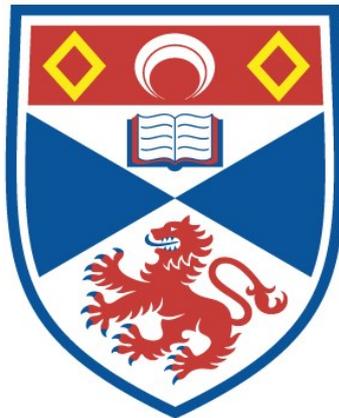


**A LIBERATIVE IMAGINATION:
RECONSIDERING THE FICTION OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË IN
LIGHT OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY**

Kj Swanson

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews**



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A Liberative Imagination:
Reconsidering the Fiction of Charlotte Brontë
in Light of Feminist Theology

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University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of PhD
at the University of St Andrews

26 September 2016

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to show the ways in which Charlotte Brontë's fiction anticipates the concerns of contemporary feminist theology. Whilst Charlotte Brontë's novels have held a place of honor in feminist literary criticism for decades, there has been a critical tendency to associate the proto-feminism of Brontë's narratives with a rejection of Christianity—namely, that Brontë's heroines achieve their personal, social and spiritual emancipation by throwing off the shackles of a patriarchal Church Establishment. And although recent scholarly interest in Victorian Christianity has led to frequent interpretations that regard Brontë's texts as upholding a Christian worldview, in many such cases, the theology asserted in those interpretations arguably undermines the liberative impulse of the narratives. In both cases, the religious and romantic plots of Brontë's novels are viewed as incompatible. This thesis suggests that by reading Brontë's fiction in light of an interdisciplinary perspective that interweaves feminist and theological concerns, the narrative journeys of Brontë's heroines might be read as affirming both Christian faith and female empowerment. Specifically, this thesis will examine the ways in which feminist theologians have identified the need for Christian doctrines of sin and grace to be articulated in a manner that better reflects women's experience. By exploring the interrelationship between women's writing and women's faith, particularly as it relates to the literary origins of feminist theology and Brontë's position within the nineteenth-century female publishing boom, Brontë's liberative imagination for female flourishing can be re-examined. As will be argued, when considered from the vantage point of feminist theology, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* portray women's need to experience grace as self-construction and interdependence rather than self-denial and subjugation.

For my grandmother, Ione Hazleton, a “free human being with an independent will,” if ever there was one.

“God did not give me my life to throw away.”

—*Jane Eyre*

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Introduction

I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer.

—*Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's fiction has played an important role in feminist literary criticism for decades. The strength and complexity of Brontë's heroines—how they voice their distress, frame their hopes, and assert their equality—has secured them a permanent place in feminist discourse. It is equally notable that Brontë's work has been labeled “anti-Christian” by nineteenth-century critics and contemporary commentators alike, even though, as Brontë scholar Marianne Thormählen points out, the label was applied “then censoriously, now approvingly.”¹ Brontë's heroines wrestle within patriarchal religious and social strictures in ways that to Victorians smacked of irreverence and to twentieth-century feminist scholars blazed with empowered dissent. As this thesis will suggest, however, the criticism Brontë offers and the liberative vision her fiction unfolds are in need of reconsideration in light of how feminist theology makes it possible to see Christian conviction and female empowerment as mutually constitutive rather than exclusive. And although the scholarly turn towards Victorian Christianity over the past twenty-five years has produced an increasing number of readings that see religious commitment reflected in the proto-feminism of Brontë's texts, very little Brontë scholarship has been done in direct conversation with feminist theology. By reading Brontë's fiction in light of an interdisciplinary perspective that interweaves feminist and theological concerns, the perceived contradictory or exclusionary relationship between the novels' feminist protest and their affirmation of a Christian worldview can be re-examined. More specifically, feminist theology, which uses women's experience as its basis,

¹ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 7.

may, I suggest, serve as a helpful vantage point from which to investigate the ways in which Brontë's heroines resist temptation to surrender to culturally prescribed roles and how they assert their spiritual agency. Further, reading *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* as examples of women's experience will, it is hoped, illuminate the liberative augmentations to traditional theologies that feminist theologians propose for women socialized into patriarchy.²

But first, what is feminist theology? A more extensive account of this is offered in chapters one and two, but for now, the broadest definition is that it is theology done from a feminist perspective. Within this, however, there are a multiplicity of methods and aims. The spectrum of what "feminist theology" can mean is helpfully summarized by Serene Jones in *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* where she acknowledges that to some it "describes a highly intellectual enterprise undertaken only by professional theologians," whereas to others it may simply refer to "any type of feminist 'spiritual thinking'."³ Whilst the history and development of feminist theology as a discipline will also be discussed in the following chapters, what can be clarified now is that feminist theologians, for the most part, work to uncover the ways in which androcentrism and patriarchy have shaped, often unconsciously, theology and doctrine. This is done with the aim of identifying beliefs and practices that have contributed to women's oppression, but also in the hope of promoting correctives or supplementary alternatives. At the same time, feminist theology draws attention to the ways in which theology can serve the purposes of promoting justice and empowerment for women. That said, although feminist theology comprises numerous faith and non-faith perspectives, this thesis applies feminist theological frameworks as they pertain to Christian doctrine and practice. Given the diversity of feminist theological standpoints, many of which fundamentally depart from Christian theology, the feminist theological construals of sin, grace, and the human condition that are employed in the following chapters are used in the

² The decision not to include Brontë's posthumously published novel *The Professor* is addressed below.

³ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 13.

service of providing a more complete picture of the Christian message and not as a wholesale rejection or replacement of the traditional theologies they critique. In this sense, Christian feminist theology does not replace traditional theology, but rather, is concerned with clarifying and expanding how to more meaningfully communicate the Christian message—namely, by liberating Christian theology from the patriarchal biases that constrain its ability to serve as good news for all and not just for some.

Whilst there are a number of reasons for drawing Brontë's fiction and feminist theology into the same conversation, the starting point for this project lies in the feminist theological interest in cultivating stories of female empowerment as a resource for spiritual formation.⁴ In seeking to counter dominant patriarchal narratives, feminist theologians have pointed to the need for women to have models from which to imagine wholeness. Part of the challenge feminist theologians have identified in women's struggle to claim spiritual freedom, as will be discussed in chapters one and two, is that women lack stories that affirm their experiences or model hopeful alternatives. However, as Sallie McFague observes, in encountering a story that affirms one's experience there is a kind of "companionship of those on the way,"⁵ a joyful relief in hearing of journeys that reflect your own: "we recognize our own pilgrimages from here to there in a *good* story; we feel its movement in our bones and know that it is 'right.'"⁶ What this thesis proposes is that there is something in the journeys of Brontë's heroines that feels "right" and "good" in a feminist theological sense. Moreover, I will seek to show that the spiritual questioning and religious critique within Brontë's novels, which have most often been read as disavowals of Christianity, reflect, from a feminist theological viewpoint, faithful resistance to theologies that undermine the Christian vision for female flourishing. Thus "liberative imagination" refers in one regard to the

⁴ This will be explored in chapters one and two. See also Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, 4-6; Zappone, *Hope For Wholeness*, 34-40.

⁵ McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*, 138-139.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 138 (emphasis mine).

emancipatory role of narrative in capacitating women towards claiming and embodying the fullness for which they were created. Additionally, it is a way of describing the qualities present in such narratives. Key themes within what feminist theologians have identified as the stories that “integrate [women’s] spiritual and social quests”⁷ are depictions of women’s self-construction rather than self-abnegation as well as portrayals of women’s healthy interdependence instead of subjugated or objectified relational postures. For women whose spiritual understanding and view of self have been formed primarily through the narratives of patriarchy, feminist theologians advocate that women’s imaginations need liberation as much as do their bodies and souls. And it is within this conversation that I wish to consider the work of Charlotte Brontë.

Interpreting Charlotte Brontë’s novels in light of feminist theology is, in a sense, a twofold process. On the one hand, it will involve highlighting the ways in which Brontë’s fiction anticipates the concerns of feminist theology; whilst on the other hand it seeks to show how a feminist theological interpretation potentially destabilizes perceived discontinuities between the feminist and religious impulses in Brontë’s work. The former activity involves listening for how Brontë’s novels raise questions and imagine solutions similar to those investigated by feminist theologians since the 1970s. The latter looks for ways that feminist theological articulations of sin and grace connect the texts’ affirmations of Christian faith with their proto-feminist plots. Because women’s fiction and feminist literary criticism helped to shape the feminist theological task, as Chapter One will explore, the following chapters do not, for the most part, distinguish between how Brontë’s work pre-visions feminist theology and how feminist theology enhances interpretations of Brontë. Rather, as will be seen, the readings of *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* in chapters four through six reflect a dual-listening to what Brontë’s fiction anticipates and what feminist theology illuminates.

⁷ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 120.

The organization of this thesis is, therefore, designed to contextualize the interrelationship between feminist theology and women's writing before directly addressing Brontë's fiction and how it has been interpreted. In Chapter One we explore the correlation between what the first generations of nineteenth-century female authors wrote about and what twentieth-century feminist theologians found when they turned to women's literature as a theological resource. This serves as an introduction to Chapter Two's survey of the feminist theological task and, in particular, its explanation of the categories of sin and grace through which Brontë's novels will be read in chapters four to six. Before turning to the novels themselves, Chapter Three discusses the gap between what feminist literary criticism has praised and criticized about Brontë's work and what religious critics of Brontë have identified. Following this, Chapter Four reads *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* through feminist theological categories of sin as reflected in women's experience. We look first at how *Jane Eyre* depicts what feminist theologians have called the feminine sin of fusion and then consider *Shirley* according to the feminine sin of fragmentation. Chapter Five explores the ways in which the female protagonists of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* respond to the temptations they encounter through the feminist theological depictions of grace as containment and right relation. To close, Chapter Six offers a view of *Villette* as a negative example of these categories in which grace is depicted through its absence.

Important to note at this point is that although excellent scholarship has been done in regard to Brontë's novel *The Professor*,⁸ I have elected not to include it for two reasons. Firstly, as a first-person narrative with a masculine protagonist, *The Professor* does not as readily lend itself the kind of feminist theological approach that is advocated in the scope of this thesis. Secondly, because *The Professor* is a posthumously published version of Brontë's first attempt at a novel, for which she did not oversee the final editing process for publication, the choice was made to focus only on the three novels Brontë published in her lifetime. Although many of

⁸ Two foundational resources for this thesis, Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* and Thormählen's *The Brontës and Religion*, are representative of such scholarship.

the frameworks explored herein also relate to *The Professor*, I have chosen to prioritize the three Brontë novels that place women's voices at the center of the narrative.

The continual goal of feminist theologians has been to uncover and incorporate the “lost voices” of women throughout history whilst endeavoring to promote women's agency—that is, helping women to locate and use their voices in freedom and strength. Rita Nakashima Brock refers to this dynamic using Nelle Morton's example of “being heard into [one's] own liberating speech,” wherein the “empathetic, receptive listening of others allows a woman to tell her own story of suffering fully from beginning to end.”⁹ As feminist theologians have claimed, this “voicing” contributes nuanced and life-giving responses to women's struggles and more generative articulations of the Christian calling. Whilst Charlotte Brontë cannot be called a “lost voice,” there is, I suggest, a liberative dimension to her writing that has not been fully explored. By reconsidering how Brontë's novels portray female suffering and female flourishing, in ways that justify the voicing of women's laments over their subjugation and the assertion of their right to claim equality on religious grounds, we might be able to be read Brontë's novels not just for how they facilitate women's ability to imagine wholeness but also for their articulations of a Christian vision that affirms women's desire for liberty.

⁹ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 23, referring to Morton, *The Journey is Home* 202-210.

Chapter 1

An Unclaimed Inheritance: Women's Writing as a Feminist Theological Resource

In order to examine how feminist theology enhances our reading of Charlotte Brontë, it is important to situate her writing within the trajectory of nineteenth-century women's literary development, as it was the transformative voices of this era that shaped the legacy from which contemporary feminist theology continues to derive meaning in regard to women's spiritual formation. When feminist theologians began using women's experience as a source for theology, it was to women's literature that they initially turned for documentation of what that experience had been. However, as Virginia Woolf famously observed, the period in which women in West first achieved the literacy and economic stability requisite to document their lives in their own words is relatively recent. It was not until the late-eighteenth century that "the middle class women began to write."¹ Yet this cultural shift was also facilitated in part, I suggest, by changes in theological doctrine and practice relating to the Evangelical revival of the same era. By exploring how women in the West came to assert their presence in literature, the resistance they faced, and what they wrote about, it is possible to see how the nineteenth-century literary voicing of women's spiritual concerns prefigures and has provided a valuable resource for feminist theology's re-articulation of the Christian message in light of women's experience. This chapter in four parts begins with an introduction to feminist theological methodology for interpreting women's narratives. This is followed by overviews of the religious and social factors that contributed to the rise of female authorship in the nineteenth-century and a discussion of how what women such as Charlotte Brontë wrote challenged

¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 66.

portrayals of the masculine experience as normative. Investigating the reflexive relationship between women's faith and women's writing affirms how the liberative imagination of feminist theology cannot be separated from the revolution that was women's writing in the nineteenth century, of which Charlotte Brontë was a leading "incendiary."²

1.1 Reading Women's Voices: A Theological Task

In *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God*, Heather Walton remarks that "it is impossible fully to comprehend the development of feminist theology without asking what women were reading in bed, on the bus and in their books groups."³ Central to Walton's reflections on the relationship between women's reading and feminist theology is that it was arguably through engagement with women's texts that the possibility of using women's experience as an authoritative theological source emerged in the first place. Whilst theologians such as Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ began to wrestle with the questions of how androcentrism was potentially distorting articulations of sin, salvation and relationship with the divine, writers Margaret Atwood, Ntozake Shange and their contemporaries were voicing women's spiritual hopes and traumas. The resounding familiarity of the suffering, rage, and desire for liberation expressed by contemporary women writers affirmed feminist theologians' search for a missing part of salvation's story—the voice of women's experiences. Through reading novels, plays and poems depicting women's suffering but which also envisioned what women's flourishing might look like, feminist theologians expanded their work beyond the propositional discourse of

² Oliphant, "Modern Novelists-Great and Small," 557.

³ Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing, and God*, 2.

the academy.⁴ In what has been characterized as a “seismic shift in theological thinking” that permanently shaped the trajectory of feminist theology,⁵ feminist theologians refused to “assimilate women’s stories to the doctrines of men,” turning instead to women’s literature as a theological source.⁶ This section discusses the turn toward narrative in feminist theology and how the feminist theological task of recovering women’s “lost voices” has involved resurrecting testimonies from the past as well as empowering women in the present. When what is at issue has been a lack of women’s voices, it is on women’s voices that feminist theologians have relied.

Heather Walton identifies the transition towards women’s literature as the beginning of feminist theology’s constructive phase, following its initially critical stance.⁷ Theologians working from feminist theoretical frameworks began to recognize that it was in women’s literature that their questions regarding women’s experience and theology were being both raised and addressed; such writers communicated what women needed salvation from and salvation unto.⁸ By claiming that women’s experience reached “its fullest articulation in literary form,” Walton explains, early feminist theologians positioned their work in such a way that the “acceptable academic genealogy” was no longer necessitated.⁹ It was in literature and only literature that women’s experience could be read in Western culture, and within that literature were those voices “unremarked by scripture and tradition.”¹⁰ As a result, a significant way in which feminist theology has affirmed the liberative function of narrative is through what Katherine Zappone calls the curation of

⁴ Exemplifying this, Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ cite a scene from Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* as one of the most-quoted feminist theological texts. Plaskow and Christ, introduction to *Weaving the Visions*, 5. For Shug and Celie’s conversation about God, see Walker, *The Color Purple*, 164-168.

⁵ Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 5 referring to an observation by Sands in *Escape From Paradise*, 124-125. See also Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 71.

⁶ Sands, *Escape From Paradise*, 124.

⁷ Chapter Two will discuss the origins and early projects of feminist theology.

⁸ Christ, *Diving Deep*, xii.

⁹ Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

“sacred stories”—bringing attention to narratives in which women’s spiritual experiences are affirmed instead of denied.¹¹ Informed early on by the work of philosopher Stephen Crites, whose 1971 essay, “The Narrative Quality of Experience”¹² influenced theologians across multiple disciplines,¹³ feminist theologians have drawn attention to how women’s identity and theological imagination is shaped by the narratives they encounter. Making use of the dialectic Crites draws between stories and experience, Carol Christ advocates that “as we begin to analyze the stories that in fact shape our lives as women, we must devour literature which reflects our experience.”¹⁴ For Zappone, this requires asking the questions, “Which stories shall we remember so that we can imagine wholeness? . . . How shall we imaginatively remember the stories? . . . What pieces of the stories liberate [women’s] imaginations; which tales paralyze?”¹⁵ Such questioning has contributed to feminist theologians seeking lost legacies of women’s knowledge and recovering unexplored models of women’s wholeness as represented within sacred texts, ancient myths, historical accounts, and fiction. Summarizing feminist writer Adrienne Rich’s argument along this line, Heather Walton explains that “although the narratives that sustain culture are dangerous for women they also carry within them the evidence of an unclaimed inheritance.”¹⁶ It is therefore, through re-reading and re-visioning past narratives that “women may begin to claim their own erased genealogy.”¹⁷

In addition to interrogating and reconceiving patriarchal narratives, feminist theologians have identified the important role narrative as such plays in women’s

¹¹ Zappone, *Hope for Wholeness*, 34-40.

¹² Crites, “Narrative Quality of Experience,” 291-311.

¹³ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 63.

¹⁴ Christ, “Spiritual Quest and Women’s Experience,” in Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, 231.

¹⁵ Zappone, *Hope for Wholeness*, 35.

¹⁶ Walton, “Feminist Revisioning,” in Hass, Jasper, and Jay, *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, 543, referring to Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.”

¹⁷ Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 63.

spiritual formation. Much of early feminist theology, which developed alongside the women's liberation movement and the practices of consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 70s, advocated the need for women to hear one another's stories and testimonies as a process of naming and experiencing their own. What Nelle Morton referred to as *being heard into speech* came to represent not just the liberative power of women voicing their struggles, but also the sacredness of women's stories.¹⁸ In *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Carol Christ writes:

Without stories [a woman] is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religiousThe expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known.¹⁹

Along with feminist theorists' identification of the ways in which women socialized into patriarchy may be inhibited in self-reflection or even self-knowledge, feminist theologians address the paradox that, "in a very real sense, women had not experienced their own experience."²⁰ As Carol Christ further explains, "When the stories a woman reads or hears do not validate what she feels or thinks . . . she may wonder if her feelings are wrong. She may even deny herself that she feels what she feels."²¹ Thus, part of the feminist theological task is the transforming of dominant cultural and religious narratives that diminish women's capacity to know themselves as whole, through fostering women's abilities to narrate for themselves—to *hear* women into speech.

In light of this, it is necessary to briefly address some of the limitations of these early feminist theological frameworks. As Chapter Two will discuss, the use of the term "women's experience" always carries with it the potential of universalizing or essentializing concepts of womanhood. Just as there is no typical "woman," there

¹⁸ Morton, *The Journey is Home*, 202-210.

¹⁹ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 1.

²⁰ Christ, "Spiritual Quest," 228.

²¹ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 5.

is no shared universal “experience” of all women. A decade after the initial publication of *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, editors Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ admitted how, “ten years later, we recognize that the term ‘women’s experience’ too often means ‘white, middle-class women’s experience,’ in just the way that ‘human’ too often means ‘male.’”²² Acknowledging this, feminist theologians have continued to problematize abstractions of female identity and experience, most especially when they are identified within feminist theological language and proposals. Thus, part of feminist theologians’ work of engaging the multiplicity of ways women self-define and experience womanhood according to race, class, socio-economic status, and gender identity involves drawing attention to the unconscious privileges implicit in many of the foundational feminist theological texts.²³ This is especially pertinent insofar as the paradigms developed in the first twenty years of the discipline continue to shape feminist theological method and inquiry.²⁴ Thus, by employing women’s stories as counter-narratives to those of patriarchal tradition, feminist theologians also cultivate awareness of biases present within their own work of narrating women’s experience.

Another way in which narrative informs how feminist theologians identify and speak about spirituality and women’s experience is in regard to faith praxis. In her study of women’s faith development, Nicola Slee identifies narrative as a fundamental way in which women conceptualize their spiritual lives. She writes of her interview subjects, “there was no woman who did not use story as a way of reflecting on her faith journey and her present experience of faith.”²⁵ Words like “quest” and “journey” are regularly used to describe women’s faith experiences, communicating a process of discovery and continuing revelation as a counterplot to

²² Plaskow and Christ, introduction to *Weaving the Visions*, 3.

²³ Dawn Llewellyn summarizes this issue well. See *Reading, Feminism and Spirituality*, 12, 21-23.

²⁴ This thesis being one such example, as the feminist theological categories of sin and grace explored and employed herein are rooted in the proposals of feminist theology’s origin years and classic texts.

²⁵ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 68.

abstract and disembodied representations of belief. In *Women and Spirituality*, Ursula King observes that “the spiritual dimension within contemporary feminism has much to do with the determined quest for wholeness and integration, the attempt to heal deep divisions and overcome all dualisms.”²⁶ As a result, feminist theologians promote the image of spiritual journeying not just as a constructive way to augment theological traditions that depict salvation as a transaction, but as the means by which women most commonly understand their spirituality.

Finally, along with the significance of narrative to faith experience, it is important to note that feminist theology’s engagement with the theological function of literature is reflected in a wider theological conversation about how literature communicates theological meaning in ways alternative to doctrinal propositions. As T.R. Wright observes, literary “devices such as metaphor, symbol, and narrative, themselves generate theological meaning.”²⁷ David Jasper draws attention to certain theologians whose “recourse to literature as a source of theological reflection is rooted in literature’s capacity to go beyond any conclusion we may claim to have reached, a valuable corrective to the ‘systematic’ theologians.”²⁸ Literature’s capacity for engaging mystery, conflict and irresolution has been held in high value in contexts where orthodox beliefs and methodology are seen to be evading challenging questions. Jasper states further:

Arguably . . . where theology has stumbled and fallen silent, the voices of the poets and writers have continued to speak and be heard. . . . Literature continues to speak, even in the midst of silence, and possibly because it has always been sensitive, in a way that theology paradoxically has often not been, to the inaudibility of the word, to the silence and darkness of God.²⁹

²⁶ King, *Women and Spirituality*, 85.

²⁷ Wright, “The Victorians,” in Hass, Jasper and Jay, *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, 149.

²⁸ Jasper specifically mentions Ulrich Simon as an example, but Paul Ricoeur may be most notable in this regard. Jasper, “The Study of Literature and Theology,” in Hass, Jasper and Jay, *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

What feminist theology and other interdisciplinary theological fields have identified is that literature may not only convey theological meaning differently than does systematic theology, it may *mean* different theology. Because of its narrative mode, literature tends to investigate the complexity of lived experiences in an expanded way that systematic theology can only address conceptually. Whereas systematic theology may effectively employ metaphor, literature's narrative form lends itself more directly to engagement with lived experience. As Nicola Slee describes, "like metaphor, story gives shape, significance and intentionality to experience, but, unlike metaphor, its linear unfolding over time implies a historical perspective on experience which is capable of capturing the dynamic movement and flow of human experience."³⁰ Literature's capacity to investigate the phenomena of human experience and divine relationship as progressive or linear, thus lends itself to theologies that address faith's temporality more so than its transcendence.³¹ In this way, feminist theology's prioritizing of narrative contributes to its criticism of traditional dualisms of mind and body, reinforcing the construal of grace as an embodied experience, not solely a spiritual deliverance.

This section has briefly reviewed the intrinsic role literature and narrative serve in feminist theology. It was through theologians reading literature by women that women's experience emerged as both "*source* and *norm*" for the feminist theological task.³² Since then, feminist theologians have sought to cultivate women's sacred stories, reclaim and reframe patriarchal narratives that have shaped women's capacity to name their experiences as unique, and to empower women's voices through hearing their testimonies of spiritual formation. Understanding how literature functions authoritatively for feminist theologians contributes to this thesis's dual approach of reading Brontë's fiction through feminist theology and identifying the ways Brontë's narratives anticipate feminist theology. Because feminist theology uses women's writing to inform and generate questions of how sin

³⁰ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 67-68.

³¹ Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 199.

³² Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 46 (italics original).

and grace are embodied in women's lives, investigating Brontë's novels for how they portray grace according to women's experience is a natural outgrowth of the feminist theological endeavor. However, before presenting the specific feminist theological frameworks of sin and grace that will be applied in this thesis—to be examined in Chapter Two—it is necessary to contextualize feminist theology's indebtedness to women's writing within the time period that launched women into publishing for the first time on a grand scale in the West. Additionally relevant is a consideration of Brontë's place within a legacy of female authors whose literary entrance into the public sphere was preceded and made possible by women who responded to a call to discipleship by claiming a spiritual authority of their own. As will be seen in the next section, when women began to write their lives in their own words, it was both a critique and a reinforcement of their cultural status as spiritual and social rejuvenators. In the examination of how feminist theology thrives on reading women's voices, the importance of listening to the voices from the century in which women gained cultural acceptance as writers cannot be underestimated.

1.2 Seeing New Prospects: Nineteenth-Century Literature, Religion and A Woman's Place

The period during which “the middle-class women began to write”³³ is also notable for the emergence of the novel as a serious form of literature. Not only are these two developments related, but the changing nature of nineteenth-century religious discourse was integral in both cases. As J. Russell Perkin asserts, “To ignore Victorian Christianity is to risk serious misunderstanding of Victorian fiction, while to study Victorian Christianity is to become aware of how complex and

³³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 66.

diverse a phenomenon it really was.”³⁴ By considering nineteenth-century developments in religious practice and literary forms and the opportunity these cultural shifts afforded to women, it is possible to see this period as a nexus wherein literature, religious discourse, and feminist social concerns met. Beginning with a discussion of how the nineteenth-century Evangelical revival in Great Britain established precedents for women’s writing and publishing, this section in three parts addresses the spiritual and cultural developments that contributed to the novel’s rise to literary dominance, as well as the socio-economic factors that made it possible for female authors to become an established literary presence.

Sacred Enfranchisement

Of the many causes that led to women entering the publishing sphere, one of the more surprising is that of the Evangelical revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in England. Despite its dissemination through a society with an ever-increasing ethos of cultural division for women and men, the Evangelical movement fostered lay participation in spiritual discourse that opened doors for women in unprecedented ways. Evangelicalism, a Low Church network within the Church of England, emphasized personal devotion through study, extemporaneous prayer, and the prioritizing of individual experience. As a result, the Evangelical focus on direct, personal relationship to God, “expanded sacred enfranchisement—transferring access to the divine from the exclusive control of the clerics to any who believed.”³⁵ As Church historian Doreen Rosman remarks, “Evangelicalism did much to encourage a love of books and an interest in study,”³⁶ partnering faithfulness with rigorous personal reading. However, the diligent readership characteristic of Evangelicalism existed alongside a theology that was

³⁴ Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 57.

³⁵ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis*, 152-153.

³⁶ Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture*, 233.

perceived by its critics as lacking scholarly rigor.³⁷ Rosman states further that any weakness in Evangelical argumentation “was in part a product of its success in spreading intellectual interest among its rank and file, for some of those who contributed to the religious press were probably self-taught thinkers tackling subjects beyond their competence.”³⁸ Nevertheless, this evangelical fostering of lay devotional writing along with the founding of organizations such as the Religious Tract Society, which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1849,³⁹ created opportunities for women to participate in the movement’s vital aim of conversion through evangelism. It is important to note, therefore, the diverse facets of evangelical literary culture that promoted women’s entry into writing careers.

A chief reason women were not discouraged from the publishing zeal of Evangelicalism was the pervasive cultural belief that women were innately morally superior to men. Both within Evangelicalism and without, women were seen as mediators of men’s salvation, functioning as “cultural filters” of the depraved public sphere.⁴⁰ This paradigm of female spiritual virtue, which will be discussed at greater length in section 2.3 of this chapter, played a key role in women’s early efforts at public writing. As Rebecca Styler explains, “the identification of ‘woman’ as moral educator legitimized her act of writing to disseminate Christian messages through society.”⁴¹ This is because during the time in which women were being idealized as moral rejuvenators, Evangelicalism was infusing congregants with a gospel call toward active labor for Christ. Whereas this spiritual mandate to work for the growth of God’s Kingdom could readily be taken up by men, women’s restriction to the domestic sphere created a conflict between spiritual calling and Christian custom.⁴² Ruth Jenkins suggests that many women faced spiritual crises

³⁷ Church, *The Oxford Movement*, 18; Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, 64, 98.

³⁸ Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture*, 233.

³⁹ Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness*, 42.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 22. Charles Dickens’s female characters have largely been associated with this paradigm. See Yildirim, “Angels of the House: Dickens’ Victorian Women.”

⁴¹ Styler, *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century*, 13.

⁴² Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 22.

when trying to resolve the contradiction of how they could “enact what they believed to be God’s plan for them when it conflicted directly with clerical and social edicts for female behavior.”⁴³ Religious writing, therefore, became a way evangelical women could fulfill the task being preached to them without compromising their feminine duties. As Elisabeth Jay observes, “the production of a morally wholesome domestic novel” could very much have functioned as “a performative instance of female religious witness in that it reinscribed the women’s sphere of witness within the home.”⁴⁴ Prohibited from preaching, most forms of teaching, and from the public sphere, religious writing was an ideal venue for women whose hearts responded to the command to serve and evangelize.

Furthermore, the Evangelical sanctification of family life,⁴⁵ which gave women “the redemptive task of making home a place to compensate for the harshness and moral compromise of the masculine public realm,”⁴⁶ fed into the growing marketplace for domestic manuals and didactic fiction. The first thirty years of the nineteenth century, the time credited with the genesis of the religious novel, was directly followed by an upsurge of etiquette guides written for and largely by women.⁴⁷ Texts like Sarah Stickney Ellis’ series *The Women of England*, *The Wives of England* and *The Daughters of England* offered didactic counsel on how to serve a husband, how to treat servants, and overall, how to exemplify Christian womanhood.⁴⁸ As Ellis explained to her readers, to become a wife was to “become the centre of a circle of influence, which will widen and extend itself to other circles, until it mixes with the great ocean of eternity.”⁴⁹

⁴³ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 18.

⁴⁴ Elisabeth Jay, “Women Writers and Religion,” in Shattock, *Women and Literature*, 257.

⁴⁵ Bradley, *Call to Seriousness*, 179.

⁴⁶ Styler, *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century*, 9.

⁴⁷ Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture*, 189; Langland, “Women’s Writing and the Domestic Sphere,” in Shattock, *Women and Literature*, 124.

⁴⁸ Beetham, “Women and the Consumption of Print,” in Shattock, *Women and Literature in Britain*, 62.

⁴⁹ Ellis, *Wives of England*, 62.

A further reason women were allowed and, in some circles, encouraged to write domestic manuals or home devotionals was that such texts were based on women's experience. Exemplary women's writing, including tracts and religious fiction, was seen to be a natural outgrowth of feminine temperament and therefore did not overtly challenge the educated masculine purview or religious authority.⁵⁰ According to Elisabeth Jay, "writing fiction, in as far as it was a permissible form of preaching, was so because it was grounded in 'experience' rather than in any claim to 'knowledge' of the rules of classical literature."⁵¹ Thus, through an initially limited sphere, specifically, topics related to the home and to relationships, women writers began to be an accepted part of the literary field in which "fiction became the vehicle through which to disseminate and reinforce moral and ethical standards."⁵²

The era in which women established their presence in the publishing world was equally a time of religious upheaval and changes in cultural perceptions of authority. In both cases, literature contributed to and was transformed by the debates. One way this can be seen is in the fact that the nineteenth century saw a great number of theologians, religious scholars and devotional writers who were, at the same time, poets and novelists.⁵³ This was perhaps not so much the result of novels eventually emerging as a tool for evangelism as it was the altered critical response to novels as a serious literary form.⁵⁴ Stephen Prickett claims, "it is no accident that the great tradition of nineteenth-century religious thinkers, men like Coleridge, Maurice, Keble, Newman, Arnold, and even Hort, were part of a literary tradition as much as a theological one."⁵⁵ Likewise, as creative literature became the domain of philosophical questioning and spiritual examination, so too did

⁵⁰ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 13.

⁵¹ Jay, "Women Writers and Religion," 257.

⁵² Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 27.

⁵³ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 6.

⁵⁴ Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 12.

⁵⁵ Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion*, 133.

writers gain new authoritative status. J. Russell Perkin describes how “writers such as Carlyle and Ruskin spoke for many Victorians with the authority of prophets, while Wordsworth provides the clearest example of the way that writers were seen as moral and spiritual teachers.”⁵⁶

Notably, this attribution of spiritual authority to authors has been linked to a decline in religious worldview.⁵⁷ Polarized factions within the Established Church, dissenting forms of worship gaining increased political and social recognition, and the influence of German Biblical Criticism are but a few indicators of what has come to be called the Victorian crisis of faith.⁵⁸ Within this changing religious landscape, the novel’s ability narratively to portray doubt and faith as progressive journeys aided its ascendancy. Perkin identifies the novel’s capacity to “represent what it feels like to believe or to doubt, and to identify some of the social and psychological factors involved in faith and loss of faith.”⁵⁹ As German Higher Criticism challenged traditional assumptions about scriptural authority, so also did novel reading transform the interpretive framework through which readers approached scripture. Instead of hearing the Bible as speaking from “a single omniscient dogmatic voice,” nineteenth-century readers began to interpret the tensions and opposing voices within the text as meaningful dialogue.⁶⁰

At the same time, the appearance of religious novels as a popular nineteenth-century genre furthered the perception of novels as texts able to communicate spiritual truths. The religious novel, engendered in the Evangelical movement, was followed and often challenged by the Tractarian novels of religious controversy that sought to “prove the truth of a particular understanding of Christianity at the expense of others.”⁶¹ Proponents of the Oxford Movement, begun in the 1830’s, were

⁵⁶ Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁸ See Symondson and Young, *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*.

⁵⁹ Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 15.

⁶⁰ Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, 108.

⁶¹ Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 69.

popularly called Tractarians, derived from the movement's *Tracts for the Times* that were used to disseminate the call to sacramental and apostolic orthodoxy.⁶² But along with its eponymous tracts, the Anglican High Church movement also produced religious fiction since credited as helping the popularity of religious novels reach critical mass by the mid-nineteenth century.⁶³ Among the Tractarian novelists were numerous women who made their literary mark, the most famous being Charlotte Mary Yonge, who was mentored by John Keble. Yet whilst Evangelicals and High Church apologists used novels to persuade the populace toward right faith, Victorian readers disillusioned by the Establishment found moral and spiritual sustenance in literature. As Perkin claims, "novels were not merely entertainment, or even insightful representations of human character and society; instead fiction filled the need for an authoritative text, and novels became secular scriptures."⁶⁴ Or, put most directly by Thomas Carlyle in his influential "Hero as Man of Letters" lecture of 1840, "Books are our church too."⁶⁵

That novels could at the same time be successful means of advocating orthodoxy and be compelling replacements of that orthodoxy suggests the suppleness and strength of the novel as a literary form. Whether as secular scripture or theological literature, the nineteenth-century novel's prominent place in the relationship between literature and theology is unmistakable. As it was through novel-writing that Victorian women gained their strongest literary platform from which they could present their experiences, taking a closer look at how women came to permeate the publishing world of Victorian England further affirms the value of engaging Victorian fiction through the lens of feminist theology.

⁶² Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 3: 243-282.

⁶³ Maison, *Search You Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age*, 3.

⁶⁴ Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 10.

⁶⁵ Carlyle, "The Hero As Man of Letters," in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, 194.

The Superabundant Woman

The questions Virginia Woolf posed in *A Room of One's Own* regarding what conditions were necessary for women to write and why it was that so little was known about women's lives before the eighteenth century, led her, and scholars who followed, to surmise that it was only in the eighteenth century that cultural circumstances arose to provide women the time, education, and position to be able to write.⁶⁶ Whereas the eighteenth century was marked by literary efforts by female aristocracy, the nineteenth century's increase in education among a growing British middle class contributed to a breakthrough of female authors from broader socio-economic backgrounds.⁶⁷ Although female education remained circumscribed to the disciplines deemed appropriate for future managers of households, reading was considered not only a necessary acquirement, but was also one of few pleasurable pastimes sanctioned for females.⁶⁸ By the second half of the century, libraries were targeting women readers when it came to the purchasing of books.⁶⁹

With more women reading came the reasonable outcome of more women writing. Higher female literacy meant women's increased access to literature and a growing facility to respond or reflect through writing.⁷⁰ That "their writing grew out of their reading" was a common assertion made by female authors of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ This dynamic whereby the demand for novels to satisfy the women readers' market and women's consumption of novels served as inspiration to write indicates women's noteworthy contribution to nineteenth-century literature and the elevated status of the novel—women helped create the demand and women rose to meet it.

⁶⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 43, 47.

⁶⁷ Beetham, "Consumption of Print," 58.

⁶⁸ Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 64.

⁶⁹ Beetham, "Consumption of Print," 62.

⁷⁰ Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century England*, 2-3.

⁷¹ Beetham, "Consumption of Print," 73.

The literary market's expansion occurred at the same time that the number of women needing to support themselves financially increased. By the mid-nineteenth century, the "Superabundant Woman" problem was a main topic of concern.⁷² An 1851 census led to interpretations of there being an "excess" in the female population of half a million, indicating a superabundance of women who would remain unmarried.⁷³ Whilst on the public spectrum this raised questions of unmarried women's role in society,⁷⁴ on the personal side, numerous women had to seek financial stability outside of marriage.⁷⁵ Given this situation, writing was an advantageous option for women as it was one of the few forms of paid work that could be done within the home.⁷⁶ Victorian anxiety over women's proper sphere could be pacified by the fact that a woman need not cease domestic duties or leave the private realm in order to write. Furthermore, within the limited socially acceptable employment for Victorian women, writing carried the greatest chance for financial improvement. Elaine Showalter explains how even a second-rate novel's copyright sale could equal what a governess made in a year.⁷⁷

The gradual acceptance of writing as an occupation for Victorian women was furthered by the fact that female authors could publish pseudonymously or anonymously.⁷⁸ Writing under hidden identities preserved privacy for female writers, limited potential notoriety or scandal for those connected to the writer, and could minimize potential discrimination from critics.⁷⁹ As will be discussed in the following section, reviews of women's writing privileged discussion of the author's sex over the author's text. Hence, Victorian female writers often chose masculine

⁷² Nestor, *Female Friendship and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell*, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁵ Bradley, *Call to Seriousness*, 124.

⁷⁶ Shattock, introduction to *Women and Literature*, 3.

⁷⁷ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 48.

⁷⁸ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 12.

⁷⁹ Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 1.

pseudonyms in an attempt to be reviewed for their artistic and literary contribution, not their gender.⁸⁰ This adoption of male pseudonyms, according to Elaine Showalter, indicates women's acknowledgment of the need to role-play in order to be successful.⁸¹ Such gendered role-playing implies women writers' desire to be treated with the respect their male counterparts received, rather than patronized or eulogized as anomalies. However, use of masculine pseudonyms also reveals a perceived conflict between the writer's vocation and feminine identity.⁸² In an era when womanhood was seen as its own vocation,⁸³ writing under a masculine name circumvented the cultural contradiction of the female author's pursuit of a professional literary career, even if it upheld it at the same time.

As this section has shown, the progress of women's entry into the literary domain would be difficult to view apart from the changing religious atmosphere which, while expanding the modes and meanings of religious practice, also created opportunities for women's religious vocation. Whether it was through the religious novel, domestic instruction, or popular fiction, the nineteenth century saw the first generations in western culture in which women's thoughts, beliefs, and experiences were being documented and distributed for mass public consumption. If, as Christina Crosby claims, women have been "the unhistorical other of history," the nineteenth century is the period in which women began to contribute to the writing of their "other-ed" history.⁸⁴ As demonstrated in the following, however, increased literary expression did not come without formidable opposition. Having discussed how women in the nineteenth century came to write, we can now consider what they were up against in the process.

⁸⁰ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 57-58.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁴ Crosby, *The Ends of History*, 1.

1.3 Writing Women's Voices: A Nineteenth-Century Challenge

It is perhaps a sign of the growing movements in the nineteenth century toward equality for women, labor rights, and religious freedoms that this time was also marked by vocal advocacy for the preservation of hierarchal order. As middle-class women such as Charlotte Brontë began to expand their own definitions of what was possible and appropriate for a woman to do, the prevailing assumptions about women, which had been considered implicit truths, now had to be explicitly argued, explained and preserved.⁸⁵ Lyn Pykett explains: "Nineteenth-century writing, by both men and women, was the site of a vigorous contest over who could represent Woman or women, and how Woman and women could be represented aesthetically, culturally and politically."⁸⁶ This public conversation took many shapes and for perhaps the first time in the West, women were contributing voices in the dialogue. Still, the resistance raised against the changing perceptions of women's duties, capabilities and rights was a powerful one. Opposition faced by women who wanted to write included the widespread acceptance of separate spheres for women and men, the dual feminine idealization and demonization that came from associating women with physical weakness, criticism for lack of education and experience, and religious prohibitions against women demonstrating spiritual authority. Whether or not a writer assented to women's subordination to men, she would inevitably need to address the resistance if she was going to be heard. The "Woman Question" of the nineteenth century was unavoidable.

Conservative reification of stratified social stations led by voices such as Thomas Carlyle, whom Ruth Jenkins credits as having "transformed the question voiced by Bunyan's Christian—what is my place in this world—into a cultural call

⁸⁵ Langland, "Women's Writing," 124.

⁸⁶ Pykett, "Women Writing Woman: Nineteenth-Century Representations of Gender and Sexuality," in Shattock, *Women and Literature*, 79.

to preserve social and economic hierarchies,”⁸⁷ fortified gender boundaries as well.⁸⁸ The hierarchical gender dualisms feminist theorists have since identified and worked to destabilize were confidently promoted in the nineteenth century. Carol Christ summarizes this paradigm:

Men have organized dualism hierarchically and have associated themselves with the positive sides of the dualisms—spirit, freedom, reason, and soul—while relegating women to the negative sides of the dualisms—nature, emotion, irrationality, and the body.⁸⁹

As Elaine Showalter points out, “when Victorian critics accused feminine novelists of misrepresenting masculine emotions, they often seem to have meant that men did not have emotions, but only reason, logic, and will.”⁹⁰ Such submission to men’s superior will, logic and reason was a dictum endorsed by Evangelical writers such as Sarah Stickney Ellis, who writes in *Daughters of England, Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (1843), “as women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength.”⁹¹ The averred inferiority of women was not portrayed negatively so much as it was discussed as a self-evident fact. Nor did it overtly contradict the belief that women were morally superior to men, at least as regarded the domestic sphere. Rather, a woman’s proper submission to male authority in acknowledgment of her own natural deficiencies, was a mark of her innate goodness. To understand one’s place in society was to know one’s duty and the fulfillment of duty was a good in and of itself.⁹² Therefore, to question one’s position could be seen not only as flouting one’s duty but also as blaspheming God’s divine order. Discussing nineteenth-century male biographers of women in the New Testament, Rebecca Styler cites the common Victorian belief

⁸⁷ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 16.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁹ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 25.

⁹⁰ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 149.

⁹¹ Ellis, *Daughters of England*, 6.

⁹² *Ibid.*

that, “divine plans are androcentric and that women are, at best, what Thomas Timpson describes in his 1834 work as the ‘most benevolent provision of the creator’ to men.”⁹³ It was considered natural, then, that women should occupy a separate sphere of life from that of men—a position that promoted the execution of their duties and protected them from the harsh domain that men must manage.

The Two Spheres

These two “spheres” of Victorian masculinity and femininity have since been categorized in terms of public versus domestic, production versus consumption.⁹⁴ Speaking of the industrial and technological patterns engendered by this dualism, Rosemary Radford Ruether explains: “The plan of our cities is made in this image: The sphere of domesticity, rest, and childrearing where women are segregated is clearly separated from those corridors down which men advance in assault upon the world of ‘work.’”⁹⁵ This social and often physical segregation of the feminized domestic sphere and the masculine world of public achievement also sustained the culture of suppression and implicit shame imposed on women. Elaine Showalter highlights the “increasingly secretive and ritualized physical experience” of women’s lives, marked by the Victorian view that “puberty, menstruation, sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause—the entire female sexual life cycle—constituted a habit of living that had to be concealed.”⁹⁶ Confinement, repression, and preservation of the home as an oasis from immoral society were the perimeters of women’s “Proper sphere.”⁹⁷ A woman’s duty was to facilitate men’s work.⁹⁸ In

⁹³ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 77 quoting Timpson, *Female Biography of the New Testament*, 2.

⁹⁴ Beetham, “Consumption of Print,” 69.

⁹⁵ Ruether, “Motherearth and the Megamachine,” in Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, 44.

⁹⁶ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 15.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-28; Styler, *Literary Theology*, 9.

⁹⁸ Ruether, “Motherearth and the Megamachine,” 44.

John Ruskin's words, "All such knowledge should be given her as may enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men."⁹⁹

With the guiding principle that a woman's role was that of helper rather than doer,¹⁰⁰ passivity and self-abnegation were traits valued in women. Valerie Sanders summarizes the nineteenth-century endorsement of this feminine archetype, explaining:

Every advice book and domestic manual since Hannah More reminds women that their demeanor in the family should be modest and submissive, self-sacrificing and gentle. Advancing claims on other people, or attracting public notice were alike inimical to the womanly ideal.¹⁰¹

Women's work was described as that which was done toward others, never for oneself.¹⁰² Being "annihilated and absorbed" into the identity of one's husband was considered the fulfillment of God's plan for women, and the preservation of women's subordinate role in the family was the common social narrative.¹⁰³ It is all the more clear, therefore, why women who desired to write, or needed to in order to provide for their families, would have faced inner conflict. As Elaine Showalter argues, "the training of Victorian girls in repression, concealment, and self-censorship was deeply inhibiting, especially for those who wanted to write."¹⁰⁴

The inner restraint women were taught was further supported by outer restriction enforced by the paternal ethos of preserving feminine innocence and ignorance. Part of occupying a separate sphere was having that domain defined by the patriarchs in one's life. Not only were certain topics promoted as appropriate for women and others prohibited, but it was not uncommon practice for male editors to

⁹⁹ Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens," 96.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 92-93.

¹⁰¹ Sanders, *Private Lives*, 7.

¹⁰² Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 22.

¹⁰³ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 78-79 quoting a 1795 conduct book; Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 57.

¹⁰⁴ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 25.

take on a feminine voice when advocating women's proper occupation and contribution. Pauline Nestor provides the following example:

Frederick Greenwood, the editor of Samuel Beaton's successful *Queen* magazine, freely offered readers "sisterly" advice under the cover of anonymity: "as for our own liberties, or our political principles, they may be safely left to men ... therefore our survey of foreign affairs and of politics generally will be recorded in a few notes."¹⁰⁵

As he writes of "our own liberties," Greenwood furtively preserves his own. Feminine submission was often communicated in terms of preserving order.¹⁰⁶ By indoctrinating women with a primary goal of serving others' needs, a woman's province and a woman's interest was bounded by the claims of others. To step beyond that boundary was then not just a matter of broken rules but of broken relationship. Literary critic J.M. Ludlow asserts in an 1853 review of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*,

No doubt a young lady—and even an old young lady—can write with the fear of God before her eyes, and become a great and good novelist; but somehow, one cannot help suspecting that she would find it much easier to write in the fear of God if she had already to write in the fear of husband and children.¹⁰⁷

The women who pursued literary careers had to navigate warnings of displeasing a Heavenly Father as well as earthly ones, testing the limits of how far they could risk stepping to the edge of the dualistic domain of what was masculine and what was feminine.

Yet even within a woman's "proper sphere" there persisted an equally daunting dualism to maneuver: the demonization of woman as carnal fiend and the idealization of woman as nonsexual angel. The historicity of these female archetypes will be discussed in Chapter Two and the Evangelical glorification of

¹⁰⁵ Nestor, *Female Friendship*, 8-9 quoting Greenwood, "Review of the Week," *Queen*, September 7, 1861, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Rigby's scathing review of *Jane Eyre* reflects these attitudes, wherein she claims Jane to be "foreign" to the "doctrine of humility," and that her "murmuring against God's appointment" is a sign of anti-Christian ingratitude. "Elizabeth Rigby, from an unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*, December 1848," in Allott, *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, 105-112.

¹⁰⁷ Ludlow, "Art. V-Ruth: A Novel by the Author of Mary Barton," 19.

women as moral rejuvenators was introduced in the previous section of this chapter. What remains to be considered here is the way these prevailing beliefs about women affected how women wrote and how their writing was interpreted. Ultimately, a female author would have to choose between writing in accordance to the angelic expectations held of her or being judged for non-compliance. Nineteenth-century women's response to this dilemma will be addressed in section 2.4 of this chapter. What needs to be considered first is how the binary of derision and praise for women's alleged essential characteristics manifested in women's lives and their literary efforts.

