



5-12-2015

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Recommended Citation

Lowe, Anastacia. (2015). "Spirits Unequal": Masculinity and the Sexualization and Commodification of Discourse in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 111. Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/111
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“Spirits Unequal”:
Masculinity and the Sexualization and Commodification
Of Discourse in Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirement for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 12, 2015

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Introduction

“And if what we want is more erotic stories, then what better story is there than *Jane Eyre*? One of the original and best stories about an innocent young woman falling in love with a much more experienced older man and getting way out of her depth... the fact is, that once you start to read *Jane Eyre* like an erotic novel, it *is* an erotic novel.”

—Eve Sinclair, author of *Jane Eyre Laid Bare*

If you were to have a discussion about erotic fiction at a dinner party (preferably one without older relatives present), titles like *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the overabundance of paperbacks with a shirtless Fabio on the cover would almost certainly be cited. Debates would begin about their literary merit, their cliché reliance on stereotypes would be scrutinized, and without a doubt they would be ascribed the label of “Mommy Porn.” The unprecedented cultural popularity of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise has opened the window of discussion for such topics, allowing people to frankly discuss erotic fiction without fear of embarrassment. The general consensus seems to be this: the novels are cliché, tacky, and completely devoid of all literary value.

What, then, can be made of the growing popularity of modern erotic novels based upon classic novels, whose literary merit cannot be disputed? In the wake of the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, novels like *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Jane Eyre* have all been given erotic makeovers by contemporary authors. Some choose to keep the original text and simply add in new erotic scenes, while others rewrite the tale in its entirety. These erotic novels market themselves as continuations of the classics, “filling in the gaps” and giving the readers glimpses into the private lives (and bedrooms) of the couples at Pemberly and Thornfield. While they read like well-edited fan-fiction at best, there is something to be said for their return to classic novels—Victorian novels in particular—for their premises.

The original text of *Jane Eyre*, most notably, is well-known and beloved for its groundbreaking insights into the personal consciousness of a female narrator and her dealings with issues of social criticism, religion, and sexuality. Readers both at the time of its publication and today are drawn in by Jane's pragmatism, lack of conformity to traditional gender and class expectations, and her fierce desire for freedom and acceptance. While the text certainly has clear moments of sensuality and romanticism (it was notably sharply criticized in its time for its sexuality), it is chaste enough in contemporary society to be taught in middle and high school classrooms across the country without a second thought.

In Sinclair's novel *Jane Eyre Laid Bare* the loyal "reader" that Jane so affectionately addresses in the original narrative is exposed to a whirlwind of sexual activity; Lowood School for girls introduces Jane to much more than just academics, and her time spent at Thornfield contains significantly more voyeurism than one might anticipate. Rochester's "life experience" goes beyond the "live and learn" tales of relationship woes that Brontë created to encompass pseudo-orgies and an obscene amount of sex toys brought back from The Orient. Even Jane herself reflects noticeably less on her convictions and the simple pleasures of life, substituting them instead with stolen moments of secret self-pleasure in shadowy halls and behind curtains. The characters are almost unrecognizable as Brontë's creations; they are creatures of almost animalistic passion, completely devoid of the spiritual and "unearthly" essence that Brontë's originals were known for. What is it exactly about *Jane Eyre* that lends itself to this kind of adaptation?

To begin to answer this question, it is necessary to engage in a close reading of *Jane Eyre*, using Sinclair's erotic novel as a lens while also taking into consideration the social context in which the original novel was created in order to understand the constraints that Brontë

was operating under. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* addresses gender roles, sexual and social power, and the social and economic exchange of women all under the guise of a traditional critique of social class. Through the character of Jane, Brontë presents a novel that, while still outwardly conforming to the traditional style of Victorian novel, is groundbreaking in the way that it explores and critiques the very traditions that it employs.

Prologue:

Comments on Victorian Era Sexuality

“Sex is always interesting, but what we summarily—and complacently—call “Victorian sex” has long had a special claim on our attention. It permits us to enjoy scandalous tales of deviance and despair...and beyond providing entertainment, Victorian sexuality offers another, still larger dividend: it permits us to feel superior. The Victorians were repressed and repressive; we are happily liberated” –Critic Peter Gay, “Victorian Sexuality: Old Texts and New Insights”

“Victorian Era sexuality” is something of an oxymoron, as the Victorian Era is a period generally associated with sexual repression, anxiety, and taboos. Classic Victorian novels often perpetuate this idea through their chaste depictions of romance and reluctance to address sex in any form. Books and resources published by the upper-class, educated people of the time also propagate these ideas, as sexuality played an important role in the social control that the upper-class exerted over the working class (namely working class women). Critic Elizabeth Fee addresses this topic at length, arguing that “Victorian society may be characterized as being divided into two clearly identifiable and opposing sexual ideologies and that these ideologies run roughly along class lines” (632). Sexuality was the dividing line between the upper and working classes, firmly put in place by the upper class who generated social anxieties about working class sexuality “directed against a threat seen as coming from below” (Fee 632). The upper-class reputation was staked on the virtues of abstinence and constraint and they defined the lower classes in opposition to themselves, projecting onto them the vices of impulsiveness and sexual depravity. In Brontë’s text, Jane straddles this dividing line between working and upper-class societies in her position as a governess, undoubtedly an effort by Brontë to expose and critique this social hypocrisy.

