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"I shall leave the house, and publish the reason": Victorian Women Speaking Publicly About the Private

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

“I SHALL LEAVE THE HOUSE, AND PUBLISH THE REASON’: VICTORIAN WOMEN
SPEAKING PUBLICLY ABOUT THE PRIVATE”

submitted by

VIANNA IORIO, CLASS OF 2019

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the 19th century, women's agency, self-assertion, and civil liberties were inextricably linked to their relation to the realm of the public. In his famous 1865 essay "Of Queens' Gardens," John Ruskin outlines how the private sphere of the home (and the domain of women) was to function as a moral corrective to the capitalist, industrial public world men entered each day to go to work. Ruskin positions the private and the public as opposite, counterbalanced forces, complementary to each other as he also argues men and women should be complementary. This binary was powerfully connected with society's conceptions of men and women, work and home, internal and external, speech and silence, and society and the individual. However, my thesis will investigate the ways in which Charlotte Brontë, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Sarah Grand subverted contemporary conceptions of public and private, and engaged with one another on the subject; rewriting and renegotiating each other's texts to increasingly situate women's private experience within the realm of public concern.

For Ruskin and others Victorian thinkers, "public" and "private" were not only used to denote physical space, but sets of ideas embodied by these spaces. This ideology of "separate spheres" was the dominant framework in which Victorians understood men's and women's relations in society, and it is therefore worthwhile to understand its general principles before exploring the ways in which it was undermined by women novelists over the century. In the world of the public: "The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial: — to him, therefore, the failure, the offense, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued, often misled, and always hardened" (Ruskin 1615). Conversely, the home, "ruled" by woman, is

the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. (Ruskin 1615)

The home then, must be entirely cut off from the influences of the “outer world” in order to maintain its position as the moral center of Victorian life. And it was women who were responsible for enforcing this boundary, and keeping the sanctity of the home free from the “anxieties of outer life” that men were subject to drag in door.

Importantly, the private and the public were also aligned with the boundary between the concerns of the individual and the forces of society. This delineation firmly positioned women’s experience with that of the individual and the personal- women’s duty was to the moral well being of her husband and family. Sarah Stickney Ellis, a prominent Victorian writer of essays and women’s conduct manuals, positions the ideal woman outside the “many voices” of the “mart, the exchange, [and] the public assembly” which speak to men’s “inborn selfishness or worldly pride;” in order to maintain the purity of her moral correctness, the significance of a woman’s experience remains within the home, and not in conversation with the public, political, or systemic (1611). Women’s exclusion from public conversation consequently positions women’s concerns, sufferings, discontent, and other issues as the result of individual failing, rather than the result of systemic inequality and oppression.

Yet even as Ruskin and Ellis insist upon the firm boundary line between public and private, they simultaneously acknowledge that this separation is permeable. It seems that even

amongst the most ardent and well known advocates for separate sphere ideology, the public and private were difficult to keep entirely divided. On the one hand, this permeability was dangerous to social order- as Ruskin writes above, once the outer world is permitted to “cross the threshold” into the domestic, the home “ceases to be a home.” However, it is significant that Ruskin advocates for the values and duties of women in the private to be expanded into the public realm:

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless. (1615)

Here, Ruskin assures his readers that a “true wife” will take the home with her wherever she may go; even if she *were* to enter public spaces she would never be without the domestic. Similarly, Ellis argues that women’s domestic influence takes on public significance to the maintenance of the entire British empire. She emphasizes “the sphere of their direct personal influence is central, and consequently small; but its extreme operations are as widely extended as the range of human feelings” (Ellis 1611). Because of woman’s moral guidance in the private, domestic sphere, her “adventurous sons” can travel to “every point of danger on the habitable globe” with “a generosity, a disinterestedness, and a moral courage” (Ellis 1612). For both Ellis and Ruskin, women’s influence, while limited to the home, had the potential for critical impact on the public sphere through their profound influence on the morality of men. In this way, middle class women could function as the moral backbone of Victorian society without necessarily leaving their homes.

My thesis will argue that over the century women novelists subverted the limits of conventional public/private discourse, and gave increasingly public weight to women's private experience. In *Jane Eyre*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, and *The Beth Book*, women use speech to move their experience from the internal to external, from private to public, and from individual to systemic. Jane, Lady Audley, and Beth insist again and again that the personal is political many decades before second wave feminists made the concept a common rallying cry. My thesis will explore the ways in which these heroines brought the public into their own homes, to a greater extent than they were ever able to enter and infiltrate public spaces themselves. I am particularly interested in the ways in which Braddon and Grand rewrite the space of the madwoman established by Bronte in *Jane Eyre*, to grant female deviancy and suffering a progressively more public voice.

Agency, repression, and madness in Victorian fiction, and particularly in *Jane Eyre*, have already been areas of extensive scholarly commentary. In their foundational analysis within *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar position Bertha as a double for Jane, and argue that in her madness Bertha is able to act out much of the anger and discontentment Jane represses. My thesis builds on Gilbert and Gubar's premise of the split self in *Jane Eyre*, and examines how the internal self (embodied through Bertha) and the external self (embodied through Jane) are 1) refracted and reconciled 2) connected with the discourse of the public and private through Braddon and Grand's texts. As Jane and Bertha are reconciled over the century first somewhat unsuccessfully through Lady Audley, and later seemingly more successfully through Beth, female agency manifested in Victorian literature becomes less vilified, and more socially acceptable. This is possible because Braddon and Grand's texts increasingly position women's agency and suffering within public discourse.

In my first chapter I will explore the ways in which *Lady Audley's Secret* rewrites *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason. Few critics have read *Lady Audley's Secret* in the context of *Jane Eyre*, and those that have have positioned *Lady Audley* as antithetical rather than a progressive reimagining. In "Disclosure as 'Cover-up': The Disclosure of Madness in 'Lady Audley's Secret,'" Jill Matus argues that Braddon uses madness as a means to "displace the economic and class issues already raised in the novel and to deflect their uncomfortable implications" (334). According to Matus, Lady Audley's madness softens Braddon's criticism of social inequity: "while madness receives most attention as the sensational secret, social position and poverty are really the issues at stake" (336). In her analysis, Matus examines Bertha Mason in order to "illustrate the virtual synonymity or substitutability of moral and hereditary madness in the representation of female insanity," however, she concludes Bertha is the "antithesis" of Lady Audley (340). Matus reasons Lady Audley's "moral insanity," without any "remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect, or "delusions or hallucinations," is the opposite of Brontë's "stereotype of the brutish and demonic lunatic" (340). However, this reading ignores much of the complexity of both Lady Audley and Bertha's representations and I would argue Braddon quite deliberately places Lady Audley in a history of literary madwomen in order to reclaim and negotiate some of Bertha's lost humanity.

Through Lady Audley, Braddon repositions the confinement and suffering Bertha Mason experiences from realm of the private to the realm of the public; and shifts the blame of her deviancy from her as an individual to systemic, social issues of class and gender inequity. When Lady Audley dramatically reveals to Robert that he has "conquered- A MADWOMAN!" she purposefully places herself within a tradition of female suffering that ties her to perhaps the era's most famous literary madwoman, Bertha Mason. At this critical point in the novel, Lady Audley

lacks the language necessary to express the systemic causes of her suffering, to voice her desperate desire for a life above poverty and oppression. Instead, Lady Audley places her personal suffering and hardship into the realm of the public discourse with the only diagnosis available for women unwilling to submit to the crushing repression required for social acceptability.

My second chapter will explore the ways in which Grand's *The Beth Book* rewrites *Jane Eyre* through the lens of what has been already done by *Lady Audley's Secret*. While critics of the New Woman often group *The Beth Book* with the beginnings of modernism, few have analyzed the ways in which Grand's New Woman novel interacts with earlier, mid century Victorian literature, and particularly its many parallels with *Jane Eyre*. Narratively, *The Beth Book* and *Jane Eyre* are incredibly similar; they are both bildungsromans, and follow their heroines from childhood to marriage in young adulthood. Beth and Jane also share fierce commitment to their own autonomy, coupled with deliberate and disciplined contemplations of their morality. In "Feminist 'Cant' and Narrative Selflessness in Sarah Grand's New Woman Trilogy," Lauren Simek argues that Grand's novels build on existing Victorian beliefs of women's, "intuitive, private, and often unvoiced conception of virtue," with a second component of public expression (338). She emphasizes that to counter an "ideal of passive virtue," Grand argues women should actively shape their "moral character through the public articulation of moral belief" (342). Beth is able to know where she stands on women's issues because she not only develops these opinions in herself, but also voices them to her community.

However, as Angeliqe Richardson points out in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, Grand's representation of Beth's sense of virtue is closely tied to "social purity ideology," which advocated fairly conservative views on the preservation of marriage and the family (25). Nearly

all New Women authors, and particularly Grand, were gender essentialists, meaning they attributed differences between men and women as innate and biologically determined. Showalter sees this essentialism, the belief that “the ideal of true womanhood” would empower women to social action, as an extension of Ruskin’s theory of woman’s influence within the home. Showalter maintains that New Women “merely transposed [this thinking] into an activist key” and “added what they had learned about campaign organization, legal strategy, publicity, self assertive careerism, charisma, and political confrontation” to conventional thinking on the feminine ideal (184). My thesis will argue that it is this relationship of ideas which grounds *The Beth Book* so solidly with earlier Victorian texts. Similarly, Ann Heilmann concludes that for Grand it was the lack of intellectual and professional opportunities, compounded by forms of personal oppression, which impairs women’s physical and mental health, rather than the repression of their sexual desires” (30). On the whole, New Women “demanded self-control for men, rather than license for themselves“ (Showalter 184-5). While *The Beth Book* seems to be progressive in its advocacy for women’s voices in the public sphere, Grand also advocates, perhaps even more forcefully, for much of the repression and self-denial Bronte has Jane struggle with so fiercely.

CHAPTER 1

Out of the Attic: *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Jane Eyre*

Sensation fiction, like New Woman fiction, received little serious critical attention before the 1970s. Around this time feminist scholars like Elaine Showalter and others began the work of recovering these texts from obscurity and giving sensation fiction, and especially that by women, a more serious concerted look. While many critics have recognized the space for sympathy Braddon creates in *Lady Audley's Secret* for her heroine/villain, few have explored the ways in which she shines a light on what remained, for many of Braddon's readers a hidden experience: the sufferings of lower-middle-class and working-class women. Still fewer critics have examined the ways in which Braddon's focus on these sufferings, and their manifestation in Lady Audley's madness, draw on and complicate a literary tradition of Victorian madwomen. Braddon positions the plight of lower class women as a driving cause of madness and implies it is lack of opportunity- rather than any biological or evolutionary defect- that derails otherwise clever and resourceful women like Lady Audley into criminality and ultimately madhouses. Exploiting the melodramatic conventions of the sensation genre, Braddon explores the ways in which a woman with Jane Eyre's sense of agency and Bertha Mason's deviancy could not only exist, but function and even thrive in 1860s England. Showalter argues that "the brilliance of *Lady Audley's Secret* is that Braddon makes her would-be murderess the fragile blond angel of domestic realism: not Bertha Mason, but Rosamond Oliver; not Maggie Tulliver, but Lucy Deane; not Marion

Halcombe, but Laurie Fairlie“ (165).¹ However, what is surely most compelling about *Lady Audley's Secret* is that Braddon's heroine is *both* fallen woman and “blond angel,” madwoman and well-mannered wife. The novel struggles with the complexities of what it would look like for Bertha to be free of the attic, to be given a voice, and to have her experiences both given room in the narrative for sympathy and contextualized within the realities of gender and class oppression. Braddon moreover develops a complex narrative perspective in *Lady Audley's Secret* that allows her to maneuver us between criticism of and sympathy for a suffering, traumatized woman.

Over the course of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Braddon positions women's private experience within the realm of public concern through three key tactics. First, Braddon connects Lady Audley's private, individual suffering to systemic forces of gender and class oppression. We, as readers, are encouraged to have sympathy for Lady Audley because Braddon indicates that the conditions that produce her criminality are those experienced by many working class women with limited opportunities available to them. Braddon achieves this effect of making the personal political mostly through Robert Audley's gradual excavation of Lady Audley's past identity as Helen Maldon/Talboys. Second, Braddon links these social conditions with Lady Audley's madness, and complicates her own text's explicit assertion that Lady Audley's insanity is strictly the result of an individual, genetic defect inherited from her mother: that is, the text *shows* us that her broken mental state stems substantially from her trauma long before it *tells* us that her madness has been inherited. Third, because of the way Braddon situates Lady Audley's madness within the context of her social situation, Lady Audley's declaration of madness takes on new significance: not only as a convenient, melodramatic plot point, but as way in which she speaks her personal dissatisfaction with the circumstances of her life into the public discourse of

¹ While Showalter does mention *Jane Eyre* and *Lady Audley's Secret* together in passing here, she does not examine in depth the relationship of the two texts as this chapter does.

madness. Here, she is positioned within a lineage of madwomen, and most notably Bertha Mason. Within this lineage, Lady Audley's suffering and subsequent madness rewrite Bertha to grant her a depth and humanity that she had been previously denied.

In her 1980 book *The Maniac in the Cellar*, Winifred Hughes notes that Braddon and contemporary sensation author Mrs. Henry Wood “demand sympathy for their fallen heroines, their bigamists or adulteresses, by making them suffer tremendously at the hands of fate and their own remorse” (108). Other critics, such as Elaine Showalter and Anthea Trodd, have focused on the way *Lady Audley's Secret* challenges family and gender politics, but do not fully examine the workings of class within the novel. As summarized by Lyn Pykett, both Showalter and Trodd emphasize “the sensation novel's characteristic preoccupation with domestic crimes is the focus of a range of anxieties about the nature and structure of the family and the problematic relationship of this private (feminine) sphere with the public (masculine) domain” (84). In *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Showalter argues that renunciation of the family and its restrictions on the lives of women was both a key feature of the sensation novel and at the core of Lady Audley's “secret.” She comments:

For the Victorian woman, secrecy was simply a way of life. The sensationalists made crime and violence domestic, modern, and suburban; but their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secrets of women's dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. (158)

Subsequent scholars, such as Pykett, Jill Matus and Susan Bernstein have begun to examine the ways in which Braddon critiques systems of class and gender, particularly as they relate to Lady Audley's madness. Like Showalter, Pykett argues that “the sensation novel habitually focuses on the secrets and the secret histories of women,” which certainly holds true for *Lady Audley*.

