

Confined and Classified: Female Madness and Institutional Power in *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*

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Abstract— Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60) represent female madness through spaces of confinement and systems of institutional authority. Although the novels differ in genre and narrative technique, both question the authority through which women are classified as mentally unstable and subsequently deprived of autonomy. This article examines Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* to argue that female madness is represented not merely as an individual psychological condition but as a category produced and reinforced through patriarchal, domestic, legal, and medical structures. In Brontë's novel, Bertha's confinement in a concealed room on the third floor of Thornfield removes her from social visibility and limits her narrative presence, while Rochester's account of her condition becomes the dominant explanation of her identity. Collins develops the relationship between madness and institutional power more explicitly through the asylum, where Anne Catherick is associated with insanity and Laura Fairlie is subsequently confined under Anne's identity. This substitution exposes the vulnerability of institutional classification and demonstrates how the designation of madness can become an instrument for controlling female identity and autonomy. Drawing on feminist literary criticism, Foucauldian approaches to madness and disciplinary power, and historical perspectives on Victorian confinement, this article compares the two novels to examine how institutional and patriarchal authority regulate women's bodies, identities, mobility, and testimony. It argues that confinement and classification operate as interconnected mechanisms of power: the classification of women as mentally unstable legitimizes their confinement, while confinement further undermines their ability to define and defend their own identities. Ultimately, both novels expose the precarious relationship between female identity, narrative authority, and institutional power in Victorian culture.



Keywords— female madness, confinement, institutional power, Victorian literature, *Jane Eyre*, *The Woman in White*, patriarchy, asylum, Bertha Mason, Anne Catherick

I. INTRODUCTION

Victorian literature frequently connects female madness with social control, confinement, and patriarchal authority. Women considered mentally unstable could be removed from ordinary social life and placed under institutional or familial control. Giordano notes the “risk of being wrongly considered insane and then confined to a madhouse,” demonstrating how the classification of female insanity could become a mechanism of social control.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60) provide significant examples of this relationship. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is confined at Thornfield and represented largely through the accounts of others. Oyeboode observes that “Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic, is rendered voiceless,” linking her lack of narrative authority to her representation as mentally ill (140). Rochester similarly keeps her “locked

away from human intercourse” and conceals her presence from the outside world (140).

In *The Woman in White*, Collins develops this relationship through Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie. Anne is associated with asylum confinement, while Laura is subsequently confined under Anne’s identity. Giordano puts it like this:

Anne was affected by a form of intellectual impairment, probably idiocy, a condition which at the author’s time was frequently treated with the confinement to a madhouse while Laura is the victim of a conspiracy and misdiagnosed as insane thanks to the power and influence of her husband (Giordano 174).

This passage demonstrates how institutional authority can be manipulated to deprive a woman of her freedom and identity.

This article therefore focuses specifically on the relationship between classification and confinement. It argues that the designation of women as mentally unstable does not merely describe their psychological condition but can function as a mechanism of institutional and patriarchal control. Bertha’s domestic confinement and Anne’s and Laura’s institutional confinement reveal different forms of the same process: once female identity is defined by external authority, women’s mobility, testimony, and autonomy become vulnerable to control. The comparison ultimately demonstrates how *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* question the authority of those who claim the power to define female sanity and identity.

II. FEMALE MADNESS AND VICTORIAN INSTITUTIONAL POWER

The Victorian representation of female madness is closely connected with questions of confinement, social exclusion, and institutional authority. Madness is not simply presented as an individual psychological condition; its meaning is also shaped by the structures that classify, isolate, and regulate those considered mentally unstable. Michel Foucault’s analysis of confinement provides a useful theoretical framework for examining this process. He argues that confinement places madness within a “world of exclusion” and functions to remove from the social order what is perceived as having no legitimate place within it (Foucault 116). Thus, confinement is not merely a response to madness but a practice through which madness becomes socially defined and controlled. Foucault further observes that confinement “suppressed” madness by reducing it to what he describes as the “empty negativity of reason” (116). This relationship between classification, exclusion, and

confinement is particularly relevant to the representation of women in *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*.

