

WRITING OUT (OF) DARKNESS

The Bastilles of England; or, The Lunacy Law at Work by Louisa Lowe (1883)¹

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Abstract – Louisa Lowe’s *The Bastilles of England; or, the Lunacy Law at Work* (1883) details the conditions of patients before, during and after their confinement in mental asylums. Based on Lowe’s personal experience, the text helped draw public attention to institutional and medical practices which claimed to act in the interest of patients and of their health, while it kept them “out of sight, out of mind”, thereby relegating them to “dark corners of the land” – the mental asylums. Whether private or pauper, English madhouses recalled atrocious places of confinement and torture such as the Bastilles of pre-revolutionary France had been. Drawing upon a popular analogy, that between the French jail and the English mental asylum, Lowe exposed and sought to dismantle a profoundly and dangerously corrupted system. Page after page, she depicted the intricacies of one of Britain’s most embarrassing and execrable legal practices – the operation of the lunacy laws – and to such an aim, images of darkness proved crucial. Lowe wrote about them; she wrote out of and against them and shed light on ideological as well as cultural and gender-related darkneses. Her treatise helped pave the way towards social responsibility, mutual help and understanding, honesty and moral integrity to vindicate that primary right to individual freedom which the lunacy laws at work – the Bastilles of late-Victorian England – were yet to recognise. This study investigates Lowe’s narrative and narrative strategy in a text that is a precious, however largely neglected testimony of fin de siècle cultural and social activism.

Keywords: Louisa Lowe; Lunacy Law; Fin de siècle; Activism; Medical Reform.

1. Introduction

Louisa Lowe’s *The Bastilles of England; or, the Lunacy Law at Work* details the conditions of patients before, during and after their confinement in British mental asylums. Published in 1883, the treatise exposed the wrongs and evils of the national lunacy system by way of a distinctive narrative that reiterates images of darkness, or darkneses, which are worth exploring in view of shedding light on a precious and yet largely neglected testimony of fin de siècle cultural and social activism. The OED entry for “dark” defines it as something “lacking light or knowledge”, something which is “done in secrecy or concealment”, “obscure”, “sinister”, “cheerless”. These notions lie at the heart of Lowe’s exposure of the English law on lunacy, all of them contributing to her attack on a system whose workings she deems gloomy, dismal, dreary, bleak, grim, vile, base, iniquitous, hellish, unenlightened. In a word, dark. In the text, I contend, dark is:

- the mental asylum and its custodial rather than curative function;
- the ignorance and silence surrounding the asylum system;

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- the lack of communication between patients and doctors;
- the violation of a person’s liberty;
- the fear of disease, contagion, and public exposure;
- the corruption at the heart of a lucrative system,
- the collective denial of truth and lack of social responsibility.

What follows explores these aspects and the way in which Lowe writes out and out of the darkness surrounding the English lunacy system of her time.

