Bertha and the Critics

LAURENCE LERNER

Bertha Mason has in the last two decades become one of the major characters of English fiction. Criticism has made Mr. Rochester’s mad wife, concealed in the attic, central not only to the plot of *Jane Eyre* but also to its emotional economy and its construction of woman, indeed to the economy, meaning, and worldview of the nineteenth-century novel.

A representative reading is that of Helene Moglen, for whom Bertha is “the monstrous embodiment of psychosexual conflicts which are intrinsic to the romantic predicament—paralleled and unconscious in both Jane and Rochester.... She is the menacing form of Jane’s resistance to male authority, her fear of that sexual surrender which will seal her complete dependence in passion.” Bertha tearing the wedding veil and leaning over Jane’s bed is seen as a fantasy of sexual violation. The need to protect Jane against what Bertha represents is felt both by Rochester, unconsciously no doubt, and, even more unconsciously, by Jane. Rochester’s rescue of Bertha from the burning house shows us “the ambivalence of the Byronic hero towards his own sexuality,” and since Bertha flees from him and leaps to her death, “rescue itself becomes a kind of murder.”

Very similar is the interpretation offered by Judith Williams, who sees “a close link between Jane’s fantasies and imagination and Bertha Mason”: Jane “was secretly attracted by the dynamic and dangerous forces the proprieties were designed to protect her from.” This critic emphasizes the hierarchic ordering of the

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house, in which Bertha is located on the third story, a "realm of fantastic, heady passion," and so is attractive to a concealed aspect of Jane. Williams, too, uses Bertha to symbolize elements in both Jane and Rochester, indeed to represent the link between them: "each step Jane takes toward Rochester is also a step toward Bertha," and Bertha is both "Rochester's dark shadow and opposite" and also a double for Jane.2

Richard Chase also reads Bertha symbolically, as "the woman who has given herself blindly and uncompromisingly to the principle of sex and intellect" (I am not sure why he adds "intellect"—as the discussion proceeds, it deals only with sex). Her link with Jane is put in slightly different form: "May not Bertha, Jane seems to ask herself, be a living example of what happens to the woman who gives herself to the Romantic Hero[?]" She certainly asks herself no such thing; presumably the sentence must be paraphrased as "we ask ourselves, and project the asking onto Jane."3

The list is long, and I must deal with others more briefly. Robert Keefe claims that Bertha is Jane's Oedipal rival, preventing her from marrying Rochester, and thus representing the dead Mrs. Brontë (who presumably—Keefe does not spell this out—prevented Charlotte from "marrying" her father). For Mark Kinkead-Weekes she represents an element in Rochester, not in Jane, in which "chained bestiality growls like a yahoo, held in check by the sardonically named 'Grace.'" Patricia Yaeger's post-structuralist variation speaks of "the madwoman's fierce semiosis"; though it is not clear just what will be said in the new language that she enables, it seems to involve the releasing of desire. There are many more, and even a levelheaded literary historian like Shirley Foster is vividly aware of these readings, and mentions (without quite endorsing) the suggestion that "she represents the bestiality of purely physical lust."4

All these critics relate Bertha, with greater or less directness, to sexual desire, and then locate liberation from repression, or from the vicarious repression represented by the stereotype of respectability, in Jane, or Rochester, or both. John Maynard asserts explicitly that “Jane sees . . . in [Bertha] a live symbol of the dangers of madly uncontrolled sexual feeling.” That is certainly not what Jane believes she sees in Bertha, and Maynard’s assertion is not exactly strengthened by the example with which his sentence continues: “as she jumps vampire-like to Rochester’s cheek and throat in the ‘sole conjugal embrace’ Rochester now expects to know.” So much for Charlotte Brontë’s irony.

A different interpretation is sketched by Carolyn G. Heilbrun, and then developed at great length by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who by making Bertha the eponymous heroine of their influential study may have contributed more than anyone to her celebrity. This interpretation too concerns repression and release (“what Bertha now does . . . is what Jane wants to do”), and its structure of argument is essentially the same as that of the critics just mentioned, but Bertha now represents not sexual desire but anger, not the repressed element in the respectable woman, but the suppressed element in the unemancipated woman. What Bertha does, we are reminded, is tear up the bridal garments; but now she symbolizes only elements in Jane, not in Rochester, acting out Jane’s disguised hostility to the man she loves. In at least one detail this emphasis then produces the opposite reading to that of Moglen and Chase: for Moglen, tearing the veil equals sexual violation; for Gilbert and Gubar it equals a refusal of marriage and thus of sex. Their interpretation has one striking advantage (if advantage it is) over the other, which is that contemporaries noticed it. Not, of course, sympathetic contemporaries (no one, to my knowledge, saluted Bertha in terms that could see her as a forerunner of the New Woman), but disapproving conservatives. “Every page burns with moral Jacobinism,” said the Christian Remembrancer sternly.

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The Quarterly Review did not “hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written Jane Eyre.” These critics did not need telling that Jane Eyre is filled with hunger, rebellion, and rage—the virtuous phrase is Matthew Arnold’s, who no doubt would have found the same spirit in a modern feminist such as Adrienne Rich when she sees Jane as having to curb “her imagination at the limits of what is bearable for a powerless woman in the England of the 1840s,” lest she become like Bertha, for the crossing of those limits by the imagination would be next door to insanity.

Into this double cast, of interpreters and interpreted, two new figures now appear: among the interpreted we must place Antoinette Cosway, heroine of Jean Rhys’s novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), which tells the story of “Bertha’s” earlier years, and among the interpreters we must place those now numerous critics who have written about Antoinette and her relationship to Bertha. (Whether Rhys should be placed among the interpreters too, or whether she belongs in the same category as Charlotte Brontë, is a tricky question.) Wide Sargasso Sea has become a favorite text in discussions of intertextuality, because of its symbiotic relationship to Jane Eyre: it illustrates, with a greater directness than T.S. Eliot ever intended, the well-known doctrine of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” that the creation of a new work of art alters the meaning of all previous works.

