LADY AUDLEY'S SPHINXIAN MYSTERY?

ADRIANA RADUCANU

Yeditepe University,
26 Agustos Yerlesimi, Kayisdagi Cad.
34755, Atasehir/ Istanbul, Turkey
adiarna@hotmail.com

Abstract: The present study is based on the analysis of the themes of madness and monstrosity, depicted through the female character, in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's well-known *Lady Audley's Secret*. It discusses the elusive nature of madness and monstrosity that may be perceived as attributes of reader, writer and characters alike; it also considers the possibility of 'madness' as subversive survival strategy and/or escape from narrow patriarchal, political, social and cultural confines.

Key-words: gender, Gothic, madness, patriarchy, strategy, womanhood

Introduction

In many an instance, reading a text through Gothic lenses involves an undeniable proximity to mental disturbances of various kinds, transitorily or permanently damaged psychologies, *monstrosity* and ultimately *madness*. However, the attempt to grasp *madness* and confine it to comfortable definitions more than once escapes even the most assiduously interested researchers. Centuries before *Lady Audley's Secret* was written, the pedantic and obnoxious Polonius, "labouring as ever, to be wittily wise", rhetorically asked: "To define true madness what is't but to be nothing else but mad?" (Shakespeare 2006, qtd. in Porter 2002:1). When reading and attempting to interpret texts focusing upon debates related to the state of mental sanity, Brewster suggests we should be wondering about "whose pathology is in the question" when "defining madness in a Gothic text", in other words, when capturing the essence of psychological monstrosity as clear deviation from the norm. Is it possible, or even desirable, to content ourselves with

the approach taken by traditional psychoanalysis according to which we should be able to “detect” traces of madness in the very biography of the authors and their characters, and interpret the texts accordingly? Moreover, doesn’t this kind of approach invariably lure us also, as readers, into fictive *madness*, thus hindering *objective* interpretation and offering instead a critical re-production of *madness* which may or may not be there in the text in the first place? (Brewster 2001:281). If we are to escape this vicious circle, then we should somehow become empowered and avoid what Punter calls “the Gothic delirium” from which we may all suffer at certain times (Punter 1996:186). However, there are poems, short stories, plays and novels which simply cannot be approached without deep immersion in the Gothic tropes of *madness* and *monstrosity* which, in turn, can provide answers to more ‘quotidian’ and poignant issues, such as family relations, economic status, alienation, cultural and geographical mobility, etc. Brooks’ system of psychoanalytic criticism emphasises that relating to madness in Gothic fiction involves “a willingness, a desire, to enter into the delusional systems of texts, to espouse their hallucinated vision, in an attempt to master and be mastered by their power of conviction.” (Brooks 1987:16) *Mastering and being mastered by texts* where *madness* plays an important role means, in my opinion, both succumbing to the aesthetic power of such texts *and* attributing *meaning* outside *irrationality*, thus reading beyond the disguise and the ‘discourse’ of pathology. With these observations in mind, the present paper will focus on Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and analyse the various ways in which *madness* and *monstrosity* can be interpreted as ‘informing’ reader, writer and character alike, subtly insinuating themselves into the key elements of the text, such as plot and atmosphere. The aim of such a reading is also to argue for *madness* and *monstrosity* as both subversive survival strategies and/or escapes from narrow patriarchal political, social and cultural confines.

Lady Audley’s Secret

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s career may be read as symptomatic of a sustained, albeit unwilling, effort to break many Victorian taboos regarding middle-class women. Her biography could not be more offensive to the overpowering *Angel in the House* ideology which controlled the destinies of many a Victorian woman; thus, hardly

