OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

The Evolution of the Perception of Female Madness from Classical Greek Tragedy to Victorian Era Literature and Its Reception

Amn Zain-ul-Abidin
az3711@nyu.edu

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the evolution of the perception of female madness from Classical Greek tragedy to Victorian Era literature by examining how societal norms and patriarchal structures have shaped the way the 'madwoman in the attic' is portrayed in literature. Beginning with an analysis of *Medea* from Ancient Greece, it dissects the reasoning behind her supposed 'madness' and how her reactions were perceived by society, often through the lens of the Chorus. It then transitions to the Victorian Era, focusing on *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, contrasting the characters of Jane and Bertha Mason (the first, mad wife), in light of the Victorian Cult of Domesticity, and how each was declared 'insane' in their own right, citing often overlooked similarities. The comparison between these periods reveals striking likenesses and differences in depicting madwomen, reflecting the persistent struggle to be seen as humans experiencing emotions, rather than those deserving confinement. The paper argues that despite the passage of over two millennia, the perception of female madness has not evolved as significantly as expected, remaining rooted in fear and control. Ultimately, the only nuance that has been catered to is reflective of the rise of ethnocentrism in the Victorian Era: feminist literature has only grown kinder to the madwoman who is not the 'barbaric, exotic foreigner' of their rigid stereotypes, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of these complex characters.

INTRODUCTION

Insanity festers in silence, in isolation, in incomprehension. A madman is "confined on the ship, from which there is no escape" (Foucault, 1961). A madwoman, on the other hand, is a definition that carries a different meaning. She refuses to be "weak, futile, passive, and docile" (de Beauvoir, 1949), one who the enforcers of patriarchy cannot box into the "ship" that is supposed to be her mandated abode.

When women are expected in both society and, conversely, fiction, to be boxed into a confined area, to limit their thoughts, feelings, and passions, they proceed to create a "fictional prison" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) within their minds. It is here that the 'insanity' festers in isolation.

This paper asks whether feminist literary representations of the 'madwoman' meaningfully evolved between Classical Greece and the Victorian Era, or whether patriarchal frameworks continue to constrain female insanity across time. To model this argument in favour of the latter, this study starts by establishing what is meant by 'madness' and the implications of patriarchy within the literature. Using comparative theoretical literary analysis, it examines Euripides's *Medea* as a case study of the treatment of the Classical Greek tragic heroine's supposed insanity. Transitioning through centuries, it then presents the Victorian Era Code, along with analyzing the idea of the "madwoman in the attic" from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. This also takes into account the prequel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, authored by Jean Rhys. To tie up the loose ends, the paper then follows with a comparative analysis of both eras and female protagonists: their triggers, personalities, and eras, establishing the argument.

DEFINING FEMALE MADNESS

The word 'mad' has no less than nine definitions within the dictionary ('Mad Definition & Meaning', n.d.), each different from the next. Taking this into account, it is a term difficult to pinpoint as a specific 'illness'. Freud claims that our traditional definition of a raving madman originates from "unexpressed emotions which never die", but lie buried, waiting for the right moment to strike viciously (Vahrmeyer, 2021). Human beings are prone to pigeonhole things, and the fear of the unknown malady 'madness' that defies all rationalization (Derrida, 1963) makes them resort to confining the madman. The reasoning behind such confinement, then, is to "eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it" (Foucault, 1961), and this subversion from normality is what is perceived as unnatural.

Since the time of hunter-gatherers and the advent of infighting, patriarchal values have seeped into society. By glorifying the warriors, i.e., the more physically able men, women used to be restricted to the sidelines of society, as their social organization is "marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family" ("Patriarchy: Meaning, History & Examples", n.d.). Hence, the conformist social order finds room for the exaltation of man, shunning the second sex. Aristotle goes as far as to claim that women do not have fully developed minds (Plećaš & Đorđević, 2023). The advent of Christianity introduced the concept of 'original sin', forging the idea that women are inherently supposed to submit to men based on Eve's sins (Pose, n.d.). Hence, society is likelier to believe the narrative of the 'damsel-in-distress', as it opens up an opportunity for the male sex to provide succor to the docile, melancholic woman. And yet, another version of the distressing damsel is the raging, crying, loud one - exhibiting traits often associated with masculinity. The latter is an anomaly in the eyes of a patriarchal society, the "figure which did not find its place within the social order" (Derrida, 1963), as it threatens the stance of men and hence the social order. "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (de Beauvoir, 1949); an individual who defies a norm of mankind, hence attacking its version of the truth, is the madman. Putting into perspective

how society is more likely to be sympathetic to men than women, the madwoman then receives the grunt of societal frustration, which does not seem to have the skill set to 'control' her.

