

‘A New Servitude’: Pedagogy and Feminist Practice in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

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<1>In its deployment of a variety of generic forms and strategies—romance, gothic, *bildungsroman*—*Jane Eyre* is representative of numerous eighteenth and nineteenth-century textual traditions, and as Gilbert and Gubar have remarked, also accessible to readers, as “we tend today to think of *Jane Eyre* as...the archetypal scenario for all those mildly thrilling romantic encounters between a scowling Byronic hero (who owns a gloomy mansion) and a trembling heroine (who can’t quite figure out the mansion’s floor plan)” (337). Yet, despite a growing interest in how didacticism shaped the reading public of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the acknowledged pervasiveness of advice books specifically addressed to female audiences, there has been no attempt to explore how didactic traditions influenced mid-nineteenth-century novels like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.(1) Scenes of women teaching and learning comprise a substantial portion of *Jane Eyre*’s action and function to shape the terms of its discourse, but these scenes are generally overlooked in the interests of emphasizing Jane’s escape from this servitude, an escape associated with the novel’s influential portrayal of feminist individualism.(2)

<2>Like other nineteenth-century governess novels, *Jane Eyre* might be traced back to a largely-ignored eighteenth-century didactic tradition that emerged with Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess; or, The Little Female Academy* (1749), which represents a female-centered pedagogy overseen by a learned female pedagogue or mentor.(3) Texts comprising the woman as pedagogue tradition take on a variety of forms and approaches, ranging from compilations of letters to more complex didactic fictions.(4) Depending on the educational philosophy, texts in this tradition might involve the examination of traditional scholastic subjects or offer advice on how to enact feminine characteristics of virtue. Regardless of the content of the education, like the early novel, characters in these texts are exemplary of either good or bad behavior, ‘good’ usually meaning in accordance with religious principles of proper conduct and behavior, sometimes in accordance with teacherly expectations of diligent study and application. In more complex fictions, characters are portrayed as Bunyan-esque types whose names reflect their particular virtue or flaw.(5)

<3>While it is certainly more appealing to imagine Charlotte Brontë reading Jane Austen or Milton, as J. Paul Hunter and William St. Clair have argued, conduct manuals and other forms of didactic writing were among the most widely-circulating texts available during the eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, and many were geared toward young readers. Given the year Brontë

spent at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge and the nature of the schoolbooks she had available to her (such as a Prayer Book and a monthly magazine featuring religious stories entitled *The Children's Friend*), it is certainly possible that she read Mrs. Sherwood's 1820 evangelical adaptation of Fielding's *The Governess*, which went through "six editions by 1840" (Ward 234). The most compelling evidence of the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and the woman as pedagogue tradition exists in the continuities between the novel's representation of female education and these texts' profound emphases on the importance of women as teachers and mentors of other women. More specifically, *Jane Eyre* reflects the work of one particular writer in this tradition—Mary Wollstonecraft.(6) In her little-recognized didactic fiction entitled *Original Stories* (1788), Wollstonecraft creates a female-centered pedagogy designed to teach young women to adhere to principles of reason and virtue by representing the flaws inherent in the traditional eighteenth-century mode of women's education, positing God as a benevolent and sometimes admonishing guide that reinforces her female pedagogue's authority.(7) By exploring the possibilities inherent in taking on the role of governess, *Jane Eyre* enacts the kind of pedagogical experience portrayed in this didactic fiction, in which young women learn from one another's (mis)behaviors. And, like Wollstonecraft, Brontë represents female relationships as the cornerstone of Jane's education. Through these relationships, I will argue, Jane tempers her "mad cat" propensity for passionate behavior, which enables her to achieve what others have celebrated as the fulfillment of her quest for selfhood. *Jane Eyre's* enactment of this female-centered pedagogy also reveals the troubling nature of this kind of learning, since Jane's education necessitates the eradication of women who fail to conform to the novel's paradigm of acceptable female behavior.

<4>In Chapter XVI of Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* (1788), female mentor Mrs. Mason tells her two young pupils the story of Anna Lofty or "The History of the Village School-mistress." Similar to *The Governess's* "Life of Miss Jenny Peace," the story emphasizes the importance of women taking on mentor/teacher roles as a means of exercising feminine reason and virtue, and reflects the situation of Mrs. Mason herself as mentoria to Mary and Caroline:

[Her] amiable parent died when Anna was near eighteen ...her aunt treated her as if she were a mere dependent on her bounty; and expected her to be an humble companion in every sense of the word. The visitors took the tone from her ladyship, and numberless were the mortifications she had to bear... She had her father's spirit of independence, and determined to shake off the galling yoke which she had long struggled with, and try to earn her own subsistence...She lives indeed alone, and has all day only the society of children; yet she enjoys many true pleasures; dependence on God is her support, and devotion her comfort. Her lively affections are therefore changed into a love of virtue and truth: and these exalted speculations have given an uncommon dignity to her manners; for she seems above the world, and its trifling commotions. (Wollstonecraft 426-428)

This is not only Anna's story, but the story of both Wollstonecraft and Brontë, who, wishing to "earn her own subsistence," accepts the position of "schoolmistress" or governess "to put her in a way of supporting herself, without forfeiting her highly valued independence" (Wollstonecraft 428). It most strikingly resembles the experience of *Jane Eyre*, who, after the death of her parents, was "brought up" by her aunt as a "parentless infant," and it was her "place to be

humble, and to try to make herself agreeable” (Brontë 13, 10), since, “[she] had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage” (Brontë 12). Finally sent away to a girls’ charity school called Lowood Institution, Jane is able to forget the “reproach of dependence” that characterized her life with her aunt at Gateshead (Brontë 10).