Saving Women From Themselves

Pamela Sue Anderson introduces well the inconsistency with which Victorian women were portrayed. Referring to the era's "unerring, global ambivalence on the subject of women," Anderson explains how "for every literary text that places well-domesticated womanhood on a religious pedestal, another text announces that, if uncontrolled, women are the root of all evil."¹⁰⁸ The preservation of purity and innocence, viewed by many as women's inherent state of being, can also be understood as a preventive measure against fears that the unrestrained woman was naturally and dangerously sensual. As the "weaker sex," women were believed to be driven by feelings rather than reason, and thus to be more capable than men of emotions such as compassion, but likewise, more susceptible to temptations. Just as the cultural belief in women's innate goodness credited women with superior moral influence whilst denying them authority in public religious contexts, so too did the worship of female innocence expose discrepancy regarding perceptions of female sexuality. Lyn Pykett identifies this incongruity as a result of women being associated developmentally with children, resulting in a "contradictory construction

¹⁰⁸ Anderson, "Feminism and Patriarchy," in Hass, Jasper and Jay, *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, 813.

of femininity as both pre-sexual and entirely sexual.”¹⁰⁹ As women’s nature was believed to be dominated by their reproductive systems, so women came to be defined by bodily functions.¹¹⁰ Thus defined, women were found lacking. A woman’s bodiliness indicated a sexuality dangerous to herself and to others.¹¹¹

The suppression of rampant sexuality, or more precisely, the sheltering from temptations that could awaken female sexuality became a guiding force in what females were encouraged to read or restricted from reading. Because it was believed that women did not read intellectually as did men but instead, “felt their reading in their bodies,”¹¹² censorship was habitual in the lives of Victorian women.¹¹³ If women were ruled by their physical being, it was thus assumed they had little control over their feelings. In *Female Writers: Thoughts on Their Proper Sphere, and On Their Powers of Usefulness* (1842), M.A. Stodart gives the following explanation to her readers;

It is not that woman is, in ordinary cases, deficient in judgement; it is that her feelings usurp the seat of judgement, and she is carried away by their power. She feels keenly, and then decides promptly, instead of calmly weighing facts and deciding upon evidence.¹¹⁴

Stodart advocates woman’s “proper sphere” by promoting its underlying beliefs as common sense and universal experience, thus training women not just in what are appropriate goals, but also in appropriate feelings about themselves.

Treated in a way that assumed their self-absorption and preoccupation with feelings, women were given little outlet other than indulging the very feelings they were disparaged for having. Elaine Showalter writes: “Denied participation in public life, women were forced to cultivate their feelings and to overvalue

¹⁰⁹ Pykett, “Women Writing Woman,” 80-81.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹¹¹ Beetham, “Consumption of Print,” 70-72.

¹¹² Ibid., 70.

¹¹³ Ibid., 70, 71-72.

¹¹⁴ Stodart, *Female Writers: Thoughts on Their Proper Sphere*, 125.

romance.”¹¹⁵ Consequently, the stereotype of women as irrational, petty, and false was reinforced by the exhortation for women to avoid critical thinking, focus on insular relationships and conceal their emotions. The social structures erected to save women from themselves ensured that women had little opportunity to become anything other than the emotionally-preoccupied persons they were condemned for being.

On the other hand, whereas the nineteenth-century woman in Britain was condemned for being chaotically female, so too would a woman be condemned for exhibiting traits deemed masculine. In her 1842 advice book to female writers, M.A. Stodart cites the example of eighteenth-century historian Mrs. Macaulay as “having nothing of the woman about her.”¹¹⁶ Macaulay is derided for being a “freethinker” who came “booted and spurred to her public career.”¹¹⁷ Stodart holds up Macaulay as a warning to her readers;

Alas, for woman when she forgets that Christianity has raised her to the place which she occupies in society; and that if she attempts to take one stone from its glorious temple, she is undermining the foundation of her own peace, respectability and usefulness!¹¹⁸

Valerie Sanders reports a similar tone reflected in attitudes toward Victorian female autobiography, explaining that if the writer “appeared hardened and defiant, or too full of her own convictions, she risked hostility from her own sex, as well as from the other.”¹¹⁹ As a result, women were condemned for lacking the positive masculine traits of logic, reason and will,¹²⁰ whilst at the same time they were deprecated for exhibiting the perceived male traits of ambition, shrewdness, or self-assertion.¹²¹ The limited respect afforded to women was therefore best achieved

¹¹⁵ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 79-80.

¹¹⁶ Stodart, *Female Writers*, 126.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Sanders, *Private Lives*, 7.

¹²⁰ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 2.

¹²¹ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 52.

by acquiescing to the alternatively problematic paradigm of the ideal, submissive “angel in the house.”¹²²

The counterpart of Victorian perceptions of women as fundamentally sexual was the representation of women as childlike and pre-sexual.¹²³ The preservation of feminine “purity” was a guiding force in female education. Anxiety over whether or not females should be allowed to read novels, much less write them, had much to do with the fear that novels conveyed knowledge of sexuality.¹²⁴ “An aura of freshness and innocence” was indispensable to female deportment.¹²⁵ Although females were perceived as innately sexual, knowledge of that sexuality was deemed unfeminine. This construction of woman as pre-sexual and passionless was the complement to the image of woman as self-less, maternal angel.¹²⁶ The view of women as morally superior had at its root the interpretation that women’s essential nature was closer to Christian virtues than was man’s foundational makeup. In her 1852 historical biography, *Women of Christianity, Exemplary for Acts of Piety and Charity*, Catholic author Julia Kavanaugh credits women with much of the early progress of Christianity in the West:

The virtues of Christianity, purity, temperance, forgiveness, and resignation were essentially feminine virtues: they were more easily practised by women than by men; and this gave to the weaker sex a moral superiority over the stronger one, which is visible even through the primitive rudeness of those dark ages.¹²⁷

The alleged intrinsic moral superiority of women, although initially a boon for female writers, ultimately became problematic for women who sought to be read as authors, not just as women. As Rebecca Styler points out, “At their most idealized,

¹²² The term “Angel in the House” and the poem by Coventry Patmore from which it is derived have received significant critical attention over the past century and thus will not be discussed in detail in this thesis. See Showalter, “Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers.”

¹²³ Pykett, “Women Writing Woman,” 80-81.

¹²⁴ Beetham, “Consumption of Print,” 66.

¹²⁵ Sanders, *Private Lives*, 7.

¹²⁶ Pykett, “Women Writing Woman,” 80-81.

¹²⁷ Kavanaugh, *Women of Christianity, Exemplary for Acts of Piety and Charity*, 56.

women were considered God's representatives on Earth, making home a foretaste of heaven itself."¹²⁸ Such transcendent angels, it was thought, could portray only a limited view of the world.¹²⁹ Properly devoid of ambition, a woman writer was appreciated for her modest counsel, but presumed incapable of writing beyond the purview of her sex. Thus, reviewers' praise for female authors reinforced the boundaries of women's "proper sphere". Elaine Showalter explains;

women writers were acknowledged to possess sentiment, refinement, tact, observation, domestic expertise, high moral tone, and knowledge of female character; and thought to lack originality, intellectual training, abstract intelligence, humor, self-control, and knowledge of male character. Male writers had most of the desirable qualities: power, breadth, distinctness, clarity, learning, abstract intelligence, shrewdness, experience, humor, knowledge of everyone's character, and open-mindedness.¹³⁰

Like the Romantic poets who had worshipped the image of the child, the Victorians raised the image of Woman onto a pedestal.¹³¹ But once on that figurative pedestal, the Victorian woman had little more power or agency than a child: praised for her innocence and virtue, yet condescended to as a charming but helpless creature. Men could learn from women by observing their chaste example but only as one interprets symbolic lessons from the natural world. Women of this period were not permitted spiritual or intellectual authority. As Ruth Jenkins suggests, "although enshrined and worshipped, women [could not] tap this position for their own empowerment."¹³² Thus, we hear Elizabeth Barrett Browning's eponymous Aurora Leigh sigh unto God, "How dreary 'tis for women to sit still / On winter nights by solitary fires / And hear the nations praising them far off."¹³³

Lady Fictionalists

¹²⁸ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 9.

¹²⁹ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 79.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³¹ Crosby, *The Ends of History*, 40.

¹³² Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 22.

¹³³ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, lines 438-440.

The disadvantage women faced due to limited education and domestic isolation was one of the greatest causes for their work to be disregarded or denigrated by critics. Whether it was through accession to essentialist beliefs about women's abilities or through emphasizing the reality of women's circumscribed education, critics regularly faulted feminine authors for failure to meet dominant standards of scholarship and analysis. As discussed above, female education in the first half of the nineteenth century was geared toward skills equipping women for running households. "For the middle-class Victorian girl," Showalter writes, "the departure of a brother for school was a painful awakening to her inferior status."¹³⁴ Furthermore, showing interest and aptitude for serious study was considered unfeminine.¹³⁵ The common fear underlying such discouragements was that rigorous study or exposure beyond domestic circles would cause women to lose "their bloom."¹³⁶ Thus, as Elizabeth Langland indicates, the majority of women writers found themselves excluded from higher education, yet "forced to demonstrate an educational capital a man is presumed to have."¹³⁷

This double standard, employed by an inhospitable literary market threatened by the influx of women writers, was often exhibited through inequitable comparisons. Elaine Showalter relates, "It was typical to score debating points . . . by comparing the average woman writer to Milton, or more usually, Shakespeare, and then finding her at a disadvantage."¹³⁸ Further criticism included complaints that women writers were purely imitative rather than creative,¹³⁹ and that women could not portray masculine society realistically.¹⁴⁰ Such efforts to discredit the very

¹³⁴ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 41.

¹³⁵ Beetham, "Consumption of Print," 67.

¹³⁶ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 56.

¹³⁷ Langland, "Women's Writing," 137.

¹³⁸ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 69.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 89-90, 133.

idea of women writing proved ultimately ineffective against the swelling popularity of female publications. Criticism therefore shifted to categorizing the successful female author as a unique brand of woman, rather than as an author. This transition from wholesale contempt for women writers as “dancing dogs” to that of “lady fictionalists” occurred through the demarcation of women’s writing as curious accidents of nature, rather than the achievement of capable individuals.¹⁴¹ The characterization of the female author as a freak of nature, which some critics such as Coventry Patmore maintained even to the middle of the century, relied on framing the successful writer’s femininity as a misplaced form of masculinity. In an 1851 review of work by Margaret Fuller and Maria Grey, Patmore refers to possible “hermaphrodites in heart and mind”—women with male abilities—but clarifies that though “there certainly have been cases of women possessed of the properly masculine power of writing books,” such cases “are all so truly and obviously exceptional . . . that we may overlook them without the least prejudice to the soundness of our doctrine.”¹⁴²

Talk of literary ‘hermaphrodites,’ however, was eventually replaced by terms that emphasized the writer’s gender as their professional qualifier. Literary magazines stressed the work under scrutiny was that issuing from “the female pen,” written by “Lady novelists” and “authoresses.”¹⁴³ Marginalizing female writers as a peculiar category of Woman supported the prevailing view of women’s writing success as an outgrowth of their inherent feminine weaknesses. Elaine Showalter summarizes such attitudes in this way:

Women were obsessed by sentiment and romance. . . . Women had a natural taste for the trivial; they were sharp-eyed observers of the social scene; they enjoyed getting involved in other people’s affairs. All these alleged female traits, it was supposed, would find a happy outlet in the novel.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 74-75

¹⁴² Patmore, “The Social Position of Women,” 525.

¹⁴³ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 74.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 82.

Thus the epitome of female writing was regarded as the application of domestic and romantic sensibilities to social observation, viewed in some circles as little more than gossip elevated through plot structure. Unless disguised by pseudonym, women's writing was commonly patronized by critics as either dainty accomplishment or as sexual ventriloquism. Either way, throughout the nineteenth century, gender would remain the principle measure of a woman's writing, not the writing itself.

For women writers on religion, gendered standards received not only cultural approbation, but sacred authority as well. Despite religious writing being key in the expansion of women's writing opportunities at the beginning of the century, prohibitions against women's interpretation of scripture or theological reflection were strictly enforced. Regardless of the Evangelical focus on private judgement, the authority to interpret divine truths was deemed solely a male prerogative.¹⁴⁵ The many nineteenth-century women who made it their life's work to write on biblical or ecclesial themes encountered injunctions from within the church establishment they sought to serve. Hannah More, one of the most influential of female Evangelical authors, introduces her *Essays on the Character and Practical Writings of St Paul* by making it emphatically clear that she is writing about practical application, not theological criticism. More begins with a profusely humble three-page apology for her "her deficiencies in ancient learning, Biblical criticism, and deep theological knowledge."¹⁴⁶ Although More admits to the "rare occurrence" in which her readings of Paul may be "interpreted in a different and even contradictory manner by men," she appeals to the reader's pious magnanimity to allow for any difference on "a few abstruse points."¹⁴⁷ Whilst acknowledging the boldness of her project, More is loath to imply any sense of authority.

The explicit humility More professes reflects strong cultural perspectives on theology as treacherous terrain for women, or as John Ruskin named it in his 1864

¹⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 16; Styler, *Literary Theology*, 71.

¹⁴⁶ More, *An Essay on the Character and Practical Writings of Saint Paul*, iii-iv.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, v.

published lecture on women's education, the "one dangerous science for women."¹⁴⁸ Ruskin's censure centers on the cavalier presumption of women who "plunge headlong . . . without one thought of incompetence, into that science in which the greatest men have trembled."¹⁴⁹ Julie Melnyk outlines Ruskin's complaint thus: "[Women] are 'prideful' because they believe they have something worthwhile to say about God, and perhaps also because what they say tends to glorify their own position as women."¹⁵⁰ Women's sin in this case is not just that of pride, but of feeling self-worth in the first place. Melnyk makes note, however, that Ruskin's vehement remarks indicate his awareness of the theological influence women were achieving through their writing.¹⁵¹ With the force of public consumption behind them, women persistently navigated an androcentric media that was invested in their continued subordination. In order to demonstrate in further detail how women writers had to choose what battles to wage and which compromises to endure, the following section reviews the topics and genres through which women gained publishing success.

1.4 Hearing New Heroines: Concerns and Claims of Nineteenth-Century Female Authors

As the century that saw the arrival of female authors onto the literary main stage, as well as the novel's cultural ascendancy, the nineteenth century is notable for a variety of new trends in literary discourse. Informed by their underrepresented perspectives and countering of androcentric convention, women's writing challenged the purview of what was of literary value and theological

¹⁴⁸ Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens," 97-98.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁵⁰ Melnyk, introduction to *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, xiii.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., xii.

concern. Whether writing within conservative frameworks or carving out new territory, the addition of women's voices into Britain's text-hungry environment transformed understandings of what could or could not be considered universal and authoritative. By prioritizing issues of the private sphere, redesigning the tropes of romance, and criticizing social injustices from theological positions, women writers of the nineteenth century affirmed the power of women's voices for shaping cultural values and faith praxis.

Inga-Stina Ewbank comments on women novelists' participation in literature's movement "away from the romantic and extravagant towards the everyday and homely, beginning in the 1840s."¹⁵² Whether it was through the growing amount of home-management guides, family devotionals and memoirs, or the domestic fiction boom, literature of the mid-nineteenth century turned a spotlight on the private home and the details of daily life. Notwithstanding reinforcement of traditional gender roles, the Victorian spiritual emphasis on the home also fostered criticism of those norms. Rebecca Styler writes: "this spiritualizing of the everyday granted worth to women's ordinary activities, and therefore reversed the long-established tendency in Western religion to represent female experience as 'non-normative' and 'less worthy of divine engagement' than male lives."¹⁵³ By recording and reflecting on the details of what occurred behind the closed doors of the private sphere, nineteenth-century women writers did the unprecedented; they wrote their own history.

However, it is important to consider women's domestic writing as an outgrowth of their societal position and not as an affirmation of essentialist claims. Heather Walton notes the concerns of contemporary feminists who warn "that the reclamation of domestic images may prove domesticating."¹⁵⁴ Certainly in the nineteenth century, critical reception of domestic fiction tended to affirm women's

¹⁵² Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 14.

¹⁵³ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 8.

¹⁵⁴ Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 44.

subordinate role in literature and society. Virginia Woolf characterizes this familiar attitude:

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists.¹⁵⁵

The significance of women's domestic writing is that women were recording their histories that until this period had been denied cultural significance. Whether or not these writers were affirming their own marginalization by writing about the domestic sphere or countering the dominant discourse by interpreting that domain as worthy of report, the nineteenth-century literary shift toward the home is noteworthy as women's first major contribution to Western literature and social history documentation. And whilst women who wrote about the private sphere reflected on aspects of life familiar to many but recorded by few, it was in fiction that women writers of the nineteenth century began to transform already established tropes and devices. With the influx of women novelists came the emergence of a new kind of heroine. No longer solely the creations of masculine imagination, female protagonists began to sound, look, and act in ways different to their male-penned predecessors. Carol Christ, referencing Joseph Campbell's well-known claim, suggests, "if the hero has a thousand faces, the heroine has scarcely a dozen."¹⁵⁶ Arguably, it was during the 1840's that the literary heroine gained some of her additional features.

Fair Gladiators

Writing about modern novelists in 1855, Margaret Oliphant describes the "orthodox system of novel making" that dominated the literary scene of the previous decade:

¹⁵⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 74.

¹⁵⁶ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 9.

Our lovers were humble and devoted—our ladies were beautiful, and might be capricious if it pleased them . . . and [the] only true-love worth having was that reverent, knightly, chivalrous true-love which consecrated all womankind, and served one with fervor and enthusiasm.¹⁵⁷

Oliphant goes on to describe how, given this paradigm, the literary scene could not have predicted the arrival of “the impetuous little spirit which dashed into our well-ordered world, broke its boundaries, and defied its principles—the most alarming revolution of modern times . . . the invasion of *Jane Eyre*.”¹⁵⁸ Oliphant describes Jane Eyre as an insurgent leading a new league of heroines who are no longer flattered by chivalrous condescension but instead, demand passionately to be treated as equals. Addressing the “orthodox” male protagonist, Oliphant explains this new female counterpart:

She is a fair gladiator—she is not an angel. In her secret heart she longs to rush upon you . . . to prove her strength and her equality. She has no patience with your flowery emblems. Why should she be like a rose or a lily any more than yourself?¹⁵⁹

The heroines Oliphant invokes represent a transition that both contemporary critics and those of Oliphant’s time credit *Jane Eyre* for inaugurating. Elaine Showalter states, “The post-Jane heroine, according to the periodicals, was plain, rebellious, and passionate; she was likely to be a governess, and she usually was the narrator of her own story.”¹⁶⁰ Whilst Jane Eyre is arguably not the first female protagonist whose presence implicitly and explicitly rejected the “beautiful weakling” role,¹⁶¹ her influence indicates the desire of women readers and writers alike to follow paths previously considered indelicate, inappropriate, or impossible. Whereas in the early years of the century, female individuality was decried as both unwomanly and inhuman by cultural voices such as Sarah Stickney Ellis,¹⁶² female heroines from

¹⁵⁷ Oliphant, “Modern Novelists,” 557.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 558.

¹⁶⁰ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 122-123.

¹⁶¹ Oliphant, “Modern Novelists,” 558.

¹⁶² Sanders, *Private Lives*, 7.

the 1840s onward began to exemplify the ambition, intelligence, and perseverance of the women who wrote them. The female authors of the nineteenth-century who embarked on professional paths heretofore forbidden, created role models in female protagonists whose journeys revealed alternatives for the lives of the women reading them.¹⁶³ The heroine's quest emerged as one of self-fulfillment rather than self-negation.

The nineteenth-century emergence of the female bildungsroman brought with it a change in status for female literary protagonists. As Showalter's earlier quote suggests, many of the heroines in these novels came from humble beginnings and had to work for a living. Characters who were by necessity self-reliant tended on the whole to speak and act from a sense of self that starkly contrasted that of their "respectable elder sisters of the literary corporation."¹⁶⁴ Describing female writers of this era, Showalter says, "They wanted inspiring professional role-models; but they also wanted romantic heroines, a sisterhood of shared passion and suffering, women who sobbed and struggled and rebelled."¹⁶⁵ And though, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has convincingly argued, the intertwining of female quest and traditional love narrative rarely effected true liberation for the heroine,¹⁶⁶ this literary wrestling match between the ideals of personal achievement and romantic union in women's fiction reflects women writers' dilemma of questioning the status quo whilst living within it.

Heroines, Heroes and Marriage

DuPlessis's argument centers on the fact that most of these unorthodox female protagonists' quests culminate in marriage—"the blessed state of normalcy"—

¹⁶³ For more on the rise of female heroines as role models, see Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*.

¹⁶⁴ Oliphant, "Modern Novelists," 557.

¹⁶⁵ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 103.

¹⁶⁶ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 1-19.

leaving the heroine's *Bildung* unfulfilled.¹⁶⁷ It is therefore notable, if not still worthy of dispute, that what differentiates much of these heroines' choices ultimately to marry the male hero is that their stories are not about being chosen, but about having the ability to choose. DuPlessis writes: "As a gendered subject in the nineteenth century, [the female protagonist] has barely any realistic options in work or vocation, so her heroism lies in self-mastery, defining herself as a free agent."¹⁶⁸ Finding fault with the inevitability of these heroines choosing marriage, DuPlessis raises important questions about how liberative these texts indeed were. However, particularly for novels such as *Jane Eyre* that appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century, the fact that women novelists formed their heroines' journeys as pilgrimages of self-discovery and self-assertion should not be discredited as fulfilling the status quo if the heroine does not end up alone. Indeed, it could be argued that to conclude all of these rebellious, outspoken characters' journeys in isolation rather than relationship would affirm the cultural belief that only passive, disinterested women deserve fulfilling love stories. Either way, it is worth considering what types of heroes these heroines chose to love and how those relationships were negotiated.

A common claim by both women writers and their critics was that women's circumscribed lives in the private sphere made conjuring realistic male characters difficult. Charlotte Brontë indicates as much, telling one of her publishers, "When I write about women I am sure of my ground—in the other case, I am not so sure."¹⁶⁹ Literary scholars have posited that women writers bridged this gap by casting male characters in their own idealized image.¹⁷⁰ In this sense, the masculine heroes of nineteenth-century women's fiction may not represent feminized ideals of masculinity so much as they represent the transmuted wish of these women writers

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 9, 14.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶⁹ Brontë to James Taylor, 1 March, 1849, in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, 2: 187-188.

¹⁷⁰ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 136.

to be men. Infusing their masculine characters with the freedom of speech and power of action they themselves had been denied, women writers created male heroes more from imagination than from life, but it was a liberative imagination. Elaine Showalter claims of these writers, “Their heroes are not so much their ideal lovers as their projected egos.”¹⁷¹

That women were potentially creating masculine heroes who reflected female experience and women’s emancipatory desires comes across in the atypical behaviour of male protagonists in this era. Narratives emerged in which male protagonists were forced to points where confession of vulnerability and helplessness are unavoidable.¹⁷² The wounded male hero is a recognizable trope within literature of this time,¹⁷³ but when viewed through women’s experience of enforced subordination, an additional interpretation of female protagonists’ demand for equality arises. If Oliphant’s portrait of the heroine who demands to be met as an equal is accurate, then it follows that it was not just the women who needed new horizons in which to test their strengths and prove their equality. Since these new heroines embodied masculine freedom, it is conceivable that the new heroes might in turn experience feminine limitation. Equity in this sense is not just women’s raised status but also the constraining of male dominance.

With DuPlessis’ critique in mind,¹⁷⁴ it’s possible to read the “fated” marriage of the marginalized heroine to a male character who is both a symbol of feminized dependence¹⁷⁵ and a projection of the female author’s unfettered anima not as a surrender to normalcy but as a depiction of feminine psychological wholeness instead. The “union of equals” paradigm, which Showalter criticizes for occurring through submission to “mutual limitation,”¹⁷⁶ and Diane Long Hoeveler calls the

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 136.

¹⁷² Styler, *Literary Theology*, 37.

¹⁷³ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 152.

¹⁷⁴ See p. 36-37 above.

¹⁷⁵ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 150.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 124.

“ultimate fantasy home—the female-dominated companionate marriage,”¹⁷⁷ is perhaps better understood if female “domination” is considered in terms of integration. Without proposing that these novels’ marriages of equality be read allegorically, it is helpful to approach these texts as the products of imaginations negotiating the complexity of essentialist beliefs, demarcated social domains, religious restriction, vocational aspiration, and suppressed ambition. When critics condemn novels of this period for ending in traditional marriage, there is perhaps a missed opportunity to consider which tradition these marriages are springing from. If the model is indeed the Victorian status quo of male headship and female submission, then the happily-wedded endings these authors provided their heroines may need to be re-read as tragic satire.¹⁷⁸ An alternative to this, however, is to allow the transformed romantic trope to convey a portrait of female desire for wholeness, not just for love. The unorthodox heroines who defied principles and broke boundaries were at the same time being partnered to unorthodox heroes who had to learn the limits of their power and privilege. The women writing these new kinds of love stories illustrated equality as achieved through empathy and self-respect. As we will see next, such issues were not just fictional concerns for female authors, but social and spiritual as well.

