

Bertha Mason and the Politics of Feeling

Megan West

University of California, Davis

Advised by Kathleen Frederickson

May 29, 2018

Bertha Mason and the Politics of Feeling

In a letter written to W. S. William on January 4th, 1848, Charlotte Brontë responds to widespread shock about her depiction of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. The “Maniac,” Brontë says, possesses a “phase of insanity which may be called moral madness” (3). Brontë describes this form of moral degeneration as the result of a sinful life, where “all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind and a fiend-nature replaces it [...] The aspect in such cases, assimilates with the disposition; all seems demonized” (3). Sue Thomas reads this portion of Brontë’s letter as evidence that emerging scientific discourses in the Victorian Era, such as the belief that certain racial groups were biologically degenerate, impacted Brontë’s description of Bertha as a “type” or symbol for “white Creole moral degeneracy” (3).¹ However, Thomas overlooks an important section in the same letter, where Brontë acknowledges that she has had too little compassion on the racialized character. “I agree with [critics] that the character is shocking,” Brontë writes, “It is true that profound pity ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation, and equally true is it that I have not sufficiently dwelt on that feeling; I have erred in making horror too predominant” (3). Brontë acknowledges that Bertha has been offered too little pity, both from the characters within the book and from the writer herself, and realizes that she has made a spectacle out of the racialized woman. In this letter, Brontë explains that a moral person should understand Bertha’s “degradation” as a result of her negative actions because the author believes that “sin is itself a species of insanity” and ignores the racial implications of her claims, but Brontë also implores the “truly good” to maintain a

¹ While Bertha may not be of African descent or have dark skin, she bears the racialized mark of the colonies. Bertha’s skin color is unclear because, as Susan Meyer explains, “the ambiguity of Bertha’s race is marked by this designation of her mother as creole. The word ‘creole’ was used in the nineteenth century to refer to both blacks and whites born in the West Indies” (68). Meyer’s “Imperialism at Home” argues that Bertha is described in terms that mark her as black throughout the novel and reveals how the novel acknowledges “the history of British slavery in the West Indies as a reality independent of its figurative uses” (71). However, Thompson argues that Brontë presents Bertha as a white Creole in order to distinctly describe her moral inferiority to the Englishwoman (12).

feeling of compassion toward those in helpless positions like Bertha's (3).

Brontë's denial of compassion to Bertha echoes throughout the text of *Jane Eyre*, as the author struggles to reconcile an unsympathetic treatment of the "Maniac" with Bertha's negative emotional responses. This tension becomes particularly evident in the appearance of two emotions within the novel: sympathy and envy. Scholars have extensively studied how Brontë uses the concept of sympathy to talk about Jane's racialization, but they have not discussed how Brontë strategically denies sympathy to Bertha. While abolitionists campaigning for an end to the international slave trade during the nineteenth century believed that portrayals of suffering should produce an emotional response of compassion for the plight of the slave, Bertha's embodiment of the spectacle of colonial suffering produces aversion and antipathy in Brontë's novel. William A. Cohen asserts that the feelings of sympathy and envy are opposing emotions that often appear together in Victorian fiction: "sympathy," he writes, "by contrast, forestalls and defeats envy through its forms of identification" (302). However, I argue that Brontë's use of sympathy produces envy, an expression of what Adam Smith calls the "unsocial emotions," when sympathetic identification becomes denied because of Bertha's race (Smith 12). Through the affect of envy, we can interpret Bertha's display of negative emotions as efforts to destabilize power structures through aesthetic performance.

In my argument, I discuss two significant gaps that have been left in the critical literature, both of which involve emotional responses toward or from Bertha in the mirroring emotions of sympathy and envy. In order to divert sympathy away from Bertha, I argue that Brontë combines two different theories of sympathy by utilizing Adam Smith's moral philosophy along with abolitionist rhetoric. Smith describes a social sympathetic mirror within the mind through which we come to understand ourselves, but Brontë uses Smith's theory of sympathy in conjunction

with abolitionist rhetoric that describes an emotional response to the observation of human suffering. Finally, while little criticism has been written on the affect of envy and Victorian fiction, Cohen's short discussion of envy in other Victorian novels explains that the emotion disrupts plot, inhibits sympathetic identification, and is most often associated with "minor and grotesque characters" (298). Based on this astute description, it is surprising that the affect of envy has not yet been discussed in relation to *Jane Eyre*, as these are the essential roles of Bertha within the novel. I argue that Bertha's envy becomes a response to inequality and a lack of sympathetic identification resulting from her racial oppression, revealing a crack in sympathy's mirror when it comes to Brontë's portrayals of race.

