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Charlotte Brontë's Other Belgian Novel: Sex, the Foreign Body,
and the Legacy of Brussels in *Jane Eyre*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Department from
The College of William and Mary

by

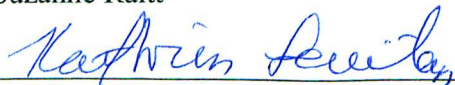
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Introduction

“This weakness of sight is a terrible privation for me—without it, do you know what I would do, Monsieur?—I would write a book and I would dedicate it to my literature master—to the only master that I have ever had—to you Monsieur.”

Letter to Constantin Héger, 24 July 1844

On New Year’s Day in 1844, Charlotte Brontë returned to Haworth, Yorkshire from her two-year sojourn on the Continent in Brussels, Belgium. The 27 year-old Englishwoman had never visited Europe before, and she arrived home with not only a profound international perspective, but also a freshly invigorated passion and dedication to become a novelist. Her first attempt at a novel, *The Professor*, was refused for publication in 1847, despite Emily and Anne Brontë’s success in publishing *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* respectively. Charlotte not only gave *The Professor* a title inspired by her Brussels teacher Monsieur Constantin Héger, but she also set the novel unmistakably in the Belgian capital city from which she returned a few years prior. Her retrospective incorporation of the Belgian setting into her novels would continue into the last years of her life with the publication of *Villette* in 1853. In the center of this timeline, *Shirley* was published in 1849 as Charlotte’s brief exercise with crafting a story from the regional setting, characters, and dialect of her Yorkshire home. Although *The Professor* was denied in 1847 and only published posthumously ten years later, Charlotte Brontë finally did become a published novelist later that year with her most recent work that solidified her fame and talent. This novel was *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, published under the pseudonym Currer Bell on October 16th, 1847, a few months after *The Professor*’s rejection. In this thesis, I first of all argue that this close chronological relationship between the openly autobiographical, Belgium-inspired *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre* shows that Charlotte’s time in Brussels remained a source of inspiration and epiphany for her later novel, despite its English setting and apparent separation from any European or Belgian context.

The majority of critical scholarship has focused on how Charlotte's time in Brussels affects *The Professor* and *Villette*, which are classified as the two "Belgian" novels¹. Since both novels take place in Brussels, critics may compare the experiences of *The Professor's* narrator William Crimsworth and *Villette's* narrator Lucy Snowe to Charlotte's own reaction to and account of the European city. I have chosen to extend this connection between biography and novel through my focus only on *Jane Eyre*, the book that is least studied in the context of Charlotte's Belgian experience from 1842 to 1844. The central thrust of my thesis concerns how Brussels inflects Charlotte's most popular novel; however, I do make reference to the two Belgian novels in order to provide the necessary context for her entire body of work.

In this thesis, I have chosen to focus only on Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre* rather than incorporate discussions of all three Brontë sisters and a subset of their novels. Much criticism seeks to comprehend the entire Brontë family collectively, especially in the "Brontë myth" format.² My decision to deviate from this template is based on a recurring theme of my thesis, that Charlotte's outlook on the world incorporated an international and cosmopolitan perspective, despite the common regional roots shared by all three sisters. While Emily did go to Belgium with Charlotte, she only stayed for the first year before returning to Haworth and her pleasure in housekeeping for their father, Patrick. Unlike Charlotte, Emily strongly defended her English customs and habits in response to the European culture shock. As a result, she came back to Yorkshire with an increased sense of the value of her regional homeland that she would celebrate and immortalize in *Wuthering Heights*. Anne Brontë, unfortunately, never visited the Continent. I thus argue that both Emily's and Anne's novels exist in a separate category from the cosmopolitanism and expression of European sexual development that infiltrates *Jane Eyre*, *The*

¹ For example, see Rebecca Fraser, "Monsieur Héger"; Sharon Yorston, "From Girl to Woman"; and Sue Lonoff, "The Three Faces of Constantin Héger."

² See Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2001.

Professor, and *Villette*. This specification leads to the question of why I have chosen not to discuss *Shirley* in length, the novel that is arguably her most regional and English story. In my wish to study Charlotte's emotional and sexual development in Brussels, I discuss the novel that best foregrounds the relationship between her and Constantin Héger. While *Shirley* serves to underline the significance of regionalism in Charlotte's writing, *Jane Eyre* best exhibits the psychological components of themes such as sexuality and the body, which I argue originate from Charlotte's personal experiences and sexual evolution while at the Pensionnat Héger.

I have divided my thesis into three central chapters—Sexuality and the Female Body, the Regional and the Cosmopolitan Vision, and Imperialism and Colonialism. My discussions of sexuality and the body are contained in the first half of my thesis. I first present an introduction to the chapter, and then provide brief historical context to Brussels, Belgium in the 1840s as well as the origins of the Héger family. I then analyze the female body's maturation from adolescence to womanhood in the red room of *Jane Eyre*; the evidence of female masturbation both in the novel and in Brussels; and both Jane and Charlotte's relationship of their bodies to Victorian society. My thesis then transitions into the discussion of regionalism and cosmopolitanism in both Jane and Charlotte's experiences. I first analyze the city of London as the metropolitan middle-ground between regionalism and cosmopolitanism, then look at the artificiality of masks and false identities, and conclude with an analysis of the questionable masculinity of both Edward Rochester and Constantin Héger. To conclude, I devote an entire section to imperialism, colonialism, and the depictions of Bertha/Antoinette Mason Rochester in both Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, as well as discuss Charlotte's novel through a postcolonial context that originated with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's germinal work in the field.³ As I will discuss

³ In his article "Incongruous Unions," Carl Plasa highlights Spivak's "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" as the "catalyst to the postcolonial reassessment of Brontë" (xi). While I will not

in depth, I synthesize the three sections through my viewing of the body as geographical territory, beginning with an exploration of how Charlotte constructs and depicts female sexuality and women's bodies in *Jane Eyre*.

discuss Spivak at length, my chapter on imperialism does address and extend many of the discussions begun by both Spivak and Plasa.

Chapter I: Victorian Sexuality and the Female Body in *Jane Eyre* and Brussels

“Sex, that most powerful, most self-evidently real of non-verbal experiences, becomes something else again when we try to talk or write about it. It becomes, of course, language.”

John Maynard, “Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality,” Preface, vii

In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, the young governess recounts a dream that she has to her master and fiancé Edward Rochester:

I was following the windings of an unknown road...I was burdened with the charge of a little child; a very small creature, too young and feeble to walk, and which shivered in my cold arms....I thought, sir, that you were on the road a long way before me....

Wrapped up in a shawl, I still carried the unknown little child; I might not lay it down anywhere; however tired were my arms—however much its weight impeded my progress, I must retain it. I heard the gallop of a horse at a distance on the road; I was sure it was you; and you were departing for many years, and for a distant country. (240-241)⁴

In this dream Jane depicts how as she moves toward Rochester, she lacks the mental and physical strength to stop him from retreating on his horse. He eventually disappears from view at the same moment that she drops the “unknown child” and falls from the “dreary ruin” of Thornfield Hall.

In their much-debated feminist work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar present the germinal reading of this scene in which they attest that “it seems clear that the wailing child...corresponds to ‘the poor orphan child’ of Bessie’s song at Gateshead, and therefore to the child Jane herself.”⁵ However, I argue that it is important to expand such critical interpretations by studying the novel through the historical context of Charlotte’s years in Belgium. Gilbert and Gubar chose instead to focus on their feminist reading without mentioning any biographical components, and they are not singular in their de-emphasis of Belgium. A recent critic, Carl Plasa, who concentrates on imperialism, also does not bring up the question of

⁴ All citations are from the following edition: *Jane Eyre: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001.

⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 358.

Belgium's influence on *Jane Eyre*. Although he states that a postcolonial reading of her works should be extended "in order to bring...the genealogy of her colonial imagination into clearer focus," Plasa never includes Belgian culture as an element of this "colonial imagination."⁶ Yet her experience in Belgium should be viewed as critically informative, for at the Pensionnat Héger, the eldest Brontë first experienced love and erotic attraction that created the emotional cornerstone for her novels.

During her time on the Continent, Charlotte lived under the same roof as an epitome of motherhood and feminine sexual power in the form of the Pensionnat's headmistress, Madame Héger. Charlotte's professor Constantin Héger was a happily married man when she fell in love with him, and so this denial of her maternal desire infuses into *Jane Eyre*'s dream sequence written only five years later. In this span of time Charlotte also composed four letters to her beloved professor that, like her feelings for him, remained unanswered. As the passage from the dream implies, Charlotte portrays Jane as a prospective mother whose fertility and maternal potential through the unknown child are thwarted. The dream-Rochester ignores her presence by riding away, which seems to bar Jane from fulfilling herself as a physical, sexual, and reproductive woman in the domestic space of Thornfield.

Jane's dream represents the yet untapped and equally significant interpretation of *Jane Eyre* that can only be recognized by viewing the novel through a Belgian context. Through this passage, I argue that Charlotte translates the emotional, psychological, and sexual impact that Brussels excited within her into the novel's language. As has been mentioned, Charlotte situates *Jane Eyre* in relation to and as a creative result of her Belgian experience through: the work's

⁶ Plasa, "Incongruous Unions," x.

themes of female and male sexuality, Jane's yearning for maternity, female masturbation, the interrelationship of regionalism and cosmopolitanism, and the imperialism question in the novel.

In this thesis, the point of connection between such diverse themes is the body, specifically Charlotte's depiction of the body as geographical territory. In order to explain my connection of the human body to geography, I use the model of the Regional English body of Charlotte/Jane, the Continental body of Constantin/Rochester, and the Foreign body of Madame Héger/Bertha Rochester. The intent of this model is to draw out the interrelationship between discussing sex and the body on one hand, and discussing regionalism, cosmopolitanism, and imperialism on the other hand. As will be discussed, in *Jane Eyre* all three themes relate and coincide, such as through the play between sexual dominance and physical submission in the novel's imperialist rhetoric.

Critics who overemphasize the emotional and intellectual attachment between Charlotte and Constantin often disregard the presence of sexuality altogether. In addition, through my addressing of the geographical setting of *Jane Eyre*, the question arises over the novel's precarious relationship to regionalism and cosmopolitanism. What does it mean that Charlotte chose to set *Jane Eyre* in England? Was it a defense mechanism to separate herself from the heartbreak of Constantin and a yearning to reunite with her English roots? It seems just as important to ask why *Jane Eyre* is *not* set in Belgium, as it is to discuss why *The Professor* and *Villette* are. Through this narrative tension between English setting and Belgian subtexts, Charlotte comments on the conflict of the regional and cosmopolitan dichotomy. I argue that because Charlotte's sexual awakening took place in Brussels, *Jane Eyre*'s erotically charged language echoes her Belgian experiences, which implies the symbolic presence of this foreign country even in such an "English" novel.

The Context of Brussels, Belgium and the Hégers in 1842-1844

“Belgium! name unromantic and unpoetic, yet name that whenever uttered has in my ear a sound, in my heart an echo....It stirs my world of the past like a summons to resurrection; the graves unclose, the dead are raised...”

The Professor, Ch. 7

One can only imagine how powerful and affecting the experience that was to follow her arrival in Brussels must have been to Charlotte, a 26 year-old Englishwoman. As Pieter Francois explains, Belgium “was increasingly viewed as a ‘little Britain on the continent’” and as “the loyal and grateful disciple of Britain,” and Charlotte at first did experience excitement and animation toward Belgium.⁷ Rebecca Fraser goes so far as to remark that for Charlotte, the foreign people and language of Belgium “gave the whole country the novel atmosphere of a fairy-tale.”⁸ Charlotte’s purpose for travelling abroad was to acquire accomplishments in order for her and her sisters to open a school in Haworth, and so the prospect of moving from stagnation and isolation into a self-sufficient lifestyle would have indeed seemed like a fairy-tale. In a letter to her close friend Ellen Nussey before their departure, she relates how “a fire was kindled in my very heart which I would not quench—I so longed to increase my attainments to become something better than I am...I longed to go to Brussels.”⁹ In these early months, Brussels came to represent both her opportunity to mingle with individuals “far more improving, polished, and cultivated, than any I have yet known,” as well as the promise of future prosperity and independence for the entire Brontë family (Smith 268).

Yet Brussels, Belgium was certainly not the most obvious location for her achievement of self-expression, especially as the cultural affinity between Britain and Belgium began to

⁷ Francois, “Belgium - country of liberals, Protestants and the free,” 664. See his entire meticulous study for a full picture of Belgian history during this time.

⁸ Fraser, *Charlotte Brontë*, 155.

⁹ Smith, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 271-272. All epistolary citations are from Volume One unless otherwise indicated.

deteriorate in the 1840s. Europe itself was stereotypically seen as a “dark and Catholic place, closely associated with ignorance, poverty and superstition” while England was synonymous with “constitutionalism, political freedom, Protestantism, rationalism, enlightenment and prosperity” (Francois 669). Surely these ideological contrasts could not have been far from Charlotte’s understanding when she first stepped onto the streets of Brussels on a February night in 1842. They would come to play an enormous role in her struggle to connect her nationality, religion, and personal integrity to the troubled environment that surrounded her.

At the center of this environment was the boarding-and-day school for girls, the Pensionnat Héger. The Héger family had come into ownership of the school after the Belgian Revolution in 1830, and at the head of the family was Monsieur Constantin Héger, a professor at the adjoining school for boys and an influential member of Brussels society. However, the axis of the Pensionnat’s power and success lay with Madame Claire Zoë Parent Héger. When Charlotte arrived, the Hégers had been married for six years and had produced three children, despite the five-year age gap between Constantin who was 32 and Madame Héger who was 37. Madame would give birth to two more children while Charlotte was in residence, and as Gérin implies, the Pensionnat was thus a “predominantly domestic atmosphere” severely different “from any educational establishment [she] had previously known” (190).