There is nothing new in the creation of a literary work that is parasitic on a previous one or (in the terminology of Gérard

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Genette) in hypertextuality. Shakespeare of course has been the most popular source, as attested by the sequels and predecessors to Hamlet and Lear, or the two brilliant parasites on The Tempest by Browning ("Caliban upon Setebos") and Auden (The Sea and the Mirror). To call such a work "parasitic" is to imply that it cannot exist independently of its host; that is, a reading of the work without the host will be incomplete, perhaps incomprehensible. Wide Sargasso Sea, as Louis James points out, can be read until near the end without realizing any link with Jane Eyre, partly because it relates events that precede, and therefore do not presuppose, Charlotte Brontë's novel, and to that extent it is not parasitic. But such a reading would miss some very delicate parallels, and thus omit part of the meaning.

The fresh material added by a parasitic work, insofar as it interacts with the original, can be compatible or incompatible with it; that is, it can tell us more about what happened and why, or it can suggest that something different happened. Rhys does make changes (Mrs. Fairfax knows all about the prisoner; Rochester is away when Mason is attacked; Bertha's name is actually Antoinette and is deliberately changed by Rochester; Richard Mason is not her blood relation), all of whose general direction is to remove Jane from the story and to make Antoinette more of a helpless victim. "Rhys's novel," Arnold Davidson claims, "can be read as the story Bronte mostly glosses over," and he then spells out how carefully Antoinette's story is designed as a foil to Jane's, and as a demonstration of the logic in her madness. A similar argument is offered by Michael Thorpe when he calls the novel "a subtle, implicit comment on the shortcomings of Jane Eyre." Underlying the difference between sticking to and changing the events of the host story is the similar but slightly different contrast between explaining more fully what happened and suggesting that the original explanation was misleading.

This same contrast can be found in the critics. Criticism can...
try to unpack the complex meaning of the original work, or it can point out faults and inconsistencies: “this is what must have been going on in the character’s mind”; “this is what might well have taken place earlier”; or, “this is inconsistent with that”; “there seems to be some carelessness—or some timidity—here.” In the case of criticism, it will usually be clear whether the work is being explained or objected to, whereas in the case of parasitic narrative there is no need—indeed, no obvious opportunity—to state such a position. Browning’s Caliban, with his intense sensitivity to physical sensations and his conviction that spite is the universal feeling, and Auden’s Caliban, representing the irreducible id, the element that cannot be made into art, can be seen as developing what is already present in Shakespeare (and that is what Browning thought he was doing). But it is also possible to claim that Browning’s Caliban, when he declares his belief in the Quiet, and Auden’s, with his elaborate Jamesian sophistication, stylistic and conceptual, are showing us elements that Shakespeare omitted, and are criticizing *The Tempest* for its inadequacy in representing the primitive mind. It may not even be possible to decide which they are doing.

One point that seems incidental in *Jane Eyre*, and becomes central in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is Bertha’s West Indian origin. No doubt this is inevitable, since the story tells of her early life, but that does not prevent us from asking how our understanding of *Jane Eyre* will be affected. Are we now required to give more importance to the facts that Mr. Mason was a wealthy West Indian planter, that Bertha was a Creole, and even to the West Indian connection of Jane herself, and the colonial source of the wealth she eventually inherits? Two critics who have written on both books claim that we are. Gayatri Spivak sees Rhys as suggesting “that so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism,” and argues back to *Jane Eyre* that the ideology of imperialism “provides the discursive field” for Jane’s rise in status. Dennis Porter, arguing

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14See Browning’s letter to Dr. F. J. Furnivall, 25 April 1884: “Then, as to the divergence from Shakespeare’s Caliban—is it so decided?” (Letters of Robert Browning: Collected by Thomas J. Wise, ed. Thurman L. Hood [New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1933], p. 228).
more powerfully in my view, also links the sexual and marital theme with that of imperialism, and extrapolates Antoinette back into Bertha: “As a member of the colonial *nouveaux riches*, she is felt to be inferior to England’s fine old families; as a daughter of a former slave-owning plantation-owner, she is a living reminder of the sordid origins of his affluence.” We can perhaps list this as a third school of “Bertha-criticism”: Bertha as representing Jane’s repressed sexual desire, Bertha as representing Jane’s suppressed anger, and now Bertha-Antoinette as representing the colonial subject. For this last argument it is of course necessary to contrast Jane with Bertha, not to see a symbolic parallel between them, and there are some awkward objections to the case. Spivak’s emphasis on the theme of imperialist exploitation glosses over the fact that Bertha (and Antoinette—on this point there has been no essential change) is an heiress, representing the exploiters, not the exploited, so that Rochester’s relation to her cannot be seen as a parallel to imperialism. It is equally questionable whether Bertha represents a “tropical . . . sensuality that both tempts and torments Rochester”—there is far less emphasis on sexual desire in his account of his marriage than in his account of his various mistresses.

It is more useful, on the whole, to place Rhys with the critics of *Jane Eyre* rather than with Charlotte Brontë, since all the expansions and corrections she offers to the novel could have been made explicitly (though far less eloquently) in discursive prose; and thus to regard the critics who talk about her novel and *Jane Eyre* together as using her in a way that does not in logic differ from how they might use an earlier critic. Such deconstruction of the distinction between fiction and criticism would be question-begging, even outrageous, if we were studying Rhys’s fiction as our main object of attention (reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* is quite different from reading a critical essay), but it is appropriate if we are studying *Jane Eyre*. This enables us to move now to the question that has, perhaps, been too long postponed: what

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does all this recent criticism really tell us about Charlotte Brontë's novel?

It is obvious that hardly any of the modern criticism could have been written by Charlotte Brontë's contemporaries, and that much of it would have puzzled and shocked them. One other thing is also obvious. If a reader could be found who had read all this material but not *Jane Eyre*, he would get at least one sharp surprise on turning to the novel: the discovery that Bertha, on whom so much interpretation has been bestowed, is a minor character, who appears only for a dozen pages out of some four hundred and fifty, is hinted at for perhaps twice as many, and who does not speak a single word. Contemporaries realized, of course, that Bertha is more important than this quantitative count suggests, and would not have been surprised at the claim that she is in some way a central figure, but the way, for them, would have concerned plot. She was, in other words, a figure, not a character. To make her prominent because of the hints of mystery, the melodramatic appearances, and the fact that she represents the obstacle to Rochester's marriage, is to read *Jane Eyre* as a Gothic novel, not as a psychological exploration or as the construction of woman. These are the elements in modern Bertha-criticism that would have astonished them, and an attempt to recapture that astonishment might make a good starting point for asking just what that criticism is doing.

