Angry Angels: Repression, Containment, and Deviance, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

By Joan Z. Anderson

Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. . .they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation . . . — Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 113.

Paradoxically, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which challenges the rigid gender constructions of femininity and the Victorian societal constraints designed to keep women enclosed, ultimately re-inscribes some of those very conventions that the author defies. Brontë's novel examines the pervasive, repressive, and controlling ideology of the "angel in the house" through female characters who embody the construct as they subvert it. At Thornfield, Jane, along with a "range of fallen women," searches for the key to release them from the containment of their "metaphorical attics" (Logan 23). And yet, despite the novel's subversive nature, Brontë's narrative ultimately functions as a warning against female rage which the author communicates through the racially inscribed character of Bertha Mason. In the end, Brontë demonstrates that women's anger is very political and to be an angry woman in nineteenth-century England is next-door to insanity.

Brontë establishes the dichotomy of male oppression and female rage through both John Reed and Mrs Reed, who essentially functions in a male capacity. From the outset of the novel, Jane demonstrates her rage and is duly imprisoned for her less than angelic behaviour. Ironically, Jane's lack of restraint causes Mrs. Reed to contain Jane within the shrine of Mrs. Reed's oppressor--her former husband. Mrs. Reed's son, John, labels Jane as bestial, a "bad animal" (Brontë 3) for her display of rage; Jane, therefore, identifies John as her oppressor and tyrant (Brontë 5) who provokes her anger. Jane reacts to her "slave-driver" (6) by becoming the "picture of passion" (6); before the end of the first chapter, the young rebel finds herself in a virtual prison. Brontë emphatically draws attention to the punishment for striking out against oppression--containment. The red room "perfectly represents her [Jane's] vision of the society in which she is trapped" (Gilbert and Gubar 340). The red room also functions as a motif of "enclosure and escape" (340). Not only Jane, but also the other women in the novel search for the key to release them from their attics and red rooms.

Appropriately, Brontë utilizes the metaphor of houses, rooms, and enclosures throughout the novel to symbolize the patriarchal structures within society that inhibit or negate the possibility of female liberty. For Jane "the fresh air and open countryside remain . . . symbols of personal freedom and independence" (Meyer 85). In the red room Jane learns that she is without a place in society--"No, you are less than a servant" (Brontë 6). The interior of the red room reflects coldness, despite the fiery colour. Not an angel but a "revolted slave" (Brontë 9) presides over this hearth; a hearth which has not warmed the room for quite some time. Jane quickly assesses that "no jail was ever more secure" (9). The author evokes a pervasive atmosphere of suffocation, the inability to breathe, or to only breathe dead air--for in this chamber where Mr. Reed "breathed his last" (8). Although much has been made of Jane Eyre's name, it bears repeating that both her ire (Gilbert and Gubar 349) and the need to breathe fresh air drive this young girl and prevent her from embodying the construct of the "angel in the house."

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Paradoxically, Mrs. Reed "too is surrounded by patriarchal limits" (343) and demonstrates submission no better than Jane. Indeed, Mrs. Reed's own son oppresses his mother with remarks of "'old girl' [and] . . . sometimes revile[s] her for her dark skin . . . bluntly disregard[s] her wishes" (Brontë 9). Regardless of John's abuse, Mrs. Reed submits to John and continues to treat him as her "own darling" (10). Although Mrs. Reed submits to this male, she rebels against her deceased husband's maxim to "rear and maintain" (11) Jane after his death. Even young Jane who despises the matriarch, recognizes that Mrs. Reed is "herself bound by this hard-wrung pledge" (11). Mrs Reed's husband continues to dictate her behaviour even from the grave. Furthermore, Mrs. Reed neither exemplifies the "angel in the house" nor contains her anger with any more success than Jane. A Victorian woman's value resides chiefly in her femaleness (Archibald 8) : Mrs. Reed's "cap flying wide and her gown rustling stormily" (Brontë 12) hardly exempilfy the angelic, feminine that poet posture Coventry Patmore envisioned. Ironically, Mrs. Reed enforces the patriarchal maxim of female silence, on Jane and further inculcates the dictum "perfect submission and stillness" (13) will liberate the young orphan. Yet, Mrs. Reed herself is incapable of such silence as she screams, "Silence!. . . and abruptly thrust[s]" (13) Jane back into the red room. Ultimately, Mrs. Reed enlists the support of Mr. Brocklehurst, the symbol of the "Victorian super-ego" (Gilbert and Gubar 343), to subdue the rebel child. Jane rebels as "Bertha does and in consequence is 'locked away' at Lowood" (Logan 14).

