

ALLISON MOORE DEVILLE. ““She-Wolf Imperfectly Tamed””: Madness, Foreignness, and Female Subjectivity in *Bleak House* and *Jane Eyre*. (Under the direction of Professor Leila May.)

Since Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s foundational work named after Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, critics have paid renewed attention to the wild woman lurking in the attic of Thornfield Hall and on the periphery of the text. However, very few have turned a critical eye on the startlingly similar character in Charles Dickens’s serialized novel *Bleak House*. *Bleak House* bears a strong resemblance to its gothic predecessor *Jane Eyre*, even down to the detail of its enraged villainess. Both Bertha Mason and Hortense are described as foreign, fiery, and forwardly sexual. If, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, Bertha Mason represents Brontë’s “anxiety of authorship” at fitting into a predominantly male literary culture, we might view Dickens’s creation of Mademoiselle Hortense as a representation of his own ambivalent feelings toward the creation of the female subject.

Dickens and Brontë highlight the connections between their heroines and their villains and explore the artificiality of social constraints against women through the discourses of race and madness. Both authors investigate the constructs of race and foreignness, although they ultimately abandon this exploration in order to make it emblematic of larger themes in their texts. Dickens and Brontë also utilize the prevalent Victorian belief in the link between madness and sexuality to connect and simultaneously distance their heroines’ more normative sexualities from those of their villains. A close reading of Dickens’s text for these themes of otherness, madness, and sexuality demonstrates that he is aware of gender inequities, even if he cannot himself fully embrace the new model of female subjectivity that Brontë suggests in *Jane Eyre*. I argue that Dickens’s ultimate treatment of Hortense reveals an acknowledgment of the control that men had over women’s lives and stories, and perhaps a sympathy for its victims.