The most significant symbol of an English female educator with whom Charlotte was familiar was Mrs. Wooler of Roe Head in Yorkshire. Charlotte had lived at Roe Head first as a student from 1831 to 1833 and later as a teacher between 1835 and 1838, and for her Mrs. Wooler would have epitomized the unmarried, sexually inactive school headmistress to which Madame Héger was a marked contrast. The Pensionnat blurred the boundaries between the private sphere of conjugal sexuality and the public sphere of education. Madame’s pregnant body

stood as a testimony to the divide between Englishness and foreignness in relation to the female ideal; this difference is illustrated in the fact that “the school’s principal was a married and not a maiden lady [such as Mrs. Wooler]...with a constant increase in family to attest to the fact” (Gérin 189).

The Pensionnat boasted a rare and sumptuous garden in the middle of a lively city that Charlotte would describe not only in her two Belgian novels, but also in *Jane Eyre*. As Fraser details, the garden’s “magnificent, ancient pear trees...were famed throughout Belgium for their massive snowy blossom and magnificent fruit” (158). However, this exuberance was countered by more Romantic features such as hidden walkways that “produced a feeling of deep seclusion that strongly appealed to Charlotte” (Fraser 158). The Pensionnat garden also contained an “allée défendue” or a forbidden passageway, so called because it separated the girls’ school from the boys’; although this section of the garden was not the most favoured, “it acquired an air of mystery because it was forbidden.”¹⁰

Such a location with trees unfolding hidden paths and an overall sense of seclusion from the outside world resonates with similarity to Jane’s description of the grounds at Thornfield Hall. Charlotte portrays how the hills surrounding Rochester’s mansion were “quiet and lonely hills enough, and seeming to embrace Thornfield with a seclusion I had not expected to find existent so near the stirring locality of Millcote” (84). The contrast between bustling Millcote and secluded Thornfield correlates to the relationship between the city of Brussels and the Pensionnat garden that was Charlotte’s “haven of peace and rest in the noisy bustle of school life” (Barker 379). The Pensionnat garden, thus, transforms into a descriptive prototype for the grounds of Thornfield. Yet as Jane’s narrative unfolds, Charlotte transforms Thornfield’s

¹⁰ Barker, *The Brontës*, 380.

apparently solitary orchard and garden into a battleground for the electrifying confrontation between Jane and Rochester in the proposal scene. Charlotte's connection of the two horticultural environments implies that a similar emotional and psychological upheaval happened to Charlotte in the Pensionnat garden even while she was alone, inspiring her conception of a garden meeting between a gentleman and a governess.

However, while Jane and Rochester enjoy the security of mutual love for one another, Charlotte's affections arose from an unattainable source in the figure of her professor, Constantin Héger. While he was at times angry and vehement in his demands for obedience from his students, Constantin also translated his role as *pere de famille* into his career, playing a "quasi-fatherly role in the school...[which] encouraged the sort of intimate paternal relationship which he liked to establish with pupils outside the classroom" (Fraser 162). In this first year, the connection between Constantin and Charlotte surely did seem to be purely paternal and academic; he recognized the greatness and uniqueness of both Brontës' intellects, and provided them with private lessons. Charlotte embraced his teachings and companionship with intensity despite his passion for Catholicism, and after a short and compulsory return to England, she wholeheartedly wished to go back. In the context of her Yorkshire upbringing, this was the first time in Charlotte's life that "someone outside her family, capable of informed judgement and himself of an intellect equal, if not superior, to her own, had recognized and encouraged her talent" (Barker 413-4). Charlotte had found her niche in which she could earn a honourable living and make herself useful while avoiding the humiliations of a governess' lifestyle.¹¹ She

¹¹ In her 1857 germinal biography, Elizabeth Gaskell enunciates Charlotte's natural unsuitability for the career path of a governess thus: "No doubt, all who enter upon the career of a governess have to relinquish much; no doubt, it must ever be a life of sacrifice; but to Charlotte Brontë it was a perpetual attempt to force all her faculties into a direction for which the whole of her previous life had unfitted them" (149).

was unaware of how vastly her psychological surface would be disrupted by the development of complex emotions and newfound sexual passion within her in the following year.

In the inquisitive, academically fervent, and knowledge-hungry mind of Constantin Héger, Charlotte had found her equal. Yet she was also a woman whose “soul glowed in her eyes and whose suffering cried out even through tight-shut lips” (Gérin 233), and Madame Héger noticed these signs of Charlotte’s love for her husband that threw into sharp relief the characteristic difference between the two women. Madame embodied a female of distinct beauty, whose ever-pregnant body was symbolic of her conjugal and maternal fulfillment; on the other hand, in the eyes of Madame “to whom being a mother was the greatest of human roles, Charlotte was an incomprehensible being” (Fraser 194). The most widely accepted critical view of Charlotte’s psychological turmoil in Brussels is that it was entirely based on her intellectual and emotional connection to Constantin, which was too close for comfort from Madame’s perspective. However, the physical and sexual disparity between the two women, one a confident, successful, well-endowed, and sexually fulfilled wife and mother, the other a demure, unsocial, bookish, fragile, and emotionally unstable virgin, seems all too clear.

In my understanding of Charlotte’s time in Brussels, I deviate from the traditional scholarly view. Despite the influence of her definitive biography on Brontë scholarship, Juliet Barker neglects to mention Charlotte’s sexual awakening, saying only that “[t]he experiences of the last two years, both intellectually and emotionally, had marked her for life” (427). In the same vein Gérin states how her “perceptions...were heightened to their fullest capacity by the struggle going on in her soul” (239), but never pinpoints exactly what that struggle is or the precise nature of those perceptions. Yet Gérin does imply that Charlotte could not mentally cope with the image of Constantin as a husband and father in that the mere “sight of his absorption in

family-life could rouse feelings so rebellious and searing that she would rather endure loneliness” (227). Charlotte’s incommunicable yearnings and desires for emotional companionship, sexual knowledge, maternal satisfaction, and love between spiritual and intellectual equals, are the defining tropes of Jane Eyre’s narrative. Charlotte’s creation of the novel ensured that her memories of Brussels and the most significant experience of her life between 1842 and 1844 would be immortalized in ink.

The Maturing Female Body in the Red Room of *Jane Eyre*

“But when one does not complain, and when one wants to master oneself with a tyrant’s grip—one’s faculties rise in revolt—and one pays for outward calm by an almost unbearable inner struggle...”

Letter to Constantin Héger, 8 January 1845

The “red room” at Gateshead, the home of the Jane’s aunt and cousins, contains sexual associations with the female body by its name alone, and in the scene Charlotte uses sexual language to affirm her narrative structure and characterization of Jane. Several details imply that the red room is not simply Jane’s confrontation with her sexuality; rather, the scene stands for her overdue recognition of how blind and unaware she has been regarding her growth as a sexual woman with a physical existence. This lack of connection between Jane’s identity and her own body mirrors Charlotte’s own intensely physical experience while in Brussels.

Charlotte describes the red room in enormous detail:

The red-room was a spare chamber, very seldom slept in; yet it was one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion.... [T]he two large windows, with their blinds always drawn down, were half shrouded in festoons and falls of similar drapery; the carpet was red... (10)

In this symbolically charged scene Charlotte presents the “two large windows” as substitutes for Jane’s eyes, specifically her inner sight into her character and consciousness. Both Jane’s mind and the windows have been covered “with their blinds always drawn down,” representing the

fact that Jane's potential for sexual awareness and capacity for perceiving her own identity have been shrouded. Furthermore, Charlotte describes the red room as "one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion" that yet was "very seldom slept in." This room reflects the paradoxical dynamic that while Jane and Charlotte yearn for sexual knowledge, both women also literally and figuratively refuse to be "slept in." Charlotte furthers this metaphor by qualifying the red room as "chill, because it seldom had a fire...silent, become remote from the nursery and kitchens; solemn, because it was known to be so seldom entered"; the red room defines Jane's sexual awareness as a cold, quiet, and solitary place separated from the mansion's locations of infancy and youth (11).

In Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation, this scene ironically stands for both Jane's individual psychology as well as the whole of Victorian female society. Yet Plasa retorts that such a claim "performs a kind of racial legerdemain, by which a female narrative of oppression and resistance which is distinctively English (and for the most part lower middle class) becomes silently representative of [Victorian] women's experience as a whole" regardless of class or race" (80). In any case, Gilbert and Gubar argue that the red room "perfectly represents [Jane's] vision of the society in which she is trapped, an uneasy and elfin dependent" and that "the spirit of society in which Jane has no clear place sharpens the angles of the furniture, enlarges the shadows, [and] strengthens the locks on the doors" (340). In their argument, the red room's status as a prison not only reflects Jane's confined childhood as an orphan and dependent, but also foreshadows her future struggles in patriarchal society as an adult woman. However, this solitary space within the cruel environment of Gateshead more significantly presents a sanctuary to Jane, almost an Eden in which, like Eve, she fears to pluck fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. It is only in the red room that Jane can and must confront her fear of the unknown regarding her

burgeoning sexuality; only through this experience, only through acknowledging the sexual energies within her, can Jane come to understand herself on the physical level.

The red room's "great looking-glass" encapsulates one of the central themes of my thesis, which is the duality between physicality and spirituality through corporeal/ethereal relationships to one's environment. Out of the vastness of the red room hangs a mirror in which Jane catches her reflection and her "fascinated glance involuntarily explore[s] the depth it revealed" (11). She explains what this "depth" is as she continues: "All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality; and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit" (11). The "depth" of the mirror signifies Jane's own sexuality in its truest form as a reflection of her body, yet the mirror also compels the belief that her sexual instinct is in fact cold and dark and strange. Interestingly, while the mirror can boast physical substance on the lowest level as an inanimate object, its reflection of Jane turns her into an ethereal bodiless being. Jane cannot perceive the reflection of her body for what it is in reality, and instead only parallels herself to supernatural beings as a "strange little figure," a "real spirit," and a "tiny phantom, half fairy, half imp" (11). While the mirror should inspire Jane to *reflect* upon her bodily existence, Charlotte's language of the transference of incorporeal qualities onto the female body commentates on Victorian sexual culture. The mirror emphasizes the role of masculine-centered society, especially in medicine and gynecology, to influence and advise women against taking notice of their bodies, and such concepts translated the Victorian female body into merely an incorporeal and inferior figment in relation to the superior male body.

As evidence for this social and gender-oriented reading, later in the passage the mirror's influence overtakes Jane's courage, vigor, and anger toward the Reeds. Jane relates how she

“grew by degrees cold as a stone, and then [her] courage sank” (13). While her skirmish with John reassures Jane of her physicality—as does the threat by Bessie to tie her down in the red room—she now transforms into the elfin-like creature that the mirror fabricated as her self-image. Jane’s fleeting sexual awareness at the beginning of the red room scene, specifically through the drawing of her blood in the fight, fades and leaves her mentally and psychologically cold. Jane fails to realize that the red room’s forceful upholding of its solid physical presence is a closer reflection of her inner being than any looking-glass at Gateshead, as well as any future mirror that she will encounter at Thornfield.

Female Masturbation in Brussels and *Jane Eyre*

“My heart beat fast and thick; I heard it throb. Suddenly it stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock, but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling; it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake...”

Jane Eyre, Chapter 35

In conjunction with the red room’s negotiation of Jane’s inner sexual energies and her sexually maturing body, Charlotte signals the moment when these inner and outer worlds converge in the form of Jane Eyre as a masturbating woman. While female masturbation in *Jane Eyre* is a seemingly untapped area of criticism, Victorian perspectives on masturbation for both sexes has been widely studied. As Richard Krafft-Ebing states in his 1886 work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which founded the study of sex and fetishes within the fields of psychology and medicine, masturbation “despoils the unfolding bud of perfume and beauty, and leaves behind the coarse, animal desire for sexual satisfaction.”¹² He additionally feared that masturbation would so greatly affect “the morals, the character, fancy, feeling and instinct of the youthful masturbator, male or female” that “the desire for the opposite sex [would] sink to *nil*; so that

¹² Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 286.

masturbation [would be] preferred to the natural mode of satisfaction” (287). While his study post-dates Charlotte’s work, the fear of autoeroticism as “the vice of individuation for a world in which the old ramparts against desire had crumbled” mirrors the precarious treatment of sex in Victorian novels.¹³ As William Cohen explains in his study *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*, Victorian novels “at once encrypted representations of sexuality and demonstrated a frantic need for managing and redeeming sexual practices.”¹⁴ Most Victorian narratives represented sexual behavior only as a didactic avenue to dissuade readers from acting on physical instinct, and the result was an irritating level of silence on the topic of sex carried out through rhetorical techniques.¹⁵ This simultaneous silencing and vocalising of sexuality in the Victorian age did not leave *Jane Eyre* untouched. Like other novelists of the time, Charlotte Brontë “encrypts sexuality not in its plot or in its announced intentions, but in its margins, at the seemingly incidental moments of its figurative language, where, paradoxically, it is so starkly obvious as to be invisible” (Cohen 32). Such silence can be heard and uncovered in two key moments of *Jane Eyre*: her solitude and loneliness as the Morton School teacher, and her climactic encounter with St. John Rivers when she hears the strange call from Rochester.

Jane’s embodiment as a schoolteacher following her desertion of Thornfield resonates with parallels to Charlotte’s experience in Brussels, and the potential to associate the village school with the Pensionnat intensifies through interpreting Jane’s dreams of Rochester as autoerotic. Although Jane’s pupils are of the agricultural working-class, she does find “estimable

¹³ Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 210.

¹⁴ Cohen, *Sex Scandal*, 27.

