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**The Pathologisation of Women's Rebellion:
The Representation of Female Insanity in
Nineteenth-century Literature**

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Resumo

Women's life in the nineteenth century was extremely challenging, as it was marked by social, economic and legal restrictions that, on the one hand, prevented them from having many legal rights and, on the other, relegated them to the private sphere, imposing on them attributes such as purity and submission. Within an extremely hierarchical society, women's opportunities for education, property ownership and free expression were minimal. However, some women gradually began to actively challenge social expectations. Consequently, due to society's fear of change and transgression, these women started to be considered "irrational" or "insane". The literature of the time only contributed to reinforce these ideas, depicting transgressive women as problematic and, by extension, as a danger to social welfare. My aim in this dissertation is to understand how this "madness" serves not only as a way of punishing female characters in their pursuit of agency and sexual pleasure, but also seems to be an omen of what is yet to come: a change in society concerning women, a sign of women's capabilities which the first feminist movements would vindicate. To serve this purpose, some key authors from this period will be examined, aiming at critically discussing their representation of women's insanity, as is the case of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Kate Chopin or Wilkie Collins.

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SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

To my mom and dad, for their patience, their advice, and for
believing in me more than I believe in myself.

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0. INTRODUCTION

When I began to consider the topic for my dissertation, I knew I wanted to write about something that truly inspired and motivated me. After four years of studying some of the most influential authors in English literature, I became aware of the fact that, even though we had tackled some major works produced by outstanding women writers, these represented only a small sample in the English literary tradition as a whole. This led me to a personal and academic urge to learn more about these women—to understand their works, the motivations behind their writing, and the challenges they encountered in the process, being part of a patriarchal society that often ignored them or did not take them seriously. Eventually, I found a theme that utterly captivated me: the connection between women and madness during the Victorian era.

This topic was not totally unfamiliar to me. I had previously studied texts such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë—despite differences, both narratives address with a great emotional charge the various ways in which women were often labelled as “mad” when they departed from expected models of femininity or when they attempted voice the injustice and oppression they often suffered. Nevertheless, I suspected that other women writers must have addressed similar issues—and indeed, I was right. From the moment I began my research, I was struck by the number of lesser-known women authors who had explored this theme—some of them more explicitly, while others offered more subtle critiques. However, all of them seemed to convey a common message: how women who defied social expectations have been historically silenced and pathologised for it. This realisation was a rather disturbing one, yet I also found the idea of giving voice to these women fascinating, just as they had once tried to do themselves.

By combining historical, theoretical, literary analysis, this dissertation seeks to study how Victorian society used the concept of insanity not only as a medical category but also as a social mechanism to control those women whose behavior deviated from established ideals of femininity, such as passivity, obedience and submission. Moreover, this study also explores how psychiatry—a strongly influential institution at the time—worked alongside fiction in constructing the figure of the “madwoman”. More specifically, it focuses on seminal short stories by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda Broughton—two authors who, despite being less widely known than many of their contemporaries, provide valuable perspectives in relation to this subject. In these short stories, both writers combined supernatural and gothic imagery in order to indirectly address urgent issues which constrained women’s visibility and their public position in Victorian society: rather than representing a flight from social issues through the Gothic and the supernatural, these narratives are historically and socially situated and provide a fierce critique on women’s subjection. In this sense, the way in which Braddon and Broughton build their narratives is characterised by the use of wit and innovation, often shocking readers with unconventional endings that often invert traditional roles.

In light of this, the central aim of this thesis is to explore the pathologisation of women’s rebellion in Victorian England, and to argue that what was often labelled as “madness” was, in fact, a social construction rooted in conservative gender ideology, rather than a natural or biological trait of women. It explores how “insanity” is rather the outcome of reaction to trauma, systematic oppression, as well as a form of protest, especially evident and acute in the narratives here under examination.

Concerning the methodology, this dissertation begins by relying on feminist studies on psychiatry and literature to highlight how Victorian ideals promoted the creation of the notion of

“female madness”. For this purpose, we will focus on major works such as *The Female Malady* by Elaine Showalter, *The Madness of Women* by Jane Ussher, and Sandra Gilbert and Susana Gubar’s, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. After that, the following chapters will focus on the literary analysis of the short stories by Mary E. Braddon and Rhoda Broughton. These tales, focusing on subjects like female isolation, women’s feelings’ dismissal, and psychological collapse, are configured through a series of elements—the setting, the narrative style, the incorporation of gothic elements, etc.—that contribute greatly to the experiences of the readers, which will be of significant interest to us.

In terms of structure, the content is divided into three main chapters, each contributing to a deeper and clearer understanding of how the notion of “female insanity” was constructed through social and cultural beliefs in literature.

The first chapter offers the necessary theoretical and historical framework to understand the context in which Broughton and Braddon lived and produced their narratives. To do so, this first part focuses on how Victorian psychiatry developed over time and how it affected women’s mental health and its social perception. In this sense, the seminal studies by Elaine Showalter and Jane Ussher explore how women’s madness was often linked both to women’s biology—like menstruation or the beginning of adolescence—and their nonconformity and transgression of social constraints.

The second section focuses on Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s short stories, particularly on “Eveline’s Visitant” (1867) and “Ralph, the Bailiff” (1862), which portray insanity not as an inherent characteristic of women, but as a logical response to the strong social repression and to the denial of their emotions and agency within marriage. The last chapter centers on Rhoda

Broughton's analysis of *Twilight Stories* (1873), a collection of short tales which incorporates the supernatural and gothic imagery. While Broughton's arguments align with Braddon's, this writer goes a step further, offering endings that subvert the reader's expectations. In "The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth" and "The Man with the Nose", Broughton depicts female characters who are initially labelled as hysterical and whose feelings are ignored to ultimately prove that they were right. This further reveals the weakness of male power and medical discourse, which, by extension, might be interpreted as a form of female empowerment.

1. MADNESS AND GENDER: THE PATHOLOGISATION OF WOMEN'S REBELLION IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Virginia Woolf wrote “If we live another century [...] and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality [...] then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down [...] She will be born” (Woolf, 1929, pp. 117-118). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf predicts a more egalitarian and promising future for women, one in which women gain financial independence, freedom, and are able to transcend limitations, participating in literature and public life. A hundred years later, this dream Woolf imagined has partially come true. However, while progress has been made, there are still many challenges women have to face, and Woolf's words serve as a reminder of the long history of female oppression, recalling the reality of the Victorian era.

Our foremothers lived in a period marked by rigid social norms that limited their rights and often punished them for their behaviour. In this patriarchal society, women's presence was confined to the private sphere, with almost no participation in public life. Forced to embody ideals of purity, obedience and submission, any deviation from these values was often pathologised as a sign of mental instability. In other words, any woman who showed disconformity with her role, any kind of academic or professional ambition, or any sign of emotional distress, among others, was labelled as mentally ill.

