

A Tale of Three Mad Women: The Victorian Good Wife & Female Insanity in Medea, Jane Eyre, and Midsommar

Introduction

The *mad woman* trope is a familiar face in Western literature. From Ophelia to Amy Dunne, numerous fictional works depict a female character descending into insanity, as well as the effects of this descent on those surrounding them. Three figures prominent within the public perception of the mad woman archetype are Medea from Euripides' play of the same name, Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, and Dani Ardor of Ari Aster's 2019 film *Midsommar*. Each woman, after experiencing significant betrayal and trauma, leans into her instability, eventually finding a twisted form of contentment in abandoning her moral inhibitions. I aim to analyze the portrayals of Dani, Bertha, and Medea in their respective stories, exploring the roles of freedom and satisfaction in the archetype of the Mad Woman.

What is a Mad Woman?

In order to discuss what being a mad woman means for these characters in the context of their respective worlds, it is important to first establish the definition and practical application of the mad woman character type in literature as a whole. I define the "mad woman" as a literary archetype encapsulating female characters who, for one reason or another, have been deemed unstable and thus not suited for traditional society. They are unsound and cannot be trusted with things that would be traditionally considered women's duties, such as managing a household, marriage, children, and general interpersonal connection. The mad woman is measured against

the yardstick of the idealized and domesticated female figure, a standard which she is fundamentally unable to live up to. Thus, she is shunned from “proper” society. Due to this othering, the mad woman often becomes progressively more insane throughout her stories, eventually snapping in some way— usually by lashing out against the aforementioned social institutions that she has been denied from. Her type of insanity is unique in that it is deeply connected to the gendered expectations placed upon women, and either brought about or exacerbated by the isolation forced upon her.

Bertha Mason

Several scholars trace the beginnings of the mad woman as we know her to Victorian English literature, often pointing towards Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre* as the standard for this trope. Brontë’s 1847 novel follows the protagonist Jane Eyre from her youth as an orphan into her position as a governess at a manor called Thornfield, where she is employed by the moody and seductive Edward Rochester. Throughout her time there, Jane falls in love with Rochester— even saving him from a fire at the mansion. After several misunderstandings and life-altering events, Rochester proposes to Jane, who accepts. However, the day of their wedding presents some unexpected surprises— namely, the news that Rochester is already married, and, worse, his wife Bertha has been living at Thornfield with himself and Jane *the whole time*. Or, rather, she has been locked in the attic of the estate, left to rot and spiral at the behest of the man she married. Jane and Rochester go to visit Bertha; who is described in an incredibly inhumane and impersonal manner. She is denoted by her animalistic qualities— likened to a “clothed hyena” (Brontë 351) and generally not afforded empathy by any party present. There is no clearer sign of

the disrespect she takes than the introduction Rochester provides to Jane and company as they enter her chambers.

“‘That is *my wife*,’ said he. ‘Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know—such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And *this* is what I wished to have’” (laying his hand on my shoulder): “this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon, I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout...Off with you now. I must shut up my prize.” (Brontë 351)

We don't hear from Bertha herself in *Jane Eyre*, other than incomprehensible and animalistic noises and laughter; thus, it is harder to understand her motivations and emotions than the way we understand Medea and Dani's (detailed later in this paper). However, it is not hard to imagine the distress this likely mentally ill woman must be in each day. Her husband, her protector, has both abandoned her *and* imprisoned her, leaving her locked inside their house for years as he courts her social and emotional opposite— Jane. Was her madness caused or exacerbated by Rochester's treatment? Did he try to help her in any meaningful way before he decided she was better off bouncing off the walls of his attic? Bertha does not tell us herself. We have to take Rochester's shaky word as truth. Instead, she is left in the mind of the reader as something closer to an animal than a human, without a voice of her own to prove this perception wrong. It is sad to think that, had she received help or support beyond Rochester's version of care, Bertha may have lived a different and possibly better life without the burden of being a mad woman.

