



Monomania and Same-Sex Desires in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862)

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Abstract

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) diagnoses Robert Audley as a monomaniac. With interest in psychiatry rising in nineteenth-century Britain, "monomania" was used to describe those who went against the norm. More specifically, it was used to describe those who had an obsessive interest in one subject. Robert's monomaniacal nature arises from the homoerotic feelings he feels for his friend, George Talboys. After their time at Eton College, a school that encouraged male love, they reunited years later. George subsequently goes missing and Robert begins a journey to understand his homoerotic desire. By looking at the works of John Barlow, Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol, and James Cowles Prichard, I show how Braddon's knowledge and usage of psychiatry can be seen and examined in her novel about marriage and desire. In addition, I argue that Braddon demonstrates how the Victorian idea of masculinity is intertwined with definitions of monomania and that these gendered concepts affect Robert as much as his psychological diagnosis.

Keywords: Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Eton, Masculinity, Barlow, Esquirol, Prichard, Monomania

Introduction

The idea behind Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) expanded beyond a short story and into a novel that is both beloved and criticized by many. The sensational novel's start began in John Maxwell's fiction magazine *Robin Goodfellow* (1861) and introduced characters such as Lady Audley, Robert Audley, and George Talboys before being published as a standalone novel in 1862. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* explores the friendship between Robert and George in the midst of solving the mystery behind Lady Audley's secret identity. Meeting again years later, Robert and George quickly become friends once again until George's disappearance. Feeling obligated to search for his beloved friend, Robert undergoes his own personal transformation in an attempt to understand his homoerotic feelings for George while eventually becoming the hero of the novel. Richard Nemesvari explores this topic in depth and

explains that “by portraying her putative hero, Robert Audley, as driven by homoerotic desires, Braddon exposes the self-interested and self-protective denial which underlies Victorian patriarchal society” (Nemesvari, 1995, p. 516). Yet as Braddon’s characterization of Robert continues, the text specifically reflects on how Robert Audley’s desires are tied to the nineteenth-century psychological disorder of “monomania”: the narrator explicitly states that “Robert Audley is a monomaniac” (Braddon, 1862, p. 2:245). Notably, Robert’s monomaniacal nature is referenced multiple times throughout the novel as linked to his homoerotic feelings for George.

Braddon’s interest in the subject of madness, specifically monomania, inspired the work of this paper, which explores how advances in nineteenth-century psychological movements around monomania might have shaped Braddon’s representation of Robert Audley. I work to examine the medical treatise of psychological theorists including the British Reverend John Barlow (1798-1869), French medical professional Jean Étienne Dominique Esquirol (1772-1840), and British physician James Cowles Prichard (1786-1848) as they inform Braddon’s representation of the “monomaniac” Robert Audley. I begin by studying John Barlow’s work, as it helps inform Nemesvari’s claim that Braddon’s novel works to challenge Victorian patriarchal society through the homoerotic relationship between Robert and George. I show how, as part of his work on monomania, Barlow builds a strong connection between masculinity and insanity and defines what it means to be a man in British society. Furthermore, I exhibit how Barlow’s concept of intellectual insanity overlaps with the symptoms connected to Robert’s monomania. Then, I examine Esquirol’s (1845) and Prichard’s (1835) writing on monomania. After elaborating the concepts from these medical treatises, I argue that Braddon’s characterization of homoerotic relationships through the notion of monomania demands analysis of related matters, from the differences between homoerotic relationships and heterosexual ones to Robert’s own version of masculinity as he works to solve the mystery of the novel. I reexamine Braddon’s depiction of Robert’s homoerotic desires through the lens of the aforementioned medical treatises to demonstrate how Braddon’s interpretation of madness suggests that she has a positive attitude towards homoerotic desire, which ultimately proves that Robert is not actually afflicted with monomania so much as he is victimized by the social norms of the time.

A Review of Nineteenth-Century Psychiatry

During the nineteenth century, adherence to British notions of masculinity was as significant for determining one's sanity as much as for determining one's spiritual devotion. Reverend John Barlow, who played a significant role in the scholarship of British nineteenth-century psychiatry, contributed to this discourse when he wrote *Man's Power Over Himself to Control Insanity* (1849). During his time at the Royal Institution, Barlow wrote that to properly educate a man, one must "supply him with the power of controlling his feelings, and his thoughts, and his actions" (Barlow, 1849, p. 59). Peter Stearns refers to this thinking as "emotional culture" and defines it as "a complex of interrelated norms, standards, and ideals that govern the endorsement, the expression, and ultimately, even the acknowledgment of emotions" (Stearns, 1993, p. 36). To be considered masculine, then, men needed to control their emotions to lead their families.

