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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Bolt, David & Rodas, Miele & Donaldson, J..

The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jayne Eyre, Discourse, Disability.

Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

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FROM CUSTODIAL CARE TO CARING LABOR

The Discourse of
Who Cares in *Jane Eyre*

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“ALL *JANE EYRE* LOVERS,” writes Gail Griffin, “have been strangely drawn to Bertha Mason Rochester” (89), and this attraction is in itself noteworthy, given that, as Laurence Lerner puts it, she is a “minor character” who “does not speak a single word” (280). Initially, a disability studies reading of Bertha and *Jane Eyre* would appear unpromising, for both seem to offer examples of what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder term the “negative image” school of “humiliating” literary depictions of people with disabilities (*Narrative Prosthesis*, 18). Cora Kaplan writes that this text “offers Bertha Mason no sympathy at all” (“Afterword,” 310). David Bolt states that Brontë “actively endorses the binary opposition of normativism and disability” (286). And Kathleen Jones writes that Bertha “remains ‘the monster,’ ‘the maniac’—a grim and hated figure [. . .]. It is with the greatest satisfaction that the author and reader reach the final dénouement—the fire, the death of the ‘maniac’ as she hurls herself from the burning building, and Rochester’s freedom to marry Jane” (21). However, by observing that “even the most ‘derisive’ portrait harbors within it an antithesis, its own disruptive potential,” Mitchell and Snyder also suggest the possibility of a “transgressive reappropriation” (*Narrative Prosthesis*, 35–40). Such a reading could turn the tables by asking, for example, not why the disabled

Bertha is killed off according to the stereotypical “cure or kill” formula, but why those charged with her care are not doing a better job of preventing her from harming herself.

Reading disability in *Jane Eyre* as a static element—as something almost exclusively associated with Bertha—will indeed yield a “negative image” interpretation; however, Bertha is merely the text’s first disabled character. By reading disability dynamically, as a category that is disclosed slowly, and by attending to the interlocking but shifting roles of caregiver and disabled, one begins to understand that the text presents two phases of caregiving and disability—the first featuring Rochester and Bertha, the second Jane and Rochester. Narrated by Jane in the mid-1840s, when public policy reforms were being instituted for improving the treatment of mentally ill and disabled people, Brontë’s novel can be understood as incorporating these reforms and reflecting negatively on Rochester’s custodial care practices. In other words, the novel’s closing chapters have Jane enact in miniature the spirit of the national reforms and, by so doing, Brontë’s narrative thematizes the transition from one caregiving paradigm to another, from custodial care to caring labor.¹

This transition from one paradigm to another can only be determined by attending closely to the text’s subtleties of discourse. Ostensibly a *bildungsroman* focusing on the protagonist’s mastery of communication, *Jane Eyre* paradoxically compels the reader to infer what the narrator does *not* say. Between the disclosure scene in the attic and her return to the ruined Thornfield, Jane does not record all or even most of her thoughts (ch. 26, ch. 36).² This chapter is concerned with Jane’s unwritten thoughts as they pertain to

1. The terms *care* and *caregiving* should not be used uncritically. Kelly writes that “persistent use of the term ‘care’ without engaging with disability critiques signals an ignorance at best, or dismissal at worst” of the “oppressive legacies” and “potential for abuse” associated with the concept (7, 8). Disability critiques view care as a complex form of oppression because, in “the context of disability, care is haunted by the spectres of institutionalization, medicalization and paternalistic charities” (3). Kelly goes on to state that “[n]aming this ambiguous work [of providing support with dressing, bathing, etc.] is an ongoing debate” (2). To disassociate it from paternalistic charity, advocates have substituted such terms as *support work*, *attendant care*, *personal support*, and *personal assistance*. (Kittay uses the term *dependency worker*.) However, Kelly acknowledges that “[s]omething is lost when the concept of care is eliminated” (17), and she presents a case for a new model of “accessible care” that resembles Cushing and Lewis’s caring labor model. Concerning *Jane Eyre*, terms such as personal assistant or dependency worker might be applicable to Grace Poole but would be inappropriate for Rochester and Jane, who fulfill functions vis-à-vis disabled spouses within a familial rather than paid context. For this reason, this paper will employ the terms *care* and *caregiver*.

2. The version of the primary text referred to in this chapter is Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York and London: Norton, 1987).

her development from the attic scene, in which she panics at the sight of the disabled Bertha, to the Ferndean section, in which she exhibits tranquility regarding Rochester's disability. In part, I present the case that Thornfield's attic functions for Jane as, what Mary Louise Pratt terms, a "contact zone" (6). This zone entails a space of encounter between two groups who have been separated geographically and who are unfamiliar with one another. Such contact produces change. In this case, the contact zone facilitates the meeting of the able-bodied Jane and the disabled Bertha and changes the former. Jane does not speak explicitly about this change, but the reader can surmise that what inaugurates her subsequent transformation is her direct encounter with Bertha and that what advances it further are her periods of wandering on the heath and convalescence at Moor House, where she learns the difference between the Rivers' *caring labor* and Rochester's grudging and negligent *custodial care*. In sum, this chapter argues that *Jane Eyre* is less a *bildungsroman* centering on Jane's mastery of communication than one of her moral education about disability and that what instigates this moral development is her close contact with Bertha.