Pykett identifies the “key secret” of the novel as the nature of Lady Audley’s madness, asking: “is she mad, or is she simply clever and/or wicked?” (88). While the question of Lady Audley’s madness is certainly key to the text, I would argue the real secret of Lady Audley’s history is the poverty, desperation, and suffering that surrounds her madness and her criminality. Matus correctly asserts that “while madness receives most attention as the sensational secret, social position and poverty are really the issues at stake” (338). It is the public dimension of Lady Audley’s private experience that Braddon identifies as the real central tension of the novel. And yet, throughout the existing criticism on *Lady Audley’s Secret* little is said about how Braddon’s social critique is developed through the complex narrative strategy of relying so heavily on the perspective of Robert- a character of severely limited insights. It is by the means of these lacunae, or narrative gaps, that our understanding of Lady Audley’s life is shifted, from one of private, individual failings, to one of structural oppression.

Moving the Private to the Public: Glimpses of the Systemic in Lady Audley’s Past

Much of *Lady Audley’s* third person narration is focalized within the consciousness of Robert Audley, Lady Audley’s nephew by her marriage to Michael Audley and friend to George Talboys, Lady Audley’s first husband. He begins the novel as a lazy but unassuming barrister, wasting his days away smoking cigarettes and reading French novels. Over the course of the story, Robert evolves into Lady Audley’s chief antagonist, and loses his dandy-like trappings to embody a more proper Victorian masculinity as he works to expose the secrets of Lady Audley’s life.² The text makes room for the public and the systemic within Lady Audley’s life story quite subtly, and the implications of her suffering often lies just at the margins of the text, in what the

² For further examination of the construction and development of Robert Audley’s masculinity, see Rachel Heinrich’s “Critical Masculinities in *Lady Audley’s Secret*”

audience sees but Robert does not. Virginia Morris argues that “Braddon's most serious limitation in depicting Lucy Audley as a criminal is that her perspective is not consistent,” meaning that the narrator vacillates seemingly without reason between sympathy and antagonism (98). Similarly, Lyn Pykett argues that the “constant shift in point of view keeps the heroine elusive and readers’ view of her in flux” (102). Yet, upon close reading it seems that this narrative complexity actually works consistently throughout the novel to draw attention to what is missing from Robert’s judgements and to emphasize the cruelty that results from his lack of compassion for Lady Audley’s social circumstances.

In each step of Robert’s quest to uncover the “secrets” of Lady Audley’s life, and his friend’s disappearance, the young lawyer encounters evidence of Lady Audley’s poverty, desperation, and limited opportunities. In each instance he chooses to ignore this evidence to focus on the private and the individual circumstances that would explain Lady Audley’s criminality without granting her empathy. Shortly after George Talboys’ disappearance, Robert Audley visits the Maldon home in search of information. There he encounters Lady Audley’s son, whom at the time he only knows as belonging to George. The son (also named George Talboys), provides the audience with a glimpse of Lady Audley alternative to the criminal Robert hopes to expose; a woman who has experienced great suffering, and whose experience is indicative of larger societal issues of class and gender. The boy explains: “She [Lady Audley] came when I was not nearly so big as I am now- and she came at night- after I’d gone to bed, and she came up into my room, and sat upon the bed, and cried- and she left the watch under my pillow, and she-” (Braddon 132). He is then cut off, and the audience never gets to see the rest of Lady Audley’s visit with her son or know what she said or thought during the visit. This is, in

other words, a moment where Braddon's fractured narrative form works to imply the existence of a Lady Audley that Robert never gets, nor cares, to know.

In short, this is one of the first instances within the novel where Braddon hints that Robert's role as a detective, and his determination to get to the bottom of George's disappearance, does not allow him to empathize with Lady Audley's sufferings or to contextualize that suffering in terms of her social circumstances. As Jill Matus explains: "at times the narrator seems to favour Robert Audley and appears to look upon his final marriage and assumption of career with approval, but the narrative tone also encourages us to see him as misogynistic and self-righteous" (336). This narrative tone is important, and it allows for Braddon to critique Robert's judgements while still working within the genre conventions that cast Robert as hero and Lady Audley as villain. What the audience can infer, but goes unsaid in this passage, is the sheer degree of sacrifice that Lady Audley has had to undergo to raise herself out of poverty; Robert can ignore the heartbreaking image of her crying at her son's bedside in the dead of night, but the text makes space for the scene and thereby implies that the reader should pay attention. The text begs us to ask what Robert refuses to: What kind of desperation must Lady Audley have experienced to make this unbearable arrangement better than what she had before? What kind of circumstances could have driven a woman to such a situation?

Moments such as the one above occur again and again throughout the novel, with the cumulative effect of suggesting a counter narrative to the one of Lady Audley's remorseless criminality that Robert creates. Bit by bit, Braddon shows us that Lady Audley has not simply been born wicked, but she has been made so by a lifetime of poverty and oppression. We are shown the poverty Lady Audley was raised in when Robert goes to visit her father, Mr. Maldon,

and son in Brigsome's Terrace. The absolutely overwhelming dismalness with which the narrator describes Brigsome's Terrace and its origins is worth quoting at length here:

“Mr Maldon had established his slovenly household gods in one of those dreary thoroughfares which speculative builders love to raise upon some miserable fragment of waste ground hanging to the skirts of a prosperous town. Brigsome's Terrace was perhaps one of the most dismal blocks of buildings that was ever composed of brick and mortar since the first mason plied his trowel and the first architect drew his plan. The builder who had speculated in the ten dreary eight-roomed prison-houses had hung himself behind the parlour door of an adjacent tavern while the carcasses were yet unfinished.”

(Braddon 128-9)

The sheer poverty and desolation of Brigsome's Terrace nearly overflows from every sentence of the narrator's description- a poverty so demoralizing it seems to be inextricably linked with images of death and decay. Brigsome's Terrace seems to both urge death, in the hanging of the builder (later in the passage the architect also kills himself) and embody death in its very essence; the homes are “carcasses” and later “brick and mortar skeletons,” located on a street haunted by “ghostly furniture vans” visiting insolvent tenants (Braddon 129). This passage also implies that this poverty is virtually inescapable, the residents of Brigsome's Terrace inhabiting literal “prison-houses” of squalor and decay. It seems clear why Lady Audley would be desperate to escape such a home, but Robert's disgust never translates into empathy for her or even approaches consideration for what it might be like to live under such demoralizing circumstances.

Robert's lack of empathy at so many key points of the text draws to the reader's attention that something is *missing*, that Robert's focus on the private dimension of Lady Audley's life is

not enough, that his determination to lay blame on her individual failings is somehow lacking. This inadequacy can be seen most clearly as the novel progresses, and particularly when Robert questions the owner of the cottages in Wildernsea (where Lady Audley used to live as Helen Talboys) about Lady Audley's sudden departure:

Yes, she left rather abruptly, poor little woman! She tried to support herself after her husband's desertion by giving music lessons; she was a very brilliant pianist, and succeeded pretty well, I believe. But I suppose her father took her money from her, and spent it in public houses. However that might be, they had a very serious misunderstanding one night; and the next morning Mrs. Talboys left Wildernsea, leaving her little boy, who was out at the nurse in the neighborhood. (Braddon 197)

It is significant that the story Robert learns of Lady Audley's situation after her husband has left her stresses the systemic forces of class and gender. George Talboys' disappearance is framed as "desertion," as opposed to George's more benign (and hard to fathom) excuse, that he's left her to seek financial security mining gold in Australia. The text draws attention to the hypocrisy of applauding George's attempt at social mobility through leaving his family to mine gold, while simultaneously condemning Lady Audley's analogous efforts: leaving her financially exploitative father to work in the limited jobs available to women to support themselves, and then later securing a financially advantageous marriage. Importantly, the description of George's departure from his wife as a "desertion" signals to the reader that there is a different way to understand Lady Audley's life, one that lies just on the edge of the text. By emphasizing Lady Audley's abandonment by her husband, exploitation by her father, and inability to support herself in any way more substantial than by giving piano lessons, Braddon shifts the blame for Lady Audley's criminality from individual to collective failings, from an issue of private intrigue

to public concern. Typically, Robert ignores all of these implications and instead replies bluntly: “But you cannot tell me the date of her departure” (Braddon 197). This desire for facts and knowledge, for getting to the bottom of a mystery, renders Robert unable to acknowledge Lady Audley’s suffering or to understand the complex calculus that influenced her life decisions. Indeed, by failing to consider systemic forces of oppression in his understanding of Lady Audley, Robert also comes to embody those forces, and perpetuates an exclusionary, patriarchal way of knowing.

In the instances discussed above, other, minor characters, provide insight into Lady Audley’s past of poverty and desperation. There are very few moments in the novel where Lady Audley is given the space to speak directly about her own past and suffering, but these moments *do* exist- in her letters, for example. Thus, on the page following Robert’s interaction with the cottage owner, Braddon inserts Lady Audley’s own words, which, while brief, connect her discontent with her social circumstances and with her madness (not yet discovered by Robert or the audience). In a letter to her father produced by the Wildernsea cottage owner, Lady Audley writes:

I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dissevered 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. (Braddon 198)

Because Braddon has already situated Lady Audley’s past within the public and the systemic in the preceding passage, the dissatisfaction with her life that she expresses here takes on new significance. Her “hateful past” demands not only sympathy for Lady Audley as an individual

woman who has had a difficult life, but also a level of awareness of the mechanisms that created her poverty in the first place. It is these engrained forces that have made her “fretful, capricious, [and] changeable,” that have created the “secret” of her life.

Indeed, over the course of the novel, Braddon ultimately makes the case for madness not as a issue of biology and genetics, but rather a way in which Lady Audley moves her suffering and her discontent from the internal to the external, from the domestic to the agora. And once again, the public weight of Lady Audley’s experience, and the empathy for her it creates, is only emphasized by Robert’s complete indifference to it. He only asks himself “what was the meaning of those last *two sentences*,” quite explicitly ignoring the unhappiness with her life, to which Lady Audley has given voice in the remainder of the letter. In a key passage, Robert contemplates life and happiness while riding in a cab through London. He thinks: “what a pleasant thing life is... what an unspeakable boon- what an overpowering blessing,” and goes on to ruminate about marriage and his relationship with George’s sister, Clara Talboys (Braddon 162). Robert understands the conditions of his life as determined by chance, deciding that happiness is “essentially accidental” (Braddon 162). Of course, what is likely to happen by “chance” is entirely different for a wealthy, educated, unmarried man like Robert, than for a working class woman like Lady Audley, deserted by her husband and exploited by her father, and with limited access to any educational or occupational opportunities.

What follows a paragraph later, however, challenges this notion of chance as a determining force in people’s lives. The narrative shift to a voice clearly outside of Robert’s consciousness happens so quickly that it may be hardly perceptible to the reader at first. As soon as Robert steps out of his cab into “all the dreary mechanisms of life,” the text suddenly launches into an impassioned tirade against those mechanisms (163). Braddon proclaims: “We are apt to

be angry with this cruel hardness in our life- this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanisms of the human machine” (163). Here, it is clear that the narrator is no longer within Robert’s consciousness or even aligned with his set of concerns. Instead, the “we” of this sentence seems pointedly to exclude Robert; after all, the reader has just seen less than a page earlier that Robert is anything but “angry with this cruel hardness in our life”; overall, Robert sees his life as an “overpowering blessing” (Braddon 162). Rather it seems the narrator here is referring to a “we” that includes Lady Audley, and women who are as dissatisfied with their social dispensation as she is. This makes sense considering Braddon’s target audience of middle to lower-middle class women who would have read her novels serially published in magazines- Braddon herself explained that she wrote for “the Circulating Library, and the young lady readers who are its chief supporters” (Showalter 159).³ As opposed to Robert’s focus on the “accidental,” this passage stresses the “cruel hardness” of the “mechanisms of the human machine” that Braddon’s audience of women would have been all too familiar with. If read not just as a general polemic, but as applied to Lady Audley’s life, the lines help to justify both her anger and the steps she has taken to free herself from the “unflinching regularity” of her past life.

The connection between Lady Audley’s social circumstances and her madness is made increasingly explicit throughout the novel. In one of the most famous passages of the text, the narrator muses on the “narrow boundary line between reason and unreason” that could make one “mad today and sane tomorrow” (Braddon 163). Elsewhere, and in much the same vein, she asks: “Who has not felt, in the first madness of sorrow, an unreasoning rage against the mute propriety of chairs and tables, the stiff squareness of Turkey carpets, the unbending obstinacy of

³ See Jennifer Phegley’s “Henceforward I refuse to bow the knee to their narrow rule”: Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Belgravia Magazine*, women readers, and literary valuation” for further analysis of Braddon’s audience and her role in serial publishing.

the outward apparatus of existence?" (Braddon 163). Braddon is asking her largely female, largely middle and working class audience: Who has not felt what Lady Audley has felt? Who could blame her for simply acting on the dissatisfaction within each of us? Lady Audley's name, moreover, is left off the page. The "madness" that is central to the novel is that which is discussed here; a "madness of sorrow," a madness that comes as a result of social entrapment and which could therefore be the fate of many. The language of madness here is not that of individual deviance, but of systematically produced discontent.

The narrator, finally, represents the consequences of this "unreasoning rage" at one's life circumstances as inevitably violent. She explains:

We want to root up gigantic trees in a primeval forest, and to tear their huge branches asunder in our convulsive grasp; and the utmost that we can do for a relief of our passion is to knock over an easy-chair, or smash a few shillings' worth of Mr. Copeland's manufacture. (Braddon 163)

Showalter argues that female sensation novels "introduced a new kind of heroine, one who could put her hostility toward men into violent action" (160). However, it is clear that Lady Audley's violence and criminality are positioned as more than simply motivated by "hostility toward men"; it isn't just that Lady Audley dislikes her husband and decides to dispose of him. Rather, Braddon emphasizes that Lady Audley's deviancy is merely an extension of her understandable frantic frustration with the conditions of her life, a frustration that the reader is presumed to share. The narrator argues here that the potential (and the desire) for the ways Lady Audley breaks out of the restrictive drudgery of her life exists within all people subject to gender and class oppression. In this way, Lady Audley's suffering, and the madness that results from that suffering, is made an issue of the systemic and the public; the "we" of this passage, the middle

and working class readership of women in 1860's England, also rest "upon that narrow boundary line of reason and unreason" (Braddon 163).

