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“[T]oo rigid a restraint”: Women and Emancipation in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

In the tradition of Victorian literature Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Jane Eyre*, remains one of the most powerful expressions of female experience of both life and love. The reputation of the work as an early feminist statement seems also to be well established among both readers and critics. However, the psychological credibility of both the story and characters, in particular that of Jane herself, is mixed with a number of contradictory ideological images of women that make the novel a critically challenging text to explore. It is these contradictions which will be discussed in this essay, focusing on what I would claim are the novel’s both radical and conservative attitudes to the issue of female emancipation. Throughout the novel we witness the attempt of a girl and then of a young woman to create an identity of her own - a tale of gender struggle that provides the reader with a lesson in the importance of self-respect and self-assertion. Seemingly Jane refuses to submit to those who are placed above her - be they women like Mrs. Reed or men like Rochester or St John Rivers. Jane does not want to be limited by what people expect her to be, either as an orphan deprived of a fortune or more generally as a woman. Each time she is confronted by such restrictions, she refuses to suffer and be still: “*Speak I must,*” she declares.¹ Despite her inferior female status, she nevertheless compels herself to express her innermost feelings frankly and directly to those around her, whether they like it or not. Thus, in her relation to Rochester, Jane finally achieves mutual respect and makes the master of Thornfield Hall understand that although she is a woman and a governess employed in his household, she is nonetheless his intellectual and moral equal.

There are therefore many passages in the text that support a critical reading in terms of feminism. Two such instances in particular can be mentioned as representing striking examples of Jane’s rebellion against traditionally Victorian views of femininity and the subservience of women. The first occurs soon after her arrival at Thornfield when Jane, reflecting upon her own situation, appeals directly to the reader on behalf of her own sex:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their

¹ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. p. 29.

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more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.²

This is not only a general condemnation of the passive condition of women, but is also an expression of Jane’s frustration about her own lowly status as a governess. Thus, her predicament as a female outsider often makes her view herself both as a single individual, and in many ways as a representative of downtrodden Victorian women everywhere.

The other occasion when Jane makes a direct link between her own personal fate and the way women in general are treated by men is when Rochester asks her to become his mistress. In response to Rochester’s allusion to a seraglio or harem, Jane sees herself immediately in a rebellious and campaigning light: “I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved - your harem inmates amongst the rest. I’ll get admitted there and I’ll stir up mutiny.”³ Once again Brontë portrays Jane as the rebel girl prepared to put herself at the forefront of the fight for female emancipation.

At the same time, there are other gendered aspects of the narrative that appear more problematic in this context and which need to be examined in critical detail. In particular, Jane’s attitude towards two key female characters in the novel - Bertha and Adèle - is very revealing. It is here, I would argue, in Jane’s relationship with these two women that her commitment to female emancipation is put to the test. Let us begin therefore by looking at her treatment of her young female pupil, Adèle.

Very few critics seem to have noticed the gendered significance of the character of Adèle. That there is a parallel between the treatment of Jane as a child and the way Adèle is similarly marginalized and patronized by Jane herself later on in the story. Despite the fact that her whole critical study deals with Jane’s subservient role as a governess, Mary Poovey for instance only mentions Adèle once, with reference to Jane’s coolness of feeling towards her charge.⁴ In her own discussion of the text - “Plain Jane’s Progress,” Sandra M. Gilbert is certainly sensitive to the “patriarchal terrors” of Jane as a young girl: “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.”⁵ However, the similarly oppressive treatment of Adèle, Gilbert ignores completely. A strange critical lapse for someone who has previously alerted us to the ties that bind the women together in story:

² Ibid. p. 95.

³ Ibid. p. 237.

⁴ See Poovey, Mary. “The Anathematised Race: The Governess and *Jane Eyre*.” p. 189.

⁵ Gilbert, Sandra M. “Plain Jane’s Progress.” p. 478.

“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.”⁶

In his recent guide to Brontë’s novels, Mike Edwards also overlooks the figure of Adèle, despite the fact that he reminds us at an early stage in his discussion of *Jane Eyre* that “we should remember that this novel is set in Victorian England. Children are not, in this social context, to be accorded the respect which they may command nowadays.”⁷ The same gender blindness occurs in Ruth Robbins’s survey of literary feminisms. Certainly, Robbins is one of the few critics who express misgivings about the way the text has been wholeheartedly adopted by feminists:

In the case of *Jane Eyre*, one of the reasons that the novel has been so often discussed in feminist literary criticism and theory is that it appears to announce a possible female victory under the restrictive and related conditions of patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism. The costs of Jane’s victory are disguised.⁸

However, Robbins never makes clear what these costs might be in relation to Adèle’s own treatment by Jane and Rochester. Instead, Robbins dismisses Adèle as merely “foolish but harmless,” a characterization worthy of Mr Rochester himself.