Of course, thinking of Bertha as any kind of constructive influence other than as a cautionary tale runs against the conventional wisdom, for few (if any) critics have entertained the possibility that Bertha presents Jane with anything positive or useful. For example, in the influential *Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that "Bertha does [. . .] provide the governess an example of how *not* to act" (361; emphasis added). Critics do not consider Bertha a catalyst of Jane's moral development because Jane herself says nothing about it. However, I argue that this moral development takes place within a discursive gap and use the concept of the implied interlocutor to provide an inductive reading of Jane's silence and Bertha's nonverbal world. By way of the implied interlocutor, one can conclude that Jane develops morally through her contact with Bertha and, more importantly, grows in her understanding and acceptance of diversities of ability and their requisite ethical considerations.

BERTHA'S IMPLIED INTERLOCUTOR

Jane Eyre has been understood as portraying its protagonist's efforts to gain recognition as a modern liberal subject. As Suzanne Shumway points out, the novel "rests upon a valorization of, as well as an investment in, language and its powers" and mainly consists in "the story of a woman's search for subjectivity through language" (159, 161). Janet Freeman con-

curs, stating that “the power of speech” in the novel “is supreme. It enables Jane to take more and more control of her life” (686). Sally Shuttleworth agrees, maintaining that from “the opening paragraphs [. . .] it becomes clear that the narrator [. . .] is a figure involved in the processes of self-legitimation” through the acquisition of “rational discourse” (153, 164). Pursuing a related line of inquiry, Julia Miele Rodas argues that reading Jane as an individual on the autistic spectrum contributes to an understanding of her childhood struggles and increasing control in adulthood “over her passionate emotional life, reducing her affect and concealing her deeply rooted feelings with ever greater success” (“On the Spectrum”). Disadvantaged by gender and class, Jane, from the beginning, strives to acquire a voice that will allow her to take her place in society. The advantages of rising socially accrue to her when she learns to practice linguistic self-control. This development becomes manifest through Jane’s increasing facility with words against the foil of Bertha’s supposed inability to communicate. Indeed, recognizing the role of increasing language facility in Jane’s social ascent, critics have commented on the pairing of the speaking Jane with the “silent” Bertha. Jane’s early, unrestrained, explosive outbursts align her with Bertha, but as the novel progresses and as Jane gains control over her tongue, Bertha metamorphoses into her counterpoint. Shuttleworth observes that “Bertha’s laughter and ‘eccentric murmurs’ constitute another narrative within the text, running in counterpoint to Jane’s rational discourse” (164). While Bertha supposedly rages incoherently and eventually dies, Jane gradually modulates her tone and, by doing so, achieves self-determination and personal integrity, thereby empowering herself as the modern independent subject and achieving rough parity with Rochester. As Gilbert and Gubar note, by the Ferndean section Rochester “and Jane are now, in reality, equals” (368).

In contradistinction to Jane’s mastery of speech is Bertha’s supposedly nonverbal status. Jane affirms that, during the attic scene, Bertha uttered a “ferce cry” and “bellowed” (258; ch. 26), but she does not report having heard Bertha speak intelligibly. Bertha thus illustrates the model set forth by Catherine Prendergast, who notes that mentally ill people are often placed in “a rhetorical black hole” and that to “be disabled mentally is to be disabled rhetorically” (198, 203). In other words, “If people think you’re crazy, they don’t listen to you” (Prendergast, 203). Bertha is a character caught in the breakdown of communication due to what is, in essence, “a sociomedical condition, a secret family history of mental illness” (Donaldson, “The Corpus of the Madwoman,” 102). Concerning such a person, Lucy Burke asks, “[w]hat does it mean [. . .] to represent someone who is unable to tell

their own story?” (ii). Exploring this prospect would require reconceiving what it would mean for the nonverbal person to speak. For example, minutes before her death, Bertha vociferates loudly from Thornfield’s rooftop. For the narration of Bertha’s final moments, Jane relies upon the report of the host of the Rochester Arms (374; ch. 36), who informs her that he “witnessed, and several more witnessed” Bertha just prior to jumping, when “she yelled” and “was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off” (377; ch. 36). In this oxymoronic “second-hand eye-witness” account, the innkeeper describes hearing her voice but indicates neither one way nor the other whether her language could be understood. In sum, he does not stop to consider what Bertha is shouting or to whom. Yet Bertha’s verbalization and frantic gesturing constitute a speech act, one that, considered dialogically, is meant for an addressee. Taking into account that this speech act is a message broadcast in a loud volume and from a high place—voluble enough to be heard “a mile off”—one reasonably could speculate that the intended recipients would be just about everyone within hearing (377; ch. 36). Her rooftop statement is delivered to a *generalized recipient*, one that is diffused over a wide social expanse.

Bertha’s delivery to this generalized recipient implicates her as a speaker in a unique dialogic situation that can be explored by recourse to the notion of an extralinguistic realm of communication. Far from the usual interactions between addresser and addressee, this kind of discourse is one in which an atypical mode of communication predominates: Ato Quayson’s *implied interlocutor*. This is a narrative device that unfolds as extralinguistic discourse for the purpose of disclosing a nonverbal character’s participation in a dialogic setting. The concept is rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of dialogism in which an addresser and an addressee exchange language between them. Put simply, anything a person says is a response to something already said and anticipates something that will be said in response. This model takes for granted that all parties in such interchanges are fully verbal. Quayson’s implied interlocutor extends Bakhtin’s model to disability studies by questioning this last aspect: two sides of an exchange exist but with one consisting of a nonverbal person and the other serving as his or her addressee or “implied interlocutor” (Quayson, 29). For the nonverbal person, there can be an “anticipation of an interlocutor even when the context of communication does not seem to explicitly denominate one” (29). Quayson further adapts Bakhtin’s work by advancing the idea that “the addressee/interlocutor” does not have to be “a human character at all” (154). Instead, the interlocutor could consist of “a structure of societal and cultural expectations

not attributable to any single source,” that is, the cumulative cultural attitudes and/or ingrained prejudices circulating within the fictive social setting (154). Quayson explains “that for the disabled, that interlocutor may be an aggregation of attitudes” of the “normate,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s term for “the corporeal incarnation of culture’s collective, unmarked, normative characteristics” (Quayson, 151; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 6). Lastly, and most importantly, such an interlocutor is unobtrusive, for it recedes into the background of the storytelling. In fact, the more it does so—becoming ever more naturalized and fluid—the more operatively influential it becomes (167).

