



The other (m)other in Jane Eyre

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The other (m)other in *Jane Eyre*

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As Jane's surrogate mother, Mrs Reed, her aunt by marriage, never fulfills her role properly, as she herself admits on her death bed. Throughout her childhood, she figuratively poisons Jane's life with her constant sarcasms and cruelty, turning Jane into another Cinderella or ugly duckling, the scapegoat of the nursery, ostracized from a family which hates her. Mrs Reed's enterprise is to negate Jane's existence, first by sending her away to Lowood, an insalubrious place for poor orphan girls where she hopes the child may die, before actually declaring she is dead to a generous uncle who wanted to make Jane his heir. But Mrs Reed is defeated both by Jane herself, whose resilience is also rewarded by a Providence that helps those who help themselves. She dies, unmourned, and Jane eventually inherits from her uncle : all is well that ends well in a world where fairy tale combines with social romance to ensure the heroine's happiness and promotion.

conte de fées, romance, autobiographie fictionnelle, résilience

The story of the relationship between Jane and Mrs Reed can be read as a remake of *Cinderella* or *Snow White* with the latter in the role of the wicked step-mother, figuratively poisoning Jane's - her rival's - life. Mrs Reed was forced by a promise to her dying husband to adopt a niece who is not hers and whom she cannot be brought to love for her personal charms are far from Cinderella's as Jane herself declares. Jane is the ugly duckling, ostracized from the very incipit of the novel, as if the bundle of fair swans feared her contamination as much as Rochester does Bertha's. Sending Jane away to Lowood is the first step toward the negation of an existence Mrs Reed resents. « You wish me dead » (23) is Jane's percipient declaration that finds its dilatory confirmation when the aunt later confesses to her niece she actually wrote to her uncle that Jane was dead, trying to deprive her of the wealth that could (and will) make her her social equal.

This paper proposes to analyse the character of Mrs Reed as a remake of a witch blaming her frustrations on the usurper, trying to deprive Jane of both affection and wealth, but being defeated in the enterprise both by Jane's obstinacy and by a Providence that helps those who help themselves. The character of Mrs Reed seems to be inscribed in a manichean pattern (the good ones are rewarded and the bad ones

punished) that is the prerogative of fairy tales but also of Charlotte Brontë's own propensity to didacticism.

I will first examine the Cinderella motif at Gateshead where Jane passively submits to the mother and son's ill-treatments of her before rebelling against both, which triggers her incarceration in the red room. The return to Gateshead years later is the occasion for Mrs Reed's confessions which validate Jane's early accusations as if the narrator needed her story to be validated and authenticated by other secondary characters whose words she reports.

1. The Cinderella Syndrome

From the very incipit of the novel, Jane is ostracized from the rest of the family : « Me, she had dispensed from joining the group » (5), the comma typographically supporting this ostracization . « The syntactical inversion serves to assert simultaneously her self-awareness and the unnaturalness of the event ».¹ Jane is to the Reed breed the Ugly Duckling in the midst of fair swans. Her ulterior analysis of the situation reinforces this first impression : « Had I been (...) a handsome romping child, Mrs Reed would have endured my presence more complacently » (12), an opinion that is also voiced by the two servants, their mistress's faithful spokeswomen. Abbott sees Jane as a toad, whereas Bessie will later tell her : « You were no beauty as a child » (78). Jane's ostracization is based on her triple « sin » : she is an orphan, poor and ugly. She has and is nothing : « Jane Eyre connaît dès son enfance le malheur de n'avoir pas de place ».² Be it as a child or as a woman, she always comes second. « C'est donc un véritable roman de formation pour adolescentes, dont la morale est qu'une fille mal dotée ne doit pas espérer passer directement de l'état de fille à celui de première épouse mais devra se contenter, plus réalistement, de celui de seconde épouse ».³

As a remake of Cinderella, she is however painfully aware that she doesn't have the same physical or mental advantages as her literary model : she confesses to having a passionate temper, which will be illustrated in her famous declaration to her flabbergasted aunt, who also confirms Jane's own diagnosis : « But you are passionate, Jane » (31). « She is humanly, but also socially 'other' ».⁴ Jane's social inferiority and dependance give her no rights in the eyes of the Victorian society emblemized by Mrs Reed and taken up by John, her favourite child, whom she (unconsciously ?) entrusts with the care of chastising the intruder : « He has a borrowed power from being the physical expression of his mother's suppressed impulses ».⁵ Marie Soumaré⁶ analyses Mrs Reed's conduct in the following terms : « Son comportement, qui traduit l'hostilité refoulée de la mère envers sa nièce, (...) ressemble à une vengeance par procuration ».⁷ For Mrs Reed, being is having. John

¹ Penny Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë* (Hemel Hempstead: Key Women Writers, 1990), p.64.