Furthermore, Barlow also developed a concept of monomania as "intellectual insanity" important for the central novel of this study, *Lady Audley's Secret*. Here, Barlow replaces the term "insanity" with "mental derangement" and separates the study of "mental derangement" into two categories: the "vital" and "intellectual" force. Barlow suggests that the disturbance of the nervous system, including the brain, via the vital force can result in delusions and memory loss. He argues that intellectual force, in contrast, affects emotions, reason, and thought. The insufficiency of the intellectual force produces the loss of control over one's emotions, which may leave a person susceptible to full mental derangement. A case study completed by Barlow not only supports his findings, but also creates a connection between the intellectual force and Robert Audley's monomania, a concept explored later in this thesis. In this study, Barlow speaks about the master of a parish workhouse master who was constantly being accused of embezzlement. Described as a "taciturn, low-spirited man" by nature, the false accusations "preyed on his mind" until a "profound melancholy was the result" (Barlow, 1849, p. 52). The man, "unaccustomed to self-control, becomes occupied by one thought," and is soon sent to a private mental health facility. After being released from the asylum, the workhouse master's mental derangement was kept in check by his wife at home, where Barlow stated that his "mind had become calm" from being "placed in a situation of comparative ease" (Barlow, 1849, p. 53). With the accusations proven false, the parish workhouse master became free from both stress and madness.

Barlow's research links masculinity and madness while simultaneously forging an relationship between Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and the world of psychiatry in the nineteenth century. Though Barlow also described a concept of monomania in the traditional vein, Robert has more in common with Barlow's concept of the patient with a derangement of the intellectual force. It was not until the works of French psychiatrist Philippe Pinel and Jean Étienne Dominique that the understanding of monomania was ultimately popularized. In 1806, Pinel was the first to gain insight into the disorder, but it is Esquirol's work that is more relevant to the reading of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Being Pinel's student and assistant, Esquirol used Pinel's research to produce his own book, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity* (1845). In this piece, Esquirol defined monomania as an "intellectual disorder" where the patient is "confined to a single object, or a limited number of objects" (Esquirol, 1845, p. 320). Sufferers of monomania "seize upon a false principle, which they pursue without deviating from logical reasonings, and from which they deduce legitimate consequences, which modify their affections, and their acts of their wills" (Esquirol, 1845, p. 320). One type of monomania, called affective monomania, is present in instances where a sufferer justifies their actions through logical reasonings, an example that will be seen later in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Even though Pinel and Esquirol were French physicians, their impact on British ideas of psychiatry was substantial. James Cowles Prichard, a widely known physician in England, worked with Pinel's research, like Esquirol, to create a similar study, *A Treatise of Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (1835). Prichard's monomania, also called partial insanity, suggests that a person's understanding "is partially disordered or under the influence of some particular illusion, referring to one subject, and involving one train of ideas" (Prichard, 1835, p. 16). A monomaniac experiences impaired intellect concerning the object of their thoughts, but otherwise shows no other symptoms of impaired intellect to the outside world. While similar to Esquirol's ideas on monomania, Prichard's main disagreement is that he believes the disorder affects "the character of the sufferer" in noticeable ways "rather than as a hidden specific form of insanity" (Jones, 2017, p. 266). According to Prichard, a patient with an altered personality prone to monomania interacts with people differently, therefore making it easier for others to identify the disorder. By announcing monomania as easily diagnosable, Prichard hands over the power of psychiatric medicine to the public, an important fact recognized in Braddon's novel.

Psychiatric Analysis of *Lady Audley's Secret*

The works of Barlow, Esquirol, and Prichard shaped ideas about madness during the psychiatric movement across Britain. During Braddon's time, the Victorian Age underwent a profound change: the "transformation of the madhouse into the asylum into the mental hospital; of the mad-doctor into the alienist into the psychiatrist; and of the madman (and madwoman) into the mental patient" (Scull, 1981, p. 6). Psychiatry was rising in prominence and popularity in Britain, and Braddon's fascination with the topic can be seen in her description of madness and monomania in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Trying to convince Sir Michael that Robert is mad to prevent her own madness from being revealed, Lady Audley questions:

What is one of the strangest diagnostics of madness—what is the first appalling sign of mental aberration? The mind becomes stationary; the brain stagnates; the even current of reflection is interrupted; the thinking power of the brain resolves itself into a monotone. As the waters of a tideless pool putrefy by reason of their stagnation, the mind becomes turbid and corrupt through lack of action; and the perpetual reflection upon one subject resolves itself into monomania," (Braddon, 1862, pp. 2:244-245)

In this moment, Lady Audley proves that she is familiar with the nineteenth-century definition of the term and does so by using strong medical language in her argument, reflecting Braddon's own psychiatric knowledge.