Like Gateshead, Lowood represents another suffocating enclosure "where orphan girls are starved or frozen into proper Christian submission" (Gilbert and Gubar 344). Jane's display of anger and rebellion label her as essentially mad and thus she must be unjustly contained. "Those most subject to 'wrongful confinement,'" Deborah Logan reveals, "were women 'who refuse to submit to the authority and control' of their husbands" (149). Clearly, Jane is husbandless, but she rebels against Mrs. Reed, who functions in the capacity of a husband, as Jane's oppressor. Remarkably, Lowood is where Jane ultimately learns to govern herself, for rigid self-control is the only way women can survive in the Victorian sexual hierarchy. Here Jane encounters two women who outwardly embody the construct of "the angel in the house," but who inwardly seethe with repressed rage.

The first of Jane's guides to self-mastery is Miss Temple, who physically reflects the cherubic ideal. She is "tall, fair, and shapely" with a "pale, clear" complexion, and "a stately air and carriage" (Brontë 45). Not coincidentally, her name echoes her appearance; she is a shrine of ladylike virtues: magnanimity, cultivation, courtesy--and repression," note Gilbert and Gubar. It is "As if [she were] invented by Coventry Patmore" (344). But Patmore's angels are not subversive, nor do they mask a "potential monster, "a "'sewer'of fury beneath this temple" (345). Miss Temple superficially acquiesces to Brocklehurst's attempts to stifle and suffocate the girls at Lowood. Yet, she meets Brocklehurst's reprimanding her for ordering food to compensate for the burned porridge with her silence. The headmistress's face assumes a "coldness and fixidity" (Brontë 62), and her mouth requires a "chisel to open it, and her brows settle gradually into petrified severity" (Brontë 62). She may not verbally protest against Brocklehurst, but she subverts his authority with her body language. Her frigidity disguises an incendiary rage which surfaces in passive-aggressive behaviour. In a manner similar to her defiance of Brocklehurst's starvation of the girls, Miss Temple also ignores Brocklehurst's indictment of Jane's character. Although Miss Temple does try to instill submissive virtues in her pupil, significantly, the

headmistress does not tell Jane to be a good girl, but merely to "act as a good girl" which will in turn "satisfy us" (70). Jane's mentor teaches the orphan to repress her rage just as does Miss Temple. Hence, at Thornfield, Jane only wears the veneer of submission. Her defiance smoulders just beneath the surface and ignites with little provocation. However, despite Miss Temple's subversive actions, ultimately the head mistress also attaches herself to "powerful or economically viable men" (Rich 470), first by acting as the column that serves to "balance that bad pillar Brocklehurst" (Gilbert and Gubar 345), and then later when she marries and leaves Lowood to fulfill her function as the angel at home. In order to survive the patriarchal sphere of authority, Miss Temple must sacrifice any "deviation into the ardent, the excited, the eager" (Brontë 73) and lead a passionless existence.

Helen Burns also teaches Jane restraint and survival, but Helen simultaneously opposes the stifling restrictions of her society. Not surprisingly, Helen adopts Miss Temple's subversive strategies. Jane describes her first encounter with Helen during a public shaming at the hands of Miss Scatcherd. Helen mirrors the frozen quality of Miss Temple, "she neither wept nor blushed: composed, though grave, she stood, the central mark of all eyes" (Brontë 50). But beneath Helen's granite exterior, which Miss Scatcherd reviles as that of a "'Hardened girl'" (52), resides a rebel who refuses to be corrected of her "slatternly habits" (50). As with Miss Temple, Helen Burns' name possesses symbolic connotations. Helen "burns with anger, leaves her things 'in shameful disorder,' and dreams of freedom in eternity" (Gilbert and Gubar 346). Moreover, despite the fact that she inhales the "fog-bred pestilence" (Brontë 76) which breathes "typhus through [the] crowded schoolroom and dormitory" (76), it is not typhus but tubercular consumption that liberates Helen. Unlike Jane, Helen cannot conceive of breathing the brisk air of freedom. Her resignation to the repressive air of Lowood keeps her trapped. Ultimately, her sublimated rage manifests in a burning fever which eventually consumes her.

At Thornfield, Jane along with the "inmates" (Brontë 111) of its Bluebeardian corridors, search for avenues of escape from patriarchal containment and restrictions largely connected to "ambiguities of status" (Gilbert and Gubar 349). The women of Thornfield all represent women without a place, the fallen, or the outcast. Jane initially mistakes Mrs. Fairfax, the possessor of a "most housewifely bunch of keys" (Brontë 98), as the mistress of the manor and puzzles over the woman's attentions which Mrs. Fairfax does not seem to regard as anything "out of her place" (98). "Women's place" governs the novel, and women who lack a place engender fear "in a culture whose solidarity depends on women's having, and keeping, their proper place" (Logan 24). Brontë's novel questions the limited number of "places" afforded women and how women are contained within those few places.