¹⁵ In her definitive article “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in favor of studying masturbation in the present day in order to counteract the Victorian and Edwardian negative perception of autoeroticism: “The narrative link between masturbation itself and degeneracy, though a staple of pre-1920s medical and racial science, no longer has any respectable currency. To the contrary: modern views of masturbation tend to place it firmly in the framework of optimistic, hygienic narratives of all-too-normative individual development” (819).

characters among them—characters desirous of information, and disposed for improvement—with whom [she] passed many a pleasant evening hour in their own homes” (312). This image of female students eager to learn and improve their abilities calls to mind a phrase from Constantin Héger’s letter to Patrick Brontë on the advancement of the Englishman’s two eldest daughters: “No doubt you will be pleased to hear that your children have made very notable progress in all the branches of instruction, and that this progress is entirely owing to their love of work and their perseverance” (Smith 300). However, Jane does at first experience disconnection from her pupils due to the difference in social class, which mirrors the cultural and linguistic contrast that initially isolated Monsieur Héger from his English students. Through the similarities of these educational environments, Jane’s pride in her students is imbued with the pedagogical determination of Constantin Héger, as well as the sense of accomplishment he felt toward Emily and Charlotte. In an extension of Charlotte’s overlapping of both Constantin and Jane as dedicated educators, the Pensionnat itself can be seen as a model for the Morton village school.

Given this spatial and psychological resemblance between the two schools, Jane’s dreams of Rochester should be read as similarly influenced by Brussels, specifically the possibility that it was in Belgium that Charlotte discovered masturbation. Following Jane’s acknowledgement of her pride as a teacher, she directly addresses the reader in a confessional tone: “[R]eader, to tell you all, in the midst of this calm, this useful existence...I used to rush into strange dreams at night—dreams many-coloured, agitated, full of the ideal, the stirring, the stormy...” (312). In this passage, Jane’s “dreams” do not simply entail her mental occurrences while sleeping. I argue that Charlotte’s construction of this scene implies that the dreams are both Jane’s passive state of being aware of her own mind (and sexual desire) and her active engagement with this self-awareness (acknowledging her desire through masturbation).

Charlotte uses both active and passive verbs to describe the love that passes between Jane and Rochester in this dream:

I still again and again met Mr. Rochester, always at some exciting crisis; and then the sense of being in his arms, hearing his voice, meeting his eye, touching his hand and cheek, loving him, being loved by him—the hope of passing a lifetime at his side, would be renewed, with all its first force and fire. (312)

In this dream-like reality, Jane oscillates the position of her body in relation to Rochester's between the passive, traditionally feminine role as the beloved in "being in his arms," "hearing his voice," and "being loved by him" with the active, masculine position as the lover "touching his hand and cheek" and "loving him." Beyond the fact that this passage upholds gender equality through including both the acts of giving and receiving affection, Charlotte emphasizes the physical senses as components of love. This emphasis on the body reveals Jane's almost visceral perception of herself as an active lover and physically mature woman. Through Jane's advocacy for a love in which she reciprocates a man's attention rather than merely absorbing it, she asserts her mental and physical capacity not merely for sexual magnetism but for sexual authority. In addition, Charlotte includes active verbs in the catalog of Jane's loving activities that signal a direct retaliation against the passive female role in both love and sex. My reading of masturbation in this scene originates from Charlotte's insistence on Jane as a physically assertive woman who understands her natural need for sexual pleasure.

At the conclusion of these dreams, the language relapses into opaqueness and reverberates with coded meanings of Jane's autoerotic pleasure at the height of her loneliness: "Then I awoke; then I recalled where I was, and how situated; then I rose up on my curtainless bed, trembling and quivering; and then the still, dark night witnessed the convulsion of despair, and heard the burst of passion" (312). As pronounced by the "curtainless bed," in this moment of solitude Jane feels no shame or need to hide, and engages in a willing exposure of the intimate

and sexual space of her bed. With this barrier between the female physical world and society eradicated, the night that is “still” and repressed and “dark” and unenlightened is disrupted by her act of taking control of her sexual needs. An autoerotic reading is not only justified by Charlotte’s impassioned language of “trembling,” “quivering,” “convulsion,” and “burst of passion,” but the sentence that follows this event emphasizes the unsuitability of her sexual experience outside of the bedroom: “By nine o’clock the next morning, I was punctually opening the school—tranquil, settled, prepared for the steady duties of the day” (312-3). Given the socially inappropriate nature of this intimate moment, Jane is compelled to regain control of her desires before conveying her body back into society’s restraints of the female physical experience. This scene offers an entirely new angle on both Jane and Charlotte as women capable of taking control of and fulfilling their own sexual desires, especially through autoerotic means when their lover is absent. By the fact that scenes of the village school frame the beginning and conclusion of this implied sexual scene, Charlotte reaffirms that Jane’s autoerotic dream was guided by her own experience at the school in Brussels.

Along with this negotiation between Jane/Charlotte and Rochester/Constantin’s bodies, a third body of St. John Rivers represents sterile masculinity that eliminates bodily passion in favor of faith. Yet in one of Jane’s most rebellious moments, St. John submits to her sexual need for Rochester and her independence and autoerotic supremacy. Following the scene between Jane and St. John in which she refuses to repent of her attachment to Thornfield and mysteriously hears Rochester calling from a distance, Jane asserts her willpower: “It was *my* turn to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play, and in force....I desired him to leave me; I must, and would be alone. He obeyed at once. Where there is energy to command well enough, obedience never fails” (358). Charlotte asserts Jane’s declaration of her own ascendancy and

power in order to redirect the narrative away from St. John's coercion and back towards Jane's insistence on her sexuality. Jane does not only refuse St. John and his idea of love mentally and spiritually, but she dismisses his physical presence from her. St. John represents the masculine agent who hypocritically reemphasizes a "morally unpolluted vision of what it mean[s] to be a woman" in order to ensure patriarchal control over the female body.¹⁶

In this pivotal moment, Jane acts as a voyeur of her own sexual recognition in which she begins to examine what Emma L.E. Rees calls "the revelation of the previously concealed" as well as "the apparent cultural eradication of women [like Jane]...who have strikingly little knowledge, or ownership, of their own bodies" (119-20). Charlotte's insistence on the power of female energy to command obedience from a man reflects Jane's refusal to submit to the gender and sexual injustice of society. This rebellion of both Jane's spirit and body from the influence of St. John could not be more clearly distinguished than in the passage that follows:

I mounted to my chamber, locked myself in, fell on my knees, and prayed in my own way—a different way to St. John's—but effective in its own fashion. I seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit, and my soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet. I rose from the thanksgiving—took a resolve—and lay down, unscared, enlightened... (358)

The question of whether this heavily-coded activity can be read as masturbatory seems to rely on Jane's two paradoxical claims—that she prays in a different way from a clergyman, and that she still uses the Christian pronoun "His" to describe the "Mighty Spirit." Due to Jane's dismissal of St. John's ideologies, her allusion to this Mighty Spirit represents something different from evangelical prayers to God, despite both Jane and Charlotte's devout faith. The event's occurrence in her locked bedroom further indicates a sexually liberated environment, and while the verbs "penetrate" and "rushed out" can imply spiritual exaltation, they also represent metaphors of sexuality that supersede a purely Christian reading. This scene acts as the climax of

¹⁶ Rees, "Narrating the Victorian Vagina," 130.

Jane's enlightenment in which she turns away from St. John's promise of a loveless marriage toward the passion that she and Rochester share, and so the Mighty Spirit could very well be Rochester's "spirit." If this is the case, the argument that Jane engages in masturbation to represent her sensual and spiritual rejection of St. John and reunion with Rochester appears more than plausible. From the moment that she catches her reflection in the red room looking-glass, Charlotte infiltrates Jane's sense of identity with the concept that her body and its relationship to society fail to reflect her inner being, specifically her desire to take outward pride in her sexual blossoming. Prior to her living with the Rivers, Jane's social propriety and personal virtue deadened her longing to convey her inner erotic passion on the physical level. In this veiled yet intuitively expressive scene, Jane finally learns that spirituality and sexuality are not mutually exclusive. Through their introductions to masturbation, both Jane and Charlotte reach this "unscared" and "enlightened" place with Edward and Constantin respectively, in which prayer takes place in the form of pleasure, and the spiritual and the physical entwine.

Chapter II: The Female Body's Relationship to Society at Thornfield Hall and the Pensionnat Héger

“You will say that I am over-excited—that I have black thoughts etc. So be it Monsieur—I do not seek to justify myself, I submit to all kinds of reproaches—all I know—is that I cannot—that I will not resign myself to the total loss of my master's friendship—I would rather undergo the greatest bodily pains than have my heart constantly lacerated by searing regrets.”

Letter to Constantin Héger, 8 January 1845

In April of 1843, Charlotte Brontë sent a letter to Ellen Nussey in response to her friend's comment that many in Yorkshire believed Charlotte only returned to Brussels in order to woo a husband. Charlotte utterly rejected this accusation on the grounds of her isolation while on the Continent:

They could not believe that I crossed the sea—merely to return as teacher to Mde Héger's...I must forsooth have some remote hope of entrapping a husband somehow—somewhere—if these charitable people knew the total seclusion of the life I lead...they would perhaps cease to suppose tha[t] any such chimerical & groundless notion has influenced my proceedings. (Smith 314)

Certainly the “total seclusion” of Charlotte's life in Brussels in 1843 cannot be questioned; Emily did not return with her to Belgium, and so the eldest Brontë sister now faced the cultural and religious differences alone. Despite her gratitude toward the Hégers, this passage reveals Charlotte's attitude toward her own body and sexuality, as well as her belief that as a rational (and devoutly Protestant) woman, the idea of her pursuing a husband in Europe is a “chimerical & groundless notion.” Through the context that “over the next year...[Charlotte] was scarcely capable of articulating what she felt for M. Héger,” her letter to Ellen suggests her full control of her emotions (Fraser 182). If Charlotte had recognized her feelings for a married man, she would not have hesitated to stay with her family in Haworth. However, when read in light of her later passionate avowals of devotion in her letters to Constantin, Charlotte's retaliation against Ellen

suggests a lack of self-knowledge. In this letter to her friend, Charlotte in fact attempts to conceal her deep-set emotional preoccupation with Belgium and the figure of Constantin Héger.

Such an absence of female self-awareness in the Victorian period was not unique to Charlotte. Helena Michie reflects on the social paradox of the Victorian female in that although “the official language of the new Victorian sexology proclaimed women’s bodies as the focal point for the analysis of women’s roles,” women themselves remained illiterate in the language of their own physicality.¹⁷ In the climactic bedroom scene, Jane rejects the oblivious female stereotype by purporting her knowledge of her own body through masturbation. The Victorian female body represented “the unknowable, the unpenetrable mystery,” and through this language of impenetrability, the body emerges symbolically as an impregnable geographical space (Michie 7). Jane’s autoerotic self-awareness implies a symbolic invasion of the stereotypical sanctity of the body, and in this way Charlotte’s representation of both the male and female body in *Jane Eyre* can be viewed in terms of geographical territory. As will be discussed in greater length, the conflict between the male and female body in *Jane Eyre* mirrors the novel’s regional, cosmopolitan, and imperialism tensions; the female body emerges as the English body of Charlotte and Jane, while the male body becomes synonymous with the Continental body of Constantin Héger and Mr. Rochester.

Jane Eyre’s Mirrors: Reflection and Self-Reflection at Thornfield Hall

“I get an interesting impression of old-age upon my face & when you see me next I shall certainly wear caps & spectacles...”

Letter to Ellen Nussey, 20 January 1842

In the context of the female body’s role in society, Charlotte uses the symbolic construction of the mirror in order to emphasize Jane’s relationship with her physicality. As a

¹⁷ Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, 5.

child, Jane confronts the mirror in the red room, which convinces her that her body is spirit-like, fleeting, and a mere mirage. Many of Jane's actions are emotionally charged responses to how the men of the narrative perceive her body as a "machine without feelings," whether as an object of John Reed's abuse, Rochester's sexual frustration, or St. John's dogmatic self-annihilation (215). As an extension of the red room, Jane's mirror in her bedroom at Thornfield catalyzes her self-admonition toward her physical ugliness that also encapsulates Charlotte's perspective on her own appearance. In this scene Jane first attempts to justify her looks by conceding to her plainness:

I dressed myself with care; obliged to be plain—for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity—I was still by nature solicitous to be neat. It was not my habit to be disregarding of appearance, or careless of the impression I made; on the contrary, I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit. (83-4)

Jane's insistence on her natural affinity for neatness as well as her duty to improve upon her plain appearance is not only a self-justification. The act of dressing must be performed in front of a mirror that acts a voyeur of Jane's own body. As Charlotte implies, Jane hopes to dissuade both the mirror and her own conscience from believing that her attention to her looks proves her narcissism, as seen when Jane insists that "I was *still by nature* solicitous to be neat" (italics mine). Although Jane calls upon her inner nature to explain her attention to her personal appearance, she also recognizes the social repercussions of her plainness and thus desires to "please as much as my want of beauty would permit." Jane burdens herself with the obligation to improve upon her lack of beauty not for personal pleasure, but for others. In the same way that the mirror is both "an image of the body [as a] vanity/surface and of an attempt to move beyond the body [into] reflection/contemplation" (Michie 8), Jane's routine in her bedroom signals both

her personal desire for and acknowledgement of the importance of beauty in Thornfield Hall society.

