

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 20.2 (Summer 2024)

“The Maddest Place in the World”: Liberty in *Lady Audley’s Secret*[\(1\)](#)

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<1>When *Lady Audley’s Secret* hit the shelves of Melbourne, Australia, in 1863, women read it in droves. Its main character’s drive to free herself from poverty when her only inheritance was insanity from her mother appealed to expatriates. Unlike George, who is allowed to pursue fortune across the globe in Melbourne’s gold fields, Lady Audley faces the ultimate confinement, prison or the “madhouse,” for securing hers at Audley Court.

<2>Closely reading *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s depictions of madness and the architecture of containment reveals the risks borne by women moving in the empire. Confining women through architecture also enables the control of sexuality and motherhood, and thus inheritance of property and maintenance of English culture. Men outnumbered women in the colony, and immigration policies encouraged English women to come and help populate it, but this plan required women to fulfill duties in the home.[\(2\)](#) Women were part of creating a new nation, a bit like Lady Audley creating a new life for herself, and many wanted to retain the stability and cultural clout that English-style buildings implied. Their simultaneous self-creation and imitation of British culture reenacts Lucy seeking Audley Court and marrying Sir Michael. The novel’s popularity in Melbourne indicates a complex, push/pull relationship with English identity borne out in the ways they built their new nation. However, Melbourne readers may have sensed a trap that Lucy does not see. In a telling revision of Braddon’s plot, the first Australian stage version of *Lady Audley’s Secret* ends with Lucy drinking poison in an act of suicide to avoid being taken to the Belgian madhouse. The colonial adaptation thus liberates her to claim agency over her life, agency denied to her in England, but it is a pyrrhic victory because it ends in her death anyway. Lady Audley’s deviant form of liberty and her punishment map onto Melbourne’s controversies over asylum reform, indicating that the

playwright and those favoring this adaptation recognized the injustice in both England and Australia's treatment of people they considered criminals.

<3>Dubbed “the maddest place in the world,” Melbourne witnessed a gold boom and subsequent gold fever, and reformers struggled to reconcile how to house people who lost sanity in pursuit of material wealth. Elizabeth Malcolm explains, “gold rushes produced great wealth for some; for many, however, they spelt, not just material disappointment, but psychological disaster” (49). In the novel, George, newly rich from Melbourne goldmines, returns to England with his sanity intact, and Lucy is locked up instead. The novel offers a critique of asylums, which trap women within their walls, but it also conveys the conflict between personal and national identities in ways expatriates might recognize. *Lady Audley's Secret* was popular as women sought individual freedom and opportunity in the new nation, even as that place began rebuilding Britain's restrictive roles into its jail and asylum designs.⁽³⁾ Lady Audley's confinement and the family's subsequent move from Audley Court mimic realities in nineteenth-century asylum and prison architecture debates, as reformers in Britain and Australia sought order and the appearance of control (Malcolm 46). There is a bait-and switch: Women are trapped and oppressed by the very system that claims to provide security, freedom, and salvation for them. In the end, Braddon and asylum reformers seem to agree that the control exerted by large-scale asylums strips women of their identity and destroys their freedom, but help comes too late or not at all. Instead, they suggest that smaller, cottage-style homes such as Robert's “fairy cottage” or a revitalized Yarra Bend asylum in Melbourne could provide healing rest, community, and a sense of connection to a less controlling version of the English past that would help them move forward.

I. Context in Mid-Victorian Psychology

<4>*Lady Audley's Secret* was published in the midst of contrasting psychological theories, some insisting on privacy for reflection, and others on connections between people. British culture lauded private space for promoting individual moral depth for those who could afford large homes, but it worried that too much privacy could provoke insanity.⁽⁴⁾ Diana Fuss explains: “the increasing [British] cultural value accorded to interiority [physical and mental] confronts each... with the same anxious query: is interiority protective or menacing? Liberating or confining? Progressive or regressive?” (13). Physical spaces could provide both privacy and connections, but not always at once. Psychologist William Hamilton maintained in 1859: “the infinitely greater part of our spiritual treasures, lies always beyond the sphere of consciousness, hid in the obscure recesses of the mind” (81). The effort to access the recesses of one's mind required privacy, he thought. Such privacy could also help

one access memories and connect, thereby helping create one's sense of self, according to psychologist William Carpenter in 1874. He argues that "the sense of continuous self depends on the awareness of the connections... termed 'consciousness of agreement' between the past and the present; that when memory breaks down, so does a coherent, directed identity" (qtd. in Taylor and Shuttleworth 71). Both Hamilton's and Carpenter's theories depend on a person having time and space to reflect on one's life, but Carpenter's differs in implying that connections between past and present might also be social. Privacy can therefore isolate and worsen one's mental state. Victorians theorized that "buildings were 'in themselves' therapies" that could connect the self with the past, both personal and cultural, and thus provide identity (Malcolm 50).

