Renegotiating Difference: Exclusionary Tactics and Variability in Victorian Disability

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Abstract
This essay deals with the “problem” of disability and exclusionary methods in the context of Victorian England. It engages with the idea that the Victorian female was essentially “disabled,” examining representations of the disabled individual in literature in terms of the female, the madwoman, and the physically disabled female in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, and Dinah Maria Craik’s *Olive*. The texts are compared and contrasted in terms of their variable representations of “disabled” figures, the implications of the issues and assumptions surrounding “normalcy,” in addition to examining their literary history. Various critics enter into the dialogue, as it is necessary to examine such works within the framework of gender theory and the postmodern perspective.

“Let me be a poet of cripples,
of hollow men and boys groping
to be whole, of girls limping toward
womanhood and women reaching back,
all slipping and falling toward the cavern
we carry within, our hidden void,
a place for each to become full, whole,
room of our own, space to grow in ways
unimaginable to the straight
and the narrow, the small and similar,
the poor, normal ones who do not know
their poverty. Look with care, look deep.
Know that you are a cripple too.
I sing for cripples; I sing for you.”
- Jim Ferris, “Poet of Cripples”

This paper begins by problematizing the societal ideal of the “normal.” Normalcy, as explored by many disability theorists, exists within a false system of difference. Forward thinkers, such as American poet Jim Ferris, have recognized the unattainable ideal of a non-disabled existence, for manifold reasons. First, “disability” as a designation, is based on a subjective set of indicators for the demarcation of certain individuals. In addition, Ferris reveals the

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1 Jim Ferris, *The Hospital Poems* (Charlotte: Main Street Rag, 2004), 12.
pervasive frailty and "disease" that cripples everyone's emotional, cognitive, or physical development with varying degrees of intensity and perceptibility. Although these deficiencies manifest themselves in various ways, there is no reason to distinguish only a portion of society, as this leads to harmful forms of exclusion. This paper will build on this idea that we operate according to flawed systems of difference that arise from indicators of disability.

Numerous critics have established constructive dialogue surrounding the implications of disability in a postmodern context. The commonality between disability theory and other forms of societal hierarchy in the Victorian novel provides an interesting framework with which these marginalized elements can be prioritized. Thus the intersections between gender and disability theory will be applied to both Dinah Craik's Olive and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. It is also important to contrast the variability of representations of the disabled subject in the Victorian novel. Thus this essay will investigate authorial context, which evidently plays a role in narrative formation. Postmodern readings engage the critic in the realm of literary history, while understanding the limitations of this type of study as well. The critic must note the relationship between the plurality of feminisms emerging from the postmodern turn and the plurality of representations within disability studies. Moreover, the postmodern agenda of "bringing the periphery to the centre" has crucial implications for the portrayal of madness or deformity, and managing the rhetorical structures concerning the marginalized Other. This essay will examine representations of disability in Victorian literature as it correlates with gender, the Other, postmodernity, and 19th century elitist discourse. Disability, as presented in many works of Victorian fiction, is a crucial area of study because of its intersections with gender theory and forms of othering, its universality and variance in representation, and its implications as an area of study in a postmodern context.

The disabled figure in literature is recognized as "the eternal Other, never 'one of us'". This is a similar position to that of the subjugated female in Victorian literature, in the case of gender-hierarchized narratives from this period. Notable critics have ascertained the commonality between varying forms of othering in these narratives, often dependent on cultural or social constructs. Elizabeth Donaldson examines the process of othering in Brontë's Jane Eyre, revealing how the hierarchies concerning gender, nationality, race, and madness all incorporate a discussion of physiognomy. Both Adele and Bertha are depicted as being "tainted" by their "matrilineal legacy," pointing to the prioritization of the paternal and the English, while blaming

"defect" on the maternal, and the cultural Other. Thus, Brontë weaves a narrative that warrants discussion of disability, while cultural constructs of gender and ethnocentrism are implicit elements in the text. Although Donaldson claims the othering of Bertha occurs on the basis of "ethnic identity and physical disorder," her dehumanization is a result of a devalued, disabled identity.

