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## **Madwomen and Resistance: Gender and Self-Harm in Romantic and Victorian Literature**

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Madwomen and Resistance:  
Gender and Self-Harm in Romantic and Victorian Literature

by

Emily V. Rasch

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

May 2019



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## Abstract

Literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was concerned with madness. However, relatively little research has been done to indicate how supposed “madwomen” escaped patriarchal control. This thesis will analyze madwomen from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries and will argue that suicide appears in literature as the sole way that “mad” characters can resist patriarchal control. I examine the impact of self-harm and suicide in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*; John Keats’s “Isabella and the Pot of Basil”; and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. I connect self-harm to the desire to escape patriarchal control that is evident in literature of the Pre-Romantic, Romantic, and Victorian eras. I use social and medical contexts to consider the patriarchal biases present in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society and put those biases in the context of literature.

Keywords: madness, self-harm, Romantic, Victorian, patriarchy, suicide

## Dedication

To my family of choice. I am grateful for your love and constant support. Thank you for loving me for who I am.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my amazing thesis advisor, Dr. Emily B. Stanback. Her English 340 class opened my eyes to the power of poetry and gave me direction in my life. When I joined the Honors College as a junior, there was little doubt in my mind that Dr. Stanback would be my advisor. She helped me through the darkest times of my life and exemplifies what it is to be a role model. Throughout the past five semesters, Dr. Stanback has watched me blossom into the woman that I became. My college experience would look a lot different without her in the picture, and I am glad she took a chance on me to be her advisee. In my college career, Dr. Stanback has played an active role in my life both in and out of the classroom. I am lucky to have had her as my thesis advisor and cannot wait for her to see what I do next. While I am sad to leave Southern Miss, I hope she realizes just how much of an impact she has made on me.

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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Introduction**

The late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries were times of immense social and political change regarding the treatment of mentally ill patients. Scholarly discussion of the madwoman tends to focus on how “madwomen”<sup>1</sup> defied social norms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, little attention has been drawn to the ways that women in said eras escaped the patriarchy by way of self-harm or suicide. The women featured in this thesis either attempt or are successful in their suicides. I argue that three different eras of literature are connected by women who exhibit self-harm behaviors. Through understanding women with a “mad” label, modern audiences have the ability to empathize with literary figures who resorted to self-harm in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This thesis will investigate three separate eras of madness and will analyze them as they relate to social and medical contexts of the time. It is problematic to diagnose eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women with modern medical diseases; therefore, I will use contemporaneous terminology and understandings of madness throughout this thesis. Understanding the contexts of madness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enhances our understanding of literary depictions of madness. The concept of “madness” is a socially constructed idea, further perpetuated by patriarchal biases in society. Exploring the social construction of female madness enables a modern audience to understand the impact of attitudes surrounding “the mad” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I use quotation marks around “mad,” “madness” and “madwomen” because what we think of as “mad” are socially constructed ideas that change with time.

## **Madness in History**

Madness is a socially constructed idea that changes with time. Michel Foucault notes that:

the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, bears witness to a rupture in a dialogue, gives the separation as already enacted, and expels from the memory all those imperfect words, of no fixed syntax, spoken falteringly, in which the exchange between madness and reason was carried out. (x)

Foucault's idea emphasizes how socially constructed "madness" was. The social construction of madness limited women's authority to voice their opinions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the fear of being called "mad" was a social force that oppressed women. If a woman was confined by patriarchal standards, she was further confined to the gender norms that were associated with biological sex. Women were more susceptible to the pressures of a patriarchal society because they were seen as second class and therefore unable to voice their opinions. Questioning male figures of power came with the risk of being called "mad," which in turn came with negative social backlash. Social expectations of madness meant that women who acted out of eighteenth-century norms faced difficulty assimilating into society.

Roy Porter discusses the social expectations of madness in *Madness: A History*. He notes that:

Stigmatizing—the creation of spoiled identity—involves projecting onto an individual or group judgments as to what is inferior, repugnant, or

disgraceful. It may thus translate disgust into the disgusting and fears into the fearful, first by singling out difference, next by calling it inferiority, and finally by blaming ‘victims’ for their otherness. (Porter 53)

Porter’s definition of stigma as a sense of “projecting onto an individual” explains how people judged those determined to be “mad.” Social stigma promoted the sense of superiority that people felt towards madwomen. People with “normal” minds felt the right to determine what was “inferior, repugnant, or disgraceful” (Porter 52). The mentality of “normal minded” people contributed to the stigmatization of female mental illness.

Hysteria was one of the most common types of madness that was associated with women. According to George Cheyne in *The English Malady* (1733), “hysteria” was a blanket term placed on cases of madness in the female sex; “hypochondria” was a typical diagnosis for men. Evolving from the Greek term for uterus, the diagnosis of “hysteria” was applied to women when their behavior did not match social or behavioral norms. In the “Introduction” to *The English Malady: Enabling and Disabling Fictions*, Glen Colburn explains that, like hypochondria and other nervous disorders, hysteria could be considered a type of “the English Malady because it represented what politicians perceived to be the threat of the disorder posed by the emergence of [the] individual’s actions” (Colburn 1). It was the fear of being labeled as mad—and the stigma that came with the label—that scared women into not exhibiting behaviors out of “the norm.”

## **The Asylum**

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one of the only ways to treat mentally ill people was by way of the insane asylum. Before then, families often kept their “mad” relatives in their houses. Association with a mad person came with the sometimes unwanted responsibility to care for a “mad” loved one. In “The Growth of an Asylum: A Parallel World,” the author notes that, “It had been accepted in English society that people with disabilities or illness who needed care and support got it from family, friends and community. Now reformers claimed that an asylum would be a safe place where 'lunatics' could be cured and 'idiots' taught” (n.p.). In the eighteenth century, “mad” people thus transitioned from living with family members to confinement in asylums.

In the early eighteenth century, the way that the “mentally ill” were treated in asylums was horrific; highlighting the inhumane treatment of mad people illustrates how madness was constructed at the time. Before the late eighteenth century, asylums resembled prisons more than hospitals. Suzanne Peloquin observes:

Torturous methods were used to treat insane persons. These methods were used not to inflict pain, but to frighten the irrational beast. Methods congruent with contemporary theory included chaining the patients, placing them in cold showers, and lowering them into water-filled wells.

(Peloquin 538)

Asylum wardens justified this treatment of mad people by claiming that they were attempting to cure the patients. Social expectations emphasized mad people assimilating to proper social norms. Often, the inhumane treatment in asylums was meant to teach



patients specific lessons about ways to conform to social norms. However, Hogan notes that:

A system had been created where the insane were perceived as an incurable threat to the progression of society, and a system of isolation that resembled imprisonment only reinforced this perception. Sane publics interacted with the mentally ill through these policies, which only confirmed their identity as deviant and dangerous individuals. (Hogan 51)

The “sane public” created the social conditions for othering and isolating “mad” individuals. From Hogan’s analysis, we can see how the public was regarded as “sane” and separated from “the mad.”

The political nature of the French Revolution at the end of the century changed the ways that mental patients were treated in France and England. Despite horrific social conditions resulting from the downfall of the monarchy, a significant change came in the form of asylum reform. Social and political attitudes towards mad people changed through the work of such reformers as French physician Philippe Pinel, who advocated for a more holistic approach to mental illness. He saw the mentally ill person as less of a prisoner confined to the asylum and more of a patient in a hospital, treating mentally ill people as patients with a desire to be helped. In his “Treatise On Insanity” (1806), Pinel notes that “all civilised nations, however different in their customs, and manner of living, will never fail to have some causes of insanity in common; and it is natural to believe that all will do their utmost to remedy the evil” (Pinel 51). The promotion of what has come to be known as “moral” treatment comes from the idea that madness is a universal

presence in all countries. Treating the “mad” with moral treatment changed the course of psychiatric history.

Pinel’s humane treatment of the clinically insane entailed the holistic treatment of madness. Dorothy Miller and Esther Blanc note that as a result of Pinel, “[t]he moral treaters saw the mentally ill as unfortunate, suffering human beings who deserved kind physical care, understanding mental care, respect, and preservation of self-esteem and dignity” (Miller, Blanc 66). Miller and Blanc highlight that, for advocates of moral treatment, those who were mad deserved empathy and respect, which often was overlooked by asylum keepers. Advocates for moral treatment such as Pinel saw patients as people who were capable of being helped and capable of understanding. Instead of chaining asylum patients to their beds or walls, patients had the ability to move as freely as the asylum would allow them to.