Literary Pulpits

The bulk of nineteenth-century women’s religious writing, including fiction, explored and advocated an interrelationship between spiritual beliefs and social accountability, pairing public ethics to personal piety. By exploring “the spiritual in secular terms and forms,”¹⁷⁹ female authors grounded their religious writing in social and ethical concerns. Scholars such as Julie Melnyk are careful to point out, though, that most women writers of religion at this time would never have called

¹⁷⁷ Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*, xiv.

¹⁷⁸ Chapter Five of this thesis makes this argument for *Shirley*.

¹⁷⁹ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 8.

their work theological. Neither, Melnyk explains, did they “propose overarching, self-consistent theological systems, but they did reinterpret the nature of God and of Christ, the relationships between God and humans, and the Scriptures.”¹⁸⁰

Benefitting from the porous boundaries between theological writing and religious writing,¹⁸¹ women did not just delineate new spaces for spiritual reflection, they reflected new spiritualities. The spirituality of nineteenth-century women’s religious writing points toward an integration of present experience and future hope, guided by compassionate concern for the well-being of society, the suffering, and the self.

As the previous section pointed out, spiritual prohibitions against women demonstrating authority through preaching or spiritual teaching resulted in women finding creative outlets through which to write about religious issues. Some of those areas, such as religious fiction and domestic devotionals, have already been considered. Additionally, the nineteenth-century saw the introduction of female missionary autobiographies, biographies of biblical women, and an increase in female-authored hymns.¹⁸² These literary genres, which used techniques from testimony, fiction and poetry, empowered the female voices that were meant to remain silent in church and subject to male headship.¹⁸³ At a time when men like Carlyle and Ruskin were claiming prophetic and priestly roles for authors,¹⁸⁴ women were able to preach from culturally sanctioned literary pulpits. The authority rendered unto authors by readers granted women spiritual equality in the press, thus validating publicly what many women already asserted personally. For women who believed writing was a divinely-gifted vocation or that writing was the

¹⁸⁰ Melnyk, introduction to *Women’s Theology*, xii.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women’s Autobiography*, 83-84, 92-99; Styler, *Literary Theology*, 69-98; Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 151-152.

¹⁸³ 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 are the passages most commonly used to support female spiritual subordination.

¹⁸⁴ Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 10.

only way they could act on the evangelical charge to put faith into action, faith empowered them to write but even more, convinced them of their right to do so.

A theme many scholars have identified within nineteenth-century women's literary theology,¹⁸⁵ which has been touched on already, is the emphasis of the personal and practical expressions of faith over those of more abstract, propositional discourse. Much of this emphasis may be a natural result of the biographical or narrative form of many of these writings took and the fact that "practical divinity" was considered an acceptable topic for women. Nevertheless, the practical and personal preference in nineteenth-century women's religious writings yielded theological implications that did not simply augment theological discourse of the day but also questioned it. Rebecca Styler summarizes this leaning as "a desire to reinterpret religion in earthly, human-centered ways," envisaging "the encounter with God taking place within human events and relationships."¹⁸⁶ Ruth Jenkins describes Elizabeth Gaskell's narratives of mercy over legalism as demonstrating that it is "interpersonal love, the interdependence of all humanity, that gains power over the abstract code of behavior."¹⁸⁷ Jenkins also draws attention to nineteenth-century hymns by women as reflecting a subjectivity grounded in an "individual's relationship with God, not simply symbolic dogma."¹⁸⁸ Further, Julie Melnyk highlights how female authors that claimed spiritual equality through their religious writing concentrated on the challenges and blessings of daily, lived faith, instead of directing attention to eternal rewards.¹⁸⁹ Linda Peterson similarly observes women's spiritual autobiographies of this period shifting "the focus away from a heavenly paradise and toward an earthly, domestic setting."¹⁹⁰ Dissuaded or

¹⁸⁵ For more on this term's specific application to nineteenth-century female authors, see Styler, "The Contexts of Women's Literary Theology in the Nineteenth Century," in *Literary Theology*, 3-18.

¹⁸⁶ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 18.

¹⁸⁷ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 115.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁸⁹ Melnyk, introduction to *Women's Theology*, xvii.

¹⁹⁰ Peterson, *Victorian Women's Autobiography*, 105.

forbidden from writing propositional theology, these women managed to shed light on areas overlooked by formal doctrine. By making human experience the starting point for religious reflection,¹⁹¹ these women writers began to redefine sin and salvation in domestic and social terms, not solely spiritual. The practical response to the problems of sin and salvation, therefore, were formed out of personal responses. For many of these women writers, that response was an insistence on compassion, empathy and love.

In her chapter on Elizabeth Gaskell's "Sentimental Social Agenda," Ruth Jenkins suggests that this agenda was a matter of asserting mercy and empathy, values largely relegated to the female private sphere, as values that should be the basis of the public and political spheres as well.¹⁹² Much of women's writing at this time resonates with the growing Christian Socialism of the 1840s and 1850s, which sought to check free market capitalism through Gospel advocacy.¹⁹³ Like Rosemary Radford Ruether's twentieth-century affirmation of women having "traditionally cultivated a communal personhood that could participate in the successes of others rather than seeing these as merely a threat to one's own success,"¹⁹⁴ scholars have recognized in nineteenth-century women's religious writing, "a communal commitment to Christianity rather than a hierarchical doctrine."¹⁹⁵ Illustrating mercy as a social and political duty, women's writing drew attention to the needs and feelings of the under-represented and distressed members of society—not uncommonly themselves. Valerie Sanders writes, "Whenever Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot use the autobiographical mode in their fiction, they seem to be challenging their readers to feel compassion for an unprepossessing or apparently unimportant individual."¹⁹⁶ By raising the traditionally feminine virtues of

¹⁹¹ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 1.

¹⁹² Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 97.

¹⁹³ Styler, *Literary Theology*, 16.

¹⁹⁴ Ruether, "Motherearth and the Megamachine," 51.

¹⁹⁵ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 104.

¹⁹⁶ Sanders, *Private Lives*, 19.

compassion and mercy to equal or greater status than public values of power and capitalization, women's religious writing challenged Christianity's ghettoization of the home. In effect, by beginning to name social wrongs as sins, such writers were dismantling the domesticated Christianity that burdened women with a redemptive role whilst exonerating men for having to work in an incurably evil world outside. Although using the very language of their domestication, these women rejected the segregation of spiritual and secular, domestic and public, thus inviting and indicting men and women equally to take responsibility for the continuance or cure of social evils. The feminization of Christianity, which had been gaining ground for the past century, eventually provided women the tools with which to champion the Gospel's power to transform society, not just the soul.

Like the heroines of this period that began to reject self-sacrifice and suffering as heroism,¹⁹⁷ and to enact their own self-actualization in the contexts of egalitarian relationships and self-reliant careers, women's literary theology of the nineteenth century illustrated the believer's personal responsibility for growing in spiritual maturity and taking compassionate action on behalf of victims of institutional sins. Though Tractarians such as Charlotte Mary Yonge tended to affirm hierarchal authority and the virtues of submission,¹⁹⁸ emerging within nineteenth-century women's religious writing was the approbation of women's spiritual right to speak truth to power and the Christian's duty to minister mercy to the powerless. Less concerned with abstract dogma or political philosophies, women's religious writing took its starting point in everyday domestic experience. The result was increased knowledge and awareness of poverty's causes and casualties, and the claiming of spiritual equality rather than moral superiority. As such, the concerns and claims of nineteenth-century female authors reveal not just a desire to read about and create new heroines but to live out those heroic possibilities for themselves. Women's literary response to their spiritual subordination, educational limitation, and sexual

¹⁹⁷ Boscaljon, "Possibilities of Redemption Through the Novel," in Hass, Jasper and Jay, *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, 761.

¹⁹⁸ See Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 73.

marginalization was not merely to argue for women's rights—it was to illustrate spiritual truths as social justice, and compassion as the ethical response to humankind's interdependency. Women began to write the world as they believed it should be and to write themselves as protagonists bringing about the change.

This chapter has sought to deepen understanding of the integral relationship between women's literature and feminist theology. Reading women's writing is a fundamental way women have tested their perceived boundaries, self-definitions, and beliefs. Feminist theologians honed their spiritual inquiries when they found those questions already being embodied in women's literature. The nineteenth-century women who created the heroines that have inspired generations of women readers not only imagined new possibilities for women's equality and self-fulfillment, they embodied it themselves by writing in the first place. In the conversation between theology and literature, faith and gender, theory and embodiment, it is in this period that we see examples both narrative and devotional of women's effort to speak the truth as they saw it. Having been apportioned their own sphere, women made use of that domain to gain an audience, and eventually, an authority. The interrelationship between theology and literature, therefore, takes on new dimension when considered in light of the religious origins of women's literary tradition and the literary origins of feminist theological method. Building upon these observations, the next chapter takes a closer look at feminist theology, exploring its development and its founding claims in order to introduce the conceptualizations of sin and grace according to women's experience upon which our feminist theological reading of Brontë's novels will be based. What we shall see is that when Christian feminist theologians take women's patriarchal enculturation into account, the Christian message becomes recognizable as that which restores women unto wholeness, breaking bonds rather than perpetuating beliefs and practices that further constrain their freedom.

Chapter 2

Sin, Grace and Patriarchy: Feminist Theology and Christian Doctrine

A challenge inherent to any feminist theological project is that of defining parameters, as feminist theology can take on many meanings. Growing as it has over the past forty years, the blurred boundaries of feminist theology's early development, in which few distinctions were made between feminist theory, theology, or religious contexts,¹ have both clarified and diversified since the 1970s. The broad reach of feminist theology's influences and aims now is such that theologians working from Jewish, Catholic, or post-Christian perspectives may all utilize similar critical positions to arrive at diverse and/or competing conclusions. The aim in sight remains, however, that of identifying systems of belief and behavior that perpetuate women's oppression in order to offer constructive proposals for how theology can foster women's empowerment and wholeness. Therefore, in order to explore feminist theology's re-articulation of the Christian message in light of women's experience, it is important to understand the foundational critiques and questions that formed and continue to shape the feminist theological task. Following an introduction to feminist theology's origins as a way of contextualizing the discipline's relationship to feminist theory and traditional theologies, this chapter introduces feminist theological inquiry in regard to three principle categories: (i) conceptions of women's nature; (ii) definitions of women's sin; and (iii) expressions of women's encounters of grace. Supported by Chapter One's analysis of the reflexive relationship between feminist theology and women's literature, the following examination of how feminist theologians have promoted the need for women's experience to be better reflected in theologies of sin, grace, and

¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 13.

relationship with the divine will serve as a framework through which is possible to see how Brontë's liberative literary voice supports and is supported by a Christian feminist conception of women's flourishing. But first, how did feminist theology take shape?

The history of feminist theology is inseparable from the feminist movement of the mid-twentieth century. Whilst the history of women's theological contribution spans centuries,² it was the paths paved by feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan along with the legislative efforts of feminist advocates that expanded opportunities for women in numerous academic fields.³ Generally speaking, feminist theorists questioned foundational assumptions and cultural practices that contributed to women's oppression.⁴ Serene Jones describes this critical method as analyzing "the signposts (orders, rules, assumptions) that structure and direct thought."⁵ What feminist theorists found when they analyzed these signposts were deep biases in scientific methods and educational structures that reinforced patriarchal perceptions of gender norms. Identifying how patriarchy functions as "a system of differential power based on the assumption that male gender identity is normative,"⁶ feminist theorists began to seek corrective strategies for women's equal representation. As Elaine Graham notes, one of the most significant contributions of second-wave feminism was the scientific research done in response to the "status quo of women's subordination and inferiority."⁷ Feminists of this second wave benefited from anthropologists, psychoanalysts, and educational theorists' data about the systemic effects of patriarchy on female development and cultural gender norming. By the 1970s, the emergence of Women's Studies programs in universities continued the shift in academic engagement with what has

² The feminist movement itself had its first "wave" in the 1860s.

³ See Ruether, "Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology," in Parsons, *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 3-22.

⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ Zimmer, "Stepping Stones in Feminist Theory," in Graff, *In the Embrace of God*, 12.

⁷ Graham, *Making the Difference*, 17.

come to be known—not uncritically—as “women’s experience.” Once compared to studies of women’s lived experience, the prevailing theories about women’s nature began to reveal biased assumptions in need of reconstruction.

The discipline of feminist theology developed in conjunction with women’s increased access to theological education and the rise of feminist critical methodology.⁸ In 1960, Valerie Saiving published “The Human Situation: A Feminine View” in *The Journal of Religion*,⁹ effectively launching modern feminist theology.¹⁰ As the first to introduce the issue of gender into theological anthropology,¹¹ Saiving posited that the dominant theologies behind the doctrines of sin and grace do not accurately reflect women’s experience. Whilst this claim remains a pivotal concern for feminist theologians, it is only one aspect of the feminist theological task. In broad terms, feminist theologians respond critically and constructively to the challenges posed by theology’s formation and propagation through patriarchal culture. There is, however, no singular definition of feminist theology. In regard to Christianity specifically, some feminist theologians focus on extracting patriarchy from the Christian tradition, parsing out the Good News from the androcentric modes of communication and interpretation present in scripture and doctrinal tradition. Other feminist theologians work to uncover the “lost voices” of women within church history and scripture. By offering new readings of traditional texts, these theologians find resources already present in the Christian tradition for advocating women’s equality and their *imago dei*.

As the following sections will demonstrate, the process of untangling thousands of years’ accumulation of patriarchal tradition and interpretation is never a simple matter of replacing what has gone before. Rather, feminist theologians, in conversation with womanists, theologians, and liberation theologians, seek new answers whilst also listening for questions that have not yet

⁸ Ruether, “Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” 4.

⁹ Saiving, “The Human Situation,” 100-112.

¹⁰ See Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God*, 25.

¹¹ See Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices,” in Graff, *In the Embrace of God*, 25.

been asked or addressed within traditional theologies. The next section explores the extent to which women have been defined by patriarchy and the ensuing complexities faced by feminist theologians to interpret “women’s nature” without perpetuating oppressive paradigms of gender binaries or biological determinism. To begin imaging wholeness for women, feminist theologians look not just at how women have experienced brokenness, but how women have experienced what it means to be a woman.

2.1 The Feminine Situation: Concepts of Women’s Nature and Women’s Identity

In Valerie Saiving’s 1960 groundbreaking essay, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” she addresses the “well-known fact that theology has been written almost exclusively by men.”¹² She further notes her growing assurance that when theologians have used the term “man,” they have not actually meant “men and women.”¹³ In one of the earliest uses of psychological development and gender in considering theology, Saiving outlines research by Margaret Mead and other anthropologists in order to indicate the imbalanced representation of masculine concerns in relation to doctrines of sin. She argues that “many of the characteristic emphases of contemporary theology—its definition of the human situation in terms of anxiety, estrangement, and the conflict between necessity and freedom”—are rooted in masculine biases of maturity as a process of individuation rather than attachment.¹⁴ She further claims that for women, attachment and not individuation has been promoted as the primary means of maturing into selfhood.¹⁵ In calling attention to this difference, Saiving launched a method of theological inquiry that

¹² Saiving, “The Human Situation,” 100.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹⁵ Ibid.

uses gender's social and biological factors as a means of elucidating what has been problematically generalized about human nature. Towards the goal of identifying how feminist theologians have since continued to describe women's nature as formed by patriarchy, this section will first investigate feminist theories about the patriarchal suppositions underlying how human nature has been defined and how this, in turn, has informed Christian theologies of the human condition. With these frameworks in mind, we can then consider what feminist theologians have identified as traditional Christianity's conception of women's nature specifically.

Before moving on to feminist theories of women's experience within patriarchy and Christianity, it is important to address differing theories of understanding gender. Up to this point, terms such as women and men have been used with little clarification.¹⁶ However, any discussion of feminist theory, and certainly feminist theology, must consider essentialist and constructivist treatments of gender. Essentialism, also called universalism, appeals to perceived essences fundamental to "man" and "woman" regardless of culture or nurture. For some essentialists, these fundamentals are based in human growth, often rooted in infancy based on mother/child relations. Essentialists locate their findings in perceived inherent traits that make men and women naturally—with an emphasis on *nature*—different.¹⁷ Constructivists, on the other hand, maintain that there are no characteristics innate to women and men, but rather, all perceived differences are informed by cultural perception.¹⁸ Even biological differences, it is claimed, are

¹⁶ Though the terms "male" and "female" as employed in this thesis are not intended to be prescriptively cisgender in meaning, there are theological, social and relational concerns particular to transgender, intersex, or LGBTQ persons that this thesis will, by the nature of its limited focus on early feminist theological foundations and Charlotte Brontë's middle-class Victorian viewpoint, be unable to address in any detail. Important constructive and contextual theology is being done from these perspectives, which will undoubtedly offer vital criticism and clarification to the gendered theology employed in this thesis. Within the framework of this project, however, discussions of patriarchal gender roles, power differentials, and social marginalization that are discussed in terms of females and males, may be understood as having similar or greater impact when considered in terms of race, gender identity, sexuality, disability, nationality, or socioeconomic status.

¹⁷ Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, xi.

¹⁸ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 32.

subject to cultural shaping.¹⁹ Serene Jones references the work of constructivist pioneer Judith Butler in saying that according to constructivist views, “science cannot help but identify and analyze biology in gendered terms,” because science views bodies through cultural perceptions of gender.²⁰ Therefore, historically, Western science has seen sex differences as self-evident even though they are culturally determined.²¹

Feminist theorists and theologians vary widely in their use of essentialist and constructivist categories. Though constructivism is the predominant context through which women’s experience will be explored in the following sections, the very effort to highlight women’s experience as an authoritative source for doing theology is arguably dependent upon essentialist premises. Although the criteria for identifying women’s experience as different from men’s may be cultural, patriarchy’s historical legacy makes resolving inherent versus learned traits of masculinity and femininity a formidable task. Hence, descriptions of male and female difference as used in this thesis are not meant to function proscriptively or definitively, but rather, are in conversation with the complexity of patriarchy’s role in formulating not just gender norms, but also our methods of discussing them. Having noted this, we can investigate how feminist theorists have differentiated between patriarchal constructions of identity and those based on women’s experience.

Four of the dominant themes that have emerged in feminist theories of how patriarchy defines human nature are those of separation, dualism, dominance, and hierarchy. Let us consider of them in turn. Separation, as the primary mode of maturation, is viewed in response to males’ need to differentiate from the female mother in order to assert masculine identity. Mary Grey notes that because male separation from the mother has been understood as “the essential step for the boy’s

¹⁹ Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 3.

²⁰ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 35.

²¹ Carol Gilligan’s influential study, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, is an excellent example of such work.

growth after the infantile sexuality period,” separation has come to define what it means to be male.²² This initial separation from the mother then structures a mode of identity formation based on difference rather than connection. Psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan asserts that “in the theories of Freud, Erikson, Piaget, [and] Kohlberg . . . the separation of the self from relationships and the elevation of mind over body, reason over emotion, appear as milestones along a developmental path, markers of progress toward maturity.”²³ These splits, she notes, when extrapolated at a cultural level through patriarchal institutions, “become naturalized and mistaken for development, or seen as a requisite of civilization.”²⁴ By viewing human nature as a process of separating from relationship in order to achieve maturity, an epistemology of dualism is encouraged.²⁵ In light of this, feminist theorists criticize how cultural traditions based dualisms result in differences being construed as opposites instead of complexities.²⁶ In *Women’s Ways Knowing*, Mary Belenky, et. al., name the imbalance inherent to patriarchal dualisms in regard to women’s experience:

With the Western tradition of dividing human nature into dual but parallel streams, attributes traditionally associated with the masculine are valued, studied, and articulated, while those associated with the feminine tend to be ignored. Thus, we have learned a great deal about the development of autonomy and independence, abstract critical thought, and the unfolding of a morality of rights and justice in both men and women. We have learned less about the development of interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought.²⁷

As patriarchy by definition privileges the masculine over the feminine, the perceived opposites associated with femininity have historically been denigrated. For feminists, this is exemplified in how a dominance/submission paradigm has

²² Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 25.

²³ Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁵ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 26.

²⁶ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 28.

²⁷ Belenky, et. al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*, 6-7.

become the chief language of patriarchy.²⁸ Carol Gilligan views this tacit paradigm as both a social and psychological problem. She writes that the system of elevating of some men over others affirms patriarchy as “an order of domination,” but that by “bifurcating human qualities into masculine and feminine, patriarchy [creates] rifts in the psyche, dividing everyone from parts of themselves.”²⁹ The internalized structures of domination then become normalized and interpreted as a matter of nature rather than culture.³⁰

This internalization has ramifications for how females and males perceive themselves and how they perceive one another. Valerie Saiving quotes Margaret Mead’s analysis that “men may cook, or weave or dress dolls or hunt hummingbirds, but if such activities are appropriate occupations of men, then the whole society, men and women alike, vote them as important.”³¹ However, “when the same occupations are performed by women,” she writes, “they are regarded as less important.”³² In patriarchal hierarchies, not only are men valued over women, men become the locus for what can be deemed valuable. Moreover, Carol Gilligan asserts that hierarchy and gender binaries are the “the building blocks of a patriarchal order.”³³ The assumption that superiority and inferiority are implicit in difference allows for structures based on supremacy to dominate, both in praxis and philosophy. For this reason, feminist theorists not only denounce patriarchal hierarchies, but they also contest the very modes of thought and value judgments encoded in hierarchal ordering.³⁴ As will be seen, patriarchy’s contribution to understanding human nature through separation, dualism, hierarchy, and

²⁸ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 1.

²⁹ Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

³¹ Mead, *Male and Female*, 16-17 as cited in Saiving, “The Human Situation,” 106.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 18-19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

dominance has theological corollaries when communicated by Christianity in the West.

Considering these categories, two corresponding themes regarding humanity's position before God can be understood: one, humankind as subject to a God that is completely "Other," who can only be known through the spirit; or second, humanity as fundamentally disobedient to God because of pride. Concerned by the imaging of God through a hierarchy wherein humankind is powerlessly subject to a distant, unreachable God, Carter Heyward proposes that a God of dominance is ultimately impassive and therefore useless to humankind.³⁵ Heyward explains that this portrayal of God "is a destructive controlling-device, manufactured in the minds of men who have bent themselves low before ideals of changeless Truth, deathless Life, pure Spirit, perfect Reason, and other qualities often associated with the patriarchal 'God.'"³⁶ Feminist theologians such as Heyward view these depictions of God as reinforcing mind/body dualisms whilst favoring the world of the mind over that of the body. The human body and bodily experience are therefore denigrated in favor of abstract, rationalistic ordering of ideals.³⁷ "The transcendence of God becomes equated with distance, separation and progress," claims Mary Grey, and "the immanent God is neglected."³⁸ According to feminist theologians such as Heyward, when human experience is articulated as something that can be stepped beyond to achieve knowledge of God, then human life itself becomes expendable, or at least secondary to an afterlife of the spirit.³⁹ The ramifications for women's experience that this view of the body encourages will be addressed further on in this chapter. Before doing so, however, we need to consider the other theological

³⁵ Questions of God's passivity or activity have a long theological tradition. Heyward's concerns are directed toward how such views of God affect humankind's participation in justice and not strictly with the origins of such views; See Heyward, *The Redemption of God*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Hinsdale, "Heeding the Voices," 23.

³⁸ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 26.

³⁹ Heyward, *The Redemption of God*, 7.

expression of human nature through patriarchy—namely, humanity’s disobedience to God through pride.

Feminist theologians claim that by defining the human condition solely in terms of original sin,⁴⁰ traditional Christian theology has overemphasized the view of self as prideful, thus perpetuating spiritual doubt; humanity’s aim is articulated as striving toward perfection and yet that very striving to be like God is the source of original sin. What results is a potential patriarchal feedback loop that places hierarchy, power, and individuation at the center of the humanity’s relationship to God.⁴¹ Carter Heyward claims that such emphasis on human pride and disobedience has resulted in Christian theology’s tendency to “foster ‘loneliness’ (separation, division, estrangement) as the human condition.”⁴² When expressed through patriarchy, therefore, feminist theologians criticize Christian theologies that construe the human condition as one of separation from God caused by disobedient self-assertion.