In asking this metacritical question, I must make one preliminary statement about the position from which I shall approach it. I start from the view that meaning must be an interaction between text and reader, rejecting both the old-fashioned view that the meaning of a text is single and unambiguous and recoverable by historical scholarship in a way that can settle all ambiguities, and the new-fashioned view that the text is a Rorschach blot onto which any meaning can be projected by the act of reading. This newer doctrine can be held in various forms, ranging from total subjectivity to the theory of interpretive communities put forward by Stanley Fish, which derives meaning entirely from the readers without wishing to undermine in the
slightest the rigorous criteria employed by scholarship; but all
forms of the doctrine maintain that there is no text in itself, in-
dependent of the acts of reading. 16 Between that position, and
the form of historical scholarship for which virtually none of the
modern criticism of Jane Eyre could be valid (simply because it
was not available to the author and her original readers), the
position of this essay can be located.

If meaning derives from an interaction between text and
reader, then intrinsic qualities of the text control its possibilities.
That view is essential to the project of this essay, which hopes to
throw light not only on modern criticism, but also on Jane Eyre,
and considers these two objectives as interrelated but different.
How can we discover those qualities in the text that control our
reading? Usually this will be done in historical terms, by ap-
pealing to the original situation, but it is important not to make
the historicism simpleminded. The claim that true meanings are
those that would have occurred to contemporaries (I will for this
argument run together the author and her contemporaries,
though obviously one would for other purposes want to separate
them), and wrong meanings are those that could not have, is
quite untenable. We read Julius Caesar and suggest that Brutus
is a fellow-travelling liberal, that Cassius could be seen as a com-
munist party secretary, Caesar as a kind of Hindenburg figure,
and Antony as a fascist; it is obvious that this reading was un-
available to contemporaries, but that does not ipso facto make
it wrong. On the other hand, we can say that Brutus is more
superstitious than Calpurnia, or that he feels no affection for
Caesar, and this, though a careless contemporary might have
said it, is certainly wrong. Similarly, to say that Jane is in love
with Rivers, that she was a meek child, and a better Christian
than Helen Burns, would be wrong for reasons that have noth-
ing to do with history, and the suggestions that Rochester could
be imagined smoking cannabis, that Blanche should be seen in
a Christian Dior dress, or that Rivers would have considered Es-

16See Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Com-
munities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), and “Consequences” in
Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago:
Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), pp.106–31. Of the Bertha-critics, Gayatri Spivak and
Patricia Yaeger, the two most Derridian, seem at least to toy with this theory.
says and Reviews an infidel book, are unhistorical but at least plausible.

In discussing the relation of parasitic to host narrative (of hypertext to hypotext), I have already sketched a way to classify what our critics are doing. Here I propose a threefold schema. First, they are unpacking the implicit meaning of the book; readers feel disturbing reverberations when they read about Thornfield and its mysteries, and the critic spells these out for us. This task can be subdivided into an unpacking that could have been done by, or at least would be acceptable to, the author or a contemporary, and an unpacking that presupposes some subsequent conceptual shift, into which the book is then fitted. Second, they are imposing onto the book a meaning that it certainly does not contain. This can still be seen as an interaction between text and reader if it is not an arbitrary imposition, but a reproach; if, that is, the interpreter is aware of all that the text is saying, and insists that it ought to be saying something extra, or something else. I shall return to this in the next section. And third, somewhere between these two, the critic can be speaking the “silences” of the text.

I take this term from Pierre Macherey, though I shall not use it in the way he proposes.17 For a critic to speak with understanding and responsibility of the necessary silences of a text, there are two things he must know: first, just what that text is not allowed to say; and second, just what it does say. The first is a historical matter. We must know what the conventions were that prevented that particular author from saying certain things to those readers: we must know, that is to say, the conventions of reticence that operate. These can either be literary conventions (as when eighteenth-century poetic diction excludes certain words from poetry that are otherwise freely used) or wider social conventions (as when a young lady’s sexual desires must not be mentioned).

Here we need to know at what level the suppression takes place, and how conscious it is; this will enable us to know something of the strategies required to circumvent the silence. It

might be, for instance, that everyone was perfectly conscious of
the suppressed material, but adhered to the agreement not to
mention it; this would be the case with excretory functions in
Victorian female society. At the other extreme, there might be
those who were totally unaware of the existence of the material.
No doubt there were young ladies reading *Jane Eyre* who were
vaguely aware that men feel a sexual urge, but assumed that
women do not, and who may have been uncertain of the anat-
omical details. This could include young ladies who were in
love; it could even conceivably (if we remove the anatomical ig-
norance) include married women, all of whom would have been
too embarrassed to be able to tolerate a discussion on the dif-
fferences between female sexual desire, a sublimation thereof, a
love that tolerated sexual intercourse as a kindness to the man,
and a frigidity that hated it even when the husband was not dis-
liked: the variations could be almost endless, and they involve
distinctions that much recent criticism ignores. This is an area
in which precise understanding on our part runs into a self-
defeating situation. Reticence is what prevents us from obtaining
precise knowledge of what was sayable; yet without such precise
knowledge, how can we fully understand the reticence? (I in-
dicate this problem in order to point out that it contains an in-
soluble element, and to introduce a note of necessary skepticism
and hesitation into the discussion.)

The second requirement is to look at what the text does say.
A great deal of the Bertha-criticism has offered interpretations
of what the figure of Bertha tells us about Jane, without asking
whether we know it already, or know anything that contradicts
it. If, for instance, Bertha symbolizes Jane’s sexual desire, we can
ask whether anything else in the novel indicates that Jane feels
sexual desire. I do not want to assert a privileged status for the
explicit as contrasted with the symbolic elements in a novel, but
I do want to deny privileged status to the latter. Many of the
issues that critics read out of Bertha as symbol are dealt with in
the novel, sometimes at length; it is at least necessary to ask
whether the explicit and the symbolic seem to be working in par-
allel or in opposition to each other, and to consider what con-
clusions follow from either.

