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| BA Thesis Title | The First Wife Haunts the Mansion:Female Competition in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* |
| Course | English BA Thesis |
| Date | 23 June 2021 |
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The First Wife Haunts the Mansion:

Female Competition in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*

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BA Thesis English Language and Culture

23 June 2021

7454 words (5820 excl. citations)

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Abstract

In this BA Thesis Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is compared to Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, which is one of its adaptations. Both novels are concerned with a heroine who is haunted by the male protagonist’s first wife. Despite both novels being concerned with the same subject matter, there are differences in the manner and duration of the heroines being haunted. The research question of this thesis is: What is the relation between the haunting of/beyond the mansion by the first wife and the nature of the competition between the heroine and the first wife? Differences in legislation concerning divorce, insanity and property can account for differences between the haunting in the novels. It is argued that in *Jane Eyre* Jane does not consider Bertha as being superior to herself and that Bertha’s haunting stops when Thornfield Hall is burned down. Mr Rochester was not legally allowed to divorce Bertha, but he was allowed to lock her up because he thought she was insane. He also did not risk losing property to Bertha. When Bertha dies, Mr Rochester and Jane can live without being haunted, because they are legally allowed to marry now, as it is no longer bigamy. In *Rebecca*’s time, it was illegal for husbands to lock up their wives if they thought they were mad. Mr de Winter would have been able to divorce Rebecca, but he would have risked losing property to her in the process. Mr de Winter possibly did not want to risk this, besides not wanting to ruin his reputation, and therefore murdered her. The second Mrs de Winter was haunted by Rebecca’s superiority until Mr de Winter confessed that he never loved Rebecca. The haunting then shifted and became a haunting guilt and fear of people finding out about this. In both *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*, the experienced, beautiful first wives are described as monsters and punished accordingly, whereas the second wives are praised for being innocent and inexperienced. This may suggest that, even though the laws had changed, in practice, characteristics and behaviour that were praised in men were still rejected in women, and the novels possibly show this.

Introduction

This BA thesis is concerned with Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. *Rebecca* is viewed by scholars as closely resembling *Jane Eyre* (Allen 301-2): the narrators in both novels marry considerably older and wealthier men whose behaviour is sometimes difficult to understand. This behaviour is gradually revealed to be connected to something in their past. One of the most crucial similarities for the purpose of my research is the haunting by the male protagonist’s first wife in the mansion. ‘Haunting’ in the contexts of these novels does not refer to literal haunting; neither one of the first wives comes back from the dead. However, their presence in the lives and marriages of the heroes and the second wives is referred to as ‘haunting’ a few times in each novel. Mr Rochester, for instance, uses the word ‘haunt’ when referring to Bertha’s presence in the house after the secret that he is already married is revealed (Brontë 362). Another example is when Mr de Winter’s second wife describes feeling haunted by Rebecca because she is so different from her (Du Maurier 137). Haunting in these novels can therefore be considered a metaphorical haunting. This haunting in the mansion is in line with a modern gothic formula, as proposed by Joanna Russ, which is applicable to modern gothic novels that can also be considered romances. These novels were especially popular among middle-class women because of the “attraction/repulsion, love/fear” between heroine/woman and suitor/husband. Readers could relate to this as they were often married to men they did not know very well (Carr qtd. in Russ 667). This formula involves a young heroine who comes to a mansion. She then “forms a personal or professional connection with an older man … who treats her brusquely” (Russ 668). In the house there are “hints of the presence of *Another Woman* … very often the Other Woman is the Super Male’s present wife or dead first wife” (Russ 668). The heroine finds out that there is a secret in the house and this secret is revealed. Often the secret is concerned with the first wife’s misbehaviour or a committed crime (669).

Key here, from the perspective of my research, is the element of the mansion. Whether the fact that the other woman, often the first wife, is present in the mansion limits her to haunting the mansion is not discussed by Russ. On the one hand there is the mansion, the place where the first wife lived. On the other hand, the heroine experiences feelings of being haunted. Is it then the case that in *Jane Eyre* and its adaptations this haunting can only take place in the mansion or also at places other than the mansion, and could it be that the object of the haunting is a person rather than a place? In the case of *Jane Eyre* and its adaptations, is it possible that the ghost, the first wife, haunts the heroine, who intends to marry or is married to her husband, which makes her the ghost’s rival for his love? I will approach these questions through a comparison between *Jane Eyre*, the original of this modern gothic subgenre, and *Rebecca*, one of its best-known adaptations.