<5>Like the schoolmistress, teaching enables Jane to take on a new set of responsibilities and experience “true pleasures.” She was afforded “the means of an excellent education... then... was invested in the office of teacher; which [she] discharged with zeal for two years ...” (Brontë 71). Later, Jane’s experience as mistress of the village-school at Morton allows her to reap the rewards of a “useful existence” (312):

It was truly hard work at first. Some time elapsed before, with all my efforts, I could comprehend my scholars and their nature. Wholly untaught...they seemed to me hopelessly dull...but I soon found I was mistaken...The rapidity of their progress, in some instances, was even surprising; and an honest and happy pride I took in it: besides, I began personally to like some of the best girls; and they liked me...I found estimable characters amongst them—characters desirous of information, and disposed for improvement—with whom I passed many a pleasant evening hour in their own homes. (312)

Though Jane finds her “heart far oftener swelled with thankfulness” employed in this “honourable exertion,” (312), Brontë’s version of this late eighteenth-century tale of a schoolmistress finding “many true pleasures” in “improv[ing] the children consigned to her management” emphasizes the shift away from this tradition’s representation of didacticism as a female-centered experience (Wollstonecraft 429). Far from the self-abnegation of Anna Lofty, who may “improve” others while remaining “above the world, and its trifling commotions,” like other later forms of the governess novel, *Jane Eyre* emphasizes the degradation associated with a life of middle-class servitude—a feeling too well documented in Brontë’s letters. Jane’s position as governess to Adèle is accompanied by all manner of unpleasant responsibilities, from restraining the flippant behavior of her charge to suffering the condescension and impertinence of Rochester’s guests. Her reflections on her role as headmistress at the Morton village school initially reveal little enthusiasm for either the work itself, which St. John recognizes as “monotonous labour wholly void of stimulus” (303), or “the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness of all I heard and saw around me” (Brontë 306). And, when St. John reveals the news of her inheritance, not only does she determine that it will be “divided equally” (329) so that Diana and Mary might be free of their “situation[s]” as “humble dependants” (300), but she also decides immediately to return to Moor House, suggesting to St. John that she will “retain my post of mistress till you get a substitute” (331).

<6>While full of hardship and at times simply “degrading” (306), Jane’s experiences as pedagogue provide the occasion for every enabling circumstance and challenge of her life. Jane’s proximity to the master of the house prompts the novel’s most significant romance, while her fortitude in enduring the privation of the Morton village school convinces St. John that she’d make a good missionary’s wife. Thematically speaking, Brontë demonstrates how teaching might allow the heroine to find “true pleasures” in experiencing “life amidst its perils” (Brontë 72). She does not succeed in achieving what Adrienne Rich has called her “*Jane Eyre-ity*” on her

own, however. Like the woman as pedagogue tradition, *Jane Eyre*'s schoolmistress heroine must learn from the other women in her life—from exemplars of good and bad female education. In its appropriation of this tradition, the story reveals the problems and limitations associated with female-centered didacticism. When this kind of education moves from the “society of children” to the wide world, women who are not “disposed of improvement” simply become disposable, or the “antipodes” of *Jane Eyre*.

Positive Paradigms: The Making of a Village Schoolmistress

<7> While *Jane Eyre* departs from *Original Stories* and other texts in this tradition by denying that the teacher/mentor experience, though trying, must be a self-abnegating one, both *Jane Eyre* and *Original Stories* emphasize the importance of educational regimens that exercise women's reason by incorporating paradigms of feminine rationality. Adrienne Rich, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and later critics have suggested that the nurturing women Jane encounters throughout her “pilgrimage” are meant to act as “mothers for Jane” (Gilbert and Gubar 346),(8) or that they function to ameliorate the profound alienation she experiences. In reading *Jane Eyre* alongside the woman as pedagogue tradition, a different rationale for the other women's relationship to Jane emerges. In eighteenth and early nineteenth-century didactic texts, paradigms of virtue or good behavior are purposefully *not* mothers, since mothers were generally recognized as the cause of their daughters' poor education.(9) Like most texts in this tradition, *Jane Eyre* represents female mentors, not as maternal figures, but as learned female educators or schoolmates. Unlike a biological mother, a mentor/teacher can dedicate *all* of her energies to the improvement of her charges, either having no husband, or one that is perpetually absent from the educational narrative that unfolds. And, more importantly, the woman as pedagogue enacts what it means for a young woman to follow the path of reason and virtue: She is not limited by the expectations or demands of patriarchal society, but, like Wollstonecraft's village schoolmistress, might “earn her own subsistence.” Relationships between or amongst women in these didactic texts resist the traditional mother/daughter paradigm involving ongoing nurture and filial attachment. Instead, they represent how young women might also become self-sufficient as a result of a *limited* encounter with women who, by virtue of their professions, cannot afford to be burdened by the full range of maternal responsibilities. In both Fielding's *The Governess* and Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories*, encounters with paradigmatic women take on a significant role within the pedagogical framework of the narrative. Like the village schoolmistress, these women remain “in the society” of those they influence, but never assume the role of mother, not even to “parentless infants.” Rather, they represent certain characteristics or attitudes that the young pupil(s) must retain and assimilate into her own worldview before moving on to the next lesson or life experience.

