

Charlotte brontë's
apology: gothic
undercutting in villette
as a feminist revisio...



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With the 1847 publication of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë—publishing under the androgynous pseudonym “Currer Bell”—effectively obscured her gender along with her identity. While Brontë did not unanimously pass for male, debate about the author’s sex began immediately, and even critics who accused the author of being in fact an authoress acknowledged a “masculine firmness of touch” in the novel (qtd. in Alexander & Smith 273). In 1848, an anonymous reviewer for the *Christian Remembrancer* addressed the rumors, decrying the “masculine hardness, coarseness, and freedom of expression” in *Jane Eyre* as particularly egregious if coming from the pen of a female author (qtd. in Alexander & Smith 136). In December of that year, a review by Elizabeth Rigby for the *Quarterly Review* rejected the rumored female authorship as an “unlikely proposition,” asserting that if *Jane Eyre* had been written by a woman, then such a woman must be “one who has... long forfeited the society of her own sex” (qtd. in Alexander & Smith 136). While Brontë later attributed the use of the androgynous pseudonym to an “impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice,” she was not particularly flattered by critical accusations of masculinity, claiming to have never suspected that her “mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’” (“Biographical Notice” xxx).

Today, of course, having one’s writing mistaken for a man’s would be even less complimentary. With the growing popularity of a recent social media trend inviting women to “describe [themselves] like a male author would,” comparisons with male writing often imply content that is satirical at best, and dangerously problematic at worst (qtd. in Bonazzo). Indeed, in the current critical climate, the biggest criticisms of Brontë’s work are no longer

accusations of being “ unfeminine,” but rather unfeminist. In the past few decades, feminist criticism of Jane Eyre has often been particularly concerned with Brontë's unsympathetic portrayal of the “ paradigmatic madwoman,” Bertha Mason (Beattie 493). Elizabeth J. Donaldson notes that “ feminist critics have sympathy for Bertha Mason that, ironically, Charlotte Brontë does not seem to share” (99). This lack of sympathy is ironic, perhaps, because of numerous “ objectionable descriptions” identified by feminist critics in which Brontë unfavorably casts Bertha in the same “ unfeminine” light the author herself resented falling into (Beattie 500). Referring to one scene in which Brontë's description of Bertha resorts to the use of genderless, unhuman pronouns—“ it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange animal” (Jane Eyre 290)—Valerie Beattie notes that Brontë portrays Bertha as so egregiously unfeminine that “ she can no longer be delineated in human terms” (500). In this analysis, Beattie echoes the condemnations of Nina Baym, whose text “ The Madwoman and Her Language” openly decries “ the work Brontë has put into defining Bertha out of humanity” (qtd. in Beattie 493).

In these analyses, modern feminist critics seek not only to expose misogynistic tendencies in Brontë's work, but also to reveal and revise similarly—however paradoxically—problematic early feminist approaches to the text. Specifically, recent feminist criticism has sought to challenge Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's optimistic championing of Bertha Mason as a feminist rebel subverting the patriarchal order. “ In this context,” explains Donaldson, “ Bertha Mason, and the figure of the madwoman in general, become a compelling metaphor for women's rebellion. Yet, this

metaphor for rebellion has problematic implications” (100). Beattie elaborates, noting that in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar tend to merely “reproduce the repressive logic” they seek to subvert with the problematic use of epithets like “the loathsome Bertha” and representations of Jane as “the sane version” of the madwoman (qtd. in Beattie 494). Both Donaldson and Beattie suggest that Brontë’s own prejudice against Bertha has stained much early feminist criticism of the novel, rendering Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal analysis merely “representative of a considerable body of feminist criticism in which setting out to explicate the role of madness in *Jane Eyre* does little more than replicate ideologically problematic nineteenth-century attitudes to it” (Beattie 494).

While, in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë may well have created a monster—or, rather, a representation of mental illness so problematic even feminist criticism couldn’t redeem it—I suggest that in her final novel, *Villette*, Brontë offers a much more sensitive and sympathetic portrayal of mental illness that feminist readers and critics alike may find considerably more palatable. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* are famous for what is at times an uneasy blending of literary realism and Gothicism. However, my reading traces the differences in Brontë’s employment of the Gothic mode in each novel, ultimately figuring the Gothic undercutting at crucial moments in *Villette* as a feminist revision of the problematic representation of mental illness in *Jane Eyre*.

