

Bluebeard and the Beast

The Mysterious Realism of *Jane Eyre*

Fairy tales were ubiquitous in Victorian England—in theater, in art, in the myriad retellings written for children during the period. They were also staple resources of the Victorian novelist. Bruno Bettelheim’s classic argument in *The Uses of Enchantment* that we read fairy tales to discover models for facing the challenges of our own lives would have seemed perfectly natural to Charles Dickens or to Charlotte Brontë, who frequently peppered their novels with both overt and subtle references to fairy tales. Bettelheim does not, however, emphasize how often these tales recur in combination with one another, combinations that alter and sometimes magnify their power. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), for instance, Brontë integrates two divergent tales about monster bridegrooms, “Beauty and the Beast” and “Bluebeard,” which serve as competing paradigms for the heroine to understand her possible relation to the mysterious Mr. Rochester and her role in the adult world more generally. These tales begin with many similar features but reach different endings with vastly different implications, particularly surrounding the relationship between self and other. Whereas “Bluebeard” ends when the heroine, in surviving Bluebeard, distinguishes herself from her undifferentiated predecessors in the forbidden chamber, “Beauty and the Beast” ultimately encourages seeing fundamental similarities beyond surface differences. After following the twists and turns of *Jane Eyre*’s specific plot affinities with both tales, I demonstrate how the tales’ divergent portrayals of affinity and distinction inform the complex logic of Jane’s relationships to Rochester and to his former mistresses and wife. Brontë’s deployment of elements from these tales—often noted but less often

scrutinized by critics—is central to her brand of realism. Oriented around the truth of the individual's experience, this realism is thus often but not always faithful to the laws of the everyday external world in the way we typically expect of nineteenth-century literary realism. Moreover, it is a striking example of the widespread Victorian practice of putting fairy tales to work in service of a multitude of ends.

"Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast" came to nineteenth-century British readers in chapbooks, gift books, and collections along with other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French fairy tales; allusions to them appear relatively frequently in Victorian texts. In *Jane Eyre* these two tales drive both the plot structure and the characterization of Edward Fairfax Rochester as some combination of a Beast figure and a Bluebeard figure. Whereas the Beast is a character who initially appears beastly but is ultimately desirable to the heroine, Bluebeard is a character who is less obviously menacing at the outset but ultimately beastly on the inside. Fairy-tale terms, in other words, can articulate Jane Eyre's dilemma. "Is he a Beast figure or a Bluebeard figure?" is a concrete, vivid way of asking, "Should I trust him? Should I stay with him?" *Jane Eyre* enacts a contest between "Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast" paradigms in that Jane legitimately struggles to answer these questions about Rochester. And readers and critics are likely to answer them in conflicting ways—as, indeed, they do. The conflicting influences of these two fairy tales can account for some scholarly disagreement about the novel.

It has been amply documented that Brontë's work in general and *Jane Eyre* in particular are deeply invested in fairy tales and in supernatural beings and experiences. Brontë's juvenilia (A. Brontë et al.) and various biographical sources demonstrate her early familiarity with *The Arabian Nights* and local folktales and fairy-tale lore, although exactly when and how she first encountered the continental fairy tales remains unclear.¹ At all events, Brontë frequently refers to Cinderellas, sprites, and so forth in personal and published writings throughout her life. *Jane Eyre* teems with more fairy-tale and supernatural elements than a single article could ever do justice to; my bibliography contains only a subset of the critical works that have analyzed the novel's debt to one or more of these influences. I argue here for the importance of the "Beauty and the Beast" and "Bluebeard" influences, but as a supplement rather than as an alternative to this body of scholarship.

Phyllis Ralph implicitly links the fairy tale to the bildungsroman by pointing out that understanding the key to "Beauty and the Beast"—namely, the fact that the transformation of the Beast is less significant than the change in the young woman's perception of him—"is important in understanding the growth of Jane Eyre and her evolving relationship with Edward Rochester. As Jane moves toward emotional and psychological maturity, she sees beyond

Rochester's bestial appearance and behavior to the human strengths and weaknesses beneath" (57). Ralph goes on to argue that "there are many surface references to fairies and other supernatural beings in *Jane Eyre*, but more significant is the underlying psychological meaning conveyed by the themes and patterns from the tales, especially that of the animal groom" (59). The common denominator Ralph identifies between *Jane Eyre* and "Beauty and the Beast" is crucial to both works but is rendered more vividly in the fairy tale. Fairy-tale allusions and paradigms in novels like *Jane Eyre* thus bring complicated psychological and interpersonal issues into sharper relief.