anything could be perceived as more scandalous than Mary Elizabeth Braddon's supporting herself and her mother by going on the stage. She then abandoned this less-than-honourable profession in order to become the author of anonymous thrillers for the penny-dreadfuls. Her personal life was also an affront to Victorian respectability. For ten years she 'lived in sin' with her publisher John Maxwell, whose wife was confined in a Dublin insane asylum. She worked constantly to support herself, Maxwell, their illegitimate children and his children from his legal marriage. This domestic burden undoubtedly helps to explain her incredibly prolific career as an author; she wrote over eighty novels, among them the best-selling *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), *Aurora Floyd* (1863), *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863), and a reworking of Goethe's *Faust* entitled *Gerard, Or the World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1891). Apart from this, Braddon also authored nine plays and numerous short stories and edited several magazines, including *Temple Bar* and *Belgravia*. Her reputation nowadays is mostly based on *Lady Audley's Secret* and the many pressing issues it tackled: identity, taboos, secrets, irrationality, adultery, anxiety, bigamy, blackmail, fraud, all of them typical of nineteenth century Gothic, alternatively known as *domesticated* Gothic and *sensation fiction*. The plot of *Lady Audley's Secret*, in spite of the complex issues it deals with, needs little review. The title character, horrified by the prospect of a life of poverty after giving birth and being abandoned by her husband, decides to entrust her child to her father and remarries into a wealthy family. Thus, by knowingly committing bigamy, she creates a new *identity*, that of the pampered and adored wife of a middle-aged man, an identity which she is determined to keep at all costs. When her first husband returns and naturally demands explanations, she tries to murder him, sets fire to a house in which a blackmailer lives (he dies shortly afterwards of his injuries), attempts to murder her second husband's nephew, and finally pleads madness in order to escape the rigours of the law. After spending a year confined in a mental asylum in Belgium, she dies (a case of extreme nostalgia and despair, perhaps - reasons are not clear), and herself becomes the dark, mysterious page in the family history.

Among the many problematic issues that plagued the Victorian era, society's response to the mentally ill was one of the most pressing, as well as one that led to the creation of purpose-built asylums throughout the country. As mentioned by Beveridge

and Renvoize, this concern was highly ambiguous; on the one hand, Victorians were eager to isolate the insane, on the other hand, they were also terrified by the possibility of “the wrongful confinement of sane people.” (Beveridge and Renvoize 1988:411). Cases of mental illness, generally but not always confined to the private sphere, were also part of many Victorian writers’ lives. Thus, Thackeray’s wife lost her sanity after she gave birth to her third child, the wife of Bulwer-Lytton was committed to a private asylum (in her later memoirs she rebutted the charge of insanity), Dickens was interested in visiting asylums in England and America and was a good friend of Dr. John Connolly, the Brontes were fascinated by phrenology and were the unfortunate witnesses of the gradual psychological deterioration of their brother, and Charles Reade successfully obtained the release of a wealthy man whom he thought wrongly confined to an asylum. (Beveridge and Renvoize 1988:411). Victorian literature also abounds in characters whose lives are tainted by *madness* (or episodes of it), and whose interaction with others is depicted as either a social evil that has to be contained or as benevolent eccentricity and a source of generosity. Among the most famous literary *mad characters* are Mrs. Rochester (*Jane Eyre*), Catherine Earnshaw (*Wuthering Heights*), Mr. Dorrit, Mrs. Clennam, Mr. F’s aunt, Maggy (*Little Dorrit*), Mr. Dick (*David Copperfield*), Alfred Hardy (*Hard Cash*), Louis Trevelyan (*He Knew He Was Right*), Anne Catherick (*The Woman in White*).

With so many Victorian characters whose literary destiny revolves around *madness*, what claims to originality can Lady Audley’s make? In order to understand the novel’s influence on Victorian society, and the subversive ways in which *madness* was depicted in the novel, the opinions of some of Braddon’s contemporaries may open the way for interpretations. Margaret Oliphant (Queen Victoria’s favourite writer), while acknowledging Braddon as “the leader of her school”, warned against the female sensationalists who, although they “reinstated the injured creature Man in something like his natural character”, also managed to mould “his women on the model of men.” (Oliphant 1867:265, qtd. in Schroeder 1988:88). E. S. Dallas also mentioned the impossibility of achieving a refined plot with a woman protagonist who, by definition, had “to be urged into a false position”, and “described as rushing into crime and doing masculine deeds.”(Dallas, II:298, qtd. in Schroeder 1988:88). Both Oliphant and Dallas therefore complained about and warned against female characters who willingly broke

the Victorian gender-taboos imposing submissiveness and passivity on women; in their view, such characters were less than authentic and representative, but rather dangerous and even monstrous.