The tie between the haunting by the first wife and the mansion in gothic literature may result from traditional gender roles in the Victorian era. The house was the place where women took care of their families: “She was (or was supposed to be) a centre of kindness and pleasantness and she created an environment of stability and tranquillity where whole families would gather, live, learn and socialize” (Cordea 16). This type of lifestyle was to be obtained through marriage, as this would give a woman access to a house where she could create this type of environment. Eliot Rubinstein states that “because of the centrality of marriage to family inheritances, the development and maintenance of the British class system and the social and economic security of women in society, the choice to marry was a momentous occasion of tremendous social significance” (qtd. in Menchaca-Bagnulo 2). A bachelor who was able to provide safety, both economically and socially, symbolised by such a house, could attract multiple women, which created competition among them. Remembering Russ’s formula, the heroines in modern gothic novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* also experience competition, namely that of the heroes’ first wives. Indeed, Kay Mussell notes that many gothic novels contain “heroines who … conform to traditional sexual and domestic role expectations for women, and ‘other’ women who do not conform to those patterns and thus fail in traditional feminine areas of influence such as domesticity, motherhood and love relationships” (85). The first wives haunt or actually live in the mansions, serving as competition for the heroines; “The two kinds of women are often contrasted with each other directly, appearing often as rivals for the love of the hero” (85). The competition between women for a suitable husband in society may be depicted on a smaller scale in and possibly beyond the mansion in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*.

The use of domesticity was a way for Victorian writers to “perpetuate and sustain patriarchal authority” or to “[test] the boundaries of the gender system [the novel] appeared to support” (Allen 303). In research on gothic literature specifically, “there has been a history of useful critical attempts … for explorations of the position of women in relation to the changing shapes of patriarchy” (Segdwick 243). As I will argue, for the purpose of analysing these two novels, changes in law are of interest: those with regards to divorce, property and insanity specifically. As for the former, these show cultural changes (Fine and Fine 267), for instance society’s perspective on husband-wife equality. Between 1700 and 1857, adultery was the only valid reason for divorce, and women needed to prove even more offences besides adultery if they wanted to divorce their husbands (Wolfram 155-7). In 1937, one year before *Rebecca* was published, adultery was no longer the only reason for divorce as The Matrimonial Act of that year stated that desertion and insanity were now also valid grounds for divorce (Wolfram 157-8; Brayshaw 300). Women were also allowed to request a divorce for one of these reasons, so they no longer needed more reasons than men (Wolfram 157).

As of 1882, with the establishment of The Married Women’s Property Act, husband and wife were “equals in property matters” (Glendon 33). Both parties had control over their own property (33), but that was not all:

Participation by one spouse in the property of the other is introduced indirectly through the technique of the laws of succession and divorce .… Thus, it is [after 1882] possible to say that while a property owner does not ordinarily gain or lose ownership rights when he or she marries, he or she does become subject to a system of legal rules, which apply only, or mainly, to married people and which either affect property themselves or permit a court, in its discretion, to interfere substantially with property rights in certain cases. (Glendon 33)

There were also specific laws concerning the insanity of a spouse. The Insane Persons Act of 1828 made it easy for husbands to place their wives in an asylum or to lock them up themselves (Bolivar 278). These options ended with The Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 and The Lunacy Act of 1890. The latter entails that if a husband locked up his wife he would risk facing repercussions (279). Knowledge of legislation is crucial when discussing *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, as writers probably assumed readers were aware of the laws of their time. It is also possible that these differences in legislation, and thus in social context between the novels, can account for significant differences between them.

These laws in combination with the depiction of marriage and domesticity in gothic literature, as well as Russ’s formula, give rise to a few questions. Firstly, what is the nature of the competition; to what extent and in what respects does the heroine view the first wife as superior to herself and therefore as competition? What, if anything, is the role of the house in this, and does the heroine’s sense of being haunted come to an end once that house - in both novels - has burned down? Furthermore, how does this relate to the differences in divorce laws and laws concerning insanity? The research question of this BA thesis is: What is the relation between the haunting of/beyond the mansion by the first wife and the nature of the competition between the heroine and the first wife?

In this comparative analysis, *Rebecca* will be compared to *Jane Eyre*. In particular, I will compare the relation between the competitor as perceived by the heroine and the heroine’s perception of herself before and after the fire that destroys the mansion in each novel. I will do this in order to determine the nature of the competition and to see whether the first wives are limited to haunting the mansion. I will compare the findings concerning the haunting of the mansion, the self-image of the heroine and the heroine’s image of the first wife to see whether there is a relation there. *Jane Eyre* will be discussed in Chapter One and *Rebecca* in Chapter Two. In both chapters, after discussing the novels, I will place my findings in a broader sociohistorical context, with a focus on legislation.