<5>For Helen Talboys, newly postpartum, and later as a childless Lady Audley, poverty and the prospect of losing stable property unbalance her mind. She breaks the connections with her past self by changing her name and assuming a new identity. Her choices revolve intrinsically on her role as a mother: she cannot raise Georgey without income, and her father has none. Her own mother left her nothing but traces of insanity. She cannot gain income as a new wife without assuming childlike inexperience. This severance between past and present leads to the type of insanity Carpenter's theory would later articulate. Lady Audley narrates breaks in her identity when she describes crossing "that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity" (295). Doing so weakens the memory that allows "a coherent, directed identity" (Taylor and Shuttleworth 71). When she finally tells her story to Robert, the revealed Helen Maldon-Talboys confesses that her mother "was a madwoman," and "I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell" (297). She cannot remember much about herself, but she does remember being struck by her mother's "girlish," powerless demeanor (298). Helen describes insanity spatially in terms of pacing a prison cell, but she also describes a temporal boundary that reduces the woman to a girl. Ironically, she seeks another sort of prison to stave off insanity and gather her many selves: the boudoir at Audley Court.

<6>If Lucy cannot connect to her own history, she may be able to assume British identity by presiding over Audley Court. The Court provides physical stability, but perhaps more importantly, it connects Lucy to national identity when her own as a striving mother has broken down. In opening the novel with a description of the house, Braddon suggests that its architecture reflects England's history as well as those of its inhabitants over time:

a house that could never have been planned by any mortal architect, but must have been the handiwork of that good old builder—Time, who, adding a room

one year, and knocking down a room another year, toppling over now a chimney coeval with the Plantagenets, and setting up one in the style of the Tudors; shaking down a bit of Saxon wall there, and allowing a Norman arch to stand here; throwing in a row of high narrow windows in the reign of Queen Anne, and joining on a dining-room after the fashion of the time of Hanoverian George I, to a refectory that had been standing since the Conquest, had contrived, in some eleven centuries, to run up such a mansion as was not elsewhere to be met with throughout the county of Essex. (8)

The house grows almost organically, individual but ingrained in British history. It connects the Lucy with time—and England—itsself. One can see why Lucy would look there for security. However, even within the same lines showing the place's unshakable connection with the past, Braddon also describes unpredictability and constant reinvention. Audley Court cannot stop time as its clock seems to do. Like the house that is not as stable as it seems, neither is Helen.(5)

<7>The house does provide its inhabitants with private rooms, idealized in Britain for separating genders and giving residents space to reflect, but even Lady Audley's "enchanted chamber," her boudoir, fails to secure her (250).(6)Foreshadowing the asylum setting that will later menace her with its watchful eyes, the boudoir at Audley Court cannot provide the true rest promised by the home.(7)In one sense, the private space fulfills its ideal function.(8) She can be with the baby shoe and lock of hair that tie her selves together, but they also remind her of her need to separate her identities. Such separation precipitates her downfall. Lady Audley's boudoir in Audley Court sets the precedent for not only her but also for other English women's ultimate loss of liberty. As Elizabeth Langland has argued, by allowing readers to watch her in her private boudoir and later admitting the preying eyes of George and Robert through an entrance unknown to Lady Audley, Braddon makes the space a panopticon, not a retreat, setting up the madhouse conclusion (7). Langland explains that the novel "illuminate[s] further the persistently troubling links between country house and madhouse and to expose the connections between the ideal upper middle-class lady and childishness associated, on the one hand, with asexuality and, on the other, with madness" (4). Boudoirs connect women to the social sphere and nation, but in this space, Lady Audley must become asexual so as not to disrupt Audley land inheritance or reveal her ties to George.

<8>Braddon shows that by breaking Lady Audley's identity with yet another new name, isolated from any family choice she made, Robert's enclosure of her in a "madhouse" ruins her mind and infantilizes her. Robert destroys the possibility of "directed identity" by removing connections to her past and from Britain's

stability.⁽⁹⁾ Dr. Mosgrave, whom Robert Audley hires to diagnose Helen, agrees that she is not really “mad” but desperate and “dangerous,” leading him to exile her: “To a place in which you will have ample leisure to repent the past” (328). He evokes the ideal of resting in private, but the windows watch her, and she cannot see herself as a unified whole because of her splitting identities over time.

