"HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE A WOMAN SCORNED": DIRECTED VIOLENCE AND ITS MEANING AS SEEN IN MEDÉA AND JANE EYRE

by

Allyson Clare Freeland

We the undersigned have read this thesis and agree that it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts.

[Signatures]

Dr. Sarah Ficke, Chair

Dr. Tonya-Marie Howe, second reader

Dr. Christina Clark, additional reader

Dr. Marguerite Rippy, DGS
“HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE A WOMAN SCORNED”:
DIRECTED VIOLENCE AND ITS MEANING AS SEEN IN MEDEA AND JANE EYRE

by

Allyson Clare Freeland

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
English Language and Literature
at Marymount University
November 30, 2018

Masters Committee:

Dr. Sarah Ficke, Chair
Dr. Tonya-Marie Howe, Second Reader
Dr. Christina Clark, Additional Reader
ABSTRACT

“HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE A WOMAN SCORNED”: DIRECTED VIOLENCE AND ITS MEANING AS SEEN IN MEDEA AND JANE EYRE

Allyson Clare Freeland

Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre was a revolutionary text and seemingly new story at the time of its publication, but by looking at it through the Classical lens, one may find that it is a refashioning of Euripides’ drama Medea. Both works focus on the “otherness” of characters and how “otherness” affects their place in society. This is exemplified in Bertha Mason and Medea. The similarities between Bertha and Medea are striking; both are foreign wives, utilized by their husbands to ensure prosperity. My paper builds on previous scholarship that Classical reception in the Victorian period allowed for women writers to be experimental with their writing and make the female voice heard. The significance of this research lies in Brontë’s revision of the myth to explore a different use of violence by focusing on the direction and possible intent. Unlike Medea who directs her violence towards innocents, Bertha directly punishes the transgressor, her husband. By revisioning Medea in the madwoman Bertha, Charlotte Brontë demonstrates how women backed into a corner could only be heard through violence. Readers clearly see Jane’s success is molded by the directed violence and transgression found in the
reincarnation of Medea/Bertha when viewed through a Classical lens, and that ultimately Jane is the new myth, the end of the cycle of scorn and abandonment. Using the connection between Jane and Bertha, Charlotte highlights the idealized Victorian woman and the chains that bound her. Jane is only able to subvert those through the violence of Bertha and Jane’s own ability to use interior aggression to form her authentic “self” devoid of “otherness.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Reader, “there is no happiness like that of being loved by your fellow creatures,” and I am extremely lucky to have the support of many people who deserve to be thanked for their involvement in this academic endeavor of mine. First to thank would be my illustrious advisor Dr. Sarah Ficke, who stood by and made sense of my endless ramblings and tangential thoughts and always spurred me on and steered me towards honing my argument and identifying my “so what.” Her guidance and breadth of experience in her field aided not only the composition of my thesis but molded me into a better literary scholar.

I also owe many thanks to my two readers, Dr. Tonya-Marie Howe and Dr. Christina Clark, whose insightful critiques truly allowed me to frame and organize my argument more fully. Special thanks are owed to Dr. Clark who went so far as to teach me a little Greek in order to further my understanding and improve my close reading of Medea. Furthermore, I owe thanks to my professors this semester for understanding my mental exhaustion, especially Dr. Holly Karapetkova for making certain allowances in my responsibilities as a TA and being a shoulder to lean on during the more stressful times in this process.

Finally, I owe insurmountable gratitude to my friends and family. Mom and Dad, you put
up with so much this semester; thank you for supporting me through the various ups and downs. Nhu, thanks for reading, editing, and listening during this process; I’ll repay you in the Spring. Courtney, if not for tacos and Bravo, I may not have survived. Finally, to Joe, thank you for reminding me to breathe and sleep, and letting me talk in circles endlessly to figure out what I was trying to say. I could never have completed this without your support, strength, and patience.

This process may have been long and arduous, but it was also worthwhile and fulfilling. While I will not be able to thank everyone who aided me, know that my debts are many and will not be forgotten. For everyone who listened and supported me, thank you.

Allyson C. Freeland
Marymount University, December 2018
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... i
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................. iii
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................. v
“Hell Hath No Fury like a Woman Scorned”: Directed Violence and its Meaning as Seen in *Medea* and *Jane Eyre*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Victorian Reception of the Classics</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>The Education of Charlotte Brontë</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Myth, Jane, and Violence</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited                                                                                         | 75   |
Bibliography                                                                                         | 79   |
“Hell Hath No Fury like a Woman Scorned”:
Directed Violence and its Meaning as Seen in Medea and Jane Eyre

Section I: Introduction

Feeling . . . clamoured wildly. “Oh, comply!” it said. “. . . soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for you? or who will be injured by what you do?” Still indomitable was the reply: “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. … I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation. They have a worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. (Brontë 328-329)

The Anglophone modern world owes many thanks to the scholars of Antiquity. From literature, democracy, medicine, science and mathematics, to mythology and the Olympics, much of the world we inhabit has been influenced and shaped by the minds of Ancient Greece. However, unless one studies within the discipline of Classics, the influence of these figures is often ignored or glossed over. In fact, so many of the humanities disciplines have their own “classics” that this nomenclature can be confusing. However, the Ancient influence has

---

1 This is from William Congreve’s The Mourning Bride, significant as the main female character Zara is held captive by her husband, much like Bertha Mason.
permeated and molded every time period and genre. This thesis aims to connect two periods, Antiquity and Victorian, through two classics, Euripides’ Medea and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. According to twentieth-century English classicist Bernard Knox, “the Victorians appropriated the ancient Greeks [and] imagined them as contemporaries,” (qtd. in Olverson 1-2). Victorians thought they were made in the Hellenic image giving them free reign to experiment outside of their puritanical perceptions as they often saw within the Ancient texts both the sacred and profane, the elevated and debased. While many of the Classical Greek and Roman texts were studied in their entirety, some of the more violent stories such as Medea which, in many of its variant myths includes filicide, were sanitized. This was intended not to change the meaning, but to protect audiences from what, in the Victorian period, was seen as the extreme violence within the tales. However, even with this sanitization of her filicide, Medea’s ability to disturb and transgress societal norms and break free of her chains of expectation, without punishment, resonated with the Victorian audience.

In Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë uses the Medea story to explore female desire, power, and violence in a manner wholly outside of the expected. Bertha Mason, Rochester’s Creole betrothed, echoes the mythical heroine Medea. Both are powerful examples of “otherness” and use their aggression to further themselves. The two characters share very similar situations, actions, and outcomes, but Bertha is clearly more than a dull copy of Medea’s character. In this thesis, I argue that Bertha is a reincarnation of Medea, used by Brontë to highlight the power of female voice given its silencing at the hands of a patriarchal society. Bertha, acting as the double

---

2 Medea was not the only tragic woman from Greek drama who inspired Victorian woman writers. See further in T.D. Olverson’s Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism.
for Jane Eyre; mirrors Jane’s underlying violence and anger, and acts as guardian and catalyst for Jane’s growth at the end of the novel thereby making a case about Victorian womanhood.

To discuss Medea, one must understand that myths begin as oral narratives which are occasionally crystallized in written texts. Euripides based his Medea on the mythical character familiar from a wide variety of representations in multiple media, as did Apollonios Rhodios later in his Argonautica. Each of the varying renditions of the Medea myth highlights a different or new aspect to her tale as illustrated in the table below: As explained by Classics scholar Sarah Johnston, “Medea was represented by the Greeks as a complex figure, fraught with conflicting desires and exhibiting an extraordinary range of behavior. In this regard, she differs from most of the other figures we meet in Greek myth, who present far simpler personae” (6). Essentially, this is to explain that the Greeks had a very different understanding of canon in that, while each Medea is still the same character and person, each may be different from the other, yet all are genuine and real portrayals of the ancient character. Medea is simply not monolithic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hesiod, Theogony (1)</th>
<th>Explains the genealogy of Medea. She is granddaughter to the sun god Helios, niece to Circe, and she is born of Aietes and an Okeanid wife. The Theogony continues with the record of Jason and Medea’s union and explains that this was the will of the gods.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica (20)</td>
<td>Discusses Colchis before Jason arrives and includes a prophecy to Aietes that he will find ruin at the hand of one of his offspring. Phrixos, Aietes’ son-in-law, dies of old age and tells Aietes to marry off Medea quickly or ruin will befall him.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Explained in more detail in a later section, see Gilbert and Gubar’s Madwoman in the Attic for further discussion.
4 Ancient pottery and artists’ renditions of the myth have not been added to the table as they are outside the scope of this thesis. All information for this table was taken from Timothy Gantz’s Early Greek Myth. The table is in the mythical timeline, the numeration identifies the historical chronology of the works composition.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pindar</td>
<td>Pythian 4 (5)</td>
<td>Mostly an account of Pelias and Jason and the prophecy that Jason will bring death to Pelias. In Pindar’s retelling Pelias sends Jason to retrieve the Golden Fleece explaining that he is too old to go himself. Once in Colchis, Aphrodite teaches Jason to use charms to beguile Medea to his side and Pindar explains the tasks set for Jason to complete. Pindar does not explain the final return of Jason and Medea to Iolkos but near the end of the ode Pindar notes that Medea will cause Pelias’ death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pherekydes</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>Mostly an account of Pelias and Jason, yet in this version Pelias, after receiving the prophecy from Delphi, asks Jason his advice if he were in the same situation. According to Pherekydes and later repeated by Apollodoros, Hera puts the idea of the Golden Fleece into Jason’s head in order to bring Medea back to Iolkos as a bane to Pelias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostoi (Agias, Homer, or Eumelos)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>This is a lost Epic but in it Medea revives Jason’s father when he returns to Iolkos with her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euripides</td>
<td>Peliades (11)</td>
<td>This is a lost drama by Euripides explaining the death of Pelias at the hands of Medea. All knowledge of this is from a summary where after rejuvenating a ram in a cauldron of boiling water and herbs Medea persuades the daughters of Pelias to kill their aging father and boil him in a similar way. Jason and Medea depart for Corinth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophocles</td>
<td>Rhizotomoi (7)</td>
<td>Similar story to the one in Euripides Peliades where Media kills Pelias after appearing as a cutter of poisonous herbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pindar</td>
<td>Olympian Odes (6)</td>
<td>Explains Jason and Medea in Colchis and portrays Medea as more responsible for her choice to betray her family and help Jason, in lieu of blaming god’s intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herodoros</td>
<td>Naupaktia (12)</td>
<td>A lost epic poem where Aphrodite helps the Argonauts escape from Aietes’ murderous intent and Medea, hearing them depart, takes the fleece to the Argonauts and leaves with them. Herodoros agrees with the Naupaktia but explains that Jason does indeed retrieve the fleece and then Aietes tries to kill him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollonios</td>
<td>Argonautika (15)</td>
<td>Explains the entire story of Jason’s travels to Colchis from Iolkos and back, explaining the tasks and highlighting how integral Medea was to the success of the Argonauts. This rendition goes into great detail about Medea and the Argonauts escape and explains the death of Medea’s brother (alluded to in Euripides’ Medea) and Jason and Medea’s marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accius</td>
<td>Medea (16)</td>
<td>Dramatizes the event of Medea and Jason killing her brother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author/Source</td>
<td>Summary/Details</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ovid, <em>Metamorphoses, Heroides, Tristia</em> (17)</td>
<td>Encompasses most of the Medea myth especially her relationship with Jason after fleeing Colchis, namely, her ability to revive his father. Continues on to her interactions with Aietes in Athens and being driven away by Theseus.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollodoros, <em>Epitome</em> within the <em>Bibliotheke</em> (18)</td>
<td>Takes place after Medea has moved to Athens and is living with Aigeus. Medea persuades Aigeus to try and destroy Theseus (unrecognized or unacknowledged by his father) by sending him to combat the Marathonian Bull. Theseus is able to capture the bull and thus Medea tries to poison Theseus but is foiled by Aigeus when he recognizes Theseus as his son and slaps the poison away.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plutarch, <em>Theseus</em> (19) Kallimachos, <em>Hekale</em> (13) Philochoros (14)</td>
<td>Follows the same part of the story of Medea only she attempts to poison Theseus as soon as he arrives and the bull is only captured due to its menacing the countryside. In Plutarch, Theseus only captures the bull after disposing of Medea.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragments of Greek lyric poets, D.L. Page, <em>Poetae Melici Graeci</em> (3)</td>
<td>In the fragments from the lyric poetry the lyric poets, Ibykos and Simonides, bring Achilles and Medea to the Elysian plain and unites them in marriage.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the purpose of this thesis I will be referring to Medea’s mythic background in a uniform manner. While I fully understand that there are many variants of her story, Euripides’ retelling is the version I am focusing on and the version I argue Charlotte Brontë is recreating. I will explain Medea’s background with the parts of her myth that are alluded to in Euripides’ Medea. The story of Medea begins with Jason the Argonaut, a man tasked by King Pelias to retrieve the Golden Fleece from King Aeëtes in Colchis, a nearly impossible task. The fleece, from the ram of Phrixos, symbolized authority. In order to collect the fleece, Jason must complete three dangerous tasks. Medea, the daughter of Aeëtes, falls in love with Jason, either of

---

5 The story of Medea explained here has been summarized from Apollonios’ *Argonautica* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* but includes only what Euripides would have been aware of or alluded to in his drama. Ovid. *Met.* VII. 1-450, AP. Rhod., *Argon.* ii. 1268-1270, iv.123ff.163.
her own volition or through Eros and Aphrodite’s trickery with their love tipped arrows. Medea uses her magic and cleverness to aid Jason in the completion of the tasks, but in the end, her father refuses to give the fleece to Jason. Medea then steals the fleece and gives it to Jason once he promises to marry her and take her with him to Greece.

Medea is a powerful woman, descended from the god Helios, who can use magic and intelligence to aid her. She is ruthless, betraying her family for love and going so far to ensure her future with Jason that she kills her brother. Throughout her partnership with Jason, she demonstrates the lengths she will go to achieve her ends, violently removing anyone who gets in their way. For instance, she uses her magic to convince the daughters of King Pelias to make mincemeat of their father after he had Jason’s family executed. This caused Jason and Medea to be banished from Jason’s home, effectively removing Jason’s security. The two moved to Corinth and lived there peacefully for ten years before the King of Corinth offered his daughter’s hand in marriage to Jason, marking the beginning of Euripides’ Medea.

In Charlotte Brontë’s novel, Bertha Rochester is the secret first wife of Edward Rochester. She is a Creole living in the West Indies, a colony of Great Britain. The Mason family was a well-off merchant family that caught the eye of Edward’s avaricious father, who ordered his second son to marry the unattached Bertha, thereby securing their family wealth. After very little time, the two were quietly married, and the Rochester name and fortune was firmly secured.

