IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON'S *LUCRETIA*: REVISITING VICTORIAN POPULAR NARRATIVES OF MADNESS*

Marta Miquel-Baldellou
Universidad de Lleida
mmiquel@dal.udl.cat

The character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has often been considered the paradigm of 'the madwoman in the attic'; an archetype arising from Gothic domestic fiction that would recur in later Victorian popular narratives and sensational novels, such as Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859) – which inaugurated Victorian sensationalism -, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) – which consolidated the genre. Nonetheless, it has rarely been noticed that Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia* (1846), featuring a demented Victorian heiress as a result of her upbringing in an eminently male environment, was published one year before Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847). This article aims at establishing intertextual links between some of these canonical popular Victorian portrayals of female madness and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia* in order to prove the influence Bulwer-Lytton himself, as well as his own personal life as a Victorian man of letters, exerted over them, thus recovering nowadays the status Edward Bulwer-Lytton deserves as a Victorian novelist.

Keywords: *Victorian popular novels, sensationalism, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, gender, female madness.*

El personaje de Bertha Mason a menudo ha sido considerado como paradigma de 'la loca del ático'; arquetipo surgido de la ficción de corte gótico-doméstica que recurriría a lo largo de venideras narraciones populares y novelas de sensación victorianas, como *The*

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Woman in White (1859) de Wilkie Collins – que inauguró el sensacionalismo victoriano - y *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) – que consolidó el género. Sin embargo, raramente se ha destacado que la novela del escritor victoriano Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Lucretia* (1846), centrada en una heredera victoriana que pierde la razón debido a su educación en un ambiente eminentemente masculino, fue publicada un año antes que la novela de Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847). Este artículo pretende establecer lazos intertextuales entre estos cánonicos retratos populares victorianos de locura femenina y la novela *Lucretia* de Edward Bulwer-Lytton, para demostrar la influencia que Bulwer-Lytton, junto a su propia vida personal como hombre de letras victoriano, ejerció sobre ellos, recuperando así el estatus que Bulwer-Lytton merece como novelista victoriano en la actualidad.

Palabras clave: *Novelas populares victorianas, sensacionalismo, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, género, locura femenina.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Victorian times, popular narratives featuring insane women and fallen angels of the house often underlined women's tumultuous discourse of anxiety, legal dependence, and subdued sexuality. Madness and female hysteria, as Foucault (1971) pointed out and Showalter (1987) later corroborated, became a metaphor that gave voice to the unspeakable, that is to say, women's condition. According to feminist precepts, through personifications of madness and sensation, instances of gender subversion were discussed in sensational novels while patriarchal testimonies cast a suspicious glance over women's increasing threat to usurp power either as strong-willed demented heroines in novels or as powerfully gifted women writers giving voice to their own narratives.

Bertha Mason had mostly remained a secondary character in popular gothic romance until Jean Rhys resurrected her through her

postcolonial adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Wide Sargasso* Sea, published in 1961. Likewise, feminist theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also exalted Edward Rochester's demented wife in their seminal interpretation of the madwoman in the attic, published in 1979, which precisely made reference to Brontë's character Bertha Mason to address female madness as closely linked to women writers' creativity. Although Charlotte Brontë's novel cannot strictly speaking be termed as sensational fiction, through time her minor character Bertha Mason has become a representative archetype of the eighteenth-century gothic romance as well as an early embodiment of female madness in Victorian sensational fiction. Since then, Neo-Victorian novels have attempted either to revive mystified memories or indulge in idealisations of the hysterical woman which have contributed to deconstructing the so-called Victorian ethics and cult of true womanhood through a feminist discourse.

Since *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, it can be argued that most popular Victorian narratives of female madness were greatly indebted to Charlotte Brontë's characterisation of Bertha Mason, Edward Rochester's frantic first wife enclosed in the attic of Thornfield Hall. In this respect, despite the fact that she originally played a minor role in the plot of Brontë's novel, Laurence Lerner argued that "Bertha Mason has become one of the major characters of English fiction" (1989:273). Nonetheless, even if Bertha Mason has often been heralded as the epitome of the madwoman, preceding such popular personifications of feigned or genuine female madness as Ann Catherick and Laura Fairlie in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) or Lucy Audley in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), it has generally gone unnoticed that the Victorian writer and baronet Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton provided an even earlier forerunner of the popular Victorian embodiment of female madness through his novel *Lucretia; or*, *The Children of the Night*, published in 1846. As a matter of fact, Bulwer-Lytton's novel, featuring an ambitious, cunning heiress and granting her the role of heroine, was published one year before *Jane Eyre* came to light. Hence, it can be argued that, despite the significant influence it exerted over later popular portrayals of Victorian female madness, up to now, Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia* and its author have not been granted the credit they truly deserve.

Despite Bertha Mason's extended shadow in Victorian popular narratives of madness, this article aims to identify intertextual links among popular Victorian portraits of actual, suspected or feigned female insanity, through characters like Bertha Mason, Laura Fairlie and Lucy Audley, in relation to Bulwer-Lytton's less-known portrayal of an insane Victorian heiress in his novel *Lucretia*. This comparative analysis will highlight Bulwer-Lytton's characterisation of Lucretia as a particularly influential heroine in Victorian narratives of sensation about female madness. The four prototypes of female insanity just mentioned disclose those values that were often demonised if found in women, such as Bertha Mason's exuberant and exotic sexual freedom, Lucretia Clavering's unusual intelligence and unlimited ambition, Laura Fairlie's independent economic condition, and Lucy Audley's will to take hold of her own life.

