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## *Jane Eyre's* Masculine Crisis

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# *Jane Eyre's* Masculine Crisis

by Samantha Hilton

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in English

Linfield College

May 29, 2015

Approved by *Signature redacted*

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# *Jane Eyre's* Masculine Crisis

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## *Jane Eyre's* Masculine Crisis

### Theoretical Frameworks

Charlotte Brontë's famed novel *Jane Eyre* was among the first novels celebrated by early feminist theorists in the 1960s for its portrayal of an independent and enviable female protagonist; both Charlotte Brontë and Jane have since been heralded as examples of the modern Western woman.<sup>1</sup> Feminist theorists have taken to *Jane Eyre* because of the text's rebellion against Victorian ideals: rather than passively follow orders, governess Jane instead follows her own code of morality. Jane is an appropriate early feminist heroine and that, perhaps, is Brontë's greatest achievement and *Jane Eyre's* most lasting success. Feminist interpretations of the novel have proven valid and extremely useful yet from a more contemporary perspective, these readings of *Jane Eyre* come across as one-sided: they are so Jane-centric and focused on her liberation that other characters of the novel are disregarded. The purpose of this paper is not to dismiss feminist critical responses to *Jane Eyre*, but to expand the critical conversation to include the novel's other central figure: Edward Rochester. Rochester is often absent from critical theory - or if he is discussed, it is to paint him as nothing more than a one-dimensional Byronic hero who serves as a test of Jane's agency. As an academic discipline, masculinity studies is growing in popularity and texts from the literary canon are being revisited and reread from this perspective; however, an updated gendered interpretation of

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<sup>1</sup>Other novels celebrated by feminists include: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

*Jane Eyre* is missing. A return to Charlotte Brontë's novel – once the model of feminist individuality – for a gendered analysis seems appropriate.

Intending to expand upon the gendered reading of *Jane Eyre*, I began my analysis by questioning whether or not I believe that Jane and Rochester are equals. The majority of existing scholarship on *Jane Eyre* would argue the two characters are not and that Jane's spirit and willpower are stronger than Rochester's; however, I assert Brontë's novel does not slate either character as a winner or as a dominant force over the other. Instead, *Jane Eyre* examines the problematic effects of societal gender expectations through these two characters. The common feminist readings of *Jane Eyre* can be augmented with a masculinity studies reading.

Feminist theory and masculinity studies continue, in some ways, to be in contention with one another. In terms of critical scholarship, the study of men and masculinity is relatively new, emerging as a response to feminist criticism – a response that may admittedly be a bit defensive.<sup>2</sup> In his essay "The Case for Men's Studies," critic Harry Brod briefly discusses the histories of these two gendered critical lenses. He summarizes women's studies by admitting that it

emerge[d] from the proposition that traditional scholarship embodies a bias that is male oriented or androcentric. Women's experiences and

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<sup>2</sup> Masculinity studies can be divided into two categories, I differentiate them as aggressive and progressive. Aggressive masculinity studies is defensive and reacts against women and their growing roles in society, stemming from an anxiety of displacement. Progressive masculinity studies saw the successes of feminism and took the opportunity to create their own field of study to show that societal structures are also harmful to men. I interact with the latter field of masculinity studies in this project.

perspectives have been systematically not incorporated into, or written out of, what has been accepted as knowledge. Thus traditional scholarship, while claiming to be objective and neutral, has been a *de facto* program of "men's studies." (39-40)

Brod claims that the women's studies response was to "revision traditional academic disciplines to produce a gynocentric rather than androcentric vision" (40). Where feminist critics aim to include the voice of women in the master narrative, masculinity studies scholars explore the male experience and how it contrasts what the master narrative claims about them. While explaining the role of men's studies, Harry Brod argues

men's studies has a task corollary to that of women's studies. The nineteenth century German philosopher Hegel wrote that what is familiar (*bekannt*) was not often really known (*erkannt*) precisely because it was so seemingly familiar...some [men's scholars] argue that men's public lives in an important sense represent a retreat and escape from their personal lives, a shrinkage rather than an enlargement of their spheres...they argue that the concepts and methodologies of traditional scholarship have perpetuated these misunderstandings of masculinity precisely because they share the same male biases. (3)

Where the lives of women have historically been privatized to the point of invisibility, the lives of men were paraded so much that the public sphere became a

safe place for men to blend into societies' single interpretation of masculinity. Individual masculinity becomes invisible in the public sphere because the male biology does not place as many restrictions on their actions as compared with the female biology. John Tosh asserts a similar claim:

Women were 'carriers' of gender, because their reproductive role was held to define their place in society and their character. Masculinity remained largely out of sight since men as a sex were not confined in this or any other way: as Rousseau bluntly put it, 'The male is only a male at times; the female is a female all her life and can never forget her sex'. (Tosh 180)

Tosh's claim about the invisibility of masculinity delivers insight to the comparative youth of the criticism. Hints of men's studies in its current form can be traced to the 1970s, but – generally – the criticism did not reach much acceptance until the 1990s. Compared with feminist theory, not much critical scholarship in defense of men exists in history or literature.

While attempting to become its own field of scholarship, men's studies was initially met with criticism. Tosh outlines three main arguments against masculinity studies: "It can be seen as an unwelcome take-over bid, as unacceptably subversive, or as a modish irrelevance" (179). Over time, men's scholars have proven all of these arguments false. In defense of men's studies, Natalie Zemon Davis asserted that understanding men was just as crucial to the holistic understanding of society to study male and female experience:

It seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus entirely on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past. (Tosh 179)

Davis' quote argues the importance for a more holistic understanding of gender. Feminist theory and masculinity studies are meant to complement and supplement one another, rather than work in opposition to one another. The point of analyzing Bronte's famed novel in terms of masculinity studies is to expand understanding of the novel and its two main characters; the analysis of Rochester is to work alongside the several analyses completed about Jane to highlight the fact that these two characters are "equals" (Martin 94). In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte is not only providing readers with a relatable and independent feminine character who usurps societal expectations, but she is also introducing an interesting male figure whose actions and mannerisms also questions the era's social norms.

