

**“The eagerness of a listener quickens the tongue of a narrator”:
Storytelling and Autobiography in *Jane Eyre***

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<1> In many ways, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is about who has the power and authority to tell stories. The issue of storytelling is raised immediately in the novel/life narrative for, in the first scene, Jane has been banned from Mrs. Reed’s drawing-room because of something that Bessie, the nurse, says she has done. Jane earns a rebuke from Mrs. Reed and, more importantly, the order to remain silent for asking to hear what Bessie has said about her. Thus, Jane would appear to be doubly excluded: she is permitted to be neither storyteller, by explaining her side of the story, nor listener, by hearing what others have said. Yet, on the following page, Jane shows that she is indeed a storyteller. Looking through the *History of British Birds*, she says, “I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains, but strangely impressive... Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings” (8). The difference, then, between this page and the one previous is that Jane evidently has the imagination to tell stories that, as her words make clear, would impress and interest a listener; however, unlike Bessie, she does not have the authority to do so, the freedom to tell stories and command a listener. Mrs. Reed silences Jane when possible or privileges someone else’s story over hers. Nevertheless, Jane learns from this early episode as storytelling becomes a strategy that she increasingly relies upon.

<2> Several critics (such as Penny Boumelha, Karen Rowe, Jacqueline Simpson, Carolyn Williams, and Nancy Workman) have explored the various literary allusions in *Jane Eyre*, usually arguing that they reveal the psychological aspects of Jane’s development or the limited “plots” available for her life. Brontë herself has sometimes been seen as similarly limited, and, unfortunately, her imaginative storytelling has often been disregarded in such biographical approaches.⁽¹⁾ For example, Philip Rule claims that her use of the gothic within a life narrative was merely a “giving in to the request of publishers who wanted something more poetical and imaginative” (165), an interpretation that ignores the fantasy kingdoms and imaginary adventures that comprise Brontë’s voluminous juvenilia. Consequently, the function of Jane’s, and by extension Brontë’s, unusual technique of blending genres has not been satisfactorily examined. Of primary interest is why Jane would purport to write in the autobiographical form, but then deliberately call attention to the text’s fictional constructs by using non-realist elements. What is to be gained? The mix of the realist mode of autobiography with the supernatural world of folk

and fairy tales may be understood as a response to the constraints imposed on women in the early Victorian period, a kind of feminist “doubleness” that negotiates the space between realism and romance, figuring binaries not as opposed but as coexisting, as Robyn Warhol explains (858). In this article, I will argue that an appreciation of storytelling and its imaginative possibilities is instilled in Jane as a child by the books she reads and by the female characters like Bessie who influence her with their tales. Yet, instead of reinforcing Jane’s disadvantaged position in the social system, the stories teach her to see “power as ability, a resource more available to women” (Newton xv). Thus, as an adult, Jane uses storytelling to implicitly challenge social institutions by gaining the authoritative position of storyteller, a position that gives her significant influence over St. John Rivers, Edward Rochester, and, of course, her reader.

<3> Recent studies of nineteenth-century women writers, domestic ideology, and autobiography show that women’s use of the genre in that period is anything but straightforward. Despite being a very old form, the term “autobiography” was first used in the eighteenth century by English working-class writer Ann Yearsley, and by the time Robert Southey used it in the *Quarterly Review* in 1809 it was widely accepted (Smith and Watson 2). Interestingly, in 1836, Brontë wrote to Southey, then Poet Laureate, enclosing some of her writing for his perusal. Although Southey was kind in his lengthy response, he lectured her that “‘literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life: & it ought not to be’” (qtd. in Miller 8). It would seem that a woman’s life cannot be the business of literature either. As Valerie Sanders explains, Victorians had clear ideas as to who was an appropriate subject for an autobiography or biography, and women, perceived “as being in no sense representative of the age,” fell outside that category:

They took no part in politics or business, they invented nothing, they failed to exhibit anything important at the Royal Academy, they contributed little to public debate. Those who did write justified their entry into a male arena on the grounds that they were passing their experiences on to their children, or teaching the public something useful about childcare and household management. (2)

Written in just such a vein is the first biography of Brontë, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by her friend Elizabeth Gaskell, published in 1857, only two years after Brontë’s death. In her “metabiography” (x), Lucasta Miller observes the care that Gaskell evidently took in selecting the anecdotes and incidents that paint Brontë as a “model of Victorian femininity” (2), thereby developing a fine tension between both the commonality and the exceptionality of Brontë’s life and justifying the female subject of the biography itself.

<4> However, despite what was said publicly about autobiography and biography being inappropriate for women, women themselves were busy writing in these forms, as demonstrated by both Gaskell’s work and Sanders’ book-length collection of nineteenth-century women’s autobiographical fragments, called *Records of Girlhood*. Women’s lives were detailed in letters such as those of Elizabeth Carter, in diaries such as those of Fanny Burney, and in journals such as those of Dorothy Wordsworth. These works are often embraced by postmodern critics under the heading of “life narrative,” a democratic term that acknowledges a wider range of autobiographical practices and writers than the previously privileged *res gestae* “autobiography,” a term which implies a “definitive achievement” or “universalizing life story” (Smith and Watson

