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A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress

I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened.

—Virginia Woolf

Never mind.... One day, quite suddenly, when you're not expecting it, I'll take a hammer from the folds of my dark cloak and crack your little skull like an egg-shell. Crack it will go, the egg-shell; out they will stream, the blood, the brains. One day, one day.... One day the fierce wolf that walks by my side will spring on you and rip your abominable guts out. One day, one day.... Now, now, gently, quietly, quietly....

—Jean Rhys

I told my Soul to sing—
She said her Strings were snap!—
Her bow—to Atoms blown—
And so to mend her—gave me work
Until another Morn—

—Emily Dickinson

If *The Professor* is a somewhat blurred trance-statement of themes and conflicts that dominated Charlotte Brontë's thought far more than she herself may have realized, *Jane Eyre* is a work permeated by angry, *Angrian* fantasies of escape-into-wholeness. Borrowing the mythic quest-plot—but not the devout substance—of Bunyan's male *Pilgrim's Progress*, the young novelist seems here definitively to have opened her eyes to female realities within her and around her: confinement, orphanhood, starvation, rage even to madness. Where

the fiery image of Lucia, that energetic woman who probably "once wore chains and broke them," is miniaturized in *The Professor*, in *Jane Eyre* (1847) this figure becomes almost larger than life, the emblem of a passionate, barely disguised rebelliousness.

Victorian critics, no doubt instinctively perceiving the subliminal intensity of Brontë's passion, seem to have understood this point very well. Her "mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage," Matthew Arnold wrote of Charlotte Brontë in 1853.¹ He was referring to *Villette*, which he elsewhere described as a "hideous, undelighted, convulsed, constricted novel,"² but he might as well have been speaking of *Jane Eyre*, for his response to Brontë was typical of the outrage generated in some quarters by her first published novel.³ "Jane Eyre is throughout the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit," wrote Elizabeth Rigby in *The Quarterly Review* in 1848, and her "autobiography . . . is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition.... The tone of mind and thought which has fostered Charism and rebellion is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*."⁴ Anne Mozley, in 1853, recalled for *The Christian Remembrancer* that "Currer Bell" had seemed on her first appearance as an author "sour, coarse, and grumbling; an alien . . . from society and amenable to none of its laws."⁵ And Mrs. Oliphant related in 1855 that "Ten years ago we professed an orthodox system of novel-making. Our lovers were humble and devoted . . . and the only true love worth having was that . . . chivalrous true love which consecrated all womankind . . . when suddenly, without warning, *Jane Eyre* stole upon the scene, and the most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*."⁶

We tend today to think of *Jane Eyre* as moral gothic, "myth domesticated," *Pamela's* daughter and *Rebecca's* aunt, the archetypal scenario for all those mildly thrilling romantic encounters between a scowling Byronic hero (who owns a gloomy mansion) and a trembling heroine (who can't quite figure out the mansion's floor plan). Or, if we're more sophisticated, we give Charlotte Brontë her due, concede her strategic as well as her mythic abilities, study the patterns of her imagery, and count the number of times she addresses the reader. But still we overlook the "alarming revolution"—even Mrs. Oliphant's terminology is suggestive—which "followed the

invasion of *Jane Eyre*." "Well, obviously *Jane Eyre* is a feminist tract, an argument for the social betterment of governesses and equal rights for women," Richard Chase somewhat grudgingly admitted in 1948. But like most other modern critics, he believed that the novel's power arose from its mythologizing of Jane's confrontation with masculine sexuality.⁷

Yet, curiously enough, it seems not to have been primarily the coarseness and sexuality of *Jane Eyre* which shocked Victorian reviewers (though they disliked those elements in the book), but, as we have seen, its "anti-Christian" refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society—in short, its rebellious feminism. They were disturbed not so much by the proud Byronic sexual energy of Rochester as by the Byronic pride and passion of Jane herself, not so much by the asexual sexual vibrations between hero and heroine as by the heroine's refusal to submit to her social destiny: "She has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature—the sin of pride," declared Miss Rigby.