Another result of Pinel’s influence came in the form of a condition known as monomania. The term, literally translating to “madness with obsession,” was coined by Pinel’s student Jean Etienne Esquirol, and evolved from mania. Monomania was a condition where both women and men demonstrated an extreme obsession with a particular object of affection. What medical conceptions of monomania did not address, however, was how both women and men could become obsessed with an idea after trauma. Women could be “excited in the mind” after the death of a loved one, for example. In John Keats’s “Isabella,” which I will discuss in Chapter 3, a young “Isabella” is obsessed with her deceased lover, Lorenzo.

While some British asylums remained places of torture, not every asylum encouraged inhumane treatment of “the mad.” Such is the case with the York Retreat, a

private retreat founded in 1796 by Quaker William Tuke. The Tuke family became known for their promotion of moral treatment for mentally ill people after learning of the inhumane approaches taken in many asylums. Samuel Tuke, grandson of William, noted in “Description of the Retreat, an Institution near York, for Insane Persons” that:

Neither chains nor corporal punishments are tolerated, on any pretext in this establishment. The patients, therefore, cannot be threatened with these severities; yet, in all houses established for the reception of the insane, the general comfort of the patients ought to be considered; and those who are violent, require to be separated from the more tranquil, and to be prevented, by some means, from offensive conduct, towards their fellow-sufferers. (Tuke 90)

The York Retreat—as its name suggests—was different from the typical British “asylum.” While the York Retreat still emphasized that violent patients should be separated from other mental patients, they were all, as Tuke notes, “fellow sufferers.” The Tuke family focused on ways that doctors could use their influence to treat mad patients fairly. Public asylums may have been places of trauma, but places such as the York Retreat provided a needed sense of relief from eighteenth-century horrors of madness.

Not all British asylums adopted moral treatments to madness, especially in the nineteenth century. Torturous conditions were common at the notorious Bethlem Hospital; its hellish conditions were the reason it became so synonymous with torture, garnering the nickname “Bedlam.” In the eighteenth century, Bethlem was what Mike Jay calls an “archetypal madhouse” because it was “one of London’s most famous

landmarks, and the subject of dozens of poems, plays, ballads, and artworks in which it became the home of madness itself” (“*This Way Madness Lies*” 19). Bethlem influenced the way society saw “the mad,” and was a physical barrier between those thought of as “sane” and “mad.” *The History of Bethlem* includes an account from Edward Wakefield, a prominent American asylum reform activist, about what he saw at the asylum in 1814. Wakefield notes, “one of the sick rooms contained about ten patients, each chained by one arm or leg to the wall; the chain allowing them to merely stand up by the bench or form fixed to the wall, or to sit down on it” (Wakefield, qtd in Porter, 422). At Bethlem, it was especially common for a woman to be chained to a wall, floor, or her bed. Women were objectified because they were seen as inferior to men, and therefore unable to voice the way that they were treated.

### **Madwomen in Society and Literature**

Madwomen were not only confined by way of the asylum, but also confined to their positions in society. Often, madwomen had limited control over their bodies, thus limiting their sense of control over their minds. Such is the case in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*, in which the protagonist is confined to the asylum because she was seen as “mad” by her husband. Jane Ussher notes that:

When we look to the symptoms which provoked [the] pronouncements and treatments [of madness] we can see how the very definitions of madness functioned to control and arguably punish women for both enacting an exaggerated form of femininity or for being unacceptable.  
(Ussher 68)

Both women who were too feminine and also women who broke social molds were seen as “mad.” Ussher essentially states that because madness was influenced by social norms, women had the continuous risk of being called “mad.” Thus, diagnoses of madness became a tool of the patriarchy. I reference this idea in Chapter Two, where I discuss the implications of patriarchal oppression in the asylum as depicted in Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*.

We can see the way that madwomen were regarded in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by way of historically contextualized literature. Helen Small notes that “For literary critics, medical history has provided a useful means of grounding fiction with experience, enabling literature’s hysterics to be brought into sisterhood with the inhabitants of real asylums” (Small 35). The “sisterhood” that Small mentions provides an invitation to see literature as helping us understand madness better because we can see literary madwomen as connected to actual madwomen.

Women in the Romantic and Victorian eras who wrote about “madwomen” provided needed perspective and gave women a voice. One of the women who did that was Mary Wollstonecraft. Michelle Faubert and Allan Ingram argue that “Wollstonecraft explores the topic of female madness in order to make a political point about her society’s lauding of passivity in women” (156). Mary Wollstonecraft was driven by the desire to create a political statement in her fictional work. As we will see in *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft’s fictional worlds became places of political influence. Wollstonecraft also wrote from experience, having attempted suicide herself. Her fiction provides a realistic view of the patriarchal confines present in late-eighteenth-century society as well as insight inside the mind of a woman called “mad.” Her

protagonist is confined to the asylum and is unable to escape her physical surroundings. Wollstonecraft's *Maria* thus serves as a representation of the barriers that women faced in relation to social status.

In fiction, the "mad" label creates an unfair patriarchal bias and does not allow for the female character to have a voice. Romantic and Victorian representations of madness, such as the ones featured in this thesis, involve women who were unafraid to step out of their social molds. Not all of these "madwomen" were confined in asylums like Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, but each was confined to her place in society. By understanding the impact of the literary madwoman character, we can better understand social attitudes towards madness. In a world that emphasized adherence to the norm, apparent "madwomen," like the ones in this thesis, were often people who defied social expectations, whether purposefully or not. Such female protagonists as Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, Keats's *Isabella*, and Bronte's *Bertha Mason* enable modern audiences to have an understanding of the social and political contexts of madness.

A literary depiction of a "monstrous" madwoman is *Bertha Mason* in Charlotte Bronte's 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre*. *Bertha* is described as "a Creole madwoman" who wreaks havoc on *Thornfield's* residents. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue against this classification, noting that "from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation" (Gilbert, Gubar 79).<sup>2</sup> Gilbert and Gubar understand madness as a way for female literary characters to express their innermost "monstrous" desires. These characters seek a sense of "self-articulation,"

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<sup>2</sup> I agree with Gilbert and Gubar's argument as it relates to the nineteenth century. However, as we see in Chapter 2, this argument is not applicable to the eighteenth century because the definitions of madness are so different.

attempting to find their own voice despite being chained by patriarchal boundaries. Jane E. Kromm notes that “mad” women “served as forlorn, unsalvageable objects designed to focalize male displays of proper feeling” (Kromm 511). Instead of women having the authority to create their own destinies, men controlled their bodies. Women with the desire to control their lives or destinies were seen as “mad,” and unable to function in the proper way in society.

In this thesis, I examine three separate eras of literature, and analyze the impact of madwomen in each. I show how each era portrays madwomen differently, but connect the Pre-Romantic, Romantic, and Victorian depictions of madness through the act of attempted or successful suicide. In Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*, we see a potential attempt at suicide at the end of the novel. John Keats’s “Isabella or the Pot of Basil,” depicts how a young Isabella is obsessed and brings about her own death. Finally, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* features an apparent “madwoman” who resorts to suicide after being confined in an attic.

While *Jane Eyre* and *Maria* were both written by women, Keats’s “Isabella” features the perspective of a woman written by a man. Brontë and Wollstonecraft had insight to the experience of womanhood, but “Isabella” features an outsider’s perspective as to what a “madwoman” was. Keats, however, did offer a medical perspective that Wollstonecraft and Brontë did not have. As Hillas Smith notes, Keats “had the ability, training, and qualification to practice as a physician; in the event, he chose not to practice” (Smith 394). It is important to understand the impact of his medical training because it allows readers the chance to see “madness” from the perspective of a doctor. Brontë and Wollstonecraft each masterfully create fictional worlds where women are

limited to their physical spaces. Devon Sherman, notes that the dilemma with *The Wrongs of Woman* was, “how to define Woman, collectively, as human and deserving of the rights of man, because her rights and her dignity must be defined against something else, against an exclusion” (Sherman 99). Mary Wollstonecraft, as a philosopher, struggled; being a woman meant lacking the authority to voice an opinion on a social or moral injustice.

