Domesticity, Identity and Mental Illness in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* from a Feminist Perspective

Steve Mark Cowan
Abstract

This qualitative essay explores and compares women’s roles and identities in the gothic novels *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*. The investigation shall be a social critique on feminine ideals from a feminist perspective. Comparable analysis of the “other women” who act as doubles for the protagonists will be essential to understanding the alter egos of Mrs. de Winter and Jane Eyre. These double personalities raise questions of identity and the roles of femininity. Similarly the power struggles between husband and wives and other feminine influences shall throw further light on prevailing feminine ideals of the times. I shall analyze Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* in relation to the concepts of the “Angel in the house” and the “Mad Woman in the Attic” with Charlotte Bronte’s novel to explore parallels between the plot and female characters. I shall show how Daphne du Maurier offers varying feminine models and ultimately takes a feminist standpoint with her novel much like Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* before her. Finally, I will show how the suppression of women by men through gender stereotyping can lead to female rebellion and, in turn, the stigmatization of female madness.

**Keywords**: femininity, feminist, gender stereotyping, madness, gothic
Table of contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 5-6
To be an Angel or not to be ....................................................................................... 6-12
Alter Egos, the Other Woman and their Husbands.............................................. 12-17
The Stigma of Female Madness and the Fallen Woman................................. 17-23
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 23
Works Cited ............................................................................................................... 24
Introduction

Daphne du Maurier’s commercial success with Rebecca was largely dependent on the novel being advertised as a gothic love story where the villainous “other woman” is defeated and the married couple can live happily ever after. However, I believe Du Maurier’s novel was influenced by Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre in that it is more than a love story and is a covert social critique on gender inequality for women. In the novels Rebecca and Jane Eyre the authors use similar literary devices which aid as social commentary on the prescribed roles for women of their day. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s famous work The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination, 1979, they explore the “fallen woman” role Bertha Mason represented in Jane Eyre. However, I believe their study and the mad fallen woman concept can also be applied to Du Maurier’s Rebecca were the similar device of a fallen other woman is used. Rebecca represents the alter ego of Mrs. de Winter and the latter is challenged by this rival. In both novels the rivalry and contrasts between the protagonists and the other women shed light on ideals of femininity. Furthermore, Bertha represents female madness and the fallen “angry” woman and Rebecca, the fallen “promiscuous” woman. Jane Eyre and Mrs. de Winter must gain knowledge from other characters on negative and positive femininities in order to help them avoid being labelled as fallen women themselves.

Even though Jane Eyre was written in 1847 and Rebecca in 1938 there are similarities in the challenges the protagonists face in the societies they live in. Their husbands pose a challenge because of their preconceived female gender roles in matrimony. Furthermore, the other women, Rebecca and Bertha, not only challenge the protagonists but also the social norms of their times. The Victorian Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel in the House” shall be examined to demonstrate how Mrs. de Winter fits the description of the 19th century ideal of femininity in comparison to the female characters in Jane Eyre. When comparing the characters Jane Eyre and Mrs. de Winter their differences and similarities shall shed light on how these women respond to the domestic expectations and suppression they must face, albeit in different time periods. I shall argue how through their relationships with other feminine models and their rivalry with the fallen women Bertha and Rebecca, Jane and Mrs. de Winter learn to reject their alter egos to survive their oppressive husbands. I shall show how through
stigmatizing Bertha and Rebecca as fallen women their former husbands intend to tarnish their reputations whilst maintaining their own innocence. Furthermore, my aim is to show how female madness and the fallen woman concept was a stigma created by powerful men through social conditioning which helped maintain a gender hierarchy which favoured men.

I shall use Gilbert and Gubar’s authoritative 1979 study to explore Coventry Patmore’s concept of the Angel in the House and to explore how the other women Bertha and Rebecca represent the rejection of this feminine ideal. For comparisons on Jane Eyre and Rebecca I shall use Miquel Baldellou Marta’s article “Caught up in Between Doublets: Neo-Victorian (Trans) Positions of Victorian Femininities and Masculinities in Jane Eyre and Rebecca,” 2009. For viewpoints on villainy in Rebecca Auba Llompart Pons’s article “Patriarchal hauntings: re-reading villainy and gender in Daphne du Maurier’s ‘Rebecca,’” 2013, will serve as a starting point for discussion. Finally, from a feminist perspective, I shall analyse these fallen women and the stigma of female madness from both a fictional and a non-fictional context using studies from Elaine Showalter’s book The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830 – 1980, (1987).

To be an Angel or not to be

In Victorian times Coventry Patmore wrote a description of the ideal of femininity in his poetry which came to represent how a woman should behave due to her perceived female nature. Women were expected to be devoted to their husbands and be submissive to them as they were fundamentally different than men:

The popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman came to be “the Angel in the House”; she was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all—pure. The phrase “Angel in the House” comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women. (Ortberg 2013)

In order to be “pious” Patmore’s feminine model assumes women are spiritual in nature. To be “pure” suggests clean in spirit and body. It can therefore be assumed that a pure
woman should not be sexual by nature and in fact aim for restraint from sexual activity. The exception from this restraint would be for a wife to engage in sex with her husband as she is required to be “devoted and submissive.” Furthermore, for a wife to be “passive” and “charming” would suggest challenging rebellious wives would not be tolerated. For a wife to fulfil Patmore’s ideal requires her to sacrifice, surrender, and be “powerless” to her husband. From a feminist perspective Patmore’s ideal is an obstacle to overcome as he advocates inequality for married women.