It is therefore significant, for both disabled communities and the modern female, when Ellen Samuels applies Judith Butler’s feminist arguments concerning the body, to the realm of disability theory. Here again these seemingly separate theoretical exchanges are unified, as Samuels reveals Butler’s inquiries that are appropriate for discussions of disability: “How does that materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms?” In Jane Eyre, Brontë rejects female “disability” with Jane’s voice in chapter 12: “It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.” Butler’s problematization of bodies “failing to qualify as the fully human,” appears reminiscent of Jane’s critique of female subjugation. The attentive reader must also note the correlation between this and Wendy Sanford’s article, “Body Image.” For example, Sanford declares, “the more we vary from the norm, the less families, friends, and physicians expect or allow us to be sexual.” Just as womanhood threatens “ability,” so too does disability present a certain set of societal expectations and limitations on the disabled body. The implications are extensive if one replaces the word “sex” with “body” in Jane’s quote, thus encouraging the reader to reject what “custom has pronounced necessary for their [body]” (emphasis added).

Both the dehumanization of the female and the dehumanization of the disabled body in Victorian literature occur with unmistakable similarity. It is important here to recognize the implications of disassociating the “disabled” female from her sex, or her capacity for sexuality. The presentation of the subjugated female in the Victorian era often appears reminiscent of Lady Macbeth’s desire to be “unsexed.” In Chapter 21 of Jane Eyre, Mrs. Reed’s perspective on Jane’s rebellion as a child not only dehumanizes, but de-sexes her: “I

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7 Samuels, “Critical Divides,” 60.
felt fear, as if an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice.”11 It appears that Jane’s attempts at agency as a child result in her being perceived as animalistic and masculine, suggesting that agency is not within the “natural” capacities of the female. Similarly in Olive, Dinah Craik figures Angus Rothesay’s adverse reaction to his daughter Olive as a result of an aversion to both her deformity and her gender. Upon first meeting Olive, it is clear that Angus is appalled by her deformity when he asks, “Is that— that miserable creature—our daughter, Olive Rothesay?”12 However, he later declares to Mrs. Gwynne, “‘You are more fortunate than I,’ he said; ‘my marriage has only bestowed on me a daughter,'”13 suggesting that his disappointment is two-fold, resulting from Olive’s status as both disabled and female.

Although Dinah Craik did not receive the accolades that Jane Eyre had warranted only three years prior (published in 1847), Olive became a powerful novel in its own right. The strength of Craik’s novel emerges as she problematizes the designations of disability that the reader is quick to apply to Olive. The variability in representations of disability in Victorian literature provides ample room for role-reversals and critiques of normative behavior. Olive’s narrative and character development utilizes the ambiguity of the “permeable”14 boundary between disability and normalcy. Thus, the critic must examine Sybilla and Angus and their insufficiencies as parents, and the role-reversal between Olive and her mother. The novel’s outset features Olive’s obvious dependence on her caretaker Elspie, and the beginnings of Sybilla’s feeble attempts at maternity. The narrator refers to “her [Olive’s] misguided parents,”5 as they are ignorant of their child’s wonderfully angelic qualities. In addition to Sybilla’s lack of agency and overall incompetence, Craik, a stern supporter of temperance, critiques Angus’s use of alcohol. She contrasts Olive’s physical disability with Captain Rothesay’s compromised cognitive state. Olive contemplates his condition: “Was her father mad? Alas! There is a madness worse than disease, a voluntary madness,”16 providing the reader with an example of alcoholism as a temporary form of disability. In addition, the hierarchized assumptions of the normalcy-disabled binary are subverted when the narrator reveals, “the angel in the daughter’s soul was stronger than the demon in her father’s.”17 Thus, despite Angus’s physical and mental proficiency, he is critiqued on the basis of an emotional deficiency. The reader must examine his

11 Brontë, Jane Eyre, 323.
12 Dinah Maria Craik, Olive (London, 1875; Project Gutenberg, 2007), 21.
13 Craik, Olive, 78.
15 Craik, Olive, 25.
16 Craik, Olive, 67.
17 Craik, Olive, 68.
FOOTNOTES

precarious emotionality when he is drunk, as well as his emotional poverty as father figure.

