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IN PURSUIT OF DANTE'S SHADOW: JANE EYRE AND INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCING FROM THE *DIVINE COMEDY* BY DANTE ALIGHIERI

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Sommario

In Jane Eyre di Charlotte Brontë (1847), la gran parte dell'attenzione critica si concentra intorno al personaggio di Bertha Rochester, la prima moglie del protagonista, Edward Rochester. In gran parte delineata come alter ego di Jane Eyre, il suo ruolo è fondamentale per l'esito del messaggio di emancipazione femminile promulgato dal romanzo vittoriano. In questa lettura critica del personaggio si farà un confronto delle proprietà fisiche di questo personaggio con il demone mitologico di Cerbero, tratto dal canto VI dell'Inferno di Dante. Questo paragone suggerisce riferimenti intertestuali che possono offrire nuovi spunti per la comprensione di una lettura più sfumata del personaggio di Bertha in questo importante frangente del testo di Brontë.

Keywords: Gothic novel, Dante Alighieri, Cerberus, Bertha Rochester, Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë, Victorian Literature

This article focuses on the comparison of the physical depictions of two characters, the entrapped woman-in-the-attic, Bertha, displayed by her husband, Edward Rochester, to the assembled wedding guests as his 'mad' first wife in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Dante's

three-headed, dog-like Cerberus from the third circle of the *Inferno*. This startling visual link has surprisingly never elicited critical attention in all the years of academic enquiry and all the volumes of commentary dedicated to Brontë's work. The possibility of Dante's influence on Brontë in this scene of the novel, however, cannot be overlooked, particularly in view of the richness that this association, if accepted, adds to the layering of meaning in the text¹. These two images share a number of physical similarities that make a case for some level of cultural appropriation if not direct intertextual referencing. However, in view of the difficulty of definitively stating that Brontë's woman-in-the-attic passage is directly reliant on Dante's text, the bulk of this enquiry – or speculation – focuses on the textual comparative analysis of the descriptions as the surest way of attaining a feasible link between these texts. Dante's works could either have been read, indirectly absorbed, or simply remembered from public readings or other means of distribution, the image of Cerberus becoming, through direct or indirect association, a model for the beast-like 'Other'. On this level, therefore, the relationship would be one of intertextuality, as a reliance on the actual source text would be referred. However, the difficulty of an actual comparison of the two texts, which cannot be definitively stated, distances the reference from a directly referenced source to the more general appropriation of an Italian cultural link. While cultural appropriation as a methodological approach in this instance is enticing, and probably closer to the truth, the problem remains of the actual resemblance between the two pieces. The idea behind this investigation is an attempt at supporting the notion that Brontë may have known, and used, the description of Dante's Cerberus from *Inferno* VI, as a loose narrative model to 'flesh out' the desired horrifying appearance of the entrapped woman, using similar details, ambience and narrative techniques. The implications of such a 'borrowing', a definition of which will also be attempted, will add to the final reading of the character's role in the entirety of the work.

¹ This article will not attempt to draw broad comparisons between *Jane Eyre* and any other features or characters from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, apart from what is already posited.

The reader's first encounter with the persona of Bertha Rochester happens immediately after the abortive marriage between Edward and Jane, well into the body of the novel:

In a room without a window, there burnt a fire, guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain. [...] In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours, it snatched and growled like some strange animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. [...] The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. (Brontë, 1847:356-7)

Dante's Cerberus, drawn from the Classical mythological three-headed dog-like creature that guards the entrance to the third circle, appears in *Inferno*, Canto VI:

Cerbero, fiera crudele e diversa,
Con tre gole caninamente latra
Sovra la gente che quivi é sommersa.
Gli occhi ha vermigli, la barba unta ed atra,
E il ventre largo, e unghiate le mani;
Graffia gli spirti, gli scuoia ed isquatra².

Supposing that Brontë knew the *Divine Comedy*³, the translation with which she would have been familiar is probably the one by Francis Cary⁴:

² The Italian text used here is Alighieri, Dante (1907) *La Divina Commedia*. Milano: Hoepli, edited by G.A. Scartazzini.

³ A purist may object to the word 'Divine', which only started being used to describe the work after 1555. This article will make use of the modern title of *Divine Comedy* as it is more current and less mannered for today's use than the original.

Cerberus, cruel monster, fierce and strange,
Through his wide threefold throat, barks as a dog
Over the multitude immersed beneath.
His eyes glare crimson, black his unctuous beard,
His belly large, and claw'd the hands, with which
He tears the spirits, flaying them, and their limbs
Piecemeal disparts.
(*The Vision of Hell*, Canto VI, vv.15-6)

Starting with the physical descriptions of the two characters, a case can be made for a link between these passages. However, in terms of historical and literary certainty, the possibility for such a link must be looked for in a broader context. A search for a hidden source with reference to Classical texts – evidence for an instance of cultural appropriation, a theme that will be discussed further on in this study – is what Hurst describes as a “childhood encounter with a major classical text in translation [which] is a common event in the biographies of nineteenth-century writers” (2010) and could be at least postulated in a search through Brontë’s many associated texts. So, even if this “childhood encounter” with Dante’s works cannot definitively be proven, a network of linkages can be made to highlight Brontë’s likely familiarity with the writings of Dante. In Brontë’s day, Dante was controversial but also widely known and admired and could offer a solution to the problem of writing the ‘unwritable’, as was attested to throughout the *Divine Comedy*.

