

“A Man is Nothing without the Spice of the Devil in Him” Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester Navigate an Imperially- Inscribed Masculinity

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Abstract

In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Edward Rochester’s imperially-inscribed masculinity, anchored in Victorian patriarchal ideals, requires Jane to negotiate and eventually resist his attempts to dominate her. Recent readings of the novel by scholars like Joyce Zonana and Ralph Austen acknowledge its heavy reliance on colonial discourse, arguing that this discourse allows Brontë to critique the Western patriarchal values that Jane grapples with by displacing them onto the colonial “other.” The Victorian patriarchal society Jane lives in marginalizes her in several ways, and the novel uses colonial themes to portray this marginalization. However, these themes also offer her ways of resistance, especially in relation to Rochester. Rochester’s masculinity, which is both marginalized according to British class standards and hegemonic according to his social position and wealth, is also figured both in colonial terms as Jane’s colonizer and in terms that mark his otherness. For example, Jane associates Rochester with the “oriental” whenever he tries to dominate her in ways that go against her Christian faith, positioning him as a “savage” and a “heathen”—a man who is powerful but still in need of the civilizing (and emasculating) Protestant religion. Thus, examining Jane’s navigation of Rochester’s imperially-inscribed masculinity offers insight into the novel’s negotiation of power and oppression.

Keywords

Jane Eyre, masculinity, gender, postcolonial, imperialism, Christianity

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Victorian literature is the site of imperially-inscribed discourses of gendered relations. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, in particular, layers Orientalist language over the descriptions and interactions of the novel’s main characters. This strategy allows Brontë to portray the interdependence of the sexes in colonial terms, replete with conquests, oppression, and marginalization. Jane Eyre narrates the novel, negotiating heavily-classed expectations of her sex while navigating Edward Rochester’s masculinity, using Orientalist language to justify her choices. We can adopt a similar strategy to analyze the novel’s gendered relations in terms of postcolonial theory, linking Western patriarchal masculinity to the colonizing figure and Western marginal femininity to the colonized. Thus, a further exploration of the way Jane traverses Rochester’s imperially-inscribed gender identity offers insight into the novel’s negotiation of power and oppression.

Scholars have read Brontë’s text in a variety of ways—Terry Eagleton has analyzed the novel in terms of Jane’s ambiguous social position as a governess (2005),

feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have traced *Jane Eyre*'s rise to prominence as a landmark feminist text in terms of gender relations (1979), scholars like Marianne Thormählen have fixated on the novel's religious aspects and on Jane's Christian faith (1999), and postcolonial theorists like Spivak have considered the novel alongside the postcolonial revisionist text *Wide Sargasso Sea*, noting that the novel tends to ignore the plight of colonial woman Bertha Mason (1985). Recent readings of the novel have taken up these subjects of class, race, gender, imperialism, religion, and more, since the novel lends itself so well to analysis of power and desire (Diederich 2010; Hanley 2009; Hope 2012; Dingley 2012). To these readings, I argue that a focus on Rochester's masculinity, inscribed as it is in terms of Western Protestant imperialist patriarchy, intersects the various emphases that others have placed on class, gender, religious, and colonial themes within *Jane Eyre*.

Since Brontë's use of colonial themes in the novel is so well-documented elsewhere (Meyer 1996; Zonana 1993; Michie 1992) it is beyond the scope of my argument to detail how extensively Orientalist language is used in the novel to characterize both Jane and Rochester in addition to characters like Bertha and Richard Mason, Lady and Blanche Ingram, and the Reeds. Instead, I align my paradigm with scholars like Ralph Austen, who argues that the novel does not have a "suppressed imperialist dimension," but that its over-representation of colonial concerns serves to teach us more about the novel rather than anything very directly about the British empire and its colonial subjects (2009, 113). Austen's approach correctly seeks to position the colonial references in the novel within the novel itself. Agreeing with this type of approach, Joyce Zonana posits that what she calls feminist orientalism¹ allows

¹ Zonana argues that feminist orientalism "is a special case of the literary strategy of using the Orient as a means for what one writer has called Western 'self-redemption' . . . a rhetorical strategy (and a form of thought) by which a speaker or writer neutralizes the threat inherent in feminist demands and makes them palatable to an audience that wishes to affirm its occidental superiority" (1993, 72).