That Jane is in love with Rochester is not in dispute. But
how far is this love recognized as sexual, that is, as a bodily experience? Perhaps the most interesting passage in the novel, for this question, is the following:

I regained my couch, but never thought of sleep. Till morning dawned I was tossed on a buoyant but unquiet sea, where billows of trouble rolled under surges of joy. I thought sometimes I saw beyond its wild waters a shore, sweet as the hills of Beulah; and now and then a freshening gale, wakened by hope, bore my spirit triumphantly towards the bourne: but I could not reach it, even in fancy,—a counteracting breeze blew off land, and continually drove me back.18

The language here is strikingly similar to that used by Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928; unexpurgated 1960), when in chapter 12 he describes Connie's experience of intercourse. Jane, of course, is alone in her single bed; the vehicle of the metaphor may be almost the same as in Lawrence, but the tenor concerns emotions and decisions, not physical desire and physical frustration. But in a book so vividly aware of the bodily element in feeling, so filled with the physical presence of Rochester, how can we fail to feel that these are the experiences of Jane's body? The resemblance between Connie's billows rolling away to some shore, and Jane's billows of trouble rolling under surges of joy, ought to be confined to the vehicle, but the tenors may not be as distinct as either author would have assumed.

Overlapping with the question of desire, but distinct from it, is Jane's attitude to marriage, and here we find a great deal that is quite explicit. There is a tension between resistance and surrender in Jane's love. This is most obvious when she is struggling with the temptation to stay with Rochester after the secret is out (chapter 27); but that rather conventional struggle between love and duty is less interesting than the account of their engagement in chapter 24, in which Jane's idea of lovemaking conflicts with Rochester's. The surrender forms the underlying continuo, and is reasserted at the end ("I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol"), but at the same time she puts up a spirited resistance to his courtship: "I assured him I was naturally hard—very flinty" (p. 344). She

refuses to be treated in Turkish fashion; she refuses presents, objects to feminine luxury, and actually repulses Rochester physically when she feels he is treating her as a sultan might treat a slave. She enlists Adele as an ally, for when Rochester tries some of the unacceptable language of courtship on the child, as an indirect way of saying to Jane what she will not allow him to say directly (“I am to take mademoiselle to the moon, and there I shall seek a cave in one of the white valleys among the volcano tops, and mademoiselle shall live with me there, and only me”), Adele rejects the language of the Minnegrotte with a robust childish commonsense (“she would get tired of living with only you in the moon”) that reinforces Jane’s less literal rejection.

This is a complex scene. Partly what we are seeing in Jane is maidenliness: the sexual nervousness of the virgin, fending off what she realizes is inevitable and is at the same time desired, out of curiosity at least, and no doubt on a deeper level too. Partly what we are seeing is independence: the refusal of the kind of idealization of woman that has always gone with actual subjection; hence the paradox that she best shows her independence by using the formulae of deference, such as calling him “sir,” since this enables her to preserve her identity as the governess who has chosen to marry her employer, rather than as an Isolde, for whom only one kind of relationship is now possible.19

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. Helene Moglen, for instance, pays little attention to chapter 24, even when discussing Jane’s attitude to her impending marriage, preferring to say that “Berthe [sic] expresses Jane’s fear of marriage as violation” (p. 126). Even Adrienne Rich’s excellent essay, one of the few that seem to have read chapter 24 attentively (“throughout the courtship there is a tension between her growing passion for him and her dislike of and uneasiness with the style of his love making” [p.100]), leans more on Bertha than it really needs to, and fails to make the point that her rejection of this (patriarchal) style does not need the Bertha-plot.

19I have discussed this further in my Love and Marriage (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979); see especially pp. 187–200.
When we compare the two groups of Bertha-critics, those for whom she symbolizes sexual desire and those for whom she symbolizes female anger, we can see the relation between them as ideological. If we define ideology as a program for displacing conflict from one area to another, for directing attention to issues that the establishment feels it can handle and away from issues that would threaten it in more disquieting ways, then there is an ideological element in Freudian psychoanalysis, which directs attention to the power of repressed libido and the need to handle it therapeutically and away from the social institutions and power structures that may be responsible for the hostile and dangerous impulses in the first place. If we accept that Bertha symbolizes hidden forces in Jane, and then identify these forces as sexual and not social, as desire and not independence, thus ignoring important explicit elements in the book and defusing its “hunger, rebellion and rage,” then we are reading ideologically. Drawing attention to what is relatively explicit does not of itself, I repeat, invalidate the claim to find what is more deeply hidden; it merely offers evidence that must be taken into account when disinterring it. So I turn now more directly to the process of disinterring—that is, to the readings of Bertha that treat her as symbolic.

There are two main traditions of symbolic interpretation available to us, one old and one new, the Biblical and the psychoanalytic. The former tradition was formalized centuries ago as the doctrine of the four levels of scriptural meaning: one literal, and three allegorical (the typical, the moral, and the anagogical: Samson as a type of Christ; Samson as the soul bound by sin and losing the strength of grace; Samson as fallen angel, or the destruction of Gaza as the Last Judgment). It can be applied to any biblical text because, as a sacred book, the Bible will always offer us these three further levels of meaning. The claim that any reading must be justified by something in the text, which I maintained earlier, is suspended because of the special status of the Bible as God’s word. No one has quite maintained (yet) that *Jane Eyre*, or any other canonized work of
literature, is a sacred text, and the profound resemblances between modern literary criticism and the tradition of biblical interpretation cannot extend to this form of symbolic reading. It is the other form that provides the paradigm for the interpretation of Bertha, and it is hardly surprising that almost every one of the Bertha-critics is, to a greater or lesser extent, psychoanalytic in approach.

