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Psychiatrists in 19th-century fiction

Lady Audley's Secret (1862), Mary Elizabeth Braddon

Fiona Subotsky

Lady Audley's Secret was an early and highly successful 'sensation' novel, which brought fame and fortune to its author, Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1837–1915). The opening is traditional: we are approaching the ancient seat of Audley Court, with its stained glass, pointed gables, trailing ivy, and a neglected, tangled shrubbery. We are not with the governess, however – she is already inside, a young, charming and delicate creature with blonde ringlets, who has married the master of the house, Sir Michael Audley. She accepted his suit while acknowledging to him that she could not 'be blind to the advantages of such an alliance'.

It eventually emerges, through the detective-like investigations of the nephew, Robert Audley, that Lady Audley had previously been married to his friend George Talbot. The latter returned from Australia to trace his wife, but then disappeared, having been pushed down a well, we learn, by Lady Audley, who then set fire to the inn in order to destroy other people who may know too much. Robert confronts Lady Audley, whose response is to announce that she is 'A MADWOMAN', and who confesses all, including that her mother had died in an asylum.

Robert telegraphs a friend, requesting the name of a physician 'experienced in cases of mania, and to be trusted with a secret'. A Dr Alwyn Mosgrave of Savile Row swiftly attends. He has a 'strangely expressionless, and yet strangely attentive countenance', having spent 'the greater part of his life listening to other people'. He doubts that the lady is mad as her actions seem to be entirely rationally self-interested. However, having heard that murder is suspected, he agrees to see her. Subsequently, he reports that although Lady Audley is not mad, she has 'latent insanity' (a diagnosis frequently favoured as a homicide defence) and 'hereditary taint', but more importantly, 'she is dangerous'.

Dr Mosgrave recommends a '*maison de santé*' in the suitably named Villebrumeuse in Belgium, which will provide security with no scandal. There Lady Audley is taken, clutching her sables, to a gloomy mansion, declaring she has been 'brought to a living grave'. She dies not long after, but her first husband George is found alive and well.

Lady Audley's secret, and the crime underlining her evilness, is the bigamy of her second marriage. Current-day feminists have difficulties with this, and Mary Braddon's own position was ambiguous, living as she did with a man whose wife was in a lunatic asylum. Dr Mosgrave is portrayed as a suave society doctor, but one with a professional conscience, who, although not accepting Lady Audley's self-declaration of madness, judges that her removal will be of benefit to all.

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