² Nathalie Heinich, *Etats de Femmes, L'identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale* (Paris : Gallimard, 1996), p.11.

³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁴ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre*, Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics, 2000, p.IX.

⁵ William Craik, *The Brontë Novels* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1968), p.89.

⁶ Marie Soumaré, *L'enfance dans Jane Eyre et David Copperfield*, DEA, Nanterre, 2002.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.49.

Reed's insistence on Jane calling him 'Master' rings like a proleptic echo of her calling Rochester the same in a caricatural respect of the hierarchical Victorian values. In her unflattering and sarcastic portrait of John Reed, Jane equates essence with appearance as much as the Reeds equate social rank with value :

John Reed was a schoolboy of fourteen years old ; (...) large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin ; thick lineaments is a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities (...) a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. (7)

The narrator forces the reader's antipathy - which is willingly granted. John Reed never misses an opportunity to remind Jane of her inferior status : « I'll teach you to rummage among my bookshelves, for they are mine » (8), where the insistence on the possessive pronoun may sound childish, but is nonetheless revealing. His interest is certainly not in the books themselves, which he probably never reads (Jane's ulterior historical references undoubtedly escape his understanding), but in the wealth, the property, they represent. His attack on Jane may be read as the enactment of his mother's desire to punish the girl, the scapegoat, the alien (the word is repeated at Lowood) « on the periphery of others' lives », ⁸ whose only aim is to try to get in. « The Reeds are cohered in part by the violence they wreak on the scapegoat alien ». ⁹ The physical assault is coupled with verbal insults, with a predilection for the word « rat », in anticipation of the theriomorphic network associated with Bertha Rochester. Gilbert and Gubar, ¹⁰ among others, have emphasized the similarities between the rebellious Jane and the mad Bertha. Jane would be a budding Bertha (her pathologized version) and without the « salutary » punishments of Mrs Reed and Brocklehurst, she might have ended badly. In addition, the connotations of the word « rat » emphasize the danger of infection and contamination which is also what Rochester fears from Bertha as he plans to nail up the front door of the house after Jane's departure. Madness may be infectious, hence the necessity to lock up mad women. For the danger that Jane represents is not only domestic, but she might shake the very hierarchical edifice of a very patriarchal Victorian society which is even more threatened by Bertha Rochester, the Other, the Creole, the Alien, whose rebellion could also be read in colonial terms. This very reading is actually suggested by Jane herself who refuses to call John 'Master' as it would imply she is his slave (an idea that recurs in her relationship with Rochester, disguised as a Sultan with his harem). Brontë's displacement of tyranny at home on to the larger scale of the Empire may be a subtle strategy of concealment, of indirect denunciation. According to Gilbert and Gubar again, it was Charlotte Brontë's anger (her *Juvenilia* were entitled *Angria*) that disturbed the Victorians, her « anger, rebellion and rage » : « For while the mythologizing of repressed rage may parallel the mythologizing of repressed sexuality, it is far more dangerous to the order of society ». ¹¹ Jane herself (or the older narrator) confirms the diagnosis : when she is reluctantly taken to the red room, she is, in her own words, « out of herself » (9),

⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power, A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (Plymouth: Macmillan, 1975), p. 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹⁰ S. Gilbert & S. Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

borrowing from *another* language the diagnosis of her state. The red room is Mrs Reed's sentence for one who has dared to transgress the law in usurping the masters' prerogatives. What Mrs Reed cannot bear is Jane's attempt to leave a place society has allotted to her : « You are less than a servant » (9) (...) And you ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Missis Reed and Master Reed » (10). In her confessions on her death bed, Mrs Reed tells Jane she couldn't accept the idea of her becoming rich. The incarceration in the room is but another topical and functional echo of the attic at Thornfield, the two being situated at the top of the two respective houses, isolated, like two « loony bins». ¹² For Jane, it is no less than the antichamber of Hell (Gateshead has often been parodied into Gateshell by the critics). This episode is one of the most symbolical in the novel. The room is a kind of sanctum Mrs Reed visits on occasion : « Mrs Reed herself, at far intervals, visited it to review the contents of a certain secret drawer in the wardrobe, where were stored divers parchments, her jewel-casket and a miniature of her deceased husband » (11), which some critics have interpreted as a masturbatory activity : « [L]e secret est bien entendu celui de la mort de l'oncle mais l'on peut penser qu'il évoque également le mystère entourant l'intimité des époux Reed ». ¹³ The Red room could also be parodied into Reed room as the patriarchal shadow of Jane's uncle hovers over it. The thought of her dead uncle may be comforting as Jane has no doubts that he would have sided with her against his wife : « *Jane Eyre* is virtually peopled with female surrogates for absent powerful males – Mrs Reed, Miss Temple, Mrs Fairfax, Grace Poole – but it is remarkable that only Jane takes on the unique power of invoking (not, of course, uttering) the very words of this absentee landlord of patriarchal ideology ». ¹⁴

On her death bed, Mrs Reed actually confirms this hypothesis as she complains about her husband's immoderate love for Jane who (like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*) became a usurper of the legitimate children's affection or the third element in an Oedipian triangle. But the prospect of his appearing as a ghost is nonetheless terrifying : « the idea, consolatory in theory, I felt would be terrible if realized » (13) : Jane makes a clear distinction between her desire and its realization, being fully aware that the first should remain such. For Diane Sadoff, the desire linking father and daughter is also closely linked to the idea of punishment : « Jane desperately needs love from the uncle who once loved her, the uncle who stood in the place of the father, and her desire causes her subsequent haunting and punishment ». ¹⁵ The child almost dies of fear in this terrifying room which undergoes a process of transformation under her horror-stricken mind : the various pieces of furniture that (like Mrs Reed) crush her down, turn into so many enemies and Jane, who is the prey of a kind of schizophrenic fit, can't recognize herself in the mirror which misses its Lacanian function and deforms her I (an experience that is reiterated on the morning of her wedding) in a literalization of the above quoted expression : « *out of myself* ». It will take the whole novel for Jane to be at one with

¹² Le français permet davantage le jeu de mots : « garde-folle » ou « cage à folle ».

¹³ Soumaré, *op. cit.*, p.85.

¹⁴ Penny Boumelha, *op. cit.*, p.66.

¹⁵ Diane Sadoff, *Monsters of Affection, Dickens, Eliot and Brontë on Fatherhood* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.135.

herself as herself. When her terror reaches a peak, when she thinks she is being confronted with a vision of the world beyond, she cries for help and begs to be brought back to the nursery as a more fitting place for a child. Mrs Reed's reaction, echoed by Abbott, is dictated by her prejudices against the child and Jane goes as far as to almost excuse her for her attitude : « she *sincerely* looked on me as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit and dangerous duplicity » (14, italics mine). « The later Jane, the narrator, offers a retrospective justification of the behaviour of the Reeds by suggesting that neither the kinship of likeness (...) nor the kinship of the family (...) obliges them to any more humane treatment »¹⁶.

