

## Review Article

# Subversive Characters and Unfortunate Victims: A Feminist Study of Medea and Bertha Mason in Love & Revenge Tragedies

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**Abstract:** Love and revenge are eternal motifs in literature, on which numerous renowned works are written in almost all times. In this paper, two characters, namely Medea in Euripides' *Medea* and Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, are chosen to explore the female images in love and revenge stories. Seen from the perspective of feminism, their images are undeniably special and even subversive in comparison with common female characters. A prominent revelation of it lies in their independence from their male spouses named Jason and Rochester respectively. With the superiority in power, Medea and Mason are able to extricate themselves largely from the reliance of their husbands, thus gaining the courage to pursue their happiness in love as well as the determination to defend their dignity by taking revenge. However, limitations do exist due to the male dominance in the patriarchal society. For one thing, the depersonalization of women under male's visual angle has made Medea and Mason turned into men's tools, which has predestined the tragic ending of their love; for another, the dominant status of male discourse has victimized them. In the society where men firmly grasp the power of discourse, their voices are "muted" and their acts of revenge "magnified" to the extreme. Consequently, in reflection of their love and revenge tragedies, Medea and Bertha Mason are both subversive characters and unfortunate victims in a male dominating world.

**Keywords:** Medea, Bertha Mason, Female Images, Male Dominance

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## 1. Introduction

Humanity is not an animal species, it is a historical reality [1]. The development of productive forces has triggered the transition from the matriarchal society to the patriarchal society, and women are in turn transferred from the position of the dominating to that of being dominated. However, since the establishment of patriarchal society, female consciousness has never ceased to appear and had posed challenges to the male order. Throughout history a lot of women have striven for the equality of two genders.

Medea and Bertha Mason are precisely the images created in this context. Originated in Greek mythology, Medea is created by Ancient Greek playwright Euripides in his masterpiece *Medea*. In regard of Bertha Mason, she is commonly remembered as "the Madwoman in the attic" in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Since 20<sup>th</sup> century, when

feminism appeared and flourished, Medea and Mason as classic female images have received increasingly more attention from researchers. Distinguished from people's former recognition of them as murderesses or mad women, they have been regarded nowadays as "icon (s) of feminism" [12]. However, these researches fail to further discover the limitations of the two female images: despite their determined resistance, they are in nature victimized by the world dominated by men. Consequently, a more insightful study of the images of Medea and Mason is supposed to be focusing on them both as subversive characters and as unfortunate victims.

This paper, by exploring the subversiveness and limitations of Medea and Bertha Mason, aims to reveal the clashes between female consciousness and the ideology of male dominance in the patriarchal society. Textual analysis will be focused on Euripides' play *Medea* and Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. On rereading and studying the

classic love and revenge stories, the paper will also discuss some enlightenment from the two female images on realizing gender equality in the modern world today.

## 2. Power and Independence: Medea and Mason as Subversive Female Images

In *Genesis*, Eve has been created with a rib of Adam's. The universally-known *Bible* story suggests the superiority of masculine vitality and strength, which enables them to drive away more threats from nature as well as create more living materials. In order to survive, the weaker sex naturally have to depend on men's power, and thus defaults the male dominance on material distribution. The inequality between two genders on material power develops further into men's control in spiritual world, and women are accordingly located in the passive position in emotional life. One telling example lies in their loss of independence in love and marriage. With the dominance of men playing their role as father or husband, women can hardly grip their right of happiness within their own hands. Instead, they are obliged in marriage to stabilize, "nurture" and "guard" [2] the family. Consequently, in literary works themed with love and marriage, ideal images of women are commonly domestic and obedient wives and mothers.

Seen from this perspective, Medea and Bertha Mason are indeed special or even subversive characters. First and foremost, instead of accepting men's courtships passively, they are independent and courageous enough to pursue their own love and happiness on their own initiative. Much distinguished from common women, as they lose their heart to the particular man, they instantly and explicitly express their love rather than keeping silent and simply waiting: Medea proposes marriage to Jason directly while Mason "display (s)... her charms and accomplishments" [3] unreservedly for Rochester. Having won their lover's heart, Medea's and Mason's devotion to the other half only grows even more robust, and they are equipped with unparalleled bravery and determination to defend their happiness and confront with all challenges. In their love stories, one common challenge comes from the totally new environment. As both of the two women leave for a distant settlement, it indicates a cut-off of their bonds to the homeland and thus an adventurous journey to the unknown. Moreover, a greater difficulty lies in the obstruction of others involved, among which Medea's father and her brother are the most typical figures. Valuing love even more than natural affection, Medea does not hesitate to resist her father as well as slay her brother. To realize their ideals on love, they are willing to trust their lovers completely, and are resolute enough as to violate the social stereotype and even defy the ethical principles. Love conquers all— this is their creed, and also what they pursue for heart and soul.