Brontë to critique patriarchal oppression in the West by displacing it onto Eastern or colonial locations. Zonana argues that this displacement enables “British readers to contemplate local problems without questioning their own self-definition as Westerners and Christians” (1993, 71). I agree with Zonana’s point and argue that the displacement she references allows Jane to critique her surroundings from a culturally-acceptable standpoint. As an example of this, Susan Meyer points out that the novel associates the “marginality and disempowerment Jane experiences due to her class and gender” with colonial others, the “dark races” (1996, 74). “By making these sly, intermittent allusions to nonwhite races when describing the British aristocracy,” Meyer argues, “Brontë gives the ‘dark races’ the metaphorical role of representing the presence of oppression in the novel” (ibid., 80). Thus, what these scholars’ collective arguments suggest is that Brontë characterizes Jane and others in relation to imperialist ideology as a way of locating and critiquing sites of power and oppression. And because of the hegemonic nature of the Victorian patriarchy—a site of power and oppression—an analysis of Rochester’s masculinity and Jane’s responses to it using postcolonial theories gives greater insight into the novel’s interplay of power and desire.

According to David Armitage’s *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, the spread of English Protestantism was one of the main catalysts for Great Britain’s imperialist expansions. Armitage claims that “the ideological origins of English nationalism, British nationhood and, in turn, British imperialism have all been traced back to the Protestant Reformations in England and Scotland” (2000, 61). Gayatri Spivak notes this as well in her argument that Christian philosopher Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative—that man is an end in itself—became a justification of the imperialist project that proposed to “make the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself” (248). As part of this ideology, the formation of the British

colonies included missionary work that served part of a civilizing mission to the perceived colonial "savages." Spivak calls this program one of subject-making, another register of sexual reproduction (ibid., 247). Additionally, if the imperialism of the West views its colonies as human subjects it has literally reproduced, then it necessarily inscribes this process in terms of gender as Jenni Ramone, author of *Postcolonial Theories*, argues: "Colonial acquisition is often described in these erotic terms, where the colonizer plays a dominant masculine role and the colonized land is figured as feminine, as virgin territory to be conquered" (2000, 30). Imperialism and colonialism, then, are figured as masculine penetrations and conquests of feminine spaces, which demonstrates how the patriarchal hegemony of the West is reproduced in and represented by its colonial subjects.

It is not only Western religion or patriarchy that is thrust upon the colonies, however. Homi Bhabha argues that Britain's desire to reproduce itself in its colonies creates copies that are "almost the same, but not quite" (1984, 127), and that this "not quite" aspect represents a menace to the colonizer:

Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers. (ibid., 126)

In other words, mimicry indicates a complex and threatening relationship between the colonial powers and their colonies. Ania Loomba sums up Bhabha's ideas well: "Resistance is a condition produced by the dominant discourse itself. Bhabha's writings are indeed useful in insisting that neither colonizer nor colonized is independent of the other" (2005, 149). Essentially, what Bhabha and Loomba mean is that the project of imperialism has transformed the landscape to one of interdependence; the colonizers depend on the colonized, and simultaneously the

colonized depend also on their colonizers. Similarly, in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë's imperially-inscribed language portrays the interdependence of the sexes, making room for the marginalized Jane to resist her oppressors.