I will attempt to show that the second Mrs de Winter considers Rebecca superior at first, but not anymore after Mr de Winter’s confession. The haunting then changes to fear of people finding out he murdered Rebecca, which is why her haunting is not limited to Manderley. As for *Jane Eyre*, I will argue that Bertha’s haunting is limited to the period when she is actually alive and therefore ends when Thornfield Hall burns down and she dies. Furthermore, Jane regards Bertha in a negative way and herself in a more positive way from. I will argue that the nature of the haunting differs per novel, depending, at least partially, on the legislation that was active at the time of publishing.

Chapter One: *Jane Eyre*

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane is confronted with the presence of Mr Rochester’s wife Bertha. Jane does not describe Bertha as being superior to Jane herself and Bertha does not seem to haunt beyond the mansion. There are a number of instances when Jane describes herself before the fire. In terms of looks, Jane says that she sometimes wishes she was prettier:

I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer: I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth: I desired to be tall, stately, and finely developed in figure; I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked. (115)

This description of what Jane wishes she looked like resembles Mr Rochester’s account of Bertha’s looks when he met her in Jamaica: “I found her a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram: tall, dark and majestic” (367). As Bertha does not look like this anymore, as will be discussed below, Bertha’s looks are no competition to Jane. Besides this, Jane is not completely discontented with her own looks: “However, when I had brushed my hair very smooth, and put on my black frock … I thought I should do respectably enough to appear before Mrs Fairfax” (115-6).

Jane also describes Bertha a couple of times before Thornfield Hall is burned down. In some of these instances, she is unsure who it is she hears or sees. In other instances she thinks it is Grace Pool or she knows it is Bertha. The first sign of Bertha’s presence that Jane receives is Bertha’s laugh, which Jane describes as “a curious laugh – distinct, formal, mirthless,” at first being low, but then becoming louder (125). The murmur that follows the laugh is “odd” according to Jane (126). The second time that Jane hears Bertha, her laugh is described as “demoniac” and Jane wonders whether this person, who she thinks might be Grace Pool, is “possessed with a devil” (176). After Richard Mason is attacked by Bertha, Jane has to stay with him while Mr Rochester fetches a doctor. Jane describes this moment in the following way:

Amidst all this, I had to listen as well as watch: to listen for the movements of the wild beast or the fiend in yonder side den … all the night I heard but three sounds at three long intervals – a step creak, a momentary renewal of the snarling, canine noise, and a deep human groan. (251)

A few things stand out in these occurrences. The first time Jane describes Bertha’s voice she uses adjectives that can apply to a human laugh, such as “curious” and “mirthless” (125). It could be argued that such a laugh is not what a natural, unforced laugh is expected to be, but there is no literal comparison to anything non-human. In the second occurrence with Bertha, Jane again only hears Bertha’s voice, and this time she calls it “demoniac” (176). The person whose laugh she hears is not entirely human according to Jane. She is even compared to a demon, which, coming from a Christian like Jane, can be assumed is a negative comment. As the novel progresses, Jane sees more of Bertha, and the next time she experiences her presence, she does not only hear her voice, but also hears her move (251). This time, when Jane is taking care of Richard Mason, Bertha is described as a human, as an animal (“beast,” “canine”) and as a demon. As Jane learns more about Bertha, she sees Bertha increasingly less as a human, and instead, as a “creature … masked in an ordinary woman’s face and shape” (251).

In the next meeting between the two women, Jane sees Bertha’s face for the first time at night and starts with describing her as a woman: “‘It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell’” (340). This description resembles Mr Rochester’s later description of Bertha when he met her in Jamaica. However, Jane also says that Bertha was like a “vampire” (314). Even though Jane recognises a woman in Bertha, she also sees her as a supernatural creature or an animal at times. After Jane and Mr Rochester’s wedding is interrupted, they go to see Bertha and this time, Jane is aware she is Mr Rochester’s wife. She knows that he locked her up because she is insane, a choice possibly influenced by the fact that he was not allowed to divorce her on grounds of insanity at the time (Wolfram 155-7). It is also the first time Jane sees Bertha during daytime. She makes comparisons between Bertha and animals:

What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (352)

Note that Jane refers to Bertha as “it” - as is done when referring to animals. She continues to call Bertha a “clothed hyena” (352). Jane then calls Bertha a “maniac” and a “lunatic” (353). Even though aspects of Mr Rochester’s and Jane’s own previous descriptions of Bertha are present, like the dark hair, Bertha is now described in a completely animalistic manner. However, in a conversation with Mr Rochester, right before Jane leaves Thornfield Hall, she calls Bertha an “unfortunate lady” and she says that “she cannot help being mad” (362). Jane, at times at least, sees Bertha as a woman, yet she also describes her as being animalistic, demoniac, mad and a vampire. Jane never expresses jealousy towards Bertha. If anything, she considers herself more fortunate than Bertha. Jane criticises herself at times and acknowledges her own flaws, but she never goes as far as calling herself animalistic or demoniac, and so she never stoops down to Bertha’s level.