---

6 Apollonius Rhodius, Argonautica 3. 25 ff (trans. Rieu) (Greek epic C3rd B.C.): “[Hera addresses Athene (Athena):] ‘We must have a word with Aphrodite. Let us go together and ask her to persuade her boy [Eros/Cupid], if that is possible, to loose an arrow at Aeetes’ daughter, Medea of the many spells, and make her fall in love with Jason (Jason) . . .’ The solution to their problem pleased Athene, who smilingly replied: ‘Sprung as I am from Zeus, I have never felt the arrows of the Boy, and of love-charms I know nothing.’”

7 There are a few versions of this episode where Medea kills her brother, regarding the specific events and situations that occur. While Euripides’ character Medea laments that she did kill her brother, I am unsure of which variant Euripides is referring and have kept the description of this event as simple as possible.

8 Another episode specifically explained by the Nurse in Euripides’ drama and thus extant in Euripides’ time.
As explained by Edward Rochester, Bertha went mad soon after their nuptials. After four years of marriage and madness, Rochester spirits Bertha away to England and hides her in the attic, abandoning her for other women and lands, living as a rich bachelor. Jane Eyre on the other hand, is a British citizen (subject) yet is also plagued with “otherness.” Jane is an orphan, raised in her rich aunt’s household, where she is abused by her cousins, until she is sent off to school to become a governess. She is poor and rejected by her family, desperately trying to fit in somewhere and make herself a home. According to Victorian scholar Mary Poovey,

The governess is . . . significant because of the proximity she bears to two of the most important Victorian representations of woman: the figure who epitomized the domestic ideal, and the figure who threatened to destroy it. Because the governess was like the middle-class mother in the work she performed, but like both a working-class woman and man in the wages she received, the very figure who theoretically should have defended the naturalness of separate spheres threatened to collapse the difference between them.

(127)

Thus, even Jane’s profession, not only her birth, set her apart from others, cloaking her in a palpable “otherness.” She is employed by supposed-bachelor Rochester to teach his ward Adele and after some time the two fall in love. She is straddling both this mothering role to her charge Adele, and the role of aggressive employee when asking Rochester for money. All the while pushing further outside the expected realm of womanhood by Rochester’s passionate pursuit. Jane ultimately, is the completed cycle of the Medea myth, as her “otherness” sets her apart, and her interior aggression likens her to both Bertha and Medea. However, she is able to circumvent
the cycle due to the actions Bertha will make and thus, Charlotte’s ideal Medea figure is established within Bertha Mason, a woman sacrificing herself for the betterment of other women.

The similarities between Bertha and Medea are striking: both are foreign wives, utilized by their husbands to ensure prosperity. Both women cause their husbands disquiet through their actions and conduct, particularly their violence. These two women, Bertha and Medea, deluded by love or parental urging, found themselves in situations where their hands were permanently tied. Both were at the mercy of their husbands, and both were cast aside for new wives. With such similar backgrounds and stories, a comparison of Bertha and Medea is natural. However, Bertha owes the broad strokes of her character entirely to Medea, as she is a revisioning of Medea within a Victorian timeframe. This connection between the two renders any comparison of the characters less about the coincidence of women in similar positions separated by millennia, and more about deliberate identification by Charlotte Brontë of one ancient character as a model for creating a tragedy of the Victorian woman.

The discussion of rights is essential in the fundamental exploration of the influence of Medea on *Jane Eyre*. Unlike Bertha, Euripides’ Medea is given autonomy and a humanity that sets her apart from other retellings and allows her the ability to expose the inequalities felt by women at the time. For example, in her reproach to Jason she explained that by harming her family and killing King Pelias, “you [Jason] have made me an icon of Greek womanhood” (Euripides *Medea* 464-518). She is saying this ironically because within Greece she is not known as the heroine, but as the barbarian wife of Jason, a butcher, whereas he is known as the hero who retrieved the golden fleece. Women were not citizens in Athenian culture and thus could not participate in contracts with substantial funds, own property, appear in legal courts, or join the
assemblies (O’Neal). They were considered part of the household oikos and subject to their male caretaker. Women began as subject to their fathers and then to their husbands. This is demonstrated by Aristotle in his Politics when he says, "Silence is a woman's glory," (1260a19); “man and woman, master and slave,” (1245b12); “the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying,” (1260a11), and that is merely Book One. The rights (or lack thereof) of native Greek women aside, as Medea was not a native of Greece, she was not technically married to Jason, a citizen of Iolkos. Non-citizen women had no legal rights in the Athenian culture and while she and Jason were “married” through a foreign ceremony, an oath in the eyes of the gods; this did not give her the same rights as non-barbarian women would have held. To add insult to injury, any children born to her, even in Iolkos, would not be citizens.

Within Ancient Greek society were polis-specific citizenships, so while Jason was a citizen of Iolkos, he was not a citizen of Corinth. However, he could become a citizen of Corinth by marriage as he was a natural born Greek male. It is important to mention that Euripides was writing for an Athenian audience and he had no need to explain these laws in his version of Medea as they were accepted and known to his audience. To be a citizen of Athens during this time a male must have two naturally born “citizen” parents. A person who was a non-citizen, and who was not a slave, woman, or short-term foreign guest (xenos), was called a metic (metioikos) and had limited legal protection through a citizen patron. While citizenship could be granted, it was extremely rare (Martin). This meant that Medea, while being Jason’s “wife,” would never

9 “And Medea, in despair, rejected by her husband, howls out "the oaths he swore" and calls upon the right hand, a potent symbol of fidelity, and invokes the gods to witness Jason's treatment of her” (Euripides Medea 19-22).
10 Euripides Medea, Chorus: “You sailed from your father's home with maddened heart between the double rocks of the sea and you live on foreign soil, abandoned, with no man in your marriage bed, poor woman, now an exile from this land you are driven away without rights” (430-436).
hold a title and their children would never be considered citizens and thus held no legal protection or rights.

Although Bertha’s father is a British colonist in Jamaica, she is more closely associated with her mother, who is identified as “a Creole” (Brontë 354). This association positions Bertha as a foreigner, disassociated from British identity, even as Rochester brings her back to England and locks her in his attic. Whether they were foreign- or native-born, Victorian wives had few rights. Victorian women became the legal dependents of their husbands and had no right to divorce, no right to their own finances or property, and no rights to their bodies. They were expected to be “Angels in the House,” essentially women who were seen, unheard, and who turned a blind eye to their husbands’ infidelities and debauchery while maintaining their households and status. In simple terms, their job was to maintain their public persona of chastity and purity, masking the truth of their inequality in marriage and life. As Mary Poovey explains,

The representation of woman not only as dependent but as needing the control that was the other face of protection was integral to the separation of spheres and everything that followed from it, because this image provided a defensible explanation for inequality. If women were governed not by reason (like men), but by something else, then they could hardly be expected (or allowed) to participate in the economic and political fray. (11) Thus, the ideal Victorian woman was not allowed independence, but needed to be controlled for she was not lead by reason, but emotion or passion, and that needed to be controlled and

11 This phrase began in reference to Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem “The Angel in the House” written about his “perfect” wife and her place in the household. “Man must be pleased; but him to please/ Is woman's pleasure;” (Patmore, IX, 1). In 1931 Virginia Woolf wrote a paper called “Professions for Women” and said, “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.” See more in Nina Auerbach’s Women and the Demon.
protected by and from men. Although there are similarities in the ways Athenian and Victorian societies legally controlled wives, one major difference between them was that women in Athenian society could divorce their husbands and maintain their dowry, but upon doing so lost all rights to their children.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, the example of Medea, especially painted within a pro-woman light as it was often during the Victorian period, would leave a lasting impression on a woman who wanted to use her voice to explain her ideas of female autonomy and equality in marriage to the general public.\textsuperscript{13}

Nina Auerbach complicates the Victorian understanding of women in her book, \textit{Women and the Demon}, where she points out that while feminist criticism has consistently exposed the repressive implications of the Victorian myth of woman as an “angel in the house,” that myth actually disguises another dominant but unformulated myth - the myth of woman as demonic, polymorphous, vital, dangerous and transcendent (14). Auerbach’s myth is “a myth crowning a disobedient woman in her many guises as heir of the ages and demonic savior of the race” (20). Since the social structure of Victorian England was divided by class and gender, according to Auerbach it found at some imaginative freedom in the vision of “an explosively mobile, magic woman” who was celebrated for her “defiance of three cherished Victorian institutions: the family, the patriarchal state, and God the Father” (8). So too, does Brontë use her revisional Medea myth to highlight the freedom of the demonic woman, ironic in that her demonic woman is confined in an attic. As Poovey explains, defying Victorian institutions is difficult “because

\textsuperscript{12} Which is a large point of contention within Euripides \textit{Medea}, as Jason’s marriage to the Princess of Corinth could have secured protection for his metic children.

\textsuperscript{13} Here, I am working on the understanding of Charlotte’s feelings of governesses and how she writes often about their plight in order to educate her audience. For further scholarship on this idea see, Alexander, Bloom, Smith, Gilbert and Gubar, and Chase.
there was no permissible plot in the nineteenth century for a woman's anger, whenever Brontë explores this form of self-assertion the text splinters hysterically, provoked by and provoking images of dependence and frustration (141). Brontë uses a tale that is known for being complicated and controversial to mold her Victorian myth, recreates Medea in Bertha to give her the demonic power she needs, and in Jane demonstrates how women can subvert their situation and better themselves, becoming equal in the marriage.

Medea and Bertha, scorned and abandoned by their husbands, banished from their new homes, subvert the control of their husbands. Both of them resort to violent forms of aggression to regain autonomy from their husbands and the laws society placed on them. After Jason accepts the marriage between himself and the princess of Corinth, Medea is banished but manipulates the Corinthian king into giving her twenty-four hours to depart. In order to exact her revenge against Jason for his infidelity, she directs her violence and rage against the princess of Corinth, her father, King Creon (who is the one to banish Medea), and her own children. She poisons a dress and a veil and sends them to the princess. The poison causes the princess’ skin to melt from her bones and catch fire. King Creon walks into this scene and tries to smother the flames with his body, catching fire and dying as he holds the charred remains of his daughter. After this, Medea turns to her children and, while arguing profusely with herself over the decision, ultimately kills both of them, concluding that it is the only way to perform a two-pronged attack against Jason and his oath breaking. Once the act of filicide is complete, Medea flies off in a chariot of fire.

---

14 Bertha is banished and imprisoned in the attic, Medea is banished from her own home and Jason’s after he leaves her for the princess of Corinth.
15 Given to her by Helios her grandfather.
16 In certain older versions of the Medea myth, her children are killed by the Corinthians as revenge for their princess. However, Euripides is credited with changing this detail when he wrote his drama. See more in Michael Ewans’ Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation.
sent down by her grandfather Helios, leaving Jason to live with the knowledge that his bride and children are dead. In doing this, Medea removes his means of living: he loses the foothold he was trying to build for his family in Corinth along with his family itself. She leaves him in exactly the same position that he was in when the two first met, making her revenge tangible as well as psychological.

Bertha, similarly, fights back against her imprisonment in the attic and her lack of autonomy imposed by Rochester. Bertha menaces Jane, sets fire to Rochester’s bed, rips Jane’s wedding veil in two, and then sets fire to Rochester’s home. Her final action, setting Thornfield on fire, allows her to find freedom from her oppression in the flames and in the process symbolically castrates Rochester by blinding him and injuring his right hand. Much like how Rochester took Bertha’s home away from her and locked her in an attic, she took his home away from him as well as marred his appearance. She levels the playing field for Jane, but also brings Rochester as low as she can without killing him.

These two women fight against their imposed loss of autonomy and their very real sense of inequality. Both women perform similar actions and cause their husbands to fall into lowly positions. These connections go a step further when the rights and laws surrounding women, especially foreign women, are compared. It is important to note that Bertha and the princess of Corinth are nonspeaking and non-point-of-view characters within their respective texts. Bertha is introduced and understood only through Rochester’s and Jane’s perception of her, which parallels the princess of Corinth who is seen only through other character’s perception of her. This is important given that Medea is the main character of Euripides’ drama but Bertha, in Charlotte’s retelling, is more like the princess of Corinth, losing more autonomy and
individuality. This extends her “otherness” past that of a foreign woman, separating her even from the readers throughout most of the novel and never allowing the readers inside her own thoughts. I take their connection a step further: Charlotte Brontë knew the myth and would have connected Medea’s violence and aggression to the Victorian woman’s plight. There are many reasons it can be argued that Bertha Mason is not simply a character with echoes to Medea, but a reincarnation of Medea with significant differences. These reasons range from Charlotte’s upbringing as the child of a minister, with access to influential and somewhat radical texts, the exceptional education she received, to her propensity to use other texts, such as her father’s, within her juvenilia and make the story her own. Charlotte Brontë changed the myth to create a new Medea-like figure who acts as seer and protector to Jane Eyre and helps break the tragic cycle to construct a successful myth, where before was merely a tragedy highlighting the plight of “other” women.

While the similarities, which will be discussed in greater detail later, are obvious, the significance of this thesis lies in how Charlotte Brontë has changed the mythic narrative. Medea is a story of revenge, it is a story of a woman working alone in order to exert her power and autonomy in her world. Jane Eyre, especially when viewed through Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s lens of doubles, is a story not of revenge but of symbiosis. Bertha acts not only to avenge her own dishonoring, like Medea, but to end the cycle of “otherness” and control. I argue that Charlotte Brontë drew on Medea—a character who was acting on her own, using justified violence and anger to prove her autonomy—but split her into multiple personas; aspects of

---

17 I am extrapolating here as within Euripides’ drama, no one interferes with her actions. The Chorus considers protecting Medea’s children, but ultimately do not, and the gods seem to condone her actions insofar as no furies or punishments were sent her way.
Medea appear in Bertha, to be sure, but they also appear in Jane. While Bertha reincarnates Medea, Jane mirrors her. Jane, an orphan, another form of “other” or foreigner within the tale, could easily become another Bertha, a now homeless woman in love with a man who could destroy both her character and being. Jane, like Bertha, has similar aggressive tendencies, shown by her early violence towards her cousin and aunt and her later aggression towards other women like Grace Poole and Blanche Ingram. Throughout her history with Rochester, Jane is saved from the fate of becoming another scorned and enslaved wife like Bertha, by Bertha. Her sacrifice ends the cycle of violence directed against women and allows Jane to succeed in her union with Rochester. Unlike Medea, Bertha directs her violence not at Jane, but at Rochester, attacking the man himself and any symbols of his control over Jane. Within the Medea, Medea does not see the Princess of Corinth as a person of merit or anything other than a pawn in her revenge against Jason. Bertha, while similar to Medea, has ample opportunity to kill Jane, but I argue sees Jane as a similar “other,” as she never hurts her. This connection between Jane and Bertha is very dissimilar to the connection between the second wife and Medea. While many scholars have discussed the relationship between Jane and Bertha,¹⁸ this thesis complicates that discussion by also comparing the relationship of Medea and the princess of Corinth.