One way to describe a commonality in how feminists have identified what it means to be a woman defined by patriarchy is that of being relational yet fragmented. Though women’s relationality may be seen as a result of patriarchal formation, it is not implicitly negative. Most feminists maintain that attention to interdependent relationship is a major contribution women can bring forward to transform the inequity of Western patriarchy.⁴³ This relationality is most often claimed from the theory of object relations with a female primary caregiver in infancy. Judith Plaskow cites anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s research, reporting, “the fact that women need never unlearn or transcend their primary identification with the mother leads them to become ‘involved with concrete feelings, things, and

⁴⁰ Feminist theologians often emphasize theories of original grace over that of original sin. See Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 6-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁴² Heyward, *The Redemption of God*, 1.

⁴³ Cadigan, “Globalization and the Second Wave of Colonization,” in Briggs and McClintock Fulkerson, *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, 293-294.

people, rather than with abstract entities.”⁴⁴ Whereas males learn to know themselves as “unlike” the source of their primary relationship, females learn through similarity. As a result, anthropologists such as Ortner and sociologists like Nancy Chodorow identify how empathy becomes central to females’ sense of self in ways that are not central to males.⁴⁵

The danger of women’s relational posture, however, as feminist theorists and feminist theologians have identified, is that in a culture that values autonomy and individuation, women may never achieve a sense of selfhood that is not defined by an other.⁴⁶ Because their upbringing and status in society orients women toward care-taking roles, women may not be encouraged in self-actualization the way males are. Speaking of such women as “received knowers” rather than “constructive knowers,” Belenky, et. al. report a recurring theme in how women perceive their moral obligations in regard to selfhood:

They should devote themselves to the care and empowerment of others while remaining “self-less.” Accepting that the world is and should be hierarchically arranged and dualistic, the received knowers channel their increasing sense of self into their growing capacity to care for others.⁴⁷

According to feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, in this model of identity, a woman lacks a container or envelope to hold her together; woman’s fragmentation derives from her lack of self-containment.⁴⁸ As a result, women’s relationships often survive at the cost of self-integrity, as broken relationships have the capacity to be experienced as an injury to a woman’s sense of self.⁴⁹ This damage is augmented by the fact that, as Mary Grey asserts, “the capacity to empathize and identify with others has never been developed as a strength in society.”⁵⁰ Therefore, with the turn

⁴⁴ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 13.

⁴⁵ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 25.

⁴⁶ Ibid.; Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 11.

⁴⁷ Belenky, et. al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, 48.

⁴⁸ Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 59.

⁴⁹ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

towards the self being felt as a rejection of relationship, women who find self-definition in caring for others describe self-care as selfishness.⁵¹ Seen this way, women shaped by patriarchy are caught in a cycle wherein self-sacrifice is viewed as healthy relationality.

As feminist theory has identified women's formation in Western patriarchy as fragmented yet relational, so feminist theology has sought to uncover the harm done to women when theology spiritualizes gender hierarchies. Voiced primarily in terms of oppression, feminist theologians criticize Christian theologies that perpetuate systems in which women's status is determined by their relationships to men.⁵² Rita Nakashima Brock describes this paradigm as one wherein God the father "denies women their own divinely created destinies," and "subordinates women to male authorities and their benevolent protection." Attendant to this, feminist theologians problematize how women in Christianity face the dichotomy of being taught that language about "men" and "sons" is implicitly meant to include women and daughters, whilst at the same time, women are not included in language about leadership, teaching, or most of the public roles in scripture or church tradition.⁵³ Women are meant to know themselves as included, while continually being reminded they are not. Ivone Gebara highlights this dilemma, saying that women "are accustomed to dreaming of a fraternal world, not a sororal one."⁵⁴ She writes that women "have committed the sins of men; they are saved through means proposed by men" and thus have diminished capacity for comprehending their own experience as women.⁵⁵

When considered from the perspective of feminist theology, traditional Christianity functions oppressively for women when masculine experience is raised up at the expense of the feminine experience. As feminist hermeneutics have often

⁵¹ Gillian, *Joining the Resistance*, 21-22.

⁵² Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, xii.

⁵³ Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth*, 36-37.

⁵⁴ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 106.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

shown, the few biblical models for women are often exalted because they exemplify masculine standards.⁵⁶ Hence, the pattern of dominance and submission between man and God is further reflected between man and woman, with woman separated even further from God than she is from man.⁵⁷ The result, therefore, is that women are inhibited from relying on their own experience of faith, but must instead attempt to translate their self-knowledge into a path designed *by men for men*.⁵⁸

It is at this point that feminist theology begins the constructive work of crafting theology that listens to, affirms, and seeks to heal women's experience. Using feminist theory, this section has outlined how patriarchy has shaped views of human nature toward separation, dualism, hierarchy, and dominance, which in turn has influenced Christianity's characterization of the human condition as disobedience and distance from God. The purpose of the foregoing section was to consider feminists' identification of women's fragmented relationality when formed by patriarchy and feminist theologians' critique of Christianity's subordination of women. The remaining two sections of this chapter use the above categories to explore feminist theology's criticism of and practical responses to patriarchal models of sin and grace.

2.2 Pride and Passivity: Sin According to Gendered Experience

As demonstrated thus far, feminist theology identifies disobedience as the predominant category through which Christianity, as disseminated through patriarchal culture, has judged the human condition. Rita Brock claims that in articulating humanity's suffering as rooted in original sin, traditional Christianity figures humankind as "self-deceptive and estranged from a right relationship to God

⁵⁶ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 62.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

because of unbelief and our self-centered hubris, or pride.”⁵⁹ Feminist theology criticizes this starting point for discussing the human/Divine relationship when it is described in terms of failure and disgrace. With sin at the center of discourse on human nature, patriarchal Christianity is seen as fostering anxiety instead of assurance. This section explores the role gender has played in defining sin and how feminist theologians have sought to represent sin in ways that more accurately reflect women’s experience. By suggesting the need for sin be to represented not solely as pride, but also as the sin of passivity—failing to take responsibility for self-actualization⁶⁰—feminist theologians seek to rectify the ways in which traditional doctrines of sin reflect the belief that the masculine experience is normative.

A main resource still used by feminist theologians to critique dominant formulations of sin is Judith Plaskow’s 1975 doctoral thesis, published as *Sex, Sin, and Grace*. Plaskow was among the first theologians to make use of Valerie Saiving’s essay, which called for new articulations of sin according to women’s experience. To investigate Saiving’s theory of “women’s sin,” Plaskow employs the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. What she finds is that by identifying pride as the primary form of sin, these theologians perpetuate a legacy that delineates doctrines from a solely masculine perspective. She says that Niebuhr, “in claiming that the primary form of sin is pride and the primary fruit of grace sacrificial love, focuses on aspects of human experience more likely to be associated with men than with women in western society, and thus both ignores and reinforces the experiences of women.”⁶¹ This view of pride is seen as a response to male socialization toward autonomy.⁶²

Sheila Collins acknowledges that although such formulations of sin may serve a necessary purpose in halting aggression and exploitation fostered in masculine circles, the same result may not be true for women. Collins suggests that because

⁵⁹ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 1-2.

⁶⁰ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶² Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 111.

men are socialized toward ambition, possession, and dominance, emphasizing the sin of pride puts boundaries on ambition.⁶³ The result of this, however, is that it also turns self-limitation into a virtue.⁶⁴ Collins explains, “these virtues were preached to women, for whom meekness, humility and self-sacrifice were already a way of life.”⁶⁵ Because man’s rebellion against God becomes the primary image of unfaithfulness, self-assertion becomes associated with sinful hubris.⁶⁶ Thus, feminist theology correlates men’s temptation being the will-to-power to women’s temptation being passivity.⁶⁷

Furthermore, feminist theologians, along with liberation theologians,⁶⁸ propose that doctrines of sin that only address actions committed by individuals, disregarding sin that pervades systems of oppression, are insufficient; moreover, they perpetuate injustice.⁶⁹ Theologians such as Ivone Gebara identify evil not merely as the evil one choses to do, but as the evil “we suffer or endure . . . the kind of evil present in institutions and social structures that accommodate it, even facilitate it.”⁷⁰ Attending to the sin in systems assists feminist theologians’ efforts to articulate the pressure women endure to image themselves through masculine values and the temptation to participate in their own oppression as a result.⁷¹ Instead of models of sin based on pride, feminist theologians promote awareness of sin present in oppression as a first step toward liberating women from damaging

⁶³ Collins, "Toward a Feminist Theology," 798.

⁶⁴ Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 211-212.

⁶⁵ Collins, "Toward a Feminist Theology," 798.

⁶⁶ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 57.

⁶⁷ Saiving, "The Human Situation," 108-109.

⁶⁸ Liberation theology has played a crucial role in the emergence of feminist theology. In many cases, the goals and methods of liberation theology are difficult to separate from those of feminist theology. Ivone Gebara is an example of a theologian who can be seen as a feminist theologian, mujerista theologian, or liberation theologian. For an introduction to the concerns of liberation theology see Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

⁶⁹ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 127-132.

⁷⁰ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 1.

⁷¹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 115.

views of self.⁷² Serene Jones clarifies the importance of identifying sin as “something that ‘occupies’ us,” in order to recognize how oppression touches the core of self-understanding—distorting perceptions of one’s world whilst also obscuring one’s ability to sense that something is wrong.⁷³ For Gebara, the oppression of women is humankind’s ultimate expression of sinfulness and therefore must be central to theology, rather than an additional topic.⁷⁴

Along with oppression—the sin one suffers—two other common themes identified in feminist theology are sin as unfaithfulness and sin as broken relationship. Sin understood as unfaithfulness connotes humankind’s failure to live according to divine purposes.⁷⁵ While this may sound like the traditional description of sin as rebellion against God, sin as unfaithfulness includes ways one may believe and operate out of untruths rather than from God’s truth. This could include acquiescing to patriarchal definitions and systems rather than living toward justice. Judith Plaskow uses terms such as “the refusal of self-transcendence” to signify how women and men fail to live responsibly in the freedom given them by God.⁷⁶ Unfaithfulness is the sin committed by evading the fullness of God’s offering of grace and accepting instead to be defined by the roles, values, and goals set forth by a broken world.⁷⁷

Following this reading of sin, broken relationships reveal the dimension of sin *caused* by unfaithfulness. Sheila Collins explains: “Feminists hold that the alienation of woman from man—because it was the first and is still the longest lasting form of human alienation—can be seen as a primordial paradigm from which all other unjust relationships derive.”⁷⁸ Sin understood as the failure to honor

⁷² Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁴ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 52.

⁷⁵ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 113.

⁷⁶ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 68.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 90; Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 44.

⁷⁸ Collins, *Different Heaven and Earth*, 161.

and respect the other, whether that is God, one's neighbor, or the environment, functions in response to feminist theology's view of sin as oppression. Whilst defining sin in terms of broken relationships invokes personal responsibility, it joins that responsibility to empathy and respect for what is beyond the self. Whereas the sin of pride or the will-to-power center on the individual, the sin of broken relationships encourages a view of self as interdependent and accountable to those with whom one is in relationship.⁷⁹ For feminist theologians, this philosophy of sin provides context through which to honor both women's and men's experience.⁸⁰ When applied to women's experience, Serene Jones states, "Historically and sociologically speaking, 'feminine sin' is what women are most apt to be guilty of when marginalized by sinful power structures."⁸¹ Understood in this manner, sin ceases to be a set of wrong behaviors or unholy aspirations; "sin" can describe any institution, tradition, or rationale that justifies oppression and denial of grace.

From this perspective, the predominant forms of "feminine sin" can best be explained by what Susan Nelson refers to as the sin of hiding.⁸² The two aspects of sin as hiding investigated most by feminist theologians are fragmentation—the sin of failing to construct a coherent self—and fusion, the sin of forfeiting agency. These expressions of unfaithfulness represent what feminist theologians see as the primary temptations facing women raised in patriarchal societies. Valerie Saiving posits women's sin as diffuseness, passivity, and dependence on others for self-definition.⁸³ This has been seen as a consequence not just of women's upbringing, but also of being instructed in the virtues of self-sacrifice, humility and meekness—traits already enforced by women's secondary position in society;⁸⁴ by requiring women to confess the wrong sin, traditional Christianity reinforces women's sense

⁷⁹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 102.

⁸⁰ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 93.

⁸¹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 115.

⁸² Nelson, "Sin Of Hiding," 317.

⁸³ Saiving, "The Human Situation," 108-109.

⁸⁴ Collins, "Toward a Feminist Theology," 798.

of guilt and thus fails to encourage women towards wholeness.⁸⁵ Valerie Saiving argues that women's sin is a matter of diffuseness, passivity, and dependence on other's for self-definition.⁸⁶ As Serene Jones explains, the dual aspect of woman's fragmentation and woman's fusion is rooted in woman's state as an "unenveloped self" and as a "constrained agent."⁸⁷ The resultant image is woman as both boundary-less and confined.

A woman's failure to construct a coherent self, when understood as the sin fragmentation, is encouraged by Christian theology's teaching on the need to surrender or shatter the self as a process of sanctification. In this model, a woman's effort to assert selfhood is deemed sinful. Judith Plaskow notes that the shattering of self as an experience of grace can only apply where one's sin is self-absorption and pride. "Where sin is not 'too much' self but lack of self," she writes, "such shattering is at least irrelevant and possibly destructive rather than healing."⁸⁸ Feminist theologians maintain that preaching humility as a virtue to counteract sinful ambition, whilst constraining masculine temptations toward self-aggrandizement, encourages women's self-denial to the point of not developing a self of their own.⁸⁹ Susan Nelson criticizes this paradigm on the basis that self-sacrificial love, pronounced as a virtue, is actually synonymous with woman's sin:

As long as the highest human virtue is self-sacrifice, and as long as the long-suffering, totally self-giving wife/mother is the symbol our tradition uplifts . . . then woman cannot answer the call to accept her human freedom without knowing the guilt of being named by the tradition, as well as herself, as assertive, self-centered, unfeminine—and, finally, as sinner.⁹⁰

For women who experience a lack of self, the spiritual admonishment to sacrifice self for other is oppressive as well as futile. Such a woman has no self to offer in

⁸⁵ Saiving, "The Human Situation," 108-109.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 119-120.

⁸⁸ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 85.

⁸⁹ Zappone, *Hope for Wholeness*, 54.

⁹⁰ Nelson, "Sin of Hiding," 322.

service of the other; thus, her efforts to bestow self-sacrificial love merely promote her self-annihilation, instead of fostering her relationship with self, God, and other. Women affirmed in this attitude are taught that they are being faithful when in actuality they have not done the work of forming a genuine self to offer another in love.⁹¹ Feminist theologians propose, however, that although women may not be directly responsible for the sinful structures that constrain them, they are responsible for how they respond. Thus, the sin of fragmentation is the failure to take responsibility for faithful self-construction. As Susan Collins puts it, “man’s sin is that he has not had enough humility, woman’s that she has had too much of it.”⁹²

An additional interpretation of women’s sin of hiding is fusion. The sin of fusion is that which arises from a woman’s lack of boundaries—failure to live with self-integrity in relationship. Women who are exhorted by patriarchal systems to deny their self, have little recourse but to seek self-definition through relationships.⁹³ The temptation to fuse with others, to surrender selfhood and seek containment through another person’s agency or control, can be viewed as a response to woman’s anxiety about separation. As mentioned above, women’s orientation and formation toward attachment can contribute to the need for affirmation within relationship, which, if damaged or denied, can feel like a loss of identity. Valerie Saiving identifies this tendency as the negative side of empathy and receptivity, wherein the danger of a woman succumbing to anxiety in regard to isolation “may also take the negative forms of gossipy sociability, dependence on others (such as husband or children) for the definition of her values, or a refusal to respect another’s right to privacy.”⁹⁴ Fusion, as a response to dependency, is not just a breach of self-integrity; it is a violation of boundaries. Serene Jones describes this state of unfaithfulness as being “a fragmented self who knows neither the promise

⁹¹ Zappone, *Hope for Wholeness*, 54.

⁹² Collins, “Toward a Feminist Theology,” 798.

⁹³ Engel, “Evil, Sin and the Violation of the Vulnerable,” in Thistlethwaite and Engel, *Lift Every Voice*, 160.

⁹⁴ Saiving, “The Human Situation,” 109.

of agency nor the hope of just relation.”⁹⁵ Having surrendered her own agency, a woman struggles to respect and recognize the agency of others. Women in this position sacrifice their self-integrity for the sake of connection, but because fusion is the opposite of intimacy, they are denied any true space to embody wholeness or mutuality in relationship.⁹⁶ Thus, as feminist theologians claim, a woman’s complicity in her own debasement through fusion is an expression of sin.

As this section has sought to show, feminist theologians uphold that traditional doctrines of sin that praise self-denial whilst admonishing efforts of self-assertion contribute to women’s sin of hiding without bringing attention to the actual sin being committed. Accordingly, feminist theologians have claimed that traditional doctrines of grace have not been figured in a way that is redemptive or restorative according to women’s experience of sin. As will be seen in the final section of this chapter, when descriptions of women’s nature and women’s sin contribute to women’s fragmentation and fusion, grace must offer constructive, embodied hope, rather than abstract promises of fulfillment beyond present suffering.

⁹⁵ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 113.

⁹⁶ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 29-30.

2.3 Constructed in Grace: Feminist Theology's Vision for Female Flourishing

Despite the half-century of feminist theology's development, the use of women's experience as an authoritative resource has not reached widespread acceptance in academia to the point where the constructive work can take place without acknowledgment of what has been destructive. That feminist theology is still largely a discussion of patriarchy need not mark it as dualistic or merely reactionary. Rather, as in any developmental process, a period of resistance and differentiation is a necessary part of shaping identity, particularly in situations where abuse or oppression has been present. Hence, discernible within much of feminist theological discourse on sin and grace is the naming of oppression that has been experienced as a beginning stage of imagining, and thus claiming, freedom from injustice.⁹⁷ This section introduces how feminist theologians have defined grace according to women's experience as flourishing. What will be seen is that when women's sin is described as submitting to the pressures to fragment and to fuse, grace is depicted as containment and right relation that capacitate one toward faithful self-construction and healthy interdependence. Rather than justification and sanctification serving as process of self-shattering, feminist theology proposes women's need to experience grace as a restoration to wholeness.

First, examining revisionary models of grace requires a brief survey of how feminist theologians have characterized traditional doctrines of atonement and redemption. Because traditional theologies have predominately defined humanity as separated from God, salvation has meant God's merciful intervention against human depravity through the sacrificial atonement of Christ's incarnation. The traditional images associated with this process of redemption, as defined by

⁹⁷ Ibid., 19; Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 32.

feminist theology, have been those of “sacrifice,” and “victim.”⁹⁸ Carter Heyward reads this model of salvation not as life-giving but as “a domination of humanity by God.”⁹⁹ Read in this way, doctrines of atonement and salvation that center on new life emerging through death have perpetuated “separation and disconnection [as] the source of reconciliation and connection.”¹⁰⁰ In these models of salvation, grace is pictured as the revelation of one’s unworthiness before a merciful God who shatters self-delusions in order to justify then sanctify the sinner.¹⁰¹ Judith Plaskow relates the view in which God declares sinners justified despite their sinfulness, as traditionally emphasizing the sin, rather than the forgiveness being offered.¹⁰² Thus grace, when termed as a shattering of the self, reinforces God’s inseparable distance from humanity.

This reinforced separation from God is evident in why feminist theology has criticized the view of salvation that is accomplished through suffering in the present.¹⁰³ In such a model, experiences of grace are not looked for in daily life, but awaited for in an unseen future beyond present trials and suffering.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, salvation becomes the anticipation of undeserved grace offered through the continual experience of dying to self. The dualist nature of traditional doctrines of grace and salvation that reinforce the separation of earthly life/eternal life, God/humanity, and Savior/sinner exemplify many of the reasons feminist theologians claim such doctrines to be oppressive rather than restorative to women. If salvation is only regarded as that which occurs after life, then women’s experience of suffering in the present—along with that of other marginalized populations—may be allowed to continue. From a feminist theological perspective,

⁹⁸ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 118.

⁹⁹ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, xii.

¹⁰¹ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 84.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰³ Zappone, *Hope for Wholeness*, 69.

¹⁰⁴ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, xi.

the overemphasis of salvation's fulfillment in the spiritual realm encourages detachment in regard to the call to participate in God's work of "moving the world toward wholeness"¹⁰⁵ by seeking to bring about justice and healing in the present.¹⁰⁶ So long as grace is the promise of complete transformation beyond death, the call to transform the present can be subsumed. Feminist theologians have regarded such theologies as gender-biased, with patriarchal doctrines being more eschatologically focused, whereas feminist theology advocates the equal importance of "life-and-present-oriented"¹⁰⁷ depictions of grace. For feminist theologians, as well as liberation theologians, womanists, and other theologians working from positions that prioritize the concerns of historically marginalized or oppressed populations, redemption cannot simply mean patiently waiting for things to become better in another world.¹⁰⁸ Rather, redemption must include taking responsibility in this life to live as sanctified beings transformed by grace, rather than subdued by it.¹⁰⁹

Using women's experience as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting and re-defining doctrines of salvation, feminist theologians have asked what kinds of grace women are actually in need of, and how grace is experienced.¹¹⁰ Ivone Gebara phrases the work of feminist theology as that of "understanding deliverance" according to women's experience.¹¹¹ As suggested in this chapter, oppression has been the predominant image of women's experience in patriarchal Christianity. Hence, the prevailing image of grace according to women's experience is that of women's flourishing. As hiding has been a guiding term for feminist theology's articulation of women's sin, this section will therefore consider the encounter of

¹⁰⁵ Engel, "Evil, Sin and the Violation of the Vulnerable," 309.

¹⁰⁶ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 130.

¹⁰⁷ Karras, "Eschatology," in Parsons, *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 244.

¹⁰⁸ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 124-125; Aquino, "Theology and Identity in the Context of Globalization," in Briggs and McClintock Fulkerson, *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, 418-440.

¹⁰⁹ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 89-90.

¹¹⁰ Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 109.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

grace not as hiding's opposite, but as its cure: intimacy. When envisaged as women's flourishing in their present life, grace can be experienced as containment that heals fragmentation, and as the capacity for right relation instead of submission through fusion. These two aspects of grace will be explored before reviewing how feminist theologians advocate their realization—how grace is offered.

For women who have been taught to believe that self-assertion is sinful and that self-sacrifice is the highest expression of love, grace as containment provides the space in which women can be built up into wholeness. Mary Grey describes the affirmation of self, or “honest self-love” that such grace can provide space to construct, as a pre-requisite for redemptive transformation.¹¹² In this interpretation, grace is the offering of space from which woman can understand and assert her own being.¹¹³ Regarding what is needed in order to develop a healthy self, grace can be experienced as the security, care, affirmation and respect that empowers a woman to know herself as separate, yet complete.¹¹⁴ Grace as containment is the offering of safety wherein a woman no longer needs to hide for fear of being shattered. Instead, grace calls her toward “responsible self-actualization.”¹¹⁵ Her lack of self is no longer deemed a virtue, but is instead an opportunity to repent her failure to claim the finite freedom for which she was created.¹¹⁶

In terms of psychological development, Mary Belenky et. al. describe women's emergence from external definitions of self as including, “the discovery of personal authority,” and the recognition of the “‘still small voice’ to which a woman begins to attend rather than the long-familiar external voices that have directed her life.”¹¹⁷ Designating grace as that which prompts a woman to claim her voice rather than

¹¹² Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 82.

¹¹³ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 121.

¹¹⁴ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Collins, “Toward a Feminist Theology,” 780.

¹¹⁶ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 39; Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 90.

¹¹⁷ Belenky, et. al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*, 68.

allow it to be silenced, describes the function of grace that concerns the individual's relationship to self as well as how one perceives and encounters others. Katherine Zappone affirms that "self-love not only enables integration, its stillness of inherent satisfaction allows respect for the other to surface."¹¹⁸ Grace must also, therefore, address how one inhabits relationship.

As illustrated in the previous section, fusion is a mode of relating in which one's sense of self is undifferentiated from one's relationships. Isolation becomes conflated with loss of identity, causing persons in fused relationships continually to seek reassurance from the other in order to "know they exist." From a feminist theological perspective, a woman's fusion may drive her to transgress against others' personal, emotional, or even physical boundaries out of desperation to experience her own worth.¹¹⁹ Hence, the sin of hiding, when figured as the sin of relinquishing agency through fusion, is responded to by grace that enables right relation. Right relation necessarily connotes the formative role relationships play in human development.¹²⁰ As much as feminist theology advocates women's claim to personal power, the aim of faithfully stewarding one's agency is not isolated independence. Nor does the feminist theological assertion of a woman's need to not be defined by others entail the rejection of relationships as formative, powerful and indispensable to human flourishing. Rather, healthy interdependence is an essential aim when grace is envisaged as the capacity for right relation. Much of feminist theology is based on the assertion that to be human is to be relational.¹²¹ Grace as right relation is then a matter of reclaiming and living out of one's inherent relationality as modeled by God's own relational being.¹²² For the woman

¹¹⁸ Zappone, *The Hope for Wholeness*, 72.