Before embarking on an analysis of the relevant sections, which will be done at a later stage of the analysis, a broad outline of Dante’s presence in the Romantic and Victorian world will be delineated to the ends of providing cultural links that can bolster the argument for Brontë’s familiarity with the Medieval Italian writer’s more popular works. Although the vast network of ramifications that link intercultural influences around this topic goes beyond the brevity allowed by an article of this nature, an attempt will be made to give as

⁴ The *Inferno*, the first cantop of the *Divine Comedy* was translated and published by 1805 (Corrigan, 1969:9). The full work was translated by 1814. See below footnote 17.

broad and coherent a background as possible. An attempt has also been made to trace the imagery through texts that either were or may have been familiar to Brontë and to assess whether these show any of the features that define Bertha, apart from the Dante reference. Readings known to have been familiar to Brontë as well as those general Victorian staples that can offer grounds for speculation around Brontë's familiarity with Dante and his world, have been considered. Two main lines of enquiry have been followed: known primary texts that can be directly related to Brontë's upbringing, schooling, reading interests and travels on the one hand, and the more general cultural 'ambience' of Victorian popular readings on the other.

Brontë's formative reading is largely known⁵, owned by the Brontë Society and held at the Haworth Parsonage Museum in West Yorkshire. An overview of some popular Victorian texts can indicate possible familiarity with Dante and be an indication of what is assumed to have been either read or encountered by her in her formation as writer. We learn from one of the numerous Brontë family collected letters, that:

They were allowed to choose freely from their father's library, which included requisite family reading such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–1684), Hannah More's *Moral Sketches* (1784), John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Sir Walter Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726–1730), and, of course, the Bible. The family regularly received *Blackwood's Magazine*, which heavily influenced Charlotte and Branwell's early writing, and, beginning in 1832, *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*. (see: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/charlotte-bronte>)

Inevitably, their reading also included a spread of canonical texts that offered the reclusive siblings a broad base for imaginative

⁵ See Myer (1987:76).

elaboration. Patrick Brontë was himself a Cambridge trained Classical studies graduate and friend of Classical scholar William Weightman (Myer, 1987:73) who was also the Brontë family curate. Patrick Brontë, unusually for the time, allowed his family open access to his library⁶. Canonical classical texts would have been standard fare amongst the educated of the time. Classical authors such as Homer, Virgil and Lucretius⁷ were popular reading amongst the educated, particularly since antiquity was considered “a privileged period within classical reception studies, with Romantic and Victorian Hellenism as prominent areas of interest” (Hurst, 2010)⁸. None refers in these terms to the mythological figure of Cerberus.

In Homer's work Cerberus appears merely as “the hound of loathed Hades” (Murray, 1924:II.8.367), in Lucretius, he lives in “pitchy darkness and the jaws of Hell belching abominable fumes” (*On the Nature of the Universe*, III:127, 1951:126), while in Virgil's *Aeneid* he is “gigantic Cerberus send[ing] echoing howls from his three throats” (1956:159), with snakes for a mane (159). However, while many more classical texts mention Cerberus⁹, all of which could have feasibly been in Patrick Brontë's library, in none of these is Cerberus a red-eyed monster, as he appears in Dante. The version of Cerberus that would undoubtedly have been most readily available to Brontë was Blake's illustration of the *Divine Comedy* (1824-1827, today held in the Tate collection), in which Cerberus appears more as a three headed fluffy pet than a red-eyed hell hound¹⁰.

⁶ Although a study of the Classics was reserved for Branwell, the only male amongst the Brontë siblings, the girls were also known to have had some training by their father in the Classics (Harman, 2015:52).

⁷ Lucretius was quoted in debates on the “conflicts between religion and science” and often seen as anticipating Darwin (Hurst, 2010). First English translation was by Lucy Hutchinson 1620-81 (Hurst, 2006:56).

⁸ Classical imagery was a prevalent visual referent in Victorian England, with even Punch's cover doing satires in the form of Classical friezes. (see <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/design/books/cooke12.html>)

⁹ A full list of all the ancient sources are listed and quoted in the following reference: *Theoi Project*, Aaron J. Atsma, available at: <http://www.theoi.com/greek-mythology/bestiary.html>.

¹⁰ Blake's illustrations of the *Divine Comedy* (1824-1827) shows Cerberus as a rather innocuous three headed dog, lacking, however, the very significant details of the black mane and fiery eyes. So while this image may have been known to the author, the lack of

Amongst Brontë's readings are also numerous French texts, unclassified and thus unknown¹¹, but important in so far as they underline the author's connection with the European continent, a fact highly significant in her formation as writer (Harman, 2015:135). These books also underscore the links with the Catholic context which Charlotte ambivalently enjoyed, treasured and held in contempt in equal proportions. Linked to her friendship with the Taylor family – fluent in French and partly inspirational for Charlotte's first stay in Brussels (135) – was her introduction to French in her early school days. Charlotte is known to have read extensively in French as well as having tried her hand at translation (Duthie, 1975:15). During her first sojourn in Brussels, from 1842, at the age of 26 (105), Brontë's familiarity with French culture became first-hand, an interest she actively maintained till her death in 1855 (110).

