'Dead Paper': The Deconstruction of Patriarchy by Nineteenth-Century Women Writers

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This article examines the written word as a form of liberation in the nineteenth century, centring on two artefacts which demonstrate attempts to prevent female expression and self-representation: the correspondence of Charlotte Brontë and Robert Southey in 1837, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story The Yellow Wallpaper *in 1892. I begin by laying out pre-existing social attitudes towards women and the marked increase of the diagnosis of hysteria and confinement as a result of perceived female insanity. This brought about practices such as the rest cure, which was mainly used for the treatment of nervous disorders. Gilman, who herself underwent this treatment, uses the suffering of the narrator of* The Yellow Wallpaper *to demonstrate the psychological damage she experienced. Both artefacts highlight the patriarchal belief that women were inherently inferior to men, and perpetuate the idea that writing ought to be an exclusively male pursuit – or, at best, only for women to do in private. I compare themes of female duty, imprisonment, and infantilization in both artefacts. Ultimately, I argue that Brontë's second letter to Southey and the ending of Gilman's short story emerge as triumphs within patriarchal prisons.*

In December of 1836, twenty year old Charlotte Brontë wrote to Robert Southey, then Poet Laureate, expressing her wish to pursue a career in poetry and asking for his advice.[1] A few months later, Southey wrote back. If Brontë had hoped for some encouragement, this was certainly not what she received – 'Literature cannot be the proper business of a woman's life,' he declared, 'and it ought not to be.'[2] Half a century later, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a single mother living in California, penned a semi-autobiographical short story about an unnamed woman's descent into madness after she is forbidden from writing by her physician husband, John. It is entitled *The Yellow Wallpaper*, for the repulsive and fascinating paper on the walls of the room in which the narrator, suffering from a postnatal 'temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency', is confined.[3] Both Southey's letter and Gilman's story demonstrate how the written word was denied as a means of expression and self-representation for women. Inhibited by her husband, Gilman's narrator must write covertly, which has a detrimental psychological impact. Likewise, Southey implores Brontë to abandon her public ambitions and view writing as an exclusively personal outlet. But, in the end, both Brontë and Gilman find their way to emancipation through the written word. In what follows, I will explore the ways in which patriarchy was constructed in the nineteenth century – and, how these two writers would begin to tear it down.

[1] Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Brontë (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1870), p.162.

[2] Robert Southey, 'Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë, 12 March 1837', in *The letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a selection of letters by family and friends*, *Vol.1: 1829-1847*, ed. by Margaret Smith, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.167-8.

[3] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, First Avenue Classics (North Minneapolis, Minnesota: Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., 2017 [first published 1892]), p.5.

At the crux of my argument is paper, the medium on which the written word is formulated and passed on. At the start of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrative takes the form of a journal of sorts, which the narrator describes as 'dead paper', a place where she is able to relieve her mind with thoughts she would not say 'to a living soul.'[4] However, as her sanity deteriorates, any semblance of narrative structure gives way to a chaotic stream of consciousness. That she perceives the paper on which she writes to be 'dead' is indicative of how little worth she attributes to her own words and, thus, her *self*. However, throughout the course of the story, the wallpaper becomes an extension of the narrator's psyche; she studies it obsessively and relentlessly. The increasingly invasive wallpaper is a manifestation of her yearning for the creative freedom which has been denied her, under the guise of medical treatment. Diane Price Herndl's theory of the relationship between hysteria and feminist writing is central to my thesis. Herndl posits that, in writing only on 'dead paper', the language of the narrator 'becomes less governed by existence in the world outside the self and more an internal, dyadic construction.'[5] Throughout the story, we are able to witness her self-identity become increasingly unstable, until it dislocates entirely and attaches itself to a female shadow she believes she sees behind the wallpaper – and, it is at precisely this moment that she is liberated. Herndl argues that 'hysteria can be understood as a woman's response to a system in which she is expected to remain silent, a system in which her subjectivity is continually denied, kept invisible.'[6] Ultimately, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a depiction of a prisoner of patriarchy. The only way she finds to escape its confines is to rip back the metaphorical wallpaper and reclaim her identity as her own, thereby freeing the silenced woman within.