Judging from the unvoiced thought processes that seem to rage incessantly within Bertha, one can surmise that she is engaged in some sort of ongoing conversation with an implied interlocutor. While it would be reasonable to assume that she seethes with anger against her estranged husband and his new love, it is equally reasonable to assume that she also reacts against the attitudes motivating these two, the same attitudes that demarcate her existence as a person with a mental disability, and that might best be interrogated by examining the attic scene. After the aborted nuptials, when Rochester leads “the three gentlemen” and Jane up to Thornfield’s third story, he chooses to be a “guide” who puts Bertha on display in the titillating prospect of a freak show (257; ch. 26).³ Until the wedding, Rochester has secreted Bertha in the attic, as he tells Jane later, due to a sense of shame and “dishonour [. . . because of his] connection with her mental defects” (272; ch. 27). However, after Bertha’s brother Richard disrupts the ceremony, Rochester reverses his position: instead of hiding her, he now makes a spectacle of her. This spectacle begins when he injects a bit of theatrical panache into the act, “lift[ing] the hangings from the wall,” thereby introducing “the brief *scene* with the lunatic” (257, 260; ch. 26, emphasis added). By pulling back what is in effect a stage curtain, Rochester transforms himself into a showman. As Hermione Lee points out, “the climactic unveiling of Bertha [. . .] is done as a dumb show with Rochester as Interpreter. He raises the curtain, goes on-stage for the fight, and then comments

3. Bogdan would argue that the display of Bertha technically does not qualify as a “freak show” because he defines the phenomenon as a “formally organized exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies for amusement and profit [. . . with the exhibition being] attached to organizations such as circuses and carnivals” (*Freak Show*, 10). Garland-Thomson observes that, whether one follows Bogdan’s strict definition or not, “[w]hen the body becomes pure text, a freak has been produced from a physically disabled human being” (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 59). Garland-Thomson also points out that 1847, the year of *Jane Eyre*’s publication, is the year the word *freak* “become[s] synonymous with human corporeal anomaly” (*Freakery*, 4).

on the scene to ‘the spectators’” (239). Rochester’s transformation into both showman and “Interpreter” calls attention to his exclusive role in telling Bertha’s story and especially to the discursive template he uses to guide the gentlemen and Jane through a reading of her body. As Robert Bogdan points out, because the chief task of the freak show exhibitor was to make certain that every spectator saw what he wanted them to see, every exhibit “was, in the strict use of the word, a fraud. [. . .] [E]very person exhibited was misrepresented” (*Freak Show*, 10). Because the evidently speechless Bertha does not tell her story, she is mediated through Rochester’s account, which, given his bigotry about disability and his melodramatic tendencies, cannot be taken at face value.

Rochester’s theatrical framing of Bertha reflects several historically resonant tropes having to do with the presentation of living human subjects in scientific and medical demonstrations, especially in the then “new” sciences of teratology (the study of monsters) and ethnology (the study of human race and ethnicity) and in the developing enterprise of exhibiting “freaks” as commercially viable entertainment. In fact, Rochester’s propensities as a scientific naturalist come to light several chapters prior to the attic scene, when, during an evening outdoors and accompanied by Jane, his attention is captured by a moth. “Jane, come and look at this fellow. [. . .] Look at his wings [. . .] he reminds me rather of a West Indian insect” (218; ch. 23). The garden incident momentarily delineates him as an amateur naturalist and foreshadows the way that he will later direct the notice of the three gentlemen and Jane to the human West Indian specimen, Bertha.

This scientific rhetoric invokes what Margean Purinton terms the “techno-Gothic grotesque,” a phenomenon of the period in which scientific and medical information were presented in theater-like settings, with aspects of drama being “appropriated by science” (301). Purinton argues:

[Especially in cases in which a living human subject was placed on display, the] physicality of the techno-gothic grotesque was simultaneously a spectacular, extraordinary body, gothically designed for pleasure and culturally coded for education, display[ed] at the public “clinic” where theatergoers could participate in scientific and medical anatomizing. (302–3)

Living human illustrations served as a key component in these displays and were particularly useful for explicating both teratology and ethnology. Aspects of the “techno-Gothic grotesque” were particularly pertinent to the former: the “burgeoning nineteenth-century science of teratology” constituted a new approach to studying monsters that was far more system-

atic than it had been in previous centuries (Philip K. Wilson, 11). Indeed, with Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's *Traité de Teratology*, published about a decade prior to the appearance of Brontë's novel, talk about so-called monsters rose to the level of a fad (Huet, 108). Perhaps inspired by Saint-Hilaire, Brontë has Rochester refer to Bertha as "a monster," and it is of her supposed *monstrosity*, especially, that he wishes to convince the three gentlemen and Jane (272; ch. 27).

