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# From Absent Mothers to Wicked Stepmothers: The Brontës, Motherhood and Neo-Victorianism

## ≈ Abstract

The present article will try to cover the main considerations regarding the depiction of motherhood in the most culturally reproduced Brontëan novels, namely Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and – to a lesser extent – Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), alongside some of their rewritings and adaptations. Special attention will be given to *Wuthering Heights* and its cultural reproductions due to its potential to delve into generational traumas and physically absent matrilineal bonds as well as due to its influence in popular memory through adaptation – be they faithful or “classic” adaptations of the novel or those imaginings that use a characteristically Brontëan language to deal with some of the issues present in the aforementioned narrative. Thus, the main aim of this discussion is to trace the affective potential of the mother–daughter bond in the Brontëan narratives so as to provide a framework of reference from which to explore how neo-Victorian fiction – in this case, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Michael Stewart's *Ill Will: The Untold Story of Heathcliff* (2018), William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* (2016) and Kristoffer Nyholm and Anders Engström's television series *Taboo* (2017) – has re-imagined these relationships and their affective legacy in cultural memory.

Keywords:

the Brontës; motherhood; neo-Victorianism; *Wuthering Heights*; *Jane Eyre*

## ≈ Resumen

El presente artículo tratará de cubrir las principales consideraciones sobre la representación de la maternidad en las novelas brontëanas más reproducidas culturalmente, como son *Jane Eyre* (1847) de Charlotte Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) de Emily Brontë y, en menor medida, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) de Anne Brontë y *Villette* (1853) de Charlotte Brontë, a la par que algunas de sus re-escrituras o adaptaciones. Se prestará especial atención a *Wuthering Heights* (Cumbres Borrascosas) y sus reproducciones culturales debido a su potencial para profundizar en traumas generacionales y vínculos matrilíneales físicamente ausentes, así como a su influencia en la memoria popular a través de adaptaciones, ya sean fieles o “clásicas”, de las novelas o aquellas imaginaciones que utilizan un lenguaje característicamente brontëano para abordar algunos de los temas presentes en la narrativa mencionada. Así, el objetivo principal de esta discusión es rastrear el potencial afectivo del vínculo madre–hija en las narrativas de las Brontë para proporcionar un marco de referencia desde el cual explorar cómo la ficción neo-victoriana – en este caso, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) de Jean Rhys, *Ill Will: The Untold Story of Heathcliff* (2018) de Michael Stewart, *Lady Macbeth* (2016) de William Oldroyd y la serie de televisión *Taboo* (2017) de Kristoffer Nyholm y Anders Engström – ha reimaginado estas relaciones y su legado afectivo en la memoria cultural.

Palabras clave:

las Brontë; maternidad; neo-Victorianismo; *Wuthering Heights*; *Jane Eyre*

**M**otherhood has been at the centre of cultural representations of women throughout history, revered in manifold religious cosmologies and taking new socio-political dimensions since the Renaissance in the Western world.<sup>1</sup> Theodora Jankowski adds that “women of the late medieval and early modern periods can really only be examined in terms of their relationship to the marriage paradigm”, which was “designed as a way to control the inheritance of male property [...] [and] as a means of controlling women to ensure that the children they produced were, in fact, the true heirs of their husbands” (1992, 24). This control was mainly enacted or reinforced through religious conceptions of women’s bodies as inherently sinful – modelled after Eve and Mary Magdalene – or pious, penitent and suffering – after Virgin Mary, which were extended to constructions of “good” and “bad” motherhood (Keeble 1994; Tishkoff 2006; Welldon 1992).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the vast majority of cultural narratives concerned with the representation of motherhood have been deeply influenced by this patriarchal – capitalist and colonialist – lens, offering limited and problematic models.

As Borham-Puyal claims, “the idea of motherhood responds to its time and age and proves elusive to simple definitions or prescriptions in its complexity and its relationship with other areas of women’s lives and identities” (2020, 73). The recent renewed interest in academic debates around motherhood continues to engage with “a number of socio-political processes” that are at work in the conception of the contemporary mother, which challenges the patriarchal notion of motherhood as women’s ultimate aspiration and space of legitimate identity-building (McRobbie 2013, 119). In fact, contemporary fiction and scholarship seem concerned not only with how women’s identities are and should be constructed beyond motherhood, but also focus on motherhood from the complex web of bonds that are established as a consequence from a feminist perspective; for instance, delving into the mother-daughter relationship (Ahmed 2006; Hirsch 1989). In many ways, this turn in motherhood studies also responds to the postmodern preoccupation with revisioning hegemonical narratives, the different concerns and perspectives that feminist and gender studies have been exploring since the seventies until now, and the rise of neo-Victorianism in the case of Brontëan rewritings and adaptations – a field that has been described as a subgenre of historiographic metafiction and that is intrinsically connected to both postmodernism and gender studies (both of which are deeply interconnected with each other).<sup>3</sup>