This sexual control was chiefly impressed upon working class women, whose legal and societal status made them easy targets of social derision. Critic Askin Haluk Yildirim argues:

Victorian Britain, with its rigid gender roles, was a strictly patriarchal society where discrimination against women was a dogmatic practice... 'It was a society characterized by increasingly sharp category distinctions of gender and sexuality'. Victorian ideology of gender rested on the belief that women were both physically and intellectually the inferior sex. (Yildirim 46)

This idea that sexual discrimination against women is “dogmatic” is a subject that Brontë examines at length in *Jane Eyre*, chiefly through the interactions that Jane has with the patriarchal figures of Mr. Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers.

At the time that Brontë penned *Jane Eyre*, these social and gendered ideas of sexuality existed and almost certainly had a substantial influence on the popular literature of the time, but they did not necessarily dictate *behavior*. While we may like to think of the Victorians as chaste and puritanical beings, “the challenge to this perception has come from different historical sources: illegitimacy rates, population statistics, and other historical data reflecting the actual behavior of the popular masses” (Fee 632). This means that, as much as the Brontë purist in me wants to dismiss the idea, the actions and behaviors of Sinclair’s revisionist characters may be more realistic than Brontë’s, at least in regards to their expressions of sexuality.

However, this is not to say to say that Brontë’s characters are at all *unrealistic* in their expressions of sexuality. In this paper, I will argue that Brontë’s characters not only address Victorian social and gendered ideas of sexuality, but also challenge them almost as overtly as Sinclair’s characters. That is to say, Brontë’s characters are most successful at challenging

sexual repression through the medium of discourse, while Sinclair's characters prefer explicit displays of sexuality.

“Spirits Unequal”:

Masculinity and the Sexualization and Commodification
of Discourse in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

From the start of the novel, Brontë presents Jane’s fond “reader” with an immediate resistance to conformity and traditional Victorian Era standards in the presentation of a family without a patriarchal figure. The unconventional family that Jane is “raised” in is headed by her widowed aunt Mrs. Reed, whose lack of any traditionally maternal or feminine sympathies is equally matched with Jane’s pragmatic refusal to romanticize her position as an orphan. The absent figure of her Uncle Reed, the one person in Jane’s life who had ever expressed concern or fondness towards her, is turned against her in her Aunt’s use of his deathbed in the Red Room as a punishment for her impertinence.

The first time the reader encounters Jane, she is physically hiding herself behind curtains from her cousin John, pressed up against the window to the outside world: “Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting but not separating me from the drear November day” (Brontë 1). Jane finds solace in this position between the restrictive luxury of the home behind the scarlet curtains and the unknown freedom of the world outside, until John comes to disrupt her. John, the first example of masculinity that we see, is far from the archetypal Victorian gentleman. A gluttonous, “unwholesome” figure, John wields his masculine power over Jane through brute force and the invocation of the inevitable ownership that he will one day claim over the Reed estate. Though he is still a child and under the rule of his mother, John invokes this ownership as a way of establishing dominance because he is the only male figure in the household. He takes great pleasure in denying Jane any claim or access to the house:

You are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they *are* mine; the entire house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows. (Brontë 5)

John's desire here to keep Jane away not only from the respite and hope of freedom that the window brings, but also from mirrors, is curious but successful in suppressing the two small pleasures that Jane finds in the Reed household: the promise of the freedom of the outside world and self-reflection. He is the first and not the last man that Brontë introduces who demonstrates his power by taking things away from Jane. However, it is not John's words that effect Jane; she is unimpressed by his masculine claim to property and social status. In fact, she goes as far as to associate his invocation of his power with tyrannical figures "You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!" (Brontë 5). Jane refuses to submit to masculine claims to power, as she instead values intellectual power and knowledge—the kind she develops through her secret readings.

For her lack of submission to John's masculinity and to traditional feminine submissiveness in general, Jane is sent to Lowood School for girls, where she is once again placed under the control of another imposing masculine figure. In her article "Jane Eyre: Governess to Girl Bride" critic Ester Godfrey discusses the subversive implications of Brontë's novel. Specifically, Godfrey addresses Jane's androgynous social position that comes about as a direct result of the complicated relationship between gendered identities and Victorian social class. Godfrey argues, "Brontë carefully portrays Brocklehurst as one who, like the owners of

mines, sees femininity as a construct afforded by the middle-class luxury and working-class androgyny as a necessary, though clearly distinct, part of the hierarchical social order” (857). At Lowood, the girls are stripped of their upper class positions and are thus expected to shed any traditionally feminine characteristics, both physical and social. Femininity is seen to be an upper-class performance, entailing extravagancies of dress, behavior, and attitude that are luxuries the lower class cannot afford. The girls are dressed and trained in an assembly-line fashion; upon her arrival Jane remarks at the oddity of their appearance:

A quaint assemblage they appeared, all with plain locks combed from their faces, not a curl visible; in brown dresses, made high and surrounded by a narrow tucker about the throat, with little pockets of holland . . . tied in front of their frocks, and destined to serve the purpose of a work-bag: all, too, wearing woollen stockings and country-made shoes, fastened with brass buckles. Above twenty of those clad in this costume were full-grown girls, or rather young women; it suited them ill, and gave an air of oddity even to the prettiest. (Brontë 45)

The girls are essentially sentient work-machines, their frocks designed to be functional “work-bags” instead of indicators of femininity. They are “plain”, “brown”, and “quaint”, embodying the descriptors of the tiny school houses they will one day inhabit. Stripped of all uniqueness or femininity, the girls are schooled in a prison-like atmosphere that fosters a curious sense of gender ambiguity. Without visible physical markers of social class in the form of feminine fashion or embellishments, they are schooled in a desexualized environment that Brocklehurst advertises as a place to “cultivate humility”, a “Christian trait” that he believes all young women should have. Mrs. Reed agrees to this, arguing “I should wish her to be brought up in a manner suiting her prospects . . . to be made useful, to be kept humble” (Brontë 31). This idea becomes

obviously hypocritical when Mr. Brocklehurst quotes his own young daughter (who is not schooled at Lowood) as saying “Oh, dear papa, how quiet and plain all the girls at Lowood look, with their hair combed behind their ears, and their long pinafores, and those little holland pockets outside their frocks—they are almost like poor people’s children...they looked at my dress and mama’s, as if they had never seen a silk gown before” (Brontë 31). Brocklehurst’s daughters will become the Blanche Ingrams of the world, dressed impeccably, decorated extravagantly, and “accomplished” in simple, ornamental arts that separate them from the traditional schoolgirl. By defining “femininity” as something attainable only to upper and middle-class women, men like Brocklehurst are able to define working-class women in opposition to them, carefully stripping them of enough femininity to isolate them, establishing them as almost an entirely different species altogether. Godfrey argues that “Brocklehurst seems to suggest that if class divisions were made impermeable, then the danger of gender ambiguity could be isolated, exploited, and controlled for middle class advantages” (867). Brontë depicts these upper-class girls as distinctly separate beings from Jane right from the beginning. She establishes a binary relationship between upper-class women and beauty and working-class women and androgyny that becomes the driving force behind Jane’s insecurities for the majority of the novel.

Though Brocklehurst is supposedly a charitable gentleman, he refuses to help Jane and punishes her by isolating her from the other girls. Like John Reed, Brocklehurst demonstrates his masculine power over Jane and the other girls by taking away her only respite, her power of speech, by forcing her to stand in isolation and forbidding the other girls to speak to her. He asserts his dominance by “towering” over the girls and threatening them with eternal damnation, using his wealth and power to become an almost godlike figure of authority. Rather than appealing to the girls as a figure of wisdom or experience, something that they could appreciate

or respect, he relies simply on the power that he derives by his social position as a wealthy man. Brontë gives him an almost farcical god-complex; upon seeing a young girl with naturally curly hair he laments “Naturally! Yes, but we are not to conform to nature... I have again and again intimated that I desire the hair to be arranged closely, modestly, plainly. Miss Temple, that girl’s hair must be cut off entirely” (Brontë 64). In having Brocklehurst at once praise the will of God and yet desire to change what He has “naturally” created, Brontë exposes his hypocrisy once again, forcing him to compromise and exploit religious standards in his attempts to desexualize the working-class women and isolate them from the possibility of corrupting upper-class men.

The idea of “humility” that Brocklehurst encourages is quite obviously a social imposition on the part of the upper class male, who force gender ambiguity onto the girls in an attempt to keep them separated from upper class society. However, the result of this gender ambiguity, this curious abjected position that Jane comes to hold, is precisely the quality that Rochester, a wealthy elite man, is attracted to. Without being able to hide behind or rely on a performance of femininity, Jane is forced to rely on her education and the development of ideas and interpersonal skills, things that women like Blanche Ingram are much less adept at. Jane places a high value on self-sufficiency and self-efficacy, taking charge of her own welfare in the absence of a caretaker.

While Brontë describes Lowood as a place of absolute sexual suppression, Sinclair chooses this setting as the site of Jane’s sexual awakening. Sinclair’s Jane finds “comfort” at (and in) the hands of the girls at school, dictating memories of sexual pleasure and companionship. This adaptation, essentially a fetishized depiction of lesbianism, is clearly an attempt to cater to modern audiences. However, it is not without foundation in the original text. Brontë’s Lowood is foundational not only in shaping Jane’s character but in establishing a social

critique of upper-class hypocrisy and the fear of the sexual power of working-class women. In a sense, Sinclair's Jane simply refuses to submit to the repression of sexuality, and instead embraces it, becoming self-sufficient sexually while Brontë's Jane becomes self-sufficient emotionally and economically.