Being a contemporary of Victorian England, Brontë, through her writing of *Jane Eyre*, offers the reader insights into various female gender models. The protagonist Jane is a rebel and does not fit the Angel in the House stereotype. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s book *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 1979, the writers comment, “What horrified the Victorians was Jane’s anger” (338). Brontë’s protagonist’s inner thoughts and feelings were obviously provocative in a period were women were expected to be mild, subservient and passive. Indeed, Brontë’s characters represent Victorian suppressed women and the novel addresses how these women either conform or angrily rebel in the light of male dominance.

Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre is an independent spirit who couples passion with logic to maintain her individual identity and refuses to be a meek subservient woman, “‘I am not an angel I asserted;’ and I will not be one till I die” (Brontë 188). Jane corrects Rochester who claims he is in the company of an angel. To state she will not be one “till I die” suggests angels belong in heaven not on earth. Jane rejects the notion of angelic behavior in women from a young age displaying a fiery spirit which she demonstrates when wronged by her oppressors. As Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, point out Jane rages against John Reed:

“Like a “rat,” a “bad animal,” a “mad cat,” she compares him to “Nero, Caligula, etc. For “the fact is,” confesses the grown up narrator ironically, “I was (at that moment) a trifle beside myself; or rather out of myself, as the French would say . . . like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved . . . to go all lengths.””
(qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 340)

Anger is described in detrimental animalistic terms which dehumanize. By the remark “or rather out of myself,” Jane suggests her outburst was not the sole result of
her nature but rather “like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved . . . to go all lengths,” a result of her oppression.

Marriage for Jane Eyre has to be on equal terms. It is this independent spirit and her determination to think, feel and live how she wants that make Jane Eyre Brontë’s feminist heroine. Jane is no angel and is no one dimensional character but a real living individual with real thoughts and emotions. As she points out herself:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë 82)

The two-sided logical and passionate personality of Jane explains how women could think and feel in equal measure. As Jane suggests women are equal to men in their natures as they are capable of accomplishments other than simple domestic chores. If women are to suffer “stagnation” then the result will be frustrated women. Therefore it is reasonable to expect female anger and opposition and Brontë’s heroine rejects any ideas of being domesticated by men.

There are lessons to be learnt for the young Jane and they come in the shape of the other female characters she encounters. The more positive influences on Jane are the characters Miss Temple and Helen Burns. As Gilbert and Gubar write “Foremost among those Jane admires are the noble Miss Temple and the pathetic Helen Burns. And again their names are significant. Angelic Miss temple, for instance, with her marble pallor, is a shrine of ladylike virtues: magnanimity, cultivation, courtesy – and repression” (344). I agree that the name is symbolic in representing Victorian ideals of virtue in women and that it is precisely through such an ideal that Miss Temple is repressed. Jane Eyre also comments on the tolerance of her friend Helen Burns “I heard her with wonder: I could not comprehend this doctrine of endurance; and still less could I understand or sympathise with the forbearance she expressed for her chastiser”
(Brontë 45). Here Jane, even though she disagrees, admires Helen Burn’s restraint which she lacks herself. However, it could be argued that Miss Burns is too meek and subservient in the face of her oppressors and Jane does have difficulty comprehending this restraint. I believe this is why the feminist writers Gilbert and Gubar describe her as “pathetic.” Nevertheless, both Miss Temple and Miss Burns are significant as they offer Jane alternative choices to open rebellion and anger in the face of Victorian oppression.

The most significant negative female influence on Jane is Bertha Mason. She represents the desires of Jane according to Gilbert and Gubar, “While acting out Jane’s secret fantasies, Bertha does (to say the least) provide the governess with an example of how not to act” (361). Here the difference between what Jane really feels and what feelings are deemed appropriate for her to show is highlighted. Later in the novel, Bertha burns down Thornfield, “Jane’s profound desire to destroy Thornfield, the symbol of Rochester’s mastery and of her own servitude, will be acted out by Bertha, who burns down the house and destroys herself in the process as if she were an agent of Jane’s desire” (360). Bertha represents Jane’s desire to be rid of domestication and acts on them by burning down the master’s house. An unwitting agent of Jane or not, the authors further suggest that Bertha represents the inner anger that Jane feels, “She is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self-Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (360). The quote suggests Bertha Mason is the angry alter ego of Jane and not just her rival with Rochester.

