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JANE'S CROWN OF THORNS: FEMINISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN *JANE EYRE*

MARIA LAMONACA

St. John is unmarried: he never will marry now. Himself has hitherto sufficed to the toil; and the toil draws near its close: his glorious sun hastens to its setting. . . . And why weep for this? No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded; his heart will be undaunted; his hope be sure; his faith steadfast. His own words are a pledge of this:—

‘My Master,’ he says, ‘has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly—“Surely I come quickly!” And hourly I more eagerly respond—“Amen: even so come, Lord Jesus!”’

Despite the loftiness of its rhetoric and the heroic light it casts on St. John's endeavors, the closing passage of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is more likely to disappoint or confuse readers than inspire them. Perhaps the most perplexing ending of any Victorian novel, Jane's closing tribute to the rigid, patriarchal, and gloomy St. John presents a particular challenge to readings of the novel as a feminist *bildungsroman*. Classic feminist readings have tended to view St. John as one-dimensional patriarchal villain; accordingly, Jane rejects not only her pious cousin, but also the Christian worldview he represents. Since St. John's religious agenda serves only as a vehicle of masculine self-aggrandizement and domination (Gilbert and Gubar 366), Jane ultimately rejects his “patriarchal religious value-system” for an earthly paradise of marital equality with the reformed and chastened Rochester (Rich 490). To interpret the novel's conclusion as an exorcism of religious thought and belief, however, fails to account for St. John's virtual apotheosis on the final page. Nor do such interpretations acknowledge the earnest (if at times unorthodox) religious commitments of the book and its author. Brontë was, after all, a loyal member of the Church of England who firmly defended *Jane Eyre* against charges of immorality and anti-Christian sentiment: “To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee,” she insisted in a preface to the book's second edition, “is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns” (3).

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Over the past decade, scholars have begun to read and interpret *Jane Eyre* with far greater attentiveness, both to its religious themes, and the theological and doctrinal controversies of Brontë's era. Consequently, some more recent studies suggest that *Jane Eyre*'s Christian commitments are not necessarily incompatible with the book's presumably feminist emphases. Readings by J. Jeffrey Franklin, Janet L. Larson, Marianne Thormählen, Susan VanZanten Gallagher, and Amanda Witt, for example, all highlight the assertion of Jane's religious and spiritual autonomy as a major component of her *bildungsroman*.¹ By discerning for herself what she perceives to be God's will, Jane effectively resists Rochester's and St. John's attempts to possess her spirit as well as her body. Ultimately, Jane marries Rochester because it is her vocation—the divine call that only she herself can hear. Given the religious resonances of Jane's marriage, as Thormählen and Franklin both suggest, the prominence of St. John (less a patriarchal bogeyman than a sincere if over-zealous Christian) at the novel's end “balances the book” (Thormählen 217). “Both have sought and received Divine guidance and been faithful to the claims of their God-created selves,” argues Thormählen (218), while Franklin perceptively suggests that the novel's concluding emphasis on St. John underscores Jane's freely chosen vocation as “a missionary of spiritual love” (482). Gallagher's reading of *Jane Eyre* as a “Christian feminist *bildungsroman*” suggests a similarly balanced and unproblematic ending: “The novel's religious assertion of a woman's right to self-identity and its depiction of marriage as a relationship of equality,” she argues, “anticipate twentieth-century Christian feminism” (68).

So intertwined were discourses of religion and gender in the Victorian period, that a close examination of *Jane Eyre*'s religious themes inevitably furthers our understanding of the novel's gender politics: that is, we see more clearly what is at stake for Jane in her struggle against male control. Yet to read the ending simply as a harmonious “balancing of the book”—with Jane and St. John heeding separate, but equal, divine callings—is to overlook the difficulties Victorian women of faith faced in trying to reconcile their spiritual integrity with cultural norms of domesticity and femininity.² To assert, moreover, that the novel embodies “a Christian feminism that . . . advocates the values of love, sexuality, and a marriage of partnership,” and that “God's providential care encourages Jane's movement towards freedom and equality” (Gallagher 67) risks flattening the rich discourses, beliefs, and practices of nineteenth-century Evangelical Christianity into little more than a strategy for women to achieve earthly fulfillment and political equality.³ Certainly, Jane's insistence upon her spiritual and moral integrity enables a stinging critique of society's expectations for women. Jane's religious convictions are presented as the primary force behind her resistance to conventional female subject-positions, whether as Rochester's mistress or as St. John's spiritual helpmate. Moreover, Jane's insistence on a direct,

unmediated relationship with her Creator uncovers a glaring inconsistency in Evangelical teaching that posed for women of faith a virtual theological impasse: Evangelicals championed the liberty of discernment and conscience for *all* believers, but *also* prized a model of marriage in which wives were spiritually subordinate to their husbands.

Given the religious and cultural context in which it was written, *Jane Eyre* proclaims what could be considered a message of radical spiritual autonomy for women. Yet feminist scholars must exercise caution: twentieth-century understandings of a woman's freedom and empowerment are not easily applied to the self-conceptions of Victorian women of faith. Rather than flatten out the rich ambiguities of the novel's conclusion, my reading merges feminist and Christian perspectives to highlight theological and domestic tensions left unresolved by the final page. Jane's spiritual *bildungsroman* requires that she develop a moral and ethical agency independent of male control. Yet *Jane Eyre*'s conclusion leaves open the possibility that Jane, despite her efforts, has failed to reconcile the conflicting demands of domesticity and faith. And although scholars such as Barry Qualls see within Brontë's fiction a privileging of the here-and-now over the hereafter, this reading suggests that *Jane Eyre*'s heroine is, by the novel's conclusion, precariously straddled between this world and the next.