3-4). A Victorian woman might paradoxically find freedom from her domestic and social environments in autobiographical writing, suggests Simon Marsden, who uses Emily Brontë's diary papers as an example, in a life-writing issue of the journal *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* (35). Estella Jelinek examines this subject in more detail in *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography* and offers an explanation for the differences between men's and women's approaches to autobiography. She claims that "[e]ven before Victorianism took hold, the impulse to intimate revelation was silent. Women continued to treat personal matters, but at a distance. To protect their vulnerable private lives, they wrote objectively about themselves and others" (41). This certainly seems to accord with Brontë's own writing practice. Like her siblings, Brontë wrote in a miniscule script that was illegible to her father and aunt, and so "the children enjoyed the delicious thrill of knowing that the contents of the little books were a secret shared only among themselves" (Barker 153). Even as an adult, Brontë kept a tenacious grip on her privacy. Gaskell notes that, valuing privacy themselves, the Brontë family "were perhaps over-delicate in not intruding upon the privacy of others" (40). Moreover, Brontë held onto her pseudonym, Currer Bell, for as long as possible to escape the public's prying into her domestic life. Gaskell reports that when the public finally identified the author, Brontë "compared herself to the ostrich hiding its head in the sand," and said that she "burie[d] hers in the heath of Haworth moors; but 'the concealment [was] but self-delusion'" (314).

<5> Yet, as Lyndall Gordon's biography shows, Brontë was a mysterious mix of contradictions, and a desire for privacy does not fully account for her choice to write a fictional life narrative. Brontë was an avid correspondent; she wrote informal book reviews and commented on the literary world in letters to her friends, her publishers, and a large number of acquaintances. Thus, at times, she clearly valued subjective literary expression. She also had ample practice writing in multiple voices and forms; her juvenilia is an eclectic mix of poetry, journalistic prose, domestic romance, adventure and historical narrative, and mock-political treatises and legal documents, much of it written in male voices, and all of which "interrogate the unified self" and "testify to powerlessness," according to Christine Alexander in *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf* (154). Moreover, Miller's *The Brontë Myth* rejects the long-standing perception of Brontë as dutifully self-effacing and reveals her frank ambition from an early age to be publicly acknowledged for her writing. Brontë undoubtedly learned much about narrative voice from the different forms of life-writing that she received from her publishers and the circulating library at Keighley. Biographies were, in fact, an ongoing interest of hers. In a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey in 1834, Brontë advises, "[f]or biography, read Johnson's lives of the Poets, Boswell's life of Johnson, Southey's life of Nelson, Lockhart's life of Burns, Moore's life of Sheridan, Moore's life of Byron, [and] Wolfe's remains" (*The Letters* 130). At another point, she enthusiastically tells her friend to "beg, borrow, or steal" without delay one of the religious biographies she had just read (*The Letters* 171). Brontë's evident appreciation for and cleverness in literary genre suggests that her application of non-realist elements like imaginative storytelling within the realist mode of autobiography should be seen as a narrative strategy inherent to *Jane Eyre* in particular. Indeed, Smith and Watson point out that autobiographical writing is best understood as "a *historically situated* practice of self-representation," in which narrators "selectively engage their lived experience through *personal storytelling*" (my italics, 14), and Susan Sniader Lanser reminds us that the act of writing and publishing "is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence" (7). In this way, then, Brontë's use of a pseudonym to distance herself from the book and use of fiction

to cloak its autobiographical scenes may be defensive strategies, similar to those outlined by Judith Lowder Newton in *Women, Power, and Subversion*; however, they may also be considered offensive strategies or ways for her to subtly circumvent the restrictions of Victorian society.

<6> Jelinek's definition of autobiography as "an amalgam of one's self, one's process of thinking and feeling, and one's talent as a formal writer" (xii), suggests how storytelling might function as part of this process for the narrator and the author of *Jane Eyre*. In fact, a lack of imagination was precisely the fault that Brontë found with Jane Austen's novels. "Can there be a great artist without poetry?" she asks in a letter to G. H. Lewes; "What I call – what I will bend to, as a great artist then – cannot be destitute of the divine gift... Miss Austen being, as you say, without 'sentiment,' without *poetry*, maybe *is* sensible, real (more *real* than *true*), but she cannot be great" (qtd. in Gaskell 262). Thus, storytelling, a metafictional layering or literariness, may testify to a writer's talent, validate a woman's use of an autobiographical form, and contribute to the mid-nineteenth-century discussion of the status of women, domestic ideology, and even literary aesthetics. For even though most Victorian women's autobiographical writing was about the domestic sphere, including subjects such as spiritual crises, intellectual development, domestic arrangements, and family relationships, some of their accounts also entered public debates, as Linda Peterson indicates in *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography* (x).

Accordingly, modern critics have contested Virginia Woolf's two famous and slightly contradictory critiques of *Jane Eyre* and its author: the first counts Brontë among the "self-centred and self-limited writers" who do not "attempt to solve the problems of human life" ("Jane Eyre" 129), and the second regrets that there is a "woman's presence" behind the character in the novel that "resent[s] the treatment of her sex and plead[s] for its rights" ("Women and Fiction" 47). Sally Shuttleworth is one of the revisionary critics who counters Woolf's claims; in the introduction to the Oxford edition of *Jane Eyre*, she argues that the book highlights some of the most pressing social concerns of the period. "At its centre," she notes, "is a restless, questioning intelligence which moves quickly outwards from childhood anger to colonial uprisings, or from the narrowness of the female lot to working-class discontent" (Shuttleworth viii).