The Victorian patriarchal society Jane lives has marginalized her in several ways. As an orphan girl, Jane has both suffered at the hands of extreme Christian patriarchy, embodied in the person of Mr. Brocklehurst, and been converted to a Christianity that denies Jane's ability to resist/rebel against her oppressor (Brontë 2003).² To reproduce this oppression using postcolonial terms, we might say that the patriarchy views Jane, a woman, as something to be colonized. The success of this colonization appears in Jane's acceptance of Christianity, through the moderator of Helen Burns, and in Jane's attempts to repress her restless spirit, which would rebel against the patriarchy if allowed. Her conversion to Christianity and repression of her wild nature is not a complete buy-in to the Western patriarchal terms of her colonizers, however.³ It is, in the words of Bhabha, "almost the same, but not quite," a form of mimesis that nonetheless is dependent on Western patriarchy for her ability to thrive and later resist. Postcolonial theory demonstrates that once the colonizers imbue the colonized with their Christianity—a civilizing mission—the colonizers also imbue the colonized with the means of resistance. Thus, the opportunity afforded Jane to attend the oppressively patriarchal Brocklehurst's school provides her with the religion she will later use to resist Rochester's patriarchal attempts to colonize her completely. In

² Mr. Brocklehurst says that because of her penchant to resist, Jane is "not a member of the true flock" (Brontë 2003, 100), but Helen Burns explains Christianity's non-resistance to Jane in a way that enables Jane to accept the doctrine of contentment despite deprivation and mistreatment (ibid., 89-90, 104-105)

³ Jane notes how Miss Temple helped to repress Jane's restless and rebellious spirit: "I had undergone a transforming process; that my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple—or rather that she had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity—and that now I was left in my lateral element, and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions" (ibid., 126).

fact, the state of Rochester's masculine identity itself contributes to Jane's resistance in its over-extension of patriarchal ideals.

Edward Rochester's place in *Jane Eyre* is central to Jane's progress and elevation. Rochester is, as Robert Kendrick argues, "crucial" to the narrative of gender relations since he "rearticulates and redefines his position as a masculine subject, as he reexamines the ethical implications of the masculine prerogatives that he has enjoyed and abused" (1994, 237). In other words, Rochester can alter his masculine identity as he is confronted with the ways that identity has afforded him certain privileges. As a result, Rochester's fluid masculine identity intersects the conventional Western Protestant imperialist patriarchy in a variety of ways. First, within the English landed gentry, Rochester's masculinity is tenuous. His initial position as second son requires him to make his own way in the world, for as Kendrick notes, "without money and holdings of his own he does not fit his class's narrative of a mature male subject" (ibid., 236). This is important because it initially locates Rochester in a subordinated position of power. Since masculinities theorists like Michael Kimmel (1994, 125) assert that masculinity is a constructed identity seeking to navigate a definition of ideal masculinity as powerful and hegemonic, Rochester turns to what Kimmel calls Marketplace Man to assert his dominance. In Kimmel's view, the "Marketplace Man derived his identity entirely from his success in the capitalist marketplace, as he accumulated wealth, power, status. He was the urban entrepreneur, the businessman. Restless, agitated, and anxious, Marketplace Man was an absentee landlord at home and an absent father with his children" (ibid., 123). In other words, a man establishing his masculinity using marketplace strategies would derive his identity from an accumulation of wealth. This would offer a path to masculine power, which would always be tenuous and require continued maintenance, for if his wealth was ever lost, the Marketplace Man would need to find a new way to assert his masculine identity.

As Marketplace Man, Rochester literally derives his masculinity from the colonies, making explicit his connection to colonization as oppressor: he accumulates wealth through his mercenary marriage to the West Indian Bertha Mason. The maintenance of his newly acquired colonial business holdings allow him to take up his place in England, though still on the margins of the British gentility. His brother's death allows him to assume the place of firstborn; however, his utilization of a marketplace masculinity simultaneously prevents him from attaining full status. For though Rochester is now part of the landed gentry, his method of accumulating wealth through marrying the mad, non-British person of Bertha Mason, whom Victorian society others, prevents him from being completely on par with his British landed peers. Although his link with the colonial other might prevent him from fully attaining the British Victorian masculine ideal, Rochester's masculinity is still inscribed by imperialism, as are the hegemonic identities of his British peers. This combination of Rochester's marginalization and his possession of masculine power allows for Jane's references to him as both colonizer and colonized—his masculinity is associated with the colonizer, but his marginalization is associated with the colonized.