Feminist criticism extends this understanding by examining confinement as a gendered experience. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify recurring “images of enclosure and escape” in nineteenth-century women’s writing and argue that women writers were “literally and figuratively confined” by the social conditions surrounding female authorship (Gilbert and Gubar xvii). Their interpretation of *Jane Eyre* connects Jane’s movement toward independence with different forms of oppression, including “madness (at Thornfield)” (339). The figure of Bertha Mason is therefore significant not simply because she is labelled mad but because her confinement at Thornfield represents the physical manifestation of a broader system that restricts female autonomy.

Bertha’s representation also demonstrates the relationship between madness and narrative authority. Femi Oyeboode argues that in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha “is rendered voiceless,” suggesting that her absence of an independent narrative voice is central to her construction as mentally ill (Oyeboode 140). He further notes that “Bertha did not utter any intelligible speech” in Brontë’s novel. It took Jean Rhys’s (1966) novel *The Wide Sargasso Sea* to give her voice” (144). Bertha’s confinement therefore operates at both physical and narrative levels: she is removed from the social world and simultaneously denied the authority to explain herself.

This relationship between madness and institutional control becomes more explicit in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*. Giordano identifies the possibility of women being “wrongly considered insane” and subsequently confined, linking institutional treatment of madness with social control (173). His discussion of Collins’s novel further connects Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie with confinement and identifies Laura as being wrongly treated as insane through the manipulation of her identity. Unlike Bertha’s concealed domestic confinement, Anne and Laura become connected with the formal asylum, where institutional classification carries legal and social consequences.

Taken together, these perspectives establish the theoretical foundation for this study. Foucault explains how confinement transforms madness into an object of social exclusion; Gilbert and Gubar reveal the gendered significance of enclosure; Oyeboode demonstrates how Bertha’s confinement is accompanied by the loss of narrative voice; and Giordano illustrates the connection between wrongful confinement and institutional control in *The Woman in White*. The present study builds on these approaches by focusing specifically on the relationship

between classification and confinement. It examines how the designation of women as mad enables their removal from ordinary social life and weakens their authority over their own bodies, identities, and testimony.

III. BERTHA MASON: MADNESS AND DOMESTIC CONFINEMENT IN *JANE EYRE*

Bertha Mason is introduced not as an independent speaking subject but as a secret contained within Thornfield Hall. Her first major function in the novel is spatial: she occupies an upper room that most inhabitants of the house do not enter. Before Jane discovers her, Bertha is experienced indirectly through strange laughter, unexplained movements, and disturbances within the supposedly ordered domestic space. The structure of this revelation is significant because Bertha's identity is withheld from both Jane and the reader, while the explanation of her condition is eventually supplied primarily by Rochester. This creates an unequal distribution of narrative authority: Bertha is physically present but narratively marginalized, whereas Rochester possesses the social and linguistic authority necessary to explain her history.

When Rochester finally reveals Bertha's identity, he explicitly classifies her as mentally ill: "Bertha Mason is mad" (Brontë, 210). He subsequently explains her condition through hereditary language, claiming that her family has a history of "idiots and maniacs" (Brontë, 210). This explanation appears to provide a medical justification for her confinement, but its reliability is complicated by Rochester's personal involvement. He is not a detached medical observer; he is Bertha's husband, the person responsible for her confinement, and the man whose desired marriage to Jane depends upon concealing Bertha's existence. His description therefore performs more than a diagnostic function. By defining Bertha as incurably insane, Rochester presents her confinement as necessary and legitimizes his own authority over her.

The relationship between classification and confinement becomes clearer in Rochester's description of Bertha as the "mysterious lunatic kept there under watch and ward" (210). The language reduces Bertha's identity to a category of mental disorder while simultaneously emphasizing surveillance. She is not merely confined; she is watched and controlled. Her domestic confinement consequently assumes functions associated with institutional authority. Although Thornfield is a private household rather than a public asylum, Rochester creates a space in which Bertha can be isolated from ordinary social interaction and placed under continuous supervision. Foucault's analysis of confinement is relevant here because it emphasizes the

relationship between madness and exclusion from the social world. In Bertha's case, the domestic space itself becomes an instrument of exclusion.

The novel's description of Bertha's body further reinforces her classification as abnormal. When Jane encounters her, she struggles to identify her and her dilemma is expressed as:

whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face." she is, while Bertha moves and "growled like some strange wild animal (Brontë 211).

