

From one of the perspectives of the Victorian culture whose myths and anxieties Charlotte Brontë so eerily transcribed in *Jane Eyre*, then, to embody the feminine in Cinderella is to call attention to the physical, financial and emotional deprivation—in a sense, the diminution—endured by married as well as single women in a society where the “second sex” was politically, economically, legally, and erotically disempowered, a culture in which, according to the famous if apocryphal advice Victoria is said to have given one of her daughters, on her wedding night a good woman was supposed to “close her eyes and think of England!” Similarly, to embody the masculine in Bluebeard is to call attention not just to the public power but also to the often fatal private knowledge of sexuality attributed to men in a society that often claimed men were beasts—insisting that, as one of the post-Darwinian heroines of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Princess Ida* put it, “a man is only a monkey shaved.” And perhaps, in fact, because such images of the feminine and the masculine were both so pervasive and so troublesome for Brontë and her contemporaries, there is a sense in which all the female characters in the novel can be seen as variations on the theme of Cinderella, with special emphasis on the problem fleshly desire poses for that heroine, while all the men can be considered variations on the theme of Bluebeard’s sexuality.

In this reading, then, the styles of what we now call “the feminine” available to *Jane Eyre* are variously represented in the stories told about a range of other female characters. The possibilities these subplots explore extend from extreme resignation to equally extreme rebelliousness, from suicidal self-abnegation to murderous passion.⁴ The angelic Helen Burns, for instance, is a kind of Cinderella who was abandoned, in effect “orphaned,” when her father remarried. But her solution to what we might call the Cinderella problem deviates radically from the fairy tale ending. Opting for absolute repudiation of desire in the physical realm of the present, Helen consumes her own body (dying, indeed, of “consumption”) for the sake of a spiritual afterlife. Similarly, though in a twist on the Cinderella plot that more closely evokes the traditional story, Miss Temple manages to escape the hardships of her job at Lowood through marriage to a Prince Charming. Yet her self-abnegation requires a rigidity that virtually turns her body to marble: by implication, indeed, she is repressing desire as well as rage when, in one famous scene, her mouth closes “as if it would have required a sculptor’s chisel to open it” (95).

But there is yet another, even more disturbing mode of “the feminine” that Jane encounters on her desirous pilgrimage, and it is quite literally embodied in the slavish flirtatiousness that characterizes little Adèle (Rochester’s ward), as well as the hardheaded *quid pro quo* eroticism of the

Still, wasn't there an element of bad faith in this reading? If as Judith Fetterley so persuasively argued, we women readers had long been acculturated to identify against ourselves when we perceived the world (and in particular our own gender) from a patriarchal, male perspective, weren't we identifying against ourselves in another way when we refused to acknowledge the rebellious sexual passion driving Jane's assertion to Rochester that "if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you" (281)? Though we might quite properly scorn the clichés of those who saw the novel as primarily a romance that "throbs with sensuality" and a book that "only the lonely" could have written, oughtn't we to have conceded that something about the "furious lovemaking" in the book was what made it ragingly popular in the first place? Or at least that the "'Rights of Woman' in a new aspect" had as much to do with something about the lovemaking as did the more obviously feminist striving toward equality?

Since Brontë first published her bestseller in 1847, there have been at least forty dramas (several of them musicals), nine television versions, and ten movies based on the book, most of them focused on the complexities of its "lovemaking."¹ And when the writer herself was told of the first of these adaptations, a play staged in London just a few months after the novel's appearance, her instant reaction was to wonder "What ... would they make of Rochester?" and then to fear that what "they [would] make of Jane Eyre" would be "something very pert and very affected" (Nudd 137). Clearly she sensed the charisma of the interactions between her hero and her heroine, and she may have sensed, too, that along with Jane's feminist insubordination, her sexual aggressiveness—the indecorous demeanor with which she confesses her feelings to Rochester while rebuking what she considers his indifference ("Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings?" [281])—might be represented as "pert" or even "affected" in a setting where the personalities of the characters had been "woefully exaggerated and painfully vulgarized by the actors and actresses" (Nudd 137). What (in another context) one feminist critic rather dismissively called "romantic thralldom" may have been Brontë's problem in her frustrated relationship with Heger, but her fantasy of fulfillment liberated Jane into erotic as well as linguistic assertion.² For this reason, the novel in which this "poor, plain, little" governess unabashedly tells her story very likely seemed scandalous to its earliest readers not just because its narrator was uppity and "pert" but also—perhaps more importantly—because she was uppity and frankly desirous.