Jane Eyre is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful, too. It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, and penniless—yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him, for the food and raiment, the friends, companions, and instructors of her helpless youth. . . . On the contrary, she looks upon all that has been done for her not only as her undoubted right, but as falling far short of it.⁸

In other words, what horrified the Victorians was Jane's anger. And perhaps they, rather than more recent critics, were correct in their response to the book. For while the mythologizing of repressed rage may parallel the mythologizing of repressed sexuality, it is far more dangerous to the order of society. The occasional woman who has a weakness for black-browed Byronic heroes can be accommodated in novels and even in some drawing rooms; the woman who yearns to escape entirely from drawing rooms and patriarchal mansions obviously cannot. And Jane Eyre, as Matthew Arnold, Miss Rigby, Mrs. Mozley, and Mrs. Oliphant suspected, was such a woman.

Her story, providing a pattern for countless others, is—far more

obviously and dramatically than *The Professor*—a story of enclosure and escape, a distinctively female *Bildungsroman* in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome: oppression (at Gateshead), starvation (at Lowood), madness (at Thornfield), and coldness (at Marsh End). Most important, her confrontation, not with Rochester but with Rochester's mad wife Bertha, is the book's central confrontation, an encounter—like Frances Crimsworth's fantasy about Lucia—not with her own sexuality but with her own imprisoned "hunger, rebellion, and rage," a secret dialogue of self and soul on whose outcome, as we shall see, the novel's plot, Rochester's fate, and Jane's coming-of-age all depend.



Unlike many Victorian novels, which begin with elaborate expository paragraphs, *Jane Eyre* begins with a casual, curiously enigmatic remark: "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day." Both the occasion ("that day") and the excursion (or the impossibility of one) are significant: the first is the real beginning of Jane's pilgrim's progress toward maturity; the second is a metaphor for the problems she must solve in order to attain maturity. "I was glad" not to be able to leave the house, the narrator continues: "dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight . . . humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority" (chap. 1).⁹ As many critics have commented, Charlotte Brontë consistently uses the opposed properties of fire and ice to characterize Jane's experiences, and her technique is immediately evident in these opening passages.¹⁰ For while the world outside Gateshead is almost unbearably wintry, the world within is claustrophobic, fiery, like ten-year-old Jane's own mind. Excluded from the Reed family group in the drawing room because *she* is not a "contented, happy, little child"—excluded, that is, from "normal" society—Jane takes refuge in a scarlet-draped window seat where she alternately stares out at the "drear November day" and reads of polar regions in Bewick's *History of British Birds*. The "death-white realms" of the Arctic fascinate her; she broods

upon "the multiplied rigors of extreme cold" as if brooding upon her own dilemma: whether to stay in, behind the oppressively scarlet curtain, or to go out into the cold of a loveless world.

Her decision is made for her. She is found by John Reed, the tyrannical son of the family, who reminds her of her anomalous position in the household, huris the heavy volume of Bewick at her, and arouses her passionate rage. Like a "rat," a "bad animal," a "mad cat," she compares him to "Nero, Caligula, etc." and is borne away to the red-room, to be imprisoned literally as well as figuratively. For "the fact is," confesses the grownup narrator ironically, "I was [at that moment] a trifle beside myself; or rather *out* of myself, as the French would say. . . . like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved . . . to go all lengths" (chap. 1).

But if Jane was "out of" herself in her struggle against John Reed, her experience in the red-room, probably the most metaphorically vibrant of all her early experiences, forces her deeply into herself. For the red-room, stately, chilly, swathed in rich crimson, with a great white bed and an easy chair "like a pale throne" looming out of the scarlet darkness, perfectly represents her vision of the society in which she is trapped, an uneasy and elfin dependent. "No jail was ever more secure," she tells us. And no jail, we soon learn, was ever more terrifying either, because this is the room where Mr. Reed, the only "father" Jane has ever had, "breathed his last." It is, in other words, a kind of patriarchal death chamber, and here Mrs. Reed still keeps "divers parchments, her jewel-casket, and a miniature of her dead husband" in a secret drawer in the wardrobe (chap. 2). Is the room haunted, the child wonders. At least, the narrator implies, it is realistically if not gothically haunting, more so than any chamber in, say, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which established a standard for such apartments. For the spirit of a society in which Jane has no clear place sharpens the angles of the furniture, enlarges the shadows, strengthens the locks on the door. And the deathbed of a father who was not really her father emphasizes her isolation and vulnerability.