For both Mrs Reed and Abbott, Jane is a precocious actress and even, according to the latter, a budding Guy Fawkes. No wonder Mrs Reed will transmit her own distrust to Brocklehurst whose social interests account for his spontaneous, natural alliance with the socially respectable Mrs Reed. In her eyes, Jane's outburst is but another form of transgression as she had expressly ordered the girl to remain silent, which she reiterates here : « Silence !, this violence is all most repulsive » (14). Jane, like Bertha, must be neither heard nor seen, must remain the *infans*, which etymology condemns to silence. « Jane est soumise au pouvoir souverain de la parole ».¹⁷ But, as Mrs Reed later discovers at her own expense, Jane is also different, not childlike or « natural ». After the red room episode, the process of exclusion is reinforced, prompting Jane's rebellion which occurs in two stages : first, Jane reverses her aunt's declaration about her own children's superiority in a tit for tat declaration that brings to light her innate sense of superiority : « The child Jane we first encounter is miserable in her social exclusion amidst the Reed household, yet we are left in no doubt that she views herself, personally and morally, as utterly superior »:¹⁸ «*They* are not fit to associate with me » (22 ; italics mine). Jane is tasting the power of language, though the voice that comes out of her is like a ventriloquist's : « something spoke out of me over which I had no control » (22), a voice that could be her dead uncle's : « My uncle Reed is in heaven, and can see all you do and think ; and so can papa and mamma : they know how you shut me up all day long, and how you wish me dead » (23), a very perceptive analysis that is corroborated later on when Mrs Reed confesses to Jane she had written to the Eyre (heir ?) uncle that Jane had died of typhus at Lowood, like all the other girls. But Jane's resilience, her « unnatural disposition » are Mrs Reed's worst enemies, defeating her wishful thinking. She is not « like the other girls ». Jane's second and final outburst at Gateshead sounds like « A Vindication of the Rights of a girl », and is prompted by Mrs Reed's labelling Jane a liar, a conviction she has always harboured : Jane has « a tendency to deceit » (28), as if it were an incurable illness. Jane's analysis once again proves very accurate. After Brocklehurst's departure, she is left alone with her accuser, of whom she gives as objective a portrait as possible in the circumstances. But « a passion of resentment fomented » (30), which finds vent in the following declaration : « *Speak* I must ; I had been trodden on severely and *must* turn » (30 ; italics the author's) and she does indeed, denouncing the injustice she is the victim of in a speech that anticipates her egalitarian tirade to

¹⁶ Penny Boumelha, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁷ Marie Soumaré, *op.cit.*, p.49.

¹⁸ Sally Shuttleworth, *op.cit.*, p.IX.

Rochester. Her present accusation tallies with Mrs Reed's preconceived opinion of her : she is not an ordinary child. We might agree with Mrs Reed on this point, as it is highly improbable that a ten year old would speak as she does. The narrator asks for the reader's « willing suspension of disbelief » and sympathy for the ill-treated child. The accused is becoming the accuser in a reversal of roles that cannot but frighten the former accuser, as the latter is not used to being contradicted, especially by so young a child who has never before rebelled against her tyranny. Mrs Reed even sees Jane as « an opponent of adult age » (30), transformed by her speech where the 'I' asserts itself repetitively : « I am glad you are no relation of mine : I will never call you aunt as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty » (30), once more reversing the roles. Jane's passion terrifies Mrs Reed : she transgresses the rules, steps out of her place and role. Her outburst, that turns her into a fury, simultaneously turns her opponent into a powerless child : « as if she would cry » (31), which Mrs Reed once again later confirms : « I felt fear as if an *animal* that I had struck or pushed had looked at me with human eyes and cursed me in a *man's* voice (204 ; my italics). « Animal becomes human, child becomes adult, and (as in Anne Brontë's novels) social inferiority becomes an expression of moral superiority » (my parenthesis).¹⁹ Whether she be turned into an animal or a man, Jane is indeed « out of herself ». But her aim has been reached as the enemy is defeated : « I was left there alone - winner of the field » (31), even offering Jane a friendship she had never before thought of offering. There is a crescendo in this ferocious savage verbal battle where Mrs Reed loses ground. The only solution that is now left her is to send Jane away. The child's triumph is however short-lived, the victory has a bitter-sweet aftertaste : « a child cannot quarrel with his elders as I had done » (31), no more than a poor man can turn against a rich one. Jane is the prey of a post-crisis depression. Her simile with a blasted ridge functions as an obvious prolepsis to Bertha Rochester's setting the house on fire and dying in it. It is as if Bertha were literalizing Jane's metaphors. The confrontation scene leads to Jane's expulsion to Lowood where Brocklehurst repeats Mrs Reed's accusations, exposing Jane on a stool with the infamous label of liar. It is only years later, when Jane has become a governess at Thornfield that she is summoned to dying Mrs Reed's bedside.