Critics often make reference more or less specifically to the fairy-tale aspects of *Jane Eyre*. Adrienne Rich calls it simply "a tale" (227); Cynthia Carlton-Ford, "a feminist fairytale" (350); and Kathleen Tillotson, both "a Cinderella fable [and] a Bluebeard mystery" (258). Offhand comparisons to "Cinderella" in particular are ubiquitous in *Jane Eyre* criticism.² The "Cinderella" comparison recognizes the novel as essentially a "rise tale," to use Ruth Bottigheimer's term: Jane begins as a penniless orphan in a house with a hostile "stepmother" and equally hostile surrogate siblings, only to end as an heiress and the wife of a wealthy man. Robert Martin treats the fairy-tale world in general as crucial to the novel, deeming Jane "first a childhood Cinderella, then a Sleeping Beauty, a wife in Bluebeard's castle, and finally Beauty wed to Beast, Rapunzel healing the prince" (94). Unfortunately he does not develop any of these comparisons in depth, pointing only to the most obvious evocations of "Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast" in particular (90, 92).³ The comparatively few critics who have discussed the role of "Bluebeard" or "Beauty and the Beast" in the novel tend to treat it as an either-or proposition; only Maria Tatar, in *Secrets Beyond the Door*, has investigated the possibility that both "Beauty and the Beast" and "Bluebeard" figure prominently in the mythical landscape of Brontë's novel.⁴ I suspect this is due in part to the weight critics typically give to the ways in which these tales resolve their respective tensions. Because these two fairy tales appear to move in opposite directions, it seems strange that together they could underpin the structure of the same bildungsroman. What I am arguing, however, is that the tension between these tale types is exactly what drives *Jane Eyre*—and that it deserves to be probed in greater depth than it has been in previous scholarship.

At a basic plot level the arrival of a young woman in an imposing house with an intimidating, suspicious master is equally evocative of "Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast"—and, indeed, of the Gothic novel. It is long unclear whether Rochester will be a Bluebeard figure or a Beast figure—that is, whether he is suspicious on the outside and thoroughly bad on the inside, or repulsive on the outside and good (or at least redeemable) on the inside. Jane herself, relatively early in their acquaintance, weighs his merits and faults, concluding,

"I believed he was naturally a man of better tendencies, higher principles, and purer tastes than such as circumstances had developed, education instilled, or destiny encouraged. I thought there were excellent materials in him; though for the present they hung together somewhat spoiled and tangled" (C. Brontë 154). The final phrase indicates that Jane recognizes in Rochester a combination of what I am calling Beast and Bluebeard qualities, even as she clearly wants to favor inner goodness.

Critics suspicious of Brontë's happy ending point to the novel's direct allusion to "Bluebeard," a tale she mentions in all but one of her major works. In Chapter 11 of the first volume, just before Jane initially meets Rochester, the housekeeper takes Jane to the third story of Thornfield Hall as part of a tour of the house. Jane peers down the corridor and reflects that it "look[s], with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle" (C. Brontë 112). Then, for the first time, she hears an eerie laugh and is told that it must belong to servant Grace Poole. The allusion is apt because, as Jane will later learn, one of the closed doors hides Rochester's secret wife, Bertha Mason, who is still alive but very much like Bluebeard's former wives in that she is discarded and hidden—and in that she causes problems for Jane. As I discuss in detail later, Jane also confronts the problem of former "wives" in the form of Rochester's various European lovers, all of whom were eventually cast aside. Despite facing no literal corpses, Jane, like Bluebeard's wife, has to deal with the problem of predecessors.

But Brontë also raises the specter of "Beauty and the Beast" early on in Rochester and Jane's acquaintance. When he asks her whether she finds him handsome and she frankly replies in the negative, many nineteenth-century readers would have been reminded of the similar scene in "Beauty and the Beast." Tatar goes so far as to maintain that Brontë intended a "conscious reprise" of the fairy tale (71). Over time, Jane and Rochester develop companionship through conversation and Jane ceases to find him intimidating; this also echoes "Beauty and the Beast." Jane has clearly learned Beauty's lesson by the time Rochester asks her to use her fairy magic to make him handsome and she responds inwardly, "A loving eye is all the charm needed: to such you are handsome enough; or rather, your sternness has a power beyond beauty" (C. Brontë 257). The "Beauty and the Beast" narrative seems nearly concluded when Jane accepts Rochester's proposal.