Charlotte's letter to Ellen while in Brussels reveals her discontents both with her physicality and with society's preoccupation with the physical female body, specifically as an object for marriage:

[I]t is an imbecility which I reject with contempt—for women [who] have neither fortune nor beauty—to make marriage the principal object of their wishes & hopes & the aim of all their actions—not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive—and that they had better be quiet & think of other things than wedlock... (Smith 314)

Despite both women's desperation to be content with maidenhood, Jane's regret in the Thornfield dressing scene reflects Charlotte's undisclosed wish for a sexually attractive body. Jane reveals that she "sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth...I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and marked" (84). The mirror seems to present the following question directly to Jane: "And why had I these aspirations and these regrets?" (84). In hindsight Jane implies that she "could not then distinctly say it to myself; yet I had a reason, and a logical, natural reason too" (84). Unlike Charlotte who contends against any implication of marriage, Jane suggests that her "logical, natural reason" is her womanly desire to be capable of attracting a man and joining with him through matrimony. *Jane Eyre* presents an image of the female body that must negotiate between two instincts of the Victorian woman—to rebel against marriage as a social construct, and to relish in the ability to woo a man through sexual attraction.

The Paradox of Masculinity and Male Beauty in *Jane Eyre's* Hay Lane

Paradoxically, Charlotte constructs the male body of Rochester (and Constantin) as equally caught between two opposing instincts, which are represented in the scene when the master of Thornfield and the new governess meet in Hay Lane. Charlotte signals Rochester's

impending arrival on horseback through a “rude noise,” that as Jane relates “broke on these fine ripplings and whisperings, at once so far away and so clear” (95). At the sound of the approaching horse, Jane also recalls tales that her nurse Bessie at Gateshead would tell in which a Northern English spectre called a Gytrash “haunted solitary ways, and sometimes came upon belated travellers, as this horse was coming upon me” (95). Even before the man himself arrives, Charlotte relates the foreboding arrival of Rochester’s body through contradictory descriptions. At first Jane senses that the noise is rude, exhibits substance, and disrupts the “riplings and whisperings” of what can be read as Jane’s femininity that has been submerged below the surface of her consciousness. However, through her childhood instinct Jane also associates the sound of a horse and thus Rochester’s arrival with supernatural and insubstantial creatures. In a reversal of gender roles, Jane’s belief in this moment that Rochester is a supernatural figure foreshadows the master of Thornfield’s dismissal of her corporeality by calling her a “fairy” and “elf” throughout the novel. Moreover, after the master takes a plunge from his horse, he initially rejects Jane’s offer of help. His command of “You must just stand to one side” expresses his perception of Jane as so physically unsubstantial that she must move to the side of him as an inconsequential bystander (96).

However, through such insistence on his physical competency, Rochester in fact reveals his emotional and mental weakness. As Paul Pickrel argues, the master of Thornfield attempts to rescue himself from moral descent through an emphasis on his physicality to ensure that “the depersonalization that has been taking him over will not become complete.”¹⁸ Rochester’s physical presence seems constantly torn between prowess and dependence. Charlotte sets up this contrast through representing Rochester as on one hand a “heroic figure astride a great horse”

¹⁸ Pickrel, “The Apocalypse of the Body,” 163.

and on the other as a man who an instant later “is on the ground unable to get up without her help,” suggesting that the latter posture is more indicative of his mental state (Pickrel 167-8). Rochester’s emotional aggression and superiority toward Jane constitutes something beyond the traditional reading that he is a Byronic, hyper-masculine figure that must be castrated in the Thornfield fire. Rochester’s emotional distance from Jane, as well as from himself, can be read as a defense mechanism through his personal need to win Jane’s approval. As will be discussed, he attempts to do so through wearing various masks of power, dominance, and social influence.

However as Jane explains, Rochester’s unpleasant physical features and choleric temperament as early as the Hay Lane scene neither frighten nor offend her—in fact, Jane is attracted by his physical incongruities.

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...I had a theoretical reverence and homage for beauty, elegance, gallantry, fascination; but had I met those qualities incarnate in masculine shape, I should have known instinctively that they neither had nor could have sympathy with anything in me...[B]ut the frown, the roughness of the traveller, set me at my ease. 97

In a descriptive passage that predicts Jane’s future meeting with the classically handsome youth St. John Rivers, Charlotte presents Mr. Rochester as a contradiction of any positive attribute of the masculine form; he is neither beautiful, nor elegant, nor even polite, and such qualities correlate directly to Jane’s conception of her own body and character. Through her belief that she is not handsome, on the most basic and physical level she senses an equal in Rochester through their common “roughness.” Rochester in many ways has convinced himself that his unpleasant exterior combined with the internal darkness of his past justifies an assemblage of faux personalities and literal masks. It is only at the novel’s conclusion that Jane succeeds in “quietly convinc[ing] him that she can accept the flawed ‘pervious’ man behind [his public persona]” (Pickrel 170). Rochester can only recognize the beauty and capacity for sexuality in his

despondent body through Jane's both internal and external liberation from her past evangelical values; Jane's sexual growth and self-awareness of her desires invigorate Rochester's perception of himself as physically and emotionally redeemed.

Charlotte Brontë's "Black swan": The Real-Life Body of Constantin Héger

"But Monsieur Héger had one really beautiful feature, that I remember often watching with extreme pleasure when he recited fine poetry or read noble prose: his mouth, when uttering words that moved him, had a delightful smile, not in the least tender towards ordinary mortals, but almost tender in its homage to the excellence of writers of genius."

MacDonald, *The Secret of Charlotte Brontë*, 185

In the context of Charlotte's life, unconventional masculine appearance and sexual attraction through surface-level "ugliness" reminds one of descriptions of Monsieur Constantin Héger that history has left behind. While an analysis of Rochester's body and his perspective on his own physicality is ameliorated by clues in the text, we know far less about Constantin's opinion of and relationship to his body and lack photographic images of what he looked like in 1842. While at least two photographs survive of him in his middle and old age, the only image of how Constantin would have looked to Charlotte is a background level, side-view portrayal of him in Ange Francois's painting *The Héger Family* in 1847. Monsieur and Madame Héger and their six small children are depicted. Monsieur stands tall and austere in mostly deep shadow with his face half-hidden in profile. His long, straight nose wears spectacles, and his black whiskers and hat shroud his face. Under one arm he holds a book as an obvious symbol of his intelligent mind and passion for teaching; the other hand caresses one of his children who clings to his legs, showing his deep love for family and fatherhood. This representation of merely half of his face in the medium of painting rather than photography is the only image we have of the man in his late 30s for whom Charlotte Brontë experienced such love and sexual desire.

However, history does leave behind a first-hand account depiction of Héger from one of his pupils Frederika MacDonald, who in 1914 published a memoir *The Secret of Charlotte Brontë, followed by Some Reminiscences of the Real Monsieur and Madame Héger*. Within her account, MacDonald describes Héger in 1859 as possessing “too good a nose for a Belgian,” “Italian blood,” and “a delightful smile, not in the least tender towards ordinary mortals, but almost tender in its homage to the excellence of writer of genius.”¹⁹ MacDonald goes on to express her opinion of Héger as both emotionally absent and physically charming:

In brief, what M. Héger's face revealed when studied as the index of his natural qualities, was intellectual superiority, an imperious temper, a good deal of impatience against stupidity, and very little patience with his fellow-creatures generally...[and that with] all these qualities of intellect, power, humour, and a little kind-heartedness, one quality was totally lacking: there was no love in M. Héger's face, nor in his character... (185-6)

In light of such fragmented evidence, I will attempt to bridge this blank page of history by noting the personality parallel between Rochester and Constantin in order to deduce if the master of Thornfield's body is indeed a shadow of Constantin's physicality.

Charlotte first wrote about her professor in a letter to Ellen in May of 1842, which has become the most frequently quoted description of Constantin due to its thoroughness: “[H]e is professor of Rhetoric a man of power as to mind but very choleric & irritable in temperament—a little, black, ugly being with a face that varies in expression, sometimes he borrows the lineaments of an insane Tom-cat—sometimes those of a delirious Hyena...” (Smith 283-4). Yet as Frederika MacDonald explains in her account, these physical attributes would not hold true for Héger at the age of 50:

M. Héger, as I remember him, was no longer what Charlotte called him, angrily, in her letter to Ellen Nussey, ‘a little Black Being’.... M. Héger in 1859 was still alert, but he was not spare, he was inclining towards stoutness. His hair was not velvet black, but grizzled, and he was bald on the crown of his head... (184)

¹⁹ MacDonald, *The Secret of Charlotte Brontë*, 185.

A year later in her correspondence with her brother Branwell, Charlotte repeats her association of Monsieur Héger with both “black” and with wild animals in her description of him as “the black Swan” (Smith 316). While the turn of phrase “black swan” refers to Constantin’s unique and refreshing personality in the Pensionnat, the language of his darkness and animalistic tendencies underlines both his non-English, Continental exterior features, as well as his tempestuous and unknowable internal life that Charlotte was fated never to know on an intimate level as Jane Eyre does with her beloved.

As a parallel to Jane and Rochester, “the frown, the roughness” of Constantin’s physical features must have reassured Charlotte that she had entered an environment wherein at least one person was capable of seeing past her supposed ugliness. Like Rochester’s constant questioning and testing of Jane’s mind, Constantin’s intelligence and emotional passion were “like a match to dynamite on his fervent, brilliant, emotionally starved pupil” (Fraser 163). But Constantin’s intellectual and pedagogical zeal alone could not have been what attracted Charlotte to such a degree that she was compelled to write letters to him up until a year after her return to Yorkshire. His “Italianate looks” and Madame’s multiple pregnancies reflected sexual prowess and an enticing personality through which he “ruled the Pensionnat like a little kingdom, its impatient, fiery, kindly and slightly absurd god” (Fraser 163). One may simply exchange the term “Pensionnat” with “Thornfield Hall” in this assertion to arrive at an equally valid description of Edward Fairfax Rochester.

Chapter III: The Regional vs. Cosmopolitan Visions in *Jane Eyre*

Introduction

“...but a fire was kindled in my very heart which I would not quench—I so longed to increase my attainments to become something better than I am...I longed to go to Brussels—but how could I get?”

Letter to Ellen Nussey, 2 November 1841

“I have nothing to tell you my dear Ellen, one day is like another in this place—I know you, living in the country can hardly believe that it is possible life can be monotonous in the centre of a brilliant capital like Brussels—but so it is...”

Letter to Ellen Nussey, June 1843

“...you showed a little interest in me in days gone by when I was your pupil in Brussels—and I cling to the preservation of this *little* interest—I cling to it as I would cling onto life.”

Letter to Constantin Héger, 8 January 1845

Brontë-in-Brussels scholarship as a field in literary criticism covers an inclusive variety of research interests. Biographers such as Winifred Gérin and Rebecca Fraser focus on Charlotte’s emotional and intellectual growth over those two years, while the definitive biographer Juliet Barker includes in-depth analyses of the essays that both Charlotte and Emily wrote for Monsieur Héger. Instead of a purely biographical perspective, Enid L. Duthie concentrates her study *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë* on the effect that Monsieur Héger’s rhetoric lessons had on Charlotte’s developing creativity and prose style. While Gaskell’s 1857 *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* presents the germinal biography for all future accounts of her life, Charlotte’s fellow female novelist companion reinterprets her psychological upheaval in Brussels. In fact, Gaskell ignores any hint of Charlotte’s sexual heartache and love for Constantin, presumably in order to secure her young friend’s reputation after her death in

1855.²⁰ Studies on the intellectual and creative gift of Brussels are no doubt essential in order to comprehend Charlotte's post-Brussels trajectory as a novelist. However, scholars have overlooked any mention of how the culture and environment of Brussels, the physical space that Charlotte called home for two years, would have influenced her perception of herself and the world.

Charlotte Brontë had not been brought up in any ordinary English town. Haworth, Yorkshire was characterized by endless moors, near-isolation, and in many ways homogenous traditions and values that infiltrated her young adult experience. Brussels, Belgium was the antithesis of Yorkshire. In the remainder of my thesis, I arrange Haworth, Yorkshire, and England as a paradigm of the "regional" and Brussels, Belgium, and Europe as exemplifying the "cosmopolitan." In my understanding of these two cultural and geographical categories, I group Charlotte Brontë (and by extension Jane Eyre) under the "regional" heading. My reasoning situates less on the location of Charlotte's upbringing and more on her negative reaction to cosmopolitan attitudes, places, and people as seen through her letters and novels.

In *The Professor*, William Crimsworth dedicates a section of his memoir to describing in minute detail the schoolgirls whom he has travelled to Brussels to teach. He first remarks how "as I sat on my estrade and glanced over the long range of desks, I had under my eye French, English, Belgians, Austrians, and Prussians."²¹ As his examination of the girls unfolds, he not only differentiates between and among the cultures he lists above, but also draws a conclusive

²⁰ For example, Gaskell emphasizes Charlotte's "strong yearning to go home" as the source of her "great internal struggle," and that due to her homesickness (and not her sexual attraction to Constantin), "every fibre in her heart quivered in the strain to master her will" (192). Additionally, Gaskell names Charlotte's distaste with Madame Héger's Catholicism as the cause of "the silent estrangement between Madame Héger and Miss Brontë" and that "though [Madame] was not given to open expression of her thoughts and feelings, yet her increasing coolness of behavior showed how much her most cherished opinions had been wounded" (195).

²¹ All citations are from the following edition: *The Professor*, New York and London: Penguin Books, 1989.

distinction between the few “British English” girls at the school and everyone else (132). In his observation, merely by a “general air of native propriety and decency” could he “at a glance distinguish the daughter of Albion and nursling of Protestantism from the foster-child of Rome, the protégée of Jesuitry” (132). Crimsworth’s observations suggest that the cultural state of Brussels was essentially a mix between various European countries; while his blatantly subjective tone reveals his xenophobia, we will see later how Charlotte’s perceptions of the Pensionnat students coincide in many ways to Crimsworth’s account.

