

David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas and Elizabeth J. Donaldson, eds. *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012. ISBN: 978-0814292976. Price: US\$49.95.

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In the early days of disability studies, essay collections often featured criticism united under a general theme. In his foreword to this volume, Lennard J. Davis rightly states that this collection's focus on one text—Charlotte Brontë's 1848 novel *Jane Eyre*—reflects “a coming of age moment for the study of disability,” which is now “so capacious [and] so much of a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary discourse that it does not have to multiply its objects” of criticism (iv). Readers readily see Bertha's madness and Rochester's blindness and maiming as disabilities, but this volume moves beyond interpretations that reduce disability to a “literary device” and identifies “the profusion of impairments and disability in the novel” (3). *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability* enriches Brontë scholarship by challenging earlier interpretations of disability as a metaphor for marginalization, and frequently responds to the pioneering feminist criticism of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. That work presents the mad Bertha as Jane's rebellious double, suggesting that insanity is the only response to a patriarchal system, while implying that Rochester's disabilities serve the moral function of punishing his wrongs or signaling his dependency, and thus contribute to establishing parity with Jane. This collection reveals the dynamism of disability studies by acknowledging *Jane Eyre*'s paradoxical presentation of

disability, and offering perspectives that refigure disability as an opportunity for dismantling hierarchies of power based on gender, class, and ability.

Combining feminist and disability theories in her essay, Elizabeth J. Donaldson emphasizes Bertha's embodied experience of mental illness. She notes that the novel generally insists on the physicality of an emotional state: interiority is visible when Jane assesses moral character from physical attributes; Bertha's insanity arises from congenital causes; and Rochester's blind, averted eyes and disfigured hand symbolically figure his madness as melancholy. Yet, she suggests, the corporeal nature of madness challenges the notion of this disability as a social construction. Focusing on the social, argues Donaldson, "privileges a transcendent civil identity and obscures or represses physical impairment," thus positing "an ideal, disembodied social subject who seems to remain intact, unaltered, even 'normal,' despite impairment" (28). The obstacles facing those with severe mental disabilities are especially complicated because they undermine a "concept of the self that is the very foundation of our political system" (29). Donaldson notes that "the cultural anxiety surrounding mental illness" arises from understanding it as "the symbolic failure of the self-determined individual," when participating in democratic citizenship requires an inviolable self. Her assertion that this tension "lies at the heart of both liberal individualism and the impairment-disability system" illustrates the stakes of her inquiry (30).

Julia Miele Rodas also investigates the political ramifications of disability in her contribution by analyzing whether Jane's character can be placed on the autistic spectrum, according to current definitions and theories of autism. Rodas reviews other literary critics' assessments of Jane's troubled sociability before turning to early scenes in the novel that illustrate her odd expressions of affect in relation to others. If autism's main feature is defined as

“an unusual degree of inwardness, aloneness, or independence,” then indeed Jane fits this description. However, Rodas stridently objects to simply diagnosing characters according to modern definitions, and insists on the political implications of any such diagnosis. When Jane accepts her “aloofness and social idiosyncrasy” by removing to Ferndean with Rochester, she, like other “individuals in retreat or acting independently” emerges as a “[proponent] of political and social change”(69).

David Bolt uses deconstruction and Freudian theory to map character functionality in Brontë’s novel, as well as Rudyard Kipling’s *The Light That Failed* (1899) and John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Assessing *Jane Eyre* as a feminist novel becomes problematic when the female character’s agency is built on the patriarchal premise of her absolute powerlessness and on the emasculation of blind male characters. Bolt systematically establishes how visually-impaired male characters’ use of their hands to acquire information figures them as animalistic and lecherous, and incapable of understanding what they see with touch; how the texts support Freud’s construction of blindness as castration when blind male characters lose the capacity for erotic love; and that melancholia necessarily results from this loss of sexual potency. Rochester’s recovered sight likewise shows that male agency is only possible in the absence of blindness. This paradigm contradicts the novel’s feminism: when the blind character “augments the status of the sighted protagonist, [this] functionality corresponds to feminism only insofar as the former is male and the latter female”; this paradox challenges both feminist and disability scholars when “the subject position that Jane occupies is bolstered by the objectification of the disabled Other; it is indicative of disempowerment rather than empowerment” (50).