As Nadie Saeed et al. suggest in *Thomas Hardy: A Torchbearer of Feminism Representing Sufferings of Victorian Era Women*, the feminist novelist was able to portray women's sufferings in the Victorian Era in a moment of social, political, and technological prosperity in the history of Britain. As stated in this work, "the Victorian age was the beginning of modern time", but whereas various reforms for the improvement of the country as a whole were being implemented, women were still deprived from any improvement concerning their fundamental rights by the patriarchal system of the time: their lives and rights had been forgotten. Important decisions pertained to men, and women were restricted to housekeeping, caregiving and domestic jobs. Nevertheless, in this pessimistic landscape, Hardy presented readers a realistic version of Victorian reality, describing women's struggles and denouncing how "they had been constantly ignored under the hollow shades of modernity" (Saeed et al., 2020, p. 56), aiming to call authorities' attention on the issue of women's rights. While several of the author's female characters stand out, Tess from *Tess of d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (1891) is the most prominent one, as "in this single character, Hardy had weaved all the problems the Victorian Era women were suffering at the social, political, financial, emotional level" (Saeed et al., 2020, p. 56). Tess epitomised female resilience in Victorian society in every aspect. Although Hardy's works were criticised and even censored, this did not prevent him from supporting women's rights and raising awareness of their reality. In fact, "once he declared that if he had not written on the subject of Victorian women, that would have been a loss of history" (Saeed et al., 2020, p. 56).

In this context, women's urge for recognition and public visibility was often regarded as inappropriate and even insane. In her book *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, Elaine Showalter explores the historical relationship between women and

madness in psychiatry between the early nineteenth century and late twentieth century.

Throughout history, madness has been considered as a mainly female issue, but this was not solely rooted in medical reasons, as these diagnoses often lacked a solid scientific basis, but in gender roles and social expectations to be complied with which women labelled as “insane” often transgressed or defied.

For years, psychiatry has not only been a reflection of gender inequality, but also perpetuated it, as evidenced in the way mental illness was diagnosed and treated in men and women. From a psychiatric point of view, female insanity has been interpreted following two different approaches. On the one hand, insanity was often regarded as an inherent characteristic of women and, as such, part of their biology and nature, hence its denomination as “female illnesses”. On the other hand, women’s insanity is also related to a reaction or form of rebellion against the oppression and limitations to which they were subjected (Showalter, 1987, pp. 23-50).

The nineteenth century witnessed a significant increase in the number of people classified as mentally ill, as well as in the number of asylums. People agreed that England, as the wealthiest and most developed society of the time, also had the highest incidence of mental illness, suggesting that madness was, among other considerations, a consequence of progress, as highly civilised and industrialised societies meant a more demanding and stressful pace of life, increasing vulnerability to mental disorders. Andrew Wynter (as cited in Showalter, 1987, p. 25) claimed that madness was “the monstrous offspring of an advanced society”. During Victoria’s reign, the treatment of madness in England experienced a drastic reform, thus becoming the center of psychiatric reform. A large number of public asylums were built all over the country,

supervised by the government, for instance Colney Hatch, symbolizing progress and modernity (Showalter, 1987, pp. 23-50).

While it is true, as pointed out by Showalter, that before the mid-nineteenth century, the proportion of men in asylums was higher than that of women, after the approval of the Lunacy Act of 1845, the percentage of female patients began to grow steadily. Therefore, by the middle of the century, the number of women in public asylums had already surpassed that of men, and towards the end of the century, in 1890, this trend had extended to almost all social classes (Showalter, 1987, p. 52). It was Charles Dickens who noted the disparity in the proportion of men and women in these institutions after visiting St. Luke's Hospital in 1851. He was particularly interested in female patients and subsequently concluded that cases of insanity were much more frequent among them (Showalter, 1987, p. 51). They were often locked down for hysteria, nervous disorders, and behaviours considered inappropriate for the female gender, often designated as symptoms of mental illness. But women were not only the majority in asylums, but also "at surgical clinics, water-cure establishments, and rest-cure homes, as well as they flocked to the new specialists in the 'female illnesses' of hysteria and neurasthenia, and to the new marginal therapies such as mesmeric healing" (Showalter, 1987, p. 52).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, many doctors still relied on the use of mechanical restraint to treat insanity, since it was thought to be reasonable and effective, something that was abolished with Victorian "moral management". It was John Conolly who introduced this new non-restraint system in the 1830s and 1840s at Hanwell Asylum (Middlesex), demonstrating that insanity could be managed without the use of force, thus providing more "humane" care for patients. Therefore, this became the symbol of Victorian psychiatry (Showalter, 1987, p. 44). According to the *Edinburgh Review*, "to him, hobbles and

chains, handcuffs and muffs were but material impediments that merely confined the limbs; to get rid of these he spent the best years of his life; but beyond these mechanical fetters he saw there were a hundred fetters to the spirit which human sympathy, courage, and time only could remove” (Connolly, as cited in Showalter, 1987, p. 44). Nonetheless, far from benefiting women, “moral management” further strengthened gender inequalities, as this system sought to adapt them to the standards and roles established in the society of the time. This would be achieved by making female patients perform household duties inside the asylum, such as sewing, cleaning, and washing, shaping them into passive and obedient beings, in accordance with Victorian values. In contrast with men, they were not allowed to engage in physical activity inside these institutions (Showalter, 1987, p. 82).

As mentioned above, Victorian psychiatrists started to associate female “madness” with biological processes such as pregnancy, menstruation, menopause, and sexuality, thus promoting theories such as “reflex insanity” and “moral insanity” that depicted women as emotionally and sexually unstable. On the other hand, the professionalization of psychiatry led to the exclusion of women from positions of power within asylums, roles they had previously occupied. With reforms such as the Madhouse Act of 1828, asylums became exclusively managed by men, relegating women to “secondary” roles, such as nursing (Showalter, 1987, p. 53).

The causes of “madness” in women were widely debated, and some physicians also attributed it to socio-economic factors. There were many poor women who were institutionalised not because they were ill, but because they lacked resources or suffered from physical illnesses like tuberculosis. In addition to this, there was also the issue of the so-called “lactational insanity”, affecting many economically disadvantaged mothers who extended the breastfeeding

period as an alternative to avoid pregnancy, causing malnutrition and other issues that were also regarded as signs of insanity (Showalter, 1987, pp. 54-55).

But worst of all were undoubtedly the treatments used to treat insanity. These ranged from cold baths, dietary restrictions, and delayed menstruation to more brutal procedures such as clitoridectomy, practised on female patients by Dr. Isaac Baker Brown (Showalter, 1987, pp. 81-82). “He operated five times on women whose madness consisted of their wish to take advantage of the new Divorce Act of 1857, and found in each case that his patient returned humbly to her husband” (Showalter, 1987, p. 76). Eventually, the more passive and submissive these women were, the more they were perceived as “cured”. This demonstrates how the real aim of psychiatry was not to cure women, but to control and submit them.