Critics have long puzzled over what Emily Heady has termed an “uneasy fusion” of genres in *Villette* (341). Straddling the line between two dominant—and, in many regards, opposing—literary modes of the era, realism and <https://assignbuster.com/charlotte-bronts-apology-gothic-undercutting-in-villette-as-a-feminist-revision-of-jane-eyre/>

Gothic romance, *Villette* coyly resists generic categorization. While scholarship has long entertained the question posed by *Villette*'s generic ambivalence, asking to which genre the novel should appropriately be assigned, more recent criticism has sought a different approach. Rather than viewing the novel's generic balancing act as a source of tension, this more recent scholarship attempts to reveal the once-competing genres as working in conjunction to produce a decidedly less uneasy fusion. Instead of writing off the novel's generic inconsistency as a failure of the text to subscribe to any one set of genre expectations, modern critics figure the novel's split between the real and the Gothic as part of a carefully orchestrated narrative strategy. Toni Wein reports that, in *Villette*, Brontë "carved emphatically Gothic features onto what had been principally a double bildungsroman," and points to "Brontë's structural Gothicizing...as evidence that she consciously engaged in rewriting gender codes" (735). In her own navigation of *Villette*'s "uneasy fusion" of the Gothic and realist modes, Emily Heady argues that "instead of foregrounding the contrasts between these two antithetical modes of story-telling, Brontë instead reveals the similarities between them" (342). Often, critics interested in navigating *Villette*'s unstable generic landscape use the novel's dual allegiance to both Gothic romance and literary realism as a framework through which to position and interrogate parallel systems of binary subversion at work in the novel, before broadening the argument to suggest that Brontë's strategies offer some kind of critique or commentary on Victorian culture or authorship.

While these readings provide a framework through which to navigate genre in *Villette* by defusing the tension between the novel's mixed uses of the

Gothic and realist modes, I propose that they ignore certain instances in which the tension between these two genres is not only present, but provides meaningful commentary on the novel's feminist treatment of mental health. Robyn Warhol's response to the traditionally-perceived tension between the Gothic and realist modes of the novel follows the increasingly common critical pattern, figuring the two genres as "not so much in competition as in continuous oscillation with each other" (858). In "Double Gender, Double Genre in Jane Eyre and Villette," Warhol extends this reading of Villette to Jane Eyre as well, figuring both novels' dual use and subversion of the Gothic mode as parallel in her narratological argument that "in Villette—as in Jane Eyre—the heroine and the narrator, though they are the same 'person,' are inhabiting two separate genres of fiction. The heroines are living a Gothic romance, and the narrators are telling a realist tale" (864). Warhol is not the first to view the generic landscapes of Brontë's two best known novels as parallel. As early as 1958, Robert Heilman's analysis of "Charlotte Brontë's 'New Gothic'" cites the ways in which, "in both both Villette and Jane Eyre, Gothic is used but characteristically is undercut" (120).

Critics interested in analyzing these Gothic tendencies in Brontë's texts usually point to her two most iconic Gothic figures: Jane Eyre's madwoman and Villette's nun. Again, more attention is usually paid to the similarities between Brontë's use of these figures rather than the differences. Indeed, reading the two in tandem has become so common that even such authoritative texts as the encyclopedic Oxford Companion to the Brontës presents their interchangeability as fact. In the entry on "Gothic Novels,"

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Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith definitively present Brontë's key Gothic figures as functionally identical, their relationship a case closed to further interpretive analysis: "Jane Eyre's madwoman in the attic and *Villette's* apparition of the nun, for example, convey the heroines' resistance to the prevailing feminine ideal, and anger at their constraining social and economic circumstances" (223). In a revision of this prevailing analysis, it is my intention to expose the ways in which Brontë's use and subversion of the Gothic functions differently in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, pointing specifically to key differences between the novels' most iconic Gothic figures to show how these differences ultimately render a much more sympathetic portrait of mental illness in the latter novel.

