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Evil Feminine and Untamed Nerves: Sensationalism in Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *The Rose and the Key*

ABSTRACT:

Starting with a cultural-historical framing of late-Victorian sensation fiction and focusing on deranged and rebellious women that populate sensation narratives, this article explores the figure of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and his artistic closeness to late-Victorian sensationalism. Having as mainstay Le Fanu's familiarity with late-nineteenth-century psychiatry, this paper pivots around the sensational that permeates Le Fanu's *The Rose and the Key*, a work that never experienced the fame, for instance, of *Uncle Silas* or *Carmilla*. Paying attention to the stormy relationship between Maud and Barbara – daughter and mother – and to the countless secrets guarded by the latter, in this article I look at *The Rose and the Key* as a denunciation of a highly corruptible psychiatric system, much oriented towards repression, especially in the case of women.

KEYWORDS: sensationalism, women, Le Fanu, psychiatry, asylum.

1. ***Wicked Literature and Late-Victorian Womanhood***

Beginning in the 1860s, a series of outrageous novels flooded British literary market and intruded into Victorian domesticity, struck terror into the mind of readers and reinforced *fin-de-siècle* anxieties over women and their alleged inability to tame instincts. To borrow from Maurizio Ascari, at the peak of its fame, sensationalism "enjoyed a vast success in terms of sales, enthralling the reading public, but was also at the heart of a heated critical debate" (2007, 110). Indeed, in

1862, in an article appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, the English philosopher Henry Longueville Mansel (1820-1871), Professor of Ecclesiastic History and Moral Philosophy at Oxford University, criticised that emerging genre and observed that

> […] a class of literature has grown around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office, playing no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation. […] The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale […] which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader. (cit. in Regan 2001, 45-47)

Born out of the cascade of Darwinian pages about natural selection and struggle for existence published in the late 1850s, the ever-increasing number of asylums built across the island, alienating industrialisation, and rampant dread of hereditary degeneration, sensationalism placed at the heart of its thrilling plots "a new kind of heroine, one who could put her hostility toward men into violent action" (Showalter 1977, 160). Shaking the pillars of a society that viewed women as subjects who "could never hope to stand on a level of social and professional equality with men" (Eagle Russett 1989, 30), sensationalists voiced "female anger, frustration, and sexual energy more directly than had been done previously" (Showalter 1977, 160) and portrayed a world "in which secrets are the rule rather than the exception" (Hughes 1980, 190). Understood in this context as a response to a cultural and clinical milieu obsessed with psychosis, human degeneration and deranged feminine, "sensation fiction engages in an intense focus on the domestic space of marital house – the desired goal of the domestic heroine – which becomes […] the locus of passion, deception, violence and crime" (Pykett 1992, 74).

Not unfrequently written by women, sensation novels, as Elaine Showalter correctly points out, "made a powerful appeal to the female audience" by expressing "a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape" (1977, 159). The protagonists of sensation narratives are most often women who, contemptuous of male authority, rebel against phallocentrism and prove disrespectful of social and marital rules. And it was in the revolutionary message underlying those new narratives that Mansel's and many others' concerns were rooted. Mansel believed that women – wives, mothers, and daughters – who enjoyed spending their time reading sensation novels could draw from those hyper-stimulating plots and end up destroying conventional moralities.

In this regard, Tara Macdonald notices that, in sensation narratives, women could find worlds that were reminiscent of their own: "they somehow inhabited those text. Implied in such anxieties about sensational reading was the notion that women readers would in fact *become* the characters they read about" (2007, 132). Calling to my mind Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Day-Dream* (1880), a portrayal of a woman who is lost in her thoughts allegedly inspired by the book she has on her lap, Macdonald maintains that "abandoning oneself to the world of the novel comes dangerously close to losing one's identity" (ibid., 135). For some women, reading sensation narratives could mean being strayed far from the path that society and families had set for them. Those gruesome narratives could undermine domestic balances by instilling subversive ideas into the minds of countless daughters and wives, whose fathers and husbands had groomed to be complaisant 'angels in the house', silently devoted to looking after men, bearing, taking care of children, cleaning, and cooking.