Besides looks, Jane also occasionally discusses her own personality traits. One characteristic that Jane had as a child that she does not approve of is her temper. After her confrontation with Mrs Reed, Jane experiences a sense of “freedom” (37), but this is quickly followed by a feeling of remorse (38). She even acknowledges “the madness of [her] conduct” (38). There seems to be a parallel between Jane and Bertha here. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Bertha represents Jane’s “hunger, rebellion, and rage” (339). Indeed, it could be argued that Bertha’s attacks show that Bertha is not able to control her anger. Besides that, Jane herself calls Bertha “a maniac” (353) and “mad” (362), which shows that she condemns Bertha’s expression of her anger.

When Jane leaves Thornfield Hall, this can be regarded as an act of self-control. This time not self-control in terms of anger, but more in terms of desire. Jane knows that if she stays with Mr Rochester, she cannot keep her distance forever because she loves him (365). This is another difference between Jane and Bertha. Jane does not give into desire, whereas Mr Rochester hints that Bertha has in the past: “Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste” (369). Jane expresses sadness when she leaves Thornfield Hall (387). Nevertheless, Jane leaves and thinks that is the right thing to do:

I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad – as I am now … I am insane – quite insane, with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. (382)

Again, Jane calls herself mad, but this time she does not give in and holds on to what she has learnt in moments of sanity. Later on, Jane is still glad she made the decision to leave: “Yes; I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law, and scorned and crushed the insane promptings of a frenzied moment” (434). This does not, however, mean that Jane wants to and will suppress the, as she calls it, fire in her forever. When St John asks Jane to marry him, Jane refuses: “But as his wife … forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital – *this* would be unendurable” (492). Jane does not want to be led by the fire in her, but she does not want to be cold like St John either. She criticises Bertha’s aggression through terms like ‘maniac’ and ‘lunatic’ and she also calls herself mad at times, yet she is not as negative about herself as she is about Bertha. The crucial difference between the two women is that Jane, at least as an adult, is able to control her anger. She knows similar temptations as Bertha, but Bertha gives into them, whereas Jane does not, which is what makes Bertha mad in Jane’s eyes. As long as you can manage to not give into temptations, you are sane.

After Thornfield Hall is burned down, Jane is no longer haunted by Bertha. When Jane visits Thornfield Hall after living with St John and his sisters, she finds out that the mansion has burned down. Jane soon learns that Bertha set Thornfield Hall on fire and is dead (517-8). After this, Bertha is not mentioned anymore, nor does Jane talk about herself. She only talks about her marriage to Mr Rochester: “I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh” (546). In these lines, Bertha is not present, suggesting that she is not present in their marriage either.

Bertha is not described as being superior to Jane at any point and Jane does not express that she sees Bertha as competition. When Thornfield Hall is burned down and Bertha dies, her metaphorical haunting stops. Bertha’s death leads to Jane’s freedom, both her freedom to marry Mr Rochester and to live a life without suppressed rage and desire. As for Mr Rochester, Bertha’s death allows him to marry Jane and he is no longer guilty of attempting bigamy. Mr Rochester was able to lock up Bertha in the first place because the legislation concerning insanity allowed husbands to lock up their wives if they thought they were mad and they had permission of one medical man (Bolivar 258). As for property laws, in the early nineteenth century, husbands managed their own estates as they did as bachelors. Husbands also became managers and owners of their wives’ properties. So, women did not have ownership over their own (future) properties anymore, and they did not have ownership over their husbands’ properties either (Glendon 26). In the case of *Jane Eyre*, Bertha could not have taken possession of Thornfield Hall in any way. Mr Rochester did not have to protect his property. In terms of divorce law, adultery was the only reason for divorce, which might be the reason why Mr Rochester did not divorce Bertha, locked her up instead and did not get punished for it.