A closer look at the language Brontë uses to describe Rochester reveals this positioning as both colonizer and colonized. For example, while Jane notes Rochester's marginal identity as an English gentleman through references to his dark features that mark his otherness (Brontë 2003, 167), which Elsie Michie argues "suggests that he fits into the simianized images of the Irish that were beginning to be produced" when Brontë was writing (1994, 130), she also ascribes characteristics to him that are a distinctly Victorian ideal of British masculinity. We learn, for example, that Rochester has a strong and athletic body with a broad chest (Brontë 2003, 167), that in personality he is "all energy, decision, will" (*ibid.*, 252), and that "there was so much unconscious pride in his port; so much ease in his demeanour; such a look of complete indifference

to his own external appearance; so haughty a reliance on the power of other qualities, intrinsic or adventitious" (ibid., 194). Her description of Rochester's embodied manhood is especially telling, for Rochester's indifference to his appearance and pride in his demonstrated qualities of virility fits with a hegemonic standard of masculinity for that time. Masculinities historian Christopher Forth traces a reaction of men across Europe around 1800 against what the British thought of as a distinctly French focus on appearance and good looks (2008, 47). The focus turned from the "effeminate man's" concern over dress to a "real man's" demonstration of unyielding virility and strength (ibid., 42). From this, we can infer that Rochester's valorization of his own active masculinity while being simultaneously unconcerned with his looks is a rejection of effeminacy. Thus, Jane's response to her master's masculinity is to highlight these exteriorized aspects of it and compare it to other, inferior examples set by Rochester's peers.⁴

Rochester's hegemonic masculinity is built on British colonialism, and his link to imperialism also makes him an object of Jane's desire. Social historian Joane Nagel (1998) explains that scholars equate the development of a hegemonic British nationalist masculinity with the expansion of the British Empire, inscribing the national standards of masculinity as imperialist. Thus the same standards of masculinity that Jane prioritizes and admires in Rochester are also the same standards of masculinity that encouraged colonization and reproduction of British societies elsewhere.⁵ Her

⁴ Jane "compared [Rochester] to his guests. What was the gallant grace of the Lynns, the languid elegance of Lord Ingram—even the military distinction of Colonel Dent, contrasted with his look of native pith and genuine power" (Brontë 2003, 252)?

⁵ Rochester's masculinity is even inscribed by imperialism in his relationship to the French girl Adele, who he derides for being shallow and obsessed with appearance. Jane notes once sadly that "if [Adele] could but have been proved to resemble him, he would have thought more of her" (ibid., 212). In other words, if Rochester could have reproduced in Adele a copy of his own British nationalism that derided her concern for dress, he would have loved her more.

admiration of Rochester's hegemonic masculinity, in accordance with Victorian gendered ideals, makes it difficult for Jane to resist his colonization of her. Complicating this is also the fact that Rochester's marginalized manhood also allows Jane to identify with him. Daniela Garofalo, in *Manly Leaders in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, resolves the problem of Jane's desire for Rochester by explaining that "[f]or Jane, the oppression of women and the lower classes consists first and foremost in a refusal to offer them the pleasures of adventure . . . Rochester brings the pleasures of the master home to Jane so that she can put aside the boredom of domestic life and create a new kind of home" (2008, 143). In fact, it is not just Jane who feels this way. Rochester's troubled negotiation of the ideal British masculinity leaves him seeking a relationship with Jane where power that is not based on the accumulation of wealth circulates more equally between them; he, too, is looking for a new kind of home than the one he has had.