Bertha Mason incarnates madness as a result of sexual deviance. Lucretia Clavering ends up enclosed in a lunatic asylum due to her unusual brightness and her unlimited ambition to achieve her goals. Laura Fairlie is incarcerated due to her high income, which was not considered particularly becoming to a young lady, as it defied the socially-established convention of women's economic dependence, and Lucy Audley also finishes her days in a mental institution after she acknowledges that she is the descendant of a madwoman, thus avoiding being prosecuted for bigamy and attempted murder. What follows is a succinct comparative outline of three of the most popular renderings of female madness in Victorian sensational novels, specifically focusing on the way these female characters originated and underlined their intertextuality with Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia*.

2. BERTHA MASON AS A LEGACY OF GOTHIC DOMESTIC FICTION

The uncanny figure of the madwoman emerged as a creation of the domestic fiction of the decade of the 1840s, whereby the capacity for violence found in demented women acquired political connotations. In this sense, the madwoman archetype appeared in the English culture of the mid-nineteenth century, to use Freudian terms, as if it was 'the return of the repressed'; understood as the process

whereby elements preserved in the national unconscious tend to reappear, thus highlighting the indestructible nature of the unconscious, no matter how one tries to conceal or destroy its presence. According to Isabel Armstrong (1987), deranged women suddenly came into vogue with the great domestic novels of the 1840s, and in this respect, Helen Small claimed that the character of Bertha Mason stood for a strange incorporation of Gothic theatricality into domestic fiction at the time (1996:140). From then onwards, critical writing about madwomen in the nineteenth-century novel has often been dominated by the example of Bertha Mason since, as Small further corroborates, very few novelists produced anything comparable to Charlotte Brontë's description of female insanity (1996:141). However, one of the few works which genuinely bears a close resemblance with *Jane Eyre* in its concern about female insanity is Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia*. Actually, not only did Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* depict female madness, but it also highlighted this discourse as a central focus of attention, thus addressing female insanity in a more thorough way than Charlotte Brontë's novel does since, despite its notorious critical acclaim later on and the importance attached to Bertha Mason through time, the discourse of female madness mostly remains peripheral in relation to the central plot of Brontë's novel.

Lucretia and Bertha Mason mainly invoke the sentimental figure of the madwoman-in-love, even if nostalgically and often in dark parody. In both cases, the heroines become insane and begin to adopt wicked habits as a result of unrequited love. In Charlotte Brontë's novel, Bertha Mason's sexual potency mostly emerges when she becomes aware of Jane's presence in the house, and in particular, when she finds out that Jane and Edward are going to get married, the point at which she finally decides to set fire to her husband's bed. Bertha's openly sexual behaviour renders her androgynous by Victorian standards, as she is often described by means of animalistic terms. Likewise, Bulwer-Lytton's heroine, Lucretia, also poses a threat concerning gender representation, as she is mainly characterised as an ambitious and extremely cunning woman, despite her outstanding youth. Lucretia is also endowed with an acute criminal capacity which is dismissed as far too masculine, and ultimately, decidedly monstrous if found in women. However, in his preface to the novel, Bulwer-Lytton insisted on making a bid for sympathy by alluding

sentimentally to the woman into whom Lucretia would have turned had she not been separated from her first lover and subsequently corrupted by the dubious tutorship of Oliver Dalibard, her husband-to-be, even though she never truly loves him. Accordingly, even if blatant parallelisms can be established between Lucretia Clavering and other popular villainesses such as Lucretia Borgia and even Lady Macbeth, Lucretia is condemned not because she is perceived as inherently cruel, but rather because she gradually becomes too determined and ambitious as a result of surrounding social and cultural circumstances. After all, it is sentimental vulnerability and motherly attachment, mainly interpreted as women's major weaknesses, that finally prevent Lucretia Clavering from becoming another Lucretia Borgia, as her protracted personal history of crime ends in madness and enclosure in a lunatic asylum when she ultimately gets to know that Ben, the young man she slays towards the end of the novel, is really her kidnapped son. Hence, Bulwer-Lytton projects female criminality into the realm of monstrosity to preserve the Victorian cult of domestic virtue, thus showing that Lucretia's mannish upbringing proves inappropriate for a young Victorian heiress.