Related to the era's new interest in monsters was the emergence of the science of ethnology. Richard Altick writes that "by the late 1840s, the infant science of ethnology" had come into formation and, with it, the need for "living specimens of barbaric or savage races" (268). The rise of ethnology merged with desire in London for spectacle, which could be satisfied at the Egyptian Hall and Bethlem Royal Hospital. At the Egyptian Hall, people from various European colonies became popular and profitable exhibitions: Sartje Baartman or "the Hottentot Venus" from South Africa, Tono Maria or "the Venus of South America," native Americans, and south African Bushmen were put on stage (Altick, 268, 272, 273, 275–79). An 1846 Egyptian Hall advertisement for "The Wild Man of the Prairies" closely resembles Rochester's presentation of Bertha: "Is it an Animal? Is it Human? Is it an Extraordinary Freak of Nature, or is it a legitimate member of nature's works?" (Altick, 265). At the city's main state-run insane asylum, the Bethlem Royal Hospital (or "Bedlam," as it was commonly known), public audiences could find similar displays of human oddity in the form of mentally ill residents. According to Allan Ingram, Bedlam had served since the seventeenth century as a venue for "spectacle, a place of entertainment," a practice that was ongoing at the time of *Jane Eyre's* publication (2). Londoners went to Bedlam to gawk at the lunatics, paying a penny to peer into their cells. A vivid illustration of this practice can be found in William Hogarth's series of engravings, "The Rake's Progress" (1735): a Bedlam cell is portrayed in the eighth and last plate, and in it the crazed Tom Rakewell occupies the foreground while behind him several fashionably dressed women appear to be amused by his antics.

In the attic, Rochester inscribes Bertha's body with the discourses derived from naturalism, teratology, ethnology, the commercial exhibitions of exotics and "defectives," and Bedlam lunacy. As a result, Bertha's implied interlocutor can be located partially in this aggregation of discourses that determine how she is viewed. Moreover, the interlocutor can be situated in the other assumptions that surface as Rochester performs the combined roles of overburdened, caregiving spouse and freak-show barker:

“That is *my wife*,” said he. “Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know [. . .]. And *this* is what I wished to have” (laying his hand on my shoulder): “this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. [. . .] Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder [. . .] this form with that bulk.” (258–59; ch. 26)

Rochester alludes to his fourteen-year “burden” of caregiving, his tone oscillating between self-pity and exasperation. Using Jane as a prop for comparison, “laying his hand on my shoulder,” he draws together the implications of the study of monsters and exotic freaks to emphasize Bertha’s lack of humanity. More exotic even than either Tono Maria, the Venus of South America, or Sartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus from South Africa, is Bertha Mason—the Venus from Hell. Thornfield’s attic room is the “mouth of hell,” Bertha’s behavior “the gambols of a demon,” and her “red balls” the devil’s eyes. Furthermore, he characterizes Bertha as a “bulk,” metonymically referencing excessive behavior and an animalistic body. This “bulk” he contrasts with Jane’s “form,” meaning Jane’s comportment, which accords “to prescribed or customary rules” regarding “etiquette, ceremony, or decorum” (“Form, n.15. a”). Rochester conflates corporeal difference with teratology and demonology. The implied interlocutor with whom Bertha must contend and to whom she shouts from Thornfield’s rooftop sees her not only as monstrous but also as that ultimate incarnation of the Other—the devil.

THE ABLEISM OF ROCHESTER AND JANE

During his tenure as Bertha’s provider, Rochester’s negative attitudes about mental disability are reflected in the type of care he arranges for her. His normative framework of caregiving is an inherently dichotomous, asymmetrical, custodial one in which Bertha is, or, in his view, should be, the *passive* recipient of care. In other words, his approach parallels the “popular conception of the one-way flow of benefits in care relationships rooted in medical and charitable paradigms” (Cushing and Lewis, 174). Power and control accrue entirely to him. While Rochester’s assumptions may have aligned with the prevailing standard in an earlier era, in which families of means either sequestered relatives with mental illness within their own homes or lodged them in private asylums, these assumptions invite scrutiny, especially

when considered in light of 1840s efforts to reform treatment for mentally ill and cognitively impaired persons.

Situating the novel historically helps one to understand why Rochester's attitudes about mental disability and caregiving may not be shared or endorsed by the novel's implied author. Jane tells her story in the middle of the 1840s, an historical moment when the neglect and ill treatment of "lunatics" and "idiots" caught the public's attention, and when a number of liberal reforms were enacted with regard to improving their conditions (McCandless, 84–104; McDonagh, 209, 211). For example, the later part of the decade witnessed the founding of Britain's first asylum for idiots, Highgate, later renamed Earlswood, which Charles Dickens visited "on more than one occasion in order to draw inspiration for his novels" (Wright, 137). Hence, Rochester's approach to caregiving represents what a sizable segment of the reading public by 1847 would have recognized as reflecting outdated attitudes, the ones holding sway back in the 1820s and 1830s, when most of the story takes place. Sally Shuttleworth explains that the "system at Thornfield represents the vestiges of a prior era, when the 'animal' insane were kept hidden and mechanically restrained (as Bertha is after each attack) and no attempt was made at cure or recuperation" (160).

By 1847, a sizable portion of Brontë's reading public would have considered Rochester's caregiving manner to be archaic for three reasons. First, Rochester confines her to the equivalent of a tower—a windowless attic (264; ch. 27). Second, even though by the time of the novel's publication cures or at least ameliorations of mental illness were thought possible, he makes no provision once the couple has returned to England for her to be seen by physicians with expertise in mental illness (McCandless, 85; Sally Shuttleworth, 36–37).⁴ Rather, he employs a single attendant, someone he found at the Grimsby Retreat, Grace Poole, and this lone attendant seems unable to perform the job adequately, for Bertha in the course of the story comes into possession of a knife, wanders Thornfield's halls at night (seemingly at will), and, on at least two occasions, lights fires. Hiring a single, "gin-sodden attendant" to supervise an ambulatory, physically powerful, forty-five-year-old mentally ill adult female would have been recognized by some contemporaries at least as reckless endangerment of the person cared for (Jones, 21). Improperly attended, Bertha brings about her own death, a death representing a catastrophically unsuccessful episode of caregiving. Moreover, by the 1840s, the public was starting to believe that lodging a

4. Neither Carter, the surgeon who dressed Mason's wounds, nor any typical rural or town physician, would have been recognized as being competent to treat Bertha's mental illness.