Jane's resistance to male control, as scholars have noted, is vexed by the fact that both Rochester and St. John cloak their agendas in religious language—that is, both presume that their desire to control Jane is compatible with God's will.⁴ Jane's resistance to this control, however, is not merely a refutation of two men's flawed theological arguments. In resisting Rochester and, especially, the pious clergyman St. John, Jane confronts a cherished Evangelical model of female piety—one based directly on Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*—that often represented women as *incapable* of discerning God's will for themselves.⁵ A survey of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century conduct books and sermons on the topic of marriage reveals two points in common: first, a pressing concern over the growing secularization of marriage; and second, the extent to which the model of Milton's Eve enchanted male clergymen across religious denominations. Repeatedly, conduct books and sermons urged readers to choose marriage partners who were earnest and upstanding Christians. In his popular treatise, *The Golden Wedding Ring* (1813), Anglican preacher John Clowes, in an attempt “to restore marriage to its primitive sanctity, purity, and bliss, by pointing out its connection with religion” (Foreword), describes “pure conjugal love” as “a representative image or picture, of the union of all divine and heavenly principles, from their SUPREME SOURCE to their lowest state of descent and operation” (13). Not surprisingly, Clowes casts husbands in the role of Supreme Being, while wives represent the “lowest state.” “For contemplation he and valour form'd,” declares Clowe of the husband,

quoting Milton's description of Adam; "For softness she, and sweet attractive grace; / He for GOD only, she for God in him" (10).

To justify this marital hierarchy, clergymen invoked essentialist claims. Clowes states that "every sensible and well-disposed woman attaches herself to a man of *understanding*, and that every sensible and well-disposed man attaches himself most to that woman who *most loves his understanding*. Here then is the true ground of the *union of minds* between two persons of different sexes" (9). Because women's salvation relied so heavily on men's "understanding" of religion and God's will, conduct books and sermons urged women to be especially careful in their choice of a spouse. In his often-reprinted sermon, *The Mutual Duties of Husbands and Wives* (1801), Dissenting minister William Jay (who also quotes Milton) allows that "If the demands of a husband oppose the will of GOD, you are pre-engaged by a law of universal operation, and 'ought [sic] to obey GOD rather than man'" (10). Yet Jay never provides any examples or explanations of such "exceptional" cases. He then goes on to say that although man "is often absurd in his designs, capricious in his temper, tyrannical in his claims, and degrading in his authority," women, by consequence of Eve's original sin, "cannot dispense with this subjection [to husbands] without opposing the express will of GOD, and violating the laws of marriage to which you have acceded" (13).⁶

Charlotte Brontë, as the daughter of an Anglican clergyman with pronounced Evangelical views, undoubtedly was familiar with such pamphlets and sermons on marriage. She was also likely to have read Hannah More's fictionalized sermon on marriage, the phenomenally best-selling novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808). As the title suggests, the novel's plot focuses on its hero's travels in search of the ideal Christian mate. Ultimately, Coelebs finds his ideal in Lucilla, a woman whose upbringing has been deliberately patterned on Milton's Eve. Lucilla is virtuous, quiet, and possesses no opinions independent of those she has been taught. She will, the novel assures us, be ideally suited for a Miltonic marriage, in which Coelebs lives "for God alone, and [Lucilla] for God in him." *Jane Eyre* might be considered a rewriting of More's novel. Not only does Brontë's novel focus on the journeying *heroine's* choice of a potential mate, but more importantly, it calls attention to the theological dangers inherent in More's (and Milton's) marital ideal. Brontë explores this threat most forcefully in the novel's insistent concern with idolatry: Jane's idolatry for Rochester, which temporarily "eclipses" God (307), and St. John's arrogant certainty of God's will, suggest a dangerous conflation between male spiritual mediators and the Divine itself. Rather than regard her husband as the mouthpiece of God, the novel suggests, a woman might come to mistake her husband *for* God.⁷

From the first moments of her love for Rochester, Jane is aware of the perils of human idolatry. Jane's passion, as much as Rochester's arguments,

distorts her judgment, so that “while he spoke my very Conscience and Reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with crime in resisting him” (356). Jane is particularly susceptible to Rochester’s seduction because he makes his appeal on religious and moral grounds. Rochester, that is, puts upon Jane’s shoulders the responsibility for his moral rebirth: “Is the wandering and sinful, but now rest-seeking and repentant man,” he queries, “justified in daring the world’s opinion, in order to attach to him for ever, this gentle, gracious, genial stranger; thereby securing his own peace of mind and regeneration of life?” (246). Rochester insistently describes his romantic desire as a product of God’s will when he proposes to Jane in his “Eden-like” orchard [278], contending that “my Maker sanctions what I do” (287).

While Jane recognizes the presumptiveness of Rochester’s position, she nonetheless cannot resist the role Rochester has assigned her. In response to his religious arguments, Jane, in a rare burst of sermonizing, retorts: “Sir . . . a Wanderer’s repose or a Sinner’s reformation should never depend on a fellow-creature. Men and women die; philosophers falter in wisdom, and Christians in goodness: if any one you know has suffered and erred, let him look higher than his equals for strength to amend, and solace to heal.” Jane’s insistence that an individual’s salvation “should never depend on a fellow-creature” is consistent with Evangelicalism’s emphasis on a “religion of the heart”—that is, an intimate, direct, and unmediated relationship between the soul and its Creator. Jane’s statement is set against a masculine religious rhetoric in the novel that, with a few exceptions, gestures towards error, insincerity, or spiritual failure on the part of the speaker. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Jane cannot live up to her spoken convictions.⁸ Shortly afterwards, she reveals the extent of her spiritual dependence upon Rochester, who has become “almost my hope of heaven” (246). More frequently, however, the text emphasizes Rochester’s spiritual dependence upon Jane, who during her stay at Thornfield is the more charismatic figure. Victorian readers, familiar with Christian typology, undoubtedly would have noticed the strong religious resonances of Jane’s account of the first Thornfield fire: “I . . . deluged the bed and its occupant, flew back to my own room, brought my own water-jug, baptized the couch afresh, and by God’s aid, succeeded in extinguishing the flames which were devouring it” (168). While the flames enveloping Rochester prefigure the second, devastating fire at Thornfield, allegorically, the text depicts Jane throwing the waters of baptism—spiritual rebirth—upon Rochester, ostensibly quenching the fires of Hell which threaten to devour him.