Besides Mansel, Margaret Oliphant Wilson (1829-1897) did not fail to express her concerns about the *diablerie* of various types that sensation plots were disseminating among mid-century Victorians. While praising Collins' *The Woman in White*, the novel that, in 1860, inaugurated sensationalism, Oliphant felt that a frenzied rebellion against nature was at work. She observed that sensationalism was imbued with horror, mystery, black arts and mad psychology, and "the result is no doubt a class of books abounding in sensation; but the effect is invariably attained by violent and illegitimate means" (cit. in Regan 2001, 41). Oliphant thought that, as long as sensationalism benefited from madness, murders, crimes, unleashed violence and outrageous characters, the effects on (mainly female) readership were perilous. She argued that, "in the interest of art, it is necessary to protest against"; "nothing can be more wrong and fatal than to present the flames of vice as a purifying fiery ordeal, through which the penitent is to come elevated and sublimed" (ibid., 43).

The female protagonists of sensation novels, Emily Allen argues, "take bullets and poison, commit bigamy and murder, lie, steal, cheat, go mad, turn detective, and disappear" (2011, 404): the domestic angel becomes a she-devil. Unstable psyches, revenge, discordance, deceptions, domestic violence, and crime constituted key ingredients of mid-Victorian sensation fiction. As pointed out by Walter Besant (1836-1901), founder of the Society of Authors in 1884,

> […] the so-called sensational novels […] show the downward progress of a character only weak at first, reckless at last. […] In this class of novel we have, it is true, plenty of incident; but we have […] all the sorrow and suffering that surround the fall of a man from his high estate of self-respect. […] The problem of suffering and sorrow is that which lies at the root of all novels: it forms the interest and pathos of every life. (cit. in McNees 2006, 187-88)

Among the many incidents that, according to Besant, can occur in sensation novels is crime, i.e. the climax of the protagonist's psychological pain and regressive metamorphosis. And, as long as foolish, brutal, and aforethought crime was presented to readers as an irresistible impulse of daily life, they had to get used to it and find possible ways to excuse it: in this context, psychosis and its disruptive consequences on one's self-control became the ideal justification for murder. Exploiting the allure of domestic secrets, sensation writers cast light on a growing mid-Victorian obsession with criminality, mental pathology and its alleged transmissibility, specially from mothers to daughters. Sensation narratives confirmed that a worrying process of decay was underway, the cause of which was mainly attributed to the female counterpart of Victorian society, accused of handing down the seeds of folly to the offspring, the future of the country. As Pamela K. Gilbert has argued, "madness, hereditary and otherwise, features as a significant plot point for novels throughout the period". Interested in "extreme medical and mental states", sensation novels repeatedly thematised "the dangers of nervous disease" (2007, 185).

Regarded as a powerful evidence of the alleged innate insanity of women, a murder of unspeakable brutality opened the 1860s: Constance Kent (1844-1944), a sixteen-year-old girl from the village of Road in Somerset, was accused of killing her three-year-old stepbrother, found in the garden with his throat slit. Spreading like wildfire, the news swiftly reached every corner of the country, strengthening an already widespread belief that, behind every angelic visage, a hideous monster might lurk. Inspired by the several crime reports of their days and psychiatric investigations, sensational writers filled their novels with mysterious women and unstable minds, with "'shocking violent outrage', 'unspeakable violence', 'murderous assaults', and 'crime of dreadful depravity'" (Rowbotham and Stevenson 2016, 140). As Winifred Hughes has remarked, "evil or antisocial action is no longer the direct result and expression of evil character", "but derives from combinations of circumstances, weakness, insanity, impulse, 'sensation' at its most basic" (1980, 58).

Notable examples of late-Victorian sensation novels are *The Woman in White* (1860) – mentioned before – and *The Legacy of Cain* (1888) by Wilkie Collins, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *East Lynne* (1861) and *St. Martin's Eve* (1866) by Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood. Other sensationalists are also worth mentioning: Rhoda Broughton, Amelia B. Edwards, Florence Marryat, Marie Louise Ramée (known as 'Ouida'), Charles Reade, and Charlotte Riddell. In this paper, nevertheless, I intend to explore the controversial figure of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, defined in the early 1930s by Stewart M. Ellis "a supreme author of stories and novels of murder and mystery" (1931, 173), whose partial neglect by scholarship, as Anna Maria Jones has written, "is of long standing and seems, often, to hinge on his not being Wilkie Collins" (2011, 270). Even though the line between Gothic and sensationalism is very often blurry, "most of the scholarship on Le Fanu, even that which reads him in conjunction with other sensation novelists, has tended to place him in the former rather than the latter category" (ibid., 271).