In the ensuing texts, the female characters presented reflect the societies in which they reside. There are those like Medea and Antoinette, i.e., Bertha Mason (the madwoman in the attic from *Jane Eyre*), who face the additional burden of being foreigners to new societal milieus, and those like Jane who are confined to the limits of their said societies. Either way, the patriarchal suppression of women's passions, feelings, and experiences often manifests in these works as the "unexpressed emotions" that Freud mentions (Vahrmeyer, 2021). The locking up of such emotions which were not culturally acceptable, inside their mental attics, aggregated to what is conventionally known as 'madness', i.e., unrestrained reactions and actions.

PERCEPTION OF FEMALE MADNESS IN CLASSICAL GREEK TRAGEDY

Starting with Ancient Greece, the literature of this era has often been considered the bedrock of Western literary tradition. Sophocles and Euripides' tragic plays remain a blueprint for theatrical performances. Subsequently, in an era so rich with literary works, the plays produced reflected the values of such a society. The Athenian Code of Ethics for Women, as per Pericles, an influential Athenian politician of the Golden Age, was simple: "To a woman not to show more weakness than is natural to her sex is a great glory, and not to be talked about for good or for evil among men" (Thucydides*, Pericles' Funeral Oration*, n.d.). In Ancient Greece, women were defined as "being invisible, ignorant, silent, the one who gives birth…" (Plećaš & Đorđević, 2023), a generally passive role in society. Euripides defied their passive role by not only forming a play about a woman but naming it after her as well.

The story of Medea is one where the titular gifted princess of Colchis leaves her island by betraying her family for Jason of the Argonauts. She slays for him, lies for him, gives birth for him, only for him to abandon her in Corinth - an unknown land with those hostile to change - for another. Euripides's play covers the onslaught of her rage. Medea's wrath towards Jason manifests in multiple ways: hysterical conjurations and curses, bloodshed, and declaring her own identity. One observes how each avenue is picked off as a reason to legitimize her as a "barbarian" from a foreign land (Blondell, 1999).

She diverges from the initial perspective of the audience and the characters of the play. As per the Chorus, Medea was supposedly the perfect wife, welcomed by all when she arrived in Corinth, "always compromising, always accommodating" (Eur. *Med.* 14). It is to be noted that the Chorus in this play is that of the women of Corinth, who while viewing Medea as a sympathetic character (Phoutrides, 1916), do not hesitate from naming her powerless: "So what if your husband has found another woman? Why let this anger of yours to break your heart?" (Eur. *Med*. 155-6). Since the Chorus represents the voice of those around the characters (Cash, 2023), this is a link to the idea that most of society was thrust into internalized misogyny, so any act out of the traditional effeminate role was received with shock.

The first trait of Medea that makes her stand apart from the traditional woman is her expression of her intelligence. She plots, schemes, and advises- actions that were mostly attributed to men; as in the play *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, a guard says to Clytemnestra - another 'mad' woman who uses her wits to exact an act of bloody revenge on her husband who murdered her child - "Woman, like a wise man you speak sensibly" (Aesch. *Ag.* 351), meaning that a woman in her self cannot be wise or sensible. As a whole, the reason female intelligence is undermined is that "society denies them any means of expression" (de Beauvoir, 1949), so any expression of it is seen as out of the box and calls to be squashed. Medea's intellect is what encourages those of both genders to come to her for advice, and by the end of the play, she brings both the King of Corinth and Jason to their knees, which makes her surpass each male character in the play. This can be read as her being a threat to the patriarchal order due to her decisiveness, resourcefulness, and power (Blondell, 1999). This corroborates Jason's reaction, that men would be infinitely happier if " men, somehow gave birth and women simply didn't exist"(Eur. *Med.* 570-71), meaning the existence of a woman sure of her identity and position should be quelled, under the guise of her being mentally challenged.