While Rochester’s temptation is difficult to resist, Jane nonetheless remains firm in her resolution to leave Thornfield, and expresses little genuine doubt about her decision. Surprisingly, it is St. John Rivers—that ostensibly unattractive, even repulsive character—who poses to Jane the greater temptation, the one she clearly has the more difficulty resisting. The

difficulty of Jane's position at this point of the novel only becomes evident once we accept that Jane truly and sincerely regards her cousin as a saintly, devoted Christian. In light of Evangelical tracts and sermons counseling women to think more of religion than love as a foundation for marriage, St. John would have been viewed in many circles as a most eligible bachelor indeed.⁹ Thus while Jane has no trouble resisting the sophistry of the religious hypocrite Brocklehurst, and can, with difficulty, see through the machinations of the all-too-human Rochester, how can she repudiate a "good man, pure as the deep sunless source," in possession of a "crystal conscience" (458)? Critics have detailed the reasons why St. John repulses Jane, but although he is clearly self-aggrandizing, manipulative, inflexible, and legalistic, these traits are presented to the reader less as inconsistencies or blemishes within his otherwise sterling character, than as the inevitable result of it. In short, St. John buckles under the weight of his own perfection. His countenance—so perfect and regular it suggests the hard lineaments of Greek statuary—accurately reflects a soul made rigid by its own moral strengths. Despite Jane's recognition of St. John's personal shortcomings, she does not let her awareness of "the corrupt man within him" diminish her veneration for the "pure Christian" (457) side of his nature. Jane even suggests that St. John's faults are part and parcel of a truly great and active nature: "[H]e was," she observes, "of the material from which nature hews her heroes—Christian and Pagan—her law-givers, her statesmen, her conquerors: a steadfast bulwark for great interests to rest upon; but, at the fireside, too often a cold cumbrous column, gloomy and out of place" (438).

Considering Jane's "veneration" of St. John, then, his attractiveness to her—and the difficulty with which she turns down his proposal—is more complex than any Freudian inclination for abjection or self-punishment. As Jane considers St. John's offer, Brontë does not ironise her reflection: "[I]s not the occupation he now offers me truly the most glorious man can adopt or God assign?" (450). That Jane believes in St. John's cause is perhaps best demonstrated by her complete willingness to help spread the Gospel in India, despite all its attendant privations, on the condition that she be allowed to remain single. To complicate matters further, Jane must once again deal with a domineering male character who is firmly convinced of God's will for them both. Because God is all-knowing, St. John seems to believe that he himself, as God's servant, is likewise omniscient. "I am the servant of an infallible master," he exults, "I am not going out under human guidance . . . my lawgiver, my captain, is the All-perfect" (447). Just as Rochester perceives in Jane "an instrument" of God, and tries to convince her that to abandon him would be an act of wickedness, St. John warns Jane, "[I]f you reject [my offer], it is not me that you deny, but God" (455).

If St. John can know God's will for himself, can he not also determine God's will for Jane? St. John determines that his marriage to Rosamond

would be a hindrance to his execution of God's divine plan. Although his renunciation of Rosamond Oliver appears at first an unnatural, even cruel, suppression of his feelings—St. John tramples the heads of flowers as he averts his gaze from the lovely maiden—Jane herself soon acknowledges the wisdom of her cousin's decision: "I understood, as by inspiration, the nature of his love for Miss Oliver; I agreed with him that it was but a love of the senses" (438). St. John's assertion that "she is not the partner suited to me . . . and . . . twelve months' rapture would succeed a lifetime of regret" (417) is supported by Jane's own less-than-complimentary observations of the heiress. Although Jane describes Rosamond as "a vision . . . of perfect beauty" (405) she also considers her "not absolutely spoilt . . . vain . . . unthinking . . . not profoundly interesting or thoroughly impressive" (411-12). In short, she concludes, "I liked her *almost* as [much as] I liked my pupil Adele" (412, italics mine). Considering that Adele is a child, a foreigner, and a Catholic, who will require "a sound English education" to mold her character (499), Jane's comparison is hardly flattering. This beautiful but somewhat childish and superficial woman is not presented as a worthy complement to St. John's greatness of character.

All these elements—Jane's veneration of St. John as a stalwart Christian, her support of his missionary cause, and St. John's unwavering certainty of God's will for them both—appear to cloud and obscure her judgment even more than her passionate love for Rochester had. At this crucial juncture of the narrative, Jane—just moments away from being "chained for life to a man who regarded one but as a useful tool" (463)—cannot bring herself to rely solely on St. John's judgment: "I could decide if I were but certain," she tells him, "were I but convinced that it is God's will I should marry you, I could vow to marry you here and now—come afterwards what would!" (466). At this point in the novel the reader arrives at that notorious "thumping piece of Gothic claptrap" (Prescott 90) which depicts Jane, in response to her frantic prayer, suddenly able to hear Rochester's voice summoning her. By the end of the chapter, Jane has successfully broken away from St. John: "It was *my* time to assume ascendancy," she says. "*My* powers were in play, and in force . . . I desired him to leave me: I must, and would be alone. He obeyed at once. Where there is energy to command well enough, obedience never fails" (467).

