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Jane Eyre, from Governess to Girl Bride

ESTHER GODFREY

> "Yes; Mrs. Rochester," said he; "Young Mrs. Rochester—Fairfax Rochester's girl-bride."
>
> —Rochester to Jane, *Jane Eyre*[1]

Since its publication in 1847, readers of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* have debated the subversive implications of this text. The plot conventions of Jane's rise to fortune and the marriage union that concludes the novel suggest conservative affirmations of class and gender identities that seemingly contradict the novel's more disruptive aspects. Despite the personal or professional motivations that led Brontë to conform the conclusion to sentimental norms, the novel continues to prove unsettling in its use of gender identities and its associations of gender with class and age.[2] Notably, while challenging gender identities, the text does more than simply transfer power from the patriarchal grasp of Rochester to the powerless hand of Jane, and it does more than feed post-Butlerian critical perspectives; the text highlights the anxieties and complexities of the Victorian understanding of gender by paradoxically dismantling and reifying nineteenth-century notions of masculinity and femininity. Masculine and feminine constructions in *Jane Eyre* ultimately cannot be separated from the larger gender anxieties raised by Jane's class position or from the "twenty years of difference" (p. 333) between the partners of the novel's marriage plot. Jane's roles as governess and as girl bride

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associate her with complex and often contradictory notions of androgyny and femininity, sexuality and innocence. Because of their complex relationships to power, economics and age operate as essential pieces in the textual performances of gender identities, performances that suggest conscious parodies of these identities and lead to radical rejections of gender norms. Furthermore, the class differences between Jane and Rochester combine with the gap between their ages to exaggerate the already extreme binary logic of Victorian gender relations and create what Judith Butler calls "psychic excess," a feature of "psychic mimesis" that structures performance and potentially undermines gender identities.[3] Reading *Jane Eyre* to uncover how class and age influence gender offers more insight into the text's subtle shifts in power and potentially reconciles disparate critical readings of the novel.

By the mid-1840s, the increasing effects of industrialism and capitalism coincided with the processes that undermined and reinstated gender identities. In *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778–1860*, Judith Lowder Newton examines the division of the nineteenth-century labor force, claiming that the rise of factory production led to the decline of home industry and therefore to the rise of "separate spheres" for masculine and feminine work.[4] Yet, these gendered realms of labor were inextricably bound with class economics; rather than experiencing a dramatic division of a masculine workplace and feminine domesticity, working-class laborers witnessed an increased blurring of gender division by the mid-1840s. Agrarian notions of men's and women's work dissolved as both men and women were utilized in the growing industrial economy.[5] Moreover, the corresponding polarization of male and female realms within the middle class can be read as the result of a larger societal anxiety about gender identities that emerged from the instability of working-class gender roles in the new social framework.

For example, in 1843 Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna published a study on the British working class: *The Perils of the Nation: An Appeal to the Legislature, the Clergy, and the Higher and Middle Classes.* In the chapter regarding the mining poor, the unsteadiness of class-based gender identities becomes central to Tonna's study. She laments at length the sinful licentiousness that pervades the mine, this "scene of deepened gloom."[6] Men, women, and children worked in mixed company in the mines, wearing little clothing because of the heat, and created an androgynous workplace where the notion of separate spheres and often gender differences themselves did not exist. As she describes, "The dress

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of these young labourers of both sexes is the same: from seven or eight years of age to twenty and upwards they may be seen, naked to the waist, and having a loose pair of ragged trowsers, frequently worn to tatters by the constant friction of the chain."[7] Tonna writes repeatedly, almost obsessively, of the virtually "naked" bodies sweating and writhing in the dark tunnels of the mines and concludes, "No circumstances can possibly be conceived more inevitably tending to general profligacy; and that the most abandoned vice does reign in the mines, transforming the female character into something so depraved that their language and conduct is [*sic*] described as being far worse than the men's, is but too well attested."[8] The gender ambiguities of the miners clearly offended the understanding of all gender constructions in Tonna's world, and she warns her reader that the deviancies of the poor have widespread ramifications as these androgynous figures are reborn from the mines into society: "Indeed, the transfer to the surface, of a body of females so utterly hardened in the gross depravities of the mines, must, for a time, spread contamination on all sides."[9]

This language highlights a middle-class fear that the androgyny of the working class was infectious. Tonna's simultaneous reluctance and willingness to talk about the lack of gender affiliation in mining work reveals the anxiety of the middle class regarding gender multiplicities and the threat of gender disruption that formed a core component of the "perils" facing British society. For social reformers, the lack of gender division among the working class justified a cultural imperialism that attempted to inscribe morals and identities upon working-class bodies in exchange for physical necessities such as healthy food and air. Tonna's work certainly demonstrates a concern for the well-being of the working poor, but the need for reform coincides with explicitly middle-class interests and allows Tonna to manipulate the middle-class fear of the workers spreading the "contamination" of androgynous identities and their perceived sexual deviancies outside of their social contexts. Like Tonna, Friedrich Engels makes similar observations of class-based gender ambiguities in his 1845 *The Condition of the Working-Class in England: From Personal Observation and Authentic Sources*. Speaking here of factory labor, he writes of "this condition, which unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow upon the man true womanliness, or the woman true manliness—this condition which degrades, in the most shameful way, both sexes, and, through them, Humanity."[10] Again, the

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welfare of the poor is addressed in conjunction with the larger interests of the middle class to reinscribe clear gender divisions, and Engels, typically an advocate for the working class, speaks for the bourgeoisie.