Chapter Two: *Rebecca*

*Rebecca* resembles *Jane Eyre* in multiple ways. The male protagonist and his second wife or fiancé live in his mansion, which seems to be haunted. This haunting has to do with the hero’s first wife, Rebecca and Bertha respectively. In both novels the mansion burns down. The second wife or fiancé can eventually be with the hero. In this respect, Rebecca’s role is similar to that of Bertha. They both stand between the second wife and the hero. In other ways, however, Rebecca is similar to Blanche Ingram, the woman whom Jane thinks Mr Rochester is going to marry. In *Jane Eyre*, Blanche is described as being superior to Jane in terms of looks. Blanche and Rebecca both have dark hair (Brontë 204; Du Maurier 262) and are tall (Brontë 367; Du Maurier 132-3). Furthermore, they are described, or in Mrs de Winter’s case, envisioned, as being beautiful (Brontë 191; Du Maurier 47). In contrast, the second Mrs de Winter thinks beauty is something she lacks (Du Maurier 148).

These characteristics also reoccur when the narrator, the second Mrs de Winter, describes Rebecca’s handwriting: “And then as it bubbled through the nib, it came a little thick, so that the name Rebecca stood out black and strong, the tall and sloping R dwarfing the other letters” (36). Especially the characteristics ‘black’ and ‘tall’ seem to refer to Rebecca herself, which is also acknowledged by the second Mrs de Winter herself: “That bold, slanting hand, stabbing the white paper, the symbol of herself, so certain, so assured” (47). In contrast, the narrator calls her own handwriting, possibly referring to herself in a broader sense, as being “without style, uneducated even” (98). This addresses another difference between Rebecca and the second Mrs de Winter. The latter praises Rebecca for her “charm” and her “breeding”, as Rebecca fits in the upper class society (224). In the narrator’s imagination, Rebecca knew what was expected of her and how to behave:

She who sat here before me [i.e., Rebecca] had not wasted her time, as I was doing. She had reached out for the house telephone and given her orders for the day, swiftly, efficiently … She had not said ‘Yes, Mrs Danvers,’ and ‘Of course, Mrs Danvers,’ as I had done. (97)

The narrator, who was not born into higher society, nor fits in it, does not know how to behave and feels awkward at times. She feels most comfortable with Clarice, her maid, and thinks she has the most in common with her (161). The narrator expresses that she herself lacks poise:

I wished I knew what to say, what to do. I wondered if [Mr de Winter] suspected, as Mrs Danvers had done, that poise, and grace, and assurance were not qualities inbred in me, but were things to be acquired, painfully perhaps, and slowly, costing me many bitter moments. (90)

The narrator also mentions another point here: her age. She often wishes she was older and expresses feeling like a child (16; 23; 40). This is a similarity between Jane and the second Mrs de Winter; both women are much younger and as a result, more inexperienced, than their husbands. Mrs de Winter feels like a child because both Mr de Winter and Rebecca are/were older and therefore more experienced than she is. The narrator, however, finds out that experience is negative in Mr de Winter’s eyes: “‘There is a certain type of knowledge I prefer you not to have. It’s better kept under lock and key’” (227). Mr Rochester and Mr de Winter have had negative experiences with women with much experience; women like their first wives. Society approved of experience in men, but disapproved of this in women, hence husbands were usually the older ones in marriage.

In a conversation with Frank, the second Mrs de Winter tells him how she sees herself and how she sees Rebecca: “‘And I realize, every day, that things I lack, confidence, grace, beauty, intelligence, wit – Oh, all the qualities that mean most in a woman – [Rebecca] possessed’” (148). This more or less sums up how she sees herself in comparison to how she sees Rebecca before Mr de Winter’s confession; everything she lacks, Rebecca possessed.

The narrator reaches a turning point when Mr de Winter confesses to her that he murdered Rebecca (298). Importantly, he tells her he never loved Rebecca and describes her in a way that is new to the narrator (304). The second Mrs de Winter described and imagined Rebecca as being a beautiful, charming, efficient woman who was loved by her husband, but she now finds out Rebecca was not loved by Mr de Winter: “‘She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together. Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal’” (304). Besides being beautiful, glamorous, older and (sexually) experienced, Rebecca was cruel. For this reason, Mr de Winter would rather be with a young, inexperienced girl (226). Now that the second Mrs de Winter knows this, she no longer sees Rebecca as superior competition and feels relieved:

I was the self that I had always been, I was not changed. But something new had come upon me that had not been before. My heart, for all its anxiety and doubt, was light and free. I knew then that I was no longer afraid of Rebecca. I did not hate her anymore. Now that I knew her to have been evil and vicious and rotten I did not hate her anymore. (319)

After Manderley is burned down, which happens at the end of the novel (427-8), the second Mrs de Winter dreams about Manderley. The dream forms the opening sequence of the novel (1-4). In this dream, she visits Manderley and describes how it is not haunted by Rebecca anymore, as the narrator is not haunted by Rebecca’s superiority anymore either since Mr de Winter’s confession:

A cloud, hitherto unseen, came upon the moon, and hovered an instant like a dark hand before a face. The illusion went with it, and the lights in the windows were extinguished. I looked upon a desolate shell, soulless at last, unhaunted, with no whisper of the past about its staring walls. The house was a sepulchre, our fear and suffering lay buried in the ruins. There would be no resurrection. (4)

This response to not being haunted anymore resembles the narrator’s response when she hears that Mr de Winter did not love Rebecca and that she was in fact not perfect at all. At this point, the narrator is no longer afraid of Rebecca. After the confession, ‘unhaunted’ is mentioned once, in the aforementioned citation, and ‘haunt’ is mentioned once as well: “She would never haunt me again … Maxim had never loved her” (320). Before Maxim’s confessions, a form of ‘haunt’ is mentioned five times, always in the affirmative form, one moment being when the narrator feels like she is being compared to Rebecca:

I could picture [Beatrice and Giles] saying to one another as they drove away, ‘My dear, what a dull girl. She scarcely opened her mouth’, and then the sentence I had first heard upon Beatrice’s lips, haunting me ever since, a sentence I read in every eye, on every tongue – ‘She’s so different from Rebecca’. (137)

This also shows that Rebecca’s superiority does not haunt the second Mrs de Winter anymore after the confession; the word ‘haunt’ is not used in contexts like the aforementioned one.

This, however, does not mean that Mr and Mrs de Winter can now live in peace. The narrator’s expression that Rebecca no longer haunts her may be premature. The second Mrs de Winter knows that her husband never loved Rebecca and that Rebecca was not exactly what she thought she was. As a result, she does not consider her superior anymore. However, she also knows that Mr de Winter murdered Rebecca, which he says he did because he did not want to damage his reputation: “‘[Rebecca] knew I would never stand in a divorce court and give her away, have fingers pointing at us, mud flung at us in the newspapers, all the people who belong down here whispering when my name was mentioned’” (306). Since Mr de Winter would have risked having to share his properties with Rebecca if they divorced, this was perhaps also a factor involved in his choice to not divorce her but murder her (Glendon 32). As a result, now that the second Mrs de Winter knows her husband has murdered Rebecca, this fear of people finding out will haunt her instead of Rebecca’s supposed superiority. This haunting starts with the reappearance of the boat in which Mr de Winter placed Rebecca’s dead body. The name of this boat is “Je Reviens,” which means “I return” (171), and also closely resembles the word “revenant,” which is another word for “someone who has returned, especially someone who returns to life after being dead” (“Revenant”). Rebecca is not actually haunting Mr and Mrs de Winter, rather the guilt and fear of the secret coming out is haunting them. This fear of people finding out is best described by the second Mrs de Winter herself when it is still unclear whether Mr de Winter will be found guilty: “Every moment was a precious thing, having in it the essence of finality” (402). In addition, Mrs de Winter does not express everything associated with Rebecca being completely in the past with much conviction: “We all of us have our particular devil who rides us and torments us, and we must give battle in the end. We have conquered ours, or so we believe” (5). The fact that they cannot go back to Cornwall can also function as evidence that Rebecca still influences them. The second Mrs the Winter argues that Manderley and the life she and her husband had there no longer affect her: “This is the present. There is no past and no future” (49). On multiple occasions, statements like these are made directly after the second Mrs de Winter dwells on the past, which contradicts her statement that there is no past:

Here, on this clean balcony, white and impersonal with centuries of sun, I think of half past four at Manderley, and the table drawn before the library fire .… Well, it is over now, finished and done with. I ride no more tormented, and both of us are free … Manderley is no more. It lies like an empty shell amidst the tangle of the deep woods, even as I saw it in my dream. (8-9)

Stating that the past does not affect Mr and Mrs de Winter is both contradictory to what Mrs de Winter describes at times herself and unlikely as Mr and Mrs de Winter can never be sure that Mr de Winter will not be caught. It can be argued that when Mr de Winter tells his wife that he did not love Rebecca, she no longer resembles Blanche, but resembles Bertha. The narrator is then no longer haunted by an image of superiority, but by a crime committed by her husband. In Mr Rochester’s case this is the failed attempt at bigamy and in Mr de Winter’s case it is the successful murder of Rebecca. The type of haunting in *Rebecca* has changed, but has not stopped.