This thesis will establish the connection between these two works, Euripides’ Medea and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, and demonstrate Brontë’s revisioning of the myth by changing the narrative and the direction of violence to give Victorian women a voice.

¹⁸ See further studies about the relationship between these two women by Gilbert and Gubar Madwoman in the Attic, Jean Rhys Wide Sargasso Sea, and Karen Stein, “Monsters and Madwomen.”
Section II: Victorian Reception of the Classics

In point of fact, there existed virtually no Victorian interest in the classics for their own sake. The Victorian treatment or treatments of antiquity were always more of a function of the response to contemporary classical writers and scholarship than to the ancient documents and plastic remains themselves. To the Victorians, the Greeks and Romans were no longer the "Ancients" whose work was to be emulated or surpassed. Rather the Ancients had become new contemporaries whose remains provided vehicles for modern self-contemplation and self-criticism. (Turner 3)

While scholarship on the role of Classical Antiquity in the Victorian period is still a growing enterprise, ancient texts permeated Victorian culture, including the education and the class systems. As Frank Turner notes in The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain, ancient Greek culture was referenced often and understood by most readers (Turner 3). This is unsurprising, given the number of translations and the emphasis the Victorians placed on the Classics, as exemplified by their education system and their idea of their national identity. The nineteenth century was one of immense social change, and leading scholars of the time were consistently comparing their own world to Greece to shed a favorable light on themselves. However, they

---

19 “However, except for a few notable books such as Douglas Bush’s Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (1937), M.L. Clarke’s Greek Studies in England, 1700-1830 (1845), Warren D. Anderson’s Matthew Arnold and the Classical Tradition (1965), David J. DeLaur’s Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England (1969), and Richard Jenkyn’s The Victorians and Ancient Greece (1980), there are almost no major studies on the Victorian treatment of the classical world; and those cited concentrate primarily on the relationship of antiquity to English literature.” This sentiment is repeated in Simon Goldhill’s Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity from 2011.
were also actively trying to bring their world closer to how they thought the Greek world
operated. While it is important to understand the similarities and differences between the periods,
it is also important to understand how Victorians conceptualized antiquity, as this made the
Classics an integral part to their culture. Not only would Charlotte Brontë have been conversant
in the translated Classics, but she also would have been aware of the connections between her
contemporary world and the ancient one and would have used them to her advantage.

The Victorians owe their relationship with the Classical world to the previous
generations, the Romantics. The Romantics were steeped in Classical allusions and inspiration,
distributing the myths to the populace within their own poetry. The eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries saw a surplus of translations of the Classics bound, distributed, and used in classrooms
(Foster 37). Not only the purview of scholarship, translated myths and dramas were common
stories, distributed in periodicals and books to households of any standing (Fiske 63). The
Classics influenced many Romantic poets, from John Keats’ *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, to most of
Percy Shelley’s poetry. As Charlotte Brontë was growing up during the early part of the
nineteenth century, the English poetic revival found in Shelley (1792-1822), Byron (1788-
1824), Keats (1795-1821), Coleridge (1772-1834), and Wordsworth (1770-1850) would have
greatly influenced her learning and understanding of the Classics. Many, if not all poets writing
during Charlotte Brontë’s time were inspired by Greek poetry; however, these poets often
labored under the oppressive weight of the idea that everything worth saying had been said
(Jenkyns 22-25). Lord Byron once conveyed the idea that “poetry is dead” merely because he felt
his poetry and the poetry of the day would never live up to Homer’s poetry (Jenkyns 24-25). In

---

20 Charlotte lived from 1816-1855.
fact, he nearly gave up on writing epic poetry, because he thought the best had been created (Jenkyns 20-23). However, Romantic poets continued to draw inspiration from these works, ensuring their spread to the wider population and firmly establishing the Classics as a part of British culture by the Victorian period.

The complex relationship between the Victorians and the ancient world was one of appreciation and critique. They saw in Ancient Greece an imaginative landscape of elevated thought and philosophical excellence for the excavation of artistic patterns, ethical values, and new concepts of human nature. While there were many parallel influences on the Victorians (Medieval, Oriental, Gothic), the fascination with the Greeks did not die out after the end of the Romantic period, either academically or popularly (Alexander and Smith 40). As Classical reception scholar Richard Jenkyns has explained, “to some Englishmen Hellenism seemed alien to the time and place in which they found themselves; the Gothic spirit appeared to be their natural inheritance. Others took the opposite view” (Jenkyns 16). One would think the Victorians would fall into a period of resistance to the Greek influence carrying over from the period before, which sang to the cries of Hellenism, but that was not the case. In 1821, Percy Bysshe Shelley famously said, “We are all Greeks” (Shelley viii); in 1886, Algernon Charles Swinburne called Greece the “mother-country of thought and art and action” (Jenyns 15); and in 1855, Charles Kingsley in his popular children’s book, Kingsley’s Heroes, explained that one could hardly read a book or see a city without noticing Greek influence, whether in the names of characters or the style of architecture (Kingsley x). Hellenism’s ability to influence the period and infiltrate popular thought was prevalent from the earliest part of the nineteenth century to the end.

---

21 For further scholarship on Victorian influences see Tonkin, M et al. Changing the Victorian Subject and Michael Timko’s “The Victorianism of Victorian Literature.”
Due to the Romantic’s use of the Classics, the general population commonly understood references and allusions to myths; however, Classical thought within the Victorian period was maintained primarily for the elite culture. Victorians wanted to make the Classics a symbol of class and intelligence, training young men in an education system based on the great Greek and Roman Classics (Clarke M. 10). On the other side, schooling for girls emphasized refinement more than educational bettering as their official education was more focused on learning French, German, playing piano, or other talents that would bolster their ability to stand out in society (Rose 35).

In order for these well-educated elite males to maintain their positions they had to translate Classical texts.²² Partly because of this educational emphasis on translation is the nineteenth century the most groundbreaking period in the history of Greek translation; Finley Foster points out that “more than half of the total number of translations printed between 1484 and 1916 were published during [those] years” (Foster xvi). While some of these translations built on previous ones from as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the majority were entirely new translations— the Victorians wanted to ensure their interpretations and understanding of the texts were addressed. It is imperative to look back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, a time slightly before the Victorian period, as the onslaught of demand for Greek translations reached an apex. This was due to the influence of the Romantics, who referred to the Classics in their works, as well as a general desire for information as the Greek War of Independence was being fought and the Elgin Marbles were being brought into Britain (Jenkyns

²² This was in part to maintain their position in the elite public’s eye but also to maintain their love and connection to the Classics. John Keats once said that he could not truly grasp the Classical text until he could translate them himself, something he never managed to do for Greek literature (Jenkyns 30).
The general populace, desperate to better understand the history of the modern Greeks and to more fully understand the significance of the Elgin Marbles, demanded more and more translations of the Greek texts to be distributed, which in the long run aided in the overall decrease of ability and need to truly learn Greek outside of the memorization exercises in school (Foster xix).23

This high demand for translations in the early part of the century created a new anthology of Greek literature, called Classical Libraries. These were books made up of many myths and dramas such as The Works of the Greek and Roman Poets translated into English Verse (1809), Valpy’s Family Classical Library (1830), Greek and Roman Poets, and even anthologies for children such as Kingsley’s Heroes (1855) (Jenkyns 74). These anthologies were designed for mass distribution and were often sold at “four shillings and sixpence per volume, a price which placed the translations within the reach of all possible purchasers” (Foster xix). Ultimately the point of these books was to furnish the British public with affordable translations of all the important classical works. These translations, begun in the early part of the century, continued to evolve and encompass more and more translated texts. While the actual Greek and Latin versions were retained for the elite, the translations and the stories themselves were distributed to the general public. Certain texts such as Ancient Classics for English Readers, a text I have cited already within this thesis, were created to increase the general public’s knowledge and understanding of Antiquity, not simply to circulate myths. Created by the elite for the uninformed, the elite class was able to control the narrative and maintained the public’s demand for Classics brought on in the Romantic period.

23 In regards to the common populace, not the elitist society.
As the demand for Classical translations throughout the nineteenth century increased, excerpts and reviews began to be circulated in the periodicals of the time. Periodicals were an important aspect of the Victorian society as it was a medium of print that reached the majority, if not the entirety of the population (Brake 7). These periodicals and magazines exemplify the reality and mindset of the period and many were full to the brim of reviews of books, dramatic performances, and opinion pieces. Anyone could submit their work, including creative writing. As is commonly known, many full texts and novels began their lives in print through periodicals, with chapters published in every new edition of the periodical or magazine. One such periodical, Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, was an incredibly popular magazine that included many translated myths, reviews of various classical anthologies, and creative writing that drew influences from the Classics. During Charlotte Brontë’s life, Blackwood’s published biannually and in every edition from 1817-1847 there were reviews of translations, allusions to Classics within reviews, or discussions of various Hellenic philosophies. These periodicals were a source of connection between the various classes of Victorian Britain.

While the Classics were withheld from women academically, to maintain status between the sexes and to assert the fragility of impressionable women, women were able and keen to experience these ancient texts. The restrictions placed on them publicly in academia were not upheld when they were teaching themselves. Many girls read books found in family-owned libraries or periodicals subscribed to by the household, and often, girls with brothers would surreptitiously use their brother’s textbooks (Olverson 8). Furthermore, with the consent of male

---

24 See Blackwood’s volumes I-L (1-50) for translations, articles on ancient thought and education, the bastardization of Greek translations by French and German translators, etc.
25 Notable examples are Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot.
relatives, girls were allowed to sit in on lessons of Greek and Latin, but it must be stressed that the attitude of their male relatives was crucial to women’s access to learning (Olverson 12). Periodicals were also helpful as they often related their articles to current events, many of which centered on the dichotomy of Greece’s past cultural height and contemporary political concerns. These articles also made translations and explanations of difficult Greek passages understandable by a wider audience. This also led to women reading the aforementioned Classical Libraries, like Lemprière’s or Valpy’s, which while still marking the Classics as a distinctly masculine body of knowledge, allowed women access to this controlled world. In fact, many of these Classical Libraries were advertised as for both men and women, “the Weekly Free Press remarked on the Family Classical Library’s extension of classical knowledge to women, ‘We see no reason why this work should not find its way into the boudoir of the lady, as well as the library of the learned’” (Fiske 6).

Women desperately wanted to learn about the Classics and found ways to do so. Classical knowledge was the basis of the male teaching model and while Classical knowledge was a way to create and distinguish an elite group, Greek and Roman influences had been changing and recreating the very foundation of British society and culture. While knowledge of the Classics was a requirement for men which affected their status in society, women could appreciate Greek more through their patchwork understanding. Isobel Hurst, a modern feminist scholar, explains that “women had one advantage over men who found that excessive repetition and grammatical analysis in the classroom was dull and sickening: they did not experience alienation from Classical literature… but could ‘feel,’ ‘relish,’ and ‘love’” it (qtd. Fiske 8). This foreign

---

26 It is helpful to note that the remark continued saying that these texts could be “safely placed in the hands of persons of both sexes.”
literature, instead of further alienating women, increased the likelihood of curiosity. Women were
drawn to the tales, drawn to the heroes who prosper and the women ever-mentioned within them
(Olerson 18). There could be no Achilles without Briseis, no Paris/Alexandros without Helen,
no Jason without Medea. These women and more, as well as the goddesses who hold power
within the tales, were tantalizing models for the Victorian woman. Goddesses could grant power
in battles, wars were fought over disagreements between goddesses, women could disobey their
husbands, and stand up to their captors. While many of these encounters ended poorly for the
women involved, these tales allowed Victorian women to see their own tragedies. As explained
by modern feminist scholar T. Olerson, “Hellenism influenced Victorian conception of gender
and sexuality in the work of women writers. Hellenism was [in the nineteenth century] a
relatively fluid set of images and ideas, under debate and construction” (Olerson 2). Thus,
Greek and the Classics were alluring in that the study and knowledge of these ideas gave women
a chance to question social conventions and rewrite the very narrative of their own lives and
positions.

The Classics permeated and influenced all aspects of the Victorian period. Introduced by
the poets of the Romantic period who ensured Hellenic influence over popular culture, the
Victorians elevated (withheld from the general public) the language and understanding of
Athenian society to fit their elitist ideals. However, the common populace was still “in the know”
of Classical texts and ideas. Thus, this idea of a “New Athens” was solidified across all parts of
the Victorian society. The average populace knew the Classical stories and used them in their
own lives as moral lessons or allusions within their writing, but the lofty philosophies and the
understanding of Greek language were elevated to the province of a higher class. This common
understanding and exposure to the Classics is important to establish in order to illustrate that Charlotte Brontë was conversant in allusions to these Classical texts and could trust that her audience would have understood their meanings and importance.
Section III: The Education of Charlotte Brontë

[T]here have always been [women]…who have felt the restlessness of intellectual faculties unnaturally cramped, the weariness of unsatisfied hunger of mind, and who in their drawing-room life have envied their schoolboy brothers their teachers and tasks, their books and their hours set aside for using them, as a crippled invalid on a sofa may envy the healthy their fatigues… the highest education offered women was no measure of the highest education they contrived to get, for women of the sort spoken of took a higher than was offered them—some of them, in fact, stole [sic] it, working surreptitiously over their brothers’ discarded schoolbooks and hiding away treatises on metaphysics and astronomy as novelists make naughty heroines hide away French novels. (Fiske 5)

Although the Classics were accessible in translation and widely distributed, Charlotte Brontë’s varied education and unconventional upbringing allowed her to have a deeper understanding of and mastery over the Classics. Charlotte Brontë and her living siblings were surrounded by family and friends who introduced them to various Classical and Romantic texts, especially her father (Shorter 48). The four younger children became writers and grew up emulating the texts they were shown by their father and texts found in his library. They also read periodicals that their household subscribed to or that could be borrowed from others. These periodicals and novels influenced the children and allowed them to read translations, reviews of translations and theatre productions, and see allusions to the Classics in reviews of contemporary books, and they were able to refer to their father for clarification.
Charlotte’s father, Patrick Brontë, was one of her most prominent literary influences, and he educated his children in an unconventional manner, instilling in them a love of learning and appreciation for literature. He came from humble beginnings in an Irish crofter’s cottage, working his way from a blacksmith’s apprentice to a college student at St. John’s in Cambridge, known for training priests and ministers (Alexander 7-13). Patrick Brontë was known as a bit of an eccentric; religiously, he was an Evangelical, a title that connoted little positivity and known as austere and severely strict; however, as a person he was very cultured. He adored Wordsworth and owned texts by Byron and Cervantes, which were considered forbidden and scandalous. Patrick was a storyteller and very well-versed in the Classics, traits he would pass on to his children (Alexander 4).