What is more, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s idea of Bertha Mason as “Jane’s dark double” (2000, 360) serves the neo-Victorian project in its quest to open “a channel of communication between the spirits of the past” so that we “continue to listen to what the Victorian ghost has to say” (Arias and Pulham 2010, xxv). In fact, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* serve as paradigmatic examples of this revisionist zeal, both of them counting with a vast array of cultural reproductions on and off the page, as Patsy Stoneman enumerates and discusses in her foundational work *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (1996), which counts with a recent second expanded edition (2018). Nevertheless, as Stoneman and Hila Shachar put forward, not every one of these adaptations bring out the affective and political potential of the hypotexts but, instead, erase that potential in favour of replicating dominating ideologies (2018; 2012). Therefore, the

present article will try to cover the main considerations regarding the depiction of motherhood in the most culturally reproduced Brontëan novels, namely Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and – to a lesser extent – Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853).<sup>4</sup> Special attention will be given to *Wuthering Heights* and its cultural reproductions due to its potential to delve into generational traumas and physically absent matrilineal bonds as well as due to its influence in popular memory through adaptation – be they faithful or “classic” adaptations of the novel or those imaginings that use a characteristically Brontëan language to deal with some of the issues present in the aforementioned narrative.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the main aim of this discussion is to trace the affective potential of the mother-daughter bond in the Brontë narratives so as to provide a framework of reference from which to explore how neo-Victorian fiction – in this case, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Michael Stewart’s *Ill Will: The Untold Story of Heathcliff* (2018) and William Oldroyd’s *Lady Macbeth* (2016) – has re-imagined these relationships and their affective legacy in cultural memory.<sup>6</sup>

The following discussion will thus provide an analysis of the above-mentioned (neo-)Brontëan texts from an interdisciplinary approach that mainly takes into account Brontë and neo-Victorian scholarship, alongside the contributions of some affect critics, so as to explore the representation and treatment of the affective legacy of the mother in the cultural journey from Victorian to neo-Victorian fiction. As *Brontë Transformations* already offers a comprehensive analysis of the many adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* that have appeared over time, the main focus of the present work, despite attempting to follow in the footsteps of Stoneman and Shachar’s discussions, is to call attention to specific rewritings and adaptations that are key to understand the cultural journey that Brontëan narratives have experience from an affective and cultural perspective in relation to the mother bond quandary. Accordingly, the first section will tackle absent mothers and affective transmission in the Brontës so as to delve into the depiction of matrilineal inheritance and its influence on the protagonists of the original novels. Subsequently, the study will focus on how some neo-Victorian rewritings and adaptations put this affective inheritance at the centre of their narratives as a way to reclaim the politicising potential of their protagonists and highlight its crucial role within the hypotexts. Thereby, the article seeks to place in dialogue Victorian and neo-Victorian cultural discourses so as to discern the extent to which contemporary debates replicate or subvert representations of matrilineal bonds and their influence. This is the reason why the scope of this article is rather ambitious, for the main focus is to interpret these works from a broader angle: in relation and as a response to one another.

### Absent Mothers and Affective Transmission in the Brontës

The loss of the Brontës’ mother, Maria Brontë, alongside the traumatic deaths of their older siblings not long after, Maria and Elizabeth, completely transformed the dynamics of the Brontë household. More importantly, it conditioned the way the remaining Brontë siblings experienced the world through their overwhelming feelings of loneliness and grief (Barker 1994; Barnard and Barnard 2013; Paddock and Rollyson 2003). Therefore, their mother’s absence and a preoccupation with death and loss are fundamental aspects not only in their lives and the development of their personality, but also in their works, which feature related thematic concerns and orphaned characters. Although

thematically different, both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* dwell on the issue of orphanhood, its weight on the individual and the absence of parental and, especially, maternal figures.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, *Villette* (1853) is similarly concerned with a protagonist who has no ties nor relations, which contributes to her emotional isolation. Following Gilbert and Gubar,

just as *Frankenstein*, with its emphasis on orphans and beggars, is a motherless book, so all the Brontë novels betray intense feelings of motherlessness, orphanhood, destitution. And in particular the problems of literary orphanhood seem to lead in *Wuthering Heights*, as in *Frankenstein*, not only to a concern with surviving evidence but also a fascination with the question of origins. (2000, 251)

Indeed, according to Paula Barba Guerrero, “the absence of the mother is interpreted, then, as a sign of female disidentification” (2024, 62) – and it could be argued that, to a certain extent, this is an overriding concern, if not an explicit one, in *Wuthering Heights*.

Nevertheless, there is no consensus as to whether the protagonist’s absent mother and her story have an influence on Jane, her journey or any other sisterly bonds in *Jane Eyre*. While “Margaret Homans and Marianne Hirsh both suggest that Jane must actively reject the mother in order to write her story” (Marsh 2004, 90), Adrienne Rich insists on how individual women help Jane Eyre to the “point she is in relation to the Great Mother herself” (1979, 102). Jane not only dreams of her mother, but her mother’s story has an effect on her, making her want to explore “her mother’s life in her own” (Marsh 2004, 91). What is more, “Jane’s creativity and her femaleness allow her to relive the experiences of the dead without being possessed by them, without being forced to repudiate them, and without reproducing the social constraints that bound the dead in life” (Marsh 2004, 91). Jane’s awareness of her social hybridity connects her directly to her mother’s story, to whom Mrs Reed “had a dislike [...] for she was [her] husband’s only sister, and a great favourite with him: he opposed the family’s disowning her when she made her low marriage” (Brontë 2012, 303–4). Jane shares with her mother her transgressive desire – in her case for Rochester and for the sustenance of her *desiring* self – and, though this mother is physically absent, it represents a model for Jane to vindicate this desire and, consequently, an identity beyond stagnant gender and social roles. In fact, Marsh highlights that “the mother’s story is potentially subversive; it is potentially the story of her pleasure, even her pleasure outside of marriage, that which, as Lloyd notes, ‘represents a complete excess here: an excess beyond her identity as a mother, beyond the end of conception’” (2004, 85). In many ways, Jane Eyre expresses how she is “weary of an existence all passive” (Brontë 2012, 153) and longs for and lives up to an existence “quickened with all of incident, life, fire, [and] feeling” (Brontë 2012, 145) – hence, “challenging the assumptions of her culture about dichotomies [...] [and] claiming the right to speak them” (Stoneman 2018, 47) – just as her mother (affectively) did.