More importantly, for the purposes of this study, during her Belgian sojourn Brontë also had direct experience of Catholicism for the first time, towards which she confessed feeling "unprepared for the strength of the hostility" (115), deeming it alien and "Other"¹². As much as the European environment, a novelty in itself, Catholicism seems to have also fed into the notion of the Gothic as "a crystallisation of [...] neurotic and psychic disturbances" (117), traditionally associated with imagery of a misguided fanaticism identified with a debilitating and restrictive repression. Many instances of anti-Catholicism are famously found in *The Professor* (1857) and *Villette* (1853), though the main example of this prejudice on Brontë's part should be the critically unacknowledged instance of Bertha in her attic and the cultural referencing to the atmosphere of Dante's *Inferno*. In *Jane Eyre*, the emotional link made between the

specificity is unlikely to make it an influence for the famous figure of the entrapped first wife.

¹¹ Myer (1987:76).

¹² A surprising episode recounted by Charlotte, during her second stay in Brussels, in a letter to Emily, describes how she, on entering a church during a period of deep depression, had joined a queue waiting for confession. When her turn came, Charlotte, strangely enough, insisted on telling her confession to the priest in spite of his attempts at dissuasion once he had discovered that she was not Catholic (Harman, 2015:175). The strangeness of this episode for one so decidedly anti-Catholic, indicates a fascination with the 'reprehensible' closely akin to the Gothic mode and a certain level of fascination with ritualistic spectacle.

cell-like room, in which the wedding guests view the 'mad' first wife, with the cultural opprobrium felt for the 'popish' faith so forcefully abhorred in Victorian attitudes in general, seems to enmesh this imagery with the despised European Catholicism of which Dante was inevitably a representative. In conjunction with the horror-cum-admiration for the Dante figures, this isotope of references may be viewed as confirmation of the origin of Mrs. Rochester and her isolated cell at Thornfield Hall¹³.

Certainly, in 1840s England, the *Divine Comedy* was not esoteric reading, having been habitually 'plundered' for themes and images since at least the Romantics¹⁴. Dante's influence on English sensibilities and writing, firstly Romantic and later Victorian, is generally accepted as an indisputable fact amongst critics. Some go as far as calling Dante's relevance to England in this period a "cult" (Havely, 2014:7) and the proliferation of commentary in this area widely spread and acknowledged. It seems probable that given the general appreciation of his works amongst these illustrious antecedents, Brontë must have been familiar with at least some of Dante's writing 'rediscovered' by the late eighteenth century¹⁵ and considered Gothic in all but name.

The Romantics, responsible for much of the Italian writer's fame in England in the nineteenth century¹⁶, were interested in both Italian

¹³ The character of Crimsworth, in Brontë's *The Professor*, holds some deeply derogatory ideas about the vices of a Catholic world view.

¹⁴ While this is broadly speaking true, a recent study by Nick Havely (2014), gathers earlier influences of Dante's works in England, starting with a 14th century text, through Chaucer's clerics, most of whom "have contacts with Italy or Italian literature" (8) studying Dante in various locations of English learning such as Cambridge University, amongst whom the influential cleric, Friar Roger from Sicily (9) in 1351-2 (9), and the 14th century manuscript now in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, the MS Hamilton 207, which appears to have been in circulation in England around the same years (1).

¹⁵ Saglia (2002:101) gives a detailed list of the many translation of the *Divine Comedy* starting with Thomas Wharton in 1781 to Cary's much more famous version.

¹⁶ *The Divine Comedy* was translated in its entirety by the year 1814, by the Staffordshire clergyman Henry Cary, who was instrumental in establishing the reputation of the Tuscan poet amongst English readers. Born in 1776 and educated first at Rugby School and later at Christ Church, Oxford, Cary is credited with providing the greatest impetus for the spread of Dante's work during the early years of the 19th century. The first three months after the release of his first translation saw a major sale of 1,000 copies (Isba, 2006:30), with a

as a language and Dante as poet, Italy having “always been not only a cultural influence but a magical place from which the English imagination [...] derived creative inspiration” (Marroni, 1996:1)¹⁷. On a more popular front, Anne Radcliffe, the main representative of the Gothic mode for the Victorians, set most of her works in Italy. Dante’s poetry began to enjoy heightened visibility in the English public’s attention after Coleridge’s acclaimed lectures of 1818-1819¹⁸ followed closely by Henry Hallam’s chapter on medieval literature in his *View of the State of Europe in the Middle Ages*. We know from a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell (letter 463, dated August 27, 1850) that Brontë was familiar with Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1849), written in commemoration of Henry Hallam upon the latter’s premature death¹⁹, in which she declares it to be “beautiful [...]; [...] mournful; [...] monotonous” and finds herself “clos[ing] the book when [she] had got about half way” (Shorter, 1969:164). Can we assume, therefore, that she may have been familiar with Tennyson’s lectures on Dante as well?