Perhaps even more threatening than Tonna's examples, here gender roles are not only ambiguously androgynous but also sexually reversed. Quoting from a letter from a working-class man, Engels describes a husband sitting by a fireside mending stockings with a bodkin while his wife works at the factory. Regretfully pining for the separation of spheres that his class position no longer affords, the male-wife complains to his friend, "'she has been the man in the house and I the woman.'"[11] Rousing fervor for social change, Engels prompts his middle-class audience's likely response: "Can any one imagine a more insane state of things than that described in this letter?"[12] The "perilous" condition of Tonna's mineworkers and the "insane state" of Engels's factory family suggest an equally perilous and dangerous position for the middle class, who, seeking to help the working class with basic economic concerns, also tried to resolve their own basic gender concerns. In reaction to this unsettling ambiguity regarding gender identities, middle-class Victorians began to push masculine and feminine constructions to extremes, reinforcing the divisions between male and female spheres of power and influence.

The labor component of *Jane Eyre* stands central to the text's manipulations of sexual identities. Gendered performances become acts that are increasingly tied to material wealth, and the text suggests that only the middle and upper classes can afford the costly performance of gender. Though Jane for a time is raised among the middle class with the Reeds, they make her different social position clear. John Reed informs young Jane: "'you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense'" (p. 7). Jane's working-class affiliation continues in her experiences at Lowood. Like Tonna's mineworkers, the Lowood girls shed traditional feminine gender traits in submission to a more practical and more economical genderless appearance. Brocklehurst demands the girls keep their "vile bodies" free from the adornments of finery, and, in violent objection to the superfluousness and femininity of the girls' long hair, orders their hair "cut off entirely" (pp. 72–3). Unlike Tonna's and Engels's reformist perspectives, which mingled working-class and middle-class objectives by advocating economic reforms that

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would enable working-class men and women to perform more traditional gender roles, Brocklehurst's position expressed a middle-class interest in preserving the economic status quo, and that position required clearer divisions between the classes themselves. Brontë carefully portrays Brocklehurst as one who, like the owners of the mines, sees femininity as a construct afforded by middle-class luxury and working-class androgyny as a necessary, though clearly distinct, part of the hierarchical social order. He responds to Miss Temple's defense of a student's naturally curly hair, "'Naturally! Yes but we are not to conform to nature: I wish these girls to be the children of Grace'" (p. 73). Jane and the other girls at Lowood are therefore taught to endure and accept their class positions. When Brocklehurst's wife and daughters enter the room toward the end of the scene, their velvet, silk, ostrich plumes, furs, and, of course, elaborately curled hair signify their comfortably middle-class feminine identities. Brocklehurst seems to suggest that if class divisions were made impermeable, then the danger of gender ambiguity could be isolated, exploited, and controlled for middle-class advantages. However, as the novel's theme of social mobility suggests, class-based gender subversion is, as Tonna and Engels maintain, highly infectious.

Jane's advancement from her position as teacher at Lowood to private governess signifies an important development in the text's subversion of gender, since governesses served as a hole in the invisible wall between working-class and middle-class gender identities. As governess, Jane bridges the gap between the dangerous androgyny of working-class homogeneity and the fragile stability of middle-class separate spheres. Mary Poovey asserts in "The Anathematised Race: The Governess," "Because the governess was like the middle-class mother in the work she performed, but like both a working-class *woman and man* in the wages she received, the very figure who theoretically should have defended the naturalness of separate spheres threatened to collapse the difference between them."[13] As keepers of middle-class children and thereby keepers of the future, governesses exhibited important influence and power upon the middle class. Poovey describes the middle-class desire to employ only women from their own class as guardians of their children because fears were prevalent that working-class women would usurp their class positions and undermine middle-class stability, and the examples of Tonna and Engels help to clarify that such class movements threatened to spread more than coarse grammar or loose morals. These infiltrations challenged basic gender and class identities, and when

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Jane comes to Thornfield, she brings an economic affiliation tied to working-class androgyny with her.