Once Jane discovers that Mrs. Fairfax is "merely a housekeeper" (Gilbert and Gubar 348), who only possesses the keys to yet another prison, Brontë reveals that Jane's self-mastery masks a weariness of "an existence all passive" (Brontë 120). Indeed, her body physically balks at returning to those "rayless cells," (121) to the "stagnation," the "silent hall," and the "tranquil Mrs. Fairfax," (120) the keeper of the enclosure. Jane's reluctance to re-enter the dark halls of Thornfield attest to Jane's experience of the manor as the "domain of a housekeeper and of housekeeping" (De Lamotte 200). Although Jane describes her position at Thornfield as a "new servitude" (Brontë 87), she longs to transcend her role as governess which primarily appears to involve child-rearing and domestic duties" (De Lamotte 200). Thornfield resonates with the dank

air of entrapment, confinement and suffocation. In signature "Jane Eyre-ity" (Rich 482), the governess turns to "the moon and stars" (Brontë 121) as an alternative to the stifling dark. Jane looks to the open air which symbolizes liberty and her wish to transcend jobs that must be repeated "day in and day out" and completed "silently" and often "in secret" (De Lamotte 201).

Significantly, Jane voices her famous manifesto from the battlements above the third story--in the open air above the "corridor in Bluebeard's castle" (Brontë 110). Gilbert and Gubar liken Jane to "Bluebeard's bride's sister, Anne" looking off into the vistas of freedom (348). It is in the fresh, untainted air that Brontë specifically outlines exactly what makes women's lives an airless dungeon: a life of confinement to boredom and endless repetitious tasks. Jane fears stillness, calmness, and stagnation: "Women are supposed to be very calm generally" (Brontë 113), but Jane does not want to be "calm" and confine herself to "making puddings and knitting stockings" (113). She refuses to accept these limitations and refuses to pay the high price of outer calm in the way of Miss Temple and Helen Burns.

Paradoxically, not only moral paragons but drunken servants wear the mask of passivity. Grace Poole, embodies both the confinement of domesticity and the "duality of outer calm and inner restlessness" (De Lamotte 202). She also bears a name which suggests "a smaller, bounded version of the 'torpid sea' on which Jane fear[s] being 'becalmed' " (202). Grace symbolizes the isolating and numbing effect of the Sisphean cycle of housework, but Grace, with her needle and thread, also embodies the silent and servile traits of the "angel in the house." Paradoxically, she also represents a woman without a place--a fallen woman who relies on a "pot of porter" (Brontë 113). As an alcoholic, Grace signifies one of the most vilified and most reviled women in Victorian society. Although Grace's role is ostensibly a seamstress for the household, her actual task as a "madwoman's representative" (Gilbert and Gubar 350) may be the real reason she relies on the pint. Her alcoholism also explains why Grace is sentenced to the unpleasant task of guarding a madwoman. Although Jane describes Grace as rather dull, with a "square made figure, red-haired with a hard, plain face" (Brontë 111), significantly, Grace represents the "emblem of those ordinary women who . . . guard silently a mystery 'nobody knows': their true feelings" (De Lamotte 202). Perhaps Grace, like Jane, cannot repress her rage and therefore enlists the anesthetic effects of alcohol to douse her fires of fury, or at least narcotise them.

In some respects, Blanche Ingram also represents a type of fallen women. Her social position demands she "prostitute" herself for material gain, much like Adele Varens' mother. Although Blanche possesses a "respectable place in the world" (Gilbert and Gubar 350), she still exists within patriarchal restrictions. Blanche's social position demands a position of marriage. Miss Ingram must play the marriage game--the only game that society has made available to her--"a game even scheming women are doomed to lose" (350).