<8>Similarly, the paradigmatic women of *Jane Eyre*, generally recognized as the embodiments of traditional feminine ideals that Jane ultimately dismisses, each impart a specific type of knowledge or system of belief that Jane must struggle with and adapt to her own circumstances to be successful in her quest for selfhood. Adrienne Rich has recognized the Reeds' servant Bessie as “the first woman to show Jane affection,” and credits her with “prevent[ing] Jane from relapsing into mere hysteria or depression” after her “fit” in the Red Room (472). What Jane admires about Bessie, beyond her (changeable) affection and her storytelling, has yet to be

adequately explored. Jane's observations of Bessie's behavior appear consistently throughout the first few chapters of the novel. Not only does Bessie encourage Jane to consider school through her descriptions of "young ladies" and their education (Brontë 20), but she also exemplifies the type of knowledge Jane will require to help her succeed at Lowood—a "natural capacity" for learning, and the ability to be "smart in all she does" (24). Jane observes Bessie's approach to her work as she "move[s] hither than thither" (16), making note of how she "had now finished dusting and tidying the room, and having washed her hands, she opened a certain little drawer, full of splendid shreds of silk and satin, and began making a new bonnet for Georgiana's doll" (17). Despite her inferior position as servant, Bessie reveals to Jane the merit of an "allegiance to duty and order," which Jane ultimately acquires and exercises as a student and teacher at Lowood (71). Bessie not only carries out her duties, but finds ways to make them tolerable, as she "sang" in the "meantime," reflecting the "zeal" with which Jane will eventually engage in *her own* duties (71). Occupying a comparable position to the one Jane later assumes as a teacher and governess, Bessie models the kind of attitude that comes in handy for such positions—dedication to one's work and the ability to approach what would typically be recognized as 'domestic drudgery' in a positive way. Although by no means "above the world, and its trifling commotions," Bessie also exemplifies an important virtue of the village schoolmistress in her willingness to make a living as her "own mistress." Jane later remarks, during a visit from Bessie at Lowood, that she "she saw a woman attired like a well-dressed servant, matronly, yet still very young; very good-looking, with black hair and eyes, and a lively complexion" (76). The reference to Bessie's attractive appearance functions to reinforce the idea that, although socially inferior, her attention to duty and order has been rewarded. She's now married with children, and no longer living at Gateshead with the Reeds, but in "the lodge" with her husband (77). Like the future Jane, Bessie has managed to do quite well for herself acting as "her own mistress." In the "passages of love and adventure" that Bessie relates to Jane as a girl of ten, Bessie foresees "from the pages of" Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* her own, as well as Jane's, *Virtue Rewarded* (7).

<9>During Jane's experience as a student and teacher at Lowood, she encounters two other female figures who prepare her to face "life amidst its perils." Miss Temple and Helen are more than just ideals to Jane; they exemplify spiritual and intellectual postures and attitudes she will have to assume throughout her journey—endurance, wit, and, more importantly, resistance to masculine authority. Gilbert and Gubar have commented on Miss Temple's resemblance to the depictions of ideal womanhood "invented" by "that indefatigable writer of conduct books for Victorian Girls," Mrs. Sarah Ellis: "[S]he dispenses food to the hungry, visits the sick, encourages the worthy, and averts her glance from the unworthy" (344). Unlike Mrs. Ellis's consummately middle class do-gooder, Miss Temple is an educator, and overwhelmed by the problems and privations that face the pupils at Lowood. She does not have the luxury of returning home from benevolent outings like the "listless" and "useless" women Ellis recalls to duty in conduct books such as *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839). As a wise, benevolent teacher, Miss Temple more closely resembles the qualities of the village schoolmistress represented in the woman as pedagogue tradition. Like the village schoolmistress, she forgoes the ease of fortune to make her own living. Miss Temple is apparently a woman of genteel upbringing, occupying a tenuous position as her own mistress in patriarchal society, and she doesn't merely "visit" and "encourage" the downtrodden, she suffers with them. Jane describes the two mile walk in the "bitter winter wind" from church to Lowood,

during which Miss Temple could be observed “walking lightly and rapidly along our drooping line...encouraging us, by precept and example, to keep up our spirits, and march forward, as she said, ‘like stalwart soldiers’” (51). When typhus afflicts more than half of the pupils at Lowood, “Miss Temple’s whole attention was absorbed by the patients: she lived in the sick-room, never quitting it except to snatch a few hours’ rest at night” (65). Miss Temple’s “stalwart” approach to the hardships of Lowood Institution anticipates Jane’s own forbearance of what she first perceives as “the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness” of the girls she teaches at the Morton village school (306), as well as her arduous journey from Thornfield to Marsh End.

<10>As an exemplar of a woman who can exercise reason in even the most challenging of circumstances, Miss Temple tactfully avoids an open display of anger that would undoubtedly result in her dismissal as superintendent, subverting Mr. Brocklehurst’s edicts in a more effective way. This is an important lesson for Jane, who has not yet learned to temper her passion, to submit when acting will only cause her trouble, like getting her locked in the Red Room for “fly[ing] at Master John” (9). In response to Mr. Brocklehurst’s demand that she “cut off” certain pupils’ hair that was too fashionably arranged, Miss Temple “passed her handkerchief over her lips, as if to smooth away the involuntary smile that curled them,” and “seemed to remonstrate” (54). While Miss Temple responds “quietly” when Mr. Brocklehurst addresses her, she defies his authority with a disguised smile, signaling that she has no intention of actually carrying out his order. When Brocklehurst accuses Jane of being “a liar” in front of the entire student body, Miss Temple waits until he departs before asking both Jane and Helen to her room to discuss the matter, promising Jane that she will be “allowed to speak” in her “own defense” (58-60). Later, she “assembled the whole school” and “pronounced [Jane] completely cleared from every imputation” (63). Thus, Miss Temple models for Jane the fine art of dealing with unrelenting male authority—to *seem* acquiescent or accommodating in his presence while acting otherwise once his judgmental gaze is turned elsewhere. This is a skill that Jane adopts in dealing with Rochester’s “fury” at her decision that she “will not” be his; rather than further provoking him by acting out her intentions in his presence, she leaves at dawn “without one sound,” and “she opened the door, passed out, and shut it softly” (271-273). Similarly, Jane escapes St. John’s inscrutable authority (in the form of a marriage proposal) by “mount[ing] to my chamber” and “lock[ing] myself in” until morning when “I heard the front-door open, and St John pass out;” she departs for Thornfield before his return home (359). More importantly, however, Miss Temple’s quiet, yet effective resistance to Mr. Brocklehurst reveals that it is acceptable to undermine masculine authority if it does not comport with one’s sense of what is right, an understanding which enables Jane to defy that authority when necessary, and also helps her to win Rochester’s love. Among other things, Rochester admires Jane’s ability to “master me” while at the same time “seem[ing] to submit;” he suggests that “I am influenced—conquered; and the influence is sweeter than I can express” (222). Hence, Miss Temple’s ability to subvert masculine authority by means of feigned submission to it easily becomes a means of captivating masculine desire in a man who is ostensibly uninterested in *exercising* his authority, who likes to be “conquered” by a woman who “bends but does not break” (222).