Medea's identity as a foreigner also plays a role in her being misunderstood, as she is a "barbarian from Colchis on the Black Sea" (Blondell, 1999), which makes her traditionally 'mad'. Edward Said's Orientalism debunks this colonial ideology: the comparatively more dominating race of colonizers, i.e., in this play, the Corinth majority over the immigrant princess from Colchis, fears the unknown race, as they fear losing the upper hand. For this reason, they choose to classify and dehumanize the other, to present themselves as morally and intellectually superior. This was seen during the cartoons of the British Colonial Era, where Indians were portrayed as dark, hairy monkeys, and reflected in the slurs attributed to slaves in the Americas. Through the "limited vocabulary and imagery" (Said, 1978) that is here assigned to Medea, such as how "horrible" it was for her to leave her homeland, and how "no Greek woman" would do the things she did as a "naive idiot" (Eur. *Med.* 1338), she is alienated as the 'other'. The traditions of Colchis differ from those of Corinth, which sets Medea more as a debunker of societal projections on outsiders: she takes on many of the Greek male gender roles - law, order, brutality, untrustworthiness, expertise with magic, etc. However, historically, the average Greek male, like Jason, is usually praised for such qualities. But by perceiving her actions as villainous, she offers a lens to objectively view the Greek males and their actions. She roleplays as a mirror of Greek masculine society's evils, via her bloodied actions (Plećaš & Đorđević, 2023).

From a more observable point-of-view, Medea's apparent state of mind is also present in her physical appearance. She is characterized as having "a pale white face", with "eyes sad" (Eur. Med. 689). Since something out of character and immediate explanation to society was taken to be a form of irrationality and insanity, it was prescribed as an illness, commonly dubbed "something wild" (Eur. *Med.* 43). One's mental distress and subsequent ill health is often symptomized via pallor (Bottaro, 2024), so Medea's unusually ashy skin during the progression of the play aids in the viewers perceiving her as ill.

In addition to this, the titular character's madness is cited due to her reliance on supposed sinister spellcasting. Generally, women associated with witchcraft have been villainized in historical literature. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's 1606 tragedy, Lady Macbeth calls to the spirits to "unsex her", and take her

breast "milk for gall" as in transforming her from a woman to one with manly qualities so that she can exercise her magic. Later in the play, she becomes "troubled with thick coming fancies," i.e., madness due to her guilt (Shakespeare, 1984). Taking her calls, curses, and guilt into account, it is a similar situation to what Medea faces. She becomes a "child killer" and one who becomes a "poisoner" by showcasing hatred for her husband, and at the same time, physically poisoning his new wife. It does not help Medea's case that she continues to call up her "evil thoughts" (40). She summons the Furies to punish the sinners and presents spells and potions. Hence, she resembles the lunar divinity that Hecate, the goddess of magic, stands for, who also symbolizes the irrational and unsound (Plećaš & Đorđević, 2023). Her seemingly barbaric actions, her bloodlust, and her foreign powers and brutal words and magic are more than enough proof for the Chorus to declare her as "wretched and mad" (Eur. *Med.* 873).

Medea's diction also presents her as psychologically distressed. Derrida is quick to note that "the disjunction between reason and unreason can only occur in the interval of a silence" (Derrida, 1963), i.e., that there is no cohesive manner a madman (or madwoman in this instance) can express their emotions within the bounds of conventional language. Hence, as Medea utters in a charged manner, "Come thunder! Come lightening of the sky!"(Eur. Med. 6), and "No, no my heart, no!" (Eur. Med. 1058), a manic repetition of seemingly nonsensical phrases out loud, to the passerby, it is an expression of insanity, of talking to oneself. Coupled with her expression of rage, this makes her the very "wild lioness" (Eur. *Med.* 1408), who needs to be caged or exiled for the sake of Corinth, and hence she deserves to "wander aimlessly away from her house"(Eur. *Med.* 1288). The unknown realm of magic and female rage is brushed under the umbrella term of 'madness' when it comes to women, whereas a man of the same period with the same qualities is glorified. For instance, Prometheus's character in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* is only associated with heroism and wisdom for disobeying the gods and upsetting the natural order, but Medea is associated with dark magic for barely a fraction of his antics.

Within Greek society, women were seen as "creatures… necessary to produce new citizens" (Slapšak, 2013, 13). Children were a status symbol, and women were the source of them. As aforementioned, Jason also holds the view that the only reason women were allowed to pollute the world of men was that they were needed to give birth. Hence, the role of the woman was more or less confined to being a "mother to her children" (Plećaš & Đorđević, 2023). However, Medea defies this very stereotype thrust upon her in two ways. First, she denounces motherhood by claiming that "One birth alone is worse than three times in the battlefield behind a shield"(Eur. *Med.* 247). Then, she proceeds to kill her children, putting her revenge on Jason as a woman above her duty as a mother. This bloody portrayal of reclaiming her identity was evidently too bold a move for any regular society to stomach, which preferred to then lock her up in her own home as dangerous.