Lucretia's eventual signs of madness are revealed through her hysterical laughter. In this sense, the description of Lucretia's depravity when she is finally apprehended closely anticipates that of Bertha Mason's latent presence all through Brontë's novel, especially with regard to her resounding laughter:

> As he [Beck] fell back into their arms a corpse, a laugh rose close at hand, -it rang through the walls, it was heard near and afar, above and below; not an ear in that house that heard it not. In that laugh fled for ever, till the Judgement-day, from the blackened ruins of her lost soul, the reason of the murderess-mother. (Bulwer-Lytton 413)

In this way, Lucretia's laughter anticipates that of Bertha Mason when Jane arrives at Thornfield Hall and her first night at the house is disturbed by the echoes of Bertha's laugh from her chamber in the attic, echoing all across the manor:

> This was a demoniac laugh – low, suppressed, and deep – uttered, as it seemed, at the very key-hole of my chamber-door. The head of my bed was near the door, and I thought at first, the goblin-laughter stood at my bedside – or rather, crouched by my pillow: but I rose, looked round, and could see nothing (Brontë: 155)

In close resemblance with Bertha, the problems the madwoman presents in Bulwer-Lytton's novel are evidence of the conflicting messages of the late 1840s. Lucretia's story exploits romantic precedents in which the abandoned woman finds an alternative outlet for her disordered emotions in subverting any established gender conventions. Likewise, as Helen Small notices, Bulwer-Lytton himself felt divided over any claim Lucretia may have had for sympathy as, even though for most of the novel he deprives her of sentimental feelings, there are signs which ultimately betray Lucretia's attachment as a mother, and thus Bulwer-Lytton's attempt at humanising his subject (Small 151). In this respect, if Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia* underlines the need to preserve domestic virtue to avoid the presence of such a determined heroine, through critical theory, and especially through Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's seminal interpretation, Bertha's madness has often been associated with the feminist conviction that insanity represents a mode of rebellion against the constraints of patriarchy, so that Bertha, as an enraged *alter ego*, gives voice to Jane's resentment as a Victorian angel of the house. And yet, as Small notices, to interpret the novel merely in this particular way involves dismissing Brontë's original determination not to give female insanity a romantic reading, as was usually the case within Gothic domestic fiction. This dual discourse, between domesticity and protofeminism, can also be identified in Bulwer-Lytton's novel, as Lucretia may be understood not only as a victim of her social circumstances but also as a villainess whose ambition for power renders her scarcely feminine and even androgynous.

Despite these outstanding parallelisms, *Lucretia* could not have directly influenced *Jane Eyre* as Brontë's novel was already in the hands of its publisher when Bulwer-Lytton's novel was published. In fact, one of the most remarkable differences between both works is that, in Brontë's novel, Bertha Mason's presence mainly remains peripheral,

as she is incarcerated in the attic of Thornfield. Thus, it can be argued that, even if her presence is threatening, she is mostly held at a distance. Bertha Mason even appears to be set out of time. Having remained locked away in the attic for a period of ten years, she is correspondingly outmoded and arises as a costume drama madwoman used for theatrical effect; a remnant of the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Gothic romance. By contrast, Lucretia's presence is constant all through the novel as the reader bears witness to her fall as a woman. Hence, Bertha Mason's peripheral, but constant, latent presence in *Jane Eyre* sharply contrasts with Lucretia's overwhelming presence in Bulwer-Lytton's novel, as she arises as both the heroine and villainess of the story.

In relation to the authors themselves, both writers, Charlotte Brontë and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, were often categorised as authors of domestic fiction, and as such, they were both accused of causing a stir among reviewers as a result of their failure to exhibit the moral conventions that were expected of that genre. However, it should be highlighted that Bulwer-Lytton particularly seemed to draw on personal circumstances to write his novel, mainly his tempestuous marriage to Rosina Bulwer-Lytton as well as his ultimate decision to confine her in a lunatic asylum. On the other hand, Charlotte Brontë grew increasingly interested in the evolving progress of medical theory and practice, and rather fond of studying any journals and books available and even attending occasional lectures on physiology and related subjects. Moreover, Brontë's close knowledge of Walter Scott's fiction appears as a certain link between her interest in the subject of female insanity and that of Bulwer-Lytton's, especially taking into account Bulwer-Lytton's fondness for Walter Scott in youth. In this respect, Brontë's blending of romantic and realistic features in her portrayal of Bertha Mason appears in clear parallelism with Sir Walter Scott's character Ulrica the Saxon in his eponymous novel *Ivanhoe*. Like Ulrica, Bertha Mason also perishes by falling off a roof-top amid flames. As for Bulwer-Lytton, he also often acknowledged his debt to Walter Scott during the first years of his career as a result of his ever-lasting interest in historical novels.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Lucretia* feature insane women whose madness is rooted in unrequited love, but both heroines are given

different interpretations in their respective novels. Bertha's female insanity is mostly described through an empathic focus on her animalistic traits, which highlight her deviant sexuality:

> In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal; but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face (Brontë 307)

In contrast, Lucretia arises as a more refined woman, a Victorian heiress, who hides a particular feature that renders her different, precisely the latent masculinity which is the result of her upbringing, and which is ultimately the source of both her strength and her mischievous nature:

> Fortunately, the slow defect of her form was not apparent at a distance: that defect was in the hand; it had not the usual faults of female youthfulness, - the superfluity of flesh, the too rosy healthfulness of colour, - on the contrary, it was small and thin; but it was, nevertheless, more the hand of a man than a woman; the shape had a man's nervous distinctness, the veins swelled like sinews, the joints of the fingers were marked and prominent. In that hand, it almost seemed as if the iron force of the character betrayed itself. (Bulwer-Lytton 50-1)

At the outcome of the novels, Bertha perishes and is removed from the Victorian scenario where Jane and Rochester will eventually marry and live together, while Lucretia is confined in a lunatic asylum but is never ultimately destroyed. Bertha Mason's peripheral presence, and particularly her laughter, renders her a lurking ghostly creature whose existence is questioned, whereas Lucretia's ever-lasting and powerful presence entitles her to become the heroine-villainess in Bulwer-Lytton's novel. Moreover, *Jane Eyre* portrays significant episodes

of telepathy and ghostly apparitions, as residual features of Gothic domestic fiction, whereas *Lucretia* becomes a paradigm of the Newgate novel, depicting crime with accurate realism. Hence, if supernaturalism ultimately prompts the encounter between Rochester and Jane, realism exposes Lucretia to the scrutinising eye of the moral establishment.