<11>Like the exemplary young pupil in the woman as pedagogue tradition who assists the governess/mentor figure, Helen Burns’ religious ideology validates Miss Temple’s resistance to masculine authority (346). As an exemplary female figure, Helen enacts a feminine appropriation

of the tyrannical Calvinism of Brocklehurst, as she explicitly suggests “No; I cannot believe that: I hold another creed; which *no one ever taught me* and which I seldom mention; but in which I delight, and to which I cling” (italics mine) (49). This is not to say that Helen dispenses with conventional doctrine altogether; when Jane asserts that she “must resist those who punish me unjustly,” Helen instructs Jane that she must “Read the New Testament, and observe what Christ says, and how he acts; make his word your rule, and his conduct your example” (48-49). By taking ownership of her religious background, Helen represents the way in which feminine will and God’s will might intersect, providing Jane with a spiritual identity to which *she* might “cling” to when faced with adversity. Like Wollstonecraft, Brontë incorporates an omnipotent yet benevolent New Testament version of God to emphasize the possibility of a direct relationship to God in the absence of male influence, representing God as (in Helen’s terms) “my father” and “my friend,” as a “universal Parent” on Whose “power” one “might rely implicitly” (69). Helen explicitly posits this feminized version of spirituality in opposition to masculine conceptions, as she explains to Jane, “Mr. Brocklehurst is not a god: nor is he even a great and admired man” (58). Helen meaningfully redefines the oppressive hell and brimstone doctrine Mr. Brocklehurst represents, making possible the fulfillment of feminine will sanctioned by her “universal Parent.” The interaction between Miss Temple’s capacity for reason and Helen’s version of spirituality result in the “rous[ing]” of Helen’s “powers within her,” which Jane regards with “wonder:”

They conversed of things I had never heard of: of nations and times past; of countries far away: of secrets of nature discovered or guessed at: they spoke of books: how many they had read! What stores of knowledge they possessed! Then they seemed so familiar with French names and French authors: but my amazement reached its climax when Miss Temple asked Helen if she sometimes snatched a moment to recall the Latin her father had taught her, and taking a book from a shelf, bade her read and construe a page of ‘Virgil’; and Helen obeyed, my organ of Veneration expanding at every sounding line. (62)

This marriage of Miss Temple’s intellect and “refined propriety” of “language” and Helen’s spiritual intensity produces a method of converse that reflects the woman that Jane will become — smart *and* interesting, with a capacity to traverse subjects generally engaged only by men, such as history and ancient language and literature. Miss Temple might be read as a church where outcasts such as Helen come to worship, as an affirmation of the “meaning” “movement” and “radiance” of the feminized spirituality with which Helen burns. Jane’s recognition of this experience as bordering on the divine, as she “was struck with wonder,” “amazement,” and “Veneration” parallels representations of Christian rebirth and regeneration through Christ. Here, in the presence of a newly-conceived God and her Church, is where *Jane Eyre*, the mad cat and ill-used victim of Gateshead, is reborn as feminist individualist. Advised by Helen to trust God as her “friend” and use Christ’s “conduct” as her “example,” Jane no longer experiences the passionate rage she so often exhibited at Gateshead. It has now been tempered by reason, and later she recalls that, by Miss Temple’s example, “better regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind” (71). Having access to a form of Christianity that authorizes the female as subject, Jane might venture into the “wide” world with faith in His Providential guidance and care.

<12>Jane's "amazement" at Miss Temple and Helen's mode of converse accompanied by her exoneration from Brocklehurst's accusation incite her to a more pronounced interest in academic achievement, setting her on the path to becoming Rochester's "good and intelligent woman" (264), a paradigm of reason and independence that is the "antipode" of Bertha Mason (265). Rochester emphasizes with great clarity that he admires Jane's panache for conversation, her "eloquent tongue" that can address subjects ranging from painting to ancient myths to the Bible, or, as he later relates "when addressed you lifted a keen, a daring, and a glowing eye to your interlocutor's face: there was penetration and power in each glance you gave; when plied by close questions, you found ready and round answers" (222, 267). Reflecting the "power" and adeptness with which Helen converses with Miss Temple, Jane's intelligence, combined with her ability to defy masculine expectation, make her the kind of woman that Rochester might regard as "my equal" and "my likeness" (217). Rochester also admires the fact that she is a woman of "character" to whom he can be "ever tender and true"—a woman who is not defined by "flatness, triviality...imbecility, coarseness, and ill-temper," but has, like Helen Burns, a "soul made of fire" (222).