<9>Helen finds that the very system claiming to provide security and salvation for women is a thinly disguised prison for their sexual transgressions. Passing leafless branches that trembled “like shadows of paralytic skeletons,” Helen “gave a little scream as she looked out the coach window” (328). Even the horses are made “wretched” as they pass windows that “looked out like the pale eyes of weary watchers upon the darkness of the night” (329). The windows watch, and Helen attempts to look back at them to gain control: “My lady, watchful and quiet as the cold stars in the wintry sky, looked up at these casements with an earnest and scrutinizing gaze” (329). The windows are partially “shrouded,” however, a term often reserved for funeral garb. The place was built for death, and instead of resting there, her mind will suffocate and die, her name unfamiliar. It is a far cry from her hopes that by ruling Audley Court, she could grow into a role that would sustain her. Helen rejects the “*maison de santé*” description of the place; it is not a “house of health” but of death. “‘I know where you have brought me,’ she said. ‘This is a MADHOUSE’” (329). Lady Audley’s horror upon arrival at Villebrumeuse deepens when she detects “the shadow of a woman with a fantastic head-dress, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backwards and forwards before the window” (329). Insanity is coded here as a dehumanized, possibly foreign, pacing “creature” to be surveilled.

II. Why Melbourne?

<10>Melbourne’s women, like Lady Audley, sought opportunities and a new life, but many were conflicted about how to hold their identity together without explicit ties to English roots. Susan K. Martin argues that for colonial readers, *Lady Audley’s Secret* could create Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” that “induces sense of national identity... In British Settler cultures this incipient community is underpinned, or undermined, by an/other imagined community—the sense of a British self which endures however attenuated the connection to the heart of Empire might be” (Martin 17).⁽¹⁰⁾ Lucy’s exile from England to the madhouse punishes her for trying to remake herself. She loses both her national and personal identity in the process, whereas her husband, George, receives no punishment aside from Helen’s attack for abandoning his family to exploit the gold fields of the British Empire in Australia.⁽¹¹⁾ Lucy’s sense of instability as she responds to desertion may have been

all the more resonant for colonial readers trying to build a “little England” that “conforms to British norms” while representing new beginnings, according to Toni Johnson-Woods (120). Many colonial women might therefore identify with Lucy’s feeling that she could balance herself in a place that connects her identity with that of Britain. “And Australian female readers could reinscribe on Braddon’s female bodies their lived colonial experiences” (Johnson-Woods 115). Melbourne’s women prospered enough, as Sharon Crozier-De Rosa writes, to “symboli[ze] as female” the “emerging new Australian nation” (37), and they were rightly proud of the shift away from Britain’s restrictions. However, recalling the psychological idea of past memories creating present coherence, a break from British stability could create anxiety. Richard Bonwick articulates Melbournians’ mixed feelings:

the values of frugality and industry allowed any able man to aspire above his station at birth. A society based on this optimism and work ethic would poorly tolerate those less able to get on because of physical or mental infirmity. In fact, they were an affront to the mores of the society. These failures needed to be locked away from the mainstream....still, money allowed a strong sense of social benevolence and personal philanthropy. (Bonwick 76-7)

If men’s failures due to “mental or physical infirmity” were an “affront to the mores of society,” visibly poverty-stricken women presented an even worse look for a nation that wanted to do better. *Lady Audley’s Secret*, which was so popular in Melbourne that it was remade into theater performances and reprinted in family magazines such as *The Australian Journal*, taps into the concern that they were working through culturally: the spirit of opportunity and social benevolence confronted with failure and homelessness.

<11>Jails and asylums in Melbourne housing desperate people were being built largely according to British models, even when locally conceived designs better addressed the needs of residents. Connection to national identity thus overtook consideration of personal liberty, in spite of the colony’s promise of freedom. Melbourne’s Gaol (1845, 1859) copied London’s Pentonville Prison (1842) in its use of solitary confinement to force penitence.⁽¹²⁾ This building ties inmates to British identity by copying British architecture, but in so doing, it punished women by trapping them in isolation, thereby destroying their minds.⁽¹³⁾ Melbourne Commission reports from 1870 studying “lunacy” admitted that many people locked in asylums were not insane but “simply had difficulty in surviving ‘the struggle for life’” (Bonwick 72), recalling Lady Audley who unsuccessfully “fought the battle” of life (Braddon 294). Nevertheless, “discarded wives and widows” (Bonwick 9) were often confined to jails and mental asylums in Melbourne that mimicked

prevalent styles in England emphasizing reform but instead furthering madness through isolation or the opposite, overcrowding and institutionalization (Bonwick 66).