Rochester’s attitude towards his ward is without doubt callously patriarchal, something to which Jane however never seems to react herself. On several occasions he equates for instance the little girl with his dog Pilot. Indeed, despite the obvious affection which the girl lavishes upon him, Rochester is almost always coldly dismissive: “Adèle went to kiss him before quitting the room: he endured the caress, but scarcely seemed to relish it more than Pilot would have done, nor so much.”⁹ He treats her “as if she had been a lapdog”¹⁰ and is contemptuous of her accomplishments, even though she can both sing, dance and recite poetry: “[S]he is not bright, she has no talents” is a typical comment.¹² In the end he has no hesitation in getting rid of her altogether and has her “put . . . to school,”¹³ a place that turns out to be a very strict establishment, reminiscent of Jane’s own school at Lowood.

Rochester’s whole dealings with Adèle indicate that he sees the child as a mere object, something that he has been compelled to take into his household to feed and dress like a pet. In many ways his patronizing male attitude towards the little girl is typical of all his dealings with women -

⁶ Gilbert, Sandra M. “A Dialogue of Self and Soul.” p. 478.

⁷ Edwards, Mike. *Charlotte Brontë: The Novels*. p. 40.

⁸ Robbins, Ruth. *Literary Feminisms*. p. 43.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 41.

¹⁰ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. p.111.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 234.

¹² *Ibid.* p.106.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 378.

young or old - they are placed at his disposal or disposed of into the attic, as the case may be.

What is much more disturbing however is Jane’s lack of response to all this, since it is through her own interior monologue that we are normally able to judge both the people and the events in the story. Despite the traumatic experiences she recounts of her own childhood abuse, Jane never seems to reflect upon Rochester’s treatment of his female ward, nor the emotional impact this has on her. This appears such a curious lapse in her otherwise expressed concern for the condition of women. It never strikes her that the oppression of women like herself begins with the way girls are treated as objects when they are young.

Perhaps one of the reasons for Jane’s not reacting to Rochester’s unfeeling behavior in this context is the fact that she herself is guilty of the same sort of coldness as a governess.¹⁴ In one of the few passages where she comments on her own method in dealing with Adèle, Jane reveals a remarkable lack of empathy and personal insight herself. This passage is significant in relation to the issue of gender awareness in the story and needs therefore to be quoted at length. After declaring - as Rochester does - that Adèle has “no great talents, no marked traits of character, no peculiar development of feeling or taste which raised her once inch above the ordinary level of childhood,” Jane defends her own emotional reserve towards her by stating:

This, *par parenthèse*, will be thought cool language by persons who entertain solemn doctrines about the angelic nature of children, and the duty of those charged with their education to conceive for them an idolatrous devotion: but I am not writing to flatter parental egotism, to echo cant, or prop up humbug; I am merely telling the truth.¹⁵

These are strange words coming from someone who, at the beginning of her own narrative, tells of the terrors of being “equally dependent and friendless.”¹⁶ However, what is even more remarkable is that the above negative characterization of Adèle comes just a few paragraphs before Jane launches into her most famous tirade against the confinement and oppression of women, which includes the particularly telling references to suffering “too rigid a restraint.”¹⁷ Jane fails to see that the oppression and objectification of women, indeed the whole infantilization of their sex

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Elizabeth Gaskell in her classic biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), makes the following observations about Charlotte’s own lack of ability as a governess to understand children: “But neither she nor her sisters were naturally fond of children. The hieroglyphics of childhood were an unknown language to them, for they had never been much with those younger than themselves... Consequently, teaching very young children was anything but a ‘delightful task’ to the three Brontë sisters.” p.112

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 95.

begins in childhood. The complete lack of both public and private rights left Victorian women in a permanent state of childhood dependence. As Francoise Basch has noted in her study of 19th century women, a woman was in general “[t]reated as a minor, she entirely lost her own legal existence, and with it, any legal recourse against her husband or anybody else.”¹⁸ It seems, however, that Jane’s emancipatory conscience does not extend towards little girls - especially if they come from across the English Channel.