Following centuries of unregulated containment within workhouses, charitable and penal institutions, at the start of the 1800s the care of the mentally insane in Britain was placed nominally in the hands of the local governance. As early as 1774 the Madhouses Act had introduced a certification system which applied to private patients only, leaving pauper patients uncared for. The new law “empowered anyone declaring himself to be an apothecary, surgeon, or physician to sign a certificate” (Hervey 1986, p. 247). Several of these men were unqualified and inexperienced, and indeed as late as 1850, medical men still had little or no experience of mental illness (Hervey 1986, p. 247): madness, that is, could not be defined by specialist psychiatric criteria. In 1808 a County Asylums Act was issued which encouraged Justices of the Peace to build dedicated institutions to house pauper lunatics in their county; in 1815 the House of Commons appointed the Select Committee on the Regulation of Madhouses in England, and in 1845 the Lunacy Act (8 & 9 Vict., c. 100) and a second County Asylums Act (8 and 9 Vict., c. 126) further strengthened the provisions of the 1808 CAA (Hughes 2023, p. 88). As of 1845, lunatic asylums became compulsory – indeed the nineteenth century would see a proliferation of madhouses across the continent, the culmination of a European movement that Michel Foucault has termed “the great confinement”, whereby those whose lives were perceived as a menace to bourgeois rationality would be blotted out of society (Foucault 1988, pp. 35-60; see also Porter 1990). In England, to inspect and regulate asylums, a full-time Lunacy Commission was set up under the Care and Treatment of Lunatics Act, and the double certificate requirement was extended to ‘single patients’, that is individuals who could be treated at home or in a private house (Porter *et al.* 2003, p. 8). By the time Lowe compiled her treatise, “nearly 8000” patients were kept in private asylums “in England and Wales” (Lowe 1883, p. 4), and it is to them especially that the English activist directed her readers’ attention – to the question of “pauper asylums” she would dedicate a second volume later on. Private asylums hosted primarily middle-class and upper middle-class patients (working-class patients were sent to public asylums), and they were targeted by reformers as places to be abolished, if not demolished. Drawing upon a visually striking image – that of the French detention house of the Bastille – Lowe journeyed down into the heart of Britain’s dark mental health’s system to provide a meticulous account of a patient’s trajectory from the way in to the often improbable way out of a madhouse. The volume resulted largely from her personal experience as a private and a single patient in three different asylums, a traumatic event which was exceptional in many ways, but also and sadly common for her times (Fig. 1). In 1870, her husband, the Anglican vicar George Lowe, had her forcefully sent to Brislington House, a private sanatorium near Bristol, where Louisa spent five months (from 23rd September 1870 to 14th February 1871) before being transferred to Lawn House, a rather expensive private madhouse in Hanwell, whence she was sent to Otto House in Hammersmith on 25th September 1871 (Brückner 2021, p. 98). Lowe’s incarceration, as she would call it, had been on account of her poor health (she had suffered from nervous exhaustion and had attempted suicide twenty years earlier), and of her interests in spiritualism and convictions that she was in possession of special powers (Brückner 2021, p. 97, and p. 117, notes 30, 31; Owen 1990, p. 171). As a

matter of fact, it was a consequence of a turbulent marriage with a rather unfaithful husband who sought to punish her extravagant character and had a strong interest in her income (she came from a well-to-do family and owned property worth £1,000 per annum). By the end of December 1871, Louisa was released on trial and spent four months in an apartment in Russell Square, London, under the supervision of a legal adviser, until April 1872, when she gained back her “right to liberty” (Brückner 2021, p. 98). At first, she sought to prevent her husband from getting access to her assets, and she sued the Commissioners that had allowed for her seclusion; in June 1873 she gave life to the Lunacy Law Reform Association (LLRA), a pressure group whose actions and reports contributed to the establishment of a House of Commons Select Committee and to the revised Lunacy Act of 29 March 1890, which would help “shape the British system up to the Mental Health Act of 1959” (Brückner 2021, p. 101).²

As noted, Lowe’s story is in many ways exceptional, yet it is also truly and sadly common for her time. The case of Miss Barbara White (1841), for instance, exposed the risks of confinement within a private house (Porter *et al.* 2003, p. 9). The case of Lady Rosina Bulwer-Lytton caused a scandal proper in 1857 when the Irish novelist could be locked into a madhouse for three weeks by her former husband, the British politician and author George Earle Bulwer-Lytton.³ There was then Georgina Weldon, the artist and spiritualist, who famously escaped incarceration, sued her adulterous husband, and under the 1882 Married Women’s Property Act took legal action also against those who had participated in “the plot and failed”, including the doctor that had issued her lunacy certificate, and the asylum proprietor (Porter *et al.* 2003, p. 18).

Several analogous stories drew public attention and raised anti-asylum sentiments across the country (Brückner 2021, p. 92 and note 5, p. 114) with popular writers such as Wilkie Collins, Henry Cockton, Charles Reade, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Rosina Bulwer-Lytton, and Georgina Weldon herself⁴ contributing to the debate, possibly picking up from the previous generation of *engagé* authors such as Daniel Defoe and Tobias Smollett who, a few decades earlier had voiced and nourished “public concern about certification, wrongful detention of the sane, and ill-treatment of the insane” (Hervey 1986, p. 246).⁵ When Louisa Lowe launched her campaign for the reform of the lunacy system, there were little doubts that enforced confinement was often and equally the result of ignorance, carelessness, incompetence, and inexperience. Nonetheless, “most Victorians supported involuntary detention fearing the consequences of allowing lunatics to remain at large”

² The objectives of the Lunacy Law Reform Association included: 1) to direct public attention to the serious defects of the existing Lunacy Laws, and the grave abuses in their operation, with a view to remedial legislation; 2) to assist persons who are or may be wrongfully incarcerated, whether in public or private asylums, to obtain liberty and redress; 3) to secure a better method of treatment for all Lunatics, and to set in motion the machinery of the law for the punishment of all persons who maltreat them; 4) to procure the gradual substitution of public for private asylums. See *Appendix* in Lowe 1883.