<7> Books are as important to *Jane Eyre* as they were to Brontë herself. Rule has counted thirty-seven allusions to the Bible in *Jane Eyre*, eleven to Shakespeare, and a plethora of references to more than twenty other writers ranging from Virgil to Sir Walter Scott (165). In a more recent article, Cheryl Wilson examines the actual reading that occurs within the span of the novel and persuasively argues that Brontë shows communities of female readers that "challenge the patriarchal forces that policed the pleasure, creativity, and intellect of Victorian women" (131). She sees Jane's solitary reading as a child, her bonding with Helen Burns and Miss Temple over books at Lowood, and her reading circle with Diana and Mary Rivers as promoting the "constructive and nurturing power of female reading communities" (36). A similar bonding over stories occurs in Brontë's real life, not only with her sisters and brother at home, but also when she is a student at the Roe Head School. Despite Brontë's preference for solitude, Gaskell tells how she was an invaluable storyteller at night, "frightening them [the other students] almost out of their wits as they lay in bed. On one occasion the effect was such that she was led to scream out loud, and Miss Wooler, coming up-stairs, found that one of the listeners had been seized with violent palpitations, in consequence of the excitement produced by Charlotte's story" (82).

<8> In *Jane Eyre*, the institutional principles of Lowood and the characters of John Reed, Rochester, and St. John Rivers, with differing degrees of malice, represent the intrusion of the patriarchal world that attempts to control women's reading and prevent the challenge to social institutions that women's reading implies. Interestingly, Wilson points out that "while at Thornfield, Jane has the least meaningful experiences with books. Books line the walls of the schoolroom and provide convenient screens for Jane to hide behind, but she does not have a community to share her reading" (137), partly because the values of the Thornfield community are different. Indeed, soon after Jane arrives at the house, she notices that most of the books in the library, which Rochester has directed to be used as the schoolroom, are locked behind glass doors; she says,

there was one bookcase left open, containing everything that could be needed in the way of elementary works, and several volumes of light literature, poetry, biography, travels, a few romances, &c. I suppose he [Rochester] had considered that these were all the governess would require for her private perusal; and, indeed, they contented me amply for the present. (103)

Jane responds in an indifferent manner because such restriction of reading was not uncommon. On the contrary, Beth Newman highlights just how unusual it was for Patrick Brontë to allow his children to have the run of his library and the local lending library, to let them avidly read whatever appealed to them, "blissfully unaware that they were being granted a freedom rarely bestowed upon children, especially girls" (4).

<9> However, *Jane Eyre* reveals that books are used for more than just individual pleasure; they also have a monetary significance. Juliet Barker, in her monumental biography *The Brontës*, observes that many of the Brontës' books were second-hand because they were expensive at the time and the family lacked the funds to spend on such extravagances (146). In *Jane Eyre*, John Reed makes the economic import of books clear when he warns Jane, "'You have no business to take our books: you are a dependent... Now, I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves'" (10), before he hurls a book at her like a weapon. Notably, John, the educated "gentleman," thinks of books primarily as signifiers of status and as weapons, as opposed to Jane who values them for their content. Most importantly perhaps, the books have a social significance for "[i]f Jane Eyre, an individual of reduced circumstances, is permitted access to the trappings of the upper middle-class, the social hierarchy will be destabilized and the position of individuals such as John Reed endangered" (Wilson 134). Kate Flint, in her influential work *The Woman Reader*, concurs; she muses on the image of a Victorian woman reading and asks "what moral, sexual, religious, ideological dangers may lie in a woman's being absorbed by so preoccupying a pursuit?" (4). However, this line of inquiry may be taken a step further for Jane's challenge to social institutions is not fully understood unless her storytelling, essentially how she applies what she learns from books and tales, is explored.

<10> Jane's interest in storytelling develops not only from the books she reads, but also from the characters who influence her with their tales, thus combining a love of fiction with a lesson in power. At Gateshead, Bessie would narrate tales, "when she chanced to be in good humour," and Jane recalls that these tales "fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken

from old fairy tales and older ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of ‘Pamela,’ and ‘Henry, Earl of Moreland’” (9). Here, Jane departs from the chronological structure of her life narrative to intimate that she continues as a reader into adulthood, eventually recognizing some of the tales that she had attributed to Bessie. Thus, she alludes to the profound effect that the books and the tales have on her throughout her life. She points out that she even draws parallels between the narratives and her own world, parallels that she occasionally declares aloud, such as when she tells John Reed, “‘You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!’” (11), because she has read Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*. And, when she returns to Gateshead as an adult, she notices the bookcases holding the *History of British Birds*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and the *Arabian Nights* before she sees the people in the room (228).

<11> Bessie is not the only character to influence Jane’s storytelling for Jane receives a crucial lesson in narrative restraint at the Lowood Institution. Mr. Brocklehurst publicly humiliates Jane by calling her a liar, and she is given an opportunity to explain herself and her family circumstances before Miss Temple and Helen Burns. Before Jane begins, Miss Temple advises her, “‘defend yourself to me as well as you can. Say whatever your memory suggests as true; but add nothing and exaggerate nothing’” (71). To an imagination as vivid as Jane’s, separating truth from fiction might not be as easy as it sounds. However, she seems to follow Miss Temple’s advice; she says,

I resolved in the depth of my heart that I would be most moderate: most correct; and, having reflected a few minutes in order to arrange coherently what I had to say, I told her all the story of my sad childhood. Exhausted by emotion, my language was more subdued than it generally was when it developed that sad theme; and mindful of Helen’s warnings against the indulgence of resentment, I infused into the narrative far less of gall and wormwood than ordinary. Thus restrained and simplified, it sounded more credible: I felt as I went on that Miss Temple fully believed me. (71)

Thus, Jane refines the rhetorical acts of “assertion, justification, judgment, [and] conviction” that intersect with the imaginative act of remembering (Smith and Watson 6). The tailoring of the tale to suit the needs of her audience is rewarded immediately by Miss Temple’s belief, and it is a useful strategy that Jane continues to practice with others throughout her life narrative. It is, in addition, a tactic that Brontë herself employed. In her justification of the somewhat shocking content of her sisters’ novels, Brontë appealed to the moral quality of truth, insisting that they were “writing in all innocence about the barbarous society in which they lived” and providing “‘simply an accurate representation of provincial life’” (Barker xviii-xix). Barker notes that Brontë resorted to this technique for her own writing, too. Brontë admitted to Gaskell that her account of Lowood School and the characters therein were drawn from her own experiences at the Clergy Daughters’ School, but she recognized that while the account was “‘true at the time when she knew it,’” it was not impartial (qtd. in Barker 120).