This paper will look at *Jane Eyre* via masculinity studies predominantly through three frameworks: performance, religion, and society - a term which, for this paper, will specifically explore the tension between public and private lives. Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler discusses gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble*. Here, Butler asserts that society's expectation of "true gender" is upheld only by "a tacit agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler 179). But Butler here should not be interpreted as promoting the idea that gender is chosen. In 1992 *Artforum*

interview with Liz Kotz, Butler admits that this section of *Gender Trouble* has been widely misread. She asserts that the “bad reading” of her theory assumes that a person can “get up in the morning...and decide which gender [he or she] wants to be” that day. This person would be intentionally treating gender “as if it’s an object out there” (83). In this Butler tells Kotz that “performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in” (84). Critic Esther Godfrey expands on this idea of performativity in terms of the Victorians: “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” (Godfrey 856). Central to my masculine reading of *Jane Eyre* is my assertion that Rochester is constantly and consciously performing the role of the Victorian gentleman throughout the text.

Religion is central to the understanding of *Jane Eyre* as so many characters are defined by their response to religion. Rochester’s response to religion is ambiguous: he waffles between condemning religious beliefs for cursing him and praying and thanking a deity for his luck with Jane. Historically, this treatment of religion is consistent with the idea of Rochester’s extended performance. As Tosh notes:

For the nineteenth-century historian the situation is at first sight particularly encouraging because of the hundreds of volumes written on the subject of “manliness” - a high-profile ideology of masculinity, if



ever there was one. It was elaborated, reiterated, contested and adapted - by preachers, school-masters and novelists. It was treated as the essence of civic virtue and the root of heroic achievement, while at the same time being scaled down to everyday proportions as a guide for the little man. As one of the key concepts in the moral universe of the Victorians, manliness has been well suited to the skills of the intellectual and cultural historian. (180)

Victorian morality was defined by the church. This could explain why Rochester chooses to appeal to it only sometimes: he does it as an ethical appeal. Religion is also crucial to two other men in the text of *Jane Eyre*: Brocklehurst, who views it hypocritically to control his pupils, and St. John, who is ultimately killed because of his devotion to God. These two men will be further discussed and compared against Rochester in the body of this paper.

Bronte's narrative style highlights the tension between Rochester's public and private lives. The first-person narration of *Jane Eyre* invites Jane-centric readings of the novel because it is through her perspective that the text's action unfolds. Rochester is never granted any time to personally connect with readers as Jane does, and because of this, the audience sees him only in relation to Jane. This is significant because it suggests that to the audience, Rochester does not have a set place: he is not seen either in public or in private. If Harry Brod is correct in his assertion that men lose their individual identities when in the public eye as opposed to their relative freedom at home, what does that suggest about Rochester, perpetually caught between the two? When Jane and Rochester meet, she is only

able to witness his actions while he is at Thornfield. Yet Rochester is not granted freedom of action at home because he is living alongside his biggest secret: his wife Bertha. Rochester is also near-constantly entertaining guests, leading to the constant overlap of his public and private lives. Jane does not – and therefore the audience also does not – know how Rochester acts when he is truly alone, nor how he acts when in public.

In his introduction to *Dandies and Desert Saints*, James Eli Adams discusses the Victorian patriarchy and social sphere, admitting that the era's views on gender were problematic and, at times, unfocused. To give an example of the era's unfocused gender roles, Tosh writes: "a contradiction within Victorian patriarchy, by which the same gender system that underwrote male dominance also called into question the 'manliness' of intellectual labor" (Adams 1). Adams' assertion partners well with Stimpson's claim that "'masculinity' and 'femininity' are the products, not of God, not of nature, but of historical processes" (Brod xii). There exists, in the Victorian era especially, a certain unfocused masculinity that Adams asserts in terms of intellect and Tosh asserts in terms of religion. Adams notes

The convergence of domestic and intellectual labor has been noted in recent feminist analyses of Victorian gender and culture; typically, however, those analyses concentrate on the work of gender in marginalizing women and mystifying class hierarchies...But the feminization of intellectual labor may also be turned against the male writer through the social leverage attached to such epithets as 'unmanly' or 'effeminate.' As male intellectual labor is susceptible to

such labels...the labor becomes an especially revealing focus of the shifting contours and internal stresses in Victorian discourses of gender. (1-2)

Here, Adams points out that ideas of femininity and masculinity are problematic for both genders. As Brod notes in the foreword to *The Making of Masculinities*, "the word 'man' is perplexing because each historical period, every society, and each group within a society interprets the raw materials of existence in its own way" (xi). This lack of unification makes gender analysis difficult because, even within the context of the Victorian era, something - like intellectual labor - can be perceived as some to be "effeminate" while other "Victorian writers represent intellectual vocations as affirmations of masculine identity" (Adams 2). While this lack of unified interpretations of manliness is frustrating, it is also useful as it proves that Victorian men had endless and contrasting limits placed upon them in the public sphere. And these limits were reflected in the literature.

Catherine Robson's book *Men in Wonderland* explores another tension in Victorian novels' portrayal of relationships. She suggests

The idealization and idolization of little girls, long acknowledged features of the Victorian era, cannot be thought of without reference to a pervasive fantasy of male development in which men become masculine only after an initial feminine stage. In this light, little girls represent not just the true essence of childhood, but an adult male's best opportunity of reconnecting with his own lost self. (3)

Robson's suggestion further complicates the gender implications of the Victorian era. Adams suggests that men were often attempting to ensure that they were not being associated with women, yet Robson claims that men cannot "become masculine" unless they have gone through a feminine stage of development. In terms of Robson's argument, Rochester can be interpreted a few ways: his feminine stage of development may have been delayed until the reveal of Bertha or may have been absent entirely, leading to his need to constantly perform.