"Beast or Human Being": Sympathetic Detachment and Unrealized Compassion

While critics have provided important insights into how sympathy functions in various ways throughout the text, such as Brontë's understanding of the sympathy utilized by abolitionists to discuss different forms of oppression, I am interested in how Brontë strategically avoids giving sympathy to Bertha despite her knowledge of the abolitionist cause. Critical interpretations of sympathy in *Jane Eyre* have largely centered around the protagonist, Jane, and her emotional search for liberty. Some scholars, like Ashly Bennet, have dealt extensively with Adam Smith's theory of sympathy in relation to Jane's negative emotions. Other critics, such as Julia Sun-Joo Lee and Lara Freeburg Kees, have argued that Brontë uses the abolitionist rhetoric of sympathy and the structure of slave narratives to talk about how Victorians racialized members of the lower-class, highlighting Jane's journey toward freedom from patriarchal and class-based oppression. However, in reading theories of sympathy through the narrow lens of Jane's emotions or racialization, few scholars have substantially addressed how Brontë applies

the language of sympathy to Bertha Mason.² Bertha, the hidden spectacle of colonial suffering, exposes a distortion in sympathy's mirror, as the treatment of the character reveals a Victorian antipathy, an aversive, contrary feeling, harbored toward the colonized woman. In order to accomplish this sympathetic detachment, Brontë blurs the lines between two moral arguments, a Smithian logic and an emotional abolitionist discourse. Brontë's language bears similarities to Smith's sympathetic mirroring and fellow-feeling, but she also slips into abolitionist rhetoric that, at times, admonishes a lack of emotional compassion and pity toward Bertha. This creates a tension within the text, where the author's, characters', and readers' awareness of the social responsibility to relate and feel with the racialized Bertha becomes simultaneously perceived and circumvented. Bertha's presence in the novel becomes the haunting of compassion not realized.

Brontë's novel was published in the interim between the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 and the American Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Brontë would have been aware of the abolitionist rhetoric that called the British people to support the cause of ending slavery in America (Lee 317). Sun Joo Lee writes about the significance of *Jane Eyre*'s publication date occurring between these two historical events:

From 1834 to 1846, or from the year of West Indian emancipation to the year Brontë began writing *Jane Eyre*, the British public was increasingly exposed to the plight of American slaves through the efforts of the British and Foreign

² Laurence Lerner's 1989 article, "Bertha and the Critics," argues that literary criticism has focused too much on Bertha as a representational figure, a pattern that still continues in more recent criticism. Lerner believes that "no one would guess, from some of the elaborate critical readings of Jane's hidden wishes and fears through interpretation of Bertha, that all this is explicit and openly shown in the book" (285). For instance, the many readings of Bertha as a representation of Jane's rage against a patriarchal social structure overlook that these concepts are not really that veiled in the novel, as Jane openly speaks of rebellion and professes that "women feel just as men feel" (129). As Lerner argues, this message of Brontë's "does not need the Bertha plot" (285). However, Lerner still limits Bertha to a "symbol" and implores readers to remember that "she is a minor figure" (300). While I find this a helpful critique of the literature, we must also remember that, while Bertha is a minor character, she also drives the plot, she is the nexus of Gothic suspense, and the revelation of her existence ultimately acts as the climax of the novel.

Antislavery Society (BFASS), the publication of slave narratives, and the lecture tours of American fugitives. (317)

Brontë might have also heard, or discussed with friends, lectures from former-slave writers, like Moses Roper, who visited churches close to her childhood home of Haworth in 1839 (Lee 318). Most strikingly, Lee argues that *Jane Eyre* is Brontë's revision of Frederick Douglass's slave narrative, "with the white English governess uncannily paralleling the emancipatory quest of an American fugitive slave" (318). However, Lee's incredibly brief discussion of Bertha as a type of slave simply places Bertha into the same role as many other critics have done, making her a "figure" who reveals Jane's "female victimization": "The narrative of Bertha's enslavement surfaces as Jane's narrative is submerged, a displacement that supports Gilbert's contention that Bertha serves as a monitory figure for Jane" (324). While Brontë clearly uses Bertha's "enslavement" in *Thornfield's* third story to display Rochester's misogynistic tendencies, Brontë also delineates racial tensions within the novel, where Rochester is a former slave master and Jane must continually confirm her Englishness in contrast to the racialized Bertha.³

For abolitionists, sympathy operates on an emotional level which acknowledges inequality and social hierarchies (between oppressor and oppressed, observer and sufferer) in efforts to address problems embedded within them (Kees 875). This version of sympathy not only makes an argument about the immorality of slavery, but the abolitionists' use of rhetorical strategies to change widespread public attitudes relies on the elicitation of emotional responses

³ When Rochester describes his sexual escapades, he talks about his three mistresses in terms of a slave-master relationship: "Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to hiring a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading" (359). Susan Meyer illuminates this passage as a connection to Rochester's very real past as a slave master: "A wealthy white man living in Jamaica before emancipation would undoubtedly have had slaves to wait upon him, and his Jamaican fortune had been the product of slave labor, so when Rochester discusses what it is like to buy and live with slaves he knows what he is talking about" (77).

toward the spectacle of the suffering slave. In a transcript of a public meeting published in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* in 1826, the speaker claims that “slavery is also opposed to the requirements of morality – that great law of right written in the heart of everyman” (“Anti-Slavery Public Meetings” 86). The speaker depicts the horrors of slavery in distinctly visual terms that are meant to evoke emotion from the listener:

The Slave Trade was even yet, in the [nineteenth] century, carried on by several neighbouring states, who still force from the soil of Africa her devoted children – severing the dearest ties of human kind; and transporting the hapless victims [...] across the waves of the Atlantic, compel them to toil [...] at the whip and will of their merciless masters. (“Anti-Slavery Public Meetings” 86)

Similarly, Brontë evokes an image of the Middle Passage in Rochester’s account of bringing Bertha to Thornfield: “To England, then, I conveyed her; a fearful voyage I had with such a monster on the vessel” (356). Brontë calls upon this language and imagery to show how Rochester tries to reassure himself that he has “done all that God and humanity require of [him]” in continuing to house Bertha “safely lodged in that third-story room, of whose inner cabinet she has now for ten years made a wild beast’s den – a goblin cell” (356). While Brontë does not seem to offer sympathy to Bertha in these passages, she highlights an ambiguous sentiment and anxiety about the treatment of the racialized character as Rochester’s “conscience recoil[s]” from directly, physically harming Bertha, which may have been influenced by the moral and emotion abolitionist appeals (337).