<12>The Yarra Bend Asylum (1848), Melbourne's first, used a sprawling cottage design that grew decrepit and overcrowded. If funded, it could have appealed to the British emphasis on picturesque cottage styles favored in England in the 1840s (Vidler 63). Instead, for its second institution, reformers chose to copy England's Colney Hatch asylum in building Kew Asylum across from Yarra Bend (Bonwick 89). Planned in the 1850s and built in the '60s, Kew replaced Yarra Bend and reflected the hope that buildings could cure. "Unlike Yarra Bend, Kew was a truly public building: it was meant to be seen from afar, and was intended to display both the progress of enlightened medical science and the benevolence of the newly established and newly wealthy colony of Victoria. However, the design was actually 'not innovative'" by the time it was built (Malcolm 51). The administrative block dominated the façade, and the halls inside kept men and women apart in accordance with British gender norms (Malcolm 53). This plan emphasized administrative power while ill-treating those inside. Men were taught work skills that could transfer outside of the asylum, while women were confined inside for mundane chores that promised no growth if they ever left (54). What is critical here is that women were not being rehabilitated; they would never return to being mothers or earning income to become independent. Although Kew was explicitly designed not to feel like a prison by moving away from solitary confinement, it institutionalized people; in forsaking smaller cottage designs, it crowded people and "'personal liberty' was 'much restricted'" (Malcolm 59).⁽¹⁴⁾ Separated from the hope of a new beginning or even connection with the past, many inmates committed suicide.

<13>Sensing that they were in the midst of debate about how to house and reform women who struggled to make it in the new nation, one they hoped would be better for women's liberties than England had been, the Melbourne public responded with ambivalence to Lady Audley's improper treatment. Australian newspapers' reviews often dismissed *Lady Audley's Secret*: "It is a good galloping novel, like a good gallop, to be enjoyed rather than criticized," discouraging contemplation of its lessons ("Lady Audley's Secret" *The Mercury* 3). Other columnists noted that the theater would run the play alongside *The Burlesque of Colleen Bawn* or *Aladdin, or The Wonderful Scamp* ("The Lady Don Performances" 2 and "Current Topics" 2). Such notices convey the story's omnipresence and melodramatization of women, alongside tales appropriated by Britain. Lady Audley's drama is exciting, but again, not in keeping with the British womanhood ideal that immigration policies imagined. Lady Audley felt what many did: the perils of trying to make it, and entrapment

punishing those who did not. Another writer compares Lady Audley's story to the real-life Constance Kent, who admitted to killing children in 1860 and served time in London's Millbank Prison before emigrating to Melbourne ("Constance"). He thus underscores the perceived danger of her actions: "Read Miss Braddon and her class, and your intellectual stomach is likely to be about as much in order as if you had been drinking a couple of glasses of raw rum" ("Our Lady Novelists" 4). The writer's tone is amusing, but it disapproves of these narratives' "bad" women who defy motherhood and were thus banished.

<14>"Our Lady Novelists" and other articles warned against the novel's "immorality" and influence on readers, bringing law and psychology to the conversation. "Baits for Suicide," published in both *The Herald* in December 1863 and the *Mount Alexander Mail* in January 1864, condemns the novel's handling of suicide and cites the *Medical Critic and Psychological Journal* to back itself:

With the English writers of the present day, as a rule, suicide is the tragic culmination of utter misery or of criminal folly; the act of an insensate, or of those whose sense of moral accountability has been blunted or extinguished by wretchedness or immorality, a crime against the state, a sin against God...George Talboys first missing from Audley suggests — suicide; A row of dismal unfinished houses suggests—suicide. Lady Audley, in her dressing room, waiting for tidings of the arson she had committed, suggests — suicide. Lady Audley, housed in the Belgian -asylum, suggests— suicide. ("Baits for Suicide" *The Herald* 4)

The writer connects mental and physical spaces and does not specifically condemn women, signaling some sympathy for Lady Audley from the Australian press in spite of treating suicide as a "crime against the state" in some cases. He carefully distinguishes between "utter misery" and "wretchedness"— conditions often created in desperate poverty— and "immorality" and "criminal" folly. The conditions have separate origins. Robert's treatment of Helen/ Lady Audley is worse; he exiles and traps her because her transgressions as a desperate woman threaten the order of Audley Court, mischaracterizing "wretchedness" as a "crime" and "sin."