"I am not like the women I have read of": Lady Audley and Bertha Mason

Recent criticism on Braddon has "figured prominently in attempts to rethink the relationships between popular and high culture and to redraw the map of the nineteenth-century novel" (Pykett 132). As Pykett argues, redrawing this literary map is important, as "those nineteenth century novels that have come to be regarded as canonical look different when read alongside their popular counterparts" (132). And *Lady Audley's Secret* can easily be considered the "popular counterpart" to *Jane Eyre*: both novels describe the plight of a young woman left poor and isolated, explore how such a woman might exercise agency within the constraints imposed by her class and gender, and consider the ways that female deviancy and suffering can be manifested through madness. We also know from Braddon's life writings that she had read and admired Charlotte Brontë. Some of her earliest attempts at novel writing during her teenage years were modeled off *Jane Eyre*, and in a letter described Brontë as "the only genius the weaker sex can point to in literature," her mind a "fiery force of genius that 'does what it must'" (qtd. in Showalter 154).

Despite these quite obvious connections, few critics have examined in depth the way *Lady Audley's Secret* rewrites and renegotiates *Jane Eyre*. Even those critics such as Showalter and Matus, who do discuss the two novels to some degree, do not evaluate *Lady Audley's Secret* as a deliberate and pointed revision of *Jane Eyre* as I do. Braddon emphasizes that Lady Audley's madness should be understood as part of a lineage of madwomen, the most prominent of whom is Bertha Mason.

First, it is important that Lady Audley *places herself* into a lineage of madwomen. Her proclamation of madness is an act of agency: she self-identifies as a “madwoman” long before she is diagnosed by Robert or by the male doctor he has brought in to evaluate her. Defining herself as mad is crucial, and in ways that have not been fully explored by literary critics.⁴ Generally, scholars tend to focus on Lady Audley’s madness as primarily a means by which she is marginalized by the men of the novel. Pykett has argued, for example, that Robert cannot “reconcile sane femininity with the criminally duplicitous behavior of which he intuitively knows Lady Audley to be guilty,” and therefore he must prove that she’s mad (94). While this is certainly true, Lady Audley’s self-identification as mad is just as important because it allows for her madness to function as a means of self-expression. In this way she is able to reclaim some control over the narrative of her life; to be a madwoman is not only to assert oneself as a woman who has suffered, but also as one who has suffered as many other women have suffered.

Furthermore, the text makes it clear that Lady Audley is fully aware of this lineage when she makes her diagnosis. Before she leaves to set fire to the inn where Robert is staying the night, she contemplates her own criminality, asking herself, “have I ever been really *wicked*, I wonder?” (Braddon 236). This meditation on wickedness, makes it possible for Lady Audley to identify with past fictional women. Meanwhile, for Victorian readers, Lady Audley is tacitly relating herself to the most famous literary madwoman, Bertha Mason. It is no coincidence that she contemplates the wicked women of Victorian fiction just as she is about to commit arson, Bertha Mason’s own most significant act of violence. Her identification with fictional madwomen also allows Lady Audley to imagine their suffering as it relates to her own. She reasons:

⁴ While Lynn Voskuil examines the nature of Lady Audley’s madness as performative, she emphasizes Lady Audley’s place within historical rather than literary understandings of Victorian madness.

My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime. I wonder whether they suffered- those women- whether they ever suffered as- (Braddon 236)

It seems at first, then, that Lady Audley rejects this literary lineage; she states that she is *not* like those other women terrorizing the novels she has read. However, she is only able to separate herself from these women through a convoluted and contradictory logic that affirms the public, systemic roots of her own crimes, but which denies her literary foremothers the same reading. Lady Audley can only withhold her identification from past wicked women, from women like Bertha Mason, because she does not see herself as innately evil. She does not plot her crimes because she is *criminal*, but rather because of “wild impulses” and desperation, and because she has been forced into corner after corner by forces beyond her control.

And it is here, in this very sentence, that the delineation between Lady Audley and the “women [she has] read of” begins to break down. Just as Lady Audley asserts her difference from her predecessors, she nevertheless falls into imagining their suffering: women who have “lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness” accurately describes both Bertha Mason and *herself*. The circumstances of their lives, their entrapment and confinement cannot be left out of Lady Audley’s imagining of their crimes. Quickly, she moves from separation to identification, and wonders whether in that “horrible dark and stillness” (of madhouses, of attics, of the margins of society), those women had suffered.

Importantly, at this point about two thirds of the way through the novel, Braddon has already well established the public, systemic dimension of this suffering; we know the kind of

suffering Lady Audley is imagining because we have seen it in her own past. However, once again, what is most important is left off the page, in this case at the end of Lady Audley's unfinished sentence. The reader must fill in what Lady Audley cannot say and must complete her question: "whether they ever suffered *as I have suffered?*" At this key moment in the text, Braddon asks what Brontë never directly gets at. How has Bertha suffered? In what ways could her criminality and her madness have been driven by this suffering? How could she have been failed by society, as Lady Audley has been failed?

Lady Audley's contemplation of her place within a lineage of "wicked" women is significant because it revises the genealogy within which Robert places her earlier in the novel. He theorizes that women are "at the bottom of all mischief" because they:

are never lazy. They don't know what it is to be quiet. They are Semiramides, and Cleopatras, and Joan of Arcs, Queen Elizabeths, and Catherine the Second's and they riot in battle, and murder, and clamour and desperation....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 anything they lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, anything they like- but let them be quiet- if they can. (Braddon 165)

This famous passage of *Lady Audley* functions on two important levels: first, it can be read as a clear expression (and indictment) of Robert's misogyny. Here Robert articulates the dominant discourse of his time and his list of women seems to only be concerned with their desire for power and potential for violence. He is not concerned with women who have been locked away in "the horrible dark and stillness," or "whether they have suffered." Rather, his list of women condemns those who have avoided that fate to achieve power and fame; their prestige is the

consequence of all the “battle, and murder, and clamour and desperation” present in Lady Audley, if only left unchecked by men, madhouses, or marriages. Alternately, this passage can also be read, as Showalter has argued, as a “thinly veiled feminist threat that women confined to the home and denied legitimate occupations will turn their frustrations against the family itself” (167-168). This argument is supported by Robert’s violent and explicit misogyny in the line immediately following this passage, when he proclaims “I hate women... they’re bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors” (Braddon 165). His outburst seems to indicate that we are hardly meant to take Robert’s judgment on women at face value; his vitriol reads almost like a parody of anti-feminist rhetoric.

Crucially, Robert’s thoughts on the situation of women may be linked directly to *Jane Eyre*, and offer, almost point-by-point, an answer to Jane’s famous monologue on women’s desire for freedom:

It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action, and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

This is one of the few occasions when Jane takes on the language of the public sphere, situating her personal feelings of restlessness and discontent within the larger context of women's opportunities in mid-century England. For Jane's demands of "freedom of opinion" and "variety of occupation" for women, Robert replies "let them have it," if only they can be "quiet." The language of silence and noise is important here; Jane observes that there are "millions in silent revolt against their lot" moved to absolute "rebellion" by their circumstances. In *Lady Audley*, Braddon created a heroine that could easily be one of these "millions of women" of Jane's imagination- except that her revolt is not a silent one. Braddon's women "don't know what it is to be quiet;" they scheme and lie and manipulate, but they also are able to speak their experience. *Lady Audley* has all of Jane's restlessness described here; she too has "suffer[ed] from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation," and desires a life beyond what her social circumstances have allotted her. Like Jane, her suffering has roots in the way she has been systematically failed by society and how she has become trapped by her limited opportunities. However, for *Lady Audley* to act on these impulses of rebellion involves crime and violence; it is her action that propels her into the role of the madwoman.

Lineages of female insanity exist both between *Lady Audley* and *Jane Eyre* and within each of the texts. Both Bertha Mason and *Lady Audley* inherit their madness from their mothers, keeping with conventional Victorian understanding of insanity as a largely matrilineal phenomenon- what Braddon terms a "hereditary taint" passed from mother to daughter (280, 281, 301). As Showalter outlines in *The Female Malady*, Victorians widely believed that "since the reproductive system was the source of mental illness in women, women were the prime carriers of madness, twice as likely to transmit it as were fathers" (67). For Braddon, this matrilineal, hereditary model of insanity lent itself well to the melodramatic conventions of

sensation fiction; a marriage to a woman with an unknown past had the potential for danger and scandal because not knowing a woman's family and class status could also mean not knowing their psychological stability.

In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester articulates this dominant discourse on women's biological predisposition to madness when he describes the history of his marriage to Bertha Mason. He describes her as the "true daughter of an infamous mother," locked away in a lunatic asylum before Rochester's arrival (Brontë 261). It is from her mother, Rochester insists, that Bertha inherited "the germs of insanity," "prematurely developed" by "excesses" both "intemperate and unchaste" (Brontë 261). For Rochester, and for most Victorians, female madness was caused by genetic predisposition manifested in excessive behaviors (often sexual, as in Bertha's case), rather than adaptive behaviors in response to trauma, as Braddon seems to position her heroine's madness for most of the novel.

It is surprising, then, that just as Lady Audley is given the opportunity to tell the story of her life, she articulates the same dominant narrative as Rochester, and claims her madness is inherited from her mother. It seems on one level that Braddon merely echoes the prevalent understanding of the transmission of madness for sensational effect, and undermines her condemnation of the environmental causes of Lady Audley's suffering that she sets forth in the preceding chapters. However, Lady Audley's declaration of her own inheritance functions differently than does Rochester's narrative of Bertha- Lady Audley appropriates the literary and cultural convention to construct a story of her life that connects her to the past, her own mother, and other literary madwomen. Lady Audley says what she knows is expected of her, but transforms what is framed to be an expression of her guilt and accompanying insanity, to a story of inherited suffering and desperate action.

She begins what many critics have termed her “confession” passage not by admitting to her crimes, but rather by speaking her own experience, her own hardship, and that of her mother. She declares: “I must tell you the story of my life; in order to tell you why I have become the miserable wretch who has no better hope than to be allowed to run away and hide in some desolate corner of the earth. I must tell you the story of my life” (Braddon 276). There is an urgency here for Lady Audley to narrate her own life for virtually the first time in the novel; it is a story she *must* tell. With her only and final opportunity to speak her own identity, Lady Audley endeavors to connect the circumstances of her life to the actions that have left her condemned to die alone, locked away in a distant asylum. However, Lady Audley begins her story not with her own madness, but with that of her mother. She begins: “When I was a very little child I remember asking a question which it was natural enough that I should ask, Gold help me! I asked where my mother was” (Braddon 276). To be the daughter of a madwoman is the cornerstone of Lady Audley’s identity; it is where she must begin to explain the course of her life. Where, in her initial declaration of insanity Lady Audley places herself in an intertextual lineage of madwomen, here it becomes clear that this lineage is also important on a smaller scale within the text.

Lady Audley’s emphasis of her matrilineal insanity functions crucially to express the multigenerational trauma that Braddon and other Victorian thinkers would have lacked the language to get at directly. For Braddon, madness as female inheritance at once solidifies connection between women, and their place in a female history, while also calling into question what exactly has been passed down: genetics or unfavorable, oppressive circumstances. One of the only other points in the text where Lady Audley hints at her mother’s madness comes near the start of the novel, right as Michael Audley proposes to her. She cries: “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” (Braddon 11). In her analysis of this passage, Matus emphasizes the division it sets up between Lady Audley (at this point known as Lucy Graham) and Michael Audley- she explains that “Lucy Audley's difference ('you' as opposed to 'we') is signalled here in terms of economics and social position” (8). While this is certainly true, the “we” here also ties Lady Audley to her mother just as much as it distances her from Michael Audley. It indicates a lineage of women who “endure,” whose hardships can never be guessed, and lie at the core of the “secret” of the novel. Madness goes unnamed in these lines; what stands in is the “poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations” her mother (and by extension Lady Audley) has suffered. As Lady Audley asserts her inheritance of madness at the end of the novel during her confession, it is with the implication it is inseparably linked to the poverty and its devastating side effects that she has inherited as well.

Furthermore, Lady Audley’s childhood imaginings of her mother, crazy and locked away in a madhouse, seem to have come from the pages of *Jane Eyre*. She recalls:

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 exaggerated ideas of the horror of the situation. 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 agony of terror, from a dream in which I had felt my mother’s icy grasp upon my throat, and heard her ravings in my ear. (Braddon 277)

These “exaggerated ideas of horror” can be easily traced back to Bertha, who “ran backwards and forward” her attic prison, as “distraught and violent” as Lady Audley imagines (Brontë 250). Lady Audley is well versed in what a madwoman *should* look like; it is the animalistic Bertha of her reading that haunts her imagination. A reader of *Jane Eyre* only glimpses Bertha as dehumanized and savage: “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” (Brontë 250). However, when Lady Audley actually goes to visit her mother what she instead finds is a “different degree of madness,” a version of insanity that resembles not Bertha Mason, but herself. Her mother was no “raving, strait-waistcoated maniac,” but rather a “golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us with yellow curls decorated with natural flowers” (277). To see her mother, a madwoman and yet almost identical to herself, allows Lady Audley to bridge the gap between women like herself and women like Bertha; she shares the beauty and the poverty of her mother, yet is condemned for the same tendency for violent action as Bertha. For Braddon, madness had the potential to be present, latent, within even the most ideal women; the madwoman is no longer as easy to spot as the savage, animal like woman of Bertha. As Bernstein argues, Braddon creates a thin line between madness and sanity, barely separating Lady Audley’s “hereditary taint” from her indignation over her predicament as a single, unsupported mother, and her irritation with the gratuitous sympathy of onlookers, all occasioned by her husband’s unaccountable disappearance” (92). Through rewriting Bertha in Lady Audley’s mother and Lady Audley herself as a beautiful, childlike, unassuming, woman, Braddon reinforces the troubling notion that madness could lie undetectable, in any woman, waiting to be brought out by hardships of poverty and lack of opportunity.