Scholars have made nuanced and convincing arguments for the resemblance between Jane’s search for freedom and slave narratives, but we must also acknowledge that Brontë’s use of abolitionist discourse shows an awareness of the plight of the slave and racialized people, yet

continues to suppress compassion toward Bertha in the novel. Brontë certainly makes Bertha into a spectacle of gothic horror, but the character also acts as an aesthetic rendering of the afflictions caused by British imperialism. After Jane and Rochester's failed wedding, Jane exaggerates and racializes Bertha's physical appearance, describing her as bestial: "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal" (Brontë 338). In Jane's imagination, Bertha becomes a "clothed hyena," an African animal dressing up in human clothes (Brontë 338). However, this fantastical depiction of Bertha's affliction does not evoke sympathy as a response. Lauren Berlant explains that while sympathy, compassion, and pity are inherently emotional responses to the "aesthetics" of suffering, something within us also wants to turn away from these feelings and detach from the misfortune of others:

The aesthetic and political spectacle of suffering vulnerability seems to bring out something terrible, a drive not to feel compassionate or sympathy [...] Some theorists, such as Veena Das, use the publicness of politically silenced subjects and the alternative modes of spectatorship those subjects make through bodily performance as a way of talking about not the transparency of pain nor the need for compassion but the fundamental break in the 'human' that manifests itself in scenes of structural violence. (Berlant 10)

Although Bertha does make sound in the novel in the form of laughing and growling, she indeed acts as a kind of "politically silenced subject" whose afflictions are an expression of a particular kind of sociocultural violence inflicted on the woman from the colonies (Berlant 10). In the novel, we only hear Bertha laugh "the same low, slow ha! ha! ha!" and her "eccentric murmurs" from the third story (Brontë 130). Essentially, we only hear Bertha when "the maniac bellow[s]"

(Brontë 338). Bertha becomes a spectacle of suffering who has been locked away in the third story of Thornfield to “be buried in oblivion,” as Rochester tries to subdue the “deep antipathy” he feels toward her (Brontë 356). Thus, when Brontë’s characters do not respond to Bertha’s misery with compassion, this lack of recognition and identification with the aesthetic performance of her pain uncovers a visceral antipathy toward Bertha that Brontë does not attempt to mitigate emotionally.

Smith’s conceptualization of sympathy does not rely on the spectacle of suffering in the same way that abolitionists did. While Kees argues that abolitionist rhetoric incorporated ideas from Smith’s moral philosophy on sympathy found in his 1759 work, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, asserting that fellow-feeling can occur across social divides, Smith’s theory of sympathy acts as a response to another person’s emotional experience, prompting an observer to “imaginatively [change] places” with another person (1). Smith theorizes that sympathy differs distinctly from compassion and pity because the sympathetic response does not require the observation of suffering, but “fellow-feeling” can occur as a response to “any passion [whatsoever]” (2). Thus, a person can also observe, imagine, and respond to other emotions like joy and grief (Smith 5). Smith’s sympathy, according to Kees, relies on a complex set of moral “rules [based] on human emotions,” but these moral rules do not fundamentally rely on inequality, where the observer stands at a position above the suffer, as the abolitionists did (Kees 892). For Rae Greiner, however, Smith’s sympathetic imagination in nineteenth century British fiction occurs in the mind at a more “formal” level: “Emotions can of course emerge from sympathy, but sympathy itself is something else, a form of thinking geared toward others, including the other that is myself as others see me. Thinking of me thinking of you, thinking of you thinking of me” (1). Therefore, Victorian sympathy becomes not an emotional response to

suffering, but a distinctly social way of understanding ourselves and others through mental reflection – the mirror of the mind.

These differences are clearly seen in the same article published by the Anti-Slavery Reporter, which uses Adam Smith's philosophy to address a moral question about slavery. In his discussion about the "Authority of Conscience," Smith makes the analogy that, if a European man were to hear about an earthquake in China, he would be too concerned with the "trivial" details of his own life to feel sympathy for the suffering victims of the mass tragedy: "He will snore contently over the ruin of a hundred million of his brethren, *provided he never saw them*" (72). This analogy seems beneficial to the abolitionist cause because it addresses a European detachment from the suffering of people in other countries associated with the British Empire's exploitation in matters of international trade. The Anti-Slavery Reporter calls upon Smith, the "most accurate analyzer of our moral sympathies," to illustrate how the British public disengages from the reality of slavery: "Why, then, is [sympathy] withheld? The truth is, it is the magnitude and enormity of the evil which prevents us from seeing it. If it was only a case of individual suffering, how easily would our sympathies be roused by it! for we could hear every groan, and see every tear [...] our sympathies become fluttered, and we are all humanity" ("Anti-Slavery Public Meetings" 91-92). The abolitionist speaker focuses on the aesthetics of sympathy, where one observes and responds emotionally to the sufferer, and proposes that if one could only but see and hear the suffering of the slave the observer would feel compassion and pity.

