

Unsuspecting Storyteller and Suspect Listener: A Postcolonial Reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* Carine M. Mardorossian

After being widely celebrated as the cult text in the decades following the second wave of feminism, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has now become one of the paradigmatic texts of postcolonial studies. The novel is the most widely discussed Victorian narrative by scholars of British colonial discourse, so much so that it seems to have become the text every postcolonial critic has to cut her teeth on today. Contemporary feminist and postcolonial critics typically cite *Jane Eyre* as the epitome of the metaphorization of racial and cultural differences.¹ They argue that Brontë's use of the metaphors of mastery and enslavement to articulate domestic oppression subordinates colonial to sexual oppression and empties slavery of its racial implications. Further, critics agree that, while the novel is somewhat self-conscious about class and gender restrictions, it effectively erases racial differences by depriving its West Indian character of any textual significance other than as Jane's foil or alter ego.² Bertha's sole function is thus to define—through contrast—the consistent and coherent female subject-under-construction and ultimately to undergo erasure so that the sovereignty of the central narrating subject can be established. As an incarnation of sexuality in its most bestial and violent form, the West Indian character is thus seen as the projection of Victorians' general, and Brontë's more specific fear about the colonizers' own possible racial degeneration.

According to this influential and well-developed strand of criticism, the dramatization of an individualist quest for self-definition in women's fiction replicates rather than revises the dominant terms of colonial self-representation because any assertion of identity is necessarily based on a "sacrificial logic," that is, a logic whereby the consolidation of the self entails the assimilation/exclusion of the object/Other by the subject.³

Specifically, *Jane Eyre's* postcolonial critics foreground the ways in which it is paradoxically the trope of sympathy that provides the grounds for the complicity between the novel's feminist and imperial processes. They recognize a revolutionary potential in Jane's identificatory gestures toward her racial others, but they see this possibility as ultimately failing to live up to the expectations it raises (Azim 176; Kaplan 171–72; Sharpe 40; 52). One of these moments of potentiality is Jane's famous reverie on top of the roof when she draws a parallel between her own situation and the oppression suffered by womankind and the "millions" that constitute other oppressed groups (96). Another episode, similarly identified as an embryonically empowering but ultimately aborted moment, is the ten-year-old Jane's identification with black slaves at Gateshead when, overcome by a sense of injustice at John Reed's treatment of her, she uses the figure of a "revolted slave" to establish a parallel between class and race oppression (8–11). According to Firdous Azim and Jenny Sharpe such expressions of sympathy fall flat because their main function is not to establish a common identity between various oppressed sections of humanity so much as to enhance the contrast between the female individualist and her "uncivilized" others.⁴

Sympathy is thus read as a humanist value that ultimately functions either to corroborate or to disguise the workings of imperialist power. Indeed, if a subject's identity is ineluctably determined by what the subject opposes, and if the two terms of the opposition (subject/other) are always defined asymmetrically as well as reciprocally, then sympathy can only serve to confirm the subject's superiority or to obscure the existing hierarchy. In keeping with this logic, postcolonial and feminist interpretations of *Jane Eyre* read the heroine's professions of sympathy for "native" women as contributing to the establishment of Jane's central narrative voice and individuated self at her Other's expense.⁵ Jane's story is read as a typical *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist fulfills the Victorian fantasy of upward mobility and, in a more or less linear process, gains a coherent and masterful sense of self which characterizes middle-class subjectivity (Armstrong 187; Azim 173–74; Spivak 270).⁶ Her development repeats Rochester's trajectory of advancement from a penniless younger son to the owner of Thornfield (and of Bertha's

30,000 pounds), and her articulation of imperialism is seen as serving—if not replicating—his.

By presenting the text and its heroine as collaborators in the discursive enterprise of empire, however, these readings ignore the ways in which the author's and the narrator's contradictory position as lower middle class women within a metropolitan society necessarily inflects Jane's representations of female and racial otherness. They present not only women's writing but also women's resistance to male structures of power as deeply complicitous with the discourse of colonialism.⁷ Azim, for instance, claims that "*whether the narrative subject is male or female*, the movement is always towards the obliteration of the Other, represented in terms of class, race or sex" (108 emphasis mine).⁸ Similarly, Deirdre David is struck by the "commanding manner in which [Jane] has conducted her life and told her story" and argues that Jane puts the Victorian governess' "physical toughness, moral high-mindedness, and innate bossiness" in the service of British imperial expansion (77–78).⁹ For Sharpe, Jane resolves the tension between her subjective desire for self-determination and the principle of self-sacrifice, which is linked with women's role in the domestic sphere by differentiating herself from her Eastern sisters, who are passive and without agency (52).¹⁰ These readings construct Jane either as denying her position as Other in order to identify with Rochester, or as simply conforming to stereotypical patriarchal female roles. The premise that Jane's subject-constitution occurs at the expense of her female Other overlooks the role Brontë assigns to Rochester's mediation in the process. Jane's negotiations and appropriations of images of racial and Oriental female otherness differ from Rochester's and mark her partial difference from the colonialist self. She appropriates the racial categories Rochester debases and illuminates their status as manipulable and conflicting representational discourses. The racial/racist ideologies deployed in the novel are thus complicated—if not disrupted—by their articulation within gender differences. The narrator Jane, I argue, does not unproblematically adopt the male colonial discourse represented by Rochester, but rather challenges such discourse to replace it with an alternative form of female power. The particular kind of feminine authority embodied by Jane pro-

motes the “powers of distance” and helps her to adopt a critical distance towards the self as well as towards the mores and manners of her times.¹¹ Such denaturalizing attitude towards social norms and conventions is, as Amanda Anderson argues, a legacy of Enlightenment ideals of rationality and detachment but does not, as is too often assumed, automatically result in forms of domination and control.

It is now a critical commonplace that “to understand how gender and [race]—to take two categories only—are articulated together transforms our analysis of each of them” (Kaplan 148). Although postcolonial interpretations claim to subscribe to this tenet, their condemnation of *Jane Eyre’s* representation of race remains singularly unaffected by the novel’s sexual politics: whether the narrative is seen as critical of, or complicit with, the dominant gender ideologies does not seem to have any bearing on what has become a predictable reading of *Jane Eyre*. If two divergent readings of the novel’s gender politics can reach the same conclusion about its colonial meanings, then chances are that the ways in which gender transforms our understanding of race have been largely ignored.

Jane Eyre’s progress, I argue, does not blindly reproduce colonial discourses; rather, more troublingly, it depends on the same kind of imperialist rhetoric that the male colonial discourse propounds. The novel’s critique of gender relations is not only far from feeble or hesitant, but it also undermines many of the stereotypical and racialized assumptions Rochester constantly draws upon for self-vindication. *Jane Eyre’s* postcolonial critics argue that Jane’s autonomy becomes established through the negation of her Other and that in making the identities generated by this logic of exclusion appear “natural” obscures the system of power/language which constitutes her. By contrast, I argue that the discursive strategy that articulates Jane’s subjectivity through tropes of otherness is not rendered transparent in the novel. While Brontë’s references to slavery, harems, and subaltern women cannot be analyzed apart from the West’s self-sustaining and naturalized *topos* about its others, deploying the references in the narrative nonetheless disrupts the expectations raised by these same Victorian cultural codes. Instead of interpreting *Jane Eyre* as the triumphant ascent of a female individualist, I read it as a narrative that illustrates the ways in which representations medi-

ate the heroine's relation to herself as well as to others. Jane's growth is not a story with a beginning, middle, and an end so much as it is a mediated process of continual deferment and development. Moreover, by pointing out the discordant effects and significations that can derive from the same discursive event, the novel ultimately offers a dissenting commentary on the "naturalized" representations that the imperial and dominant signifying system promotes.