¹¹⁹ Saiving, "The Human Situation," 108-109.

¹²⁰ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 85.

¹²¹ While many theologies hold that humankind is created by God to be relational, feminist theology may differ in that it tends to use human relationality as a starting point for theology, rather than a secondary component. For more on relationality as a starting point for feminist theology, see Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 1; Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 7.

¹²² Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 1.

whose sin is hiding through fusion, grace convicts her neglect of others' individuality and her own, thus pressing her toward an individuation that maintains closeness without absorbing others into her self. Right relation, as a result of grace, reveals the ways sin tears at the heart of relationships between God, self, and other.¹²³ As Mary Grey proposes, "the language of redeeming grace is the language of claiming power-in-relation."¹²⁴ Therefore interdependency is rooted in the humble acknowledgment of one's need for others and, in Nicola Slee's words, "the freedom of each living thing to be its distinctive self, thus necessitating the embrace of otherness within an essential connectedness."¹²⁵ Hence, in receiving grace, a woman moves out of hiding and into empowered, individuated relationships wherein she can mutually shape and be shaped.

Uniting these two aspects of grace, containment and right relation, is the notion of intimacy. Feminist theology has criticized traditional views of human nature that promote separation as the fundamental aspect of human/divine relations. What feminist theologians offer as a corrective are doctrinal interpretations that emphasize relationality. For many Christian feminist theologians, a relational view of humanity is based on Trinitarian theology, valuing non-hierarchal depictions of God's self-relation, and thus non-hierarchal relations amongst humankind.¹²⁶ Furthermore, a Trinitarian focus strengthens the understanding of being made in God's image as being made for relationship.¹²⁷ Intimacy, therefore, is way to understand relationality as requiring both vulnerability and responsibility, as one cannot share intimacy with an object or with a diffuse other. Serene Jones speaks of wonder as a component of intimacy, representing the way in which one encounters another person with openness to surprise and mystery, rather than presumption or resignation, and how intimacy

¹²³ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 36.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹²⁵ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 138.

¹²⁶ Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 26.

¹²⁷ See Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*.

“requires a vivid sense of where you end and the object begins” in order for sharing to occur.¹²⁸ From this perspective, when intimacy, and not solely self-sacrifice, is raised as a model of divine relation, grace is that which emboldens and frees one to love intimately.¹²⁹

What then do feminist theologians identify as the means of grace? It is here that feminist theologians’ pursuit of practical and pro-active expressions of doctrine is most apparent, for the feminist theological task of envisioning women’s wholeness is inextricable from advocating and working towards justice in women’s lives.¹³⁰ This chapter has explored the pragmatic impulse of feminist theology as grounded in God’s immanence. Because God is seen as co-operative with humankind, women and men are thus accountable for their participation in justice and mercy in this life, not just their faith in God’s justice and mercy.¹³¹ Rita Brock writes, “the work of Christian grace and love is now, and not just later.”¹³² Hence, feminist theologians portray grace as co-created in multiple, tangible ways. The means discussed in this chapter are not exhaustive, but reflect the categories most applicable to Charlotte Brontë’s fiction. The remainder of this chapter examines feminist theologies of embodied grace as resistance, recovery, and care. Each of these elements of grace contribute to the imaging of female wholeness.

As women’s sin has thus far been defined as fragmenting or fusing in response to social, relational or spiritual pressures, grace envisaged as the power of resistance demonstrates how grace awakens one to injustice. Resistance, fueled by righteous anger, is the manner in which a woman acknowledges then steps away from systems of oppression that deny her wholeness. Feminist and liberation theologians alike highlight the importance of anger as a tool of resistance in that it signifies a healthy reaction to violation; passivity, not anger, is the sinful response

¹²⁸ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 163-164.

¹²⁹ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, xii.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41; Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 156; Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 125.

¹³¹ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 1.

¹³² Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, xi.

to harm.¹³³ Rita Brock clarifies, “anger that we integrate, rather than vent on others, leads us to self-assertion and self-acceptance, . . . [hence] anger is a way to intimacy and loving, if it is understood to contain clues to our own pain.”¹³⁴ In this portrayal, the faithful response to evil is righteous anger at the violation of God’s good creation, and resistance to further abuse. Mary Potter Engel notes the historical interpretation of anger and “vocal, vehement resistance” as unchristian and even more so, unfeminine.¹³⁵ She rejects this inference and stresses the danger of dissolving one’s anger rather than responding to it.¹³⁶ According to Engel, internalized anger embeds a victim in their feelings of powerlessness and increases the need for splitting into self-protective mind/body dualisms.¹³⁷ Such splitting may function as a gift of mercy to an abuse victim,¹³⁸ but if never healed, can perpetuate the loss of self instigated by the abuse. Therefore, anger and resistance must be taught as positive reactions to the transgression of one’s boundaries. Grace, then, is that which empowers a woman to recognize and resist the violation of her boundaries.

Additionally, when sin is described not just as one’s unfaithfulness but also as the sin one is subjected to, recovery from abuse becomes an important expression of grace. In many ways, traditional diagnoses of sin, when viewed through women’s experience, resemble trauma. Where Christian teaching has sanctioned women’s subjugation as God’s will and affirmed the need to die to self, women’s experience of such theology evokes imagery of trauma, understood as an event wherein one feels the threat of annihilation from an external force that cannot be resisted or escaped, leaving one unable to cope.¹³⁹ Women who have struggled under threat of self-

¹³³ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Engel, “Evil, Sin and the Violation of the Vulnerable,” 156.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 160.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 157.

¹³⁹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 13, citing the work of Bessel van der Kolk and Judith Hermann. See van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*; Hermann, *Trauma and Recovery*.

annihilation by a vengeful God, by patriarchal leaders, and by their own internalization of damaging paradigms, need experiences of grace that not only free them from these systems of oppression, but help them recover what they have lost while in the abusive setting. Grace embodied as recovery from trauma introduces the role of testimony and storytelling as means of healing.¹⁴⁰ In trauma recovery, learning to recount the narrative of the traumatic event from a psychologically safe distance and having it heard by an empathetic listener point the way toward the victim being able to compose a new story of recovery.¹⁴¹ Serene Jones writes of this process:

In testifying, the survivor gives voice to previously unspeakable agony, and in witnessing, the receiver of the testimony is able to confirm that the survivor's voice is heard and that the plight no longer needs to be hidden in a dark corner of the soul, but can be pulled into the light of day and affirmed as a reality worthy of sustained lamentation and possible redress.¹⁴²

Recovery through testimony is similar to resistance in its attention to shedding light on violence and suffering, but the work of recovery is not that of “vocal, vehement resistance,” but rather, of making the unspeakable spoken. Nelle Morton's statement about “being heard into speech,”¹⁴³ is often quoted regarding the manner in which silenced victims, sufferers, or marginalized people, come to find their own voice through the act of being listened to and respected.¹⁴⁴ “Being heard into speech, being ministered to in mutuality,” Mary Grey writes, “has become an experience of liberating grace, enabling women to move from being victims to co-liberators of each other.”¹⁴⁵ Where hiding has been a woman's necessary response to trauma, recovery through testimony invites the grace of safe exposure and empathy.

¹⁴⁰ For more research related to writing and storytelling in the trauma recovery process, see van der Kolk, “Language: Miracle and Tyranny,” in *The Body Keeps the Score*, 230-247.

¹⁴¹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 32.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴³ Morton, *The Journey is Home*, 202-210.

¹⁴⁴ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 23; Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 158.

¹⁴⁵ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 158.

Empathy as a channel of grace is also reflected in what feminist theologians as well as feminist theorists term an ethic of care. A concept first introduced by Carol Gilligan, the ethic of care counters a patriarchal ethic of rights based on deduction according to set principles and rules.¹⁴⁶ Instead, a feminist ethic of care figures ethics as attendant to the complexities of interdependence.¹⁴⁷ An ethic of care recognizes the need for flexibility and connection in human relationships and conflict resolution. Susan Frank Parsons calls the “care” in this ethical posture a “means to understand oneself and others to be woven together in a network of relationships, and to keep those relationships sturdy and flexible enough to sustain us.”¹⁴⁸ Embodying an ethic of care places individuals in a posture of respect and connection to their environment and community. For feminists who have seen the ethics of rights as instrumental to much of Western culture’s legacy of oppression, exploitation, and environmental devastation, an ethic of care replaces the idealization of “blind impartiality” with the actualization of contextuality as a needed source for justice.¹⁴⁹ Carter Heyward’s suggestion that “our liberation from injustice in the world is dependent upon the theological value we give to our shared humanity”¹⁵⁰ demonstrates how an ethic of care is reflected in feminist theology. Operating from an ethic of care is the large-scale application of grace as right relation, viewed at the societal and communal level. When empathy and interdependence are given priority over principles that regard justice as an universalized abstraction rather than a contextualized reality, a grace-enabled ethic of care affirms the movement toward wholeness as the practice of responding to the world as “relational at its very core.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, 100.

¹⁴⁷ Belenky, et. al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, 8; Zappone, *The Hope for Wholeness*, 25-26.

¹⁴⁸ Parsons, “Redeeming Ethics,” in *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 212.

¹⁴⁹ Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 17-18; Belenky, et. al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 16.

¹⁵¹ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 31.

Ultimately, the expressions of grace-enabled flourishing explored in this section do not rely on gender. Because feminist theology is concerned with human freedom and justice, not with replacing matriarchy for patriarchy,¹⁵² the theological condition of grace being part of how men and women treat one another, makes grace a divine gift that can be imparted and acted upon in tangible, recognizable ways. Thus, feminist theology's project of envisioning female wholeness is inseparable from envisioning wholeness for men, for children, and for all created beings and for the earth. To participate in God's redemption of the world is to value one's identity as a unique, interdependent part of a relational coexistence. For the woman who has felt isolated, silenced, fragmented or fused, this is the liberating, Good News feminist theology seeks to share.

This chapter has explored feminist theology's development in response to traditional Christian theology's gender-biased articulation of the human condition. Having identified the need for women's experience to be represented in Christian doctrines of sin and grace, feminist theologians have pursued constructive ways to let women's voices shape how sin and grace are articulated. By drawing attention to how women in patriarchy have been enculturated towards passivity and self-abnegation, feminist theologians seek to present a more complete and liberative articulation of the Christian message in which women's experience, not just men's, is affirmed and acknowledged. Such envisioning, as this chapter has attempted to show, has been offered in response to the feminist theological question: "what might be done to narrate conversion in women's lives more meaningfully?"¹⁵³ In the next chapter, the question of narrating conversion takes on literary significance. Turning now to Charlotte Brontë's novels and their place within feminist and religious criticism, the remaining chapters will argue that *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* embody a liberative vision for female flourishing that anticipates feminist theological depictions of women's experience of sin and grace. By first examining the division within literary criticism between perceptions of Brontë's feminist impulse

¹⁵² Ibid., 2.

¹⁵³ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 63.

and Christian faith, we can begin to see how a feminist theological perspective might lessen that gap.

Chapter 3

Charlotte Brontë's Feminist Voice and Christian Faith: Divergent Critical Approaches

Thus far, this thesis has explored how feminist theologians have sought to more accurately and liberatively communicate the Christian message on behalf of women socialized into patriarchy. As explored in Chapter One, it was through reading women's literature that feminist theologians first began to identify the conflict that arises when female self-assertion is deemed prideful and self-abnegation is called virtuous. Understanding the reflexive relationship between women's narratives and feminist theology provides a helpful context for considering the ways in which Charlotte Brontë's fiction anticipates these feminist theological concerns. Reading Brontë's fiction in light of feminist theology, however, is a different, though complementary task. By jointly considering Brontë's anticipation of feminist theology and the way feminist theologians might read Brontë, a more complete picture emerges of Brontë's complex portrayal of women's experience and the role Christian theology plays in her novels' liberative imagination. To read Brontë in light of feminist theology, three veins of literary criticism must be examined. This chapter looks firstly in detail at feminist criticism's leading role in Brontë scholarship and how Brontë's proto-feminism has largely been read as a denouncement of Christianity. Only more recently has scholarly engagement with Brontë's religious material and context begun to counter this latter tendency. Secondly, however, as this chapter will seek to show, criticism that finds Brontë affirming Christian orthodoxy often problematizes the narratives' emancipatory impulse; which is to say, Brontë's religious expression is praised at the expense of the stories. The third section of this chapter, therefore, examines recent Brontë scholarship that reads the romantic and religious plots of Brontë's novels—the

feminist trajectory and Christian faith affirmed in her texts—as mutually informing. Particular attention will be given to how critics have read *Jane Eyre*'s conclusion, in order to demonstrate how a liberative reading might avoid dualistic choices between marriage and patriarchy, earthly happiness and eternal salvation, personal fulfillment and religious conviction. These examples, which view Brontë's feminism as influenced by her Christianity and interpret her Christian material as aligned to the novels' romantic plots, indicate how a feminist theological reading might shed further light on Brontë's depiction of women's experience of sin and hopes for salvation.

3.1 Brontë in Feminist Criticism

An overview of feminist criticism of *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), and *Villette* (1853) may seem superfluous when one considers that in many ways the critical engagement with Brontë's fiction for the past four decades *has been* feminist. Whether that critical perspective has berated or applauded Brontë's heroines and their journeys, the parsing of patriarchal influences and feminine self-assertion in Brontë's work has arguably been the dominant tendency in Brontë scholarship of the latter-twentieth century. Within this near-consensus, however, the growing theological engagement with Brontë's work highlights elements still debated in feminist criticism. Before engaging Brontë's fiction from the perspective of feminist theology, it is important to take note of those feminist critical concerns that disrupt traditional theological readings of the novels, as well as the elements of Brontë's work to which feminist critics have remained most resistant. This section will address *Jane Eyre*'s pride of place in feminist criticism and the themes of rebellion and resistance that feminist critics have highlighted as central to Brontë's fiction. Additionally, the ways feminist critics have positively figured Brontë's heroines as rejecting the Christian establishment will be brought into conversation

with nineteenth-century critics who decried Brontë's fiction for the same reason. These shifting perspectives on Brontë's religious worldview and portrayal of human love reflect ways in which even now Brontë's work can spark opposite strains of praise and accusation for nonconformity.

A Cult Text of Feminism

In 1979 when Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published what quickly became a touchstone of feminist literary criticism, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, they referred to Charlotte Brontë as an "often under-appreciated" novelist.¹ If Brontë was perceived as critically under-appreciated before the publication of *Madwoman in the Attic*, that is perhaps the last time such a statement could be made, at least from a feminist standpoint; *Jane Eyre's* status as the primary (and eponymous) text of *Madwoman in the Attic* more or less marks the beginning of feminist literary criticism's centrality to readings of *Jane Eyre* and Brontë scholarship in general. Already by 1985, *Jane Eyre* had become "a cult text of feminism," according to postcolonial theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak.² In the decades since, read either as "new feminist myth,"³ "female bildungsroman,"⁴ or narrative expression of feminist political consciousness,⁵ *Jane Eyre* has become a core text in feminist literary criticism. And although feminist interpretation of Brontë's work has not been limited to *Jane Eyre*, this section summarizes aspects of *Jane Eyre*, the novel that has most regularly received feminist approval, in order to introduce wider issues of Brontë's fiction that have shaped the critical discourse since Charlotte Brontë first began to publish. For whilst the themes of empowerment, rebellion, and

¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, xii.

² Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," 244.

³ Peterson, *Victorian Women's Autobiography*, 108.

⁴ Sternlieb, "Hazarding Confidences," 504.

⁵ D'Albertis, "Beyond The Brontë Myth," 268.

resistance for which *Jane Eyre* is celebrated are pillars on which a feminist theological reading of Brontë stands, these themes are neither unqualified nor unequivocal. Understanding the silences feminists find in Brontë's liberative voice will help to keep us from anachronistic readings of Brontë as feminist iconoclast whilst also pointing to spaces wherein a feminist theological reading of Brontë may provide alternatives to perceived failures of her liberative vision.

A key claim by feminist critics since the 1970s is that Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is an emancipatory narrative in which a marginalized young woman asserts her power. When read as a feminist parable,⁶ Jane Eyre's pursuit of personal liberty and equality stands out as the central drama of the novel. Pressured toward roles of subservience—dependent orphan, kept mistress, servant-wife—Jane resists “the thrill of masochism,” which is Adrienne Rich's term for what tempts Jane at each scene of crisis.⁷ As Elaine Showalter writes, “For Jane Eyre, action is a step toward independence; even if it begins as escape, it is ultimately directed toward a new goal.”⁸ Jane's ability to name and pursue her desires, despite the sometimes physically and psychologically violent ways she is compelled to conform, have represented for decades of feminist readers the female struggle within patriarchy. Despite Brontë's nineteenth-century social constrictions, or more likely *because* of them, feminist criticism has heard in *Jane Eyre* a vital and relevant voice of hope for female emancipation and equality.

This identification of modern feminist concerns with Brontë's fiction is nowhere more explicit than in the passage critics have termed Jane's feminist manifesto.⁹ Jane, discontented with the security and routine of her newly established position as governess, restlessly wanders the upper stories of Thornfield

⁶ Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 72.

⁷ Rich, “Temptations of a Motherless Woman,” 474.

⁸ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 124.

⁹ See Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism*, 170-175; Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women*, 111.

Hall and ruminates on the millions of women “in silent revolt against their lot.”¹⁰ “Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth,” she says of the injustice wherein women are treated as inferior in feeling, ability, and intelligence by the men who “condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”¹¹ And whilst Adrienne Rich appears to have been the first to apply the term “manifesto” to Jane’s tower speech, *Jane Eyre* has been called the fictional complement to Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 “manifesto,” *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*,¹² and even early-twentieth century writer Arthur C. Benson found in *Jane Eyre* a “manifesto . . . of the equality of noble love.”¹³ The pairing of *Jane Eyre* with the appellation “manifesto” reflects how Brontë’s novel has been read not merely as an illustration of a woman’s emancipatory journey, but as an explicitly political protest advocating action—Jane’s rebellion as a call to revolution.

Along with embracing Jane’s incisive tower speech directed towards her “more privileged fellow-creatures,”¹⁴ feminist critics have highlighted the importance of young Jane’s visceral reaction to injustice being manifested as anger. Holding up Jane’s rage as an ally in her growing awareness of the maltreatment she is told to accept as her appointed position of dependence and submission, feminist readings have found in *Jane Eyre* a dramatization of rightful protest against female oppression.¹⁵ As Brontë scholar Marianne Thormählen summarizes, “Rage’ has always been associated with Charlotte Brontë and her work, and the nature of Jane

¹⁰ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 129.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 129-130

¹² Diedrick, “Jane Eyre and A Vindication of the Rights of Women,” in Hoeveler and Lau, *Approaches to Teaching Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre*, 23.

¹³ Benson, “Charlotte Brontë: A Personal Sketch,” 58-59.

¹⁴ *Jane Eyre*, 130.

¹⁵ Gilbert, “Jane Eyre and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking,” 353-354; Diedrick, “Jane Eyre and A Vindication of the Rights of Women,” 26.

Eyre's rebellion has been the subject of what amounts to a critical industry."¹⁶ Whether endorsing Brontë for her heroine's "primal scream" against suppression,¹⁷ or criticizing Brontë for arguably allowing Jane Eyre to be subdued through marriage,¹⁸ feminism's positive valuation of anger as a response to injustice is well reflected in Brontë scholarship.

Whilst *Jane Eyre* in particular has been honored for the way it resonates with contemporary feminist concerns, all of Brontë's novels have been recognized for the way they challenge and resist the cultural norms of Brontë's own time. As narratives of women resisting their culturally-proscribed spheres, which also demonstrate the harm done to women forced to conform to those gendered norms, Brontë's fiction has been celebrated by feminist literary scholars for its progressive critiques.¹⁹ Important examples of this include the ways Brontë's fiction explicitly identifies women's enforced dependence as unfair and unjustified, with the corollary illustration of how women suffer both in mind and body from their restrictive position.²⁰ Additionally, within Brontë's portrayal of women's circumscribed lives, feminist critics note Brontë's commentary on stereotyped ideals of womanhood as counter to women's capacity to be rational, whole human beings;²¹ there can be no meaningful existence, her books assert, as a "half doll, half angel."²² For decades of feminist readers, Jane Eyre, Shirley Keeldar, Caroline Helstone, and Lucy Snowe represent heroines that subvert the status quo and, despite relational and social pressures, carve alternative paths toward their own definitions of fulfillment and

¹⁶ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 128.

¹⁷ Fraser, "The 'Woman Question' and Charlotte Brontë," 317.

¹⁸ See Martin, *Petticoat Rebels*, 93; Edwards, *Psyche as Hero*, 87-89; Heller, "Jane Eyre, Bertha, and the Female Gothic," in Hoeveler and Lau, *Approaches to Teaching Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre*, 54-55.

¹⁹ See Björk, *The Language of Truth*, 26; Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 73; Flint, "Women Writers, Women's Issues," in Glen, *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, 171.

²⁰ See Searle, "An Idolatrous Imagination?" 44; Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality*, 214.

²¹ See Judge, "The 'Bitter Herbs' of Revisionist Satire in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley," n.p.; Barker, *The Brontës*, 657; Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 144.

²² Brontë, *Shirley*, 352.

happiness. Locating the “rebelliously feminist”²³ voice of the “female individualist”²⁴ in Brontë’s fiction, feminist scholars continue to mine these stories for new insights. As Drew Lamonica summarizes, one of Charlotte Brontë’s most notable legacies is that of being promoted as “a public voice—a feminist voice—condemning the plight of unmarried women, their aimless existence, their economic and emotional dependency.”²⁵

Because these emancipatory feminist readings provide part of an important foundation for a feminist theological interpretation of *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*, it will be helpful to consider as well where feminist scholarship has pushed back against Brontë’s narratives and the elements of feminist scholarship that problematize theological interpretation of Brontë’s work. Noting the perceived failures of Brontë’s feminist impulse and the prevalent feminist assertion of Brontë’s denunciation of the Christian establishment may help to illuminate places in which a feminist theological approach can augment the conversation. As introduced in Chapter One, feminist literary criticism has identified patterns in nineteenth-century women’s literature wherein the female protagonist’s personal, social or spiritual quest is ultimately sublimated and domesticated into traditional matrimony. Charlotte Brontë is amongst the female authors in whose narratives feminist critics have highlighted what they interpreted to be a relinquishing of freedom in exchange for romantic bliss. Regarding *Jane Eyre*, critical dissatisfaction with the novel’s marriage ending has persisted for more than half a century.²⁶ *Shirley* has received as much, if not more, negative response for its dual marriage conclusion, with its implications that the once financially and intellectually independent Shirley is ultimately “tamed” by her husband,²⁷ and Caroline equally displaced from her central place in the narrative by her husband and his industrial

²³ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 399.

²⁴ Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts,” 244.

²⁵ Lamonica, *We Are Three Sisters*, 32.

²⁶ For summaries, see Weisser, “Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, and The Meaning of Love,” 99; Griesinger, “Charlotte Brontë’s Religion,” 54.

²⁷ *Shirley*, 623-624.

pursuits.²⁸ Within these critical responses, the fundamental concern is that what is progressive and revolutionary about these heroines' journeys has, by the conclusion, been absorbed into the very "domestic angel" role the characters had resisted from the start.²⁹ Feminist Theologian Carol Christ, in a work of strictly literary criticism, attributes the endings of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* to Brontë's ambivalence about imaginative freedom, marked by Brontë disowning "her character's imaginative energy just as she disowns her own."³⁰ To many readers, the romantic marriage conclusions of the first two novels signify near-betrayals of the stories' feminist trajectories.

Alongside disapproval of the marriage endings as capitulation to Victorian romantic ideals, critics have read Jane's return to a wounded and weakened Rochester³¹ as another questionable aspect of the novel's conclusion. Either the self-determined Jane who refused to be ensnared as Rochester's mistress has been entrapped as his nurse instead, or the cause of Jane's initial departure and ultimate return to Rochester is explained as sexual anxiety.³² Reading Rochester's maiming as a symbolic castration, this strain of criticism assigns to Jane (and largely to Brontë as well) a fear of sex that is only assuaged by marrying an ostensibly impotent Rochester.³³ Though such Freudian readings have lessened in recent

²⁸ See Ward, "In Search of Healing Voices: Church and State in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," 624; Flint, "Women Writers," 184.

²⁹ DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 9-10; Chase, "The Brontës, or, Myth Domesticated," 102-119.

³⁰ Christ, "Imaginative Constraint, Feminine Duty, and the Form of Charlotte Brontë's Fiction," 292.