In this thesis, I see attempts at suicide as the only way for the “madwomen” that I study to escape the patriarchy. Margaret Higonnet, notes that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a

...reorientation of suicide toward love, passive self-surrender, and illness seems particularly evident in the literary depiction of women; their self-destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self but as surrender to an illness. (Higonnet 106)

While Higonnet argues that suicide is “a surrender to an illness,” I argue against this classification. I read these suicides as women’s only escape from their mental distress and from the patriarchal societies they lived in. The suicide attempts in the texts I analyze connect three separate eras of literature by showing self-harm as the only option for women to escape the confines of the patriarchy.

Understanding the social and medical implications of madwomen in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature enhances the understanding of modern audiences’ perspective on the way that the patriarchy sought to control women. In each of the texts that this thesis examines, suicide was the only option for women to escape, emphasizing how desperate women were to escape from the confines of patriarchal control. Examining



the suicides from medical and social standpoints enables modern audiences to have a deeper understanding of what “the mad” resorted to in the nineteenth century.

## Chapter 2:

### Suicidal Ideation in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman*

Mary Wollstonecraft is best remembered for her 1792 political text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. *Vindication* is considered to be one of the first true “feminist” texts because it presented a radical feminist ideology. The less discussed but equally important fictional sequel to *Vindication* is *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, published by William Godwin after Wollstonecraft's death in 1797. Because of her death, the novel lacks a definite conclusion. The unfinished didactic novel features a young mother, Maria, who is confined to an insane asylum. Maria navigates asylum life by finding common ground with her attendant, Jemima, and by finding comfort in Henry Darnford. The setting in the asylum is purposeful. Maria's confinement in a madhouse represents the confinement that women faced because of their position in society. In *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman*, Maria's unfair confinement in the asylum contributes to her eventual self-harm.

### Mary Wollstonecraft's Background

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* is a reflection of eighteenth-century treatments of and attitudes toward the “mad.” At the time, women could be considered mad if they did not conform to the expectations set in place by patriarchal society. R.A. Houston notes that in the eighteenth century, “madness is not an assertion of power, but a product of powerlessness” (Houston 310). Women faced negative consequences, like confinement to an asylum similar to the one in *Maria*, if they defied traditional gender norms. The powerlessness mentioned by Houston refers to

women's inability to voice their opinions without being labeled as "mad." However, the idea of powerlessness also connects biographical details of Mary Wollstonecraft's life to the novel.

Mary Wollstonecraft defied typical expectations for women at the end of the eighteenth century in terms of what a woman was supposed to act like. Women authors were not expected to write about subjects with much substance. Gary Kelly notes that "...most women writers kept to kinds of writing that could be seen as [an] extension of women's domestic range of education and experience" (Kelly 10). Mary Wollstonecraft went out of this "domestic range." She considered herself a female philosopher and wrote compelling arguments about women as people who could make significant impacts on society beyond the domestic sphere.

When Wollstonecraft wrote *Maria* in 1797, she took considerable time to write and revise it, unlike *The Rights of Woman*. In the preface to the novel, William Godwin notes that "the composition had been in progress for a period of twelve months. She was anxious to do justice to her conception, and recommenced and revised the manuscript several different times" (8). The timeframe of *Maria* is important because it indicates Wollstonecraft's desire to accurately portray the "madwoman." As Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, she "earnestly wish[ed] to see the distinction of sex confounded in society" (18). Though *Maria* is fictional, the novel applies fundamental concepts of *The Rights of Woman* and places them in a somewhat realistic world. Wollstonecraft uses *Maria* to demonstrate the potential for power that women have over their physical bodies, as in the case of Maria's eventual self-harm, despite the power of the patriarchy.

The philosophical contradictions present in *Rights of Woman* set the philosophical landscape for *Maria*. Laurie Finke observes that the contradictions “are not logical flaws, but productive tensions that reveal the impossibility within eighteenth-century philosophical discourse of creating a rational speaking subject who is also a woman” (Finke 119). Even though Maria is confined to the asylum, she still exists, at least somewhat, in the domestic sphere because she is confined in a kind of “house.” The asylum is a place where the private and public spheres are blurred because it allows women from different backgrounds to tell their stories. Maria is relieved from her duties as a wife, but the physical walls remind her that she is still oppressed, just in a different type of society. Through the novel, Wollstonecraft demonstrates the power that women’s stories can have.

### **Maria the “Mad” Woman**

*The Wrongs of Woman* begins with the novel’s protagonist, Maria, confined to her cell in the asylum. She yearns for the child that was taken from her and struggles to find purpose in her confined world. Her initial hurdle is facing whether or not she will eat and “she calmly endeavoured to eat enough to prove her docility” (5). The way that Wollstonecraft uses “calm,” however, highlights how Maria was actually calm in her desire to “prove her docility,” despite the circumstances she was in. After coaxing from her attendant, Jemima, she decides to eat as a way to prove her sanity and to keep herself alive. She has lost her ability to perform domestic duties but must remain focused, and must seem “hungry,” for the sake of the child that was taken from her.

Maria's body was that of a new mother, making her body more vulnerable than the "typical" woman's would have been because she was still in recovery from giving birth. The text notes that "[Maria] heard her [daughter] half speaking half cooing, and felt the little twinkling fingers on her burning bosom—a bosom bursting with the nutriment for which this cherished child might now be pining in vain" (3). Clare Hanson notes that the maternal body is "a troubling, disruptive body. Its most striking characteristic is its mutability, as it expands, dilates, contracts and expels. It is also leaky and permeable, losing mucous, blood and milk" (87). The description of the maternal body as "leaky and permeable" relates to Maria because, confined in the asylum, her physical body cannot nourish her child.

Jemima and Maria eventually inch closer towards a friendship, but Jemima still remains skeptical of Maria's lucid moments. Maria observes that "though she often left her with a glow of kindness, she returned with the same chilling air; and, when her heart appeared for a moment to open, some suggestion of reason forcibly closed it" (10). Even though her heart opens, Jemima remains skeptical of Maria because she is a patient in a madhouse. Thus, Jemima maintains boundaries between the "sane" and "mad." Jemima's skepticism represents eighteenth-century attitudes toward mad people. Though Jemima comes to see Maria as less mad, she still understands the social boundaries associated with mad people. Maria uses Jemima's warm relationship to her advantage, as Jemima obtains books for her to read, plus a pencil and paper with which she can write. Maria makes use of the pencil and paper and begins writing a story for her daughter that will "perhaps instruct her daughter, and shield her from the misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid" (8). Maria writes to "shield" her daughter from the horrors of the

patriarchal world. However, writing also provides relief from the mental trauma she faces while contained.

While reading books, Maria notices thought-provoking marginalia, and begins to wonder about its author. Jemima explains that the man was a former patient of the asylum who we later learn is Henry Darnford. Jemima describes him as having “an untamed look, a vehemence of eye, that excites apprehension” (11). Maria begins to craft a vision of her supposed intellectual match. Jemima’s description of Darnford as “untamed” can be read as a reference to his “madness” because the mad were thought to have “untamed” desire. Even though Darnford is perceived as “mad,” Maria believes that “the man who could write those observations was not disordered in his intellects” (12). Maria begins to craft the perfect vision of what the man looks and acts like and expresses a desire to meet him. Maria’s ability to distinguish between intellect and madness indicates that she herself is also not “mad,” and she hopes that Darnford is also not mad, either, despite his “untamed” look.

Aside from the fact that the books allow Maria and Darnford to meet, attention must be drawn to the *type* of book that she reads: political texts that inform her of liberal ideology. Maria reads Jean Jacques Rousseau, and the passages that describe Rousseau may be read as Wollstonecraft’s critique of the author’s patriarchal ideas. In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau argues against educating women so that they can exist outside of the domestic sphere. He notes that the role of women was “to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable” (Rousseau 363). Rousseau argued that women’s sole purpose was to please men; he saw them as property and as

objects to be used for man's affection. Wollstonecraft believes that women have the ability to make decisions for themselves; her mention of Rousseau in the chapter shows the perspective that Maria has to resist.