Despite a long history of criticism which explains Jane's "mysterious summons" in terms of psychological or natural phenomena, this salvific moment in the novel can be convincingly read as a moment of direct supernatural intervention.¹⁰ Like the great Romantic poets, Jane associates Nature with the transcendent. Yet Romantic engagements with nature, as M. H. Abrams has noted, tend toward celebrating the divinity of humanity rather than reaffirming an otherworldly deity—a tradition which Jane does not seem to invoke. Instead, the natural world reinforces for Jane her conviction of a

God far greater than—and hence distinctly separate from—humankind. Out on the heath at night, after her initial flight from Thornfield, Jane’s musings about Nature, which she invests with a feminine persona, at first suggest little more than a vague pantheism: “Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, cling to her with filial fondness. To-night, at least, I would be her guest—as I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price” (363). Yet Jane’s pantheistic musings quickly give way to a more conventional theological creed: “Night was come, and her planets were risen . . . We know that God is everywhere; but certainly we feel His presence most when His works are on the grandest scale spread before us: and it is in the unclouded night-sky, where his worlds wheel their silent course, that we read clearest His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence” (364).

Although Jane, at the time of St. John’s proposal and her subsequent mysterious summons, dismisses the voice as merely “the work of nature,” she undergoes a sudden change of heart once she returns to Rochester at Ferndean. Rochester describes how—after supplicating God for an end to his torment—he cried out to Jane three times in a fit of despair and longing, and heard in response her voice: “Where are you?” This manifest coincidence astonishes Jane beyond all power of speech:

Reader, it was on Monday night—near midnight—that I too had received the mysterious summons: those were the very words by which I replied to it. I listened to Mr. Rochester’s narrative; but made no disclosure in return. The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed. If I told anything, my tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of my hearer; and that mind, yet from its sufferings too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural. *I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart.* (497, italics mine)

At this point, rather than try to reason herself out of “superstition,” Jane simply acknowledges the “awful” and “inexplicable” character of this “supernatural” coincidence. Jane’s unwillingness to speak further (in a book where religious talk is cheap) is typical of her recognition of great theological and religious significance. Indeed, Jane’s final comment to the reader, “I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart” echoes Luke’s description of Mary’s response to the miraculous event of the Incarnation.¹¹

Jane, in the course of her moral reflection, eschews both Rochester’s and St. John’s attempts to dictate God’s will to her. Discerning God’s will through seemingly direct contact with the supernatural, Jane demonstrates that women—true to one facet of Evangelical doctrine—must experience God directly, “through the heart,” despite Evangelical models of femininity and gender which, paradoxically, denied women this very possibility. God’s

voice doesn't simply fall out of the sky into Jane's lap, however; clearly, she has had to *learn* discernment. *Jane Eyre* levels another subtle criticism against male spiritual authority in the fact that Jane seems to learn her "religion of the heart" not from the male clergymen of the novel, but from the *women*. Despite St. John's apparent sincerity and sterling virtue, both he and Brocklehurst preach a religion of the Letter, or Law. Their God is a supernatural magistrate who damns sinners for disobeying the Word. "Do you know where the wicked go after death?" (41), Brocklehurst asks Jane, before giving her a tract on "the awfully sudden death of Martha G-, a naughty child addicted to falsehood and deceit" (44). After hearing St. John preach for the first time, moreover, Jane describes "a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness: stern allusions to Calvinistic doctrines—election, predestination, reprobation . . . each reference to these points sounded like a sentence pronounced for doom" (394).¹²

While Jane has learned to seek God in Nature, as well as in the stillness of her own heart, St. John can look no further than the "letter [that] killeth" (2 Corinthians 3:6). "Nature was not to him," Jane notes, "that treasury of delight it was to his sisters [. . .] never did he seem to roam the moors for the sake of their soothing silence" (393). Unlike the men who attempt to impose their wills upon Jane, women in the novel communicate their theological convictions by example rather than exhortation, thus imposing a feminine silence in contrast to male garrulousness about the Word. Of course, Helen Burns makes some long speeches. Helen's renunciation of earthly happiness represents an aspect of St. John's theology that Jane cannot accept, but Helen, in spite of Adrienne Rich's assertion, cannot fairly be considered a younger and feminine version of St. John Rivers (Rich 487). This is partly because Helen's otherworldly views pose no real threat to Jane, since they are perfectly disinterested. More importantly, although Jane rejects some elements of Helen's spoken doctrine, her example and beliefs serve Jane in good stead later in the novel.¹³ It is Helen who advises Jane to study the New Testament and follow Christ's *example*, in particular his injunction to "Love your enemies"—a counsel that clearly influences the forgiveness Jane grants the dying Mrs. Reed. More importantly, however, Helen also tells Jane not to "think too much of the love of human beings" (81) and instead anticipate God's love in the next world. While Jane, in marrying Rochester, obviously does not follow this advice to the letter, it represents to her the necessity of valuing God's love above all earthly passions, and seems to provide her with a moral framework for later resisting an idolatrous relationship which, in violating "the law given by God," would cut Jane off from her Creator.