I am not trying to absolve Charlotte Brontë of complicity with the ideological processes of imperial domination and consolidation. The metaphorization of race emblemized by the numerous parallels the narrative draws between Jane and her other, Bertha, arguably falls within the framework of colonialist discourse insofar as it takes away from the literal reality of racial oppression by subordinating it to gender. Nevertheless, I argue that the contradictory impulses of gender in the text ultimately complicate these appropriations of images of racial otherness. While it is true that the recourse to the West Indian Other turns Bertha into Jane's foil, it nonetheless (albeit indirectly) makes us identify with the exploited. Moreover, the fact that Jane's "self-making" is, as I will show, patterned after an Oriental woman's assertion of identity also challenges the text's sacrificial logic. Like her favorite heroine, Sheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*, Jane relies (albeit with a twist) on storytelling as a means of delaying an evil, thus turning her Oriental other into an exemplar and undoing the "us" and "them" opposition.

I. "But it was always in her": Metaphors of Slavery in *Jane Eyre*

In the opening scenes of the novel, Jane's nine-year-long quiescence under the Reeds' treatment finally gives way to open rebellion. Troubled by her inability to communicate her thoughts, the girl resorts to an outrageous comparison between her own situation and the harshness and humiliation of slavery she has just read about in Goldsmith's *History of Rome*. In the child's distressed mind, the violence of slavery is what comes closest to the physical and mental torture she has had to endure: "You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!" I had read Goldsmith's 'History of Rome,' and . . . had drawn parallels in silence which I never thought thus to have de-

clared aloud" (8). Jane first strikes back at her young tormentor, John Reed, and later verbally assaults Aunt Reed herself: "Like any other rebel slave, [she] felt resolved in her desperation, to go all lengths" (9). Even the starkest punishment—a night spent locked up in the haunted Red Room—does not quell the "mood of revolted slave" (11), which resurfaces several times until her departure to Lowood: "*Speak* I must; I had been trodden on severely and *must* turn: but how?" (30). Although the use of slavery as a metaphor for other forms of oppression does indeed detract from the "true meaning—the literality—of slavery" (Plasa 69), the fact that an overwrought child with an "undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings" (6) generates from her readings such a strained analogy highlights, I argue, the incongruity of the comparison. At the same time, however, what begins as the young Jane's endeavor to convey her deep sense of injustice gives way to a microcosm of colonialist discursive practices whose workings get indirectly exposed and scrutinized.

Metaphors of slavery permeate the text even more pervasively than the few explicit references to enslavement suggest. The trope of the idle and degenerate slave is constantly drawn on to justify the kind of treatment to which Jane is subjected. She is considered as less than human and inferior to the working class which the Victorians already put at the farthest reaches of civilized society: "You are less than a servant for you do nothing for your keep. There, sit down, and think over your wickedness" (9). On her deathbed, Mrs. Reed recalls the shock she experienced when Jane "[broke] out all fire and violence, as if an animal had looked up at [her] with human eyes and cursed [her] in a man's voice" (210). Her revolts are seen as impulsive and irrational tantrums which lack consideration, and, after she rises against her "benefactress," her past behaviour is immediately re-evaluated in the light of her ungovernable rage and barbarity: "But it was always in her" (10). Nine years of patience and acquiescence, including her attempts to win her aunt's favour, are retrospectively interpreted as signs of her duplicitous and inherently depraved nature. Jane's passionate reactions are constantly thrown back at her and linked with her "bad propensities" rather than with the injustices she has had to face. Even her fearfulness is not taken at face value and is recast as the cause rather than the result of the treat-

ment she has to endure: “Don’t start when I chance to speak rather sharply: it’s so provoking. . . . If you dread [people], they’ll dislike you” (33–34). Thus, feelings, which are usually seen as emergent reactions to external stimuli, are again and again interpreted as causing the very conditions from which they derive.

This recurrent reversal of the cause/effect relationship is particularly meaningful when examined in the context of slavery. The slave rebellions that increasingly shook the Caribbean in the early 1800s¹² constitute a key discursive context for a text whose narrator is relating in 1819 the events of 1799–1809.¹³ Movements ranging from abolitionism to Chartism seriously hampered the practice of providing a “positive” justification for black slavery as well as for what came to be known as “white slavery” in British factories. 1834 saw the Emancipation Bill become law in England, and, in 1840, London staged the World Anti-Slavery Convention. What had been accepted without question until the second half of the eighteenth century now required an explanation for its continuation. With the tremendous influence of evangelicalism, a movement that had been instrumental in popularizing the ideals of the French Revolution in England, skin color or class origin could no longer be summarily invoked as a justification for a person’s lack of freedom and equality. The leaders of the evangelical movement (Wesley, Whitfield) denounced slavery on the grounds that all men were the children of God¹⁴ and reframed the debate as a moral rather than an economic issue. Although the supporters of slavery originally argued that unremunerated labour was necessary to consolidate national wealth and power,¹⁵ when the moral objections were magnified to the point of overriding the economic dimension,¹⁶ they resorted instead to a mode of representation that would absolve them of the charges of immorality, sin, or inhumanity. They now justified their authority on other grounds than merely economic ones and refined for this purpose the whole range of conceptual categories and rhetorical strategies solidified by the debasement of blacks under slavery had solidified. Their representations of otherness were thus continually readjusted so as to stabilize and maintain colonial authority in the midst of an otherwise unstable situation of colonial relations.

Jane Eyre, and more particularly its representation of Jane and Bertha, draws on arguments from both sides of the slavery debate. On the one hand, Jane echoes the abolitionists' claim that slave rebellions are a rightful response to the violence of slavery:¹⁷ "If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way; they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse" (50). On the other hand, Mrs. Reed's reversal of the cause and effect relationship parallels the anti-emancipationists' rhetorical strategies. By representing vengeance and deceitfulness as inherent to the black slave rather than to his/her strategies of resistance, the planters effectively separated the slave's deeper reality from material and historical circumstances. This displacement allowed them to argue that since the blacks' so-called "perverse nature" was the source of the problem, and not bondage, the removal of slavery would not turn these "savages" into equal and civilized human beings. Even after Emancipation, the image of miasmatic, savage, and irrational blacks in revolt continued to be summoned as proof of the justice of British rule, since as Kamel explains, "[u]pper middle class types like Aunt Reed whose relatives profited in Madeira especially feared the newly freed slaves who . . . 'reject[ed] the new economic order of society based on capital accumulation by residual ex-plantocrats and their patriarchal allies'" (7). The Jamaicans who were involved in the 1865 Morant Bay uprising, for instance, were characterized by the defenders of Governor Eyre's bloodthirsty retaliation as

thoroughly undisciplined, with a tendency to revert to bestial behavior, consequently requiring to be kept in order by force, and by occasional and severe flashes of violence; vicious and sly, incapable of telling the truth, naturally lazy and unwilling to work unless under compulsion. (qtd in Biddiss 26)¹⁸