However, Smith's analogy does not discuss emotions or suffering in this way; rather, Smith delineates the selfish nature of human feelings, which must come under the rule of "conscience" in order to be truly productive. Smith's remarks immediately following this analogy contradict the abolitionist argument that sympathy is produced by an observation of

suffering: “It’s not the soft power of humaneness, the feeble spark of benevolence that Nature has kindled in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. [...] It is a stronger power... It is reason, principle, conscience... the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct” (72). For Smith, the ability to overcome selfish feelings does not occur through responding to suffering with feelings of compassion or even mentally trying to understand the suffering of others. Sympathetic identification only occurs through a logical self-reflection, where one observes himself through the “eye of this impartial spectator” (Smith 72). Brontë also discusses at length the importance of conscience and reason, where Jane must adhere to “the guiding of that still small voice that interprets the dictates of conscience” and attend “to the claims of conscience, the counsels of reason” (233). Furthermore, it is Jane’s conscience that, in Smithian fashion, “[holds] passion by the throat” (Brontë 343). For Smith, and Brontë at times, reasoned reflection guides sympathetic identification rather than emotions or feelings of compassion.

Brontë utilizes the Smithian model of sympathetic identification to assign immorality and judgement to Bertha based on her negative emotions, actions, and responses, which serves as Brontë’s moral justification for the antipathy directed toward Bertha. Smith’s work relies on the figure of the “impartial spectator,” an imagined, detached judge of emotions that assigns morality to both the responses of the observer and the observed (Greiner 123). In this way, Brontë not only racializes Bertha’s body, but she also seems to categorize Bertha’s emotions in a way that justifies a recoiling of one’s sympathy. For instance, Rochester discusses his regrets in marrying Bertha, but he also describes her lack of moral character as a reason for his treatment of her: “I was not sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature: I had marked neither modesty, nor benevolence, not candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners” (Brontë 352). According

to Rochester, Bertha's "cast of mind [is] common, low, narrow," and her "violent and unreasonable temper" cause him to "repress the deep antipathy [he] felt" (Brontë 353). Under a Smithian model, one's "unsocial emotions" must be controlled and explained, as "there is nothing more detestable" than giving into anger and rage without bringing one's feelings down to a level where the spectator can identify with and understand the cause of the emotion (Smith 12). According to Smith's discussion of the impartial spectator, expressions of anger, resentment, and rage, the emotions strongly associated with Bertha here, disrupt one's ability to view the situation objectively and create a kind of sympathetic indignation in the observer, where the natural response becomes an aversion to these unsocial emotions (Smith 12). Brontë does something similar when she describes Rochester's antipathy, an aversion to the unsocial emotions, toward Bertha, making space for Brontë to justify sympathetic detachment without directly talking about race.

According to Smith, however, a spectator must know the cause of an unsocial emotion before sympathy can be extended, and Brontë chooses to make Bertha speechless as a way to redirect sympathy away from the character. When the observed person exhibits an unsocial emotion, such as anger, and they cannot explain the cause of their emotions, Smith's sympathy cannot be extended; rather, the sympathy becomes redirected toward the person with whom the observed person is angry (20). Bertha does not articulate her own experiences within the novel in words, but only communicates through the animalistic sounds that she makes in times of distress. Instead, Rochester tells the story of Bertha's life in the West Indies, even describing her language and style of communication in his own terms. "My ears were filled with the curses the maniac still shrieked out; wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language! – no professed harlot ever had a fouler vocabulary than she,"

Rochester says, “I heard her every word – the thin partitions of the West Indian house opposing but slight obstructions to her wolfish cries” (Brontë 355). When Rochester laments that Bertha “dragged [him] through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste” and explains that no one can bear Bertha’s expressions of emotional distress, Jane responds to his narrative account of his wife’s rage with “I pity you – I do earnestly pity you” (Brontë 353). Brontë uses the Smithian rules of sympathy as a model that allows Jane, and the reader, to deflect sympathetic identification on a rational level, as well as compassion and pity, away from Bertha and redirect the sympathetic response to Rochester. This seems to be something that Jean Rhys attempts to mitigate in her rendition of Bertha’s life in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the Creole woman gets to speak and share the story of her life, producing a kind of sympathy and emotional identification with the reader.⁴

Similarly, although Jane remains the narrator throughout, Rochester temporarily takes over the role of narrator when he divulges his past and his relationship to Bertha; this strategy allows Jane to see her own reflection in Rochester’s eyes as the “antipodes of the Creole” (358). Rae Greiner argues that Smith’s “impartial spectator” allows us to detach from a situation and imagine our own emotions from an objective perspective (13). The figure serves as a unbiased, moral manager of our own emotions, which Smith “trusted to reveal us to ourselves” (Greiner 13). This “detached” sympathetic mirroring, Greiner says, commonly occurs in nineteenth-century literature through narration: “When Adam Smith spoke of mirrors, he too was interested