Mad Women as More

Holding Bertha Mason in mind, let's expand our view of the mad woman. The Victorian, Brontë-esque form of this archetype is often locked away in an attic or basement, her existence serving as a source of shame for the man who has removed her from sight in the same way that one would hide an ugly piece of furniture. She is not just your everyday voluntary shut-in, however. Amber Kelly, writing for Emerson College, notes that an integral part of the mad woman is being “not just crazy— she is crazy and isolated from society. In many cases, she is locked away by a male figure... the character is separated from the world by a door and a key” (Kelly). Kelly places significant emphasis on the lack of autonomy in the mad woman's physical isolation; solitude has been forced upon her as a form of punishment *for* or protection *from* her insane tendencies.

While I agree with Kelly's assertion that the involuntary nature of the character's seclusion is integral to the archetype of the mad woman, I would argue that limiting the form of isolation to a lock-and-key scenario is reductive and does not account for different, less explicitly physical types of forced seclusion. The mad woman does not necessarily need to be contained in the shut-in sense to be othered. Social and emotional exclusion, despite being surrounded by others, can be equally as effective as environmental isolation in turning a woman mad. The truly dangerous combination is when the character is *both* physically and socially isolated, therefore giving her madness a chance to grow in a public, observable setting. This is what we see in *Medea* and *Midsommar*— a female protagonist who, pushed to extremes by her interpersonal relationships, life circumstances, and societal expectations, lets go of her sanity and gives in to madness.

Medea

In Euripides' play (as well as Greek mythology as a whole), Medea is undeniably a mad woman figure. In events that transpired before the play begins, Medea gains the favor of her husband Jason through using her uninhibited ruthlessness to help him obtain the Golden Fleece. She betrays her family and homeland of Colchis by killing her brother Apsyrtus and defiling his body, orchestrates the death of Jason's uncle Pelias, and uses her sorcery and divine connections to Helios and Hekate to accomplish these nefarious goals (Euripides pg. 5). After she commits these heinous acts, Medea and Jason flee together to Corinth under the rule of King Creon and live happily for a time, siring two sons and entering into a common-law marriage of sorts. However, Jason falls into favor with Creon's daughter Glauce and abandons Medea and their children to wed the princess. It is here the play begins, with Medea distraught over her husband's betrayal and abandonment of their family.

Medea's identities as an immigrant, a sorceress, and Jason's wife essentially doomed her to both the physical and social isolation, characteristic of the mad woman archetype. Ancient Greece was famously a xenophobic society, holding the prevailing belief that non-Greeks were lesser than Greek citizens (a class encompassing a very narrow sect of the Greek population already). "The idea of welcoming and befriending non-Greeks was not part of the ancient Greek civilization. Non-Greeks were considered barbarians and uncivilized" (Papanikos 2). Medea is a foreigner from the land of Colchis, a region often seen as the edge of the "civilized" world. Not only is she not Corinthian or Athenian, Medea is a "barbarian," and thus intrinsically an outsider in Corinth. At several points in the play, Medea's non-citizen and barbaric status is used as justification or reason for why Jason has left her, such as when Medea says "Not this restrained here. A barbaric mate/Had brought thee disrepute in thy gray years" (Euripides pg. 36). Walton's

translation of this line cements the point even more: “That’s not it, is it? As time went by/You found it inconvenient to be living with a foreigner” (Euripides lines 591-592).

Additionally, being a sorceress (and a brutal one, at that), Medea possesses a fearsome and divinely backed type of power, one that Jason and the Corinthians don’t quite know what to do with. They fear her, but also hold the view that she must be controlled or exiled for their safety and political advantage. Take this interaction, for example, between Medea and Creon early in the play. Medea asks Creon why she and her children are being banished from Corinth, to which he responds “I fear thee, nor is there a need to cloak/My words, fear that thou do unto my child/Some ill incurable; and to this fear/Doth much bear part.” (Euripides 21) Creon has no pretense– he is afraid of Medea. He understands her vengeful nature, the power at her disposal to do “some ill incurable,” foreshadowing the eventual and incurable poisoning suffered by he and Glauce both. Creon wants her out of Corinth, and for good reason.