Women, as a reaction against the constraints of their time, started to show an interest in fighting for their rights towards the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. They demanded the right to vote, the right for education and a job, etc. These reactions generated tensions within society, causing these women, usually young ones, to be diagnosed with hysteria. Physicians eventually concluded that feminist ambition—implying independence, a strong character, dissatisfaction with traditional roles, the pursuit of sexual freedom, the rejection of marriage, etc.—resulted in physical and mental deterioration. Simultaneously, literature also helped to enhance this view of the feminist, autonomous woman as conflictive and subversive, and by extension, insane. As a result, society as a whole internalised this vision of women. Nonetheless, psychiatrists’ perspective towards hysteria started to change towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was Sigmund Freud who demonstrated that hysteria was not merely an exaggeration, but a true mental disorder. However, his theories remained influenced by discriminatory and sexist biases, since he continued to associate it with women’s sexuality and

repression. Additionally, psychoanalytic approaches often ignored women's real experiences, meaning that they were disregarded for the diagnostic process, ultimately reinforcing male perspectives on women's insanity (Ussher, 2011, pp. 64-65).

Jane M. Ussher also examines the relation between women and madness in her book *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience*, exploring whether the high rates of women in asylums and diagnoses of mental illnesses reflect a tendency in women or whether the relationship women-madness responds to a socially constructed phenomenon to exercise control over the female population. In her work, Ussher challenges the perspective that regards insanity as an inherent quality of women's nature, opting for the idea that this association is rooted in gender ideology, thus claiming that "madness" was a response to trauma and discrimination rather than a real pathology. Like Showalter, Ussher also mentions the brutal treatments to which women were subjected, adding electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and drugs, among others, to "pacify" them. Ussher also mentions Alexandra Kaplan, who holds that depression, instead of an illness, is "an exaggeration of the normative state of being female in Western society" (Kaplan, as cited in Ussher, 2011, p. 64). Women have always been categorised as more vulnerable and weaker than men, so diagnosing them with mental illnesses was socially acceptable. Moreover, Phyllis Chesler's wrote in 1972 in his work *Women and Madness* that "most twentieth century women who are psychiatrically labelled, privately treated and publicly hospitalised are not mad... they may be deeply unhappy, self-destructive, economically powerless, and sexually impotent— but as women they're supposed to be" (Chesler, as cited in Ussher, 2011, pp. 64-65), suggesting that women's suffering is socially accepted, and it starts to be problematic when it alters societal norms.

Ussher mentions Showalter in her work, highlighting how the latter suggested that hysteria was “in many ways, synonymous with femininity” (Ussher, 2011, p. 68). It is interesting how a woman could be labelled as “mad” both for being too feminine—as in the case of the hysterical woman, who exaggerates the traits attributed to femininity—and for not being feminine enough—when showing disconformity with the female roles of wife and mother. This suggests that anything outside the normative perfect balance was pathologised, showing the contradictory nature of society (Showalter, as cited in Ussher, 2011, p. 64).

Going back to the treatments used to “cure” these women—both psychological and physical—Ussher also agrees on how intrusive and demeaning they were. A perfect example of one of the most well-known treatments was the one portrayed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a work which will be here addressed from this perspective. The so-called *rest cure* was the name given to women’s complete isolation as a cure for women’s mental health issues, forbidding them any kind of intellectual activity and contact with the outside world, as will be later here examined. Ussher chooses to reject the idea that considers women’s suffering as a medical issue, but she does not ignore their pain and frustration. She is aware that these profound emotions might lead women to tragic ends, including suicide, but instead of visualising this as an individual problem, Ussher addresses it as a collective problem of womanhood, as a response or form of rebellion against patriarchal domination.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) Gilbert and Gubar also offer a seminal approach to the dyad gender/insanity, specifically focusing on how women's mental health has been addressed in literature and how female writers did in a world dominated by men. The lack of female models in the literary field led them to suffer the so-called “anxiety of authorship” and, therefore, their novels often show a division between two types of female characters: the “angel”,

the obedient and idealised woman, and the “monster”, the rebellious and “dangerous” one (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, 17). One of the key examples Gilbert and Gubar offer is Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, showcasing the opposition between Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre. While Jane would be the representation of the “angel”, Bertha, on the contrary, would represent the “madwoman in the attic”, which actually serves as the title of Gilbert and Gubar’s work. However, their analysis goes beyond Brontë, as they also incorporate other instances of female writers—such as Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*, among others—in order to demonstrate how nineteenth-century female writers used their works to question gender roles and to explore female ambition. What is more, Gilbert and Gubar also demonstrate how, at this time, writing was considered an act of rebellion against societal norms.

In short, *The Madwoman in the Attic* shows how women at the time not only challenged social expectations in daily life, but also in literature. Many women writers used their voice to portray through literature women’s struggle within a patriarchal society that aimed to silence and limit them. This aspect will be utterly relevant for this dissertation, as will be subsequently explored.

As already argued, the relationship between madness and women has been extensively examined by different authors throughout history, concluding that rather than being attributed to biological factors, the diagnosis of madness has predominantly served as a means of suppressing women’s resistance to traditional values. At the time, women were not allowed to publicly challenge societal norms; so, eventually, hysteria and other diagnoses were rather a way of individual rebellion, of denouncing women’s disconformity within a society that oppressed and condemned them without even listening to their testimonies. In this sense, Gayatri Spivak’s assertion that “the subaltern can speak but won’t be listened to”, famously argued for in her

seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) in relation to postcolonial societies, is here especially pertinent. Women can speak, but their voices are silenced or ignored by power systems: this can be extrapolated to Victorian women. Eventually, it would be the advent of feminism that would transform their internal struggle into a shared uprising. Insanity was, after all, women's way of making themselves heard, as survivors of the oppressive system.

2. HAUNTED WOMEN: MARY E. BRADDON'S "EVELINE'S VISITANT' AND "RALPH, THE BAILIFF"

Well-known for her novels, short stories, and plays, Mary Elizabeth Braddon (London, 1835 - Richmond, 1915) was among the most prolific writers of the Victorian period. As a leading figure in the *sensation novel* genre, she played an essential role in defining Victorian literature. Braddon's works often engaged with themes of identity, gender, and social constraints, therefore questioning traditional roles assigned to women. In fact, her protagonists are frequently determined figures who challenge these norms, defying the limitations imposed on them by Victorian society. Moreover, Braddon explored the concept of insanity related to women, using it as a metaphor for sexual repression. Claims of "madness" in her narratives often serve as a tool to silence and control women, also incorporating elements such as crime, the supernatural, and fraud, among others (Beller, 2012, p. 1).

Braddon herself defied societal conventions by becoming an actress at a time when this profession was seen as a questionable occupation for women. As Anne-Marie Beller states in her book *Mary Elizabeth Braddon: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction*, "in defiance of conventional morality and the codes of property governing middle-class female conduct, she went on stage at a time when actresses were seen by many as little better than prostitutes, lived with a man who was already married, bore him six children while serving as stepmother to the five-surviving children from his marriage, and secured reputation as a leading 'sensation novelist' whose works were condemned as unhealthy and immoral by conservative critics" (Beller, 2012, p. 5). Braddon's family struggled with financial issues, mainly due to her father's infidelity, and she began acting—under the name of Mary Seyton—in order to provide for herself and her mother (Beller, 2012, p. 5).