Likewise, much attention has recently been placed on the racist undertones attached to the first Mrs Rochester and her predisposition to immorality and sexual liberation. Actually, according to Small, Bertha Mason would clearly fall within the Victorian psychiatrist James Cowles Prichard's category of moral insanity. In Victorian times, both women and so-called savage creatures were held to be more vulnerable to derangement, because their will was presumed to be notoriously weak. In contrast, Lucretia, even if deemed insane, is intelligent and self-willed, and is enclosed for her unlimited ambition which even ends up in murder. Thus, both characters are confined but for significantly different reasons. If Bertha's sexual desire is considered menacing, Lucretia's powers of the mind, as well as her ambition, render her acutely threatening, and therefore, she needs to be expelled from the established gender conventions pertaining to the Victorian moral establishment.

3. BULWER-LYTTON'S *LUCRETIA*: BEYOND THE DOMAIN OF FICTION

As James Campbell states in his article "*Lucretia* and the Influence of Home Education on Later Conduct", at the centre of *Lucretia*, there exists "the shaping thesis about how intellect without ethical guidance leads to evil" (1986:51), since the central plot presents "an amoral villainess of commanding intellect, who, driven by jealous revenge, attempts to poison her rivals to secure a large fortune" (51). In this respect, Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* resembles a few more villainous Victorian heiresses of sensational novels of the time, in which young, but well-instructed heroines, make use of their powerful intellect to achieve their wicked aims, while subtly implying that a powerful mind is not regarded as appropriate for a submissive and dutiful Victorian heroine, thus taking it for granted that rising above her prospects may inevitably lead her to commit wicked deeds.

Bulwer-Lytton's attempts at teaching morality through the vileness of a female character caused a notorious upheaval in the Victorian society of the time, which had its effect on the considerable number of adverse reviews *Lucretia* received. By the time Bulwer-Lytton's novel was published, he had already written several other novels featuring a criminal as the protagonist, such as *Paul Clifford* (1830) and *Eugene Aram* (1832), which inaugurated the Newgate genre in England, precisely characterised by introducing a criminal as the hero of the novel. Nevertheless, none of Bulwer-Lytton's works had received such negative reviews as *Lucretia*, which was condemned by the *Athenaum* periodical for exhibiting a markedly "moral unhealthiness of mind" (Campbell 53), and by the *Morning Herald* for being "as mischievous as those other works of the same author" (Campbell 53). As a result, Bulwer-Lytton felt compelled to write a pamphlet to defend himself and his works, and in his pamphlet entitled *A Word to the Public*, published on January 23, 1847, Bulwer-Lytton argued that "crime had a legitimate and useful place in literature" (Campbell 53). Nevertheless, in the case of *Lucretia*, it appears that, at the root of the objections and resulting upheaval, was the fact that the novel featured a young woman as the criminal heroine, since merely introducing criminal deeds into the realm of literature was considered a narratological twist commonly exploited in the penny dreadfuls of the time. Lucretia thus proves to be an implacable character, strong-willed and resilient, often described as embodying traits that were only traditionally attached to men. Nonetheless, Bulwer-Lytton claims that her acts, though vile and wicked, are ultimately the result of an uncaring family background; an upbringing merely based on profit and resentment engendered by unrequited love.

According to Ciolkowski (1992), the forgery of female subjectivity in *Lucretia* inscribed a specifically Victorian 'anti-feminism' which was aimed at preserving the sexual status quo, and eroding the basis for the participation of women in fields from which they were socially - if not legally - excluded in the early part of the nineteenth century (94). Nonetheless, in addition to his comment on that type of contemporary social discourse, as Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues in her article "Writing for Revenge: The Battle of the Books of Edward and Rosina Bulwer Lytton", by means of Lucretia's perpetual incarceration in a madhouse, Bulwer-Lytton "may well have created a distorted