Of the more notorious readings of Dante’s poetry the largely reviled narrative poem by Leigh Hunt, “The Story of Rimini” (1816), based on the tale of Paolo and Francesca’s tragically fated love affair,

second edition the following year, reaching a fourth in the year of Cary’s death in 1844 (30). By 1817, when Coleridge met him in person, developing a high regard for his work, Cary’s translation had already gained respect in literary circles. Of the Romantic circle, Keats is definitely known to have taken the 1815 edition of Cary’s translation on a walking tour of Scotland, because its small size allowed it to be easily packed and was light to carry (Milbank, 2002:17). In view of this fact it seems unlikely that Brontë would have been unaware of Dante’s work through these contemporary literary networks, further spreading Dante’s fame. Cary’s translation eventually became “the *terminus post quem* of the Romantic assimilation of Dante” (Braidà, 2004:9).

¹⁷ Byron, a great admirer of Dante, had started learning Italian during his sojourn in Greece in 1810 (Beatty, 1960: 395) going beyond simple influence by interweaving the story of Paolo and Francesca into the first canto of his *Don Juan* in 1811 and enmeshing its main points with his own biographical affair with his half-sister Augusta (398). It is through Byron, for instance, that Brontë first encountered Ancient Greece, the poetry of which “brought to life for her the beauty of the Mediterranean landscapes” (Duthie, 1975: 51). Likewise, Keats’ *The Fall of Hyperion* is also considered to have been influenced by his own 1819 reading of Dante (Saly, 1965:65).

¹⁸ Coleridge’s reading of Dante was based on the early Boyd translation of 1796 (see Brown, 1998).

¹⁹ Henry Hallam was himself “a promising Dante scholar” (Wallace, 2007:292).

retold in *Inferno V*, became the most highly criticised²⁰ reference to Dante's work amongst the English reading public. Much like Byron's projection of his own affair with his half-sister Augusta into Dante's figures of Paolo and Francesca, Hunt's scandalous relations with his sister-in-law at the time of writing his own version of the story added piquancy to his literary works by eliciting social scandal and thereby drawing notoriety to his own and Dante's writings. Gossip, literary or otherwise, would surely have brought these points to Brontë's attention, even years later. We certainly know that the controversy around Hunt's poem raged in the *Blackwood Magazine*, a publication regularly read by the Brontë family. Charlotte had certainly also read some of Hunt's own work²¹ and was to express astonishment at his reported admiration for her own writing, stating as much to her publisher in the year of *Jane Eyre's* publication (Harman, 2015:239). Later, she also agreed with Hunt's appraisal of her own Bertha as "shocking" (Shorter, 1969:383). It seems reasonable to think that she would have been familiar with at least part of Hunt's source texts.

Also important for the spread of Dante's fame in the early nineteenth century were the public lectures and articles by the Italian poet Ugo Foscolo, exiled from Italy for subversive political activities against Austrian rule in the years leading up to the Italian Unification, and a familiar presence in English contemporary intellectual Whig circles (Walsh, 2014). Brontë's interest in the politics of her day, as well as her documented familiarity with the *Edinburgh Review*, would have certainly exposed her to Foscolo's articles on Dante. Although written mainly to supplement his income while living in exile, Foscolo's series of articles on Italian literature, starting with Dante,

²⁰ The heated controversy is most starkly represented by the acrimony of the mysterious commentator, "Z", who attacked Leigh Hunt both on a personal and literary level over a number of issues of "Blackwood Magazine".

²¹ Brontë is known to have read Hunt's *The Town* (1848) about which she writes to W.S. Williams in 1849, expressing her favourable impressions on the piece (Eberle-Sinatra, 2013:125). Hunt wrote a number of other poems around subjects set in Italy, where he resided for a considerable time. The play "A Legend of Florence" is an elaboration on a traditional story "variously told by Italian authors, and [with which] I have taken my own liberties [...] accordingly" (Leigh Hunt, "A Legend of Florence", 1840:viii).

were received with acclaim in the years 1818-9 (Millbank, 2002:14)²². Perhaps this fact should not be surprising as in the years immediately following the Napoleonic Wars, the British public found renewed interest “in all things European, with the exclusion of things French” (Millbank, 2002:20).

For the Romantics and their Victorian successors, the story of Paolo and Francesca's adulterous love highlighted two of Dante's most important traits: a dramatic corporeal character description, which went hand in hand with what Carlyle defined as “a certain tragic passion fused with a spontaneous and natural sentiment of human piety” (Marroni, 1996:1) and the balance between the dramatically etched characters in the *Inferno* and the projection of their psychological human frailty which cannot but have influenced the 'realist' writing of the day. The monstrous Bertha Rochester, emerging for a single moment in literary time from the shadows of her Thornfield cell, projected into the pages of the novel by a few sketchy but saliently defining physical traits, could be a figure straight out of Dante's *Inferno*.