This paper will conclude with a queer studies analysis of Rochester, especially with regard to his cross-dressing scene. Holly Furneaux's book *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* cites that critical interest in Victorian homosexual relationships began because of the Tudor act of 1533, under which all acts of sodomy were punishable by death. This practice existed in England until about 1861, when these criminal charges were instead punishable by arrest (Furneaux 1). Furneaux analyzes Dickens' texts and challenges the conservative notion of "Victorian respectability and...so-called Victorian family values" by noting the dynamics of the many male to male relationships in Dickens' novels (Furneaux 3). While Furneaux does not discuss Rochester or *Jane Eyre*, the models of the Victorian gentleman that she establishes in her text are useful in analyzing any male Victorian in terms of queer theory.

### **Fluctuating Power Balance of Jane and Rochester**

Critical analysis of *Jane Eyre* often restricts Rochester to the stereotype of the Byronic hero. While this interpretation is limiting, it is supported by the text. The Bronte sisters were well read and at the time of their writing, they would have been

familiar with Lord Byron and his namesake character trope. Lord Byron was personally inspired by Percy Shelley's concept of "flawed grandeur" and modeled many of his male protagonists with that idea in mind (Norton). Bronte highlights Rochester's wealth and grandeur when she introduces him to the novel:

A rude noise broke on these fine rippings and whisperings, at once so far away and so clear: a tramp, tramp...It was very near, but not yet in sight, when, in addition to the tramp, tramp, I heard a rush under the hedge, and close down by the hazel stems glided a great dog, whose black and white colour made him a distinct object against the trees. It was exactly one mask of Bessie's Gytrash, - a lion-like creature with long hair and a huge head: it passed me, however, quietly enough; not staying to look up, with strange pretercanine eyes, in my face, as I half expected it would. The horse followed, - a tall steed, and on its back a rider. The man, the human being, broke the spell at once. (95-96)

Jane's quiet walk to town was interrupted by the tramping of Rochester's horse; when she first hears the horse coming down the road, Jane immediately believes that it is a Gytrash - an apparition that takes the form of an animal (Bronte 95) - from one of Bessie's stories that haunts solo travellers. Instead of a ghost, Jane is confronted with Rochester atop his "tall steed," accompanied by his "lion-like" dog, Pilot. Critic Peter Thorslev, Jr. notes that the Byronic hero "must be bigger than life" and "above the common level with greater powers, greater dignity, and a greater soul" (Thorslev 186). When introduced, Rochester is riding his horse, allowing him a placement physically above the "common level" where Jane resides (186).

Rochester's companions also assert the analysis of him being a Byronic hero. Yet immediately the "greater dignity" and "greater soul" that Thorslev argues the Byronic hero should have are subverted.

Rochester falls from his horse, "a clattering tumble, arrested [Jane's] attention. Man and horse were down; they had slipped on the sheet of ice which glazed the causeway. The dog came bounding back" (Bronte 96). Rochester's tumble from his horse changes the dynamic of the scene completely: he is no longer a dramatic half-paranormal creature in the night, but he is revealed to be a flawed human. The fall even alters the description of Pilot. No longer "gliding", "lion-like", and "distinct" (95), Pilot is no longer a threat or symbol of status, but a recognizable loyal and concerned pet. This scene sets up Rochester's complexity and serves as a foreshadowing of Jane and Rochester's constantly changing power relationship. In terms of masculinity studies, this scene is significant because it illustrates the difference between what is *expected* of men and what is true. In terms of Victorian society [find citation, I think this will be in Tosh], Rochester would have been expected to pull off the image of high society gentleman riding in the road [he is performing a role]; however, Rochester is unable to fulfill that role. He falls and is angry. He initially refuses Jane's help - "You must just stand on one side" (96) - and attempts to continue the journey alone [citation from Adams about expectations of the male body]. Ultimately, he is unable to return home without Jane's help.

The power dynamic of Jane and Rochester's relationship is constantly in flux; men's scholars would blame this on Victorian society. Catherine Stimpson asserts "'masculinity' and 'femininity' are the products, not of God, not of nature, but of

historical processes” (Brod xii). These historical processes have informed Rochester that, as a man with a household, he is required to be the dominant force in his relationships. Tosh observes an important element of masculinity: “In most societies that we know of, setting up a new household is the essential qualification of manhood” (Tosh 185). Rochester meets Tosh’s criteria for manhood: he has a wife whose actions he controls – though at this point in the novel, Jane does not know about Bertha – and he runs his household, Thornfield. Despite his classification as a man, Rochester has a difficult time abiding by societal constructs and in being the dominating force in his interactions with Jane. During many of their conversations, Rochester attempts to control the staging - or performance - of a scene. He narrates Jane’s actions and commands that she do or say certain things:

‘Little nervous subject! Forget visionary woe, and think only of real happiness! You say you love me, Janet: yes - I will not forget that; and you cannot deny it. *Those* words did not die inarticulate on your lips. I heard them clear and soft: a thought too solemn perhaps, but sweet as music - “I think it is a glorious thing to have the hope of living with you, Edward, because I love you.” - Do you love me, Jane? Repeat it.’

(Bronte 240)

Rochester is so concerned with performance that he has gone so far as to pen a line for Jane to repeat: “I think it is a glorious thing to have the hope of living with you, Edward, because I love you” (240). Rochester is insecure and needs the satisfaction and assurance of hearing Jane tell him that she wants to be with him. Harry Brod discusses, at length, the concept of male masking and hiding in the public sphere. He



asserts that men created their society as a place in which they were able to hide their weaknesses and shortcomings from others (Brod 46). In addition to hiding from others, the idea of hiding in public also allows males to hide from themselves. Rochester may be hiding from his own insecurities, forcing them to crop up during his moments of vulnerability – for instance, in asking Jane to repeatedly assure Rochester that she loves him. Jane, for her own right, does not go along with Rochester's games. Instead of either denying him outright or submitting fully, Jane goes in-between and paraphrases Rochester's prompt by answering, "I do, sir, - I do with my whole heart." Rochester, apparently, is not wholly satisfied with Jane's response as, after contemplating the situation responds:

'Well,...it is strange; but that sentence has penetrated my breast painfully. Why? I think because you said it with such an earnest, religious energy: and because your upward gaze at me now is the very sublime of faith, truth, and devotion: it is too much as if some spirit were near me. Look wicked, Jane; as you know well how to look; coin one of your wild, shy, provoking smiles; tell me you hate me - tease me, vex me; do anything but move me: I would rather be incensed than saddened.' (Bronte 240-241)

It is notable that during these scenes in which Rochester is attempting to control the action, Jane's voice is suddenly missing. Jane's only voice is her response to Rochester; we are not awarded Jane's thoughts on the scene at hand. Instead, we have Rochester informing Jane's feelings. His above description of Jane displays her as the angelic lover as he claims to have been struck by her "devotion" and "earnest,



religious energy" (240). He immediately switches the commands, after describing Jane as angelically loyal, he switches to call her "wicked" and demands "provoking smiles" from Jane and requests that she "incense" him (240-241). Jane's response to Rochester's command is conditional. She asserts that she "will tease [Rochester] and vex [him] to [his] heart's content when [she] has finished [her] tale" (241). Jane will not submit to Rochester and let go of the situation until she is heard. Rochester was attempting to use his acting, rhetoric, and commands to convince Jane to forget about the previous night and to accept the strange noises as a dream. Unfortunately for Rochester, this does not work in his favor as Jane does not simply forget about the situation.

The power fluctuation between Jane and Rochester is one of the most compelling aspects of the novel, yet difficult to explain. Traditionally, the gender flux could be read as Jane just trying to assert her independence and her voice when she can, I argue that her voice is a little more intentional. Esther Godfrey writes extensively about class structure and age difference in relation to power in *Jane Eyre* and she notes

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. Bronte'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. (Godfrey 860).

While this paper does not specifically discuss the age imbalance between the text's main characters, it is important to keep in mind. When power fluctuates in Jane's favor and she is in control of a scene, Rochester has surrendered his agency to a woman half his age with no financial power over him. This is significant in terms of masculinity studies, because it shows that Rochester is not completely content being the head of the relationship as he is head of Thornfield.

*Jane Eyre* is narrated from Jane's perspective and, as such, readers are not allowed to know Rochester intimately. Instead, Rochester is only viewed from Jane's perspective and, for Rochester, Jane exists somewhere in-between the public and private sphere. As readers, we never see Rochester in public – where we could assume he is always in performance-mode in order to assimilate to society's ideas of masculinity – and we never see him in private – where he would, Brod argues, be completely himself and at-ease. This is significant because it suggests that Rochester does not exist on a clearly defined plane; instead, he is undefined. Arguably, Rochester is the most complicated character in *Jane Eyre*. The novel's other characters - such as Jane's aunt and cousins, Mrs. Fairfax, Bertha, and Mr. Brocklehurst - have clear purpose in the novel. Their inclusion coincides with a character trope or Bronte presents the character as some form of caricature of their own right.

### **Rochester: Not a Tyrant, Hypocrite, or Martyr**

Jane's personal growth and feminist maturation could easily be charted in terms of whichever male figure is controlling her life. As a child, her every action and every "morsel of [her] flesh" was terrified by how cousin John would punish her.

Jane's late childhood and teenage years were spent at Lowood School where she was under the reign of Mr. Brocklehurst. From Lowood, Jane immediately becomes the governess at Thornfield Hall, where Rochester – of course – enters her life. Finally, after Jane flees from Rochester, she struggles against her cousin St. John Rivers.

What separates Rochester from these other men is simple: Jane uses her own choice and agency to return to him. Unarguably, some of Rochester's traits overlap with those of the other men in the novel; however, unlike these men, Rochester's character is fully developed.

Masculinity studies is important to understanding Rochester because it highlights the complex nature of his character; if Rochester was more straightforward of a character, he would risk becoming a stereotype. The other male characters of *Jane Eyre* exemplify what these stereotypes are and, when compared against Rochester, display some of the traps and limitations of these stereotypes.

The primary male antagonist of Jane's early life is her cousin John Reed. Fueled by his mother's dislike and rejection of Jane, John does everything in his power to make Jane's life miserable. Of John, Jane remembers "every nerve [she] had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on [her] bones shrank when he came near" (Bronte 8). Cousin John is presented as little more than a self-important tyrant. In the opening scene of the novel, Jane is scolded and punished by John for reading:

"You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not live her with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense.

Now, I'll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows."

I did so, not at first aware what was his intention, but...the volume was flung, it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it...

He ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder...I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer. (9)

In his treatment of Jane, John was both physically and verbally abusive. The text reveals that John's ideas of Jane are likely not his own independent ideas – instead, he is taking cues from what his “mamma says” (9); however, Jane recalls being primarily tyrannized by him. Here, cousin John is serving as the epitome of traditional Victorian society: he is being bred to be the tyrannical head of the household. It is common to associate Edward Rochester with the role of tyrant; however, compared to John Reed, Rochester is more forgiving and kind. He is strict, but he is not physically abusing his staff.

Another male character in the novel who is largely detested is Brocklehurst. He similarly punishes Jane at Lowood school; rather than a physical assault, his punishment is meant to isolate Jane from her fellow students. Brocklehurst announces to the pupils and staff of the school that Jane

might be one of God's own lambs, [but] is a little castaway: not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien. You must be on your guard against her; you must shun her example: if

necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse. (Bronte 56)

In John's speech against Jane, the focus was on her lack of family and belongings: John was punishing her for having to be taken in by his mother, Mrs. Reed. She saw him as an outsider. Brocklehurst, on the other hand, intends to make Jane an outsider in his speech. He publicly calls Jane an "alien" and requests that no one befriend her or pay her any mind. As Tosh notes, "masculinity is more than social construction. It demands to be considered also as a *subjective* identity, usually the most deeply experienced that men have" (Tosh 194). This subjective identity is carefully formed:

If men are the sex at large in society, they must live by a code which affirms their masculinity. As such a code, Victorian manliness was not only taken very seriously by pundits and preachers; it was also manifest in the lives of countless young men, who saw it as an expression of their manhood in keeping with their religious convictions, or their social aspirations, or both together. (181)

Tosh's statement ties nicely into Mr. Brocklehurst, who is consciously aware of living up to his own religious code and his social one. John Reed and Brocklehurst exaggerate the trouble and tension of the public and private spheres: John Reed displays the abuse that can occur when lives are entirely privatized while Brocklehurst exemplifies the hypocrisy of living a life fully in the public eye. Rochester exists between these two spheres.