In 1860, Braddon met publisher John Maxwell, with whom she eventually formed both a professional and personal relationship, and they legally married in 1874, despite the fact that he was already married. While it is true that Braddon was respected for her achievements in literature, she was also criticised for writing popular fiction, since some considered it to lack literary value (Beller, 2012, p. 5).

One of Braddon's most famous works, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), exemplifies the key elements of *sensation fiction*—madness, the subversion of traditional gender roles, etc. This novel, in addition to reflecting Braddon's recurring literary themes, consolidated her reputation in the *sensation novel* genre. The protagonist, Lady Audley, is an ambitious and manipulative woman who challenges the Victorian ideal of femininity (Tromp et al., 1999, p. xxv).

A key aspect of Braddon's literary innovation is her portrayal of female characters. As mentioned above, women in Victorian fiction were often depicted as passive and submissive individuals, confined to the domestic sphere, seen as their "natural" place which ultimately also determined their role in society. Braddon changed these conventions by creating complex female protagonists with their own agency and desires. Recurrent subjects in her work include the idea of marriage as a prison for women, something that will be reflected in Braddon's analysed works below. While marriage was considered one of the most sacred and strong institutions of the time, many of Braddon's heroines struggle within unhappy marriages or seek to escape from them. Lady Audley herself embodies this type of character, one that is pathologised for challenging societal expectations of her time. In relation to this, Braddon's works often incorporate the vision of women as intelligent and manipulative beings, who seek to "survive" in a world dominated by men. Braddon's narrative style mirrors that of her contemporary Wilkie Collins, who also explored these innovative motifs in his literature.

Braddon eventually passed away in 1915, leaving a vast literary legacy. Regarded as a revolutionary writer of her time, her work continues to be studied today, especially in feminist contexts (Beller, 2012, p. 9).

As previously mentioned, Braddon's literary production featured numerous short stories. While this genre has been less studied in her work, it is key to understanding her literary style and, most importantly, her concerns.

Braddon's acclaimed short story "Eveline's Visitant" (1867) explores themes such as jealousy, guilt, and the supernatural through the perspective of its male protagonist, Hector de Brissac, a French nobleman. The first-person narrative follows his confession of a crime and the haunting repercussions that this unfolds. The narrative centers on Hector's rivalry with his cousin, André de Brissac, over a woman, which leads them to a violent conflict that culminates in André's death at Hector's hands. As André lies dying, he utters a terrible curse, promising his vengeance will haunt Hector beyond the grave. Eventually, Hector marries Eveline, and the newly-weds retreat to an isolated chateau, but soon their peace is shattered when Eveline begins to witness a spectral presence which she can only see, a figure that stalks her. Initially, Hector dismisses his wife's concerns, labelling her as mad, yet Eveline's delusions aggravate, progressively deteriorating her health. It is only after Eveline's tragic end that Hector understands André's curse—it was not meant for him, but for the person he loved the most.

The apparent nature of "Eveline's Visitant" as a ghost story allows Braddon to articulate an implicit critique of how Victorian society treated women's mental health, particularly within marriage. The worsening state of the female protagonist—both physical and mental—follows the Victorian pattern established in the opening section of this dissertation: the newlyweds' initial

happiness vanishes quickly, turning into what Victorian society would label as “madness” or “hysteria” from the moment Eveline claims to see the ghost.

In a symbolic way, when analysed through a gendered lens, while Eveline seems to constantly witness these apparitions, André’s ghost never materialises for Hector, perpetuating the stereotype that these “hysterical” experiences—hallucinations and delusions—, often assigned to women’s psychology. This view is mirrored in Hector’s words:

—I begin to think the stranger is only a phantasm of your own romantic brain [...]

A chatelaine who is always reading romances may well meet handsome cavaliers in the woodlands [...]

—My darling, this is madness [...] You know that no stranger can come to you in the pleasance [...] (Braddon, 1867, p.5)

Hector’s invalidation of Eveline’s symptoms, as well as his call for medical intervention, reflect Victorian psychiatric tendency to pathologise women’s emotional experiences. Eveline’s signs of nervousness, fragility, and fear, resonate with the traditional diagnosis of hysteria, corroborating how physicians misunderstood logical psychological reactions as signs of innate instability in women.

Furthermore, Eveline’s breakdown might be also read as a direct response to psychological trauma, aligning with the Victorian tendency to pathologise female emotional distress as madness. As established at the beginning of this dissertation, many women who were diagnosed as insane in Victorian England were not victims of an actual pathology, but instead, were prey to a refusal to comply with the expectations of their time, which limited their lives to

domestic confinement or male violence. In Braddon's "Eveline's Visitant", this danger is represented by the figure of Hector. Though he never manifests his violence toward Eveline within their marriage, his past actions do not rule out the possibility that he may reoffend. Eveline's physical and mental deterioration, therefore, does not emerge from an inherent frailty, but from the constant threat that her husband's brutality could come to light at any moment. In fact, Eveline's fear mirrors, symbolically speaking, women's fear of violence within patriarchal structures. Eveline's struggle does not represent an isolated case, but was rather emblematic of innumerable Victorian women's experiences, condemned to silently tolerate male violence within their marriage but keeping the façade of the perfect, docile wife.

Braddon's depiction of marriage as a prison mirrors fiction's thematic conventions. Whereas Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" showcases an example of a physical lockdown, "Eveline's Visitant" relies on a more psychological imprisonment: after her wedding, Eveline withdraws with her husband to an isolated and unfamiliar chateau, where her husband's control and André's ghostly apparitions—only visible to her—increase her isolation and annul her agency. In fact, the ghost itself might be considered to play a crucial role in the narrative, proving Eveline's entrapment. It works as a mirror of Eveline's deteriorating mental state, embodying the hidden violence in her marriage that she is socially expected to ignore, as well as how defenseless she is. As mentioned earlier, Hector witnesses Eveline's physical and mental deterioration—from her first symptoms to her death—but never acknowledges her suffering, trivialising her encounters with the ghost as delusional episodes. Indeed, Hector's attitude is not casual, but it rather reflects the typical behaviour of Victorian patriarchal society, one that often pathologises women's behaviour refusing to hear their truth. It is for this reason then that Braddon incorporates the supernatural element: while Hector insists on the fact that

Eveline is mad, the reader may understand that her visions are the manifestation of real terror within her marriage that no one else seems to understand. This serves Braddon as a way to criticise the institution of marriage.