Her godly powers and skill as a poison-master are not to be understated– she has the ability to call upon the chariot of her grandfather Helios to escape (as seen in the final scene of the play), as well as the resources and capability to mix a poison attached to clothing that activates *specifically* when it touches Glauce, only impacting Glauce herself and those who touch her, and *not* Medea’s children who bear the gifts. “For I shall send [my sons], presents in their hands/To bear the bride, a plea to stay in their exile/A filmy robe and wreath of woven gold./And if she take the ornaments and bind/Then on her, she deplorably shall die/And all who touch the maiden; with such drugs” (Euripides pg. 48). Her skill, brutality, and cunning cannot be understated. Creon, even more than Jason, understands this reality and fears her because of it. He attempts to other Medea by banishing her– an attempt with deadly consequences for Creon and his daughter both.

Finally, the relationship between Medea and Jason others her in perhaps the most damning way– from the person who should be her equal and protector. Jason and Medea’s relationship is highly unusual for Ancient Greece. This is, of course, partially due to the two aforementioned identities of foreigner and scary sorceress. However, their marriage is unique in that Medea and Jason are on a much more level playing field than the standard Greek man and wife. Independence for married Greek citizen women was heavily limited– Cartwright, writing for World History Encyclopedia, describes the role of the married Greek woman as follows: “In the family home, women were expected to rear children and manage the daily requirements of the household... They could go out and visit the homes of friends and were able to participate in public religious ceremonies and festivals. Whether women could attend theatre performances or not is still disputed amongst scholars. More clear is that women could not attend public assemblies, vote, or hold public office. Even a woman's name was not to be mentioned in public – for good reasons or bad” (Cartwright).

While, granted, a vast majority of our records and scholarship around the female experience in ancient Greece are both centered around Athenian citizen women *and* depict an idealized and likely unrealistic paragon of womanhood, these resources are useful in the context of *Medea* to understand the standard of womanhood Medea is held to, as well as emphasize how alien she is to this ideal. In the course of the play, we see and hear of Medea doing things that would be out of reach for many Greek wives; from seemingly innocuous deeds like seeking protection from Aegeus behind the backs of Jason and Creon to killing Glauce, Creon, and her children. This puts Medea in a more traditionally masculine role within the marriage, thereby bucking the subjugation necessary in most ancient marriages and leveling the playing field between her and Jason. Even the linguistic description of their relationship sets them apart from a

standard Ancient Greek marriage. On Jason's betrayal, Walton states "The Chorus are unimpressed, accusing him of 'doing what is not right' (*ou dikaia dran*) after 'betraying his *alochos*' (*prodous sên alochon*, 578). This is a curious word to use because *alochos* almost always means 'partner' in our modern usage of the word, what in English law used to be known as common-law wife" (Walton). Medea is his common-law wife, his equal, his "right hand" (Euripides pg. 31), a position Jason is threatened by and consequently acts out against.

All in all, Medea is a confusing and formidable presence for Jason, Creon, and the rest of the Corinthians. Her power, immigrant status, and gender set her apart from those around her. Walton describes her aptly, writing that "Medea's story, then, as Euripides tells it, may be set in Corinth, but identifies the predicament of many non-citizen women in Athens. She is a barbarian, while Jason, though no Corinthian, is at least Greek. As a Greek he can be a suitable husband to the daughter of another Greek. As a non-Greek, Medea has no security. Medea's killing of her children is presented with as much sympathy as it would be possible to muster... The circumstances in which such an atrocity could happen are explained in part by the nature of her 'foreignness' – of her 'otherness'" (Walton). While, at the beginning of the play, Medea's status as a magically powerful and ruthless foreigner have othered her in a detrimental way, as the story progresses we see Medea embrace isolation and otherness as a form of empowerment, thereby taking back her autonomy by force (without hesitation for the blood she sheds along the way). I categorize her as an *actively mad woman*, denoted by Medea's conscious choice to lean into everything people fear about her and use this as a path to her freedom.