2. Confessions of an (un)justified sinner

On entering the well-known room, Jane is plunged back into a painful past : « I looked into a certain corner, half expecting to see the slim outline of a once-dreaded switch, waiting to leap out imp-like and lace my quivering palm or shrinking neck » (196). The once terrified girl resurrects in a familiar environment. Her feelings of old however have changed from vengeance to pity and hope for reconciliation : she means to bury the hatchet, as she is no longer the little girl in the hands of a tyrannical family. And she has also imbibed some of Helen's lessons, who preached forgiveness : « Love your enemies ; bless them that curse you ; do good to them that

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

hate you and despitefully use you » (49). Jane is ready in her turn to forget and forgive one who confesses to having wronged her twice, and let bygones be bygones. But the past is not dead : neither Mrs Reed nor the room have changed. Her harshness has not been eroded by illness and approaching death : « There was that peculiar eye which nothing could melt ; and the somewhat raised, imperious, despotic eyebrow. How often had it lowered on me menace and hate ! » (196). The ice has never melted. It is as if the same causes always produced the same effects in a frightful infernal repetition in one so petrified in her rancour. Despite her weakness, Mrs Reed is still strong enough to make a proper declaration of hatred, making Jane responsible for the very feeling. And despite her will to forget and forgive, Jane is forced into the opposite direction and the young passionate Jane resurrects in the presence of the « unchanged and unchangeable enemy » : « I felt pain, and then I felt ire, and then I felt a determination to subdue her - to be her mistress despite both her nature and her will » (197). Mrs Reed endeavours to rationalize, and even justify, her feelings : Jane has always been an enigma, as her behaviour baffled her understanding. The qualifiers she recurrently applies to Jane are « unnatural », « unchildlike » or its « frankensteinian » alternatives : « fiend » or « creature ». What she can neither understand nor forgive is Jane's outburst after so many years of patient endurance (Jane herself had actually been surprised at her own fury), which « legitimately » triggered her thirst for vengeance. In a word, what she hates is Jane's nature, who, even as a baby, didn't behave baby-like : « It would wail in its cradle all night long – not screaming heartily like any other child, but whimpering and moaning » (197). Hence also her incomprehension at her husband's love for the child. Her calling him Reed is an obvious token of estrangement, even rejection : it is as if he had deceived her with another woman who has nothing to attract him (Mrs Reed's opinion anticipates the innkeeper's at the end who couldn't understand Rochester's falling in love with such an insignificant « midge » (364)). Her excuse for such a wish is her visceral hatred for Jane whose mother she had hated before her. And if it is a sin to be poor, it is even worse to try and improve one's condition. Her preventing Jane from inheriting a fortune was her revenge upon the once rebellious child. If the word « regret » is uttered, Mrs Reed nonetheless resumes her former declaration of hatred, shifting the blame onto Jane, turning the oppressed into the oppressor : « You were born, I think, to be my torment » (204), a burden, an annoyance, which resumes Jane's own self-diagnosis. Mrs Reed's accentuating of Jane's difference is the best way to justify her rejection : « Give a dog a bad name and hang him ». Mrs Reed's death is in keeping with her life : « nothing soft, nothing sweet » (205) will alleviate the pain of the last moments. Her *rigor mortis* is but an exacerbated version of her old self : « rigid, cold, inexorable » (205). Death becomes her so well.

Conclusion

Jane's miserable childhood is a perfect illustration of Frank Mc Court's humorous incipit to his autobiographical novel *Angela's Ashes* :²⁰ «the happy childhood is hardly worth your while ». Her outburst after years of patient

²⁰ FrankMcCourt, *Angela's Ashes* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p.1.

submission and endurance triggers her departure to Lowood, whose headmatser voices and applies all the former prejudices she had suffered from at the hands of the Reed family. Though Jane had sworn she would never go back there or call Mrs Reed her aunt, she is brought back to Gateshead by a sense of duty to her death bed. The last meetings offer Mrs Reed an opportunity to relieve her tormented conscience but do not abate her visceral hatred for her wronged niece. The main difference is Jane herself, whose maturity helps her to forget and forgive and who no longer cares whether she is loved or not : « Love me then, or hate me, as you will » (204). Long die Mrs Reed and long live Jane !

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