Most interestingly, however, Helen models for Jane an independence of thought on matters of theology and doctrine. Unable to reconcile her belief in an all-benevolent God with the concept of eternal damnation, Helen professes a personal belief in universal salvation: "I hold another creed;

which no one ever taught me, and which I seldom mention . . . it extends hope to all: it makes Eternity a rest—a mighty home, not a terror and an abyss. Besides, with this creed, I can clearly distinguish between the criminal and his crime; I can so sincerely forgive the first while I abhor the last” (70). Helen’s willingness to depart in significant ways from hard-line Calvinist doctrine not only distances her further from the rigid St. John, but also seems to prefigure Jane’s own attitudes towards religious people and creeds alike. Just as Helen can keep her awareness of sin from destroying her belief in humanity, Jane can keep her recognition of St. John’s human frailty from diminishing her regard for him as a stalwart and sincere Christian. She can, moreover, accept some elements of Evangelical Christian doctrine while rejecting those that seem to her incompatible with her own religious convictions. Supporting Jane in her refusal to accept St. John as a husband—the most torturous form of self-renunciation she can imagine—is a belief in a more benign and loving Creator, a Creator closer to Helen Burns’s merciful Father than to St. John’s vengeful deity. This notion of a gentle, loving Creator seems much more conducive to a “religion of the heart” than masculine visions of an angry, unapproachable Lawgiver.

After Helen Burns, it is Diana and Mary who serve as models of divinely-inspired womanhood for Jane. Diana and Mary demonstrate no trace of the Calvinist morbidity or grim earnestness that consume their brother. Instead, they demonstrate a power which Jane sorely lacks: that of resisting St. John’s charismatic power. St. John induces Jane to study Hindostanee, in part, because he cannot convince his sisters to do so. His long sermons upon the nature of Jane’s duty, moreover, are set into stark relief by the gentle, loving, and quiet support Diana and Mary provide for their adopted “sister.” Significantly, among all the matters these three women discuss among themselves—foreign languages, literature, drawing—religion and theology are not mentioned. As women who veil their religious convictions in silence, they are a pair after Jane’s own heart. Most importantly, Diana pronounces St. John’s designs upon Jane as “Insupportable—unnatural—out of the question!” (463). Once again, a female character upholds for Jane a sense of Divine will and purpose which is more allied with human nature and human desire.

For all Jane’s notions of a gentle, nurturing Creator, paradoxically, her spiritual progress pushes her toward active postures which are anything but conventionally feminine. Indeed, Jane’s progress suggests a kind of “muscular Christianity” that thrusts her, for much of the narrative, away from conventional women’s roles and domestic spaces. Despite Evangelical visions of the home as a consecrated space, Jane experiences her most direct contact with the supernatural when outdoors—on the open heath after her flight from Thornfield, and at the time of St. John’s proposal, in a mossy glen by a waterfall (446). The discernment of God’s will, moreover, is no passive

exercise; as Jane discovers, it requires a considerable amount of self-reliance and active agency. Contrary to traditional Calvinist notions of Christian grace (which posit the human soul as completely powerless to save itself, relying entirely on divine mercy, forgiveness, and salvation it cannot earn), Jane must actively work to enable her redemption. Aside from active prayer and discernment, Jane must suffer. Jane's suffering is not like Helen Burns's passive endurance of persecution (a mode of suffering typically associated with the feminine), however, but rather an *active* (masculine, heroic) decision to *renounce*, however painful, the thing she most ardently desires—Rochester's love which stands between Jane and her "hope of heaven."¹⁴ After Jane's aborted marriage ceremony, she determines to force herself to adhere to the law and will of God unaided: "[Y]ou shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall, yourself, pluck out your right eye: yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim; and you, the priest, to transfix it" (335). Jane's reliance on herself to cast away the adulterous temptation—along with its imagery of self-mutilation—is entirely in accordance with Christ's command in the New Testament: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee . . . if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee" (Matt. 5:29-30). Although painful, this emotional self-mutilation is infinitely preferable to spiritual ruin: Jane, not Rochester, becomes master of her soul as well as her body. Accordingly, Jane's suffering also manifests itself physically. Upon fleeing Thornfield she conveniently forgets her small store of money and provisions, rendering herself prey to the ravages of rain, cold, hunger, and fatigue.

Although Bertha's death enables Jane to return to Rochester, the couple's happy union seems first to require a mutual spiritual purging. Like Jane, Rochester has been chastised through suffering. Yet while Jane's active suffering (tearing away her own "right eye" and "right hand") frees her from limiting feminine postures, coinciding with her wanderings from hearth and home, Rochester's literal mutilation (interpreted by many critics as a symbolic castration) is forced upon him. Having taken no action in the matter of his own redemption, Rochester's passive suffering—akin to that of Helen Burns—takes on a distinctly feminine quality: "Divine justice pursued its course," he tells Jane, "disasters came thick on me: I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. *His* chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever. You know I was proud of my strength: but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance, as a child does its weakness?" (495).

Jane's empowering suffering leads her to spiritual victory and domestic bliss—a "happy ending" predicated, however, upon the containment of her muscular spirituality. Interpreted one way, the book's conclusion shows Jane victorious over two spiritual pitfalls: the dangers of human idolatry

(suggestive of mere sensual gratification), *and* the lure of excessive self-renunciation. The renunciatory power which renders Rochester's suffering feeble in comparison must ultimately itself be relinquished, lest Jane, like St. John Rivers, become at the fireside "a cold, cumbrous column, gloomy and out of place." Both extremes, self-indulgence and self-restraint, must be purged from the text before Jane and Rochester's domestic paradise can be realized. Just as Bertha, the lascivious madwoman, conveniently falls to her death, St. John, Jane's *other* double, must remove himself to the deadly privations of missionary life in India. Consequently, Jane's marriage is framed as self-gratification (albeit one consistent with "the law given by God; sanctioned by man" [356]) rather than self-renunciation. In response to Rochester's suggestion that Jane's wish to marry him emanates from her "delight in sacrifice," Jane replies, "To be privileged to put my arms round what I value—to press my lips to what I love . . . is that to make a sacrifice? If so, then certainly I delight in sacrifice" (494).