Nineteenth-century patriarchy was primarily underpinned by a medically-validated belief system that the physiology of women rendered them emotionally unstable and thereby inherently inferior. In order to understand why it became acceptable to shut away a woman suffering from depression, let us first deconstruct the concept of hysteria, which entered popular consciousness around the late eighteenth century. Derived from the Greek *hystera*, for 'womb', and linked to the idea that vapours would rise from reproductive organs and disturb a woman's mental state, the condition was intrinsically gendered from its conception. Heather Meek writes that hysteria was 'notoriously difficult to define,' and therefore 'metaphors of wandering wombs, corrupt menstrual blood, and diseased uteri lingered.'[7] Doctors would insist on using the term exclusively for female patients, and generally agreed on 'women's inherent hysterical inclinations and deficient physiology.'[8] Gilbert and Gubar, in their influential volume *The Madwoman in the Attic*, have suggested that its gendered associations are due more to the fact that 'hysteria did occur mainly among women' than to the etymology of the word itself.[9] This is, frankly, an oversimplification; it is more so the case that the name and associations of 'hysteria'

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[4] Ibid., p.5.
[5] Diane Price Herndl, 'The Writing Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna O., and "Hysterical" Writing', in *NWSA Journal*, 1.1 (1988), p.71.
[6] Ibid., p.53.
[7] Heather Meek, 'Medical Discourse, Women's Writing, and the "perplexing Form" of Eighteenth-Century Hysteria', in *Early Modern Women*, 11.1 (2016), p.177.
[8] Ibid., pp.177-8.
[9] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979), p.53.

have a mutually reinforcing effect: the word itself is fundamentally associated with women, and thus women are more likely to be diagnosed as hysterical, thereby strengthening the patriarchal belief system.

It was an observable reality that nineteenth-century women, for arguably the first point in modern history, were more likely to be confined due to perceived insanity than men. In an essay on Victorian women and insanity, Elaine Showalter examines an account from Charles Dickens' writings, in which he attends a patients' Christmas dance at a hospital 'for the Insane' in 1851; one of his key observations from this visit is that there were more women present than men: 'Female servants are, as is well known, more frequently afflicted with lunacy than any other class of persons.'[10] Dickens is shocked, too, at the progress that had been made in the treatment of the insane in the hospital; it is during the Victorian period that visitors to asylums 'saw madness domesticated, released from restraint, and unnervingly like the world outside the walls.'[11] Showalter's essay is important in highlighting this point: that notably, 'the domestication of insanity, its assimilation by the Victorian institution, coincides with the period in which the predominance of women among the insane becomes a statistically verifiable phenomenon.'[12] But this is surely too tentative a conclusion: I would suggest that it was precisely the prevalence of diagnoses among women which brought about an increased domestication – or normalisation – of insanity. Nevertheless, it is pertinent that there was an increasing cultural fascination and preoccupation with 'mad women' in the nineteenth century, maintained by an influx of male experts on the subject.

The treatment depicted in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, of which Gilman was herself a recipient, was known as 'the rest cure'. Although it was first invented by Silas Weir Mitchell, a specialist of nervous disorders in the United States, to treat soldiers with battle fatigue, most patients seemed to be 'nervous females who were suffering from battle fatigue on the homefront.'[13] As Ellen Bassuk points out, it was less ostensibly barbaric than the customary treatments of women with nervous ailments: leeching, cauterization, or ovariotomy, perhaps.[14] Patients of the rest cure would be isolated and forced to bed-rest for an unspecified length of time, with little to no stimulation; once there was demonstrable physical progress, they would begin the process of 'moral re-education,' with Mitchell's ultimate aim 'to make clear to her [he presumes a female patient] how she is to regain and preserve domination over her emotions.'[15] In 'Why I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*?', Gilman describes how she went to Mitchell in 1887, after suffering from a breakdown: 'This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure.' Then, he sent her home with the advice to live a life of domesticity and 'never touch pen, brush or pencil again'. After three months of this, Gilman