The “cosmopolitanism” that I will refer to in conjunction with the Pensionnat and Brussels is defined by the widespread amalgamation of cultures in the city and its populace. Crimsworth establishes the separateness between himself and the Belgian girls along nationalistic and religious lines as Protestant England and Catholic Europe. I use his generalized and simplistic distinction as a prototype for my regional England vs. cosmopolitan Belgium analysis, in light of the fact that this is how Charlotte clearly viewed her relationship to Brussels as an Englishwoman. The contrast between regionalism and cosmopolitanism in Charlotte’s accounts of Belgium inflects the narrative structure of *Jane Eyre*, as well as suggests the subtle changes that she underwent as a result of her immersion into a foreign, European, and cosmopolitan environment.

The question then arises of what cultural, historical, and environmental elements contribute to my designation of Brussels as a quintessential cosmopolitan city. Pieter Francois’ study presents the most in-depth discussion of the shifting relationship between Britain and Belgium in the mid-nineteenth century. In response to Belgium’s cry for independence from the Netherlands in the 1830 Revolution, Britain’s initial division over the issue along political party lines was “replaced by an almost universally felt sympathy for Belgium” by virtue of the fact that

“the image of the British as the staunch supporters, and even creators, of Belgian national independence became virtually unchallenged” (Francois 664). Yet political party debates in Britain still played a key role in determining why this shift in favor of Belgian independence happened at all. As Francois suggests, while before 1830 the Tory party reigned and produced anti-Belgian feelings, the Whigs after 1830 encouraged and fortified a pro-Belgian attitude that eventually became the norm. When Charlotte arrived in Europe in 1842, her native country viewed Belgium as “the first bridgehead of the advance of the British system on the continent” (Francois 670).

However, the British people and Charlotte discovered that an insurmountable issue fragmented their initial sympathy for the Belgian people—Catholicism. Francois quotes from a British traveller George Augustus Sala, who conveys his disbelief in Belgium’s Catholic staunchness: “[I]n this temperate, methodical, cabbage-bearing land, the hips and haws of Protestantism should have been indigenus. The people have a Protestant look” (672). Sala’s optimism reflects Britain’s hope in the 1830s that Belgians would soon recognize their national identity as Protestant and make the necessary conversion to the Anglican faith. Yet in the 1840s when Charlotte arrived, Belgium had become a nation that separated church and state. While the British had believed that Belgian Catholicism would soon fall to a Protestant Belgian identity, the division between religion and civic jurisdiction jeopardized these British hopes. Catholicism in Belgium was now viewed as un-liberal and wholly devoted to the Pope, which made such allegiance difficult to reconcile in the British mindset. Francois concludes that by 1850, the number of Protestants in Belgium totaled only 15,000 people as a liberal estimate, with only 2,000 English people in the capital city (674). In this way, Charlotte Brontë as a Protestant Englishwoman in Brussels would not only have represented a cultural and religious “other”; her

arrival only twelve years after the Revolution would also have reminded the Belgians of Britain's persistent and ultimately futile attempt to convert their country to the Protestant faith.

Despite the strength of Francois' focus on religious tension, he fails to deliver a fully developed picture of what the cultural landscape of Brussels would have looked like, especially to an English subject and foreigner like Charlotte. Brussels was organized around a hilltop in which the geographical layers corresponded to the various classes; the Rue d'Isabelle on which stood the Pensionnat Héger was situated between "the spacious, aristocratic quarters" above and "the busy commercial town, with overcrowded slum area" below (Fraser 156). Charlotte's adventurous visions of Europe that she had created through her fictional land of Angria "bore no resemblance to her present, curious position," which was augmented by the flat and small Belgian landscape that seemed tame in comparison to the sublime Yorkshire moors (Fraser 163). Fraser writes that Brussels was a "moisture-laden atmosphere" (157), and while she here makes reference to the dreary Belgian weather, I argue that Brussels was also a sexually "moist" environment in which, free from the cultural habits of England, Charlotte connected with both the tactile experience of the city as well as of her sexual body. Such incongruities between Belgium and England create the framework for my definition of Brussels as a truly "cosmopolitan" location. I argue that through its Catholic traditions, urban rather than rural sublimity, presence of multiple languages and nationalities, and non-English sexual liberation, Brussels emerges as a paradigm of cosmopolitanism.

The Regional vs. Cosmopolitan Visions: Charlotte Brontë in London as the Metropolitan Mediator

"...she seemed to think our business was, and ought to be, to see all the pictures and statues we could. She knew the artists, and knew where other productions of theirs were to be found. I don't remember what we saw except St. Paul's."

Mary Taylor to Elizabeth Gaskell, Barker, 377

In Chapter 12 of *Jane Eyre*, Jane ascends to the roof of Thornfield Hall and muses on the civilized and cultured world she imagines stretching out before her:

...I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of, but never seen; that then I desired more practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach...I believed in the existence of other and more vivid kinds of goodness, and what I believed in I wished to behold. (93)

This is one of the first scenes in the novel in which Jane, a member of the regional Yorkshire community, longs for a more cosmopolitan environment, mirroring how Charlotte yearned to escape the incapacitating Haworth parsonage in favor of the bustling newness of Brussels.

Amanda Anderson argues that this Victorian desire for cosmopolitanism relies on a person's willingness to explore "what it means to cultivate a distanced relation toward one's self [and] one's community."²² Moreover, a "reflective distance from one's original or primary cultural affiliations" entails the essence of Anderson's cosmopolitanism definition in which one reaches "a broad understanding of other cultures and customs" (63). While Anderson argues the appeal of the cosmopolitan is based on a willing desire to *separate* from one's cultural and geographical roots, I would offer that Jane and Charlotte feel the call of urban culture due to their wish to *expand* upon their regional heritage. Both women yearn to mentally and physically connect to a new environment in order to fully engage themselves, not fully detach. Although Anderson's study focuses on how industrialization in urban environments produced this sense of detachment, it is significant to note how Jane and Charlotte find connection with their inner selves, specifically their sexuality, only through connecting to cosmopolitan locations (such as Brussels) and individuals (such as Constantin and Rochester). In her rebellious fashion, Jane ultimately rejects the Victorian preoccupation with detachment, specifically the separation of the mind from

²² Anderson, *The Powers of Distance*, 4.

the body and rationality from base impulses. By experiencing and embracing the cosmopolitan within Rochester, Jane in fact finds herself—not the reverse. In her musing from the roof of Thornfield, Jane even names the residents of her imaginary cosmopolitan environment as “my kind,” inflecting a sense of familiarity and connection onto a socio-cultural group based solely on what she believes; as she confesses, “what I believed in I wished to behold” (93).

Later in the passage, Jane continues to describe the delight she takes in her imaginary cosmopolitan city: “I opened my inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously, quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence” (93). The metaphorical image of “a tale my imagination created” seems to directly refer to Charlotte’s childhood stories that she and Branwell wrote about the land of Angria; these fantasies comprised the only understanding Charlotte had of an urban, Continental setting prior to 1842. Yet even before she entered the gates of non-English speaking, non-Protestant Brussels, Charlotte first experienced the London metropolis en route to Europe.

In the course of Charlotte’s introduction into cosmopolitanism, London represents a mediator between the rural Englishness of Yorkshire and the urban Continental culture of Brussels; London is simultaneously based in the novelty of urban culture yet remains situated in the boundaries of England and the English language. The capital city marks the catalyst of “the great adventure on which [Charlotte] was embarked in the pursuit of learning, of culture, [and] of art,” and Charlotte intended to indulge in London to her fullest capacity (Gérin 181). Juliet Barker even uses the language of sexuality to highlight Charlotte’s zeal for the metropolis in that through her “ambition to see and experience the sights and sounds of the city” the rest of her family “was bullied or cajoled into accompanying her on an *orgy* of culture” (377, italics mine).

In addition to the artistic pleasure of exploring a city at her leisure, Charlotte also reflects on the insignificance of her life in Haworth: “I like the spirit of this great London which I feel around me. Who but a coward would pass his whole life in hamlets, and for ever abandon his faculties to the eating rust of obscurity?” (Barker 378). While Gérin insists that Charlotte’s experience in London was “a time of hope, if ever there was such a period in life” (183), I question if London did fulfill all of Charlotte’s expectations. I argue that London provided only a partial and temporary freedom from her anonymity in Yorkshire, in the same way that art offers a brief aesthetic repose from one’s personal troubles. While Charlotte may have grown in London as a student, the time and place were yet to come when and where she would grow as an emotional and sexual woman.

Charlotte’s experiences in both London and Brussels mirror one another by the fact that she was forced to alter her wardrobe in order to conform to the urban expectation of the female body. Prior to the trip, Charlotte endured a “tedious manufacturing of clothing” including “chemises and nightgowns judged necessary for the cosmopolitan city” (Fraser 153). In this way, fashion served as a marker of Charlotte’s conscious desire to undertake a more cosmopolitan appearance by altering her body. Through its celebration of industry, urbanization, and upper-class sophistication, London represents a material artificiality that demands for visitors to also appear artificial, in the same way that Rochester demands for Jane to wear her best dress while in the presence of the Ingrams.

This required alteration in fashion applied to Brussels in equal if not more intense measure. Charlotte in Belgium “began to wear plainer clothes, neatly waisted with narrow sleeves and small, contrasting, embroidered collars...clearly imitating the Belgian girls” as well as foreshadowing her plain heroines’ tidy style of dress (Barker 393). It is significant to note that

while Charlotte was willing to embrace a more Belgian style, Emily was steadfast and continued to broadcast her English background through her regional clothing. Charlotte's flexibility with and enjoyment of the new cosmopolitan ways highlights the young Englishwoman's desperation to find herself through, as Anderson argues, an act of detachment from her original cultural perspective. Among Charlotte's biographers, Barker in particular discusses Yorkshire, London, and Brussels in a way that establishes Charlotte's paradoxical relationship to these three contrasting environments: the liberation and confinement of London, the allure and disappointment of Brussels, and the warmth and isolation of Haworth. *Jane Eyre* can thus be read as negotiating three different poles of the regional Yorkshire, metropolitan London, and cosmopolitan Europe. Brussels amazed Charlotte through its cultural freedom and combination of languages that did not and could not apply to a place like Haworth. Brussels, I argue, evoked her desire to define herself through her English culture, religion, and language while simultaneously rejecting English stoicism for the bodily and sexual candor of Belgian culture.

The Regional vs. Cosmopolitan Visions: Artificial Belgian Identity and Masks of Thornfield Hall

“Brussels is a beautiful city—the Belgians hate the English—their external morality is more rigid than ours—to lace the stays without any handkerchief on the neck is considered a disgusting piece of indelicacy...”

Letter to Ellen Nussey, May 1842

“...my advice to all protestants who are tempted to do anything so besotted as turn Catholic—is...to attend mass sedulously for a time—to notice well the mummeries thereof—also the idiotic, mercenary, aspect of all the priests—& then if they are still disposed to consider Papistry in any other light than a most feeble childish piece of humbug let them turn papists at once...”

Letter to Ellen Nussey, July 1842

In both Jane's narrative and Charlotte's time in Brussels, the presence of false identities through masks underscores the tension between regional honesty and cosmopolitan deceit. In her letter to Ellen on March 6th, 1843, Charlotte describes the night on Ash Wednesday when

Monsieur Héger took her and another student to the local holiday fair: “The Carnival was nothing but masking and mummerly....it was amusing to see the immense crowds, and the general gaiety, but the masks were nothing” (Smith 311). While Charlotte enjoys the celebratory mood of the urban setting, she rejects the artificiality of mask wearing, perceiving this masquerade as a mode through which Continental Catholics detach from individuality and hide behind false identities. Through the scene in which Rochester dresses as a gypsy-woman, Charlotte translates her ability to see through the concealment of masks into Jane’s own recognition of the gypsy’s true identity. In the same way that urbanite Brussels citizens donned Carnival masks in order to hide their wealth, rank, and identity, Rochester conceals his cosmopolitanism under the guise of the gypsy-woman.

In her 1966 work “English Regional Novel,” Phyllis Bentley begins with the following definition of regionalism: “The regional novel is the national novel carried to one degree further of subdivision” in that it “depicts the life of [a particular] region in such a way that the reader is conscious of the characteristics which are unique to that region and differentiate it from others in the common motherland.”²³ She then goes on to imply that regional novels only arise out of a country that exhibits cultural diversity among its distinct regions. Her definition calls for focusing on “a particular part, a particular region, of a nation”; at least in this initial meaning, regionalism is not limited to rural areas—both cosmopolitan and metropolitan locations can also be discussed as specific geographical “regions” in conjunction with rural regional environments (Bentley 7). While Bentley only focuses on *Shirley* as a regional novel, *Jane Eyre* exhibits the same tight focus on one particular region in relation to the national perspective that is inherent in the regional novel format. K.D.M. Snell echoes Bentley in his attribution of the regional novel to

²³ Bentley, *English Regional Novel*, 7.

that which is “set in a recognisable region, and which describes features distinguishing the life, social relations, customs, language, dialect, or other aspects of the culture of that area and its people.”²⁴ He further explains that regional novels use geographical region to indicate “how people respond to particular circumstances and environments, to evoke good and evil through landscape contrasts, or to intensify mood or convey a sense of irony” (35). If Snell’s definition stands, I argue that the foundation of *Jane Eyre* relies on such a psychological connection between the main characters and the setting they inhabit.

Moreover, in her definition Bentley focuses on the significance of the physical distance that separates two human habitations. She proposes the rhetorical question of “Surely places are too near together physically in England to be socially far apart?” (7). While she goes on to argue in England’s defense, she glosses over the fact that in Victorian England, physical spaces were not imagined to be close together. Travel between regions was exceptionally long, and every mile of wet and unpaved road that was required to transverse England made one conscious of the separation between local cultures. In *Jane Eyre* the gypsy-woman seems to appear out of thin air even though pockets of vagrants may not have been uncommon in the area. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan Ingrams arrive as if from another world, and even the thought of moving to Ireland seems like a hemisphere away for Jane.²⁵ Through these regional vs. cosmopolitan details, Charlotte emphasizes the sense of geographical and cultural detachment between Thornfield and the outside world.