As for a resolution to the problem of human idolatry, the conclusion's implicit association of Jane with the Virgin Mary suggests Jane's acquisition of an autonomous spiritual power. Aside from "keeping and pondering," like Mary, miraculous events in her heart, Jane, when the chastened Rochester first glimpses her, is garbed in a light blue dress, the traditional color of the Virgin. In the very next paragraph, Jane describes Rochester receiving his infant son into his arms. As Rochester holds the infant, and "acknowledged that God had tempered judgment with mercy" (501), the reader is reminded once again of Christ's birth, and of the infant who came to redeem humankind from sin and death. Jane, initially faced with the dilemma of Milton's Eve, has been transformed from a woman relying on her fallen husband as an intermediary between herself and God, to a woman who is figured in Scripture as favored daughter of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christian theologians have traditionally figured Mary as a Second or New Eve, one who would, by bringing Christ into the world, participate in the atonement of Eve's Original Sin. Mary's obedience to God's will ("be it unto me according to thy word" [Luke 1:38]) atones for Eve's original disobedience; Jane, accordingly, through accepting what *she* perceives as Divine Will, has mastered the temptation to be led astray by others. Although faithfully reflecting scriptural precedent in this regard, Jane's retelling of Eve's story is nonetheless a radical departure from Milton's account: Milton (in common, no doubt, with the original writer(s) of Genesis), had not considered that Adam and the Snake might, for Eve, be one and the same.

However, the Marian allusions also raise questions as to what extent Jane has truly liberated her spiritual self from dependency upon fallible human beings and human relationships. Jane's association with Mary may signify

a special, unmediated relationship between herself and the Father; it also suggests, however, that Jane now acts as a Mediatrix for Rochester (or even an idol, considering that Victorian anti-Catholic propaganda depicted Catholics “worshipping” Mary). Keeping in mind the fire-quenching scene earlier in the novel, the reader is left with the impression that Jane has simply reverted to her earlier role as her master’s Savior. While Jane is still pondering St. John’s marriage offer, she tells him, “[B]efore I definitely resolve in quitting England, I will know for certain, whether I cannot be of greater use by remaining in it than by leaving it” (461). Recalling St. John’s dedication to potential Indian converts, Jane invests her relationship to Rochester with redemptive, Evangelical overtones. Although Jane’s marriage, framed as an alternative missionary endeavor, could be perceived as “balancing the book,” ultimately Jane—having taken upon herself the redemption of her husband—rejects Eve in favor of another conventional female role: that of the Victorian Household angel. Rochester, who is unable fully to recognize God’s love and mercy until Jane returns to him, becomes spiritually, as well as physically, dependent upon Jane. Jane, by taking on the role of divine intermediary for Rochester, ironically renounces spiritual autonomy for a reciprocal dependence. Just as St. John cannot follow the will of God and carry out his vocation unless he goes to India, it is only through Rochester, we are led to infer, that Jane can fulfill *her* religious and spiritual destiny.

For all Jane’s heroic struggles, she may not have entirely freed herself from the dangers of human idolatry. While the conclusion’s double portrait of Jane and St. John suggests two individuals who have found and fulfilled their respective callings, perhaps only one has found a sphere truly suited to his ambition and talent. “Well may he eschew the calm of domestic life,” reflects Jane of her cousin at one point, “it is not his element: there his faculties stagnate—they cannot develop or appear to advantage. It is in scenes of strife and danger—where courage is proved, and energy exercised, and fortitude tasked—that he will speak and move, the leader and superior” (438). In the rose-tinted vision of Jane’s long-deferred domestic bliss, however, it is easy to overlook the fact that Jane—in so many ways St. John’s double—has no lack of ambition herself. Early in the narrative, we see young Jane dreaming of travels to faraway lands. She dreams of “the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia . . . Iceland” (14) and upon reading *Gulliver’s Travels*, muses how “I might one day, by taking a long voyage, see with my own eyes the little fields, houses, and trees [of Lilliput]” (29). Later on, Jane rebels against the notion of a conventional domestic life of “making puddings and knitting stockings” (126). Yet this is precisely the sort of life she leads at Ferndean.

Given the possibility that Jane—shut away in moldy Ferndean, constantly ministering to the demands of an invalid—may *not* have found her earthly paradise, the rhetoric of Victorian domesticity allows her no means through which to articulate any disappointment. Like any good household angel, Jane “delights in sacrifice”; any pain or suffering, supposedly transformed into pleasure by womanly love and devotion, is thereby negated. In choosing to marry Rochester, Jane has forfeited her ability to perform heroic, *visible* acts of self-renunciation. Deprived of this avenue of self-assertion and autonomous identity, Jane removes herself from the conclusion of her own autobiography, ceding her place to one presumably worthier than herself: “His [St. John’s] is the exaction of the apostle, who speaks but for Christ, when he says—‘Whosoever will come after Me, *let him deny himself*, and take up his cross and follow Me’” (my italics). Having freed himself from the hearthside, St. John’s suffering, unsoftened by domestic sentiment, feeds his “ambition . . . which aims to fill a place in the *first rank* of those who are redeemed from the earth” (501-02, my italics). Jane’s veneration of St. John’s zeal reflects her own thwarted ambition, and foreshadows the frustration of a housebound St. Teresa in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.¹⁵