<15>Notably, the most prominent theater versions of *Lady Audley's Secret* in Melbourne prevent Robert's revenge by changing the ending, indicating some willingness in Melbourne to change the ending for women like Lucy. She drinks poison once she is "cornered" instead of dying in the Belgian asylum under a false name ("Monday" 4). This play does not merely suggest suicide, but completes it. The 8 June, 1863 issue of Melbourne's principal newspaper, *The Argus*, explains:

“At the Theatre Royal, on Saturday evening, was produced what is styled in the bills ‘the great sensation play’ ‘Lady Audley’s Secret’ in five acts. In these days of sensation performances, it will, perhaps, be considered quite unfashionable to regret that the stage which has been recently occupied by representations of the legitimate drama should be given up to emotional heroics” (“Monday” 4). “[H]eroics” are fashionable, and Lucy, not George, is the hero. He is merely “a lucky digger with £20,000 from... his ultimate adventure to Australia, whence he has returned wealthy.” On the other hand: “Hemmed in on all sides by exposure and danger, Lady Audley takes poison, and dies after forgiving and being forgiven by all the personages interested in her fitful career” (“Monday” 4). She escapes by taking action. The review says that she is “anxious” but notes nothing of the novel’s “madness.” Instead, all forgive each other. She gets to keep her identity intact, if not her body. She never goes to Villebrumeuse; she does not die alone as Madame Taylor. The writer concludes that the play, though long, was well-received. The colonial audience approves of her escape from the asylum, perhaps aware that the institutions built to help women trap them instead, but they are as yet unwilling to let them live.

<16>The June 1863 production was the first of three main adaptations performed in Melbourne from the 1860s-1880s (Martin 56). Written by Julius Vogel, a Melbourne gold-miner and journalist who became the Governor of New Zealand in 1873, it was successful, “filling the theatre for the usual week-long run” (Martin 65).⁽¹⁵⁾ Forty-two years after it premiered, journalists still interpreted the suicide ending as a way to avoid the lunatic asylum. A January 1905 column by *The Argus* writer “Autolycus” memorializes the life of actor Marie St. Denis, who often played Lady Audley and died by suicide herself at age twenty: “In the last named play her acting was very impressive. It was startlingly so in the last scene where Lady Audley took poison to escape imprisonment in a madhouse” (Autolycus 5). While Susan K. Martin suggests that this ending “contained” transgressions within the female body so that audiences did not see the worse sight of the asylum (64), such containment at least reflects Lady Audley’s choice. She cannot find liberty, but she maintains control of her life. This version appeared many times in Australia over the next few decades, with a New South Wales advertisement in January 1882 proclaiming that the Victoria Theatre’s production “by Sir Julius Vogel, of Miss Bradley’s [*sic*] novel, ‘Lady Audley’s Secret,’ will be produced in five acts...In this version all the sensational incidents and effective dialogue will be carefully preserved” (“Victoria Theatre” 5). They expected a “grand success” from this performance. Vogel eventually retired to England where he wrote what he might have envisioned as the ultimate alternative ending: *Anno domini 2000; or, Woman’s Destiny*. “It was set in a futuristic world where poverty no longer existed and women held all the top

government positions. The book was published in London in 1889, but sold badly” (“Biography”). Having used government positions himself to annex land for the British Empire, he died arguing for more rights for women to avoid poverty-driven desperation.

<17>Other adaptations avoid the madhouse ending but weaken Lady Audley’s resolve. The second version in Melbourne reproduced a London production. It ends with Lady Audley’s demise but denies her agency. Written by George Roberts, it shortens the novel to two acts and exaggerates Lady Audley’s madness. Her last line, delivered to Robert Audley, exclaims: “You have conquered a – MADWOMAN!” (Roberts 62). Audley gets the finale: “The soul still lingers, but the mind, the mind is gone!” (Roberts 62). Yevgeniya Traps argues: “the novel encourages interest in the psychological implications of her actions. In the hands of the male playwright, in contrast, Lady Audley is made an unambiguous monster” (64). She loses the choice to take poison and instead concedes defeat. When this version came to Melbourne’s Haymarket Theatre in September, 1864, advertisements bragged that *Lady Audley’s Secret* was “the most popular novel of the nineteenth century, prepared originally for the St. James’s Theatre, London, by George Roberts” (“Advertising” 8). It hails the British connection that pathologizes the woman in the end. While there may be other unlicensed adaptations, a third commonly produced version premiered in September, 1871, and Lady Audley maintains control of her mind but dies of shock upon seeing George. A reviewer for *The Argus* explains that “The clever fiction which first introduced Miss Braddon to literary fame has been a fruitful subject for stage adaptation... The play produced on Saturday evening is by Mr. Brougham, an American adapter, who has handled his subject very skillfully” (“Princess’s” 5). Like Vogel’s version, it ends in death but without reducing Lady Audley to a “monster,” as in Roberts’ London-based version. All of these productions watch Lady Audley’s demise while hiding even the idea of the asylum from viewers’ sight.

