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SEEING THE OBJECT AS IN ITSELF IT REALLY IS

Beyond the Metaphor
of Disability

LENNARD J. DAVIS

THIS BOOK marks a moment in disability studies that is unique, as far as I can tell. This is the first time a volume on disability examines only one work, in this case, *Jane Eyre*. Many other books and special issues have looked at a variety of artists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, and so on, often under a uniting theme. But the idea of choosing only one literary work as an object of focus from a disability perspective means something quite significant—it means we believe that disability studies has become so capacious, so much of a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary discourse, that it does not have to multiply its objects to bring along enough variety to sustain a single volume. Indeed, this is a coming of age moment for the study of disability.

To the average reader, the role of disability does not seem particularly obvious in Brontë's novel. Yes, Rochester goes blind and is maimed, but that comes at the end of the novel. The bulk of the story is about a young woman's coming of age and her impassioned and frustrated love affair with her employer. Bertha is seen as a crazed monster, rarely as a woman with affective and cognitive disabilities. It would seem to most people that one could safely get through the issue of disability in *Jane Eyre* in a few short pages and then you would have done with it. As Dr. Johnson once famously remarked about a dog walking on its hind legs, "It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all." So too scholars might not care about

the quality of a disability analysis; rather they might be surprised that it was done at all.

So this experiment conducted by David Bolt, Julia Rodas, and Elizabeth Donaldson, with the aid of all the authors in this volume, to see if *Jane Eyre* can sustain this multiple set of readings comes as a surprise but not in the way others might have predicted. In fact, the surprise one registers after reading all the chapters comes from wondering how it has been possible to read *Jane Eyre* without a serious consideration of disability. As the authors point out, while the feminist, colonialist, Freudian, and other dominant readings are more than valid, the point is that they all are largely ignorant of the basic facts about disability. For the most part even the best of these readings simply metaphorize disability. Given the former absence of disability studies in the humanities, there was no real way to talk about disability as disability. We saw this same problem in the case of race in literature, when early analyses of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, focused on "man's existential quest for meaning" or the "soul's attempt to find enlightenment"—all the while completely ignoring the issue of race. As Freud once said in regard to his ideas of the phallic symbol, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Likewise, sometimes disability is just disability.

What does it mean to metaphorize disability? The process of metaphorization is a substitutive one in which you say something is something else. A woman is a rose; a scythe is death. Whether you substitute entire objects for others or you use parts for the whole, the effect is to distract, to disengage from the initial object. When we say a woman is a rose, we are looking away from the woman toward the rose. We are saying that roses smell sweet, look beautiful, and are fecund. Then we turn back to the woman and say "You, too, are all those things."

The problem with metaphor and disability is that disability already involves looking away. As the normate regards the person with a physical disability, the normate both wants to stare and to look away—both actions have the same ends, which are to objectivize and stigmatize by an interrelated process of fascination and rejection (the latter in either or both the forms of disgust and dismissal). So disability has a special relationship to the process of metaphorization that other identities might share or might not. In any case, the idea that in *Jane Eyre* blindness is a metaphor for castration, for example, might work very well in a Freudian or a feminist analysis, but nevertheless such an approach fails to look directly at blindness, as does David Bolt's chapter, as a thing in itself, as an experience and an embodiment that does not have to steal its terms and borrow its existence through the process of metaphorization. Likewise, Bertha's madness is rarely addressed directly as it is in Chris Gabbard's chapter in this collec-

tion, and the implications of metaphorizing madness have not been clearly identified as they are in Elizabeth Donaldson's contribution. Instead of the more informed and nuanced readings in this volume, Bertha's madness is generally seen in the line of postcolonial and feminist readings that might include other works like *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The chapters in this volume show us that before we can leap to the metaphor, we need to know the object. Before we can interpret the semiotics of disability, we need to understand the subjectivity of being disabled.

