

# THE PATRIARCHY IN THE ATTIC: HOW PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE CREATES WOMEN'S MADNESS

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## Introduction

No novel has captured the focus of feminist scholars and critics over the years to the same extent as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The novel's dynamic female characters and its focus on male-female relationships establishes a critical lens into the mechanisms of patriarchal systems. *Jane Eyre* has been the focus of much study and debate in feminism and disabilities studies due to its inception of the *Madwoman in the Attic* archetype with the volatile character Bertha Mason. Her behavior has sparked discussion for feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in "Madwoman in the Attic," focus on madness as a form of rebellion against patriarchal systems. In contrast, disabilities studies critics such as Elizabeth Donaldson focus on the real-world implications and fictional portrayals of mental health problems in her "Corpus of a Madwoman," resisting Gilbert and Gubar's position which, Donaldson claims, unwittingly erases the real experiences of people suffering from mental illness. However, these studies of Brontë's characters should not be left within their own theoretical silos.

While both Donaldson's and Gilbert and Gubar's papers comprise the foundation of *Jane Eyre* critical literature, both approaches miss the forest for the trees. By focusing on only one potential motivation behind the characters' behaviors, each critic misses how male-female interaction creates a more complicated chapter in the female story. This scholarly disagreement raises the following question: if a patriarchal system causes mental illness, then why can madness not be a form of escapism and/or rebellion within that system? While mental illness should not be erased or overshadowed insofar as it is a true medical condition, does that mean we must disregard the pathologization of women's behavior in response to oppression? In order to explore these

questions, this paper discusses two instances of madness: Jane's 'fit' in the Red Room, and Rochester's hypocritical treatment of Jane and Bertha. Whether physically or emotionally catalyzed, all instances of women's madness in the novel reflect one cause: a man commits a violent or oppressive act against a woman, and, regardless of her reaction, she is punished and labeled 'mad,' effectively scapegoated in order to maintain the patriarchal imbalance of power.

### The Patriarchy of Childhood

Charlotte Brontë survived a difficult and traumatic childhood, faced with abandonment and isolation following the deaths of her mother and sisters. Moreover, she found little solace as an adult: refusing to marry, experiencing discrimination as a female novelist in a male-dominated field, and eventually being betrayed by her lover (Newman 5-7). Brontë's personal experiences fueled Jane's same estrangement and shaped how the character navigates these experiences from childhood to adulthood.

*Jane Eyre* opens with an incident from Jane's childhood illustrating the upbringing she survived after her parent's death. The infamous Red-Room scene relays one of Jane's earliest instances of oppression from a male in the form of physical violence:

[H]e struck suddenly and strongly . . . I instinctively started aside with a cry of alarm... it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it . . . He ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder: he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw him a tyrant: a murderer. (Brontë 25-26)

Despite the fact that her older male cousin instigated the attack, punishment falls on Jane. Her aunt blames her for the incident and orders the servants to remove her from the window room and lock her in the ominous Red-Room, but not before someone leaves Jane with the warning to "say [her] prayers . . . for if [she does not] repent, something bad might be permitted to . . . fetch [her] away" (27). Here, a young girl has been physically assaulted by a male and left with a concussion, yet she is punished by being abandoned and threatened. While readers may be duly frustrated by this clear injustice, this fictional scene pales in comparison to the patriarchal reality on which the dynamic of the scene is based.

Gilbert and Gubar claim that Jane's behavior in the Red Room constitutes a form of "escape," arguing that Jane finds options for

[e]scape through flight, or escape through starvation: the alternatives noted, throughout much other nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature by women. In the Red-Room, however, little Jane chooses (or is chosen by) a third, even more terrifying, alternative: escape through madness. (341)

However, Elizabeth Donaldson pushes back against the "madness-as-feminist-rebellion metaphor," which—though it may seem like an effective tool for combating the stigma surrounding mental illness—actually "diminishes the lived experience of [those] disabled by mental illness" (618). Donaldson advocates a more cautious approach to literary criticism that avoids romanticising mental illness or using it as a source of political gain, resisting the erasure of real medical struggles associated with mental illness.

Additionally, Jane Ussher's book, *The Madness of Women*, focuses on the importance of feminism within the medical and psychiatric communities. She explains how modern and historical 'treatments' for female mental illness are based solely on the comfort of men instead of on the comfort and wellbeing of the patient. Ussher's observation supports my analysis of the Red Room scene in *Jane Eyre*, highlighting how the way Jane's behavior is perceived and addressed is based entirely upon the emotional comfort of others. Rather than investigating the cause for her behavior, Jane's aunt punishes her in such a way that discourages her from any future resistance or defending herself against men's abuse, thereby upholding the patriarchal structure that places men's comfort ahead of women's wellbeing. Ussher's point stands: regardless of the original action (men's violence against women) and the damage it causes, women's reactions to men's abuse, both incidental and systemic, are pathologized and punished. In this example, both Donaldson's and Gilbert and Gubar's stances apply in equal measures: Jane's 'madness' marks a rebellion against her circumstances, caused by the patriarchal oppression of her environment, but also signifies a legitimate pathological condition caused by the patriarchal oppression from her family. Here, the madness is not a metaphor for feminist escape, it is literally her trying to escape from a traumatic situation, but the madness is already a gendered situation.