[10] See Charles Dickens, 'A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree', *Household Words*, in *Charles Dickens' Uncollected Writings from "Household Words," 1850-1859*, ed. by Harry Stone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp.387- 8. The marked increase in women in hospitals for the insane might be attributed to the fact that women were more likely to be affected by the worsening standards of living in nineteenth-century Britain. There was a rise in asylum facilities for the poor, alongside a lower standard at which a pauper was judged to be insane.
[11] Elaine Showalter, 'Victorian Women and Insanity', in *Victorian Studies*, 23.2 (1980), p.158.
[12] Ibid., p.159.
[13] Ellen L. Bassuk, 'The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts?' in *Poetics Today*, 6.1/2 (1985), p.247.
[14] Ibid., p.245.
[15] Silas Weir Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co, 1888, p.8.

'came so near the border line of utter mental ruin that [she] could see over.'[16] Gilman uses the unnamed protagonist of her story to illustrate her own detrimental experience with this course of treatment.

It is critical to examine Southey's letter to Brontë in conjunction with an account such as *The Yellow Wallpaper*, because it captures precisely the cultural conditions and attitudes towards gender which lay the transatlantic landscape for such treatments of female hysteria to emerge. Consider the talent that Brontë would have *already* held as a young woman, writing to Southey. It is widely recorded that she was a writer from an early age; Elizabeth Gaskell, her biographer, references 'a curious packet [..] containing an immense amount of manuscript, in an inconceivably small space; tales, dramas, poems, romances, written principally by Charlotte.' Gaskell sees Brontë's adolescent works 'as a curious proof how early the rage for literary composition had seized upon her.'[17] It was not particularly the quantity of written material which was the most striking for Gaskell, but the quality: 'of singular merit for a girl of thirteen or fourteen.'[18] And, we know from Southey's careful letter to Brontë that he did, at least, agree with Gaskell's appraisal of Brontë's talent, conceding that she possessed 'what Wordsworth calls "the faculty of Verse"' (although he adds the caveat that 'in these times it is not rare').[19] We might ask ourselves why Southey, famed romantic poet as he was, even bothered to reply to an unknown young woman. Was it truly out of concern, as the letter purports, or was it the case that her talent was so unnerving to him that he felt compelled to quell her ambitions?

Southey's tone throughout the letter is one of condescension. He bemoans the unpleasant task of having to 'cast a damp of the high spirits & generous desires of youth,' yet undertake the task he does. 'You live in a visionary world,' he tells her, 'and seem to imagine that this is my case also, when you speak of my "stooping from a throne of light & glory."' He advises that if she continues to 'habitually indulge' in daydreams, this is 'likely to induce a distempered state of mind.' Brontë will become 'unfitted' for the ordinary aspects of the world, 'without becoming fitted for anything else.' Ultimately, Southey asserts,

Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment & a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity.[20]

The overarching message of his letter is not exactly to discourage Brontë from writing, only 'to think of it and so to use it, as to render it conducive to [her] own permanent good.' In essence, for a woman, the written word must be nothing more than a private pursuit; she must not write with any ambition of fame, fortune, or influence. She may 'embody in it [her] best thoughts and [her] wisest feelings, and in so doing discipline & strengthen them;'[21] but the true duties of her life lie with home and family. Brontë, Southey emphasises, will realise this herself in due course. Perhaps he would approve

[16] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Why I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*?', in Advances in Psychiatric *Treatment*, 17.4 (2011), 265.
[17] Gaskell, pp.83-84.
[18] Ibid., p.86.
[19] Southey, p.167.
[20] Ibid., pp.167-8.
[21] Ibid., p.168.

if she were to swap her poetry for a journal – 'dead paper' – on which to write her musings (after she has completed her duties for the day).