⁴ Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* chronicles the imagined life of Bertha Mason, or as the novel calls her, Antoinette, before the events of *Jane Eyre*. Similar to Brontë’s novel following the life of Jane, the author tracks Bertha’s experience from childhood into adulthood, culminating in her marriage to Mr. Rochester. However, Rhys’ story take a different approach, giving Bertha a backstory and an identity of her own. Rhys’ story makes an argument that Bertha’s “madness” might arise from experiences with imperialism, where she finds herself subjected to racism, sexism, and discrimination because of her status as a Creole woman. Most significantly, the Bertha of *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not represent Jane’s repressed childhood anger as she does in later criticism: she possesses feelings of her own. In Rhys’ novel, Bertha acts a character with a voice and defiance, who harbors her own rage against those who oppress her.

in the distancing effect of representational doubling [...] Striving to inhabit other minds we hope to gain something like a narrator's perspective on ourselves: impersonal and faithfully rendered, viewed at a remove" (123). While Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have interpreted Bertha as a mirror of Jane, we can also read Rochester's narrative as Jane's mirror, where Jane must see herself through Rochester's eyes. For instance, although Rochester describes Bertha as possessing "a nature the most gross impure, depraved [he] ever saw, was associated with [him], and called by the law and by society a part of [him]," he tells Jane that if she "flew at [him] as wildly as [Bertha] did this morning, [he] should receive [her] in an embrace" (352, 347). Perhaps this reveals Jane's desire to reestablish her identity as a moral Englishwoman in contrast to Bertha, but it also serves as a mechanism through which Brontë limits sympathy to an exchange between Jane and Rochester.

However, in this same scene, Jane interrupts Rochester's narrative in a surprisingly emotional language that mimics an abolitionist appeal to *see* the suffering of the racialized other. Brontë's engagement in complex strategies in order to redirect sympathy away from Bertha in order to reassert English superiority does not keep her own awareness of oppression from showing through:

'Sir,' I interrupted him, 'you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate—with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel—she cannot help being mad.'

'Jane, my little darling (so I will call you, for so you are), you don't know what you are talking about; you misjudge me again: it is not because she is mad I hate her. If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?'

'I do indeed, sir.'

‘Then you are mistaken [...] Every atom of your flesh is as dear to me as my own: in pain and sickness it would still be dear. Your mind is my treasure, and if it were broken, it would be my treasure still: if you raved, my arms should confine you, and not a strait waistcoat—your grasp, even in fury, would have a charm for me [...] I should not shrink from you with disgust as I did from her.’ (347)

In this moment, Brontë seems to know that one should feel pity for the inhumane treatment that Bertha receives from Rochester, as Jane admonishes Rochester for his lack of compassion toward Bertha. Jane points out Rochester’s hateful speech, calling it cruel and pitiless. This evokes the abolitionist cry for sympathy toward the slaves who have been placed in terrible positions outside of their control. However, Brontë avoids directly provoking the topic of race, as Rochester explains that Bertha’s madness and ill-temper are what incites his indignation and lack of sympathy toward her. While this brief moment of compassion for Bertha reveals an awareness of abolitionist morality and understanding, Rochester maneuvers around this plea for compassion by describing Bertha in contrast to Jane.

While Adam Smith claims that the unsocial emotions disrupt the exchange of sympathetic identification, a moment in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* also reveals that these “negative” emotions can also act as responses to a lack of sympathy from the spectator (9-10). In this passage, Smith’s theory of sympathy seems inconsistent, as the philosopher admonishes a lack of sympathetic identification with those who suffer. “But if you have no fellow-feeling for the misfortunes I have met with, or none that bears any proportion to the grief that is consuming me, or if you have no indignation at the injuries I have suffered,” Smith writes, “we become intolerable to one another [...] You are bewildered by my violence and passion, and I am enraged by your cold lack of feeling” (9-10). Here, Smith adds an interesting complication to his

argument. While sympathy still does not rely on the need for the observer to see the suffering of others, the spectator has the moral responsibility to imagine the experiences of another person's feelings. In fact, Smith argues here that this dynamic, the disunity of feeling between people with different experiences, is exactly what his theory of fellow-feeling aims to remedy: "what is needed for there to be some correspondence of sentiments between the spectator and his companion is for the spectator to try his hardest to put himself in the other man's situation" (10). However, these passages contradict his later claims that the unsocial emotions prevent the spectator from offering sympathy. Smith creates a circular question, where the unsocial emotions prevent sympathy but they are also responses to a lack of sympathy. Perhaps, Smith intends for his readers to hold these two perspectives in tension, as they tend to occur simultaneously in social relations.

"The madwoman in the attic emerges": Bertha's Envy and the Racial Politics of Feeling

Bertha's envy offers an affective strategy that gives us an important glimpse into the dynamics of inequality that take place in *Jane Eyre*. While my discussion of sympathy reveals how Brontë manages to divert sympathetic identification away from the racialized Bertha, this analysis only uncovers a negative space: the places where Bertha is absent, the moments when she does not speak, and the lack of sympathy from her oppressors. In order to more fully understand the role of the racialized woman in the novel, we should consider both how Bertha acts and reacts to the inequality she experiences. Encounters with Bertha occur mostly during her displays of Smith's "unsocial emotions", such as anger, rage, fear, and envy. Jane Gallop argues that envy is an emotion "we might want to call political" because it exists on the basis of inequality (20). Similarly, Sianne Ngai explains that the envier does not necessarily want what

another person possesses, but envy also acts as a means of drawing attention to the unequal power dynamics between two people; thus, envy becomes “the subject’s affective *response* to perceived inequality” (126). I argue that Brontë’s use of envy also illuminates a fundamental flaw Smith’s sympathetic mirror, where the racialized Bertha’s actions and emotional responses become strategies to destabilize the unequal power dynamics between her and Jane. Although it would be impossible to claim that Bertha has true agency to challenge her position within a racist and misogynistic nineteenth century Britain, Bertha does possess the ability to alter the perceptions and emotional states of those around her through the aesthetic performance of negative feeling.