Furthermore, Blanche functions as a stand-in for Bertha and for Jane. All three women are "in their different ways . . . drawn into weddings with Rochester that are nothing more nor less than simulacra" (Plasa 75). Blanche shares certain similiarities with Bertha Mason. Both Bertha and Blanche function as marital commodities in the upper-class marriage market, and as such both hold social positions that require them to marry. Although Blanche is not physically imprisoned by four walls, she possesses few more options than does Bertha. Blanche also "stands in for herself because her position as mock-bride in the charades [Bridewell] is a duplication of her status in what passes for the reality beyond them" (Plasa 75). The suggestion

that marriage, for women in this period, is a prison resonates with significance in a society that insists women's "fulfillment lies at the hearthside" (Archibald 5), although the hearth itself must belong to a husband. Although a woman like Blanche will likely ensnare another husband, the failed engagement with Rochester could conceivably sentence her to prolonged spinsterhood. Following her encounter with Rochester as the gypsy fortune-teller, his disclosure about his "eligible estate" (Brontë 210) leaves her dark, dissatisfied, and disappointed (204). True, Blanche may pursue only Rochester's purse, but she does so to fulfill the dictates of a society that insists she marry to ensure her future.

Significantly, Blanche's pseudo-fallen status and her role as Jane's oppressor also connect Blanche to the metaphor of race predominant throughout the narrative. The oppressor's role is racially tainted consistently in the novel. Brontë links Blanche with Mrs. Reed and her son, John Reed, who "reviles his mother for her 'dark skin, similar to his own'" (Meyer 79). Accordingly, "when Mrs. Fairfax describes Blanche to Jane, she emphasizes her darkness" (78). Brontë's penchant for symbolic names surfaces in the ironic naming of the dark beauty. The whiteness of Blanche's name refers only to her "spotless white" attire, not to her actions or colouring, which Jane describes as "dark as a Spaniard" (Brontë 181). Blanche's willingness to prostitute herself for a profitable marriage repulses Jane, and Brontë couches Blanche's actions within capitalist terms. Jane remarks Blanche "need not coin her smiles so lavishly, flash her glances so unremittingly, manufacture airs so elaborate" (196). Moreover, Rochester associates Blanche with his detested wife Bertha, whom he describes as a woman in "the style of Blanche Ingram" (324). Perhaps, he ascribes racial otherness as a metaphor for Blanche's fallen status just as he does for Bertha.

Although Brontë utilizes the metaphor of race to signify the oppressor throughout the novel, paradoxically, she also uses racial otherness to characterize and essentially vilify Bertha Mason--a woman no longer in any position to oppress anyone. Brontë's complex use of race as metaphor, Susan Meyer believes, hinges on the logic that "oppression in any of its manifestations is foreign to the English, thus the nonwhite races signify oppression within England, either subjection to or participation in the unjust distribution of power" (81). A close examination of Brontë's shifting racial metaphor is beyond the focus of this paper; however, Meyer's assessment accounts for Brontë's apparent contradiction in the author's use of racial metaphors.

An unjust distribution of power is precisely why women like Bertha must be locked away. Bertha is doubly imprisoned. Brontë characterizes Bertha as possessing a "discoloured face," "a savage face" (Brontë 301); moreover, the author reduces Bertha to "a foul German spectre--the Vampyre" (301). Bertha is not only bestial and uncivilized--she is monstrous. Brontë operates within the conventions of her society and therefore repeatedly casts the madwoman without a voice--who is only capable of "snarling canine noise[s]" (219). Bertha embodies these stereotypical, Victorian beliefs about madness and fallen women. "If the madwoman is throughout the story seen as and compared to an animal," observes Shoshana Felman, "this persuasive metaphor" implies the need to "capture the animal and to tame it" (15). The patriarchal society represented by Rochester and the "medical men" who "pronounced her mad" (Brontë 327), contain the "hyena" (311) within an attic prison. Significantly, Rochester invokes medical authority to corroborate his assessment of Bertha which demonstrates "'how men could

deliberately invoke the masculine powers of Victorian medicine and law to disarm, discredit, and confine women who refused to suffer and be still'" (Logan 149). Bertha, even in isolated confinement, remains untamed, to which Richard Mason attests when he asserts that Bertha "sucked his blood" (224). Her tenacity could demonstrate that she is indeed mad or it could attest to the feact that Bertha's rage continues to burn years after the marital breakdown and her virtual entombment. Not surprisingly, she attacks her brother who has abandoned her and permitted her incarceration in the upper reaches of Rochester's ancestral mansion.

Bertha's unwomanliness--her masculinity in a society that raises femininity onto a pedestal--further stigmatizes Bertha as fallen. She embodies the unfeminine aspect of both anger and madness which threatens masculine control of Victorian society. Bertha must be contained because she is not submissive. Female madness pivots on the notion of the "other," Shoshana Felman asserts and therefore, "the woman is 'madness' since the woman is difference; but madness is 'non-woman' since 'madness' is the lack of resemblance.