As a matter of fact, the Brontës’ novels depict and participate in what Amanda Auerbach has termed “affective transmission”. Auerbach envisions affective transmission as “the transference of an emotion (which might be thought of as a force of energy) among a group of people” (2020, 686). In her analysis of *Villette*, she asserts that, in the case of Lucy Snowe, she “repeatedly

distances herself from interpersonal and therefore uncontrollable emotions that take hold of her by attributing them to fictitious characters” (2020, 666). Though this attribution might be a way of self-distancing oneself from one’s emotions, it interrupts Lucy’s gender and social performance, contributing to the disruption of her sense of self and her construction as a desiring one in alignment with *Jane Eyre*’s eponymous heroine.<sup>8</sup> In addition, taking this into consideration, it could be said that Lucy Snowe also somehow transmits the overbearing grief she feels for the loss of her mother when she was fourteen to the figure of Paul Emmanuel when he loses him – finally letting herself further connect with what this first loss has meant in her life, as well as to both “accept her loss in order to develop an objective relation with the other” and also to “retain her [mother]” (Bertrandias 2001, 134).<sup>9</sup> One way or another, the Brontës’ novels seem concerned, therefore, not only with affective transmission but also with a sort of matrilineal affective inheritance that appears either as a ghostly presence – most conspicuously in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, as it will be outlined below – or as a desire to break away from the limitations imposed on their selves and their bodies.

Yet, this is not entirely the case of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, if the relationship between the protagonist and her son is analysed closely. Contrary to her sisters’ most well-known novels, the protagonist of *The Tenant*, Helen Graham is quite a transgressive and truly revolutionary motherly figure. Trapped in an abusive marriage with the narcissist Arthur Huntingdon, she eventually decides to run away with their five-year-old son so that he is not mistreated or corrupted by Arthur’s overbearing and drunken influence. Helen reflects in her diaries about a moment in which her husband is drunk and careless around their son before deciding to leave him, saying: “My little Arthur was standing between his knees, delightedly playing with the bright, ruby ring on his finger. Urged by a sudden, imperative impulse to deliver my son from that contaminating influence, I caught him up in my arms and carried him with me out of the room” (Brontë 2001, 255). Motivated by the duty she feels as a mother to not let her son be mistreated or turn into a despicable man like his father, Helen later on escapes from her family home and starts a hidden and secluded life making a living for herself and her son in a time in which women, their possessions, inheritance and children were lawfully their husband’s. Motherhood in Anne Brontë’s novel, thus, (dis)similarly leads to the protagonist’s grasp of agency and disruption of her assigned gender performance – as it acts as an affective force that propels Helen to act illegally to preserve her and her son’s life and dignity while also retaining her income.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Mike Barker’s 1996 television adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* seems to have followed the novel’s lead in portraying Helen Graham’s relationship with her son and its centrality in Helen’s determination to be her own person, whilst also showing Helen’s identity beyond motherhood as an artist and a desiring woman.

### *Affective Inheritance in Wuthering Heights*

The concern with women as property runs through both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* as well. However, the absence of a “proto-feminist” motherly figure (Berry 1996, 45) in their narratives is somehow compensated with the disruptive force that their (anti-) heroines affectively exert throughout the narration. Although this disruption is controversial both in the case of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, the latter best conveys the affective power of the absent mother in the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw. ~

In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine's haunting presence is first introduced by Lockwood when he sees what appears to be her ghost in what is presumed a nightmare, prematurely judging her: "that minx, Catherine Linton, or Earnshaw, or however she was called [...]. She told me she had been walking the earth these twenty years; a just punishment for her mortal transgressions, I've no doubt!" (Brontë 2000, 18). Most significantly, Nelly's narration chiefly focuses on Catherine, even in her account of the second-generation Cathy, whom she compares to her mother on several occasions, for instance, when commenting that "that capacity for intense attachments reminded me of her mother" (Brontë 2000, 137). Catherine's struggle is then ever-present in the second generation of characters, her ghost emphasising the need for the mother to take up space – both affective and physical – and the intergenerational reminder of the need for women to construct their identity beyond their role as mothers, even though this desire to "go beyond" is disruptive for themselves and the society they live in.

In this regard, Nancy Armstrong suggests that the Brontës' fiction brings a disruption that changed the direction of the novel:

The Brontës infuse their female protagonists with sexual energy in order to destroy the hierarchical structure of the landowning economy and to remodel domestic relations as the mother's purview – a pair of moves accomplished in each novel by the shift of the family seat from older, indigenous households to a distinctively modern country house. (Armstrong 2012, 175)

This seems particularly true of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in that "all the devices that disrupt the continuity of the community – for example, two generations of Earnshaws, the complicated transfer of property in *Wuthering Heights*, and the heroine's five social relocations and unexpected inheritance in *Jane Eyre* – indicate something of the formal labour required to establish continuity between the Austen model and their own" (Armstrong 2012, 175). However, "to maintain that model, both novels have to destroy it – which they achieve by including Heathcliff and Bertha Mason as figures of maleness and femaleness that obliterate the norms of masculinity and femininity, respectively" (Armstrong 2012, 175). As Gilbert and Gubar put forward, both Heathcliff and Bertha Mason serve as more than devices but as (at least) potential doubles of Catherine Earnshaw and Jane Eyre. By being key to the conception of these affective worlds, they take centre stage and act as haunting presences that remind us that there are "more stories" beyond the Eurocentric patriarchal, colonialist and capitalist realities in which they are inscribed. In a similar way, that the harrowing absence of the mother is felt in the protagonists' quest to transgress boundaries by opening channels of communication between this world and the next – which can be also understood in terms of the affective potentiality of their mothers' stories.