Jane's partial colonization, or rather her mimicry of Western, Protestant, imperial, patriarchal ideals prior to her arrival at Rochester's house, has already primed her for the entrance of Rochester's compromised masculinity and the creation of an interdependent relationship between master and servant. Rochester notes how her mimicry is both appropriately submissive yet inappropriately powerful: "Jane, you please me, and you master me—you seem to submit, and I like the sense of pliancy you impart . . . I am influenced—conquered" (Brontë 2003, 372). But if Rochester feels that she has conquered him, Jane herself is ready to be conquered more completely—lending not just her social status and general behavior to the patriarchy's power, but her feelings as well: "[His features] were full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me—that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his" (ibid., 252). We see here that her attraction to Rochester is coded in terms of power where Jane positions herself as subordinate to him. However, though Jane wishes to

yield to her conqueror, upon learning that he has over-extended the power of his position beyond what a Christian, imperially-inscribed masculinity permitted, her mimicry becomes subversive. This is significant to their relationship and the ways imperialism is inscribed in the novel. For while Rochester desires Jane's mimicry initially, when the "menace" that Bhabha notes is inherent in mimicry threatens Rochester's attempts to over-extend his patriarchy, as Kendrick claims he does by attempting bigamy (250), Rochester's response is a violent one. In colonial terms, he desires to suppress Jane's rebellion through force. Garofalo notes that the couple's "doom would be to reduce their relationship simply to one of brute oppression and to establish an explicit hierarchy," (146) which is what Rochester's instinctual response is to do. In attempting to dominate Jane, he replicates the patriarchy's hegemonic oppression of women, but that hegemony has also given Jane the tools to resist Rochester's claims of dominance and to undermine his attempted use of violence against her because her master's claims of authority in this instance clash with Christianity's law.

Although Rochester's masculinity is marginalized in some ways, his attempts to navigate the ideals of proper British manhood have led him to depart from the dominant Victorian moral code, which Kendrick notes is within the masculine privilege of his class. By keeping mistresses and fathering an illegitimate child, Rochester, according to Kendrick, is able to return to some form of patriarchal power despite his closeted wife (251). We see his power in the way Rochester dominates the relationships and activities of his house-party.⁶ On the other hand, his indulgence of passion also violates the law of God according to the Protestant religion, and Rochester laments

⁶ Jane notes that if Rochester "was absent from the room an hour, a perceptible dullness seemed to steal over the spirits of his guests; and his re-entrance was sure to give a fresh impulse to the vivacity of conversation" (272).

how this diminishes his masculine identity, saying first to Jane, “Nature meant me to be, on the whole, a good man,” and then confessing to her, “I am a trite commonplace sinner, hackneyed in all the poor petty dissipations with which the rich and worthless try to put on life” (Brontë 2003, 198). Christopher Forth, in his work on masculinity in the modern West, calls this tension the “‘paradox’ of the Protestant ethic [that] is at heart the paradox of a consumer society that encourages both self-discipline and self-indulgence (52). Thus, Rochester’s status as manly gentleman is undermined by his indulgence in the things that simultaneously reinforce his class’s privilege and power. To demonstrate this simultaneous identification with patriarchal power and that power’s undermining, Jane nearly always associates Rochester with the “oriental” whenever they discuss his penchant for breaking the laws of God. He is positioned, in short, as a “savage” and a “heathen”—a man who is powerful but still in need of the civilizing (and emasculating) Protestant religion. In the instance, for example, where Rochester is first deciding his plans of wooing Jane, he invokes the unalterability of the laws of the Medes and Persians in a reference to the East as well as an acknowledgement that his plan goes against Western Protestant Christianity. In terms of Rochester’s masculinity, however, this misbehavior does not necessarily diminish his British manhood in the eyes of society, indicated by Blanche Ingram’s assertion that “a man is nothing without the spice of the devil in him” (Brontë 2003, 258). Jane herself delights in calling Rochester her “master” (ibid., 359) when he displays his power. However, Elsie Michie notes that “when Rochester is characterized as most powerful relative to Jane, he is most explicitly associated with the “oriental,” (1992, 136) and Zonana points out that because Jane sees Rochester in this way she “later is able to free herself from a degrading relationship with a man who has bought women, is willing to become a bigamist, and acts like a despot” (1993, 74), rebelling against his heathen ideas even when he is at his most powerful. Maria Lamonaca notes in an