Despite their deep devotion, they are not boundlessly tolerant to their husband's transgressions, and this is also a telling distinction between them and common female images. In the society highly dominated by men, countless women suffer from their husbands' or lovers' violence, infidelity or

other forms of persecutions while swallowing all the pains eventually. It is undeniable that Medea and Mason share the same or even greater grief with all other women from the abhorrent husband. In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea unbosoms her exceeding sense of desperation by calling out "My hope is death" [4]; while Mason vents her unparalleled indignation on Eyre's wedding dress and tears it apart. However, unlike most common women, they are not overwhelmed by the grief or simply making meaningless accusations but rather proved to be firmly resistant. To take revenge is their choice for resistance. In the society where men take up absolute dominance, Jason's and Rochester's disloyalty can hardly be given the deserved punishment. Consequently, the act of revenge can be inevitable for Medea and Jason, for it is the last and only resort to execute their justice. Despite the bloody and controversial ending, their act of revenge has severely shocked their unfaithful husbands as well as the structure of the male-dominant world, for it reveals distinctly the huge willpower of women to defend their own dignity and autonomy. With the emotional persecutions continuing, the seed of revenge in women's mind will never vanish, and tragedies as Medea's and Mason's will never halt.

However, the mere willpower is far from enough to eradicate the persecutions brought by male dominance. In reflection of the subversiveness of Medea and Mason, I would like to argue that the fundamental reason lies in their breaking the inequality on power between two genders. Medea's magical forces and Mason's large dowry prove their superiority over Jason and Rochester on power and wealth. As consequence, the common role of men and women are reversed in the two love stories: Instead of being dependent on the male lovers, Medea and Mason are largely relied on by Jason and Rochester initially. The reversal plays a decisive role in their behaviour patterns analyzed previously: It is with the power and wealth that they are able to gain the independence from the courtship through the miserable marriage. The independence disintegrates the foundation of male dominance and accordingly enables them to resist their husbands without further worries on their basic needs for survival. Seen from this perspective, the two stories have inspired us on the ideal way for women to live: Constant compromises and silence are bound to get them nowhere. Only when they strive to gain more power can their independence be recognized and the equal status realized. It applies to the past, the present and the future.

## 3. Depersonalized Beings: Medea and Mason Under Male's Visual Angle

Despite the substantial breakthroughs in female consciousness, the images of Medea and Mason still fail to evade the fate of being haunted by the overwhelming dominance of male power, which has kept almost invariant through human history since the shift from the matriarchal society to the patriarchal one. In the patriarchal society, women do not "enjoy the dignity of being a person" [1]. Their

roles are usually designated with biases by the opposite gender as their accessories, tools or properties. In other words, women are depersonalized. The depersonalization of women triggers the tragic neglect of their utterances and thoughts, thus producing tremendous persecutions in their love and marriage. In spite of the time span of thousands of years, Medea and Mason are the same as to be the unfortunate victims of it. Depersonalized as various beings, they are unfairly treated by the men, who push them into the destructive path of revenge.

The depersonalization of Medea lies in the fact that she is more of a tool of Jason than of his ideal wife. In order to realize his desire of acquiring the Golden Fleece and the throne to be followed, Jason borrows Medea's magical power at the cost of becoming her husband. Consequently, Jason's marriage to Medea is not initially based on his affection towards her but instead on the practical benefits that he is able to receive from her. While Medea loves Jason unreservedly, Jason deems her more as a tool to achieve his ambition— a malformed unity has been established, and the tragic ending of this marriage is doomed from the very beginning. Since Jason is attached to Medea with such depersonalized thought, his relationship with Medea naturally accords with her use to him. As Medea helps him achieve the Golden Fleece and liquidate Pelias the usurper, their marriage stays at the peak. First banished from Iolcus and moving to Corinth, the marriage remains stable, with the birth of two sons. However, the moment Jason is granted the chance to fulfill his ambition for power by marrying the princess of Corinth, Medea has instantly become an encumbrance, and the marriage, not surprisingly, culminates with Jason's unmerciful abandonment without any regard for her feelings. Precisely due to the depersonalization, Medea is hardly treated as an emotional subject. Consequently, while she is accusing Jason of his unforgivable betrayal, what she confronts with will undoubtedly be his rage rather than compassion and sense of guilt. In Euripides' *Medea*, Jason's exasperated words in the quarrel best prove it:

*...But I can't bear how you exaggerate your selfless role in my success. I know how I was saved. Powerful Aphrodite... And you, yes, you have a mind for plots and treachery, but Cupid had to wound you with his darts before you moved... I won't say your passion wasn't real. I won't say you didn't help, you did... To me, fame is the important thing. I'd give up all I owned for it... As for my royal marriage, if your reproaches weren't so blind, you'd see it as a plan—ingenious, disciplined, farsighted— to support you and the children. [4]*

As Horace's saying goes, anger is a short madness. However, it is this "short madness" that reveals Jason's true colour as "a crass and boundless egotist" [5]. Seemingly conceding the help Medea offers, he actually attributes his "success" to "powerful Aphrodite", weakening her role deliberately. Moreover, in concluding her devotion as the sheer outcome of the hand of God (Cupid), he suggests that Medea is but one without her own emotions— her love is manipulated by other's mind in addition to her instinctive

"real passion", and her hatred and rage at the moment are simply a product of her inborn hysteria. However, this is still not the end, for Jason further brands Medea as thoughtless. While Medea's just reproaches are simply smeared to be "blind", he is generous in bragging himself on his "ingenious, disciplined, farsighted" plan, imagining that Medea is gullible enough to believe his pretexts. Within a few lines of utterance, Jason strips Medea of her own emotions and thoughts, which are the two essential qualities of a flesh and blood— Medea is depersonalized. More seriously, he even tries to degrade her from being a tool for power into nothing, thus justifying his vicious act of betrayal! All these hypocritical words compound Medea's rage and desperation, and push her a large step closer to the brutal homicide to take revenge on the unfaithful husband.

Bertha Mason, similarly, is victimized by the depersonalization of women, and more tragically, she is not only depersonalized by Rochester, but by his father Mr. Mason. It verifies Simone de Beauvoir's claim that a woman herself "forms a part of the patrimony of a man: first of her father, then of her husband" [1]. Deeming her daughter as his patrimony, or his property, Mr. Mason naturally grips the decision of her marriage within his hand regardless of her will. Consequently, the marriage to him is an opportunity to gain more practical benefits, and her daughter, undoubtedly, becomes the cost for better profits. Affluent and coming from the "civilized" world, the Rochester family is perfectly satisfactory for him, and an arranged marriage is settled. Fortunately, Bertha Mason does lose her heart to Rochester initially, described by the latter as "a dog-like attachment" [3]. Despite Rochester's scornful tone, Mason's deep affection towards him proves to be obvious. However, what if she has no feelings for Rochester at the beginning? The answer is possibly predictable: depersonalized as her father's property and stake, she absolutely has no say in her marriage, and the outcome will probably remain the same. That is, to become the wife and patrimony of Rochester's. Imprisoned by "the Law-of-the-Father" [6], women's emotional lives are, with hardly any exception, at the verge of the cliff, with their husbands to decide whether to push them off or pull them back.

Rochester is undoubtedly the "pusher", for he depersonalizes Mason even greater. First and foremost, I would like to argue that similar with Mason's father, Rochester depersonalizes Mason as the key to wealth. In his narration of the origin of this tragic marriage, the utterance goes as follow:

*... My father was an avaricious, grasping man... Yet as little could he endure that a son of his should be a poor man. I must be provided for by a wealthy marriage. He sought me a partner betimes. Mr. Mason, a West India planter and merchant, was his old acquaintance. He was certain his possessions were real and vast: he made inquiries. Mr. Mason, he found, had a son and daughter; and he learned from him that he could and would give the latter a fortune of thirty thousand pounds: that sufficed. When I left college, I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted*

for me. My father said nothing about her money. [3]

Reading between the lines, we may make out that Rochester is trapped in a premeditated marriage designed by his father and elder brother without any knowledge of the fortune. However, I argue to rebut this statement. Regardless of the possibility that Rochester lies on the knowledge of thirty thousand pounds, he has every reason to believe her dowry to be worth a fortune, for he knows his father too well—How should an “avaricious, grasping man” marry his son to a disadvantaged family? Moreover, considering the background of the times, how possible will a white father accept a dark-skinned, “uncivilized” daughter-in-law without extra conditions? The answer can be clear for Rochester, a well-educated elite. Consequently, from my perspective, he has more or less acquiesced in his father’s arrangement. In regard of the reason, we are also hinted in his own utterance: For one who is about to become a “poor man”, the large dowry is so alluring that his love can largely be put aside. As the marriage is degraded into a business, Mason is unfortunately of little account but depersonalized as a cash cow, and for Rochester, the money-based relationship resembles an illusion, leading him to a marriage “achieved almost before (he knows) where (he is)” [3]. The disillusionment, needless to say, comes as the economy no longer constitutes Rochester’s concern, and the desperate days for Mason to be a Madwoman in the attic is soon to follow. While the narrow, dark attic forms a tangible prison, the intangible shackle of depersonalization forged by Rochester is much more fatal, for all her emotions and sentiments are ruthlessly deprived of and are taken place by the sheer word “mad”.