³¹ Essaka Joshua offers a helpful criticism of the inegalitarian convention in Brontë criticism of referring to Edward Rochester solely by his last name. However, without wishing to further perpetuate patriarchal language biases, this thesis follows the standard usage of Rochester's surname and Jane's first name as it best reflects how the characters most commonly speak of one another. See Joshua, "I Began to See': Biblical Models of Disability in *Jane Eyre*," 290n8.

³² For an early psychoanalytic reading of Brontë's fiction focused on unconscious sexual repression, see Dooley, "Psychoanalysis of Charlotte Brontë, as a Type of the Woman of Genius," 221-272.

³³ Gilbert and Gubar counter the previously dominant reading of Jane's departure being caused by sexual panic, evaluating Jane's responses to Rochester's claims of dominance as political, rather than sexual. See *Madwoman in the Attic*, 354-355.

decades, viewing Jane's marriage to Rochester as the dead-end of her journey of self-definition remains a prominent critical stance.

“An anti-Christian composition”

Equally influential is the critical analysis that Brontë's heroines achieve their personal, social and spiritual emancipation by rejecting Christianity. Feminists were not the first or only scholars to interpret Brontë's work as anti-Establishment, but it has remained a theme much returned to within feminist literary discourse. In many cases, the critical view is that Charlotte Brontë's novels illustrate a turn from Christian orthodoxy to a type of Romantic or pre-Christian spirituality rooted in nature.³⁴ Paired with this is the stance that Jane Eyre's denunciation of Calvinistic self-denial and her pursuit of self-fulfillment are irreconcilable with Christian faith. Margaret Blom especially sees Jane as “incapacitated for Christian faith by her reliance on her vital, autonomous imagination.”³⁵ In most instances, such readings arise from a perspective that views Christianity as inextricably patriarchal³⁶ and that equates Brontë's repudiation of certain expressions of Christianity with its wholesale rejection. Christianity is seen either as a cultural habit for Jane to outgrow in adulthood, an oppressive system she successfully escapes, or a limited worldview she ultimately exchanges for a more inclusive one. If the religious elements are not ignored all together, as is quite common,³⁷ feminist criticism most often endorses Brontë's fiction as post-Christian texts of women's emancipation or else censures the texts when adherence to Christian principles appears to constrain characters' potential. At the center is a critical stance that views the religious

³⁴ See Wheeler, *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction*, 41; Clarke, “Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the Turn to Secularism,” 702.

³⁵ Blom, “Jane Eyre: Mind as Law Unto Itself,” 353.

³⁶ For discussion of the critical view of Christianity's indistinguishability from patriarchy, see Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse*, 4; Pearson, “Religion, Gender and Authority in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë,” 63.

³⁷ Henry Staten argues the commonality of this in *Spirit Becomes Matter: The Brontës, George Eliot, Nietzsche*, 31-75.

elements of Brontë's fiction as obstructing the liberative impulse of the narratives. When these interpretations are compared to the types of negative response Brontë received in the 1840s and 1850s, however, the pattern could almost be switched; the novels' aims are seen as obstructing the religious content.

The nineteenth-century reviews that found "coarseness" and "heathenish-doctrine" in Brontë's novels are well documented and oft quoted.³⁸ The accusation "coarse," for female authors in particular, could be meant as censure for unconventionality,³⁹ representing a realism deemed inappropriate for female readership,⁴⁰ or for employing an ironic or satiric—that is "masculine"—tone that is considered distasteful.⁴¹ *Shirley* may have received the harshest criticism in this regard. Brontë's depiction of selfish Anglican curates, disagreeable Methodist mill-workers, and hard-nosed foreign mill-owners was scolded as "vulgar,"⁴² "disgusting,"⁴³ and "repulsive"⁴⁴ in the negative and mixed reviews it received. ⁴⁵ *Jane Eyre* was censured by its detractors as irreligious for its critique of evangelical Calvinism,⁴⁶ appropriation of scriptural language,⁴⁷ and more widely for its themes of revolt against what was perceived as the divinely ordered social system.

³⁸ The most notorious of these being *The Christian Remembrancer's* and Elizabeth Rigby's 1848 *Quarterly Review* responses to *Jane Eyre*. See Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 88-92.

³⁹ Showalter, *Literature of Their Own*, 25.

⁴⁰ Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 46.

⁴¹ See "From an unsigned review, *Christian Remembrancer*, April 1848," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 89.

⁴² "G.H. Lewes, from an unsigned review, *Edinburgh Review*, January 1850," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 164.

⁴³ "From an unsigned review, *Daily News*, 31 October 1849," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 117.

⁴⁴ "Albany Fonblanque, from an unsigned review, *Examiner*, 3 November 1849," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 126.

⁴⁵ For more on the unfavorable and lukewarm critical response to *Shirley*, see "Shirley. A Tale, and Related Manuscripts," in Alexander and Smith, *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, 468-470

⁴⁶ For an excellent discussion of Brontë's contemporary, author Emma Jane Worboise's attempt to redress Brontë's alleged maligning of Rev. Carus Wilson, figured as Rev. Brocklehurst, see Elisabeth Jay's chapter "Thornycroft Hall: An Evangelical Answer to *Jane Eyre*," in Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, 244-260.

⁴⁷ "From an unsigned review, *Christian Remembrancer*, April 1848," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 89.

Elizabeth Rigby's "anti-Christian" labeling of *Jane Eyre* is based on the novel's "murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor," equivalent to "murmuring against God's appointment," and its sinful "assertion of the rights of man."⁴⁸ In a manner reminiscent of late-twentieth-century feminist criticism, many nineteenth-century critics correlated Brontë's portrayal of marginalized women asserting their equality with men and their social superiors as a repudiation of Christian values. In the latter case, however, the "ungodly discontent"⁴⁹ of *Jane Eyre* or *Villette's* "bitter complaint"⁵⁰ against woman's dependent position denotes the sin of pride, or more specifically, a lack of humility. One of the harshest criticisms Elizabeth Rigby can lodge at the character of Jane Eyre is that "the doctrine of humility is not more foreign to her mind than it is repudiated by her heart."⁵¹ To many nineteenth-century readers such as Rigby, the very journeys of self-definition Brontë's heroines undergo were signs of prodigality; rebellion and the anger that fueled it were temptations to overcome not embrace.⁵²

Of course nineteenth-century and twentieth-century critics are not only comparable for how Christianity and women's rights have frequently been read as conflicting. The majority of critics and readers in Brontë's day regarded her novels highly for their literary merit and unconventional spirit.⁵³ A change is notable, however, in the critical treatment of religion in Brontë's novels. As examined in the

⁴⁸ "Elizabeth Rigby, from an unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*, December 1848," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 109.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ "From an unsigned review, *Spectator*, 12 February 1853," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 182.

⁵¹ "Elizabeth Rigby, from an unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*," in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 109.

⁵² Marianne Thormählen notes that condemnation of anger is likely the hardest aspect of Christian ethics for contemporary readers to understand in regard to its moral significance to Victorians. Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 123.

⁵³ Anne Thackeray Ritchie's memoirs about the literary notables she met growing up as the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray include her observations from her childhood meeting of Charlotte Brontë, which is an often quoted example of how Brontë was regarded: "This then is the authoress, the unknown power whose books have set all London talking, reading, speculating . . . We look at Jane Eyre—the great Jane Eyre—the tiny little lady." "Anne Thackeray Ritchie on Charlotte Brontë," in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 2: 754.

following section, though the majority of twentieth-century scholarship dismissed the religious elements of Brontë's novels, Victorian Christianity has increasingly become an important critical lens through which to approach Brontë and her contemporaries. What feminist criticism largely ignored or deconstructed, critics attending to biblical and theological components of Brontë's fiction now claim as instrumental to Brontë's literary craft.

3.2 Critical Engagement with Religious and Theological Material in Brontë's Fiction

If nineteenth-century critics demonstrated concern over the religious orthodoxy—or lack thereof—in Brontë's fiction, it has arguably taken another century to return to such questions. With twentieth-century Brontë criticism dominated primarily by Freudian and feminist readings, it is only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that critical resistance to religious and theological readings of Brontë began to ease. A number of factors could be seen as contributing to this shift, such as increased acknowledgment of Victorian Christianity as a cultural environment foreign to most contemporary readers that warrants review.⁵⁴ Within this is the growing investigation into nineteenth-century biblical literacy, typology, and hermeneutics as culturally and artistically shaping forces.⁵⁵ For Brontë specifically, archival expansion and corrections to long-perpetuated editorial errors have updated and clarified aspects of Brontë's personal and publishing history in ways that destabilize many Brontë myths.⁵⁶ Over time,

⁵⁴ For discussion, see Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, 1-2; Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 57; Maynard, "The Brontës And Religion," in Glen, *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, 192-195.

⁵⁵ See Prickett, *Origins of Narrative*, 44, 152-156; Marsden, *Emily Brontë and the Religious Imagination*, 73-74.

⁵⁶ For examples, see Juliet Barker's preface to the second edition (2010) of *The Brontës*, as well as her original 1994 introduction. Barker, *The Brontës*, ix-x, xvii-xx.

the image of a Charlotte rebellious against an authoritarian Calvinist father and terrified by a stern Methodist aunt has transmuted to nearly the opposite.⁵⁷ Brontë's Christian faith and commitment to the Established Church, as well as Patrick Brontë and aunt Elizabeth Branwell's reputations,⁵⁸ have been largely rehabilitated over recent years through scholarship and a relinquishing of certain biases. With scholars from diverse critical perspectives attending to the theological and religious aspects of Brontë's fiction with a curiosity largely unseen within twentieth-century criticism, the landscape of religious criticism of Brontë is broadening.

Amidst such expanding territory there is, naturally, a spectrum of interpretations. As regards a feminist theological reading of Brontë, this section identifies patterns of critical engagement that read the religious and feminist impulses within Brontë's fiction as conflicting. Whether by claiming the novels' failure to prove the Christianity professed by the characters, affirming religious dualisms arguably in tension with Brontë's narratives, conflating definitions of orthodoxy, or assessing Brontë's spirituality as outside of Christianity, critics do not consistently see the liberative vision of Brontë's fiction aligning with its religious components. In these readings, the religious plots of Brontë's novels are given credence, but the romantic plots, implicitly or explicitly, become suspect.

Spiritual Confusion

One common interpretation among critics engaging Brontë's religious and theological content is that the texts do not sufficiently demonstrate the spiritual development that the characters espouse. This interpretation arises most often in regard to *Jane Eyre*, with Barbara Hardy notably claiming that whilst Jane's personal and relational growth is detailed, her spiritual journey is only implied.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 16.

⁵⁸ See Stoneman, "The Brontë Myth," in Glen, *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, 215.

⁵⁹ Hardy, *The Appropriate Form*, 61-70.

From a literary standpoint, Hardy sees Jane's religious development as assumed rather than demonstrated. Hardy contends that no attention is "drawn to Jane's change in belief" from a young child who cannot comprehend Helen Burns' faith into a young woman that can offer forgiveness and reconciliation to her Aunt Reed.⁶⁰ For Hardy, this oversight is attributable to a presumed shared faith between Brontë and her readership, for which an explicit conversion description would be unnecessary.⁶¹ Robert Merrett faults *Jane Eyre* in similar fashion, saying that despite invoking the style of nineteenth-century spiritual biographies, *Jane Eyre* "assumes rather than validates Jane's religious sensibility."⁶² Merrett credits Brontë with the goal of depicting "Jane's orthodox education and religious sensibility," but claims she fails to achieve that goal by misunderstanding and misusing spiritual autobiography's modes and symbols.⁶³ In both examples, the lack of explicit conversion narratives in Brontë's novel is read as a literary flaw.

Readings such as the above often focus on young Jane Eyre's spiritual confusion. Jane's famous retort to Reverend Brocklehurst that the way to avoid hell is to "keep in good health, and not die,"⁶⁴ and her woeful query to a dying Helen Burns, "Where is God? What is God?,"⁶⁵ bookend the novel's account of young Jane's spiritual knowledge. To this end, Henry Staten remarks that "such passionately expressed doubt about the most fundamental element of Christian faith—the belief in another life—cries out for definitive, explicit retraction by the mature narrator, if the reader is to conclude that she has indeed retracted it."⁶⁶ Staten points to Peter Allan Dale as one of the earlier critics to describe *Jane Eyre* as containing two competing narrative structures—religious and romantic—that compete and resolve

⁶⁰ Ibid., 67-68.

⁶¹ Ibid., 65.

⁶² Merrett, "The Conduct of Spiritual Autobiography in 'Jane Eyre,'" 11..

⁶³ Ibid., 14-15.

⁶⁴ *Jane Eyre*, 39.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁶ Staten, *Spirit Becomes Matter*, 38.

only through evasion.⁶⁷ Claiming the religious plot to be the dominant structure of *Jane Eyre*, Dale argues that because the novel's central question is, in fact, "what [must one] do to avoid damnation (or achieve salvation),"⁶⁸ the absence of a "climatic spectacle of conversion"⁶⁹ represents a purposeful departure from readers' expectation.⁷⁰ As a result, the spiritual wrestling of Jane's youth is seen as an unanswered question, or at least a proof without evidence.

Other critics have considered Brontë's lack of conversion depictions or deficiently explicit faith statements as indicating indifference to religious commitment. In these readings, characters' accession to religious dictates are motivated by cultural capitulation or thinly disguised ego-preservation. John Maynard sees the only positive—or the least ambivalent—religiousness portrayed in *Jane Eyre* to be "a very watered-down faith in the inner light (Wesley's 'inner witness')" that merely prompts Jane towards fulfilling her "secular destiny."⁷¹ For Margaret Blom, Jane's Christian moral resolve in moments of crisis is "merely expedient—the product not of a belief in these tenets but of a resurgence of selfhood."⁷² Christianity, in this sense, is a mode of expression or possibly a concession to social norms on Brontë's part, and in no way an integral aspect of the characters or narrative Brontë has constructed. These critical perspectives look at the textual evidence of religious commitment in *Jane Eyre* and find partial story arcs or unresolved theological issues. Resembling, to an extent, nineteenth-century critics that were troubled by Brontë's mingling of Christianity with personal will, modern critics that identify insufficient spiritual testimony from Brontë's characters have most often attempted to resolve these perceived breaches by explicating them as Brontë employing a secularized Christianity or depicting the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 31-32.

⁶⁸ Dale, "Tale Half-Told," 112

⁶⁹ Ibid., 119

⁷⁰ Ibid., 113

⁷¹ Maynard, "The Brontës And Religion," 204.

⁷² Blom, "Mind as Law Unto Itself," 361.

spiritual failure of her characters. In either case, the attention is largely on narrative technique not doctrinal definitions. The latter applies to the next method of modern critical engagement with Brontë's religious and theological elements.

Henry Staten, in his excellent work exploring how Brontë anticipates Nietzschean critique of Christianity, remarks that the recent expansion in religious readings of Brontë, and *Jane Eyre* in particular, has “muddied the view of what is at stake, because these readings have such varying notions of what counts as Christianity.”⁷³ When the question explicitly or implicitly posed is whether or not a particular Brontë novel is Christian, defining the measure of orthodoxy is crucial. What Staten describes as a “muddied” view certainly applies to readings that conflate or ignore theological boundaries whilst determining the Christianity of Brontë's texts. Kristi Sexton's 2014 *Brontë Studies* article, “Jane's Spiritual Coming of Age,” is one such example. Sexton lauds Brontë's portrayal of a woman's journey toward spiritual maturity, but does not define said spirituality. Phrases such as “New Testament Christianity,” “personal relationship with God,” and “path to spiritual enlightenment”⁷⁴ connote an assumed but unstated equivalence between Brontë's religious context, contemporary Evangelicalism, and, imprecisely, Eastern spirituality. In such readings, the lines of orthodoxy are not so much blurred as they are disregarded.

Furthermore, in many contemporary religious readings, the manner in which Brontë's theology is affirmed arguably works against the liberative trajectory of the novels. Whereas critics such as Barbara Hardy argue that the religious plot of *Jane Eyre* threatens the romantic plot, many readings that commend *Jane Eyre*'s religious trajectory do so at the cost of the romantic plot by judging characters' actions and motivations in light of doctrines that potentially conflict with the text's religious critiques and relational depictions. This paradigm is most noticeable in how critics view the reasons for Jane's departure from Thornfield after Rochester's bigamy is revealed. Whereas feminist critics tend to disregard Jane's keeping of

⁷³ Staten, *Spirit Becomes Matter*, 31.

⁷⁴ Sexton, “Jane's Spiritual Coming of Age,” 180-181.

“the law given by God; sanctioned by man”⁷⁵ when she chooses to leave Rochester as “Protestant poetics,”⁷⁶ there is a pattern amongst many religious readings of crediting Jane’s departure solely as allegiance to Christian precepts, beyond relational or personal considerations. If feminist critics tend to have Jane departing Thornfield for fear of sex, religious critics have Jane fleeing for fear of damnation. Marilyn Nickelsburg writes, “Jane must deny her physical, emotional and intellectual attraction in order to redeem her soul.”⁷⁷ In this scenario, it is not just Rochester’s deception and offer to make her his mistress that Jane must flee; it is her very attraction to Rochester that threatens her soul. Furthermore, within such a dynamic, Jane’s eventual marriage to Rochester must either come at the cost of her soul or, the rules of salvation must change by the novel’s close.⁷⁸ Shaped largely by atonement theories based on penal substitution, readings such as Nickelsburg’s view Jane’s sacrifice and suffering as necessary conditions of salvation. Maria Lamonaca claims that, “Jane must suffer,” asserting, albeit critically, that “like any good household angel, Jane ‘delights in sacrifice.’”⁷⁹ In ascribing to Jane a self-mortifying⁸⁰ commitment to personal atonement, these readings contrast with feminist views of Jane’s defiant self-assertion as well as religion-centered readings that view Jane as driven by unregenerate self-preservation. By focusing on Jane’s repentance from idolatry as the central religious narrative, many of these readings

⁷⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 365.

⁷⁶ Williams, “Closing the Book: The Intertextual End of *Jane Eyre*,” 66.

⁷⁷ Nickelsburg, “Rending the Veil,” 297.

⁷⁸ Indeed, Nickelsburg makes such a strong case for Jane’s idolatrous relationship to Rochester that her concluding description of Jane as “a model for young women who wished to maintain their own identity, a model of one who maintained her moral compass in the face of Rochester’s adulterous proposal . . . to find and marry her proper partner,” reads paradoxically, with no explanation offered as to how Rochester has become that proper partner by the end. See Nickelsburg, “Rending the Veil,” 297.

⁷⁹ Lamonaca, “Jane’s Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*,” 255, 258.

⁸⁰ Merrett, “Conduct of Spiritual Autobiography,” 4.

threaten to overshadow the romantic narrative, leaving Jane either apostate in marriage, or, as will be discussed below, chastened by a punitive God.⁸¹

However, before looking more specifically at religious consideration of *Jane Eyre's* conclusion, there is a further commonality amongst critics who examine the religious and theological content of Brontë's work. Consonant with feminist readings that see Brontë's heroines liberating themselves entirely from Christianity are the interpretations that see Brontë's work portraying spiritualities outside of Christianity. From this perspective, characters like Jane Eyre do not reject Christianity, per se, but seek a spiritual home beyond orthodox boundaries. In his chapter on "The Brontës and Religion" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, John Maynard describes the entirety of Brontë literature as a subversive converting of traditional Christianity "into alternative religious energies moving towards pagan, female, or pagan and female new religion."⁸² Similarly, Jeffrey Franklin asserts that Christianity alone cannot account for the modes and manner of spiritual discourse of *Jane Eyre*.⁸³ Rather, Brontë demonstrates "mixed allegiances" to multiple spiritualities that ultimately point to "a new, hybrid spirituality for herself and for her time."⁸⁴ Likewise, in his typological study of Brontë's work, Keith Jenkins reads *Jane Eyre's* feminist initiative as representing Brontë's "attempts to create an alternative religion in which paradise is a present possibility and male and female are truly equal."⁸⁵ The issue to note from these examples is the view that the liberative, patriarchy-resistant trajectory of Brontë's spiritual discourse fundamentally departs from Christianity. Or put differently, that Christianity cannot communicate Brontë's proto-feminist spirituality. The question of orthodoxy notwithstanding, the implication of many such readings of Brontë's religious

⁸¹ Departing from this trend, Essaka Joshua reads *Jane Eyre's* warnings against idolatry as promoting healthy relationships, not the rejection thereof. See Joshua, "Almost my Hope of Heaven," 81-107.

⁸² Maynard, "The Brontës And Religion," 196.

⁸³ Franklin, "The Merging of Spiritualities," 460.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 477.

⁸⁵ Jenkins, *Charlotte Brontë's Atypical Typology*, 20.

material is that Christian faith cannot be the bearer of Brontë's liberative themes. If a message of female empowerment or equality is found, its foundation is deemed out-of-bounds from Christian faith.

i. *Jane Eyre's* Conclusion: Rochesters in the Hands of an Angry God

Nowhere in Brontë's fiction is the perceived conflict between Christian faith, human love, and female agency more critically debated than in the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*. Both feminist and religious critics have introduced doubt as to whether Jane's marriage successfully fulfills her narrative journey—that journey being one of self-definition for the former and salvation for the latter. Where feminist critics have seen the liberative narrative endangered by the romantic plot, religious critics have at times constrained or qualified the liberative narrative for the sake of the religious plot. In each perspective, Jane's marriage as a result of rejecting both Rochester's previous adulterous proposal and St John Rivers' claim to her as a missionary wife, is noted by critics as a choice between earthly fulfillment or eternal salvation. Does marrying Rochester represent an embrace of idolatrous love and thus a rejection of divine authority? If not, how is this negotiated? Further, on what Christian terms does Jane both cast off St John as spiritual master *and* give him the last words of the novel? A brief survey of critics who have read *Jane Eyre's* conclusion through these questions will serve as a transition from considering critics who read the liberative plot of *Jane Eyre* in conflict with its romantic or religious plot to examples of recent criticism that upholds a liberative unity between Brontë's romanticism and religion.

A common theme amongst critics engaging either the feminist or religious matter of *Jane Eyre* is the question of to what extent Jane chooses married life with Rochester at the expense of her soul. Whilst feminist criticism largely sees Jane's decision to marry Rochester as embracing an earthly paradise over a Christian heaven, critics focused on the novel's religious plot identify a similar decision, but with suspicion. Simon Marsden identifies this paradigm, stating that "the range of

critical readings of the novel's conclusion seems to be due in large part to the persistent sense that *Jane Eyre* is a novel with two endings—earthly and eschatological—and that those endings co-exist uneasily.”⁸⁶ For critics engaging *Jane Eyre*'s religious content, the conclusion tends to be read as Jane exchanging her eternal salvation for a life with Rochester. Such readings rely in large part on interpreting Jane's journey as a struggle with idolatry. Brontë employs significant biblical allusions and references to Jane's love for Rochester becoming idolatrous, with Jane reflecting back to a time when Rochester had become “almost my hope of heaven.”⁸⁷ Numerous critics read the novel's ending as Jane's failure to overcome that idolatry or as her wholesale acceptance of it. Speaking of Jane's struggle to accept St John's marriage offer and missionary life, Jerome Beaty describes how, “if she accepts, she knows it will probably mean her early death, and so will the sacrifice of choosing this life for the eternal, divine love over human love.”⁸⁸ Here, choosing St John means impending death ameliorated by eternal life, but rejecting him in favor of human love means sacrificing any hope of eternity. Margaret Blom also reads Jane's choice of Rochester as a resigned forfeiture of heaven: “Rejecting the promise of an eternal, spiritual paradise, Jane pursues the path of a worldly love which earlier, she prophetically foresaw, ‘must lead, *ignis-fatuus*-like, into miry wilds whence there is no extrication.”⁸⁹ The idolatrous temptations Jane has hitherto avoided, she now accepts. Kathleen Vejvoda reads the novel's closure as less definitive but arguably more tenuous in tone. According to Vejvoda, if the novel raises the question of whether or not passionate love can avoid idolatry, then *Jane Eyre* asserts its possibility whilst demonstrating its inevitable failure. Assuming the blinding of Rochester symbolizes the breaking of Jane's idol, then “Rochester's gradual regeneration threatens to destabilize Jane's earlier repudiation of

⁸⁶ Marsden, “‘The Earth No Longer a Void’: Creation Theology in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë,” 244.

⁸⁷ *Jane Eyre*, 316.

⁸⁸ Beaty, “St. John's Way and the Wayward Reader,” 493.