And yet, for all her murders and curses, Medea, in the end, is also a woman suffering. The difference between her portrayal of her grief is that she refuses to be thought of as a "weak and sickly woman or one of those quiet spirits" (Eur. *Med.* 808). She lost her father, abandoned her homeland for a stranger, and then traveled the seas with said stranger. After having his children and settling into a foreign land, reluctant to accept her, she still tries to remain patient, never arguing, always docile, against her own nature. She is much confined to her own 'attic' by this point, to satisfy the man she loves. However, it is when the man, Jason, whom she sacrificed so much for, leaves her for one native to her land that her

sense of isolation heightens. In Ancient Greek society, as Clytemnestra states, "for a woman to sit in the house alone apart from a male is a terrifying evil" (Aesch. *Ag.* 861-62), so the judgmental gazes start hounding Medea. It does not help that Jason treats her uncivilly, and this reinforces her own insecurities about not being enough because she is a foreigner to him. Rationalizing her experiences, one is compelled to state that she is not 'mad', but could be claimed as "the first person in literature whose thinking and feeling are described in purely human terms, as the products of the human soul" (Katz, 1994). It is the fact that the distinction lies in sex, and not in the depth of human emotion when perceiving illnesses, that makes her villainization stand out.

However, as established, Greek society was mostly sympathetic towards its men. In *Heracles*, another play by Euripides, the titular character's uncontrollable murder of his wife and children is said to be the influence of divine intervention (Hera). In *Medea*, no such excuse is made for her actions by either the playwright or the Chorus. Instead, she is vilified in literature as psychotic. It is rightfully stated that "all oppression creates a state of war" (de Beauvoir, 1949), so the suppression of Medea's emotions and rage built up to her waging war on Jason. The Colchidian princess says, "Now, I am Medea", only after cleansing her hands of the revenge against her husband in the most heinous of manners. This way, she cuts off her connection to a man, as she claims that despite her sorrow, her "pains are eased knowing she is not the object of Jason's ridicule" (Eur. *Med.* 1355). Her independent will and power over the lives of people make her as prominent in society as a man, sowing fear into the hearts of her opposers who then wish to cage her, and isolate her from others, labeling her as "wild"(Eur. Med. 102), to reclaim her position.

On the whole, Medea uncovers male anxiety about women's will and sexual autonomy, which, given her status as a "witch" (Blondell, 1999), are viewed as expressions of demonic powers calling for exorcism or confinement (Blondell, 1999). This portrays her as a bloody, villainous madwoman, rather than the hurt human being she is, largely because of her sex.

PERCEPTION OF FEMALE MADNESS IN CLASSICAL GREEK TRAGEDY

In 400 BCE, the most dominant presence in Europe was that of Classical Athens, the era discussed above. Two thousand, two hundred and fifty years later, this was the British Empire, in the nineteenth century, under Victorian Rule. The Victorian Era Code for Women, however, was still, in certain respects, in line with that of the Athenian Code. Commonly referred to as the 'Cult of Domesticity' (Cooper, 2001), the role of women within it entailed them being the "angels of the house" ("Write-Up on Victorian Age," n.d.). They were expected to be pious, pure, polite, and most importantly, submissive. This docile role taught women effectively that they were irrelevant to important processes of society, so most of them internalized the belief of their invisibility (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Since the emphasis was placed on those being submissive, those subject to "wrongful confinement" were women who refused to submit to the control of their husbands (Logan, 1998). Confinement, as established, remains one of society's peak mannerisms to "suppress madness and eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place

within it" (Foucault, 1961). In this paper, the disobedient and hence maddened wife will be explored using *Jane Eyre* as a case study.

The Brontë sisters are reputed for their Victorian Era feminist literature. *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, was published in 1857, narrating the story of an orphan girl and her struggles through classism and love. A central plot point is when the titular character is employed as a governess for the daughter of the wealthy, middle-aged owner of Thornfield Hall, Edward Rochester. Halfway through the story, Jane and Rochester are standing at the altar for their wedding when it is revealed that the latter has been married for over fifteen years to Bertha Mason, who has been haunting the halls of Thornfield since Jane's arrival. Upon the revelation of his wife, who Rochester has locked up in the attic of his house, hence the phrase "the madwoman in the attic" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979), it is also disclosed that she is in fact "the vampyre" (Bronte, 1847), mad to the very definition of a rabid dog. Later, in one of her fits, Bertha proceeds to set fire to Thornfield and jumps off the rooftop to her death, leaving Rochester and Jane free to marry.