Braddon, in engaging with the ideas that arose from *Man's Power Over Himself to Control Insanity*, seems to particularly critique Barlow's ideas surrounding sanity and masculinity by displaying masculinity's toxicity within heterosexual marriages. She portrays monomania and homoerotic relationships as relatively healthy developments by creating a new version of masculinity. While Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is filled with heterosexual marriages, these unions are rarely happy ones, especially the marriages between Sir Michael Audley and Lady Audley as well as between George and Helen Talboys. Sir Michael's marriage to Lady Audley is not done out of love but is rather described as a "bargain" that leads his new wife to obtain a fortune and title (Braddon, 1862, p. 1:16). George's marriage to Helen is not much better, as George leaves Helen and their newborn child in search of wealth, only to return to the supposed death of his wife. Eventually, it is learned that Helen is not dead but is remarried to the unsuspecting Sir Michael Audley. Robert uncovers Lady Audley's double life as a bigamist and sends her to an asylum, where she later dies.

Compared to these heterosexual marriages, Braddon's description of Robert Audley's homoerotic friendship with his former school friend George Talboys is healthy. Having first met at Eton, Robert and George were able to build a relationship based on friendship and mutual respect, unlike other relationships depicted in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Their education at Eton bonds the two men together and allows for their relationship to grow years later and to explore their feelings for one another.

During Robert and George's time at school—before Lord Clarendon reformed the school in 1862—their alma mater, Eton College encouraged the celebration of male friendships like theirs. Notably, Eton was known to “accept such homoerotic attachment as not only natural but as desirable” (Bullough, 1979, p. 261). Jennifer Kushnier states that this philosophical turn promotes a strong focus on finding love through friendship between the male students. From the seventeenth century up until 1861, Latin and Greek were the main topics taught to male students, who were encouraged to develop interest with the Greek way of life. Many aspects of Greek culture, such as Greek history, mythology, and literature “rivalled the medieval as the model and testing ground for Victorian politics, theology, and education” (Tobias, 1983, p. 98). In Clive Dewey's “Socratic Teachers’: Part I - The Opposition to the Cult of Athletic at Eton,” “Socratic” teachers used the teaching of friendship to “attract[ed] boys’ affection” and then use “their leverage over their emotions to mould their minds” (Dewey, 1995, p. 51).

Robert and George's time at Eton taught them to express their emotions and form strong male friendships established from love and affection. As a result, Robert freely admits the love he has for another man to Lady Audley, and states that George is “loved very dearly” by Robert himself (Braddon, 1862, p. 1:123). Rather than controlling his emotions as Barlow recommends, Robert accepts and acts on his love for George, encouraging him to look for George after he disappears. Kushnier argues that this love is more than friendly, and states that “the Eton connection is central to the homoerotic issue in the novel” (Kushnier, 2002, p. 61). Braddon's critique of Barlow's work seems to suggest that the author does not agree with Barlow's definition of masculinity. In fact, it is Robert's inability to control his emotions that makes him the hero of the story. The homoerotic emotions expanded on by Eton College influenced Robert to search for his friend while at the same time leading him to recognize his love for George.

As stated previously, Barlow's work on madness and masculinity is an entryway into the world of psychiatry in Braddon's text. In fact, Barlow's discourse on psychiatry further

permeated the reading of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* in that Robert's psychological experiences are almost identical to the ones recorded in Barlow's study of the parish workhouse master. The man of Barlow's study, who suffers from a damaged intellectual force, shows symptoms identical Robert's monomania. The parish workhouse master falls into a "profound melancholy" similar to Robert. Robert becomes possessed with one thought, or rather one person, George Talboys, until he becomes obsessed with solving the central mystery of the novel. Thus, Robert's focus on George's disappearance is the origin of his own profound melancholy. Robert grew increasingly "moody and thoughtful, melancholy and absent-minded" (Braddon, 1862, pp. 3:281-282) until he eventually became an "unhappy young man" (Braddon, 1862, p. 3:282).

Robert's story has the same ending as that of the workhouse parish study. In Braddon's novel, Robert becomes "sane" once again after being reunited with George. Upon seeing George for the first time since he was thought dead, Robert "uttered a great cry of delight and surprise" as he "opened his arms to his lost friend, George Talboys" (Braddon, 1862, p. 3:377). When the novel ends, readers see Robert happy with George, Clara, and the new Audley baby. The story of the man from Barlow's research ends in the same way, with him back with his family and "cured" of all mental derangements. The workhouse master's mental derangement was kept in check by his wife and friends and stayed that way until the end of Barlow's account. When George returns, the case is closed and Robert's monomaniacal nature ceases. For Robert and George, their stories end with Robert's heterosexual marriage, George's inclusion in the family circle, and a happy conclusion free of fixation.