2. Le Fanu's Closeness to Late-Victorian Sensationalism

Aware of the worries that sensationalism had been spreading in society since the beginning of the 1860s and terrified of the repercussions that those concerns could have on his works, in his "Preliminary Word" to *Uncle Silas* (1864), Le Fanu remarked that he despised the current of sensationalism. Although he produced works that displayed several of the characteristics that are typical of sensation novels, he "vehemently objected to them being classified as such" (Jones 2011, 270), as he felt that the label 'sensation novel' could severely detract from the quality of his novels. He wrote:

> The author trusts that the Press, to whose masterly criticism and generous encouragement he and other humble labourers in the art owe so much, will insist upon the limitation of that degrading term to the peculiar type of fiction which it was originally intended to indicate, and prevent, as they may, its being made to include the legitimate school of tragic English romance, which has been ennobled, and in great measure founded, by the genius of Sir Walter Scott. (Le Fanu 2000, 4)

Nonetheless, time would tell a different story. In spite of his avowed reluctance towards sensation novels, Le Fanu drew heavily from that new genre. A great deal of his works can be looked at as deft pastiches of Gothic and sensation fiction, literary genres that sew the narrative fabric in a similar way. Lyn Pykett has observed that mid-Victorian sensation novels, like "gothic romances, were concerned with terror, mystery, suspense, secrecy, deception, and disguise, and they frequently […] involved the persecution and incarceration of the heroine" (2001, 203-04). On this issue, Patrick Brantlinger has argued that "some sensation novels are indistinguishable from Gothic romances" (1982, 8) and that late-Victorian sensationalism brought Gothic trope up to date by mingling it "with the conventions of realism as to make its events seem possible if not exactly probable" (ibid., 9). The most obvious disjunction between Gothic and sensation fiction lies in the predilection of the latter for domestic settings. While Gothic narratives, such as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Lewis' *The Monk*, or Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, "explore the deepest recesses of human psychology, always stressing the macabre, the unusual and the fantastic" (Carter and McRae 2001, 244), sensation novels prefer prying into Victorian houses and probing into private lives of their inhabitants. To put it another way, sensationalism substituted gothic mysteries with domestic tragedies, turning domesticity into a key component of its plots.

3. The 'Sensational' Underlying *The Rose and the Key*

Bearing this in mind, in this paper I revisit Le Fanu's proximity to the aesthetics of sensationalism, emphasise his considerable knowledge of the mid-Victorian psychiatric system, his undoubted familiarity with the treatment of female insanity, and foreground the 'sensational' that features *The Rose and the Key*, a novel that is overshadowed by more critically acclaimed works by Le Fanu, such as *Carmilla*, *In a Glass Darkly*, and *Uncle Silas*.

Born in Dublin in 1814, Le Fanu spent most of his youth studying at a military school. Educated according to the rigid precepts of the Church of Ireland, he did not take long to manifest an innate passion for writing stories. In 1844, at the age of thirty, he married Susan Bennett, a nervous, religion-obsessed and anxiety-ridden woman, a troubled soul who, in the grip of recurrent panic attacks, died in 1858, at the age of thirty-four, leaving her husband with two daughters and two sons: "her loss was an irreparable grief" to Le Fanu (Ellis 1931, 156). The mental derangement of his beloved Susan represented for Le Fanu a first-hand experience of the plague of hysteria, a sort of bitter confirmation of the rumours that, in those years, claimed that women were – by nature – incapable of controlling their minds and nerves. And it was this vast knowledge of Le Fanu of psychoses, asylums, and medical discourses on women and insanity that spilled over into his writings later on: *The Rose and the Key* – an extremely suspenseful novel – is an excellent example in this context.

Published weekly from January to September 1871 in Charles Dickens' *All the Year Round*, *The Rose and the Key* presents almost all the principal characteristics of a typical sensation novel. Indeed, if the main elements of sensation narratives are vengeful, criminal and violent femininity, psychiatric hospitals and dark minds, *The Rose and the Key* is a sensation novel in its own right, even though crime and criminals – central to sensation novels – are missing in Le Fanu's novel. Yet, even though there is no crime in *The Rose and the Key*, the greedy and duplicitous Barbara Vernon, the main character besides her daughter Maud, harbours murderous intentions towards the latter, "the source of half of" her nervousness (Le Fanu 1982, 428).