As stated earlier, the de-sexualized disabled figure is a common representative strategy in Victorian England, however there is an essential division between the disability of Olive, and the “madness” of Bertha in Jane Eyre. Olive is masculinized by her physical irregularity and her function outside the domestic sphere. In Chapter 21 of Olive, her beginnings as an artist are coupled with Vanbrugh’s commentary about her new de-sexed identity: “Vanbrugh had said truly, that genius is of no sex; and he had said likewise truly, that no woman can be an artist.”

Olive’s identity can be thus contrasted with Bertha’s hyper-sexualized existence in Jane Eyre, illustrating the universality and variability across representations of disability. Donaldson reveals, “the gestation of her [Bertha’s] madness is specifically linked to her drinking and to her sexual appetites—failures of the will, not the body, in Rochester’s opinion.” Clearly there is a semblance between Bertha’s representation in Jane Eyre, and Captain Rothesay’s representation in Olive, but it is the sexualized identity that differs in the case of Bertha. This poses an interesting question for the critic: Why is failure of the will associated specifically with Bertha’s disability? As alluded to earlier, Bertha’s identity as disabled is coupled with her existence as the racialized Other, thus excluding her from the dominant discourse of Victorian society. Thus, even though “Bertha’s disabling mental illness is transferred to the body of her husband as physical impairment and blindness” it is only Rochester’s disability that is approached with the rhetoric of pity. In the case of Jane’s introduction to her, Bertha’s dehumanized identity is subjected to the gaze of the “normal” characters: “the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet.” In this instance it is clear that the gaze is not to be reciprocated, as Mrs. Poole indicates: “Ah, sir, she sees you!” exclaimed Grace: ‘you’d better not stay.” Here the reader must note a dualistic approach to difference in the narrative, between the representation of disability as either “Monster” or “Victim.” Rather than being subjected to the critical gaze of the dominant elite, “Jane’s narrative encourages readers not to stare but to gaze with pity upon Rochester’s newly disabled body.” Thus Bertha represents Monster, while Rochester is Victim: a dichotomy that evokes aforementioned intersecting theoretical positions of gender and disability.

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18 Craik, Olive, 115.
21 Brontë, Jane Eyre, 381.
22 Brontë, Jane Eyre, 381.
23 Beatson, Disability, 2.
Postmodernity's concern with "bringing the periphery to the centre" necessitates the critical examination of the marginalized aspects of Victorian texts. Postmodern feminism introduced efforts to problematize the existing culturally constructed forms of gender, a process mirrored by the impairment-disability divide, as theorized by Lennard Davis. Donaldson notices this relationship: "Like Gayle Rubin's configuration of the sex-gender system—the process by which biological sex is transformed into cultural gender—the impairment-disability system is the process by which biological impairment is transformed into cultural disability (1975)."25 Using this lens of "cultural disability" to examine Victorian texts, the reader can reinterpret characters like Olive and Bertha Mason, despite the fact that "congenital physical impairment is often characterized by concomitant reductive assumptions about biological bodies."26 Antonia Losano's, "The Woman Painter in Victorian Literature," provides new methods of privileging the periphery. Losano discusses the "Jane-o-centric"27 readings of Jane Eyre, insisting, "Even Bertha herself is often read as almost not 'real'"—that is, she is read allegorically as Jane's alter ego, her angry double.28 If Bertha Mason exists simply as a "double," Victorian understandings of the universality of disability are merely a method by which to gain a better view of the "center." The critic must renegotiate the narrative space created for disabled characters to function and be prioritized, and thus critical response must engage with these figures by revealing their existence as subalterns.