After some convincing from Maria, Jemima allows Maria and Darnford to meet. Maria is drawn to Darnford's intellect, while he is drawn to her physical body. Words brought them together, but the physicality of the relationship keeps them together. Maria and Darnford engage in a sexual act, and both "were, at first, embarrassed; but fell insensibly into confidential discourse" (85). Darnford tells Maria that he was only placed there after being drunk. Both patients were placed in the asylum without their consent. Mentioning Darnford's unfair containment in the asylum along with Maria's leaves audiences to question when it was acceptable to confine people despite their opposition. We see this in the novel when Darnford notes "that I should not be insulted, or forced out of the house, by any body" (75). The sex takes on greater significance because Maria and Darnford could consent to one another, despite not having the ability to consent to their placement in the madhouse.

Maria's attachment to Darnford is ultimately one-sided. When they meet, she experiences the physical affection that she did not have with her husband, and the "moments of happiness procured by the imagination may, without a paradox, be reckoned among the solid comforts of life" (138). The happiness was not genuine, indicated by how the moments were "procured by the imagination" (139). Their bodily connection provides both with a sense of pleasure and needed human contact in a place where neither was supposed to exist, indicating the paradoxical nature of their love.

A triumph of *Maria* is the fact that the narrator shifts between Jemima and Maria's perspectives. The novel uses Jemima's story alongside Maria's to demonstrate what the "Wrongs of Woman" are. Through the shift, readers learn of Jemima's past and can see another potential heroine in the novel. For years, Jemima suffered at the expense of men and was only able to go from one patriarchal society to another. A revealing moment in Jemima's narrative is when she admits to having had an abortion. After a rape resulted in pregnancy, her master gave her a "medicine in a phial" by which she "sought to procure [an] abortion" (28). She immediately senses that the medicine "stopped the sensations of new-born life," a feeling she says made her feel "indescribable emotion" (29). Jemima's shameful tone regarding her abortion represents eighteenth-century attitudes about the act. Had Jemima disclosed the information about her abortion in public, she would have faced legal consequences. R. Sauer notes that, "During the eighteenth century, the view that the foetus was alive from conception gained in popularity, and in Britain's initial abortion statute, the Ellenborough Act of 1803, it was given legal protection" (Sauer 81). Thus, Jemima would have faced legal consequences had she revealed her abortion in public. The walls of the asylum may have physically confined Jemima and Maria, but through their stories social barriers are broken. Jemima's character demonstrates the power of solidarity that women have to offer one another. Instead of seeing each other as different in their status and experiences, they use their experiences of womanhood to strengthen their bond.

Jemima and Maria also share a difficult relationship to motherhood. Although Jemima chose to end her fetus's life, and Maria lost her child, the potential of motherhood connects the two women. Both feel the loss of an infant, and both go through



“indescribable pain” after the loss. Wollstonecraft uses motherhood to connect two women from different classes.

After Jemima finishes her story, the perspective shifts back to Maria. Chapters 7-14 are told from the perspective of Maria, via the book that she has written for her child. Maria addresses “these memoirs to you, my child, uncertain whether I shall ever have an opportunity of instructing you, many observations will probably flow from my heart, which only a mother—a mother schooled in misery, could make” (40). Her story, for the first time, can be told, and readers see the world from her perspective. We learn of her miserable childhood that was filled with her mother’s obvious favoritism towards male figures. Maria questions the favoritism, but she “was rudely rebuffed for presuming to judge of the conduct of my eldest brother” (43). This experience represents young girls’ early exposure to the patriarchy. Despite the fact that Maria’s mother was a woman, she prioritized the needs of her son because she thought he would accomplish more than her daughter: “in comparison with her affection for him, she might be said not to love the rest of her children” (41). Maria was unable to succeed because of the constant competition with male figures. Young Maria’s competition with her brother foreshadows her eventual fight for her own freedom later on in life.

Maria learns of her infant’s death as she begins to tell her story. The narrator notes that Maria passionately exclaims, “‘My child is dead!’ Jemima solemnly answered, ‘Yes;’ with a look expressive of compassion and angry emotions” (39). The death of Maria’s child represents the death of her role as a “traditional” woman. She no longer has anything or anyone to rely on, and the role of a mother is stripped from her. Jemima’s “angry emotions” indicate that she sees Maria as less of a patient and more of a friend

than she did previously. She understands the way that Maria feels because she too lost a child. While Jemima's situation may have been different because she "took medicine in a phial" that caused an abortion, she still understands the way that Maria felt (27). It becomes clear, then, that Jemima is at this point more than just Maria's attendant; rather, she is now her friend.

One of the last complete scenes in *Maria* depicts Maria's escape from the asylum. After the asylum owner mysteriously disappears, Jemima tells Maria to write a letter to Darnford. When Maria questions what will happen to Darnford, Jemima tells her that he will be released in two days. Because of Darnford, Maria reluctantly follows Jemima, who demands that Maria give her the "clothes; I will send them out of the house with mine, and we will slip out at the garden-gate. Write your letter while I make these arrangements, but lose no time" (86). Maria has to pack her limited belongings that she brought into the asylum, but also each of the "solid comforts of life" that she held onto while there. Just as Maria was confined to her physical place in the asylum, women were similarly confined in the "real world." Though she escapes the asylum, boundaries regarding class and expectations of womanhood still existed beyond the walls of the madhouse.

While in the midst of escape, a supernatural force grabs Maria by the arm: "'Woman,' interrupted a sepulchral voice, 'what have I to do with thee?'—Still he grasped her hand, muttering a curse" (87). A possible interpretation of the force is that it serves as a representation of the patriarchy. It is not an "it" that grasps Maria's hand, but a "he," which means that the force is male or physically resembles a male. This description suggests that even though one cannot see the patriarchy, it still has control

over women's lives. Janice Peritz argues that because the escape "promises a way forward and out of the prison, it appears political as well as worldly" (Peritz 258). Thus, the escape provides a forward way out of both the patriarchy and the asylum.

Maria and Darnford are unable to continue their relationship beyond the asylum walls, and it is largely due to George Venables, Maria's husband. After the escape, Venables attempts to sue Darnford for his romantic pursuit with Maria. In court, Maria declares that she "will not live with the individual [Venables] who has violated every moral obligation which binds man to man" (89). The fact that she "will not live" foreshadows one of the potential endings of the novel with her attempted suicide. However, more important is her use of "man to man," as it represents the patriarchal restraint over Maria's physical body. Maria may have been constrained but gains a sense of agency by defending her rights and decisions. She claims that she "wish[ed] her country to approve of my conduct"; she continues, "but, if laws exist, made by the strong to oppress the weak, I appeal to my own sense of justice" (93). As she presents her case to the judge, she passionately defends her rights as a woman. Her plea to escape from Venables represents her need to escape from the association with her husband. Instead of being seen as someone's wife, she yearns to be seen simply as Maria.

Maria decides to testify on behalf of Darnford to spite Venables. Through Maria's perspective, we learn of the horrific patriarchal oppression in her married life. As Venables's wife, Maria "submitted to the rigid laws which enslave women, and obeyed the man whom [she] could no longer love" (90). Venables thought that if he confined Maria, she would conform to his wants and desires. In reality, Maria ends up defying Venables, noting that a woman "must be allowed to consult her conscience, and regulate

her conduct, in some degree, by her own sense of right” (92). Deborah Weiss notes that Maria is trapped by her role because “the law does not recognize the rights—economic, emotional, or moral—of married women” (Weiss 72). Maria existed in a society that believed marriage meant sacrificing parts of her womanhood. Maria has no control over her body or physical surroundings, and her attempt to escape the mold that she was placed in by society suggests that women should have the opportunity to escape if they choose. The idea that women should “regulate their conduct” by their own sense of right, suggests Wollstonecraft’s personal attitudes towards the expectations of women. If women truly had agency, actions out of “the norm” would not as often be seen as “mad.”

The judge presiding over the case rules in favor of Venables, citing insanity as the reason for his decision. The “conduct of the lady did not appear that of a person of sane mind” (93). The judge makes the case for insanity as a justification for keeping Maria constrained under Venables. While Maria’s testimony was a powerful statement, the case was still between Venables and Darnford. Moreover, the judge’s claim that Maria “did not appear that of a person of sane mind” suggests that Maria was unable to make decisions for herself, which readers know to be false. The judge’s ruling for patriarchal control emphasizes the patriarchal biases in the legal system. However, *Maria* can be interpreted by modern audiences as showing how society confines women by unwritten rules. Maria was thought to be “mad” because she did not conform to a specific mold set by men. She loses control of her life because of patriarchal expectations set by society.