Critics pointing to *Villette's* nun as a Gothic element functionally parallel to *Jane Eyre's* madwoman fail to address what I read as an increasing sense of unease when, in *Villette*, realism intervenes to provide a logical explanation. While Warhol aligns Brontë's use of the Gothic in *Villette* with that in *Jane Eyre*, I instead figure the former's stunted Gothicism as a feminist response to the latter's uncurbed flights of fancy. While *Jane Eyre's* principle Gothic figure, the madwoman in the attic, remains untempered, the realist undercutting of *Villette's* Gothic specter of choice ultimately absolves Lucy of the accusations of madness leveled against her. A dissolution of the tension between the Gothic and realist modes in *Villette*, as well as a parallel reading of the Gothic in *Jane Eyre*, ignores crucial ways in which Brontë's jarring undercutting of her own Gothic maneuvers is in fact unique to *Villette* and seeks to carve space for a feminist reconsideration of mental health in that later novel. I suggest that incorporating a revised analysis of *Jane Eyre's*

treatment of the Gothic into our thinking about *Villette*'s generic landscape enables us to understand the Gothic and realist tensions at work in the novel as a critique of gendered Victorian attitudes toward mental health—and perhaps even as a revision of those gendered attitudes perpetuated by Brontë herself in *Jane Eyre*.

Following *Jane Eyre*, Brontë's work shows a tonal shift away from the more dramatic and sensational elements of her first novel. This departure was a conscious one for Brontë, who, despite the general acclaim received by *Jane Eyre*, "was very anxious to avoid a repetition of the charges of melodrama and improbability that had been leveled at her by reviewers of her first published novel" (Alexander & Smith 461). Indeed, in her second novel, *Shirley*, Brontë openly endeavors to craft "something real, cool, and solid... something unromantic as Monday morning" (*Shirley* 5). Although Brontë's next and final novel, *Villette*, shows a partial return to many of the stylistic elements of *Jane Eyre* from which *Shirley* marked a departure, I contend that the Gothic undercutting in *Villette* remains more severe than in *Jane Eyre*, and is symptomatic of Brontë's continued wariness of uncurbed melodrama.

While *Jane Eyre* also blends the realist and Gothic modes in a move that has come to be regarded as characteristic of the broader Brontë canon in general, the Gothic is considerably more tempered in *Villette*. The differences between Brontë's use of the Gothic in these two novels is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in the treatment of their respective Gothic icons. In what I present as *Villette*'s most jarring instance of Gothic undercutting, the novel's longstanding figure of Gothic intrigue—the spectral nun—is revealed to be nothing more than a tertiary character in disguise. By <https://assignbuster.com/charlotte-bronts-apology-gothic-undercutting-in-villette-as-a-feminist-revision-of-jane-eyre/>

contrast, Jane Eyre's Gothic specter of choice, the madwoman in the attic, receives no such realist undercutting. In fact, while in *Villette*, explanation arises to unmask and disarm the Gothic, the revelation of Jane Eyre's Gothic mystery does the opposite: unabashedly proving and reinforcing the presence of the Gothic in real life. *Villette* explains away its own Gothic implications as a silly misunderstanding, while the only explanation Jane Eyre provides is that there is, in fact, a madwoman locked away in the attic.

While my argument presents this crucial moment of Gothic undercutting in *Villette* as the cornerstone of Brontë's feminist revision of the problematic representation of mental illness in Jane Eyre, it is first worth noting other significant ways in which *Villette* revises Jane Eyre's treatment of madness. While in Jane Eyre, madness is at the heart of the novel's embodiment of Gothic horror, *Villette* transfers the affliction to the novel's heroine. Madness in *Villette* is not, as in Jane Eyre, the antagonist that must be vanquished in order for the "sane" characters to achieve their happy ending. Rather, it is given to the protagonist in a moving, sympathetic portrait of human despair and suffering.