This particular aspect of cultural chauvinism is also something that Jane shares with Rochester. Not only does he remain cynical about French women after his betrayal by his mistress Céline Varens, he also insists on having Adèle dressed up like a little doll, blaming her vanity on her Gallic background: “[C]oquetry runs in her blood, blends with her brains, and seasons the marrow of her bones.”¹⁹ Despite the fact that Adèle is both lucid and intelligent when she is allowed to converse in French, Jane herself shows a similar sense of national prejudice against the girl:

I took her on my knee; kept her there an hour, allowing her to prattle as she liked: not rebuking even some little freedoms and trivialities into which she was apt to stray when much noticed, and which betrayed in her a superficiality of character, inherited probably from her mother, hardly congenial to an English mind. Still she had her merits.²⁰

This personal condescension is not only contradictory in terms of Jane’s own avowed rebellious disposition, it also puts in doubt the feminist credentials of her whole story. Jane is unable to link the idea of women’s liberation to any general praxis - except when it affects her own life. Other women in the story seem to be of little account, in particular if they are children:

A further example of the objectification and infantilization of women, the most dramatic case in the whole book in fact, is of course the treatment of Rochester’s wife - Bertha. Once again, it is in the lack of correspondence between the personal and the political that makes Jane’s awareness of gender issues appear seriously flawed.

The relationship between Jane and Bertha has been much discussed by critics, in particular by those who work within the field of feminism. Perhaps the most defining statement in this context is Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s study, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), the title of which refers directly to the emblematic figure of Bertha herself. Here it is claimed that Jane and Bertha should be seen as twin souls or emotional sisters in a symbolic relationship that links Bertha to Jane as her demonic Other. Gilbert writes for example that:

¹⁸ Basch, Francoise. *Victorian Women in Society and the Novel*. p. 54.

¹⁹ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. p.122.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.127.

Bertha ... is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead ... Specifically, every one of Bertha’s appearances - or more accurately, her manifestations - has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane’s part.²¹

In a more recent work, *Literature and Gender* (1996), Lizbeth Goodman also supports this critical connection in the text: “Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of the grotesque, animalistic Bertha Mason as Jane Eyre’s dark double is convincing and compelling.”²² More recently, Mike Edwards (1999) reiterates the claim that Bertha is a mirror image of Jane’s repressed fears and desires. The key scene in this context is Bertha’s intrusion in Jane’s room on the eve of the wedding, during which she tears her veil in two in front of the mirror:

The mirror also implies an identification between the intruder whom Jane sees, and Jane herself: Jane looks in the mirror, and sees a stranger dressed up for a wedding. (...) Her violence suggests the violence with which Jane’s world is disrupted. Above all, she represents Jane’s apprehensions, from the limited perspective of her narrow experience, about the world of sexual passion, physical intercourse, and sensual violence which she feels she is on the point of entering into.²³

This idea of mutual identification is however something that has been questioned by other critics, in particular Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her now famous essay, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985), Spivak adds yet another dimension to the gender aspect of *Jane Eyre*. She sees the novel’s message primarily in terms of the racial image of Bertha as a Creole woman-slave, imprisoned by her European husband-master. In this context, Spivak argues, there is in fact very little that links Bertha and Jane as mirrored reflections of one another. Instead, using Jean Rhys’s version of the story, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Spivak views Bertha’s existence as merely the colonial excuse for Jane’s own sexual emancipation. Another critic who questions the gendered identification between Jane and Bertha is Elaine Showalter who, while still viewing the two women as doubles, nevertheless points out in *The Female Malady* (1985) that there is very little sympathy shown between them:

What is most notable about Brontë’s first representation of female insanity, however, is that Jane, unlike the contemporary feminist critics who have interpreted the novel, never sees her kinship with the confined and monstrous double, and that Brontë has no sympathy for her mad creature. Before Jane Eyre can reach her happy ending, the madwoman must be purged from the plot, and passion must be purged from Jane herself.²⁴

²¹ Gilbert, Susan. “A Dialogue of Self and Soul.” p. 480.

²² Goodman, Lizbeth ed. *Literature and Gender*. p.120.

²³ *Op. cit.* p. 93.

²⁴ Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady*. pp. 68-9.

Such conflicting critical responses to the link between Jane and Bertha seem therefore to beg a closer examination of the relationship between these two women - the most important major and minor characters in the novel. Not surprisingly, the first negative characterization of Bertha comes from her husband, Rochester himself, who informs Jane, not only that he is married, but also that his wife is a madwoman: "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations? Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!"²⁵

Thus, Rochester provides Jane with an image of Bertha, both as a female hysteric, as well as one corrupted by her social and ethnic background. However, it is Jane herself who, on first seeing Bertha soon after, adds to this patriarchal image of a lunatic woman a characterization of her own that is even more brutish:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.²⁶

What is remarkable here, apart from the fact that Jane accepts Rochester's demonization of his wife, is the way in which she takes the dehumanization of Bertha a step further by calling her "it." It is a form of objectification that is even more shocking coming from a woman who has herself been treated as an object - both as a child and as an adult. The depersonalized view of Jane as a mere governess is something that she herself has reacted to on several occasions.