²⁴ Snell, “The Regional Novel” 1.

²⁵ Jane’s anxiety at the thought of having to move to Ireland is also based on the relatively long distance that separated regional areas from one another due to the low efficiency of travel in Victorian Britain. Despite the innovations in industrialization that economized land travel, the duration of the train ride that the Brontës took from Leeds to London explains why, to Jane, the next-door neighbor country of Ireland seems like an exotic land—as Barker details: “They travelled together by train from Leeds to London, arriving at Euston Station late in the evening after a journey of eleven hours” (377).

In the gypsy-woman scene, Charlotte highlights Jane's distaste with mask wearing and artificiality in a way that mirrors her own experience at the Brussels Carnival. When Jane enters the library, she conveys her sense of ease in the presence of the strange woman: "I felt now as composed as ever I did in my life; there was nothing, indeed, in the gypsy's appearance to trouble one's calm" (167). Jane's feeling of security originates not only from her intuition that the figure is not a gypsy-woman at all, but also from the gypsy's representation of local traditions, which is a welcome repose from the urbanite Ingrams. Nevertheless, as with the Ingrams, Jane must again confront an individual who conceals his/her true self beneath either literal or figurative costumes. Jane's disbelief in the gypsy's guise urges her to openly question the woman's powers when asked: " 'Why don't you tremble?' 'I'm not cold.' 'Why don't you turn pale?' 'I am not sick.' 'Why don't you consult my art?' 'I'm not silly.' ... 'You are cold; you are sick; you are silly.' 'Prove it'" (167). This exchange not only reveals Jane's self-composure but also exposes Rochester's cosmopolitan nature, which he tries to submerge under the literal cloak of regional culture. In the same way that Rochester attempts to overpower Jane's rationality, the cosmopolitan environment of a city exudes intensity onto its foreign visitors. Just like Charlotte's fascination with London (and with Brussels at first), cosmopolitan spaces and practices could conquer a person's senses to such an extent that they would tremble, turn pale, and seek for guidance in a supernatural entity. Despite Jane's insistence on her mental and intellectual superiority over the gypsy's magic, Rochester's insight into her psychology envelopes her in "a web of mystification" until Jane "wondered what unseen spirit had been sitting for weeks by [her] heart, watching its workings, and taking record of every pulse" (170). Moreover, Jane senses that "[h]er accent, her gesture, and all, were familiar to me as my own face in the glass—as the speech of my own tongue" (172). In a paradoxical way, Jane recognizes

an emotional and mental resemblance both to cosmopolitan Rochester and to the regionalism of his gypsy appearance, despite her displeasure with such mummery. As will be discussed, such a close association implies that the inner core of Rochester's character is perhaps more regional than cosmopolitan, which calls into question the cultural thrust of the novel as a whole. Through Jane's denial of the accusations of being cold, sick, and silly, she expresses her social and physical detachment from any manifestation of artificiality, whether the social etiquette mask that Rochester wears to impress his elite party or the trappings of a gypsy to resemble a regional vagabond.

In Snell's study, he remarks that in regional fiction "key fictional characters have been outsiders [who carry] certain moral connotations" and as a result "insider-outside tensions are central to the plot" (43). The drawing-room scene at Thornfield with the Ingrams establishes such tensions through its theatrical and symbolic structure as a masquerade of cosmopolitanism in confrontation with Jane's regional descent, customs, and beliefs. In the gypsy scene that follows, Rochester even expresses his wonderment over Jane's isolation while in the drawing-room "with the fine people flitting before you like shapes in a magic lantern; just as little sympathetic communion passing between you and them as if they were really mere shadows of human forms and not the actual substance" (168-9). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar refer to this scene as an example of Jane's anger, which was a characteristic that a section of Victorian society admonished in the novel. Curiously, Gilbert and Gubar agree with this contemporary opinion of Jane as unbearably free-spirited: "[P]erhaps they, rather than more recent critics, were correct in their response to the book....the woman who yearns to escape entirely from drawing-rooms and patriarchal mansions obviously cannot [be accommodated]" (338). Yet I argue that rather than breaking codes of social conduct, Jane in fact obeys

Rochester's command to dress nicely and sit demurely while he and his guests mingle. Even when she does "escape" from the drawing-room, she gladly submits to Rochester's perusal of her countenance after which he exclaims that she is depressed, not exhibiting acute anger as Gilbert and Gubar suggest. In addition, Jane seems to experience a sense of quiet joy simply to be in Rochester's presence, especially given the fact that while in the drawing-room Jane's "eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face; [she] could not keep their lids under control....[She] looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking" (148). In order to properly comprehend the symbolism and cultural tensions of this scene, I believe we should see Jane not as an angry rebel, but as a patient and careful observer of the clash between cosmopolitanism and regionalism that quite literally surrounds her in the drawing-room.

Charlotte selects the window-seat as the ideal spot in the room for Jane's observations, which parallels the window-seat at Gateshead that acts as Jane's first place of refuge from the Reeds: "I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged, like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement" (5). In the Thornfield drawing-room, Jane chooses the window-seat based on the same three criteria that she did at Gateshead: a space that is near a window, hidden in shadow or by drapes, and structured for personal privacy. Mrs. Fairfax even suggests that Jane should "choose your seat in any quiet nook you like" and declares that "nobody will notice you," emphasizing her otherness from the group like young Jane sitting at the Gateshead window "like a Turk" (144). In a regional/cosmopolitan context, the symbolism of this window-seat must be uncovered in order to, as Phyllis Bentley phrases it, "ascertain how far the elements of the novel are affected by regionalism when it is present, how far and how deeply the local colour dyes" (13). Jane's choice of a seat by the window reflects the comfort she finds in the natural, regional world; through her

need for familiarity in the foreign drawing-room environment, she places her body close to the outdoor world that lies just beyond the pane of glass. Jane also chooses a spot that is partially concealed both by shade and a curtain, representing her emotional disconnection from the party and her wish not to be seen. Moreover, the seat also affords her the privacy to gaze upon the party uninterrupted. Jane especially observes Rochester both with sexual need and with a degree of rational guilt in that she feels “a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless” (148-9). In this scene, Jane personifies regionalism in her position as both a voyeur to and a backdrop for cosmopolitan life; while the elite urban men and women only look to Jane with scorn, she remains steadfast in her knowledge that the value system they represent is morally polluted. Jane’s dual state of being both hidden and existent exemplifies the role that regionalism plays in the entire novel. Through their observations of urban environments, Jane and Charlotte reject cosmopolitan masks and artificial identities; in the novel, this fosters the image of Jane’s moral fortitude through her cultural association with the natural world and with her regional birthplace.

The Regional vs. Cosmopolitan Visions: Cigars and Rochester’s Masculinity in the Proposal Scene

“...my step is stayed—not by sound, not by sight, but once more by a warning fragrance.”
Jane Eyre, Chapter 23

In my discussion of the thematic relationship between regional/cosmopolitan tensions and *Jane Eyre*, I have analyzed how both Charlotte and Jane inflect “city life” with both a positive allure and a negative artificiality. I now focus on Edward Rochester and his masculinity in order to explore whether he is a force of regionalism or cosmopolitanism in the novel—is he the cultured and European Byronic tragic figure that many critics insist? Before Jane has met Mr.

Rochester, Mrs. Fairfax provides a brief biographical synopsis on the master of Thornfield and the entire Rochester line:

Why, Miss Eyre, though Mr. Rochester's visits here are rare, they are always sudden and unexpected.... he has a gentleman's tastes and habits, and he expects to have things managed in conformity to them.... the family have always been respected here. Almost all the land in this neighborhood, as far as you can see, has belonged to the Rochesters time out of mind. (89)

Through this personal history of Edward, Charlotte inflects the entire Rochester family with both permanence and constant displacement; while the Rochester estate has survived throughout history, the current master of Thornfield Hall hardly spends enough time there to call himself a resident of the area. However, this intrinsic association between the Rochester line and Thornfield estate emphasizes “that the history and identifying features of an area [are] entwined with its gentry family” (Snell 8). The question then arises of how Charlotte's depiction of Edward Rochester, the Rochester family, and Thornfield Hall comments on how Edward relates to the English land: is Rochester really a paragon of his region, or is he the cosmopolitan presence that disrupts this regional harmony? The proposal scene of Chapter 23 in the Thornfield orchard provides the most representative clues that delineate not only the moral and cultural dynamic between Jane and Rochester, but also how the traditional image of Rochester as a multi-cultural urbanite falls short of the truth of his character.

Charlotte sets the stage for the proposal through the descriptions of the time of year and the uniqueness of the weather on this particular day: “A splendid midsummer shone over England...[i]t was as if a band of Italian days had come from the south, like a flock of glorious passenger-birds, and lighted to rest them on the cliffs of Albion” (210-11). The symbolism of this day is twofold: Britain has been “invaded” by European culture as indicative through a warm day, and the time of midsummer represents a time of license, especially sexual license and an

invitation for conventional boundaries to be broken. In addition, Jane describes how “the sun had gone down...burning with the light of red jewel and furnace-flame” and that soon the sky “would boast the moon, but she was yet beneath the horizon” (211). Traditional symbols for the moon include womanhood and the menstruation cycle, and so I argue that Charlotte symbolizes Rochester’s masculinity as the sun that declines, and Jane’s mature femininity as the moon that ascends over the course of the proposal scene. In an extension of this masculine/feminine relationship, I would suggest that Charlotte also uses the sun and moon in this moment to indicate the relationship between cosmopolitanism and regionalism. During the proposal, Jane’s regional influence and self-liberation (as the moon) eventually dominate over Rochester’s cosmopolitan artifice and its power to corrode his identity (as the sun).

Although the sun disappears, one flame still burns, and that is from the light of Rochester’s cigar.

I walked a while on the pavement, but a subtle, well-known scent—that of a cigar—stole from some window. I saw the library casement open a hand-breadth; I knew I might be watched thence, so I went apart into the orchard. No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like. (211)

The scent of Rochester’s cigar exudes not merely from Thornfield Hall, but from the library as the center of books and patriarchal learning that Jane turns from in favor of the solitude of the orchard. The narrative detail of the cigar is not Charlotte’s original conception but derives from Brussels, specifically from Monsieur Héger who was “permanently wreathed in cigar smoke” (Fraser 188). The relationship between cigars, books, and Monsieur Héger is also highlighted in a passage from *Villette* in which Lucy recognizes that M. Paul has rummaged through her desk to deliver a book by his telltale tobacco scent: “Impossible to doubt the source whence these treasures flowed: had there been no other indication, one condemning and traitor peculiarity

common to them all, settled the question—*they smelt of cigars*” (455).²⁶ Charlotte’s association of cigars with Monsieur Héger calls for an analysis of how and why she uses the scent to represent the presence of Rochester and his masculinity in the proposal scene.

Jane’s communion with nature is interrupted by the scent of Rochester’s cigar, suggesting that the cigar represents the disruption of regional serenity by both masculinity and cosmopolitanism. The masculine symbol of the cigar interferes with Jane’s attraction to and communion with the moon, which embodies the mature female body through its association with a woman’s monthly cycle. As the tobacco product of choice by the patriarchal aristocracy, cigars also denote the prominence and power of the cosmopolitan way of life. As she traverses the orchard, Jane remarks how she was “enticed by the light of the now rising moon” and that her “step is stayed—not by sound, not by sight; but once more by a warning fragrance” (211). In this way Charlotte constructs the cigar as an image that paradoxically both enhances and diminishes Rochester’s physicality. On one hand, Jane neither sees nor hears him, but only recognizes his presence through the ethereal cigar scent: “[N]o moving form is visible, no coming step audible; but that perfume increases” (211). In a scene that mirrors Jane and Rochester’s supernaturally-tinted meeting in Hay Lane, Charlotte attributes incorporeal features to the master of Thornfield; he is neither seen nor heard, but can only announce his presence through a scent. Such tension between his sexual availability and existence only through an aroma suggests that like all of his previous masks, Rochester employs the cigar as a social construct through which he conceals himself from Jane under the cover of cosmopolitan refinement.

Yet this masculine-cosmopolitan act does not last, for Rochester reveals his inner impulse to appreciate regional English nature through his observation of a moth: “‘Look at his wings,’

²⁶ All citations are from the following edition: *Villette*, New York, London, Toronto: Everyman's Library, 1992.

said he; ‘he reminds me rather of a West Indian insect; one does not often see so large and gay a nightrover in England. There! he is flown’” (212). Although this comment reveals Rochester’s knowledge of the foreignness of the West Indies, such an observation of nature also signals his connection to this particular region of England, and to regionalism in general. This is especially evident given that Rochester’s cigar entirely disappears once he and Jane meet and walk together in the garden. Charlotte also pairs Rochester with the moon’s female symbolism by the fact that his shadow was “thrown long over the garden by the moon,” which emphasizes his intrinsic cultural and moral correlation to Jane (212). Through the power of Jane’s presence, for this brief moment Edward Rochester is no longer enslaved to a self-cultivated image as an urban and European aristocrat that has been slowly burning away his morality and individuality, like the fire of a cigar.