On their wedding day, however, Rochester is forced to reveal that he has a wife hidden in a chamber of the house. Given this development, the novel appears to shift to the "Bluebeard" paradigm, only to bring back "Beauty and the Beast" shortly thereafter. Instead of following in Bluebeard's footsteps by threatening the new object of his desire and earning his own death at the hands of her brothers, Rochester lives, and Jane quits Thornfield Hall with

mixed feelings, just as Beauty abandons the Beast in his castle. From this point on, “Beauty and the Beast” prevails. Like Beauty, Jane bides her time with her family and is nearly tempted away from Rochester forever. This happens to Jane twice: climactically, after the aborted wedding, but also before her engagement to Rochester, at the behest of the dying Aunt Reed. The earlier episode is, at least on the surface, even more evocative of “Beauty and the Beast,” hinging as it does on the illness of a relative, an unexpectedly extended sojourn, and a conversation between Jane and Rochester before her departure as to how long she will stay away. The supernatural call of distress that summons Jane back to Rochester after her second departure (discussed later) has an antecedent in some versions of “Beauty and the Beast” as well. In the 1756 Madame Leprince de Beaumont version that Brontë most likely would have known, for instance, Beauty sees in a dream that the Beast is near death because of her extended absence.

Although *Jane Eyre* contains no magical transformation from inhuman to human, it does feature a highly fortuitous event—the fire—that “transforms” Rochester from a married man and potential bigamist into an available widower and enhances any physical monstrosity he may have already possessed, hinting at the “Beauty and the Beast” narrative. His blindness and debilitation render him physically less attractive than before, at the same time that this transformation paves the way for his marriage to the heroine. Jane notes, “In his countenance, I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding,” in contrast to the strength he had always projected in the past (C. Brontë 454). Rochester himself feels a change: “Of late . . . I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my maker” (470–71). That the inner improvement comes at the price of a battered exterior poses no problem for Jane. Rochester expects rejection: “I thought you would be revolted, Jane, when you saw my arm and my cicatrized visage.’ ‘Did you? Don’t tell me so—lest I should say something disparaging to your judgment’” (460). Like Beauty, Jane loves Rochester despite his physical defects. As U. C. Knoepfelmacher argues, Brontë finally “revalidate[s] both a Beast who remains a beast and a Beauty who was never a beauty” (24). In Brontë’s version this revalidation discards the importance of appearance altogether; Jane outdoes Beauty by marrying a “beast” whose physical beastliness has not disappeared but increased.

Some critics argue rather that fairy tales cease to inform Jane’s life in the final episodes of *Jane Eyre* because they simply represent the fantasy she must learn to transcend. Karen Rowe, for instance, who finds the novel more evocative of “Beauty and the Beast” than of any other fairy tale, maintains that Brontë “tests the paradigm of fairy tale for her *Bildungsroman* and finds it lacking, precisely because it can give shape only to the child bride of Rochester, not to the substantial human being who is Jane Eyre” (71). To Rowe, the experiences

of Jane and Rochester “are not awakenings in the fairy-tale sense, where instantaneous love allows one to live happily ever after; rather they are enlightened perceptions, hard-won within a real world where fallible humans must perforce exist” (87). But to equate all fairy tales with the instantaneous is to miss the integral point of “Beauty and the Beast,” which champions the opposite of “instantaneous love.” Beauty, the Beast, and the members of Beauty’s family are all “fallible humans,” and Beauty’s ordeal of leaving her home and beloved father to live with an unfamiliar creature of whom she is initially terrified absolutely earns her ultimate happiness the description of “hard-won.” In fact, the “paradigm of fairy tale” is not “lacking” at all if the fairy tale in question is “Beauty and the Beast.” This fairy tale is precisely about the realization that one’s previously held perspective on the world should always be susceptible to change, which structures Jane’s growth into a more mature and multifaceted understanding of Rochester and the world around her. Tatar cites Rowe but attributes to Jane not so much a graduation from fairy tales as a purposeful, ongoing revision of them: in “making productive use of fairy tales by reacting to them, resisting them, and rewriting them rather than passively consuming them and internalizing their values, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* offers a map for reading our cultural stories and using them” (73).⁵