The language is significant because Bertha's body is transformed into visible evidence of her supposed madness. She is described through images of savagery, animality, and monstrosity rather than through her own account of herself. This representation corresponds with Oyeboade's observation that "The association of the idea of madness with savagery and the less than human is clear. Thus, madness can be either comical or terrifying" (Oyeboade 141). The description of Bertha as animalistic therefore does not merely establish her as frightening; it demonstrates how madness is narratively constructed through the denial of ordinary human identity. Her body becomes an object to be observed and interpreted rather than a subject capable of defining itself. Thus, the classification of Bertha operates not only through Rochester's verbal diagnosis but also through the narrative construction of her body as threatening and other.

The gendered significance of Bertha's confinement becomes clearer when her position is considered alongside Jane's experience of restriction. Jane repeatedly encounters spaces and structures that limit her freedom, but she gradually develops the ability to resist and leave them. Bertha, by contrast, remains confined within Thornfield and has no comparable control over her circumstances. Gilbert and Gubar place "madness (at Thornfield)" within the larger pattern of female oppression represented in the novel, connecting it with the "oppression" and "starvation" experienced by Jane at earlier stages of her life (339). Their interpretation helps illuminate the contrast between the two women, but Brontë's text makes the distinction particularly stark: while Jane can eventually escape the spaces that restrict her, Bertha remains physically contained by Rochester's authority. Her position as Rochester's wife does not provide her with greater autonomy; instead, marriage becomes another structure through which her body and identity are controlled. Bertha's confinement thus

represents an extreme form of the restrictions that the novel associates with female dependence, transforming the domestic space of Thornfield into a site where patriarchal authority is enforced through physical isolation.

Bertha's representation is also connected with sexuality and colonial difference. Rochester's account emphasizes her supposed sexual and moral disorder, presenting her behavior as evidence of a deeper degeneracy. At the same time, Bertha's Creole identity distinguishes her from the English social environment into which Rochester brings her. Oyeboode notes that her foreignness contributes to her alienation within the novel and observes that feminist readings have connected her representation with the patriarchal arrangements of nineteenth-century English society. Bertha's characterization therefore brings together gender, sexuality, colonial difference, and madness. Her confinement functions as a means of containing these perceived forms of disorder within the domestic space of Thornfield.

Yet Bertha is not entirely passive. Her actions repeatedly disrupt the domestic order that Rochester attempts to establish. She tears Jane's wedding veil, enters Rochester's room, attacks Richard Mason, and eventually sets Thornfield on fire. These actions cannot be treated only as symptoms of madness because they also perform an important narrative function: they expose the secret upon which Rochester's proposed marriage to Jane depends. Bertha's physical resistance becomes the means through which the concealed truth repeatedly returns to the surface.

The destruction of Thornfield therefore intensifies the paradox at the centre of Bertha's representation. Her classification as mad makes her vulnerable to confinement, yet the confined woman becomes the force that repeatedly disrupts the patriarchal order that confines her. Her final act of setting the house on fire destroys the physical space in which Rochester has hidden her and maintained his authority. Her death subsequently removes her from the narrative, but not before her actions have exposed the deception surrounding Rochester's marriage. The destruction of Thornfield thus marks the collapse of the domestic structure that had enabled Bertha's confinement and Rochester's concealment of his first marriage.

Bertha's representation consequently demonstrates that madness and confinement are mutually reinforcing mechanisms of control. Rochester's classification of Bertha legitimizes her physical isolation, while that isolation contributes to the loss of her social and narrative identity. Yet Brontë simultaneously gives the confined woman disruptive physical agency. Bertha cannot control the narrative through speech, but she can challenge the order imposed upon her through action. Her confinement

therefore produces both her marginalization and her disruptive power, making her central to the novel's examination of female identity, patriarchal authority, and the unstable boundary between madness and resistance.

IV. ANNE CATHERICK AND THE ASYLUM IN *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

While *Jane Eyre* locates female confinement largely within the domestic sphere, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* makes institutional confinement central to its plot. Anne Catherick's first appearance immediately establishes a connection between female vulnerability, escape, and the asylum. When Walter Hartright encounters her on the road, she has escaped from an institution, yet his immediate response is not to assume that she is insane. After learning that she has been confined, he reflects: "But the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum ... never occurred to me, in connection with her" (Collins 22). Hartright's response is significant because it separates Anne's observable behavior from the institutional label attached to her. The asylum suggests insanity to society, but Hartright's direct encounter with Anne produces uncertainty rather than confirmation.