³ See Blain 1990, p. 211: “He had his wife (from whom he was legally separated but could not gain a divorce) locked up in a lunatic asylum after she had publicly denounced his miserly treatment of her to his Hertfordshire electorate in the summer of 1858”; and Blain 1990, p. 211, note 2: “Lady Bulwer Lytton remained in the asylum for three weeks, from 22nd June until 17th July 1858, when she was released upon public outcry”. Rosina Bulwer-Lytton recounted her ordeal in her autobiography: *A Blighted Life: A True Story*, published in 1880.

⁴ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, London 1860; Henry Cockton, *Valentine Fox*, London 1842; Charles Reade, *Hard Cash*, London 1905 [1863]; Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Leipzig 1862. See Hervey 1986, p. 249. Georgina Weldon wrote extensively on the matter, and she contributed to the cause to which Lowe had also devoted herself.

⁵ See also Defoe 1728, pp. 30-34; Smollett 1762, pp. 228-230, quoted in Hervey 1986, notes 7 and 8, p. 246. The history of ex-patients campaigning against the practices of madhouses also started at this time.

(Hervey 1986, p. 249); in fact, there seemed to be little concern for the way in which the insane were perceived and treated. The old proverb “Out of sight, out of mind” summed up, simply yet brutally, the dominant approach, and this for Lowe was a “disgrace to our civilisation” that made it possible for patients to become “victims” and as such to “sink down below the surface of society [...] disappear one by one, and [be] forgotten” (Lowe 1883, p. 3). The risk of social effacement and oblivion was one of the different aspects of a rather complex reform project whose achievement rested in the hands of a small group of devoted philanthropists, medical men, M.P.s, and ex-asylum patients whom she challenged, with courage.⁶ This is what Lowe engaged herself in, and it is largely what she aimed at in *The Bastilles of England; or, the Lunacy Law at Work*. The remainder of this study revisits her “dark tale of official guilt”, as she terms it (Lowe 1883, p. 127), with special attention to the rhetoric of darkness in it, that is to say to ways in which the exercise of writing revolves around and deploys negative darkneses while also developing against and out of them.



Figure 1
Portrait of Louisa Lowe (1883). Public domain.

2. Darkness 1 - The Prison Metaphor

Images of darkness are implied already in the title – *The Bastilles of England. Or, The Lunacy Laws at Work* – and promptly echoed in Lowe’s opening analogy of the lunacy system with pre-revolutionised France, a dark place of terror and torture, abuse, isolation, and enforced silence:

Few analogies can be more striking than those between our English Houses licensed for lunatics, and the Bastilles of pre-revolutionised France, between the English medical certificates of lunacy and their concomitant ‘order’ of incarceration, and the French *lettre de cachet*. In each case the individual is ‘deported and incarcerated’ at the will of another private individual, by means of documents, of which he is allowed no cognizance, and which, as experience shows, are procurable by all who can pay for them. (Lowe 1883, p. 1)

⁶ Lowe uses Percy’s words in *Richard II* (IV, i) to challenge the people exposed in her treatise: “There lies my gage! LET HIM TAKE IT UP WHO DARES” (Lowe 1883, p. 127; capital letters in the original).