<12> Jane’s life narrative is a frame that encloses not only the story of her provincial life, but also several fantastic stories which she remembers from her youth and retells. As Jane explains, “‘this is not to be a regular autobiography: I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her

responses will possess some degree of interest” (83). Ostensibly, then, Jane deviates from the strictures of memory, as does Lucy Snowe in Brontë’s *Villette*, by jumping over certain periods of her life and including stories in order to interest or entertain her reader, whom she refers to as a “romantic reader” (110). Some of the stories seem to complement Jane’s own life, showing the parallels that Jane herself acknowledges: Bessie’s doleful ballad of the “poor orphan child” (22) is similar to Jane’s own situation; fairy tales are narratives of social and moral development, and the tale of Bluebeard’s castle, in particular, is similar to Jane’s own situation at Thornfield; and, as Nancy Workman suggests, Rochester is, in some ways, similar to the *Arabian Nights* ruler, Sultan Shabriyar, while Jane as storyteller is a kind of Scheherazade. Alexander, in *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, examines how such works, especially the *Arabian Nights*, influenced Brontë’s own storytelling as a young girl (18). However, some critics have taken the similarities between the literary allusions and Jane’s life even further. Karen Rowe, in an influential article on this subject, points out that the plot of *Jane Eyre* more closely resembles the romantic fairy tale than the traditional *bildungsroman*. But in her fervour to thoroughly link *Jane Eyre* with classic fairy tales, Rowe makes some statements that almost misrepresent Jane’s situation. For example, she claims that Bessie radiates the “maternal warmth” of the fairy godmother and, ignoring Jane’s reiterated unattractiveness, claims that she “outwardly resembles classic fairy-tale heroines” (72) and is transformed by Miss Temple into “a respectable governess, if not a great beauty” (75). More troubling perhaps is Rowe’s assertion that Jane renounces the “realm of adolescent dreams and fantasies” (71) late in the novel “because it subverts the heroine’s independence and human equality” (70). Certainly Jane’s storytelling is more apparent during her formative years, but its relevance to her adulthood and to the act of writing the life narrative itself – composed retrospectively when Jane has, according to Rowe, supposedly outgrown her penchant for stories – should not be overlooked or underestimated. This is demonstrated in the red room scene near the beginning of the novel, when Jane’s retrospective narration describes her young self’s apprehension that she may encounter a ghost and the subsequent apparition of a beam of light across the room. Warhol observes that,

[t]hroughout the passage the narration is focalized through a perspective that is “fearful,” “wracked with violent grief,” “endeavoring to be firm,” “trying to look boldly,” “prepared for horror,” “shaken by agitation”; with “heart beating thick,” “head growing hot,” “ears filled with the sound of rushing” – the perspective of a Gothic heroine, although the tale is told by... the voice of Jane’s older self. (861)

While Jane the narrator’s imaginative storytelling in her life narrative should not be confused with Jane the character’s preference for stories as a child, both indicate an appreciation for the art that she maintains and develops as she grows.

<13> Other critics have argued in a fashion similar to Rowe’s. For instance, Boumelha finds that the gothic romance “brings with it closure and restraint” (25), and Peterson claims that “the invasion of the gothic signals male interpretative power and loss of female freedom. It supports Rochester’s view of events rather than Jane’s control of her life and life story; it threatens the autobiographical independence that Jane seemed to have achieved” (89). These analyses ignore that Jane’s gothic-inspired reading of the events at Thornfield is, in fact, validated, while Rochester’s “commonsensical explanation” (Peterson 89) of Grace Poole is exposed as a façade

and is thereby discounted, bestowing more, not less, interpretative authority on Jane. This suggests as well that imaginative constructs, such as the fairy tale or gothic modes, are employed not merely as escapism or literary decoration in *Jane Eyre*, for they significantly function as an aid to Jane's self-analysis and narrative. Thus, Jane's appreciation for stories cannot be easily dismissed or relegated to a phase of her romantic youth.