Jane appears fully aware of the radical potentiality and instability of her new position as she moves from a working-class world into the middle class. When Jane decides she wants "'[a] new place, in a new house, amongst new faces, under new circumstances,'" she questions her own qualifications for infiltrating the middle class (p. 102). She self-reflexively comments on her own advertisement: "'[a] young lady accustomed to tuition (had I not been a teacher two years?)'" (p. 103). While she questions the truthfulness of herself as one "accustomed to tuition," what she does not question and deliberately leaves unspoken, that she is a "lady," resides at the center of her self-doubt. Jane is painfully aware of her poor circumstances and the tremendous improvement a situation as a governess would be over her position at Lowood, a step that doubles her salary and raises her social rank considerably. The transition is precarious, and upon her appointment, class-aligned gender differences immediately surface. Jane's somber appearance, reflective of the lessons in androgyny given by Brocklehurst, boasts none of the traits of pampered adornment of Jane's coquettish rival, Blanche Ingram, or Jane's highly feminine pupil, Adèle. Her meager provisions in feminine apparel prove problematic when she is summoned to meet Rochester officially at Thornfield. Instructed by Mrs. Fairfax that she needs to dress for dinner when Rochester is home, she explains: "This additional ceremony seemed somewhat stately: however, I repaired to my room, and, with Mrs. Fairfax's aid, replaced my black stuff dress by one of black silk; the best and the only additional one I had, except one of light grey, which, in my Lowood notions of the toilette, I thought too fine to be worn, except on first-rate occasions" (pp. 145–6). Jane, urged by Mrs. Fairfax, dons the solitary pearl she owns as a brooch and does her best to perform middle-class femininity so that she will be accepted as governess.

Jane's performance of femininity initially flops. While Mrs. Fairfax encourages the gender parade of her charge, announcing to Rochester when he fails to notice Jane, "'Here is Miss Eyre, sir,'" his answer appears to renounce any desire to provide the appropriate masculine gaze to the feminized object: "'What the deuce is it to me whether Miss Eyre be there or not? At this moment I am not disposed to accost her'" (pp. 146–7).[14] Jane is pleased that her theatrically contrived portrayal of gender and class is temporarily interrupted. She reflects on Rochester's dis-

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missive comment, "I sat down quite disembarrassed. A reception of finished politeness would probably have confused me: I could not have returned or repaid it by answering grace and elegance on my part; but harsh caprice laid me under no obligation" (p. 147). Seated, she momentarily allows herself to return to her familiar identity as a working-class, ambiguously gendered figure, and, as she rests outside of Rochester's scrutiny, she realizes the strangely empowered implications of her gender neutrality: "on the contrary, a decent quiescence, under the freak of manner, *gave me the advantage*" (p. 147; emphasis added). This scene is one of many in which Jane revels in her lower-class position and finds it useful for its complex relation to gender. Although Jane appears feminized by her disempowered position while she remains in a subservient, even servile, relationship to Rochester, the androgyny of her working-class status clears the way for the text's dalliances with gender deviancy.

For Victorians, the threat to gender stability presented by governesses stemmed not only from the middle-class fear that they would teach ambiguous notions of gender and class to their children but also from the more explicit sexual threat governesses wielded to the middle-class men they encountered. Because they contrasted and complicated middle-class notions of femininity, governesses commanded desire through their polymorphous characteristics. They were feminine and yet they were not feminine; they were sexual objects and gender subjects; they occupied a place simultaneously within and outside middle-class society. These working-class reproductions of middle-class female sexuality conveniently were and were not conventional of existing gender identities, and the uncertainty of the governess's class and gender positions piqued middle-class interests. Richard Redgrave's 1844 painting *The Poor Teacher* plays upon the governess's marginalized position within the middle-class home, and Rebecca Solomon's 1854 *The Governess* extends the sexual connotations of the theme by depicting the governess as stealing a look that is both longing and covetous toward her male employer while he, at least for the moment, manages to focus his gaze on his wife.[15] Poovey maintains, "That representations of the governess in the 1840s brought to her contemporaries' minds not just the middle-class ideal she was meant to reproduce, but the sexualised and often working-class women against whom she was expected to defend, reveals the mid-Victorian fear that the governess could not protect middle-class values because she could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality."[16] The tension Poovey describes is a crucial one;

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the governess simultaneously presents a middle-class feminine ideal, which, if not devoid of sexuality, is sexually restricted, and she embodies a working-class androgynous reality that suggests unrestrained sexuality. Governesses could, therefore, provide a site for middle-class male desire while working against existing gender norms and outside of the sexual restrictions imposed upon middle-class wives and daughters.