Panicky, she stares into a "great looking glass," where her own image floats toward her, alien and disturbing. "All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality," the adult Jane explains. But a mirror, after all, is also a sort of chamber, a mysterious

enclosure in which images of the self are trapped like "divers parchments." So the child Jane, though her older self accuses her of mere superstition, correctly recognizes that she is doubly imprisoned. Frustrated and angry, she meditates on the injustices of her life, and fantasizes "some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression—as running away, or, if that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die" (chap. 2). Escape through flight, or escape through starvation: the alternatives will recur throughout *Jane Eyre* and, indeed, as we have already noted, throughout much other nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature by women. In the red-room, however, little Jane chooses (or is chosen by) a third, even more terrifying, alternative: escape through madness. Seeing a ghostly, wandering light, as of the moon on the ceiling, she notices that "my heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down." The child screams and sobs in anguish, and then, adds the narrator coolly, "I suppose I had a species of fit," for her next memory is of waking in the nursery "and seeing before me a terrible red glare crossed with thick black bars" (chap. 3), merely the nursery fire of course, but to Jane Eyre the child a terrible reminder of the experience she has just had, and to Jane Eyre the adult narrator an even more dreadful omen of experiences to come.

For the little drama enacted on "that day" which opens *Jane Eyre* is in itself a paradigm of the larger drama that occupies the entire book: Jane's anomalous, orphaned position in society, her enclosure in stifling roles and houses, and her attempts to escape through flight, starvation, and—in a sense which will be explained—madness. And that Charlotte Brontë quite consciously intended the incident of the red-room to serve as a paradigm for the larger plot of her novel is clear not only from its position in the narrative but also from Jane's own recollection of the experience at crucial moments throughout the book: when she is humiliated by Mr. Brocklehurst at Lowood, for instance, and on the night when she decides to leave Thornfield. In between these moments, moreover, Jane's pilgrimage consists of a series of experiences which are, in one way or another, variations on the central, red-room motif of enclosure and escape.



As we noted earlier, the allusion to pilgrimage is deliberate, for like the protagonist of Bunyan's book, Jane Eyre makes a life-journey which is a kind of mythical progress from one significantly named place to another. Her story begins, quite naturally, at *Gateshead*, a starting point where she encounters the uncomfortable givenness of her career: a family which is not her real family, a selfish older "brother" who tyrannizes over the household like a substitute patriarch, a foolish and wicked "stepmother," and two unpleasant, selfish "stepisters." The smallest, weakest, and plainest child in the house, she embarks on her pilgrim's progress as a sullen Cinderella, an angry Ugly Duckling, immorally rebellious against the hierarchy that oppresses her: "I know that had I been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child—though equally dependent and friendless—Mrs. Reed would have endured my presence more complacently," she reflects as an adult (chap. 2).

But the child Jane cannot, as she well knows, be "sanguine and brilliant." Cinderella never is; nor is the Ugly Duckling, who, for all her swansdown potential, has no great expectations. "Poor, plain, and little," Jane Eyre—her name is of course suggestive—is invisible as air, the heir to nothing, secretly choking with ire. And Bessie, the kind nursemaid who befriends her, sings her a song that no fairy godmother would ever dream of singing, a song that summarizes the plight of all real Victorian Cinderellas:

My feet they are sore, and my limbs they are weary;

Long is the way, and the mountains are wild;

Soon will the twilight close moonless and dreary

Over the path of the poor orphan child.

A hopeless pilgrimage, Jane's seems, like the sad journey of Wordsworth's Lucy Gray, seen this time from the inside, by the child herself rather than by the sagacious poet to whom years have given a philosophic mind. Though she will later watch the maternal moon rise to guide her, now she imagines herself wandering in a moonless twilight that foreshadows her desperate flight across the moors after leaving Thornfield. And the only hope her friend Bessie can offer is, ironically, an image that recalls the patriarchal terrors of the

red-room and hints at patriarchal terrors to come—Lowood, Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers:

Ev'n should I fall o'er the broken bridge passing,

Or stray in the marshes, by false lights beguiled,

Still will my Father, with promise and blessing

Take to His bosom the poor orphan child.