While Southey's letter oozes anxiety about the hypothetical neglect of Brontë's 'proper duties,' Gilman's doctor, Mitchell, expresses a similar sentiment in his writings about the rest cure:

The woman's desire to be one with men and to assume his duties, is I am sure, making mischief, for it is my belief that no length of generations of change in her education and modes of activity will ever really alter her characteristics. She is physiologically other than the man.[22]

Hence, the pseudo-scientific theory behind the rest cure and the belief in the inherent inferiority of women are one and the same – and indeed, both are used to justify the suppression of women writers. Gilman's parting shot at the man under whose medical expertise she suffered so greatly is packaged in a threat John makes to his wife, that if her condition does not improve he will send her §to Mitchell in the fall. 'I had a friend who was in his hands once,' the narrator explains, fearfully, 'and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!'[23] Paula Treichler points out that the use of this real proper name 'draws explicit attention the world outside the text.' Suddenly, the story moves beyond 'a fictional challenge to the patriarchal diagnosis of women's condition' and becomes 'a public critique of a real medical treatment.'[24] At one point, the narrator exclaims, 'It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!'[25] because she is not able to tend to her newborn baby. The word 'duty' signifies that the narrator is regurgitating John's words, as the patriarch. If we follow Herndl's theory, this is symptomatic of her loss of voice and – thus – her dwindling grasp on her own reality.

Throughout the story, there are a number of motifs of imprisonment which speak not only to the narrator's physical situation, but also to her social status as a nineteenth-century woman. The room John chooses for them is at the top of the house, which the narrator guesses must have been 'a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium,' because 'the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the wall.'[26] There is a gate at the top of the stairs, and the bed is 'immovable', nailed down.[27] She is not only imprisoned by walls and bars, but also by the infantile state in which John keeps her: he laughs at her ('of course, but one expects that in marriage'),[28] 'hardly lets [her] stir without special direction,'[29] and takes his 'blessed little goose' in his arms when she gets upset. At times, we can hear more than an echo of Southey's words of warning to Brontë, not to continue to indulge in daydreams lest she 'induce a distempered state of mind':

[John] says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.[30]

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[22] Mitchell, p.13.
[23] Gilman, *Wallpaper*, p.11.
[24] Paula Treichler, 'Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in *The Yellow Wallpaper*', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 3.1/2 (1984), pp.68-9.
[25] Gilman, *Wallpaper*, p.8.
[26] Ibid., p.7
[27] Ibid., p.12.
[28] Ibid., p.5.
[29] Ibid., p.7.
[30] Ibid., p.9.

The narrator continues to report John's words objectively, suggesting that she has submissively accepted their truth. As the narrative deteriorates, it becomes progressively apparent that her sense of self is dislocating; she begins to notice distinct shapes 'behind' the wallpaper and, over time, they take a female form: 'The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.'[31] Sometimes it seems 'there are a great many women behind,' and other times 'only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.'[32] Her relationship to the spoken word is increasingly tenuous, and she regresses – her imagination runs wild, rendering her, effectively, the childlike woman of John's perception. She exists, therefore, through his eyes – the patriarchal lens. She only expresses how she truly feels on the 'dead paper' of the narrative. As put by Herndl, 'given all these desperate and failed attempts at being "seen" or heard, it is no surprise when she begins to retreat to the dyadic, hallucinatory realm of the pre-linguistic imaginary of the *infans*.'[33] She notes of one of the wallpaper's inmates: 'it must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!', before adding 'I always lock the door when I creep by daylight.'[34] Imprisoned not only by the 'ancestral halls' of their summer residence,[35] but also by the ancestral confines of nineteenth century patriarchy, she associates herself with the women she imagines to be trapped behind the wallpaper; thus, she makes, in Herndl's words, a 'last desperate attempt to be seen'. And, in breaking these women free, in tearing away the dead (wall)paper, she chooses to self-represent, rather than to be represented by the patriarchal voice.