<18>Asylums opened in Melbourne with optimism that they could help people (Bonwick 65, Nelson 8), but as in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, they concealed transgressors from public view and often led to suicides widely reported in *The Argus*. One letter dated in 1856 to the editor praises doctors at Yarra Bend for offering humane treatment: “It has been my fortune to witness in this gold country a resort and refuge for those whom God has afflicted,” namely his wife, whom he has committed for no given reason (“The Yarra Bend: To the Editor” 5). Unfortunately, the spaces promising cure trap and kill instead, like Audley Court and Villebrumeuse. Henry Jones, the foreman of the jury that oversaw an inquest for the suicide of Ellen Davidson at Yarra Bend, describes women so desperate to escape

its confines that they stacked furniture beneath windows, only to fail and commit suicide instead. His “Suicide at Yarra Bend” letter to *The Argus* in 1864 conveys no sense of the “forgiveness” that satisfied audiences of the play only a year before. For women who faced the asylum, suicide was a horrifying way out when physical escape was impossible. He explains, “The jury...were ‘unanimously of the opinion that the cupboard or dresser which served as a ladder to enable the lunatics to make their escape, should have been removed long ago’” (“Suicide” 7). Women, including Davidson, had evidently transformed the makings of domestic comfort, cupboards and dressers, to free themselves from the madhouse. Instead of helping them, the foreman calls for removal of the furniture where they are “confined.” This constitutes control of women’s bodies disguised as care. They are no longer women but “unfortunate creatures confined” within a system that kills them for trying to escape.

<19>In yet another example of mistreating a woman for leaving the house, a *Mercury* article lamenting the overcrowding at Yarra Bend tells a story of Catherine Nolan, aged nineteen or twenty, who was last seen “confined in a jacket, a violent maniac” (“The Yarra Bend” 3). She was newly “arrived in the colony,” and employed by a family in St. Kilda, not far from Melbourne. The writer empathizes with the woman and points to the inevitability of mental illness under such treatment, but his solution is to build bigger madhouses, not to solve the underlying poverty or meeting her ambition. Although “strongly recommended for her good moral and general conduct,” Catherine supposedly had a “slight irregularity in the system” and became “frightened on opening the street door.” The writer explains that her fright was due to a “fit of hysteria, not uncommon in girls of her age.” She may have been threatened by someone in the street or otherwise feared her loss of position, but no cause other than female hysteria is given. The family employing her sent for the police, who then confined her in “lock up” at the Western Gaol. She faced a week of medical examinations there, and by the time she was moved to Yarra Bend, “she was we need hardly add, a dangerous lunatic, probably for life” (3). “Let any mother realise to herself the effect of that night upon a girl of nineteen so suffering. Let her imagine her own daughter thus dealt with for a temporary complaint, requiring the tenderest care and most delicate treatment even a mother could bestow” (3). The author, clearly moved by Catherine’s plight, implies that mothering would have helped Nolan, who is a bit like Helen Maldon in lacking such maternal comfort because of poverty and movement. The “madhouse” is no mother, however, and it pulled troubled girls off the streets to prevent them from becoming “bad” mothers like Helen or those in Melbourne’s jail.[\(16\)](#)

<20>Readers of *Lady Audley's Secret* were therefore also reading constant coverage of women made suicidal and “mad” by spaces meant to restore them. The novel strikes a nerve and points to debates about whether control through large institutions would secure women, or whether to invest in something better. By the end of the 1860s, officials began seeking to confine “mad” behavior like Lady Audley’s—behavior driven in part by an inability to secure the ideal country house and the stabilization it promised.⁽¹⁷⁾ Robert Audley is not interested in helping, only keeping her from polluting Audley Court with her presence or worse, bearing an heir to displace him. By the novel’s end, Lucy simply wants to sleep: “Take me away...and let me sleep! Let me sleep, for my brain is on fire” (311). Given the asylum debates, one can see why a Melbourne audience might count among the “heroics” Lucy’s suicide to get herself away and to “sleep,” thus avoiding such a fate as Yarra Bend or even, as it turns out, the planned building of Kew. Poverty and lack of hope seem to spur her mother’s mental illness in her, but it is an illness exacerbated by material conditions, not unlike the condition of Melbourne’s prison and asylums.