In *Jane Eyre*, the gender subversions permitted by Jane's working-class status become even more powerful and more complex, as the romantic tension between Jane and Rochester focuses increased attention on her ambiguous sexual position. Jane's working-class androgyny and the sexual liberties associated with feminine unsexing penetrate the middle class just as Tonna predicts the mineworkers will "spread contamination" from the mines.[17] But if class opens the door for *Jane Eyre* to convey the pliability of gendered constructions, it does so to make way for other devices that challenge gender identities. In its romance plot, the text participates in the Victorian obsession with male-female relationships in which an older, fatherly male exceeds a younger, childlike female in age by twenty years or more, and age, like class, creates power inequities between Jane and Rochester. Brontë's brilliant pairing of the subversive qualities of class and age is central to the text's dismantling of gender identities and offers new insight into Victorian gender anxieties.

These instances of older-man/younger-woman relationships begin to appear everywhere in the Victorian period, evidenced in literary productions as diverse as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–50), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1871–72), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–62). They appear to reinforce the subservient role of the female as child, as student, as victim, and the dominant role of the male as father, as teacher, and as aggressor, just as, on the surface, working-class positions appear powerless while middle-class positions seem powerful.[18] Much of the psychoanalytical criticism regarding these relationships assumes that this power dynamic exists and that the young woman either faces an Oedipal crisis of attraction to a lost father or is the victim of metaphorical or literal sexual interest from a domineering father figure.[19] Both Jean Wyatt's *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* and Diane F. Sadoff's *Monsters of Affection* address *Jane Eyre* from these perspectives.[20] Though

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these psychoanalytical approaches have validity, a social psychology that considers changes in labor markets and demonstrates a larger concern with gender constructions must attempt to read the text's manipulations of age for more diverse relations of gender and power. What is often viewed by feminist theorists as male-centered pedophiliac desire of domination and control can demonstrate complex reversals of power when the older man actually becomes subordinate to the younger woman whether psychically, sexually, economically, or de facto at the older man's death.

The frequency of nineteenth-century literary treatments of marriages with large age differences parallels what Poovey deems a similar Victorian fascination with depictions of governesses, and age proves to be another popular vehicle for Victorian explorations of alternate sexual identities and their relationships to power. Age can complicate the dynamics of sexuality and gender, and young wives thus can inhabit a unique realm positioned between sexual and nonsexual existences, as well as between androgynous and gendered realities. As James Kincaid has explored in depth, the construction of childhood as a specialized time of innocence and purity, a state of existence that William Wordsworth describes famously as "trailing clouds of glory,"[21] is necessarily accompanied by an erotic otherness and a lack of gender identity. Young, middle-class brides were generally expected to be sexually inexperienced, yet the potentiality of their latent desires, as well as their desirability, conflicted with patriarchal concerns with control, dominance, and feminine fidelity. Young women also enjoyed a certain gender ambiguity because androgyny formed an important part of the Victorian concept of the child. Kincaid questions, "What really is the gender of Oliver Twist . . . What is the gender of the comic-strip character Buster Brown, with his long lashes and long locks and skirt-like affair, not very different, one might assume, from the pinafore worn by Heathcliff? What is the gender of Little Nell?"[22] Child brides, like governesses, consequently were and were not sexual and were and were not feminine, and the androgynous qualities of Jane are compounded by both her class and her youth. The "second childhood" associated with old age further complicates readings of gender in these marriages, as older husbands fulfill alternate ideals of marital, sexual desire and fatherly, platonic love, and Rochester's age consequently feminizes him in surprising ways. Though reading Jane, a seemingly capable and self-governing adult, as a child might appear to be a critical stretch, the text encourages readers to take note of her relative childishness within

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her relationship to Rochester. Brontë allows Rochester to voice his pleasure proudly at having procured a younger wife: "'Yes; Mrs. Rochester,' said he; 'Young Mrs. Rochester—Fairfax Rochester's girl-bride.'" Here, the sexualized connotations of marriage and the masculine privilege of possessing a trophy wife are intricately tied to Jane's youth and girlhood. *Jane Eyre*, like other Victorian literary discourses on these marriages, uses age to control and direct redistributions of power between genders, and this theme is rich in its ability to disrupt gender identities.[23]