Bronte does not present John Reed to the exterior world; he exists - at least at the beginning of the novel - only in his mother's house, where Mrs. Reed's lax attitude toward parenting him allows him free reign over the individuals who live there. Cousin John exists only in the private sphere; a status that frees him to act however he wants and to lord over and dictate the actions of others.

Brocklehurst, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the public's interpretation of his character. His students at Lowood are intentionally starved, freezing, and relegated to strict rules and guidelines, yet Brocklehurst's own daughters are "splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs...[with] beaver hats...shaded with ostrich plumes" and "elaborately curled" hairstyles (Bronte 54-55). Brocklehurst justifies his hypocriticism with exaggerated religious devotion; he claims that his treatment of the girls at Lowood - his "train[ing] in conformity" (Bronte 29) - is directly in line with "consistency...the first of Christian duties" (28).

Rochester has a few similarities to these characters. While not as aggressive as John Reed, Rochester can be self-serving and also notes a few times that Jane is under his charge and part of *his* household; however, Rochester is a more dynamic character than John Reed. Cousin Reed is caricature of Victorian masculine aggression. Rochester and Mr. Brocklehurst are similar in terms of their interest in the public's reaction to their person. While Brocklehurst hides behind his, presumably, feigned religious devotion, Mr. Rochester attempts to reconstruct his reputation by fleeing the sin of the Continent in favor of the more conservative England. What separates Rochester from these two is his lack of exaggeration. Bronte constructs Rochester as a three-dimensional character to whom readers can

be sympathetic. John Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst serve as foils of Mr. Rochester as they exaggerate Rochester's complexity - he is not simply a barrier to Jane's agency as John Reed and Brocklehurst are. Much of Rochester's complexity is due to his existence in a liminal space; where John Reed exists only in the private sphere and Mr. Brocklehurst exists only in the public, Rochester - as will be discussed in detail later - exists somewhere in-between the two.

In addition to John Reed and Mr. Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers serves as another foil of Mr. Rochester's. When St. John is discussed in literary criticism, he is always analyzed in relation to Rochester as a conflict to the Victorian marriage plot. While I maintain that *Jane Eyre* is more than a marriage plot novel - Jane herself has insisted against caring about marriage - Rochester's perceived competition with St. John is important to my masculinity studies analysis because it exemplifies Rochester's anxiety and insecurities regarding his relationship with Jane.

The tension between Rochester and St. John is highlighted in a lengthy scene at the end of the novel in which Rochester and Jane are discussing St. John's relationship with her.

"St. John made you schoolmistress of Morton before he knew you were his cousin?"

"Yes."

"You would often see him? He would visit the school sometimes?"

"Daily."

"He would approve of your plans, Jane? I know they would be clever, for you are a talented creature."

"He approved of them - yes."

"He would discover many things in you he could not have expected to find? Some of your accomplishments are not ordinary."

"I don't know about that."

"You had a little cottage near the school, you say; did he ever come there to see you?"

"Now and then."

"Of an evening?"

"Once or twice."

A pause.

"How long did you reside with him and his sisters after the cousinship was discovered?"

"Five months."

"Did Rivers spend much time with the ladies of his family?"

"Yes; the back parlour was both his study and ours: he sat near the window, and we by the table."

"Did he study much?"

"A good deal."

"What?"

"Hindustanee."

"And what did you do meantime?"

"I learnt German, at first."

"Did he teach you?"



"Miss Eyre, I repeat, you can leave me. How often am I to say the same thing? Why do you remain pertinaciously perched on my knee, when I have given you notice to quit?"

"Because I am comfortable there."

"No, Jane, you are not comfortable there, because your heart is not with me: it is with this cousin – this St. John. Oh, till this moment I thought my little Jane was all mine! I had a belief she loved me even when she left me: that was an atom of sweet in much bitter. Long as we have been parted, hot tears as I have wept over our separation, I never thought that while I was mourning her she was loving another! But it is useless grieving. Jane, leave me: go and marry Rivers."

"Shake me off, then, sir – push me away, for I'll not leave you of my own accord."

"Jane, I ever like your tone of voice: it still renews hope, it sounds so truthful. When I hear it, it carries me back a year. I forget that you have formed a new tie. But I am not a fool – go –"

"Where must I go, sir?"

"Your own way – with the husband you have chosen."

"Who is that?"

"You know – this St. John Rivers."

"He is not my husband, nor ever will be. He does not love me: I do not love him. He loves (as he *can* love, and that is not as you love) a beautiful young lady called Rosamond. He wanted to marry me only

because he thought I should make a suitable missionary's wife, which she would not have done. He is good and great, but severe; and, for me, cold as an iceberg. He is not like you, sir: I am not happy at his side, nor near him, nor with him. He has no indulgence for me – no fondness. He sees nothing attractive in me; not even youth – only a few useful mental points. – Then I must leave you, sir, to go to him?”

I shuddered involuntarily, and clung instinctively closer to my blind but beloved master. He smiled.

“What, Jane! Is this true? Is such really the state of matters between you and Rivers?”

“Absolutely, sir. Oh, you need not be jealous! I wanted to tease you a little to make you less sad: I thought anger would be better than grief. But if you wish me to love you, could you but see how much I *do* love you, you would be proud and content. All my heart is yours, sir: it belongs to you; and with you it would remain were fate to exile the rest of me from your presence for ever.”

Again, as he kissed me, painful thoughts darkened his aspect.

“My seared vision! my crippled strength!” He murmured regretfully.