article on Christianity and feminism in *Jane Eyre* that “[b]y discerning for herself what she perceives to be God’s will, Jane effectively resists Rochester’s . . . attempts to possess her spirit as well as her body” (1992, 246). In other words, Jane denies his supposed right as a man and her almost-husband to command her when that right infringes on the law of God.

Jane’s resistance to Rochester, despite his masculine power and his almost-total success at colonizing her, is anchored in the religious principles that her colonization has imbued her with. Her resistance, in effect, threatens to emasculate Rochester, who pleads with her, asking, “What shall I do, Jane? Where turn for a companion and for some hope?” (Brontë 2003, 450). Jane’s response is to instruct him to “trust in God and yourself” (ibid.) Rochester’s next question is again inscribed by Western Protestant imperialist patriarchy: “Then you will not yield?” (ibid.). That word “yield” is associated with the Biblical call to wives to submit to their husbands (Col. 3:18 and Eph. 5:22), the Victorian understanding of the domestic realm, and with the imperial demands placed on colonial subjects. Jane’s refusal to yield to Rochester’s colonization of her renders him without power to control her, as he complains: “Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage—with a stern triumph . . . Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling-place” (Brontë 2003, 452). In this complaint, Rochester notes that his attempt to completely colonize both the land and its inhabitants—Jane’s body and her spirit—is a failure.

Jane’s flight from Rochester’s colonization ends in his physical emasculation despite a moral remasculinization. We learn that when Bertha sets the house on fire, Rochester saves her, and this can be read as a Christian submission to God appropriate of Western British men who were supposed to be the protectors of women, as Victorian author John Ruskin (2002) claims. Ruskin writes of men: “The man’s power is active,

progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender” (77). Kendrick even argues that if Rochester had not tried to save his wife, it would have represented a final alignment with Oriental heathenism that abrogates the laws of God, recalling the earlier conversation between Rochester and Jane when Rochester desires to pass a law as unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians (252). Rochester’s attempt to save Bertha, however, fails and destroys both his hand, which is tied to his strength, and his vision, which is tied to his patriarchal power of the male gaze. The emasculating nature of his injuries is clear to him, as he notes to Jane at the novel’s end, “You know I was proud of my strength: but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance, as a child does its weakness?” (Brontë, 632). Yet, Jane, as Garofalo points out, recognizes the inherent power located within her master despite his physical limitations: “At the moment that Rochester’s masculinity seems most imperiled, it ceases to become a matter of the physical body and becomes, instead, a sublime object that seduces Jane. This strength, not of the body, offers a new virility seemingly unrelated to social power” (150). This new masculine strength is directly related to a clearer allegiance and submission to the Protestant God that Jane believes in, as we see when Rochester prays that God would grant him strength to live a purer life with Jane than he had once led (635). As Garofalo puts it, “This is a mastery that emerges, as it were, out of the ashes of a purifying fire that burns off the social superfluities of caste and gender leaving the essential nature” (150). Postcolonially, we can see that in *Jane Eyre*, as Edward Said in a discussion of decolonization notes, “[I]nstead of liberation after decolonization one simply gets the old colonial structures replicated in new national terms” (74). But these terms are more equal, for now *both* Rochester and Jane are submitted to an authority higher than that inscribed by imperial masculinity. Thus, when Rochester’s literal reproduction, his son, is placed in his arms

by his wife Jane, Rochester thanks God, with whom true authority for subject-making lies.

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