The French Bastille, it shall be recalled, was a Medieval fortress turned into a State prison from the 17th century on. Known as a place of torture for the conditions of its inmates, the Prison held up to forty people including political troublemakers and individuals locked in at the request of their families, whose detention was ordered by way of a *lettre de cachet*, issued by the King (Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Bastille*). The “lettre de cachet” served to “[command] the recipient to obey the orders therein without delay and giving no explanation”, and it could be “granted to private persons for action on another individual” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Lettre de cachet*). Anyone, in other terms, could be arrested upon suspicion and before trial, which means that the *lettre de cachet* could be (and often was) used arbitrarily. Across Europe, this became common practice from the middle of the seventeenth century (Foucault 1988, pp. 37-38);⁷ regarding mental health, in Britain, the law similarly established that:

1. Any registered medical practitioner in actual practice may give a certificate of lunacy;
2. Any person whatever who [could] obtain two such certificates against an individual may order that individual’s incarceration and detention in any asylum, or licensed house for detention of lunatics, or in any unlicensed place he pleases [...] (Lowe 1883, p. 4)

The implications of such wording are worth exploring. Lowe deems the lunacy system barbarous in its similarity to the *ancient regime* in a country, France, that knew no liberty, equality nor brotherhood prior to July 14th, 1789, when the iconic storming of the Bastille overthrew the king and its unquestioned coercive power. But while in France “the fearful power was centred in but a few hands, and those the highest in the State”, Lowe observed, in Britain power was “confided to a numerous profession, entirely regardless of moral or intellectual worth in the individuals that compose it” (Lowe 1883, p. 52), namely magistrates, parsons, asylum keepers, and the “ubiquitous” registered medical practitioners (there were over twenty thousand at the time, Lowe 1883, p. 49). A symbol of revolutionary struggle, the siege of the Bastille was a clear warning and a reminder to the British reader that “when a dwelling has [...] become very inconvenient and insecure, it is cheaper and wiser, a great saving of time, money and temper to pull it down and reconstruct, rather than repair it” (1883, p. 129). There was no fixing the law; rather it had become necessary and urgent to repeal all the “heterogenous statutes forming the lunacy system of Great Britain”. Accordingly, *The Bastilles of England; or the Lunacy Law at Work* articulated a detailed plan for a radical reform, which in Lowe’s words “would be an easier and safer performance than by piece-meal legislation, to reconcile the [statutes’] incongruities and guard against their danger” (1883, p. 129).

“Guard” and “danger” are keywords in Lowe’s exposure of a dark system, which was deliberately iniquitous, ambiguous, and treacherous to the point that anybody, potentially, could become its victim. She built her argument around this notion and demonstrated how actual change in the law was an act of responsibility and self-preservation on the part of every citizen of the Empire. Her reader would thus partake in current debates on lunacy and would possibly be re-educated in her/his perception of insanity and in her/his perception of truth as well.

⁷ As Foucault reminds us: “It is common knowledge that absolute power made use of *lettres de cachet* and arbitrary measures of imprisonment; what is less familiar is the judicial conscience that could inspire such practices...From the middle of the seventeenth century, madness was linked with this country of confinement, and with the act which designated confinement as its natural abode” (Foucault 1988, pp. 37-38).

The prison metaphor is furthered through Lowe's distinctive verbal choices: to the French Bastille analogy and to the terms 'incarceration' and 'incarcerator' she adds the concept of 'entombment', to suggest the impossibility for some patients to gain their freedom back, thereby denouncing the fact that some died because nothing was done to set them free. Under current rule, in fact, "no private person can release or discharge a patient *except the one who signed the order for his incarceration*; nor can the patient be removed for change of air, or the benefit of his health without the written permission of the same person" (Lowe 1883, p. 4; my emphasis). To be locked in a mental asylum meant death foretold sometimes, and in most cases, it would be a slow death, a death by torture i.e. by seclusion (with limitations to fresh air and food provisions, for instance) and isolation, since patients could not communicate at their will with the world outside, nor could they receive visits or correspondence without their incarcerator's approval. In addition, "no penalty [was] attached to the indefinite detention after recovery", and where mistakes were made on the part of the institutions involved, little or no punishment was applicable. The possibilities of abuse lying hid were infinite for single patients to whom the law granted "no general supervision" (Lowe 1883, p. 49) – this is perhaps the most appalling instance of darkness exposed herein, given that "no sort of check on the cruelty or cupidity of [...] custodians" was provided (Lowe 1883, p. 50).