mirroring of the madness that he claimed was afflicting his wife" (167). Therefore, apart from Bulwer-Lytton's intention to underline the importance of early upbringing in young females, he may have also been referring to a particular case in which he had been personally involved. As Louisa Devey (1887) admits in the biography she wrote of Bulwer-Lytton's wife, Rosina, when he was canvassing in Hertford for nomination as a Tory Member of Parliament, Rosina interrupted her husband's address and made a speech urging the electors not to vote for him. Regarding Rosina's actions as unequivocal signs of insanity, Bulwer-Lytton decided to have his wife committed to a lunatic asylum on June 21 1858, a decade after he had published his novel *Lucretia* in 1846, so that, in this case, fiction anticipated real life. As a result of her enclosure, Rosina also wrote her autobiography *A Blighted Life* in 1866, which especially dwelled upon on her incarceration. However, it was not published until 1880, seven years after Bulwer's demise. Rosina's narrative is somehow reminiscent of Georgiana Weldon's *How I Escaped the Mad-Doctors* (1878), which was also a protest against the right of husbands to correct rebellious wives during the Victorian period (Mulvey-Roberts 1994: xxix). Bulwer-Lytton's knowledge about female socialists who did not just leave the home and renounce conventional marriage but who also dared to rise in front of a large audience to address private issues probably came from Ann Wheeler, a social feminist and, significantly, his wife's mother. In fact, as David Lytton Cobbold (1999), Bulwer-Lytton's descendant, mentioned in 1999, Ann Wheeler together with William Thompson contributed to the early history of feminism with a significant volume entitled *Appeal of One Half of The Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men* (1825).

With regard to Bulwer's novel, Lucretia Clavering's disruption of the sanctum of the Victorian family and her desire for power outside the confines of the home underline the Victorian debates about the effects of modern society and industrialisation on moral and ethical structures. According to Ciolkowski, *Lucretia* can be read as a homily on the dangers of the post-industrial female subject and the incipient feminism that enables the heroine of the novel to test the limits of a politics of separate spheres (80). Lucretia Clavering's feminine beauty encodes her as a woman, but her disdain for the protected field of the home and her desire for power in the public sphere of politics render

her closer to masculinity. Brought up and educated by her bachelor uncle, Sir Miles St. John, to become his heiress, Lucretia is provided with all the trappings of masculine power. However, in order to achieve the wealth and freedom she desires she must also excel in embodying the perfect Victorian angel. Her fondness for theatricality enables her to manipulate all those with whom she comes into contact. Nevertheless, as a result of the public discovery of her romantic involvement with the commoner William Mainwaring, against her uncle's wish, Lucretia is disinherited and banished from her uncle's estate. Ultimately, Lucretia is also forsaken by William who rejects her in favour of Lucretia's half-sister, Susan Mivers, an angel of the house in fact, and Lucretia's counterpart.

Subsequently, Lucretia gets involved with her French tutor, Olivier Dalibard, who initiates her into the world of crime. Actually, as Allan Conrad Christensen argues in *Edward Bulwer-Lytton: The Fiction of New Regions*, it is Dalibard who truly "becomes the tutor, corruptor, and husband of the heroine Lucretia" (2003:114). Having been initiated in mischief, Lucretia, now Madame Dalibard, eventually has her husband murdered, poisons her second husband, destroys the life of her half-sister Susan, makes an attempt on the life of her young niece Helen to secure her son's inheritance, and murders a young street boy, Beck, who, in clear resemblance to the tradition of classic Victorian melodrama, turns out to be her lost son. Lucretia's ability to impersonate the female subject cherished by Victorian society enables her to move through the world with the advantage assigned to virtual Victorian angels of the house, hiding her unlimited ambition and cunning intelligence behind a meek and pious countenance. Lucretia is thus able to forge her female subjectivity, and Bulwer-Lytton's novel thus explores a shifting negotiation of identity and difference which disfigures Victorian assumptions of gender.

With a view to turning her into an heiress, Lucretia's mind has been educated for masculine pursuits, while her body has been trained to impersonate the Victorian angel to perfection. Her forgery of femininity brings into being an egotistical female subject, disguised in the forms of feminine beauty and fated to disrupt the mechanics of Victorian society. This is revealed early in the novel by means of an ambiguous description, in which she is characterised as "tall, - tall

beyond what is admitted to be tall in woman; but in her height there was nothing either awkward or masculine, - a figure more perfect never served for model to a sculptor" (Bulwer 50). The forgery of femininity in Lucretia undercuts the naturalised link between femininity and morality that is cherished by middle-class Victorians, and destabilises the figure of the Victorian angel. Bulwer-Lytton seems to portray Lucretia as a monstrous form of femininity; a female mutation against which Victorian society must be on its guard. The forgery of femininity in Lucretia problematises the portrait of angelic femininity as she defies the Victorian binary model of sexual difference according to which woman must be the very antithesis of theatricality, thus revealing in the end, that the myth of the unitary soul is ultimately a mirage. The complementary nature of the fallen woman and the angel of the house, embodied by Lucretia's appearance and her true inner nature, as well as by Lucretia herself and her half-sister Susan Mivers, would also play an important role in Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White*, published in 1859, significantly one year after Bulwer-Lytton had committed his wife Rosina to a lunatic asylum. Thus, this exchange of identities and personalities would also be further explored by Wilkie Collins, with whom Bulwer-Lytton was closely acquainted.

4. THE SENSATIONAL CASE OF *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

According to Matthew Sweet, *The Woman in White* has generally been regarded as the first sensational novel, which can be defined as an enormously influential branch of Victorian fiction which blended the apprehensive thrills of Gothic literature with the psychological realism of the domestic novel (1999:xiii). The rise of the sensational novel was intimately connected with the development of Victorian consumer culture, a shift in social and economic behaviour that brought about the near industrialisation of pleasure. Wilkie Collins' first efforts were written under the influence of Gothic fiction and Bulwer-Lytton's historical novels, and yet the acknowledged source from which Collins drew his popular novel, *The Woman in White*, preceded Bulwer-Lytton's incarceration of his wife only a few years.