The Brontë’s home life was turbulent and furthered the children’s immersion into their education and fantasy worlds. Their history begins with Patrick marrying Maria Branwell, a wealthy woman from Cornwall who was highly educated and deeply religious. Together they had six children and moved to Haworth, Yorkshire. Soon after, Maria died and her sister, Elizabeth Branwell, moved in to help bring up the children. For much of the children’s early academic careers, Patrick taught them himself. He gave his children basic lessons in literacy, geography, history, math, and a little French. Patrick formally taught Branwell, his only son, Latin and Greek, and there is evidence in letters and annotations in the family’s books to suggest he also tutored the girls in Latin (Alexander and Smith 177). Patrick was a firm believer in being self-taught and having freedom in learning. He allowed his children access to his extensive library and never forbade them from reading anything, including many of the periodicals he would bring.

---

27 Branwell’s real name is Patrick Branwell Brontë, but he is more commonly known as Branwell and in order to prevent confusion will be referred to by his middle name.
home concerning current events and subjects other children may not have been exposed to. He also allowed them access to some of his personal writings, which would later influence the children’s own juvenilia.

Patrick tutored the girls (Maria, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne) until they became old enough to attend school, around 8-10 years old. He was forced to look into “charity” schools for his girls due to his financial situation. These were inexpensive boarding schools that were subsidized by wealthy benefactors. Patrick sent his four eldest girls (excluding Anne) to Cowan Bridge School in 1824, where they lasted only a year before contracting tuberculosis, which claimed the lives of the two eldest daughters. This traumatic experience affected the younger Brontës, Charlotte going so far as to write Cowan Bridge School into Jane Eyre as Lowood School, where Helen died and Jane was tormented by the wicked headmaster. After this, it would be six years until Patrick felt comfortable sending his girls away for formal education. During those six years, the four remaining Brontë children were tutored by Patrick, their aunt, and some of Patrick’s friends. He wanted his children to be free-thinking and subscribed them to a Romantic education, full of appreciation for the natural world not only by reading common texts like Wordsworth, but also by allowing them to learn outside and explore their surroundings (Alexander 17).

It was during this time that the remaining Brontë children began working on their juvenilia, most notably the “Glass Town Saga” and “Tales of Angria.” These stories were influenced by their father’s writing, the periodicals they often read, and tales their father told them about Ireland. There are many notable influences on these stories, such as Arabian Nights and the Tales of the Genii (Alexander 20). Furthermore, Patrick was often found reading
newspapers and discussing current events with his children, treating them as adult companions (Alexander 21). He would often submit translations, reviews, and articles to periodicals, especially Leeds and Blackwood, which he allowed his children to peruse on their own and would also read aloud to them (Fraser 18). His children were more exposed to the content within them and had a better grasp of what they were reading, as Patrick’s background in the Classics meant he could explain any allusions or off-hand references to obscure ancient texts (Alexander 40). All of these experiences and texts left lasting impressions on the children, to the point where Branwell and Charlotte created their own Blackwood Magazine (Alexander 3). As explained by Olverson, a modern Victorian scholar:

Victorian novels and biographies abound with stories of girls whose fascination with the Classics evolves from envy of their male counterparts and of sisters who learn ancient languages on their own to help their brothers with their studies. … Quite often, as in the case of Charlotte Brontë, women’s exposure to the Classics [also] came from articles, translations, and reviews in popular journals and periodicals. (Olverson 5)

These articles and translations would have been very accessible to Charlotte and her siblings, as exemplified by the many Classical references found within the siblings’ early works.

There is evidence in many of Charlotte’s letters and within books found in the Brontë household to prove that she was a very well-read individual. In many letters, she recommends Milton, Shakespeare, Thomson, Goldsmith, Pope, Scott, Byron, Campbell, Wordsworth, and

---

28 “[Charlotte] and Branwell were writing prolifically, creating miniature magazines filled with precocious reviews, poems, and stories in imitation of the journals seen or taken at the parsonage.”
Southey (Brontë and Smith 123). She was extremely fond of *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Brontë and Smith 123). While Charlotte makes little mention of the Classics or ancient history in her letters, “her juvenilia shows that she was familiar with such figures as Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and Virgil, probably in translation by Dryden or Pope” (Alexander 22). Charlotte also annotated Branwell’s copy of Dryden’s *The Works of Virgil*, not only with notes but also names and drawings of various Angrian characters (Lonoff de Cuevas 4). Seeing continuity between these ancient poems and her own works, she drew Angrian characters into Dryden’s book, especially since most of Charlotte’s early heroes were gleaned from ancient history (Alexander 22).

Charlotte was greatly influenced by her father and his ideals that he portrayed in his writing and would often use his stories as a base for her own work. For instance, Charlotte created a retelling of Patrick Brontë’s *The Maid of Killarney*, adding to and complicating the characters and their situations. *The Maid of Killarney* is a tale about an Englishman named Albion and his courting of Flora, an Irish Catholic. It was Patrick’s commentary on politics, religion, and society. The story was a romantic one, but at one juncture an aged character explains to Albion that “women are not to pore over the musty pages of Grecian and Roman literature” (Alexander 27). The character proffered the advice after Albion questioned what traits in a woman make her a good match, specifically her understanding of the Classics and her education in general. This scene must have left an enormous impression on Charlotte Brontë because later, in her juvenilia, she recreates these characters from her father’s story but added a

---

29 See letter addressed to Ellen Nussey: 4 July 1834.
30 See letter addressed to Ellen Nussey: 4 July 1834.
new female character, Zenobia. In her retelling, Albion and Flora were still a couple, but Zenobia was another love interest for Albion and an autonomous character in her own right. The Angria character Zenobia was created to resemble the ancient Queen of Palmyra and was to be a foil to Flora, who was the ideal woman from Patrick’s story. Edward Gibbon, the most influential British ancient historian of the period who wrote in the half-century before Charlotte’s heyday, described the ancient Queen as:

perhaps the only female whose superior genius broke through the servile
indolence imposed on her sex by the climate and manners of Asia. She claimed
her descent from the Macedonian king of Egypt, equalled in beauty her
ancestor Cleopatra, and far surpassed that princess in chastity and valour. Zenobia
was esteemed the most lovely as well as the most heroic of her sex. She was of a
dark complexion. Her teeth were of a pearly whiteness, and her large black eyes
sparkled with uncommon fire, tempered by the most attractive sweetness. Her
voice was strong and harmonious. Her manly understanding was strengthened and
adorned by study. She was not ignorant of the Latin tongue, but possessed in
equal perfection the Greek, the Syriac, and the Egyptian languages. She had
drawn up for her own use an epitome of oriental history, and familiarly compared
the beauties of Homer and Plato under the tuition of the sublime Longinus.

(Gibbon 128-129)

Gibbons’ book, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, shaped the reception of historical characters, like Zenobia, by British readers. Charlotte would have been aware of this text and its descriptions of various ancient heroes would have influenced her understanding of
the historical characters. Charlotte’s Zenobia was Lady Zenobia Ellrington, the Countess of Northangerland. She was based on Gibbon’s description as well referenced in Thomas Peacock’s poem, *Palmyra*. Alexander and Smith in their *Oxford Companion to the Brontës* explain that Charlotte created Zenobia to be a “masculine soul in a feminine casket,” who was a learned woman, reading Aeschylus and Herodotus, and often referred to as the “Empress of Women” (178). Alexander and Smith describe Zenobia as “swarthy and raven haired, renowned for her pride, choler, and statuesque figure (inherited from her mother), as well as her decadent form of dress, namely crimson robes and a turban” (179).

The existence of Lady Zenobia is essential to the reader and researcher and provides a view into Charlotte’s thinking. Charlotte wrote a character based on an “Eastern” Queen, a barbarian to the Greeks and Romans, and her character knew not only the Classical texts but the languages of Greek and Latin, a form of study exclusive to male elites. As explained by Alexander in *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, Zenobia is a love interest to the lead protagonist in the tales, up against a virtuous, yet meek leading lady (36). Lady Zenobia is a force to be reckoned with, and the fact that Charlotte would mention the Classics in this character’s education not only cements Charlotte’s own experience with the Classics but also the importance she placed on them. As interpreted by Alexander and Smith, Charlotte’s character Zenobia is not simply a third leg in a love triangle but portrayed as an equal to the other male characters in the Angrian stories (178). Lady Zenobia was set above other women (who would only understand French or German) by her intellect and knowledge of the Classics. Zenobia could equal a man, and an elite one at that, through her ability to navigate the realm of Classical understanding. In short, it is not enough to say Zenobia was merely intelligent; she was liberated
and held herself equal to men in status and intellect because of her education. Thus, Charlotte retells the original story to encompass the choice of Albion between the educated and intimidating Zenobia and the conventional and desired Flora. Zenobia ends up marrying Albion’s enemy in the tale, and while she is not a “bad guy” within Charlotte’s version, she is instrumental as a foil. Charlotte understood and appreciated the role the Classics played in Britain’s cultural foundation as well as the prestige associated with an understanding of them.

Zenobia’s existence within a recreated story lifted from her father sets precedent for Charlotte Brontë’s inclination to take tales of others and recreate them as her own, improving them in her mind’s eye or adding her own spin to the characters.31 Not only does this rewriting of *The Maid of Killarney* demonstrate Charlotte’s knack for recycling material, it also shows that she had a propensity and agenda to add female characters who challenged the norm into these texts. This is demonstrated by the sheer dichotomy of Flora and Zenobia. Flora is quiet, unassuming, she is educated but not in the Classics, and she epitomizes the Victorian ideal of the aforementioned “Angel in the House.” However, Zenobia was a passionate character. She had violent tendencies and was created in response to her father’s story where women were not to be learned. Charlotte incorporated violence into her character as the last resort a woman could take, and much like Medea, she allowed Zenobia to be more like men in her actions, yet still emanate femininity. Zenobia was a champion of women, but also a precursor to Charlotte’s later female characters. Scholars like Alexander, Smith, Chase, and Lonoff argue that Zenobia could be a direct ancestor to Bertha Mason, as Zenobia is a foreigner with dark hair and a man’s stature, all

31 This is something the Greeks did as well. They would retell stories and it entertained the audience to recognize new and old in each retelling.
descriptions used for Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. Similar to Bertha, both have violent tendencies, allowing these women to assert their dominance and be more like men. However, Lady Zenobia’s intellect and ability to eloquently explain her position on matters is a trait shared with both Jane Eyre, and Medea. Regardless of which characters echo Zenobia later, her very existence written within her father’s story is evidence of Charlotte’s proclivity for taking stories and making them her own.

Charlotte’s schooling had a huge effect on her later writing, but none so much as her education in Brussels where she studied at the Hegers’ *pensionnat,* another of her literary influences. Mlle. Claire Heger took education seriously and wanted her pupils to be well-bred and ready for marriage and companionship. Her husband, M. Constantin Heger, who previously taught at the Athénée Royal, taught rhetoric and literature at the *pensionnat*. While the two Hegers believed women should be taught only enough education to be suitable partners, they recognized motivation and intellectual aptitude in Charlotte and Emily Brontë and opted to let them take a non-traditional route in their education (Lonoff de Cuevas 9). Charlotte was an outstanding pupil of M. Heger, and nineteen of her compositions under him survived to this day (Alexander and Smith 158). The pedagogical method M. Heger employed for Charlotte was one of analysis and mimicry. He would read extracts by major French authors, ask her to analyze the structure and content, and then express her own views in response to the prompt but in a corresponding manner (Alexander and Smith 158). Many of Charlotte’s assignments showed her originality and breadth of literary knowledge. She often perfectly captures the methods and style

---

32 See Alexander’s *Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* for a full discussion.
33 Girls boarding school.
of her extracts but would change the settings to foreign places, like Egypt (Shorter 30). Charlotte wrote a twenty-page narrative connecting Greek history, myth and geography entitled, “Athens Saved by Poetry” (Alexandra and Smith 162).

These exercises support the precedent that Charlotte recreated former stories, arguments, and ideas and remade them into her own. This is not to say that Charlotte was a plagiarizer, as many of her stories are influenced by others, but that she deliberately used other’s works and added her own spin to them. She was trained to do this in Brussels, to use another’s argument or syntax and adapt it to make it her own. When Charlotte accomplished these exercises, according to Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography, M. Heger moved on to:

read to them various accounts of the same person or event, and make them notice the points of agreement and disagreement. Where they were different, he would make them seek the origin of that difference by causing them to examine well into the character and position of each separate writer, and how they would be likely to affect his conception of truth… And from these conflicting characters he would require them to sift and collect the elements of truth, and try to unite them into a perfect whole. (Gaskell 239)

Charlotte’s recreation of text was more than an exercise used to practice her writing or to improve her writing style, it was her way of changing the narrative to highlight a truth within the text. Often, she would add a moral spin to her tales. For M. Heger, she once took a report of a landlord ridding his property of foxes to protect his chickens and rewrote it to show how a “fox-hunting landlord [became] an example of human cruelty” (Alexandra and Smith 160). I use this example as it shows how Charlotte could find or create meaning in even the smallest or most
mundane of examples and rewrite them to demonstrate what she saw. Instead of focusing on the chickens or the potential good the landlord was doing to protect his patrons and livestock, she created a story victimizing the fox and highlighting the avaricious landlord exerting control and cruelty. It is important to understand that anything in Charlotte’s hands could become malleable and express new meaning via hidden truths.
Section IV: Myth, Jane, and Violence

In the *juvenilia*, she had attempted parodies and modeled her romances after Byron’s. But her approach had not been reflective, character and action were paramount. For her *devoirs*, she could still compose episodes and portraits, but she also had to think about concepts. (Gaskell qtd. in Fiske 68-69)

The Brontës’ connections to the Classics, now well established, is a trademark in their works. Beginning in their *juvenilia* through to maturity, many of the Brontë children reference myth in their literature. Emily Brontë, in *Wuthering Heights*, mentions the story of Milo; in Charlotte’s *Shirley*, there is a reference to “dragon’s teeth being sown amongst Hiram”; and in *Villette*, there are many overt references such as the “apple of discord” and the “Sphinx-riddle.”

Myth scholars often look for patterns and repetition that harken back to ancient myths, including outright allusions, as these patterns and allusions connect to the readers through this repetitive and common subtext. Furthermore, myth critics find double meanings within the text, for instance, the apple of discord can be traced to Biblical connections, Homeric connections, and at

34 Milo of Kroton was a very strong Greek wrestler and soldier. He won many awards and was extremely strong. However, one day he was testing his strength in a forest when he was trapped by an old tree and eaten by animals (Martin).
35 A myth found in both Cadmus and in The Golden Fleece; if one sows dragon’s teeth into the ground an army would erupt from the ground (Grimal).
36 The apple of discord is a common allusion to the golden apple which sparked a dispute of vanity among Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite which ultimately led to the Trojan War (Grimal).
37 The Sphinx has the head of a woman, the body of a lioness, the wings of an eagle, and a serpent-headed tail. She guards the city of Thebes and asks all who wish to enter to answer a riddle or they will suffer a painful death (Grimal).
the same time represent the crux of an argument or be used for dramatic irony. Inserting these allusions and narrative patterns ensures a layering of meaning and gives the text an ability to connect and communicate on various levels.