One could easily imagine Mrs. Reed giving an identical description of Jane, or Rochester discussing his first wife in these same terms. Indeed, both Mrs. Reed and Rochester have to contend with a "rebel slave" of whom they are in charge, and both are adamant about being the "real" victims of this power relationship. Although the metaphors of enslave-

ment in the novel clearly positions them as oppressors, they themselves feel abused in the hands of “a nature wholly alien” (269) and “an interloper not of [their] race” (13), both of who are seen as subhuman. Eight years after Jane’s single-handed mutiny at Gateshead, Mrs. Reed still vividly remembers Jane’s “unchildlike look and voice” (210): “No child ever spoke or looked as she did. . . I felt fear, as if an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice” (203, 210). By thus representing Jane as animalistic and unchild-like, Mrs. Reed obscures the power imbalance that characterized her relationship to Jane. Similarly, Rochester cannot simply summon his wife’s madness as a reason for burying her alive in a “room without a window” (257), since in the 1840s, madness was a major cause for liberal concern.¹⁹ Only by resorting to the notion of “moral madness” can he exonerate himself; when Jane points out that the “unfortunate lady . . . cannot help being mad” (265), he immediately retorts that Bertha’s “hereditary” condition was preceded and actually caused by her sexual intemperance and “giant propensities” (269).

Such repeated attempts at self-vindication, however, ultimately allow Jane and, to a greater extent, the reader to note the contradictions and unreliability of the various narratives that are marshaled to justify existing power relations and that the young Jane has half internalized herself.²⁰ According to Mrs. Reed, Jane is impulsive and impassioned and yet simultaneously capable of the most manipulative and calculating schemes, a “creature” who hardly has any brains but who nonetheless thinks too much. Jane’s angry outbreaks are cast both as a sign of passion (“Did ever anybody see such a picture of passion?” 9) and of an inherent underhandedness and “dangerous duplicity”:

“She never did so before,” at last said Bessie, turning to the Abigail.

“But it was always in her,” was the reply. “I’ve told Missis . . . and Missis agrees with me. She’s an underhand little thing: I never saw a girl of her age with so much cover.” (10)

Indeed, “Missis” describes Jane “as a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity” (14), “a tiresome, ill-conditioned

child, who always looked as if she were watching everybody and scheming plots underhand" (21). When Jane goes to her aunt's deathbed, the first memory that emerges in the old woman's delirious mind is of the child's "incomprehensible disposition, and her sudden starts of temper, and her continual, unnatural watching of one's movements!" (203).

Mrs. Reed's description of Jane as "something mad, or like a fiend" (203) is only one of many correspondences between the protagonist and her alter ego Bertha,²¹ not the least of which is their symbolic positioning as black slaves. Although as a white Creole heiress, and a member of the slaveholders' class, Bertha cannot either be equated with the exploited, the narrative does, as Susan L. Meyer convincingly shows, "associate her with blacks, particularly with the black Jamaican antislavery rebels, the Maroons. In the form in which she becomes visible in the novel, Bertha has *become* black (252), . . . [and] symbolically enact[s] precisely the sort of revolt feared by the British colonists in Jamaica" (255).²² She is invariably figured as "fearful and ghastly" with "thick and dark hair," a "savage face," "blackened" and inflated features, the "lips . . . swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes" (249). Like Jane, Bertha is made to represent the threat of irrational colonial rebellion and is consequently locked away. She also eventually materializes the child's evocation of the phenomenon of slave suicide: "Resolve . . . instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression—as running away, or, if that could not be affected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (12). That Bertha's jailer Grace Pool should bother making "sago" (136), a West Indian bread or cereal made with starch extracted from palm tree trunks, suggests that her prisoner refuses to eat any other food. And in the light of the homicidal and unbroken rampage that Bertha undertakes against her husband and brother "now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night" (180), her suicide actually takes on the character of yet another act of resistance rather than, as Spivak argues, of a ritual self-sacrifice.²³ Brontë must have had in mind the numerous and extremely popular slave narratives that were in circulation during her lifetime as well as the manifold British novels such as *Oroonoko* which foregrounded the prevalence of slave suicides as a strategy of resistance against slavery.²⁴

These initial connections between Jane and Bertha highlight the inextricability of the ideological narratives of gender and race in the novel. Nevertheless, Jane's development from childhood to maturity, does increasingly dissociate her from her alter ego. According to Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the distance is created because the relationship between the two women becomes a "monitory" one: "while acting out Jane's secret fantasies, Bertha does (to say the least) provide the governess with an example of how not to act" (Gilbert and Gubar 361). Sharpe, however, argues that "Jane's development . . . is represented by her movement from the instinctive rebellion of black slaves toward assuming the moral responsibility of a cognizing individual" (42). In other words, Jane has to distinguish herself from slaves, because in keeping with the racialized thinking of her time, Brontë did not believe blacks to have any sense of morality on which to base their actions.

Although it is true that Jane gradually and self-consciously moves from revolutionary outbursts to more subdued and "rational" reactions, this evolution does not make her reject Bertha to internalize "the proper forms of feminine conduct" elicited by domestic ideology (London 209) so much as discard the particular form Bertha's resistance takes in the novel. In fact, while other characters are outraged by the young Jane's rebellious outbreaks, the narrator describes them as "uncontrolled" but "logical" reactions which aimed at "avert[ing] farther irrational violence": "'Unjust!—unjust!' said my reason, forced by the agonizing stimulus into precocious though transitory power" (12). It is not that her revolt is not ethically justified, but that it is eminently recuperable by a discursive formation expert at perpetuating itself. Jane soon discovers that open rebellion often reproduces rather than exposes the oppressiveness of the power structure and its naturalized categories. Calling John Reed a slave-driver makes him behave even more like one.²⁵

It is the realization that social customs cannot be so easily evaded, rather than a belief in the English moral and national superiority, that drives Jane to remain within the bounds of conventionality. When Rochester seeks to vindicate his previous life of "dissipation" ("never debauchery") and to rally Jane to his views by contrasting her with his

Creole wife and his three “foreign” mistresses, Jane is far from approving of his depiction of her as the “antipode” of “these poor girls” (274). The marriage of equal minds is, she realizes, impossible when the very language Rochester uses is saturated with the binary logic which governs the Victorian representations of women’s nature: “It was a grovelling fashion of existence: I should never like to return to it. Hiring a mistress is the next worst thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading” (274). These words are ultimately responsible for Jane’s determination to leave (“I knew what I must do” 277) even before her “indomitable” claim “I care for myself” sends her on her way (279). Rochester claims Jane as his equal but annihilates the very possibility of equality, since his adherence to Victorian definitions of women renders the very notion unthinkable. For Rochester, a pure and un sullied woman like Jane would never even consider his unconventional proposal were it not for the extenuating circumstances in which he finds himself. Her knowledge of the truth thus necessarily sets her apart from his previous “degenerate” mistresses who had no legitimate excuse to get involved in a sexual *liaison* outside the bounds of marriage. In other words, Rochester’s disregard for conventions is circumstantial and actually reproduces the oppressive codes of Victorian gender ideology.