The women in Rebecca also influence the protagonist, for better or for worse, by representing different versions of femininity. A significant difference between Jane and Mrs. de Winter however, is while Jane is a rebellious character Mrs. de Winter is without doubt an angel, “Dear God, I did not want to think about Rebecca. I wanted to be happy, to make Maxim happy, and I wanted us to be together. There was no other wish in my heart but that” (Du Maurier 154). Here the new bride not only shows her insecurity over the memory of Rebecca but also that she is devoted to her husband and in fact marriage and making her husband happy is all she cares for. Therefore, she fundamentally echoes Patmore’s Victorian Angel in the House ideal.

The other female characters in Rebecca are not so angelic. Rebecca and Mrs. Danvers are not meek and pure like Mrs. de Winter. Although Mrs. Danvers is a maid
and serves her master Maxim, she does so not out of honour but necessity. And Rebecca, as the other woman, is a cheating wife to Maxim. According to those who knew her she was very beautiful. For example, when she asks Frank about Rebecca he replies, “she was the most beautiful creature I have ever seen” (261). This suggests Rebecca was admired and presents a glamorous rival for Mrs. de Winter. However, it seems Rebecca was not just beautiful but accomplished as well:

Rebecca, always Rebecca. Wherever I walk in Manderley, wherever I sat, even in my thoughts and in my dreams, I met Rebecca. I knew her figure now, the long slim legs, the small and narrow feet. Her shoulders, broader than mine, the capable clever hands. Hands that could steer a boat, could hold a horse. Hands that arranged flowers . . ., made the models of ships . . . I knew the scent she wore, I could guess her laughter and her smile . . . I shall never be rid of Rebecca. (261-262)

Reminders of Rebecca are everywhere in the novel and haunt the mind of Mrs. de Winter. However, the physical reminders of Rebecca are not the only influence on the young wife – her own delusions have an impact to. The quote above offers an insight into Mrs. de Winters mental state and her fanciful imagination. After all, she never meets Rebecca but claims that she is in her dreams, and to know the scent she wore and could guess “her laughter and smile.” This suggests Mrs. de Winter has an unhealthy obsession over Rebecca. This obsession develops throughout the plot as Mrs. Danvers is frequently on hand to remind Mrs. de Winter how accomplished Rebecca was. Rebecca’s memory and accomplishments are omnipresent and she is the other woman that the new Mrs. de Winter is to be compared with and judged against.

The only confidant or friend for Mrs. de Winter comes in the shape of Maxim’s sister Beatrice. Although kind, she is no angel, “I show everything on my face: whether I like people or not, whether I am angry or pleased. There’s no reserve about me” (110). Beatrice appears to be a strong confident woman and is not scared to show how she feels, something which would have been frowned upon in Brontë’s times. Beatrice’s lack of reserve is important as she openly offers insights into Maxim’s moods to Mrs. de Winter, “Maxim loses his temper once or twice in a year, and when he does – my God – he does lose it. I don’t suppose he ever will with you, I should think you are a placid little thing” (111). These comments are telling as they reveal Maxim’s hidden bad temper, which he seems to repress most of the year, and at the same time the placidness of the angelic Mrs. de Winter. The lines also suggest that Maxim chose a
placid wife because she would cause no trouble and what might happen if she did. Beatrice appears to be warning Mrs. de Winter about her brother’s lack of anger management skills.

The temper of Maxim is significant as he is a brooding man who is capable of murdering his wife. Therefore, although the novel Rebecca can be viewed as a love story, I believe it serves as a cautionary tale to women. In the article “Patriarchal hauntings: re-reading villainy and gender in Daphne du Maurier’s ‘Rebecca’” Auba Llompart Pons, 2013, notes:

Criticism of Daphne du Maurier’s popular classic (1938) can be divided into two main interpretations. On the one hand, it was traditionally marketed as a gothic romance where the hero and the heroine conquered the evil women that separated them. On the other, certain feminist critics have recently provided a very different view of the story, aligning it with gothic narratives that deal with the dangers women suffer under the patriarchal control of their husbands. (70)

This is a very significant statement. Like Brontë’s Jane Eyre which, was viewed by feminist critics Gilbert and Gubar as a covert warning about women and marriage in Victorian times, I believe Du Maurier’s Rebecca offers the same warning in 1930’s England. However, where there are many men for Jane Eyre to fight, Du Maurier offers us the villainous “femme fatale” Rebecca and the sinister Mrs. Danvers for the angelic Mrs. de Winter to battle against. While these two women can rightly be viewed as villains Du Maurier portrays Maxim as a complex ambiguous character and I believe should not be discounted as villainous on account of his Byronic temper. As Llompart writes there are “those who identify the novel as a reworking of the bluebeard tale, in which the gentleman actually turns out to be a villain who unjustifiably murdered his first wife” (71). I believe Maxim, the owner of Manderley, represents a bluebeard type husband who attracts women to his manor and kills them when they desire to be free. In comparison, Brontë’s Rochester can be viewed as another bluebeard figure for imprisoning his first wife Bertha in his attic for her desire to be free from her marriage to him.