As Charlotte indicates in the proposal scene, the burgeoning relationship between Jane and Rochester is reflected by the garden in which the climactic conversation unfolds. The natural elements of the sun, moon, and even the moth along with the scent of Rochester’s cigar combine to form the symbolic framework upon which this narrative moment relies. The importance of regionalism and cosmopolitanism is also signaled through Jane’s despair at the thought of having to move to Ireland upon Rochester’s marriage to Blanche Ingram, with “all the brine and foam, destined...to rush between me and the master, at whose side I now walked” and with the coldest “remembrance of the wider ocean” (214). The ocean itself represents an isolated future in a foreign land detached both from Rochester and from the regional setting of Thornfield (and England) more broadly. Rochester, still acting under the guise of Blanche’s fiancé, enunciates the physical distance that Ireland suggests: “It is a long way to Ireland, Janet, and I am sorry to send my little friend on such weary travels” (214-5). The game that Rochester plays with Jane

coincides with my theory that he is, in fact, more of a regional figure than a cosmopolitan one. In his construction of the Ireland scenario, he fabricates himself as a manifestation of England; for Jane to be apart from Rochester means that she will also be separated from regional Britain. While his game is ultimately a test to prove Jane's love, the test also reveals Rochester's devotion not to Continental culture, but to the region of England of his birth and title and the place that Jane calls home.

When Charlotte Brontë landed at the harbor town of Ostend, Belgium and made her way to the capital city of Brussels, she entered a country that was in many ways diametrically opposite from Haworth, Yorkshire, and England. Belgium had undergone a revolution in 1830 that resulted in an exalted sense of national pride, which manifested itself most strongly through its Catholicism and French-speaking traditions. To 26 year-old, Yorkshire-born Charlotte, the cities of London and Brussels represented foreign environments that both promised the cultural learning of a city that she craved as well as emphasized her regional roots that she never could entirely relinquish. Unlike Emily, Charlotte took pains to assimilate to the cultural requirements of Brussels in aspects such as her wardrobe, but her connection to England still plagued her with homesickness during her Continental stay. Snell argues that “[r]egionalism itself...was arguably inconceivable in a context in which questions of nationality—of what it was to be Irish, Scottish, Welsh or English—were irrelevant or minor” (44-5). I propose that *Jane Eyre*, a novel that never mentions Belgium, connects to Charlotte's experience in Brussels precisely through its English setting. Charlotte's turn away from Belgium to focus on a Yorkshire environment demonstrates her desire to disconnect from her emotional dependence on Brussels and passion for Monsieur Héger. In conclusion, I argue that Charlotte's choice of an English regional setting establishes

Jane Eyre as a Belgian novel in its own right through its discussion of regional and cosmopolitan tensions that Charlotte would analyze in all four of her novels.

Chapter IV: Imperialism, Colonialism, and Bertha/Antoinette Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*

“...and that is truly humiliating—not to know how to get *mastery* over one’s own thoughts, to be the *slave* of a regret, a memory, the *slave* of a dominant and fixed idea which has become a *tyrant* over one’s mind. Why cannot I have for you exactly as much friendship as you have for me—neither more nor less? Then I would be so tranquil, so free...”

Letter to Constantin Héger, 18 November 1845 (italics mine)

In her letter to W.S. Williams dated January 4th 1848, Charlotte Brontë discusses her depiction of Bertha Mason Rochester in the following way:

There is a phase of insanity which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind and a fiend-nature replaces it. The sole aim of the being thus possessed is to exasperate, to molest, to destroy, and preternatural ingenuity and energy are often exercised to that dreadful end....It is true that profound pity ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation, and equally true is it that I have not sufficiently dwelt on that feeling; I have erred in making *horror* too prominent. (Smith, vol. 2, 3)

Charlotte here draws attention to Bertha as a morally tainted and violent figure, as well as confesses how, rather than encouraging a sympathetic outlook toward Rochester’s mad wife in her readers, she has dwelt on the horrific elements that make her madness so terrifying. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha occupies an ambiguous moral, racial, and sexual status. She is a Creole, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “a person born in [the Caribbean, certain parts of the Americas, etc.], but of European or African descent.”²⁷ While today racial difference is not a necessary component of the word “Creole,” the Victorian world would have read the novel’s description of Bertha as a Creole to denote her “othering” in terms of race. As a result, critics since Gilbert and Gubar have interpreted Bertha as the presence of immorality, exertive sexuality, and Jane’s “dark side.” However, in his work “Slavery and the Politics of Metaphor in *Jane Eyre*,” Carl Plasa offers a postcolonial re-reading in order to question how the language of

²⁷ “Creole, n. and adj,” *OED Online*.

slavery is used to describe Jane's plight. Charlotte's application of enslavement language effectively silences Bertha as the underlying presence of unjust racial "othering" and the British slave trade in the novel. Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) also provides a counter-argument to *Jane Eyre* through a narrative in which the peripheral figure of Bertha/Antoinette dominates the forefront, and her story can be told through her eyes and not through Jane's or Rochester's. While the postcolonial and imperialism context in the Victorian novel is a wide field, in this section I return to my beginning theoretical concept: in *Jane Eyre*, the male/female body acts as and is representative of geographical territory as associated with sexuality, regionalism and cosmopolitanism, and now, colonialism and imperialism. Despite the lack of racial and colonial tensions between England and Belgium, Charlotte's first-hand experience on the Continent still applies to Bertha's existence in *Jane Eyre*. In the above passage Charlotte describes a woman who is inhuman through her lack of a moral conscience, her wish to destroy what is (presumably) good, and her possession of the power to do so in a way that is un-pitiable and horrific. While Charlotte clearly speaks of Bertha Mason, these same attributes could be seamlessly applied to Madame Héger, both through Charlotte's creative construction of her in *The Professor* and *Villette*, and her recorded opinion of the Pensionnat headmistress in letters. Such similarities—especially given the association between Charlotte/Jane/Lucy Snowe and Monsieur Héger/Rochester/M. Paul—contribute to my argument that Charlotte's fashioning of Bertha as a madwoman reflects her opinion of the actions, morals, and philosophies of Madame Héger, as well as Belgian women overall. I will first analyze the overlap between Rhys' and Brontë's depictions of Bertha; secondly, I will look at how Jane defines her (sexual) identity in response to both Bertha and Blanche Ingram's foreignness and "otherness"; and I will conclude

with a study of the tensions between the female body and colonialism, specifically how they manifest themselves in both the Brussels experience and in *Villette*.

Although begun much earlier in the late 1920s, Dominican-born British novelist Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, which fills in the gaps of Bertha (renamed “Antoinette”) Mason Rochester’s story. In this three-part novel, Rhys switches point-of-view multiple times, from Antoinette’s tale of growing up in the West Indies, to Rochester’s post-marriage regrets, and finally to Bertha’s mental degeneration while in the Thornfield attic that ends with her fiery death. *Wide Sargasso Sea* epitomizes the trend of postcolonial literature in the mid-twentieth century following the achievement of national independence in former British colonies, and therefore this literary tradition “subverts the imperial privilege of the ‘centre’ in order to give voice to the ‘periphery’ which has been silent for so long.”²⁸ Any potential for Bertha Mason’s voice in *Jane Eyre* is silenced not only by Rochester’s retelling of his West Indian past, but also through Jane’s perception of her as sub-human; in response to both Rochester’s and Jane’s occupation of the center in *Jane Eyre*, Rhys supplies the peripheral figure of Bertha with a voice and a story to tell. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette’s childhood and adolescence remain fraught with the racial conflict that arose after the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1833 that abolished slavery in the British Empire. As Silvia Cappello explains, because Antoinette’s family experiences “financial and social decay resulting from the end of slavery,” she becomes identified with the minority group of the “creolized white community [that was] regarded negatively by both British whites and local blacks” (49). One such British white was Edward Fairfax Rochester, “a victim himself [of] patriarchal society”

²⁸ Cappello, “Postcolonial Discourse in *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” 47.

(Cappello 51), who as Charlotte details denies and thus annihilates any claim that Bertha could justly make to her own humanity and sanity as a victim of British imperialism.

Through an analysis of both novels, several contrasts emerge between the way Rhys and Brontë depict the figure of the Creole Bertha. The beginning paragraph of *Jane Eyre* offers an immediate opportunity to compare both novelists' treatments of femininity, nature, and childhood:

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner...the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so somber, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question. I was glad of it. I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes...humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority... (5)

In their interpretation of this opening based on reading Jane's story as a pilgrimage into adulthood, Gilbert and Gubar associate "that day" with "the real beginning of Jane's pilgrim's progress" and the impossibility of a walk as "a metaphor for the problems she must solve in order to attain maturity" (339). Moreover, *Madwoman in the Attic* emphasizes *Jane Eyre's* status as a Bildungsroman and a "story of enclosure and escape...in which the problems of the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood...are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome" (Gilbert and Gubar 339). However, Carl Plasa proposes that by depicting Jane as "Everywoman," "a female narrative of oppression and resistance which is distinctively English...becomes silently representative of women's experience as a whole...[suggesting] a certain blindness with regard to female histories which are racially and culturally other" (80). In the very first sentences of *Jane Eyre*, rather than Charlotte proposing an "Everywoman" homogenization of female experience, she in fact presents the differences between women of separate countries and climates—specifically how Jane and Bertha would have experienced childhood differently. From the

beginning, Charlotte highlights the story's Englishness through the influential presence of English weather; the day was defined by "leafless shrubbery," "cold winter wind," and the impossibility for the children to venture into nature and enjoy the outdoors. The impossibility of taking a walk determines Jane's childhood experience in that instead of being liberated by English nature, she must remain in the oppressive and physically enclosed space of Gateshead.

By contrast, Jean Rhys portrays Antoinette/Bertha's adolescence as enriched by the West Indian climate through her ability to exist outdoors and identify with her natural surroundings. Antoinette describes how "[o]ur garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell."²⁹ While this passage carries the foreshadowing connotation of the social dissolution that Antoinette and her family would face, the environmental and regional differences between Bertha and Jane's childhoods are startling; Bertha simply does not and cannot experience the physically and emotionally isolating English weather that Jane does as a young girl. While Jane's narrative begins through an image of her bodily separation from nature, Bertha wanders a wild garden that denotes both her physical and mental liberation. Rhys inflects the character of Bertha Mason with physicality, originality, and a life outside of and prior to Thornfield Hall, which is unlike both Charlotte's depiction of Bertha and critical interpretations of her as the "madwoman." By arguing against criticism such as *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Carl Plasa questions the traditional reading of Bertha as Jane's psychological "double" or "other." He argues that critics like Gilbert and Gubar seem to collude with the novel and its desire to muffle Bertha as a female and a human being through their choice to view her only as a psychological symbol and narrative technique. Such a reading, as Plasa

²⁹ All citations are from the following edition: *Wide Sargasso Sea*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966.

insists, “denies Bertha’s status as an autonomous subject in Brontë’s novel, favoring, instead, a psycho-feminist emphasis on her role of the metaphorical expression of Jane’s own unconscious desires and discontents” (80). Through the different natural (or unnatural) environments in which Jane and Bertha experience childhood and puberty, Gilbert and Gubar’s assertion of Jane as “Everywoman” cannot hold true. In fact, such homogenization of the female experience with Bertha as Jane’s “double” only serves to efface the former’s racial and cultural distinctions that make her such a multi-faceted character.

In order to conclude how both Jane and Bertha’s natural settings represent their social, racial, cultural, and mental differences, I argue that both Rhys and Brontë create a thematic connection between geographical climate and the blossoming or repression of sexuality. Due to the harshness of the English winter, Jane feels “humbled by the consciousness of [her] physical inferiority,” and this frustration with her body later manifests through her physical attack on John Reed and eventual imprisonment in the red room (5). On the other hand, Antoinette perceives her tropical homeland as an environment of security in which she is safe from foreign invasion, both of her home and of her maturing sexual body: “I am safe...There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers” (27). Such association between Bertha and her West Indian tropical clime connects to Rochester’s “logic of female succession...[in which] the Creole Bertha functions as a geographical type,” and so his search for Bertha’s opposite first through European mistresses and then Jane becomes a quest for the female products of different nationalities.³⁰ This symbolic correlation between Bertha and the West Indies emphasizes her existence as a human being who exhibits cultural and environmental difference, rather than her

³⁰ Berman, *Creole Crossings*, 123.

presence as merely a racially and mentally “other” figure in contrast to Jane. Carolyn Vellenga Berman points out that the British fear of sexual license among members of colonies did not necessarily refer to “blackness per se” or rely on the exhibition of racial difference (129). Instead, intemperate sexual appetites in the colonies were based more on “the general dangers of sentimental and political alliances between colonizer and colonized,” and traits of “beastliness” thus could be applied to “Creole whites, Creole mulattos, blacks, and even English women who chose black mates” (Berman 129). Rather than rejecting his marriage to Bertha based on her racial or psychological otherness, Rochester searches for new lovers who are geographically and culturally different from Bertha, in this case from European stock—not women who were a racial or mental improvement upon his Creole wife. His progression from the West Indies (Bertha), to Europe (multiple mistresses), to his native England (Jane) signals his eventual rejection of the foreign and the cosmopolitan. Through viewing Bertha as a culturally foreign woman rather than a mentally subhuman Creole symbol, a parallel surfaces between Bertha Mason’s foreign presence in *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte’s own cosmopolitan experience in Brussels, Belgium.

In my thesis so far, I have analyzed how Jane Eyre’s sexual growth is linked to Charlotte’s own sexual maturity that was catalyzed by her two years in Brussels. Both Jane and Charlotte’s relationship to their sexual bodies most strongly registers through contrasting themselves to women who exhibit sexual tendencies, appetites, or traits that are in some way “foreign” to both English women’s identities. Blanche Ingram is higher up the social ladder and so represents an elite, artificial, and cosmopolitan female archetype. Bertha Mason (at least to Jane) is psychologically “other,” although the careful reader understands that there are more significant geographical, racial, and cultural differences in play. In the novel, these two female

characters represent the synthesis of my discussions of Victorian sexuality and regional/cosmopolitan tension. In the context of Charlotte's residence at the Pensionnat, the cosmopolitan figure of Blanche and the geographically foreign figure of Bertha combine to form the fictional representation of the real-life Madame Héger. In response to Madame's cosmopolitanism, European status, and overt sexual ability, Charlotte ironically both rejected the Belgian woman's lifestyle as alien to her own while simultaneously and subconsciously using Madame's example as a template for her burgeoning sexual needs.