3. Darkness 2 – Against Blind Faith and Prejudice

People appointed to make decisions upon an individual's health knew little or nothing about lunacy. Lack of knowledge (symptoms were determined subjectively), the impossibility of veritable diagnoses – given that a) "sanity and insanity are more matters of degree than aught else" (Lowe 1883, p. 122)⁸ and b) that there seemed to exist "40 different forms of insanity", which implied that "there would have been sufficient grounds to shut up nine-tenths of the people of England" (Lowe 1883, p. 7) – combine with self-interest: "The wish is oftentimes father to the thought" (Lowe 1883, p. 7), she contends, and therefore certificates of lunacy were often issued for personal interests.⁹ Lowe does not attack the medical profession wholesale, rather she exposes the fact that "the first registered medical practitioner one comes across – however young and, inexperienced or needy – is as competent in law to give a certificate of lunacy as the highest authority on psychology in the land" (Lowe 1883, p. 6). She condemns the common attitude of trusting doctors blindly and placing them "on a pedestal" and "do them honour as an African does to his medicine-man" (Lowe 1883, p. 6), treating them like demigods where they are criminals proper to whom "the law confided absolute power to certify lunacy" (Lowe 1883, p. 6). What is more, among the public there is "an exaggerated dread [...] of the insane or *quasi-insane*" (Lowe 1883, p. 114), the belief that "the sane cannot safely

⁸ "We see people every day going through life creditably, and managing their affairs, who yet manifest, in a slight degree, the very same symptoms of excited brain or distressed nerves, which, if carried beyond their own cognizance and control, would qualify them for a lunatic asylum" (Lowe 1883, p. 122).

⁹ "Could anyone doubt that a medical certificate of lunacy will ever be obtainable by all able to pay for it, who desire safely and silently to remove an enemy from their path?" (Lowe 1883, p. 6). The birth of the clinic is strictly connected to the construction of dedicated places for the confinement of the mentally insane. And the emergence of the medical establishment as a powerful societal institution across Europe is a consequence of the reorganization of knowledge and power in 18th- and 19th-century medicine, as demonstrated by Michel Foucault, who focuses also on the power relationships between doctors and patients (Foucault 1988; Foucault 1973).

associate with the insane for even a brief period” since such association “would almost certainly upset the mind of a sane person, and in the case of the nervous and excitable, “twenty-four or thirty-six hours in an asylum would suffice to produce insanity” (Lowe 1883, p. 42). And then there was the fact that “many Victorians still viewed insanity as a disgrace as well as a hereditary ‘taint’ which might bring scandal and social ostracism to the victim’s family”, and therefore “tended to oppose any measure designed to prevent wrongful confinement which threatened to expose their ‘shame’” (McCandless 1983, p. 86).¹⁰

In the face of such deeply rooted discourses and practices, it ought to be recalled that a man could be “legitimately deprived of liberty” *only when and because* he was “dangerous to himself or others” (Lowe 1883, p. 8). Citing John Stuart Mill, who back in 1859 had criticised the “contemptible and frightful” evidence on which people were declared unfit to manage their own affairs (Hervey 1986, p. 275), therefore aligning herself with a popular discourse in the public sphere in Britain at the time, Lowe reminded her reader that the individual was and remained “sovereign over himself, over his own body and mind” (Lowe 1883, p. 123), and denounced the tyranny of the medical institution to maintain that “it is for the judges, and for them *alone*, to declare the law, for Parliament to amend it where defective, and for the lunacy Commissioners to obey it as it stands” (Lowe 1883, p. 9).¹¹

Exposure of complicitous silence, of ignorance, and of what Lowe called “fetish trust” (Lowe 1883, p. 53) in doctors was crucial to a reconstructive project which targeted the uncritical mind and sought to liberate it of its cultural biases. On the matter of prejudice, itself a form of ideological darkness, it should be said that in the wake of the New Woman question, and fully aware of gender inequality,¹² Lowe contended that it was “naturally more frequent for women in general and wives in particular to be ‘put away’ [...] without due cause, than for men” (Lowe 1883, p. 46). The practice of spiritualism, which led to her incarceration, for instance, was a prominent reason for detention since

higher expectations existed regarding what conduct was seemly – for a woman – and partly because it was widely believed that women were actually more prone than men to moral insanity [...] on account of the powerful links between their sensitive and variable sexual organs and nervous disorders. (Porter *et al.* 2003, p. 7)