The Brontës made a powerful impact on society, an impact that has evolved and increased as years go by, which has inspired critics to look for examples of what made their works universally impactful. One such critic, Richard Chase, wrote famously that “Charlotte’s great achievement is that she transmuted the Victorian social situation into mythical and symbolic forms” (“Myth Domesticated” 21). In this way she pushed her novels beyond the limits of the genre and created new myth, a reinvention or evolution of the old myth. By this, Charlotte was able to use her fiction, her new myths, to highlight the inequalities between genders, much like the ancient dramatists. According to Chase, these female protagonists become “culture heroines”:

The culture heroes of mythology are those figures who, like Hercules, Prometheus, or the animal deities of the American Indians, slay the monsters or overcome natural or human obstacles or bring intelligence to men so that civilization can be born out of savagery and chaos - "transformers," the anthropologists call these culture heroes. We may almost say that the Brontë household was this primeval social order. The purpose of the Brontë culture heroine as a mythical being is to transform primeval society into a humane and noble order of civilization. (Chase “Myth Domesticated” 12)
Within Charlotte’s texts, especially *Jane Eyre*, each pivotal female character has herself become her own myth and “culture heroines” to rise up and pave the way for this newly transformed society. To give her protagonists that type of transformative power, Charlotte used the elitist Classical myth in order to connect with the very group that could enact real, social change. In order to fully communicate her ideas, she had to extract the iconic from the ancient texts and veil it within her texts, thereby subtly communicating with her audience on multiple levels.

While Charlotte Brontë was clearly aware of Classical texts—and it is likely she knew *Medea*—connecting her explicitly to this drama is nearly impossible. She wrote overtly about *Electra*, another Euripidean play about a scorned woman, in an assignment for M. Heger. In her response to this assignment, Charlotte “constructed a mosaic of classical images and genres…transforming a historical [fictive] document into a [modern] fictive one, demonstrating a preference for the more philosophical and more elevated” (Fiske 76). According to Fiske, she created a new dynamic between two characters by making one a foreigner and a slave, an Athenian in Sparta (83). Charlotte highlighted the oppression she was feeling in her schooling as well as communicated her ideals of her own art (Fiske 83). It is important to note, that M. Heger’s method of mimicry in conjunction with his later assignments of assimilating multiple versions into one is precisely the kind of exercise that Apollodorus and later mythographers engaged in when they set down entries on each myth, attempting to reconcile the variant

---

38 Electra is interesting as it is about Clytemnestra’s daughter Electra and her plot for revenge against her mother. Clytemnestra had killed Electra’s father Agamemnon in retaliation for sacrificing their eldest daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis before the battle of Troy. This is interesting as it is more female oriented violence, similar to *Medea*.

39 *Electra* is a tragedy and in no way historically accurate. I believe Fiske was highlighting the age of the piece. My additions are to clarify her thoughts.
accounts to get at the truth or at least the original.” Fiske points out that Thomas De Quincy saw Charlotte’s use of the drama as a reimagining. Fiske continues this train of thought, explaining that Charlotte subscribed to Friedrich Schiller’s school of thought where, “We have to make ourselves a concept of the suffering we are supposed to be taking part in. That requires that the concept coincide with something already previously at hand in us” (Fiske 94). Thus, Charlotte wished to place modern, or contemporary truth and emotion into the elevated ideals of the Classical text. In this way, she demonstrates her truth, and the universal truth, within a frame understood and esteemed by many.

Charlotte’s research into Euripides as well as these assignments from M. Heger is one occasion for her exposure to Medea, who was portrayed inconsistently by ancient writers and would therefore serve as an ideal object of this kind of variant analysis. If Charlotte did not perform this exercise on Medea directly in her schooling, she approached dissonant narratives this way and may have approached the myths similarly, which could have led to her breaking the Medea character into multiple personae in Bertha and Jane. If one can create coherent versions of historical and mythical accounts, one can also break them apart into components with relative ease.

However, given Charlotte’s knowledge of Euripides, there are reasons to connect her to Euripides and Medea. An example is in her novel Shirley, mentioned earlier with the allusion to “dragon teeth sown in Hiram.” In the Argonautica, Jason sows the teeth of a dragon, causing an army to rise up and with Medea’s advice, Jason is able to throw a rock causing the soldiers to

40 My own emphasis.
attack each other and not him. This action is first used by Jason and most commonly associated with Jason, who can only defeat the army because Medea aids him. The sowing of dragon’s teeth is also a part of the story of Cadmus, a hero whom Euripides references in *The Bacchae* (Bloom, *Euripides* 45). Cadmus, however, is mentioned by many other ancient authors. While it is not certain which myth Charlotte is referencing in *Shirley*, the act is only performed by Cadmus and Jason in the Classical canon, which narrows possible sources.

While the *Shirley* reference may be a direct connection to Euripides’ *Medea*, it’s also worth noting that Charlotte and most Victorian readers would have been exposed to Medea in more casual ways. Medea was used as shorthand reference to add emphasis to claims and ideas, much like offhand Biblical references today. While this type of connection does not strengthen the claim that she had read *Medea* or was intimately aware of Euripides’ version, it does bolster the understanding that she and her audience were aware of the myth. Jason and Medea’s story becomes a highly referenced example, mentioned often in reviews and articles in periodicals, most notably *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. To clarify, Euripides’ *Medea* is one of the first written references to Medea and is the most well-known, but he only covers her time with Jason on Corinth and references her background myth. Others, like Ovid and Apollonius, give a fuller picture of her background and future outside of Euripides’ *Medea*.

41 “Listen carefully. This is the way I'll work your rescue. When you go to my father, and he furnishes you with the deadly teeth from the dragon's jaws for your sowing, … And I'll tell you something else to help you: As soon as you've yoked the tough oxen, and speedily with might and main ploughed over that stubborn fallow, when along the furrows the giants come sprouting up from the serpent's teeth that are sown in the black glebe, the moment you see a mass of them rise from the ploughland, then covertly toss a big stone among them: like ravening hounds round their quarry, they'll kill each other over the stone; and then do you with all haste betake yourself to the battle. As for the Fleece-win the contest, and you'll carry it off back from Aia to Hellas, a long, long haul. Still, after you leave here you'll go where you choose, where your pleasure takes you.” (AP II.1026-1062)
Within *Blackwood*, a mention or allusion to Euripides or even Medea is a not uncommon occurrence, yet it is usually in passing. The allusions are often small and quick, used to drive home a point. For instance, in 1827, many of these periodicals were discussing “The Perfect Murder” a review written in 1823 and published in the *Lapham Quarterly*, calling into detail Samuel Taylor Coleridge and other Romantics, discussing the loss of virtue, the fine arts, and what that means for society. Within the original 1823 review by De Quincey as well as a rebuttal published in 1827 in *Blackwood* titled, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,” the story of Medea was mentioned in conjunction with a loss of virtue. Medea was a controversial character in the time, especially when one considers the rampant infanticide that would occur in 1834 with the advent of the new “Poor Man’s Laws” (Goc 32). During this time, poor women and prostitutes were looked at both disdainfully and sympathetically:

> And while the Victorians condemned the ‘fallen’ young woman for her immoral actions, and believed she should be punished for the crime of infanticide, many also acknowledged that there was a gross inequity in a system that allowed the mother alone to bear the burden of an illegitimate child. (Goc 33)

The women referenced in the quote above are being spoken about sympathetically and disdainfully. They are seen as pitiful creatures but are still considered murderous, fallen women. Medea was often used as a shorthand for these dichotomous feelings, as she was both a sympathetic girl taken advantage of and used by Jason, but also a mother who murdered her own children. *Blackwood’s* magazine often referenced her, sometimes negatively like when compared to Lady Macbeth (Blackwood “Fanny” 692), described as “an enchantress” (Blackwood “Greek Drama” 413), or “culling poison” (Blackwood “Ararat” 577), but also sympathetically when
described as, “Medea of Euripides, the mother bewailing over the “last smile” of her children” (Blackwood “Late Physician” qtd. Euripides 567). This is significant because even though she was partly a symbol of sympathy, her story was confidently used by many writers to illustrate not only a scorned and abandoned woman but also serve as an example of depravity, of hysteria, and of barbarianism to their audiences.

While I believe Charlotte Brontë recreated Euripides’ Medea, it is important to understand the many variant examples of Medea that Charlotte would have known due to their commonality in the Victorian period. It is important to understand the differences in the ancient variants, all of which painted Medea in a different light. The myth of Medea is quite old and is referenced in many texts of antiquity, both Greek and Roman. Medea’s story has been retold by Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Ennius, Pacuvius, Accius, Ovid, and Seneca, and has a place in antiquity’s oral tradition (Goc 378). It is important to note the historical context of Medea’s composition as it frames elements of a very old, strange myth. The myth, which circulated orally for hundreds of years, was then told continuously in written form for nigh on 1500 years, taking on a different framework based on that of the society in which it was being told. What is most important between the retellings is how each author interprets Medea. Euripides brings Medea’s plight of womanhood into the foreground of the discussion. She is his protagonist, his hero; she laments the inequalities of women; she anguishes over her decision to kill her sons; she is human and bound by her gender leaving her no choice but violence.

Classically, Euripides is known as “the dramatist who seems most interested in suggesting the full potential of the female pattern of experience” (Lefkowitz 5). Euripides was

42 See table in Section 1 for a fuller breakdown.
unlike his contemporaries in this matter as he was known to disregard justice given by a man. His use of irony in his texts is often interpreted as his support towards highlighting the inequalities experienced by women in Athenian society. Euripides, born in 484 B.C. in Athens, is assumed to have come from a noble family and coincidentally his maturity and artistic renown occurred simultaneously with that of the Athenian Empire (Bloom *Euripides* 13). However, Euripides wrote the majority of his plays much later in his lifetime, during the fall of Athens in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C. (Bloom *Euripides* 13). Euripides, beginning his career at the age of 19, often submitted his dramas to the spring festival of Dionysus to be performed each year (Bloom *Euripides* 14). After the performances, there was a vote and a first, second, and third place winner would be chosen. Euripides won many times, but what is interesting is that most of his plays coincided with tumultuous events in Athens’ history. These events, which concurred with the production of his dramas, led many critics to focus on the pervasive presence of irony in Euripides’ works (Bloom *Euripides* 18). According to critics, “this irony represents an irreverent or cynical attitude toward the conventions surrounding Ancient Greek institutions such as marriage, religion, and war” (Bloom *Euripides* 14). Euripides is far from the only dramatist to examine contemporary issues by incorporating subtle commentary into their tragedies. Doing this protected the playwright from backlash and allowed them to caricature current events. However, Euripides’ use of irony aided him in conveying his eccentricity and questioning attitude towards current convention within many of his plays, giving women a voice and highlighting the inequalities of the rights of women and men, thus changing

---

*Hippolytus* was performed in 428 B.C., two years after an outbreak of plague in Athens, and *Iphigeneia* and *Bacchae* were performed posthumously, coinciding with the defeat of Athens by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. *Medea* won third prize and coincided with the eruption of war between Athens and Sparta. For more examples see Bloom.
the original oral narrative of the myth and immortalizing it in text. Unlike his contemporaries, Euripides truly considered his female characters, using them to highlight the males’ *hubris*, “status violations against one’s fellow mortals” (Blondell 19). This is important when discussing Medea as a mother who killed not only her husband’s new wife, which under the circumstances and in the setting of antiquity is not as extreme, but also her children out of revenge. Infanticide may be seen as extreme, but within antiquity it was an ubiquitous act, often occurring soon after a baby was born when the father would decide if the child would be accepted into the *oikos*. What made Medea’s action so extreme was that she took this decision away from Jason and did so many years *after* the sons had been accepted into the *oikos*. Euripides is the first extant version to have Medea kill her children and for him to focus on Medea’s humanity and paint her sympathetically is a mark towards his assumed desire to highlight the inequalities women faced in his society.

Outside of tragedy, in other versions like Ovid’s epic, the focus is on Medea’s madness and her lack of scruples as Ovid was highlighting her metamorphosis from human girl to relentless and cruel witch. No longer is she a complex person who was harmed, but a naïve girl turned vengeful and hateful, a girl who sacrificed her own family many times to get ahead. Ovid focuses on the metamorphosis of her character, beginning with a shy, naïve girl suckered by love, but highlighting her nefarious nature, as if to say that her devious nature or madness was always there, that her lack of scruples cannot be learned but is something innate. Ovid especially highlights Medea’s choice to be treacherous and her choice to perform criminal acts for Jason. Focusing on her killing and dismembering her brother, Ovid points out her madness was swirling

---

44 Euripides published *Medea* in 431 B.C., Ovid in 8 A.D.
underneath, a result of other tactics to drive her father off his pursuit of the Argonauts (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 7. 160–396). Ovid, in his reception of Euripides, connects Medea to other scorned women, like Scylla or Procris, and is highlighting the corner in which women are placed within these societies, but unlike Euripides, this reading of his works is not the main reason for his writing. Similar to Euripides, “Ovid seems to reflect upon the moral and social ambiguities of marriage, love, and filial duty that involve the love-torn woman who chooses to speak and act independently, thus suggesting that women are the prisoner of social conventions that fail to protect them” (Lauriola 385). While Ovid suggests this, he is not one to overtly stake a claim one way or another. He shows Medea’s disadvantages, yet qualifies them by highlighting the cunning within her and the choices she made, whether under Aphrodite’s spell or not. He appears to negate Medea’s visibility in a truly sympathetic light and more so highlights how normal women, ones who do not act independently of their station, should be pitied. Thus, unlike the tragedian Euripides, who framed his stories to highlight his female protagonist’s plights completely, Ovid walks a line, highlighting the animal qualities in Medea when she is backed against a wall.

Seneca’s tragedy, *Medea,* is very different than Euripides’ or even Ovid’s in that his popular retelling exemplifies the violence within the character, Medea. Seneca frames *Medea* around her anger and madness opening his drama with a revenge plot already concocted and a Medea who exudes treachery, madness, and animalistic qualities (Seneca *Medea* 1–55). He flips Euripides’ *Medea* entirely, by opening his play with Medea’s rage and then providing the

---

45 Euripides published *Medea* in 431 B.C., Seneca 50 A.D.
46 All of Seneca’s plays were more violent than the rest as he was writing during a trying time under Nero.
reasoning behind it. Seneca’s Medea emanates sadism, losing any humanity Euripides gave her, killing her children without a second thought to simply spite Jason, who loves them. She is addicted to carnal pleasures and is described as a masculine woman who pushes away her femininity to equate herself to men. Unlike in Euripides, where most of the violence takes place off-stage, in Seneca, all of the violence is showcased and if performed would be visible on-stage. Medea murders her children in the open and, unlike Euripides, harbors no internal conflict over any of her actions. In Seneca’s retelling, “criminality and madness coupled with bestiality are in fact the attributes highlight[ed] in his Medea” (Lauriola 386). His Medea demonstrates no humanness and is precisely a play of madness, witchcraft, and devious femininity which he exaggerated from his understanding of Euripides’ Medea.