The first pages of *The Rose and the Key* resemble the initial chapters of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, where Braddon resorts to the image of a storm as an omen of a family tragedy, a portent of an impending apocalypse: "the ivy rustled against the glass with the same ominous shiver as that which agitated every leaf in the garden, prophetic of the storm that was to come" (2012, 64). In much the same way, in *The Rose and the Key*, the young heiress, Maud Vernon, watches a distant tempest that looms on the horizon, a turbulence which embodies her "presentiment that some misfortune impends" (Le Fanu 1982, 23). The darkness falling on the Welsh countryside mirrors the gloomy premonitions of Maud, who is tormented by the shadowy presence of a one-eyed man, an evangelical called Elihu Lizard, "an ill-looking, canting man" instructed to follow her, "collect information, and make notes of everything" (ibid., 380) to gain evidence of Maud's alleged insanity. Alongside Lizard, the young heiress has to deal with her gruff mother: whenever Maud attempts to enter into dialogue with Barbara, they always end up quarrelling and "Maud's heart swells with bitterness" (ibid., 60).

Emulating sensation narratives that preceded it, *The Rose and the Key* does not neglect to address the issue of marriage. In effect, in the novel Le Fanu explores the institution of marriage and its implications from the perspective of Barbara. Surrounding herself with psychiatrists that, in cahoots with her, are poised to certify Maud to prevent her from marrying, Barbara informs readers that the marriage of her daughter would result in her loss of power over the Vernons' fortune. Portrayed as a mysterious woman harbouring a diabolical monster in herself, Barbara – like Silas in *Uncle Silas* – is corroded by the terror of being deprived of her treasure: "she heard the pulse of the artery in her temple drum on her pillow; and her heart beat harder than a heart at ease is wont to throb" (ibid., 239).

Well informed of the many cases in which, in those years, fathers and husbands (yet not exclusively) used asylums as prisons for troublesome and rebellious daughters and wives, Le Fanu depicts the ruthlessness of a mother who, helped by corrupt alienists and wishing to gain economic advancement from the removal of Maud from society, plans to conceal her daughter within the walls of a psychiatric hospital:

> […] in the corner of the deep and dark cell she occupies, there stands, as it were, an evil spirit, and there ripples in and fills her ears, with ebb and flow, the vengeful swell, but too familiar to her soul, of another psalm – a psalm of curses. […] Had she abused the Word of God; and was the spirit she had evoked her master now? (ibid., 97-98)

Corroborating what Hughes argues, that sensation fictions "reveal a recurrent preoccupation with the loss or duplication of identity" (Hughes 1980, 21), the more Barbara Vernon perceives Maud as a threat, the more she descends into madness. Nevertheless, even though Barbara's *doppelgänger* is increasingly evident, she deftly maintains the guise of a classy woman in control of her instincts: "with a womanly weakness she walked to the mirror close by, and looked into it, and perhaps was satisfied that traces of this agitation were not very striking" (Le Fanu 1982, 120). Resembling Miss Havisham in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, the diabolical matriarchy of *The Rose and the Key*, despite her wealthy position in society, is an instance of 'fallen woman', "bearer of corruption and disease" (Pykett 1992, 154). "As a rule, the brain does not lead. It is the instrument and the slave of desire. […] It is the desire that governs the will, and the will the intellect" (Le Fanu 1982, 193), and Barbara "has a strong will", "she has the appearance of coldness, and she is secretly passionate and violent" (ibid., 126). Akin to "prostitutes, unmarried women who engage in sexual relations with men, victims of seduction, adulteresses, as well as variously delinquent lower-class women" (Anderson 1993, 2), in the eyes of readers Barbara is a woman spoiling Victorian 'purity'.