Throughout her adolescence and arrival at Thornfield Hall, Jane prides herself on her lack of interest in cultivating outward beauty, choosing to accept her plainness and simple attire rather than revolt against the unchangeable. Even young Jane at Gateshead rejects the falsity and injustice of the spoiled brat Georgiana whose "pink cheeks and golden curls seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault" (12). However, the introduction of Blanche Ingram as Rochester's wealthy and beautiful bride-to-be catalyzes Jane's comparison of her face to Blanche's. In harsh instructions, Jane tells herself to "place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture...omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, 'Portrait of a governess, disconnected, poor, and plain'" (137). Jane's labeling of herself as a disconnected, poor, ugly governess not only reflects her lower social status, but also suggests her regional roots as a governess who lacks the worldly privilege that would connect her to elite social circles. Jane then instructs herself to "delineate carefully the loveliest face you can image...omit neither diamond ring nor gold bracelet...call it 'Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank'" (137). She then points to her self-portrait and declares: "Is it likely [Rochester] would waste a serious thought on this indigent and insignificant plebian?" (137). While she believes this exercise proves her physical inferiority and unworthiness of Rochester's

affection, this moment of personal rejection of everything Blanche represents—wealth, rank, artificial beauty through diamonds and gold—solidifies Jane’s morality and personal truth; she accepts her body rather than allowing herself to be influenced by Blanche’s false beauty. Thornfield society’s captivation with Blanche’s body mirrors a comparison between Miss Ingram and Bertha Mason that Rochester draws when he describes Bertha as a “beauty...in the style of Blanche Ingram; tall, dark, and majestic” (260), as if Bertha instead “belongs to the [English] colonizing classes” (Berman 260). Yet while Blanche Ingram signifies an English aristocratic ideal that Jane declines, Antoinette/Bertha Mason deviates from Jane’s physical and sexual status quo through her foreign, trans-Atlantic nation of birth.

When Bertha and Jane officially meet after the interruption of Jane and Rochester’s wedding, Charlotte crafts the interaction to emphasize Bertha’s bestiality, as well as how her ferociously non-human actions and emotions contrast the governess’ self-control. Indeed, Jane seems to guiltlessly relish in describing Bertha in sub-human terms: “What it was, 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...[T]he clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet” (250). In her study “Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” Laura E. Ciolkowski highlights Antoinette/Bertha’s precarious social status as a racially ambiguous woman in that the “Creole woman straddles the embattled divide between human and savage, core and periphery, self and other,” and is necessarily “caught between the increasingly separate moral and economic logics of England and the West Indian colonies.”³¹ Jane only momentarily refers to Bertha’s humanity in describing her as “a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband, and corpulent besides” (250). In this rare instance, Bertha is qualified as a physically present

³¹ Ciolkowski, “Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea” 340-1.

“woman” who not only has the corporeal ability to match Rochester’s strength, but also exercises social possession over Rochester—in Jane’s eyes, she is not *his wife*, but he is *her husband*.

However, the significance of Bertha’s physicality disappears when Rochester not only affirms that Bertha is “*my wife*,” but expresses that her physical strength is a savage quality that rebels against the norms of society and domestic conventions: “Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know” (251). After Rochester fails to assimilate Antoinette into the English domestic sphere of conjugal rights and controlled sexual urges, he attempts to organize a “relationship between English Self and ethnic Other by...defending the moral and physical differences that are enlisted as the signifiers of English national identity” (Ciolkowski 343). In order to do so, Rochester continues by contrasting Bertha and Jane based on their physical features as reflections of their inner character: “And *this* is what I wished to have...this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet...looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon...Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder—this face with that mask—this form with that bulk; then judge me” (251). To Rochester, Jane personifies the English domestic female ideal—a woman whose emotions are under complete self-guidance even when faced with a tumultuous and violent sight. Rochester uses the contrast between Jane’s “clear eyes” and Bertha’s “red balls” to enunciate the English domestic stereotype “that is dependent on the stigmatization of female self-indulgence and sexual appetite” (Ciolkowski 343). Plasa sets up the connection between women and their bodies through the language of slavery in that “Bertha stands in...for the ‘rebel’ or ‘revolted slave’ to whom Jane systematically likens herself” (90); both Jane and Bertha are commanded to control their bodies, and so the female body represents an entity that must be restrained and mastered in order to be socially acceptable. Bertha fails to conform to this standard, and as a result represents “the importance of a[n] [English] proper education by

illustrating the consequences of its absence” due to her ambiguous Creole status (Berman 3-4).

Moreover, Jane corroborates society’s rejection of Bertha and her unhinged sexuality through her perspective that the madwoman lacks corporeal existence. From the first time Jane hears Bertha while on the mansion’s third floor, the repressed and imprisoned Creole woman’s laugh is “as preternatural a laugh as any [Jane] ever heard”; without realising the consequences of this observation, Jane enunciates the stigmatism that Bertha’s racial and cultural otherness is “preternatural,” denying her the right to a physical body (91). Bertha is “deemed unsuited for English domestic bliss...because of the appetites and excesses she so liberally exhibits” (Ciolkowski 343), and Jane herself uncharacteristically (and presumably unconsciously) assists in reaffirming the conventional Victorian domestic angel stereotype. However, at the same time Jane justifies her relationship to her own body as surpassing all cosmopolitan or foreign influences. Through her growing sexual and physical identity, Jane actively chooses to reject the outside influences of both Blanche and Bertha in order to reaffirm her individual femininity.

Throughout *Jane Eyre*, the sexualities of both Blanche Ingram and Bertha Mason are depicted as cosmopolitan, foreign, and artificial in contrast to Jane’s original path toward physical self-awareness. In this thesis I have encouraged a biographical reading of *Jane Eyre* in the context of Charlotte’s time in Brussels, and I argue that Madame Héger herself was the creative inspiration for these two female characters through her cultural otherness from Charlotte’s regional status quo. If Madame Héger can be understood as Charlotte’s sexual and physical contrast, what light does this shed on the personal sexual enlightenment that the Englishwoman received in Brussels? How does this comment on the moral values that were in play in the Pensionnat under the leadership of Madame, and how could Madame both paradoxically define the kind of woman that Charlotte was not while also contributing to her

sexual understanding? A key to the answers lies in a chapter from *Villette*, one of Charlotte's most quintessentially Belgian novels.

In Chapter 19 of *Villette*, the protagonist Lucy Snowe observes a painting entitled "Cleopatra" that offers a picture of Charlotte's emotional and philosophical response to Belgium's display of blatantly mature, female sexual bodies.

[T]his picture, I say, seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection. It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life...She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat...must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say...She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case... (261)

This painting, which in reality was entitled "Une Almee" or "The Dancing Girl," frames many of the moral and physical attributes that Charlotte associated with Madame Héger. As seen in her letters and her fictionalization of Madame as Madame Beck in *Villette* and Mademoiselle Reuter in *The Professor*, Charlotte suspected that, like "Cleopatra," Madame Héger considered herself the "queen" of the Pensionnat. The Belgian woman governed her school based on "regulating...the health and welfare of the pupils" through the "easy hours, the excellent food, the benign supervision"; in short, in Madame's institution, "nothing was left to chance, and no child abandoned to its own devices—or even vices" (Gérin 190). While Charlotte believed Madame's governance of the school was a system of spying to keep surveillance over the English students, her unfounded suspicion reveals that she was simply unfamiliar with the foreign ways of a foreign school. To her regret and disgust, Madame's queen-like and "larger than life" influence over her realm even extended to Monsieur Héger, as Charlotte conveys to Emily on May 29th, 1843: "I am convinced she does not like me—why, I can't tell, nor do I think she has any definite reason for the aversion...M. Héger is wondrously influenced by Madame...Except for the

loss of M. Héger's goodwill (if I have lost it) I care for none of them" (Smith 320). Like the entrancing effect of "Cleopatra" on its viewers, Madame's government over the Pensionnat represented a form of unbridled tyranny that, far from being the exacting cruelty of Brocklehurst's Lowood school in *Jane Eyre*, dealt its harsh and calculating blows with the soft hand and observant smile of Madame Héger.

Through her connection to the well-fed and fleshy body of "Cleopatra," Madame Héger's physically "larger than life" status was evident through her multiple pregnancies, adding further fuel to Charlotte's inner detestation and jealousy. In response to both "Cleopatra" and Madame's pride in their physical maturity, Charlotte's "puritan spirit revolted at this slave of sensuality...That the flesh should be worshipped in this way offended her, the worshipper of intellect, and one who was ever miserably conscious of her deficiency in physical charms" (Fraser 173). While to qualify Madame as a "slave of sensuality" would be far-fetched, the image still resonates of Charlotte as the plain, intelligent student being housed and paid by the beautiful, sexually adult Madame. Yet while Charlotte envied her employer's sexual experience, she also found a way to counter her spite through Madame's domestic status as a wife and mother, which to Charlotte represented "the frustratingly limited life of what was considered to be appropriate for women" based on a "code of behavior which was unnatural and stupid" (Fraser 173). Charlotte declared to Ellen on October 13th, 1843, that she "cannot count the Belgians as anything," and scorned the fact that "Madame Héger is a politic—plausible and interested person—I no longer trust her" (Smith 334). Only a day later on October 14, she scribbled the following passage in the cover of her *Russell's General Atlas of Modern Geography*: "I wish I were at home...I am tired of being amongst foreigners it is a dreary life—especially as there is only one person in this house worthy of being liked—also another who

seems a rosy sugar-plum but I know her to be coloured chalk...” (Smith 335). At the age of 26, Charlotte suddenly found herself in the midst of a choice between two equally repelling ideals of Victorian femininity, which only added to the tempestuous confusion and self-doubt that must have plagued her while in Brussels. Charlotte’s only two options were to live as a sexual woman or live as a housewife, and to complicate the situation Madame Héger herself represented the epitome of both extremes. Like Jane Eyre’s decision between living with Rochester in sexual sin or laboring with St. John in a loveless marriage, Charlotte ultimately rejected Belgian sexual and domestic feminine robustness in favor of life as an independent Englishwoman. Charlotte’s two years in Brussels shed light on her sexual growth through the paradoxical image of womanhood that Madame Héger symbolized, heading her school for girls with female bodily ripeness while simultaneously retaining a moral center that exalted motherhood, childbearing, and the realm of domesticity. Madame’s suspicion of Charlotte’s attachment toward her husband and eventual distancing of pupil and professor catalyzed the Englishwoman’s crisis of sexual identity, which she would for the rest of her life seek to come to terms with through the art and craft of her novels.

Conclusion

Jane Eyre instigated both outrage and positive reviews through the narrative's unhindered expression of a young governess who develops—not into a spinster or domestic angel—but into a mature sexual woman. Upon its publication in 1847, Charlotte Brontë's picture of femininity both offended sensibilities of the Victorian public as well as enthralled many critics with Jane's refreshing assertion of female independence. Since then, the novel has been read through the structure of modern feminist criticism in order to analyze how Charlotte's portrayal of Jane's body relates to the novel's Victorian socio-cultural context. On the other end of the spectrum of Brontë studies, *Villette* and *The Professor* have been classified as “the Belgian novels” due to their setting and the biographical information they provide about her emotionally and creatively charged years in Brussels. However, I argue that *Jane Eyre*, despite its English setting, can also be profitably viewed as a Belgian novel, specifically through the interrelationship between the sexual body, physical spaces, and geographical territory.

In contemporary society, *Jane Eyre* represents a classic of English literature that is read by the general public, taught in schools, and converted into theatrical versions both onscreen and onstage. The novel's theoretical ideologies such as feminism, supernaturalism, and psychology have been frequently analyzed in literary criticism. In the process Charlotte's biographical context as well as how Jane's sexuality interrelates to areas such as regionalism, cosmopolitanism, and imperialism have been neglected. While *Jane Eyre* does not transpire in Belgium, the novel's English setting in fact reveals the underlying presence of Brussels as Charlotte's inspiration, imposing a degree of biographical significance that *The Professor* and *Villette* cannot access as thoroughly. While all three novels are told through the perspective of English subjects, Charlotte traces Jane's struggle with the foreign entities that threaten the

regional status quo through the England/Europe and Yorkshire/Brussels dynamic, which mirrors her own biographical experience.

Before she arrived in Brussels, Charlotte ached to cultivate her mind and imagination in the metropolitan environments of Europe. However, once in Belgium she experienced repulsion to its moral, cultural, and social codes while simultaneously fearing the solitary life that would face her upon returning to Haworth. Her burgeoning sexual understanding also prompted inner conflict between the intellect and the body, Protestantism and Catholicism, and her moral and Anglican upbringing in confrontation with her consuming love for her professor, Constantin Héger. In the novel, Jane Eyre must also make decisions based on a series of oppositions, most pivotal of which is her decision between the sexual Edward Rochester, and the cold St. John Rivers. Through analysing both the thematic and narrative parallels between the novel and 1842-1844 Brussels, *Jane Eyre* acts as a window into Charlotte's emotional, mental, and sexual struggles while on the Continent that neither her letters nor her two official Belgian novels can fully envision. I propose that in the future of Brontë criticism, scholars should strive to observe, study, and understand Charlotte Brontë as both a novelist and a woman with a conscious relationship to her mature body and flourishing sexuality. Through this biographical understanding, Charlotte's works may be read not only as a passionate middle-class woman's cry for acknowledgement as a female novelist, but as vital memoirs of her love for a European man and the legacy of her entry into sexual self-discovery in Belgium.

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