Charlotte would have been aware of these other translations, yet would have known the original extant Medea was Euripides. Furthermore, within the early Victorian period, “Euripides was a Wordsworth and Wordsworth is a Euripides” (Blackwood 354). He was esteemed as a dramatist and was often written about and translated. Given her past use of Euripides’ Electra, and the knowledge that Euripides’ Medea is the most sympathetic to Medea, she likely based her original recreation on the Euripidean model. Even into modern times, many scholars, especially feminist reception scholars, see Euripides as the dramatist who cared most about demonstrating the expectations and outcomes of women (Lefkowitz 5).\footnote{See also Isobel Hurst, Helene Foley, and Froma Zeitlin.}

If one were to survey myths in antiquity one would find women have but three life patterns. These begin with birth and move into areas where a woman’s individuality is challenged. According to Mary Lefkowitz, women can maintain their chastity, destroy their marriages to maintain independence, or concede to
marriage and children while losing their autonomy and self (42). Euripides focuses on the female individuality in many of his plays, outside of the normal pattern of marriage and childbirth. As continued by Lefkowitz, “women’s love for one-another and the world they share apart from men are not aspects of life described in ordinary poetry. Such intense feelings are voiced only by women in tradition on the verge of disaster, such as Medea” (Lefkowitz 30). Medea, therefore, would have been and was an important drama for women in the Victorian period. Therefore, as Charlotte had access to Classical texts, this drama, known for establishing a women’s individuality and independence, would have been a great base for her own literature later.

The Medea revival that would have affected or increased Charlotte Brontë’s introduction to the story of Medea began during the “resurrection” of Classical studies in the early Renaissance (Lauriola 388). The very first Medea performed in the modern world is the Latin translation of Euripides’ tragedy by the Scotsman George Buchanan (1540s), followed in France by Jean de la Peruse’s variant (1553); but, ultimately in the Eighteenth century, Medea’s tragedy received special attention in music and opera, particularly in Italy, rather than in literature (Lauriola 389). However, unlike in continental Europe, Medea was only presented in England after a thorough “sanitation” (Lauriola 390). English playwrights were hesitant to produce Medea because the heroine of the story was profoundly unsuited to be a champion of the British concept of femininity and sentiment, especially with the scene of infanticide. Thus, in many early Medea performances and revivals in England, the scene of infanticide was removed in order to improve her morality (Bloom Euripides 78). An example of this would be Richard Glover’s 1767 “Medea: A Tragedy,” where, finding it impossible to present a mother deciding to kill her own children, Glover removes the issue by having Medea kill her children under the
influence of madness (Lauriola 390). Glover’s version continues with this purification of Medea’s character by having Medea exile herself after a loving dialogue with Jason, maintaining her virtues as mother and wife (Lauriola 390). This sanitization of performance in Britain continued into the early nineteenth century, but reviews of the more vivid and true continental versions of Medea were still circulating in England so the full story was usually understood. However, even though the reviews allowed for a fuller understanding of the drama, the sanitized Medea is still a tale exemplifying the plight of women. To be frank, Medea’s violent actions against Jason and his new wife are easy to believe. It is not a stretch for a scorned wife to be angry when her husband parades around with his new wife. Those emotions would certainly increase if the original pairing had children together. However, Medea does not need to kill her children in order to fight against the dishonor Jason has levied against her in breaking his oath. Killing them is an extreme response, but even violently killing the new wife is still a departure from what is expected and accepted by society, and still drives home the understanding that she is rebelling within the confines of her position. Hence, even if the majority of common references and performances to the play encompass only the story without the infanticide, the overall play would still convey Euripides’ heroine breaking the socially-accepted female behavior. This is important for two reasons: the first is that even though Charlotte Brontë and many of the Victorian reading audience may never have known about the infanticide within the Medea myth, the myth was still disseminated among the general population; the second reason is because, if Charlotte Brontë did know about the original myth, she would be reminded each time

48 Medea gained popularity later in the century due to the change in the “Poor Man’s Laws” and the rise of infanticide by destitute mothers. To explore further scholarship, see Fiske’s Heretical Hellenism and Goc’s “Medea in the Courtroom and on the Stage in Nineteenth-Century London.”
she was exposed to a sanitized version that changing or reinventing the story does not change the message or meaning of the story. This may have furthered her ability to look at texts and see ways to reinvent them or play with them to make them her own.

With that being said, the catalyst of Charlotte Brontë’s rewriting the Medea myth in *Jane Eyre* could have come decades earlier in a review of a German *Medea* revival. In the *Blackwood Edinburgh Magazine*, found in the latter issue of 1827, there is a review entitled, “King Ottokar’s Prosperity and Death.” This is a lengthy review about a few plays performed in Germany, “King Ottokar” and “Das Goldene Vliess,” or, “The Golden Fleece,” the English name for the *Argonautica*. This issue of *Blackwood* would probably have been read by the Brontë children as this was published after the older girls had returned home from Cowan Bridge School and were being tutored by their father. Their father would likely have been extremely interested in this article as much of it discusses Goethe and other notable Romantics, including Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth being a favorite of Patrick Brontë. “Das Goldene Vliess” is about Medea and Jason, but unlike the *Argonautica*, which ends with Medea and Jason sailing for his home, “Das Goldene Vliess” continues the story, ending with the betrayal of Medea by Jason and her murderous revenge. To quote the review, “the character of Medea is throughout admirably conceived, and for the most part admirably delineated; and we still hope ere long to make her more fully known” (Blackwood 300). As stated before, Medea could be seen in a complex light, and Grillparzer, the German writer and director of this play, wanted to place Medea in a sympathetic light devoid of the idea of her as a deranged and violent lunatic. The review in *Blackwood’s* honors this, emphasizing Grillparzer’s Euripidean Medea, a young girl.
taken advantage of, highlights Jason’s infidelity, and demonstrates Jason’s abject lack of respect for all Medea had done for him.

It is interesting to note Grillparzer’s need to paint Medea sympathetically. In his variation, he highlights the sequence of events that leads to her crimes, sequences that when used in this way are meant to redeem Medea from her crimes (Lauriola 391). Grillparzer focuses on the fact that without Medea, Jason would have failed his mission and goes so far as to juxtapose the outcomes to render a sympathetic, if not defensive view of Medea. Any reviews, summaries, write-ups on the performance, including Grillparzer’s, could have been read by Charlotte, and within this context could have swayed her understanding of the myth and solidified her sympathies with the scorned, foreign wife.

Furthermore, Grillparzer focuses on Medea’s “otherness,” drawing from some of the final lines in Euripides, “No Greek woman would ever have dared to do this” (Medea 1339–40). In Grillparzer’s production, Medea wears a Colchian witch outfit, which she sheds and hides once she and Jason are out of Colchis, donning a new “Greek” outfit in its place. However, Grillparzer has the Princess of Corinth alienate Medea’s children from their mother, and this final act of abandonment and isolation causes Medea to rip the Greek cloak in two, symbolically demonstrating her acceptance of her inability to integrate with the Greek culture (Lauriola 393). Medea, now naked, must don the old Colchian outfit and in this way, accepts her “otherness” and utilizes it to her advantage. These actions are echoed later in Bertha Mason, leading one to believe Charlotte Brontë could have used Grillparzer’s understanding and view of Medea to

49 Taking the decision to expel the sons from their oikos away from Jason.
influence her own understanding of the work and her own understanding of her reimagined Medea.

The review of “King Ottokar” suggests further connections to *Jane Eyre*, particularly the character “Bertha” who descends into madness, and similar situations between wives and husbands. The review explains that “King Ottokar” is a historical play involving King Ottokar, the King of Bohemia, who is vying to become the King of Austria. The review focuses on scenes where Ottokar dissolves his marriage with Queen Margaret and pursues Bertha Rosenberg. Within the scene Bertha faints, refusing to believe the King will divorce and choose her, as she wants no part in the matter. Queen Margaret, a tall, dark haired, intelligent woman, likened to the Queen of Sheba, who is known for being articulate, gorgeous, and regal, enters and cares for Bertha. The Queen exemplifies her goodness in taking care of the soon-to-be new wife of her husband, and in the words of the reviewer, “Bertha’s unfitness to be Ottokar’s wife.” Margaret is older than Ottokar, a widow of the King of the Romans, and her cheerfulness and affections buried in the grave with her first marriage and children. She is the Heiress of Austria and Styria but must turn them over to Ottokar as per the rules of marriage. She submits to the divorce, but “refuses to admit the nullity of their marriage, that the years she has lived with him may not be stained with sin and shame” (Lauriola 303). The review continues to describe the fourth act, where Ottokar has fallen and disgraced himself. Bertha is led onstage by her father and “having lost her senses, has not spoken for months.” Her father entreats her to speak, “were it even in raving frenzy” (Lauriola 310). The review ends with an explanation that the English crowd would have delighted in the insanity of Bertha, as she ruins the solemnity of the end of the play, one that is “too solemn indeed for the taste of a British audience” (Lauriola 316). The reviewer
ends on a note discussing devotion, and that “enthusiastic devotion appears to be so usual, we might almost say, so essential a feature in the German character, that we consider this anomalous theatrical procedure, merely as one of the marks of deficient taste” (Lauriola 316).

If Charlotte were to have read this, she could have gleaned the plot and inspiration for her characters from this very article. The article encompasses both the Medea myth, as well as a mad character named Bertha and another scorned wife. It is wasteful not to point out the similarities between this second play and *Jane Eyre*, most obviously the madness of Bertha Rosenberg. While the play and *Jane Eyre* are not carbon copies of each other, as the mad wife and the rich wife are the same in *Jane Eyre* and separate in *King Ottokar*, there are still similarities. Bertha Rosenberg shares not only a surname initial with Rochester, but both are also three syllables. There is also the benefit of marriage to Margaret, the first wife of Ottokar, which is reminiscent of Rochester’s benefits for marrying Bertha Mason. Furthermore, this review puts both the similar plot of the “King Ottokar” play in line with “Das Goldene Vliess,” and the Medea myth. It is known that Branwell and Charlotte both combed their periodicals and books for inspiration on characterization and names, and this article is too similar to *Jane Eyre* not to have had some influence over Charlotte when she was constructing her later masterpiece (Alexander and Smith 305). While she would have read this article anytime between 1827 and 1831, (recall that *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847) it perhaps left a lasting impression about the plight of women as it is ultimately a review of three women, two scorned by men, and one who goes insane because of a man. In these two plays, the rights of these women are minimal; in fact, Queen Margaret concedes when her husband wishes to divorce her and has no say in him usurping sovereignty of her countries from her. Bertha Rosenberg is forced to marry and ends up only surviving the
marriage by losing her mind. Medea is the only one to exert any control and only does this through violence. In looking at *Jane Eyre* the influence is palpable, but also the various ways Charlotte was able to tap into how women could handle these situations. Do they roll over and accept their fate like Margaret? Do they care for the new wife, like Margaret, or attack and potentially kill the new wife, like Medea? Do they go insane from their inability to control their future, like Bertha, or do they attempt to exert a semblance of control, like Margaret and to an extent, Medea? Between young Medea, a girl wounded by love and enacting revenge, to the high-class ladies who accept their fate and go insane or die to escape it, the inspiration to rewrite the story is plausible when connected to an impressionable and intellectual scholar found in Charlotte Brontë. These women may have influenced and inspired Charlotte in her later works, especially juxtaposed in this way where the options and outcomes are laid out to be interpreted and changed.

Now comes the crux, Charlotte Brontë’s re-creation of Medea within Bertha. Bertha and Medea, as stated previously, are both foreign women used by their husbands for security and monetary gain. Both are described as animalistic, mad, and violent. Both fight against the restrictions placed on them in marriage and champion the rights of scorned and abused women. Bertha Mason is a non-speaking, non-point-of-view, and hidden character throughout most of the novel of *Jane Eyre*. For the readers, she manifests as screams in the night and nightmare inducing occurrences, terrifying Jane yet leaving her unscarred. The connections between the Bertha and Medea are uncanny, from their similar descriptions to their similar actions. Both begin their tales described ominously, foreshadowing their characters. Bertha, while unnamed and unexpected, first appears in the novel as a disembodied laugh, echoing off walls, described
as “curious; distinct, formal, mirthless” (Brontë 107). The narrator, a grown-up Jane who describes her past to the readers, explains that the noise caused her disquiet, that she feared the noise but did not know why (Brontë 107). This eerie introduction, on the heels of Jane asking if there are any ghosts or peculiarities to be concerned about, immediately puts the reader into a state of unease. Similarly, Medea is introduced into her tale uneasily by her Nurse who explains she is a depressed and angry woman, “pallid” and refusing to eat (Euripides Medea 1-30).50 The Nurse goes on to say that she is scared of Medea, a girl she has known since infancy, and worries as Medea takes no joy in her children. She described Medea as δείνος which can be translated as either “fearsome” or “astounding” and explains that her “temperament is grave (βαρεῖα) and will not tolerate bad treatment” (Euripides Medea 37-40).51 Furthermore, in lines 44-45 the Nurse finishes her warning of Medea’s state with, “She is frightening. It won't be easy for an enemy to come out victorious in a battle with her” (Euripides Medea). These descriptions are highly ominous, putting the audience or reader on edge, and showcasing how these women challenge femininity. In lieu of more common feminine descriptions about their bodies or hair, their fairness of skin and temperament, these women are frightening or fearsome, mirthless, nightmarish in their descriptions.

