither man dies. So why does Braddon punish her? Why does Lucy Audley die in an insane asylum? And why, for many readers, does she get what she deserves?" (pp. 94-95). For Hughes' (1980) this is because of the generic conventions of sensation novels:

In order to provide some justification for the erratic behavior of their murderers, bigamists, and adulteresses, the sensation novelists are driven to exploit the irrational elements of the psyche, the obscure and unreasonable motivations that in the twentieth century are associated with the subconscious. Inner forces, as powerful and uncontrollable as face, claim equal numbers of victims. Evil or antisocial action is no longer the direct result and expression of evil character, as in conventional melodrama, but derives from combinations of circumstance, weakness, insanity, impulse, 'sensation' at its most basic (p. 58).

Seemingly, female madness is used in novels as a plausible explanation for female transgression. Purchase, for instance, stresses that madness in Victorian Literature is associated with moral corruption (189). Such association is particularly used for female criminals, or in general terms, for wrong-doers, which gives the impression that the erratic behaviors of women cannot be explained by anything other than madness. Esther Saxey (1997) shares a similar opinion and states that, "this association of women and madness could be used to pathologise undesirable behaviour" (p. xvi).

In her interpretation of *Lady Audley's* madness, Elaine Showalter (1977) differs from other scholars since she reads Braddon's novel as a subversive and therefore feminist text. According to her, "as every woman reader must have sensed, *Lady Audley's* real secret is that she is *sane* and, moreover, representative" (p. 167). This point is very significant in that it reminds us of the statements of Dr. Alwyn Mosgrave in the novel, who is a "physician, experienced in cases of mania" (p. 368). Dr. Mosgrave's words are crucial because in the first place he thinks that *Lady Audley* is not mad at all. Having listened to Robert Audley as he tells the story of *Lady Audley*, Dr. Mosgrave reveals how he conceives the events:

She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and possession. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that (p. 377).

Having a male character, a man of science, making such wise observations is worth noting. Later, however, after having a brief conversation with *Lady Audley*, Dr. Mosgrave is confused and offers the following ambiguous diagnosis about her psychological state:

'I have talked to the lady,' he said quietly, 'and we understand each other very well. There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a life-time. It would be *dementia* in its worst phase perhaps: acute mania; but its

duration would be very brief, and it would only arise under extreme mental pressure. The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous' (p. 379).

In this speech, Dr. Mosgrave's words exemplify anxieties of Victorian society about erroneous women; they can be quite dangerous, particularly because they will resort to anything (Lady Audley attempts even arson and murder) to achieve their ends. That is exactly why they must be confined to an asylum. Karen Tatum (2005) interprets such dangerous nature of the sensation heroine by accentuating that she does what she does powerfully, independently, and without any help just to reach her aspirations (p. 146). She also maintains that Lady Audley uses the idea of madness to cover her criminality, which is what makes her dangerous: "Being a woman who intelligently concocts schemes of self-preservation and usurps the masculine construction of women's madness for her own advantage is precisely what makes Lady Audley dangerous" (p. 146). This suggests that she does not submit to what Victorian society can offer her as a low-class woman and she develops her own ways of achieving a better life only to get punished severely at the end. As a punishment, she is confined to a madhouse, gets sick and dies there, while the narrator closes the novel in the following way, assuring happy ending for those who are left behind: "I hope no one will take objection to my story because the end of it leaves the good people all happy and at peace" (pp. 446-7). Confinement was inescapable in *Lady Audley's Secret* because the heroine does not repent or writhe under emotional distress. Thus, she faces double punishment; she is sent to an asylum and she dies there after two years.

One last point should be noted as to why Braddon puts female madness at the center of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Tomaiuolo (2010) suggests that autobiographical factors might have been influential in the way Braddon treats female madness in the novel. Two women who indirectly took place in Braddon's life might have served as models for the representation of the mad woman. The first case concerns Braddon's personal life, which was as scandalous as her novels for she had a "stable, sentimental and editorial relationship with John Maxwell," her publisher (p. 11). Hughes (2005) draws attention to the connection between Braddon's life experiences and the plots of her novels: "As Braddon's reviewers maliciously hinted, her scandalous plots were not so far removed from her life; she had a secret of her own in her liaison with the publisher John Maxwell and their five illegitimate children. Maxwell's legal wife, confined to a lunatic asylum, was all too real" (p. 271). John Maxwell was in the business of publishing and he was also editing periodicals. When he met Braddon, Maxwell

was already married to Mary Ann Crowley, who was diagnosed with “puerperal insanity,” thus had to spend the rest of her life in an asylum (Tomaiuolo, 2010, p. 11). This detail is worth emphasizing because the same mental illness also affects Lady Audley's and her mother's life in *Lady Audley's Secret* (11). Tomaiuolo (2010) interprets this connection by writing that “through Lady Audley's final incarceration Braddon was in part trying to exorcise her own personal ghost, in the figure of John Maxwell's ‘mad wife’” (p. 13).