Moreover, there is no monolithic fairy-tale paradigm in *Jane Eyre*; Brontë makes productive use of these cultural stories by combining them. The novel offers a central male figure who embodies elements of both Beast and Bluebeard, as, indeed, many twentieth- and twenty-first-century stories would go on to do.⁶ Critics who insist on viewing Rochester as ultimately all good or all bad are behind the times when it comes to the evolution of these stories. Although straight versions of both tales certainly still circulated in Brontë’s time, the incorporation of their themes into novels is multifaceted and complex.⁷ Part of the mystery of *Jane Eyre* is precisely whether Rochester will lean more toward Bluebeard or Beast, wavering as he does between the two throughout the novel. To say that Jane is “blind” to Rochester’s faults, as Anderson (119) and Tatar (74) do, and therefore participates in a reactionary “Beauty and the Beast” narrative or in a “Bluebeard” narrative with the wrong ending is unsatisfactory because it acknowledges only part of the story. The point is not that Rochester is the Beast or is Bluebeard but rather that he presents a combination of two story paradigms that suggest to Jane two different responses. Her dilemma, then, is to figure out how to translate what she has learned from fairy tales into her real-life adult relationship with a complex human being. Winifred Gérin sees this process as fundamental: “Above all, what distinguished Charlotte’s conception of the hero, both in her juvenilia and adult writing, was her acceptance of his moral imperfections” (89). Gérin attributes this acceptance to Brontë’s early encounters with Byron’s heroes and

Milton's Satan and, more acutely, to her deep love for her morally imperfect brother, Branwell. The dimension of moral shortcomings is what "Bluebeard" adds to the "Beauty and the Beast" lesson to love despite physical shortcomings. Because these tales are interwoven in the underlying narrative structure of *Jane Eyre*, they produce in the hero a double imperfection without providing an obvious answer as to whether that imperfection should be overlooked.

Both "Beauty and the Beast" and "Bluebeard" raise fundamental questions about when and how to distinguish between selves and others. Whereas Beauty learns to value difference less highly over the course of the story, Bluebeard's last wife can survive only by distinguishing herself from the past wives strung up along the wall of the chamber "l'une après l'autre" ("one after the other"; Perrault 129; translation mine). The predicament of Bluebeard's last wife is crucial to Brontë's portrayal of the relationship between Jane and Bertha. Numerous critics have noted the strange and intimate connection between the actions of Jane and those of Bertha, although the characterizations of and explanations for this relation vary. Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar seminally point out that Bertha acts as Jane's "ferocious secret self," always appearing in "associat[ion] with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane's part" (360). They make a compelling case for Bertha as an agent of Jane's darker desires. Whether repression is involved or not, if we consider Bertha the representative of Bluebeard's dead wives, Jane's myriad affinities with her suggest how close she comes to assimilation with the group.

Viewing Bertha and Jane in the roles of Bluebeard's last two wives offers one answer to the much-debated question of exactly why Jane leaves Rochester when she discovers the existence of his wife. Early reviewers tended to applaud Jane's moral fortitude; on the other end of the spectrum, Heta Pyrhönen suggests that Jane seizes an opportunity to act on the misgivings about Rochester she already had (5). Ruth Yeazell maintains, "Victorian sexual morality and Christian dogma certainly influence the terms in which Jane defines her conflict, but not its essential nature. At the deepest level, Jane struggles to preserve the integrity and independence of the self. . . . The identity she thought to have found as Rochester's wife has proved illusory" (248). I agree with Yeazell but understand something specific by "preserv[ing] the integrity and independence of the self": Jane worries above all that Rochester will eventually abandon her if she accepts him on the same terms as his mistress Céline Varens. Toward the end of the scene in which Rochester explains his marriage to Bertha and asks Jane to stay with him as his mistress, Jane arrives at "the certain inference, that if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, as . . . to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory" (C. Brontë 329). To be the "successor"

to a long line of discarded women is precisely to find oneself in the midst of "Bluebeard." Jane refuses to do this, just as she had refused during the proposal scene to "stay and become nothing" to a Rochester married to Blanche Ingram, the woman Jane had supposed at the time to be her rival (265). Staying and becoming nothing is exactly what befell Bertha. Jane prefers to be at least something to herself ("respect myself," as she says; 334) rather than nothing to Rochester. Bertha is the strongest manifestation of Jane's susceptibility to becoming a mere successor: Jane is "like" all the other women who have been romantically involved with Rochester, but she is especially like Bertha insofar as Bertha can be read as a manifestation of aspects of Jane herself. The frequently insisted-on affinity with Bertha thus emphasizes how vital it is for Jane to distinguish herself.