The origins of Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White* (1859) have been acknowledged to involve several well-known Victorian

personalities. It is estimated that on one moonlit summer night in the 1850s, Wilkie Collins and his brother, Charles Allston Collins, were escorting the Pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais from one of their mother's parties in Hanover Terrace to his home at 83 Gower Street in London. Their conversation was suddenly arrested by a piercing scream which appeared to come from the garden of a villa close at hand. Before they could decide what course of action to take, the iron gate leading to the garden was thrown open, and from it came the figure of a young woman dressed in white robes that John Everett Millais described in the following terms:

> She was a young lady of good birth and position, who had accidentally fallen into the hands of a man living in a villa in Regent's Park. There for many months he kept her prisoner under threats and mesmeric influence of so alarming a character that she dared not attempt to escape, until, in sheer desperation, she fled from the brute, who, with a poker in his hand, threatened to dash her brains out. (Millais 278-9)

John Everett Millais' actual description of the lady in white, whom Collins also saw as he was escorting his friend, bears a close resemblance with its fictional counterpart as described by Walter Hartright in the novel:

> It was then nearly one o'clock. All I could discern distinctly by the moonlight, was a colourless, youthful face, meagre and sharp to look at, about the cheeks and chin; large, grave, wistfully-attentive eyes; nervous, uncertain lips; and light hair of a pale, brownish-yellow hue. There was nothing wild, nothing immodest in her manner: it was quiet and self-controlled, a little melancholy and a little touched by suspicion; not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life. The voice, little as I had yet heard of it, had something curiously still and mechanical in its tones, and the utterance was remarkably rapid. She held a small bag in her hand: and her dress – bonnet, shawl, and gown all of

> white – was, so far as I could guess, certainly not composed of very delicate or very expensive materials. (Collins 24)

The ambiguous description of a demented young woman in sensational narratives, mostly considered to have been created by Wilkie Collins, was forced to ground itself within contemporary debates about the nature of identity and the science of mental pathology. Wilkie Collins was no stranger to either physical or nervous illness, and it was during the late 1850s that he became particularly concerned about insanity. According to Sweet, the effortlessness with which Collins accomplishes this portrayal exploits a topical scary plot of the 1860s, that is, the threat of wrongful incarceration in a madhouse.

The end of the decade of the 1850s witnessed the phenomenon of the so-called "lunacy panic" in Great Britain, arising from a great number of cases involving individuals wrongly diagnosed, certified insane, and forcibly committed to madhouses. In an interview conducted with Wilkie Collins in 1871, the writer admitted the explicit effects these events exerted on the composition of his novel *The Woman in White*. Out in the country, the penny newspapers were fuelling speculation that the madhouses of England might enclose behind their walls an unknown number of sane individuals, mainly incarcerated for pecuniary reasons. It seemed medical men were allying with unscrupulous families who wanted to dispose of troublesome relatives. In their volume entitled *Masters of Bedlam*, Andrew Scull, Charlotte MacKenzie and Nicholas Hervey argue that "the boundary between sanity and madness was and remains uncertain; and there were inescapable moral and social components in all such judgements" (1999:181). Moreover, as John Sutherland claims in his book *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (1995), the question of diagnosing insanity, and the problem of how to dispose of wearisome women, were a cause for concern in Wilkie Collins's own circle.

As a matter of fact, one of the events that propelled the long friendship established between Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins was their acting together in one of Bulwer-Lytton's plays. On 16 May

1851, *Not So Bad as We Seem* was performed with a cast including Mark Lemon - editor of *Punch*- , John Forster - then secretary to the Commissioners for Lunacy-, and Robert Bell - co-proprietor of the Manor House private asylum in Chiswick. Charles Dickens ensured that a police guard was on the door because of threats from Rosina Bulwer-Lytton, Edward's estranged wife, who publicised her intention to assault Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort as they attended the opening night. Rosina had separated from the baronet in 1836 on very bad terms, and had continued pestering him with insulting letters – sending them to him directly, to his acquaintances, and also even to the press. Her anger intensified in 1848, when her husband banned her presence when their nineteen-year-old daughter, Emily, was on her death-bed, dying of typhoid in a cheap London boarding-house. In June 1858, after Rosina's outrageous attack in front of a crowd of electors in his Hertford constituency, Bulwer-Lytton felt compelled to abduct Rosina and commit her to the Wyke House Lunatic Asylum in Brentford. She was certified insane on the authority of John Conolly and Lyttleton Stewart Forbes Winslow, two of the most eminent psychiatrists in the country. In this respect, Bulwer-Lytton's procedures at that time appear as not entirely removed from those of Count Fosco in Wilkie Collins' novel. Rosina's incarceration actually preceded the publication of *The Woman in White*. Nonetheless, Wilkie Collins was careful not to refer to the specific event that seems to have given rise to the plot of his eponymous novel. In any case, Rosina was more fortunate in real life than Laura Fairlie is in fiction, as Rosina was released from the mental institution where she had been enclosed after three weeks. The scandal that erupted in the Victorian society of the time as a result of Rosina's enclosure forced Conolly and Forbes Winslow to re-evaluate Rosina's mental condition and concede that her sanity was beyond question.