Brontë's Jane takes it upon herself to find a position outside of Lowood, once again claiming authority over her own person and situation in a way that is completely forthright and un-romanticized. This comes as a stark contrast to other Victorian heroines, who are often simply products of circumstance and dependent upon the interference of masculine or authoritative influences in the securing of employment or economic stability. She is not thrown about by circumstances beyond her control but rather charts her own path in life so that any of her victories or success, few as they may be, can be only attributed to her own conscious choices. In becoming a governess, Jane is in a position where she uses "maternal" or feminine traits in dealing with children and childrearing, but earns the salary of a man. Godfrey explains this, saying "Because the governess was like the middle-class mother in the work she performed, but like both a working-class woman and man in the wages she received, the very figure who theoretically should have defended the naturalness of separate spheres threatened to collapse the difference between them" (Godfrey 857). Jane uses the gender ambiguity imposed upon her at Lowood--her lack of traditional femininity that would make her easily susceptible to masculine influence—as a means of gaining independence from the patriarchal influence of society.

Before she meets Rochester, Jane inquires about him to Mrs. Fairfax, who chooses to describe him in terms of his social standing: "The family have always been respected here. Almost all the land in this neighbourhood, as far as you can see, has belonged to the Rochesters time out of mind." To this, Jane responds "Well, but leaving his land out of the question, do you

like him? Is he liked for himself? [...] What, in short, is his character?" (Brontë 109).

Unconcerned with social traditions or conventions, Jane seeks to learn about Rochester as an individual person rather than by his defining social markers. Her lack of interest in his social status comes as a direct contrast to the typical woman depicted in Victorian novels, whose opinions of men are almost exclusively grounded in physicality and adherence to social conventions. In the marriage-plot storylines of Jane Austen, for instance, the frequently debated "eligibility" of men is based almost exclusively on their wealth, good breeding, and participation in social events. The most eligible bachelor Mr. Bingley in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is described favorably as being "quite young, wonderfully handsome, extremely agreeable, and, to crown the whole, he meant to be at the next assembly with a large party" (Austen 6). While Austen's Jane is quite taken with these qualities, Brontë's Jane remains unimpressed with the frivolities of upper-class societal distinctions as they prevent the acquisition of spiritual and intellectual equality that she is always searching for. Jane solidifies this point in her musings saying,

There are people who seem to have no notion for sketching a character, or observing and describing salient points, either in persons or things: the good lady evidently belonged to this class; my queries puzzled, but did not draw her out. Mr. Rochester was Mr. Rochester in her eyes; a gentleman, a landed proprietor—nothing more: she inquired and searched no further, and evidently wondered at my wish to gain a more definite notion of his identity. (Brontë 110)

Through the depiction of this idea of Rochester's "identity" as not only more than his societal ranking but also transcending it to the point of excluding it entirely, Brontë contests the

traditional Victorian contemplation of a person's worth, especially in terms of their consideration as a potential spouse.

Brontë's depiction of the physical estate of Thornfield Hall also deviates significantly from the traditional Victorian manor. Despite its statuesque nature, nobody in the town surrounding it seems to know of its existence when Jane inquires about it during her travels. It exists almost exclusively as a relic of the past, slowly falling out of fashion and use with the extended absences of Mr. Rochester. Mrs. Fairfax remarks "It is a pretty place; but I fear it will be getting out of order, unless Mr. Rochester should take it into his head to come and reside here permanently—or at least, visit rather oftener. Great houses and fine grounds require the presence of the proprietor" (Brontë 104). In the absence of Mr. Rochester, the house is used only sparingly by its few occupants, leaving the majority of the manor in a state of neglect. Its many rooms are full of relics of the past:

The furniture once appropriated to the lower apartments had from time to time been removed here, as fashions changed...bedsteads of a hundred years old...stools still more antiquated, on those whose cushioned tops were yet apparent traces of half-effaced embroideries, wrought by fingers that for two generations had been coffin-dust. All these relics gave to the third story of Thornfield Hall the aspect of a home of the past---a shrine of memory. (Brontë 110)

Brontë's description of the third floor of the house evokes strong images of suppression, namely the suppression of expressive or ornamental femininity. Though the house is currently in the hands of a masculine figure, the items Brontë describes represent a specific type of femininity,

one represented by recognition of changing fashions and embroidered cushions. One might imagine them having belonged to women like Blanch Ingram or the young Brocklehurst girls, results of their “accomplishments”; ornamental, sentimental representations of upper-class women. However, these items have been “removed” from parts of the house that remain in use, now “antiquated relics” that have become part of a “shrine of memory.” In a moment of foreshadowing bordering on the comical Brontë writes “one would almost say that, if there were a ghost at Thornfield Hall, this would be its haunt” (Brontë 111). This “shrine”, the reader later finds, is also where Brontë has Rochester keep Bertha locked up, another relic of suppressed memory.