The ignoring of logic was, from the first, regarded by Freud as a characteristic of the unconscious. Instead of syllogistic reasoning, it uses juxtaposition; it ignores the concepts of negation and contradiction, and compresses two opposite meanings into the same symbol. By now it is difficult to conceive of psychoanalytic reasoning without these elements, which correspond to the ambivalence that Freud finds everywhere in our emotional life: “we too have called the dream absurd; but examples have shown us how wise the dream is when it simulates absurdity” (The Interpretation of Dreams, p. 543). But if we are to hold a rational discussion of dream interpretation, we must distinguish between the wisdom of absurdity and the discourse of interpretation, in which contradiction is not permitted. This is as true of the interpreter of Bertha as it is of the interpreter of dreams. Rochester, according to Moglen, “fears with unusual acuteness both powerlessness and power.” Here is what follows from that:

The hostility, therefore, born of his anxiety, is projected onto the “love object.” It is not enough, therefore, for Rochester to reject Berthe.

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20The fullest statement of Freud’s theory of the primary process is to be found in The Interpretation of Dreams, 3d ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), chapter 7 (E), which contains an account of the mechanisms of condensation, composite formation, loose connections, and the tolerance of contradictions found in the latent dream thoughts, and contrasts them with “the selection and the retention of the right conceptual material” which is found in “the normal movement of our ideas” (p. 548). This is stated more succinctly in the Fourteenth Introductory Lecture: “opposites lie very near one another in association and . . . actually coincide in the unconscious” (Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922], p. 185). In the 1895 “Project for a Scientific Psychology” there is a clear statement of the resemblance between the primary processes “daily presented to us during sleep” and “the pathological mechanisms which are revealed by the most careful analysis in the psychoneuroses” (in The Origins of Psycho-Analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902 [New York: Basic Books, 1954], p. 398). The aim of psychoanalysis is not, of course, to dismiss these illogicalities, so rich in information about our unconscious psychic life; nonetheless, Freud is a rationalist studying the irrational, not an irrationalist.
He must protect himself as well against everything in Jane that suggests an affinity with his first wife. He must deny that aspect of her sexuality which is perceived as aggressive and “masculine.” He must bifurcate her personality. But because he fears as well the power of his own virility, he incorporates into himself that aspect of femininity which is unthreatening: the capacity for intense and absolute love. In this way Jane is not only divided. She is negated: denied function and space. She becomes quite simply an extension of him. (p. 128)

This passage does use the word “therefore,” which I take as a claim to follow certain logical procedures. If I now examine these in some detail, it is not out of a wish to attack this particular critic, but because it is so representative a piece of psychoanalytic reasoning.

Rochester's hostility to Bertha is explained as projection. Is all hostility a form of projection? Unless we simply assume that the answer is yes, we need to contrast hostility caused by the object (the Jew's hostility to the Nazi) with that projected onto it (the Nazi's hostility to the Jew?). The most obvious way to distinguish them would be to ask if the actions of the object could reasonably be seen as causing hostility, and if we consider what Bertha had done, it seems astonishing that this possibility is not even considered.

Second, for the same reason, Rochester must deny “that aspect of [Jane's] sexuality which is perceived as aggressive.” This compound assertion needs unpacking if it is to be discussed, and the relation between its two parts is peculiarly intricate. Jane does not appear to show either aggression or open sexual desire toward Rochester, so what is there for him to deny? If there is an aggressive element expressed through her sexuality, and if there is a sexuality displaced onto her aggression, then the claim makes sense, but each half of this hypothesis depends on assuming the truth of the other half. If we object that she shows neither, there seems no way the claim can meet this objection.

Furthermore, the claim that Rochester wants to deny any part of Jane's sexuality is astonishing; he is after all one of the most virile lovers in nineteenth-century fiction. What he wants to do is awaken her sexually; that is the not-quite-openly admitted purpose of his “Turkish” courtship. If the symbolic interpretation of Bertha is offered as an explanation of elements in
Rochester's behavior, are we not entitled to ask, first, for the evidence of what needs explaining?

Third, the fact that Rochester feels intense and absolute love for Jane is attributed to "incorporating into himself" the unthreatening part of her. Again this raises the question of what needs explaining in terms of projection (or here, introjection), and what is part of our normal psychological equipment. Is there such a thing as love which is not projection? If so, why should Rochester not feel it? If not, the love that he finds in Jane and introjects would also need explaining—what is she compensating for by loving him?

Fourth, Rochester's "fear" of his own virility was explained earlier in the paragraph as fear of impotence, and verified by his continual sexual conquests. If all sexual drive is fear of impotence, we seem to be playing with words: why should projection be more basic than libido? If there is a distinction between direct sexual drive and that which conceals fear of impotence, then it is at least necessary to look at Rochester's conquests to ask which they seem to be.

Fifth, what does it mean to say that Jane is negated, denied function and space? Does this describe any part of Jane's experience? Her love for Rochester fulfills her, enlarges her space, and enriches her function. Or does it describe Rochester's perception of Jane? He is vividly aware of what she is like, and when speaking of his love he continually mentions the qualities in her that attract him.

And finally, may I suggest that the words "quite simply" let a large cat out of the bag. If there is any sense in which Jane becomes an extension of Rochester, it is certainly not a simple one; it can at the most be an element in a complex of feelings that include some real perception. But in a train of reasoning that brushes aside the complexities of the text in order to replace them by a one-dimensional theory, such a relationship will indeed be quite simple.

The question of psychoanalytic reasoning is so central to the argument of this paper that I must add another extended example. This one comes from a discussion that seems to me superior to the others on two counts, first because it reads Bertha as symbolizing rage rather than desire, and second because it
reads the text far more scrupulously. Nonetheless, the chapter by Gilbert and Gubar on “the Spectral Selves of Charlotte Brontë” employs a form of reasoning that I wish to interrogate.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bertha is an avatar—the most threatening one—of Jane. She does what Jane wants to do: she tears up the bridal veil as a way of refusing marriage, for Jane fears marriage. I have already sketched my answer to this: there are two views of marriage for Jane, the “Turkish” or patriarchal (Gilbert and Gubar call it “romantic” as well), which she certainly rejects, and the marriage of equals, which according to Gilbert and Gubar is sketched at the end of the novel, but which seems to me far more vividly present in her outbreak to Rochester (“I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities” [p. 318]) and in her handling of him during courtship.