## **Maria's Suicide**

*Maria* lacks any sort of resolution. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote potential endings, but none of them solidified Maria's fate. William Godwin discusses the multiple endings that Wollstonecraft could have chosen in the pieced-together conclusion. Some of the endings dealt with Maria having a miscarriage, and others dealt with Darnford leaving her. One of the potential endings indicates a suicide attempt: "Divorced by her husband—Her lover unfaithful—Pregnancy—Miscarriage—Suicide" (95). This possibility tells readers that Maria was so miserable that she could not live. The potential for death represents the death of traditional expectations of womanhood. The fact that suicide is triggered by a miscarriage, however, is tragic. It is as though the pregnancy may have provided Maria with a sense of purpose after her infant daughter's death. Again losing her role as a mother, she aims to escape by having her physical body die, too. She may not have been able to control her fate with Venables, but she exercises the ability to control her body.

Maria's potential death by suicide indicates her miserable life in an oppressive society. Understanding oppression helps us to comprehend Maria's mindset in the moment of her suicide attempt. In her emotional state, suicide could have been liberating for Maria. However, the potential for suicide is problematic because it suggests that people have to live for something or someone else to have a purpose. Just as she is about to attempt self-harm, a change takes place, and Maria expresses a desire to "live for [her] child" (95). Throughout the novel, readers see Maria as a strong-willed woman who could fend for herself. The desire to live for the child is a reminder that there is something for Maria to live for, despite resorting to suicide.

Each of the possible endings of *Maria* indicates a sense of escape. She “escapes into the country” in one ending, and Darnford “goes abroad” in another. Suicide is Maria’s desperate act after she experiences “pregnancy” and “miscarriage.” The suicide, therefore, can be seen as possibly the only way for Maria to escape the miserable patriarchal world she lives in. She lost the case against Venables and no longer has a child to live for. The act of suicide allows her to have control over her body and mind that she did not have. Maria could not control what happened to her child while she was in the madhouse but could control what happened to her physical body once she left.

One of the goals of *Maria* was to “pourtray passions rather than manners” (8). Even though the novel went unfinished, William Godwin was determined to make it known. Wollstonecraft’s untimely death did not allow her to finish the novel the way that she had hoped to. However, Godwin emphasizes Wollstonecraft’s need to “drag into light those details of oppression” (97). The “evils that are too frequently overlooked” were those related to the oppression of the female sex.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* reflects eighteenth-century ideas of madness and shows how women who defied expectations of women were considered “mad.” Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* suggests that “madwomen” should have a voice and place in society. Mary Wollstonecraft gave oppressed women a voice by highlighting issues that were often too taboo to discuss in everyday conversation, like abortion and suicide. While *Maria* went unfinished, it highlights the need for women to take control of their physical bodies and surroundings. Mary Wollstonecraft may not have been alive to see her work make an impact on society,

but she lives on through her ability to give oppressed and underrepresented women a voice.

### Chapter 3:

#### Decay as a Representation of Suicide in John Keats's "Isabella; or the Pot of Basil"

Madness in the Romantic era was a shifting concept, particularly concerning women. Two famous Romantic-era poems about madwomen are William Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and "The Mad Mother." While John Keats's legacy centers around poems such as "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode to a Grecian Urn," he too wrote about madness in such poems as "Ode on Melancholy" and "Isabella or The Pot of Basil." "Isabella" was published in 1818, after Keats adapted Giovanni Boccaccio's "Lisabetta and the Pot of Basil" from his famous *Decameron*. "Isabella" is a poem about a woman who is driven "mad" because she loses her lover, Lorenzo, at the hands of her two brothers. The "fair, simple" Isabella exhumes Lorenzo's body, plants his head in a pot of basil, and is driven to the point of insanity while obsessing over the basil. Themes of madness recur throughout the poem, where decay serves as a metaphor for the protagonist's mental state. It is ultimately Isabella's obsession with Lorenzo's exhumed head that allows modern audiences the chance to see Isabella's death as a form of suicide.

Readers first encounter Isabella as "fair Isabel, poor, simple Isabel" who is in love with Lorenzo, a man of a lower class (1). She is innocent and has not yet experienced heartbreak and is not mature enough to understand the consequences of adulthood. By noting that Isabella is "fair" and "simple" in the first line of the poem, Keats sets Isabella up as an inherently innocent woman who has yet to experience trauma. Isabella and Lorenzo's love conflicts with social norms. Traditionally, falling in love with a man of a lower social class would have been socially unacceptable. Diane Hoeveler reads Lorenzo as a representation of Keats and his inability to conform to a specific class, arguing that



“Lorenzo embodies Keats as victim of class prejudices” (Hoevler 325). Class separated Isabella and Lorenzo, and while the thought of marrying someone of a lesser class did not matter to Isabella it certainly mattered for the people she associated with, such as her brothers. Lorenzo, though, is aware of the pressures and boundaries associated with class, and ultimately he is murdered because of his class.

Isabella and Lorenzo yearn for each other, but also know that they may never get the chance to be together. They “could not, sure beneath the same roof sleep/But to each other dream, and nightly weep” (9-10). This establishes a sense of distance early on, alluding to the eventual deaths of the two protagonists. In particular, it is a purposeful nod to Lorenzo’s fated murder at the hands of Isabella’s brothers. The third person speaker similarly alludes to Lorenzo’s eventual murder when he notes that Lorenzo’s “soul is to doom: I would not grieve” (11). The use of “I would not grieve,” anticipates Isabella’s eventual grief at Lorenzo’s death.

Throughout the early stanzas of the poem, Lorenzo and Isabella’s love is troubling, as there is a sense of unhealthy infatuation between the two. He waits to see her with a “sick longing” and to “hear her morning-step upon the stair” (23-24). Keats uses “sick” throughout the poem to represent the unhealthy, unrealistic longing between Isabella and Lorenzo. Isabella’s sick longing is her unhealthy ability to see past Lorenzo’s lower class; his love literally blinds her. Eventually, this “sick” love results in Isabella’s self-harm.

Isabella’s brothers first appear in Stanza XIV and are the antagonists of the poem. The narrator mentions that “With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt/ Enriched from ancestral merchandize” (25). Not only do they serve as the antagonists, but also serve as

representations of the patriarchy in the poem. They are money-hungry and obsessed with maintaining control and power. They have a hold on Isabella that reflects patriarchal control and are evil and unable to reason. When the brothers realize that Isabella loves Lorenzo, their “bitter thoughts” are “well nigh mad” (45-46). The use of “mad” makes the audience aware of the behavior that forces Isabella to resort to self-harm, their murder of Lorenzo.

A melancholy mood surrounds Lorenzo and Isabella as they meet for the final time. Lorenzo “saw her features bright / Smile through an indoor lattice, all delight” (57-58). Their fascination with one another allows readers to speculate as to whether or not their souls and physical bodies will continue to intersect. The latticework alludes to the fact that both Lorenzo and Isabella will continue to be separate from one another. Lattice has gaps and is incomplete; it allows for connection, yet still remains a material barrier.

### **Lorenzo’s Murder**

The narrator does not describe the actual act of Lorenzo’s murder. Instead, the poem notes that the brothers take Lorenzo “into a forest quiet for the slaughter” (216), a quiet that contrasts with Isabella’s later mourning, as “Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry” (492). We can see the impact of the separation of class and the implications of patriarchal violence with the cries. While Isabella has the benefit of being heard throughout the land, Lorenzo is forever without a voice; even the physical landscape in which he died was quiet.

Instead of mentioning the graphic details of the murder, the narrator instead skips over it, noting only that “there was Lorenzo, slain and buried in [the forest]” (218). The

brothers did not see the act they committed as horrific. Social standing and boundaries separated the brothers and Lorenzo, and Lorenzo is aware of it. Michael Lagory notes that “Limited perception dooms the brothers to a limited world, blinds them to the things most worth seeing” (Lagory 342). The “limited perception” Lagory mentions is a catalyst of Lorenzo’s death, which is more than just the death of a physical body. The death represents the inability of the upper class to recognize their privilege, which proves to be fatal for both the upper and lower classes.

As time passes, the “breath of winter comes from far away / and the sick continually bereaves / of some gold tinge” (251-253). Keats personifies winter with “breath,” which gives the season a sense of human qualities. The physical landscape that surrounds Isabella represents her lack of feeling inside. I see the use of “sick” in this instance as a way for winter to further consume Isabella. Where Isabella would have felt Lorenzo’s warmth, the seasonal change indicates the passage of time, and echoes Isabella’s longing for Lorenzo.