If Jane and St. John have each discerned God’s will for themselves, why is St. John “called, and chosen” (502) to his heroic missionary endeavors—certain of a greater glory awaiting him—while Jane, called to “mind [more] earthly things,” is presumably relegated to the second or third ranks of God’s faithful? If Jane’s religion is—as feminist criticism sometimes presumes—merely a strategy for personal empowerment, then clearly this religion has failed her by novel’s end. To Evangelical Victorians, however, “vocation” and “calling” was, if something freely discerned, *not* freely chosen. If Jane’s calling as Rochester’s wife is (as the conclusion works to convince us) compatible with Jane’s own desires, so much the better for Jane. Yet the lingering possibility of Jane’s dissatisfaction underscores a cultural breach between our ideas of happiness and Evangelical Christian notions of a life well lived. In *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-02), William James described modern religious liberalism as “a victory of healthy-mindedness . . . over the morbidness [of] . . . old hell-fire theology” (88) of the previous century. Thus the “healthy-minded” modern reader (whether or not a believer) might find it difficult to comprehend the mindset of those James labeled as “sick-souled”: beliefs which lead individuals to court suffering, accept sacrifice, or make decisions seemingly contrary to personal desire and inclination. Despite Barry Qualls’ assertion, then, that Jane in her marriage to Rochester opts for a “healthy-minded” earthly paradise, “an alliance [of nature and religion] which does not oppose . . . a genuinely human and creative life lived in this world” (46), the possible limitations of Jane’s choice gestures towards a more traditional, “sick-souled” worldview. Jane’s marriage, framed as a vocation in its own right, cannot then be considered a happy

ending, but rather an arduous process, leading—like St. John’s missionary work—to some yet-deferred state of bliss.

Despite Charlotte Brontë’s struggles to reconcile her heroine’s spiritual integrity with female desire and with the rhetoric of nineteenth-century femininity, she cannot, in the end, give equal weight to all claims. Jane imagines a life that will accommodate both her passionate desires and her ambitious nature; her spiritual integrity, however, ultimately demands that she frame both passion and ambition within the constraints of Victorian domesticity. Numerous critics, of course, have expressed uneasiness with the final pages of *Jane Eyre*. There is much evidence to suggest that the redeemed, glorified figure of Jane is overshadowed, whether by a repressive Victorian culture, or—through the book’s closing reference to the Book of Revelation—“a patrilineally mediated structure of authority and voice” (Williams 84). In focusing on the theological and religious significance of the conclusion, however, it is impossible to overlook other, even more ominous hints. While a “sick-souled” notion of stern duty and suffering threatens to darken Jane’s domestic idyll, so might an unexpectedly threatening notion of God the Father. For all Jane’s suggestions of a benign, gentle, and even maternal God—one whose will is not incompatible with human nature and human desire—it is St. John’s coldly just and vengeful deity that looms over the novel’s final scenes. God may have “tempered judgment with mercy” in bringing Jane and Rochester together again, but not until He exacted the full Scriptural penalty—an eye and a hand—upon Rochester for his crime of intended adultery. This God, who *enforces* compliance with his will, resembles less the Mother who pleads with Jane to “flee temptation” than the Father who hurled Eve out of paradise for her disobedience. In this light, even the religious faith that has enabled Jane to maintain a sense of autonomy in the face of all attempts at manipulation, suggests yet another constraint upon her freedom. This note of Calvinist panic—evoking the terrors of Brontë’s early womanhood, and the specter of a God allowing *no* individual choice in the matter of personal salvation—uncomfortably suggests the final, lingering possibility of a patriarchal force that no amount of renunciation can surmount.

Jane’s *bildungsroman*, viewed through the lens of nineteenth-century Evangelical Christian discourse, thus exposes intimate connections between female identity and faith in Victorian England. Victorian women lived in a culture that employed the rhetoric of Christianity to prescribe their role and identity—an identity that many women, paradoxically, perceived as a threat to their moral and spiritual integrity. To obtain power, knowledge, and interpretative authority, as Janet Larson notes, women “had to expose the violence of a dominant ideal and ‘kill,’ maim, or at the very least convert the Victorian Angel in the House” (46). Brontë, along with many of her female contemporaries, similarly drew upon Christian discourse and theology to

challenge existing feminine ideals of Eves and Angels. For these women, however, God was no rhetorical abstraction, but a very real and genuine Other. Throughout the margins of *Jane Eyre*'s final speeches lurks an anxiety that Jane may be confusing her own desires for God's will.¹⁶ And by invoking God's will to support these desires, she may be distorting that Other—a misrepresentation tantamount to idolatry. It should come as no surprise, then, that by novel's end Jane's theology is every bit as conflicted as her new identity as Mrs. Rochester. These ambiguities reflect the tensions real Victorian women of faith experienced in trying to meet multiple, often conflicting demands in their lives. Such challenges were complicated further by the fact that nineteenth-century Evangelical Christianity—attentive to the realities of sin, sorrow, sacrifice, and loss—was no easy creed for women or men. Despite the attractive “healthy-mindedness” of so much of Jane's theology in her narrative, the book's tormented ending reminds readers that Brontë, freethinker as she was, nonetheless subscribed to Christianity that cherished Christ's “Crown of Thorns” as its standard. Given, then, the vexed discourses of gender, domesticity, and faith surrounding *Jane Eyre*'s production, an easy reading of the book's ending is neither possible nor desirable.

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NOTES

¹ In the first, long-overdue, book-length study on religion in the Brontës' fiction, Marianne Thormählen regards Jane's religious convictions as the primary motivation for her actions: “Jane . . . withstand[s] temptation not because [the Brontës' heroines] are ‘good girls’ . . . reluctantly complying with now-outmoded rules for virtuous behavior. They resist because failure to do so would be a betrayal of the Creator who is to them . . . the very fount of love” (59-60). J. Jeffrey Franklin also stresses the centrality of Jane's faith in God in the novel. “[C]ontact with the supernatural,” argues Franklin, “appears to contribute directly to Jane's empowerment, to the finding of her own voice” (471-72). Amanda Witt describes Jane's spiritual maturation as an essential part of her *bildungsroman*, noting that Jane finally acquires “perfect [spiritual] vision” by “looking to God first, rather than to an idolized lover” (33).