Moreover, Lady Audley shares all the repression, discontent, and desire for revolt that Jane describes, yet to stage that revolt in her own life leaves her confined as Bertha is confined. Lady Audley's embodiment of Jane's anger and her call to revolt, gives shape and depth to exactly the role Bertha plays as Jane's double in *Jane Eyre*. As famously argued by Sandra Gilbert, "every one of Bertha's appearances- or more accurately, her manifestations- has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane's part" (488). Perhaps the most notable example in the novel, Jane's impassioned speech above is cut off by Bertha's laughing; her "slow ha! ha!" and "eccentric murmurs" (Brontë 93). Gilbert argues that even Bertha's most extreme violence in the novel, burning down Thornfield, acts out "Jane's profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester's mastery and her own servitude" (488). Lady Audley does not repress her outrage and desire for protest as Jane does; she, like Bertha acts on these impulses with the same violence and desperation, and is similarly unable to survive to the end of the novel.

Reading Lady Audley with the precedent of Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre in mind allows us to understand the already-established discourse into which Lady Audley chooses to enter when she declares to Robert that he "has conquered- A MADWOMAN" (Braddon 274). Her madness here may be understood as a way in which she places herself in conversation with Bertha Mason; it is the manifestation of restlessness, anger, and rebellion against the way her world oppresses and constraints women. However, instead of assigning this anger and action to two distinct characters as Brontë did with Bertha and Jane, Braddon combines them within one woman. This lineage of madness gives Lady Audley the language to express not only her dissatisfaction with the circumstances of her life, but also the psychic costs of struggle: of poverty, of managing, of making do as a woman in a society that gives women few opportunities

as yet for independent class mobility. Moreover, Braddon's revision of Bertha Mason in *Lady Audley* retrospectively lends Bertha the humanity she had been stripped of. The space for sympathy that Braddon creates for Lady Audley, and the way in which her private experience is given the weight of the public, prompts the reader to wonder what kind of structural injustice Bertha may have suffered, resulting in her confinement in the attic of Thornfield.

Nevertheless, while Braddon is able to position Lady Audley's, and by extension Bertha's, madness within the realm of the public and systemic, she is unable to imagine a way for her heroine's deviancy to exist in the world in any sustainable way. While Jane is able, thanks to Bertha's death, to be symbolically free of her repressed inclination towards violence and revolt, Lady Audley is unable to rid herself of this deviancy; it can never be disassociated from her as it is for Jane. She ends up locked away by Robert in an insane asylum. When she arrives at the madhouse, she looks up to the window to see "a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backwards and forwards before the window" (Braddon 307). This language almost exactly mirrors the way that Brontë describes both Jane and Bertha. As Gilbert notes:

The imprisoned Bertha, running "backwards and forwards" on all fours in the attic, for instance, recalls not only Jane the governess, whose only relief from mental pain was to pace "backwards and forwards" in the third story, but also that "bad animal" who was ten-year-old Jane, imprisoned in the red room, howling and mad. (489)

Gilbert emphasizes, "Bertha not only acts *for* Jane, she also acts *like* Jane," and in her final home in the novel *Lady Audley* will act like Jane as well, perpetually pacing "backwards and forwards," in what could be read as a reincarnation of both Bertha's attic and Jane's red room

(489). Despite all her of scheming, plotting, and cleverness, Lady Audley's story concludes with the same constraints from which Jane and Bertha struggled so intensely to free themselves.

CHAPTER 2

Looking Back Through *The Beth Book*

Most of *Lady Audley Secret's* social critique happens indirectly, within either narrative gaps, where the audience is asked to pay attention to the suffering Robert Audley pointedly ignores, or in the coded language of madness, through which Lady Audley gives voice to her discontent with the circumstances of her life. Braddon creates space for an empathetic consideration of Lady Audley's experience through its lacunae, in which one is drawn to consider the public, collective dimensions of her suffering. However, interpretation of these lacunae is ultimately left up to the reader, who is given the agency to then fill in both sympathy for Lady Audley and condemnation of the structures that the text implies are primarily responsible for her criminality. However, by the time Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* is published in 1897, the language of protest prompted in Braddon's narrative gaps had moved from the margins to the center of discourse. Signs of women's increasing public power abounded in magazines and periodicals, in the meetings of a plethora of societies aimed at social reform, and throughout popular literature of the time by what Grand herself termed "New Women." Because of this turn of the century public discourse, Grand is able to give voice to the discontent produced by systemic gender inequity that Braddon leaves her readers to articulate in the privacy of their own homes. *The Beth Book* has access to the language needed to fill the spaces that *Lady Audley* opens up; Beth is able to speak the words Lady Audley leaves off the page.

Over the course of *The Beth Book*, a novel about a young girl's growth to adulthood and disastrous marriage, the duality Brontë establishes between Jane and Bertha is reconsidered and reconciled in the figure of the novel's protagonist, Beth.⁵ First, Grand rewrites much of what is most essential about Jane- her self discipline, moral strength, and insistence on self assertion- in a moment of feminist community that had become possible at the turn of the century. This community, and its public manifestations through both New Woman fiction and the newly established feminist press, lend Beth language and a sense of solidarity to assert herself within the home.

Second, Grand rewrites Bertha's space of the attic from one of confinement, to one of both creative and moral improvement for Beth. In *Jane Eyre* the attic functions as the realm of the madwoman, and is primarily where Jane's repressed resentment, desire, and potential for radical, violent agency become embodied in Bertha. In *The Beth Book*, Grand transforms the space of the madwoman's attic into what was newly imaginable for female art and activism at the end of the century. Importantly, Beth's attic makes possible her later feminist action not simply because of the reading and writing she does there, but because that reading and writing helps Beth clarify and articulate her moral consciousness. Because of the self-discipline Beth practices in her attic, she is able to both confront her husband within their home and advocate for women within her larger community. As argued by Marilyn Bonnell, Grand champions an "ethic of care"- a particularly feminine framework of social responsibility defined "in terms of degrees of connection to others, not in terms of separation from others," and that "took care of the world" by positioning literature as "an instrument of social concern" (124-5). In the novel, this "ethic of

⁵ This duality, first famously argued in Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, established Bertha's function as a double for Jane, acting out, often violently, the anger and violence Jane represses. Of course, Bertha's function as a double for Jane is a point of critical contention, taken up most famously by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism."

care” takes shape in Beth’s life most prominently through the the moral and creative discipline of the attic; it is here Beth comes to see her purpose in creating “art for man’s sake-” a stance Grand saw profoundly invested in immediate moral and political concerns, and in staunch opposition to the aesthetic mantra of “art for art’s sake” (Grand 558).

When placed in literary tradition, the space of the Beth’s attic sits interestingly, then, as a midway point between Bertha’s prison and the most important literary space for women of the following century: Woolf’s room of one’s own. On the one hand, Beth’s attic contains everything Woolf believed a woman artist could need: it is an exclusive, private space, away from the “common sitting-room;” where a woman could dedicate herself fully to artistic creation (2272). On the other hand, the space is still tinged with the transgressiveness of Bertha Mason, (even as Grand ultimately attempts to expel Bertha, and all the carnality and aggression she represents). In contrast to both Brontë’s attic of dangerous, repressed femininity, and Woolf’s room, of privacy, independence, and artistic possibility, Beth’s attic may seem surprising in its relative conservatism: it is in many ways a space absolutely saturated in strict Victorian moral righteousness and self-discipline- Beth reads voraciously, but “hurried over all the hateful words and passages in the Bible, Shakespeare, or any other book she might be reading” (Grand 321). However, the moral reflection and self-improvement that Beth carries out in her attic is absolutely foundational to Grand’s feminism.

Lastly, while Beth ends the novel, after the breakdown of her marriage, an activist and public orator for women’s issues, it is only as an act of self-sacrifice; the most extreme altruism demanded of true womanhood extended to justification for social action. Grand ultimately renounces Bertha in her final chapters, and arguably loses what is most subversive in *Jane Eyre*

(and built on by *Lady Audley*): the latent potential for female revolt in the wake of oppression, through madness, violence, or other means.

The Beth Book as Revision and Culmination of 19th Century Womanhood

Some critics regard the New Woman as a phenomenon particular to the 1890s, isolated in the tumult of sexual questioning brought about in the height of decadence and Oscar Wilde. Many scholars, particularly before the onset of second wave feminism, deemed New Women fiction as minor works, “low art” not meriting much critical attention. In *A Literature of Their Own*, originally published in 1977, Elaine Showalter argues that what began for the New Women as “a real concern for the future of womanhood” ultimately failed to do anything other than “show the bars of [their] cage” and “elevate their restricted view into sacred vision” (215). John Kucich summarizes: “The conventional view, formulated by, among others, Elaine Showalter..., is that New Woman novelists were too activist and polemical to be interested in aesthetics and that they grounded themselves in antiquated didactic realism” (243).

Others, largely as part of subsequent feminist attempts to reclaim the New Woman’s literary significance, have situated New Women fiction at the beginning of modernism. Lyn Pykett argues that New Women writers “anticipated the attempts of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf to develop a specifically feminine voice and form for fiction” (195-6). Pykett makes this distinction for the New Women in contrast to their contemporaries’ view of them as “failed masculine realists, or incomplete pathological naturalists” (195). Molly Youngkin also aligns novels such as *Grand*’s with the beginnings of modernism. While Pykett bases this claim of proto modernism in the fragmented form of many New Women texts, Youngkin emphasizes the focus of their content on “consciousness and subjective experience” (Youngkin 8). These

scholars and others emphasize New Women fiction's turn away from conventional Victorian forms and principles, and towards what is often framed as a more radical modernism. However, *The Beth Book's* deliberate reconstruction of Victorian ideals of morality, self discipline, and respectability, as well as the realist form of early Victorian texts, are just as significant to its feminism. In *The Beth Book*, Grand rewrites *Jane Eyre* by drawing on what has been already made possible by sensation fiction like *Lady Audley* and by women's increasingly public, political discourse at the turn of the century.

In many ways, *The Beth Book* mirrors *Jane Eyre* as a coming of age story of a likable, independent minded heroine. Grand opens the novel with Beth's childhood, first in Ireland and later in England, throughout which Beth struggles to find any productive outlet for her intelligence and imagination, as she is denied the access to education her brother squanders. Beth plays complex make believe games with her sister and childhood friends, makes up snippets of original poetry, and is particularly sensitive to the influences of the natural world. Throughout her childhood, Beth is also given, like her precursors, Bertha and Lady Audley, to unruly behavior as a girl. Beth's sometimes violent temper and emerging sexuality at times become overpowering in her girlhood: she gets into a number of both verbal and physical fights over the course of her youth, and as a young teenager carries on a secret romance with a neighborhood boy. Beth's rebellious impulses are mediated by her relationship with her Aunt Victoria, who embodies an essential Victorian morality that becomes crucial to Beth's maturation; she teaches Beth a kind of restraint, altruism, and self respect that later become central to Beth's feminism, and ties her to *Jane Eyre*. Beth's relationship to Aunt Victoria also echos Jane's relationship to Miss Temple, her teacher and headmistresses at Lowood, who "had always something of serenity in her air, of state on her mien, of refined propriety in her language, which precluded deviation

into the ardent, the excited, the eager” (Brontë 61). Both Jane and Beth are taught by older, maternal figures (though notably not their mothers) to practice a control over their emotions and passions, which significantly shapes their morality and sense of self as young women. However, Beth’s feminist consciousness only really comes into being after her terrible marriage to Dr. Dan Maclure. During this section of the novel she comes to lean upon the support of a community of female friends to confront her husband’s mistreatment and moral degradation, which includes torturing live animals in the name of science. During her marriage Beth also channels her imaginative energy into writing, transforming a hidden attic (not coincidentally the space Bertha inhabits throughout much of *Jane Eyre*) into a private, secret room for moral and creative improvement. But Beth ends the novel not as a writer, but a public orator, a “vocation” through which she quite explicitly is able to make women’s private experience an issue of public concern, yet must sacrifice her own creative and artistic desires.

Defining the New Woman at the *fin de siècle*

At the same time as Grand calls back to *Jane Eyre*, she also reimagines Jane in the language that had become available to women at the *fin de siècle*, a time of intense suffrage concern, and in the aftermath of the successful repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The 1880’s and 90’s saw a proliferation of explicitly feminist publications, largely written and read by women. Widely read periodicals such as *The Women’s Signal* (founded by Henrietta Muller in 1888 as *The Women’s Penny Paper*) and *Shafts* (founded in 1892 by Margaret Shurmer Sibthorp) played a critical role in establishing the New Woman as a cultural figure. These publications were also inextricably linked with New Women fiction being published at the period, and particularly *The Beth Book*. Grand herself often published in the feminist press,

perhaps most famously coining the term “New Woman” in perhaps her most widely read nonfiction, a 1894 article titled “The New Aspects of the Woman Question.” Therefore, from the first page of *The Beth Book*, Beth is not only an individual character, but a representation of the larger cultural figure of the New Woman, and her development over the course of the novel cannot be separated from the public discourse of Grand’s historical moment. Michelle Tusan argues that in these *fin de siècle* feminist publications, the New Woman was generally depicted as

a reasonable and thoughtful woman who had only the best interests of the British state at heart. In essence, the New Woman represented feminists' Utopian vision of the model social reformer. Her interest in politics and social justice, however, were not represented as a challenge to her dedication to the home, but rather were depicted as an extension of her domestic duties. (170)

It is this representation of New Womanhood that Grand engages in *The Beth Book*; Beth, as a New Woman, represents an *extension* of ideal womanhood (the same ideal that so constrains both Jane and Lady Audley), rather than a clean break from this past. As Grand writes near the end of her most famous novel (and precursor to the Beth Book), *The Heavenly Twins*, New Women should not seek to “raise revolutions,” but rather trust that, “evolution if slower is surer” (602). Grand’s ideal New Woman was Ruskin’s Angel of the House, whose morality had evolved and expanded beyond the home to improve all of British society.