Having built her existence on numerous secrets that sour her feelings, Barbara not only has a double personality and a strong dislike for her daughter, but she also has a covert son, Elwyn Howard, who is attracted to Maud, and both are wholly unaware of their kinship. The incestuous relationship and the plausible eventuality of a marriage between the two consume Barbara, who crumbles under the burden of her internal conflicts. Pictures of a tragedy take shape and Barbara's devotion to God is no longer of use. For although Lady Vernon has a strong belief in God, her prayers fail to give her relief and she surrenders to the Evil:

> […] a woman of her strong will, pride, and ability, could not be very long incapacitated, and in a little time she resolved upon several things. She shut the big Bible, that still lay open, with an angry clap. 'I have asked for help, and it is denied to me,' she said fiercely to herself, with an odd mixture of faith and profanation. (Le Fanu 1982, 199)

Le Fanu confronts his readers with a woman consumed by resentment and anger. Much like fears of human decay were corroding Victorians from within, Barbara's psychic integrity is undermined by irrepressible forces of hatred towards her daughter.

> For years she had things to vex her. She had more; secret afflictions and dreadful recollections, of which but one person now living, expect herself, knew nothing. For years she had been silently, though unconsciously, battling with remorse. She was battling with the same fiend now. But was not Satan writhing under her heel? […] What were these internal questionings, doubtings, and upbraidings, but the malignant sophistries of the Evil One accusing the just? (ibid., 257)

Engulfed in an endless spiral of lies and deceit that she has concocted over the years, the sinister matriarch teams up with some professionals working in the field of psychiatry: as Pamela K. Gilbert claims, "by the 1860s, doctors are everywhere in the fiction, but their uncanny ability to read symptoms and unearth secrets, as well as their drive to knowledge for their own sake, begins to have a darker side" (2007, 187). First of all, Barbara can count on the help of Dr Antomarchi, the forbidding and austere administrator of a psychiatric hospital, a stern man that can inspect his patients' minds, penetrate their fathomless depths, and understand their secret codes. He is "a marble-featured man, with strange eyes, and black, square beard" (Le Fanu 1982, 297). Dr Antomarchi is an extremely powerful mesmerist, a satanic man that runs an asylum called 'Glarewoods'. No stranger to the mesmeric shows that in the late-Victorian age spread across Britain and Ireland, Le Fanu portrays Dr Antomarchi as a brilliant mesmerist who can infiltrate and manipulate women's psyches like clay in the hands of a skilful potter. And, in this case, it is Maud's mind that Dr Antomarchi is called upon to mould.

Persuaded that she is going on a courtesy visit to Lady Mardyke's luxurious mansion, Maud finds herself imprisoned in what turns out to be nothing but the *trompe l'oeil* of Lady Mardyke's residence. Maud soon realises that she has been tricked by her perfidious mother and relegated to Dr Antomarchi's asylum, a 'horrible place' with "lots of hands and eyes everywhere; and good locks, and safe windows, and high walls" (ibid., 366). Confined in this inhospitable place, Barbara experiences fears that, through Le Fanu's pen, become almost palpable on the reader's part.

> She heard other men's voices, now in low and vehement dialogue, and sounds of shuffling feet, of gasping, tugging, and panting, as if a determined struggle were going on; once or twice a low laugh was heard; and then came a yell loud and long, which seemed passing further and further away, and was soon lost quite in the distance; a door clapped, and the place was silent. (ibid., 303)

Le Fanu catapults us into Antomarchi's psychiatric hospital and offers a minute description of Maud's feelings. Maud "sat down trembling, and then got up, pressing her hands to her temples, with a terrible look of helplessness" (ibid., 347). Helpless victim of her mother and of Antomarchi's mistreatment, Miss Vernon realises that her stay at Glarewoods would drive her mad: "'I shall go mad. I can't stay here! I'll not eat or drink – I'll find a way, some way, a short way. Oh, mamma! You'll be sorry, then. […] I can't be imprisoned here. I'm not a slave'" (ibid., 346). Nevertheless, in spite of her burning anger, Maud soon understands that she has to renounce her hostility, accept her imprisonment and adopt what Alison Milbank has called a "passive conformity" (1992, 168) to the ironclad rules of Dr Antomarchi, who cautions her:

> It is my duty to treat you with what skill I possess; it is yours to submit; and submit you shall. I have heard of your language, of your violence, of your covert menace of forcing to escape, or committing self-destruction. Sufficient precautions are taken in this establishment to render that crime impracticable.