However, the story of Bertha extends further than this. In 1966, Dominican-American author Jean Rhys published a post-colonial and feminist prequel to *Jane Eyre*, titled *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which she expands upon Bertha Mason's backstory as a Creole in Jamaica, and how she was driven to her 'madness'. Angela Smith claims in her introduction that "Rhys was annoyed when she read *Jane Eyre* because she thought, 'That's only one side, the English side" (Rhys, 2000). In this novel, we realize that Rochester was the one who named his wife 'Bertha' when in reality her name was Antoinette, and forced her out of her hometown. Antoinette's life is peppered with insinuations of her maddened mother, the burning of her house, Coulibri, and the prevalent idea of her being "marooned" (Rhys, 1966), neither belonging with the white man, nor the black, due to her mixed heritage. In the ensuing paragraphs, this paper will chronologically delve into each of the two women in the *Jane Eyre* continuum, what makes them 'mad' in their own respect, and the reception to it.

With reference to Bertha Mason, to most readers of *Jane Eyre*, she was indeed "fearful and ghastly" (Brontë, 1847). To understand what made her the "mad woman", one must look into her childhood in Jamaica. It was simple enough for Rochester to rule her out as "she came from a mad family" (Brontë, 1847), but Antoinette's past is more complex than the vague umbrella term attributed to anything out of her husband's norm.

Antoinette's mixed race takes center stage in her existentialism. Taking place after the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act (Rhys et al., n.d.), her widowed Creole family faces the brunt of post-colonial sentiment in Jamaica. When her mother marries the Englishman Richard Mason, the immigrants from Europe look down upon their skin and the 'wildness ' of life away from 'civilization', i.e., the British Empire. As she grows up surrounded by ex-slaves, mostly black, she is ridiculed not only for her riches but for being a "white nigger" (Rhys, 1966). A central internal conflict within Antoinette from the day she was born remains in her questions: "I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why I was ever born at all" (Rhys, 1966). Those displaced within themselves are not ever likely to achieve mental peace, and isolation only nurtures insecurities, doubts, and insanity. Her only companionship is her black nanny, Christophine, who is also known as the local "voodoo lady" (Rhys,

1966), whom most Englishmen fear. Once Rochester comes into the picture, a jilted youth, Antoinette is sold off by her stepbrother in marriage. Where Rochester holds Antoinette in the same lens as he would an Englishwoman, i.e., through the Victorian Era Code for Women, Antoinette grew up in the gardens of Coulibri, surrounded by animals and fire. Where he despises the Jamaican land, it is her only home. Antoinette's habitual isolation also negatively impacts her communication with those around her, leaving a dearth of unanswered questions between her and her husband. Being alone in the land of the colored, Rochester feels as isolated as Antoinette, and as unaware. It is to be noted that most white men in foreign lands during the Victorian Era, also referred to as peak colonial times, took pleasure in controlling the supposedly inferior race. The concept of Orientalism can be applied here as he says, "She was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (Rhys, 1966). Being a stranger in the land of barbarians, where everyone around him mutters about Christophine, Rochester realizes he would have no control over the world of magic, which makes him feel in the shadows, convinced the land is his "enemy" (Rhys, 1966).

This very racism is his justification for locking up his wife. If she yells and breaks glasses when he sleeps with another woman, it is not the rage of a betrayed wife but that of a mentally disabled woman. If she refuses to divulge her family history, she is guarding secrets of a "three generations' challenged mad lineage" (Bronte, 1847), rather than taking her time to trust a stranger. After associating madness with her "impure" racial composition, Rochester reverts to the West Indian climate as cultivating such madness, a kind of hell for the 'civilized' Englishman such as himself. Hence, any behavior of Antoinette that defies Rochester encourages him to lock her in his attic, to exercise colonial supremacy. She is "victimized by an Imperialist history which has never been conducive to a successful cultural syncretism" (Forrester, 1994). This racism is solidified all through *Jane Eyre* as well, as the biggest inducer of her 'madness' is Rochester taking her forcefully to England, where no one is aware of her customs and Creole appearance. So, when Jane refers to her as someone with "lips swelled and dark", with "black eyebrows" (Bronte, 1847), it is a direct insult to the English standard, being that of a gentle-featured wife. The more out of place Antoinette becomes, the more isolated she becomes, which only increases her loneliness and hence her desperate actions, such as roaming around Thornfield, searching for the two longings she had always had: "I wanted to be loved, and I wanted to be always alone" (Rhys, 1966). Considering how she is deprived of all the love Jane swoops in and takes and is never left unsupervised in her attic, Antoinette loses all semblance of what held importance to her.