Jane refuses to be the exception that confirms the rule and identifies with the mistresses whom she has been so near succeeding. When she asks Rochester whether he did not see anything wrong with living “first with one mistress and then another,” he immediately assumes that what she finds reprehensible is the corruption he incurred through mixing with people who are, if not “by nature,” then “by position, inferior” (274). Jane, herself an inferior by position, challenges his essentialist characterization by relocating the source of the degradation in him, namely in the “feeling which *now* in his mind desecrated their memory” (274 emphasis mine). It is precisely because she sees the equivalence between herself and his ex-lovers and not because she considers herself morally superior that she chooses to leave. She cannot accept an offer that is ultimately based on the traditional image of the self-sacrificing and self-regulating domestic woman rather than on a notion of equal-

ity between the sexes. What she had thought of as a spontaneous and spiritual communion that bound her to Rochester in the garden scene is exposed as another layer of conventionality and reveals the inextricability of identity from social constraints.²⁶

The demonstration of the inescapability of the socio-symbolic order, I argue, does not lead Brontë to advocate conformity or capitulation to it. Rather, Brontë dramatizes the self-destructiveness entailed in attacks against oppressive social forms, and, while demonstrating that there is no space outside dominant narratives, she nonetheless suggests the possibility of wresting from these narratives the means of empowerment. Jane's lack of expressed opposition in the second half of the novel does not signify her acceptance of pathological conditions of domination but her reliance on a type of "oppositional power" that, although it derives from existing power structures and as such does not challenge them overtly, "has the extremely tricky ability to erode insidiously and almost invisibly, the very power from which it derives" (Chambers 2). According to Ross Chambers, the effectiveness of "oppositonality" depends on its use of circumstances established by the dominating system but for ends of which the system itself is unaware. It thus remains effectively "'oppositional' unless and until it is perceived by the power structure itself, in which case it is classified as illicit or even criminal resistance (and so represents a failed form of 'opposition')" (9).

In this respect, Jane's deployment of "oppositonality" is resonant with the black Creoles' "tactical" resistance in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Like Rhys's rewriting, *Jane Eyre* foregrounds the ways in which "coming to voice" in the face of authority results in the speaker losing rather than gaining power. The moment Christophine, the most resilient black character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* stands up to Rochester, she has to leave the narrative field altogether. Only when her resistance is articulated with rather than directly opposed to the categories of imperial and patriarchal discourse does it have the potential to unsettle the modes of operation of authority.²⁷ Similarly, in *Jane Eyre*, the potential for effective resistance is located "between the possibility of disturbance in the system and the system's power to recuperate that disturbance" (xi). Although, as Chambers points out, this "room for maneuver" does not effect radi-

cal or immediate transformation let alone revolutionary reversal, it does have the power “to change what people desire [which] is, in the long run, the way to change without violence the ways things are” (xii). This, I want to argue, is what Charlotte Brontë is doing: taking imposed codes and languages and transforming them from within.²⁸ It is also what the narrated Jane undertakes: she stages her “silent revolt” within rather than against the institutions that constrain her and uses the very social and linguistic systems that seem to lock her in conformity for “other” purposes. For instance, whereas her use of the formula of deference “Master” to address Rochester seems to epitomize her subjection, it also enables her during their “engagement” to assert her independence and identity both of which “her employer” is threatening. Jane’s interiorized form of discipline or “reserve” is thus far more complicated than just an “enforced self-suppression” (London 203) “in keeping with domestic ideology’s structures of self-government” (202).²⁹

II. Unsuspecting Storyteller and Suspect Listener

As Rosemarie Bodenheimer and Janet Freeman point out, Jane’s evolution is also, if not primarily, a verbal one: she grows into a fully developed narrative voice that solicits the reader’s whole-hearted assent (Bodenheimer 160; Freeman 698). The interlude at Ferndean epitomizes this verbal mastery: she has literally become Rochester’s “narrator,” his “vision” and his “right hand,” and has acquired the authority to interpret his life: “He saw nature—he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam” (397). Jane has now achieved the status of an effective storyteller. She not only has the ability to anticipate her audience’s reaction but also to manipulate “the narrative of [her] experience” accordingly: “to have told him all would have been to inflict unnecessary pain” (387). She gives “partial replies” and even withholds her account of their telepathic communication because her “tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of [her] hearer” (394). Applying a lesson she learnt at Lowood, she thus uses “subdued” language and restraint in order to sound more credible (Bodenheimer 160): “I infused into the narrative far less of gall and

wormwood than ordinary. Thus restrained and simplified, it sounded more credible” (62). Jane’s discursive authority is consequently shown to be about telling as much as about not telling, about keeping quiet as much as about taking the floor. Although her hermeneutic monopoly at Ferndean contrasts with her earlier characterization as reserved and undemonstrative, it does not, however, signify a radical shift in her sense of self or in her relationship with others but a refinement of “well-practised skills” (Tromly 48). Neither can this authority be reduced to the socially ordained “power of influence” Victorian ideology imparted to the domestic woman.³⁰ Rather, Brontë creates a model whereby Jane’s positioning as both object and audience of the conversation neither symbolizes her powerlessness nor her complicity with middle class conventionality. As Laurence points out,

If reality is perceived according to established patriarchal values, then women’s silence, viewed from the outside, is a mark of absence and powerlessness, given women’s modest expression in the public sphere until the twentieth century. If, however, the same silence is viewed from the inside, and women’s experience and disposition of mind inform the standard of what is real, then women’s silence can be viewed as a presence, and as a text. (157)

At the end of the novel, Jane foregrounds her expertise as a narrator by indirectly comparing herself to Sheherazade, the paragon of tale tellers: “You shall not get it out of me to-night, sir; you must wait till to-morrow; to leave my tale half-told will, you know, be a sort of security that I shall appear at your breakfast table to finish it” (386). While Jane is modeled after the narrator of the Eastern collection, Rochester is linked to the despotic Sultan Shahriyar both through the imagery that describes him and through Jane’s direct remarks. These references are all the more significant because *The Arabian Nights* formatively influenced Brontë’s style. Sheherazade’s stories were indeed one of the Brontës’ favorite childhood books, “so early acquired, assimilated, conned as to be almost coeval with . . . memory” (Gérin 7). Charlotte and Branwell’s juvenilia is saturated with motifs, references, and images from the *Nights*.

Both Charlotte and Emily borrowed Sheherazade's narrative strategies, embedding tale within tale in their own fiction. In *Jane Eyre*, for instance, Jane's dreams, the pantomime, the gypsy scene, and Rochester's lengthy reminiscences constitute embedded narratives that "are used structurally to reflect the central action" (Workman 182). Nevertheless, although Jane's own desire to "open [her] inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale [her] imagination created, and narrated continuously" (Brontë 95–96) does indeed associate her with Sheherazade, I would suggest that Brontë introduces in this novel an unprecedented spin on her borrowings from *The Arabian Nights*, and in so doing destabilizes the (passive) victim/(cruel) sultan binary that Victorians associated with the figures of the Oriental woman and man.