Like governesses, these marriages between older men and younger women were viewed with great ambivalence during the Victorian period. While they remained sanctioned under heterosexual and religious norms, the Oedipal and pedophiliac associations of such unions suggested sexual deviancy. In *Jane Eyre*, the tenuous acceptability of these marriages becomes clear during Jane's conversation with Mrs. Fairfax regarding the possibility of Rochester's marrying Blanche Ingram. Mrs. Fairfax explains her understanding that the age difference between Rochester and Blanche is clearly too great, even though it is smaller than the difference between Jane and Rochester: "'Oh! yes. But, you see, there is a considerable difference in age: Mr. Rochester is near forty; she is but twenty-five.'" Advancing her heretofore unacknowledged interests, Jane calmly replies that "'[m]ore unequal matches are made every day,'" but Mrs. Fairfax returns, "'True: yet I should scarcely fancy Mr. Rochester would entertain an idea of the sort'" (p. 200). Though she avoids articulating her rationale, Mrs. Fairfax is quick to recognize the dangerous potential of a marriage between partners of such different ages, even among members of the same class. She reassures herself, perhaps blindly, that her master would not think of such a union that could threaten normative power relations between husband and wife. Though she grants that "[m]ore unequal matches" are common, she refuses to allow that her middle-class master, and the home and employment he offers, could be open to such peril. Her response foreshadows her later reaction to Jane's announced engagement to Rochester. Initially, Mrs. Fairfax is convinced that she merely dreamt Rochester told her he was to marry Jane, and she asks that Jane not laugh at her ludicrous query: "'Now, can you tell me whether it is actually true that Mr. Rochester has asked you to marry him? Don't laugh at me. But I really thought he came in here five minutes ago, and said, that in a month you would be his wife'" (p. 333). In the following exchange, she expresses her incredulity, musing that "'he . . . has always been called care-

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ful'" (p. 333). Convinced of the offer at last, she discouragingly states that "'there are twenty years of difference in your ages. He might almost be your father'" (p. 333). Mrs. Fairfax also evidences Poovey's explanation that a governess "could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality" when she repeatedly warns Jane to "'keep Mr. Rochester at a distance'" and voices her uneasiness at finding Jane and Rochester both missing the night before (p. 334). For Mrs. Fairfax, Jane and Rochester's engagement seems the flaunting of a doubly violated social taboo in which class and age boundaries, and their accompanying gender norms, are subverted through sexuality and legitimized through marriage.

Moreover, just as Jane as governess is forced to perform femininity to facilitate her access to middle-class culture, a sense of theatricality pervades the older man-younger woman marriage. To infiltrate Victorian culture effectively, Jane must again perform femininity, even though her age places her at times in a sexually empowered position in the relationship. Rochester likewise plays at a masculine identity, although he is increasingly feminized in his role as older husband. Throughout the romantic plot of *Jane Eyre*, gender multiplicities abound in rapid costume and set changes that reflect a sexual fluidity in strict opposition to middle-class separate spheres of gender.

Brontë reminds us at the beginning of chapter eleven in the first volume, "A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play; and when I draw up the curtain this time, reader, you must fancy" (p. 112). Continually self-referential in its theatricality, the novel draws attention to its own conspicuous performance of gendered romantic relationships, especially the performance of marriage, which is parodied repeatedly throughout the text. From the charade wedding of Rochester and Blanche Ingram, through Bertha's costuming of herself with Jane's veil, to the climactic disruption of Rochester and Jane's first wedding ceremony, marriage is parodied and the subversive implications of Rochester and Jane's marriage are underscored. Furthermore, as Caroline Levine and Judith Wylie have convincingly argued, the text explores the transcendence and instability of gender identities through Rochester's transvestite performance as a gypsy woman.[24] Butler explains this initial move in gender subversion: "No longer believable as an interior 'truth' of dispositions and identity, sex will be shown to be a performatively enacted signification (and hence not 'to be'), one that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings."[25] If gender

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as a performance raises the question of gender instability, class and age seem to be strategies to reground gender by increasing the feminized position of the poor and the young, but they also lead to more gender play.

Age relates to superiority in complex patterns in *Jane Eyre*, constantly redistributing the powers of gender and class through performative acts. The peculiar construction of age in the marriage allows both Jane and Rochester to hold and to release power in turn. Thus, while both invest a great deal of energy in convincing the other that each is not interested in fulfilling the conventions of gender, they at times exaggerate their gender identities, and, at other times, reject such identities altogether. Shortly after their first meeting, Jane refuses to participate in the verbal and social niceties associated with femininity, replying bluntly "'No, sir'" to Rochester's query about whether she considers him handsome and refusing to cater to his teasing inquiries concerning her desire for a gift (pp. 160, 147). Unlike Blanche Ingram, Jane chooses not to adorn herself with traditional feminine costuming, even when Rochester desires to drape her in silks and jewels (p. 338). Likewise, Rochester's entrance in the novel and first encounter with Jane fails to cater to the heroic ideal of masculinity; his horse slips on the ice and he falls, causing him to require Jane's physical help at their first meeting as he later will at the end of the novel (pp. 136–7). But these refusals to adapt to gender conventions are only part of the text's subversion of gender—though Jane can say that Rochester is not handsome, she must do it by saying "'No, sir'"—and only draw attention from the ways in which the novel replicates other conventions of gender to excess. As explored earlier, Jane's tenuous position as governess necessitates a performance of femininity for very material purposes. Furthermore, this excess, which both affirms and subverts gender identities, emanates directly from the age difference between Jane and Rochester.