<14> Perhaps the primary mistake that Rowe's and Peterson's studies commit is that they do not look at Jane's active agency in her employment of fairy tale and gothic elements. For instance, Rowe insists that if Jane's love of storytelling endures, she has only two options:

Acquiescent in her servitudes, she can nurture feminine domestic skills and virtues, while dreamily awaiting the romantic prince and marriage as her promised reward; or, according to masculine archetypes, she can defy larger-than-life authorities and journey into foreign environments, seeking a rugged independence, but sacrificing hearth and family comforts.
(75)

This interpretation does not consider how Jane may be capitalizing on these elements, using them to open new avenues of social power. Patrocinio Schweickart explains, "[a] feminist cannot simply refuse to read patriarchal texts, for they are everywhere, and they condition her participation in the literary and critical enterprise" (624). Indeed, instead of fitting her life to a genre, perhaps Jane alters a genre (or several) to fit her life. As Warhol points out, "Victorian women novelists like the Brontës are not so much unconsciously 'written by' gender codes as they are actively engaged in rewriting them" (858). In other words, patriarchal stories or formulas – including the style and form of autobiography – might undergo significant changes when retold from a woman's perspective or reappropriated for a woman's life experience. Jane's rehandling of these stories, then, is an interesting twist on men's manipulations of women's writings, as in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Such changes are implied in Jane's repeated assertions that she was not born for a fairy-tale existence and that she dislikes traditional plot lines. When Rochester masquerades as a gipsy to question Jane about her feelings, she tells him that she has not much choice of plot for "[t]hey generally run on the same theme – courtship; and promise to end in the same catastrophe – marriage," and, when Rochester asks her how she likes that "monotonous theme," she exclaims, "[p]ositively, I don't care about it: it is nothing to me" (198). Georgiana Reed, however, approves of this theme, and Jane wryly observes that she describes her life very much like "a volume of a novel of fashionable life" (234).

<15> Despite Jane's own marriage at the end of the novel, her allusions to multiple stories and literary forms demonstrate an attempt to differentiate herself from conventional Victorian women, like Georgiana, who are pinned to only one plot. Jane, and by extension Brontë, value elements of magical fairy tales and gothic romances because of the multiple possibilities that they represent, possibilities that Jane initially thinks are outside of the sterility of her everyday life. She admits that the "tale that was never ended," the tale her imagination tells her "inward ear," is "quicken[ed] with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, *that I desired and had not* in my actual existence" (my emphasis, 109). Helene Moglen confirms that both Jane and "Brontë did not write of what was, but of what could be" (484), and Barker agrees, observing that "[t]he joy of

the imaginary kingdoms [in Brontë's writing] was that different elements, no matter how incompatible or incongruous in real life, could be brought together to form the backdrop for the stories" (161). Thus, although Jane calls her reader the romantic one, it is she herself who desires to live in an alternate world, one of her own construction. This is suggested in Jane's judgment of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, which Helen is reading when they meet each other at Lowood. At first, Jane is interested in the book because the name strikes her "as strange, and consequently attractive," but a brief examination convinces her otherwise: "'Rasselas' looked dull to my trifling taste; I saw nothing about fairies, nothing about genii, no bright variety seemed spread over the closely printed pages" (49-50). Jane retrospectively attributes her opinion to the fact that she was young and "could not digest or comprehend the serious or substantial" (49), but her preference for "the full *romance of reading* itself," as Garrett Stewart puts it (248), does not alter over the years and neither does Brontë's. As a child, Brontë read romantic tales in her family's magazines, and, in a letter to Hartley Coleridge, she explains that she still thinks such tales are "infinitely superior to any trash of Modern Literature" primarily because she read them in childhood "and childhood has a very strong faculty of admiration but a very weak one of Criticism" (qtd. in Barker 146). The Brontë children's own playful, often collaborative, writing is a mix both of fact and fiction, realism and romance, and the siblings' absorption in these worlds endured into adulthood. Alexander establishes that Brontë continued to write about her imaginary kingdom of Angria well into her twenties when she took her first post as a governess (1).

<16> Romance seems to be a "relief" for Jane's restless nature, too. At Thornfield, just before her oft-quoted rant on the lack of opportunities for women, which is itself a borrowing from "the contemporary political rhetoric of the 'masses'" (Shuttleworth xiv), Jane says,

[I] walk along the corridor of the third story, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot and allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it – and, certainly, they were many and glowing; to let my heart be heaved by the exultant movement, which, while it swelled it in trouble, expanded it with life; and, best of all, to open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended – a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously. (109)

Jane's preference for romance is indicated again when she considers the probability of a union between Rochester and Blanche Ingram and rebukes herself for indulging in fantasy: "Reason having come forward and told, in her own quiet way, a plain, unvarnished tale, showing how I had rejected the real, and rabidly devoured the ideal... That a greater fool than Jane Eyre had never breathed the breath of life: that a more fantastic idiot had never surfeited herself on sweet lies, and swallowed poison as if it were nectar" (160). Significantly, reason turns out to be on the wrong tack though. The "real" that Jane perceives at this point is a kind of play, just like the charade within it, or indeed a parody of the fashionable novel; Rochester arranges the house party, or so he later says, merely to make Jane jealous and wildly in love with him, and he never has any intention of marrying Blanche.

<17> By infusing these fairy tale and gothic elements into her life narrative, Jane is able to create an amalgamated world, both real and unreal. Sanders notes that many women writers in the

nineteenth century felt as if they were living double existences, describing themselves as “dreamers, fantasists, storytellers, creating a secret inward world which alternately delights and tortures them, as it became more real than the real world” (11). In an untitled manuscript that begins “Well, here I am at Roe Head,” Brontë relates this kind of doubled perception of herself; when she has the freedom to pursue her own thoughts, the “here” fades away. She says, “[m]y mind relaxes from the stretch on which it has been for the last twelve hours and falls back onto the rest which nobody in this house knows of but myself. I now, after a day of weary wandering, return to the ark which for me floats alone on the face of this world’s desolate and boundless deluge” (410). In *Jane Eyre* as well, Rochester repeatedly proclaims that Jane “comes from the other world,” that he is not sure if she is “substance or shadow,” an elf, a changeling, or a fairy (245). He wonders after their first meeting if she might have bewitched his horse or been waiting “[f]or the men in green” (122). Workman astutely points out that Jane answers him seriously, telling him that these men fled England a century before, “but she never contradicts the implication that she herself possesses some sort of magical ability” (188).