The narrator describes Isabella’s physical body, noting that she “by gradual decay from beauty fell” (256). The use of “decay” alludes to the condition that Isabella’s mind is in. Her body becomes an outward representation of her inner self, her “mad mind” that decays as a result of her traumatic experience.

Isabella learns of Lorenzo’s death on line 266, but only after her brothers lie to her. They tell her of the forest where his “great love did cease” (266). She is unaware of the location of the body, but eventually discovers its location when Lorenzo appears to her in a dream, telling her that, “I am a shadow now, alas! Alas” (267). Like Lorenzo, is now, Isabella will also eventually become “distant in Humanity” (312).

## **Death, Decay, and Madness**

Audiences can infer that death is a metaphor for the impossibility of a time and place when Isabella and Lorenzo could be allowed to be with one another. Isabella's outward grief represents her inner mental decay. Her long, laborious cries represent her inner thoughts and feelings, and she is unable to cope with the loss. As a spirit in her dream, Lorenzo encourages Isabella to "shed one tear upon my heather-bloom, and it shall comfort me within the tomb" (303). Lorenzo's request of "one tear" is later undermined as Isabella mourns his loss with an abundance of tears

After Lorenzo appears to Isabella, she fixates on being with him. She says that the Spirit "hast school'd my infancy," alluding to her initial lack of innocence (334). Isabella is no longer the "fair," "simple" Isabel and she now understands that her brothers killed the love of her life. Her ultimate revenge will come from her eventual suicide. We can see Isabella's "mad" mind through her desire to physically be with Lorenzo. The dream "made sad Isabella's eyelids ache / And in the dawn she started up awake" (328). She fixates on finding his body so she can be comforted. a reference to nineteenth-century ideas of madness, and monomania in particular.

The only other female character in the poem is Isabella's nurse. The nurse functions as a rational female figure in Isabella's life. While witnessing the "feverous hectic flame," she asks what she can do so Isabella "should'st smile again" (350). She is aware that Isabella is capable of happiness yet cannot help her find it because Isabella is so consumed with the grief from Lorenzo's death. Isabella is unable to focus on the beauty around her. In a sense, the nurse functions as a mother figure for the "mad"

Isabella. She uses her influence in an attempt to help Isabella, but is unsuccessful, as Isabella still heads to the forest to exhume Lorenzo's body. The nurse and Isabella "went into that dismal forest-hearse," and in doing so they go back into nature to exhume the body. Nature is also representative of a mother figure in the poem. Margaret Homans notes that girls, "are obliged to reject the object of their first love, their mother, in order to redirect their love to masculine objects" (Homans 15). Isabella is missing the "object of [her] first love" and has to account for it with Lorenzo's corpse.

While digging, Isabella does not encounter Lorenzo's head immediately. She first finds a purple glove that "Her silk had play'd in purple phantasies" (370). Isabella had sewn the glove and views it as a physical reminder of the connection she had to Lorenzo and as a representation of their love. Isabella's innocence continues to deteriorate when she sees the glove, and she mourns it similarly to how she mourns Lorenzo. Similar to how the latticework functioned as a way to connect the two lovers' lives, the glove functions as a representation of the experience of unfulfilled love, as their stories were also "play'd in purple phantasies" (370). They were both so lovesick that the way they interacted was more like child's play.

Isabella appears to be fully mad when she exhumes Lorenzo's head. Rather than having Isabella quickly find and exhume Lorenzo's head, she and the nurse dig for three hours (382). The passage of time demonstrates Isabella's mental decay. It would have been simple for Keats to say that they dug "for a while." Jack Stillinger, notes that in this moment, Isabella is depicted as "fully deranged. She combs the hair of the severed head, points the eyelashes, washes away dirt with her tears, [and] continues kissing [the head]" (Stillinger 602). When Lorenzo was alive, her focus was on him. Now that he is dead,

Isabella still feels the need to “thrive” him. When Isabella digs, she does so “more fervently than misers can” (367-368). Isabella resembles a miser because she is greedy for Lorenzo’s presence. Her soul is physically distant from the man she loves, but she knows that the physical connection is necessary to dull the pain of the loss.

Unlike Boccaccio’s tale, which features Lorenzo’s dead body still intact, Keats purposefully notes that Lorenzo’s body had begun to decay in order to increase the emotional appeal of the poem. We can see this when the narrator notes that, “she look’d on dead and senseless things” (491). Aileen Ward comments that Keats “calmly presented the fact of its [the corpse’s] physical decay in order to heighten the pathos of Isabella weeping over it in her madness” (Ward 174). The decay of Lorenzo’s body coincides with the decay of Isabella’s body and mind.

In order to be comforted, Isabella takes Lorenzo’s head and plants it in a pot of basil. Isabella becomes so fixated on the pot that she is unable to focus on the everyday pleasures of life. While the pot provides her with needed comfort, she becomes so obsessed with it that she starts to harm her physical body and her soul. It was rare when she went “to chapel-shrift / And seldom did she feel any hunger pain” (465-466). The notion that she seldom felt “any hunger pain” represents the lack of hunger that she has for life. Also, her lack of spiritual devotion symbolizes her lack of connection to the spiritual world. She lives to be with the basil pot because it is the only physical connection she has left to Lorenzo. Even when she does leave the pot, she “hurrie[s] back, as swift / As bird on wing to breast its eggs again” (468-469). Similar to the urgency felt while digging the grave up, the “swift” return represents Isabella’s urgency to return to Lorenzo's body. She experiences separation anxiety when unable to be with

the pot, similar to the longing that she felt with Lorenzo earlier on in the poem. However, her longing is different now because she does not have a breathing human to give affection to.

Isabella's obsession with the basil pot is indicative of not just a "mad" mind, but specifically her potentially monomaniacal mind. Monomania was an eighteenth-century form of madness that was characterized by extreme obsession. Kathleen Beres Rogers discusses the impact of reading *Isabella* as a potentially monomaniacal character. Rogers argues that *Isabella* is monomaniacal according to the idea of "notional insanity," meaning "that the person was in charge of his or her senses, but some smaller part of the brain had gone awry" (Rogers 37).

Isabella's body physically decays as a result of longing for Lorenzo, as she sits "drooping by the Basil green" (458). A "normal" body would not "droop" over a pot, and the physical "drooping" represents the decay of her mind. Furthermore, the narrator later describes the pot as "vile with green and livid spot" (475). A once beautiful *Isabella* relies on a grotesque pot to make her happy and the "green" and "livid" pot represent the ugly, grotesque nature of *Isabella*'s mental state, and her ability to engage in self harm.

The fact that *Isabella* must be physically present with Lorenzo's head stresses her reliance upon physical objects and her madness. She obsesses over the basil pot to the point that it is "cover'd it with mould" from her tears. The basil, despite being in a moldy pot, flourishes at the expense of *Isabella*'s body. As *Isabella*'s body and mind decay, basil grows from Lorenzo's exhumed head, and *Isabella* "Hung over her sweet Basil evermore" (425), "evermore" suggesting that *Isabella* has no specified endpoint to her grief and obsession. Some scholars, such as Argha Banerjee, speculate that the growth of

the basil “implicitly promotes the growth of a male at the expense of a female” (Banerjee 69). Even as Isabella’s body physically withers away, there is still growth that comes from Lorenzo’s head, which flourishes at her expense. Lorenzo may be physically gone, but as a metaphorical wife, she regards the pot almost as her husband and submits to it as should a nineteenth-century wife.

### **Suicide and Isabella**

The brothers return and “contriv’d to steal the Basil-pot / And to examine it in secret place” (476). The fact that they examine it in “secret place” indicates that they likely see the implications of the murder and may feel remorse for what they did. The brothers were so fascinated with the pot because they saw Isabella weep as the days dragged on. Instead of thinking for herself and moving on, Isabella lets her body decay. Because she allows her body to physically decay, after the brothers steal the pot from her, Isabella cries for “her lost Basil amorously” (491). Her “amorous” cries indicate the love that she still has for Lorenzo, despite his death. She loves his “cold,” “dead” body, and cries over the lost possession of her basil pot. However, Isabella does so in a way that suggests an unhealthy obsession, further alluding to the “sick” aspect of her infatuation. She believes that it is “cruel” to “steal my Basil-pot away from me” (496), defending it as if it was a real person.