Midsommar

Dani Ardor from Ari Aster's *Midsommar* is also a mad woman— albeit in a markedly different way than Bertha and Medea. To understand how Dani fits the archetype, it is integral to take a look at the first scene of the film. *Midsommar* begins with firefighters roaming around a house in full gas masks and protective gear. They come across a garage with two cars, both vehicles left running. Hoses attached to the exhaust pipes run into the main area of the house, snaking upstairs to the bedroom where two firefighters silently observe an older man and woman in a bed, clearly deceased. They transfer the bodies into bags and carry them away from their bedroom— a place for rest, perverted to mean rest of the most final kind. As the firefighters walk past the doorway, we see a young woman in the next room, slumped on the floor with a hose (presumably attached to one of the exhaust pipes), also dead. A computer sits on the desk behind her, lit up in bright white in contrast to the darkness of the surrounding room. The camera zooms past the woman's glassy eyes and vomit-soaked shirt into the computer screen, where we can see email messages presumably from this woman, reading “everything's black— mom and dad are coming too. goodbye” (Aster 2:02). An icon pops up in the righthand corner, reading “4 new messages from Dani Ardor” (Aster 2:02). There is no dialog in this section and very little diegetic sound, only the droning, eerie sound of a violin playing the same few notes over and over and slight noise of footsteps and rustling of equipment.

The scene switches to a man, whom we will later know as Christian Hughes, walking through the snow, a woman's guttural scream piercing through the ever-louder violin. He then goes into his apartment and cradles the woman, Dani Ardor, as she hysterically sobs on his couch. The window set directly above the couch mirrors the window above the desk in the room we saw moments ago where the dead woman laid. It is one of, if not the most, haunting opening scenes in horror movie history. Soon, we learn that Dani's sister Terri, an unstable bipolar

woman, committed a gruesome murder-suicide of herself and her and Dani's parents by funneling car exhaust into their home. Terri sent Dani erratic emails with increasing frequency in the months before her death, containing vague threats and cryptic statements. It is revealed in following scenes that Christian previously discouraged Dani from worrying too much about her sister's behavior, thereby delaying her response to this tragedy.

We see Dani's resentment of Christian build throughout the movie, and vice versa mirroring the Medea-Jason relationship leading up to the events of the play). In the time before this tragedy, Christian had been building up the nerve to end his and Dani's relationship, but when the murder-suicide happened, he was made to be Dani's rock and therefore discouraged from breaking up with her. His bitterness towards her and dismissal of her grief in the months following her sister and parents' death isolates Dani from the man from whom she expected the greatest support. We don't see Dani with any real friends in the film, nor are there many mentions of any connections she has or had, aside from her family, Christian, and Christian's group of grad student friends. Dani finds out that Christian and this group have planned an extended summer trip to Sweden to meet and experience the culture of one of their friends, a Swedish international student named Pelle. Dani, in an effort to sustain her dying relationship and also to seek human connection, essentially invites herself along on this trip full of people who don't like her, won't look out for her safety or well-being, and want Christian to break up with her. She ends up essentially alone in a foreign country (much like Medea), albeit surrounded by people she knows. This profound loneliness during the most traumatic period in her life, as well as the preexisting tumultuous emotional state, sets Dani up for both the social and physical isolation necessary for her to become a mad woman. While one may consider Terri the

proverbial mad woman in *Midsommar*; I believe that Dani is the truer expression of this character type.

Midsommar follows Dani, Christian, and their friends as they experience the Swedish commune, slipping deeper into the increasingly more cult-like behaviors of the Hårga people. Pelle, the graduate student responsible for the trip, is the only sympathetic party to Dani out of the group of friends. One of the most famous lines from the film comes from a scene between Dani and Pelle after she breaks down, packing her things and having a panic attack. He sits down next to her and talks her through her feelings in a tender and patient way, something she hasn't experienced for a very long time. In this conversation, he positions the cult of the Hårga as an accepting, loving community who helped him through the death of his own parents, saying that he has "always felt held" by them, calling them "a real family". Turning the conversation to Christian, Pelle asks Dani "Do you feel held by him? Does he feel like home to you?" (Aster 01:23:44) This interaction plants the seed of cult susceptibility into Dani's mind; encouraging her to take the leap from a terrible, isolating relationship to the Hårga promise of support, patience, and a place to call home. After all, when going through the most traumatic situation in our lives, expected to keep up appearances with little to no social support, who among us *wouldn't* want to "feel held"? To relax into the seemingly loving arms of a community that has done the same for the only person around who's been kind to us? It's hard to blame Dani for craving love and acceptance in the wake of a horrible tragedy, making it all the more tragic to see her descent into madness by way of the Hårga cult.