Such "melancholy madness," according to Donaldson, formed the Victorian counterpart to the "raving madness" exhibited in Jane Eyre (108). Though distinct, in certain ways, from other forms of madness, Victorian melancholia was considered related to insanity the same way clinical depression is today treated as mental illness. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe describes her experience with a "peculiarly agonizing depression...a strange fever of the nerves and blood" (148). Gradually descending into what would now likely constitute clinical suicidal depression, Lucy refers to a "sorrowful indifference to <https://assignbuster.com/charlotte-bronts-apology-gothic-undercutting-in-villette-as-a-feminist-revision-of-jane-eyre/>

existence...a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly" (145). In attributing the experience of madness, "melancholic" or otherwise, to the novel's first-person narrator and protagonist, Brontë not only gives mental illness a sympathetic portrayal, but also a voice. Such a voice is sorely lacking in *Jane Eyre*, as Donaldson, citing Marta Caminero-Santangelo's "aptly-titled" *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or, Why Insanity is Not Subversive*, points out (101). As if foreseeing this criticism, Brontë ensures that, in *Villette*, the "madwoman" can and does speak.

Although Lucy does not succumb to her episodes of suicidal ideation, they do leave her vulnerable to accusations of insanity and hallucination—particularly from the well-meaning Doctor John. However, unlike Bertha, Lucy is given the opportunity to both challenge and mock these accusations.

When Doctor John dismisses the nun as a mere "case of spectral illusion," Lucy is told that "happiness is the cure—a cheerful mind the preventative: cultivate both" (225). As narrator, Lucy possesses a voice with which to decry this dubious medical advice: "No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to cultivate happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mold and tilled with manure" (235). In this aside to the reader, Doctor John becomes a humorous figure of ridicule, rather than the masculine authority on mental illness that Bertha's silence in *Jane Eyre* permits Rochester to become. Moreover, Lucy's voice is not merely limited to her readership. In narrative time, she directly challenges Doctor John: "'Cultivate happiness!' I said briefly to the doctor: 'do you cultivate happiness? How do you manage?'" (235). While Lucy is encouraged to doubt her own senses and question "whether indeed [the

nun] was only the child of malady, and I of the malady the prey," she is given a voice, both as narrator and character, with which to counter and question these accusations of madness (237).

It is in the ultimate unmasking of the nun as neither "spectral illusion" nor "child of malady" that the novel definitively exonerates Lucy of the charges of madness against her. In this way, as I have argued, *Villette* atones for the problematic portrayal of mental illness and female hysteria in *Jane Eyre*. Unlike that novel's untempered embodiment of Gothic horror—the raving madwoman in the attic—*Villette*'s Gothic specter is sharply undercut with a swift realist explanation. This humorous anti-climax leaves Lucy not only "relieved from all sense of the spectral and unearthly," but also relieved of the allegations of madness that have plagued her throughout the novel (441). In *Villette*, Brontë not only gives a sympathetic voice to mental illness, but she ultimately exonerates the "madwoman" in a feminist revision of the insanity script in *Jane Eyre*.

Of course, it could be argued that Brontë's undercutting of the madness in *Villette* does not constitute a revision so much as an equally problematic erasure of mental illness. In her feminist disability studies reading of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, Donaldson criticizes a trend in critical feminist approaches to the novel, beginning with Gilbert and Gubar, of figuring Bertha Mason's mental illness as a metaphor for female rebellion against the patriarchal order. While Donaldson admits that "the madness-as-feminist-rebellion metaphor might at first seem like a positive strategy for combating the stigma traditionally associated with mental illness," she argues that "when madness is used as a metaphor for feminist rebellion, mental illness <https://assignbuster.com/charlotte-bronts-apology-gothic-undercutting-in-villette-as-a-feminist-revision-of-jane-eyre/>

itself is erased" (102). Figuring Villette, as I have here, as a feminist response to *Jane Eyre*, it would appear as though Brontë's final novel itself falls into many of the same problematic critical trends that Donaldson identifies and challenges in traditional feminist criticism of *Jane Eyre*. In rendering Lucy Snowe's insanity null and void through the realist undercutting of the "nun," Villette unwittingly participates in what Donaldson calls the "anti-psychiatry" movement, which figures mental illness as a mere myth (100). Thus, Villette's erasure of Lucy's madness is ultimately no less problematic than "the elision of the physical component of Bertha Rochester's madness in contemporary criticism," as both are symptomatic of a "larger, cultural anxiety surrounding mental illness" (Donaldson 113). While texts like Brontë's initially invite modern readers and critics to write these problematic attitudes off as a product of the repressive social climate of the Victorian era, an analysis of the repeated failures and attempts—in both literature and criticism alike—to revise these attitudes reveal that they remain alive and well today.

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