This uncertainty establishes one of Collins's central concerns: the authority to classify a woman as insane. Hartright has seen Anne as an individual before learning that she has been an asylum inmate, and the discovery consequently changes the framework through which her behavior is interpreted. The institution possesses an authority that can potentially override personal observation. Collins therefore introduces the asylum not simply as a place where madness is treated but as a structure capable of producing an authoritative identity for the person confined within it. Giordano similarly identifies the novel's concern with "misdiagnosis and wrong confinement" and connects this concern with questions of gender and social control.

The relationship between institutional authority and confinement becomes even more significant when Anne's history is considered alongside Laura Fairlie's fate. Giordano notes that Anne and Laura are both confined to a private asylum at different points in the narrative and "Laura is the victim of a conspiracy and misdiagnosed as insane" through Sir Percival Glyde's power and influence (Giordano 174). Collins thus moves beyond the representation of a woman whose mental condition may be uncertain to expose the possibility that the machinery of confinement can be deliberately manipulated. Anne's identity becomes the instrument through which Laura can be confined.

The asylum consequently becomes a space where external signs can override personal testimony. Laura insists upon

her own identity, yet the institution receives her as Anne Catherick. The problem is therefore not simply whether Laura is sane or insane; it is whether the institution recognizes her as the person she claims to be. Her confinement demonstrates that a woman's testimony may become powerless once an institutional classification has been established. In this respect, Collins makes identity itself vulnerable to institutional authority.

Foucault's account of the asylum helps clarify the significance of this process. He describes the modern asylum as "a juridical space where one is accused, judged, and condemned", arguing that madness remains subject to judgment even within an apparently medical institution (Foucault 269). This formulation is particularly relevant to Laura's confinement because the asylum does not simply observe her mental state. It effectively determines the meaning of her behavior and places her within a predetermined category. Foucault further emphasizes the authority of the medical figure, noting that the physician becomes responsible for admission and that a medical certificate becomes central to confinement. Collins's narrative exposes the danger inherent in such authority when the information on which classification depends has itself been manipulated.

The contrast between Anne and Laura is therefore central to Collins's critique. Anne is presented as psychologically vulnerable and associated with institutional confinement, whereas Laura is a woman who is deliberately made to occupy Anne's institutional identity. The two cases demonstrate that the asylum does not necessarily distinguish reliably between actual mental illness and imposed identity. Giordano similarly emphasizes that Anne's confinement and Laura's wrongful confinement arise from the interests and influence of Sir Percival Glyde.

Collins consequently transforms the asylum from a background institution into an instrument of narrative and social power. Anne's escape initially raises the possibility that institutional classification may be mistaken; Laura's subsequent confinement demonstrates that it can also be exploited. The asylum becomes a place where identity is determined externally, and where the testimony of the confined woman can be rendered ineffective by the authority of medical, legal, and patriarchal structures.

This produces an important parallel with Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha is confined within Thornfield and Rochester controls the dominant explanation of her condition; Laura is confined within the asylum and the institution accepts an identity imposed upon her. The mechanisms differ, but the underlying structure is similar: the woman's own identity becomes subordinate to an authoritative classification imposed by others. In Brontë,

domestic authority produces confinement; in Collins, institutional authority formalizes and legitimizes it. Both novels therefore expose the vulnerability of female identity when male and institutional power possesses the authority to define who a woman is and whether she is considered sane.

V. CLASSIFICATION, IDENTITY, AND THE POWER TO DEFINE MADNESS

The comparison between Bertha Mason and Laura Fairlie reveals that the power to define madness is closely connected to the power to define identity. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's condition is interpreted largely through Rochester's account, whereas *The Woman in White* makes the instability of such classification central to its plot. Collins complicates the association between institutional confinement and actual mental illness through Anne Catherick, whose behavior after escaping from the asylum is frequently purposeful and intelligible. A critical study of the novel observes that Anne "appears quite sane throughout the novel" and her escape is "portrayed as an act of self-preservation." (Sherman 66) Her attempts to locate Laura, warn her about Sir Percival Glyde, and investigate her family circumstances suggest deliberate action rather than an absence of reason. Collins therefore creates a gap between Anne's institutional classification and the behavior witnessed outside the institution.