Lady Audley's character, it should be noted, although *playing* the part of madness, most certainly does not *look* it. Frequent passages in the text refer to her angelic features, a "childishness and a charm which few could resist", the "innocence and candour of an infant" which "shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes", "the rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets", which rendered her "the character of extreme beauty and freshness". (Braddon 1997:43) Nevertheless, when Braddon offers the readers the portrait of Lady Audley for scrutiny, in an extremely well-achieved example of *ekphrasis*, the demon lurking behind the perfect façade is also powerfully present. Robert Audley's character attributes the painter's 'third eye', capable of grasping reality even in its most frightening aspects, to the supposition of the artist having "copied quaint medieval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful *fiend*." (Braddon 1997:57) However, as readers, we know better; if the portrait of the beautiful blond angel seems to also contain a fiend, a monstrous entity, it is because Lady Audley can, when the circumstances are right, behave like one. The incongruity between, on the one side, her considerable physical charms rendered as in a Pre-Raphaelite painting, her appearance of virtue, and, on the other hand, the monstrosity of her deeds is what mainly disconcerted the Victorians and made her into a figure of horror. However despicable and un-womanly Lady Audley's actions were, it was the final revelation of her altered mental state, i.e. her *madness*, that both made it seem sensational to peruse the novel or watch the play on stage, *and* fostered repulsion towards the protagonist. As mentioned by Henderson:

Reading *Lady Audley's Secret* was not, then, simply a matter of learning to intuit vice in the presence of sweetness, it entailed a radical disturbance of the orthodoxies of signification. For the only thing more disconcerting than a surface appearance that signified its opposite in moral worth, was a surface appearance that signified nothing at all. If at the Court of St James crowds gazed upon the indubitable embodiment of all that was 'happy and fair', incorporating in her person, what is more, the stately continuities of British aristocracies, at St James's Theatre audiences thrilled to look upon a gorgeous creature whose unmediated violence and greed embodied the ferocious realities of global *Victorian modernity*. (Henderson 2006:4).

It is the rise of the realities of global *Victorian modernity* that female characters such as Lady Audley were part of, albeit in a distorting and aggressive manner. The fact that she moves freely, unencumbered in any way by her gender, is able to manipulate, deceive and perfect the plausible persona of the governess as a social trampoline for her final achievement may be read as an inevitable response to the new culture of global imperialism, characterised by a lack, an “absence of transcendent morality.”(Henderson 2006:5) From this angle, Lady Audley’s *madness*, in spite of the protestations of the character herself, is at best questionable, at worst non-existent. One of the most famous readings of Braddon’s work, dealing with the issue of mental insanity, is that of Elaine Showalter, who argues that “as every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley’s real secret is that she is *sane* and, moreover, representative.”(Showalter 1977:235). Although Showalter’s essentialist feminist formula appears to favour the social context over the text itself, a close perusal of the novel sustains such a reading, which was also embraced by later critics. Jill Matus’ approach runs along the same lines; according to her, “Braddon suggests to the reader that Lucy is not deranged but desperate; not mad (insane) but mad (angry).”(Matus 1993:344) Lynn Voskuil emphasises the confrontational episode between Dr. Mosgrave and Lady Audley, in which the former is asked by Robert Audley to confirm a diagnosis of *madness*. Thus, she prefers to focus on the difficulty of establishing a clear diagnosis, and remarks that the mixture of behavioural truthfulness and crafted theatrical performance displayed by Lady Audley confuses Dr. Mosgrave’s diagnostic abilities. The diagnosis then sounds less than convincing and appears as an almost-failed attempt to restore and reassert male, scientific, middle-class authority. (Voskuil 2001:634).

Interestingly, besides the theatrical performance meant to baffle and ‘tease’ the abilities of the professional brain (according to Voskuil), Henderson aptly notices the absence of “the physical signs of mental causes.” The consequences of such an absence are almost comic, if read in terms of a gender struggle; instead of being governed by a cool, professional rationality, Mosgrave “finds himself frenziedly attracted to an aggregate of disturbingly desirable signs”, so that “he would throw himself upon the abysmal symbolism that constitutes my lady.”(Henderson 2006:13).

