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*Jane Eyre and the Secrets
of Furious Lovemaking*

Wild Nights—Wild Nights!

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury!

Rowing in Eden—

Ah, the Sea!

Might I but moor—Tonight—

In Thee!

—Emily Dickinson, #249

In the spring of 1975, I found myself, rather to my own surprise and for the first time, theorizing about a novel. To be sure, I'd produced fiction myself, including not only a few published short stories, but also a vaguely experimental novel, the typescript of which was still rather hopelessly circulating among New York editors. But in the professional life as teacher and critic on which I had fairly recently embarked, I really considered myself a "poetry person." I'd been writing poems since I was a child and had studied mostly poetry—especially Romantic and modernist verse but the theory of the genre, too—in college and graduate school. My dissertation was on the poetry of D. H. Lawrence, and after I'd expanded, "booked," and in 1973

published it, I planned an intensive study of "death as metaphor" in nineteenth and twentieth-century poetry. As a product of sixties radicalism, moreover, I'd sworn only to write, on the one hand, Meaningful Books and, on the other hand, literary journalism (Meaningful Reviews and Significant "Think-Pieces"), and never, never to start grinding out academic hack articles like what Henry James once called "an old sausage mill." But now I was writing what would ordinarily be defined as an article, though I thought of it as an essay ultimately destined to become part of a book. And that article was about the novel *Jane Eyre*.

What had intervened to change my supposedly well-laid plans? Lots of intangibles, no doubt, but the proximate causes, so far as I could see, were, first, my youngest child, and second, the women's movement. When she was eight or nine, my daughter Susanna had begun devouring nineteenth-century novels, especially such female-authored standards as *Little Women*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*. (My other two children read voraciously too, but had different literary tastes.) Nostalgically—for the books Susanna read were the ones I myself had loved best when I was growing up—I reread along with her, and as we discussed the books we often tried to explain to each other our feelings about episodes or settings each of us found particularly compelling. Susanna especially loved what she called "the wonderful tea" featuring seed cake and sympathy with which stately Miss Temple nourishes Jane and Helen amidst the desolation of Lowood. I was drawn over and over again to the sanctuary in the attic where, "wild and savage and free" as the young Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, obstreperous Jo pens her blood-and-thunder Gothics, far from the pieties of superegoistic Marmee and long before meeting censorious Professor Bhaer. And, too, as I'd been when as a teenager I read *Jane Eyre* for the second time, I was delighted by the illicit glamour of the romance between Charlotte Brontë's "poor, plain, little" governess and her brooding master. When the so-called second wave of feminism crested in the seventies, I was more than ready—was indeed desperately eager—to understand the manifold ways in which not only is the personal the political (as the famous movement motto had it) but the literary is, or can be, both the personal *and* the political.

That we bring ourselves to what we read—that, as Emerson put it, our "giant" goes with us wherever we go—is hardly a new insight. In an era of cultural studies, new historicism, and gender theory, such a notion seems self-evident. Yet for those of us raised on the austere dicta of the New Criticism (Beware the extra-textual! Never look an author in the intentions! One ambiguity is worth a thousand histories!), it was profoundly exhilarating to find myself, as I had in the fall of 1974 at Indiana University, team-teaching what I had based was a largely undiscovered literary tradition in the

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context of a history—the history of *women*—that I'd never myself been taught. In response to departmental needs, Susan Gubar and I were that term offering a course we called "The Madwoman in the Attic," so in my daily professional life I frequently found myself reflecting with considerable intellectual passion on books that in my personal life I'd lately been exploring far more naively. For indeed, though in some part of myself I must have understood even then that no reading is altogether innocent, the readings I'd begun doing with my nine-year-old daughter felt both innocent and sentimental, if only because they were not only outside my disciplinary "field," but they were also rereadings and rememberings, hence, recapturings, of experiences I'd had when I myself was at least a more innocent reader.

And, a more innocent movie-goer! For surely my memories of such classics as *Jane Eyre*, *Little Women*, and *Wuthering Heights* were colored not just by my almost kinetic recollections of the fat gold armchair in Queens where, romantic and dreamy, I'd curled up to read them but also by the Hollywood versions of these books I'd seen in my growing up years, versions that amounted to a series of pop-culture exegeses of the nineteenth-century novel. If Jo was always already a tomboy played by Katharine Hepburn, Heathcliff was perpetually Laurence Olivier, stalking apart in a fit of Byronic "joyless reverie," while Rochester was inevitably an even more Byronically glowering Orson Welles. That Jane and Cathy were more dubiously identified with, on the one hand, the timid prettiness of Joan Fontaine and, on the other hand, the come-hither elegance of Merle Oberon testifies to a tension between page and screen that would prove productive for feminism—for weren't Fontaine and Oberon just the kinds of socially sanctioned female figures the Brontë heroines were struggling *not* to become? I didn't quite realize this when I first began my researches into books and movies past, but it would become clear soon enough, as I gained sophistication in the new field of women's studies.

What I *did* realize was that there was a commonality among these (and other) female-authored novels—as well as, very differently, among their film redactions—that went beyond the Gothic elements about which Jo March writes and among which Jane and Cathy live. In my first critical efforts at defining this commonality, I saw it as a shared discomfort with *houses* that issued in repeated and, to me, quite charismatic acts of defiance by all the heroines. Jo flees to the attic in order to escape the moralizings of the parlor, where she is obliged to act like a "little woman." Jane suffocates in the red-room where Aunt Reed imprisons her, then grows up to pace the battlements room where Aunt Reed imprisons her, then grows up to pace the battlements between the oppressive squalor of *Wuthering Heights* and the bourgeois