The inherited fear of female self-expression is realised in the close of the story, when John's 'little girl'[36] locks herself in her room and lays waste to the wallpaper, her sense of self amalgamated with the phantom women. Eventually, John opens the door, to be confronted at last by the violent reality of his wife's condition:

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time![37]

Critics have understood this ending in a number of different ways. Gilbert and Guber argue that 'John's unmasculine swoon of surprise is the least of the triumphs [...] The woman from behind the wallpaper creeps away, for instance, creeps fast and far on the long road, in broad daylight;'[38] We might, perhaps, take this creeping woman to represent the progress of women writers, freed from the wallpaper and thus literary representation at the whims of men. For Treichler, the ending is 'ambiguous and complex'. There is, certainly, a triumphal tone: 'As she steps over the patriarchal body [literally: John, fainted on the floor], she leaves the authoritative voice of diagnosis in shambles at her feet.' But Treichler is also careful to remind of the real-life consequences that the unnamed narrator would have had to experience as a result of this episode, once John is able to collect himself. Perhaps she would have to

[31] Ibid., p.14.
[32] Ibid., p.15.
[33] Herndl, p.71.
[34] Gilman, *Wallpaper*, p.19.
[35] Ibid., p.5.
[36] Ibid., p.14.
[37] Ibid., p.23.
[38] Gilbert and Gubar, p.91.

undergo Mitchell's treatment after all.[39] Herndl suggests that the narrator 'does not join with other women in a collective, but becomes Woman, in the hereditary estate of all women.' She is finally able to accept herself as an object; 'After her own self-representations are denied, the woman accepts the cultural representations of Woman, becoming thereby just another of the indecipherable furnishings in her husband's house.'[40] These readings carry forward a mixed sense of both triumph and bleakness from the story's conclusion. While the narrator's destruction of the paper and liberation of the women within may be read as a metaphor for her creative freedom, her continued status as an inmate of patriarchy is emphasised: she *chooses* to lock herself in, throwing the key out of the window, and she must rely on John to retrieve it and unlock the door; she secures herself to the room with a rope; even when she tries once more to move the bed, it remains fixed to the floor.[41]

Let us return again to Southey and Brontë in order to illustrate that the ending of the *The Yellow Wallpaper* is, ultimately, more victorious than it is bleak. After Brontë received Southey's letter, she very quickly returned a response to him: in it, we can infer something of the spirit which, in the end, prevented her from heeding his advice. She writes carefully, flatteringly, while at the same time signalling to a more objective reader than her words are laced with irony. She explains that she 'had not ventured to hope for such a reply; so considerate in its tone, so noble in its spirit.'[42] As a governess, she continues, she often finds that she has enough to occupy her thoughts during the day.

In the evenings, I confess, I do think, but I never trouble any one else with my thoughts. I carefully avoid any appearance of pre-occupation, and eccentricity, which might lead those I live amongst to suspect the nature of my pursuits.

She admits that she would often rather be reading or writing, but does her best to 'deny' herself.[43] Most modern readers perceive Brontë's letter to be deeply imbued with sarcasm. Carol Bock takes a more nuanced approach, labelling her response 'complexly ironic' – Brontë twists Southey's advice so that it reinforces her personal and professional ambition: to be successful as a writer without neglecting 'objective reality and social duty.'[44] Bock concludes that 'the anxiety that Brontë shared with her male contemporaries about the dangers of the private imagination was likely to have been exacerbated by social expectations that were particularly intense for women,'[45] but we can take this further; social expectations did not merely heighten anxieties faced by women writers. Their right to represent themselves, their very right to exist on their own terms – let alone on a page – was denied by patriarchy. Needless to say, Brontë went on to publish *Jane Eyre*, a decade on from her correspondence with Southey. It should be noted here that *Jane Eyre* was initially published under a masculine pseudonym, as were all of the Brontës' early works – this, too, indicates that her career was

[39] Treichler, p.67.
[40] Herndl, pp.73-4.
[41] Gilman, *Wallpaper*, pp.21-2.
[42] Charlotte Brontë, 'To Robert Southey, 16 March 1837', in *The letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a selection of letters by family and friends*, *Vol.1: 1829-1847*, ed. by Margaret Smith, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.169.
[43] Ibid., p.170.
[44] Carol A. Bock. 'Gender and Poetic Tradition: The Shaping of Charlotte Brontë's Literary Career', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 7.1 (1988), pp.61-2.
[45] Ibid., p.61.