In addition, Catherine's complicated relationship with her pregnancy and, therefore, the idea of motherhood is also mediated by its sociocultural implications and associated affects. It can be deduced from the novel that her moments of manic depression – or, as seen by other characters, madness – coincide with her confinement, which could be inferred to be a prescribed pregnancy rest. Catherine's entrapment is double in that her body

also acts as a metaphorical cage, one that further anticipates a future of entrapment in Thrushcross Grange and in her almost exclusive role as a mother. Brontë's Catherine starves herself and proves that her descent into illness is not a consequence of a feeble, agentless constitution, but – at least partly – her own will. Hence, when Heathcliff says to Catherine that "[she has] killed [herself]" (Brontë 2000, 117), it could be read quite literally. Catherine's final hour, however, arrives at childbirth while she delivers a girl, Cathy, from her union with Edgar Linton. Catherine's pregnancy coincides with her physical and mental deterioration and deepens her sense of connection with her body and, therefore, her awareness of the oppression and entrapment she suffers and is yet to experience in the future. This might be one of the reasons why Nelly talks of young Cathy as "an unwelcomed infant" (Brontë 2000, 119). Catherine's prescribed rest might be considered the ultimate certainty of a future indoors, devoting herself to her child. In this light, Catherine's death in confinement and motherhood represents her final maddening cry against the complete alienation of her body, taken by the patriarchal system to fulfil its reproductive needs: it is her ultimate rebellion against her inability to find an earthly space for a self that dissents from its assigned gender performance. If mothers, wives and daughters were assumed to be more emotional, yet expected to be more restrained and "protected from certain selfish emotions" due to them being imagined as "uniquely qualified to preserve the emotional purity of the home" (Ablow 2012, 197), Catherine's story is one of affective disturbance and this is felt throughout the novel, even when the second generation of characters reach their youth. The "emotional purity of the home", as she terms it, is challenged by the potentially subversive story of Catherine's painful desire.

Likewise, for Hannah Bury *Villette* "explores how the symbiotic relationship between madness and isolation disrupts normative constructions of middle-class femininity" (2021, 159). In a similar way to how Catherine Earnshaw positions herself away from the Angel in the House, Lucy does not fit the "domestic ideal of marriage or motherhood" (Bury 2021, 166). Just as Catherine's ghost disrupts and influences the second generation of characters in *Wuthering Heights* through the stories that bear witness to her struggle, Catherine's model of transgressive femininity – and her consequent disruption – vindicate "an excess beyond her identity as a mother" (Lloyd qtd. in Marsh 2004, 85). What is more, just as the second generation – and, in many ways, the first generation – of *Wuthering Heights* are motherless, only in touch with this matrilineal inheritance of disruption and desire, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are also characterised by the (physical) absence of motherly figures. As Ivonne Defant argues, "the regeneration of life that [...] is deeply desired by Catherine neatly develops in the second part of the novel when Cathy is often seen treading on the earth trodden before her mother" (2017, 42). This image evokes Rich's words when she said that: "I believe that every woman's soul is haunted by the spirits of earlier women who fought for their unmet needs [...]. Those spirits dwell in us, trying to speak to us" (1994, 24). In the affective bonds that can be established among the hereby mentioned Brontëan outsiders, mothers might be physically absent, but their presence is felt in the excessive nature of the mother's story.

Both *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette* are deeply concerned with loss and absence. In *Wuthering Heights*, the theme of loss and absence takes on immeasurable magnitude. To a certain extent, all characters experience the loss and absence of a loved one,



from Mr and Mrs Earnshaw to Hindley and the Lintons. It is not just Catherine and Heathcliff who mourn their dead: all of them grieve for the living and even for themselves. *Villette's* Lucy Snowe similarly deals with absence and isolation and her narrative is vertebrated by the loss of her family, her own self and that of Paul Emmanuel, whom he eventually falls in love with. Be that as it may, it is perhaps the narrative of *Wuthering Heights* that hints at Emily Brontë's reaction to maternal loss the most, as it also turns it into a thematic taboo. After the mother's death, the children are continually silent; for instance, both Hareton and Cathy seem reluctant to mention their mothers. As it has been tackled in this section, though the mother's story seems to be erased or tabooed in the novel, the mother lives on through the affective trace that lingers and haunts the narrative and its protagonists – which is, perhaps, especially palpable in the first and second generation Catherines.