For the early Victorians, Italy was both a physical place and an emblematic 'region of the imagination' from which to draw inspiration. The early interest in Dante's work was of a diffuse and, considering the later ubiquitousness of his influence amongst the Romantics and Victorians, also of a more generalised nature, what Saglia (2002) refers to as “cultural appropriation”, a recognition of place beyond quotation or allusion. As a process, “cultural appropriation” allows for a fusion that leads to “inclusion and adoption of foreign, *other* signs into one's own cultural environment in order to aggrandize, enlarge and reinforce it” (Saglia, 2002:98) thus providing a methodology for the inclusion of images and ideas which would otherwise be difficult to reconcile. On the most obvious level, the image of Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* has transmuted from an

²² It is interesting to note that in the diary of John Cam Hobhouse, a friend of Foscolo's and commentator on Byron, a story is told in which Hobhouse attempted to promote the Italian poet's articles on Dante with Rees, the editor of Longmans. Rees declined to buy the articles because “everyone is sick of Dante” (Havely, 2014:128), thereby confirming what must have thus been seen as the public's overexposure to discussions and publications around Dante's work.

element derived from a foreign text to becoming an “assimilation [that] corresponds to a domestication of diversity” (Saglia, 2002:96). This, however, does not preclude the direct borrowing of images, which goes beyond the general absorption of spirit of place but still not identifiable as quotations.

The presence of Dante's figure of Cerberus thus works on a number of levels. As an example of cultural appropriation, the image is “foreign”, Italian as well as Classical, filtered through a series of important re-framings, moving from the Greek *Kerberos*, monstrous son of Greek gods, to Dante's *Cerbero*. As dramatic characterisation, the image is a visually identified reference to the set of Dantesque characteristics; black hair, red eyes, long nails for ripping flesh, grovelling on all fours, canine appearance. In Brontë use and possibly appropriation, has been made of this principal image, turning the monstrous dog-as-guardian into the monstrous dog-as-woman image, while aligning many of the core associations from the one to the other. However, the relevance of the link stretches more broadly and subsumes the ambivalence that Brontë displayed throughout her life towards Catholicism. In its ‘new’ placement in *Jane Eyre* the figure addresses a number of related issues.

In their three defining characteristics these two ‘hell hounds’ share salient traits; they both have animal-like behavioural and animalistic physical attributes; copious amounts of dishevelled black hair and crimson, bloodshot eyes. Although Brontë does not refer to the red eyes in this specific instance, they had already been mentioned in the preceding chapter of the novel where Jane describes the redness twice – “the roll of the red eyes” (Brontë, 1847:345) and the “black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes” (345) - when Bertha usurps and tears Jane's wedding veil on the eve of the latter's marriage. The image of Bertha as red-eyed is therefore already established before the appearance of the animal-like Bertha. Further, they are both “strange” and “savage”; the one a frightening, three-headed canine creature, the other a dog-like human being, one has claws that flay the souls entering into Hell, while the other is reported to have physically lacerated her own brother, Richard Mason, in the vestibule to the same chamber (“she bit and stabbed you here”,

Brontë, 1847:359) while later in the same scene also physically attacking her husband Edward²³.

However, Diane Hoeveler points out the most highly significant anomaly between Bertha Mason's first appearance in Jane's bed chamber and her second appearance in her own attic-cell:

[...] this description differs significantly from the previous description Jane had given only twenty-four hours earlier to Rochester. There Bertha's hair was long and dark; now it is grizzled like an ape's. Then she had worn a white sheath; now she is a wild animal seemingly covered with a coat of fur. Her demonization, her abjection, her objectification – all are motivated by Jane's intense guilt and shame. (Hoeveler, 1998:218)

This anomaly, however, rather than showing “Jane's intense guilt and shame”, may, in fact, be explained by positing the influence of Dante's Cerberus passage as the source-text for Brontë's description. In Dante's portrayal the infernal creature's black mane is “atra”, or “grizzled”, similar to Bertha's now “grizzled” hair, while in Brontë's text Bertha's body, in order to fulfil the important “abjection” of which Hoeveler speaks, has been shown transformed through a process of profound degradation: from woman, albeit monstrous, to the animal-like status of the ‘beast’, of which Dante's Cerberus may have offered the most starkly rendered prototype. Bertha Rochester's Gothic intensity is mainly attributable to the monstrosity of her

²³ While in Cary's translation the creature more elegantly “barks”, Dante's Cerberus “howls” (“lata”) in a ferocious, animal-like manner, preparing the reader for the verb “disquarta” or “quarters”, rather than Cary's more sedate “disparts”, which reduces the extent of the savagery, and with it, some of the impact of the image. In Brontë's version, the animal-like creature “grovelled” while it “snatched and growled”, the “strangeness” serving to dissociate it from the human norm, while it's “bellow[ing]” aligns it to the animal. Brontë's version is more starkly horrifying and closer in spirit to the Dante original, underlining the similarity of the images. However, this textual reading adds a further question of whether Brontë could have in fact based her image on the original Italian, which in itself becomes another line of investigation.

physical appearance, a quality she shares with a fantastic trans-species, almost entirely alienated from the human form. Is there the possibility, then, that Brontë may have known the works of Dante and used this episode from *Inferno* VI, as a model for the description of the mad woman in the upper floor of the Hall? In her effort to describe the fullest horror of 'otherness', identified as a process of transmutation from the human to the monstrous, Brontë may have turned to the culturally defined terms of reference to be found in an author seen as producer of archetypal literary interstate monstrosity, Dante himself.