The manifold translations of these "oriental tales" provided the Victorians with an inexhaustible source of unexamined and stereotypical Eastern images to fulfill their fantasy needs. English and French writers plundered the *Nights* for oriental props and erotic references. Drawing heavily on the tales' descriptions of Oriental women and especially of "harem-inmates," they reproduced Victorian expectations about Eastern womanhood as either "erotic victims [or] scheming witches" (Kabbani 26).³¹ Even the narrator of the tales Sheherazade, with whose predicament most if not all of Brontë's contemporaries sympathized, ultimately helped perpetuate the topos of the erotic female other as victim of a fanatical, violent, and lusty Eastern master. As a result, the abundance of similes and metaphors inspired by *The Nights* in *Jane Eyre* is accordingly often summoned as evidence of Brontë's (feminist) Orientalism.³²

Nevertheless, whereas the few studies of the relation between *Jane Eyre* and the *Nights* highlight the ways in which Jane's situation and maneuvers parallel Sheherazade's, what strikes me is the ways in which they differ.³³ Indeed, in contrast to Sheherazade who relies on storytelling as a survival strategy, Jane adopts the role of a quiet listener when she is most vulnerable. At important dramatic moments, she grows silent, and her storytelling skills are overshadowed by her withdrawn and undemonstrative countenance. Throughout the novel, she is repeatedly positioned as the object rather than the subject of conversation: at Gateshead, Mrs. Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst discuss the future "fitting

a child like Jane Eyre" (29), and the servants confer about her propensities and even about her possible death in her presence. At Lowood, Mr. Brocklehurst places her on a stool and publicly proclaims her "vices" to humiliate her (57). And at Thornfield, whether Rochester bombards Jane with questions about her past, relatives, and experiences, and even goes so far as to assume the guise of a gypsy in order to find her out. Controlling the discourse, he not only determines what he would like to know, but eventually makes up his own answers (Azim 194).

As the relationship progresses, Rochester increasingly assumes the part of storyteller and Jane the role of listener. In his words, "it is not [her] forte to tell of [her]self, but to listen while others talk of themselves" (119); she was made "to be the recipient of secrets" (127). Rochester not only gives her several more or less elaborated versions of his past relationships and mistakes, but he also starts relating to her parts of her own narrative. He assesses her personality so precisely that she "wonder[s] what unseen spirit had been sitting for weeks by [her] heart watching its workings and taking record of every pulse" (175). The few times when Jane does attempt to tell and interpret her story, Rochester imposes his own reading on the events she is recounting. When she tells him about the incident of the torn veil, a rendition that a critic has qualified as "forceful, honest, and self-consciously formalized—complete with 'preface' and 'tale,'" her storytelling abilities ultimately fail her since Rochester unscrupulously imposes his own interpretation in lieu of hers (Peters 228). He dismisses her dreams as nonsensical and explains away Bertha's frightening appearance as "half dream, half reality" (251). Sometimes he even talks about Jane in the third person as if she were not present. For instance, he turns the story of their meeting into a fairy-story for Adèle and tells it again later to Jane herself in the third person.³⁴ Finally, from telling her who she is, Rochester predictably reaches the point of telling her what she ought to do, namely become his unofficial "Angel in the House" whose mission would consist of rehabilitating him.

During the Moor House episode, Brontë even more explicitly distinguishes her heroine from Sheherazade. Despite the manifold allusions that associate the two women, Jane is again positioned as both interpretable text and attentive audience rather than as a storyteller.

The day after St. John Rivers recognizes her real name on the drawings she had mechanically and abstractedly signed, he returns to her cottage “experienc[ing] the excitement of a person to whom a tale has been half-told, and who is impatient to hear the sequel” (332). The irony is that Jane had left no narrative “half-told” in the first place and has no clue about what he means. Like Rochester, St. John then proceeds by “assuming the narrator’s part, and converting [Jane] into a listener” (334). He appropriates the interpretive authority and turns Jane into the object of analysis and the disempowered audience of her own past experiences.

Thus, by contrast with her Eastern literary model, who spins out tale after tale (and tale within tale) to save her own life and the lives of the young women of her country, Jane’s quietness and modest expression seem at first to reinforce her powerlessness in a male-dominated context. According to Carol Bock, “[d]espite the pleasure that Jane takes in hearing Rochester, one still senses that being reduced to a mere audience places her once again in a position of vulnerability. . . . Jane is debarred from exercising the interpretive and expressive talents that we have seen are essential to her sense of self” (86). Brontë, however, disengages Jane’s undemonstrative behaviour from what could be perceived as passivity and submission. Like Rhys, she propounds a form of resistance “marked by women’s indirectness of speech and silence” (Laurence 158). In the presence of men whose conceptual framework—let it be Rochester’s patriarchal “despotism,” Brocklehurst’s hypocritical brand of evangelicalism or St. John’s Calvinistic “creed”—strictly controls what it is possible to say on any given topic, Jane learns to adopt an “oppositional” form of resistance which draws on the dominant modes of thought but for her own purposes. Thus, the image of the “caged bird” which conventionally signifies imprisonment and powerlessness paradoxically but judiciously comes to symbolize Jane’s freedom and agency: “Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature!” (280).

Jane is at her most vulnerable when she tells her ex-fiancé of her decision to leave Thornfield. Rochester reacts violently and is dangerously close to sexually assaulting her: “Jane! will you hear reason? (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear), because if you won’t, I’ll try vio-

lence" (266). He warns her that "I am not a gentle-tempered man—you forget that: I am not long-enduring; I am not cool and dispassionate. Out of pity to me and yourself, put your finger on my pulse, feel how it throbs, and—beware!" (267). Jane's response is quite unexpected considering the "perilous crisis" she is facing: "Sit down; I'll talk to you as long as you like, and hear all you have to say, whether reasonable or unreasonable" (266). She encourages Rochester to start the tale of his first marriage and promises to listen to him "for hours if [he] will" (268). When his first narrative is over, she elicits another one, namely the story of his search for a woman "who'd understand his case and accept him in spite of the curse with which he was burdened" (273). She thus takes over the role of questioner and confessor. Rochester resumes his storytelling but not without first remarking: "When you are inquisitive you always make me smile. . . . But before I go on, tell me what you mean by your 'Well Sir?' It is a small phrase very frequent with you; and which many a time has drawn me on and on though interminable talk; I don't very well know why." Jane's answer evades the question and again urges him to go on: "I mean—what next? How did you proceed? What came of such an event? Did you find anyone to marry you?" (273).

What is revealed as Jane's *pattern* of questioning throws a new light on their relationship: Rochester is not as much in control of the discourse as we thought. While he is busy trying to gain mastery over Jane, she makes him narrate a succession of tales to avoid a potentially violent situation. Incidentally, this is also true of the month preceding their wedding when she makes him sing or talk in the evenings in order to avoid the physical intimacy he insists on establishing. The framing of a person talking to delay an evil is of course a crucial device of *The Arabian Nights*. While Rochester is plundering the *Nights* for stereotypes of Oriental women and Grand Turks to playfully represent their relationship, Jane uses the same book on a meta-level in which Sheherazade functions to make *him* go on talking. Unlike her Eastern counterpart, however, she does not locate her power in speaking but in listening.³⁵ Indeed, whereas speaking up consistently gets her into trouble and gives her away, her surreptitious attentiveness allows her to gain invaluable

insight into people's motives and compromising situations. Thus, she occupies the position of both Sheherazade and the Sultan.