In both novels, the husbands prefer angelic, well behaved wives. However, nearly all the female characters reject this feminine ideal and even Mrs. de Winter, in the end, becomes a more “independent” version of the angel. Jane’s rejection of Bertha and her defiance towards being an angelic wife leave her in a position to marry Rochester as an equal. Her cool rational behavior as she matures is a result of lessons she learns
from other suppressed females. In comparison, Mrs. de Winter matures and no longer fears to be herself after being convinced by Maxim that Rebecca was a fallen woman for whom he felt no love.

The power struggles between the husbands and wives and the influences of the female characters are, positive or not, instrumental for Jane Eyre and Mrs. de Winter to find their “true-selves.” Maxim and Rochester are similar to each other in that they struggle with challenging defiant former wives who must remain a secret from Jane and Mrs. de Winter. On the other hand, the various female characters represent a range of femininities who ultimately teach the protagonists on how to avoid becoming fallen women. If we compare these Manderley women to the women in Jane Eyre Mrs. de Winter fits the description of an Angel in the House best in her meekness and devotion to her husband. However, there are many women in Jane Eyre who behave more in accordance to the Victorian angelic feminine ideal in comparison to Rebecca, Mrs. Danvers and Beatrice. This may not be surprising given the different time periods separating the novels. Still, it is significant that Mrs. de Winter fits the Victorian angel description so well and it could be argued that Du Maurier was influenced by Victorianism. It is also significant that Rebecca represents the other woman to Mrs. de Winter much in the same way as Bertha Mason represents the other woman to Jane Eyre. I believe that with the struggles between husbands and wives and the complex feminine influences on her protagonist, Du Maurier, like Brontë with Jane Eyre, is making a social comment on the gender inequalities in her own times. As we shall see in the next chapter, these gender struggles and the influences of other models of femininity on the protagonists reinforce themselves through the doubling and rivalry with Bertha Mason and Rebecca.

**Alter Egos, the Other Woman and their Husbands**

Though there are many female influences on the protagonists there are power struggles as well. Jane and Mrs. de Winter’s struggles with their husbands serve as lessons to be learnt. However, it is first and foremost the struggles with the former wives of Thornfield and Manderley which lead the protagonists to enlightenment. In the article “Caught up in Between Doublets: Neo-Victorian (Trans) Positions of
Victorian Femininities and Masculinities in Jane Eyre and Rebecca,” 2009, Miquel Baldellou Marta writes:

Jane and Mrs de Winter are sufficiently haunted by other women, by social and cultural expectations, by their feelings towards the men in their lives and by their unconscious need to act according to gender standards. Many gender-transgressive or gender-worshipping ghosts confront both Mrs de Winter and Jane before they encounter their real doubles, Rebecca and Bertha.

(28)

The author suggests that the many influences and pressures on the protagonists and how they learn from them are gender based. She also indicates, like Gilbert and Gubar, that Bertha and Rebecca represent the protagonists “doubles” which I believe there is no doubt. If Jane Eyre and Mrs. de Winter are to succeed in finding themselves in maturity the other women Bertha Mason and Rebecca have to be experienced and dealt with, “Both Jane and Mrs. de Winter need to understand their alter egos so as to become aware of the examples they should definitely reject” (30). This is a correct assumption as the other women do represent perceived negative feminine models and as a consequence are viewed as fallen women.

Brontë offers complex versions of femininity with her female characters and especially Bertha Mason. The passive wife role is rejected by Brontë and Jane but at the same time so is Bertha. In contrast, Du Maurier, on the surface at least, offers us simpler versions of femininity with the angelic Mrs. de Winter as the heroine and Rebecca as the villain. However, it is important to remember that it is through Maxim that we learn of Rebecca’s promiscuity, a man who has dark secrets of his own. If he can no longer conceal his crimes then he must at least try to justify them. The novels go further than rejecting these other women. Both the negative alter egos are literally killed off from the plot symbolizing that they must be destroyed in order for the more positive alter egos of Jane and Mrs. de Winter to triumph. However, it is Bertha’s and Rebecca’s stigmatization as fallen women that ultimately convince our protagonists to follow more socially accepted versions of femininity.

Rebecca’s reputation as a fallen woman is sealed thanks largely to her former husband’s description of her. But Maxim not only feels the need to ruin Rebecca’s reputation but to silence her for good:

Rebecca destabilizes Mrs. de Winter’s integrity and Maxim’s sanity. Maxim’s confession reveals Rebecca as the fallen woman, leaving the
second Mrs. de Winter free to become the angel of the house. Maxim’s need to preserve his status and to conform to social conventions entails murdering his wife, who, with her passionate nature, short hair-cut and independence of mind, is presented as gender - transgressive. As a consequence, in an echo of Victorian times, Rebecca now identified as a fallen woman, suffers a similar fate to Rochester’s Bertha. (31)