What reason have we for believing that Bertha “is Jane’s truest and darkest double . . . the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress”? Here, slightly abridged, is the long paragraph in which Gilbert and Gubar deal with this question:

Bertha has functioned as Jane’s dark double throughout the governess’s stay at Thornfield. Specifically, every one of Bertha’s appearances . . . has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane’s part. Jane’s feelings of “hunger, rebellion, and rage” on the battlements, for instance, were accompanied by Bertha’s “low, slow ha! ha!” and “eccentric murmurs.” Jane’s apparently secure response to Rochester’s apparently egalitarian sexual confidences was followed by Bertha’s attempt to incinerate the master in his bed. Jane’s unexpressed resentment at Rochester’s manipulative gypsy-masquerade found expression in Bertha’s terrible shriek. . . . Jane’s anxieties about her marriage, and in particular her fears of her own alien “robed and veiled” bridal image, were objectified by the image of Bertha in a “white and straight” dress. . . . Jane’s profound desire to destroy Thornfield . . . will be acted out by Bertha. . . . And finally, Jane’s disguised hostility to Rochester, summarized in her terrifying prediction to herself that “you shall, yourself, pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand” comes strangely true through the intervention of Bertha. (p. 360)

The next paragraph begins by conceding that some of these parallels “may at first seem somewhat strained.” In a way they are, cumulatively, rather convincing; the problem is not whether they
hold up as parallels, but what such parallels prove. There are
two kinds of examples in this long list. First, there is the claim
that what Bertha does “expresses” or “objectifies” Jane’s feelings
or wishes. Whether this is the case is precisely what I am ques-
tioning, so we cannot begin by assuming its truth. Second, there
is juxtaposition (“were accompanied by,” “was followed by,” etc.).
I do not deny the extraordinary power of juxtaposition, in lit-
erary texts even more than in dreams, but what they are showing
us must always remain open. They can show exemplification,
parallel, or contrast, and each of these will be equally powerful.
If Bertha represents the very opposite to Jane, as woman and
as potential wife for Rochester, if her presence in the attic sym-
bolizes all that Jane does not feel, if she tears the bridal veil when
Jane with her whole being wishes to wear it, if she tries to burn
Rochester and this horrifies Jane because she feels no hostility
to him, even unconsciously, then the parallels will be just as
strong. A critic committed to psychoanalytic theory may want to
maintain that there is no such thing as love without elements of
repressed hostility, or maidenliness without elements of re-
pressed sexual desire, so that juxtapositions will always, because
of ambivalence, represent both parallel and contrast. This is a
less drastic claim than Gilbert and Gubar seem to be making,
and let me for the moment grant it. But interpretations that are
universally true tell us nothing in particular about an individual
book; Bertha is then a symbol for Jane’s feelings as much as (and
no more than) Becky Sharp is a symbol for Amelia’s or Mrs. Elton
a symbol for Emma’s.

The first parallel, in which Bertha’s laugh is heard just after
Jane’s rebellious reverie, is discussed at greater length by Cora
Kaplan.21 The length of her discussion enables a more subtle
reading, which at the same time is used to attack Virginia Woolf’s
dismissive comment on the passage. Woolf disliked it because
she felt that the author “will write in a rage where she should
write calmly,” an indictment that Kaplan describes, with some
justice, as “devastating, controlled, yet somehow uncontrolled”
(p. 171). Kaplan focuses on the element in Jane’s reverie that

21“Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism,”
in Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism, ed. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn
emphasizes female rebellion (“nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth”), and claims that Bertha becomes “the condensed and displaced site of unreason and anarchy as it is metonymically figured through dangerous femininity in all its class, race and cultural projections” (p. 172). It seems to me misleading to call Bertha the site of anything: we are simply not given enough of her consciousness for her to be considered the site on which such issues are enacted (it is Jane who is the site; Bertha is the symbol). But for the purpose of this discussion, what matters is the relation between Bertha and Jane that is achieved by the juxtaposition, and here Kaplan shows a careful awareness of the ambivalence:

Bertha must be killed off . . . so that a moral, Protestant femininity, licensed sexuality and a qualified, socialized feminism may survive. Yet the text cannot close off or recuperate that moment of radical association between political rebellion and gender rebellion.

(pp. 172–73)

It is not necessary to share the feminist socialist position from which Kaplan writes in order to appreciate the justice of this analysis; the reader who prefers moral femininity, licensed sexuality, and qualified feminism may still recognize the disturbing, even anarchic, power of Bertha’s laugh (misattributed to Grace Poole—a detail that makes it even more mysteriously disturbing) at that point.

There are other aspects of psychoanalytic reasoning that can be illustrated from the Bertha-critics. Robert Keefe, after maintaining the unexceptionable view that “it would be a mistake to treat Bertha’s death realistically,” continues, “for she represents an aspect of a woman who is already long dead, Mrs. Brontë” (p. 127). Moglen sees Rochester’s rescue of the mad wife as expressing “the ambivalence of the Byronic hero towards his own sexuality” (p. 140). Can the same figure in the novel represent both the dead Mrs. Brontë and Rochester’s sexuality? In principle the answer might be yes, though it is a wide gap for such a minor figure to bridge; but must it be left to the metacritic to ask whether these two symbolic roles (plus all the others) in-
terfere with each other, and, if they do not, how the symbolic functions are divided up?

For a case of what I shall call sliding substitution, I shall turn again to Judith Williams. Her aim is to show that there is "of course, a close link between Jane's fantasies and imagination, and Bertha Mason." She tells us that Jane, even when she left Lowood, "was secretly attracted by the dynamic and dangerous forces the proprieties were designed to protect her from ('I longed to go where there was life and movement')"; then comes the discussion of the hierarchy of the house and its architecture, in which the third story, associated with antiquity and romance as well as with Jane's daydreams, seems, in being a realm of memory and fantasy, to be a realm as much of the creative imagination as of physical instincts:

In locating the mad Bertha there, Charlotte Brontë is making a very important link between the imagination and the passions... Jane is strongly drawn toward this dangerous realm of fantastic, heady passion.\(^{22}\)

The primary evidence here is Jane's longing for "life and movement." This is immediately paraphrased as "dynamic and dangerous forces," and later as "fantastic, heady passion." Because of the architectural metaphor, this passion is then located on the third floor of Thornfield, and since that is the floor where Bertha lives, therefore Jane is attracted to Bertha.