However, her mixed heritage is not the only rationale Rochester presented for her being a "demon" (Brontë, 1847). It then becomes a tussle between Jane and Bertha - the former is the perfect example of the groomed "Miller's girl", i.e., the blue-eyed, docile white girl (Rhys, 1966). Antoinette dreamed of being accepted by society, to be loved. Instead, she becomes an object of Rochester's fleeting lust. He is quick to state, regarding Jane, "This is what I wished to have... this young girl who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon" (Bronte, 1847). Jane is everything Bertha could never be. It is the tragic irony of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that it is "possessed by an already dead protagonist whose destiny has already been written" (Forrester, 1994). Hence, due to her status as a mixed woman who is louder and makes her presence known, Antoinette is the one robbed of a voice to tell her story. She is brazen; she seemingly "sucks blood" (Bronte, 1847), has wild hair, and in

times when she was supposedly less "mad" (Bronte, 1847), would drink heavily because her husband made her, and would lose herself in the throes of passion with him. As pre-established, such behaviors are neither docile nor submissive, and "any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and her seductiveness" (de Beauvoir, 1949), threatening male stereotypes. A prominent context that impacts Antoinette's mental state is the preemptive assumptions everyone has about her mother, Annette, being "mad" (in reality, she was sexually abused after losing her son, home, and identity). Rochester specifically emphasizes this, saying, "'You have your mother's eyes. There is nothing you can hide from me" (Rhys, 1966). Antoinette becomes a self-fulfilled prophecy: fearing the fate of her mother but repeating her steps. The only identity Antoinette has is attached to her mother via her name, but then Rochester renames her "Bertha", completely taking ownership of "his mad girl" (Rhys, 1966). His fierce jealousy and want for control over his wife lead Rochester to establish that "She'll have no lover, for I don't want her" (Rhys, 1966)- an ironic statement, but the one that imprisons her in the attic. The attic is where her "confinement merely manifested what madness in its essence was: a manifestation of non-being" (Foucault, 1961). Just as limiting as the setting of her attic is, Rochester has then "enclosed her in definitions of her person and her potential which by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her sense of her self" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). His robbing her of her expression and sense of self is what drives her to the typical definition of madness, not any other element.

On the other hand, the world of *Jane Eyre* has another woman in it, equally suppressed by society. While Bertha's confinement takes a physical form, Jane's is a mental attic. At the beginning of *Jane Eyre*, when she disobeys her aunt, she is locked up in the Red Room, where her uncle died. This is her attic, the "land of the patriarchal death chamber which functions as a motif of enclosure and escape" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) from suppressing men. She is a quiet character, as "she refuses to reveal to those around her the hidden self that she considers to be her real self and that is an imaginary character" (de Beauvoir, 1949). As she is titleless, poor, and an orphan, Jane's best hope to survive in the world stems from her invisibility. Despite this, bits of individuality seep through, as she does state in classic feminist undertones that "It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action, and they will make it if they cannot find it" (Bronte, 1847) - while women were not allowed to have action in Victorian society. Rochester takes pride in being the object of the affection of this "little girl" (Brontë, 1847). Again, he exercises his want for control over a woman, and this time succeeds as she is an Englishwoman who lives up to the submissive standard. She is supposed to "attain ultimate fulfillment in a subservient relationship with a husband whose devotion seems to spring mostly from his new state of physical vulnerability" (Zare, 1993). Jane's surrender to Rochester creates her attic, where she bars her true personality for the greater good that society convinces her to exist.

A common motif in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that of mirrors, as Bertha longs for a "looking glass" where she would observe her reflection and know what she is like. Quite exactly, in the Red Room, Jane looks at the mirror and states that all she sees in her reflection is a "strange little figure…with a white face and arms and glittering eyes" (Bronte, 1847). Strangely, not only is this a parallel to how Bertha views herself, but the description of pallor and wild eyes conforms to the typical descriptors of madness. So, the anger inside Jane, as a "wild, frantic bird", who was abandoned by her family, cheated on by Rochester, and left to die on the side of the road, is still caged as she quells her reactions - the very reactions Bertha

expresses. It is plausible that "Bertha... is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). However, the difference between them still stands. Where Rochester denounces Antoinette for being a "goblin" for her restlessness, he praises Jane for being a "vivid, restless, resolute captive if free, would soar cloud-high" (Bronte, 1847). Unlike Bertha, Jane escapes Thornfield. Unlike Bertha, she can leave Rochester and fend for herself. Unlike Bertha, she finds love and herself.