Much has been written about the first Mrs. Rochester's physical appearance, the Caribbean connection alone spawning an array of literary commentaries. Bertha, starting off initially as exotic 'Other', a shadowy Caribbean presence emerging from the outer perimeters of Victorian colonial interests, becomes more emblematic through a layering of visual imagery and references drawn from the standard tropes of the Gothic genre. At this point of the novel Bertha Rochester serves the narrative function of fulfilling the reader's highly anguished Gothic expectations. The Gothic genre predetermines the reader's appraisal of the entrapped first wife in an obligatory vision of arresting physical horror. All the common themes of the Gothic mode are present: isolation, entrapment, female subjugation, madness, physical disintegration. The dog-like creature in the attic of the castle is a figure of horror meant to cast doubt on the very 'reality' experienced by the characters up to this point of the narrative. The chaos of uncertainty, identifiable here with a process of change from the human to the semi-human, is at the core of Brontë's understanding of the female condition. In order to maximise the *unheimlich* of the 'Other' Brontë has used the recoil offered by trans-species indefinability to be found in a long literary tradition, and still to this day a powerful part of the Gothic interrogation of taboo. When, towards the end of *Jane Eyre*, the reader finally comes into contact with what had only, until this point, been a series of Gothic literary reverberations, the mysterious figure is finally defined by iconography of madness-as-alterity, outside of the human: evil as half beast/half human confined to the periphery of everyday human experience.

In the tradition of Medieval bestiaries and early travel literature – of which Charlotte's brother Branwell was most fond (Duthie, 1975) – the deepest incongruity and strangeness possible for the human form is the monstrous hybridity offered by the condition of trans-species, the obfuscation of demarcation between the real and the marvellous. Literature dedicated to the 'strange' and the 'fantastic' could thus allow a latitude for disorder and subversion in all "perfect societies" in order to allow them to "revel in human disorder" (Flores, 2007:555)²⁴. This is a metaphorical literary territory to which a 'realist' Victorian writer could revert in the effort of finding textual forebears in which to cast the half human/half animal. This literary need is still seen in the numerous popular novels and films that rely on the shift between the human and the animal²⁵. Such an appropriation of Dante's Cerberus, a fantastic dog-creature that functions as a human flagellating judge punishing human error, could be an easy forebear to which to turn for this descriptive need.

The figure of Bertha Mason, at the core of the Gothic field of the novel, is thus not simply a visual trope providing a superficial *frisson* of fear but also a ready excuse for a re-visioning of the other interpersonal relationships between the dominant patriarchal figure, Edward Rochester, and the rest of the subordinated, and largely subjugated, female characters. The interplay of the multiple relationships brings together the female individuals found in this juncture of the novel, in which issues of personal choice and patterns of survival in the closely structured Victorian society form the backdrop to the novel. Gilbert and Guber posit Bertha as "Jane's truest and darkest double" (1979:360), the first Mrs. Rochester being, in their reading of the text, the mirror image of Jane, projected by Jane herself, to explore what could be the result of a loss of empowerment should Jane become subjected to the masculine supremacy of Rochester's patriarchal male power.

²⁴ Flores studies the transportation of the marvelous from the Mughal court to Europe in the 17th century but offers some interesting notions on the process of transference of literary imagery in general.

²⁵ The novels *Zoo City* (2010) or *Broken Monster* (2015) by Karen Beukes being simply the most recent in a tradition of similarly themed works to have been highly successful in recent years.

However, Bertha Rochester's significance goes beyond the parameters of simply being Jane's double. Her placement at the core of the novel, of the castle and thus of the meaning of the text, makes for a presence more integral to the meaning than a simply reversed mirror image of Jane. Her position as the core of the novel's message sets her up as a foil for all the other female characters at Thornfield Hall. Bertha is linked in one way or another to the other female characters in this part of the novel: to Jane as her putative romantic rival, in 'combat' for the affections of Rochester; to Mrs. Fairfax as unacknowledged prisoner or ward ("She was kept in very close confinement, ma'am; people even for some years were not absolutely certain of her existence", Brontë, 1847:524); to Adele Varens as barely tolerated social burden of Edward's social 'obligations' ("Pilot is more like me than her", Brontë, 1847:173); to Grace Poole, the paid servant, who as subordinated, disempowered female figure in the employ to the 'master', is expected to be the strong arm of Bertha's factual incarceration and Edward Rochester's 'agent' in control ("Mr. Rochester stayed a moment behind us, to give some further order to Grace Poole", Brontë, 1847:358). Jane herself has already drawn some of these secondary characters together by citing their names in the *elenchus* she makes when describing the events on the night of the wedding-veil rending:

Mr. Rochester, this was not Sophie, it was not Leah, it was not Mrs. Fairfax: it was not – no, I was sure of it, and still am – it was not even that strange woman, Grace Poole. (Brontë, 1847:344)