It is no wonder that, confronting such prospects, young Jane finds herself "whispering to myself, over and over again" the words of Bunyan's Christian: "What shall I do?—What shall I do?" (chap. 4).¹¹

What she does do, in desperation, is burst her bonds again and again to tell Mrs. Reed what she thinks of her, an extraordinarily self-assertive act of which neither a Victorian child nor a Cinderella was ever supposed to be capable. Interestingly, her first such explosion is intended to remind Mrs. Reed that she, too, is surrounded by patriarchal limits: "What would Uncle Reed say to you if he were alive?" Jane demands, commenting, "It seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance: something spoke out of me over which I had no control" (chap. 4). And indeed, even imperious Mrs. Reed appears astonished by these words. The explanation, "something spoke out of me," is as frightening as the arrogance, suggesting the dangerous double consciousness—"the rushing of wings, something . . . near me"—that brought on the fit in the red-room. And when, with a real sense that "an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into unhopeliber for liberty," Jane tells Mrs. Reed that "I am glad you are no relation of mine" (chap. 4), the adult narrator remarks that "a ridge of lighted heath, alive, glancing, devouring, would have been a meet emblem of my mind"—as the nursery fire was, flaring behind its black grates, and as the flames consuming Thornfield also will be.



Significantly, the event that inspires little Jane's final fiery words to Mrs. Reed is her first encounter with that merciless and hypocritical patriarch Mr. Brocklehurst, who appears now to conduct her on the next stage of her pilgrimage. As many readers have noticed, this personification of the Victorian superego is—like St.

John Rivers, his counterpart in the last third of the book—consistently described in phallic terms: he is “a black pillar” with a “grim face at the top . . . like a carved mask,” almost as if he were a funeral and oddly Freudian piece of furniture (chap. 4). But he is also rather like the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood.” “What a face he had. . . . What a great nose! And what a mouth! And what large prominent teeth!” Jane Eyre exclaims, recollecting that terror of the adult male animal which must have wrung the heart of every female child in a period when all men were defined as “beasts.”

Simultaneously, then, a pillar of society and a large bad wolf, Mr. Brocklehurst has come with news of hell to remove Jane to *Lowood*, the aptly named school of life where orphan girls are starved and frozen into proper Christian submission. Where else would a beast take a child but into a wood? Where else would a column of frozen spirituality take a homeless orphan but to a sanctuary where there is neither food nor warmth? Yet “with all its privations” Lowood offers Jane a valley of refuge from “the ridge of lighted heath,” a chance to learn to govern her anger while learning to become a governess in the company of a few women she admires.

Foremost among those Jane admires are the noble Miss Temple and the pathetic Helen Burns. And again, their names are significant. Angelic Miss Temple, for instance, with her marble pallor, is a shrine of ladylike virtues: magnanimity, cultivation, courtesy—and repression. As if invented by Coventry Patmore or by Mrs. Sarah Ellis, that indefatigable writer of conduct books for Victorian girls, she dispenses food to the hungry, visits the sick, encourages the worthy, and averts her glance from the unworthy. “‘What shall I do to gratify myself—to be admired—or to vary the tenor of my existence’ are not the questions which a woman of right feelings asks on first awaking to the avocations of the day,” wrote Mrs. Ellis in 1844.

Much more congenial to the highest attributes of woman’s character are inquiries such as these: “How shall I endeavor through this day to turn the time, the health, and the means permitted me to enjoy, to the best account? Is any one sick? I must visit their chamber without delay. . . . Is any one about

to set off on a journey? I must see that the early meal is spread. . . . Did I fail in what was kind or considerate to any of the family yesterday? I will meet her this morning with a cordial welcome.”¹²

And these questions are obviously the ones Miss Temple asks herself, and answers by her actions.

Yet it is clear enough that she has repressed her own share of madness and rage, that there is a potential monster beneath her angelic exterior, a “sewer” of fury beneath this temple.¹³ Though she is, for instance, plainly angered by Mr. Brocklehurst’s sanctimonious stingingness, she listens to his sermonizing in ladylike silence. Her face, Jane remembers, “appeared to be assuming . . . the coldness and fixity of [marble]; especially her mouth, closed as if it would have required a sculptor’s chisel to open it” (chap. 7). Certainly Miss Temple will never allow “something” to speak through her, no wings will rush in her head, no fantasies of fiery heath disturb her equanimity, but she will feel sympathetic anger.