Whether the house is a shrine or a prison has yet to be discovered by Jane, but its gothic, almost funereal atmosphere is palpable. The house is a physical manifestation of generations of social conventions and appurtenances long forgotten, passed down through generations to its current proprietor, Mr. Rochester. It is clearly a house for a gentleman, a label that Brontë does not ascribe to Rochester. Critic Robert Kendrick refutes this depiction of Rochester as a traditional Victorian gentleman as well, saying “Brontë’s Edward Rochester, far from being a man who quite unproblematically occupies the position of Victorian patriarch...represents a man who is quite at odds with the dominant narrative of being an ‘English Gentleman’” (Kendrick 247). Rochester remains distant both physically and psychologically from Thornfield and all that it represents, choosing to detach himself from the societal and generational pressures and stigmas that it embodies. The estate represents a specific brand of power, specifically paternal, masculine wealth that was held by past generations of wealthy landowners by way of colonial British inheritance. Rochester, as Jane comes to find, does not subscribe to this type of power, but still remains entrapped by it through his possession of Thornfield.

When Jane first meets Rochester in person, her conception of his identity takes a further turn from Victorian standards when it expands to overlook his physicality as well. Rochester does not fit the traditionally handsome archetype of the Victorian bachelor in much the same way that Jane deviates from the quiet and submissive beauty of the Victorian heroine. Jane goes as far as to say “Had he been a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman, I should not have dared to stand thus questioning him against his will, and offering my services unasked” (Brontë 119). Curiously, though she has never before taken stock in physical appearance, it is only Rochester’s physical deviation from the traditional Victorian hero that allows her to approach him as an equal without fear of judgment, as she senses a sort of unspoken allegiance through their mutual lack of conformity to societal standards of beauty. She finds herself at ease as a result of his uneasy and disapproving gaze, quite possibly because this was the only side of men that she had grown accustomed to in her youth. Their encounter is also curious, as Gilbert and Gubar note, in that Jane is forced to assume the position of the traditional hero, helping Rochester back up onto his horse and inquiring about his safety (351-52). When she leaves Rochester on the side of the road, she does not yet know of his wealth or the social power that it entails and reflects not on his physical appearance but on the impact his disposition had on breaking the monotony of her day, a decidedly less romantic reflection.

It is not until Jane and Rochester have their first conversation --a moment that I will identify as the beginning of Jane’s metaphorical ‘sexual awakening’--that the deviation from traditional Victorian era society novels becomes obviously apparent. Initially, Jane feels inferior when she feels as though she is expected to interact with Rochester in a socially conventional way; “her meager provisions in feminine apparel prove problematic when she is summoned to meet Rochester officially at Thornfield”(Kendrick 858). Her first responses to him are polite and

rehearsed, adhering strictly to the conventions of the time; she demonstrates the “humility” impressed upon her at Lowood and is immediately rebuked by Rochester: “Oh, don’t fall back on over-modesty!” (Brontë 128). Rochester is just as disinterested in social niceties as Jane is, though social status and his position as a dominant male figure requires him to be the one to state it outwardly to set the tone for their discourse. Rochester is the first masculine figure that Jane encounters who does not immediately attempt to take away her power of speech in order to assert his dominance over her. Instead, he attempts to “draw her out,” refusing to let her fall back into the submissive feminine humility she was schooled to perform.

Jane takes this admonition with relief and begins to respond to him on a personal level and as an equal rather than through the language and strictures set about by social convention. She addresses him frankly and honestly, almost to the point of offense at times. However, rather than being offended, Rochester seems to find Jane’s honest perspective refreshing. He often remarks that her work and perspectives are “for a school-girl, peculiar,” noting that she expresses herself in a manner that seems to contradict the stringent education she spent her formative years receiving. As their conversations progress and they begin to feel more at ease around each other, a distinctive shift occurs in the nature of their conversations. While their dialogue is primarily focused on social critique and philosophical ponderings, their repartee becomes decidedly flirtatious. The content of their discussions remains chaste, but the nature of their discussions turns into almost playful banter.

“And so you were waiting for your people when you sat on that stile? [...] for the men in green: it was a proper moonlight evening for them. Did I break through one of your rings, that you spread that damned ice on the causeway?”

I shook my head. “The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago,” said I, speaking as seriously as he had done. (Brontë 129)

This playful banter persists throughout the text; Rochester mocks Jane’s “otherworldly” nature and she replies with quick wit and good nature. This flirtatious, sexy dialogue not only serves as the foundation for social equality in their relationship, but it also acts as a form of subject building. Brontë uses dialogue as a substitute for sex in a way that creates a kind of subjectivity for the Victorian self.

As their “friendship” progresses, Rochester begins to call upon Jane more frequently, asking for her company under the pretense of a desire for stimulating conversation. “I’m not fond of the prattle of children,” he argues, “...nor do I particularly affect simpleminded old ladies...I am disposed to be gregarious and communicative tonight...it would please me to draw you out—to learn more of you—therefore speak” (Brontë 137). Despite his lack of interest in social conventions, Rochester still does implement his position of power over Jane to coerce her into conversing with him; as he is her “master” she is bound by good manners to engage him. However, the claim to power he feels that he has over her is not grounded in social standing but rather in the vast difference between their life experiences: “I do not wish to treat you like an inferior: that is (correcting himself), I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years’ difference in age” (Brontë 141). Throughout the novel this idea of “life experience” being worth more than social or economic status becomes a great equalizer between Jane and Rochester, for their desire for one another needs a bridge between their differences in order to be justified.

The Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs; and you fear in the presence of a man and a brother—or father, or master, or what you will—to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly: but, in time, I think you will learn to be natural with me, as I find it impossible to be conventional with you; and then your looks and movements will have more vivacity and variety than they dare offer now. I see at intervals the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage: a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high. (Brontë 147)

Rochester finds it “impossible to be conventional” with Jane, breaking the socially constructed barriers between master and servant to have such frank discussions with her. There is a sense that dialogue itself is subjected to a social hierarchy, that there are topics and manners of speech that are restricted to one class or between people of equal social standing. In this rather overtly sensual speech, Rochester is essentially propositioning Jane, offering to help her be more open and “natural” with him, to be uninhibited and to reject the idea of stratified discourse.

When he commands Jane to converse with him she remarks “Very few masters would trouble themselves to inquire whether or not their paid subordinates were piqued and hurt by their orders” (Brontë 142). Rochester attempts to play this off coyly, exclaiming “What! You are my paid subordinate, are you? Oh yes, I had forgotten the salary!” While Rochester often reaps the benefits that his social and economic wealth allows him in gaining the upper hand over Jane, he never seeks to do so intentionally. This gap, however, is a significant factor in keeping Jane from even considering Rochester to truly be her equal; though she can overlook his wealth to see into his spirit, she cannot bring herself to actually claim it until much later, when he physically

loses his wealth. This is because Jane values freedom above all else, and wealth, specifically wealth in the hands of powerful men, has been used so often as a cage barring her from freedom. To marry Rochester when they were unequally matched financially would be a submission to the power of his estate and all its history of bigotry, though it was not a power he consciously wielded against her.

However, rather than feeling confined or restricted, Jane finds a degree of freedom in expressing herself through her discourse with Rochester. In refusing to submit to the constraints of stratified dialogue and by continuing to engage in this suggestive dialogue with Rochester, Jane obtains a degree of freedom that is comparable to a kind of deviant sexuality. She develops a sense of subjectivity, and it is clear that Rochester views this discourse as a social equalizer.

That is not to say that Rochester has never before exercised the power of his estate, or more specifically, his familial name and wealth. Rochester admits to having used his wealth and social standing to seduce Celine Varens and we can assume that his marriage to Bertha Mason was arranged as a result of his name as well. In both prior instances, Rochester was deceived and manipulated cruelly, making his reluctance to use this power against Jane understandable in his pursuit of a true and honest relationship with her. However, Rochester is unable to fully conceal his dark past from Jane. In attempting to exert power through experience, rather than wealth, he is forced to draw upon these negative sexual experiences, which also serve to isolate Jane.

Whenever their conversations steer towards physicality or to the vague “pleasures” that Rochester often alludes to, the two become far less personal in their repartee and distance themselves until they retreat into the safety of formalities. Rochester repeatedly steers their playful banter into these darker, more sensual territories, almost a form of verbal foreplay. After

Rochester begins remarking about vague “sweet, fresh pleasures” that he is willing to get “cost what it may” (perhaps foreshadowing the loss of his home and wealth in order to legitimately pursue her) Jane retreats into formalities to avoid the discussion that is rapidly becoming more sensual and worldly than she is equipped to discuss. She replies “To speak the truth, sir, I don’t understand you at all; I cannot keep up the conversation, because it has got out of my depth” (Brontë 145). While Jane finds enjoyment in engaging frankly and honestly with Rochester, when the conversation steers towards things that she is unfamiliar or inexperienced with, namely sexuality and “pleasures,” she begins to feel inferior under the power of experience that he exudes and retreats back into the humility she was conditioned to express.

Sinclair also addresses these “pleasures” that Rochester so cryptically references, though she chooses to address them more directly. Sinclair’s Jane responds to these references, reflecting:

He was right of course. I had never tasted the life of which he spoke. I wished I had the courage to tell him that I secretly yearned for the kind of experience of which he intimated. That to indulge in sweet, fresh pleasure was a desire I harbored at the core of my soul. But something more than that, too, pricked at my conscience., counterbalancing my inner thoughts with my outer appearance. I could not condone his indulgence in sweet fresh pleasure, if by that, he meant sweet fresh girls...I was unsure as to why the thought of his desire for pleasure elsewhere bothered me so. (Sinclair 73)

In Brontë’s text, we see Jane retreat in response to Rochester’s musings of his desire for pleasure, while Sinclair’s Jane not only seems to understand this desire but admits to sharing it