III. Conclusion: The Fairy Cottage

<21>People needing help, like Helen and her mother, were thus institutionalized, while men with means, like Robert, Michael, and George, could live in a “fairy cottage” (378). Grace Wetzel argues: “In the end, there exists no stable space or community for the nineteenth-century homeless woman, who lives staging and seeking identity with little realization or deliverance” (91). The novel concludes with Audley Court “shut up,” “Madame Taylor” dead, and yet the “good people...all happy and at peace” (380). They live in a “fantastical dwelling-place of rustic woodwork, whose latticed windows look upon the river” (378). Cottages such as this were often idealized in Britain because they allowed separation between people and gave them respite from each other inside but proximity to others outside.⁽¹⁸⁾ James Buckingham, MP, thought “the diverse afflictions of mankind required a systematic answer for their solution: a complete model town that combined in its social organization, architectural plan, and institutional structures all the remedies for the national evils of midcentury” (Vidler 63). Cottages could help create such a town. An 1855 design by W. Butterfield of Yorkshire grouped a “church, school, and vicarage supplemented by cottages like a ‘model village.’ The picturesque and associational simplicity of the former ‘cottage’ was replaced by formal and moralistic simplicity” (Muthesius 72). Braddon gently critiques Britain for normalizing the attainment of this ideal for men but offers Melbourne readers, who dismiss George as a “lucky digger,” a chance to do better. The cottage design of Yarra Bend could have reflected Butterfield’s and Buckingham’ ideal that was even

promoted by psychologists in England. “As early as 1876 [Kew’s] superintendent conceded that 'modern opinion' had turned against large asylums and that smaller cottage style institutions were preferable to huge barrack-like complexes such as Kew” (Malcolm 59).⁽¹⁹⁾ Had Melbourne’s mental health reformers noted the advantages of Yarra Bend’s cottage style, funded it instead of imitating Britain’s barracks, they could have moved more quickly into community care models: connection without surveillance. Unfortunately for Melbourne’s women, especially, reformers did not take Braddon’s cue to reform the cottage as the cure. They might have realized the chance to reconceive home as a community and create new connections outside Britain.

IV. Current Debates

<22>Mental health advocacy dominates public discourse in the 2020s, and the 1860-70s debates about how best to house and treat those in peril persist. Of current debate is whether “deinstitutionalization” and resulting shifts to community-based care have worked, and to the extent that they have not, to figure out why. Winnie S. Chow and Stefan Priebe’s review of the term “institutionalization” from 1961 through the 2010s, including in Australia, notes that while many people with severe mental illness [SMI] need full-time residential care (as in Kew) (8), most could be released into newly established “alternative community-based mental health services” (rebuilt Yarra Bend cottages, for example) (2). There, “the discharged patients experienced a higher quality of life compared to the hospitalized patients” (Chow 10). Patients “acquired friends and confidants” and could “gain domestic and community living skills, although no change was found in the patients’ clinical state or in their problems of social behavior” (Chow 10). It may seem ironic that Robert Audley finds respite at the novel’s end in such a community, where his “friends and confidants” assuage his anxieties but provide only outward change in his “social behavior.” He marries, but his attitude towards Lady Audley remains unchanged.

<23>Writing from Australia, Alan Rosen explains that funding cuts have strained community-based services: “the closing of institutions in Australia has been half-hearted and incomplete; it has not been accompanied by full transfer of real investment in mental health services and facilities” (Rosen 21). As a result of budget cuts, “Individuals living with mental illness are now often living on the open streets or incarcerated, and on average die 20 years sooner than the rest of us” (Warburton 115). New York City psychiatry resident Eric Nelson calls the incarceration rates of mentally ill people “a new dark secret” (9), no better than that of the 1830s that propelled Dorothea Dix and others to establish humane asylums based on reforms in England (Nelson 8). Psychiatrists Katherine Warburton and Stephen M. Stahl call

this a pendulum swing back to institutionalizing people who need it, but funding is at the core of the problem (115). They call for a new version of the institution replacing the barracks with an idea that “make[s] room in our medical, psychological, advocacy, and academic environments to talk about changing the ethics of our approach to this disease” (Warburton 117).

<24>Lady Audley, who was never ill but only “dangerous” (Braddon 328), needs neither the institution where Robert confines her nor community-based mental health cottages, but rather a society supportive of women seeking meaningful lives, wherever they find home. Her only “illness” was demanding more than the men of her life allowed. One can hope the pendulum does not swing back to containing such desire for liberty.

Notes

(1)Melbourne, Australia. Ephraim Zox, chairman of the 1884-6 Victorian Royal Commission on Asylums for the Insane and Inebriate, coined this phrase (qtd. in Bonwick 62 and Malcolm 49). “[L]unacy was widely perceived to be rampant in Victoria...Victoria during the 1880s had the highest rate of psychiatric institutionalisation of any of the Australian colonies” (Malcolm 49).(^)

(2)In the 1850s, *The Lady’s Newspaper* published numerous articles on the British Female Emigration Society. Later in the century, *The Logan Witness* added: “There is especially a want [of] women...who, while not disdaining to take their share in domestic work, can bring and shed around them the sweeter influences of life” (“The Women’s Emigration Society” qtd. in Donnelly 106).(^)