Jane discovers at a young age that what is true or false is actually pre-determined by particular discourses (or, in Foucault's term, "regimes of truth") rather than by the "truthfulness" of the actual occurrence. When Mr. Brocklehurst asks her whether she is a good girl, she finds it "[i]mpossible to reply to this in the affirmative" since "her little world held a contrary opinion" (27). Similarly, at Thornfield, Victorian gender norms are portrayed as so authoritative that, instead of justifying his offer of "free love" by appealing to Jane's and his desires, Rochester remains steeped in extremely conventional terms of female domestic and sacrificial devotion. Jane foregrounds the deep-rootedness of self-perpetuating social codes, when, for instance, she resorts to visual representation as a means of curbing her feelings of infatuation for Rochester. "[A superior] cannot possibly intend to marry [a governess]," so Jane reinforces the unbreachable social gap by painting two portraits, one of herself she draws in less than two hours and entitles "Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor and plain," and a miniature of Blanche she takes two weeks to complete and which delineates "the loveliest face" with "the raven ringlets, the Oriental eye" (141). Jane uses the scripts she has at her disposal to remind herself of the way the dominant systems of meaning perceive her and to make sense out of her situation. However, while she is emphasizing the impossibility of speaking from a space outside of social conventions ("[Blanche] answered point for point" to her portrait 151), she also displaces the conventional symbolic representations that define Victorian class and gender ideology, since their reification takes place at the cost of these representations' "naturalness." Indeed, that her faithful representation of Blanche precedes the appearance of the individual Blanche and yet resembles her almost exactly, points to the ways in which social realities are shaped by the representations that they supposedly antecede. While Brontë's novel has been read as responsible for the perpetuation of a dominant domestic ideology to which Jane ultimately submits, I read *Jane Eyre* as seeking to expose the constraints and contradictions such ideology entails for women. The marriage of equal minds can only occur through

supernatural intervention and when Rochester, deprived of his abilities to either read or write, is dependent on Jane to provide him with (her) representations of the world.

Jane's increasing awareness and manipulation of the complex and unstable processes through which she identifies herself and is identified by others is particularly salient in her "oppositional" recuperation of *The Arabian Nights* paradigm. The novel's feminism intersects with a well established English habit of Eastern allusion but does not exactly reproduce it. Because it draws attention to representation's work as representation, it questions the status of *The Arabian Nights* and its female stereotypes as reality.³⁶ Not only is Jane's role model an Oriental woman, but her borrowing of Sheherazade's narrative strategies to resist Rochester also challenges the vocabulary and imagery of silent Oriental womanhood as passive. The novel's reworking of the *Nights'* paradigm questions the prevalent stereotype of the Eastern woman without agency, whose "soul [is] made of yielding materials, [and is] just animated enough to give life to the body" (Wollstonecraft 311). It also challenges the victim/master binary that characterizes Victorian representations of the East. Brontë's continuous brooding on the "Woman Question" as well as its novelistic articulation in *Jane Eyre* creates a subversive text that reveals the connections between the workings of dominant gender and race ideologies. As Sara Mills explains in her important book *Discourses of Difference*, while Western women could not be said "to speak from outside colonial discourse. . . their relation to [it was] problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of 'femininity,' which were operating on them in an equal, and sometimes stronger measure. Because of these discursive pressures, their work exhibits contradictory elements which [acted] as a critique of some of the components of other colonial writings" (62). Similarly, the invocation of racial otherness to describe Jane Eyre's gender subordination suggests her solidarity with nonwhite women in a way which does not simply replicate dominant stereotypical views of non-European others.

In claiming that *Jane Eyre* does not pass along the unquestioned ideology of imperialism, I do not mean to suggest, however, that Jane's discourse makes no claim to power. As her characteristic inversion of the

Sheherazade role demonstrates, Jane does acquire authority if only by forcing confessions through strategic listening. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse have argued that, in fact, the more subtle kind of power Jane harbours, in other words, one that, unlike the masculine modalities of power, “speaks with a mother’s voice and works through the printed word upon mind and soul rather than body and soul” (4) itself exemplifies a kind of violence, “the violence of representation.” In line with a Foucaultian hermeneutics, they see Jane’s specifically female authority as more insidious than the violence of earlier political orders whose forms of control were at least overt. It is a form of power, they claim, that derives its authority from an alleged position of helplessness: Jane is excluded from available forms of social power (money, beauty, status) and becomes as a result the triumphant underdog with whom we cannot help but identify. She is given depth by virtue of her subject position and becomes the “progenitrix of a new gender, class, and race of selves” whose judgment of others we trust and “in relation to whom all others are deficient” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 8). The psychological depth of character she creates through the sheer power of the word “allows her to exemplify and evaluate not only the thoughts and feelings of women but those of men and children as well. . . . And by virtue of this power alone, she builds around herself a community that excludes those who do not think and feel and read and write as she does, all of whom die by novel’s end” (4).

Rather than see *Jane Eyre’s* denaturalizing attitude towards norms and people as a masked form of power through which the heroine arrogates moral superiority on behalf of the rising middle class, I have sought to offer a more tempered account of the ideal of critical distance the novel propounds through the character. The text, I argue, encourages us to take a dissenting view of the imperial discourse embodied by Rochester and St. John and promotes instead a conscious cultivation of critical distance embodied by Jane’s practices of shielded observation. As Amanda Anderson argues, the practices of critical detachment Brontë’s heroines represent and with which the Victorians were obsessed were far from homogenous in their effects. While contemporary theory tends to emphasize the forms of violence and exclusion attendant on the valorization of

Enlightenment ideals of distance and depth, *Jane Eyre* reveals a dialectic between “detachment and engagement, a cultivated distance and a newly informed partiality” that does not necessarily lead to control, management and surveillance.³⁷ Instead, Jane cultivates distance not only from others, but also, and predominantly, from her own self.³⁸ She evaluates herself often more severely than she does others, but the illusion of depth achieved through such self-scrutiny does not, as Rochester would have it, merely serve to separate her from her inferior others. Instead, it exposes the arbitrariness of the boundaries that allegedly set her apart from, for instance, his former mistresses. Rather than engage his claims about the nature of “slaves and mistresses,” she realizes that who they are is inseparable from how *he* sees them, that is, through the lens of constraining Victorian conventions. Furthermore, far from assuming a stable position of superiority from which she can make final judgments about others, her self-reflexive cultivation of distance is an ongoing practice that does not claim absolute objectivity. It is not, in other words, that Jane Eyre makes no claim to power, but that the alternative form of power she represents reveals the positive potential of cultivated detachment, a potential that cannot be recognized when her practices of withdrawn observation are folded into English conventions of feminine conduct or when all forms of power in the text are read as a ruse.