This gap becomes more significant when Anne's identity is transferred to Laura. Laura Fairlie is not confined because her own behavior has independently established her as mentally ill; she is confined because she is made to occupy Anne Catherick's identity. The physical resemblance between the two women makes the deception possible, but Collins uses their resemblance to expose the weakness of a system that depends upon external forms of identification. Once Laura is accepted as Anne, her own declaration of identity loses authority. Giordano accordingly describes Laura as being "misdiagnosed as insane" through Sir Percival Glyde's power and influence (174).

The episode demonstrates that institutional classification can become more powerful than individual testimony. Laura knows that she is Lady Glyde, yet the people responsible for her confinement interpret her claim according to the identity already assigned to her. Her assertion of self therefore becomes evidence against her. Instead of correcting the mistaken classification, her speech is absorbed into it: because she is considered Anne, her insistence that she is Laura can be interpreted as proof that she is incapable of recognizing her own identity. Collins thus exposes a circular logic in which the classification produces the very evidence used to sustain it.

The distinction between Anne and Laura is crucial to this process. Anne has actually been confined and carries the institutional identity of a woman regarded as mentally unstable, while Laura is subsequently confined under Anne's name despite not being mentally ill. The two cases demonstrate that institutional classification does not necessarily correspond to an individual's actual psychological condition. The critical discussion of Anne emphasizes precisely this contradiction, noting that her actions following her escape are largely rational and directed toward protecting herself and Laura. Collins consequently separates the categories of madness, behavior, and institutional identity, showing that they cannot automatically be treated as equivalent.

This instability also reveals the connection between patriarchal authority and medical classification. Laura's confinement is made possible through Sir Percival's manipulation of the circumstances surrounding her identity. Giordano connects the wrongful confinement of Laura with Sir Percival's control and identifies the episode as part of the novel's broader concern with "misdiagnosis and wrong confinement" (Giordano 174). The asylum therefore does not operate independently of the social structures surrounding it. Its authority can be activated by information supplied and manipulated by those who possess greater social and legal power.

Collins's narrative structure strengthens this critique of authority. Rather than providing one uncontested account of events, *The Woman in White* reconstructs its story through different narrators, testimonies, documents, and retrospective accounts. The reader must therefore evaluate competing versions of reality. This narrative method parallels the novel's treatment of institutional classification: just as the reader must determine which account can be trusted, the characters must confront the question of whose account of identity should be accepted. Truth is not automatically guaranteed by the authority of the person or institution presenting it.

Laura's case is particularly revealing because she is able to speak but cannot make her speech authoritative. This distinguishes her situation from Bertha Mason's in *Jane Eyre*. Bertha is largely excluded from the narrative and has little opportunity to establish her own account, whereas Laura is physically present and capable of asserting her identity, yet the institutional framework prevents that assertion from being accepted. Bertha's confinement therefore operates through silencing, while Laura's operates through the discrediting of speech. In both cases, however, male authority determines how the woman is understood.

The comparison demonstrates that classification has consequences beyond diagnosis. Once a woman is placed

within the category of madness, her behavior, speech, and identity can all be interpreted through that category. Anne's rational actions do not automatically overturn her institutional reputation, while Laura's rational insistence upon her identity is treated as evidence of insanity. The novel therefore reveals the circular relationship between classification and interpretation: the label determines how subsequent behavior is read.

Thus, *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* present different forms of classificatory power. Brontë emphasizes the domestic control through which Rochester confines and represents Bertha, while Collins exposes the medical, legal, and documentary mechanisms through which Laura can be transformed into Anne. Yet both novels demonstrate that women become particularly vulnerable when others possess the authority to determine the meaning of their bodies, behavior, and identities. Madness is consequently represented not only as a psychological condition but also as a social classification whose effects depend upon who has the power to impose and sustain it.

VI. CONCLUSION

Jane Eyre and *The Woman in White* represent female madness as a condition shaped not only by individual behavior but also by structures of patriarchal and institutional authority. Bertha Mason's domestic confinement and Anne Catherick's asylum experience reveals how women can be removed from social visibility and defined through the interpretations of others, while Laura Fairlie's wrongful confinement demonstrates how institutional classification can override individual identity and testimony. Although Brontë emphasizes domestic and marital control and Collins foregrounds medical and institutional power, both novels expose the vulnerability of women when others possess the authority to define their sanity and identity. Ultimately, the novels challenge the stability of madness as a category and present confinement as a powerful means of regulating female bodies, voices, and identities.

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