What the narcissistic economy of the masculine universal equivalent tries to eliminate, under the label 'madness,' is nothing other than feminine difference" (16). Brontë makes much of Bertha's difference or "otherness." Bertha's role is as "Jane's counterpoint" (Zlotnick 31) not as Gilbert and Gubar assert, Jane's "truest and darkest double" (360). Rochester attempts to marry Jane on the "basis of her differences from Bertha" (Plasa 75). During Rochester's desperate attempts to persuade Jane to become his mistress, he claims that what propels his search for the right woman is a longing for the "antipodes of the Creole" (Brontë 331). Jane satisfies his desire as she is "poor, plain, little, pale, neat, and quiet, while Bertha is rich, large, florid, sensual and extravagant" (Gilbert and Gubar 361). Perhaps Rochester's rejection of Blanche Ingram is truly rooted in her discomfiting resemblance to Bertha.

Not only does Bertha's primitive, snarling signify her female difference, but so does her alleged sexual deviance. Bertha possesses both canine qualities and the feline tendencies of a "tigress" (223) which thereby casts her as a seductress. Rochester's rather one-sided account labels Bertha as "intemperate and unchaste" (326), a "lunatic" both "cunning and malignant" (330). However, there is little to support either of these claims. Bertha's ability to escape her prison and light fires during the night, both literally and metaphorically, would indicate that Grace Poole imbibes quite heavily, but Bertha evidently abstains from the pint of porter. Such a conclusion would also imply that Bertha, who "represents womanhood gone berserk" (Logan 147), may actually possess moments of lucidity, or in fact, be sane. Her actions in Jane's room depict a woman well aware of the significance of the wedding veil which Bertha, quite rightly, places on her own head. Bertha's "flinging" and "trampling" (Brontë 301) of the veil is also appropriate. Since Bertha is still Rochester's wife and since she appears to be aware that his attempts to marry to Jane are both illegal and immoral, Brontë seems to justify her angry and violent actions. Significantly, following her aggressive destruction of Jane's veil, Bertha calmly draws aside "the window-curtain and looked out" (Brontë 302). Such behaviour appears "remarkably deliberate and collected for one presumed to be in an incendiary rage" (Logan 150). Brontë suggests the madwoman understands the danger Jane faces in marriage to Rochester--a man who willfully deceives Jane in the name of love, so that perhaps Bertha's actions are a warning to the young Jane. After all, even though she has opportunity and justification, she does not assault Jane, whom she thereby acknowledges as another victim of Rochester's duplicity.

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Although Jane feels sympathy for "the unfortunate lady" (Brontë 320), Brontë still marks Jane as racially and morally superior to Bertha. Jane "can govern herself. . . and has learned to [self] govern all the passionate indignation that marred her childhood" (Zlotnik 33). Jane resists Rochester's attempts to sully her honour (Brontë 337). Jane follows the dictates of her society which tells her to "flee temptation" (340). Much of what places Jane above Bertha hinges on the vociferous repulsion that female sexuality elicits in Victorian society. "Instead of recognizing her alignment with this worthy opponent," Deborah Logan notes, "Jane seems smug in the knowledge that chastity and restraint is rewarded by unimpeded union with her true love, an equation from which Bertha is strikingly absent'" (156). Significantly, it does not seem to matter that the allegations of Bertha's lacking both temperance and chastity remain unsubstantiated.

Bertha's construction as "black" associates her with imperialist beliefs of lasciviousness and with "xenophobic anxieties . . . aroused by Bertha's foreign heritage" which connect to beliefs of "'racially inflected sexuality' " (Logan 23). Jane's whiteness, her self-governance, and (eventually), her embodiment as helpmate at Rochester's hearth all affirm the construct of the "angel in the house." Jane represents the "civilized" female and, thus, the novel ends with her movement from a community of women to a movement "towards white men" and pointedly, "away from black women" (Zlotnik 28).

Although Brontë's narrative effectively challenges some of the suffocating restrictions imposed upon nineteenth-century women, and desires "exercise for [women's] faculties, and a greater field for their efforts" (Brontë 113), ultimately, Jane's triumph resides in assuming the conventional role of wife. None of Brontë's females achieves true independence or freedom. Throughout the novel, Jane associates "freedom and oppression with healthy and unhealthy environments" (Meyer 85), not unlike Lowood. But, ironically, Brontë sequesters Jane in an isolated and restricted environment--Ferndean, which possesses "a dank and unhealthy atmosphere" (85). The author casts Jane as the long suffering, moral priestess who ministers to the blinded Rochester. Brontë's oasis in Ferndean suggests that even ideological worlds still require female servitude and women to keep the home fires burning--in the hearth. Women like Bertha, on the other hand, must be destroyed--the fires they light are too volatile, too threatening to masculine security and control.

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