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Let me make it quite plain that I don't in any way want to repudiate earlier claims I've made about *Jane Eyre*. Rather, I want to elaborate, complicate, and enrich them by speculating that the perpetual fascination of this novel arises at least in part from its ambivalent obsession with "furious lovemaking," that is, from its impassioned analyses of the multiple dramas of sexuality. Like so many other (yes) *romance* writers, Charlotte Brontë created a heroine who wants to learn what love is and how to find it, just as she herself did. Unlike most of her predecessors, though, Brontë was unusually explicit in placing that protagonist amid dysfunctional families, perverse partnerships, and abusive caretakers. Unlike most of her predecessors, too, she endowed her main characters—hero as well as heroine—with overwhelmingly powerful passions that aren't always rational and often can't be articulated in ordinary language. This sense of unspeakable depth or fiery interiority imbues both Rochester and Jane with a kind of mystery that has always been charismatic to readers. But it was almost certainly the startling, even shocking intensity with which Jane publicly formulates unladylike eroticism as well as indecorous social resentment that struck so many Victorians as revolutionary. Here, therefore, Mary Oliphant's association of Brontë's book with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* "in a new aspect" was not just accurate but perhaps unnervingly so. For even while Jane formulates a traditional feminist creed when she argues that "women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do ... and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings" (141), her narrative dramatizes a "furious" yearning not just for political equality but for equality of desire.

That *Jane Eyre* introduced audiences to the "wild declarations" and egalitarian strivings of an unprecedentedly passionate heroine certainly explains why the novel has always had a special appeal for women, who tend to identify—and want to identify—with this compelling narrator's powerful voice. For the same reason, the work has often elicited different, at times less enthusiastic, responses from male readers, with some dismissing Jane as priggish (for refusing to succumb to her desires) and others disparaging her ferocity (in articulating those desires).³ Yet of course Brontë's novel broods as intently on the mysteries of male sexuality as it does on those of female eroticism, transcribing the fantasies of both sexes with uncanny clarity and (for its period) astonishing candor. To men as well as women, in other words, *Jane Eyre* tells a shifting almost phantasmagoric series of stories about the



perils and possibilities of sexual passion. For indeed, as Elaine Showalter observed some years ago, a "strain of intense female sexual fantasy and eroticism runs through [even] the first four chapters of the novel and contributes to their extraordinary and thrilling immediacy" (Showalter 115).

To be sure, Brontë was working with plots familiar to many of her readers, who would have known, among other significant precursors, the Cinderella story Samuel Richardson told in *Pamela* and the Bluebeard tale of Anne Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. But the author's genius in *Jane Eyre* consisted in the fervor with which she defamiliarized such received plots by putting them together in a new way. In fact, as a number of comparatively traditional analyses have long since suggested, it's possible to summarize this novel's narrative with a *National Inquirer* headline: CINDERELLA MEETS BLUEBEARD! More particularly, a "poor, obscure, plain and little" but notably rebellious stepchild/orphan becomes the servant of a princely master, falls in love with him, and desires him intensely, even while finding herself used and abused by him. In fact, this not very acquiescent Cinderella sees her Prince Charming turn into Bluebeard, the jailor (and murderer) of wives, while she herself simultaneously toys with fantasies of seducing him and rebels against his sway by struggling to subvert his power. Brontë's book thus asks a number of crucial questions. For example, what if instead of wielding her broom Cinderella rages against (and amidst) the cinders? And what if Prince Charming is not just a charming aristocrat but a Bluebeard who elicits passionate desire in Cinderella? And at the same time, what if Bluebeard feels he has exonerating reasons for locking up his sexual past? Can, or *should*, a Cinderella like this one live happily ever after with such a Bluebeard?

To say that Jane Eyre "is" Cinderella and that Rochester "is" Bluebeard is of course to imply that they embody ideas of the feminine and the masculine in a particularly resonant way: an impoverished and orphaned dependent in a hostile household, Cinderella is, after all, condemned to a life of humiliating servitude from which she can only hope to escape through the intervention of an imperious man, and significantly, in the old tale, she finally achieves release through diminution. The ancient plot stresses not just her modesty (and the modesty of her needs), but also her physical daintiness—modesty (and the modesty of her needs), but also her physical daintiness— notably the tininess of her feet compared to those of her arrogant stepsisters, both of whom are literally as well as figuratively swollen with pride and ambition. As for Bluebeard, in the old tale he is depicted as a mysteriously predatory, dark ("blue"), even swarthy figure whose beard signifies an animal physicality frighteningly associated with his femicidal erotic past, and, more particularly, with the bloody chamber in the attic where he keeps the ghastly relics of past sexual conquests.