> There are people confined here whose desire to commit suicide amounts to a lust. They hope for nothing else, they dream of nothing else […] Violence here, leads necessary to repression; customary, in the most trifling particulars, to increased restraint; and angry language, as tending in certain nervous states to produce corresponding action, necessarily to a treatment dispensed with before, that is intensely disagreeable. This, you understand, is not punishment; it is precaution, and a process, though painful, strictly of a sanatory kind. (Le Fanu 1982, 353)

And it is precisely at this point of the narrative that Le Fanu starts shedding light on the atrocities performed in a great deal of Victorian asylums at the expense of many patients. By probing the blurry line between psychiatric treatment for curative aims and psychiatric treatment for punitive purposes, Le Fanu confronts us with the ruthless cruelty of Dr Antomarchi, a torturer of his defenceless patients, who are forced into atrocious harassment and continuous punishments.

Exploiting the widespread fascination among his contemporaries with asylums, in *The Rose and the Key* Le Fanu displays his knowledge of the ways in which the insane were often treated in psychiatric hospitals, a universe largely spectacularised by popular culture and the press, to which Le Fanu himself "for a long period devoted his energies" (Ellis 1931, 156). Focusing on Dr Antomarchi and the treatment that the latter imposes on the Duchess of Falconbury, Le Fanu offers a rich window on the methods most frequently employed in late-Victorian asylums to soothe women's nerves: the shower-bath. In the nineteenth century, cold showers or baths were not simply used for cleansing and cleaning patients: hydrotherapy was an excellent way to cool down hot minds. In Victorian asylums, patients could be subjected to prolonged jets or immersions in water, which had the power to convert the patient's delirious outbursts into paralysing fears of drowning. As stressed by Foucault, "from the end of the seventeenth century onwards, the cure by baths was […] the most common form of treatment for insanity" (2006, 314): a cold shower-bath had a "psychological effect of a disagreeable surprise", in the sense that it "broke the chain of thoughts and changed the nature of feelings" of the delirious self; cold showers, not unlike cold baths, ended up becoming a "usual punishment meted out by the simple police tribunal that permanently sat in the asylums" (ibid., 501).

Foucault's assertions are fully confirmed by the following extracts, where Le Fanu describes a sort of attempt on the part of the asylum personnel to drown the Duchess during a bath at Glarewoods. Offering his readers scenes of unutterable inhumanity, Le Fanu presents the helplessness of the Duchess who is treated as if she were a criminal to be punished for her unforgivable crimes.

> Poor thing! her grace was in a sorry plight, strapped down in the iron chair, and, spite of all her writhings and tuggings, unable to alter her position by a hair's-breadth, or even to jolt one leg of the heavy chair the smallest fraction of an inch off the ground. […] For a time the fury of the patient seemed to increase. It is was not long. In Maud's ears, the monotonous down-pour grew louder and louder, as minute after minute passed. The yells became sobs, and the sobs subsided. And still the rush of water thundered on. 'Oh! my God! She's drowning!' cried Maud. […] After a time there was a little sob; and after an interval another, and then a great sigh, and then again another and another, long-drawn as that with which life departs. There must be the agonies of drowning in all this; worse than common drowning, drowning by a slower suffocation, and with a consciousness horribly protracted. And now there is the greater agony of recovery. The doctor had returned to the side of the poor duchess, who was now breathing or rather sighing, heavily, and staring vaguely before her. (Le Fanu 1982, 356-58)

To make the novel more faithful to the world of his female readers, after recounting the torture to which the Duchess is victim, Le Fanu pauses the narrative and offers an overview of mid-Victorian psychiatry and of the legislative apparatus intended to regulate the lives of patients in psychiatric institutions. Stressing that "the peculiar use of the shower-bath in the treatment of insane is no fiction" (Le Fanu 1982, 359) and referring to the Commissions in Lunacy – instituted by the *Lunatic Asylums Act* of 1845, – Le Fanu turns his novel into an occasion of social denunciation by pointing out that:

> […] the Commissioners in Lunacy preferred an indictment against the medical superintendent of an English asylum, for having, as they alleged, caused the death of a pauper patient, by subjecting him to a continuous shower-bath of *thirty* minutes' duration, and for having administered to him, soon after his removal from the bath, and whilst in a state of vital depression, a douse of white-coloured mixture, alleged to have contained two grains of tartar emetic. The physician in this case resembled Antomarchi in no respect, expect in being a man of attainments and experience. […H]is theory was this, that in the awfully depressing malady of madness, if a patient is 'violent,' 'noisy,' 'excited,' and 'destructive,' 'quiet' and 'docility' are legitimately to be induced by 'overpowering' him, and 'prostrating the system,' by a continuous shower-bath of monstrous duration, followed up on his release from the bath by a nauseating emetic, still further to exhaust an already prostate system. This practice is no longer countenanced by the faculty. (ibid.)