I want to make clear that I am not denigrating these identity-based readings, but I think they need to succeed, not precede, disability studies readings. Theoretically those identity-based readings have put the cart before the horse, which means the horse has to do a lot more pushing and the way is not very clear. If we can have a firm understanding and foundation in seeing disabilities as they really are in themselves, as Matthew Arnold may have put it somewhat sightedly, then we might logically move to a more metaphorical and metacritical reading. But historically disability studies has been invisible in its nascence until fairly recently, so we cannot expect feminists or postcolonialists to have access to the increasingly larger and deeper pool of research in disability studies. The reason for this virtual ignoring of the disability studies archive is that disability is, as I have said elsewhere, the most discriminated category of oppression, at least from the point of view of academic recognition, if not in society in general.

I also do not want to imply that we can actually see disability as it is. Obviously we exist now in a postmodern era of analysis, and the idea that something simply *is* no longer works. What I am saying, however, is that we need to begin with disability in all its complexity as a socially constructed entity that exists, too, in an embodied form. Disability is not in fact an object but a way of knowing, a way of being known, and a modality for corporeality. We can put that consideration first before we then use it in a meta-analysis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.

Perhaps the largest lesson of this volume is that the very best feminist or postcolonial criticism is only as good as its knowledge base. And, for example, the classic feminist works on *Jane Eyre* have had a pitifully small base on which to make large claims. As a result, the very best feminist works on *Jane Eyre* have had to take a common sense, which is to say ableist, perspective on disability. Thus, it seems logical, if you are not blind, to think of blindness as a form of castration. (If you are blind, you might laugh at this statement, even as you engage in completely uncastrated sex.) It is likewise logical, if you are not a single amputee, to see an amputated arm as an object of horror and of course—inevitably—as a symbol of castration. (If you are a person who is missing an arm, you might laugh at this assumption

as you attach your prosthesis so you can be the best of cyborgian lovers.) I have made this point in a somewhat lighthearted manner, but the reality is that these statements only reveal how any reading of *Jane Eyre* that fell back on the received “wisdom” of an ableist culture would be sadly impoverished and diminished. Even ballpark assessments of, say, biblical references to disability can be quite wrong, as Essaka Joshua points out in her chapter in this work. Likewise, from-the-hip assessments of the role of illness can be equally incorrect, as Susannah Mintz helpfully notes. Received wisdom is, in the end, a congealed form of the same ideology that plunged people with disabilities into unemployment, discrimination, segregation, stigma, and even annihilation and death. I do not want to exaggerate or be overly histrionic, but just as statements about the laziness of blacks, the avarice of Jews, the insensitivity of Asians, or the blood-thirstiness of Arabs or Native Americans fall back on stereotypes and local wisdom, so too do classic works such as *The Mad Woman in the Attic* objectivize and stereotype people with disabilities.

One of our aims in reading a novel is to identify with and understand the characters in the work. Despite all our intellectualizing, a novel will never work if we do not make some kind of connection with the main character. How readers have over time come to understand Jane, Rochester, and Bertha tells us a lot about how much ideology and the ideological underpinnings of medical knowledge and psychological knowledge play a part in those acts of understanding and identification. As this volume shows us, the place of disability, illness, madness, and behavior will condition a response in the very-directly-addressed “Reader” of *Jane Eyre*. So even a conventional analysis of this novel will have to grapple with character types available to the culture at a given time. As Julia Rodas points out, the autistic-acting nature of the character of Jane would send different signals of embodiment and psychological existence to various groups of readers. And as Martha Stoddard Holmes indicates, these signals will reverberate through any filmic variation of the text. Margaret Rose Torrell too gives us an opportunity to understand in depth how embodiment will be part of this reception process. In short, the biocultural nature of being is surely vastly significant in any understanding of Brontë’s text. Without that perspective, this text and what one can claim to understand about it is so much diminished.

We can say, with the publication of this book, that no one can claim to write knowledgeably on *Jane Eyre* without taking into consideration the issue of disability. And if one does, then one may well be continuing the legacy of ableism that, Reader, we can now see has haunted this work from its inception.