“lunatic” in a private home was backward, while accommodating him or her in an asylum was progressive, therapeutic, and humane (regardless of what is believed today in the wake of Foucault). In the 1820s and 1830s, several public and private asylums were operating in Yorkshire, and if Rochester were a progressive thinker, he would have lodged her in one of them. In sum, Rochester implicitly makes choices about Bertha’s care that a portion of Brontë’s audience in the late 1840s would have recognized as inadequate and outdated. As a consequence, given the reform mood, a number of readers would have identified his conduct toward the woman in his custody as negligent, abusive, and cruel—a dereliction of responsibilities.⁵

Calling into question both Rochester’s outdated notions and his careless practices is Jane, who strongly censures him. Following the attic scene, Jane tells him to modulate his tone when speaking of his wife, chiding him for being “inexorable for that unfortunate lady” and for speaking “of her with hate—with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel” (265; ch. 27). In the same scene, after Rochester asks her, “If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?,” her reply is sharply critical: “I do indeed, sir” (265; ch. 27). However, what makes Jane *most* wary of Rochester’s way of thinking and doing things is the fact that, just as he alludes to one set of pseudoscientific notions to explain Bertha to Jane, so too has he alluded to a second set earlier when explaining Jane to herself. Previous to their nuptials, he has told her that she suffers from “hypochondria” and has addressed her as “Little nervous subject!” (246, 248; ch. 25). Additionally, the night before the wedding, he dismisses her fear about a bedroom intruder by intimating that she is experiencing a nervous disorder. Her fear, he informs her, is the “creature of an over-stimulated brain; that is certain. I must be careful of you, my treasure; nerves like yours were not made for rough handling. [. . .] [T]here shall be no recurrence of these mental terrors” (250; ch. 25). Shuttleworth insightfully observes that Rochester is not “content with defining one wife as ‘maniac’” but also must place “his future bride in that other category of female weakness, the nervous, hysterical woman” (171). However, Jane

5. Along these lines, Grudin points out that Brontë “was a devoted disciple of Harriet Martineau, who in ‘The Hanwell Lunatic Asylum’ [. . .] sought to eradicate” the cruel and negligent treatment that those with mental illness suffered (147). Brontë may have assumed that most readers would consider Rochester’s practices slipshod and backward. “It is no wonder that the novelist was obliged to apologize for the message a literal reading of her novel seems to produce” (Grudin, 147–48). Concerning her portrayal of Bertha, Brontë writes the following: “I agree with [Miss Kavanagh and Leigh Hunt] that the character is shocking [. . .]. It is true that profound pity ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation, and equally true is it that I have not sufficiently dwelt on that feeling; I have erred in making *horror* too predominant. [. . .] [T]he truly good behold and compassionate [insanity] as such” (“To W. S. Williams,” 3).

immediately refutes his explanation by stating, “Sir, depend upon it, my nerves were not at fault” (250; ch. 25). Producing the torn wedding veil, she demonstrates the basis of her fears. Having proven him wrong once, she has reason to not accept at face value whatever he says about Bertha.

And yet, however critical of Rochester’s attitudes Jane may be, she is far from enlightened, at least at this stage of the narrative. In fact, it is not just Rochester who contributes to the aggregation of attitudes of the normate but Jane as well. As the fourth attic spectator, Jane recounts her first impressions of Bertha, and these betray her extreme nervousness in the presence of disability:

[A] figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (257–258; ch. 26)

Jane’s description reveals more about herself than about Bertha. Her disgust and fear become evident in her impulse to animalize the mentally disabled woman, who becomes in her telling an inhuman “figure” scurrying “backwards and forwards” as though without direction or purpose. Commenting on the scene, Grudin asserts that “[e]ven to the relatively charitable Jane, Bertha is essentially subhuman, terrifying, and disgusting,” and viewing her prompts Jane to see “something more deserving of annihilation than of charity” (147). Interestingly, Jane’s vocabulary references the language used about Jane by Mrs. Reed: by employing the pronoun *it* and reducing Bertha to animal status, Jane inadvertently echoes her former guardian’s words about herself. On her deathbed, the ailing Mrs. Reed says of her young charge, “I hated it the first time I set my eyes on it” (203; ch. 21), a characterization reinforced when, later, referring to the youthful Jane’s episode of explosive anger, Mrs. Reed states that it was “as if an animal that I had struck [. . .] looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice” (210; ch. 21). Jane’s visit to the dying woman calls attention to how hard she has struggled to free herself from dehumanization. Now, having been recently reminded of this objectification as “it” and “an animal,” Jane reassigns these attributes to Bertha. Thus, Jane’s use of Mrs. Reed’s language to describe Bertha symbolically transfers these qualities from herself to another.