The figure of the ghost in “Eveline’s Visitant” coincides with a motif that has been present in literary history. If we go back to William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) and *Macbeth* (1623), ghosts often work as metaphors for suppressed guilt and trauma. However, the victims are not often men, but women affected by the consequences of men’s violence. Katherine Crooks focuses on these ideas in her article “On Hole Too Many: Ghosts and Mad Women in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*”, exploring how madness and ghostliness are closely related in these plays, further demonstrating how ghosts and “mad” women lack independent identities and they serve as mirrors that reflect other characters’ fears and emotions (Crooks, 2012, p. 2). In “Eveline’s Visitant”, André de Brissac’s ghost is presented as a metaphor for the trauma Eveline holds due to Hector’s actions. The ghost is visible to no one but to her, reminding the reader of the violence she is forced to withstand silently. Similarly, Banquo’s ghost in *Macbeth* only appears to him, serving as a reminder of his crimes, and thus, his guilt. However, Lady Macbeth is gradually consumed by the consequences of her husband’s choices. Her sleepwalking and eventual suicide reveal how women are often forced to carry the psychological burden of male decisions and actions. On the other hand, in *Hamlet* (1603), Ophelia’s madness emerges also as a result of the pressures she faces as a woman living in a patriarchal environment. Like Eveline, she is deeply affected by the actions of the men around her—Laertes and Polonius control her agency, Hamlet manipulates her feelings on his own benefit, etc.—to ultimately be labeled as insane instead of having her actions interpreted as natural responses to the systemic abuse she is subjected to.

Ultimately, these female characters, particularly Eveline, are characterised by their passivity and lack of agency, being used by male characters to reflect their own anxieties and fears. In other words, they are paying the price for something they have no control over, since in the end, control lies within the power of men. Eveline's actual tragedy lies not in being haunted, but in being silenced and dismissed as hysterical—even by her husband, whose actions have condemned her to this tragic fate. Her suffering in isolation represents the Victorian archetype of innumerable women who struggle with the same issue.

In a similar vein, Braddon's *Ralph the Bailiff* also incorporates terror and suspense. The tale begins with Martin Carleon's death, the elder son of the family, who died in mysterious circumstances. Martin was the heir of the Grey Farm, an estate that had belonged to the family for generations. After Martin's death, Dudley Carleon, the youngest brother, with little experience in farming, ultimately inherits the family property. Due to his lack of experience, he takes over the management of the farm with the help of his bailiff, Ralph Purvis, a dark and controlling man. Ralph and his sister Martha, the housekeeper, become Dudley's closest confidants, working alongside him to ensure the farm's prosperity, and Ralph becomes Dudley's shadow in the narrative. Shortly after Martin's death, Dudley meets Jenny Trevor, a young woman he eventually marries and who will become a central figure in this story. Although she is not truly in love with him, Jenny finally accepts his marriage proposal. On the wedding day, Agnes Marlow, Jenny's friend and Martin's ex-fiancé, tries to stop the union warning Jenny of her suspicions. Agnes privately confides in Jenny, insisting that Dudley is responsible for his brother's death, an accusation she makes without any evidence but with dreadful conviction. Jenny dismisses these accusations, believing Agnes has gone mad. Little does she know that her life at Grey farm will soon drive her to the same state. Though Dudley seems to be devoted to his

wife, Jenny develops an irrational fear for him, one that sharpens with Ralph's presence, who always seems to be watching her. Gradually, Jenny's health starts to decline: weakness, exhaustion, and sickness take hold of her, resembling Martin's symptoms before his death. Convinced of also being poisoned by her husband, she eventually decides to escape as her only chance to survive. Seizing a moment when Dudley and Ralph are away, she disappears without a trace. Dudley will eventually end his own life, unable to cope with guilt. On the other hand, Ralph will finally inherit the ownership of the farm, faking Dudley's will. However, along with Martha and her son, he will abandon Grey Farm to move to Australia.

Agnes and Jenny personify the two faces of Victorian "madness" in this short story. On the one hand, Agnes is silenced and labelled as mad for speaking up—as stated by Dudley "Agnes Marlow is a madwoman; whatever she says to you, remember that" (Braddon, 1861, p. 20)—, while Jenny is condemned for not speaking at all, suppressing her feelings until the end. As already established, Agnes was classified as hysterical—even by her friend, Jenny—for her accusations against Dudley without supporting evidence. Her character resembles Florence Nightingale's Cassandra: she tells her "truth" in an attempt to save her friend's life, but far from being listened to and believed, her words are ignored and qualified as "delusions". In fact, from that point onwards, she disappears from the narrative, as if she never were there.

On the other hand, Jenny is initially described as lively and vibrant, standing in stark contrast to Grey Farm, characterised by its bleak and oppressive atmosphere.

Something so bright in colour, so radiant in appearance, so airy and fluttering in motion [...] he found himself face to face with a young lady, dressed in pink muslin and a gipsy hat [...] She was almost childlike in appearance, and

excessively pretty [...] which trembled and glistened in the summer breezes and the bright June sunshine (Braddon, 1861, p.16).

However, as the plot progresses, her physical and mental decay become unmistakably evident. Much like Eveline, she finds herself confined to Grey Farm with her husband, also subjected to Ralph's continuous surveillance. Additionally, despite dismissing Agnes' words, Jenny lives in perpetual anxiety and fear, feelings that only grow stronger as the days go by—she is tormented by the idea that everyone in the house is guilty, that they will come for her next. Soon, this paranoia starts affecting her physical health, entering a vicious cycle she cannot get out of. Though he eventually manages to escape Grey Farm physically, she will never be free of it mentally. What happened there, as well as the guilt she carries concerning her husband, will live in her forever. This ultimately enhances the idea that Hector's actions not only haunt Jenny within the marriage, but the psychological weight will persist indefinitely inside her.

Eveline and Jenny represent different responses to patriarchal oppression—while the first chooses to voice her anxieties through confrontation, the latter decides to internalise her distress through silence. Nevertheless, in the end, both stories reveal the same troubling reality: women's suffering is often dismissed as madness in a patriarchal society, and women's right to express their pain is denied. In light of this, we observe how Braddon's short stories serve as a reinterpretation of this motif that had already emerged a few centuries before—as previously examined in the context of Shakespeare's plays—, exposing how society and psychiatry have systematically pathologised women's attempts of rebellion and natural responses to oppression.

3. RHODA BROUGHTON'S *TWILIGHT STORIES*: SUBVERTING ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Rhoda Broughton was a popular novelist born in Denbigh in 1840. Despite her popularity in the late nineteenth century, Silberg (1977, p. 1) claims that “today her name is barely familiar even to students of the Victorian novel”. Since then, she has been eclipsed by more widely recognised figures, such as the Brontë sisters, among others, even though her works offered significant perspectives on Victorian social conventions, gender dynamics, and the literary landscape, particularly for female writers—especially the dominance of serialised fiction and the so-called “three- decker” literature.