Mrs. de Winter’s integrity is connected to her own passivity which makes her doubt herself and hate Rebecca. It is only after suffering self-doubt for so long that she gains the knowledge that Maxim did not love Rebecca but had killed her. With the revelation that Rebecca was the fallen woman Mrs. de Winter can cast aside Rebecca’s domineering influence. But if Rebecca is the fallen woman as Maxim claims does this justify him killing her? Interestingly, Rebecca not only haunts Mrs. de Winter but Maxim as well. Maxim’s worst fear is to have his marriage exposed as a failure. It seems that the pressure to conform to domesticity and its prescribed gender roles are simply too much to live up to for both sexes. The above quote suggests Maxim commits murder because of the burdens of status connected to male gender roles of power. There are other significant gender issues in the quote. It is symbolic that Rebecca clipped her hair before her final confrontation with Maxim. Her short hair would make Rebecca appear more male-like and be a reminder to Maxim that she was less normal than other wives. I believe that status and the shame Rebecca represented may well explain why Maxim, like Rochester with Bertha, desired to be rid of his unwanted troublesome wife.

Both Jane and Mrs. de Winter must be careful not to show signs of rebellion given the prevailing social female gender norms of their times which had a lot in common with the Angel in the House model. They are expected to suffer in silence. These inner struggles with their dual personalities are crucial to the plots and act as a social critique by showing the reader the prescribed acceptable and unacceptable behavior for women. In other words, two versions of femininity, the angelic or fallen angel, are offered as a choice for the protagonists. If they display their alter ego’s anger or overt sexuality then they run the risk of being labelled fallen women themselves. Therefore, the safest option for them is to reject these other women and embrace their angelic sides instead.

In Brontë’s novel, through the use of opposites and symbolism, we are shown how Jane learns to be herself. As Gilbert and Gubar comment many critics note how,
“Charlotte Brontë consistently uses the opposed properties of fire and ice to characterize Jane’s experiences” (339). But this symbolism can be viewed as the double character of Jane as well. For instance, Jane Eyre keeps her passion in check with her cool logic, avoiding the judgement of men. On the other hand, she rages at John Reed’s treatment of her which can be viewed as her fiery side. Jane is on a journey of discovery to selfhood but much like fire and ice, her double personality of passion and rationale conflict. The fiery side of Jane is represented by Bertha which Jane struggles against and finally defeats using her rational cool side. However, Jane also experiences inner conflict because of her rage at society which she knows she has to conceal in order not to be punished. If women could not be true to their real identities and were forced to behave angelically then it is reasonable to assume women could become repressed. To escape such repression women may have been reduced to outbursts of rage. In this sense, Bertha Mason may not only mirror the inner life of Jane but those of Victorian women generally.

Bertha Mason, alive throughout most of Jane Eyre, is hidden away in the attic. She manages to escape but only gets to hint at her story through non-verbal clues, “presently she took my veil from its place; . . . and then she threw it over her own head and turned to the mirror. At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage . . . “And how were they?” Fearful and ghastly to me . . . it was a savage face” (Brontë 205). It is significant that there is a mirror reflecting Bertha’s image symbolizing Jane’s double. In this scenario the fate of Jane if she marries Rochester is quite literally mirrored by Bertha’s “savage face” as she tries on the veil. Bertha has been reduced to a primitive version of herself by being married to Rochester. The next morning, with more symbolism, Jane finds the veil torn in two, a clear warning to Jane to stay away from marriage. And Brontë, with Bertha’s symbolic clues, warns contemporary female readers that being married in Victorian times could have negative consequences for them as well.

The stigmatization of the fallen woman coupled with the consequences for such women would surely act as a warning for most females. After all, fear is a good motivating factor. And if the other women are to be destroyed in the protagonist’s psyche, which ultimately frees them, perhaps this explains why the protagonists so readily believe their husbands denunciations on their former wives. Furthermore, the
fallen women are no longer around to tell their stories. Mrs. de Winter, towards the end of the novel, seems particularly eager to believe Maxim’s description of his former wife. Before this, with Rebecca dead, apart from Maxim himself, there is only Mrs. Danvers to present details of Rebecca’s character. Unfortunately, Mrs. de Winter has a difficult time living up to the model of femininity Rebecca represented according to Mrs. Danvers. Furthermore, Mrs. de Winter believes Maxim is still in love with her alter ego and so Rebecca becomes a rival. Therefore, Mrs. de Winter attempts to be more like Rebecca but fails. This is most evident when she is easily duped into wearing a copy of Rebecca’s dress by Mrs. Danvers, “Yes, the dress had been copied exactly from my sketch of the portrait” (Du Maurier 238). Mrs. de Winter muses over the arrival of her dress for the ball not realizing the portrait was of Rebecca. And as she painfully finds out there are consequences in resembling Maxim’s other woman “‘Go and change,’” he said, ‘it does not matter what you put on’” (240). Maxim is shocked by Mrs. de Winters appearance and is not pleased to be reminded of Rebecca. Mrs. de Winter has been fooled by Mrs. Danvers and shown it is no use trying to mimic Rebecca in front of Maxim as he is still “troubled” over his former wife. Feeling she cannot compete with Rebecca this would offer further motivation for Mrs. de Winter to dismiss her rival as a fallen woman.

