



## Meet the Madwoman: Who is Bertha Mason?

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) tells the life story of Jane, a young woman who goes to work as a governess. Jane falls in love and intends to marry the owner of the manor house, Mr. Rochester. However, a man steps forward on their wedding day to reveal the existence of Mr. Rochester's wife: a madwoman named Bertha Mason, barricaded in a separate room within the manor. Bertha's madness haunts the story of *Jane Eyre*. My research explores the connection between Bertha and Victorian ideas of psychosis.

Listed below are Bertha's four key scenes in in the novel (as represented in textual quotations):

- Jane's recollection of a dream: Bertha's actual appearance and wearing of the veil. As Jane tells Mr. Rochester, " 'It removed my veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts... Taking the candle, it retreated from the door. Just at my bedside the figure stopped... she thrust up the candle to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes. Jane compares Bertha to "The foul German spectre- the Vampire" (371).
- Bertha stabbing Mr. Rochester's friend (not represented directly).
- Mr. Rochester exposes Bertha to Jane and the wedding attendees: "A figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell...it snatched and growled like some strange animal: but it was covered with clothing" (380).
- The inn proprietor's recollection of the fire at Thornfield Manor (Bertha's death): "Bertha [was on the roof...we could see it [her hair] streaming against the flames as she stood.... Mr. Rochester ascended through the skylight on to the roof: we heard him call "Bertha!" We saw him approach her; and then ma'am she yelled, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement" (529).

Michael Foucault establishes that, toward the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, madness took on a moral quality which necessitated punishment as means for treatment (182). During this time, asylums became increasingly common in Victorian society. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, treatment for insanity shifted over to "medicine of the mind" and away from individual confinement (Foucault 274).

Despite the novel being written in 1847, Bertha is not in an asylum, although her character remains isolated. Furthermore, the cause of her insanity reflects racialized stereotypes of the time (madness due to biological heritage) rather than a medicalized disease of the mind.

## Responses to Bertha: Victorian vs. Modern

### Victorian Reviews: The "Maniac Wife"

"There is a phase on insanity which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind, and a fiend nature replaces it." -Charlotte Brontë

"She [Jane] was told by the landlord that the havoc was the work of Mr. Rochester's maniac wife..."- *The Morning Post*, 1847

"Rochester had been married to her against his will, when quite a young man, and had born gently all the mad [illegible] (for she was of West Indian Origin) that drove her into real insanity" -*The Manchester Times and Gazette*, 1847

"...the shape of another wife of the bridegroom's, who, although mad, is alive...Mr. Rochester's mad wife fires the hall at night, and perishes in the catastrophe." -*The Bradford & Wakefield Observer; and Halifax, Huddersfield, and Keighley Reporter*, 1847

### Modern (21<sup>st</sup> Century): A Progressive Disorder

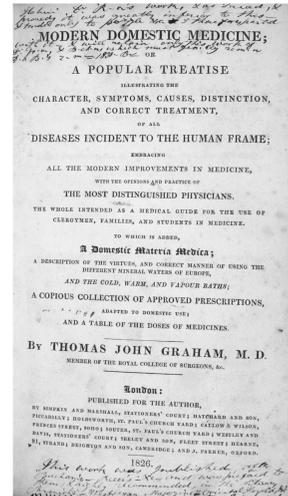
"This depiction of a progressive familial disorder with behavioral and cognitive decline with violent movements is similar to Huntington's original essay describing Huntington disease"-Elizabeth Coon & Anhar Hassan, "Did the 'Woman in the Attic' in *Jane Eyre* have Huntington Disease?" *Tremor and other Hyperkinetic Movements*, 2015

### References

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# Representations of the Madwoman: *Jane Eyre's* Bertha in Text & Image

Veronika Larsen, English and Psychology



## Brontë's Source for Bertha?

First published in 1826, *Modern Domestic Medicine* provided guidance to families on common ailments. Charlotte Brontë's father, Patrick Brontë, owned and annotated an edition of the book (left). His dense annotations cover the top and bottom of the page. The book addresses an array of illnesses and treatments and includes a section on insanity.

The book may have served as a primary source of medical information for Brontë while she was writing *Jane Eyre*. Her reliance on the text emerges in the description of Bertha Mason's appearance and behavior. Congruent with Bertha setting fire to Thornfield manor, the book's section on insanity maintains that madness ultimately leads to "acts of extreme violence" (Graham 395). Moreover, the Brontës' copy of *Domestic Medicine* characterizes madness by "an altered and peculiar appearance of the eyes" and a "successive change of features" (Graham 397). Accordingly, Jane describes Bertha as possessing "a discolored face... [with] red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments" (Brontë 371).

## Chaos & Violence in Life, Beauty in Death (19<sup>th</sup> Century Illustration)



F. H. Townsend (born in London, 1868-1920) illustrated an edition of *Jane Eyre* in 1896. As seen above, Townsend depicts Bertha as a "maniac," which reflects initial books reviews of the time (see *Responses to Bertha*). On the right, Bertha remains bound to a chair with rope; this event never occurs in *Jane Eyre*. Townsend supports the view of Bertha as an animal, violent and dangerous. In the same picture, Jane stands to the far right wearing her wedding veil, a re-occurring object in illustrations of *Jane Eyre* for over seventy years.

A marked difference exists between Bertha's figure when drawn alive as opposed to dead. In both "alive" illustrations, her figure is de-humanized, clothing either billowing out to hide her body or ripped and tattered. In stark contrast, her corpse appears feminized and beautiful after death. Her dress remains remarkably untouched, even as flames surround her and Rochester approaches her body, his hand up to ward of the fire and smoke.

## Chaos & Violence in Life, Beauty in Death (19<sup>th</sup> Century Illustration continued)



Edmund H. Garrett (born in New York, 1853-1929) contributed his illustrations to an edition of *Jane Eyre* in 1897 (a year after Townsend's illustrated edition). Although Garrett was born and raised in the United States, his portrayal of Bertha exhibits a similar pattern to Townsend's illustrations. Notably, the contrasts are even more marked. While alive, Bertha is drawn "roughly": the illustration itself appears composed of sharp line marks and chaotic scribbles. Garrett draws Bertha's face completely lacking in beauty, and her left hand clenches tightly, perhaps as a sign of imminent violence. On the right-hand illustration, however, Bertha's appearance in death demands sympathy. Garrett's illustration (right) presents an elegant, ghostly beauty. Her clothing remains unaffected by her jump or the flames above. Her right arm raises toward her face and her hair sweeps out, becoming part of the background. As in Townsend's image, Rochester approaches her in close proximity to the fire.

## Emotion Emerges in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century



The images above are taken from separate editions of *Jane Eyre*, 1942 (left) and 1943 (right). The 1942 edition includes lithographs by Barnett Freedman (born in London, 1901-1958). The right showcases Fritz Eichenberg's (born in Germany, 1901-1990) wood engraving. Almost a century after the publication of *Jane Eyre* (1847), both illustrators chose older imaging techniques to accompany the newer editions of Brontë's novel. Both images emphasize her humanity: facial emotion (and thus cognition) over animalistic portrayals of violence. On the right, Bertha looms over Jane, ominous yet not as beast-like compared to illustrations by Townsend and Garrett. Note that both illustrations partially hide Bertha's face, by either veil (left) or darkness (right), suggesting her madness as a barrier to our full comprehension. In both cases, Bertha holds a candle to her face, providing the only source of light in each figure. The candle is also present in Garrett's illustration (1897). In both images, Bertha's body no longer assumes importance: her emotion appears dominant.