One by one, Dani's friends are killed off by the cult in extremely gruesome ways. All of this culminates in the May Queen festival, a religious celebration involving the ingestion of psychedelics, a huge feast, and a maypole-dancing competition. Whichever young lady of the

cult dances around the maypole the longest is crowned the May Queen, adorned with a flower headdress and gaining a high social standing within the Hårga. In an entirely cult-orchestrated sequence, Dani is crowned May Queen. It is here in the final scene, sitting on her throne with her crown of flowers, that Dani beholds the bodies of her travel companions. Most disturbing, perhaps, is Christian's live but drugged and immobile form, encased inside of a bearskin and set to be burned alive as part of a cult ritual. Dani, upon seeing this, greets the haunting sight with a broad, dead-eyed smile, fully inducted and on board with the unthinkable things happening to people she loved. The camera lingers on her glassy grin for a moment, and the film ends.

Parallels

Several striking similarities emerge between *Midsommar* and *Medea*; namely between Dani and Medea's story arcs. Both begin the story in a state of significant distress (Medea in death-like mourning for her relationship and future of her family, Dani in actual death-induced grief for her sister and parents.) The distress is brought on by familial circumstances, which is where Bertha's similarities emerge. Dani grieves for what *has* happened regarding her sister and parents' murder-suicide, Medea grieves for what *will* happen to her and her children without Jason's social status as protection, and Bertha grieves for the past and present of being cast aside by her husband amidst a struggle with mental illness. A sense of betrayal and bitterness within the women's relationships contribute to their elevated emotional state. Jason's betrayal and abandonment is a more explicit iteration of Christian's apathy and emotional distance from Dani; whereas Rochester does what the other two men probably wish they were able to do—lock their problem away and ignore her presence for years.

Continuing the thread of Jason, Rochester, and Christian's similarities, all men feel that they are in imbalanced relationships with their partners in some way; Jason because of Medea's foreign status, assertive nature, and sorcery, Christian because of Dani's instability and helplessness, and Rochester because of his wife's insane state. Jason and Medea's mismatch is Medea having *too much* power and agency, while Christian and Dani's is Dani not exercising *enough* power and agency. Rochester and Bertha, however, exist in a strange state in which they wield power against each other in different ways. Bertha is very much unable to fulfil her expected Victorian wifely duties, whereas Rochester seems to be a perfect husband from the outside. One may say that although Rochester exercises his dominance over his wife by isolating her, Bertha asserts her own agency by making his life as hard as possible, destroying the things he holds dear, and overall bucking the idea of a good wife.

I would be remiss not to discuss the role of race and ethnicity within the Mad Woman archetype. Bertha and Medea share the experience of being othered even further by way of their identity as non-white and non-Greek women respectively. Medea's outsiderhood in this regard stems from her "barbarian" immigrant status, whereas Bertha's is due to her half-Creole background. Rochester and Jason both cruelly demean their wives on the basis of their race at points in these stories: Rochester by tracing her insanity back to her mother "the Creole... a madwoman and a drunkard," insinuating that her race was a determinant of her unhinged state. And yet, he fetishizes Bertha's non-white identity by stating that he specifically sought out Creole women to marry, while also demeaning them as insane in the same breath.

"I longed only for what suited me—for the antipodes of the Creole: and I longed vainly.

Amongst them all I found not one whom, had I been ever so free, I—warned as I was of the

risks, the horrors, the loathings of incongruous unions—would have asked to marry me.’”