² The model Victorian woman was devoted to husband and family—so much so, that some women viewed domestic ideals as a potential threat to their spiritual integrity. “What I complain of the Evangelical party for,” wrote Florence Nightingale, “is the degree to which they have raised the claims upon women of ‘Family’—the idol they have made of it. It is a kind of Fetichism . . . They acknowledge no God, for all they say to the contrary, but this Fetich” (qtd. in Reed 209). Charlotte Yonge, in a letter of 1853, expressed similar concerns about the spiritual pitfall of human idolatry: “I know women have a tendency that way [towards hero-worship], and it frightens me, because the most sensible and strong-minded are liable to be led astray . . . I always remember one of Dr. Pusey's letters that speaks of a desire for guidance, a good thing in itself, turning to be a temptation. I am very much afraid of live Bilds [heroes] . . .” (qtd. in Coleridge 190).

³ Evangelical ideals were at once complicit in and opposed to Victorian constructions of the domestic sphere. On the one hand, Evangelical writers often condemned novels that downplayed concerns about eternal salvation in favor of representing all-too-temporal roman-

tic and domestic bliss. At the same time, Evangelicalism's idyll of the home as a sacred space—a space presided over by perfectly virtuous women—contributed significantly to the formation of the secular cult of the Angel in the House.

⁴ As Carolyn Williams points out, “St. John convincingly claims to be a ‘medium,’ to convey God’s will and God’s voice transparently” (74).

⁵ My use of the term “Evangelical” throughout this essay is informed by Elisabeth Jay’s definition in her book *The Religion of the Heart*. While acknowledging the absence of doctrinal uniformity or theological consistency within Evangelicalism, Jay attempts to outline a “consensus of beliefs held by different individuals” (51) within the Anglican church of the nineteenth century. Chief among these beliefs, according to Jay’s definition, is a personal apprehension of God (51), the conviction of innate human depravity (Original Sin), and the authority of Scripture. Some disputed, “non-essential” doctrines were a belief in eternal punishment for sinners, an expectation of the Second Coming, a belief in the active agency of Providence, and personal assurance of salvation. Although Jay focuses on Evangelicalism within the Anglican church, the Evangelical movement significantly influenced all Protestant denominations in Britain in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁶ Similarly, the Presbyterian minister James Fordyce, in *Sermons to Young Women* (a text that ran through at least fourteen editions between 1765 and 1809) lauds “that obsequious majesty ascribed by [Milton] to innocent Eve” (130). He urges his female readers to “command by obeying, and by yielding to conquer” (131).

⁷ So might men, apparently, be perceived as gods to their children. In another classic Evangelical novel, Mary Martha Sherwood’s *History of the Fairchild Family*, Mr. Fairchild pronounces to his offspring that “I stand in the place of God to you, whilst you are a child” (qtd. in Jay 141).

⁸ Charlotte Brontë, along with many of her contemporaries, “did not look with favor upon the ‘serious conversation’ in which many Evangelicals delighted, preferring to keep their religion a matter for private contemplation” (Jay 255).

⁹ *Considerations on Marriage, Addressed to Christian Professors* (1840) urges women to think of love “as little as possible” (11), and “never to give their hearts to an object, whose heart was not, as far as they could judge, on scriptural grounds, given to God . . . never to arrange, by their own choice an act, to spend a life of unsanctified enjoyment on earth, with one with whom they cannot hope to spend an eternity of hallowed happiness in heaven” (13).

¹⁰ Thormählen, who also considers the summons as a supernatural event, places Brontë’s use of the miraculous within the context of some trends in early nineteenth-century religious thought. Coleridge and Maurice, she notes, regarded the miraculous not as a rupture with Nature, but as an affirmation of its hidden order (70).

¹¹ Following the visit of the shepherds, the Evangelist reports that “Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19).

¹² As both Elisabeth Jay and historian D.W. Bebbington have noted, there was no consensus among Evangelicals on the question of predestination or eternal damnation. Jane, by rejecting St. John’s Calvinism, merely rejects one strand of Evangelical thought for another doctrine—that of Arminianism.

¹³ Helen’s “earnest conversation” also differs from that of Brocklehurst and St. John, because she partakes in it only after Jane invites her to do so. Jane, marveling at Helen’s example of quiet submission to Miss Scatcherd’s torments, asks her to explain her motives. Helen’s response suggests that example must accompany legislation: “Read the New Testament, and *observe* what Christ says, and how he acts—make his word your rule, and his conduct your example” (69, my italics).

¹⁴ In *Dandies and Desert Saints*, James Eli Adams notes that Victorian heroines often assert independent will through “a virtuoso ascetic regimen” (7)—an exhibition typically “stigmatized” and contained within the course of the narrative by the force of gendered norms.

¹⁵ “Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity . . . Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognisable deed” (Eliot xiv).

¹⁶ This ambivalent dimension of *Jane Eyre*'s conclusion seems to echo the spiritual terror expressed by Brontë in a letter of 1837, in which she despairs of ever being able to know or follow God's will: "[I am] smitten at times to the heart with the conviction that ghastly Calvinistic doctrines are true . . . If Christian perfection be necessary to salvation, I shall never be saved; my heart is a very hot-bed for sinful thoughts, and when I decide an action I scarcely remember to look to my Redeemer for direction. . . . I go on constantly seeking my own pleasure, pursuing the gratification of my own desires" (qtd. in Gaskell 152).

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