The protagonist’s reliance upon a singular object solidifies her place as a literary madwoman. Isabella exhibits characteristics of nineteenth-century ideas of madness; reading her in the social and medical contexts of the time helps us understand nineteenth century attitudes toward “the mad.” The poem ends with Isabella’s death, which we can



read as a form of suicide. We can infer that Isabella felt that being dead with Lorenzo was better than being alive without him. In the text, this idea is present when Isabella, “pined, and so she died forlorn / Imploring for her Basil to the last” (496-497). “Imploring...to the last,” Isabella cannot shake the desire to be with the basil, further stressing why we can read her as a “mad” character” in relation to nineteenth century definitions of madness.

Isabella’s legacy is reminiscent of the way she dies, as her story “From mouth to mouth through all the country pass’d” (502). Ultimately, “Isabella or the Pot of Basil” enhances modern understanding of nineteenth-century ideas surrounding “the mad.” With “Isabella,” Keats portrays the impact of self-harm as the sole escape from Isabella’s mental distress. The portrayal of “madness” in relation to self-harm allows modern audiences the chance to understand why “madwomen” in the Romantic era might resort to suicide.

## Chapter 4:

### **Suicide as an Escape from Patriarchal Control in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre***

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* was released in 1847 and tells the story of a young, opinionated woman who does not conform to social expectations. However, a vital component of *Jane Eyre* is the "madwoman in the attic," Bertha Mason. Scholarly attention regarding Bertha and her impact on Victorian literature tends to focus on how Bertha and Jane are doubles of one another. Bertha is understood as a physical representation of Jane's inner thoughts and desires, but there is more to Bertha than meets the eye. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha also functions as a way for modern audiences to understand how "madwomen" viewed suicide: as the only escape from the patriarchy.

Bertha is the wife of Edward Fairfax Rochester, the novel's main male character, and she is held in the attic of Rochester's mansion, Thornfield Hall. Bertha resents Rochester, who confined her in the mansion's attic after bringing her to England from Jamaica. Rochester keeps her in the attic of Thornfield Hall, where she "is cared for as her condition demands" (253). Bertha wreaks havoc on Thornfield when she escapes, and though she does not attempt to harm the women at Thornfield, she does attempt to harm Rochester, indicating a dislike of him.

The topic of madness first appears in *Jane Eyre* in reference to the titular character, Jane, who was a young, blossoming woman who found her voice despite the oppressive society she lived in. She is described as "mad" by Miss Abbot and Bessie, the women responsible for her, as they attempt to confine Jane to a red room in the first chapter. When Jane rejects this idea, she flails her body around to the extent that Bessie refers to her as a "mad cat" (9). Characterizing the female protagonist as "mad" character

in this context reflects how “the mad” could transgress social boundaries, which becomes vital in later understanding the “madwoman” in the text. Jane’s comparison to a “mad cat” therefore foreshadows the novel’s overarching theme of madness.

Jane Eyre arrives at Thornfield after being hired as a governess for Adele, the daughter of Rochester’s French mistress, Celine. Upon arrival, while exploring the third floor of the house with Miss Fairfax, Jane hears a laugh and describes it as “curious” and “mirthless” (85). When Jane enquires about the laughter, Rochester’s response is that “perhaps Grace Poole” caused the disturbance (85). He blames the drunk Miss Poole so Jane will not have any more questions, and Miss Fairfax lies for him. However, Jane later describes the laugh as “preternatural” (86). The moment creates suspense as readers attempt to decipher what the laugh is. While Jane trusts Rochester, she questions whether or not the laugh comes from a singular person. The laugh is still, according to Jane, “demoniac,” in the sense that it is “low, suppressed, and deep” (89). The use of “demoniac” suggests that she remains apprehensive regarding the figure’s true identity, despite assurance from Miss Fairfax.

Bronte’s appeal to the senses before introducing Bertha or any part of her backstory is vital to the madwoman’s presence throughout the novel. Though Jane is unaware of her physical body, Bronte uses the sounds to indicate a potential supernatural force present at Thornfield. Madness becomes part of the soundtrack to the estate, with the “curious,” “mirthless,” and “mad” laughter key indicators of another presence (89). Bronte’s appeal to the senses foreshadows the way that Jane eventually reacts to Bertha. However, it also creates suspense as readers decipher the source of the madness and helps the audience understand the way that madness wreaks havoc on characters in the novel.

Fire is a metaphor for passion throughout the novel, but is especially relevant as Rochester and Jane inch closer towards a courtship. One night, smoke escapes from Rochester's room. The curtains are on fire, and he is unaware of what is going on because he "lay stretched, motionless, in deep sleep" (120). Rochester staying asleep while the room is on fire is significant for two reasons. One, it suggests that he is metaphorically asleep to Bertha's needs. Two, it suggests Rochester's disconnection from reality—a disconnection from his immediate surroundings and also the world beyond the walls of Thornfield. Jane smells the smoke from next door, but Rochester is unable to notice that his bed is on fire. Rochester wakes "before the bed-clothes or the wood-work caught," and escapes death only because Jane comes to save him, a reversal of typical gender roles. There is little doubt that the fire was Bertha's attempt to hurt Rochester, although she did not want to hurt Jane.

Jane and Rochester fall in love and become engaged quickly, demonstrating the patriarchal hold that Rochester has on Jane. Rochester attempts to plan a wedding as quickly as possible. Bertha knows of Jane and Rochester's impending nuptials. Before Jane and Rochester are expected to marry, a figure comes in and rips Jane's veil: it is "torn from top to bottom in two halves" (233). The veil symbolized Jane's innocence and how she was veiled, quite literally, from exposure to "mad" people in Victorian society. The destroyed veil foreshadows the derailment of the wedding. However, the destruction of the veil also serves as a warning from Bertha to Jane. Both society and Rochester drove Bertha to madness, and though Bertha is a madwoman, she still hopes to save Jane from potential heartache with Rochester.

When the veil incident happens, Jane accuses a figure she describes as having “lips [that] were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes” (232). Bertha’s “black eyebrows” and “bloodshot eyes” make her appear more like an animal than a human being. The eyes are the windows to the soul. Bertha’s “bloodshot” eyes do not allow her to connect with Jane as they hinder Jane, a “sane” woman, from sympathy with Bertha. While Bertha is physically grotesque, she never touches Jane. Bertha does not want to harm Jane but does want to harm Rochester and her brother, Richard, whom she bites “like a tigress” (172). This links her with the animalistic, a common association with madness. Bertha physically attacks the men in her life but empathizes with Jane. As Jody Bower notes, Bertha “considers herself an ally of Jane” (Bower 172). Although Bertha appears to want to warn Jane of Rochester’s potential to harm, her outward appearance shocks Jane to the extent that she cannot recognize Bertha’s potential ability to help her.

When Jane describes the ripping of the veil to Rochester, he is outraged, describing the force that ripped the veil as “malignant” (173). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines malignant as “potentially fatal; extremely severe; exceptionally contagious or infectious; incurable” (OED). The “infectious” nature of the unknown force—Bertha, although the reader also does not know this yet—seems to threaten Jane’s safety. Readers are already aware that the force is unwanted. However, Rochester’s purposeful use of the word “malignant” suggests that he sees his wife as an unwanted, unnatural, and disturbing presence in a house that emphasizes order.

## **Bertha Revealed**

The wedding goes awry with the revelation that Rochester is married. In response to this revelation, delivered by Bertha's brother, Richard, Rochester calls his wife by name for the first time and claims, "Bertha Mason is mad; she came from a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard" (239). Rochester attempts to blame Bertha's mother for her daughter's madness. Rochester associates madness with "idiots and maniacs" (239). Bertha, in Rochester's mind, is stupid because she is mad. A troubling aspect of Rochester's description of Bertha's mother is his reference to her mother as "the Creole." She is not *a* Creole or "of Creole heritage" but is instead referenced as "the." Bertha's Creole heritage makes reference to the fact that there was an association between mental illness and non-European populations. The reference to Bertha's Creole heritage also further others and stigmatizes her and her family. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the "bestial Other could be annihilated to constitute European female subjectivity" (87). The only solution according to Gilbert and Gubar is for Bertha to be "annihilated" for the world to be right for white women, which is a comment on Bertha's eventual suicide.