<13>As representations of two socially significant nineteenth-century figures, Miss Temple and Helen Burns function as relatable characters, not as didactic tools. Yet Jane learns from them, and therefore invites readers to do as well. Like the inevitable separation of the still learning pupil from her teacher, Miss Temple's departure from Lowood spurs Jane onward into the next phase of her journey, since "with her was gone every settled feeling, every association that had made Lowood in some degree a home to me" (71). And, like Mrs. Mason's pupils in *Original Stories*, Jane must prove that she can "observe" Helen and Miss Temple's "precepts" despite the circumstances that await her (Wollstonecraft 450).

Learning by Example: Blanche and Bertha as *Jane Eyre's* "Bad Girls"

<14>Mary Wollstonecraft and others writing in the women as pedagogue tradition addressed the problems inherent in current methods of women's education. Having worked as a governess, Brontë need not have read Wollstonecraft or Catharine Macaulay to know the *effects* of this type of education, which emphasized "cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 19). Brontë writes the following to a friend regarding her experience as a governess to the wealthy Sidgwick family:

I soon found that the constant demand on my stock of animal spirits reduced them to the lowest state of exhaustion—at times I felt and I suppose seemed depressed—to my astonishment I was taken to task on the subject by Mrs. Sidgwick with a sternness of manner & a harshness of language scarcely credible...Mrs. Sidgwick is generally considered an agreeable woman...but O Ellen does this compensate for the absence of every fine feeling of every gentle—and delicate sentiment?...I have never had five minutes conversation with her since I came—except while she was scolding me. (Dunn 434)

Brontë's description of Mrs. Sidgwick resonates with Wollstonecraft's exemplars of poor female education in *Original Stories*, emphasizing the selfish and even tyrannical nature of women who

have been taught only to please men. Like *Original Stories*, *Jane Eyre* demonstrates what happens when bad girls grow up, and how their naughty, childish attitudes and behaviors translate into self-destructive or even dangerous ones in adulthood. As an acknowledged part of practicing good behavior, the bad girls of the woman as pedagogue tradition are treated with empathy by the mentor and her pupils. *Jane Eyre's* representations of poor female education experience decidedly different fates, revealing how the "society" once so important to the village schoolmistress breaks down when patriarchal expectations undermine the female-centered quality of the learning experience.

<15>*Jane Eyre* offers a complex portrait of poor female education that manifests itself in a wide range of characters such as her Aunt Reed (who closely resembles Mrs. Sidgwick), her stepsisters Eliza and Georgiana, her pupil at Gateshead, Adèle, and the "exquisite" Miss Rosamond Oliver who visits her at the village school. However, Jane learns the most from the two women who threaten the fulfillment of God's providential design for her life, marriage to Mr. Rochester. Jane's first encounter with Blanche Ingram is through the description of Mrs. Fairfax. Not only is Blanche beautiful according to contemporary standards, with features comparable to the "noble" and "graceful" stature of a "Grecian" goddess, but, as Mrs. Fairfax relates, she is also "admired" "for her accomplishments," which, Jane later learns, consist of conversing on "botany," playing the piano, singing, and speaking French (135, 147). The image of Miss Ingram undermines the possibility of a relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester, and Jane chastises herself for her naiveté and attempts to recall herself to "common sense" by sketching out their portraits (137). Jane's comparison of her "plain" features to the beauty of Blanche Ingram establishes the two women as rivals for Rochester's affection, and also gestures towards *Jane Eyre's* larger commentary on the differences between women educated by exemplary, virtuous women, and those educated to please men. As Jane learns, underneath the ivory surface of the Grecian Goddess lies a selfish and undeniably bad temper. Jane observes that Miss Ingram's approach to conversation with Mrs. Dent "was decidedly not good natured" (147) and, when Mr. Eshton asks if Jane might take part in the game of charades, Blanche rudely asserts that "she looks too stupid for any game of that sort" (155). Not only is she ill-natured towards other women, but even shows "spiteful antipathy" (158) towards Rochester's ward Adèle, remarking to him that "You should have sent her to school" (150), later calling her a "tiresome monkey" (161) when she incorrectly suggests that Rochester has returned from Millcote. While Rochester is away, Blanche exposes her lack of consideration for others, as well as the limits of her intellectual endeavors, as she "repel[s], by supercilious taciturnity, some efforts of Mrs. Dent and Mrs. Eshton to draw her in to conversation...[and] flung herself in haughty listlessness on a sofa, and prepared to beguile, by the spell of fiction, the tedious hours of [his] absence" (161). She takes an attitude with her mother, who suggests she "cannot possibly" allow the fortune teller in: "Indeed, mamma...I must have my will" (164). When the footman doesn't usher the fortune teller in quickly enough, she exclaims "Cease that chatter, blockhead! and do my bidding" (164).

<16>In her unrelenting insistence that she have her own way, Blanche resembles *Original Stories'* Jane Fretful, who was "so accustomed...to see everything give way to her humour, that she imagined the world was only made for her...she was very unhappy, but did not try to conquer her temper" (Wollstonecraft 381). Blanche's discussion of her education simultaneously reveals the extent of her ill-nature (she knows Jane is in the room, sitting by the window) as well

as the behavior from which it developed, as she begins the tale: “I have just one word to say of the whole tribe [of governesses]; they are a nuisance. Not that I ever suffered much from them; I took care to turn the tables” (151). Blanche’s pleasurable recalling of the “tricks” she and her brother used to play on their incompetent governesses not only reflects poorly on her character, but also indicates that Blanche did not have the benefit of a Miss Temple to emulate. One governess was “poor and sickly,” the other “coarse and insensible,” and, worst of all, Madame Joubert went into “raging passions” when confronted with childish impudence. Her bad behavior unchecked and reinforced by poor example, Blanche has grown into a woman who, although beautiful and refined, is “coarse and insensible,” demanding to have her “passions” indulged at her whim, and ultimately one that Rochester finds “not worth the trouble of vanquishing” (Blanche on Miss Wilson, 151).