Rochester tells Jane, "'Miss Eyre, I beg your pardon. The fact is, once for all, I don't wish to treat you like an inferior: that is (correcting himself), I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years' difference in age and a century's advance in experience'" (p. 163). Age can work to reverse the gender binary in regard to sexual power, but it is important first to note how it also initiates an exaggerated display of conventional systems of male-female power. Rochester's "twenty years' difference" further polarizes the already-noteworthy Victorian double standard of access to power and knowledge regarding sex between men and

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women of the same age.[26] In addition to the sexual experiences that would have been presumed in Rochester's secret marriage to Bertha, the presence of Adèle and Rochester's willingness to discuss his former sexual affairs with Jane clearly place him in a masculine position of authority and dominance against her childlike innocence.[27] Describing his relationship with Céline, Rochester assumes the power position of experience, authenticating his knowledge while clearly disavowing Jane's: "'You never felt jealousy did you, Miss Eyre? Of course not: I need not ask you; because you never felt love'" (p. 174). Their age difference allows for an exaggerated performance of masculine knowledge of sex, while preserving, at least theoretically, Jane's angelic and ignorant status.

The effects of Jane's doubly feminized position through age and class superficially reaffirm her subservient position to Rochester. Jane must bear Rochester's orders of when to stay and when to go and when to speak and when to be silent. He is clearly her "master," and she responds to him with the deference expected by one in his position. "'Yes, sir'" and "'no, sir'" become abundant refrains throughout the text, persistently, and perhaps subversively, reminding the reader of the gross inequalities in their economic situations as their attraction grows. Jane's use of the terms "sir" and "master" to refer to Rochester becomes so natural through frequent repetition that she, as well as the reader, must be reminded of their inappropriateness when Jane and Rochester's romance attempts to transcend their difference in class. When Rochester proposes, he asks Jane to use his given name Edward, yet after she responds with "'Then, sir, I will marry you,'" he must remind her that she is now entitled to use his given name: "'Edward—my little wife!'" (p. 321). Despite his suggestion, she continues to refer to him as her master not only up to the point of her fleeing Thornfield but also after she has gained an independent fortune. When she seeks Rochester at Ferndean, she continues to employ the terminology of her former servile position: "Dusk as it was, I had recognised him;—it was my master, Edward Fairfax Rochester, and no other" (p. 551).

The dynamic quality of the age difference allows for more overt shifts in power that coincide with the novel's dramatic reversals of fortune. The sexual threat of Jane's youth influences the transference of physical and economic strength from Rochester to Jane. Consequently, while many feminist critics have focused on the Rochester-centered romantic triangles of Jane and Rochester and Bertha or of Jane and Rochester and Blanche Ingram, the most

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important triangle in terms of the subversion of gendered power comes through the romantic triangle of Rochester and Jane and St. John Rivers that concludes the novel. Rochester's relationships with Bertha and Blanche contribute to his control of sexual and economic power, but Jane's marriage proposal from St. John Rivers completes the power reversal brought about by Rochester's loss of his estate, his social position, and his eyesight. Rochester's anxiety from the threat of young Jane's sexual interest in another forms the foundation of chapter thirty-seven of the final volume, the next-to-last chapter, and colors the seemingly conventional romantic ending that is so challenging for feminist critics. After Jane has returned to the blinded Rochester, but before her romantic interests in him are clear, Rochester must address his own fears of her power.

Clearly, Rochester is aware of the various ways the scales of power have tipped in Jane's favor, but the text repeatedly returns to his concern with her age. He interrogates Jane: "'I suppose I should now entertain none but fatherly feelings for you: do you think so? . . . But you cannot always be my nurse, Janet: you are young—you must marry one day'" (pp. 557–8). Rochester's concerns about his powerlessness directly correspond to his sexual fears regarding their age difference. He compares himself to the "'old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard'" and questions, "'what right would that ruin have to bid a budding woodbine cover its decay with freshness?'" (p. 568). Now assured that the two scenarios he envisioned regarding Jane's departure from Thornfield did not occur (that she was dead in a ditch or a "pining outcast among strangers" [p. 556]), Rochester speculates that Jane has likely met a man her own age. The sexual threat of the younger woman builds with additional fervor. Rochester forcefully demands, "'Who the deuce have you been with?'" to which Jane replies, "'If you twist in that way, you will make me pull the hair out of your head; and then I think you will cease to entertain doubts of my substantiality'" (p. 561). Jane's new power here is clear to Rochester and the reader, and Rochester is forced to temper his queries, though he incessantly pushes, repeating "'Who have you been with, Jane?'" and, a few lines down, "'Just one word, Jane: were there only ladies in the house where you have been?'" (p. 561). Jane revels in her sexual power and makes Rochester wait until the next day for the "one word" that will answer his question.