and feeling envious that he would seek this pleasure “elsewhere.” While this dialogue serves as a metaphorical sexual awakening in Bronte’s text, it is a literal sexual awakening in Sinclair’s. Whereas Bronte’s Jane admits only vaguely to confusion and curiosity after her conversations with Rochester, Sinclair’s Jane retreats back to her chambers where she fantasizes about the “pleasures” that Rochester has unburdened on her. In a way, the sexual awakening that Sinclair’s Jane is undergoing is more personal and independent of her relationship with Rochester; she seems to simply draw upon his stories for her own use and pleasure. After hearing of Rochester’s encounters with Celine Varens, Jane confesses, “Now that I was alone...I fell upon the details of the tale Mr. Rochester had told me and devoured them... I relived his grand passion, fleshing out his affair with the great French beauty” (Sinclair 88). She “fleshes out” his details to a point where she makes them even more risqué, wondering “What if Celine Varens, skilled seductress as she was, had managed to soothe this Mr. Rochester of my fantasy and had entreated him to join her and the officer on her bed?” (Sinclair 90). This sexual fantasizing comes as a stark contrast to Bronte’s Jane who simply leaves the conversation, “deeming it useless to continue a discourse that was all darkness to me; and besides, sensible that the character of my interlocutor was beyond my penetration, at least, beyond its present reach; and feeling the uncertainty, the vague sense of insecurity, which accompanies a conviction of ignorance” (Bronte 146). Bronte’s Jane confesses to feeling a sense of insecurity at her level of ignorance on the topic of pleasure, though Bronte’s diction here, with its references to discourse being beyond Jane’s *present* “penetration”, seems to argue that it is an ignorance that she would also like to remedy.

Above all else, Jane’s relationship with Rochester is based upon honesty and frankness, which benefits Rochester more so than Jane as he is the one with the “experiences” to be shared. Jane has very little to be honest about, save her reactions and commentary on Rochester’s

exploits. He is open with Jane about his conquests and about Adele's relation to him, as he knows that Jane will not judge his character according to traditional societal standards of what a gentleman should be. Instead, Jane views Rochester as a victim of circumstances from which she believes he can rise and better himself not for society's sake but for his own piece of mind.

Yet I had not forgotten his faults; indeed, I could not, for he brought them frequently before me. He was proud, sardonic, harsh to inferiority of every description: in my secret soul I knew that his great kindness to me was balanced by unjust severity to many others...but I believed that his moodiness, his harshness, and his former faults of morality (I say former, for now he seemed corrected of them) had their source in some cruel cross of fate. I believed he was naturally a man of better tendencies, higher principles, and purer tastes than such as circumstances had developed, education instilled, or destiny encouraged. I thought there were excellent materials in him; though for the present they hung together somewhat spoiled and tangled. I cannot deny that I grieved for his grief, whatever that was, and would have given much to assuage it. (Brontë 155)

Just as Jane herself is a victim of circumstance, shaped by her time spent at Lowood and the Reed home, she believes that Rochester is simply a victim of his past exploits. In a way, Jane romanticizes Rochester in a way that could present him almost as a traditional Victorian hero, though she is aware that her impression of him is heavily influenced by their personal relationship. She takes it upon herself to fix him, to "assuage" his hedonistic tendencies with her feminine humility, effectively hoping to quell his defensive hyper-masculinity with her habituated performance of femininity.

Because their ability to speak so candidly with each other is the great equalizer in their relationship, Rochester's deception—his hiding of Bertha in the attic—comes as an incredible shock to Jane and creates an imbalance in their relationship once again: “Oh, never more could I turn to him; for faith was blighted—confidence destroyed! Mr. Rochester was not to me what he had been; for he was not what I had thought him. I would not ascribe vice to him; I would not say he had betrayed me; but the attribute of stainless truth was gone from his idea” (Brontë 319). Though Rochester had always claimed to want Jane to express her freedom and “uncage” herself, he now strives to keep her with him and to force her to share in the cage that Thornfield and Bertha are for him. In his desperation and rage he becomes quite like John Reed and Brocklehurst, talking down to her and attempting to take away her freedom in order to maintain his masculine power. He reverts back to conventional language, “Jane, you understand what I want of you? Just this promise—‘I will be yours, Mr. Rochester.’” Jane responds back sharply “Mr. Rochester, I will *not* be yours” as he has abandoned the language of equality and mutual respect in favor of invoking masculine ownership and power over her to prevent her from exercising her freedom. Though she does not deny that she does still love Rochester, the gap in equality and experience is no longer one that she can bridge.

Seeing Bertha solidifies Jane's deep seeded fear of allowing herself to be dominated by love. Earlier in the novel, after first realizing her feelings for Rochester, Jane warns herself “Look on your own accursed senselessness! It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them, which , if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it” (Brontë 170). Now having borne witness to this exact “madness” in Bertha, Jane has essentially

looked into the eyes of her foil, of the woman she could be if she allows herself to fall into a position of submission to Rochester in any form, even as his wife and even as his equal.

Bertha Mason, whose backstory we learn only through Rochester's stories of questionable reliability, presents us with a curious image of absolute repression combined with absolute freedom. She is wild and uninhibited, "whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered in clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (Bronte 316). Bertha is clearly free from any social anxieties or pressures, as she is more animal than human in her behavior and dress. However, she is confined and trapped up in the attic, stripped of all personal freedoms and autonomy, treated like an animal as well. She has, which is likely terrifying to Jane, no power of speech. Unable to articulate her thoughts or feelings, she simply growls and lashes out physically, attacking Rochester with an almost masculine "virile force" (Bronte 316).