Gilbert and Gubar begin their discussion of the field-defining *Madwoman in the Attic* with a question: “Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” (3).⁵ They critique a Freudian notion of penis envy, which assumes that “male sexuality... [is] the essence of literary power” (Gilbert and Gubar 4). Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bertha is both a representation of Jane’s unconscious and a figure of the white, female writer’s anger toward oppression in a male dominated literary field: “the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the *author’s* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (Gilbert and Gubar 78). Their work relies on Bertha as a figure that encapsulates the female writers’ “fragmentation,” as they “desire to both accept the

⁵ Despite the title of their work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar’s 1979 analysis does not focus on the experience of Bertha Mason, the aforementioned madwoman. Drawing heavily on Freudian theory, particularly his concept of psychological doubles and repression, they argue that Bertha Mason is a representation of Jane’s unconscious mind, her childhood trauma coming back to haunt her: “Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (Gilbert and Gubar 360). Under this framework, Bertha becomes a symbol of Jane’s psychological and sexual repression as a Victorian woman. While Gilbert and Gubar make a profound contribution to the realm of feminist literature, their work relies on subsuming the identity of a racialized character under the experience of an Englishwoman, and they construct the character of Bertha as having no personhood or ability to act of her own accord.

strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them” (78). While their question about the metaphorical female writers’ pen serves their argument well, this argument about Freudian penis envy nonetheless interprets Bertha only in terms of an Englishwoman’s experiences. The critics subsume the racialized character under these experiences of an Englishwoman, constructing Bertha as having no significance of her own. In doing so, they also overlook the importance of envy as an emotion that operates on a much more complex social level in Brontë’s novel, particularly in the exchange that occurs between Jane and Bertha.⁶

Ngai adds to this critique of penis envy, proposing a broader definition of the term that also includes envy between two women, and this definition allows us to take a more nuanced approach to Bertha’s envious actions in *Jane Eyre*. By only focusing on Jane’s rebellion against patriarchal social structures, we overlook other power imbalances that exist within the relations between these two women. Bertha and Jane are not simply in a psychological exchange that represents a revolt against male dominance: they are two women locked in an exchange of power created by racial inequality. In Ngai’s theory of envy, “the traditional feminist critique of penis envy regards envy as saying something about the subject’s internal state of affairs (‘deficiency’) as opposed to a statement by or from the subject concerning a relation to the external” (Ngai 126). For Ngai, envy does not have to be limited to a psychological framework for internal

⁶Deanna K. Kreisel’s makes the important discovery that the conceptualization of Bertha as the iconic “madwoman” is flawed because she does not occupy Thornfield’s attic; rather, Bertha lives in the third story. While this might seem like a minor detail, it reveals that literary criticism has not understood the space that Bertha occupies in the novel. Kreisel points out the importance of this: “Bertha’s removal from the third floor to the attic shifts her from the realm of the prosaic [...] to a space where she ceases to *mean* in the terms set by the novel, and where she is thus more fully available to critical projection and fantasy. It is the intensity of our own desires that makes Bertha’s mislocation so unsettling” (113). Thus, Bertha’s character has often been used to serve specific feminist arguments, and in doing so, we make her “the avatar of voicelessness, forgetting, and loss of self” (Kreisel 110). In attempting to uncover female oppression, literary criticism has inadvertently silenced the racialized female and relocated her out of sight. Kreisel argues that Bertha is “often used to ‘symbolize’ hidden structures,” but we also must acknowledge that Bertha herself becomes hidden when we place her as a representational figure for the female unconscious rather than a separate character within the novel (113).

feeling because discussing envy in that way causes the emotion to become “stripped of its potential critical agency” that allows the envier to “antagonistically respond to [...] institutionalized forms of inequality” (129).

Post-colonial critics do not often give attention to Bertha’s response to inequality, as Bertha is often constructed as having little ability to act out of her own will. While postcolonial critics seek to address disparity in the literature by calling attention to Bertha as a representation of, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s terms, the “colonial subject” and the “violence of imperialism,” they also construct Bertha as a powerless character who does not attempt to affect those around her (251). For example, Spivak argues that, in Brontë’s novel, Bertha serves as a powerless figure meant to accentuate Jane’s status as a female heroine: “In this fictive England, [Bertha Mason] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (Spivak 251). However, we know that Bertha continually breaks out of her place of confinement in the third story and violently attempts to make her presence known to her oppressors. Rochester notes, “*my wife* is prompted by her familiar to burn people in their beds at night, to stab them, to bite their flesh from their bones, and so on” (Brontë 347). Similarly, Grace Poole explains that Bertha “is so cunning: it is not in moral discretion to fathom her craft” (Brontë 338). While Brontë does not allow Bertha the opportunity to openly challenge racist ideologies that keep her confined, Bertha certainly does not passively accept her place within Rochester’s home or her position of inferiority in contrast to Jane. Bertha ventures outside the confinement of the third story to disrupt the hegemonic structures of inequality through her interactions with Jane. Bertha becomes a woman with her own semblance of emotional power to affect those around her. Throughout the novel, Bertha demands to be seen

and heard, repeatedly escaping from the third story. Thus, we can read her as coming out of her room and acting in rebellious ways against the social relations that keep her confined.