Any element of the novel that diminishes Jane's individuality thus contributes to Brontë's deployment of "Bluebeard." One crucial component of the linking between Bertha and Jane is the similar use of the language of supernatural beings for both of them. Although this language is applied to many characters, it is most noticeably and frequently applied to them. Critics typically focus on the differences between the varieties of figurative language used for Jane and for Bertha, reducing them to Jane-as-fairy versus Bertha-as-demon. Indeed, Rochester frequently compares Jane to fairies, elves, and sprites, whereas Bertha is associated with vampires, called a "demon" and a "fearful hag," and accused of having a "goblin appearance" and a "familiar" (C. Brontë 223, 297, 317, 299, 317).⁸ But supernatural beings were not so easily pigeonholed in the 1840s; it took much of the nineteenth century to solidify the opposition between conceptions of the fairy as good and the goblin as bad.⁹ When Rochester calls Jane a fairy, he does not just mean to praise her for being adorably petite. He is testifying to her strangeness, her ability to bewitch him, her alternation between granting and withholding physical affection, her seeming to stand for something that he desperately desires but doubts he can ever truly possess. Rochester tells Adèle the story of his meeting Jane as a light-hearted tale of fairy summons, but in most contemporary tales of being "pixy-led," the human protagonist either dies or goes insane; the moral of these stories is that human beings cannot abide in Elfland.¹⁰ Five times, Rochester calls Jane the predominantly negative "thing," which in the mid-nineteenth century could be used not only "in contempt or reproach, usu. suggesting unworthiness to be called a person," but also, thanks to Brontë's beloved Byron, "a particular supernatural or other dreadful monster" (*OED*, s.v. "Thing," senses II.8e and II.10a). Jane refers to herself as a thing in relation to the Reeds: "They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst them; a heterogeneous thing . . . a useless thing . . . a noxious thing" (C. Brontë 16). She therefore welcomes Rochester's

use of “thing” while she is attempting to keep him at a distance during their engagement: “I had rather be a *thing* than an angel” (275; emphasis in original).

Furthermore, many identical or similar terms are used for both Jane and Bertha and at times for Rochester as well. Rochester applies the word *creature* to Jane and Bertha two times each (C. Brontë 224, 298, 329, 335). He uses the term *monster* for Bertha and never for Jane, but Jane uses it on herself: “Am I a monster? . . . Is it impossible that Mr. Rochester should have a sincere affection for me?” (326, 278). Similarly, Rochester frequently characterizes his appearance as hideous and fears that Jane will be repulsed by it; he also speculates that she refuses to dine with him because she “suppose[s] I eat like an ogre, or a ghoul” (283). He may call Jane a “shadow,” but he also characterizes his past wandering self as a “Will-o’-the-wisp” and his present self as a “devil” (257, 327, 305). When Rochester wakes to see Jane dousing him with water after Bertha has set his bed on fire, he asks, “In the name of all the elves in Christendom, is that Jane Eyre? . . . What have you done with me, witch, sorceress?” (156). Late in the novel, both Jane and Bertha are compared to witches by an outsider: Jane’s informant on the subject of the fire at Thornfield Hall remarks that the servants claimed never to have seen anyone as much in love as Rochester had been with her, as though he had been “bewitched”; in the following paragraph, the same man deems Bertha “cunning as a witch” (450). Obviously the speaker intends opposing connotations, but his use of the same figure for both women nearly in the same breath is telling. Imagery of the supernatural Other does not simply contrast Jane with Bertha; rather, it pervades the novel and actually muddles the distinctions among the central characters.

Jane is always in danger of becoming Bluebeard’s next wife—not only because she nearly stays with Rochester after the failed wedding but also because she is the heroine of a bildungsroman, which means that she is by definition still in development and thus at risk of falling into the same trap as the women before her. She models herself on the people around her; because of her desire for control and independence, however, she adopts aspects of these people only to discard many of them over time. Acknowledging the extensive critical work on this topic, Karen Chase suggests considering characters such as serene Helen Burns, violent Bertha, and self-sacrificing St. John Rivers “not as parts of, or doubles for, Jane, but as *phases*, temporary and extreme manifestations” (73; emphasis in original). Jane’s tendency for abrupt departures and her avowed trepidation about becoming a “successor” indicate a constant fear of absorbing too much from the people around her.