Grand herself outlines women’s moral obligation to “teach” and “raise” men out of moral degradation as an extension of her “place” in society in “The New Aspect of the Woman Question.” Writing in encouragement to her fellow women, Grand instructs:

Man, having no conception of himself as imperfect from the woman's point of view, will find this difficult to understand, but we know his weakness, and will be patient with him, and help him with his lesson. It is the woman's place and pride and pleasure to teach the child, and man morally in his infancy. There have been times when there was doubt as to whether he was to be raised or woman was to be lowered, but we have turned that corner at last; and now woman holds out a strong hand to the child-man, and insists, but with infinite tenderness and pity, upon helping him. (29)

Here, Grand figures New Womanhood as an extension of women's natural "pride and place and pleasure" as maternal teachers of morality. Grand's feminist utopia is not one in which women break free of the domestic (or the men they care for there), but rather one in which women's domestic role as moral corrective is enhanced and expanded. This is not to diminish the potential Grand imagined in women for the betterment of all of English society. It was women's ethical superiority that had the power to raise men up from their vice and "weakness" to a new moral strength Grand saw as central to correcting nearly all social problems. In *The Beth Book* Grand positions Beth's morality as clearly superior to her husband's even at the start of their marriage- it becomes clear as she gains feminist consciousness through both her reading and her relationships to other women in her community that she is not to be "lowered" by him. This moral strength in the face of her husband's degradation, can be seen a few chapters into their marriage when Beth demands that Dan "understand once and for all, like a good man that I am not going to be domineered over you as if I were a common degraded wife with every spark of spirit and self-respect crushed out of me by one brutal extraction or another" (Grand 408). However, *The Beth Book* also complicates the utopian vision Grand articulates in her imagining of New Womanhood- as will be explored further later in the chapter, it seems that while Beth's

morality certainly allows her to stand up for herself and other women, it does little to improve her degraded and immoral husband. When she leaves him, she is certainly a New Woman, but he is not in any way a demonstrably better man.

A Community of Women; Beth's Public Condemnation within the Home

The rise of popular feminist publications at the *fin de siècle* created a sounding board for women's issues that simply didn't exist during Brontë's lifetime. Not only does the majority of *Jane Eyre* take place within the domestic space, (as does, largely, *The Beth Book*), Jane also has very little contact with anything or anyone outside of these spaces- we rarely see her writing or receiving letters, reading the newspaper, interacting with people in town, etc. Where Jane can only voice her desires for freedom and liberation to herself, in isolation, and see those desires "scattered on the wind then faintly blowing," Beth (particularly as a grown woman) would have been able to see her own yearning for emancipation echoed back to her by other women in her community (Brontë 72). This happens in *The Beth Book* through both Beth's circle of female friends, and the feminist writings in pamphlets, periodicals, and newspapers which had become widespread by the end of the century. In Chapter 1, I argue that Lady Audley is able to find others with whom she can identify in her suffering by looking back, to a history of literary madwomen; Braddon's text is one concerned with inheritance, with what Lady Audley inherits from both her literary and biological mother. *The Beth Book* similarly looks to the past, but importantly also to the vocal community of sister women publishing and advocating at the *fin de siècle*.

By engaging in the public discourse available at the turn of the century, Grand rewrites *Jane Eyre's* famous assertions of freedom to shift focus from the individual to the collective.

This new, public language of feminist periodicals and magazines permeates *The Beth Book*, but is particularly notable in the scenes after Beth's marriage, as she comes to know what Youngkin refers to as the "consciousness" phase of New Womanhood.⁶ One critical way in which Grand integrates the public discourse of the feminist press into her novel is through what would have been highly topical issues of vivisection, or the dissection of live animals for medical research, and Lock Hospitals, where women suspected of prostitution were held (often without their consent) as a result of the Contagious Disease Acts.⁷ Grand centers these issues within the most powerful and clear scenes of feminist assertion in the novel, in which Beth invokes the consequences of public judgement within the private sphere of her home. Before Beth even considers a role as a public advocate, she voices her moral concerns in her own living room, and as a means of checking her own husband's cruelty and degradation.

Throughout the *fin de siècle*, anti-vivisection advocacy was closely tied to advocacy for women. Frances Power Cobbe, a prominent feminist activist and organizer, founded the Society for the Protection of Animals Liable to Vivisection in 1875 and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection in 1898.⁸ Out of all the reform movements of the late 19th century anti-vivisection societies appear "to have had the highest level of female participation of any movement that was not overtly feminist in its objectives" (Hamilton 22). Feminist publications such as *The Women's Signal* often featured anti-vivisection editorials and advertisements, such

⁶ Youngkin claims that both fictional and real life New Women needed to assert agency through three stages: "they needed to experience consciousness to realize their condition, articulate their condition through spoken word, and use concrete action to change their condition" (7).

⁷ These two issues may seem disparate, yet for late Victorians they were closely connected; as Showalter remarks, *fin de siècle* feminists were "fervent associationists" (193). Richard French argues, both "saw themselves as arousing the basic moral instincts of laymen against an arrogant coalition of scientists, medical men, and legislators, who were blindly following the dictates of technique into a technical cul de sac, where beneficent ends failed to justify horrid and repugnant means" (230).

⁸ For more on Cobbe's work in anti-vivisection organizing, see French's *Anti-vivisection and Medical Science in Victorian Society*, Chapter 8, "Anatomy of an Agitation"

as the one excerpted below, taken out by the Victoria Street and International Society for the Protection of Animals against vivisection in 1895:

Englishwomen! There is a matter on which you ought to be informed. If a man thrash a donkey unmercifully, or illtreat a cat or dog, he may be prosecuted under the Cruelty to the Animals Act, and if convicted, will (justly) be fined, or sent to prison. But you probably do not know that there are about 180 men in England at this moment who have received from Government *licenses* to do *infinitely more cruel things* than these to cats and dogs, rabbits and pigeons; and some of them have also permission to use horses, asses, and mules in what they call their “researches.” These persons holding licenses are men of science, and some of them are surgeons and physicians in the public hospitals!

(Multiple Classified Advertisements)

The logic here is to appeal specifically to women so they can become “informed” on the issue of vivisection, use that information to substantiate a moral stance against the “cruel things” performed by vivisectors, and then channel that morality into advocacy for political change. Anti-vivisectionists called for men to resist the cruelty and degradation of vivisection at the same time at which Grand called for men to resist the cruelty and degradation of sexual licentiousness—she saw both as requiring moral strength and self-control. It is no coincidence that Beth confronts her husband’s work as a vivisector and as a doctor in a Lock Hospital in the same scene because both were public, topical issues that Grand positions here as evidence of moral failing. As an 1886 piece from the Victoria Street Society describes, “the question of vivisection was not that of utility, but that of morality” (Public Meetings). It was this idea of activism rooted in morality that so called to New Women, and particularly to Grand in *The Beth Book*. Beth’s protest against

vivisection, even as it occurs in her own home, would have been recognized by Grand's readers as participation in the public discourse of the time.

Beth's stand against vivisection comes at a key moment in the novel; it is arguably the turning point of her marriage and the start of her new, feminist consciousness that allows her to stand up for and assert her moral standards both in her home and later to her wider community as a public orator. Her husband, Dan, is an archetype of the moral failings Grand presents as most needing correction in men: he is cruel and demanding, obsessed with his social appearance, wasteful with (Beth's) money, sexually licentious (he cheats on Beth quite openly with one of his female patients), and altogether has no consideration or empathy for Beth (or really anyone else). At this point in the text, Beth has learned from her group of female friends that her husband works as a doctor in a Lock Hospital, a practice, alongside vivisection, so abhorred that Beth is initially ostracized by her community for her mere proximity to Dan. Imposing such "social sanctions" on vivisectionists was a common way in which anti-vivisection literature urged women to protest vivisection in their own communities. In her analysis of such anti-vivisection periodicals as *The Home Chronicler*, Susan Hamilton notes that "over and over again, women are exhorted not to consort with the vivisectionist, [and] specifically not to marry with them" (31). It is interesting that the call to action here is not one for legal sanctions (although anti-vivisectionists did agitate for changes to the law elsewhere), but domestic sanctions, and seems to follow a certain eugenicist logic Grand also picks up later in this section of the novel. If women, as a whole, confronted and rejected male vivisectionists, as Beth does when she discovers her husband's work, then the logic here follows that men will be forced to reform, and the practice will simply die out.⁹

⁹ Grand's thinking here is also clearly linked with the logics of evolution and Darwin, whom New Women often engaged with in their writings. For further analysis on what has been termed Grand's

Beth's discovery of a dog tied up, writhing and crying, on a vivisectioning table horrifies and outrages her to such a degree that she is moved to subsequent action- both directly in the plight of the animal, and subsequently in her own subjection as a woman. Grand's description of vivisection here could have come straight from the lines of a Victoria Street Society column. On the operating table in Dan's surgery, Beth finds "a sight too sickening for description" (Grand 437). She writes: "the little black-and-tan terrier, the bonny wee thing which had been so blithe and greeted her so confidently only the evening before, lay there, fastened into a sort of frame in a position which alone, must have been agonising" (Grand 437). Grand's language here takes on the sentimental flair common of the anti-vivisection writing throughout the *fin de siècle*- at an 1895 Bristol Anti-Vivisection Society meeting one pro-vivisection advocate complained that "supporters of vivisection agitation were led away by looking at the matter from a sentimental point of view," to which Miss Garland, an anti-vivisection activist, replied that "without *moral sentiment* they could not hope to do much [emphasis my own]" (Bristol Anti-Vivisectionists 1895). Late Victorian feminist and anti-vivisection activism hinged on this connection between emotion and moral responsibility, and specifically a moral responsibility that then lead to action. In *The Beth Book*, this "moral sentiment" works on two levels: first, the horror and cruelty of vivisection spark Beth to kill the animal out of mercy, and then later confront her husband on his practices. Second, Grand's anti-vivisection rhetorical calls to the reader to also take up Beth's sense of moral action- here the text both responds to and amplifies the already existing public discourse of anti-vivisection.

"eugenic feminism," see Angelique Richardson's "The Eugenization of Love: Sarah Grand and the Morality of Genealogy" and Patricia Murphy's "Reevaluating Female "Inferiority": Sarah Grand Versus Charles Darwin".

In the next lines Beth is moved so dramatically by the dog's suffering that she summons the courage to administer a few drops of poison, as the most humane end to its torture. Grand positions Beth's action as not only one of moral strength, but also as a response to public discourse within domestic space. Grand describes how

Beth had heard of these horrors before, but little suspected that they were carried on under that very roof. She had turned sick at the sight, a low cry escaped her, and her great compassionate heart swelled with rage; but she acted without hesitation. (437)

It is in the feminist press, in publications like *Shafts* and *The Woman's Signal* where Beth would have "heard of these horrors before." In this first sentence, Grand combines the effect of public language within the domestic space- it is one thing to *know* of vivisection and another to confront it within one's home. What ultimately brings Beth to action is witnessing cruelty she has learned of in the realm of the public "carried on under that very roof." This moment also again exemplifies the key "moral sentiment" that Grand, and other New Women writers, saw as essential to spurring feminist action. Beth is able to confront cruelty and suffering because she is *both* empathetic *and* brave enough to channel that empathy into action- it is only after the instant in which Beth's "great compassionate heart swelled with rage" that she is able to "act without hesitation."

Crucially, it is by taking action against the torture of another creature that Beth is able to begin to take action against her own oppression. Her bravery here restores the sense of agency and self-possession Beth revels in throughout her childhood but has largely lost thus far in her marriage. After poisoning the dog out of mercy, Beth's "eyes were haggard and her teeth were clenched, but she felt the stronger for a brave determination, and more herself than she had done for many months" (Grand 437). Here, what may seem to be a somewhat murky logic of the New

Woman's investment in anti-vivisection activism becomes clear: to act bravely and justly for another can propel a woman into taking a stand against her own suffering.

Furthermore, it is important that Beth's address of her husband's vivisectioning is made in response to her own victimization by him- Grand presents us with a clear parallel between the abuse of women and animals by morally bankrupt men. At this point in the text Dan is badgering Beth to settle a debt for him, suggesting in his typically crude manner she "lay [herself] out to please" his debtor who "has a weakness for pretty women" (Grand 438). When she refuses, Dan berates her: "Oh damn your self-respect... your cursed book-talk is enough to drive a man to the devil. Anybody but you, with your 'views' and 'opinions' and fads and fancies would be only be too glad to oblige a good husband" (Grand 439). Clearly, Beth's newly formed feminist consciousness- her "views" and "opinions" and "fads" and "fancies"- are threatening to Dan because the immediate consequences lie with his behavior. It is also significant that even Dan locates this threat beyond merely Beth's individual contempt for him; he also recognizes the power (and danger to patriarchy) present in feminist literary community- Beth's "self-respect" is linked immediately to "book-talk." Kate Flint argues New Woman fiction worked similarly to the kind of reading and self-knowledge Beth is engaged in: because New Women fiction was "conducted in terms which strengthen the possibilities for binding women together through shared subjectivity," readers of texts such as Grand's could find "confirmation of the fact that [they] were not without others who thought and felt along the same lines" (Flint 299, 311).

This "book-talk" also characterizes her direct address of Dan's vivisectioning- it imposes precisely the kind of "social sanctions" anti-vivisection advocated women impose. Beth's activism begins not in parliament or reform societies, but in her own home, in opposition to her own husband. She begins by informing Dan: "I am not going to have any of your *damnable*

cruelties going on under the same roof with me” (Grand 439). This declaration of will exemplifies Grand’s most clear articulation of how she thought feminism was to work- as discussed earlier, Grand imagined men would be improved on an individual basis, when their own wives, sisters, mothers, and other female acquaintances began condemning and correcting their morally inept behavior, as one would “teach lessons to children.” Grand’s ultimate vision for society was one in which these public, social sanctions on men’s behavior were universal and inescapable: she writes that women “have endured most poignant misery for his [man’s] sins, and screened him when we should have exposed him and had him punished” (Grand, “New Aspect” 30). Beth articulates this exact vision a few pages later, proclaiming: “I cannot understand any but unsexed women associating with vivisectors... you will be driven out of all decent society, to consort with the hangman- if even he will associate with you” (Grand 441). Moral correction for men required all women to participate in their public exposure.