not such a straightforward victory against patriarchy.[46] Brontë defends this tactic in the 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', which was printed in a collection of her sisters' works in 1850:

We had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes used for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.[47]

Brontë's appraisal of writing as a woman under patriarchy is understated – there is nothing vague, after all, about Southey's declaration that literature cannot, and ought not, be a female pursuit. Her defiance comes not from speaking out against these critical figures, but simply from continuing to act against their advice. Gilman, on the other hand, is far more candid in her defiance of the patriarchal voice. Her purpose in writing *The Yellow Wallpaper* was, essentially, revolutionary – she discloses in her autobiography, *The Living*, that she sent a copy of the finished story to Mitchell in the hope that it might induce him to change his approach: 'If that is a fact, I have not lived in vain.' Her own moment of escape came during a moment of lucidity after several months of following Mitchell's treatment, in which she left her husband and moved to California to be a writer.[48] When we learn in the first pages of *The Yellow Wallpaper* that John says the very worst thing the narrator can do is 'think' about her condition,[49] we are reminded of Brontë, wryly confessing to one of the most famous poets of her time that in the evenings she *sometimes* thinks. Thought is a precursor to the written word, and when Gilman's unnamed narrator defines her own condition using the wallpaper, she thinks independently of John and reaches a conclusion beyond his comprehension, ripping back her paper prison and setting both the women, and herself, free. In her insanity, she is emancipated. Gilman took back control of her own life and representation not only by tearing down the wallpaper, but effectively by throwing the book out of the window.

Gilbert and Gubar reflect on 'the explosive violence of these "moments of escape" that women writers continually image for themselves', which is often enacted by a 'mad double' – in this case, the woman in the wallpaper – through whom an 'anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be obtained.'[50] Since, Gilman had already made her 'escape' at the time of writing *The Yellow Wallpaper*; we can conclude that the unnamed narrator was created in the hopes of breaking other women out and we should therefore glean a message of hope from its final scene. Arguably, Brontë enacts a more outspoken revolution in the form of her own literary 'mad double': Bertha Mason (see Figure 1), *Jane Eyre*'s answer to the trope of the mad woman in the attic, for whom Gilbert and Gubar's volume is named.

[46] See Patricia Ingham, *The Brontës* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.25-27, for an account of the reception of the sisters' works under their pseudonyms, Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell: 'Much attention in reviews and elsewhere focused on the identity of the Bells [...] reviewers speculated as to gender since they found matters such as the brutality, attempted bigamy, and an unmarried woman's passion for a married man in *Jane Eyre* easier to accept from a male author.'
[47] Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', in *The letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a selection of letters by family and friends*, *Vol.2: 1848-1851*, ed. by Margaret Smith, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.743.
[48] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1935), p.121.
[49] Gilman, *Wallpaper*, p.6.
[50] Gilbert and Gubar, p.85.

Bertha is Edward Rochester's first wife, imprisoned within his 'ancestral' home – Thornfield Hall – due to her perceived insanity. At the end of the novel, Bertha finally breaks free and burns down the house, killing herself in the process.

Unlike Thornfield Hall, the 'ancestral halls' of Victorian patriarchy remain standing at the turn of the nineteenth century, perpetuated by the attitudes of writers like Southey, whose letter to Brontë half a century earlier anticipated the pseudo-scientific justification for practices like the rest cure to become an acceptable treatment of madness in women. Female creativity is liberation and power, and thus is to be feared by men; Robert Southey and Gilman's John are worlds apart, and yet they share a tone of condescension reserved for putting challenging women back in their place. Throughout this article, I have argued that both Brontë and Gilman defied patriarchal attitudes through the medium of the written word, and the very existence of the literary canon of nineteenth-century women writers asserts this. They could not be silenced forever, their words no longer sentenced to 'dead paper'.

I've got out at last […] And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back![51]

[51] Gilman, *Wallpaper*, p.23.

Figure 1: F. H. Townsend,
an illustration of Bertha Mason for the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, 1847
(Photo: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

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