Both of these women are complicated characters and are introduced by (assumed) mentally sane and reliable characters, whose calm sanity is juxtaposed with the women’s already menacing existence. Furthermore, both characters, Bertha and Medea, put the audience on edge as much as they do the other characters within the text. Both are described less like humans and

---

50 Similar to Euripides’ Hippolytus, another drama where a woman destroys a man. The not eating is a sign of grief.
51 Many editors bracket all or parts of lines 38-43 in the belief that they are a later interpolation. As they stand they are in part repetitious of sentiments already expressed or about to be expressed and could be an explanation by a commentator.
more like animals and are referenced within the text as such. For instance, the first time the
readers and Jane physically see Bertha, with knowledge of who she is, Jane describes Bertha like
this:

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 wild animal: but it was
covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head
and face. (Brontë 303)

This description is something out of a horror film. Bertha is seen only as an animal, and a caged
one at that. Jane states that you could not tell if she were animal or human; the only evidence or
reasoning she can muster for why Bertha may be human is because she is wearing clothing.
Bertha’s dichotomy of animal and human is palpable every time her presence is felt in the novel.
For example, often when Bertha is creeping around Jane explains she is holding her breath to
listen for the “wild beast or the fiend” hearing “snarling, [a] canine noise, and a deep human
groan” (Brontë 146). By juxtaposing both animal and human descriptions for Bertha, Charlotte
creates questions surrounding this character who cannot defend herself. Is Bertha sane or is that
no longer a question as her insanity is personified in her actions? Bertha’s madness is accepted
by the other characters but some of her actions betray more sense than madness to the readers,
such as her lack of violence towards anyone other than her main captors. While her inferiority
and “otherness” is palpable, the question of her sanity is compelling yet ignored by the other
characters. An example of how Bertha is merely accepted as mad by the other characters happens
at the end of Bertha’s introduction. In this first scene where Bertha is seen for what she is,
Rochester jolts the reader’s attention from Bertha to himself, who sarcastically introduces the figure as his wife.

She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest — more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. He could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle. At last he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord, and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair. The operation was performed amidst the fiercest yells and the most convulsive plunges. Mr. Rochester then turned to the spectators: he looked at them with a smile both acrid and desolate.

"That is my wife," said he. "Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know — such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours!" (Brontë 304)

To start, Bertha is described as a “big woman” and “corpulent,” the opposite of the idealized feminine. She is fleshy and large, strong and virile, which is an adjective commonly used to describe men, cementing this lack of feminine “grace” or “beauty.” Juxtaposed to this threatening mass of a woman is Rochester, whose refusal to hit Bertha highlights his self-control. By being tied to a chair, treatment befitting an animal, Bertha is devolved into an animal herself in the bystanders’ descriptions of her. Her attempting to flee is exactly what any prisoner would do, but this scene is framed in such a way to make Bertha seem mad and violent, not desperate for freedom. To land the final blow, Rochester addresses Bertha as “that,” not “she” or “this person,” but “that,” a term one could use for a piece of furniture. This is not the way to address
another human, it is an insult to her humanity and it highlights the ferocity Rochester and the rest view in her. This juxtaposition between Jane and Bertha, rampant in this scene, is furthered when he continues, “[s]uch is the conjugal embrace I am ever to know,” a pointed comparison between the tied-up animal and the calm, saintly man who would not hit her. Bertha is given no chance to prove her sanity, as the scene ends with everyone else ushered out, leaving her tied to a chair.

This bestiality of Bertha is entirely opposite what idealized Victorian femininity was, and similar to Medea, Bertha’s bestiality is created by other’s perceptions of her. Within Euripides’ Medea, the pivotal character is introduced by her Nurse who explains she is “afraid of Medea” with her, “wild animal glare” looking “as if she is planning to do something” and who is “howling” in the background, offstage, akin to a wild animal (Euripides Medea 91-95). Medea grieves her husband’s dishonor in breaking his oath to her, while her Nurse portrays her as an emotional woman, full of grief, but hysterical all the same. After this statement, Medea enters and speaks for the first time, calmly, rationally, persuasively, and with composure. Is she playing to an audience? Medea, unlike Bertha, is allowed to communicate her thoughts and her side (and does so eloquently), but given our understanding of her, the audience is left to question whether Medea can be trusted. Some would argue that Medea cannot be trusted, as in Ancient Greece all women descended from Pandora and trust was hard to come by. Women were seen as specious, beautiful on the outside yet cunning and treacherous within. Yet Medea lamented a broken vow, and her actions were in response to Jason’s treatment of her. Much like Bertha, Medea’s conflicting emotions are proven by her actions. Bertha runs and acts like an animal, attacking others and snarling; Medea lures her prey into a false sense of security and kills them, all with

52 Medea’s howling is marked as stage direction and may have been added after Euripides original drama was written.
the calm outer shell. While her humanness is something she can attempt to persuade the audience to believe in, and many argued was successful in that endeavor, Bertha was not given that chance, and was condemned by the other’s perception of her. Within these texts these women became aliens within their own stories, inferior and undermined by their own husbands and caretakers.

However, while Medea and Bertha are portrayed as inferior and animal-like, they are also referred to and compared to powerful mythical creatures. Bertha is compared to a goblin and “vampyre” (Brontë 294) and Medea is referred to as a “Fury” (Erinys) (Euripides Medea 1259). While goblins are not creatures that instill a true fear into the audience, known more for being mischievous poltergeists, vampires are traditionally menacing creatures, with roots in ancient mythology. Immortal creatures of the night who suck the blood of their victims, they were commonly known in the Victorian period after John Polidori’s The Vampyre (Auerbach Our Vampires 20). However, to further this connection between Bertha and Medea, furies can be argued as the precursors to vampires, as shown in Aeschylus’ Eumenides. Furies were born from spilled kin’s blood and night, and caused their victims to go mad. Aeschylus described them as drinking blood, and Euripides would use them in his plays. Much like modern, or at least Victorian-era vampires, they were powerful and ominous, harbingers of death or damnation. The fact that these women were compared to such similar creatures is no accident and allows Bertha and Medea to gain some power over the others. Not only were they violent and unpredictable like animals—and within the Christian belief that Charlotte and Jane Eyre subscribe to, humans

53 “A mother’s pitiful blood/ is hard to draw up from the earth again./ It runs down into the ground at your feet, it is gone./ You must atone: from your living body/ let me slobber up the red gruel offering. From you/ I will plunder my fodder, drink what makes mortals gag.” Aeschylus Eumenides 262-268
held dominion over animals—they were also supernatural and formidable, holding power over others. The dichotomy of their inferiority and “otherness,” juxtaposed with the fear of them, is a compelling part of their characterization. They gain power from the fear they instill in others, but that fear also alienates them and creates a visible and explicit “otherness.”

Bertha and Medea, while similarly described in their respective texts, also perform similar actions which furthers the understanding of Bertha as a reconceived Medea created by Charlotte Brontë. Both women use veils for violence, both use violence to level their grievances, and both symbolically castrate their husbands. Veils in literature have many symbolic meanings, from a symbol of purity and chasteness to a symbol of the female sex organ. Thus, it is obviously a powerful use of symbolism that both of these women use this article of clothing against other women; especially given that they have been scorned and betrayed by the very men who have rent their veils. Medea outright poisons the veil that she gives the Princess of Corinth, killing her when worn, thus poisoning the marriage and womb of the new wife. This further demonstrates Jason’s hubris in breaking his oath to Medea: his actions poison and destroy a womb. Bertha tries on Jane Rochester’s veil, a distinction that will be explored in more detail later, and then proceeds to rend the veil in two, trampling it into the ground. Here, Bertha attacks the symbol of Jane and Rochester’s impending union, and a symbol of Bertha’s own union with Rochester. Bertha and Medea also use physical violence in order to be taken seriously as equals even when their voices went ignored. Bertha physically attacks Rochester and her brother Richard Mason, and Medea attacks the Princess and King of Corinth and her own

54 See further scholarship in Gilbert and Gubar’s Madwoman in the Attic and Janet Todd’s Feminist Literary History.
55 A similar action is performed by Hekabe, Hektor’s mother, in The Iliad when she hears of Hektor’s death.
children. Not only is this violence a physical symbol of their resisting the limitations set on them, it is also a sign of their departure from attempting to integrate their “otherness” into the accepted norm. Finally, these two women in their final acts symbolically castrate and place limitations upon their husbands. Medea, in destroying Jason’s prospects of a proper and advantageous marriage and murdering their children, removes Jason’s power and autonomy in one fell swoop, putting him back to where he was before meeting her. Bertha, when setting Thornfield aflame, blinds and maims Rochester, castrating him with her fire. This has been seen as a method of lowering his sexual potency or as Charlotte Brontë’s approach to creating equality between Jane and Rochester. Much like Medea, who after performing her violence flies off in Helios’ flaming chariot (getting of scot free), leaving Jason to contemplate the wreck of his life, Bertha too jumps into the flames, gaining freedom in death yet still punishing Rochester, destroying his home and wealth, and leaving him disabled, reversing their lot. This “castration” by the two women highlights the idea of sex as madness, as both are accused by their husbands of being “sex-crazy,” which furthers their need to castrate them at the end. For instance, Jason accuses Medea of being unable to do what is right because she is jealous of Jason’s sexual advances on another woman (Euripides Medea 446-626). Medea herself blames her past actions helping Jason on passion, the passion caused by Aphrodite and Eros, which can only be lust and sexual desire (Euripides Medea 484). Similarly, Rochester describes Bertha as “unchaste” with “monstrous

56 See further scholarship on this castration in Richard Chase’s “The Brontës, or, Myth Domesticated,” Peter Pickrel’s “Jane Eyre: The Apocalypse of the Body”, and Gilbert and Gubar’s “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress.” See too, Julia Miele Rodas, Elizabeth Donaldson, David Bolt’s The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability for an interesting counter argument to the aforementioned scholarship on Rochester’s castration.

57 Touched on in introduction but see Mary Poovey’s Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England for a full understanding of male sexuality and its influence on women.
propensities” (Brontë 346). Within these two tales sex has enormous power, the power to create madness and to confirm madness. Both periods, the Victorian and Ancient, saw women as susceptible to sexual insatiability. According to Poovey, “the implicit accusation here is that women had to be idolized and immobilized for some men to think them safe from other men's rapacious sexual desire and from their own susceptibility” (148). These two women, accused as falling into that trap of sexuality, found another way to challenge femininity and another attributing factor to their “otherness.” On a final note, it is the most poetic ending that both women turn that around and “castrate” the very beings who accused them of sexual madness.

The connections and comparisons between Bertha and Medea are so numerous and so similar, they break from the realm of mere resonances into the realm of reincarnation. Bertha is a recreated Medea, used by Charlotte Brontë to act as mirror to her pivotal character. Much like Charlotte would mimic myths in her Brussels schooling or rewrite her father’s stories with the same characters reimagined or with new characters added, Charlotte Brontë here has created a new Medea to catalyze and educate her own Jane Eyre. Much like Medea became a symbol for women in the Victorian reception, Charlotte Brontë reiterates this in her own Bildungsroman.

Medea and Bertha, while very similar, have a principal difference which lends itself to Charlotte Brontë’s reimagining of the myth, namely the direction of their violence. Medea, while ultimately plotting revenge against Jason, attacks everyone but the one who caused her ire in the first place. She kills the Princess without ever meeting her, killing her solely to harm Jason. She does the same to her own children, murdering them, not because she hates them, but to hurt Jason. While her intention is ultimately to hurt Jason, her violence is directed towards everyone else, as this is the most effective way to achieve lasting harm to him. Bertha is very different.
Bertha directs all of her violence at Rochester and men in general. In every interaction Bertha and Jane have, and considering Bertha’s nighttime strolls they have many interactions, Bertha never once harms Jane. Bertha has ample chances to hurt Jane, and during the years Rochester stayed away, Bertha could have harmed any of the women in the household but does not. If she had, she could have hurt Rochester’s livelihood, any romantic prospects, and his place in society. Instead Bertha outright attacks Rochester and her brother and destroys symbols of Rochester’s superior control over Jane. For instance, the veil that Bertha destroys is a gift from Rochester. Jane in her admission to the reader explains that it is not something she would have picked and is not something she likes or wanted. It is also a symbol of Jane becoming Jane Rochester, and Bertha destroys it after trying it on herself. The hand-me-down nature of the veil is another connection to the Medea myth, as the veil that Medea poisons is one of her own and is a precious gift from her divine grandfather. In this case, Medea uses the precious material to kill this woman whom Medea disregards, whereas Bertha takes on the precious material and destroys it to protect Jane.

Despite the obvious parallels between the veil scenes of both works, this scene is a pivotal one in *Jane Eyre* specifically as it establishes the duality and the mirrored-ness Bertha and Jane share. This connection between Bertha and Jane is a substantial vein of scholarship that is substantial. Many scholars bring up Jane’s youth, being called a “bad animal” by her cousin before she harms him, as well as Mrs. Reed telling Jane she was a “mad fiend,” as solid connections between the conduct of the two women (Brontë 32). See Gilbert and Gubar and Richard Chase for more information of these particular instances.
negative feelings towards Rochester, she subdues herself and Bertha acts out in her place (Gilbert and Gubar 362). Claire Rosenfeld in “Plain Jane’s Progress,” a landmark scholarly text about feminism in Victorian literature, especially Jane Eyre, explains that:

The novelist who consciously or unconsciously exploits psychological doubles frequently juxtaposes two characters, the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the free, uninhibited, often criminal self. (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 360)

Bertha in this case is the character who, while locked in an attic, is “externally uninhibited” refusing to follow societal norms and performing whatever actions she sees fit. Jane on the other hand, walks a line between these two choices. Jane can be both “other” and “within,” she can integrate herself more easily than Bertha, but still finds herself on the outside. This ability to infiltrate is seen more easily once juxtaposed with Bertha, as at this time she more closely follows conventions. Lowood teaches Jane her station in life and the conduct expected of her as a governess. However, young Jane was much like Bertha and acted outside of conventions placed on children at the time, fighting back, talking back, and showing strength where none was expected or wanted. Even as an adult she still rebelled at times against her station. Often pointed out by Blanche Ingram or Mrs. Fairfax, Jane would act above or outside her station as governess, and while she always returned to the convention of quiet and unobtrusive governess, ultimately, she did rise to the rank of Mrs. Rochester.