In addition to exposing systemic, narrative-based othering, the postmodern disability theorist must recognize the exclusionary tactics of the discourse of normalcy. Such exclusion results in a homogeneity based mostly on visual preference: "because disability can be a more evident signifier even than the color of one's skin, it becomes a visual means by which to define normalcy."29 In her examination of the domestic realist novel, Losano indicates, "the novel becomes a way of collapsing social heterogeneity into homogeneity."30 Although she refers to these homogenizing elements as the pressures to conform to female dependency, patriarchal structures, and domesticity, the strictures of normalcy must also be added to the list. Cindy LaCom declares, "interstitial (in-between) spaces can foster those moments of recognition and of connectedness essential to the creation of a heterogeneous nation (because difference itself is temporal and co-

28 Losano, Woman Painter, 254.
30 Losano, Woman Painter, 240.
exists with similarity)."31 In negotiations of difference, the postmodern critic relies on such moments of recognition from which to base any attempts at societal or literary heterogeneity. It is essential that the readers of such novels recognize for themselves the characters that function within and without the given social and cultural strictures of normalcy, and thus recognize themselves in both protagonist and subaltern.

Such understandings of the Other can best function within the framework of personal connectivity. In the case of Charlotte Brontë, it is useful to examine Jane Eyre from the perspective of literary history. Although postmodernism cautions against essentialist generalizations based on historical context, Paul Marchbanks has uncovered useful contextual details surrounding the home life of the Brontë sisters. Charlotte’s brother, “A despondent and self-destructive Branwell,”32 clearly exposed her at a young age to the implications of living alongside a “disordered mind.”33 Later in life, according to the historical data Marchbanks investigates, Branwell was given to drinking and debauchery34, aspects that characterize Bertha Mason’s descent into madness. There is an obvious correlation between the historical reality of a mentally unstable sibling and Bronte’s literary representation of madness. Moreover, despite “constriction in this newly industrialized society’s willingness to devote long hours to caring for those with illnesses and disabilities,”35 both Branwell and Bertha find themselves provided for within the confines of the family home. Due to the variability of representations of disability, it is intriguing that “[Bertha’s] habits exacerbate her dysfunction in the same way that Branwell’s behavior creates his, and her condition presents Rochester with the same quandary that faced Charlotte: how does one responsibly supervise the differently functioning mind in one’s midst?”36 Without formulating too many speculative assumptions based on literary history, it remains clear that personal connectivity to the Other becomes an outlet for establishing heterogeneity.

Examinations of disability prove valuable in discussions of Olive, Jane Eyre, and other Victorian texts due to the important ways these conversations connect with gender theory, the variability of the disabled figure, and the postmodern interest in the formation of heterogeneity and giving a voice to the margins. Both Craik and Brontë deal with negotiations of difference, managing the divisions between patriarchy and domesticity; elitism and inclusivity; the

31 LaCom, “Revising The Subject,” 140.
33 Marchbanks, “Costly Morality,” 55.
variable and the homogeneous. Victorian sensibilities are manifest in the texts examined, however these female authors largely dismiss the ingrained elements of hierarchy and culturally constructed ideology. Their resistance to systemic patriarchy, both as successful independent women and via ideological defiance in their novels, is limited by the lack of agency given to the racialized Other, as in the case of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, and the desexualized representation of the disabled female, as seen in *Olive*. However, both authors problematize many of the societal constructs that lead to such depictions, while their narratives were clearly restricted by the male dominated field of publication. The observant reader must ascertain both the implicit and explicit critiques in these narratives. It is this amalgamation of transparency and ambiguity that reveals the multiplicity of human frailties, appropriately found within these examinations of disability.
Works Cited