Du Maurier projects Mrs. de Winter as the Angel in the House of the twentieth century and Rebecca as the worldly wise accomplished former wife and hostess. Significantly though, the narrator is nameless suggesting she has no real identity. In fact, she only requires a name through marriage to Maxim and is thus referred to as Mrs. de Winter thereafter. On the other hand, Rebecca is simply referred to as Rebecca. I believe with this literary device the author is communicating a message about marriage during the period. Rebecca keeps her own name as she maintains her own identity by rejecting the angel role once married to Maxim. In contrast, Mrs. de Winter only finds her identity through marrying Maxim. Through Rebecca’s beauty and accomplishments as a perfect hostess we learn of the expectations of an aristocratic wife during Du Maurier’s times. We also learn of the limitations of Mrs. de Winter when she tries to compete with Rebecca. Although Mrs. de Winter desires to be accomplished like Rebecca she fails as she can only be her inexperienced self. However, a metamorphosis does happen to the character of Mrs. de Winter when she
matures. It is only then that she can reject Rebecca and finally break free of her own passiveness, “These two selves merged and I became one again. I was the self that I had always been, I was not changed. But something new had come upon me that had not been before. My heart, for all its anxiety and doubt, was light and free. I knew then that I was no longer afraid of Rebecca” (319). Maxim’s shared knowledge ends the pilgrimage to self-discovery for Mrs. de Winter as she finally learns he did not love his former wife. Although polar opposites Rebecca, ironically, through her tarnished reputation, helps her rival Mrs. de Winter to find her renewed identity and freedom to be the wife Maxim always wanted.

In both novels, fire is used as a symbol of rage and revenge by Brontë and Du Maurier. Bertha dies when she burns down Thornfield and injures Rochester in the process. Echoing Bertha, Mrs. Danvers burns down Manderley as revenge against Maxim for Rebecca’s death. I believe the rage in these female characters should be viewed as symptoms of social injustice and men should be viewed as the cause. As we shall see in the next chapter, female rage and/or overt sexuality in women was easily manipulated by men in claiming these traits were the results of female madness.

The Stigma of Female Madness and the Fallen Woman

In this chapter I will compare both novels portrayal of the fallen woman with analysis on women and madness from other literature works and social and cultural case studies. To do this I will turn to the renowned feminist writer Elaine Showalter, works of Florence Nightingale and theoretical medical studies for insights into the conditioning of women and madness. These insights reveal secrets into how men stigmatized women in order to maintain power over them, not only in Victorian times but in the twentieth century as well. In Elaine Showalter’s book The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830 – 1980, 1987, the author writes on the consequences Victorian feminine ideals and female gender roles meant for women:

In a society that not only perceived women as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable but also rendered them legally powerless and economically marginal. the medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive systems made women more vulnerable to derangement than men had extensive consequences for social policy. It was used as a reason to keep women out of the professions, to deny them political rights, and to keep them under male control in the family and the state (73).
If this statement is to be believed it is no wonder that women were raging at men. They were acting out their repressed frustrations over their political situation. Furthermore, it is telling how women were considered “more vulnerable to derangement than men” which is echoed by Rochester’s confession on Bertha, “Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations. Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard” (Brontë 211). Rochester’s claim that Bertha descends from “maniacs through three generations” is doubtful since this would be difficult to prove. However, it is significant he chooses “the family” and especially the “mother” as being responsible for Bertha’s madness implying madness is a woman’s disease. I believe we should not trust the prejudiced Rochester as he represents a bluebeard “kidnapping” type figure who needs to clear his name by discrediting Bertha’s reputation. I believe that Bertha is only guilty of demonstrating her anger and discontent over her limited role through marriage to Rochester. In this way it can be argued that Rochester is responsible for Bertha’s so called madness as he is an abusive husband who limits his wife’s right to be herself and ultimately, her freedom.

Showalter writes how for Victorian women, “the image of monstrosity was related to her anger and discontent and to the necessity of concealing her drives for independence, work and power” (62). Social suppression and enforced circumstances creates anger in these women which must be repressed to avoid showing symptoms of a monstrous condition. As well as anger, female sexuality was considered another monstrosity by other Victorian female authors in Brontë’s times. Showalter quotes from Nightingale’s Cassandra, 1860, to show how the protagonist has desires unlike other daughters who are taught not to have sexual desire because, “in the conventional society, which men have made for women, and women have accepted, they must have none, they must act the farce of hypocrisy” (qtd. in Showalter 64). This “hypocrisy” is the act of sex within matrimony where a woman had a duty to please her husband. The quote suggests that a male ruled society leaked down into the institution of marriage. Du Maurier’s character Rebecca challenges this kind of hypocrisy by acting on her sexual desire by having sex with other men and not her husband. It is her marriage to Maxim that is a farce as it is without love and is sexually redundant. Rebecca, in her
promiscuity, claims the right to have a female sexual libido. It also gains her power over Maxim because she has her scandalous sex secrets to bribe Maxim with. As Mrs. Danvers points out, it was all a game to Rebecca, “She had a right to amuse herself hadn’t she. Love making was a game with her, only a game . . . . She did it because it made her laugh . . . . She laughed at you like she did at the rest” (Du Maurier 382). Mrs. Danvers points out to Favell, Rebecca’s cousin and lover, that he meant nothing to her. Her “game” was to refuse to be passive and claim the upper hand over men and in doing so defy social norms of femininity. As Showalter writes, “What terrified Nightingale was that middle-class Victorian women Cassandras rendered so crazy and powerless by their society that they could rail and rave but never act” (65). It is telling that the post Victorian Rebecca character dares to act by leading a life of adultery and as a result is punished by her husband for doing so. This shows that wayward women could expect to be punished not only in Victorian times but during the early part of the twentieth century as well. Bertha is punished when she is imprisoned by her husband partly for her apparent overt sexuality and is forced to act by escaping the attic and burning down Thornfield.