Their encounter the next day continues to build upon the way their age difference reverses the conventional power binary. Before she begins to answer his questions about her whereabouts, and

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thereby to relieve his anxieties about her sexuality, he places her childishly (and sexually) on his knee (p. 563). When she reveals the existence of St. John Rivers, Rochester quickly directs his questions to the heart of his concerns. To her explanation that St. John Rivers was a "good man," Rochester leads the attack: "'A good man? Does that mean a respectable, well-conducted man of fifty? Or what does it mean?'" Jane replies, "'St. John was only twenty-nine, sir.'" Bitingly, Rochester returns, "'*Jeune encore*,' as the French say" (p. 564). For Rochester, a man of fifty who would be closer to his own age would not have offered the same threat as one "still young." Fueled by Jane's noncommittal answers, Rochester attempts to degrade St. John Rivers from various vantages, and Jane refutes them all until Rochester explodes, "'Damn him!'" and directly questions, "'Did you like him, Jane?'" When she responds in the affirmative, Rochester begins the first of many requests for Jane to get off his knee. He first quips, "'Perhaps you would rather not sit any longer on my knee, Miss Eyre?'" and later, more irritably, "'Why do you remain pertinaciously perched on my knee, when I have given you notice to quit?'" (pp. 564–5, 567). Under the sexual threat of St. John Rivers, Rochester no longer benefits from his "century's advance in experience," and the childish posturing of Jane on his knee proves an unpleasant reminder of his "twenty years' difference in age." Jane, now the psychically and physically dominant of the two, refuses to move. She revels in her youthful position and flatly responds to his demands in the negative, affirming her age-associated power "'[b]ecause I am comfortable there'" (p. 567).

In "'Harmless Pleasure': Gender, Suspense, and *Jane Eyre*," Levine explores how Brontë skillfully delayed the release of her authorial identity as a woman and the development of the text's narrative plot to titillate her readers and to challenge gender norms.[28] The suspense and delight of Jane's power play in chapter thirty-seven works in much the same way. In a startlingly torturous display, Jane plays with Rochester's insecurities in a manner that parallels Rochester's early games with her. She explains, "'He relapsed again into gloom. I, on the contrary, became more cheerful and took fresh courage'" (p. 558). She consciously manipulates the truth to increase her advantage over Rochester. To his observation, "'you are young—you must marry one day,'" she tells him, "'I don't care about being married,'" when just a few paragraphs before she had revealed as narrator that "'I had indeed made my proposal from the idea that he wished and would ask me to be his wife: an expectation, not the less certain because

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unexpressed, had buoyed me up, that he would claim me at once as his own'" (p. 558). In truth, Jane's statement dismissing her desire for marriage serves primarily to convince Rochester that she does not want to marry him. Her slow torturing of Rochester continues for nearly five more pages, moving painfully for him but pleasantly for Jane and for the reader, who both know Jane's intentions to marry Rochester while he remains ignorantly powerless. The next morning, after he rhapsodically muses about Jane, the actualization of the power reversal becomes apparent to Jane, and she realizes her success: "'The water stood in my eyes to hear this avowal of his dependence: just as if a royal eagle, chained to a perch, should be forced to entreat a sparrow to become its purveyor'" (p. 562). Jane glories in her newfound masculine role as keeper and caretaker of her trapped bird, who has been "forced" to renounce patriarchal authority over her. When she finally dismisses her affection for St. John Rivers and agrees to marry Rochester, he must once again engage their discourse specifically regarding their age difference. Describing himself, he places himself clearly in the typically feminine, powerless position in the marriage: "'[a] crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on'" (p. 569).

During the course of the novel, Jane slips from the androgyny associated with her working-class background and her age into parodies of femininity and eventually into a legitimized form of female masculinity. The gender deviancy that was initiated by her working-class status initiates a more complete overthrow of gender identities brought about by the theatrical excess and sexual threats inherent to marriages between older men and younger women. But even these reversals of power, like gender and age, are not stable constructions. Undoubtedly, the sentimental ending of the novel reproduces gender roles and identities within traditional Victorian gender norms, just as throughout the novel, gender identities are repeatedly built up only to be torn down. In the final chapter, Jane resigns herself to the domestic sphere in her subservient role as wife, maid, and child for Rochester and exchanges her former child-rearing position as a paid governess with the new unpaid feminine status of mother. Teasing her readers as Jane does Rochester, Brontë allows the novel to conclude within the established tradition of the sentimental novel, and Jane joins the middle class, where gender divisions seem more stable. Rochester likewise is avowed as patriarchal authority; his sight and power are renewed just in time to see the baby boy who will carry on his social and economic gender role. However, even

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while the text appears ultimately to confirm a male-dominated Victorian gender system, it has so radically subverted such gender constructions through the play of class and age that such an affirmation proves impossible. As older husband, Rochester will never conform to a simplistic model of traditionally perceived male authority, just as the complexities of Jane's power as younger wife cannot be denied.