### Neo-Victorianism, Motherhood and the Brontës

In neo-Victorian fiction, though *Jane Eyre* has provided the groundwork for many celebrated rewritings of Charlotte's story – and is, in fact, the most reproduced work of the Brontë sisters – the *Wuthering Heights's* approach to matrilineal inheritance sits at the centre of contemporary revisitations of the Brontës' narratives – either affectively or in terms of the plot – due to the model of disruption illustrated in the previous section. In her foundational work *Reading the Brontë Body*, Beth Torgerson highlights how *Wuthering Heights* stands as a critique of dispossession. In her words, "Brontë's critique of patriarchy's dis/possession of women emphasizes that women are not allowed to own land. The dis/possession of land is shown to be intimately connected with questions of possession of the women's bodies and identities" (2005, 109). It is perhaps because of how brutally and violently *Wuthering Heights* dramatises the inner workings and the complex layers of the patriarchal, capitalist and colonialist narratives in which the main characters are caught upon that the novel serves as an endless well for exploring and critiquing these narratives and the structures of power that uphold them in a more nuanced way. Be that as it may, as it will be shown in the discussion of neo-Victorian texts below, the disruptive (affective) centrality of *Wuthering Heights* is almost always accompanied with the revision of the figure of *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason, which functions as a paragon of the neo-Victorian project and the postmodern concern with deconstructing metanarratives and reevaluate history. Thus, many of these neo-Victorian and (neo-)Brontëan mothers – if not all – are somehow connected and interwoven through the legacy of the figure of Bertha Mason or, to be more precise, through the legacy of *Wide Sargasso Sea's* problematisation of the same.

#### *Inheriting Madness in Wide Sargasso Sea*

Caribbean-British author Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is, if not the first neo-Victorian novel, one of the first neo-Victorian rewritings of *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of the madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason. In Rhys's novel, Bertha Mason is Antoinette, the Creole Jamaican heiress with whom Edward Rochester is set to marry before the main *Jane Eyre* plot takes place. In this rewriting we hear Antoinette's voice for the first time, being participant in her story and the gender and race oppression that she suffers at the hands of her society – she is seen as a "white cockroach" (Rhys 1997, 64) – and Rochester himself, who orientalises and objectifies her.<sup>11</sup> Though Rochester and other characters mistreat her, they insist in linking her

supposed "madness" with that of her racialised black mother in an attempt to dust away their blame and upholding of patriarchal and colonial attitudes towards her. Antoinette's mother, Annette, is also portrayed as a major outsider in her world. At the beginning of the novel, Antoinette reflects on how the Jamaican ladies never approved of her mother due to her being a beautiful Creole woman from Martinique. Annette goes on to marry an Englishman, Mr Cosway (Antoinette's father) and later remarries another one, Mr Mason. Annette faces the circumstances of being an outsider to both the societies she marries into and is born in, which culminate in a series of events that deeply affect her mental health. In that sense, Antoinette does not inherit Annette's mental illness but her circumstances, this being the reason why Victoria Burrows argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a narrative "of a daughter's cumulative trauma, much of it carried over from her mother's own traumatic life" (2004, 45).

Antoinette's madness is always, and perhaps more acutely, a projection of others, especially Rochester's, who fails to recognise her estranged nature and the pain and consequent anger of her loss. Most significantly, Rochester starts calling her Bertha, intending to strip her away even of her name, as it may be the last remnant of her self: "Good-night Bertha.' He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name. 'I hope you will sleep well, Bertha' – it cannot be worse, I said. 'That one night he came I might sleep afterwards. I sleep so badly now. And I dream'" (Rhys 1997, 71). In reality, Antoinette's "madness" or unruliness proves to be her mother's inheritance of dissent and the struggle that she also had to endure. Going back to her mother's story, Antoinette makes sense of her own journey to what others brand as madness. However, this is not unproblematically presented in the novel, as Antoinette is depicted going through several moments of dissociation and conflictly clinging on to her alleged madness to reclaim a sense of identity distinct from the colonising influence of Rochester.

It is noteworthy how Antoinette is affectively and materially dispossessed in a similar way to that of Catherine Earnshaw. Unable to inherit any of her family's fortunes due to her being a woman, she and her mother must marry to somehow retain, through these unions, some of them – as well as a sense of self and status. Therefore, their bodies are similarly commodified and rendered "mad" when they ultimately respond to the intersectional oppression and abuse that they both suffer. As a matter of fact, referring to herself in the mirror, she claims "it was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair" (Rhys 1997, 123), which further connects the narrative to that of *Wuthering Heights* and Catherine Earnshaw's disidentification when she looks at herself in the mirror.<sup>12</sup> In identifying herself with the ghost and simultaneously clinging on to the red dress, Antoinette renders visible the patriarchal narratives of control and dispossession that write her as a ghost and a madwoman, but also stands in communion with the very desires that these narratives use to justify control over her body and agency. Notwithstanding, Bertha Mason is no longer just posited as *Jane Eyre's* darkest double here, as *Wide Sargasso Sea* reconfigures *Jane Eyre* through Antoinette and, in some way, through Catherine Earnshaw. To a certain extent, this enlivens her discourse as a character and the Brontëan discourse of the novel, making it relevant nowadays by highlighting the potentiality of the original story and the affective – and, in a way, maternal or sisterly – bonds that can be traced amongst their protagonists.<sup>13</sup>