Next, Beth connects her husband’s vivisecting to his wider moral failing, and the implications of those failings for women as a whole:

I have endured your sensuality and your corrupt conversation weakly, partly because I was the only sufferer, as it seemed to me, in the narrow outlook I had on life until lately; but I know better now. I know that every woman who submits in such matters is not only a party to her own degradation, but connives at the degradation of her whole sex. (Grand 439)

Here, Beth explicitly ties Dan’s cruelty as a vivisector to his sexual (and necessarily moral) degradation. The vivisecting *she* has had to endure came in the form of his “sensuality” and “corrupt conversation;” violations of Beth’s own body that she clearly sees as connected to Dan’s abuse of animal bodies. This connection will be further developed as Beth turns the

argument to Dan's work in Lock Hospitals, but it is important to note this first link through vivisection. As Hamilton observes of anti-vivisection literature, social sanctions by women functioned to "deny men associated with vivisection access to women's bodies, bodies which, as the identification with the vivisected animal body implicitly implicates, are already figured as potential subjects for the bloodied hands of the 'working' physiologist" (31). Men, such as Dan who abused animal bodies, clearly could not be trusted with access with women's bodies either.

This passage also crucially demonstrates the importance of community for Beth's feminist consciousness. She was only willing to tolerate Dan's behavior when she saw herself as "the only sufferer," of his corruption- when in her "narrow outlook" Beth situated her sufferings merely as personal, and unconnected to the political. But Beth has since become connected with a cohort of women, both in print and in person, who have taught her that "there was a duty she owes herself as well as to her husband" (Grand 425). Here, after her interactions with other women in her community and her time spent developing moral discipline in her attic, Beth presents her own oppression as interwoven with the oppression of others (moving from inclusion of the vivisected dog to inclusion of other women who have suffered the moral degradation of men). Beth has gained an awareness that the cruelty of her husband works as a part of a societal issue which sanctions male corruption; Grand positions the domestic as an arena in which the advancement or degradation of Beth's "whole sex" is played out. As in the movement against the cruelty of men towards animals, the movement against the cruelty of men towards women must begin in one's own home, with one's own husband.

Therefore, the stakes of wifedom are incredibly high for Beth- it is not only for her own moral standards that she must confront her husband, but for the moral betterment of all of society, or as Grand commonly positioned it, the entire British race. The passage above also

interestingly locates women's tolerance of men's immoral behavior as not only injurious to their own happiness, but complicit in that immorality- she that merely passively endures her husband's mistreatment (as traditional Victorian gender ideals encouraged women to do, and as Beth's own mother does) "*connives* at the degradation of her whole sex." Silence here is not amoral or apolitical, but rather a willful contribution to the oppression and moral abasement of all women.¹⁰ Therefore, Beth's action is not only "brave," as her mercy killing of the dog earlier, but the only morally responsible thing to do- *all* women, as individuals, are implicated in the wellbeing of their "whole sex." Action is not only encouraged, but urgently necessary.

In the section that follows, Beth links Dan's work as a vivisector to his work as a doctor in a Lock Hospital- which she importantly only learns of from her group of female friends. Lock Hospitals would have been familiar to contemporary readers from the controversy surrounding the repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts (CDA) in 1886. The CDA, passed in their first iteration in 1864, aimed to protect men in the British army from venereal disease- which had become rampant due to the widespread solicitation of prostitutes by British soldiers.¹¹ The CDA first only applied to men in India and other colonies, and then were expanded to England as well in 1866. They allowed for any unmarried woman (though typically poor women) suspected of prostitution to be committed (with or without her consent) to a "lock hospital." As Judith Walkowitz explains, the CDA, with their accompanying vague euphemisms of "Contagious Diseases" and "great social evil" "reflect both a discomfort and a discomfort with sexual

¹⁰ Although it is important to note that for Grand, Beth's "whole sex" was largely limited to white, middle to upper class British women. For a more extensive look at Grand's class and race politics, see Chapter 1 of Theresa Mangum's *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant*.

¹¹ According to medical statistical reports, in 1864 "one out of three [army] sick cases were venereal in origin" (75 Walkowitz). Such statistics were sensationalized in the initial advocacy for the acts passage as evidence of the great vice and "social evil" plaguing British society. See Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz's *The London Lock Hospital in the Nineteenth Century: Gender, Sexuality and Social Reform* for more on Lock Hospitals and late Victorian fears surrounding gender and sexuality.

questions” typical of the Victorians (70). The humiliation and violation of women authorized by the CDA and committed in the lock hospitals quickly provoked outrage, and particularly among women leaders. A robust repeal campaign began in the 1870s and really gained traction in the 1880s; activists “organized branch associations, mass public meetings, petition campaigns, and electoral leagues,” in addition to distributing “mountains of propaganda” containing “medical and statistical evidence” (Walkowitz 85). In 1866, Josephine Butler (also an outspoken opponent of vivisection) founded the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts (LNA).¹² The LNA attracted “hundreds of middle-class women to the political arena for the first time,” many of whom, like Beth, were surprised and emboldened by their own ability to speak publicly on an important social issue (Walkowitz 134). One member recalls: “I well remember, having to make some business announcement at the close of a women’s meeting, how appalled I was at the sound of my own voice- the first time I had heard it at a public hall” (qtd. Walkowitz 134).

The CDA were finally repealed in 1886- approximately ten years before *The Beth Book* was published. However, the tension surrounding morality, public health, and women’s bodies that had come to the surface during the repeal campaign remained a point of anxiety for New Women writers and activists well into the 1890’s. Just before the turn of the century, there was a push among some to revive the CDA, at least in India where they were originally intended. An 1897 “women’s memorial respecting the health of the Army” reprinted in *The Women’s Signal* argued that the CDA “if exercised with scrupulous care, do not cause any real danger to women,

¹² Butler also explicitly ties vivisection to gender and colonial oppression, specifically for Indian women, in a way that is at once empathetic and dehumanizing: “[Indian women] are indeed between the upper and nether milestone, helpless, voiceless, hopeless. Their helplessness appeals to the heart somewhat in the same way in which the helplessness and suffering of the dumb animal does, under the knife of the vivisector” (qtd. Ledger 68).

but that they constitute a valuable safeguard of women's virtue" (Health of the Army). However, while a woman suspected of prostitution would be "afford[ed] a great opportunity of escape from a life of vice" in compulsory containment within a lock hospital, the vice of men was accepted as a necessary evil (Health of the Army). The memorial goes on to argue: "it is the duty of the State which, of necessity, collects together large numbers of unmarried men in military service, to protect them from the *consequences of evils which are, in fact, unavoidable in such a community* and under such conditions" (Health of the Army).

Both *The Women's Signal* and *The Beth Book* address the hypocrisy of this justification, and tease out the moral and gender implications of the controversy. An 1897 response in *The Women's Signal* begins by emphasizing the way the letter above exploits women's investment in the issue of the Contagious Diseases Act, and misrepresents their support: "They know well enough that women in an overwhelming majority oppose such laws, and therefore any sort of support from women is paraded and emphasized in a remarkable manner" (Signals from our Watch Tower). Importantly, the repeal of the CDA and women's subsequent involvement in the issue underline the new importance of women's voices in public conversations; women are not only implicated in the effects of the acts, they are the key players in both its opposition and support. This public discourse surrounding the acts also functions as a crucial window into changing conceptions of women's morality: once idealized at the core of the home and largely confined within that domestic space, it is by the *fin de siècle* expanded to the political and the public. Through the CDA and accompanying lock hospitals late Victorian women became involved in issues of public health, military strength, and sexual policing. The CDA were a key debate in which a woman could assert her moral influence not just in the drawing room, with

their own husband and children, but in the pages of newspapers, pamphlets, and periodicals, in lectures, public meetings, and letters to those in power.

As with vivisection, Grand takes up this newly public language of the feminist press almost word for word within *The Beth Book*. *The Women's Signal* criticizes Lady's Henry's hypocrisy in "'recognizing the necessity' (hateful and familiar phrase) of the State making provisions from our taxes for men's safety in the practice of immortality" (Signals from our Watch Tower). Beth uses almost this exact language in her own home, so that not only is feminine morality made public, but then that language of the public is reintegrated back into the home, giving the leverage of public opinion to what would otherwise be an individual, domestic affair. In response to Dan's similar justification of his work in a Lock Hospital, Beth responds "It is precisely in order to make vice safe for men that such appointments [in Lock Hospitals] are made... medical etiquette would not stop where it does, at the degradation of those unfortunate women, if you were honestly attempting to put a stop to that disease" (Grand 443). And Grand doesn't just incorporate the language of public protest into Beth's own arguments; during this conversation, Beth actually picks up a copy of the *Times* and reads aloud to her husband. Teresa Mangum argues "Beth's knowledge of the Contagious Disease Acts forces her attention from the murk of her personal life to the public sphere, as she realizes that her marriage mirrors the relative positions of women to men and their institutions on the larger world, in this case particularly in the field of medicine" (169). But it is not just that through her knowledge Beth's marriage become a "mirror" for the larger world; rather the larger world also crucially acts as a sounding board for the issues of her marriage. The relationship of public to private is circular rather than linear; "private morality" is applied to public crises just as public language of protest gives new weight to issues of the private and domestic. Beth's thinking and language is

overwhelmingly and inextricably connected with a network of other women, whose voices not only validate Beth's own opinions, but are woven into the most personal of her relationships.

The leverage of this public discourse, and the social sanctions it encouraged, becomes most clear in Beth's threats of public exposure. The first of these threats comes earlier in her marriage, before she knows of Dan's vivisectioning. It is one of the first hints of Beth's understanding of the personal as political, which she will return to in her address of Dan's work as a vivisectioner. Here, when Dan implies she is cheating on him, she replies: "I advise you to weigh your words, for you shall answer to me in public for any insult you may offer me in public" (Grand 377). While this threat certainly does not fix Beth's marriage, it does make Dan pause in his vulgarity. According to Beth, in the private domestic space, men feel they can act with impunity against their wives because there is not social pressure to act otherwise. It is an assertion of power to move one's affairs to public spotlight, and a testament to Beth's understanding of her historical moment that would be more likely to condemn her husband's poor behavior than censor her own act of defiance.

While the scene above gestures to Beth's growing awareness of her private marital conflict as a site of public discourse, this understanding becomes most pronounced and most powerful once she takes up the issue of her husband's vivisectioning. Beth tells Dan that if he does not abandon his "hellish practice" of vivisection, she "will call in the townsfolk to see [him] at [his] brutal work" (440). To make a claim such as that, Beth must have at least some assurance that the "townsfolk" will largely disapprove of his work. Her certainty of his public condemnation implies that the reason Dan performs his vivisection in secrecy is that it is immoral, and a practice worthy of public shame were it to be revealed. Beth has the power to bring on this societal condemnation as a check on Dan's moral corruption because she sees herself as having a

voice in this public conversation. Again, she tells him that he continues to perform vivisections, she “will leave this house, and publish the reason” (444). It is implied that Beth knows her views *will* be published because she has *seen* them published. The ultimate threat rests not with Beth’s individual demand, but with the collective group of like-minded women and sympathetic men who support her thinking.

This crucial scene of domestic conflict is a turning point in the *The Beth Book*: it marks simultaneous beginning of Beth’s engagement with public discourse on women’s issues (and her future as a public speaker) and the end of her submission to her husband. Beth’s interactions with her husband at this point in the novel also seem to quite pointedly rewrite similar scenes of domestic conflict within *Jane Eyre*- after all, nearly every one of Jane’s famous moments of self-assertion occurs within the home, either with her Aunt as a child, Mr. Rochester at Thornfield, or St. John at Marsh End. However, while Jane’s sufferings and challenges are mostly evoked as private and personal to her, Grand insists, by the close of the novel, that a woman’s suffering is a public and social issue in that the suffering is caused by socially and culturally enforced norms. Interestingly, only scenes from Jane’s childhood take on the public dimension Grand prioritizes in Beth’s feminism. As the novel progresses Jane matures out of this tendency, and with increased self-control seems to come to a narrowed focus on the self, the personal, as not directly linked with the political. While Jane is not unaware of the larger, social structures restricting women (and especially poor, unconnected women like herself), the public is never interwoven into her relationships to the extent that it is for Beth.

One such example of Jane’s childhood leverage of public opinion comes during Jane’s famous confrontation with Aunt Reed after she has been locked away in the red room and labelled to Mr. Brocklehurst as troublesome and deceitful. This is a powerful moment of self-

assertion for many reasons, but one of the ways it is so effective at frightening Aunt Reed into submission is because of Jane's threat of public shame. Jane asserts:

I shall remember how you thrust me back into the red-room, and locked me up there, until my dying day... I will tell anybody who asks me questions this exact tale. People think you are good women, but you are bad; hard hearted. You are deceitful! (30)

Just as Beth threatens to "call in the townsfolk," Jane will tell "anybody who asks" about Aunt Reed's abuse. It is significant that Jane is only able to have this moment of self assertion once she knows that she will soon have access the wider world at Lowood, when she has found her existence expanded beyond just the walls of Gateshead. A bit later in this same passage Jane threatens explicitly "I'll let everybody at Lowood know what you are, and what you have done" (31). While the public discourse Beth brings to bear in her home is a bit more specific and rooted in her historical moment, here Jane is also able to gain power, despite being poor, a child, and an orphan, because she aligns herself with the weight of public opinion.

However, later in the novel, as Jane confronts Rochester upon learning of Bertha in his attic, she quite notably does *not* invoke this same threat of public judgement. It never occurs to Jane to expose Rochester's arguable cruelty towards Bertha, to "call in the townsfolk" to learn of the secret wife he has kept locked away in his attic. And really, Jane's sympathy towards Bertha never quite extends to even considering her imprisonment an act of cruelty worth protesting against. In this scene, Jane only pauses just for a moment to consider the injustice of Bertha's imprisonment, arguing to Rochester: "you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate- with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel- she cannot help being mad" (Brontë 257). However, Rochester quickly brushes off this indictment, claiming (quite unconvincingly) "it is not because she is mad I hate her," implying vaguely that it is her "excesses" and "propensities"

that warrant his abhorrence. In any case, after this one accusation, Jane moves on quickly and does not return to the ethics of Bertha's confinement; Jane's focus remains throughout the rest of their conversation on her own moral endangerment and preservation. Importantly, Jane doesn't ever identify with Bertha the way Beth identifies with the dog left cut open on the vivisection table. In *The Female Malady*, Showalter argues that "what is most notable about Brontë's first representation of female insanity... is that Jane, unlike contemporary feminist critics who have interpreted the novel, never sees her kinship with the confined and monstrous double, and that Brontë has no sympathy for her mad creature" (69). While I would argue that Jane's lack of sympathy does not necessarily preclude Brontë's, the point remains that *Jane Eyre* certainly does not privilege solidarity between suffering women as *The Beth Book* does.