The second case concerns the dedication page of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Tomaiuolo (2010) discusses the dedication page of the novel as an example of a paratext, which can shape the interpretation of a literary work. Braddon dedicates *Lady Audley's Secret* to her literary mentor Edward Bulwer Lytton⁷, who had a tormented relationship with his wife Rosina Wheeler. Mrs. Wheeler was also a novelist, who is underread today. The couple had a problematic relationship, which made itself apparent in what is today called the Hertford scandal. When Bulwer Lytton was offered “a cabinet post in Derby-Disraeli government,” he went to Hertford to deliver a public speech (p. 1). However, the event turned into a scandal when Rosina Wheeler showed up in Hertford unplanned, interrupted Edward Bulwer Lytton's talk and delivered her own speech to defame him (p. 2). Rosina was known as a very outspoken and assertive woman for her time, which can explain why she was deliberately (and wrongly) accused of madness and confined to an asylum after the Hertford scandal. Tomaiuolo (2010) interprets the connection between Rosina Wheeler's story and the dedication page of *Lady Audley's Secret* in the following way:

First, this dedication suggests that Braddon owes him much in terms of ‘literary advice’. Moreover, Braddon's words inform Edward Bulwer Lytton that the book is written *for him* and addressed *to him* in multiple ways. It follows that the similarities between Lady Audley's attitudes and vicissitudes (in particular her imprisonment in the Belgian asylum) and Rosina Wheeler's story suggest an approach to *Lady Audley's Secret* as a fictional alternative rewriting of Lady Lytton's incarceration. In what will be her first successful novel Braddon, so to speak, pays her literary debt to Bulwer Lytton and, at the same time, offers him Lady Audley's death in an asylum as a sort of fictional gift and a surrogate solution to his battle with Rosina, giving an alternative epilogue to his wife's ‘improper’ behavior (p. 13).

⁷ On the dedication page of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon writes in capital letters: “DEDICATED TO THE RIGHT HON. SIR EDWARD BULWER LYTTON, BART MP, DC.L, & C., & C., IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF LITERARY ADVICE MOST GENEROUSLY GIVEN TO THE AUTHOR” (LAS n.p.)

Having considered the background story between Edward Bulwer Lytton and Rosina Wheeler, the dedication page of *Lady Audley's Secret* can be read as a deliberate beginning. It is true that Braddon accepts Bulwer Lytton as her literary mentor, which can give the impression that she pays her tribute to him through the dedication page of her masterpiece. Still, while interpreting the dedication page of the novel, one cannot remain blind to what happened to Rosina Wheeler, who ended up in an asylum probably as a punishment for her misconduct. Just like Dr. Mosgrave's statements about Lady Audley, this can be because Rosina Wheeler was indeed not mad, but she was very dangerous in the eyes of the Victorians.

Conclusion

All in all, women in the Victorian period tended to produce novels within Victorian conventions perhaps due to pressures caused by expectations of the novel industry. Thus, although at times they put signs of feminist consciousness in their writings, they also contributed to the production and circulation of the right discourses, which was expected to ensure the sustainability of Victorian morals. Still, by representing different female experiences both in public and private spheres through various forms of female transgressions, such novels also enabled Victorian women readers to discover alternative life styles and to sustain their hopes about other possibilities of survival in the patriarchal social structures. This is possibly why *Lady Audley's Secret* was very popular particularly among women readers and remained a best-seller throughout the nineteenth century.

Lady Audley is portrayed as an assertive and self-confident woman character but the plot line gradually unfolds to the disadvantage of her and she is doomed to fall at the end. Though directing all attention to phenomenal deeds of the heroine, *Lady Audley's Secret* at the same time promotes internalized oppression and intrinsic sexism through the authorial narrative voice and perspective, which are unfavorable to the heroine. It is worth mentioning once again that sensation novels were read mostly by women and this raised concerns about their potential influence on women readers. Thus, while the novel pictures a subversive and unconventional heroine, her cautionary and anti-feminist treatment throughout the narrative puts the novel in an ambivalent position regarding feminist implications.

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