Transferring the dehumanization from herself to another, however, also signals the end of one phase of Jane’s development and the beginning of

another. As has been observed above, the principal skill that Jane learns to master in this *bildungsroman* is a modulation of language and tone; by the time the eponymous hero enters the attic, for all intents and purposes she has thereby achieved a considerable degree of self-determination and personal integrity, empowering herself as the modern independent subject. Therefore, by the time of the attic scene, Rochester and Jane have already become “in reality, equals” (Gilbert and Gubar, 368), a rough equality accomplished through Jane’s linguistic accomplishment. However, contact with Bertha profoundly unsettles Jane because it forces her to confront something she heretofore had not anticipated—the limits of language. This confrontation instigates the final major phase of her maturation: the exploration of extralinguistic discourse. Whatever Bertha may vocalize during the attic scene, and whether those within hearing are capable or willing listeners, Bertha’s presence is especially meaningful for the narrator. At the first sight of Bertha, Jane can acknowledge only an abject, subhuman figure lacking linguistic capability, the very capability that she has striven to master and that, Jane has come to believe, underwrites full membership in the human species. Seemingly devoid of intelligible speech, Bertha instantiates for her a disturbing humanoid form, human and subhuman combined, an embodiment of the animal-human nexus—an uncanny double. This encounter with the uncanny instigates a paradoxical reaction: while the meeting should reinforce the primacy of language for Jane, in effect it does the opposite, highlighting instead the fragility of the self she has assiduously constructed and challenging the very definition of the human. Because of Jane’s encounter with Bertha, the questions of what it means to be human and how speech fits in as to resolving this issue become less certain, not more so. Jane has assumed language was worth mastering because doing so meant everything, but her sudden close proximity to an alternative verbal position raises the alarming possibility that a realm exists in which conventional mastery of language is of little use. Far from eliciting a sense of wonder, this revelation arouses revulsion.

**JANE’S IMPLIED INTERLOCUTOR:
FROM CUSTODIAL CARE TO CARING LABOR**

This revulsion reflects the approach to disability in the earlier part of the novel that ends with Bertha’s death. The aggregation of normative attitudes that underwrites Rochester and Jane’s conduct earlier in the text comes under implicit scrutiny in the latter part of the narrative. Here, the sub-

ject-positions shift, with the former caregiver switching places to occupy the disabled position, and Jane, formerly a bystander, entering to become a caregiver. One could argue that, for Rochester, the hubristic ableist, to become disabled himself, constitutes poetic justice. However, to suggest such an idea would be to replicate the ancient prejudice—that disability serves as a punishment or symptom of wrongdoing. A more coherent and consistent way to address this role reversal is the recognition that, “as linguistic creations, the disabled in literature may trade a series of features with the nondisabled, thus transferring some of their significations to the nondisabled and vice versa” (Quayson, 27). Some characters, like Bertha, became disabled sooner than others, and, with Rochester eventually joining her in this category, his example validates the observations of those disability scholars who have “noted the provisional and temporary nature of able-bodiedness” (Quayson, 14). Bertha thus trades a series of features with the formerly nondisabled. As Rodas notes, “in the end [. . .] husband and wife both wind up participating in disabled identity” (“Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,” 151). Neither immune nor invincible, Rochester must come to terms with both the vicissitudes of the body and his former ableism.

Jane, too, is drawn into the circle of disability by moving into the caregiver role. However, the novel’s second phase of disability and caregiving will not replicate the mistakes made in the first. By the time Jane steps into the caregiving position (*vis-à-vis* a disabled life partner) once held by Rochester, her attitude about the responsibilities it entails varies considerably from what his had been. In fact, her approach differs radically, for hers is rooted in what Pamela Cushing and Tanya Lewis term a “philosophy of relational mutuality” (174). What Jane effects with Rochester is, using Cushing and Lewis’s language, “a shift from custodial care to ‘caring labor’” (180). As they observe, “Sharing power [between caregiver and disabled] is a radical ideal in a field where workers are tacitly trained to value ‘compliance’ over agency in their charges” (186). The relational mutuality approach aims to build a relationship of reciprocal respect by mitigating dependency and achieving parity between the person with a disability unable to live independently and the person undertaking his or her care.

The vehicle for this transition from one model of care relationship to the other is the alteration in Jane’s worldview that occurs between the time she views Bertha in the attic and that of her return to the ruined Thornfield. Jane’s psychological development after the attic scene supplants the novel’s earlier preoccupation involving the narrator’s mastery of language and tone. Her growing respect for and comfort with extralinguistic discourse commences with her initial, panicked reaction at the sight of Bertha, a point

at which her uncritical, ableist assumptions about the human and about discourse and disability become painfully apparent and against which her later behavior can be contrasted. By the time she returns to Thornfield after wandering on the heath and staying with the Rivers, she has grown in her tolerance for extralinguistic discourse, in her appreciation of divergent levels of ability, and in an understanding of dignified caregiving. The evidence of her “education” can be read in her willingness to act in accordance with the principles of relational mutuality once she is reunited with the disabled Rochester at Ferndean.

Because the phase between the attic scene and her Thornfield homecoming is so important, it will be necessary to retrace several of her steps. After Jane flees Thornfield, three episodes unfold by which she learns what it means both to see the world through Bertha’s eyes and to be seen in the world as Bertha. In the first of the three episodes, Jane becomes implicated in Bertha’s supposed animality. Recounting what she saw in the attic, Jane reports that “it [Bertha] groveled, seemingly, on all fours” (257; ch. 26). However, soon after she leaves Thornfield, and yet prior to boarding the coach, she falls and is reduced to “crawling forwards on my hands and knees” (283; ch. 27), a description strongly reminiscent of Bertha “grovel[ing], seemingly, on all fours.” Thus, as Shuttleworth points out, Jane “mirror[s] Bertha’s animal posture” (166). Earlier, this chapter examined Jane’s unwitting deflection of Mrs. Reed’s attempt to dehumanize her by assigning the same animalizing language and objectivizing pronoun *it* to Bertha. Yet, with the phrase *crawling forwards on my hands and knees*, she lapses back into the bestial position into which she had attempted to substitute Bertha, thereby rendering the earlier transference unsuccessful.