THE COMPARISON OF THE EVOLUTION BETWEEN THE TWO GENRES AND TIMES

Classical Greek and Victorian Era feminist literature are supposedly two very different realms. For one, the former was "authored by men, almost entirely" (Plećaš & Đorđević, 2023). *Medea* was written by Euripides for a largely male audience, as Athenian women were barred from attending public gatherings (Thucydides*, Pericles' Funeral Oration*, n.d.). It would then seem logical to assume that Victorian Era literature had evolved more, as the novellas discussed in this paper were authored by women, who could now attain an education. However, Charlotte Brontë is another example of internalized patriarchy. When her sister Emily published *Wuthering Heights*, famed as one of the most wildly passionate novels in history, Charlotte censored her books and presented Emily as an "unthinking vessel" (Bronte, 2003). This is an eerily similar situation to how Bertha was labeled mad for her passionate outlook on life, showcasing that despite the presence of the female narrative, the internalized misogyny meant a comparatively inauthentic worldview of 'madness' by female authors themselves. Jean Rhys, the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who came in 1966, was slightly more mature in her retelling, as she viewed Antoinette through her lens, but since the novel was told mainly through Rochester's perspective, Antoinette remains the "poor ghost" in her narrative (Rhys, 2000).

Both eras, while separated by over two millennia, in some respects, had similar codes for women, centered around the idea of being submissive. It could be said that since the Athenian Empire was the foundation for civilizations in Europe, as some argue, the British Empire carried forth most of its traditions when it came to interpersonal relations, including the expectations for women. Hence, it could be said that there are few differences in the way Medea and the women in *Jane Eyre* are portrayed, save one: the treatment of the familiar.

Medea and Antoinette have almost parallel storylines. Both are intelligent women associated with the "obeah," i.e., magic (Rhys, 1966) of their localities, driven away from their homelands and settled as foreigners with deceitful husbands, who seek to rob them of their identity. As de Beauvoir notes, "No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful than the man who is anxious about his virility" (de Beauvoir, 1949). Both are also driven to distraction by said husband's deeds, which lead them to act rashly. Tragically, however, Medea is the one who claims her independence, not Bertha. The lack of progression in the narrative of the latter almost makes feminist literature regressive many years later. What sets Medea and Antoinette's tragic fates apart from Jane Eyre, however, is that Jane is everything

the two of them could be to be accepted into society. This is where the crux of the development of said perception over the years comes in.

In comparison, in Ancient Greece, Euripides' Medea could be labeled as insane, partially because of her foreign heritage, which makes her unknown, hence fearful, and in need of confinement by society. Yet, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is still a local woman of high stature, and she is labeled a "wild beast" for taking vengeance for her daughter's murder. This goes to show that, irrespective of one's race, culture, or heritage, provided they were a woman, something perceived as unordinary, which could potentially be "the dream of a purely paternal hereditary" (Katz, 1994), was 'mad'. Progressing through the centuries, however, the outlook slightly differs. Jane boldly states, "I am not an angel, and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself" (Bronte, 1847), and asserts that "You think wrong! — I have as much soul as you". She declares her independence and free will, and seeks out her fortune, shunning Rochester. And yet, it only encourages him to pursue her for her fierceness, and she ends up rewarded for her brash statements. This is far from what Antoinette receives. If she says "I am not yours" (Brontë, 1847) to Rochester, bolstering her own independent identity, repetitive rejections force her into the attic. It then boils down to his reproachful statement to Jane: "It is not because she is mad I hate her. If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?" (Bronte, 1847), implying another reason.

At that point, the difference between the self-assertion of Jane and Bertha lies in their heritage. Rochester finds it refreshing that a "grave and quiet" (Bronte, 1847) Englishwoman is rejecting his advances, but when Antoinette does it, he has been "jilted by a Creole" (Rhys, 1966), an insult. This nuance in the perception of female madness likely originates from the normalization of women like Jane Eyre, Elizabeth Bennet, Mina Harker, etc., expressing their identity. However, such enlightenment supposedly did not reach the 'heathens' of the colonial lands within imperial discourse, who fitted the aforementioned Aristotle's description of women as "not having a fully developed mind" (Plećaš & Đorđević, 2023). Hence, when someone like Bertha, one of the barbarians away from civilized England, expresses the same concerns as a white woman, she is locked up as a "German Vampyre" (Bronte, 1847). In contrast, in Greek literature, in presentations of madness, one's sex was usually more specified as opposed to the foreign blood, as anything out of the ordinary in the otherwise invisible women was in black and white: mad or not mad. Nor were imperialization and colonialism as widespread before the Common Era as they were in the nineteenth century. George Eliot crudely noted about this literary progression, i.e the victory of Jane over Antoinette, that "in most novels, it is the dumb, blond heroine who outshines the virile brunette" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979), due to the prevailing patriarchy viewing the former as the weaker ones, the less intelligent ones, and the latter the wild, untamable ones, as they take over the features of the colonized women.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is appropriate to assume that, ranging from Ancient Greece to the Victorian Era, the foundations of feminist literature remained unchanged due to the patriarchal fears of being overthrown by the single-minded matriarch. However, nuance in the exact evolution was created when, historically, the