Significantly, Nightingale writes how husbands could imprison women in the family home without having to send them to an asylum, “Others have been kept unjustly in confinement by their well-intentioned relations, as unfit to be trusted with liberty. In fact, in almost every family, one see’s a keeper, or two or three keepers, and a lunatic” (qtd. in Showalter 62). These lines suggest that in Victorian times uncompliant wives were hidden away as not to embarrass their husbands and ruin their reputations. It seems the fictional Bertha was not alone in being locked up in the 19th century as there were real existing case studies of domestic confinement. Furthermore, there were “keepers.” Showalter points out that Brontë shows no pity towards Bertha, “Brontë has no sympathy for her mad creature. Before Jane Eyre can reach her happy ending, the madwoman must be purged from the plot and passion must be purged from Jane herself” (68-69). It is interesting to consider that Jane as a “keeper” shows no compassion for Bertha’s fate and subsequently considers marriage to Rochester as an option shortly after the other woman’s demise. This would suggest Jane saw Bertha as a rival. This rival, who represents Janes “passionate” side, which could either suggest
anger or sexuality, has to be vanquished as an example of unacceptable femininity and female madness.

Showalter points out how Brontë, “offers several explanations for Bertha’s madness, all taken from the discourse of Victorian psychiatry” (67). It is significant how Brontë explains madness in Victorian psychiatric terms as if that were the authority of the day on female madness. Furthermore, Showalter comments on how after their union in marriage Bertha becomes a “monster of sexual appetite who is finally pronounced mad by ‘medical men’” (67). If displays of sexual passion in Victorian females signified madness according to contemporary male medical professionals this would indicate how female madness was determined by powerful men. If being the case, it shows how men could enforce and maintain power over women using social gender hierarchy where males occupied higher status professions than females.

In the post Victorian novel Rebecca it might be argued that the women protagonists all seem to suffer from mental illness. For instance, Mrs. de Winter suffers from paranoia and obsession over Maxim’s former wife. This leads to Mrs. de Winter’s delusions. It can also be argued that, with her obvious love for Rebecca, Mrs. Danvers displays obsessive traits. Her constant undermining and bullying of Mrs. de Winter also becomes obsessive and accumulates into her almost coaxing Mrs. de Winter into suicide, “‘Look down there she said.’ It’s easy, isn’t it? Why don’t you jump? It wouldn’t hurt, not to break your neck. It’s a quick, kind way” (Du Maurier 276). Mrs. Danvers attempts to persuade a depressed Mrs. de Winter to kill herself after her rejection from Maxim when she wore an identical dress to Rebecca’s at the ball. Mrs. Danvers can and should be described as a villainous psychopath as she plans to kill through cunning manipulation. Rebecca for her part, if her promiscuity and her “incapability to love” are to be believed, can be described as a sociopath as she rejects the female social norms of her day. Maxim’s description of Rebecca in his confession to Mrs. de Winter certainly suggests that she did not fit in with any romantic ideals, “She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together. Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal” (304). These remarks show the hatred Maxim had for Rebecca and suggest what he expects from a “normal” wife. In comparison, Rebecca hated the “norms” Maxim expected her to follow and threatened
to reveal their marriage for the sham it was. Unlike Mrs. de Winter, Rebecca rejects and rebels against the angel ideal and in doing so rejects the male dominated society she was oppressed by.

There is no doubt that Rebecca was a sexual woman who controls men with her sexuality. During the early twentieth century Du Maurier shows us with her femme fatale Rebecca, that women who had sexual desires and acted on them, could easily be accused of being a fallen woman. Similar to “mad” Bertha, Rebecca is defeminized by her husband’s description of her incapability to love. I believe both women are stigmatized by their husbands to justify that they need to be “dealt with” for such inappropriate female behaviors’. Bertha is imprisoned in the attic by Rochester to become immortalized as the “Madwoman in the Attic” by Gubar and Gilbert, 1979. In contrast, Rebecca is murdered and sunk with her sailing boat to the bottom of the sea. After all, dead women tell no tales. It could be viewed that Bertha’s confinement in the attic served the same purpose as Rebecca’s confinement to a watery grave – to silence these subordinate women. But no matter how you view the motives of Maxim and Rochester, symbols of patriarchal power with bluebeard tendencies, they act immorally. It is only by Victorian standards that imprisoning a woman in the attic could be practiced. It could be suggested that in the more enlightened twentieth century locking up an unwanted wife was not so common and Du Maurier, lacking a chance to use this Victorian restraint, has Maxim kill his wife instead.