Notes

- 1 See Azim, Boumelha, Chow, and Sharpe; Plasa also makes this point, but he identifies in the novel an underlying critique of its rhetorical strategies.
- 2 This criticism can also be leveled against some of *Jane Eyre's* feminist critics: Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, do not interpret the character of Bertha, the white Creole “madwoman” from the West Indies, in the context of Rochester and his father’s colonialist practices but as Jane’s “dark double,” the displaced representation of the heroine’s repressed rage at women’s social destiny (Gilbert & Gubar 339; Showalter 112–24). In her analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Baer goes further to suggest that even Rhys’s Antoinette is Jane’s double: “One can make a convincing case for a shared identity: Jane and Antoinette are doubles” (135).
- 3 See Weir for a critique of the poststructuralist assumption that individual and collective identity is always necessarily founded on a same/other dialectic and produced by a logic of exclusion or sacrifice.

- 4 Azim sees the text's recognition of the sexual oppression of *all* women as "hesitant and diffident" (182), while Sharpe argues that Jane identifies herself *as* a slave but not *with* slaves. For Sharpe, the older narrator actually uses the metaphor of slavery to illustrate an improper form of resistance and the slaves' lack of moral responsibility (40–42). Similarly, Jane's sympathy for her imaginatively summoned "harem-inmates" is identified as a colonial trope that serves to establish her racial and moral superiority by constructing Oriental women as victims to be rescued and molded according to her self-image (Azim 181–82; Sharpe 30). As Sharpe points out, the notion of the submissive, self-effacing, and erotic "native woman" at the mercy of cruel indigenous practices is indeed one of the tenets that legitimated the West's "mission civilisatrice," represented by the missionary enterprise of St. John in the novel (30).
- 5 See Boumelha, David, Meyer, Perera, Spivak and Zonana for other instances of the kinds of readings I have described here.
- 6 Fraiman challenges this notion and argues that the process of Bildung for female protagonists is necessarily fraught with difficulties that destabilize the linear narrative of progress. Her chapter on *Jane Eyre* emphasizes the many threads in the novel, which, by pointing to a common identity between Jane and working class women, disrupt the vertical story of Mrs. Rochester's formation.
- 7 David acknowledges Jane Eyre's status as an "object," but she sees this condition as constituted by the ideas of racial superiority and class difference and as the means through which the heroine establishes her agency. In other words, Jane embraces the ideal of Victorian womanhood and puts it in the service of empire, because doing so fulfils her desire for authoritative subjectivity (85).
- 8 Azim is aware that the text constantly thwarts the consistency of Jane's progress towards selfhood and autonomy (when, for instance, the homeless and destitute Jane, "crawling on [her] hands and knees," temporarily resembles and even "becomes" the savage and animal Bertha), but she reads these destabilizing moments as "rites of passage" that ultimately secure rather than disrupt the sovereignty of the central narrating subject (178–79).
- 9 David's reading of Jane as the "symbolic governess of empire" sees her as unproblematically (re)producing middle class ideology and values. She thus ignores Poovey's important contention that while the middle classes were indeed counting on the governess to affirm and maintain their class values, her status as a "border case" not only produced anxiety but also contested the evenness of Victorian gender ideology.
- 10 Like Azim, Sharpe complicates Spivak's contention that the discourse of feminist individualism excludes the "native female" by arguing that the subjectivities of the subaltern women actually constitute the very condition of possibility for the establishment of the English subject.
- 11 See Anderson, who examines the progressive potential of forms of cultivated and critical distance in Victorian culture. Anderson challenges in so doing

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- Foucauldian readings such as Armstrong's, which only recognize the violent and alienating effects of practices of detachment.
- 12 Although slave revolts had been part of the Caribbean political landscape since the end of the seventeenth century, they augmented in frequency and violence on all the British islands after 1800 and were finally responsible for bringing slavery to an end: the march on the government house in Tobago (1807), the second Maroon War in Dominica (1809–1814), Bussa's rebellion in Barbados (1816), the 1st West Indian Regiment Mutinies in Trinidad (1837), the 2nd West Indian Regiment Mutiny (1808) and the famous Baptist War (last days of 1831) in Jamaica involved thousands of slaves who sought to destroy the slave plantations and kill their masters. See Rogozinski 157–61.
 - 13 As Sharpe points out, “[a]lthough Jane identifies the master/slave relation as Roman, the idea of a revolted slave had to come from a more recent past” (39), namely from the memory of the slave insurrections in the West Indies.
 - 14 In fact, after the Jamaican “Baptist War,” the biggest best organized rebellion of Creole slaves in the history of the Anglophone Caribbean, infuriated whites destroyed the chapels of Methodist and Baptist ministers because they held them directly responsible for the insurrection (Parry et al. 158–60).
 - 15 Williams argues that modern slavery (in European colonies) was originally a function of economic profitability and not of racism. Stereotypes such as the belief in the inherent inferiority of blacks “were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labour because it was cheapest and the best. This was not a theory, it was a practical conclusion deduced from the personal experience of the planter” (20). Morgan corroborates Williams's thesis but adds that the planters actually fostered race prejudice among the white lower classes in order to prevent any potentially dangerous alliance between the two groups (330–31). For historians who question the idea that race prejudice was the result rather than the cause of slavery, see Degler and Hoetnick. My own position is closer to Green's for whom the fact that black slavery emerged for economic reasons far from precludes the prior existence of racism.
 - 16 Historians disagree about the basis of the antislavery movement's success. According to Williams, abolition only took place because the economic significance of the West Indian colonies had declined to the point of making the West Indian slave system dispensable to the British metropole (also see Parry et al. 56). This argument challenged most Anglo-American historical studies of abolitionism, which typically emphasized British altruism and humanitarianism as the source of emancipation. For proponents of this view, see Klingberg and Gay. More recently, some historians have occupied a middle-ground between these two views: they argue that emancipation not only failed to undo the basic structure of relations of production but that it also contributed to the transformation of British rule from physical coercion to a “moral imperium” which allowed the British to “celebrate

concessions made to humanity as evidence of moral superiority, and therefore as proof of the justice of their rule” (Richardson 184; see also Smith 93).

- 17 See, for instance, the 1824 tract *The Rights of Man (Not Paines) But the Rights of Man in the West Indies*:

Nothing can be more evident than, that, if the slave-master will rule his slave by the law of power,—(which must ever be the case where slavery exists, for no man is a slave willingly,) the Slave has a right to make use of the law of power in return. . . . Unprotected, then, as the Slave is by law;—upon the principles of natural right and justice, the allegiance he owes to the law, is nothing. . . . as long as his present state continues, the Slave has a right to rebel;—no moral guilt whatever, that I see, can possibly attach to him, for attempting to assert what is the universal birthright of mankind. (qtd in Sharpe 41)

- 18 One white and 50 slaves were killed during the 1816 revolt in Barbados, and 214 slaves were executed after the uprising was defeated. The Baptist War in Jamaica led to 14 white and 540 slave deaths (Rogozinski 183–84). The West Indian planters actually saw these slave uprisings as “an opportunity of embarrassing the mother country and the humanitarians,” who favored abolition (207).

- 19 In 1845, the Lunatics Act was passed and established the principle that the community had a duty to provide care for the insane.