<18> Indeed, Jane does have profound psychic experiences, such as the episode in the red room at Gateshead which leads her to lose consciousness, the hypnotic candle scene with St. John Rivers at Moor House, and her unusually vivid dreams and presentiments. One of these presentiments, in particular, has as its foundation an old tale of Bessie’s that suggested “that to dream of children was a sure sign of trouble, either to one’s self or one’s kin” (220). Jane recalls this saying from her childhood and the accompanying incident that verified it, and then reveals that she had recurring dreams of an infant just before she was informed of John Reed’s death and summoned to Mrs. Reed’s bedside. But, at other times, Jane’s vivid dreams seem to simply relieve her from her loneliness or restlessness. She explains, “I used to rush into strange dreams at night: dreams many-coloured, agitated, full of the ideal, the stirring, the stormy” (366). Particularly interesting is how Jane describes the uncanny telepathy-like exchange she shares with Rochester that prompts their reconciliation at the end of the book as “not unlike an electric shock... it was as sharp, as strange, as startling,” but she claims it was not superstition, deception, or witchcraft, but rather “the work of nature” (420). Thus, Jane continually shows that, even as an adult, she can “find the supernatural in the natural” (Shuttleworth xi), and, more importantly, that the division between the two modes is itself a construct. With this, Brontë offers a metafictional comment on how literature, or the “unreal,” does not exist in isolation; rather, it is created in and inscribed with a social and political context, and, therefore, is “an important arena of political struggle,” that has the ability “to *change the world*” (Schweickart 615-16).

<19> Recognizing Jane’s active agency as narrator is a valuable step past previous criticism that privileged her unconscious motivation and participation in a patriarchal system. Lisa Sternlieb, in *The Female Narrator in the British Novel*, asks herself, “Am I granting these fictional narrators too much agency, too much conscious motivation? I believe that I am countering an enormous body of criticism that chooses instead to read them as victims or incompetents. How can we hear Jane... as silenced by men when we are reading [her] words?” (7). Sternlieb’s study celebrates “the capacity of a woman narrator to design, construct, and baffle while appearing to ingratiate with artless candor” (1). “Artless candor” is exactly what Miss Temple advises Jane to use, but Jane sees it as yet another narrative strategy with which to manipulate an audience. In this way, Jane frequently invokes the truth, but complicates the very notion of truth by repeatedly

emphasising that there is always more than one story. For example, in her early confrontation with Mrs. Reed following Mr. Brocklehurst's visit to Gateshead, she asserts that she will tell her perception of Mrs. Reed's character "[b]ecause it is the *truth*" (31). She is, at the same time, aware that her narrative authority rests on more than simply truth, otherwise presumably people would have listened to her complaints long ago. She is attentive to the fact that the truth is essentially a story, a story that may reflect what really happened and what was really felt, but, because of Jane's lack of privilege by gender, class, and birth, her story can only claim authority if it is well-constructed and convincing. Thus, when Jane has something particularly contentious to express, such as when she confesses seeing the servant Grace Poole "bearing a pot of porter" to her room (110) or when she describes a governess's cool attachment rather than "idolatrous devotion" to her charge, she sardonically remarks that she is "merely telling the truth" (108).

<20> Jane is also perceived as truthful and unthreatening because she invites others to think she lacks agency and is only an artless scribbler. Jelinek points out that nineteenth-century autobiographies often show women as either apologetic and self-deprecating about their lives and accomplishments or focused on famous male writers and husbands; she suggests this "indicates the low esteem in which these women – and society – held their own literary efforts" (45). But there is an alternative interpretation that Jelinek does not consider. This practice takes men as the subjects to be moulded by the power of a woman's imagination and to be placed within the confines of her writing. Jane does something quite similar, then, not only by taking Rochester as a main subject of her work, but also by taking male-authored fairy tales and stories and rewriting them within her own text. The reader's interpretation of Rochester and these tales depends entirely upon Jane's presentation of them.

<21> This positive interpretation may seem problematic when the text is a life narrative because, if it is the story of a woman's life, it suggests that her self is largely determined by her relationships to men, but it is almost impossible to be otherwise in a patriarchal society. Newton reminds us that "to see women we must see men... that to examine the force of ideologies we must examine the social relations which they insure" (xx), and Ann Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy Schrom Dye insist that "it is precisely the *interactions* between women's sphere(s) and the 'rest' of history that enable us to discover women's contributions to world history and the meaning of their subjection" (85). Indeed, Workman states that "[n]ot only is [Jane] the narrator and central character in the book, she also controls the events in her life by her narrative skill – she alters events and others' perceptions of her by the careful way in which she provides them with information or withholds it from them" (184). However, Sternlieb puzzlingly suggests that "[i]t is for the very reason that their lives are so restricted, so comparatively dull that women make fascinating narrators. For their experience of telling must necessarily be made more interesting than their experience of living" (4). If the basic events of Jane's narrative can be trusted, her life is anything but dull; Boumelha neatly keeps score:

In the course of the novel Jane has three jobs, five homes, three families of a sort, two proposals of marriage. If her travel is restricted, at least she nearly goes to the South of France, nearly goes to Madeira, nearly goes to India. She learns French, German and Hindustani. She lives alone, receives male visitors in her bedroom in the middle of the night

and hears confidences of financial treachery and sexual profligacy. She saves a life, proposes marriage and gives away thousands of pounds. (75)

Even if Jane's perception of these events is called into question, her imaginative life is so rich and so inseparable from the rest of her world that it is still a stretch to label her life as dull. Yet the suggestion that Jane's life consists of at least two narratives, an autobiographical thread and a fictional thread, is fitting. It is also applicable to Brontë's own life, as Brontë and her sisters can be said to have "used counter-narratives in much the same way that they did pseudonyms, to live in two worlds simultaneously... to live virtuously while telling subversively" (Sternlieb 5).