In the second episode, after wandering from the heath into a village, Jane feels a sense of “moral degradation” because people regard her as “an ordinary beggar” (289; ch. 28). The villagers avoid her, even shun her as a pariah, perhaps concluding that she is “crazy.” As was noted earlier, “If people think you’re crazy, they don’t listen to you” (Prendergast, 203). In these circumstances, Jane simply cannot approach the villagers and explain she is as rational as they are, for the very attempt would confirm their initial unfavorable assessment. Bertha’s character is momentarily superimposed over her own on account of this public perception of her mental incapacity: she steps into Bertha’s role as a mentally deranged spectacle and, by so doing, takes on the role of reviled Other. Thus, she experiences firsthand an alterity far more profound than anything she previously has encountered.

The third episode is anchored in a moment long prior to her leaving Thornfield. Upon learning of her impending marriage to Rochester, Mrs.

Fairfax attempts to caution Jane, and the latter rebuffs her, asking “Am I a monster?” (233; ch. 24). As it turns out, Jane’s question is far from rhetorical, for several chapters later she undertakes an action that alludes to nineteenth-century British literature’s most well-known monster, Victor Frankenstein’s creation in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). After leaving Thornfield and wandering on the heath, Jane comes upon Moor House and, approaching it stealthily, creeps up to a window and reports observing the family within through an “aperture” (292; ch. 28). This action parallels the one Victor Frankenstein’s humanoid performs when he discovers a remote dwelling and through an “imperceptible chink” secretly observes the De Lacey family (100; ch. 11). The similarity between these scenes serves to mitigate the reader’s sense of Bertha’s monstrousness by intimating that Jane, too, possesses a share of this quality. This mutual apportionment blurs any simple binary between the monstrous and the “normal.” For a moment, Jane’s identity blends with the monstrousness of Frankenstein’s creation and, by implication, with that of Bertha.

In these three episodes, the parallels with Bertha are unmistakable, and it would be reasonable to suppose, given her quickness of association, that the narrator herself glimpses some of these similarities. And yet, she does not acknowledge recognizing them, nor, indeed, does she reference Bertha at all between chapter 27, when she leaves Thornfield, and chapter 36, when she returns and learns of her demise. In fact, Jane never once names Bertha in the novel: “Bertha” is a name uttered only by others. The closest Jane comes to speaking of her directly is in conversation with Rochester, when, before leaving, she refers to her in the line, “Sir, your wife is living” and in back-to-back sentences: “Sir [. . .] you are inexorable to that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate [. . .]. It is cruel—she cannot help being mad” (267, 265; ch. 27).

Though the reader can assume that Bertha and everything associated with her must cross Jane’s mind, the narrator does not inform the reader about having such thoughts. Indeed, it becomes downright curious that, over the next nine chapters after leaving Thornfield, she never once speaks of or even alludes to her rival. While Bertha is the text’s most obvious nonverbal character, Jane too, for long stretches, and depending on the subject, can be said to be nonverbal. Hence, Rodas has proposed that Jane’s unusual communication and affect are suggestive of autism. For the purposes of the present chapter, however, Jane’s language gaps can productively be understood as suggesting an implied interlocutor. Quayson observes that the implied interlocutor is not necessarily confined to situations in which a non-

verbal disabled character such as Bertha appears: “all literary characters,” disabled or not, “in the end interact with an implied interlocutor” (154).

Of course, it could be objected that to suppose a narrator is engaging in an unrecorded conversation with an implied interlocutor is pure speculation, for, by the very definition *unrecorded*, no evidence can be produced to support the claim. However, it is helpful to consider that, in the case of Jane at least, the implied interlocutor serves as a variety of structural irony. Just as a naïve narrator does not fully comprehend the events he or she narrates, and just as an unreliable narrator cannot be fully trusted, so a narrator with an implied interlocutor discloses less than everything he or she thinks. As a narratorial device, Jane’s implied interlocutor to some degree serves the purpose of avoiding redundancy: the reader can perceive the existence of an implied interlocutor through the dynamic that not everything needs to be uttered for Jane’s views to be made known. In other words, the reader can imagine what her thoughts must be, given her recent history and current circumstances. For example, the reader does not need to be told that Bertha in the attic and Rochester’s manner of dealing with her occupy Jane’s mind. Also, a reader expects the implications of these spectacles to weigh on her, especially as she wanders the heath, where she is homeless, shunned by the villagers, and needing care. More to the point, a reader anticipates her apprehensions concerning the type of care (or lack of it) she is likely to receive, based on the models of caregiving presented by Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, and Rochester. In fact, the very excuse she makes on behalf of the villagers (they “knew nothing about my character” [289; ch. 28]) intimates that it is a response to these unrecorded anxieties.

In addition to avoiding redundancy, this device sharpens the contrast between her hopeless plight on the heath and the *deus-ex-machina* solution of Moor House, the very juxtaposition of which renders her so receptive to the relational mutuality model. This receptivity can be measured by the extent to which Jane becomes part of Moor House and embraces its philosophy. She goes from being a stranger looking through an “aperture” at its occupants to becoming literally a part of the family (292; ch. 28). Diana, Mary, and St. John accept her into Moor House despite the fact that she is a stranger to them, an Other, even a potentially “crazy” one. Demonstrating skill and respect as they nurture her back to health, they showcase a type of care based on the relational mutuality principle. Having been well cared for during this period, Jane comes to understand the difference between humane and dignified treatment of people in positions of dependency versus Rochester’s scorn and disregard.