To conclude this discussion, I have a further suggestion about finding a double for Jane. Bertha is of course a possible double, but is she the only possibility? Is not Helen Burns a double for Jane? She represents the obedience that Jane can never bring fully to the surface, the submissiveness that as a conventional heroine she must feel along with her hunger, rebellion, and rage. Helen's death shows that Christian obedience would be fatal for Jane. And Helen is not simply meek—she has to struggle against her own slovenliness, for Jane represents the

\(^{22}\)Williams, pp. 30–31. The use of "of course" is striking ("There is, of course, a close link between Jane's fantasies... and Bertha Mason"). This reminds us—Williams's book is dated 1988—that if something is repeated often enough it can pass into the common wisdom.
dark part of her. Is not Mrs. Reed too a double for Jane? She represents Jane's often overpowering urge to self-punishment. She must be forgiven, "for you knew not what you did"—just as Jane does not know what it is that drives her to behave rebelliously and be punished by being locked in the red room. The red room has been viewed (among many other interpretations) as a symbol for Jane's own body: her refusal to tolerate being locked there would then be a refusal of her own incipient sexuality, and Mrs. Reed would be the compulsion to accept her own physical nature, however great the reluctance. Jane's self-hatred then becomes implicit when Mrs. Reed on her deathbed confesses how much she has disliked her, and Jane's inner need for independence requires her, through the action of her double, to refuse the contact with her uncle that would bring her legacy.

Is not Rivers a double for Jane? More insidiously and more dangerously than Helen, he represents the urge toward duty from which she needs to free herself in order to act out of pure love. Rivers quite consciously represses his sexuality, knowing his love for Rosamund Oliver, and putting it aside in order to be a missionary and demand a wife toward whom he feels no sexual attraction. Jane similarly repressed her own sexuality in placing duty before her love for Rochester. Marriage for Rochester is represented by the Creole woman, marriage for St. John by the journey to India, for marriage has to be seen as exogamous; as the men marry out of their race or clime, so Jane marries out of her role as governess. And is not Rochester a double for Jane? This seems the most obvious one of all, since he acts out or openly demands what Jane tries to suppress in herself—sexuality, breaking of the law as a mere technicality (John Reed's claim that Jane has no money, is a dependent, and ought not to read the books without permission, is a similar technicality that Jane learns to despise), and even the self-punishment that Jane is always drawn to. Rochester did not succeed in saving Bertha from the fire, and quite possibly knew he would not be able to; what he did was lose a hand and his eyes, thus enacting the Old Testament punishment that Jane feels it necessary to threaten herself with, and also, if we are to take this interpretation, cas-
trating himself symbolically to act out Jane's own fear of sexuality.

Since the most popular candidate for Jane's double is so comparatively minor a figure, we need not stop here. Helen Burns (who forgives in a way Jane insistently refuses to allow herself) and Miss Temple (the ideal of female independence compatible with eventual marriage); Richard Mason (victim of a murderous attack from Bertha); Mrs. Fairfax (who must have known more about what was going on in the attic than she admitted); and Grace Poole herself (kept prisoner by the madwoman she is supposed to keep prisoner) are all possibilities. I put forward all these candidates not (or not merely) for the purpose of reductio ad absurdum, but to suggest that there are constant parallels and mutual illuminations between all the characters. This tells us what kind of novel Jane Eyre is. In a realistic novel, the characters are clearly distinct from one another, and when we put them together we do so rationally, looking for comparisons and contrasts that do not undermine their identity. In a novel in which characters merge into one another, in which identities are undermined and resemblances rearrange themselves, in which this mutability seems not the result of incompetence but the source of strange power, realism has given place to what we can provisionally call the gothic. Jane Eyre is a realistic story over which the shadow of gothic strangeness keeps looming. To see Bertha as Jane's double is, I suggest, fitfully true, but not in a way that grants her any special status as the double for Jane.

I remarked earlier that the aim of this essay is not merely to discuss contemporary criticism, but also to say something about Jane Eyre. So I now conclude with a brief suggestion of another way to read the marriage of Rochester and Bertha.

Rochester is not the only man in Victorian fiction whose life is ruined by a bad marriage. In Dickens's Hard Times (1854) Stephen Blackpool is married to a woman who (as Bounderby puts
it with disrespectful but bracing succinctness) “took to drinking, left off working, sold the furniture, pawned the clothes, and played old Gooseberry.” He is unable to marry the woman he loves, who is represented with all the qualities of the perfect wife: she is an angel, she is “so good and so forgiving,” and she devotes herself without a word of complaint to nursing the drunken wife who displaced her. In its quiet, un-gothic way, the chapter that describes this is as full of melodramatic cliché as anything in *Jane Eyre*. Rachel, “seen across the dim candle with his moistened eyes . . . looked as if she had a glory shining round her head” (p. 85). The wife, with her “debauched features,” even has some physical resemblance to Bertha, and like Bertha she does not speak a word; just as Rochester could have got rid of Bertha by sending her to live in the unhealthy climate of Ferndean, so Stephen has the chance of getting rid of his wife when she almost drinks the poison (whose presence on the table beside her sickbed seems about as implausible as the fatal effects of the climate of Ferndean, where Jane and Rochester live quite happily ever after—melodrama requires a touch of implausibility), so that Stephen, reading what was printed on the bottle of poison in large letters can turn “of a deadly hue, and a sudden horror [seem] to fall upon him” (p. 83).