<17>Although Blanche has acquired little from her governesses, she exemplifies Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ideal type of education for women, using the art of cunning in order to secure Rochester as a husband.(10) Jane observes Blanche’s posture, having “seated herself with proud grace at the piano...” (153):

‘Oh, I am so sick of the young men of the present day!’ exclaimed she, rattling away the instrument. ‘Poor puny things not fit to stir a step beyond papa’s park gates: nor to even go so far without mamma’s permission and guardianship! Creatures so absorbed in care about their pretty faces and their white hands, and their small feet; as if a man had anything to do with beauty! As if loveliness were not the special prerogative of woman—her legitimate appanage and heritage! I grant an ugly *woman* is a blot on the fair face of creation; but as to the *gentlemen*, let them be solicitous to possess only strength and valor: let their motto be— Hunt, shoot, and fight; the rest is not worth a fillip.’ (153)

By suggesting that beauty is “the special prerogative of woman” and that men should “possess only strength and valor,” Blanche recalls Rousseau’s idea that women are “naturally weak” and “must have the skill to incline us to do every thing which her sex will not enable her to do herself” (349-350), such as hunting, shooting, and fighting. In so doing, she emphasizes her femininity and advertises her need for a man to protect her. More importantly, however, she exercises cunning by emasculating men who indulge in their appearance in an attempt to flatter Mr. Rochester, who, as Jane indicates, is “athletic,” but not handsome.

<18>Yet, like Wollstonecraft’s representations of debauched females in *Original Stories*, Blanche Ingram is thwarted in her efforts to obtain happiness through cunning and bad temper. As Jane relates, “Miss Ingram was a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling” (158), since she did not exhibit any of Jane’s own qualities of intellect or spirituality. Like a true rival, Jane contemplates her “defects,” suggesting that “her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature...She was not good; she was not original...she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her” (158). Never taught to develop her reason, Blanche does not have anything “original” to say, but merely “repeat[s] sounding phrases from books” to *appear* interesting. Unable to restrain her passion, she fails to exercise “goodness” or “sympathy and pity,” since she cannot see past her own wants and desires to take another’s feelings into consideration. So self-absorbed that she treats a child with “coldness and

acrimony,” Blanche Ingram exhibits none of the qualities of Miss Temple and Helen Burns; she exercises neither reason nor Christian goodness. Jane’s recognition of Blanche’s faults functions to reinforce the importance of what she has learned from her female exemplars at Lowood, and Rochester’s seeming affirmation of her assessment reveals that educations designed to please men inevitably fail when those men are looking for “a good and intelligent woman” (264): “I felt he had not given her his love, and that her qualifications were ill adapted to win from him that treasure...*she could not charm him*” (159). Despite her “meretricious arts and calculated manoeuvres,” Jane suggests that Blanche’s “pride and self-complacency repelled further and further what she wished to allure” (159). Rochester’s “clear consciousness of his fair one’s defects” and his “obvious absence of passion in his sentiments towards her” (158) prompt Jane to consider the power that she possesses, as she remarks “when she failed, I saw how she might have succeeded. Arrows that continually glanced off Mr. Rochester’s breast...might, I knew, if shot by a surer hand...have called love into his stern eye” (159). By failing to win Rochester’s love, Blanche reinforces the importance of reason-based education for women, since she cannot “charm” Rochester with all of the accomplishments she has mastered. Blanche’s inability to “fascinat[e] Mr. Rochester” also affirms Jane’s sense of identity as a woman of faith and intellect, as *she* has the power to “charm” him without the aid of either rank or beauty.

<19>Having experienced a complete recognition of who she is—a woman whose “spirit” renders her equal to a man of rank like Mr. Rochester—bad-tempered Blanche, she finds, is no longer a candidate for Rochester’s affections (216). Rochester explains that “she...deserted me: the idea of my insolvency cooled, or rather extinguished, her flame in a moment” (224). Although Jane makes some inquiry into why Rochester took “such pains to make me believe you wished to marry Miss Ingram,” and as to whether “Miss Ingram will...suffer from your dishonest coquetry,” she quickly disregards the fact that Rochester insensitively used Miss Ingram to rouse her jealousy. Reassured by Rochester’s insistence that “there is not another being in the world has the same pure love for me as yourself,” Jane seems to accept Blanche’s bad behavior as license to overlook how Rochester has treated this bad-tempered woman, failing to consider the import of *his* bad behavior, though, as a woman of sympathy, she appropriately calls it “a burning shame” and “a scandalous disgrace” (224). While Jane could have used Rochester’s ill-treatment of Blanche as an opportunity to question his motives, Rochester’s suggestion that Blanche’s “pride” required “humbling” excuses his “dishonest coquetry.” Blanche’s bad behavior camouflages Rochester’s complicity in this “feigned courtship,” allowing Jane to have what *she* desires—to continue to love him “very much” despite his “eccentric” “principles” (224). Having served her purpose in allowing Jane to affirm her own identity, Blanche is written out of the story; she is dehumanized as “inferior,” unlovable—an object of Rochester’s “sneer[s]” and (indirectly) Jane’s “scorn” (216).