Turning yet again to *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's orphanhood and origins sit at the heart of the narrative, having other characters refer to him as a "gypsy [...] a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway" (Brontë 2000, 35), and looking "exactly like the son of the fortune-teller" (Brontë 2000, 34). Nelly Dean even tells him that who knows if "[his] father was Emperor of China, and [his] mother an Indian queen" (Brontë 2000, 40). There are several rewritings that tackle the character of Heathcliff, his conflicted identity and his three-year-long absence from *Wuthering Heights*, namely, Jeffrey Caine's *Heathcliff* (1977), Anna L'Estrange's *Return to Wuthering Heights* (1978), John Wheatcroft's *Catherine, Her Book* (1983) and Lin Haire-Sargeant's *The Story of Heathcliff's Journey Back to Wuthering Heights* (1992), just to mention a few.<sup>14</sup> In a more recent neo-Victorian rewriting, Michael Stewart's *Ill Will: The Untold Story of Heathcliff* (2018), the intersectional racial and class oppression that the character of Heathcliff suffers in *Wuthering Heights* is presented from the point of view of Heathcliff himself, who journeys on to Liverpool in search of his mother.<sup>15</sup>

The irreconcilable loneliness of this Frankenstein-like creature that is Heathcliff is nevertheless somehow atoned at the end of the novel, when he finds out that he is the son of an African slave, christened Lilith, and mistreated to death. Discovering that he is Catherine's half-brother, being the son of an African woman and Mr Earnshaw, Heathcliff also learns that "she was a slave in Africa. Born a slave, no doubt. Buying her and shipping her to Barbados was a kindness" (Stewart 2018, 229). Coming to terms with the abuse and rape her mother suffered at the hands of men, he reclaims her affective inheritance as a way to shape his identity and gather agency to somehow "avenge" her and himself: "I am the son of Lilith," I said. "My mother who you drove to her death. Who died under your very roof in the attic above this room. And now I have come back to put right your terrible crime" (Stewart 2018, 309). Heathcliff's origin story, therefore, is reconceptualised as one in which he encounters and reclaims the matrilineal inheritance that others seem to punish him for as a way to vindicate his affective experience as a racialised and destitute Other. Moreover, it does not seem coincidental that Heathcliff's mother dies in her oppressor's attic in *Ill Will*. The above-mentioned matrilineal inheritance further connects the figure of Heathcliff to *Jane Eyre*'s madwoman in the attic – especially to *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s problematisation of Bertha Mason through a post-colonial lens.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, *Ill Will* introduces another orphaned character that accompanies Heathcliff in his journey: that of the ten-year-old daughter of a hanged highway man, Emily. Having previously considered Catherine "[his] teacher, [his] lover, [his] mother [...] all [he] needed in the world" (Stewart 2018, 5), to whom he directs his inner monologue in Stewart's novel, Heathcliff encounters a different companion that connects him with his mother in more than one way. Foul-mouthed and rogue, Emily talks Heathcliff into her mediumistic abilities and both devise a plan to jointly earn a living out of them. Eventually, although Emily reveals her mediumship to be a trick – much as fiction might be considered to be – she previously makes Heathcliff believe that his mother is speaking through her: "Yes, it is me, son" (Stewart 2018, 97). This somehow symbolically infuses the character of Emily with Brontë's haunting presence, and the affective responsibility the latter might bear in regards to Heathcliff, which is her creation, and his search for a mother figure.

In the realm of film adaptation, particularly of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, as Patsy Stoneman and Hila Shachar have argued, other discourses have occupied centre stage – most conspicuously appropriating Brontëan themes for commercial, nationalistic or cultural purposes. Therefore, more often than not the disruptive force of Brontëan female characters and the subversive matrilineal bonds that are implicit in their stories have tended to be erased. Nonetheless, Shachar has noted how the rise of neo-Victorianism has started to change this, and discusses the 2009 ITV *Wuthering Heights* adaptation for its preoccupation with matrilineal inheritance/bonds. Shachar maintains that "some of the most telling scenes in ITV's *Wuthering Heights* occur through an exploration of Cathy's relationship with her dead mother. While the second generation is explored in far greater detail in this adaptation, Hareton and Linton receive little screen time, with the main focus being primarily on Cathy" (2012, 151). Yet, none of the classic adaptations further explores the mother figure beyond the maternal in a way that places at the forefront the story of her desire (sexual or otherwise) or the potentiality of the story of her pleasure and desire, as it has been mentioned above. In this context, other onscreen texts that are not announced revisitations of Brontëan narratives, but that are paradoxically closer to them due to their closeness to their original discourses and their recognisable iconography, continue to appear. These new fictions are particularly relevant to today's society because they attest to the necessity to recuperate the politicising potential of the source texts that has been erased in their cultural journey to the screen. By defamiliarising these discourses but continuing to use conspicuous Brontëan images and tropes, it could be said that these new onscreen works create a position from which we can revisit and interrogate the Brontëan novel, our contemporary assumptions of it and our own cultural landscape.

One of these cinematographic texts is William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* (2016), which presents a distinctive Brontëan cinematic language that invites comparison between its protagonist, Katherine Lester and Emily Brontë's Catherine Earnshaw. In Oldroyd's film, Katherine's desire is presented as an excessive force that is nonetheless necessary for her to sustain her body and her sense of self in a context that commodifies and annihilates her. Getting pregnant outside marriage and as a result of her own desire, Katherine's pregnancy might be understood as another form of entrapment, especially at the end of the film when she is alone at the house again, in the same way Catherine Earnshaw's pregnancy is suggested to do in Brontë's novel. Just before she finds out about her own pregnancy, Katherine learns of the existence of her husband's ward, a boy he fathered with a black woman. Katherine first acts motherly towards this new boy, only to later murder him because he threatens her hard-earned freedom – and ultimately, her own child's. As Katherine voices it herself when she commits her first murder: "We did it so that we could be together here. No more bowing and not being who [we] deserve to be" (Oldroyd 2016, 0:56:54). This is one of the reasons why her lover, Sebastian, eventually confesses their crimes together and says that Katherine "suffocated [him] [...] she's a disease" (Oldroyd 2016, 1:20:42). In this case, Katherine, as a wicked stepmother and expectant mother, seems to leave a legacy of desire that although debatable and colonising towards others – and also towards two racialised characters in the film – makes visible the violence necessary to sustain the self and make space for women's bodies. In any event, however, "*Lady Macbeth* revisits the burden

motherhood entails for the Brontë boy” (Bernabeu 2021, 204).