Rochester attempts to garner sympathy from the guests at the wedding by showing them the "sort of being [he] was cheated into espousing" (239). Rochester believes that he was "cheated" into marrying Bertha because he was unaware of her madness. However, it is hard to empathize with Rochester because he responded to his sense of betrayal in a violent way, by confining Bertha to the attic.

Initially, Jane is horrified by Bertha's physical appearance, questioning whether or not Bertha is a human; the narrator describes what Jane thinks by noting that, "whether

beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell” (240). Jane’s biases as a “sane” woman are revealed here. Jane also interprets Bertha as exhibiting animal-like characteristics. She is a “clothed hyena” who “stood tall on its hind-feet” (241). Jane, similarly to Rochester, views Bertha as an animal. Her madness is the defining factor of who she is as a person. Bertha’s inability to verbally communicate, and reliance on communicating with action, helps to explain why Jane is frightened by her. Bertha’s lack of verbal communication matters because it alludes to her inability to have a voice; Jane views her as an animal who is incapable of voicing her opinions or feelings.

Since she was his wife, Rochester was legally responsible for Bertha; his duty as a husband was to take care of her. Rochester fulfills these primary duties by providing shelter, food, and someone to take care of Bertha. Rochester’s role in keeping Bertha imprisoned, however, stresses the importance of patriarchal power over “the mad.” Rochester refers to the attic as the “wild beast’s den,” and is unafraid of admitting that he kept her hidden there (253). He does not allow her to leave the confined space of the attic in order to hide her from society. Rochester has power over Thornfield, so he can do whatever he chooses to do with his “mad” wife.

Bertha seems to have been driven mad by the conditions that Rochester kept her in. The only source of light in the attic is a “fire guarded by a high and strong fender” and lamp that is “suspended from the ceiling by a chain.” (266). Even in Bertha’s chamber, she cannot control the type of light coming in. Not allowing her to see the light alludes to Bertha’s madness because she lives life in the dark. Darkness consumes her life like madness consumes her mind: fully and completely. She is kept in literal darkness because she is perceived as a “madwoman” by social standards.

After carefully examining the relationship that Rochester has with Bertha, Jane decides to leave. Jane feels for Bertha and believes that she “cannot help being mad” (340). Jane, unlike Bertha, can leave as she pleases. Though Rochester objects to her decision, Jane does so in an attempt to follow her instinct. Although Jane is confined to a typical role for women in nineteenth-century society, in this instance she can leave as she pleases. Bernard Paris argues that Rochester “wants [Jane] to be a liberated woman who is capable of understanding his case, of overleaping the obstacles of custom, convention, and mere human law in the name of a rational morality” (Paris 157). The “rational morality” Paris discusses applies to Rochester because he attempts to rationalize his control over women. However, I disagree with Paris because I believe that Rochester wants to control Jane but knows that she cannot be controlled.

### **Bertha’s Suicide and Impact**

Time passes as Jane ventures away from Thornfield Hall. She finds members of her family that are good to her. She rejects a marriage proposal from a man named St. John because the relationship lacked the passion she had with Rochester. Instead of relying on reason, Jane lets her passion draw her back to Thornfield. When she does finally arrive at Thornfield, Miss Fairfax tells Jane that Bertha jumped to her death after setting the attic on fire. Nothing is left of Thornfield as it was “burnt to the ground: there are only some bits of walls standing now” (265). The physical structure that imprisoned the madwoman dies with her.

Miss Fairfax’s description of the incident is that Bertha “yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement” (266). Bertha physically jumping



from the attic engulfed in flames represents her final fall, quite literally, from society and social expectations. It is appropriate for Bertha to yell rather than speak. She does not need to speak any words, as her actions communicate her intended message. Bertha simply “gave a spring” and her life was over. She finally escaped from the attic, and her death was the only way for it to happen. Fairfax describes Bertha as “dead as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered” (353). The graphic description of Bertha's brain scattered on stones alludes to the “scattered” mind she had while living. Her brain was the source of her “madness,” which died with her physical body.

Bertha’s suicide helps the audience understand how women with mental illnesses may have turned to death as the only way to escape from the patriarchy. Suicide was and continues to be a heavily stigmatized issue. Barbara Gates notes that upper class Victorian society, “strongly believed suicide to be immoral” (Gates 26). Understanding suicide as a rare source of liberation for mad people explains why those with a label of mental illness in the nineteenth century could resort to such an act.

Although Rochester seems not to care about Bertha throughout the novel, his attempt to rescue her and the Thornfield servants from the fire suggests otherwise. Rochester’s attempt to save Bertha is evidence that he has been trying to redeem himself or become a better person. According to Miss Fairfax, Rochester “got the servants out of their beds and helped them down himself and went back to get his mad wife from her cell” (266). By referring to Bertha’s living area as “her cell,” Miss Fairfax uses alludes to the prison-like conditions of the attic.

Bertha continues to impact the novel indirectly after her death. When Rochester and Jane reunite at Ferndean, Jane learns that Rochester had become blind in both eyes

after attempting to save the servants and Bertha from the fire. His disability may be understood as a result of an otherwise heroic act, but Elizabeth Donaldson argues that Rochester's disability is a result of him being blind to the world around him. She notes that after Bertha's death, the "disabling mental illness is transferred to the body of her husband as a physical impairment and blindness" (Donaldson 108). Donaldson's reading of Rochester's blindness suggests that the same darkness that was present in the attic now manifests in Rochester's body. When Bertha was alive, Rochester was metaphorically blind, unable to see Bertha as a person. His eyes, once windows to the world, are now useless.

Eyesight is not the only way that the fire permanently alters Rochester's body; he also loses his left hand. When Jane sees him again, he stretches out his right hand, but "the left arm, the mutilated one" he keeps "hidden in his bosom" (266). The narrator's emphasis that the left hand was "mutilated" emphasizes the abnormality of his body. His hand is "a mere stump, a ghastly sight" that he is embarrassed to have. The "ghastly sight" alludes to the inability for him to marry Jane while Bertha was living. His left hand, forever "mutilated," creates suspicion as to whether or not he and Jane would ever marry. Eventually, however, Jane reveals that she and Rochester have "now been married ten years" and they have a child together (372). He has regained his eyesight in one eye but is still blind in the other. I argue that his partial blindness indicates that he will always be blind to some aspect of his life. Bertha was a temporary presence in his life, but his permanent bodily disfigurement is a physical reminder of her. Bertha's suicide is viewed in a positive light as it rid the manor of the "madwoman" in the attic. However, through

Rochester's disabilities Bertha Mason has a permanent impact on Rochester, Jane, and Thornfield Hall, even after her death.

It is dangerous to attempt to diagnose Bertha with modern medical diseases. Her "mad" mind was a product of nineteenth-century attitudes regarding the "mad." Ultimately, Bertha's presence in *Jane Eyre* exposes horrors associated with the treatment of mad people in the Victorian era. Bertha's presence also shows how "mad" women could escape the patriarchy by way of suicide. Bertha should not only be studied because she was the "madwoman in the attic." Instead, it is through Bertha that modern audiences can understand negative attitudes toward mad people in the nineteenth century and why the only escape could be suicide.

## Conclusion

Science and medicine are socially constructed ideas that change as time does. Similarly, so do definitions of madness and ideas about gender. Understanding the way that women were confined by way of the patriarchy allows for modern audiences to comprehend the reasons why “mad” women resorted to self-harm or suicide in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

There is a connection between “madness” and attempted or successful suicide. If a woman was unable to escape patriarchal control, self-harm was one of the only ways that she had authority and control over her own body and destiny. Understanding why late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary madwomen attempted or died by suicide is important because it shows the impact of patriarchal control. Since conditions for madwomen were so terrible, they lacked the ability to escape the confines of a patriarchal society. Thus, suicide was sometimes the only way for women to escape the patriarchal standard in society.

Through Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*, John Keats’s “Isabella,” and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, actual nineteenth century women who escaped patriarchal control by suicide have a voice. Instead of being seen as “madwomen,” their attempted or successful suicides allow modern audiences to empathize with these women, despite their “mad” label. Though each of the women were of different eras, they provide a compelling view of the “madwoman” and how she could escape patriarchal control by way of suicide.

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