(Brontë 372)

This is similar to Jason and Medea’s story. In previous iterations of his myth, he originally valued Medea’s non-Greek past and her opposite temperament from the subservient Athenian woman. Jason needed someone who knew Colchis and would commit acts of violence and betray her homeland to help him, and he found her in Medea. He loved her when she was of help to him. Only when she was not immediately useful did he begin to see her immigrant identity as a burden and hindrance, hence his search for a more traditional bride in Glauce (much like Rochester seeking out Jane). When Medea and Jason argue, he demeans her homeland and the sheer sacrifice she made to further his goals. We see a mirrored trajectory in each relationship— a traditionally powerful man fetishizing and then promptly discarding his wife, at least in part because of her race and ethnicity.

Finally, all three works conclude with the mad woman participating in a final, iconic act of insanity— something that cements her as unhinged but empowered in a strange and surreal manner. For Medea, this is the airborne abduction of her children’s bodies; the children that she brought into and then took out of the world. For Dani, it is the disturbingly gleeful smile spread across her face as she bears (pun intended) witness to the ritual sacrifice of her boyfriend and travel companions, fully giving in to the cult of the Hårga and finally feeling “held.” For Bertha, it is of course setting the manor aflame and jumping from its roof, blinding Rochester in the process. They all exact some sort of vengeance on their antagonistic male counterparts in a way that no socially ingrained woman would, fully embracing their status as mad women and enjoying the agency that comes with it.

Contrasts

There are many parallels between these stories, but this is not to say that Dani, Bertha, and Medea express their madness in identical ways. Dani is a more passive iteration of the mad woman. She spends the first half of the movie trying to actively silence any unstable mental or emotional expressions— first by managing Terri’s erratic behavior before the film begins, and then by stifling and shaming herself for her mourning. Surrounded by unsupportive and isolating figures, Dani represses her grief until it becomes a gaping hole, begging to be filled by the Hårga’s strange, twisted sense of community. She finds satisfaction in *ending* her isolation (or so she thinks, because what will happen to her now that she’s the lone survivor of a ritual killing, far, far away from home?) and *giving in* to the cult madness.

Medea, on the other hand, leans into her isolation by severing all of the connections she had in Corinth, violently and irreparably. She *takes* back her freedom in the most horrifying manner. The two women are inverses of each other here; Medea finds power in embracing isolation through characteristics deemed frightening or undesirable, while Dani’s perceived power comes in the form of social acceptance granted by the cult and finally *not* being an outsider.

Bertha, on perhaps an entirely different appendage, is a total wild card with seemingly few premeditated actions throughout the story. She is far from the main character role in which Dani and Medea find themselves, meaning we have much less insight into Bertha’s thought process and decision-making. It is a voyeuristic state the reader finds themselves in, only presented with Bertha through the eyes of her romantic rival and warden (Jane and Rochester, respectively) without the more personalized lens her counterparts are written through. As such,

Bertha is understood in a fundamentally obscured sense— we may never know the true Bertha Mason in the way that we know Medea and Dani.

Conclusion

Midsommar, *Jane Eyre*, and *Medea* are, through some lenses, akin to pseudo-feminist horror stories. They explore the cost of perceived freedom, the burden of patriarchal expectations, and the idea that indulging one's inner mad woman can be a reclamation of her agency. In the end, each character obtains what she most needed; albeit in a deeply disturbing and twisted manner. Dani gets the community, empathy, and unconditional support she desperately craved after experiencing massive familial trauma and a toxic, distant relationship. Unfortunately, the support is from a predatory cult that brutally murders her boyfriend and companions right in front of her; an act that Dani greets with a broad, earnest smile. Medea ends the play by seeking a new life with her pledged protector Aegus, free of a broken marriage that falsely promised her safety and equality. She exercises her independence and reclaims the formerly suppressed parts of her, committing several murders— including the brutal filicide of her and Jason's sons. Bertha sets the manor (or, more aptly, her prison) on fire at the end of *Jane Eyre* and takes her own life by jumping off the roof as it burns. Although we don't explicitly understand her motivation for this act in the story, is it so far-fetched to think that the destruction of her cage could have been Bertha's final act of defiance against her husband and warden? Each woman's story lies in a murky, murderous in-between of cautionary tale and female empowerment. Unhinged, damaged, and glorious in their insanity, it's clear why Bertha, Dani, and Medea have remained so prominent in the public consciousness as essential portrayals of mad women.

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