¹⁰ “Despite the efforts of medical men to equate insanity with physical disease and take the stigma out of it, many Victorians continued to view it as a disgrace. The belief was probably encouraged by “the tendency of many doctors to locate the causes of insanity in vices and moral failings such as drunkenness, deviance, pride, anger, and so forth” (McCandless 1983, p. 96). And, as McCandless further notes, “the desire of well-to-do families to avoid exposure of a relative’s insanity was also increased by the wide-spread view—again encouraged by many doctors—that madness was frequently hereditary. Thus, to openly acknowledge a mental “taint” in the family was to jeopardize the future prospects of its members” (McCandless 1983, p. 96). Along the same lines, Michel Foucault speaks of degeneracy as the “effect of anomaly produced on the child by the parents; a predisposition to the anomaly that, on the child, will make the madness of the adult possible” (Foucault 2006, p. 230). The madman was seen as someone “who reasons wrongly”, a concept which became central to moral therapy reformism (Porter 1990, p. 50).

¹¹ She echoed “the debate over the insanity plea” that was then “at the heart of the wrongful confinement controversy”: “Medicine viewed insanity as a disease which needed to be cured, normally by asylum treatment, while the law tended to see insanity as a status entailing loss of liberty and civil rights, a status so humiliating that anyone ‘accused’ of it should be given every chance to ‘prove’ his sanity” (McCandless 1983, p. 85).

¹² “Perhaps there was a little distrust of an association so rashly unconventional as to employ and believe in a woman secretary” (Lowe 1883, p. 20), and yet trust there was on the part of several patients unjustly certified as lunatics.

Feminist recrimination was not Lowe's primary scope in *The Bastilles of England; or, the Lunacy Law at Work*: she had previously recounted her ordeal,¹³ presenting it as a cautionary tale, which had granted her public attention but failed to win her full respectability of the judges she was addressing. About a decade later, having learnt that a different and gender-inclusive approach would be more effective in bringing down the lunacy system, she was careful to state how, sometimes, "the tables were turned, and the wife or mistress incarcerates the lover or husband" (Lowe 1883, p. 46) and went on to narrate the story of a man, Mr. Chance, who had been locked into a madhouse by his wife (Lowe 1883, p. 73). Another thirteen emblematic cases followed, reconstructing the misery of men and women who had equally fallen victims to the system.

4. Darkness 3 – The Lunacy Trade

Venality, selfish ends, and strong pecuniary interests lied at the heart of a corrupted and lucrative system which, at the time, was significantly defined "a trade" to point out, in Lowe's words, that "the root of all the evils is [...] the principle of profit" in asylums (Lowe 1883, p. 67): "Commissioners in lunacy drive a *profitable trade* with the superintendents and madness-mongers, by allowing them to incarcerate sane persons or detain patients after recovery" (Lowe 1883, p. 75; my emphasis). Corruption – "the vice of dishonesty [that] pervades all" (Lowe 1883, p. 78) – posed a major obstacle to reform since the wellbeing of patients was not a priority for those involved in their incarceration. To expose the corruption of the law, Lowe exploits a functional trope – the pride of a civilised nation, Great Britain – to denounce those who "do their best to screen each other from blame, and to maintain intact that frightful trade which is, in reality a *slave trade* of the very worst description" (Lowe 1883, p. 120). The analogy adds to the prison metaphor above, enhancing it. Certificates of lunacy *de facto* had become like any "marketable commodity" (Lowe 1883, p. 54), and with regards to madhouses especially, the "undue detention of a well-paying patient" was an irresistible temptation.¹⁴ This custom Lowe challenges most forcefully, as she bids for responsibility of all, both with deeds and words.

5. Writing out Darkness

Regarding words, it is interesting to highlight some features of Lowe's writing. Careful attention is placed on her "gentle reader", with a view to winning their trust, their understanding of the law and their engagement in the cause. Citing Plutarch, in an epigraph to the text, the late-Victorian activist seeks attention, while also suggesting that time has come to do something and change the statutes: "Strike, but hear me", she says,

¹³ Following her release, Lowe recounted her confinement in a five-pamphlet series entitled *Quis custodiet, Ipsos custodiet*. She also published *My Story*, an autobiographical account with the telling subtitle of *Exemplifying the Injurious Working of the Lunacy Laws, and the Undue Influence Possessed by Lunacy Experts (as shewn before the Select Committee on Lunacy Law of the House of Commons in 1877)*.