- 20 Indeed, Jane’s moments of fierce indignation alternate with times when her “habitual mood of humiliation, self-doubt, forlorn depression” (13) takes over: “All said I was wicked, and perhaps I might be so” (13); “Bessie . . . proved beyond a doubt that I was the most wicked and abandoned child ever reared under a roof. I half believed her” (23). Jane’s last altercation with Mrs. Reed gives her an incredible sense of exultation and freedom but is immediately followed by “the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction” (32). One hour later, however, Bessie notices her “new way of talking” and unusually “venturesome and hardy” demeanor, and Jane deems it better not to divulge the source of this welcome change, namely her earlier confrontation of and victory over Mrs. Reed (34). This oscillation between rebellion and convention, coupled with Jane’s self-avowed recognition of her inability to effectively convey her emotions, works to make us sympathize with a “heterogeneous thing” whose perspective vacillates and who has no clear notion of herself.

- 21 See Gilbert and Gubar’s important essay for an elaboration of the parallels between the two women.

- 22 According to Kamel, even Rochester’s repugnance to Bertha’s foul language, cursing, and “wolfish cries” can be associated to the colonist’s fear of rebellion, since black women in Barbados for instance resorted to cursing to incite revolts before Emancipation (16).

- 23 Donaldson similarly argues, “[Bertha’s] insistence upon the physical destruction of both Thornfield and herself constitutes an act of resistance not only to her sta-

- tus as a woman in a patriarchal culture but also as a colonized object” (76). For Perera, like for Spivak, Bertha’s death constitutes a denial of her subjectivity.
- 24 Equiano’s memoirs, for instance, document that the slave traders watched their African prisoners very closely “lest [they] should leap into the water” and whipped them hourly for not eating (34). Captain Phillips, a slave trader, reported that “[Whydaw slaves] often leap’d out of the canoes, boat and ship, and kept under water till they were drowned to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats” (qtd in Ferguson 243–44). According to Gilroy, slave suicide constituted a major challenge to one of the central categories of modern Western thought, namely the Hegelian master/slave dialectic of intersubjective dependency and recognition. While in Hegel’s scheme, this rational logic dictates that the slave will choose the master’s version of reality over death, slave narratives repeatedly depict death as preferable to bondage.
- 25 Slavery was extremely unpopular in England in the 1840s. Brontë herself was a strong supporter of abolition which, in 1848, she called “a glorious deed” (Wise and Symington *The Brontës* 2 198). Thus, despite the playfulness of her exchange with Rochester, Jane’s suggestion that he “lay out in expensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash [he] seem[s] at a loss to spend” can only be meant to castigate him. Tellingly, Rochester is not in the least piqued by the implication that he too is a “slave-driver.” To him, the problem with “buying slaves” is not the act of buying fellow human beings but the fact that one has then to mix with “inferiors.” Considering the time in which the novel is set, Rochester was probably a slave-owner during his stay in Jamaica.
- 26 It is significant that the moment she proclaims her equality to Rochester also marks the turning point at which she starts to increasingly subordinate her feelings to moral and social conventions, keeping a proper distance from her “Master.”
- 27 See my book, *Reclaiming Difference: Caribbean Women Rewrite Postcolonialism*, for an elaboration of this point.
- 28 See for instance Heilman who foregrounds Brontë’s skill at both using and modifying the conventions of fictional art such as the traditional Gothic. Bodenheimer also argues that the narrative of *Jane Eyre* continually summons conventional and melodramatic plotlines in order to undercut them and highlight its own originality (162–65). According to Baer, Brontë radically revises the Cinderella story through her introduction of Bertha Rochester’s character (132). See Tromly for a discussion of the ways in which Brontë reworked the autobiographical genre in her “thrice-told tales” (14).
- 29 See Kucich who similarly foregrounds the instability of binary oppositions such as desire and reserve in Charlotte Brontë’s work. He argues that for her, “desire is engendered by means of reserve rather than despite it” and “articulates itself by collapsing the distinction between expressed passion and reserve, making these gestures parallel, sometimes interchangeable modes of self-extension” (68).

- 30 Sarah Ellis, Brontë's contemporary, popularized the concept of "feminine influence" in her book *Women's Mission* (1839), where women's submission to men is recast as a form of power, namely the power of morally reforming men. According to David, for instance, Jane Eyre ultimately abides by this doctrine: "[Jane's] vocation is to rescue Rochester from his career of materialism and debauchery in a manner that grants her agency in the service of patriarchal rehabilitation" (89). Zonana also argues that Jane "define[s] herself as a Western missionary seeking to redeem not the "enslaved" woman outside the fold of Christianity and Western ideology but the despotic man who has been led astray within it" (593). This reading simply ignores that Rochester's rehabilitation takes place independently of Jane's return: "[he] began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to [his] Maker" (393), at a time when he thinks that she is dead.
- 31 For elaborations of the ways in which Victorian writers used *The Arabian Nights* to forge stereotypical representations of the Orient, see Kabbani (23–37) and Melman (63–73).
- 32 Zonana calls "feminist orientalism" a "long tradition of Western feminist writing" that displaces the root of patriarchal oppression onto an Oriental society so that its British readers can investigate women's issues and demands without questioning the Occident's moral and cultural superiority (593–94).
- 33 The associations between Brontë's heroine and Sheherazade have constituted the subject of several studies that reveal how extensively *Jane Eyre* is permeated by elements of *The Arabian Nights*: see Jassim Ali's Sheherazade in England; Stedman's "The Genesis of the Genii"; and Workman's "Sheherazade at Thornfield."
- 34 This way of representing Jane as if she was not present parallels his relationship with Bertha whose story he also tells several times and whom he only directly addresses ("Bertha!") right before she jumps to her death.
- 35 In a related argument, Kreilkamp argues that at a time when fiction writing was increasingly associated with the author's speech and presence, Charlotte Brontë rejected "a model of authorship based on voice and embodied personality in favor of one based on the material [and disembodied] possibilities of print" (332).
- 36 Lane, one of the most famous translators of the *Nights*, claimed that the interest of the collection was not in the stories themselves but in the "fullness and fidelity with which they describe the characters, manners and customs of the Arabs" (qtd in Melman 66). As Melman points out, however, after Lady Montagu's self-documented peregrinations in the East, the writers of harem literature started to be critical of the use of *The Arabian Nights* as ethnographic source. In 1837, Julia Sophia Pardoe was already criticizing the Western representations of oriental customs for being fantasies rather than the truth:

There is no intimate knowledge of domestic life, and hence the cause of the tissue of fables which, like those of Scheherazade have created ge-

nii and enchanters *ab ovo usque ad male* in every account of the East. The European mind has become so imbued with the ideal of Oriental mysteriousness, mysticism, and magnificence, and it has been so long accustomed to pillow its faith on the marvels and metaphors . . . that it is doubted whether it will willingly cast off its associations, and suffer itself to be undeceived. (qtd in Melman 67)

37 In her book, Anderson discusses this ideal of detachment in relation to Brontë's *Villette*.

38 This is particularly salient when the older narrating Jane distances herself from her younger self's actions and unspoken assumptions.

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