Showalter also writes on the fictional Victorian influences on female madness, “Bertha’s violence, dangerousness, and rage, her regression to an inhuman condition . . . became such a powerful model for Victorian readers, including psychiatrists, that it influenced even medical accounts of female insanity” (68). Here we have life imitating art. If Brontë’s fictional writing could influence the Victorian medical profession this signifies how diagnosis and treatment of madness was still very much in its infancy. Interestingly, later in the twentieth century, according to Showalter, David Cooper, a colleague of the renowned psychiatrist R. D. Laing, described their anti-psychiatry movement as an “attempt to reverse the rules of the psychiatric game . . . According to the anti - psychiatrists, mental illness had to be examined in terms of its social context: the emotional dynamics of the family and the institution of psychiatry itself” (221). I agree with this more social approach to understanding mental illness. As Showalter’s
studies show madness in women may well be caused by the society they live in, even
the home they live in and the low position they hold in the family hierarchy.
Significantly, Showalter writes how David Cooper’s anti-psychiatry social approach
into mental health changed the “game.” His approach is enlightening and modern in
comparison to Victorian medical approaches which, according to Showalter, were
influenced partly by Brontë’s writing and largely by professional men. In other words,
madness is not a biological female disease but a byproduct of the circumstances women
were forced to live in and the rules they had to obey and live by. Similarly, it can be
argued the fictional female characters of Brontë and Du Maurier are the victims of male
instigated social conditioning which results in frustrated repressed women.

If the concept of female madness was manipulated by men in Victorian authority it
is not so infeasible that Brontë offers us an example of stigmatized female madness in
the shape of Bertha Mason. It would be very easy, much like the professional men of
Brontë’s day, for Rochester to make this stigma work against the frustrated and angry
Bertha. In contrast, Du Maurier in her novel, which was published over half a century
after Brontë’s, understandably chooses not to lock up her fallen woman in Maxim’s
mansion as times had changed. Du Maurier uses Rebecca’s female sexuality to
stigmatise her other woman as a sexually immoral “fallen woman” rather than a
“madwoman.” As Maxim describes her she was not even “normal.” In other words,
Rebecca was overly sexed rather than romantic, which in Du Maurier’s times, would
simply not do.

As the fictional and non-fictional studies in this chapter argue social and cultural
factors influenced by powerful men reinforce these female gender stereotypes. It is
significant that Jane Eyre and Mrs. de Winter are willing to believe what their husbands
say about the other women without any real knowledge of who they really were. I
believe that the pressure to marry and to be seen as “normal” women contributed to the
protagonist’s unquestioning belief in their husband’s condemnation of their former
wives. It is mostly through fear that Jane and Mrs. de Winter reject their alter ego
influences. As the feminist theorist Showalter suggests women in the authors times
were under social and political pressures where they had very little opportunity and
identity outside of wedlock. Furthermore, if we consider that women could be
stigmatized as mad and/or sexually fallen women then they could well be forgiven for
siding with their husbands. They may well have been ostracized from society and ultimately destroyed like Bertha and Rebecca if they hadn’t.

**Conclusion**

The crimes against the other women Bertha and Rebecca can never be justified as they are only guilty of acting out their desires. It is the husbands who are guilty of provoking the repressed rage in their wives which in turn lead to atrocities acted out against these defiant women. The violent behavior of Bertha towards Rochester and her burning down of Thornfield should be read as the actions of a frustrated powerless wife. On the other hand, Rebecca sought revenge not through violent rage but by playing men and her husband at their own “game” by daring to live the life she chose and by using her sexuality. Bertha’s angry rebellion result in her being stigmatized as the mad fallen woman and as punishment is imprisoned by Rochester. In contrast, Rebecca’s sexual liberation and defiance make her an easy target to be stigmatized as an impure, immoral fallen woman by Maxim.

In contrast, the protagonists represent other versions of femininity to their alter egos. Jane Eyre rebels against Victorian female gender inequality. However, she rejects Bertha Mason’s open angry rebellion in favour of compromise in order to marry Rochester on more equal terms. In comparison, Mrs. de Winter is an Angel in the House of the early twentieth century who rejects her alter ego Rebecca and in doing so is free to meet her husband on more equal terms. After all, it is easy for Maxim to portray Rebecca as the villainous fallen woman. However, read from a feminist perspective, as I believe one should read *Rebecca*, Maxim is guilty of murdering his accomplished defiant former wife and escapes justice. In this way, Du Maurier’s character Rebecca, similar to Brontë’s Bertha Mason, should be viewed as a victim of domestic abuse rather than simply a villain.

**Works Cited**