Another work of onscreen neo-Victorian fiction that taps into this characteristically Brontëan imaginary is Kristoffer Nyholm and Anders Engström’s television series *Taboo* (2017). Again, though not overly connected to the Brontës’ texts, the series presents a Heathcliff-like character through which nineteenth-century discourses that are integral to Emily Brontë’s novel are articulated and critiqued. *Taboo* picks up on this racial ambiguity and its complex connection to the wild through the character of Delaney, who troublingly finds out that his Native American mother was bought by his father alongside Nootka Sound. Delaney is committed to recuperate his mother’s story and heritage as well as to – questionably – avenge her. In this sense, both *Taboo*’s Delaney and *Ill Will*’s Heathcliff respond to the question of the origins of Brontë’s character pointing at his biracial heritage and the idea of a matrilineal inheritance they somehow try to trace, recuperate and vindicate. Delaney already knows what to him is the painful reality: “Nootka was my mother’s tribe”, he tells Brace. Delaney, adding emphasis, remarks that his father “bought some land and he bought a wife. And he bought them both for gunpowder” (Nyholm and Engström 2017, Episode 1, 0:24:26). This fact seems central to Delaney’s motivations in somehow disturbing the patriarchal, capitalist and imperial order that articulates the series’ relations and narratives and further connects *Taboo* to both *Wuthering Heights*’s and *Jane Eyre*’s cultural imaginary. On this wise, *Lady Macbeth* similarly highlights the fact that Katherine is “bought along with a piece of land” (Nyholm and Engström 2017, Episode 1, 0:51:06), re-assessing Catherine Earnshaw’s impossibility of inheriting the property of *Wuthering Heights* – and her consequent homelessness from a gender perspective – and putting these problematics somehow at the forefront of the outsider’s troubled dispossession. Furthermore, in *Taboo* Delaney often reminds other characters that his mother’s name was not Anna, but “Salish. My mother’s name was Salish” (Nyholm and Engström 2017, episode 1, 0:25:32). This response, as well as Delaney’s concern with his mother’s story and inheritance, are particularly reminiscent of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s preoccupation with naming, belonging and being allowed to be one’s self. In Rhys’s text, Antoinette re-politicises the sense of abjection that Rochester imposes on her; for instance, reclaiming her alleged madness as a form of matrilineal affective agency that disrupts the oppressive narratives that wish to make her body submissive to colonising and racist discourses and structures of power.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion: From Absent Mothers to Wicked Stepmothers?

The Brontës’ depiction of motherhood and matrilineal bonds seems to be aligned with the politicising potential of their fiction and, despite being ambiguous, continues to be disruptive in Armstrong’s sense of the word – thus, making possible and visible the legacy of matrilineal bonds that represent a sometimes “undesirable” excess that transgresses what is socially prescribed for them as women. Mothers in these and other neo-Victorian rewritings vary from absent figures, ghosts, madwomen, victims and wicked stepmothers, sometimes being two or even three of these categories at once. Although the problematics that these representations may produce remain largely unexplored despite the rising interest coming from neo-Victorian studies, this evinces the affective afterlife of matrilineal bonds and their taking up space in patriarchal systems that seem to regard them only for their reproductive abilities. This panoramic overview

of the most culturally reproduced Brontëan narratives, despite the ambitiousness of its scope, has allowed a space to trace the subversive power of maternal bonds and matrilineal inheritance in the selected Victorian and neo-Victorian works. Through the porous relationships that are established amongst Brontëan characters, it is possible to recuperate, reconsider and update discourses around gender, race and class that have been obscured in the popular imaginary. In this regard, onscreen fiction and its contemporary use of this Brontëan imaginary further testifies to the constructive dialogues that can be initiated also thanks to this interconnectedness – and especially thanks to *Jane Eyre*’s and *Wuthering Heights*’ models of motherly absence, concerned with recovering the potentiality of the mothers’ story and the creation of (neo-)Victorian doubles that problematise stereotypes around motherhood, loss and the sociocultural forces that perpetuate these reductive views.

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1. The advent of the Renaissance "produced a cultural shift from an organic to a mechanical paradigm that legitimized the exploitation of women and nature" (Federici 2004, 13). Consequently, Silvia Federici argues, the construction of the nuclear family was "given a new importance as the key institution providing for the transmission of property and the reproduction of the workforce", the state intervening "in the supervision of sexuality, procreation, and family life" (2004, 88). In addition, in Britain, the institutionalisation of the Church of England "helped construct an ideology of femininity which was confined to the domestic sphere, and defined in relation to the power of men" (Aughterson 1995, 10). That is, the emergence of humanism, capitalism, Protestantism and colonialism all reinforced patriarchal gender divisions, the necessary construction of an ideal and oppressive view on motherhood and paved the way for the early stages of capitalism (Abate 2017, 17). In sum, "an ideal model of motherhood came to be developed as a political instrument" (Borham-Puyal 2020, 73).