In order to explain the unsocial emotions, such as envy, Brontë again utilizes Smith's concept of sympathetic mirroring, in which Smith theorizes that children and adults learn to understand the "beauty and ugliness of [their] own mind" through the mirror of others' perceptions of them (62). In Smith, mirrors are described as social mechanisms through which sympathetic identification takes place. Smith writes that a child who grew up without any contact with society would be unable to properly understand the "propriety or demerit" of his or her own feelings or actions (62). A person, according to Smith, comes to understand his or her own actions through the mirror of others:

[Naturally, man] isn't equipped with any mirror that can present [his own character] to his view. But now bring him into society, and he immediately has the mirror that he lacked before. It is placed in the faces and behavior of those he lives with... and that is what gives him his first view of the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and ugliness of his own mind. (62-63)

For Smith, society becomes the mirror that we hold up to ourselves in order to understand our actions and behaviors. As Greiner argues, "others acts as mirrors through which to envision our own reflections, seen as if through their eyes" (Greiner 123). While Ngai imagines the affect of envy to be a response to inequality, Brontë also calls on the unsocial emotion of envy to expose a critical flaw in the social mirror of sympathy: a nonreciprocal dynamic created by Bertha's racialization to which she must protest.

In order to understand how Brontë's use of the affect of envy alters Smith's mirror of sympathy, we must turn to the metaphor of mirrors in *Jane Eyre*, which truly conveys a social,

rather than a purely psychological, explanation for the unsocial emotions. Brontë depicts a social response to disparity in Jane's childhood when she looks into the Red Room's mirror. Gilbert and Gubar understand this mirror scene as the first occurrence of Jane's "frightening series of separations from the self" (359). These "separations," though, stem from the rage and unsocial emotions that result from Jane's inability to gain sympathy with her family (359). This first appearance of a mirror in Brontë's novel takes place just after Jane is punished by her Aunt Reed: "I had to cross before the looking-glass [...] the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still [...] How my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection! Yet in what darkness [...] was the mental battle I fought!" (Brontë 18). In this passage, Jane experiences a detachment from herself when she looks in the mirror, seeing her reflection as something spectral and monstrous, but this detachment results from a lack of sympathy: "I was a discord at Gateshead Hall; I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children [...] They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst them" (19). Jane's emotional distress comes from this oppressive relationship, but Jane's negative reaction also stems from a lack of fellow-feeling from her wealthy aunt and cousins, revealing a disruption of sympathetic identification caused by their unequal status.

However, Brontë depicts this disruption of sympathy most strikingly through Bertha's envious emulation of Jane, through which the racialized character expresses strong emotion and attempts to resist confining social structures. Ngai uses a modern film, *Single White Female*, to illustrate a depiction of envy between two women; in the film, one woman begins to dress like her friend, whose actions she mimics in order to destabilize the power dynamics within their relationship (Ngai 130). In her interpretation of the film, Ngai explains that her definition of

envy involves “emulation,” but this mimicry “does not necessarily entail wishing to *be* that someone, or even that one desires to take over the social or symbolic positions her or she occupies in order to enjoy its privileges” (142). The envier does not want to take what another person possesses but wants to upset the unequal dynamics that exist within the relationship *because* of the privileges the other possessed through their social status. “Instead of being a means of altering one’s self in *deference* to another,” Ngai argues, “emulation can be a form of aggressive *self-assertion*: performed with the purpose of causing the other anxiety or distress [...] with the intent of “spoiling” her by rendering her own identity unstable” (Ngai 142-143). Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar discover that Bertha “acts *like* Jane” when her animalistic movements “backwards and forwards” mimic Jane’s pacing across the third story, and this mimesis upsets the boundaries within the female relationship, causing Jane emotional turmoil (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 361). This exchange reveals Bertha acting out for herself, destabilizing her unequal relationship to the Englishwoman through emotional intimidation and confrontation. Bertha does not necessarily want to take on Jane’s role of the Englishwoman, but the envious character wants to alter the unequal dynamic within the relationship. Bertha’s envious emulation of Jane can be read as this “aggressive self-assertion,” a form of agency where she is able to manipulate her environment and destabilize the Englishwoman’s identity (Ngai 142-143).

Bertha aesthetically displays the emotion of envy when she acts out in response to the real, lived inequality she experiences, which becomes particularly evident in the scene when Bertha breaks into Jane’s room to put on her wedding veil. When Jane looks in the mirror at Thornfield, she sees Bertha instead of her own reflection, which causes her to experience feelings of terror and anxiety: “I bent forward: first surprised, then bewilderment, came over me;

and then blood crept cold through my veins [...] Presently [Bertha] took the veil from its place: she held it up, gazed at it long, and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror” (Brontë 326-327). Gilbert and Gubar read this mirror scene as a return of Jane’s childhood repression in the form of an angry Bertha, “the demon of rage who has haunted her since her afternoon at Gateshead” (347). However, this scene not only shows Bertha putting on Jane’s clothing and acting like her, but it also exemplifies Bertha’s attempts to subvert the interpersonal power dynamics of her connection with Jane by affecting the protagonist’s psychological state and perceptions of herself. Bertha puts on the veil, momentarily assuming the aesthetic disguise of the married, Englishwoman, a station the racialized woman cannot literally occupy. After this performance, Bertha causes Jane emotional distress through the act of intimidation: “Just at my bedside, the figure stopped: the fiery eyes glared at me – she thrust her candle close to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes [...] I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life – only the second time – I became insensible from terror” (327). Jane’s agitation and emotional disturbance show that Bertha has the ability to affect the emotional states of those around her through her manipulation of the objects, and by implication the ideologies, that symbolize her oppression.