Rochester compares Jane and Bertha as binary figures: "That is *my wife*...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...this young girl who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon" (Bronte 317). However, Jane and Bertha are not quite as dissimilar as Rochester would hope. Jane herself had once been locked away like Bertha in the Red Room in the Reed estate for her own impassioned refusal to submit to masculine power. She has had her own powers of speech and her ability to interact with others restricted by patriarchal force of Mr. Brocklehurst at Lowood. Bertha is not only a predictive image of what Jane could become, but a glaring reminder of the demons of Jane's own past.

Perhaps the most significant change in Sinclair's adaptation is the presentation of Bertha, who is not a madwoman, but instead a dominatrix. Bertha lives in a richly decorated BDSM-style chamber in the attic where there is "an array of leather objects—mask and whips and manacles such as I had never seen" (Sinclair 37). While Bronte's Bertha was herself restrained in the corner, it seems that Sinclair's Bertha is the one who does the tying up.

She was attired in a red dress...her dark hair was curled and piled up on her head. In her hand, she carried a riding crop...I had never seen a woman dressed like her, or beheld one with such a self-confident air. Her green eyes were outlined in thick black kohl, her dark cheeks rouged with a soft pink and her full, sensual lips stained red...I shrank away from her gaze as she looked on me and smiled. (Sinclair 308)

The "madness" of Sinclair's Bertha comes from her overt sexuality, which is as foreign and frightening to Sinclair's Jane as Bertha's madness had been to Bronte's. In the erotic text it is not simply Rochester's lies that severs his connection to Jane, but his willingness to submit to Bertha's domineering, which is a perversion of all that Jane has grown to know about sex and pleasure. Bertha speaks clearly and confidently:

'Did you think you could escape me, Edward?' she asked. She had a strange voice—a foreign, exotic accent. She put the riding crop underneath his chin, forcing him to look at her. Her eyes flashed devilishly at him. She clicked her tongue in disapproval. 'I was only going to travel with her for a while,' Mr. Rochester said, but he didn't sound like my Mr. Rochester. His voice had changed and I saw then that all his manliness had

gone from him and he stood before the woman like an apologetic schoolboy. (Sinclair 308)

Before Jane has a chance to fully acclimate herself to this emasculated view of Rochester, she is faced with another shock; Bertha remarks “I told you to train her, to strip her of her innocence, to make her pliant and bring her to me so that I might then set about her education as well” (Sinclair 308). Jane comes to find that Rochester’s seduction of her had been entirely directed by Bertha, who longed for a “fairer companion” to dominate. Jane flees after seeing Rochester fall to his knees, begging to be punished by Bertha. Just as Bronte’s Jane was aghast at the thought of “living in sin” with Rochester and having her freedom restricted, Sinclair’s Jane is revolted by the idea of being “trained like a dog” and submitting her personal and sexual freedom not only to Rochester but to Bertha as well.

When Jane goes to live with St. John, however, she is exposed once again to the domineering and tyrannical masculinity that she had seen before in John Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst. Though he is not prone to the violent outbursts of John or the hypocrisies of Brocklehurst, St. John still seeks to restrict Jane’s freedom, through the institution of marriage. While he is socially and economically her equal, he treats her as an inferior based on her gender and his claim to divinity through the church. While their life together would be stable and arguably content, Jane feels no passion for St. John, whose constant references to her as a “partner” and “sister” effectively sterilized their relationship of any potential passion and any sort of personal freedom.

While Jane lives free from the pressures of Thornfield with St. John at Marsh End, she still lives without complete freedom, going by the name of “Jane Elliott” and still living under

the influence and direction of a dominating male figure. Though she is now working in her dream job of running a small schoolhouse that she articulated to Rochester as the gypsy earlier in the novel, she is not doing so on her own terms and so it quickly loses its appeal. She receives her means of escape in the form of her inheritance, which allows her to not only break free from St. John without regret but to finally claim agency over her own person completely for the first time. “I broke from St. John...it was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play and in force” (Brontë 456). Jane leaves Marsh End fully intent on rekindling her relationship with Rochester, but this time on her own terms.

Brontë ends her novel with Jane returning to Rochester as an emotionally and financially independent woman. She allows herself to return to him only once she has gained this personal agency as not to compromise her principles and dignity. While some critics have argued that Brontë’s ending conforms to Victorian standards in a way that undermines her progressivism, I would argue just the opposite. Though she does “submit” to a socially acceptable position as a wife and mother, it was self-submission; she was not coerced or influenced by anything other than self-efficacy.

Curiously, Sinclair chooses to end her story quite a bit sooner. After finding out about Rochester’s secret dominatrix bride, Sinclair’s Jane leaves him...and the book ends. Brontë’s infamous line, “Reader, I married him” (the active, declarative nature of which I believe refutes any critical claims of submission or conformity) is replaced instead with the parting line “Reader, I left him” (Sinclair 322). Though Brontë and Sinclair chose to end their works in dramatically different places, in a way, they both leave Jane in the same position. After experiencing life, fighting to overcome the social and sexual powers imposed upon her by the patriarchal forces of masculinity, and becoming financially and socially independent, in the end

of both novels, Jane is finally free; a “free human being with an independent will” who chooses to live her life according to her own principles, beliefs, and intuitions rather than the ones thrust upon her by society, by religion, and by the men who seek to silence her.

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