The complete lack of empathy Jane shows towards Bertha's condition of being locked away in the attic has a direct parallel with Jane's own imprisonment as a child in the Red Room. The lapse is all the more striking since in her own narrative Jane makes a point of the injustice of her ill-treatment as a child: "Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned?"²⁷ The same question is begged by the way Bertha herself is treated.

Moreover, Jane's rebellious nature is at times viewed as a sign of her own unstable mental state - both by herself and by others. Her violent protests as a child, which cause her to be locked up, are seen as a result of her losing her mind: "Miss Abbot stood with folded arms, looking darkly and doubtfully on my face, as incredulous of my sanity."²⁸ As a woman in revolt against Rochester's suggestion that she become his mistress, Jane also has doubts about her own sanity:

²⁵ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. p. 257.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 258.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.10.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 8.

Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would they be worth? They have a worth - so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane - quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs.²⁹

Despite this, Jane shows no recognition of Bertha's terrible predicament in her own life, no sense of identification, no criticism of the oppressive way in which she is locked away. There is only one point in the novel when Jane reacts to Rochester's violent condemnation of his wife - only to be patronized herself by her lack of understanding of the situation:

'Sir,' I interrupted him, 'you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate - with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel - she cannot help being mad'

'Jane, my little darling (so I will call you, for so you are), you don't know what you are talking about; you misjudge me again: it is not because she is mad I hate her. If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?'

'I do indeed, sir.'

'Then you are mistaken, and you know nothing about me, and nothing about the sort of love of which I am capable.'³⁰

The final proof of Jane's total lack of feeling for Bertha - as well as her complete identification with Rochester and his thoughts and reactions/emotions - is the way Jane receives the news of Bertha's suicide. She is shocked at the event, but more concerned about the fate of Rochester himself. Bertha's death is passed over quickly and briefly in the narrative and then all traces of her are gone - she is never mentioned again in the story.

Thus, despite the critical reputation of *Jane Eyre* as an early feminist novel, it seems on looking more closely at Jane's own attitudes to other female characters in the story, that her revolt on behalf of Victorian women is rather less convincing. The gender issues in the novel are instead blurred, mainly because there seems little or no connection between Jane's personal rebellion and the way she views the oppression of others. Theory and practice are never linked.

This essay has sought to explore the aspects of female emancipation as they are dramatized in the fictional autobiography of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. It is argued that it is through the gendered context of Jane's relationships with other women in the story that many of the contradictions of Brontë's novel are revealed. This is particularly the case in Jane's attitudes to the minor, but ideologically no less important female characters of Adèle and Bertha, where the collective image of women's oppression is

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 280.

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 265-6.

shown to have little lasting impact on Jane's own rebellious consciousness. She begins her story by revolting at the thought of being any man's servant, but in the end she slips into that very same role – at least in the way she uncritically adopts her male master's view of other dependent women about her.

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Gender Roles and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act accordingly.

(Hurston 1987: 9)

Toni Morrison has been described as a feminist as well as a womanist writer. Gender roles are indeed central in her fiction, also in *Paradise* (1998), which deals with the double burden of discrimination: both being black in the society dominated by whites, and being female in the male-dominated society. I apply Jessica Benjamin's (1988) particular notion of intersubjectivity in my examination of gender roles in the novel and in the study of recognition as a prerequisite for the healing of traumas. I claim that the way women and men act towards each other reflects not only their personal traumas but also the collective, cultural trauma of slavery.

Jessica Benjamin says in her work *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*:

What is extraordinary about the discussion of authority throughout Freudian thought is that it occurs exclusively in a *world of men*. The struggle for power takes place between father and son; *woman plays no part in it*, except as prize or temptation to regression, or as the third point of a triangle.

(1988: 6, my italics)

However, my discussion of gender roles and trauma in Morrison's *Paradise* largely focuses on women. Slavery and racial discrimination is an obvious cause for trauma, but I argue the gender roles are also traumatizing. In the quest for recognition, people search for love and acceptance from others without realizing that they first need to accept themselves before the healing can start. Although Brooks Bouson (2000: 205, my italics) argues that in "telling the story of the Convent woman side by side with the story of how the Ruby men come to pathologize and scapegoat the woman, *Paradise* focuses attention on the blocked thinking of racial assumption and stereotypes", I claim that gender is an equally important issue.

My discussion of otherness is based on Jessica Benjamin's study of domination and gender roles, and on Simone de Beauvoir's idea of the woman functioning as man's primary other. According to Benjamin, the roles of masculinity and femininity are adopted in early childhood in the relationship to the mother, when "boys discover that they cannot grow up to become her; they can only have her" (Benjamin 1988: 75). Therefore, the issue of parenthood is also a crucial one in the novel.