While Robert's actions match the parish workhouse master that suffers from intellectual force impairment, he better fits into what Esquirol and Prichard defined as monomania. Though their concept of monomania differs, Braddon seems to include both definitions in her description of the disease. Robert Audley admits to himself on several occasions that he has been afflicted with monomania ever since the vanishing of George Talboys. The novel's narrator does as well, and states that Robert "thought of his friend's disappearance until the one idea has done its fatal and unhealthy work" (Braddon, 1862, p. 2:245). As a result, Robert begins to look at situations with a "diseased vision" until he "distorts it into a gloomy horror endangered of his own monomania" (Braddon, 1862, p. 2:245). Braddon's description of Robert's monomania thus directly matches

Esquirol's definition of the disease. Robert becomes obsessed over his friend's absence to the point that he can no longer focus on anything or anyone else.

Interestingly, Braddon specifically makes Robert fit Esquirol's conception of a patient with affective monomania. According to Esquirol, affective monomania is present in instances where a sufferer justifies their actions through logical reasoning. After Robert replaces his heterosexual feelings for Lady Audley with his homoerotic feelings for George, he starts to alter his fixation on George to prevent the "legitimate consequences" of his recently developed emotions (Esquirol, 1845, p. 320). Robert does not see his monomania as a choice, but rather as a chore pushed upon him. Robert announces: "if I could let the matter rest; if — if I could leave England forever, and purposely fly from the possibility of ever coming across another clew to the secret, [he] would do it — I would gladly, thankfully do it - but I cannot" (Braddon, 1862, p. 2:148). Robert believes that it is not himself that wants to find George, but that it is the will of God and that God's will comes before his own true desires. By justifying his actions as providentialism, Robert is able to align his affections and actions with logical reasoning.

Previously mentioned, Esquirol and Prichard's definition of monomania are alike, but their symptoms differ. Robert fits Prichard's description of the monomaniac well and, in Robert's monomania, has his intellect questioned by Alicia in the way of Prichard's imagined lay audience of diagnosticians. While visiting Audley Court during his uncle's illness, Robert sits with Alicia and Lucy, only for Alicia to become annoyed with him. In her frustration, Alicia declares that Robert has "left [his] intellect, such as it is, somewhere in the Temple" and blames it on the "honored object of his affections" (Braddon, 1862, p. 2:193). Thinking it is Lady Audley that holds Robert's affections, Alicia remains unaware that it is George that takes up his thoughts and time. This is the first time that Robert's intelligence has been doubted and as claimed by Alicia, is caused by monomania. Alicia's diagnosis directly matches with Prichard's opinion that monomania is a form of intellectual insanity, and that the sufferer's intellect is only put into question when it involves the object of the disease. Besides the mystery of George's vanishing, Robert's intellect remains unbroken.

Braddon further displays how easily Robert's monomania is diagnosed by others, himself included. At first, Robert questions his own sanity after realizing he has developed a fixation on George's disappearance. Remembering the "vague feeling of terror which had taken possession of him immediately upon losing sight of his friend," Robert asks himself, "why was it that [he]

saw some strange mystery in [his] friend's disappearance? Was it a monition, or a monomania?" (Braddon, 1862, p. 2:217). Robert tries to make sense of the strong dread he feels over the loss of George himself and concludes it might be a form of monomania. Yet he is not the only one that comes to this realization. In a conversation with Lady Audley about George, Lucy asks Robert why he "torments [her] about this George Talboys" and asks him if he "select[s] [her] as the victim of [his] monomania" (Braddon, 1862, pp. 2:225-227). Lucy does not hold any medical background but can see how passionate Robert is about George by the sudden change in his nature.

The symptoms that Robert Audley experiences in the novel correlates with Barlow's derangement of the intellectual force while at the same time fitting into the monomaniac diagnosis set by Esquirol and Prichard. In the text, Braddon seems to be disproving Barlow's connection between madness and masculinity by creating a newer and healthier version of masculinity through Robert. Even though Braddon mirrors Robert's monomaniacal nature with Esquirol's and Prichard's definition, she does so for a specific reason. By examining the works of Esquirol and Prichard and using it to closely read *Lady Audley's Secret*, I realized that Braddon utilizes her psychiatric knowledge to prove that Robert is not actually monomaniacal. Robert does not suffer from monomania, but rather struggles with his own homoerotic feelings. Robert journey of self-discovery and love for George compels him to undergo the investigation. His obsession with solving the mystery does not go unnoticed by Lady Audley, or even himself. Robert and Lady Audley's reaction to diagnose Robert as a monomaniac is the result of psychiatrists, like Prichard, giving the power of diagnosability to the public. The public deem the unnatural as a symptom of some kind of madness, but Braddon does not end her tale with Robert sent to a mental health facility. Instead, Braddon displays Robert as the hero of the novel and proves that Robert's homoerotic feelings for George do not make him morally defective but a productive member of society. Robert Audley became a prime example of those who became victim to the harsh judgement of nineteenth-century Britain because of his homoerotic desires. Braddon not only addresses this fact but demonstrates her own positive attitude toward homoerotic desire through Robert's journey in the novel.

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