British Empire embarked on expansion after 1750, hence trying to 'civilize' the barbarians, that is, the non-whites, of the world. Then, their system was not only threatened by another sex but also by another race. So, madness took a new face, in the form of the unknown cultures and curses of the areas they colonized, which made them more sympathetic to women of their 'own kind', as the others, like Antoinette, could not live up to the Cult of Domesticity. On the whole, however, madness remained perceived as the fault of the woman, not those around her. Medea was driven away, Jane was locked in the Red Room, and Bertha was confined to the attic for over 15 years, all because they were supposedly 'mad'. But the insanity arose because "confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness experienced as unreason" (Foucault, 1961), through the repression of emotions by patriarchal orders. Feminist literature likely cannot truly evolve from its male-dictated roots till the world order shifts, which will allow for the locked attics to release their 'madwomen'.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study is necessarily limited in scope. It focuses on a Western literary canon, specifically Classical Greek tragedy and nineteenth-century British and postcolonial Anglophone fiction, and examines a small selection of representative texts rather than offering an exhaustive survey. Consequently, the analysis does not claim to account for all literary traditions or historical experiences of female madness, particularly those outside the Greco-Roman and British imperial contexts. Instead, these texts are read as influential case studies through which dominant patriarchal frameworks and their narrative treatments of female "madness" can be examined across time.

REFERENCES

Blondell, R. (1999). *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides*.

Bottaro, A. (2024, June 21). *Skin Paleness (Pallor): Causes and When to Seek Help*. Verywell Health. Retrieved August 2, 2024, from https://www.verywellhealth.com/pale-skin-5187220

Bronte, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*.

Bronte, E. (2003). *Wuthering Heights* (P. Nestor, Ed.). Penguin Publishing Group.

Cash, J. (2023, September 25). The Role of the Chorus in Greek Theatre: 39 Critical Facts. The Drama Teacher. Retrieved August 7, 2024, from https://thedramateacher.com/the-role-of-the-chorus-in-greek-theatre/

Cooper, S. F. (2001). *Victorian Woman*. Harry N. Abrams.

de Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The Second Sex*.

Derrida, J. (1963). Cogito and the History of Madness.

Forrester, F. (1994). WHO STOLE THE SOUL IN 'WIDE SARGASSO SEA? *Journal of West Indian Literature*.

Foucault, M. (1961). *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*.

Gilbert, S., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.

Katz, M. A. (1994). THE CHARACTER OF TRAGEDY: WOMEN AND THE GREEK IMAGINATION. *Rethinking the Classical Canon*, *27*(1).

Logan, D. A. (1998). *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, Or Do Worse*. University of Missouri Press.

Mad Definition & Meaning. (n.d.). Merriam-Webster. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mad

Medea. (2014). Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial España.

Patriarchy: Meaning, History & Examples. (n.d.). StudySmarter. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/politics/political-ideology/patriarchy/

Phoutrides, A. E. (1916). The Chorus oEuripideses. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, *21*, 77-170. https://doi.org/10.2307/310565

Plećaš, T., & Đorđević, A. (2023, May). Medea: Greek Myth and Peculiar Identity.

Pose, F. (n.d.). *The Original Sin*. Lapham's Quarterly. https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/religion/original-sin

Rhys, J. (1966). *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Rhys, J. (2000). *Wide Sargasso Sea (Penguin Modern Classics)*. Penguin UK.

Rhys, J., Busby, M., & Andoh, A. (n.d.). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Wikipedia. Retrieved August 3, 2024, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wide_Sargasso_Sea

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Shakespeare, W. (1984). *Macbeth* (A. Durband, Ed.). Hutchinson.

Slapšak, S. (2013). Feminist Essay: A Polygraph of Contemporary Culture. 19.

Thucydides, Pericles' Funeral Oration. (n.d.).

Vahrmeyer, M. (2021, April 12). *Unexpressed emotions will never die*. Brighton and Hove Psychotherapy. Retrieved July 20, 2024, from https://www.brightonandhovepsychotherapy.com/blog/unexpressed-emotions-will-never-die/

Write up the Victorian age. (n.d.). Monad University

Zare, B. (1993). JANE EYRE'S EXCRUCIATING ENDING. *CLA Journal*.