NOTES

[1] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Jane Jack and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 325. Subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

[2] Many critical works have addressed the novel's play with gender. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1979) are two early feminist readings of the text. See also Carol A. Senf, "*Jane Eyre* and the Evolution of a Feminist History," *Victorians Institute Journal* 13 (1985): 67–81. While a number of critics, including Joseph A. Dupras in his "Tying the Knot in the Economic Warp of *Jane Eyre*," *VLC* 26, 2 (1998): 395–408, assert that the novel concludes as a conservative affirmation of Victorian class, race, and gender roles, many feminist theorists have sought to reexamine and reclaim the novel as a quintessential feminist text.

[3] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 13–31, 24–9.

[4] Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778–1860* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1981), pp. 18–21.

[5] For more background on the shift from agrarian to industrial economies, see Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) and J. T. Ward, *The Factory Movement: 1830–1855* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962).

[6] [Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna], *The Perils of the Nation: An Appeal to the Legislature, the Clergy, and the Higher and Middle Classes* (London: Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1843), p. 54. In "Charlotte Brontë and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna: A Possible Source for *Jane Eyre*," *PLL* 20, 1 (Winter 1984): 96–8, Joseph Kestner connects Tonna with Brontë. He finds numerous textual similarities between Tonna's 1832 *The Museum* and *Jane Eyre*, suggesting Brontë's familiarity with Tonna's work.

[7] Tonna, p. 47.

[8] Tonna, p. 56.

[9] Tonna, p. 54.

[10] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England: From Personal Observation and Authentic Sources* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), p. 184.

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[11] Engels, p. 183.

[12] Engels, p. 184.

[13] Emphasis added. Mary Poovey, "The Anathematised Race: The Governess and *Jane Eyre*," in *Jane Eyre*, New Casebooks, ed. Heather Glen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 168–95, 170. Poovey develops her theories regarding gender and class in relation to other Victorian texts in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988).

[14] For more analysis on the gaze, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminisms*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 432–42.

[15] Richard Redgrave's painting *The Poor Teacher* later known as *The Governess* is at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Rebecca Solomon's painting *The Governess* is in a private collection.

[16] Poovey, "The Anathematised Race," p. 173.

[17] Employing more overtly draconian measures, middle-class fears of contamination from the lower classes continued and eventually erupted in the 1860s in a series of Contagious Disease Acts that stripped the rights of women suspected of prostitution and subjected them to examinations and quarantines in efforts to prohibit the spread of venereal diseases to the middle class. For more background regarding the Contagious Disease Acts and other legislation regarding women, see Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989).

[18] Although the rise in literary interest in relationships between older men and younger girls or young women corresponds with the social and economic forces of industrial Britain, the phenomenon is truly transatlantic, as recent scholarship regarding Victorian American authors such as Mark Twain suggests. For more information about Twain's interest in little girls and gender subversion, see John Cooley's "Mark Twain's Heroic Maidens: Angelfish, Androgyny, and the Transvestite Tales," *Mark Twain Journal* 34, 2 (Fall 1996): 38–42, and *Mark Twain's Aquarium: The Samuel Clemens Angelfish Correspondence, 1905–1910* (Athens and London: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1991). Other nineteenth-century American literary January-May relationships that deserve scholarly attention include Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Henry James's *Watch and Ward* (1871).

[19] *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1989), a collection of essays edited by Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, offers insightful criticism to the ongoing discussion regarding paternal desire.

[20] Jean Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* (Chapel Hill and London: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990). Dianne F. Sadoff, *Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot, and Bronte on Fatherhood* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982).

[21] William Wordsworth, "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), pp. 279–85, line 64.

[22] James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 64. Catherine Robson's provocative

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Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001) also offers an insightful discussion of the Victorian male obsession with little girls.

[23] While claiming special meaning and increased interest in the Victorian Age, the literary treatment of marriages between older men and younger women has a long history. More extreme differences in age are central to the plots and humor of both Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale" and "Miller's Tale" (ca. 1375). The theme succeeded as a stock comic device on the eighteenth-century stage in dramatic hits such as Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (1780), and early-nineteenth-century writers as diverse as George Gordon Lord Byron and Jane Austen also played upon the theme to varying effects.

[24] Caroline Levine, "'Harmless Pleasure': Gender, Suspense, and *Jane Eyre*," *VLC* 28, 2 (2000): 275–86. Judith Wylie, "Incarnate Crimes: Masculine Gendering and the Double in *Jane Eyre*," *Victorians Institute Journal* 27 (1999): 55–69.

[25] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 44.

[26] For more information about gendered divisions of sexual knowledge and experience, see James Eli Adams, "Victorian Sexualities," in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Malden MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 125–38, and Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994).

[27] Even if Adèle is not his biological child, Jane is aware that Adèle could have been.

[28] Levine, p. 275.

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