By the time Jane goes back to Thornfield, she has embraced the caring labor model of relational mutuality. And yet, as with so much else in this part of the narrative, she does not acknowledge the development. Wide gaps emerge in the storytelling, one of which concerns the fact that she returns to Thornfield expecting to find Bertha alive but about which she says nothing to the reader. Moreover, she goes back to Rochester even though his proposal—that they live together unmarried—has not become any less “sophistical” during her stay with the Rivers (267; ch. 27). Because it would be absurd to suggest that she is *not* aware of the implications of returning, her lack of disclosure further substantiates that she engages *sotto voce* with an implied interlocutor. Whatever her expectations regarding a reunion with Rochester, she cannot help but understand that his wife will continue to require care and that this care hitherto has been inadequate and inhumane. While Jane most certainly does not return to Thornfield for Bertha’s sake, it is plausible to infer that it cannot be far from her mind while in transit that the manner of the wife’s care would have to be reformed. However, she arrives too late to accomplish this, learning instead that the woman shouted from the rooftop before to jumping to her death (377; ch. 36). Jane is as silent about what she thinks of Bertha’s final speech act and demise as she is about her prospects upon returning to Thornfield.

Whatever Jane’s thoughts, her subsequent behavior and attitude reveal a great deal. For example, she adopts an upbraiding tone with Rochester soon after, when, alluding to the difference between his approach to caregiving and that of the Rivers, she tells him, “I have been with good people; far better than you: a hundred times better people; possessed of ideas and views you never entertained in your life” (385–386; ch. 37). In assuming the caregiver role with him, she will play it in the same way these “good people [. . .] a hundred times better” would do it. Consequently, she inaugurates in the novel’s second phase of caregiving what amounts to reform measures, ones that align with those being implemented historically on a wider social scale. For example, rather than equating people with disabilities with the subhuman, as Rochester had done, Jane will acknowledge their full humanity, and this new attitude is evidenced when she tells him, “It is time some one undertook to *rehumanise* you” (384; ch. 37; emphasis added). Taking her at her word, it would be impossible for the reader to imagine Jane making a degrading spectacle of Rochester as an exotic, subhuman specimen in any way resembling the manner he did with Bertha. Thus, when he asks, “Am I hideous, Jane?” and she replies, “Very, sir: you always were, you know,” her line is both humorous and telling (385; ch. 37). She is referring

not just to his postfire physical configuration but also to the monstrousness of his former ableist attitudes and negligent practices.

It could be objected that Jane falls into the category “of those who care passionately—rather than compassionately” (Flint, “Disability and Difference,” 165). However, Eva Feder Kittay notes that for caregiving to be “well-done,” it must be characterized by “care, concern, and connection” (31). Either way—passionately or compassionately—the responsibilities and occupations of caregiving are taxing enough, as Jane acknowledges when she finally sends Adèle away to boarding school: “my time and cares were required by another—my husband needed them all” (396; ch. 38). As Kittay observes, “the care of dependents *is work*” (30). Jane’s position with her husband is the mirror image of what Rochester’s had been with his wife, namely, of one spouse caring for the other.⁶ The comparison of the way Rochester and Jane fulfill their roles vis-à-vis a life partner underscores the preference for a caregiver who cares *passionately* over one moved by compassion, an emotion that can corrupt into pity. Most importantly, one of this novel’s core themes is the passion (or lack of it) in the individual who cares for those living dependently. Jane’s reform mode brings into consideration the novel’s other, positive examples of caregivers: not just Mary, Diana, and St. John Rivers but also, and most particularly, Maria Temple. Conversely, Jane’s approach implicitly critiques those who are cruel and negligent: Mr. Rochester, of course, but also Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst.

By recourse to the implied interlocutor, the reader can infer that Jane grows in her understanding and ethical appreciation of disability. She overcomes the panic the disabled woman initially elicited and becomes able and willing to gain knowledge from her. Indeed, to argue that Brontë’s novel is a *bildungsroman* of moral development instigated by an inarticulate woman with a mental disability is counterintuitive, given both the text’s preoccupation with language and its characterization of a “madwoman” that easily could fall into the “negative image” school (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 18). Yet Jane’s attitude regarding disability clearly changes from the contact zone of Thornfield’s attic to the closing section at Ferndean. Three interpretive maneuvers open up this transgressive reappropriation: (i) utilizing the implied interlocutor to disclose concealed aspects of Jane and Bertha; (ii) superimposing the narrative’s timeline over its historical one; and (iii) taking into account the reform movement unfolding at the time of

6. Jane’s fulfilling the caregiving role more satisfactorily than Rochester did replicates the gendered pattern so characteristic of such activity, for women disproportionately assume the caregiving position. For the feminist critique of care, see Kittay and Kelly.

publication—the novel’s narrative instant. Telling a story that unfolds over several decades, Jane brings the fictional histories of Bertha, Rochester, and herself into the historical present of 1847. By doing so, she *looks back* and, by doing so, *looks askance* at the caregiving practices that once held sway at Thornfield. The protagonist’s reformed caregiving practices enacted in the narrative’s present (the mid-1840s) vis-à-vis her spouse vastly improve upon those carried out by Rochester with *his* spouse one-to-two decades in the past. Thus, at the conclusion, rather than the story of disability coming full circle, gesturing toward an ever-repeating cycle, the ending points to a new beginning, to the hope of reform.