<20>Blanche’s inability to please Rochester with her feminine “allure,” “manufacture[d] airs,” and flattery serves as a useful counter-example to Jane as she engages in courtship with Rochester. No sooner has Jane agreed to marry Rochester than he begins to treat *her* like a Blanche Ingram, flattering her “beauty,” uttering sweet nothings in regards to her “brow,” her “fine wrists,” and “fairy-like fingers,” which he wishes to adorn with “jewels,” “bracelets,” and “rings” (220-221). Although Rochester has just professed his admiration for “the soul made of fire, and the character that bends but does not break,” dismissing “women who please me only by their faces” and exhibit “flatness, triviality, ...coarseness, and ill-temper,” he demonstrates that

he only knows how to treat Jane as if *she were* Blanche Ingram, threatening, in turn, her sense of self. Re-asserting her independence, Jane insists that she “shall continue to act as Adèle’s governess; by that I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty pounds a year besides.” (230). Throughout their engagement, Jane avoids “sink[ing] into a bathos of sentiment,” opting instead to “thwart” and “afflict” him, aware that “a lamb-like submission and turtle-dove sensibility, while fostering his despotism more, would have pleased his judgment, satisfied his common-sense, and even suited his taste, less” (233-234). By refusing to play the role of submissive, doting female, Jane simultaneously re-establishes herself as a woman of “character” and ensures that she will retain Rochester’s affections. Recognizing that Rochester is incapable of understanding how to exact from women that which will “suit his taste,” Jane must adapt herself to this flaw, making sure that she maintains her own identity despite his insistence that she submit to his desires. Rochester’s approach to courtship reveals that the cause of poor female education lies in the confused and debauched patriarchal psyche, which unconsciously objectifies women as “dolls” to be “dressed,” encouraging them to be submissive despite the desire for a woman of strong mind and fortitude. Thus, Blanche Ingram serves as a valuable exemplar for Jane, alerting her to the dangers of being too eager to please Rochester, though, as Jane suggests, she “would rather have pleased than teased him” (234).

<21> The problematic nature of this feminist pedagogical approach is more fully realized with the introduction of Rochester’s “mad” wife, Bertha. Like Blanche, Bertha serves as an example to Jane, one that prevents her from submitting to another of Rochester’s desires that threatens to jeopardize her sense of identity as well as his love for her. Culturally defined by nineteenth-century imperial ideology as one who is unable to exercise reason, Bertha exemplifies the most extreme effects of poor female education.⁽¹¹⁾ Rochester emphasizes that it is not “because [Bertha] is mad I hate her” (257), instead explaining how he “repressed the deep antipathy [he] felt” for the fact that “her cast of mind [was] common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher” (261). The daughter of a wealthy “West India planter,” Bertha experienced a similar type of education as Blanche, as “she flattered [Rochester], and lavishly displayed for [his] pleasure her charms and accomplishments” (260). Described as having once been “a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram” (260), Bertha also recalls Blanche’s “poor” mind and lack of originality in conversation as well as her “coarseness” and bad temper, demonstrating an inability to control her passion with reason.

<22> Rochester’s recognition of her “pigmy intellect” and “giant propensities” as *evolving into* the “excesses [that] developed the germs of insanity” recalls *The Governess* and *Original Stories*’ representations of the effects of passion unrestrained by reason, consisting of extreme forms of bad behavior, such as incessant wailing and physical violence: “I had a little Play-fellow, in a Child of one of my Papa’s Servants, who was to be intirely under my Command. This Girl I used to abuse and beat, whenever I was out of Humour” (Fielding 88). Like Blanche, Bertha affirms Jane’s identity as a woman of reason and spirituality—one who is “a contrast to the fury I left at Thornfield” (264). Thus, Bertha’s dehumanization as a madwoman and a “beast” is a necessary prerequisite to the realization of Jane’s feminist dream, since it was Bertha’s “pigmy intellect” and “excesses” that led Rochester to seek “the antipodes of the Creole” (265). Her “mental defects,” like Blanche’s pride and bad-temper, also serve to overshadow Rochester’s complicity in marrying a woman out of lust, that he “never loved” and “never esteemed,”

inciting Jane to “pity” him and excuse *his* “mental defects,” his inability to restrain his passion and act according to reason (261).

<23>In the same moment that Jane excuses his faults, Rochester, a self-destructive purveyor of patriarchal power, unwittingly attempts to seduce her into the same sort of relationship that undermined his happiness with Bertha. By insisting that Jane unlawfully “be Mrs. Rochester—both virtually and nominally” and, in essence, become his “mistress,” Rochester asks Jane to become exactly what he despised in Bertha—“intemperate and unchaste” (261). Listening to his tales of mistresses that failed to retain his affections, all of which shared one or more of Bertha’s defects, “violence[ce],” mindless[ness],” “not one whit to my taste” (266), Jane acknowledges to herself: “if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled to me... to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated [his former mistress’s] memory” (266). The “teaching” to which Jane refers is what she learned from Miss Temple and Helen Burns: to resist masculine demands when they don’t comport with the principles of feminine virtue and rationality. Despite Rochester’s insistence that she acquiesce to his desires, Jane acknowledges that by doing so, she would be accused of the same vices as Bertha. In response to his convincing suggestion that “you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me” (270), Jane asserts: “*I* care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was *sane*, and not *mad*—as I am now...” (italics mine) (271). Reinforcing the idea of madness as passion unrestrained by reason, Jane suggests that Rochester’s emotional harangue has taken its toll on her ability to exercise her judgment, inciting in her the same “mental defects” that plague his debauched wife (262). Aware that by submitting to him, she risks defying “the law given by God” and therefore her identity, Jane insists that she will adhere to her “principles” and “foregone determinations” adamantly stating, “there I plant my foot” (271).