There are a number of similarities and differences between *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. The novels have in common that there is a considerable age gap between the narrators and their husbands and that the mansions are destroyed by fires. Both Bertha and Rebecca are no longer or not considered superior and the narrators do not want to be like them. In addition, Bertha and Rebecca are both unchaste (Brontë 369; Du Maurier 310). A crucial difference, however, is that Mr Rochester did not murder Bertha, whereas Mr de Winter did murder Rebecca. Mr Rochester was also stopped from marrying Jane, so his attempt at bigamy failed, whereas Mr Rochester succeeded at murdering Rebecca. As a result, Rebecca’s death is not the end of the haunting, as Bertha’s was for Jane and Mr Rochester. In *Rebecca*, after Mr de Winter’s confession, Rebecca’s haunting shifts from a haunting concerning superiority to a haunting concerning the fear of people finding out Mr de Winter murdered Rebecca. Mr and Mrs de Winter will always have to live with the feeling of guilt and the fear of being caught, whereas Bertha’s death enables Jane and Mr Rochester to marry, thereby ending Mr Rochester’s guilt.

A few differences in legislation might account for the differences between *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. Divorce law in *Rebecca*’s time would have enabled Mr de Winter to divorce Rebecca, whereas Mr Rochester could not divorce Bertha (Wolfram 156-8). Mr de Winter chose not to divorce Rebecca and states that he did not want to ruin his reputation (Du Maurier 306). If laws on property are considered, Rebecca could have had the right to own a part of Mr de Winter’s possessions, possibly including Manderley (Glendon 33). This may also have been a reason why Mr de Winter chose to murder Rebecca rather than divorce her. In contrast, Bertha did not have any legal right to own Thornfield Hall or anything else that was Mr Rochester’s (Glendon 26). Even though the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 contributed to the emancipation of women in legal terms, it did not protect Rebecca (Bolivar 279). Moreover, Bertha and Rebecca, who used to be beautiful and experienced, are described as being monsters, especially by the men who were attracted to them. In contrast, women such as Jane and the second Mrs de Winter are described as being innocent, chaste, inexperienced, and demure and they are praised for this. This may show that, even though progress was made in the emancipation of women in terms of legislation, in practise not much had changed yet. In terms of laws on insanity, in *Rebecca*’s days husbands were not allowed to lock up their wives anymore if they thought they were insane, so locking up Rebecca was no option for Mr de Winter (Bolivar 278). He could have locked up Rebecca in *Jane Eyre*’s time based on her sexual activity and, according to him, mental state: “She was not even normal” (304). Mr Rochester was legally allowed to lock up Bertha (Bolivar 258). Another difference is that Mr de Winter murdered Rebecca and is punished for going against the law, which is created by society, by Rebecca’s continuous haunting. Mr Rochester, on the other hand, attempts bigamy, but is stopped by society’s law before he succeeds. Therefore, when Bertha dies, marrying Jane is no longer illegal. Mr de Winter experiences the threat of societal punishment whereas Mr Rochester experiences societal intervention, which is why Mr and Mrs de Winter are always haunted, whereas Mr Rochester and Jane are not.

Conclusion

The main question of this BA thesis was: What is the relation between the haunting of/beyond the mansion by the first wife and the nature of the competition between the heroine and the first wife?

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane never sees Bertha as superior, possibly because she has not seen Bertha when she met Mr Rochester in Jamaica, closely resembling Blanche, someone whom she considers superior in beauty. Mrs de Winter considers Rebecca as being superior to herself, but only before Mr de Winter reveals that he never loved Rebecca.

As Bertha’s death coincides with the fire at Thornfield Hall, this is a turning point in *Jane Eyre*. This is the end of Mr Rochester’s guilt for attempting bigamy and therefore the end of Bertha’s influence on Jane and Mr Rochester. Mr Rochester’s guilt is removed and so are the legal obstacles. In *Rebecca*, this is different for multiple reasons. Firstly, Rebecca is dead the entire period the novel covers. Connected to this, the fire at Manderley does not kill her nor does it end her haunting. When Mr de Winter confesses that he never loved Rebecca, the second Mrs de Winter does not view Rebecca as being superior to her anymore. This ends Rebecca’s haunting in that respect. Considering that Mr de Winter has murdered Rebecca, he and his new wife have to live with the fear of people finding out this secret. With the ending of one type of haunting, another starts. In short, Bertha’s death ends her influence on Mr Rochester and Jane and their marriage completely, whereas Rebecca will always have influence because Mr de Winter killed her.