Perhaps for this reason, repressed as she is, she is closer to a fairy godmother than anyone else Jane has met, closer even to a true mother. By the fire in her pretty room, she feeds her starving pupils tea and emblematic seedcake, nourishing body and soul together despite Mr. Brocklehurst’s puritanical dicta. “We feasted,” says Jane, “as on nectar and ambrosia.” But still, Jane adds, “Miss Temple had always something . . . of state in her mien, of refined propriety in her language, which precluded deviation into the ardent, the excited, the eager: something which chastened the pleasure of those who looked on her and listened to her, by a controlling sense of awe” (chap. 8). Rather awful as well as very awesome, Miss Temple is not just an angel-in-the-house; to the extent that her name defines her, she is even more house than angel, a beautiful set of marble columns designed to balance that bad pillar Mr. Brocklehurst. And dispossessed Jane, who is not only poor, plain, and little, but also fiery and ferocious, correctly guesses that she can no more become such a woman than Cinderella can become her own fairy godmother.

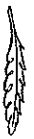
Helen Burns, Miss Temple’s other disciple, presents a different but equally impossible ideal to Jane: the ideal—defined by Goethe’s

Makarie—of self-renunciation, of all-consuming (and consumptive) spirituality. Like Jane “a poor orphan child” (“I have only a father; and he . . . will not miss me” [chap. 9]), Helen longs alternately for her old home in Northumberland, with its “visionary brook,” and for the true home which she believes awaits her in heaven. As if echoing the last stanzas of Bessie’s song, “God is my father, God is my friend,” she tells Jane, whose skepticism disallows such comforts, and “Eternity [is] a mighty home, not a terror and an abyss” (chap. 7). One’s duty, Helen declares, is to submit to the injustices of this life, in expectation of the ultimate justice of the next: “It is weak and silly to say you *cannot bear* what it is your fate to be required to bear” (chap. 7).

Helen herself, however, does no more than *bear* her fate. “I make no effort [to be good, in Lowood’s terms],” she confesses. “I follow as inclination guides me” (chap. 7). Labeled a “slattern” for failing to keep her drawers in ladylike order, she meditates on Charles I, as if commenting on all inadequate fathers (“what a pity . . . he could see no farther than the prerogatives of the crown”) and studies *Rasselas*, perhaps comparing Dr. Johnson’s Happy Valley to the unhappy one in which she herself is immured. “One strong proof of my wretchedly defective nature,” she explains to the admiring Jane, “is that even [Miss Temple’s] expostulations . . . have no influence to cure me of my faults.” Despite her contemplative purity, there is evidently a “sewer” of concealed resentment in Helen Burns, just as there is in Miss Temple. And, like Miss Temple’s, her name is significant. Burning with spiritual passion, she also burns with anger, leaves her things “in shameful disorder,” and dreams of freedom in eternity: “By dying young, I shall escape great sufferings,” she explains (chap. 9). Finally, when the “fog-bred pestilence” of typhus decimates Lowood, Helen is carried off by her own fever for liberty, as if her body, like Jane’s mind, were “a ridge of lighted heath . . . devou’ring” the dank valley in which she has been caged.

This is not to say that Miss Temple and Helen Burns do nothing to help Jane come to terms with her fate. Both are in some sense mothers for Jane, as Adrienne Rich has pointed out,¹⁴ comforting her, counseling her, feeding her, embracing her. And from Miss Temple, in particular, the girl learns to achieve “more harmonious

thoughts: what seemed better regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind. I had given in allegiance to duty and order. I appeared a disciplined and subdued character” (chap. 10). Yet because Jane is an Angrian Cinderella, a Byronic heroine, the “inmates” of her mind can no more be regulated by conventional Christian wisdom than Manfred’s or Childe Harold’s thoughts. Thus, when Miss Temple leaves Lowood, Jane tells us, “I was left in my natural element.” Gazing out a window as she had on “that day” which opened her story, she yearns for true liberty: “for liberty I uttered a prayer.” Her way of confronting the world is still the Promethean way of fiery rebellion, not Miss Temple’s way of ladylike repression, not Helen Burns’s way of saintly renunciation. What she has learned from her two mothers is, at least superficially, to compromise. If pure liberty is impossible, she exclaims, “then . . . grant me at least a new servitude” (chap. 10).



It is, of course, her eagerness for a new servitude that brings Jane to the painful experience that is at the center of her pilgrimage, the experience of *Thornfield*, where, biblically, she is to be crowned with thorns, she is to be cast out into a desolate field, and most important, she is to confront the demon of rage who has haunted her since her afternoon in the red-room. Before the appearance of Rochester, however, and the intrusion of Bertha, Jane—and her readers—must explore Thornfield itself. This gloomy mansion is often seen as just another gothic trapping introduced by Charlotte Brontë to make her novel saleable. Yet no, only is Thornfield more realistically drawn than, say, Otranto or Uldolpho, it is more metaphorically radiant than most gothic mansions: it is the house of Jane’s life, its floors and walls the architecture of her experience.