Apart from the greed for wealth, Rochester establishes his relationship with Mason also out of other instinctive desires: His “prurience”, along with the vanity to stand out in the “idiotic rivalries of society”, drives him to take the courtship as a hunting or contest, and Mason is accordingly transformed into the prey and the prize. The depersonalization exceedingly undermines Rochester’s emotional basis towards Mason, for the excitement and joy of winning the prey and prize expires easily and quickly. Passing through the hall of marriage, when the competitors vanish and the physical pleasure brought by Mason fades away, he feels instantly the worthlessness in her: she no longer constitutes the prey and the prize in his perspective. Precisely at this moment, a new role of Mason occurs in Rochester’s recognition, and the second wave of depersonalization is gradually taken in shape—Mason is thought of as “a temptress of men” [2], an incarnation of vicious desire, or more precisely, the demon. In his completely biased mind, Mason is such a demon with the intention to “drag (him) through all the hideous and degrading agonies” [3], and the perilous allurements are her evil means to trap him into the marriage. All flaws and badness are revealed in her: coarse, trite, perverse, imbecile [3], and most importantly, mad! Since demons are all too often related with madness, by labeling Mason as a Madwoman, Rochester manages to turn her into a

non-human being, thus making her the foe of not only Rochester himself, but all humans. Consequently, confronted with the “demon”, it is his obligation to detain her in the attic. By demonizing Mason, Rochester locates himself in the position of the victim and similar to Jason, he contemptibly justifies the act of betrayal and shirks the responsibility of bigamy.

Power, wealth and fame... concerning these eternal items in the patriarchal society, women are always involved in them, only that they, like Medea and Bertha Mason, serve more often than not as the tools or victims of men. The villain of the piece, as revealed in my analyses, is precisely the depersonalization of women. Materialized by the opposite gender, women are stripped off their independence in emotions and thoughts. Consequently, their demands in love and marriage are prone to be suppressed by men’s desires, thus leading to the love tragedy. The process in which Medea and Mason take revenge is actually to overturn the depersonalization and reconstruct their own identity as an independent individual—They strive to be who they are.

#### 4. “Muted” and “Magnified”: Medea and Mason as Victims of Male Discourse

Power of discourse, with no difference from other powers, is handled by the dominating groups. In the patriarchal society, it is undoubted that men possess the dominant position while women are usually regarded as the disadvantaged. Hence the power of discourse is tightly grasped by men, with women’s voices taken as “female cowardice”, “threaten (ing) to subvert... the social and political stability, the health, of the whole state” [7]. Since the power is within men’s hands, they are able to judge social behaviours from their own values, thus justifying their deeds and expanding their boundary of acts. Seen from this perspective, the power of discourse is in turn instrumental in solidifying men’s dominance in the patriarchal society. Meanwhile, due to the lack of weight in discourse, constraints imposed by men on the female increase constantly, and they are, to the large extent, forced to be silent, deprived of the right to have actual statements or arguments.

The deprivation of power of discourse lies most conspicuously in the text, and is particularly so in the story of Bertha Mason. Accounting for fairly little content in *Jane Eyre*, Mason is never granted the chance to speak even a word, and the only channel through which we get to learn her background is Rochester’s mouth. With the power of discourse gripped only by Rochester, we have no access to verify his utterance but to presuppose it to be the truth. The predetermined background, in addition to Mason’s seemingly crazy act, successfully lead us to the conclusion that Rochester intends to guide us to—Bertha Mason is a Madwoman he unfortunately marries, and he is compelled to commit the bigamy. As we rarely pay much attention to an insane being, Mason is apt to be kept away from our mind,