While much scholarship has explored the relationship between Bertha and Jane, studies have been seldom performed looking at the text through a Classical lens and how that may change their relationship. Two scholars, Shanyn Fiske and Kathleen Wall, have identified
correlations between Victorian literature and Classical reception. Fiske demonstrates that women established the foundations of a “heretical challenge” to traditional assumptions about classical knowledge and women’s place in literary history (Fiske 113). Focusing on Medea and the changes the play’s reception had on women at the time, Fiske outlines women’s allusions to the Classics, to show the influence these texts had on everyone, not just the male elite. However, she did not consider how this heretical challenge could change the interpretation of the relationships between established characters such as Jane and Bertha. In a similar vein, Wall compares the relationships between Bertha, Blanche Ingram, and Jane within the Callisto myth, showing that parallels can be found. Wall argues that “Brontë’s novel derives its power not from obscure literary sources, but from mythic ones” (Wall 77). Her argument is that the entirety of Jane Eyre follows an extended Callisto myth, where a virgin (Jane), removed from her community of Diana worshipping virgins (Lowood, Helen, Miss Temple), is raped by Zeus (Rochester), attacked by his wife Hera (Bertha), and is exiled (at Moor House) until Zeus saves her by turning her into a constellation (Jane and Rochester reunite). Wall continues by explaining that “an additional power comes from Brontë’s ability to wed the material of myth with that of history, reflecting the situation of women in the nineteenth century with an accuracy which frightened her contemporaries: Brontë not only evokes the archetype but engraves on it a signature with demands and rewards close attentions” (Wall 77). While Wall argues that Jane, like Callisto, is acted upon by the other characters, and that her inability to change her fate is the overall message of the Victorian women’s plight, I argue that like Euripides’ character Medea, Jane does have authority and the ability to act to change her fate, and Jane Eyre is protected by Bertha.
I argue that while Bertha is Charlotte Brontë’s reimagined and recreated Medea, Jane is the mirrored image who is able to surpass the Medea/Bertha outcome and is thus also Medea’s foil. This is because Euripides’ Medea, and Medea in general, is a divided or dualistic character. Medea’s complicated relationship between her thoughts and actions is displayed outwardly, the battle between her mind and her passion on display for the audience and characters acts to humanize her more. Not only in Euripides, though he paints this picture most obviously, Medea has constantly been in turmoil over her inner feelings and has voiced them. In Ovid’s account, she discusses her division between desire and reason: “Aliudque cupido, mens aliud suadet” (“desire persuades me one way, reason another”), and questions her actions (Metamorphoses 7. 19–20). Unlike Bertha, who is unable to speak for herself and whose only form of dualism is in the question of her humanity (human/animal), Jane is dualistic in many ways. First, she is both current Jane and Jane the narrator. This situation can cause confusion, as narrator Jane will revert into current Jane, which changes not only the focalization of the situation but also reminds and alerts the reader that two Janes exist. Furthermore, Jane is often described as a “witch” or “faerie,” she was a “bad animal” in her youth, yet as she grows she becomes more and more human, “You are altogether a human being, Jane? You are certain of that?” “I conscientiously believe so, Mr. Rochester” (Brontë 454). Finally, and most important for the comparison of Jane to Medea and Bertha, there exists Jane Eyre and Jane Rochester. When Jane and Rochester become engaged she explains that the new name is strange (Brontë 262). She does not know who Mrs. Rochester is or how she can become her (not knowing that a Mrs. Rochester already exists). Jane feels conflicted over becoming this new person. Would she cast off her otherness, her foreignness, to become a kept wife to Rochester? Is Jane to follow in the footsteps of Medea and
Bertha, falling prey to Eros and giving up everything only to become beholden to another? In gaining vengeance and removing herself from this situation, Medea acts as a man would and destroys all ties to Jason and annihilates his future. However, Medea merely creates a similar outcome with Aegeus, to whom she flees. Jane is lucky, as Bertha destroys this Jane, much like Medea destroys the Princess of Corinth. Bertha, in destroying the veil of Jane Rochester allows Jane Eyre to prosper. Bertha removes the possibility of a second scorned and mad wife to be created by Rochester, intervening on Jane’s behalf. This idea of Bertha as savior to Jane is one created and bolstered by Gilbert and Gubar, and then later by Susan Fraiman. Within the reboot, *The Madwoman in the Attic: Thirty Years Later*, Fraiman explains that the, “madwoman paradigm transformed rivals into doubles, reconciled wife and mistress, showed us Bertha acting on Jane’s behalf” (29). Thus, unlike the altercation portrayed in the Medea myth, Charlotte Brontë shifted her version into one of partners. Bertha Rochester exists to the readers only because Jane Eyre hears and interacts with her and only because Jane was attempting to become her. Jane Eyre would have become Jane Rochester without Bertha. If Jane had given in and married Rochester, she would have gone “so far to forget [herself] and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me” (Brontë 361). Thus, without Bertha to stop her, Jane Eyre would have been destroyed. Jane even converses with herself, much like Medea, about her choices and how her conscience turns against her when debating staying or leaving Thornfield:

> This was true: and while he spoke my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with crime in resisting him. They spoke almost as loud as Feeling: and that clamoured wildly. "Oh, comply!" it said. "Think of his misery; think of his danger — look at his state when left alone; remember his
headlong nature; consider the recklessness following on despair — soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for you? or who will be injured by what you do?"

Still indomitable was the reply — " I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad — as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth — so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane — quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. Preconceived opinions, foregone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot.” (Brontë 362)

While discussing within herself she recognizes the madness of passion and love that take over, similar to the passion that Medea feels for Jason. But Jane persists and refuses to fall prey, because she has seen what it has done to the other women in Rochester’s life and refuses to be like them. Without Bertha to aid in destroying Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre could never have fortified herself and become equal to Edward Rochester. Jane Eyre, with all of the eloquence, power, and passion of Medea, needs only to fall prey to her emotions to fulfill the cycle of abandonment and abuse. Yet, with Bertha’s aid, Jane Eyre grows in experience and knowledge
(as well as fortune) to be a more equal and independent partner to Rochester, while Bertha brings Rochester low by taking her pound of flesh for his treatment of her.

In the last third of Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë reworks the Medea myth by granting Jane autonomy from her “otherness.” Unlike Medea, who needed Jason in order to survive in Greece, and Jason who needed Medea in order to achieve his goals, Jane is able to raise her station and afford to live as a single woman. Medea, who allows herself to become “other” in a foreign land, could never remove her “otherness.” Jane abandons Thornfield and Mr. Rochester in order to save herself. After nearly dying on the moors she is taken in by the Rivers siblings, later revealed to be her cousins. She is also gifted 20,000 pounds upon the death of her long-lost uncle, money she splits between herself and her newfound family. Thus, Jane is able to become a single woman in her own right; no longer an orphan, she now has a family, and no longer destitute, she retains five thousand pounds. Not only this, but Jane is ultimately true to her authentic self. When her cousin St. John asks her to marry him and go with him to India she refuses him. She could not marry someone she doesn’t love or throw her life away, “God did not give me my life to throw away; and to do as you wish me would, I begin to think, would be almost equivalent to committing suicide” (Brontë 432). Jane is able to become strong like Medea, knowing that she needs passion in order to be happy but that she needs it on her own terms. She is not some child who will follow what any of these men command her to do, she will follow her own voice and use her internal aggression and strength to achieve her own goals and live her life, something she is only able to do because of her experience with Bertha. Jane believes in her authentic self. She knows what she wants and is strong enough to stand by those convictions. She was willing to go to India with St. John but knew she could not marry him.
“Once more, why this refusal?” he asked.

“Formerly,” I answered, “because you did not love me; now, I reply, because you almost hate me. If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now.”

His lips and cheeks turned white—quite white.

“I should kill you—I am killing you? Your words are such as ought not to be used: violent, unfeminine, and untrue. (Brontë 431)

Jane refused St. John’s marriage but was willing to go to India to help him. She could not fathom marriage to him, a cold, passionless marriage where she would be expected to perform all her wifely duties but enjoy none of them. She argues with St. John rationally, explaining her side and her inability to marry him. She is willing to go as siblings to India. But he pressures her to marry him, causing her to exclaim that he is killing her. This response, pointed out by St. John, is unfeminine and violent, as Jane has stepped outside of the idealized actions of women and stood up for herself. Much like Bertha, Jane uses this vocalized violence to assert her own desires, something the ideal Victorian woman would never do. Thus, she is truly Rochester’s equal as not only has she shed her “otherness” but she has also established her own being and strength without the need for a male protector.

Unlike Bertha, who like Medea will never be able to lose her “otherness,” Jane is able to assimilate and integrate with society and thus equal Rochester. Charlotte highlights how important it is for Rochester and Jane to be equal when she has Jane realize that if she were to lose herself to stay with the married Rochester, soon she would be like every previous woman in his life; additionally, if she were to marry St. John in a passionless union, she would die as well. Her only way of being happy was as her authentic self either alone or with an unattached
Rochester. However, interpreting *Jane Eyre* through the lens of the play highlights the problematic aspect to Jane being able to overcome “otherness” while Bertha cannot. Postcolonial studies and feminist studies alike have pointed out the difference in which Charlotte Brontë wrote these two characters. Jane is able to rise up above her station, yet Bertha is “incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger” (Brontë 300). Bertha, who is not truly a foreign character like Medea, but who is colonized by Britain, is still held back from becoming anything other than a madwoman. While Jane is powerless from birth due to her parents’ station and lack of wealth, throughout the retold myth she gains and maintains her own power by not marrying Rochester until her “otherness” has been destroyed and her autonomy established. However, Bertha, as the double to Jane must fall for Jane to succeed, demonstrating how Charlotte Brontë needed Bertha to help Jane, but ultimately could never see a resolution for Jane without the absence of Bertha. Thus, within Bertha is the original Medea, but within Jane is the revisioning of Medea.

Charlotte Brontë was able to take the Classical myth of Medea who was seen as a champion of women and recreate the story into one that fulfilled that promise for the Victorian woman. Medea, while standing up for herself and fighting back against her oppressors, falls into the traps that many of these Classical powerful women characters fell into: attacking and demoralizing other women to punish men. Medea attacks the Princess, Hera attacks Callisto, but Bertha does not attack Jane. While Medea does stand up for herself and is human in her Euripidean retelling, she directs her violence not against the man who hurt her, but everyone else around him, including her own children. I believe Charlotte disagreed with a champion for

---

59 See studies in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, or Gayatri Spivak’s *The Post-Colonial Critic*. 

70
women who destroyed other women. Even within Jane Eyre, Jane never attacks a woman without apologizing afterwards. She is angry with her aunt yet apologizes on her deathbed even though she had every right to be angry with her. She is never rude or mean to her female cousins she grows up with (only ever striking John Reed her male cousin), she apologizes internally to Grace Poole and Blanche Ingram for thinking ill of them, and even though she does not help Bertha, she respects the position Bertha holds as Rochester’s wife. Similarly, Bertha never attacks Jane, only her own brother, Rochester, and symbols of their control and authority.

Charlotte, in using an ancient myth is symbolically attacking the elitist culture that has imposed the ideal prison of womanhood, much like the dramatists would use women characters to further their political ideas and agendas. By creating female characters who act aggressively or violently, Charlotte creates masculine characters to subvert society’s control. While violence can be seen as madness, the direction of that violence is telling whether directed towards the source or at everything but the source.

In the recreation of the Medea myth, Charlotte still places importance in the idea of passion or Eros. Jane turns down a loveless marriage with St. John, and instead rushes back to Thornfield when she hears a voice call her name. The voice may be Aphrodite and Cupid instilling passion into Jane, resetting the recreated myth. Once back at Thornfield Jane aids Rochester, not unlike Medea helping Jason. However, this myth ends happily as the both Jane and Rochester are now unattached and autonomous beings who can better each other in an equal

60 Outside the scope of this paper is an analysis of Wide Sargasso Sea, the adaptation by Rhys that details Bertha’s past and allows her a voice to defend herself. However, within analysis of this text by Spivak, “[Bertha] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (251). While, within the confines of Jane Eyre this argument can only be speculated, within the adaptation, Bertha’s sacrifice is an accepted part of the understanding of Bertha’s and Jane’s relationship.
and loving marriage. Bertha has died, the flaming Thornfield her chariot of fire. Jane Rochester is dead, her bed being the second thing burned by Bertha’s pyrotechnics. Rochester has lost his home and has been symbolically castrated and is now equal to Jane. Jane is no longer an “other” and Bertha’s ultimate sacrifice ended the cycle of the scorned and abandoned woman. 

Ultimately, Charlotte recreates a myth of equals, a marriage of love and trust, where two people serve to improve each other’s lot. She aims to highlight how Victorian women are forced into these two camps, demon or angel, and how both negatively impact women. Demons or violent women may enact revenge or gain some semblance of autonomy, but at the cost of how society views their sanity. Demons become “other.” Angels on the other hand, are ideal and accepted but go unacknowledged and put down. Charlotte, in Jane, created a woman, encompassing both of these categories’ characteristics. In this woman she creates a myth of women to allow them their own place among men.
Section V: Conclusion

Of all creatures that have life and reason
we women are the sorriest lot:
first we must at a great expenditure of money
buy a husband and even take on a master
over our body: this evil is more galling than the first.
Here is the most challenging contest, whether we will get a bad man
or a good one (Euripides Medea 229-235).

The Classics were an important influence on the Victorian period, as the Britain of the
Victorian period saw itself as the new Athens. Thus, the texts which had influenced thinking and
the subsequent works in the Romantic period before it now created elite classes and
distinguished between the high and the lowly. However, the general population still had access to
the stories and myths of the Ancients, if not through translations, then through performances,
reviews, and articles in household periodicals. One play, Medea, known as a story of a
madwoman, was a complex drama used often as shorthand to communicate a varied look at
women. In artwork, theatre, and some reviews, she was often spoken of or portrayed as a naïve
girl, tricked by Aphrodite and used by Jason: however, she was also seen and used to portray
madness and violence. Thus, depending on the reception, she was either a lunatic, devious,
horrid woman, or a sympathetic woman, thrust aside when Jason had no use for her and
abandoned. In the latter reception, her only course of action was to fight back in order to be
heard, something that flew in the face of the ideal woman, the “Angel in the House.” However,
that did not stop Medea from becoming a champion of women’s rights, or an example of how society could fail women.

Charlotte Brontë was able to take the Classical myth of Medea, who was seen as a champion of women, and recreate the story into one that fulfilled that promise for the Victorian woman. As previously stated, I believe Charlotte disagreed with a champion for women who destroyed other women.

The Classical lens offers a new way of interpreting Jane Eyre and explaining Jane’s actions, as the plot without any lens follows a sane woman who runs away from the very insanity that threatens her existence only to return to it willingly. After being betrayed by Rochester through his lies, she returns to his side. Without the mythical approach and background this story is one seemingly in reverse, where the protagonist learns nothing. It is not until the question of “otherness,” and equality of women is considered that this story shows growth in the main character through the sacrifice of Bertha/Medea, the incomplete champions of women.

Charlotte Brontë was a woman who used her writing to educate the masses of her understanding of the female pattern within the Victorian society (Bloom Charlotte Brontë 45). Using stories previously told she would make changes or add characters to ensure her ideas stood out in the retelling, calling into focus how women were treated and expected to conduct themselves. By utilizing Medea and reincarnating her in the madwoman Bertha, she demonstrated how women backed into a corner had only one way to be heard, and that was through violence. Charlotte, however, changed her Medea, redirecting her violence to prevent another scorned wife from being created in the pivotal character.
Works Cited


Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Strahan & Cadell,


“Greek Drama No. 1.” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 30, 1831, pp. 354.


Lempiere, J. *Bibliotheca Classica or, a Classical Dictionary; Containing a Copious Account of the Principal Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors; with the Value of Coins, Weights, and Measures, Used Among the Greeks and Romans; and a Chronological Table.* Edited by Charles Anthon, G.&C.&H. Carvill-H.C. Sleight, 1833.


Bibliography