<22> Jane's authority derives from her language ability and her storytelling, as she reveals early in the book when she says, "*Speak* I must: I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn: but how? What strength had I to dart retaliation at my antagonist? I gathered my energies and launched them in [a] blunt sentence" (36). Yet blunt sentences, as Jane comes to find out, are not always the best option. Newton points out that, for nineteenth-century women,

[h]aving influence, in fact, having the ability to persuade others to do or to be something that was in *their* [women's] own interest, was made contingent upon the renunciation of such self-advancing forms of power as control or self-definition. To have influence, for example, the middle-class woman was urged to relinquish self-definition. (4)

This would suggest that in order for Jane to exert influence over others, she would paradoxically need to appear to relinquish that power, which she accomplishes by appearing to be deferential and by using narrative strategies like storytelling that conceal her process of self-definition.

<23> Indeed, in *Room for Maneuver*, Ross Chambers proposes that to tell a story is to exercise power. He argues that storytelling is often used as an "oppositional" practice, a behaviour of resistance used by the weak against the strong. Its purpose is not necessarily to cause change in the power structure, but rather to allow for survival. "Oppositional narrative," he claims, "in exploiting the narrative situation, discovers a power, not to change the essential structure of narrative situations, but to *change its other* (the 'narratee' if one will), through the achievement and maintenance of authority, in ways that are potentially radical" (11). In this way, Jane uses storytelling as an oppositional response to her oppressed and alienated state as a young, dependent woman in the socially ambiguous position of governess, a plight that Mary Poovey has examined in her work. "A private governess has no existence," Brontë once complained (qtd. in Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë* 1), but storytelling is a way to reclaim one's existence. This storytelling is, as Chambers suggests, an "'art'" that can "turn the power of the narratee in the interests of the narrator," if the story is interesting or "seductive" enough to the narratee (10). Furthermore, Chambers' view that oppositional discourse is something that works in "disguise," or with a degree of duplicity, helps explain the need for storytelling as a deceptive front in a woman's life narrative as well as Brontë's method of writing behind a male "mask," both of which effectively disguise whose life narrative it actually is – the author's or a character's.

<24> Jane's successful storytelling wins her physical release from the Reeds, and Hannah, the housekeeper at Moor House, seems suitably impressed when Jane proudly confirms that she is

“book-learned” (341). However, this narrative authority does not come easily in all her relationships as Jane has a significantly more difficult struggle with Rochester and St. John. Both Rochester and St. John demand that Jane abandon her autonomy to them. Workman observes that “Brontë’s imagery suggesting power and privilege emphasizes that Rochester conceives of both the world and its people as slaves to his whims” (181). But, particularly troubling for Jane is that while most of the others in her life lack the storytelling skill that she has, Rochester may be one exception. He, too, seems to have both the power and the authority to command an audience, and his challenge to Jane is similar to his pushing her “unceremoniously to one side” of the piano bench, as Jane says at one point, “usurp[ing] my place, and proceed[ing] to accompany himself” (271). He subordinates Jane to the role of listener, rather than narrator, telling her, “people will instinctively find out, as I have done, that it is not your forte to tell of yourself, but to listen while others talk of themselves” (135). Jane questions him in response, asking, “[h]ow do you know? – how can you guess all this, sir?” (135), but Rochester maintains that he knows best. Indeed, although he tells Jane, “you master me... I am influenced – conquered” after he proposes to her, he muses in the same sentence, “you seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart” (260). Moreover, Rochester’s narrative almost succeeds, for his view of Jane as tiny, bird-like, childish, and vulnerable threatens to overpower her own view of herself as strong, independent, and morally certain. He tempts Jane, apparently by words alone, to abandon her principles altogether by living with him as his mistress instead of his wife. But, strengthening her resolve and settling on a course of action, she agrees to play the listener one last time, saying, “I was not afraid... I felt an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported me... I took hold of his clenched hand; loosened the contorted fingers, and said to him, soothingly, – ‘Sit down; I’ll talk to you as long as you like, and hear all you have to say, whether reasonable or unreasonable’” (302).

<25> Jane tries to exert narrative authority over St. John as well with similar degrees of success. For instance, like Scheherazade, Jane tells St. John an interrupted narrative that interests him to such an extent that he wades through waist-high snow at night in order to hear its conclusion. She also interrupts him when he is speaking, particularly when he introduces topics that make her uncomfortable, such as his marriage proposal. However, St. John has a manipulative power over Jane, and he seems to use her love of stories against her. For example, St. John brings Jane a copy of Sir Walter Scott’s *Marmion* that sends her into an ecstatic review of the merits of the author and a dismal assessment of the literature of her own period (371), an opinion that Brontë herself shared, being an ardent admirer of Scott and other late Romantics. St. John, like Rochester, eventually tries to persuade Jane to “[l]eave [her] book a moment,” to refrain from narrating, and to become a listener instead; he says, “I spoke of my impatience to hear the sequel of a tale: on reflection, I find the matter will be better managed by my assuming the narrator’s part, and converting you into a listener” (379). The first part of the “tale” is, significantly, Jane’s self-written name, written on a piece of paper, a name that St. John steals and carries away with him. Jane is, as Stewart notes, “the eager auditor, hence narrative recipient – of her own story. Most of it would be properly hers to tell, except for the recent news of the inheritance, but Rivers instead seizes the reigns of narrative power” (245). Jane and St. John’s relationship is unbalanced to the extent that “[b]y degrees,” she says, “he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind,” and he attempts to speak and direct her life for her (397). Jane explains, “I felt as if an awful charm was framing round and gathering over me: I trembled to hear some fatal word spoken which would at once declare and rivet the

spell” (402). Significantly, as many times as Jane protests and refuses his proposal, St. John maintains his persuasive force and gradually wears her down.