She grew up in a well-educated family, thus it would be precisely this cultured environment that would lead her to develop a special sensibility to literature, especially English poetry, which would later influence her writing. After her parents' deaths in 1860 and 1863, respectively, she began writing her first novel *Not Wisely but Too Well* (1867), whose publication process faced a number of difficulties. It was initially published anonymously and serialised in the *The Dublin University Magazine* between 1865 and 1866. Broughton's novel was edited by Irish writer of Gothic tales and mystery novels J. S. Le Fanu—who, in fact, turned out to be Broughton's uncle. The novel had been previously rejected by publisher Richard Bentley and Son after novelist Geraldine Jewsbury, one of their trusted readers objected to its “highly coloured and hot blooded passion” and its “lukewarm rose water sentimentality” (Silberg, 1977, p. 10). *Not Wisely but Too Well* was eventually published during the autumn of 1867, thanks to Tinsley. Broughton's second novel *Cometh Up as a Flower* was also published in 1867, which appeared as “an anonymous two-decker “autobiography” dedicated to J. S. LeFanu” (Silberg, 1977, p. 11). This time, Broughton's

novel received Bentley's approval. These first works established the author's popularity, mainly because of her creation of female heroines who challenged the oppressive values of the time.

Broughton works centered on how these women dealt with—often tragically—social constraints, love, the challenge of Victorian norms in the pursuit of love—represented by characters such as Nell LeStrange in *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) or Kate Chester in *Not Wisely but Too Well* (1867). Broughton also addressed class dynamics and families' struggles due to financial hardship—like Joan in *Cometh Up as a Flower*—, critique of loveless marriages in works like *Belinda* (1883), as well as ghost stories—which will be especially interesting to us—like *Tales for Christmas Eve*, later *Twilight Stories* (1873)—, blending the supernatural with gothic imagery and dreadful settings.

Broughton's earliest novels sold well and “by 1874, *Cometh Up* had been widely circulated by Mudie's and had sold 10,500 copies” (Silberg, 1977, p. 27). Paul D. Herring's article on *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel*—a book by G. L. Griest—explores the impact of Mudie's Circulating Library in Victorian literature. This literary institution—one of the most significant ones in Great Britain at the time—dominated the field since its foundation in 1842, as it made books accessible to everybody at a time when public libraries were limited and books were costly, which contributed to the development of a broader audience. Simultaneously, it benefited writers, as they could rely on steady sales as long as their works complied with moral principles and were sufficiently entertaining for Mudie's subscribers—hence, they avoided themes that might be considered controversial, focusing instead on “appropriate” stories, thereby maintaining the approval of Mudie's and its readers. Given Mudie's growing power and relevance as early as the 1880s, the company began to exercise some control over the content, format, pricing, and distribution of novels, being accused by critics, authors, and others of censorship and of

deliberately extending the prevalence of the so-called “three-decker”—the three-volume novel format. Eventually, Mudie’s downturn would occur in the 1890s due to financial challenges that forced the abandonment of the three-volume novel format (Herring, 1971, pp. 177-178).

In light of this, and despite the apparent success of Broughton’s novels, the reception of her works by critics and audiences was equivocal. Silberg points out how “in her early period, before 1880, those who enjoyed her work did not write about it. Most of those who did write about it attacked it either for moral and religious faults or for formal errors. The moral and religious criticism described her novels typically as blasphemous, disrespectful, indecent and flippant. The formal criticisms were directed at her grammar, spelling and French pronunciation. The educational attainments of those women writers lacking the conspicuous intellectual credentials of George Eliot were always open to cavil”. Another technique that did not work in Broughton’s favour was the use of the historical present tense—i.e. using the present tense of a verb to describe events that took place in the past, intensifying the dramatic impact. Authors such as Compton Mackenzie expressed their admiration for Broughton’s novels, yet he chose not to reread them, thus preserving the impression of the first reading: “I would not for the world spoil the impression they made upon me in the heart of France thirty-three years ago. . . . Miss Broughton's historic present might seem painfully dated nowadays, but I do not intend to find out. It remains in my memory alongside *Cranford* and *The Vicar of Wakefield* [...]" (Mackenzie, as cited in Silberg, 1977, p. 2).

Notwithstanding criticism, Broughton was a well-regarded writer, particularly among the general audience. She did not consider fiction as an elevated form of art, and her novels display a rather variable and not very consistent style, though her literary talent was evident (Flint, 2004), as Silberg suggests: “The public relished her work. Not only was she read by women, but such

men as Gladstone, Andrew Lang, Sir Clements Markham and Bernard Shaw enjoyed her novels” (Silberg, 1977, p. vi). As previously mentioned, Broughton is not a widely read or extensively studied author today, but this does not diminish her merit. Furthermore, her work is highly valuable to understand the conditions of Victorian women. After her death in 1920, The *London Times* obituary stated: “There are certainly imperfections in her writings on which criticism can fasten; but it is to such that prudent criticism will turn a blind eye, for the sake of the sound contribution which Miss Broughton makes to the history of English manners” (Silberg, 1977, p. 4).

A work that draws our particular attention is *Tales for Christmas Eve*, five short stories that appeared for the first time in the magazine *Temple Bar* in 1872, later collected into this volume. In 1879, this work would be republished, but this time under the title *Twilight Stories*. It is true that the originality of the plots is not a remarkable quality of these tales, since they are rather simple and even foreseeable, but what makes this collection stand out is how it is executed, especially through the incorporation of the supernatural—already seen in Mary E. Braddon’s short stories. The highly precise description of characters, environment, and feelings manage to fully captivate the readers, even causing them to become immersed in the stories and feeling part of them, experiencing the fear, anguish, and despair of the characters. In addition, *Twilight Stories* may serve as a source of connection with Victorian women, especially for female readers. This is because the vast majority of these tales focused on women’s experiences of fear, loneliness, and most importantly, dismissal of their concerns. The overt treatment of these issues was utterly restricted during the era, making Broughton’s stories one of the few works through which women could see themselves reflected. We will see how, just in the case of Braddon, the supernatural does not emerge merely as an ornamental element, but rather as a highly symbolic strategy for the author, allowing her to draw attention to these significant issues of the time.

“The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth” is an epistolary tale in which the plot is gradually revealed through the correspondence between two women. One of them has recently moved with her husband to a new residence in London, a house initially portrayed by the protagonist herself as a “paradise”. However, this first impression would be soon undermined by a series of unsettling events that would disturb their lives completely. *The Man with the Nose* is the only tale in the sequence narrated from a male perspective, yet the narrative is concerned with the experiences of the narrator’s wife. The newlywed couple enjoys their honeymoon when Elizabeth, the protagonist, begins to have recurrent nightmares about a man with a peculiar nose. Nevertheless, what begins as a simple dream will soon turn into reality, severely affecting the woman’s health and stability. “Behold, it was a Dream”, once again, unfolds through a series of letters exchanged between two women, Jane and Dinah. However, this time, the epistolary element is combined with conventional prose. One day, Dinah has a premonitory dream in which her friend is murdered. In her effort to warn Jane, no one seems to believe her, yet it soon becomes clear that her intuition was not wrong. In *Poor Pretty Bobby*, a woman is visited by the spirit of her fiancé after his death, in order to offer her a final farewell and a chance to find closure. Rather than evoking fear, the presence of the ghost conveys a sense of tenderness and joy, giving the audience the opportunity to connect with the supernatural in a wholesome way. Lastly, although “Under the Cloak” differs from the rest of the stories in lacking the supernatural element, its narrative conveys a powerful message that is still relevant today. In this tale, a woman shares her train journey to Paris, during which she is drugged and robbed by two men. Although written long ago, the experience presented still reflects the serious threats women continue to face in today’s society, even in public areas. As we may observe, *Twilight Stories* presents various narratives, though they all converge on a common point: all of them are centered on women who are forced to confront

the restrictions, dangers, and even rejection not only from society, but also from those close to them, being dismissed in most cases as hysterical when they attempt to raise their voice.