I caressed, in order to soothe him. I knew of what he was thinking, and wanted to speak for him; but dared not. As he turned aside his face a minute, I saw a tear slide from under the sealed eyelid, and trickle down the manly cheek. My heart swelled. (376-378)

Critic Patricia Spacks notes that Jane chooses “passion over action” (81), thus leading to her choosing Rochester of St. John - she chose “the primacy of feeling” over the complacent relationship of convenience she would have had with St. John. Rochester’s anxieties are clearly on display in the questions he asks Jane. He explicitly asks Jane about the nature of her relationship with St. John, needing the assurance that Jane is free to be with him romantically. Perhaps St. John would have been a better choice for Jane – there are literary critics who believe so – but ultimately, his single-minded determination to be morally good and religious is his ultimate downfall as he is killed on his mission trip.

### **Bertha Mason**

Possibly the most surprising scene in *Jane Eyre* is the revelation of Rochester’s imprisoned wife, Bertha. While she never speaks in the novel, Bertha has become a lasting symbol of female oppression. Victorian critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlighted Bertha’s position by naming their famous feminist text, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, after her. In their discussion of *Jane Eyre*, Gilbert and Gubar have elaborated on Jane’s gentle nature as compared against the “lunatic” Bertha (Bronte 250); this reading has been, perhaps, this novel’s most lasting. I would like to challenge Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of Bertha by reevaluating her character and dissecting her symbolism and possible doubling in reference to Rochester rather than Jane.

Bertha serves as Jane’s foil. Where Jane seeks her own independence and freedom, Bertha is trapped, angry, and mentally unsound. To Jane, Bertha represents her potential life – she sees Bertha’s “shaggy locks,” “purple face,” and

“bloated features” and worries that she is destined to become Bertha (Bronte 250). Jane even questions her identity after the revelation, noting that “nothing had smitten [her], or scathed [her], or maimed [her]. And yet, where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday? - where was her life? - where were her prospects? (252).” Jane’s thought pattern suggests that something essential to her has changed. No longer available to her as a fiancé, Rochester – Bronte implies – was Jane’s life and prospects. To Jane, Bertha represents entrapment and the end of her life with Rochester.

Similarly, Bertha also serves as a symbol of entrapment for Rochester. When forced to discuss Bertha, Rochester says,

“That is *my wife*,” said he. “Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know - such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And *this* is what I wished to have” (laying his hand on [Jane’s] shoulder): “this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout.” (251)

Here, Rochester is comparing Bertha to Jane; he notes that Jane is calm and collected while Bertha acted as a fierce demon. Even though Rochester is the cause of Bertha’s imprisonment, his comparison between the two women is full of regret. His emphasis on “my wife” while he is holding her by cord and rope comes off as disdainful while he appeals to his audience to feel sorry for him that his only affection was to come from a supposed maniac who “bit and stabbed” her brother

(250). Rather, though, than his anger being directed only at Bertha, I would like to offer the interpretation that Rochester is also projecting some self-loathing.

After the Bertha revelation, Jane informs Rochester that she intends to leave Thornfield Hall. Rochester attempts to stop her and instead of marrying him, Rochester asks her to leave and to run away with him; however, Jane does not want to become his mistress. Jane's response angers Rochester, who does not consider himself married to Bertha. In an effort to keep Jane, Rochester divulges the "circumstances attending [his] infernal union" with Bertha (259). According to Rochester, his union with Bertha was arranged by his father who sought a "wealthy marriage" for Rochester after giving all of his property to Rochester's older brother, Rowland. Rochester summarizes his background:

"When I left college I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me. My father said nothing about her money: but he told me Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie...Her family wished to secure me, because I was of a good race; and so did she. They showed her to me in parties, splendidly dressed. I seldom saw her alone, and had very little private conversation with her. She flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments...and being ignorant, raw, and inexperienced, I thought I loved her...a marriage was achieved almost before I know where I was. Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! - an agony of inward contempt masters me. I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her..."

“My bride’s mother I had never seen: I understood she was dead. The honeymoon over, I learned my mistake; she was only mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too, a complete dumb idiot. The elder one, whom you have seen...will probably be in the same state one day. My father, and my brother Rowland, knew all this; but they thought only of the thirty thousand pounds, and joined in the plot against me.” (Bronte 260-261)

Rochester interprets his marriage to Bertha as an elaborate plot orchestrated by his father and by Bertha’s family. Rochester’s father wanted Bertha’s money while Bertha’s family sought Rochester’s “good race” (260). Interpretations of Rochester’s past are divisive and the reader has to decide whether or not they believe Rochester’s account of being tricked into marrying a mentally unstable woman.

A famous example of one who does not believe Rochester’s story is author Jean Rhys whose novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* reimagines Bertha and Rochester’s story. Rhys’ postcolonial novel highlights the power divide between men and women and the racism of nineteenth-century British colonial dominion. Rhys imagines Bertha as Antoinette Cosway, a white Creole heiress whom Rochester displaces by forcing her away from her home and bringing her to England. Rhys argues that it is this displacement, combined with Rochester’s poor treatment of her that slowly drives her insane.

Rhys’ reading of *Jane Eyre* is significant in terms of Britain’s colonial history; however, it is not the only way to interpret this scene. Again, interpretation of Rochester’s past is divisive and much of that is due to the narrative style of the text:

how much are we trusting Rochester's description of his past? For this masculinity studies reading of *Jane Eyre*, I would like to assume that Rochester's presented story is accurate. While his story could easily be interpreted as a ploy to lure Jane into staying with him, it is such a crucial moment in the novel for our understanding of Rochester that I would like to propose it read, for this purpose, as true.

Robert Tosh, Harry Brod, and James Eli Adams all suggest that Victorian male identity hinges, at least somewhat, upon publicity and how the public is reacting and interpreting their character. Rochester's decision to hide Bertha's existence is a strong indication of his constant performance – he performs the role of wealthy bachelor by hosting parties, by appearing to court Blanche Ingram, and by asking Jane to marry him as if he was available to be wed. Further, when Mason appears at the church during Jane and Rochester's marriage ceremony, the clergyman expressed his shock at Bertha's existence, exclaiming, "At Thornfield Hall!...Impossible! I am an old resident in this neighbourhood, sir, and I never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at Thornfield Hall" (Bronte 248). Rochester has been consciously hiding Bertha for a long while. But is he hiding Bertha because he feels shameful towards her?