Beyond the “long cold gallery” where the portraits of alien unknown ancestors hang the way the specter of Mr. Reed hovered in the red-room, Jane sleeps in a small pretty chamber, harmoniously furnished as Miss Temple’s training has supposedly furnished her own mind. Youthfully optimistic, she notices that her “couch had no thorns in it” and trusts that with the help of welcoming Mrs. Fairfax “a fairer era of life was beginning for me, one that was to

have its flowers and pleasures, as well as its thorns and toils" (chap. 11). Christian, entering the Palace Beautiful, might have hoped as much.

The equivocal pleasantness of Mrs. Fairfax, however, like the ambiguous architecture of Thornfield itself, suggests at once a way in which the situation at Thornfield reiterates all the other settings of Jane's life. For though Jane assumes at first that Mrs. Fairfax is her employer, she soon learns that the woman is merely a *housekeeper*, the surrogate of an absent master, just as Mrs. Reed was a surrogate for dead Mr. Reed or immature John Reed, and Miss Temple for absent Mr. Brocklehurst. Moreover, in her role as an extension of the mysterious Rochester, sweet-faced Mrs. Fairfax herself becomes mysteriously chilling. "Too much noise, Grace," she says peremptorily, when she and Jane overhear "Grace Poole's" laugh as they tour the third story. "Remember directions!" (chap. 11).

The third story is the most obviously emblematic quarter of Thornfield. Here, amid the furniture of the past, down a narrow passage with "two rows of small black doors, all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle" (chap. 11), Jane first hears the "distinct formal mirthless laugh" of mad Bertha, Rochester's secret wife and in a sense her own secret self. And just above this sinister corridor, leaning against the picturesque battlements and looking out over the world like Bluebeard's bride's sister Anne, Jane is to long again for freedom, for "all of incident, life, fire, feeling that I . . . had not in my actual existence" (chap. 12). These upper regions, in other words, symbolically miniaturize one crucial aspect of the world in which she finds herself. Heavily enigmatic, ancestral relics wall her in; inexplicable locked rooms guard a secret which may have something to do with *her*; distant vistas promise an inaccessible but enviable life.

Even more importantly, Thornfield's attic soon becomes a complex focal point where Jane's own rationality (what she has learned from Miss Temple) and her irrationality (her "hunger, rebellion and rage") intersect.¹⁵ She never, for instance, articulates her rational desire for liberty so well as when she stands on the battlements of Thornfield, looking out over the world. However offensive these thoughts may have been to Miss Rigby—and both Jane and her creator obviously suspected they would be—the sequence of ideas

expressed in the famous passage beginning "Anybody may blame me who likes" is as logical as anything in an essay by Wollstonecraft or Mill. What is somewhat irrational, though, is the restlessness and passion which, as it were, italicize her little meditation on freedom. "I could not help it," she explains,

the restlessness was in my nature, it agitated me to pain sometimes. Then my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third story, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot, and allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it.

And even more irrational is the experience which accompanies Jane's pacing:

When thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh. [chap. 12]

Eccentric murmurs that uncannily echo the murmurs of *Jane's* imagination, and a low, slow ha! ha! which forms a bitter refrain to the tale *Jane's* imagination creates. Despite Miss Temple's training, the "bad animal" who was first locked up in the red-room is, we sense, still lurking somewhere, behind a dark door, waiting for a chance to get free. That early consciousness of "something near me" has not yet been exorcised. Rather, it has intensified.



Many of Jane's problems, particularly those which find symbolic expression in her experiences in the third story, can be traced to her ambiguous status as a governess at Thornfield. As M. Jeanne Peterson points out, every Victorian governess received strikingly conflicting messages (she was and was not a member of the family, was and was not a servant).¹⁶ Such messages all too often caused her features to wear what one contemporary observer called "a fixed sad look of despair."¹⁷ But Jane's difficulties arise also, as we have seen, from her constitutional *tre*; interestingly, none of the women she meets at Thornfield has anything like that last problem, though all suffer from equivalent ambiguities of status. Aside from Mrs. Fairfax, the

three most important of these women are little Adèle Varens, Blanche Ingram, and Grace Poole. All are important negative "role-models" for Jane, and all suggest problems she must overcome before she can reach the independent maturity which is the goal of her pilgrimage.