Margaret Rose Torrell’s essay integrates paradoxical interpretations of disability’s impact on expressions of gender, ultimately establishing that disability dismantles conventional

hierarchies of gendered power in *Jane Eyre*. Focusing on the ramifications of embodiment in Jane and Rochester's relationship, she accepts Bolt's assertions about how attenuated agency associated with female embodiment transfers to Rochester after his disfigurement, and that Jane's role as caregiver places her in a dominant position. However, Torrell presents an alternative assessment of the gender and ability dynamic by identifying how the novel positively presents masculinity embodied through disability. Jane's erotic interest in Rochester intensifies with his physical differences; he maintains his manly appeal, not despite, but through his blindness and disfigurement. Their caregiving relationship also resists hierarchal dynamics, not by reversing the dependent roles but rather by establishing interdependency. Thus the novel presents "an unusually progressive portrait of disabled masculinity": while male embodiment does contribute to Jane's empowerment, it is "not necessarily an expressway to his disempowerment," but rather an "inroad to an alternative, non-oppressive model for masculinity" that may expand to include "new, more inclusive possibilities for male embodiment" (90).

By historicizing the caregiving relationship in *Jane Eyre*, D. Christopher Gabbard reassesses the *Bildungsroman* to emphasize Jane's moral education in response to disability, particularly Bertha's dehumanization through madness. Gabbard establishes that Jane's overtly ableist views necessitate invoking an implied interlocutor in order to detect the evolution from repulsion to Bertha to her eventual identification with the madwoman. Significantly, Brontë sets the novel in an era in which the care of the disabled underwent significant reformation toward more compassionate care. Brontë's readers would be familiar with more humane treatments of mental disability and would judge Rochester's actions with the same disapprobation as Jane. Her role as Rochester's caretaker illustrates Jane's moral reformation, as her unstated identification

with Bertha and the model of her cousins' care giving during her flight from Thornfield align Jane with emerging norms for sympathetic care for those with disabilities.

Essaka Joshua's essay challenges the assumption that Rochester's disability is a punishment for immorality by examining Brontë's use of biblical allusions, establishing that when disability is uncoupled from stigma it becomes "a symbol of being saved" and "a route to salvation" (115). Conceding that Rochester views his blindness as retribution for past sins, Joshua positions this disability as representing an opportunity to "see" differently, thus creating the opportunity for discipleship. The essay is most effective when it compares Rochester to biblical representations of Samson and Nebuchadnezzar that illustrate how physical and mental breakdowns facilitate spiritual redemption. While this chapter addresses biblical allusions in relation to other characters, such as Brocklehurst and St. John, it focuses mainly on Rochester; Bertha's madness, addressed so richly elsewhere in this volume, is covered in one paragraph, and only in relation to Rochester, which seems a disappointing omission.

In a similar vein, Susannah B. Mintz refutes assumptions that disability and illness test characters' responses to physical difference; instead, using the psychoanalytic concept of recognition, she shows how the novel forwards intersubjective relationships that refuse to dismiss or displace bodily difference. Brontë's novel never settles on a singular symbolic equation for physical difference or frailty, thus opening the potential for a more direct evaluation of interactions between characters. Mintz emphasizes that the meaning of any physical body is not innate but interpreted, and that the novel's consistent refusal to equate physical difference with a negative anomaly suggests that, "what makes people who they 'are' derives from *how* they are in intersubjective relation with others" (143).

Martha Stoddard Holmes evaluates several film and television adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, and concludes, much like Mintz and Torrell, that disability intensifies relations between Jane and Rochester. When directors resist invoking disparities of power in their initial and final scenes, they effectively maintain the erotic power of this central relationship throughout the film. Holmes uses the terms of film criticism—the use of high and low angles, direct or chiaroscuro lighting, and shots that emphasize an implied gaze—and examines adaptations such as Robert Stevenson’s 1944 film with Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles and Susanna White’s 2006 BBC miniseries. Many filmmakers selectively depict Rochester’s disability—“an amputation is a deal-breaker and blindness isn’t”—but newer versions of *Jane Eyre* nonetheless emphasize Jane’s genuine erotic desire for Rochester over feelings of duty, born from pity, thus shedding assumptions about disability, dependency, and emasculation (171). Holmes’s criticism, already central to disability studies of nineteenth-century literature, addresses the absence of disability perspectives in film studies of *Jane Eyre*.

Readers new to disability scholarship can appreciate the range of perspectives in this volume dedicated to *Jane Eyre*; those familiar with disability studies will welcome it as a breakthrough text that demonstrates the innovative strengths of this discourse.

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