This fear, in addition to offering a reason that Jane leaves Rochester rather than become his mistress, also helps to answer the difficult question of why she returns to him when she does. “Because he is no longer married to Bertha”

cannot be the answer, because Jane does not know of Bertha's death when she returns to Thornfield Hall. But two events have occurred by that time that distinguish Jane from Rochester's wife and mistresses. One is the episode of the "mysterious summons," in which Jane and Rochester somehow communicate with each other over a great distance at a time of need. This uncanny communication is clearly a once-in-a-lifetime experience; Jane can safely assume that Rochester never had such a moment with any of his continental paramours. Second, Jane differs from the other lovers because she left Rochester rather than give in. She has distinguished herself by establishing a life apart from him, achieving professional, financial, and domestic stability along the way. Narrator-Jane never discusses what she would have done if Rochester had still been married when she returned; we can only speculate. But in "Bluebeard" terms Jane's task of saving herself is complete; whatever might have happened after her return, she would not have become a mere "successor" indistinguishable from others in a long line of unfortunate predecessors.

Jane thus shifts her focus from "Bluebeard" to "Beauty and the Beast." Whereas the former tale hinges on the heroine's discovery that the master of the castle intends to place her in a lineage of victims, the latter tale progresses from her initial perception of immutable difference between her and that male figure to her realization of deeper affinity between them. Although Jane and Rochester relate to one another more immediately from the beginning than Beauty and the Beast do, Jane still has reasons to feel categorically separate from Rochester. Both of them, in fact, fear that they are not physically attractive enough to appeal to the other; this problem from the fairy tale of external "beastliness" thus plagues them both (even though Jane occupies the role of the character named Beauty). Jane, however, worries more about her relatively low social class, of which she is painfully aware because of both her upbringing with Mrs. Reed and her awkward position as governess at Thornfield Hall. She commands herself to expect no love from Rochester: "Keep to your caste" (C. Brontë 171). Before his declaration of love for her, she assumes that despite their good rapport, he does not consider her a romantic possibility because of her physical and financial liabilities: "If God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you" (265–66). Like Belle in the original literary version of "Beauty and the Beast" (1740) by Madame de Villeneuve, in which the transformed Beast's mother is disinclined to allow her princely son to marry a woman she believes to be a mere merchant's daughter, Jane recognizes that she lives in a society in which rank typically trumps love when it comes to matrimony.

But unlike her fairy-tale predecessor, Jane clearly resents these external social impediments to the deeper impulses that she believes deserve to be

regarded more highly: "Wealth, caste, custom intervened between me and what I *naturally and inevitably* loved" (C. Brontë 264; my emphasis). Jane is keenly aware of whether or not she feels such sympathy with people; she feels none with her blood relatives, the Reeds, for instance, nor does she believe Rochester feels any with his fellow aristocrats: "He is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine. . . . I feel akin to him—I understand the language of his countenance and movements: though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him" (184). Jane explicitly opposes the dicta of "rank and wealth" to the physical and mental compatibility she feels with Rochester.

Rochester, too, feels "akin" to Jane; "I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you . . . as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame" (C. Brontë 264). He calls her "my equal" and "my likeness"; "I love [you] as my own flesh" (267). This is strong language—and language that acts out what it declares, mirroring Jane's insistence earlier in the conversation that "I have as much soul as you, and full as much heart! . . . I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!" (265, 266). Jane goes further than Rochester in focusing on a spiritual communion, but they both grope for language to express their unconventional feelings.

"Beauty and the Beast" resolutely gives precedence to that which unexpectedly lies under the surface. The fairy tale is thus an apt intertext for *Jane Eyre* not only for its capacity to illustrate the kinship that Jane and Rochester feel but also because Brontë's narrative strategy subordinates a superficial sense of realism to a deeper psychological "nature" and "truth." Most accounts of literary realism, varied as they are, prioritize the faithful representation of external realities over that of internal realities.¹¹ But Brontë's work encourages us to reevaluate that hierarchy. Critics since early reviewer George Henry Lewes have appreciated *Jane Eyre* for its portrayal of a "deep reality" (691), with some particularly noting the effectiveness of the supernatural in characterizing psychological experience. John Maynard, for example, holds that "Brontë discovered how to adapt romance, fairy tale, Gothic story, or mythic modes to the conscious aim of verity to inner psychology rather than fidelity to external detail and event" (215). Although to many critics the use of fairy tales in Victorian novels appears to be an interruption of realism, for Brontë it is actually integral to her understanding of realism's most vital aspects.