‘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: acute mania; but its duration would be 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 and the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley, she is dangerous!’(Braddon 1997:301)

My own interpretation of the paragraph above both reinforces and adds to those of former critics. I find this key quotation indicative for the establishing of a clinical, social and linguistic reading of *madness*. Almost as if it were an infectious disease, *madness* appears easily transmissible from patient to doctor; as can be noticed, there is increasing confusion and acceleration in the professional’s list of possible diagnoses, which may be read as incompetent guesswork, pathetically failing to convey the impression of professional, mature and well-informed judgement. At the same time, such blathering may also point to the acuteness of the gender struggle and the male inability to ‘cope’ with the mental ‘traps’ set by an attractive and intelligent woman. The above episode reminds contemporary readers of a similar gender –confrontation that is carried on in the cinematic world. As many of us surely remember, the erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* revolves around the sexual and intellectual games masterfully played by an increasingly aroused detective (Michael Douglas), who, under the spell of a stunningly attractive and intelligent crime novelist (Sharon Stone), perhaps fatally ‘blabbers’ his way in establishing her guilt. The increasing sexual tension between them demands gratification, but the end of the film offers no final answers regarding the identity of the killer; certainly, an ending as ambiguous and rich in possibilities as the novel in discussion. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Mosgrave’s professional discourse baffles readers by its constellation of hesitations, almost as much as he himself is baffled by Lady Audley’s self-appraisal, interestingly carried on behind closed doors. In Mosgrave’s own words, as rendered in the quotation above, Lady Audley’s condition displays signs of “latent insanity” competing with “dementia”, opening the way to “acute mania”, obviously explained by the “hereditary taint in her blood”, and reinforced by “the cunning of madness and the prudence of intelligence.” The irresolute nature of such diagnoses,

feeble as they are, appears even more questionable in the light of Mosgrave's final exclamation. The fact that he perceives her as "dangerous" transforms the exercise of medical diagnosis into a gender confrontation that can only end with the verdict of *monstrous* female power and assertion, which demand immediate isolation as the ultimate and most effective solution for punishing Lady Audley's 'un-feminine' transgressions.

Monsters "are in the world but not of the world", "paradoxical personifications of *otherness within sameness*", "threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established and accepted order of things." (Beal 2002:4). The paradox represented by the monster can be best understood through Sigmund Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*, that is, the "unhomely" or "uncanny". *Unheimlich* refers to that which threatens the home not from the outside, but from the inside. Read as symptomatic for the manifestations of the *unheimlich*, obviously the character of Lady Audley haunts the Victorian psyche as a monstrous figure, disguised as the very epitome of female beauty, charm and grace, which nevertheless endangers, through her actions, the male protagonists' "sense of at homeness", "of security, stability, integrity, well-being, health and meaning." (Beal 2002:5). The *uncanny* and hence the *monstrous* within the body is interestingly supported by the latest medical discoveries. Anolik, in her Introduction to *Demons of the Body and Mind*, draws on the idea of *Visible vs. Invisible Disability*, as instrumental in organising her selection of essays on disability in Gothic literature. According to recent developments in the problematical field of disabilities of various kinds, ranging from physical ones to psychological ones, we might look at Lady Audley's condition and regard her as suffering from a species of *Invisible Disability* affliction. As explained by the website of The Invisible Disabilities Advocate:

A person can have an *Invisible Disability* whether or not they have a "visible" impairment or use an assistive device like a wheelchair, walker, cane, etc. For example, whether or not a person utilizes an assistive device, if they are debilitated by such symptoms as extreme pain, fatigue, cognitive dysfunctions and dizziness, they have invisible disabilities. (quoted in Anolik 2010:8)

Anolik connects Invisible and Visible Disability to the well-known Gothic types of fear, or tropes, *Terror vs. Horror*. As staples of Gothic, generally present in one form or another in whatever Gothic text we may choose for perusal, *terror* and *horror* have

remained influential since Ann Radcliffe's seminal distinction and subsequent definitions in *On the Supernatural in Poetry* (1826). According to Radcliffe's distinction *horror* demands visibility and a strong impact on the senses to cause fear, and has at its centre the figure of the *monster*. *Terror*, as the less visible but none the less effective counterpart of *horror*, relies on the invisible, on what prowls unseen in the dark. (Anolik 2010:8) However, Gothic texts are very often seen to willingly blur the boundaries between *horror* and *terror*. The nature of Lady Audley's *madness* appears melted and insidious, between boundaries of manifestation or concealment; generally not visible, lurking, uncertain and obscure but all the more horrible when revealed and reclaimed by the physical appearance of angelic beauty.