I would argue that Rochester does not hide Bertha out of shame for her, but for him. If we are to believe his account of his marriage to Bertha, then Rochester becomes the victim of the marriage. Yes, he went about his treatment of Bertha incorrectly, but I would argue that he wanted a second chance at marriage and at love. The laws against divorce are often cited as methods to further trap women into unhappy marriages. Historically, they needed the husband to provide for the family



because they were not allowed to work. Bertha – nor Jane for that matter – need to marry Rochester for financial gain. In fact, Bertha was chosen to be Rochester's wife because her money is what supported their relationship initially; a trend which subverts the traditional Victorian family. Rochester is unable to get their marriage annulled, and it becomes the source of their unhappiness. Bertha is becoming more and more mentally unstable as her imprisonment lengthens while Rochester continues to pretend that she does not exist.

Bertha represents Rochester's masculine anxiety. He was unable to provide for his family and fulfill that role traditionally and he felt, as he tells Jane, tricked into a marriage of convenience. In order to live up to societal constructs of masculinity, Rochester chooses to lock Bertha in the attic and perform the role of wealthy bachelor. This way, he does not have to publicly admit that Bertha – a woman – saved his family's name and reputation from financial ruin.

### **Mother Rochester**

A gendered analysis of *Jane Eyre* would be incomplete without a queer reading of Edward Rochester. My reading is inspired by Holly Furneaux's *Queer Dickens*, a text in which Furneaux analyzes Dickens' male characters in terms of their ability to be nurturing, rather than be family-oriented. Furneaux looks at a variety of male character types, including bachelor fathers, men against marriage, and male nurses in Dickens' novels. While not all of these character types directly apply to *Jane Eyre*, I will be using Furneaux's text and analyses a model for my queer reading of Rochester.



Related to the idea of a gender performance is *Jane Eyre's* gypsy scene in which Rochester cross-dresses as a woman in order to glean Jane's affection for him. The idea of gender performance was first popularized by critic and philosopher Judith Butler, other critics have since adopted her idea. One such critic is Esther Godfrey, who notes that to Victorians "gendered performances become acts that are increasingly tied to material wealth, and [Bronte] suggests that only the middle and upper classes can afford the costly performance of gender" (856). Here, Godfrey is comparing Jane to Blanche Ingram. She argues that since Blanche is wealthy, she can afford to decorate herself with jewelry and nice clothes – essentially Blanche has the freedom to play a girl. On the other hand, Jane is not decorated and was defeminized at Lowood School and therefore does not have the luxury to perform freely.

Like Blanche, Rochester is wealthy and, as we exhibited earlier, has a leaning toward performance. When entertaining guests at Thornfield, Rochester organizes elaborate games of charades, setting up stages and costumes. At one particular party, he dresses himself as a gypsy and lures Jane into the room to, ostensibly, have her fortune told by the visiting gypsy. The scene ends up being one of the most intimate between Jane and Rochester:

The old woman's voice had changed: her accent, her gesture, and all were familiar to me as my own face in a glass - as the speech of my own tongue... I looked; I stirred the fire, and I looked again: but she drew her bonnet and her bandage closer about her face, and again beckoned me to depart. The flame illuminated her hand stretched out:

roused now, and on the alert for discoveries, I at once noticed that hand. it was no more the withered limb of old than my own; it was a rounded supple member, with smooth fingers, symmetrically turned; a broad ring flashed on the little finger, and stooping forward, I looked at it, and saw a gem I had seen a hundred times before. Again I looked at the face; which was no longer turned from me - on the contrary, the bonnet was doffed, the bandage displaced, the head advanced.

"Well, Jane, do you know me?" asked the familiar voice.

"Only take off the red cloak, sir, and then -" ...

And Mr. Rochester stepped out of his disguise.

"Now, sir, what a strange idea!"

"But well carried out, eh? Don't you think so?"

"With the ladies you must have managed well."

"But not with you?"

"You did not act the character of a gipsy with me."

"What character did I act? My own?"

"No; some unaccountable one. In short, I believe you have been trying to draw me out - or in; you have been talking nonsense to make me talk nonsense. It is scarcely fair, sir."

"Do you forgive me, Jane?" ...

I had been on my guard almost from the beginning of the interview. Something of a masquerade I suspected. I knew gipsies [*sic*] and fortune-tellers did not express themselves as this seeming old woman

had expressed herself; besides, I had noted her feigned voice, her anxiety to conceal her features. (Bronte 172-173)

Clearly, this scene is sexual in nature: there are clothes being removed and reference to a "round, supple member" (172). A more traditional reading of this scene would interpret Rochester as purposefully employing this ruse to have sexual relations with Jane, a trick that is fairly common in literature and theatre since *Don Juan*; however, I would like to interpret the scene differently, with all of the novel's gender anxieties and crises being called into question.

Jane notes Rochester's "anxiety to conceal" his features; however, even after the gypsy has revealed herself to be Rochester in disguise, Jane still refers to him with the female pronoun "her." This is significant because so much of the novel is focused upon their power struggle. In this scene, Jane is the dominant partner, not Rochester; she is fulfilling the traditional male role by entering the female's room and instigating intimate relations.

Jane starts the intimacy through her observation of the gypsy. The scene is illuminated by firelight and Jane takes note of the gypsy slowly pulling her "bandage closer about her face" – an action that can be interpreted as coy, nervous, or uncomfortable. Jane's gaze moves to Rochester's hand, which is described as phallic. In their dialogue, Jane does not end up telling Rochester what he wants to hear – that she loves him – instead, she disarms him by asking him questions and by calling him out for playing games. Rochester's response to the situation is to ask for forgiveness.