with few ones bothering to explore her nature. While Mason has been deprived of the opportunity to argue for herself, neglects on her from the outside world brings her even more pathos, for her argument, if there is any, has lost its meaning at the moment. In the patriarchal society, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe, pen is metaphorized as “penis” [8], symbolizing men’s position of owning “the only legitimate power” [8] in all discourses. In view of this, I would like to argue that men’s mouths serve as the extension of their pens. For one thing, the colloquial expression enables them to exert their power on women more directly and handily. For another, in combination with their low-pitched voice and sentiments, the mouths are usually more effective than the cold pens. Consequently, sitting face to face with Rochester and listening to his voice, Eyre is absorbed in his seemingly plausible explanations and her compassion is accordingly aroused. While she “earnestly pit (ies)” [3] Rochester’s miseries, she has actually defaulted his words on Mason, and meanwhile weakened her accusations of Rochester’s act of bigamy— They both become the victims, only that Mason is victimized worse. In light of this, Mason and Eyre are miniatures of countless women persecuted by the men’s monopoly of power of discourse: They are tragically silent and are decided by men on “who they are” and “what they should be”.

Men’s dominance of the power of discourse is also from beyond the text. That is, the values. Discourses are, as a matter of fact, not simply concerned with the words written or uttered, but are highly involved with the writer’s or the speaker’s values. After a long-term development of the patriarchal society, the dominating gender has established a fixed value system, defining the roles of women and ruling their behaviors in a stringent manner. Within this strict system, any female individual’s “transgression” is deemed as a threat of the patriarchal values. Consequently, men are prone to disintegrate the legitimacy of her actions through their powerful discourses.

Medea’s revenge tragedy best proves it. Revenge, generalized by Francis Bacon as “a kind of wild justice” that “man’s nature runs to” [9], has certain legitimacy psychologically. Despite its probable violence of “the code of law” [10], the act of revenge is agreeable to some extent, for it punishes the evildoer and defends “the code of honour” [10] of the avenger. However, our agreeableness of revenge has its limit. That is, when the avenger’s act equals to the evildoer’s in terms of viciousness. Beyond this limit, our compassion for the avenger may soon be transferred into abhorrence, and the two parties’ respective roles as perpetrators and victims may also be exchanged quickly in our mind. This is precisely what the image of Medea suffers from— With the power of discourse grasped by men, she is shaped as a radical avenger and thus an evil committing infanticide. Infanticide is, without any doubt, one of the last sins that is forgivable in any forms of society, not to mention that she is created in a highly patriarchal one where the role of “mother and nurturer” is the basic position of women. Setting such

extreme act of revenge for Medea, the myth distracts us from Jason’s betrayal to her ruthless killing spree and even makes the disloyal, hypocritical Jason somewhat pitiable. The magnification of Medea’s act of revenge is largely a product of male discourse. It concedes certain flaws in men, but meanwhile intentionally justifies their dominance over women for at least they do not transgress the social codes so far as those “Medeas”. Moreover, it tries to release such a suggestion that women are in nature completely emotional beings: Driven by sheer sentiments, they more often than not behave at will, regardless of the outcome it brings. Consequently, women are supposed to be “inferior being (s)” [11] instructed by rational men. Despite the fact that men often err and thus hurt them, their resistance and retaliation can lead themselves to an even more destructive ending. From my perspective, this much biased value contained in Medea’s revenge story reveals part of the nature of mythology. That is, to serve for the interest of male dominance in the patriarchal society. Their values are the foundation of the dominance, and their powerful discourses serve as the sounding-board of the value system.

In reflection of Mason’s and Medea’s story, we can discover the omnipresence of men’s control of the power of discourse in the patriarchal society. The control is revealed in varied levels: for one level, women’s discourses are totally deprived of and they are forced or guided to be silent; while for another, their resistant discourses and actions are magnified in male discourses and taken advantaged of to prove the validity of patriarchal value system. With men dominating the power of discourse and social value system, not any female individual is able to gain independence and freedom in real sense, and that is the inevitable limitation of these two female images.

## 5. Conclusion

From ancient Greece to the Victorian Age in Britain, female consciousness has always made its appearance, which contains the demand on gender equality and represents the trend of the advancement of times. Female images exemplified by Medea and Bertha Mason are precisely the products of this consciousness. Independent and courageous, they are to some extent subversive and form great shock wave to the patriarchal society. However, due to the overwhelming dominance of male power and male discourse, they are still unfortunate victims in various senses, and thus their images inevitably have the limitations.

History is a mirror for the future. As we reread the love and revenge tragedy of Medea and Mason, we should bear it in mind that gender equality is always reached by the interplay of both genders, with women striving for their independence and men discarding their biased ideas. Only then are we able to avoid the recurrence of that tragedy and step further to a more civilized world with the harmony of two genders in real sense.

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