Furthermore, Jane's struggle to leave Rochester is so impressive because of how much it draws on her individual moral strength- Jane is utterly alone in the world, and must now leave the only home that has ever given her a sense of belonging. In one of the most intense, and oft quoted moments of this scene, Rochester excruciatingly attempts to manipulate Jane's isolation to convince her to continue to live with him as his mistress. He asks her: "Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law- no man being injured by the breach? for you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear offend by living with me" (Brontë 270). Then again, he begs:

'Oh comply! ... think of his misery; think of his danger- look at his state when left alone; remember his headlong nature; consider the recklessness following on despair- soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for *you*? or who will be injured by what you do? (Brontë 270)

In both of the quotations above, the crux of Rochester's leverage over Jane is her *aloneness*, her lack of community with shared moral standards she must adhere to. His emphasis is that Jane may disregard morality because nobody is watching, because she is so alone and overlooked that she can escape public judgement and is therefore free to act as she wishes. However, Jane famously answers with a fierce moral strength rooted in herself, innate and entirely unshakable: "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am the more I will respect myself" (Brontë 270). Jane's strength is rooted in the "I"- it is enough that *she* cares for herself alone in the world. Brontë's vision of female agency is fundamentally rooted in individuality, not the collective. Where Jane answers directly the first of Rochester's questions ("who in the world cares for you?"), Grand picks up with the second in *The Beth Book* ("who will be injured by what you do?"). As quoted above, Beth seems to answer that it is all women who would be injured by Jane's submission. If she were to give in to Rochester, Grand implies that Jane, like Beth, would be "not only a party to her own degradation, but connive at the degradation of her whole sex" (Grand 439). And similarly to Beth, Jane is not "lowered" from her clear moral superiority to Rochester's abasement, but she also does not "raise" him out of "moral infancy." For both Jane and Beth, moral strength can really only go so far as self preservation in the face of their degraded partners.

Even as Grand builds on and expands the stakes of this scene to the public, Jane's moral tenacity in the face of degradation here is exactly what would become so crucial to Grand decades later. In fact, Beth repeats Jane's articulation of moral principle in this passage almost word for word. Jane declares that:

Laws and principles are not for time when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are

they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth- so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane- quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. (Brontë 270-1)

When Beth is confronted with a similar offer to run away as a mistress to Alfred Pounce (her childhood boyfriend who returns at this point in the novel as an author), she echoes Jane:

How can a woman feel anything else [other than contempt] for a man who is false to the most sacred obligations? who makes vows and breaks them according to his own inclination? If we make a law of our own inclinations, what assurance can we give to any one that we shall ever be true? (Grand 472)

Both rely on the language of law vs inclination to assert a kind of moral foundation strong enough to resist the importuning of men to vice. Grand plainly takes on the language of Brontë here, to the effect that it is clear that Beth's feminism seems to be rooted in the same moral resolve that Jane asserted nearly 50 years earlier- both Jane and Beth are bound to a kind of moral "law" that remains steadfast despite their own "inclinations" or "convenience." However, crucially, the tension of Jane's duality with Bertha is altogether lost in Grand's articulation. Jane stands firm in her self-assertion, but also clearly struggles against "veins running fire" and a "heart beating faster than [she] can count its throbs;" repressed emotion Jane cannot allow to come to the surface but exists within her nonetheless. In contrast, Beth's moral steadfastness has contains none of this language of passion and excess, the language of Bertha repressed but persistent within Jane. Jane's self-control has a nuance and complexity through the spectre of Bertha that seems to have been entirely purged in Beth.

An Attic of One's Own: Reading, Reflection, and Moral Activism

In her foundational chapter on New Women fiction in *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter is heavily critical of the utopian quality of Beth's attic, and skeptical of the kind of feminist and literary potential it offers for Beth. Showalter refers to Beth's attic as a "feminist fantasy," a "housewife's daydream" Grand inserts into the novel as a convenient solution to Beth's terrible marriage (208, 209). For Showalter, Beth's secret attic isn't even an incredibly *good* solution to her marriage, providing little more than a temporary escape for Beth. The attic is a "claustrophobic image, and patently related to Sarah Grand's conception of her literary purpose," which Showalter saw as similarly limited to women's political agitation without ever coveting serious literary merit. However, while Beth's attic does function crucially as an escape from her always intruding, never considerate husband, Showalter ignores the the actual work Beth does while there- her reading, writing, sewing, reflection- and the implications that work has for both Beth's feminist action, and the novel's renegotiation of Bertha Mason.

When in *Jane Eyre*, Jane searches for some small escape from the demands of her life at Thornfield, she climbs "the three staircases, raise[s] the trap-door of the attic, and having reached the leads, looked out afar over the sequestered field and hill, along the dim sky-line," where she "longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit" (Brontë 93). Similarly, Beth climbs the staircases of her home until she can go no further, where she stumbles upon a secret room in her attic, hidden behind stacks of boxed and nearly invisible from the outside of the house. As Woolf would argue nearly thirty years later, to be an artist (and an activist in Grand's vision) Beth requires not only the talent and the will to write, but also *physical space* of her own. Just before she ascends to the attic, Beth thinks:

She must have some corner where she would be safe from intrusion. He had his consulting-room, a room called his laboratory, a surgery, and a dressing-room, where no one would dream of following him if he shut the door; she had literally not a corner.

(Grand 347)

For Grand, it is harmful not only for men to crowd women out of literary space, but also out of the domestic space that had been traditionally deemed woman's domain. For women to have their own intellectual and literary space, they first need to have their own space within their own home. Importantly, whereas Jane finds herself just above Bertha's attic, on the rooftop, mirroring Bertha's pacing and restlessness with her own, Beth finds herself *in* the attic. But unlike Jane, Beth does not act as Bertha acts. Beth has a sense of ownership over her attic that both Jane and Bertha do not at Thornfield- what is for Bertha a prison, and Jane a dark, dangerous, and repressed part of herself, is for Beth a refuge.

Several critics, including Showalter, claim that Beth's attic is a recreation of her Aunt Victoria's room, which was one of the only spaces where as a child she was taught both compassion and self-discipline. And Beth mostly certainly does bring this learning, and her relationship with Aunt Victoria into the space- Beth almost immediately begins to set out the objects she has inherited from her aunt around the room and it is one of her first actions in claiming the space as her own. However, it is not clear that this link to her aunt is what attracts Beth to the space initially. Beth remarks that "everything about her was curiously familiar, and her first impression was that she had been there before," not mentioning anything about Aunt Victoria until she begins unpacking her things later in the passage (Grand 347). Instead, it is possible to read Beth's strange familiarity with the room in the same vein as Lady Audley's familiarity with "those women she has read of:" Beth is stepping into the space of the literary

madwoman, into Bertha's prison; it is familiar to her because of she is tied to its history of womanhood.

Beth's engagement with this history is central to the reading and thinking she does in her attic. Grand roots Beth's growth as an artist in women writers who have come before- just as Woolf suggests the women artist most needs to do. Woolf advises that by "drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her" the woman artist (imagined famously as Shakespeare's sister) "will be born" (2272). While the forerunners Beth turns to were certainly known, they nonetheless serve the purpose of a female literary tradition Woolf advocates: "it delighted [Beth] when she found in them some small trait or habit which she herself had developed or contracted such as she found in the early part of George Sand's *Histoire de ma Vie*, and in the lives of the Brontës" (370). Beth must learn to grow and develop from these models, to find her own voice distinctive from those she admires, but it is important that she begins with the lives of the Brontës and George Sand, to help her form "a code of literary principles for herself" (Grand 371). Beth comes to know herself as an artist by studying those that came before her, by locating her own work in a tradition of women whom she can identify with. Crucially, here Beth learns to see herself as part of a lineage spanning back through the century, in addition to her contemporary community.

The reading Beth does in her attic also functions to solidify her moral conviction; Grand makes it clear that this reading is a purposeful form of self-improvement, rather than simply arbitrary collection of facts. While working in her attic, Beth comes to realize literature "interested her only as the raw material from which a goodly moral might be extracted" (Grand 358). This narrow focus on the moral potential of literature may seem to readers now a surprisingly reductionist and conservative view. However, here Grand quite strategically places

Beth's (and by extension her own) New Women fiction into a contentious *fin de siècle* conversation on art's relation to morality. She vehemently opposed the aestheticism movement of the 1890's, spearheaded by Oscar Wilde, that proposed that "all art is quite useless" (xii). Wilde famously championed "art for art's sake," or the notion that art should be entirely disconnected from any moral or social use. While Wilde's actual art, (and particularly *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) seems to discount the notion of art's amorality, Grand clearly took his claims at face value.¹³ As Bonnell argues, "Grand rose to [Wilde's] bait, begging to differ with this sentiment, feeling that a novel should in fact be useful and necessary and that its only proper place was as part of a social context" (128). Grand frames Beth's work in her attic as both a reader and a writer around her "heartfelt belief that a novel- and a novelist- must serve humanity" (Bonnell 128). Importantly, for Grand moral novels were not merely dusty vestiges of a conservative past, but entirely necessary vehicles for social good. Beth responds directly to Wilde as she reflects on the kind of purposeful reading she has dedicated herself to now that she has the privacy of her own room: "Art for art's sake she despised, but in art for man's sake she already discovered noble possibilities" (Grand 358). According to Grand, the way to serve humanity was through art; through reading we can improve ourselves and through writing we can improve others.

For Beth, this improvement occurs in the space of Bertha's confinement - and in many ways directly counters Bertha's madness and its corresponding threat. One way in which this happens is in the overwhelming focus in morality through reading, as discussed above. This reading, strictly disciplined and self-controlled, functions as a corrective to Bertha's madness rooted in excess. As Rochester laments, it is Bertha's "propensities" and "excesses" which

¹³ For more on the relationship between Wilde's Aestheticism and Victorian conceptions of morality, see John Allen Quintus' "The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism".

“prematurely developed the germs of insanity” (Brontë 261). Beth’s attic is cleansed of this excess (and its sexual implications) by her commitment to self-discipline and self-regulation, which is manifested in her artistic work.

Beth’s reading is both extraordinarily personal and deliberate- it is not merely that Beth blindly adheres to whatever moral code is laid before her, but that she absorbs and internalizes texts to best suit her own goals for moral improvement.¹⁴ As Beth sews in her attic:

Beside her was always an open book, it might be a passage of Scripture, a scene from Shakespeare, a poem or paragraph rich in the wisdom and beauty of some great mind; and as she sewed she dwelt upon it, repeating it to herself until she was word-perfect in it, then making it even more her own by earnest contemplation. (Grand 357)

What is important is that Beth makes the text “her own,” that she transforms the words on the page into tools for her own betterment. Beth’s process here is a deliberate and scaffolded- she does not ever simply get swept up in a novel merely for her own enjoyment or escape. Instead, Beth must first “dwell upon” the passage, then learn it by heart, then apply it to her own life through earnest contemplation. On one level, Beth’s reading seems to adhere to conventional Victorian reading practices for women: she distinctly avoids “losing herself in the hedonistic pleasure of reading for reading’s sake,” following common guidelines of 19th century advice texts, which “stressed [that] the sensual, autoerotic pleasures of novel-reading must be restrained” (Bilston 3). However, while Beth certainly doesn’t read solely for the pleasure of reading, she also doesn’t read to become more useful to or conversant with her husband, as both Flint and Bilston suggest an ideal woman reader would: “the self-regulation mandated by these

¹⁴ In comparison, Jane Eyre’s reading, and particularly her reading as a child, is much more driven by pleasure and imagination than purposeful moral improvement. See Sarah Bilston’s “It is Not What We Read, But How We Read”: Maternal Counsel on Girls’ Reading Practices in Mid-Victorian Literature.”

texts is not designed to empower, but rather to produce wives and mothers who were knowledgeable but not too knowledgeable” (Bilston 2-3). Crucially, Beth’s reading *does* empower her to act, both in defense of her own moral standards to her husband, and through her writing, which, as I argued earlier in the context of Wilde and aestheticism, Beth saw as distinctly as a vehicle of moral and social good. Through this disciplined, systematic reading, literature becomes for Beth “the light which showed her life as it is, and as it should be lived” (Grand 357). The moral strengthening Beth achieves through her attic reading is important because of the ways in which it is translated to action, the way it informs how she should live her life.

Where Bertha’s attic is one of ungovernable desire and violence, Beth’s is one of serene self-control. Grand emphasizes the way Beth’s literary discipline orders her thinking, bringing her away from the clouded, passion driven existence of Bertha and towards what she positions as stable and reasonable clarity:

In meditating upon [these texts] she taught herself to meditate; and in following up the clues they gave her in the endeavour to discriminate and to judge fairly, by slow degrees she acquired the precious habit of clear thought... Wholesome consideration of the realities of life now took the place of fanciful dreams. Her mind, wonderfully fertilised, teemed again- not with vain imaginings, however, as heretofore, but with something more substantial. Purposeful thought was where the mere froth of sensuous seeing had been (Grand 357)

Beth’s reading allows for her to hone in on the “realities of life” over the “fanciful dreams” and “sensuous seeing” that overrun madwomen like Bertha. For Beth, reading is a turn toward the “substantial” social and moral issues of her world, and away from excessive, unrestrained

imagination. It is this “purposeful thought” that she has gained access to in the space of her secret attic, free from her husband’s instructions and degradation that is key to Beth’s activism, rather than, say, the simmering restlessness and outrage of Lady Audley or Bertha Mason.