This scene demonstrates Rochester's masculine identity crisis – he is hiding because of this anxiety. In the Victorian era, friendship between women were encouraged because it “cultivated...feminine virtues of sympathy and altruism” (Marcus 26). Because of the accepted intimacy of female friendships, Rochester's dressing as a gypsy could be interpreted as a way for him to achieve a closeness with Jane. Jane is the one who urges Rochester to remove his cloak and Jane continues to refer to Rochester as “her” and “Mother” as the scene continues. In Jane and Rochester's dialogue, this scene becomes a role play. Rochester assumes the stereotyped role of the coy, nervous, unsure female while Jane is the instigator of this scene.

Role play is a significant part of Jane and Rochester's relationship and it is important to gender studies. Role playing allows the characters to, obviously, assume different roles. Rochester receives a break from constantly acting as a wealthy bachelor. Jane is not limited to her label as “governess”; it allows the characters more fluidity.

### **Castration Theory**

I would like to end my paper with an argument against the popular Freudian castration argument for *Jane Eyre*. While Jane is returning to Thornfield, she learns that the building was burned down and that Rochester was injured. He is left blind and with a crippled hand. A psychoanalytic Freudian argument suggests that Rochester's blindness is symbolic of his castration. Critic Dianne Sadoff's interpretation of this theory is often cited in feminist and Freudian criticism of *Jane Eyre*. She claims that Rochester's “symbolic castration represents the daughter's

surreptitious punishment of the domineering master-father...and gains the daughter a qualified mastery over him" (145). In Sadoff's interpretation of the scene, Jane assumes the role of the daughter, while Rochester is the master-father. Sadoff interprets Jane and Rochester's relationship as fundamentally unbalanced, and asserts that the only way this relationship can be successful is if the daughter wins "a qualified mastery" over the master.

This analysis is limiting. Not only is this read textually problematic – it is noted that Jane and Rochester have a child at the end of the novel – the implication is that there can never be an equal relationship. Sadoff implies that Jane and Rochester's relationship cannot be equal without Rochester being emasculated, or "punished" in some way, hence his blindness. Blindness, however, is not emasculating. Traditionally in literature, blindness is a common sign of wisdom and knowledge and this, ultimately, is what the injury comes to symbolize for Rochester. After his tragedy, Rochester is humbled by his injury. Bertha – and therefore his tie to societal expectations – is gone. Rochester's blindness and injury are what bring Jane back to him. While I would not go so far as to call Rochester "wise," his blindness allows him to move past his performance.

Another way to interpret Rochester's blindness is to view it as a form of justice; the blindness can symbolize Rochester's surrender to Jane. The surrender can be interpreted as equalizing – a way to make up for Rochester's wealth and power over Jane – or it can be another form of role play with Rochester being unable to care for himself and be wholly dependent on Jane for his welfare. Jane makes the conscious choice to return to Thornfield and to assist Rochester. The end of the

novel is surprising as there are no assumptions made in terms of gender: the two are married and have a child, but Jane is not a submissive wife. Again, the two – to some degree – role play.

I argue that Rochester is, to use the gender binary, more feminine by the end of the novel – and this should be interpreted positively as a reformulation of male identity. I do not believe that there is a “winner” at the end of *Jane Eyre*. Neither Jane nor Rochester triumphed over the other nor has any specific gender been crowned victorious, but Bronte has placed them on more equal terms. The ending of *Jane Eyre* is freeing to both genders: Jane is granted the power of choice and Rochester is free from Bertha and from the limits of the created society. Bronte’s ending actually expands the possibilities for what masculinity can look like.

### **Conclusion**

Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is an exercise in gender theory. It has been regarded as feminist for a long time – and a lot of feminist critique exists for *Jane Eyre*; however, I think it is time that Bronte is acknowledged for being more than just a feminist writer. *Jane Eyre* explores the pitfalls of societal expectations and how those created expectations are harmful to both men and women.

Currently, society is undergoing a cultural shift. Individuals do not have to identify as either male or female and self-identification in terms of sexuality is even more expansive. Academic criticism should begin to evolve as well. Rather than the male and female binaries, I argue for a spectrum view of gender. A gender spectrum would allow for more fluidity in our labeling of identity and would lead to richer,

more expansive analyses of characters – you would not have to make them fit an archetype. Again, *Jane Eyre* has been heralded as a feminist novel for decades; I would like to see Bronte's novel progress further to be a standard text for gender studies as a whole. As I have exhibited, Rochester is more complex than he is traditionally portrayed. He is not a hyper-masculine, brooding, mysterious Byronic hero. Instead, he is a gender fluid, anxiety-ridden male character whose power was called into question when Bertha's money had to save his family, whose freedom was taken in an arranged marriage, and who constantly pretends to be a magnanimous and stereotypically masculine figure. Rochester displays his anxieties in his interactions with Jane. He plays with her feelings by pretending court Blanche Ingram. He locks his wife Bertha in the attic and blames her for her mental unbalance. Rochester is not literature's most beloved character; however, he does not have to likeable to be interesting or worthy of study. This paper exhibits a range of reactions and emotions from Rochester. On a gender spectrum, he would be plotted all over, but he would be in good company.

When *Jane Eyre* was first published under the pseudonym Currer Bell in 1847, there was debate over whether or not *Jane Eyre's* author was male or female. In a review for the *Quarterly Review*, Eliza Rigby asserted the author was male because Jane was given an "undisciplined spirit" with little "self-control"; of Jane, Rigby said "[n]o Christian grace is perceptible upon her" (Melani). Charlotte Bronte was aware of gender struggle first-hand. When it became common knowledge that *Jane Eyre* was written by a female, its popularity and number reviews declined dramatically. Probably because of her struggle is the reason *Jane Eyre* succeeds.

I would like to see a more conscious move in academia to the dissolution of gender binaries and a return to classic, canon texts would be an interesting starting ground for gender studies. Contemporary review of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in which Mr. Darcy is given more attention largely inspired this project on *Jane Eyre*. When and if the canon does change and gender studies becomes the academic standard, I would expect Charlotte Bronte's masterpiece novel *Jane Eyre* to have a starring role on the course syllabus.



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