¹⁴ Citing Lord Shaftesbury, a commissioner in lunacy for five decades, and a permanent chairman of the Board for over thirty years, Lowe reiterates the idea that: "The temptation is so great that very few people could resist. I do not believe that any person could [...] I am sure that I could not resist it" (Lowe 1883, p. 54).

recalling the words spoken by Themistokles to Eurybiades.¹⁵ Along the same lines, she addresses the reader “in hopes of thy perusal”, and calls herself “Thy faithful sister”, as she signs the short foreword to the text. Faith, trust and accountability are crucial to her “records of the wrongs wrought under shelter of the lunacy law” (*Dedication*): to expose and dispel the darkness concerning lunacy, she relies on a language that is accessible, however specific in legal terminology; she describes select cases with accuracy, naming people (patients, doctors, commissioners etc.) and places, and providing numbers and statistics – all of this giving proof of Lowe’s competence and reliability but also of her determination to bring down the Bastilles of England.

The text is divided into four chapters, followed by an *Appendix* and a bibliography of texts on the lunacy question (Fig. 2). Chapter One, bearing the title of *The Way In*, aims to show how the law “works in practice” (Lowe 1883, p. 2) and denounces the fact that over “20,000 persons in England and Wales [are] deprived, without cause, of all civil rights [and] subjected to the most abject personal slavery on allegations of lunacy” (Lowe 1883, p. 3). This is where Lowe describes the double certificate system and targets the inadequacy and corruption of most alienist doctors through reports of thirteen remarkable cases.

In Chapter Two, titled *The Way Out*, Lowe describes the composition of the Select Committee, whose members have the “duty to exercise the most minute and jealous supervision over every particular that can directly or indirectly affect the moral or physical well-being of the hapless class whose appointed protectors they are” (Lowe 1883, p. 58). The term “duty” is repeated throughout: on the one hand, Lowe defines her task as a “painful duty” (i.e. Lowe 1883, p. 66, p. 91, p. 121), on the other she demonstrates “the improbability” for a commissioner to perform his duties “efficiently” (Lowe 1883, p. 58, p. 109). Lowe contends that undue detention owes to an iniquitous law which is applied wrongly (Lowe 1883, p. 69). She relies on her reader’s sensibility, who cannot be “unmoved or feel other than indignant at the perfunctoriness and callous indifference to the sufferings of the incarcerated on the part of the lunacy officials”. Her “record of misery”, she adds, is “an authentic narrative, not [her] opinion” (Lowe 1883, p. 72): as it is typical of Lowe’s communication strategy, and its efficacy, the text engages her readers’ attention while seeking a radical transformation of the general mindset on the question of lunacy.

Replicating the title of a pamphlet series she had published about ten years earlier, *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*, chapter three poses a question that is at once rhetorical and provocative. Lowe refers here to Helen Burnard, an American visitor to the UK, who had denounced “the profitable trade” of the English lunacy law in an article appeared in *The New York Sunday Times*. The piece circulated widely also in the British colonies (Lowe 1883, p. 75), thereby compromising the public image of a country who prided itself for being a champion of liberty and equality to all its citizens. At the height of Britain’s imperial expansion, Lowe knew that the question of reputation would strike a chord with any reader. She goes on to argue that in England custodians had become untouchable, and that there was no possibility for them to be proven wrong; where mistakes were made, and could be proven, custodians were hardly punished (Lowe 1883, pp. 76-80). In the epilogue she reminds her reader that the “only ways of deliverance from an English Bastille are [...]