## Marriage Violence

*Jane Eyre*'s main female characters—Jane and Bertha—are often viewed as mirroring archetypes of the “virgin angel” and the “whore/sinner,” resulting in Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of “dark doubles” between Jane and Bertha. This concept of doubles explains how men simultaneously value female purity while compulsorily sexualizing women, only to condemn female sexuality as promiscuous and impure. Rochester’s treatment of women exemplifies this oppression, as he laments Bertha’s over-sexuality as a direct cause for her madness, yet he continually engages Jane in word games borderlining foreplay.<sup>1</sup> Rochester receives Jane’s returned interaction positively because she is willing to play the socially acceptable parts in his games. Bertha, on the other hand, is understood to have played her part incorrectly and was therefore rejected by her husband and removed from society.

Rochester’s strikingly different treatment of Jane and Bertha demonstrates the covert rules of the patriarchal system. Unaware of the hypocrisy guiding his actions, Rochester justifies his behavior by blaming Bertha:

Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard! . . . Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parents in both points. I had a charming partner—pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man . . . [Y]ou shall see what sort of being I was cheated into espousing . . . (Brontë 287-88)

Rochester’s cold tone here tells only one side of the story: he says that her drinking and sexual appetite were the initial symptoms of her madness (287-90), but he fails to mention how he addressed this behavior or what compelled him to imprison her in the top floor of his estate. Instead, he justifies his inhumane treatment of her by reducing her humanity, abandoning her to instead “seek sympathy with something at least human,” referring to the pure, virginal Jane (288).

Gilbert and Gubar’s treatment of female authors and characters in “Plain Jane’s Progress” highlights the anger that drives their focus on *Jane Eyre*: “[Brontë] seems here definitively to have opened her eyes to female realities within her and around her: confinement, orphanhood, starvation, rage even to madness” (336). Brontë’s dedication to detail in describing the situations surrounding Jane and Bertha supports this statement. Gilbert and Gubar continue,

<sup>1</sup> See Alison Kinney’s article “Fifty Shades of Brontë” for a full discourse on the BDSM and sexual tones of Jane and Rochester’s interactions.

Where the fiery image of Lucia, that energetic woman who probably “once wore chains and broke them,” is miniaturized in *The Professor*, in *Jane Eyre* this figure (Bertha Mason) becomes almost larger than life, the emblem of a passionate, barely disguised rebelliousness. (337)

Interpreting Bertha Mason’s actions as rebellion, then following up by recognizing the “central confrontation” of the novel as that between Bertha and Jane, completes their concept of “dark doubles” between the two women. Donaldson directly argues against these ideas of rebellion in the character Bertha:

Although Gilbert and Gubar warn readers against romanticizing madness, the figure of Bertha Mason as a rebellious woman subverting the patriarchal order by burning down her husband’s estate has a certain irresistible appeal . . . [U]sing madness to represent women’s rebellion has undesirable effects due primarily to the inevitable . . . slippage between “madness” and “mental illness” . . . Indeed, one could argue, when madness is used as a metaphor for feminist rebellion, mental illness itself is erased. (615-17)

Offering additional insight into the complicated mechanisms of women’s madness, Phyllis Chesler’s *Women and Madness* tackles historical and modern structures of social and private patriarchal oppression. Chesler declares that women’s madness, both real and perceived, is a direct result of—or is even related to—oppression. Chesler writes about her concept of the “female career as a psychiatric patient,” pointing out that women are institutionalized for mental illness at much higher rates than men (ch. 4). She claims that the cause is how women are positioned by patriarchal forces,

for example, the real oppression of women—which leads to the real distress and unhappiness; the conditioned female role of help-seeking and distress-reporting—which naturally leads to patient “careers” as well as overt or subtle punishments for such devalued behavior. (118)

In other words, patriarchal systems still manage to pathologize women’s behavior as “mad” or “mentally ill,” whether or not there is an actual illness involved. “Women are seen as ‘sick’ when they act out the female role . . . and when they reject the female role” (188n).

Chesler furthers her claims through a series of interviews of women in four categories determined by social and economic factors. The results of these interviews varied within each category, but they offered consistent conclusions: these women's problems all traced directly to specific treatment by men in their lives or to the consequences of the ever-present patriarchal regime. Many of these women asked Chesler for help to leave abusive relationships, receive abortions, or otherwise escape imprisonment from the patriarchy. "However, these requests for help were from women less in need of 'social work' than of a station on a feminist underground railroad" (124). These women's needs and Chesler's connection to the Underground Railroad exemplifies how patriarchal structures create vacuums in society rather than systems that protect and help women. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha and Jane both need one of these "stops on a feminist underground railroad," an escape or treatment for physical or mental wounds received at the hands of the men in their lives.

#### Conclusion

The nature of the English literary canon—being primarily the point of view of affluent white males—creates a problem for both feminist and disabilities studies views of *Jane Eyre*. Since the recorded behaviors of women tend to either be described as a man's ideal, or as being mentally unfit when they do not live up to expectations, there is little to no foundation to determine which women are suffering from mental illness and which do not follow the patriarchy's expectations of decorum. Either way, it leaves those surrounding the woman-in-question free from any responsibility, regardless of how their actions contribute to female madness. While it is clear from Brontë's personal history of standing up for herself against oppressive men that she does not believe in the patriarchal oppression of women during her time, it is still difficult to come to a single conclusion about female characters' behavior as rebellion versus mental illness. Though the issue of female madness appears complicated and unclear, this essay has proven that much of that complication stems from male oppression, and that long held misconceptions and compulsory pathologization of women's rebellion have only served to uphold the patriarchy.

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