However, when Jane says that she becomes unconscious from shock and panic for only the second time in her life, Brontë connects this passage back to the mirror of Jane’s childhood, drawing parallels between the sympathetic detachment that occurs in both scenes. In the mirror at Thornfield, Jane first describes Bertha as a woman, using the pronouns of “she” to describe her: “It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and black hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on” (Brontë 326). When Bertha turns to the mirror wearing Jane’s veil, Jane begins referring to Bertha as a dehumanized “it”: “I saw the reflection of the

visage [...] It was a discoloured face -- it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments! [...] It removed the veil from its gaunt head, rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them” (Brontë 326-327). After Bertha removes the veil and looks away from the mirror, Jane begins referring to her as a woman again: “I was aware her lurid visage flamed over mine” (326). When Bertha confronts Jane by putting on her clothes, Jane reacts to this disturbance of social roles by denying Bertha both sympathy and humanity. This scene differs from the mirror of Jane’s childhood because, rather than a lack of congruent feeling disrupting sympathy, it is Bertha’s emulation of Jane and the unsettling of power structures through her affective performance that prompts Jane to respond with the deepest antipathy. In order for Jane to avoid entering into the process of sympathetic mirroring with Bertha, she must imagine Bertha as unhuman. Ultimately, Brontë shows that sympathy for Bertha is always already denied because nineteenth century hierarchies of social rank in Britain, specifically in the categories of race, play a significant role in the disruption of sympathetic identification. Bertha’s only method of protest to her subjugated position at Thornfield becomes her performance of negative feeling. Because Bertha exists outside Smith’s model of “thinking of me thinking of you, thinking of you thinking of me,” her main form of resistance becomes Smith’s unsocial emotions, the display of rage, anger, and envy (Greiner 1).

My discussion of the connections between sympathy and envy uncovers Brontë’s cognitive dissonance when it comes to her own treatment of the racialized woman in the novel. Brontë’s use of Smithian sympathy creates a rather complex framework that cannot fully reconcile abolitionist ideologies with English superiority. As Meyers argues, the story of Bertha makes a claim about the harmfulness and oppressive nature of British imperialism in the West

Indies, but Brontë is “finally unsympathetic to her as a human being” (71). When Brontë introduces race into this model of sympathetic identification, there emerges a clear power imbalance between the more privileged spectator and the observed sufferer, as British imperialism violently silences the colonial subject and grants the Englishperson the ability to give or deny sympathy. While Brontë’s use of the Victorian concepts of sympathy and the affect of envy seem to maintain these imperialistic hegemonic power structures, Brontë also reveals that the performance of negative emotions becomes the mechanism through which the oppressed can resist these harmful social relations. Bertha Mason will always be a minor character, but her presence drives the plot and action, possessing the power to emotionally affect those around her. Bertha continuously protests her position as she ventures outside the confinement of the third story, disrupting these structures of inequality along the way. Throughout the novel, Bertha demands to be seen and heard, repeatedly escaping from the proverbial “attic” in which she has been unjustly placed for so long.

Works Cited

- "Anti-Slavery Public Meetings." *The Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter, Jun.1825- Dec.1831*, no. 9, 1826, pp. 86-94. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2926703?accountid=14505>.
- Bennett, Ashly. "Shameful Signification: Narrative and Feeling in 'Jane Eyre.'" *Narrative*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2010, pp. 300–323. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40856415.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin Classics, 2006.
- . *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: with a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*. Ed. Margaret Smith. Vol. 2. Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Gallop, Jane. "Introduction: Envy." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3/4, 2006, pp. 12–21. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40003212.
- Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*. Routledge, 2004.
- Cohen, William A. "Envy and Victorian Fiction." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2009, pp. 297–303. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27764319.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Greiner, Rae. *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.
- Kees, Lara Freeburg. "'Sympathy' in *Jane Eyre*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2005, pp. 873–897. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3844619.
- Kreisel, Deanna K. "The Madwoman on the Third Story: *Jane Eyre* in Space." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 131.1 (2016): 101-15.

- Lerner, Laurence. "Bertha and the Critics." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1989, pp. 273–300. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3045152.
- Lee, Julia Sun-Joo. "The (Slave) Narrative of 'Jane Eyre.'" *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2008, pp. 317–329. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40347190.
- McKee, Patricia. "Racial Strategies in Jane Eyre." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2009, pp. 67–83. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40347214.
- Meyer, Susan. *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*. Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2005.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: Norton, 1966.
- Smith, Adam. "The Theory of Moral Sentiments." *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1761. *Early Modern Texts*, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/smith1759.pdf>
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 243–61. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1343469.
- Thomas, Sue. "The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1–17. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25058436.