Jane Eyre's most striking example of this rejection of a superficial apparent realism for a deeper sense of reality is the episode of the "mysterious summons" that finally draws Jane back to Thornfield Hall (C. Brontë 472).

When Jane inexplicably hears Rochester calling her name across a great distance, she quickly acknowledges and dispels the possibility that “superstition” is the cause: “This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature. She was roused, and did—no miracle—but her best” (442). Jane later reflects that the voice “seemed in *me*—not in the external world”; it felt “like an inspiration” (444). These two remarks seem contradictory: how can the summons come from within and yet be an “inspiration,” which suggests an external source? Rochester, too, in revealing later that he heard Jane’s distant response, warns, “You will think me superstitious,” only to insist, “Nevertheless, this is true—true at least it is that I heard what I now relate” (471). Whereas Jane focuses on the “work of nature” to insist on the deep reality of the experience, Rochester uses “true,” with the clarification that although he cannot account for anything outside himself, he can insist on the authenticity of his subjective experience.

Yeazell allows that the novel “is part fantasy,” because “even the most conventionally romantic of readers could scarcely deny, of course, that midnight conversations between lovers many miles apart . . . are scarcely the stuff of which a realistic novel is made” (251, 240). But she takes seriously Jane’s and Rochester’s insistence on something natural or true about the inexplicable experience. Quoting from a letter Brontë wrote to reviewer Lewes after heeding his suggestion to read Jane Austen, Yeazell writes, “If an Austen novel, in Charlotte Brontë’s terms, is ‘more *real* than *true*,’ *Jane Eyre* can be said to be ‘more true than real.’ For although the miraculous events which conclude this novel are scarcely realistic, they *are* ‘true’—true to the internally consistent laws by which [Brontë’s] world is governed. . . . [This] truth is the truth of the psyche” (241). The word *real* here seems contingent on the external, the objectively verifiable—the prosaic drawing-room experiences that populate Jane Austen novels, for example (by which Brontë was far from impressed, unsurprisingly). Brontë seems to have a surface-depth model in mind when she faults Austen for losing sight of what is true in her detailed treatment of what is real. In Yeazell’s assessment, *Jane Eyre* is “part fantasy” because the mysterious summons amounts to an external event cooperating with the demands of the psyche: “The ultimate dream which *Jane Eyre* enacts is thus the dream of the harmony between the individual psyche and the world which it confronts . . . this coincidence of inner and outer reality” (252). This is the happy ending: as signaled by Jane’s convoluted language, the inexplicable call comes from inside and outside at once, both an “inspiration” and the unshackling of the soul itself.

Nature thus connects two spheres: the internal as opposed to the conventional, and the literary quality that is related to but distinct from simple realism—and that can include fairy-tale and supernatural elements. Brontë designates “a

faithful allegiance to Truth and Nature” the primary task of an author; she aims to “study Nature herself” and to “use the language of Truth in preference to the jargon of Conventionality” (Barker 202, 206). Lewes, despite his injunction to read Austen, understood this commitment to underlying truth, as his review of *Jane Eyre* in *Fraser’s Magazine* demonstrates: “The book closed, the enchantment continues. . . . Reality—deep, significant reality—is the great characteristic of the book. It is an autobiography,—not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience” (691). Lewes subordinates the “facts and circumstances”—the trappings of a realist novel—to something more “actual” and “deep.” In almost the same breath, he attributes to *Jane Eyre* “enchantment” and “deep, significant reality.” Like the characters in the novel, he resorts to the language of the supernatural in attempting to access the inner reality that is not easily articulated in everyday language.

Lewes’s assessment brings us back, finally, to “Beauty and the Beast,” the deep reality of which is precisely the value of accepting an improbable truth that underlies a deceptive surface. After all Jane’s insistence on independence, “how is it possible for Brontë to picture the self as engaged with, but separate from, an other?” (Chase 85). The problem with the “Bluebeard” story paradigm, in addition to its violence, is that Jane would have lost any distinction from her predecessors. By slipping into a “Beauty and the Beast” story, Jane fits herself into a fairy-tale model and thus joins a long line of predecessors anyway. But this kind of succession does not seem to bother her, rather like the oddly merged selfhood she develops with Rochester that presumably leaves her sufficient independence. Her sense of inherent kinship with him alleviates potential problems; instead of stepping out of herself and into a new role, she is returning to something deep-seated. He suits her “to the finest fibre of my nature,” she tells him after their reunion (C. Brontë 470). Their marriage may not fit social norms, and the mysterious summons that reunited them may not fit conventional realist narration, but Jane insists to the end on a deeper justification.