What deserves attention in the novel is the fact that the authorial voice prefers to preserve the atmosphere of doubt and ambiguity regarding firstly the very existence of a case of *madness* and secondly the nature of it. It may be argued that part of such vagueness can be explained by the lack of scientific and properly categorised data regarding mental insanity. It may also be superbly employed Gothic art. Alternatively, Braddon's silence can be read as a highly effective strategy directed at penetrating the stifling set of Victorian gender-conventions, mirrored by Lady Audley's invocation of *madness*, which is meant to protect her from a worse fate. Maintaining a tone of ambiguity is, in this case, more than just a matter of creating and preserving authorial success - notwithstanding the best-selling author benefits that Braddon reaped - but rather a female strategy for initiating heated debates on pressing gender-related subjects, and the nature of *madness*, much too readily ascribed to *all* women, by mere virtue of their physiology. As Brewster suggests, following Foucault's arguments in *Madness and Civilization*, ascribing *madness* to anything outside the strict boundaries of the clinic and the asylum may be read as "a crisis of reason":

This crisis must be evoked, however, beyond the language of reason, eschewing the compromised discursive systems that have monitored and silenced madness for several centuries. Foucault claims that madness opens up such a privileged space within literature from the late nineteenth century onwards [...] The increasing proximity of madness and literature suspends the 'reign of language', bringing the phrases 'I write' and 'I am delirious' into intimate relation. Interrupting the

work of art, madness ‘opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer [...] where the world is forced to question itself.’(Foucault 1967:288quoted in Brewster 2001:282)

Braddon’s novel, interpreted from a Foucauldian perspective, emphasises powerful but invisible connections between language and *madness*, connections that frustrate attempts to read behind her novelistic strategies and argue either for a questioning of the world or for a muting of its most pressing issues. Lady Audley herself, in the novel, draws attention to the materiality of language, which can dissolve in the appearance of *madness*: “Repeat the commonest word in the English language twenty times, and before the twentieth repetition you will have begun to wonder whether the word which you repeat is really the word you mean to utter.”(Braddon 1997:228). Alternatively, Lady Audley’s words can be echoed, if we listen carefully, by Braddon’s voice, heard between the lines, urging us to repeat the word “madness” twenty times, assuming that it covers the whole of Lady Audley. and for sure we will begin to wonder whether the complexity of the character can possibly be done justice to in terms of a monomania which conveniently simplifies Victorian games of significances. Braddon never allows her readers and her critics a ‘moment’s peace’ with respect to the true mental condition of her protagonist. Should we even for a split second content ourselves with explaining Lady Audley’s murderous actions as a result of her *madness*, the very same character’s statements baffle us again. Thus, Lucy Audley quite unequivocally thwarts Dr. Mosgrave’s medical expertise, since Braddon renders *her* as far better qualified to attempt to explain the nature of her own mysterious disease. This female Hamlet’s intellectualisation and rationalisation of her condition fosters verbosity and, as stated before, baffles male characters and audience alike. In Lady Audley’s own telling, *madness* visits only during stressful times, the first fit having occurred after the birth of her child. In this she claims that she tragically reproduces the fate of her mother, who also lost her reason after giving birth. Showalter, in her critical study, writes that “puerperal insanity” accounted for “about ten percent of female asylum admissions” in the Victorian era. (Showalter 1977:323). In Lady Audley’s own words, the revelation of her mother’s condition triggers the series of her willing metamorphoses, all aimed at putting a distance between her and what she perceives as a cursed inheritance:

‘I brooded horribly upon the thought of my mother’s madness. It haunted me day and night. I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell, in a hideous garment that bound her tortured limbs. I had no knowledge of the different degrees of madness, and the image that haunted me was that of a distraught and violent creature, who would fall upon me and kill me if I came within her reach. This idea grew upon me until I used to awake in the dead of the night, screaming aloud in an agony of terror, from a dream in which I felt my mother’s *icy grasp* upon my throat, and heard her *ravings* in my ear.’ (Braddon 1997:277, emphasis mine)

As the *icy grasp* and the *ravings* are but figments of a sensitive child’s imagination, soon to be dispersed by a real encounter with a beautiful, chattering, wearing-flowers-in-her-hair mother - although she is the inmate of an asylum - Lady Audley’s tone in her confession of her criminal deeds displays nothing but cold, calm, detached recollection and faultless logic. Her disguised appeal to Robert Audley’s, and implicitly the readers’, sympathy when she claims that “the hidden taint that I had sucked in with my mother’s milk”, “possible to drive me mad” is the only thing responsible for the attempted murder of her first husband (Braddon 1997:312) certainly reminds us of a similar appeal voiced by Lady Audley’s famous prototype:

[...] what I have done/That might your nature, honour and exception/Roughly awake, I here proclaim was *madness*./Was’t Hamlet wrong’d Laertes? Never Hamlet:/If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away,/And when he’s not himself does wrong Laertes,/Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it./Who does it, then? His madness: if’t be so,/Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong’d;/His madness is poor Hamlet’s enemy. (Shakespeare 2006:711)

From her first rash marriage to George Talbot, whom she had thought to be rich but who was disinherited by his father upon the news of his misalliance, to the sweet, docile, ultra-feminine behaviour displayed for the world to see and for Sir Audley to decide to marry her, Lady Audley’s actions speak of just this: *action* as opposed to *passivity* and acceptance of a life spent in poverty and under the spectre of permanent surrender to hereditary *madness*. In other words, the only manifested *madness* in Lady Audley’s behaviour may be read as her *difference*, *out-of-the ordinarieness*, and her *venturing* outside of one system of thought into another which under Victorian circumstances could only be read as a case of authentic *madness*. Her incarceration at the

end of the novel befits the circumstances more than the individual. Non-normative female assertion and sense of power can only lead to social suppression and the inevitable reinstallation of the temporarily disturbed gender paradigms. As Kungl notices “perhaps aware of her role as a Gothic heroine manqué [sic], she romanticizes her situation” (Kungl 2010:173) and “looked upon herself as a species of state prisoner, who would have to be taken good care of: a second Iron Mask who must be provided for in some comfortable place of confinement.” (Braddon 1997:296). Reality, however, contradicts Lady Audley’s expectations of a safe and comfortable place of confinement. Instead, she is ‘sentenced’ by Robert Audley’s male authority to spend the remaining years of her short but adventurous life in “Villebrumeuse”, near Brussels. Under the façade of a very civilised *maison de santé*, Villebrumeuse is but a locus of live burial, strangely reminiscent of the confinement of Lucy Snowe in *Villette*:

My lady stared dismally round at the range of rooms, which looked dreary enough in the wan light of a single wax candle. This solitary flame, pale and ghostlike in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, or the window panes, in the looking-glasses or in those great expanses of glimmering something which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries of burnished tin. (Braddon 1997:309)

Conclusion

Lady Audley’s struggle ends unceremoniously after only one year of incarceration. In this early and rather convenient death, which mercifully protects her from experiencing the moral agonies that the Victorians were so fond of, Braddon clearly states where her sympathies lie. Lady Audley thus remains a heroine who fights and loses chiefly because she is less powerful in what is undoubtedly a sexual battle. Her final cry: “You have brought me to my grave, Mr. Audley [...] You have used your power basely and cruelly, and have brought me to a living grave!” (Braddon 1997:310) implies the fatal recognition of the implacability of gender hierarchies. It is this implacability that justifies, among other things, the Gothic trope of *enclosure* as means and solution for preserving classic power relations in the realm of gender. Nothing short of incarceration can prevent the possible emulation of Lady Audley’s behaviour by other female characters in the

novel, as becomes clear from Robert Audley's musings: "The more I see of this woman, the more reason I have to dread her influence upon others." (Braddon 1997:177). In other words, for the fabric of Victorian society to preserve its impenetrability and stability in terms of gender and gender-roles, transgressive characters like Lady Audley had to be confined to cultural impotence and political castration. Hence, the 'true' essence of Lady Audley's *madness* mainly resides in her attempts to be different, by escaping the pre-determined fate of the poor and abandoned woman. These attempts, coupled with an unstoppable energy for plotting and action, can hardly be said to constitute a *feminine* attribute, especially in Victorian times. Ultimately then, it appears that Lady Audley's "gender-inappropriate behaviour was sufficient evidence of a diagnosis of madness." (Anolik 2010:176).

However, redirecting our attention to the initial questions that this study proposed, regarding necessary immersion into *madness*, apparently inescapable when we try to find our way through the interstices of any Gothic text, there seems to be no definite answer regarding the *nature*, the *origins*, and the *possible cure*. Possibly then, all we can achieve is to enjoy and indulge in the "excess or overabundance of interpretation" (Brewster 2001:285) and escape the *madness* of any attempt to construct sterile essentialisms. This is the only way in which the *sphinxian* and the *ineffable* may continue to 'haunt' great literature and lure us into the delirium of reading.

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