These distinctions between *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* are in line with differences in law between the years the novels were published. When *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 (Brontë 1), the Insane Persons Act allowed husbands to keep their wives locked up if the husbands and the medical men signed the Orders and the Certificate respectively(Bolivar 258). In *Jane Eyre*, there are indeed no repercussions for Mr Rochester for keeping Bertha locked up, aside from not being able to marry Jane, as insanity was not a valid ground for divorce (Wolfram 155-7). When Bertha dies, he can marry her at last. There are no repercussions then either. Mr Rochester loses his property, which functions as a cleansing of his guilt for trying to live a bigamous life, as Thornfield Hall was where he tried to do this. In terms of property law, both Mr Rochester’s and Bertha’s properties are Mr Rochester’s because they are married, and Bertha would not have been able to legally take possession of anything that was Mr Rochester’s or hers before they married (Bolivar 279). Losing property is then not something Mr Rochester risked in any choice he made or could have made.

When *Rebecca* was published in 1938 (Du Maurier 1), the Lunacy Act of 1845, and later the Lunacy Act of 1890, had replaced the Insane Persons Act. The Lunacy Act of 1890 determined that husbands could no longer take action, in the form of bringing their wives to an asylum or locking them up, if they thought that their wives were mad (Bolivar 278). If they did this anyway, they would face repercussions (279). In *Rebecca*, the first wife can openly express and act on her sexuality. Mr de Winter cannot lock her up for it, whereas Mr Rochester could have, because sexuality in a woman was seen as an expression of madness and allowed husbands to lock up their wives in Mr Rochester’s time (264).

There are also differences in legislation on divorce. Adultery was the only reason for divorce between 1700 and 1857 and so Mr Rochester was not able to divorce Bertha because of her madness (Wolfram 155-7). Possibly due to this not being an option, Mr Rochester chose to lock her up. Mr de Winter, however, would have been able to divorce Rebecca if he had wanted to, because, among others, insanity was now a valid reason to divorce, as stated in The Matrimonial Act of 1937 (Wolfram 157-8; Brayshaw 300). Since he did not think Rebecca was sane (Du Maurier 304), divorcing her was an option. However, he chose to murder her instead, possibly because of the property division between husband and wife after divorce.

The Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 was active when *Rebecca* was published but not when *Jane Eyre* was published. Rebecca and Mr de Winter were more equal as husband and wife in terms of possession than Bertha and Mr Rochester (Bolivar 279). In case of a divorce, Mr de Winter possibly would have had to give Rebecca a part of the value of the estate, whereas that was not the case for Mr Rochester, who was not allowed to divorce Bertha, nor had she any right to own anything that was his or hers before they married (Glendon 26; Bolivar 279). Furthermore, Rebecca was able to express her sexuality without the risk of being locked up, whereas Bertha was locked up because of her madness, aggression, and overt sexuality (Brontë 369) - the latter was believed to be caused by madness (Bolivar 264). In this respect as well, Rebecca was more equal to Mr de Winter than Bertha was to Mr Rochester. The first wife’s haunting of the second wife and her husband is then not only a matter of rivalry between the women, but also rivalry between the husband and the first wife.

These changes in legislation show legal progress in terms of the emancipation of women. From 1882 onwards, husband and wife were more equal in terms of possession, as men risked losing parts of their possessions to their ex-wives (Bolivar 279). Besides this, as of 1937, women were allowed to request a divorce based on one reason, so they did not have to give more reasons than men did anymore (Wolfram 157). Furthermore, men were not allowed to lock up their wives anymore if they thought they were insane as of 1890 (Bolivar 279). In *Rebecca*, just as in *Jane Eyre*, however, the glamorous, experienced first wife is described as a monster and thus punished, whereas the second wife is praised for her innocence and inexperience. This gives rise to the question of whether in practice much had changed with these laws. Characteristics and behaviour that are praised in men are still rejected in women. *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* adhere to the patriarchal idea that innocent, inexperienced, demure women should be praised and worldly, experienced, glamorous women should be rejected. In this way, the inconsistency between the judgment and position of a man compared to that of a woman, as well as that of a woman compared to another woman is possibly shown in these novels. This is not unusual for gothic literature, as they often “[explore] the position of women in relation to the changing shapes of patriarchy” (Segdwick 243). As for *Rebecca*, Rebecca’s haunting is unending and Mr and Mrs de Winter express feelings of unrest. This may also be a way for the novel to express that what happened to Rebecca and the way in which she was judged was unjust.

Due to the limited scope of this research, only *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* were discussed. Further research may be able to include more novels that concern second marriages to see whether similar conclusions can be formed. In addition, it would be interesting to see whether other adaptations of the gothic formula mentioned by Joanna Russ keep the same endings or whether they change the endings, and whether that is, as in these novels, also possibly related to the divorce, property, and insanity laws of their time. Besides these laws, it would be interesting to look at social etiquette rules of different times concerning the way in which a wife ought to behave in more detail. Perhaps there are parallels between changes in other laws and differences between gothic novels as well.

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