As Matthew Sweet further asserts, Bryan Procter, one of the metropolitan Commissioners in Lunacy present at Rosina's second examination, was precisely the dedicatee of *The Woman in White* and doubtless supplied Collins with many of the novel's details (1999: xxix). Wilkie Collins' use of a plot about an ageing and sour-tempered baronet who incarcerates his sane wife in a lunatic asylum greatly pleased Rosina, Bulwer-Lytton's wife, who wrote to Collins claiming that she could provide him with material from her own experience

which would enable him to create the most dastardly villain in literary history, mentioning that "the man is alive and is constantly under my gaze. In fact, he is my husband" (Robinson 1974: 141). Apparently, as a result of these blatant similarities between fact and fiction, Bulwer-Lytton dismissed Wilkie Collins' novel in a letter to Frederick Lehmann as "great trash" (Gasson 1998: 24). Nonetheless, significantly enough, Bulwer-Lytton was full of praise for Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), written by his protégée and published four years later than Wilkie Collins' novel, despite the fact that this novel concludes with its heroine's imprisonment in a French lunatic asylum, thus again bearing an acute resemblance with Bulwer-Lytton's endeavours with regard to his own wife. As a matter of fact, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon not only shared an interest in sensational fiction, but they were also closely acquainted with each other. Mary Elizabeth Braddon regarded Wilkie Collins as her literary father and admitted that the plot of her novel *Lady Audley's Secret* owed much to *The Woman in White*. Likewise, she was also to dedicate her novel *Lady Audley's Secret* to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whom she considered her literary mentor, thus addressing him in the following terms: "in grateful acknowledgment of literary advice most generously given to the author"; which proves both Mary Elizabeth Braddon's gratefulness and her indebtedness to the Victorian baronet.

5. SENSATIONAL FICTION GAINS PUBLIC ACCLAIM

By the end of 1862, Mary Elisabeth Braddon had established her reputation as a leading writer in sensational fiction. She shared this position with Wilkie Collins, whose novel *Woman in White*, published two years earlier, had inaugurated the genre of the sensational novel. According to Jenny Bourne Taylor (1998), it was precisely *Lady Audley's Secret* which epitomised the most notorious and disturbing aspects of the sensational fiction which was characteristic during the decade of the 1860s. Mary Elizabeth Braddon initially relied on the patronage of the masculine literary world, and her early career was fostered by two powerful older men, namely Wilkie Collins and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. By the 1860s, Bulwer-Lytton had become one of the most respected living English writers, and was particularly aware

of Braddon's early work, offering her enormous encouragement. As a result, Mary Elizabeth Braddon dedicated her novel to him, and both maintained copious correspondence until Bulwer-Lytton's death. Hence, Bulwer-Lytton is estimated to have played the role of mentor and literary father to his female protégée. As Sweet further claims, Bulwer-Lytton even once showed Braddon his private collection of photographic portraits of demented and lunatic patients, and it seems inevitable that his attempt to incarcerate his wife, Rosina, actually inspired elements of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's best-known sensational fiction.

On the other hand, John Maxwell, a publishing magnate, who became Braddon's lover and lifelong partner, also exerted a deep influence on the young writer at both a personal and professional level. Braddon had met John Maxwell in the late 1850s and started living with him in an unmarried union, even though he already had a wife, who had also been confined in a mental institution. This aspect in Braddon's personal life echoes two recurrent themes in her sensational fiction: the difficulties posed before the reform of the divorce laws due to the indissolubility of marriage, and the confinement of the wife in an asylum; both themes widely explored in *Lady Audley's Secret*. As a matter of fact, both Bulwer-Lytton's and John Maxwell's wives were committed to an asylum at some point in their lives, and both exerted a significantly personal influence on Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

Lady Audley's Secret gradually reveals that, behind Lucy Graham's identity, there lurks Helen Talboys, a bigamist and a suspected murderess. Subsequently, it is also disclosed that, behind Helen Talboys' identity, there lies Helen Maldon; a woman who describes herself as inheritor of hereditary insanity on the part of her mother. According to Doctor Mosgrave's diagnosis in the novel, "[t]he 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!" (372). Furthermore, this intermittent play of identities associates the anxieties about the breakdown of established class relationships and the mutability of social roles with a set of debates about the nature of identity and the limits of the inner self that intrigued Victorians and began to give shape to the emerging field of nineteenth-century psychiatry.