¹⁵ “When Eurybiades said to him, ‘Themistocles, at the games those who start too soon get a caning,’ ‘Yes,’ said Themistocles, ‘but those who lag behind get no crown.’ And when Eurybiades lifted up his staff as though to smite him, Themistocles said: ‘Smite, but hear me.’ Plutarch, *Themistocles*, chpt. 11: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0066%3Achapter%3D11> (30.03.2024).

discharge by the incarcerator, by the lunacy commissioners, or by an inquisition” (Lowe 1883, p. 73). The following chapter furthers Lowe’s accusation while also suggesting viable solutions: *Thou Art the Man* places responsibilities on those who do nothing but can and should change the law. This is also where she reminds her reader that the aim of her work is to expose the truth of the matter, and to put a remedy to that “*suppressio veri*” that is made “with perfect knowledge and intention” (Lowe 1883, p. 98). Written out of and against a dark law, the chapter gives visibility and a voice to its victims: “Not in my voice”, Lowe repeats, as she exposes “the acts” and “the evidence” of the select Committee. The *Appendix* coherently recaps the various points of the treatise, reiterating the authoress’ view that the “statutes forming the lunacy system of Great Britain” are “obsolete” and “inconvenient”, and therefore that a “simpler” one is needed, one that could be applied also to “the whole Empire and to all classes of its inhabitants” (Lowe 1883, p. 129). Lowe lists here her “suggestions”, hoping that they may be taken as “useful stones for the edifice” of a new lunacy system (Lowe 1883, p. 129). She finally adds the authoritative voices of people (reformers, activists, journalists), who had equally engaged in fighting for the prevention of more misery and the reform of the law.

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Figure 2
Contents page, *The Bastilles of England* (1883). Public domain.

6. Conclusions

Unlike “those able novelists” who had recounted asylum life, the “amenities of fiction” (Lowe 1883, p. 119) remained beyond Louisa Lowe’s ambition. And although she replicated notions and lexical choices recurrent in popular novels at the time,¹⁶ in *The Bastilles of England; or, the Lunacy Law at Work* she opted for a different style, devising a more efficient narrative strategy that avoided subjective reconstructions or wishful thinking, in favour of a “plain unvarnished account of facts, facts as I have seen them or known them to be” (Lowe 1883, p. 119),¹⁷ deliberately omitting the nature of her relation to asylums (“Whether as a matron, a keeper or a patient, I leave to thy discrimination”, she tells her reader in a foreword), nonetheless exposing abuses that she had suffered herself.¹⁸ Page after page she sought to depict the intricacies of one of Britain’s most embarrassing and execrable legal practices – the operation of the lunacy laws – and to such an aim images of darkness proved crucial. Doubts were thus cast on the current system, and a redress of it could be pursued which implied better qualification for medical practitioners and commissioners, proper training for asylum attendants, prevention of wrongful incarceration, careful identification of patients and of treatments needed, and a faster process of inquisition. First and foremost, however, a radical reconstruction of the system aimed at dispelling what Lowe terms “the haze of darkness” while exposing “the dread of light” surrounding Britain’s lunacy system (Lowe 1883, p. 126). The way out of darkness, therefore, would become a way out of selfish ignorance and self-interest into the light of social responsibility, mutual help and understanding, honesty and moral integrity. Writing out of and against darkness became a vindication proper of that primary right to individual freedom that the lunacy laws at work – the Bastilles of late-Victorian England – were yet to recognise.

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¹⁶ One example for all is the notion of being “buried alive” or “entombed”, when sent to a private asylum. The use was initiated by the French lawyer and activist Simon Nicholas Henri Linguet in an influential prison narrative, *Mémoires sur la Bastille* (1783), where he depicted the horror of wrongful confinement he had suffered. Along the same lines, when the *Daily Telegraph* reported on the case of Rosina Bulwer Lytton, it referred to her ordeal in terms of being ‘buried in a social tomb’ to say that she had been evicted from her community and family. Mary Elizabeth Braddon replicated the same wording in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, her sensation novel from 1862. When Lady Audley is finally taken to a Belgian lunatic asylum, she conceived of it as a ‘living grave.’ (Homberger, see: <http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/deviance/wrongconfine/intro.htm> 30.03.2024).

¹⁷ Elsewhere she defines her work as “unconventional and hazardous course of revealing to the world [certain] misdeeds” (Lowe 1883, p. 125).

¹⁸ She dedicates a whole section to “two of the best and most highly lauded licensed houses in England – Brislington House, near Bristol, owner, Dr Fox; and The Lawn, Hanwell, owner (at that time) Dr. Henry Maudsley” (Lowe 1883, p. 80). The tone is ironic throughout. Lowe provides a meticulous account of life within both asylums; she never says that it had been her own experience, knowing that her reader must have known.

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