We have already addressed the ways in which Mary E. Braddon's short stories explore the inner conflict typically faced by female characters—in this case, Victorian women: what society expects from them—ideals of obedience, docility, devotion to the family, etc.—and their own desire to challenge and subvert those standards. This is what Braddon recovers in her work. The close connection between both authors will be further explored, given that they examine similar themes, yet through slightly distinct approaches.

Although all the stories in Broughton's collection are notably revealing, this analysis will focus in greater detail in the first two. In "The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth", as mentioned above, a married couple moves into a new house in London. At first, everything seems like a dream, even Cecilia—the protagonist—claims to be "installed in our Paradise" (Broughton, 1879, p. 4). The property is in impeccable conditions, though the rent is suspiciously low. Shortly after their arrival, Cecilia hears rumors suggesting the presence of strange phenomena in the house, which is why previous occupants have not stayed there for long. In a state of desperation, she decides to inform her husband, who immediately dismisses her concerns, even responding with a paternalistic attitude and labeling her worries as "babyish fears" (Broughton, 1879, p. 7).

The moment Henry came in, I ran to him; but he pooh-poohed the whole story, laughed at me, and asked whether we should turn out the prettiest house in London [...] because of what a grocer said [...] He derided my "babyish fears", as he called

them, to such an extent that I felt half ashamed, and yet not quite comfortable either (Broughton, 1879, p. 7).

As we know, this behaviour was common during the Victorian era, once again corroborating the prevailing gender dynamic within marriages of the time. Nevertheless, Cecilia was not only dismissed by her husband, but also by her own friend. This intensifies the dramatic tension in the narrative, allowing readers to experience the protagonist's frustration and sense of alienation as she is discredited by those she trusted.

—You know my utter disbelief in ghosts. [...] According to your hypothesis, your whole household ought [...] to be stark staring mad. Let me implore you not to give way to a panic which may [...] probably prove utterly groundless. Oh, how I wish I were with you, to make you listen to reason (Broughton, 1879, p. 9).

When everyone around had dismissed Cecilia's words, they decided to prove that her claims were ungrounded. Ralph Gordon—one of the characters in this story—volunteered to spend the night in the room where the paranormal phenomena seemed to occur. Although Cecilia tried to discourage him, her efforts were ineffective.

There he was, standing in the middle of the floor, rigid, petrified, with that same look [...] of awful, unspeakable, stony fear on his brave young face. [...] he groaned in a terrible husky voice, "Oh, my God! I have seen it"! and fell down dead. [...]

Vainly we tried to bring back the life to that strong young heart [...] (Broughton, 1879, p. 12)

This story, like many of Broughton's narrative closures in this collection, offers a completely unexpected conclusion, through which the veracity of the female protagonist's statements—those that had been ignored and discredited—is ultimately confirmed, demonstrating she was right. This type of ending—as well as its recurrence throughout the book—is significantly compelling and, above all, innovative. This will be examined in more detail later, but we will see how it might be interpreted as a possible strategy used by Broughton to establish a deeper connection with her Victorian female readers.

Besides the supernatural, another element that takes on special significance in this story is the setting. We have already seen that this tale takes place within a single setting: the interior of the house, which has historically been considered as “women's true place and power” (Ruskin, 2004, p. 159). This association is deeply connected not only with traditional Victorian ideals, but also with the figure of the “Angel in the House”, introduced by Coventry Patmore in his poem *The Angel in the House* (Clio Kao, 2015, p. 118). Clio Kao suggests that this work “celebrated the Christian and moral superiority of women who dominate the private sphere of ‘home’”. The “Angel in the house” represented the embodiment of the Victorian ideal of femininity, relegating women solely to the private sphere and, by extension, excluding them entirely from any involvement in public life. However, the term “angel” may suggest some sort of ambiguity, since in spite of suggesting virtue or even elevation of women, it actually implies the opposite: a metaphor for deep oppression and sexism within a patriarchal society. In short, we see the transformation of both the setting and the protagonist through the intervention of the supernatural,

which acts like an agent inverting roles. On the one hand, the house—a place typically associated with safety and intimacy turns into an environment of despair, fear, and disruption of both family and personal life. On the other hand, the female protagonist also suffers a transformation from “the Angel in the House” to the “Madwoman in the Attic”— as previously established in this thesis, a notion introduced by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. This model sees the Victorian woman as “mad” when she attempts to express all she has repressed for so long and from which she wants to free herself. These repressed feelings ultimately lead the Victorian woman to hysteria, delirium, etc., often interpreted by others as symptoms of insanity. Taking this into consideration, it seems as if the woman and the house were so closely connected that the transformation of one—the woman—inevitably affects the other—the house.

In the same way, “The Man with the Nose” presents a parallel situation to both Broughton’s tales commented above and to Braddon’s supernatural narrative in general. However, the selection of a male narrator is particularly striking, especially because this is the only tale in the sequence told from the point of view of a man. In this case, he is in charge of transmitting all the protagonist’s concerns and sensations; it is he who gives voice to his wife’s experiences and feelings, instead of being the female protagonist herself. This may seem odd at first, because why give him the voice instead of being her who narrates her own experiences? This may presumably be a strategy to relegate Elizabeth to the background, thus becoming a mere spectator: she is the victim, but she is also silenced. We cannot be certain if everything the husband tells us is what actually happened, since he is responsible for interpreting and filtering the information before presenting it to the readers. The newly married couple in this story enjoys their honeymoon when, one night, the woman wakes up startled and nervous, claiming to have seen a strange-looking man with an unusually creepy nose. In a state of shock, she wakes up her husband, who tries to calm her down

by suggesting that it has all been a dream. However, everything has been so realistic that his wife is not convinced:

—Now tell me, my little one, [...] what was what you thought you saw?”

—*Thought I saw!*” echoes she, with indignant emphasis, sitting upright, while her eyes sparkle feverishly. “I am as certain that I saw him standing there as I am that I see that candle burning, that I can see this chair, that I can see you” (Broughton, 1879, p. 19).

Everything becomes even more macabre when the protagonist sees the suspicious man again—this time while awake—plunging her into hysteria. Desperate for validation, she hopes that her husband has seen the man too, but the only thing she gets from him is disregard. As we may observe, this point connects with the previous story—and in fact, with the other tales as well.

—You saw him [...] I know you did [...] you cannot say that it was a dream this time

—I saw two or three ordinary-looking men [...] I did not notice anything remarkable about any of them; you know the fact is, darling, that you have had nothing to eat all day [...] and you are over-wrought, and fancy things (Broughton, 1879, p. 24).