On a metaphorical level Bertha's Gothic 'presence' embodies the Victorian concern with the social 'disorder' resulting from the loss of rigid surveillance. When associated with the guardian's sleep this allows for the rise of the 'monster' at Thornfield Hall, a fact that also threatens the advent of "fires of Hell", the dangers of which we are warned against at the onset of the novel. The reader is aware that these "fires" are factual as well as metaphorical; they metaphorically threatened the young Jane's psychic wellbeing at the beginning of the novel, fires that are equated with the threat of eternal damnation

spurring her on to take control of her own life and matching Brocklehurst's threat with belligerent individuality. Fires physically threaten the older Jane's life in her encounter with Rochester in his burning bed chamber, where the fire is twinned with the first implied amorous *rapprochement* between the two. Both these interpretations of the fire – metaphorical and factual – finally come together at the end of the novel in the physical destruction of the Hall. However, through the inclusion of the visual link to Cerberus, if we agree to its relevance, the symbolic value also extends to the threat of patriarchal 'damnation' to which the other female characters may be subjected except for the intercession of the first Mrs. Rochester. On a plot level, Bertha Mason's actions enable a resolution whereby Rochester is freed, although chastised, to marry again. However, on a more metaphorical level, her actions at the end of the novel as well as the imagery that surround them, posit Bertha Rochester as the 'keeper' of the doors of Hell, a fully-fledged archetypal image drawn from the resemblance between the physical and literary properties of Cerberus and the unlucky Bertha Mason from *Antigua*.

In Dante's canto, Cerberus has the dual role of 'pre-punishing' the souls – by quartering them ("*isquarta*") – while also allowing them entry into the third circle. In Dante's words, again echoed in the Cary translation, the figure of Cerberus lords "Over the multitude immersed beneath" just as Bertha's final moments are spent on the pinnacle of the roof, overlooking the expanse into which she will ultimately hurl herself. In the final chapters of *Jane Eyre*, the figure of Bertha completes this action of self-destruction, resolving the issues at the centre of the work, by plunging headlong into the fire that also destroys the Hall. In the meantime, she serves as visual intermediary between earth and Hell, the fiery pit surrounding the building within which she dies, which also holds the other characters, 'the multitude' of people whose fate she determines, both physically and metaphorically.

[...] he went up to the attics when all was burning above and below, and got the servants out of their beds and helped them down himself, and went back to get his mad wife out of her cell. And then they called out to him that

she was on the roof, where she was standing, waving her arms, above the battlements, and shouting out till they could hear her a mile off: I saw her and heard her with my own eyes. She was a big woman, and had long black hair: we could see it streaming against the flames as she stood. I witnessed, and several more witnessed, Mr. Rochester ascend through the sky-light on to the roof; we heard him call 'Bertha!' We saw him approach her; and then, m'am, she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement. (Brontë, 1847:526)

In this *denouement* attention is again drawn to the black mane silhouetted against the fiery sky, the character herself having been saved from a 'cell' in the manner of a Catholic recluse. Surrounded by the chaos of incoherent noise ("shouting out till they could hear her a mile off") much as in Dante's third circle the souls cry out in the manner of wild dogs ("*Urlar li fa la pioggia come cani*" *Inferno*, VI, v. 19 "[...] Howling there spread, as curs,/Under the rainy deluge, [...]")²⁶ her final action is that of suicide by jumping into the fiery scene below. The act of suicide, the voluntary taking on of the 'punishment', a mortal sin in terms of Dante's world view, however, here allows the action to be restored to the peace and rebirth of the 'happy ending'. In the shift from Dante's afterlife to the "domestication" of this act of sacrificial suicide the changes in the imagery also bring the actions from Dante's apocalyptic vision into the realm of the domesticated Gothic, with which Brontë is so often associated.

Bertha's actions thus stand as a barrier or threshold for all the female characters at Thornfield Hall where, by interposing herself between the 'saved' and the 'damned', she 'shelters' the other female characters from those "fires of hell" that, at the end of the novel, engulf everything ("[...] the house was burnt to the ground: there are only some bits of walls standing now", Brontë, 1847:526). In the anti-Catholic discourse prevalent in the years around the composition of

²⁶ Translation from Cary's *The Vision of Dante*, Canto VI, vv. 19-20.

the novel, and the mid-Victorian attitude to madness, the reader can find further peripheral support for this linkage between Dante and the Gothic image of the entrapped first wife. In the general way that “English anti-Catholicism was the fear of Catholic institutions and sacerdotal activity” (Peschier, 2005:52), so the particulars of the imagery can also be seen as popularly promulgated by probably the most famous Catholic of all, Dante Alighieri. Notably important is Brontë’s focus on the location of Bertha Rochester’s entrapment, the “secret inner chamber” (Brontë, 1847:377), the “wild beast’s den”, an enclosure that both confines the inhabitant and defines her personality.

Cary’s description of Dante’s poetry as “graphic and picturesque”²⁷ underscores the association made by nineteenth-century readings of the Medieval poet with expectations of romantic sublimity and dramatic impact. On this level the early Victorians could sublimate the imagistic and the visual by associating it with the medieval poet. Interestingly, Coleridge notes the physicality of Dante’s imagery, and although an admirer of Dante’s work, still feels distaste for the graphically overt descriptions that, in his view, do not include the high moral tones attributable to Milton (“[...] he is sometimes horrible rather than terrible [...] many of his images excite bodily disgust, and not moral fear”)²⁸. His work, “approached through such contemporary aesthetic categories [...] as the pathetic and the sublime, especially through their joint formulation in the Gothic literary mode” (Saglia, 2002:104), could provide an easily recognizable model with which to include secondary meanings, much like Brontë, who could be accused of the same.