According to Chase, the “governing presupposition” of Brontë’s juvenile tales is that “reality is tractable” (11). Clearly this presupposition extends to *Jane Eyre*. Insisting on the value of the improbable but profoundly true, “Beauty and the Beast” offers a way to consider the flexible realism Brontë uses to emphasize the experience of the psyche over the laws of the outside world. As for the content of the novel, Jane progresses chronologically from prioritizing her uniqueness (the requirement of “Bluebeard” for the heroine’s self-preservation) to prioritizing her affinity with Rochester (the requirement of “Beauty and the Beast” for the same end). But Brontë’s hybrid evocation of the two tales is crucial to the novel as a whole. Jane arrives at her particular

happy ending only after she has learned the lessons of both and mastered their meanings sufficiently to mold them into a narrative of her own.

Notes

1. One general source for Brontë's knowledge of fantasy is the work of the Romantic poets, which we know influenced her heavily. As Whone shows, libraries that the Brontës frequented contained works by Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott that featured fairy material and a great deal of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English and French literature. Brontë may have accessed the classic French fairy tales here. She learned much local fairy lore from beloved Brontë family servant Tabitha Aykroyd, as Jane Eyre hears tales from her aunt's servant Bessie.
2. See, for instance, Benvenuto (212); Gilbert and Gubar (342); Leavis (143); and Miele (501), which also suggests the related "Donkeyskin." See also Heiniger.
3. For additional mentions of *Jane Eyre's* affinity with "Beauty and the Beast," see Sullivan and Imlay.
4. In *Spellbound: The Fairy Tale and the Victorians*, Molly Clark Hillard wisely argues that *Jane Eyre* contains far too many references to fairy tales and legends to support critics' claims about the predominance of any single source. She suggests rather that the novel "more closely resembles the natural history in its widespread collection and interpolation of the fantastic" (Hillard, *Spellbound*, 55). Although I agree that no tale can be justly considered Brontë's primary model, I maintain nonetheless that the interaction between the two tales I consider in this essay warrants more examination than it has thus far received.
5. It is also significant that Beauty is quite active compared to many other traditional fairy-tale heroines. Cristina Bacchilega calls her "an active heroine whose physical and psychological journeys provide most of the narrative 'suspense' and whose decisions—right and wrong—advance the plot" (76). As this description emphasizes, Beauty has agency that is interesting and substantial enough to carry a narrative; thus she is better suited than many other heroines to provide the model for a complex bildungsroman.
6. See, for example, *The Phantom of the Opera* (the 1910 novel, several film versions, and the 1986 musical), *King Kong* (1933 and 2005 films), and the Jean Cocteau and Disney film versions of *Beauty and the Beast* (1946 and 1991). Both film versions of "Beauty and the Beast" infuse small hints of "Bluebeard," particularly moral problems in the hero (see also the forbidden chamber in the Disney film). The heroines of *King Kong* and *The Phantom of the Opera* see past the male figures' outward beastliness or disfigurement as in "Beauty and the Beast," but because these male figures are killers, like Bluebeard, they ultimately cannot be redeemed. Portrayals of these Beast-Bluebeard hybrids have grown increasingly sympathetic over time.
7. For substantial lists and discussions of the many (and multifaceted) versions of "Bluebeard" in nineteenth-century English culture, see Hermansson, Hearne, and Barzilai.
8. Rochester's conception of Jane as a fairy also resonates with the revelation in Madame de Villeneuve's original novel-length "Beauty and the Beast" (1740) that Beauty had a fairy mother. Although Brontë may not have encountered this

version, the connection between Jane-as-fairy and Jane-as-Beauty-figure nonetheless adds helpful complexity to our conception of Jane's particular fairy status.

9. For a thorough discussion of this shift, see Hillard ("Dangerous Exchange").
10. See Bray, *A Peep at the Pixies*; and Bray, *Traditions*. Brontë's beloved Romantic writers produced a number of tales of the pixy-led. In the conclusions of James Hogg's "Mary Burnet" (1828) and "Kilmeny" (1813), the fairy-abducted heroines are supposedly content but nonetheless barred from returning to the human world. John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1819) offers a particularly stark account of the danger a mortal man risks in becoming romantically entangled with a fairy woman. See Silver for a wealth of examples and analysis of Victorian fairy lore.
11. See, for example, Clayton; Levine; Lodge; Armstrong; and Claybaugh.

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