<24>Once again, in an effort to gratify his desire, Rochester blindly and self-destructively attempts to transform the woman he loves into one he will ultimately despise. Knowing that giving in to unrestrained passion will make her “insane” like the madwoman in the third story, through Bertha’s example, Jane avoids her fate. And, like all the other women who have made their mark on Jane’s character, Bertha is conveniently written out of the story once the other achievements of Jane’s quest for selfhood come to fruition. Jane’s moment of concern for Bertha (her reference to her as “that unfortunate lady” who “cannot help being mad” (257)) quickly subsides as Rochester’s story of Bertha’s “pigmy intellect” and “giant propensities” unfolds. With one bad girl scorned and the other dead, *Jane Eyre* can assume her role as the wife of Mr. Rochester, now bereft of a hand, his sight, and, thanks to Bertha’s uncontrollable, incendiary passions—his bad behavior. Unlike negative female exemplars in the woman as pedagogue tradition, Brontë’s bad girl is neither pitied nor given the opportunity to reconcile with those she offends. As rivals for Rochester’s affections, *Jane Eyre* invites readers to dismiss Blanche and Bertha as quickly as Jane and Rochester dismiss them. Jane’s means of finding happiness gestures towards the troubling effects of Brontë’s appropriation of the woman as pedagogue tradition, suggesting that the only way Jane might conform to principles of reason and virtue is through the failure of other women to do so. The representation of Blanche and Bertha as expendable sanctions a feminism that seeks to eradicate—not the cause of poor female education

exemplified in Rochester—but the women who suffer from his licentious and self-destructive principles.

Endnotes

(1) For more comprehensive studies of how didactic writing shaped reader expectations and influenced the development of other forms of writing during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see and J. Paul Hunter's *Before Novels* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1990) and William St. Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge UP, 2004).(^)

(2) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's groundbreaking reading of *Jane Eyre* as representative of "feminist individualism in the age of imperialism" can be found in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" in *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn 1985): 243-61.(^)

(3) In *The Victorian Governess Novel* (Lund UP, 2001), Cecelia Wadsö Lecaros offers a detailed study of the features as well as the socio-historical context of the genre.(^)

(4) The following texts exemplify how women represented themselves as pedagogues in eighteenth-century conduct books and early forms of the governess novel. Some, like Fielding's *The Governess*, are educational novels, while others take the form of dialogues or a series of letters: *Mentoria* (Ann Murry 1778), *Original Stories from Real Life* (Mary Wollstonecraft 1788), *Letters On Education* (Catharine Macaulay 1790), *Anecdotes of Mary; or, The Good Governess* (H.S. 1795), *Letters on Subjects of Importance to the Happiness of Young Females, Addresses by a Governess to her Pupils* (Helena Whitford 1799), and "The Good French Governess" (Maria Edgeworth 1801).(^)

(5) Jean Ferguson Carr, Stephen L. Carr, and Lucille Schultz's approach to nineteenth-century textbooks in *Archives of Instruction* (2005) provides a useful model for identifying and categorizing didactic texts. Their recognition of 19th century textbooks in the U.S. as belonging to "traditions" rather than types or genres emphasizes the ways in which textbooks often borrow from and "rework" one another, as they "trace the intermittent migrations of routines, practices, and principles from one tradition to another" (17). I adopt the term "tradition" to signify the dynamic and fluid nature of didactic discourses disallowed by the term genre, and I discuss the conventional aspects of what I call the "woman as pedagogue tradition" based on widely-circulating exemplars that might be read as representative of what Carr, Carr, and Schultz call the "shared features" of a tradition (16).(^)

(6) In *Approaches to Teaching Brontë's Jane Eyre* (MLA, 1993), James Diedrick explores a possible relationship between *Jane Eyre* and Wollstonecraft's well-known feminist tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. He argues that "no attempt has been made...to link...the terms of [*Jane Eyre's*] feminism in general, to a tradition of feminist discourse that originated fifty-five years before *Jane Eyre* appeared..." (22-23). While similarities in the treatment of women's experiences in both texts is notable, I see *Jane Eyre's* connection to Wollstonecraft's

work as extending beyond the appropriation of her feminist philosophy to the enactment of a female-centered pedagogical approach.(^)

(7)More profoundly than other female didactic writers of her time, Mary Wollstonecraft elaborated on the problems inherent in eighteenth-century approaches to women's education, focusing on the negative effects this education produced in the lives of aristocratic and middle-class women. Based on the assertion articulated in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) that women, as the weaker sex, should cultivate different virtues than men, traditional approaches to women's education were devised essentially to make them "pleasing." For Wollstonecraft, women educated according to this system were puerile, vain, competitive, and incapable of thinking beyond the petty demands of dressing and adorning themselves.(^)

(8)See Adrienne Rich's "Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman" in *On Lies, Secretes, and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress" in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale UP, 1979), and Natalie J. McKnight's "Charlotte Brontë: Moving from Mother to Mother" in *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (St. Martins, 1997).(^)

(9)For more detailed analyses of how this cultural perception shapes nineteenth-century representations of the mother figure, see Jean Ferguson Carr's "The Polemics of Incomprehension: Mother and Daughter in *Pride and Prejudice*" in *Tradition and the Talents of Women* (Illinois UP, 1991), Barbara Z. Thaden's *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction* (Garland, 1997), and Natalie J. McKnight's *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (St. Martins, 1997).(^)

(10)See endnote 7.(^)

(11)For further commentary on how *Jane Eyre* represents nineteenth-century imperial ideology, see Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire* (U of Minnesota P,1993)and Susan Meyer's "'Indian Ink': Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*" in *Imperialism at Home* (Cornell UP, 1996),(^)

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