(3)Sharon Crozier-De Rosa and others have argued that, while “the emerging new Australian nation was increasingly symbolized as female,” by the end of the nineteenth century, “the role of women in the construction of that new nation was rarely acknowledged” (37).(^)

(4)Writing in 1880, architect J. J. Stevenson contends that the English love of “seclusion and retirement” makes it necessary to isolate individual rooms (48).(^)

(5)See Eva Badowska for more on tracking time and space through Audley Court and Lucy’s boudoir.(^)

(6)British architectural writer Robert Kerr (1864) describes the need for privacy and more separation between family and servants as the family’s status rises (64). “What we would call in England a comfortable house is a thing so intimately identified with

English customs as to make us apt to say that in no other country but our own is this element of comfort fully understood” (Kerr qtd. in Rybczynski 125).(^)

(7)Elizabeth Langland cites Alberti’s 15th-C treatise on patriarchal authority, architecture, spatial order and gender (7) as well as Mark Wigley’s “Housing of Gender” (1992) to argue that architecture helps produce the gender division and controls sexuality (7).(^)

(8)Ilona Dobosiewicz cites John Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” to argue that Victorians sought the “space of the home... Only at home, he could be truly himself” (97).(^)

(9)Citing *The English Maiden: Her Moral and Domestic Duties* (1842), Andrea Kaston Tange illustrates that for Britons, “the power of the nation depends upon the sanctity of the home” (33), making a Helen’s revelation of bigamy in the attempt to secure a house a threat.(^)

(10)John Plotz argues that portable objects like periodicals, including those such as *The London Journal* that carried *Lady Audley’s Secret* from London to colonial audiences, become what he calls “repositories of mobile memory” (Plotz xiv).(^)

(11)Susan K. Martin explains: “For Australians the diggings were seen, in Melbourne and in the other colonies, as the cause of wife desertion across the 1850s and beyond...At other sites around Melbourne and Victoria this abandonment was attributed either to the diggings or to the unsettled nature of work and family life in Australia...George’s disappearance to Australia, then, might almost be code for desertion” (Martin 75). Australian readers, following this logic, might have had little patience for George and viewed Lady Audley in a positive light.(^)

(12)Poor women in Melbourne who killed abusive husbands or drowned children they could not afford to keep were also housed in Melbourne’s jail (“Women & Children of the Gaol”).(^)

(13)Isolation’ was listed as a cause of ‘moral insanity’, and leading to admission for 92 patients in the decade” from 1869-1878 (Bonwick 66).(^)

(14)Richard Bonwick argues that “barracks-style” asylums “provided an embodiment of the contemporary ideas of madness in Victorian society” (96). He explains: “The various colonies established in Australia in the eighteenth century were outposts of the British empire. The society was a replica of contemporary England, transposed 12000 miles to a landscape completely unlike the British Isles”

(Bonwick 7). Such replication meant that in reality, “Practitioners, theories and architecture were all imported from the ‘mother country’” (Bonwick 7). As *Mercury* and *Argus* coverage shows, the change towards enormous asylums resulted as much from local public pressure as from top-down government surveillance.(^)

(15)For more on Vogel’s political interests, which mostly include imperialist advocacy for changing Melbourne trade policies, reducing export duty on gold, annexing Fiji for Britain, and funding public works projects in New Zealand, see Kennedy.(^)

(16)Sally Swartz explains that colonial asylums used psychiatry to deal with “social dissent, or with legitimate suffering caused by the yoke of colonialism” (172). This essay has looked mainly at Lady Audley and white settler women who might be “baited into suicide” by fiction as the newspaper feared, or catch her “moral insanity.” The tendency to pathologize threats to the dominant social order, including homeless or, in the case of Catherine Nolan, “hysterical” women, exemplifies Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb’s analysis of settler fears of contagion, including from each other, and even as people tried to reform asylum architectural design (“The Yarra Bend,” *Mercury* 3). The asylum itself was built on land deeply associated with the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people in the early years of Victoria’s colonial history and thus also represents imperial violence (“Protecting”).(^)

(17)The Yarra Bend” and “Suicide at Yarra Bend” authors’ insistence on changing the asylums reflects “important new ideas about asylum architecture” that “emerged during the 1830s and 1840s” in Britain, Germany, and the United States (Malcolm 50).(^)

(18)See W. Hale White’s “House Building and Home Building” (1877).(^)

(19)“[t]here is also evidence that even gender segregation failed at times. Given that the asylums were small, and generally poorly funded, there was little or no provision for wealthier patients within them” (Swartz 167). While this language sounds condemnatory, the lack of gender and class segregation presents positive opportunities.(^)

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