In George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* (1861) Godfrey Cass is married to a drunkard, and like Rochester has kept the marriage secret. He too wants to marry a pure young girl, and he does so, for the convenient death of the wife leaves him free for Nancy; but since disowning the wife required Godfrey to disown the child as well, the new marriage is childless. The Victorians did not know that infertility is often caused by the man, so George Eliot missed an opportunity to present childlessness as a fit (and plausible) punishment for Godfrey’s disowning of his actual daughter—a chance to combine the kind of poetic justice that appealed to her with the realism it normally threatens in her fiction. Instead she combines childlessness with a mention of “the little dress, which had been made the burial dress,” and so sentimentalizes it. Godfrey, like Rochester and like Stephen,

is visited by the thought that the death of his drunken wife is devoutly to be wished, but is never tempted actually to do what the plot so conveniently does for him.24

A lesser-known case is that of Warrington in _Pendennis_ (1848–50), the friend whom Thackeray’s hero shares rooms with in London. He is a disappointed man who neglects his own talents, and eventually we learn why: as a young man, he explains, “I became attached or fancied I was attached, to a woman of much lower degree and a greater age than my own.” Her parents encouraged him “with all sorts of coarse artifices and scoundrel flatteries,” and he found himself “married to a boor. She could not comprehend one subject that interested me. Her dullness palled upon me till I grew to loathe it.” When he finds that “her heart, such as it was, had never been mine, but had always belonged to a person of her own degree,” he separates from her, pays her and the children to keep away from him and not take his name, and settles mournfully to a ruined life. The story is told as a warning to Pen, and as a contribution to Thackeray’s ongoing ambivalence about marrying for love.25

Here are the four leading novelists of early Victorian England telling what, under the surface, can be seen as the same story. And since my main concern here is with Charlotte Brontë, I will add that an episode in _Villette_ (1855) offers a striking structural similarity. Paul Emmanuel’s courting of Lucy can be seen as parallel to Rochester’s of Jane: he is interested in her long before she realizes it; he conceals his growing love not under the scheme of courting someone else but under a gruffness and apparent hostility that lays claim to an intimacy it does not seem to court; and he is very slow to make a declaration. Just as Jane discovers Rochester’s impediment through the intervention of others, so M. Paul’s secret is given to Lucy by a sort of collusion between the Père Silas and Madame Beck. The secret is not a wife but a dead fiancée to whose memory he is faithful and a series of grotesque dependents who render it financially impossible—they claim—for him to marry. If we think of Mme

Walravens living in the dingy upstairs room where Lucy finds her, misshapen, filled with spite, vaguely powerful and threatening ("Cunégonde, the sorceress—Malevola, the evil fairy"), it may not be too farfetched to claim that Villette too has its madwoman in the attic.26

I do not claim that Mme Walravens or Père Silas or Justine Marie are the dark doubles of Paul Emmanuel, or of Lucy, but I do suggest that this element in the novel has more than a plot interest, more than the faded thrill of the gothic. It offers one kind of explanation (though a patently inadequate one) for perhaps the most interesting element in the book, the ambiguous sexuality and reluctant courtship in the relationship between M. Paul and Lucy, and it adds a further possibility of meaning to the celebrated ambiguity of the ending. Lucy's normal, healthy sexual attraction was to the handsome hero, Graham Bretton; when her affection shifts to Paul Emmanuel, it grows both more and less sexual: we are vividly aware of Paul's bodily presence, as we never are of Graham's, but there is a profound reluctance to admit the sexuality (the scene in which he asks Lucy to be his sister is more highly charged emotionally than the subsequent scene in which he asks her to be his wife). The Mme Walravens/Justine Marie plot offers an explanation of this ambiguity that is as inadequate as what the Bertha figure tell us about Jane's complex feelings. In each instance one can see the episode as a way of showing the inadequacy of explanations on the level of plot.

What are the common elements between these four or five stories? In each case the man may be a major or a minor character in the novel, but the wife is always minor; her function is to ruin his life, not to be looked at in her own right. The story is told as something that could not have come out differently once the marriage had taken place; the man's folly may be responsible for contracting the marriage, but the woman is responsible for his ruin. Wide Sargasso Sea provides a striking contrast: it sees a hopeless marriage as something that happens to two people. Warrington's story is the one that most strikingly

invites this comment, for the wife’s inability to comprehend one
subject that interested him is presented as a datum, not anything
that could have been influenced. It is easy to imagine Mrs. War-
rington’s version, in which he might appear as having made up
his mind that nothing could be done to arouse her interest, and
then not trying. In all four cases, we can try to imagine the same
retelling, but the texts themselves will not help us do this, since
we here encounter an area of silence in the novels.

Silence in a realistic novel is a way of shutting off certain
possibilities. Rendering the loss of sympathy, the growing im-
possibility of communication, is exactly the sort of thing George
Eliot is best at (we can think of Lydgate and Rosamund, or Rom-
ola and Tito), but the way this happened to the Casses is not
explored—no more than what happened to the Warringtons or
the Rochesters. Of course, that is not the story we are being told.
It is never possible to explore everything, so there must be re-
lationships that are not explored, and there must be minor char-
acters. But this can be described in two ways: failure to explore
an issue can be seen as uncontroversial if it concerns a minor
character, since that is what a minor character is; or the decision
of which characters to relegate to minor status can be seen as
ideologically determined—the drunken or lower-class wife who
ruins her husband’s life is not to become the focus of attention.

In the case of Bertha, we have the extra factor of madness.
If there were hereditary insanity in the Masons, then Rochester
can obviously be cleared of responsibility for the failure of the
marriage. But if we shift the perspective and ask why they are
presented as insane, we can see this as a parallel to making the
wife a minor figure: it exonersates both husband and author.
Madness equals incurability, and can be equated with (incurable)
drunkenness or even with the class gap, if it is seen (as it seems
to be by Thackeray and George Eliot) as unbridgeable in mar-
riage. Madness, like minor-character status, is a device for keep-
ing certain items off the agenda.

I hope this essay has not had the flavor of a curmudgeonly
rejection of all recent literary theory. It is based on the belief
that consciousness can be multi-layered and symbols can be am-
B E R T H A  A N D  T H E  C R I T I C S
bivalent, that the relation between the explicit and the implicit
may be one of harmony, but also may not be; that social conflicts
will appear in a novel as tensions or even as contradictions—but that ambivalence, disharmony, and contradiction cannot be assumed, but must in each case be demonstrated, and measured against controls. And I do not offer my brief concluding survey as the only way of discussing Bertha, or the context of other Victorian novels as the only one in which to place *Jane Eyre*. But I do propose that it is a context at least as illuminating as that of psychoanalysis, and that instead of unpacking the significance of Bertha in a way that forgets how little we are actually told about her, we might gain more insight by remembering and exploring the fact, which has more than a technical importance, that she is a minor figure.

*Vanderbilt University*