

Coming out of the Attic: Re-examining Disability in *Jane Eyre*

[*The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*](#). Edited by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas and Elizabeth J. Donaldson, with a Foreword by Lennard J. Davis. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012. 196pp

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<1>Since the explosion of interest in disability as a subject for academic study, it has become common for an essay on disability to be included in surveys of Victorian fiction or in book-length studies of single novels. This collection is the first of its kind, however, in being devoted to the representation of disability in a single novel, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In his foreword, Lennard J. Davis sets out the argument which underpins the collection: previous critical studies of *Jane Eyre* have paid too little attention to its representations of disability as such, preferring immediate metaphorical translation of, for example, blindness into castration, or madness into political rebellion. As Davis argues, "[t]he chapters in this volume show us that before we can leap to the metaphor, we need to know the object" (xi).

<2>Davis's claim echoes Sharon Marcus's call in *Between Women* (2007) for a "just reading practice," a caution against scurrying to translate away images which discomfort the reader.⁽¹⁾ Yet Davis's argument is more problematic than this: there is a suggestive slippage in his final sentence, concerning the "legacy of ableism which we can now see [...] has haunted the novel from its inception" (xii). Are we being pointed to the ableism which informs critical readings, or the ableism of the text itself – in other words, reception or creation? The obvious answer might seem to be both, but surely there is a significant difference between an attempt to recover something in a text which critics' own prejudices have obscured in their readings, and the attempt to recover an experience to which the text itself is insensitive – to read, that is, through the text, or even against it. Both might be valid reading practices, but ought they to be aligned and elided?

<3>The essays which follow implicitly take up this difficult question. In the first chapter, Elizabeth J. Donaldson offers a critical view of the tendency in the feminist tradition to regard Bertha Mason and other 'mad' women characters as figures of female resistance, pointing out

that the “slippage between ‘madness’ and ‘mental illness’” (15) renders such readings utterly insensitive to the lived experience of women suffering the latter. The challenge of synthesizing such an argument with a convincing reading of the novel itself – which, it must be said, is less than sympathetic in its representation of Bertha’s condition, however ingeniously it is analyzed – is considerable. However, Donaldson meets it successfully through yoking her wider political argument to a discussion of the novel’s representation of madness in the context of phrenology. She argues that the complex dialectic between disability and impairment, and the need to balance recognition of the socially constructed nature of the former with the embodied experience of the latter, is captured both in the text itself and in its critical reception.

<4>David Bolt takes a more trenchant approach in his analysis of Brontë’s representation of blindness. He sets out the premise of his argument very clearly: he is concerned not with Brontë’s ‘intention,’ but with the impact of her ocularcentrism, which he convincingly locates in her construction of blindness as catastrophic deficiency. The discussion which follows encapsulates the strengths and limitations of such an approach; on one hand, the argument is powerfully and persuasively made, animated by critical indignation at such harmful misrepresentation of the experience of blindness. On the other, Brontë’s conviction for ableism is in itself rather limiting; Bolt concludes with the acknowledgment that she “may be excused for the regressiveness of her approach to disability on the grounds of historicity” (50), which feels rather an understatement, pointing to the potential reductiveness of charging nineteenth-century authors with failing to live up to the ideals of contemporary academics. Similarly, while the contrast with Kipling’s *The Light that Failed* illustrates the continuities between the two representations of blindness, and contributes to the highly effective marshaling of evidence against the two authors, little attention is paid to their differing historical contexts, considering that Kipling’s text was written in 1891.

<5>The liveliness of the collection is greatly enhanced by the robust disagreement between contributors, and, having considered Bolt’s approach, the reader can turn to D. Christopher Gabbard’s, in which the emphasis is on the historical context in which the novel was written and first received, and in which Brontë is shown as fundamentally sympathetic to Bertha’s plight. Gabbard situates the representation of Bertha’s incarceration, and Jane’s subsequent experience of care at the hands of the Rivers family, in the context of public debate surrounding the care of the mentally ill in the 1840s, and the resultant reform movement. Gabbard offers a compelling reading of the attic scene, in which Rochester’s display of Bertha to the appalled onlookers recalls the contemporary fashion for “the presentation of living human subjects in scientific and medical demonstrations” (97) and in *freak shows*, suggesting that Brontë intended to censure such objectifying practices. His quotation of a letter in which Brontë expresses regret at “having erred in making *horror* too predominant” when “profound pity

ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation” (101), gives a fascinating insight into Brontë’s own sense of her obligations to both characters and readers.

<6>Where Gabbard is concerned with historical context, Margaret Rose Torrell situates her discussion in the internal context of Brontë’s construction of gender and embodiment. Embodiment, Torrell explains, has traditionally been associated not only with disability, but with femininity, as “male privilege is gained by a comparative disassociation with the body” (74). Torrell argues that this binary is broken down (rather than reversed, as Bolt argues) by Jane’s narration, which through representing not only herself but also the male figures she encounters throughout the text as subject to the vicissitudes and frailties of the body, culminates in “a nonhegemonic model of masculinity, one which is complemented as opposed to conflicted by physical disability” (71). Torrell’s careful, nuanced argument well captures the ambition of the collection as a whole, in its synthesis of a call to political action and reassessment on the part of the reader, with a sensitive analysis of how bodies are conceptualized and used in the novel itself.

<7>A major strength of this collection is its sheer diversity. The inclusion of a single essay on disability (or, for that matter, race or gender, which also suffer from this kind of tokenistic inclusion) in a collection of essays often carries the risk that the single disability studies offering will be read as typical of all work in the field. Here, however, we can appreciate the range of approaches and possibilities that can occur under the umbrella of disability studies, from Martha Stoddard Holmes’s enjoyable analysis of the representation of Rochester’s blindness and amputation in screen adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, to Essaka Joshua’s exploration of Brontë’s use of the Bible in her construction of disability as a condition of salvation, and Susannah B. Mintz’s interpretation of illness in the novel, which draws on psychoanalytic theory.

<8>On the other hand, placing side by side eight essays on a single theme in a single novel does put considerable pressure on the contributors to avoid overlap, and at times there is a sense that critical ingenuity is being stretched to a breaking point. A case in point would be Julia Miele Rodas’s essay, which argues for reading *Jane Eyre* herself as being on the autism spectrum – and indeed diagnoses her cousins Eliza Reed and St John Rivers for good measure. The essay is lively and engaging, combining an intriguingly provocative reading of the novel with much useful information about autism as it has historically been understood and experienced, but I remained unsure of the soundness of its premise. In diagnosing a fictional character with a condition which was not categorized or formulated until a century after her creation, do we not risk reifying diagnostic categories as transhistorical realities? Rodas is clearly alive to such risks, and states that her reading is intended “not as an incarceration of the character within the rigid frame of diagnosis [...] but instead as a device to reopen discussion of the novel’s politics” (61-62). In heightening the reader’s awareness of autism, causing the re-assessment of regressive

or dismissive attitudes, and in offering a canonical and famous fictional forebear to readers who have themselves been labelled in such a way, this valuable political work might be seen to outweigh the risk of anachronism – and then again, it might not.

<9>It is a testament to the success of this collection that such questioning is encouraged, and that, far from being left with a sense of exhaustion, the reader's appetite is whetted for further debate and discussion on the range of issues it raises. In demonstrating the viability of a book devoted to disability in a single novel, *The Madwoman and the Blindman* instantiates the ever-growing pluralism and confidence in the field of literary disability studies, and justifies the hope that it will be the first of other such works.

Endnotes

(1) Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 75. [\(▲\)](#)