In the end, once again, the narrative proves the validity of the woman’s beliefs. When the narrator returns home after some time away, he finds no one waiting for him, which fills him with concern.

I look up at our windows; nobody is looking out from them [...] I run quickly upstairs [...] Empty, perfectly empty! I open the adjoining door into the bedroom, crying [...] but I receive no answer. [...] A feeling of indignation creeps over me [...] (Broughton, 1879, p. 29).

He will eventually discover that his wife has left with the strange man with the nose and he will never see her again, and the roles of the protagonists seem to reverse. Now it is he who, consumed by despair and hysteria, will try to find his wife by any means.

Not all my inquiries, not all my cross questionings of the whole staff of the hotel, of the visitors [...] of nearly all the inhabitants of Lucerne and its environs, procure me a jot more knowledge. On the next few weeks I look back as on a hellish and insane dream. I can neither eat nor sleep. [...] O reader! these things happened twenty years ago; since then, I have searched sea and land, but never I seen my little Elizabeth again (Broughton, 1879 p. 32).

After the examination of *Twilight Stories*, one particularly revealing conclusion can be drawn. Unlike Braddon, who uses the supernatural primarily as a metaphor for female discomfort in the context of Victorian repression, Broughton introduces a significant twist in the structure of the stories. In her work, the supernatural element does not merely symbolise the emotional suffering of women, yet it acts as a disruptive agent that challenges the traditional male discourse, uncovering its weaknesses. In most of the tales, those characters who ignored, dismissed or even ridiculed the perceptions and feelings of the female protagonists, end up being affected by the

forces they initially disregarded—either psychologically or through more direct consequences. This kind of irony underlines the need to make women’s voices visible, which makes clear Broughton’s commitment to doing justice to this cause. By ultimately demonstrating that women were right all along, Broughton reverses the roles within a patriarchal dynamic that, as it has been already discussed in this dissertation, has repeatedly linked reason with masculinity and irrationality and emotion with femininity. These women are not mad, they are simply denouncing their discomfort with a reality they only seem to perceive and men—and also their close ones—seem to ignore: the oppression within Victorian society, the demanding and limiting expectations imposed on them, the constant judgement and enforced silencing in the face of these circumstances. In fact, we might also read Broughton’s recourse as a way of revenge: men who thought they were invulnerable and dominant are finally defeated by what they once ignored, and this is the moral we get from these works. This mechanism employed by the author can be interpreted as a form of emotional validation for Victorian women readers, whose feelings were often systematically pathologised. Broughton not only created a space in which women could see their concerns and frustrations reflected, but also introduced the once inconceivable notion that men could also be wrong. Therefore, in this sense, *Twilight Stories* become an implicit act of rebellion and support for women of the time.

4. A COMPARATIVE CONCLUSION TO MARY E. BRADDON AND RHODA BROUGHTON

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's and Rhoda Broughton's works present a number of stylistic differences, yet both authors share a crucial element: they incorporate the supernatural and gothic imagery as symbolic tools to denounce the patriarchal and oppressive system that shaped the lives of Victorian women. Despite this trait being the backbone of these writers' narratives, some differences may also be discussed. On the one hand, Braddon incorporates the supernatural as a metaphor for the trauma and repressed emotions of her female heroines, whereas Broughton moves a step further by adopting a more subversive perspective, actively challenging and shifting the traditional male discourse through unexpected narrative closures that question the coherence of the narrative up that point and invite readers to pose forward alternative interpretations. In light of this, both authors contribute to the demystification of the "Angel in the House"—which depicts women as passive, obedient beings often silenced and pathologised by their society—as well as to the symbolical restoration of the figure of the "Madwoman in the Attic". Not only did Braddon and Broughton provide deep reflections on Victorian gender constructions, but their works also continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, since despite significant social progress, the experiences they narrate might, in certain cases, continue to be perceived as still prevalent.

5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has aimed to shed light on how Victorian society has historically pathologised women's resistance to social constraints, using medical discourses on madness and insanity as a way to exert control over them. In this sense, this thesis has been informed by feminist approaches to the topic—such as those of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, and Jane Ussher—to inspect some short stories by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Rhoda Broughton through a feminist lens. In doing so, it has been demonstrated how Victorian society, psychiatry, and literature have worked together to silence women. All this has ultimately contributed to the creation of the figure of the “madwoman”, often constructed by women writers as a reaction against their disconformity within patriarchal society.

In this respect, Mary E. Braddon's short stories—particularly “Eveline's Visitant” (1867) and “Ralph, the Bailiff” (1862)—and Rhoda Broughton's gothic tales, included in the collection *Twilight Stories* have been analysed. These writers created female characters who, in attempting to question the norms of their time and refusing to behave as was expected from them, were often rendered as mad by their husbands and by others within their close circle; their experiences represent the situation of thousands of Victorian women. Nevertheless, the plots are not the most salient aspects of Braddon and Broughton's works; their power rather lies in the incorporation of supernatural imagery. Far from being mere escapist narratives, the utilisation of such elements is meant to produce a more dramatic effect by symbolising the female protagonists' concerns and conveying in a more indirect way what could not be said overtly at the time, especially in the case of women.

As previously argued, these women writers have contributed to the demystification of the figure of the so-called “Angel in the House”, eventually reassessing the figure of the

“Madwoman in the Attic”—a notion proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susana Gubar to refer to those repressed women who deliberately decided to break the silence. Thanks to Braddon, Broughton, and many other women authors of the period, Victorian women were able to see their anxieties and experiences reflected in fiction.

Although Braddon and Broughton’s short stories serve as a way of denouncing the women’s invisibility and oppression in Victorian society, this is implemented by using different narrative strategies. They both challenge social norms by portraying female characters as heroines who defy expectations and break their silence—as opposed to the traditional conception of women as passive and obedient individuals—in a society that judged and punished them for it. The messages transmitted by these writers were especially significant at their time, as they allowed many women to see their own experiences reflected in fiction. Furthermore, it would be interesting to consider for future research on this subject how these Victorian constructions related to the duality female/insanity have influenced the perception of women’s mental health today. Analysing in greater depth how these stigmas persist today and to what extent these ideals have changed up to the present day may be helpful to a more effective detection of mental health issues in women, free from gender-based biases.

It is true that contemporary society has significantly evolved since then, and that women are nowadays empowered by the free exercise of rights that would have been unimaginable for Victorian women. But this is an assumption which is by no means universal: the tendency to pathologise women’s emotions and sensitivity remains persistent. This dissertation has aimed to show the relevance of women’s discourse, and how their experience must be recognised and respected. Enabling women to express their concerns without fear of dismissal or pathologisation is essential for progressing towards an egalitarian society. Braddon, Broughton, as well as other

authors addressed in this thesis, had already pursued this objective at a time when obstacles were much greater. In this sense, we have now the responsibility to continue advancing by following their example.

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