2. The cultural representations of the Virgin Mary as the epitome of self-sacrificing motherhood and Mary Magdalen as the image of overpowering sexuality and perpetual repentance speak for the eternal dichotomy between saintly and sinful women perpetuated throughout history. For a more detailed analysis of these cultural and socio-political questions and their representation in late medieval and Renaissance literature, see my article "Redeeming *Lady Macbeth*: Gender and Religion in Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015)" (2023).

3. The term neo-Victorianism, first coined by Dana Shiller, includes works that "revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and 'new' Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century conventions" (Shiller 1997, 558). Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn emphasise that these texts are engaged in acts of "(re) interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (2010, 4). Thus, neo-Victorianism is deeply concerned with the reworking, re-imagining of Victorian stories, but as a mode of engaging with them from a more contemporary perspective. Accordingly, contemporary neo-Victorian fiction is interested in representations and interpretations of motherhood and the ideal of the nuclear family from a critical and feminist perspective (Cox 2015; Muller 2009; Pedro Mustieles 2023; Russell-Brown 2012).

4. Although the main focus of this analysis are *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* due to their cultural canonisation and multiple cultural reproductions, a brief discussion on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Villette* is relevant here so as to provide different models of representations of (present) motherhood in the Brontës.

5. Following Yvonne Griggs's terminology here (2016, 27–8).

6. In my article "Catherine Earnshaw Meets Katherine Lester: Revisioning the Brontë Body by Sustaining the Self in William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* (2016)" (2021), I maintain that the film uses a recognisable Brontëan language to delve deeper into discourses around the body that are characteristically Brontëan (Torgerson 2005). Hence, I have decided to include Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* here so as to provide an overview of the journey of the

Brontë's works in cultural memory and the possibilities to explore the potentiality of the original narratives from a contemporary perspective that is committed to establishing a postmodern dialogue between then and now.

7. It could be said that one is concerned with the journey of an orphaned governess and the other with how patriarchal, capitalist and colonialist oppression hinders this journey of self-development with its catastrophic consequences on the individual, this being better accomplished in the portrayal of the first generation of characters, Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff.

8. In fact, *Villette* has been considered, in many ways, "a revisioning of *Jane Eyre*" (Poore 2017, 186).

9. Bernadette Bertrandias maintains that "the bond connecting the subject to the mother is cryptically present in Charlotte Brontë's text in the guise of various Gothic figures included in pseudo-realistic fiction" (2001, 134). Moreover, the traumatic loss that vertebrates the novel from the beginning "is reported to occur to the heroine at the age of fourteen", but she is only allowed to grieve this loss when she loses Paul Emmanuel, her romantic interest, "since now the lost object is legitimately desirable" (2001, 134–7).

10. Joan Bellamy declares that "Helen, in retaining the money she earns, is acting illegally because a wife's earnings were the property of the husband; they legally belonged to Arthur. So not only has she stolen his son, she has stolen his money too" (2005, 256).

11. Amongst other instances of exoticisation, Rochester notes how her eyes "are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys 1997, 40). According to Karolina Tennholt, Rochester's cruel treatment of Antoinette can be explained by the fact that his "patriarchal and strict Victorian upbringing makes him obsessed with control and dominance" and, though "he is attracted to his wife, he does not want to fall in love with her since that would lead to a loss of control, dominance and power" (2005, 16). Preferring to "have authority and maintain his patriarchal power", he aims at colonising everything that he does not understand or control: Antoinette and her world (16).

12. In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly describes Catherine's "hair flying over her shoulders" when chronicling one of Catherine's "frenz[ies]", and the description accompanies a depiction of "her eyes flashing, the muscles of her neck and arms standing out prenatally" (Brontë 2000, 86). Later, she explains that Catherine's "thick, long hair had been partly removed at the beginning of her illness, and now she wore it simply combed in its natural tresses over her temples and neck" (Brontë 2000, 113). These descriptions associate Catherine's loose hair with her animation, an agitated liveliness that is temporarily subdued at certain moments during her illness. In a way, this may symbolise how Catherine's true self and desires are cut off in a physical sense, an event that speeds her journey of disassociation – in which, after some time, she cannot recognise herself in the mirror – culminating in her death (Brontë 2000 89).

13. There are two existing onscreen adaptations of the novel, by Brendan Maher (2006) and John Duigan (1993). Though a discussion of the maternal-filial relationships in the films would prove insightful here, it is preferable to focus on more

varied representations of maternal bonds in different Brontëan narratives so as to assess the already-mentioned cultural journey of these characters and to comply with the scope of the article.

14. Again, the study of these and other rewritings has been vastly carried out by Patsy Stoneman in *Brontë Transformations*, so I believe that briefly including *Ill Will* (2018) is more suitable to this article's concern with an up-to-date discussion of the selected Brontëan narratives' cultural journey.

15. Susan Meyer claims that "Nelly's speculations about Heathcliff's parentage offer him a fantasy of retribution for his unwilling colonization" (2003, 493).

16. Moreover, whilst *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals Antoinette Cosway as Bertha Mason, Heathcliff becomes William Lee in *Ill Will*. Re-naming stands as a way to (affectively) re-consider both characters, as well as the uncertainties these new liminal identities arise.

17. For a more in-depth analysis of matrilineal bonds in *Taboo*, see Bernabeu (2025, forthcoming).

Título:

De madres ausentes a madrastras malvadas: las Brontë, maternidad y neo-Victorianismo

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