This narrative break serves Le Fanu to move away – at least for a few lines – from his role as a novelist and recover his past days as a journalist, a sharp columnist who, in *The Rose and the Key*, is busy inspecting the late-Victorian psychiatric system in order to bring to light its darkest sides and its cruellest procedures. The novel thus turns out to be a clear-cut critique on Le Fanu's part of the dreadful treatments that patients in asylums had to endure on a daily basis and a bitter realisation that, for many of them, psychiatric hospitals had become for many nothing but dead-end prisons. As argued by Milbank, in *The Rose and the Key*, Le Fanu shows a society that "does not merely shut its awkward women in madhouses but is itself one giant system of repression and control" (1992, 167). Besides dealing with the ease with which late-Victorian alienists could be bribed, Le Fanu forcefully comments on the inability of the Commissioners of Lunacy to oversee asylums and verify the mental derangement of the exorbitant number of patients locked up in psychiatric institutions throughout the country. Dazed because of hypnosis, Maud is in fact unable to provide clear answers to the questions of the Commissioners, and her disarray can only but reinforce the (phoney) diagnosis of psychic instability. Looking at Maud's plight through a feminist lens and emphasising that the accusation of madness often invalidated any attempt on the part of the accused to prove its actual untruthfulness, Le Fanu depicts the young heiress of Vernon's family as an icon of the numerous inconvenient women that, victims of evil relatives, were compelled to spend the rest of their lives within the walls of a Victorian asylum: as Gilbert observed, "the only thing more frightening […] than being mad was being diagnosed and treated for it" (2007, 190).

Visited by Dr Damian, a *deus ex machina*, Maud is eventually freed from the label of madness: there is no trace of psychic fragility in her. "Trembling, Lady Vernon sat down. There is always a 'devil's advocate' to pervert the motives and distort the conduct of the saints, and hers had just been with her" (Le Fanu 1982, 391). Rejected by her daughter, Lady Vernon has ultimately to come to terms with her filthy consciousness:

> The great and faultless Lady Vernon is by this time cooling and stiffening rapidly, on the sofa, a shawl over her feet, her head propped with the pillow, and something under her chin to close her mouth. […] The tints on her cheeks fade naturally into the proper hue of death […]. Her large grey eyes are now, one at least, quite shut; there is a little glitter perceptible under the lashes of the other. This solitary lady, with one great and untold affection among the

> living, one passionate affection among the dead, is more alone than ever now. (ibid., 429)

Recalling what Brantlinger has remarked, that the best sensation novels are novels with a secret, *The Rose and the Key* is a novel that abounds in family secrets and mysteries and presents itself as a paradigm of the sensation mania that spread in mid-Victorian society. Although in *Uncle Silas* Le Fanu attempted to distance himself from sensationalism by evoking an older tradition attributable to Walter Scott, a few years later, in *The Rose and the Key*, Le Fanu rode on the fame of sensation novels and exploited their ability to capture readers' attention. I contend that *The Rose and the Key* makes clear that Le Fanu could boast an enviable literary versatility and a remarkable capacity to weave secrets, mystery, insanity, fiction and reality, to the point of creating narratives that could catch the attention also of those readers who "would have no liking for the ordinary sensation novel" (Ellis 1931, 178).

In conclusion, I agree with Ellis who, in the early-1930s, suggested that in *The Rose and the Key* Le Fanu "in certain measure resembles the methods of his great sensational and contemporary rival who wrote *The Woman in White*" (1931, 171). *The Rose and the Key* reveals that J. Sheridan Le Fanu was a skilful sensationalist and an outstanding explorer of his characters' minds and innermost secrets. I suggest that what Tatiana Kontou has rightly observed regarding *Uncle Silas* – that "the novel contradicted the author's romance intentions by becoming one of his most sensation tales" (2007, 143), – can also be claimed for *The Rose and the Key*, a novel that, through a composite interplay of projections from fiction and late-Victorian reality, offers itself as an exemplary sensation novel and as a harsh critique of a faulty and highly corruptible psychiatric system.

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