In this respect, Braddon's novel was soon compared with two earlier novels that also drew connections between female insanity, established gender conventions and social-class disruption: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel actually takes and transforms aspects of Bulwer-Lytton's story. Lucy's first husband, Robert Audley, avoids the scandal of a public trial and denies Lucy's rights as a subject provided that she is confined in a lunatic asylum. Nevertheless, the description of her incarceration blurs any distinction between criminal responsibility as a villainess and wrongful confinement as a victim:

> (Dr. Mosgrave) 'From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that house,' he said, 'her life, so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished. Whatever secrets she may have will be secrets for ever! Whatever crimes she may have committed she will be able to commit no more. If you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations.' (Braddon 373)

This previous excerpt, which echoes burying the individual alive, bears a close resemblance with Bulwer-Lytton's portrayal of Lucretia's incarceration in a lunatic asylum at the end of the novel:

> The place of her confinement thus continued a secret locked in his own breast. Egotist to the last, she was henceforth dead to him, - why not to the world? Thus the partner of her crimes had cut off her sole resource, in the compassion of her unconscious kindred; thus the gates of the living world were shut to her evermore. (Bulwer-Lytton 423)

As is the case with Lucy Audley, Lucretia ends her days in an asylum as a result of her crimes. Nonetheless, if Lucy's madness seems to be feigned in order to avoid moral judgement, Lucretia's more real and tragic insanity arises as a result of having killed her own son.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Despite its undeniable importance as a seminal text portraying female madness in popular Victorian narratives, Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* still remains a lesser-known Victorian novel of sensation, even though it preceded Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and both Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon acknowledged their debt to Bulwer-Lytton, as a friend and a mentor, respectively. The exploration of female madness as portrayed in all these novels taking Bulwer-Lytton's seminal text as a focus of attention may shed some new light on canonical portraits of Victorian female insanity.

These four Victorian portrayals of female madness display differences, but also share outstanding similarities. Bertha Mason is enclosed in the attic of Thornfield Hall as a latent presence in the house, whereas Lucretia, Lucy Audley and Laura Fairlie - the latter mistaken for Ann Catherick - are incarcerated in a lunatic asylum as a result of their wicked deeds. *Jane Eyre* has often been highlighted as the forerunner of sensational fiction, mingling domestic fiction and gothic romance. *The Woman in White* is considered to be the first sensational novel, whereas *Lady Audley's Secret* consolidated the genre. Above all, Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia*, the first of them all to be published, sheds its shadow over the rest significantly, as well as unveils a real domestic event which gained public attention in Victorian society at the time: the case of Rosina Bulwer-Lytton's actual commitment in a mental institution.

Furthermore, apart from the blatant intertextual links that can be established among these four narratives, especially with regard to the discourse of female madness, and the actual connections in real life among writers such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, there are other issues that underline differences as well as parallelisms among these four novels, as is the case with the genre to which they belonged, the importance they attach to the figure of the double, the centrality given to the heroine in each of these narratives, the discourse they address, as well as the reasons why the respective heroines are termed insane, mainly owing to sexuality and gender subversion. As far as genre is concerned, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has often been considered as belonging to

domestic fiction, whereas the rest of these novels have been traditionally regarded as sensational fiction, given the importance this genre acquired during the decades of the 1850s and the 1860s. Moreover, all four novels display concern about the literary figure of the *doppelganger*, since Jane and Laura are conceived as victims, female angels of the house, who suffer the existence of their double mad counterparts, Bertha and Ann, respectively. Bertha Mason stands as the Creole female who inherited madness from her own mother and separates Rochester from Jane, whereas Ann Catherick knows Percival's secret, that he was born out of wedlock, and her Ophelia-like madness renders her Laura's alter ego as well as Sir Percival Glyde's scapegoat. Likewise, in Bulwer-Lytton's novel, the heroine Lucretia and her half-sister, Susan, become clear antagonists and counterparts, as is also the case with Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which the heroine Lucy Graham hides her real identity as Helen Talboys. The centrality given to these demented women also differs in each of these novels as, in both *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*, the madwomen play a minor role, whereas the actual heroines are Jane and Laura. In contrast, Lucretia and Lady Audley become actual demonised heroines and acquire central protagonism; likewise, their centrality allows the reader to gain insight into their motivations as female characters, thus rendering them more human, even if they are inevitably vanished from stage at the end.

These sensational novels also underscore a domestic as well as a protofeminist discourse, even if Lucretia and Lady Audley seem to respond more faithfully to feminist demands as enraged heroines. Actually, it is worth noticing that, even if incarcerated, both Lucretia and Lady Audley die a peaceful death in the asylum, whereas Bertha and ultimately Ann die in strange circumstances, thus falling prey to the respective heroes' purposes. Rochester becomes free to marry Jane, whereas Sir Percival and Count Fosco take advantage of Ann Catherick's death to exchange her for Laura Glyde. Ultimately, despite Lucy's failed attempt, it is only Lucretia of these four heroines who really commits a murder, thus arising as an actual murderess, even if it is implied that her actions respond to her upbringing and social circumstances.

Finally, in relation to the cause of these heroines' madness, Bertha Mason is the descendant of a lineage of demented women, traditionally linked to the sensuousness pertaining to the Creole female identity. Ann Catherick knows a secret which compromises social standards. Lucretia is too masculine, too intelligent, and holds too much power in her own hands. Lady Audley has committed the sin of starting a life of her own in spite of the fact her husband is still living. Because of the fact that they defied Victorian standards, all these heroines were considered deviants, and therefore, became social outcasts according to Victorian conventions, as they exemplified the threat of being incarcerated as a result of defying their husbands' authority. All things considered, the significant relations established among these four novels, as well as the numerous points in common they present, turn them into paradigms of sensation and of that cultural portrayal of female madness which gained particular acclaim and popularity in Victorian times.

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