A well-read Victorian woman, educated at home in a cultured environment, of a clerical family, who clearly knew “her language better than most ladies do, or has had a classical education” (Hurst, 2006:52)²⁹ would have been familiar with the harrowing figure created in Dante’s Hell. In a letter (260) to W.S. Williams of 4 July,

²⁷ Milbank (2002:20).

²⁸ Corrigan (1969:76).

²⁹ This was the opinion of Thackeray about the anonymous author of *Jane Eyre* in 1847 (Hurst, 2006:52).

1848, the author equates the figure of Mrs. Rochester with what she describes as “fiend-nature” (Shorter, 1969):

There is a phase which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind, and a fiend-nature replaces it. [...] The aspect, in such cases, assimilates with the disposition – all seem demonised. [...] I have erred in making horror too predominant. (383)

The “fiend-like” nature of this “moral madness” also ties the image integrally to the Victorian discourse on madness. But in order to effectively describe the physical properties of this “fiend nature”, Brontë seems to have referred closely to the Dantesque lesson, the canine imagery also pointing to a dual association between the dog and evil (Rowland, 1973:60) and the dog as guardian (62), both of which resonate with Bertha in the novel. An evil dog-like creature, entrapped in a windowless prison, running on all fours like an animal, both victim and perpetrator, crowned with black hair and glaring red eyes. She is the “unchaste” first wife, but also a barrier to the Hell symbolized by the fires that engulf Thornfield Hall at the end of the novel. Similarly, the vicious dog is the keeper of the doors of the third circle of Hell, both protector and monstrous victim, both outside of Hell as well as one of its inhabitants, just as Bertha Rochester, both perpetrator and victim, both protector and scourge, becomes the metaphorical monster at the doors of the patriarchal ‘Hell’ of Thornfield Hall. The fire at the Hall, which marks the before and after of the character of Edward Rochester powerful position in the novel’s plot, also determines the ascendance of Jane’s equality in the face of gender positioning. Beyond her physical and metaphorical presence lies the pit of Hell associated with the loss of self, just as beyond the figure of Cerberus in Dante’s *Inferno* lie further gradated levels of Hell as eternal damnation.

Rochester himself, showing Bertha to the assembled company straight after the abortive marriage ceremony, uses a similar register, describing Jane as “this young girl who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell” (Brontë, 1847:358). The link is a strong echo of a

cultural appropriation of this imagery, functionally inserted into a new placement, adding to its richness and taking it outside of its otherwise strictly defined meaning. Bertha protects, by allusion, the other female characters from the fate awaiting those who are not able to protect themselves from the dangers of annihilation threatened by the patriarchal figure of Rochester. The “fires of Hell” in the novel are the result of patriarchal dominance that is the inevitable part of loss of self³⁰. Jane’s childhood resolution expressed defiantly to Mr. Brocklehurst, to avoid the fires of hell by “keep[ing] in good health, and not [dying]” (Brontë, 1847:32) is terrifyingly realised at Thornfield Hall in encountering at first-hand what can happen to women in a state of social and personal vulnerability. Jane’s “fires of hell”, threatened in childhood, are faced in person in Thornfield Hall in the real arson perpetrated by the terrifying Gothic ‘Other’. However, but thanks to the latter, neither Jane nor the other female characters face the destruction that characterises part of the disempowered female state. In this appropriation of Dante’s imagery and conception of the afterlife, Brontë’s feminist ‘moral’ has taken on an entirely new ontological depth.

By starting the fire that consumes Thornfield Hall, Bertha also frees the other characters from the subjugation that had been their fate. She is dichotomously both a victim and a perpetrator, the cause of the fire and the agent for the release from the patriarchal bonds that potentially entrap the other female characters of the novel. Jane wins the battle for all the women of the novel by adhering to her own personal integrity – metaphorically and psycho-spiritually “keeping well” – which the first Mrs. Rochester literally and figuratively fails to do and, through her personal agency of choice, by surviving the “fires of hell”. Jane manages this feat, however, by learning the lesson obliquely taught by the figure of Bertha who, by standing between the female characters of the novel and the fires of hell that engulf the castle, saves them and sets them free. The *Inferno* has surely made a

³⁰ It is interesting to note that the dog as guardian, symbolically placed as a deterrent to entry into Hell, is also to be found in an anecdotal reference from Brontë’s personal life. Her sister Emily’s dog was called “Keeper” “that ferocious canine without whose company Emily Brontë would not stalk the moors” (Moers, 1963:260).

new place for itself in the Victorian environment of male-dominated stately homes, where governesses have to fight for their freedom and learn from the lessons of the former wife's downfall, and Dante, "the author of shocking tales", a writer who is "by extension, a Gothic, gloomy and ruthless author, enjoying gory descriptions and meeting out terrible punishments" (Saglia, 2002:104) is still seen as leading the way.

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