Moreover, the self-discipline Beth comes to master through her attic reading not only applies to her intellectual life, but also to her sexual politics. Grand’s feminism certainly did not include sexual liberation for women- she believed firmly that women’s self respect was rooted self-control, which required a kind of strength and discipline morally debased men too often simply lacked. As in “New Aspects of the Woman Question,” Grand writes that for men, “liberty meant license” (32). On one level, it seems that this insistence on women overcoming, controlling, and repressing any kind of sexual desire is not quite a radical, or even realistic, feminist message. But for Grand (and Beth) this self-control is central to New Womanhood: in order for women like Beth to enact the social and moral change, they must rid themselves of Bertha’s carnality- erasing the madwoman, “at once intemperate and unchaste” from the attic. Beth proclaims: “Self-control is not slavery, but emancipation; to control our passions makes us lords of ourselves and free of our most galling bonds- the bonds of the flesh” (Grand 467). According to Grand, freedom for women meant the most extreme manifestation of Jane’s self-restraint, unhindered by the duality of Bertha’s unbridled excess.

Not only is Bertha’s sexual excess purged from Beth’s space of creative discipline and moral improvement in her attic, Bertha is also manifested outside of the attic in a character of the same name within *The Beth Book*. Bertha Petterwick is Dan’s patient (and, as we learn, mistress), whom he invites to live at his and Beth’s home to treat for her “hysteria.” She takes on not only Bertha Mason’s name, but her vulgarity and sensuality, hinted at the very first time Beth meets her: “She was a dark girl, good looking in a common kind of way, with a masculine stride

in her walk, a deep mannish voice; and not at all intellectual, but very practical: what some people consider a fine girl and others a coarse one, according to their taste” (Grand 396). Grand’s “taste” here is more than clear- Bertha Petterwick has not become “free of [her] most galling bonds” as Beth has (Grand also indicates that this lack of “self-respect” has something to do with Bertha Petterwick’s class in addition to her character- she is “coarse” and “common” whereas Beth is “refined”). Bertha Mason is similarly described as “dark,” “coarse,” and masculine (Brontë 250). If Beth’s womanliness- her innate compassion, sensitivity, and self-discipline, is the source of her morality, as Grand claims it is, then we know Bertha Mason and Bertha Petterwick’s morality has been perverted by their apparent masculinity. Their sexuality, not properly restrained, has made them less than woman, and, in Bertha Mason’s case, less than human.

Furthermore, Beth’s discovery of Dan’s and Bertha’s affair is one of the most interesting and clear revisions of *Jane Eyre* in the entire novel. Through Beth and Bertha Petterwick, Grand inverts the positions of Jane and Bertha Mason, and suddenly, the attic becomes something of sacred space of Beth’s righteousness, where she literally looks down upon Bertha’s intemperance. Peering out her attic window, Beth sees her husband and Bertha meet in the garden: “Bertha flushed crimson and became all smiles as soon as she saw him... Dan, after carefully satisfying himself that there was nobody about, sat down beside Bertha, put his arm round her waist and kissed her” (Grand 403). Now, Beth is the first wife in the attic, as her husband pursues a new young woman. But the sexualized threat, the uncontrollable emotion and desires, have been expelled to outside her space. And Beth is no madwoman- she does not respond with the violence or even outrage. Instead “Beth pitied Bertha, but with royal contempt. It all seemed so sordid and despicable. Jealous she was not” (Grand 403). Because of the moral

improvement Beth has developed and refined through her reading, she now has both the self-control and moral superiority to literally gazw down upon Bertha Petterwick's excess. Unlike *Lady Audley's Secret*, which attempts to imagine Bertha's existence beyond her imprisonment, *The Beth Book* makes every effort to expel and erase her from the narrative.

It is surprising, then, that a critic such as Showalter, particularly dedicated to tracking a tradition of women's writing over the course of the 19th century, would so entirely dismiss Beth's attic and what she does there as mere feminist fantasy.¹⁵ Not only is Beth's attic crucial for her development of a moral, feminist consciousness, it also allows for Grand to renegotiate Bertha's sexual threat in *Jane Eyre*. Beth's feminism has none of the tension manifest in the duality of Jane- and as seen in the final chapters of the novel, by expunging even the of uncontrolled passion, emotion, and self-indulgence, Beth becomes dangerously and destructively self-denying.

Grand's feminist(?) conclusion

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter organizes women authors throughout the 19th century as "feminine" (including Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot), "feminist" (including the sensation novelists such as Braddon), and "female" New Women (such as Grand). This framework implies a linear progression of women's activism and agency- literature begins mid century simply written by women, and then becomes politically conscious and socially engaged by the time Grand begins writing at the *fin de siècle*. While not to oversimplify her argument, even Showalter herself defends her commitment to "the idea, even the metaphor, of progress in

¹⁵ Showalter has since walked back some of criticism of the New Woman, and in of Grand in particular. In her Introduction "20 Years On: *A Literature of Their Own* Revisited," Showalter writes: "If New Women novelists withdrew in frustration from social engagement, they had good reason to do so and fought courageously against the conventions of the time" (xxx).

English women's writing, if only in terms of range and freedom of expression" (xxvi). On one level, this progression may seem more or less accurate, with Brontë and Braddon's "female" and "feminine" texts concluding rather conservatively. After all, *Jane Eyre* ends with Bertha dead and Jane happily married, *Lady Audley's Secret* with Lady Audley dead and Robert happily married. On the other hand, *The Beth Book* seems to move beyond the marriage plot to see Beth as a feminist orator and activist. Beth successfully moves from a life limited to the realm of the private, to one fully engaged in that of the public, advocating for the collective need of women in turn of the century England. For contemporary readers, it may seem obvious to conclude that Beth is the most liberated, that Grand has come the farthest in imagining a woman with agency and conviction could look like.

However, this easy progression from subjection to liberation over the course of the three novels only really works when they have been reduced to the most simplistic renditions of their plots, as I have done above. Throughout *The Beth Book*, Grand *does* significantly situate the personal as political- and importantly explores how 1890s public discourse comes to add leverage to women's protest in privacy of their homes. Yet, Grand's ending to *The Beth Book* has struck many critics as strange- both oddly fantastical and weirdly self-abnegating for Beth. After she leaves her husband, planning to pursue her career as a writer she had begun in her attic, Beth meets Arthur Brock, an American artist who lives in the same building in which she rents a room. When Arthur (whom she has only known for a few weeks) falls sick, Beth gives up her own work to care for him. All of her fiery dedication to her writing, her commitment to her own sense of self despite a husband who wished to degrade her, is entirely lost. Beth transforms into the stereotypical Angel of House, ministering to Arthur's needs with the utmost self-sacrifice. Beth sells her gowns, goes without food, and, in one exceptionally melodramatic moment, cuts

off all her hair to pay for Arthur's medical costs. Magnum insists that Beth's relationship with Arthur, and the self-sacrifice she performs for him, is still a kind of feminist subversion on Grand's part because "we can only assume that Beth and Arthur are contemplating the adulterous "free-love" relationship that Alfred proposed earlier" (190). However, this reading is complicated at best- while it is true that Beth is not technically divorced by the time she meets Arthur, there is certainly nothing explicitly sexual about their relationship. Perhaps even more damning for this interpretation, Grand herself was absolutely not in favor of "free love" or any such sexual liberation for women outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage- she urges "not indulgence but self-restraint, duty, and the joys of duty," and discourages the "self-indulgence [that] is at the bottom of all laxity of principle on social relations" (Grand, "Marriage Questions" 89). It seems unlikely then, Beth's behavior with Arthur is meant to in some way advocate for the "laxity" and "indulgence" of free love.

Furthermore, Beth's renunciation in these scenes borders on masochistic- suddenly her Jane-like self control loses much of its nuance, and becomes nearly a caricature of Victorian womanly self-abnegation. Where Jane desperately clings to a hope for some kind of freedom: "I desired liberty, for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer," by the end of Grand's novel, Beth dismisses such desires (Brontë 72). When asked by Arthur, "You don't clamour for more liberty, then?" she replies:

It depends upon what you mean by that. The cry for more liberty is sometimes the cry of the cowardly anxious to be excused from their share of the duties and labours of life; and it is also apt to be a cry not for liberty but for license. One must discriminate. (Grand 504)

Grand cannot seem to reconcile the tensions that Brontë embodies in Jane; Jane "desire[s] liberty" yet must settle for "a new servitude" (Brontë 72). Grand, fifty years after *Jane Eyre* is

published, does not even allow her heroine Jane's *yearning* for liberty- Beth's womanhood must be inextricably tied to "the duties and labours of life" and even with all the advancement of feminist community and advocacy at the *fin de siècle* Beth too must settle for "a new servitude."

Even as *Jane Eyre* concludes with Jane content in a conventional role as wife and mother, her return to Rochester is a powerful act of agency, defiance, and self-assertion:

I broke from St. John, who had followed. and would have detained me. It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play and in force. I told him to forbear question or remark; I desired him to leave me: I must, and would be alone. He obeyed at once.

Where there is energy to command well enough, obedience never fails. (Brontë 358)

Jane's absolute determination to fulfil her own wishes, to follow what she sees as right, assumes almost spiritual significance: she "assume[s] ascendancy" as her "powers" are finally felt in full force. Most importantly, this spiritual power is fully in service to Jane- "my" is italicized not once, but twice in this passage, emphasizing that it is not St. John or even a higher power driving Jane's actions, but herself. Here, *Jane* commands and *St. John* obeys. Jane's decision to return is most certainly not one of renunciation or self-denial; it is instead a culmination of her own will and resolution to seek personal fulfilment over the life of self-sacrifice St. John offers her as a missionary and his wife.

Contrastingly, while Beth ends the novel with a commitment to feminist advocacy, becoming a public orator on women's issues, this advocacy is still framed as kind of sacrifice. Beth's role is fundamentally political, yet somehow still within the bounds of womanly self-abnegation. After she is pushed into speaking at a public meeting, Beth suddenly shifts, just two pages before the close of the novel, from her desire to be a writer, to the call she feels to be a public speaker. Morgan Fritz claims that here Grand "successfully transforms the female public

speaker from a curious anomaly to the harbinger of feminist,” however, the actual language Grand uses to justify Beth’s career as a public speaker doesn’t translate quite so easily into an unequivocal victory (452). Quite oddly, Beth’s decision here seems almost out of her own control; she regards public speaking as her “vocation,” an “inevitable which she had been forced to recognize” (Grand 524). This vocation was “discovered by accident, and with dismay, for it was not what she would have chosen for herself in any way had it occurred to her that she had any choice in the matter” (Grand 524). Beth seems to have shockingly little agency in this decision that, on its surface, seems to be an affirmation of her newfound freedom and access to public life.

Grand’s justification for this lack of agency happens quickly, all within the same paragraph in which it occurs to Beth that she may be drawn to public oration. Here, Grand positions art, not as a means of both personal fulfillment and social/moral good, as she has done consistently throughout the novel in the 524 pages leading up to this point, but as a manifestation of self-indulgence. To be an artist, as Beth most desires, would be a “selfish life made up of impersonal delights” (Grand 524). Instead, it is the self-denial (that Grand saw as essential to womanhood) that drives her turn to public service:

She was debarred from [the selfishness of life as an artist], however, by grace of nature.

Beth could not have lived for herself had she tried. So that now, when the call had come, and the way in which she could best live for others was made plain to her, she had no thought but to pursue it. (Grand 524)

The grace of Beth’s womanly nature has forced her to renounce what she most derives happiness from- as an artist, Beth would live an inexcusably pleasure driven life “for herself” rather than “for others.” Here, Grand has positioned Beth’s role as an activist (arguably her most radical of

the entire novel) as paradoxically rooted quintessentially conservative Victorian altruism. Somehow, a woman willing to enter public life on her own accord, because she believes in her own advocacy and ability, is not quite imaginable for Grand. The fact that Beth can only fully enter the public realm as a means of “living for others,” and as a denial of herself, indicates an irresolvable tension in *The Beth Book* of self-control (dangerously bordering on self-abnegation) and the self-assertion necessary for feminist action. At the same time as Grand calls women to activism, to take up their personal oppression into the realm of the public and political as Beth does, she ultimately cannot translate her idealized true womanhood of the past into the kind of liberation demanded of the future.

CONCLUSION

As I have argued throughout this project, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Sarah Grand both rewrite *Jane Eyre* to situate their novels within a female literary tradition, at the same time as their heroines strive to envision themselves as a part of a lineage of women- both wicked and moral, suffering and strong, self-controlled and unrestrained. Over the course of the 19th century, writers like Braddon and Grand rewrote and reimagined *Jane Eyre* as means of grappling with what it meant to be a woman, to have agency, to suffer, and to be empathetic to the suffering of others.

Jane Eyre's influence obviously didn't end with *The Beth Book*- women would return to *Jane* again and again throughout the 20th century and into the present, most famously in Jean Rhys' 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the novella, Rhys imagines Bertha's life leading up to her imprisonment, we see her genteel poverty, her mad mother, and perhaps most importantly, her mistreatment by Rochester. Just as in *Lady Audley*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* invites the reader to empathize with Bertha's suffering- to see the madwoman as abused and misunderstood, failed by both the people around her and the larger system that allow for her abuse. Rhys clearly picks up where Braddon left off in rewriting Bertha's humanity, however these works are rarely read in conversation with one another, as part of a tradition of renegotiating and reimagining Bertha Mason. But I would argue that there is a sense of community and solidarity gained not only in recovering 19th century texts like *Lady Audley* and *The Beth Book*, as many second wave feminist literary scholars did, but by placing these texts in deliberate conversation with both one another and more canonical works, like *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

In the spirit of claiming the personal as politically (and literarily) significant, I want to conclude with my own experience reading *Jane Eyre* for the first time at 16 years old. My best friend, who had read it first with her own mother, lent me her copy, beautifully marked up, underlined, and annotated. She and I talked, after class in our public school hallways or sitting cross-legged with cups of tea on our bedroom floors, as I made my way through the novel chapter by chapter, of the ways in which we saw ourselves as Jane, both of us “poor, obscure, plain, and little.” We read and discussed alongside our favorite English teacher, a woman with wild hair and floral dresses we loved as Jane loves Miss Temple. Reading *Jane Eyre* now leaves me feeling at once like Beth- more moral, more brave, more sure of myself- and like Lady Audley- finding comfort in the idea that, nearly 170 years ago another woman felt the same restlessness, the same deep tension to keep one’s passions and discontent in check. But most importantly, reading *Jane Eyre* leaves me connected to both the women I have known, and the countless others who have loved Jane over the course of history. This sense of connection, of female lineage, was important and empowering for Braddon in the 1860s, Grand in the 1890s, and continues in the present to move women to self-knowledge, self-assertion, and activism.

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