The first, Adèle, though hardly a woman, is already a "little woman," cunning and doll-like, a sort of sketch for Amy March in Louisa May Alcott's novel. Obviously a poor orphan child, like Jane herself, Adèle is evidently the natural daughter of Edward Rochester's dissipated youth. Accordingly, she longs for fashionable gowns rather than for love or freedom, and, the way her mother Céline did, sings and dances for her supper as if she were a clockwork temptress invented by E. T. A. Hoffman. Where Miss Temple's was the way of the lady and Helen's that of the saint, hers and her mother's are the ways of Vanity Fair, ways which have troubled Jane since her days at Gateshead. For how is a poor, plain governess to contend with a society that rewards beauty and style? May not Adèle, the daughter of a "fallen woman," be a model female in a world of prostitutes?

Blanche Ingram, also a denizen of Vanity Fair, presents Jane with a slightly different female image. Tall, handsome, and well-born, she is worldly but, unlike Adèle and Céline, has a respectable place in the world: she is the daughter of "Baroness Ingram of Ingram Park," and—along with Georgiana and Eliza Reed—Jane's classically wicked stepsister. But while Georgiana and Eliza are dismissed to stereotypical fates, Blanche's history teaches Jane ominous lessons. First, the charade of "Bridewell" in which she and Rochester participate relays a secret message: conventional marriage is not only, as the attic implies, a "well" of mystery, it is a Bridewell, a prison, like the Bluebeard's corridor of the third story. Second, the charade of courtship in which Rochester engages her suggests a grim question: is not the game of the marriage "market" a game even scheming women are doomed to lose?

Finally, Grace Poole, the most enigmatic of the women Jane meets at Thornfield—"that mystery of mysteries, as I considered her"—is obviously associated with Bertha, almost as if, with her pint of porter, her "straid and tactum" demeanor, she were the madwoman's public representative. "Only one hour in the twenty-four did she pass with her fellow servants below," Jane notes, attempt-

ing to fathom the dark "pool" of the woman's behavior; "all the rest of her time was spent in some low-ceiled, oaken chamber of the third story; there she sat and sewed . . . as companionless as a prisoner in her dungeon" (chap. 17). And that Grace is as companionless as Bertha or Jane herself is undeniably true. Women in Jane's world, acting as agents for men, may be the keepers of other women. But both keepers and prisoners are bound by the same chains. In a sense, then, the mystery of mysteries which Grace Poole suggests to Jane is the mystery of her own life, so that to question Grace's position at Thornfield is to question her own.

Interestingly, in trying to puzzle out the secret of Grace Poole, Jane at one point speculates that Mr. Rochester may once have entertained "tender feelings" for the woman, and when thoughts of Grace's "uncomeliness" seem to refute this possibility, she cements her bond with Bertha's keeper by reminding herself that, after all, "You are not beautiful either, and perhaps Mr. Rochester approves you" (chap. 16). Can appearances be trusted? Who is the slave, the master or the servant, the prince or Cinderella? What, in other words, are the real relationships between the master of Thornfield and all these women whose lives revolve around his? None of these questions can, of course, be answered without reference to the central character of the Thornfield episode, Edward Fairfax Rochester.



Jane's first meeting with Rochester is a fairylike meeting. Charlotte Brontë deliberately stresses mythic elements: an icy twilight setting out of Coleridge or Fuseli, a rising moon, a great "lion-like" dog gliding through the shadows like "a North-of-England spirit, called a 'Gytrash' which . . . haunted solitary ways, and sometimes came upon belated travellers," followed by "a tall steed, and on its back a rider." Certainly the Romanticized images seem to suggest that universe of male sexuality with which Richard Chase thought the Brontës were obsessed.¹⁸ And Rochester, in a "riding-cloak, fur-collared, and steel-claped," with "a dark face . . . stern features and a heavy brow" himself appears the very essence of patriarchal energy, Cinderella's prince as a middle-aged warrior (chap. 12). Yet what are we to think of the fact that the prince's first action is to fall on the ice, together with his horse, and exclaim prosaically "What the