<26> The “fatal word” that eventually does “rivet the spell,” is Jane’s own name. Workman points out that when Jane finally breaks from St. John, the scene “demonstrates Jane’s resolve not to listen to St. John any longer; she deliberately silences him... her response to the spoken word, the ‘Jane! Jane! Jane!’ or Rochester’s call, reveals her own response to the ‘word’; we see that she is far less influenced by the Word of Christianity than by the words of passion, of desire, of love” (185). This telepathic moment draws Jane back to Rochester, and, at the end of the novel, Jane and Rochester finally share a narrative because they tell of the same uncanny experience, hearing each other’s voice calling on the night wind, which led to their reconciliation. Critics have disputed the power dynamics of the final few scenes in which the complexities of Rochester and Jane’s relationship are revealed. Sternlieb, for example, sees the ending as ambiguous and concludes that by focusing on the politics of narrative authority, she finds “an ongoing, unresolved struggle for power between the sexes” (10). Workman also posits a reading of the ending as incomplete, but, more positively, proposes that this story without an end ensures Jane’s own timelessness (183), or her continuation of the “tale that was never ended” (Brontë 109). Objections like these seem to subtly blame Jane for not providing a solution for all women, and they fail to recognize the significant effect that one Victorian woman’s claim to creative freedom might have on others.

<27> There are important details in the closing passages that strongly reinforce a reading of Jane as not only empowering herself through the position of imaginative storyteller, but also preserving her authority in that position through her autobiographical writing. Certainly, Jane is drawn back to Rochester largely by her love for him, as Workman suggests. Boumelha sees that love as a kind of “vocation”; she says the voice that “wrenches Jane away from one lover to another, one story to another, also quite literally makes the calling of the wife the vocation of the woman” (26). However, Boumelha’s reading, which maintains a system of binaries by associating the plot of romance and marriage with Rochester and the plot of *Bildung* or vocation with St. John, overlooks the fact that Jane’s ultimate ambition is, as the title page makes clear, to write her own story. The uncanniness of the calling is not that Jane hears another’s voice from afar, but that she hears *her own name*, and it is this autobiographical vocation, the articulation of the self, that she pursues. In the final scenes of the novel, Jane’s recouped power as narrator is clearly highlighted. When she reports to Rochester how she spent the last year apart from him, she “soften[s] considerably what related to the three days of wandering and starvation, because to have told him all would have been to inflict unnecessary pain” (440). She provides a similar justification for not disclosing her side of the telepathic experience to him. She says “[i]f 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” (448). Thus, Jane provocatively implies that her narrative is almost too powerful for Rochester to handle; he is significantly weakened, and his narrative authority, in particular, seems to have relaxed for he now says, “it is difficult to express what I want to express” (447).

<28> Perhaps, then, Jane's overarching fantasy is that men can fall in love with women who are dominating and authoritative, and the final alteration in the terms of their relationship shows that this is not unrealistic. Jane's narrative is, in fact, the ultimate authority because it contains, controls, and decides Rochester's and St. John's narratives as well. Blinded and maimed, Rochester must now rely on Jane to narrate the world for him, and, although his sight partially returns in the conclusion, Jane assures us that "[h]e cannot see very distinctly: he cannot read or write much" (451). Jane has St. John, on the other hand, drawing near death, as "his glorious sun hastens to its setting," and no one "weep[s] for this" since he has chosen his own course (452). Of course, Jane may appear to be reliant on Rochester, too, for in order to be a storyteller she requires an interested listener. Claudia Nelson indicates this when she explains that "one measure of a work's success must be how it affects its audience... By this standard, a painting that goes unseen or a story that goes unheard is incomplete; audience response (emotional, moral, or financial) is intrinsic to art" (21). Yet Jane's final subversive act of writing her novel/ life narrative ten years after being married, and presumably without her husband's knowledge, suggests that she continues to appreciate stories and to foster her own storytelling ability, and that she is not reliant on, or content with, Rochester as her sole audience after all. Indeed, Carolyn Williams posits that by keeping this final secret from Rochester, Jane "keeps it as her story, the story of her call to voice and vocation" (80), and Boumelha reminds us that Jane writes as "Jane Eyre," not as Mrs. Edward Rochester (74). Brontë's own struggle for authority as a storyteller may be seen as equally triumphant: in the same way that Rochester's perception at the end of the book depends on what Jane resolves to tell him, Gaskell reveals that Patrick Brontë never knew of his daughter's successful first book until she decided to disclose her secret to her blind father.

Endnotes

(1)For a survey of the most influential biographical studies of the fiction, see Winifred Gérin on Brontë's close relationship with her brother, Branwell; Dianne Sadoff on the importance of Brontë's father in her life; Robert Keefe on Brontë's traumatic loss of her mother and older sisters; and Linda Kauffman on Brontë's unrequited love for M. Constantin Heger. (^)

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