⁸⁹ Blom, “Mind as Law Unto Itself,” 352, quoting Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 186-187.

idolatry.”⁹⁰ For Vejvoda, the depiction of Jane and a partially-sighted Rochester gazing at their infant son is just as likely to indicate a new idolatrous love in their marriage than be proof of God’s blessing.⁹¹ For many such critics, attending to the theme of idolatry in the novel means acknowledging the ambivalence with which *Jane Eyre* concludes by having Jane marry the man who one year previous had “stood between [her] and every thought of religion.”⁹²

The dangers of Jane’s idolatrous marriage are mitigated, in some interpretations, by Rochester’s wounding. Unlike Vejvoda, who takes Jane at her word when she tells a physically humbled Rochester, “one is in danger of loving you too well for all this,”⁹³ many critics view Rochester’s maiming as a divine judgement validating Jane’s return. The “divine retribution” against Rochester is, in this sense, a positive good.⁹⁴ Kate Flint reads Rochester’s blinding as reflective of mid-nineteenth-century religious teaching wherein blindness served as a metaphor for worldliness chastened “through bodily darkness.”⁹⁵ Alison Searle similarly indicates that there is a “process of sanctification through chastening that enables Jane and Rochester to enjoy human love in the context of divine love at the end of the novel.”⁹⁶ If Jane has been in danger of surrendering to idolatry, then Rochester’s physical and spiritual humbling signify the atoning sacrifice that blesses their reunion—suffering redeems Rochester, thus suffering redeems their marriage.

Maria Lamonaca, however, although not questioning Jane’s salvation, views the “divine justice”⁹⁷ of Rochester’s chastening in a less positive light. Lamonaca contends, “God may have ‘tempered judgement with mercy’ in bringing Jane and Rochester together again, but not until He exacted the full scriptural penalty—an

⁹⁰ Vejvoda, “Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*,” 256.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 255-256.

⁹² *Jane Eyre*, 316.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 503.

⁹⁴ Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 70.

⁹⁵ Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, 80-81.

⁹⁶ Searle, “Idolatrous Imagination,” 38.

⁹⁷ *Jane Eyre*, 514-515.

eye and a hand—upon Rochester for his crime of intended adultery.”⁹⁸ As Lamonaca and many others note, the permanent loss of sight in Rochester’s left eye and the amputation of his left hand mirror the adultery passage from the Sermon on the Mount:

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee.⁹⁹

Jane uses this language earlier in the novel during her wrestling moments before fleeing Thornfield and adultery with Rochester: “You shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand.”¹⁰⁰ If Jane has been tempted towards adultery, then Rochester bears the marks of one who has committed it. For many critics attending to the religious content of Brontë’s fiction, Rochester’s wounding is not a castration that frees Jane from her sexual anxiety, but a punishment necessary to make Rochester a repentant and worthy husband to Jane. In this view, Jane’s salvation is sure because both she and Rochester have been sanctified through suffering.

However, viewing Jane’s salvation and marriage to Rochester with mutual confidence is complicated for many critics by the fact that Jane’s first person narrative ends not in her own words but in those of St John Rivers. In terms of the religious plot, the perceived yielding of narrative closure to St John indicates to some critics, Jane’s—or Brontë’s—ambivalence about her happy ending. Peter Allan Dale notes a “strange disorder in the religious narrative,” wherein Jane, the pilgrim whose progress the novel has focused on, celebrates “Great Heart” St John reaching the Celestial City rather than herself.¹⁰¹ Dale claims, “instead of Jane’s final confession of faith we have a conspicuous silence on her part while another

⁹⁸ Lamonaca, “Jane’s Crown of Thorns,” 259.

⁹⁹ Matt. 5:29-30 (All quoted scripture from the Authorized King James Version).

¹⁰⁰ *Jane Eyre*, 343.

¹⁰¹ Dale, “Tale Half-Told,” 121; *Jane Eyre*, 521.

character affirms the Christian ending.”¹⁰² That it is St John’s eager anticipation of Heaven in the words of St John the Divine’s ending of Revelation, “Surely I come quickly,” and not Jane’s “My Edward and I, then, are happy,” which ends the novel, indicates to critics such as Dale, an implicit exhortation of St John’s heavenly quest over Jane’s earthly love.¹⁰³ Jane’s displacement as narrator becomes, in a sense, a confession of guilt or at least of doubt. For Vejvoda, the words of St John’s last letter serve as a warning against the idolatrous temptations still threatening Jane and Rochester.¹⁰⁴ Despite Jane’s repeated refrains of feeling “blest beyond what language can express,”¹⁰⁵ and the recounting of penitent prayers from Rochester,¹⁰⁶ the real ending of *Jane Eyre* is read here as a reticently cautionary tale against the subtleties of idolatry.¹⁰⁷ Jane does not voice her regrets, but instead implies them by pointing to one who has chosen more rightly.

Adjacent to such an interpretation is a common approach of reading St John’s conclusion to Jane’s story as representing two different but equally worthy Christian paths. Of these readings, Jerome Beaty’s is perhaps the most cited. For Beaty, Jane’s choice to reject St John’s spiritual and conjugal claim on her does not put her salvation or right to marry Rochester in doubt. Rather, Beaty proposes that each character follows the appropriate path of salvation suited to them: self-denial and sacrifice for St John, which Beaty defines as an agape way of love, and for Jane, the “everyday, domestic life, the life or *eros*.”¹⁰⁸ Though St John’s way is not Jane’s way, by giving him the last words of the story, Jane, and thus Brontë, exhort St John’s agape way as equal, not superior or inferior to Jane’s *eros* path to salvation.¹⁰⁹ Carolyn Williams, though reading *Jane Eyre* as a purely secular

¹⁰² Dale, “Tale Half-Told,” 121

¹⁰³ *Jane Eyre*, 521, 520.

¹⁰⁴ Vejvoda, “Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*,” 256.

¹⁰⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 519.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 516, 520.

¹⁰⁷ Vejvoda, “Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*,” 257.

¹⁰⁸ Beaty, “St John’s Way,” 499-500 (italics in original).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 500.

narrative, draws a similar conclusion that treats Jane's final panegyric of St John as sincere, but made possible through the safety of time and distance. After the psychological torment Jane experienced under St John's influence, it is only from the security of her chosen life with Rochester that she can, in the end, pay tribute to St John's chosen path. But this very tribute, according to Williams, whilst generous, is Jane's final act of differentiation, "making a place for the other only to turn away from that place in closing her book."¹¹⁰ Jane can honor St John because he no longer poses a threat.

Interpretations that read St John's missionary life and Jane's married life as equally good but vastly different paths move closer to uniting the religious and romantic plots as equally liberative than do critical readings that prioritize one over the other. However, by placing Jane's quest for personal liberty and emotional fulfillment on equal terms with St John's "long-cherished [married missionary] scheme, and the only one which can secure [his] great end," is potentially to overlook if not condone the "freezing spell" and "iron shroud" Jane experiences under his tutelage.¹¹¹ To read Jane's eulogy of St John as a purposeful equalizing of Jane's choice not to "throw away" her life to St John and of St John's anticipation of "his sure reward, his incorruptible crown," may honor Jane's final choice of Rochester but overly valorize the man whom Jane solidly believes would not care if she died; "he would resign me, in all serenity and sanctity, to the God who gave me."¹¹² What the forgoing sections of this chapter have sought to highlight is some of the representative ways in which feminist critics and critics engaging the biblical and theological content of Brontë's work have read the romantic and religious narratives as incompatible. And whilst "religious" and "romantic" are not the only opposing plots critics have identified within *Jane Eyre* or Brontë's other novels,¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Williams, "Closing the Book," 82.

¹¹¹ *Jane Eyre*, 471, 459, 465.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 466.

¹¹³ For example, Emily DuPlessis names Victorian women authors' narrative challenge as being between quest plots and love plots. DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 6.

the binary reading of competing plots begets problems of its own. What this chapter proposes instead is that a more helpful framework for engaging Brontë's work actually involves three narrative streams: the romantic, the religious, and the liberative. For the romantic plot, Peter Allan Dale's definition is helpful in that it combines the association of love relationships fulfilled—Jane's marriage to Rochester as the conclusion to *Jane Eyre's* romantic plot—but also the meaning of romantic as invoking the early nineteenth-century philosophy in art and literature marked by individualism, imagination and independence.¹¹⁴ The romantic can still be differentiated from a liberative narrative, though. As noted in section one, many feminist critics read the romantic conclusion of *Jane Eyre* as non-liberative, with Jane reinscribed into a patriarchal system of domestic submission; Jane's liberative journey is deemed ultimately a failure. Similarly, whereas some of the above examples of biblical and theological criticism claim a unity between the romantic and religious plots of *Jane Eyre*, the theology asserted arguably undermines the liberative impulse of the story; Jane and Rochester are united as a reward for enduring their deserved Divine chastisements. The final section of this chapter introduces examples of critical readings that read both the romantic and religious impulse of Brontë's narratives as united by the stories' liberative trajectories. Following primarily the comparisons from *Jane Eyre* made thus far, these readings provide an introduction to the final chapters' feminist theological readings of *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*.

3.3. Liberative Readings of Brontë's Feminist Impulse and Christian Faith

So far, this chapter has explored the splits and divergences between what feminist critics have praised and problematized in Charlotte Brontë's fiction and

¹¹⁴ Dale, "Tale Half-Told," 113.

what scholars engaging the religious content of Brontë's work have found. As noted above, large-scale critical interest in the religious dimension of Victorian literature is a relatively recent—late-twentieth century—development. Attention to Brontë's biblical literacy as well as her fluency in the religious controversies and theological positions of her day have moved center stage in numerous publications over the past twenty years. Many such readings examine Brontë's use of biblical allusion and typology or analyze her commentary on denominational practices and attitudes as reflective of her commitment to Christianity, rather than secularized poetics or parody.¹¹⁵ And whilst in general such close readings do not conflict with the novels' feminist or liberative trajectories, a look at current scholarship that explicitly links Brontë's feminist impulse and Christian faith to her writing's emancipatory voice indicates entry points for a feminist theological reading of Brontë. The following examples demonstrate how the narrative journeys of Brontë's heroines can be read as affirming both Christian faith and female empowerment. Though some of these readings speak of "Christian feminism"¹¹⁶ or "biblical feminism,"¹¹⁷ there has been little to no consideration of Brontë in light of feminist theology specifically.¹¹⁸ Yet without explicitly using the categories of feminist theology, critics engaging how the feminist and liberative trajectory of Brontë's work functions within a Christian worldview demonstrate the small but increasingly influential vein of Brontë scholarship reads the theological aspects of Brontë's fiction as a central component of her literary achievement. This section will review themes within such scholarship

¹¹⁵ Marianne Thormählen is foremost amongst such readings. Lisa Wang, Linda Freedman, and Sara Pearson are other representative examples of critics that explore Brontë's literary use of biblical material and denominational postures without framing them as secularized tropes. See Wang, "Unveiling the Hidden God of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*"; Freedman, "Reflection and the Aesthetics of Grace in *Villette*"; Pearson, "God Save It! God Also Reform It!: The Condition of England's Church in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*."

¹¹⁶ Gallagher, "Jane Eyre and Christianity," in Hoeveler and Lau, *Approaches to Teaching Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre*, 62-68.

¹¹⁷ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 47.

¹¹⁸ Karen Cubie Henck mentions Valerie Saiving's key feminist theological text, "The Human Situation," as it relates to the Wesleyan view of relational idolatry, in her article exploring *Jane Eyre's* connection to Methodist preacher Mary Fletcher. Carol Christ published literary criticism on *Jane Eyre* but did not apply a feminist theological perspective. See Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 44; Christ, *Imaginative Constraint*.

as it relates to the issues raised in feminist criticism and non-liberative religious criticism, making further use of *Jane Eyre's* conclusion as a case study of ways in which Brontë's work might be read as equally feminist, Christian, and liberative. Understanding how current scholarship engages these questions is the final step before directly considering Brontë's work in light of feminist theology.

“Radically feminist, Protestant, and biblical”

Numerous liberative readings of Brontë's feminist impulse and Christian faith begin by addressing the religious motivation or structure within Brontë's literary project as it relates to feminism. Emily Griesinger states that despite the proliferation of scholarship on Brontë and women's issues, “what has been missing until recently is a feminist approach that takes seriously the religious dimensions of Brontë's life and makes this background central to understanding women's religious experience” in her work.¹¹⁹ Susan Gallagher notes that *Jane Eyre* need only be read as anti-Christian if Christianity is deemed “inherently patriarchal and oppressive.”¹²⁰ To counter this, Gallagher suggests that the “feminism of the novel, Jane's progress from oppression to liberation, is actually supported by the kind of supernatural being that Brontë envisions”—a God of equality imaged through Christian feminism.¹²¹ The proto-feminism of Brontë's novels is here envisaged as influencing and influenced by religious belief, not a rejection thereof.

Also differing from critical readings that consider Brontë's use of biblical material as a solely secularizing activity, Simon Marsden demonstrates how Brontë employs biblical types “to make space for female self-narration within the Christian metanarrative.”¹²² Brontë may be communicating a “female theology of creation,”¹²³

¹¹⁹ Griesinger, “Charlotte Brontë's Religion,” 29-30.

¹²⁰ Gallagher, “*Jane Eyre* and Christianity,” 67.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Marsden, “Earth No Longer a Void,” 238.

¹²³ Ibid.

but its articulation remains within a Christian worldview. Furthermore, Essaka Joshua makes what could be considered a bold claim by affirming that the Christianity of *Jane Eyre* is central *and* orthodox—an “unexceptionable Christian message.”¹²⁴ Jane’s journey of self-definition and personal fulfillment, according to Joshua, occurs firmly within established bounds of Christian orthodoxy, needing no “feminist” or “subversive” qualifiers. But whether or not Brontë is read as promoting mainstream Evangelical Anglicanism or “revisionary Christianity,”¹²⁵ liberative readings of Brontë’s literary feminism and faith affirm the necessity of viewing both together.

A common claim within these readings is that the religious critiques present in Brontë’s fiction reflect the attitudes of one looking from within, rather than outside the Church Establishment. Charlotte Brontë’s personal correspondence paints a portrait of an Evangelical Anglican desirous of reform but committed to the Church of England’s centrality to British identity, politics, and morality.¹²⁶ As a result, liberative readings of Brontë’s religious material challenge the view that Brontë’s use of biblical topoi and spiritual references are merely cultural capitulation or poetic shorthand. Rather, a “spirit of religious inquiry,” grounded in Brontë’s experience of “Christianity as the very substance of daily life,”¹²⁷ shapes the aesthetics, characterizations and assertions within her fiction. Marianne Thormählen is amongst scholars who identify the spiritual questioning and condemnations of religious hypocrisy in Brontë’s fiction, which have been perceived by some in her time and ours as disavowal or disillusionment with Christianity, to

¹²⁴ Joshua, “Almost my Hope of Heaven,” 83.

¹²⁵ Greene, “Apocalypse When? *Shirley*’s Vision and the Politics of Reading,” 353.

¹²⁶ Brontë’s December 1847 letter to her publisher W. S. Williams is often quoted in this regard: “The notice [of *Jane Eyre*] in the “Church of England Journal” gratified me much, and chiefly because it was the Church of England Journal—Whatever such critics as He of the Mirror may say, I love the Church of England. Her Ministers, indeed I do not regard as infallible personages, I have seen too much of them for that—but to the Establishment, with all her faults—the profane Athanasian Creed excluded—I am sincerely attached.” Brontë to W.S. Williams, 23 December 1847, in *Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 1: 581-582. For further discussion see Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 65; Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 62; Ward, “Healing Voices,” 616.

¹²⁷ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 220, 144.

instead be reflective of the wider Victorian exploration of faith and doubt.¹²⁸ There are also increasing interpretations of Brontë's evangelical valuation of the priesthood of all believers and the right to private judgement as being a motivating force in her novels' positive portrayal of women's spiritual equality and interpretive authority.¹²⁹ Karen Henck explores Jane Eyre's struggle for spiritual agency by drawing parallels to early nineteenth-century female Methodist preachers,¹³⁰ whilst Simon Marsden helpfully identifies Lucy Snowe's interpretive imagination as allowing her to appropriate the language of Calvinist predestination in order to envision her life within a Divine plan.¹³¹ Additionally, critics reading Brontë's feminist and religious material as mutually liberative have drawn attention to the fact that *Shirley*, Brontë's novel most overtly concerned with the "woman question," explicitly portrays its two female heroines debating gender-biased hermeneutics. When *Shirley*'s Joe Scott declaims women as "a kittle and a froward generation," citing his "great respect for the doctrines delivered in the second chapter of St. Paul's first Epistle to Timothy," as justification, both Caroline and Shirley offer reinterpretations of the injunction that women should be silent and exercise no authority.¹³² Sally Greene suggests that "with the introduction of [1] Timothy, Brontë invites her readers out of the fiction and into the contemporary debate about women's place in the Christian scheme."¹³³ Greene sees in this passage, as well as *Shirley*'s continual reframing of Eve as mother of Titans rather than Milton's cook,¹³⁴ both female protagonists pointing "toward a radical revisioning of Christianity that empowers women."¹³⁵ Joan Chard further credits Brontë's

¹²⁸ Ibid., 6-8. See also Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power*, 64-92; Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, 3-30.

¹²⁹ Greene, "Apocalypse When?," 352; Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion" 32-33; Phillips, "Charlotte Brontë and the Priesthood of All Believers," 145-155.

¹³⁰ Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 7-22.

¹³¹ Marsden, "Earth No Longer a Void," 246-250.

¹³² Brontë, *Shirley*, 328-330, referring to 1 Timothy 2:11-13.

¹³³ Greene, "Apocalypse When?," 363.

¹³⁴ *Shirley*, 319-321, 487-489.

“hermeneutical astuteness and feminist sensibility” as vital to how her novels repeatedly trouble scriptural interpretations that subordinate women.¹³⁶

Increasingly, scholars are linking the liberative voice of Brontë’s heroines to the theological acumen of their author.

Another point of critical divergence between feminist and religious scholarship of Brontë that liberative readings offset is the question of dramatized Christian conversion. Whilst feminist readings have claimed that Brontë’s heroines complete their personal quests, in part, through rejecting Christianity, critics of Brontë’s religious material have largely regarded Brontë’s lack of conversion passages as a conspicuous omission. Countering these views, more theologically concerned scholars consider Brontë’s portrayal of heroines’ spiritual development as not just inferable but integral. With reference to *Jane Eyre*, Essaka Joshua draws attention to the process of healing and religious development that enable Jane ultimately to renounce the disordered loves proffered by Rochester’s and St John’s claims on her.¹³⁷ Janet Larson describes Brontë as authoring “full-length fictional histories of the female soul,” whereby spiritual formation and female liberty progress through tests of discernment.¹³⁸ Similarly, Emily Griesinger’s characterization of *Jane Eyre* as a “Christian feminist bildungsroman” is explained as the dual aspect of Jane learning to differentiate between faithful Christian practice and misappropriation of doctrine along with her “growing awareness of the importance of faith and Christian belief in strengthening and empowering her as a woman.”¹³⁹ Regarding *Villette*, Lisa Wang identifies Lucy Snowe’s story to be “as much a journey over spiritual as geographical distances,” where both the plot and narrative style search the spaces between the hiddenness of God and revelation of God’s plan.¹⁴⁰ Whereas

¹³⁵ Greene, “Apocalypse When?,” 361.

¹³⁶ Chard, “Apple of Discord:” Centrality of the Eden Myth in Charlotte Brontë’s Novels,” 198.

¹³⁷ Joshua, “Almost my Hope of Heaven.”

¹³⁸ Larson, “Lady-Wrestling for Victorian Soul,” 48-49.

¹³⁹ Griesinger, “Charlotte Brontë’s Religion” 47.

¹⁴⁰ Wang, “Unveiling the Hidden God,” 343-344.

other readings have found defiance of Christian belief systems or doubtful equivocation, these interpretations trace a progressive unity between the heroines' acquirement of self-knowledge and spiritual maturity. Rather than Damascus Road conversions, Brontë's heroines affirm their faith through acknowledgement of sin, repentance, and prayers of thanksgiving for God's loving provision.¹⁴¹

Central to such views of the Brontë heroines' spiritual progress is the issue of resistance. As feminist critics have predominantly praised Jane Eyre's rage and rebellion, this has most often been paired with the throwing off of Christianity. Recent liberative criticism has demonstrated, however, that the nature and degree of Jane's angry resistance is supported rather than undermined by the strengthening of her Christian understanding. Thormählen refers to Jane Eyre's "spiritual and emotional *Bildungsweg*" as learning the difference between personal malice and righteous anger against injustice.¹⁴² In this vein, a number of liberative readings of *Jane Eyre* identify Jane's resistance as demonstrating her increasing ability to rightly discern God's will versus human abuse of authority, particularly in regard to her Reed relatives, Rev. Brocklehurst, and St John Rivers. The rage that is viewed as an ally in feminist criticism is here transmuted to the righteous denouncement of any person or system seeking to usurp God's authority or mar one's spiritual identity. Reading *Jane Eyre* in light of the Wesleyan principle of avoiding relational idolatry, Karen Henck outlines "Brontë's Gothic tale of resistance" as one wherein Jane "views the giving up of spiritual responsibility as an evil to be avoided at all cost."¹⁴³ Examined through the perspective of feminism and Christianity, the force of resistance in Brontë's fiction can be seen as defying false voices and affirming the value of one's own.¹⁴⁴ As Emily Griesinger asserts, Jane's refusal to accept St John's spiritual authority over her is "radically feminist, Protestant, and biblical"—submission to God's will is not questioned, but it is Jane's

¹⁴¹ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 48; Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 62-64.

¹⁴² Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 134.

¹⁴³ Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 13, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Larson, "Lady-Wrestling," 49.

moral duty, not St John's, to discern that will.¹⁴⁵ In liberative readings of Brontë, discerning God's will is an act of claiming female agency, and nowhere in Brontë's fiction is the question of discerning God's will and making right choices more pertinent than in the conclusion to *Jane Eyre*.

i. *Jane Eyre's* Conclusion: More Than a Marriage

As we have noted, critical response to *Jane Eyre's* ending is indicative of themes within feminist and religious interpretation. Critics whose readings support a view of Brontë's feminist and religious impulses as mutually liberative find neither patriarchal entrapment nor spiritual recklessness in Jane's choice to return and marry Rochester; instead, Brontë's ending to *Jane Eyre* affirms Divine love as well as human. Further, whereas feminists have regularly seen Jane's marriage to Rochester as a sublimation of her rebellious spirit into the role of domestic angel and helpmate, liberative readings find the opposite to be true; Jane's marriage does not limit her sphere of influence—it widens her horizons through the now strengthened ties of community and intimacy, as well as financial independence.¹⁴⁶ The likelihood of Jane becoming one of the silenced pudding-makers or sock-menders who yearn to revolt¹⁴⁷ is dispelled by the successful achievement of her intellectual, emotional, and financial liberty¹⁴⁸ that she secured during her time at Morton—a reality she does not hesitate to emphasize by letting Rochester know he can visit, should she choose to build a separate house next door to him.¹⁴⁹ Nor does Jane's marriage implicitly signify the relinquishment of her salvation. Liberative readings see Jane's reunion with Rochester as an answer to Jane's prayers, assuring her of God's providence, rather than as the mark of her dismissing any further heavenly assistance. Such readings point to Jane's spiritual journey as the

¹⁴⁵ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 51-52.

¹⁴⁶ Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 20.

¹⁴⁷ *Jane Eyre*, 129-130.

¹⁴⁸ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 54.

¹⁴⁹ *Jane Eyre*, 501.

central narrative arc over that of the romantic plot. As Marianne Thormählen remarks of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s Helen Huntingdon, “[they] “can live . . . apart from the men they love; but life without God is impossible.”¹⁵⁰

One way in which liberative readings see Jane’s marriage as blessed by God and not the relinquishing of her salvation or agency is by interpreting her married life as vocational fulfillment. Jane’s marriage-as-ministry may sound ominously similar to Victorian models of femininity, but Karen Henck links Jane’s care for others—Rochester, her Rivers cousins, Adèle—to her own experience of physical pleasure and emotional intimacy in marriage. Jane’s fulfillment in marriage is not defined as self-sacrificial, but as the “fulfillment of her talents,” which calls others also to love intensely and compassionately.¹⁵¹ Hence Jane’s choice of marriage over that of a missionary life with St John does not consign her to spiritual oblivion. Instead, as Susan Gallagher puts it, “*Jane Eyre* suggests that Christian vocations encompass more than the mission field.”¹⁵² Jane has stayed in England, where, as she suspected, she has “[been] of greater use by remaining in it than by leaving it.”¹⁵³

Divine approbation of human love relationships is another aspect of how Jane and Rochester’s marriage is read liberatively in light of both feminist and religious considerations. Whereas many scholars who focus on *Jane Eyre*’s theme of idolatry see Jane ultimately succumbing to an idolatrous love for Rochester, Essaka Joshua reads the novel’s conclusion as clear demonstration that by the time of their marriage both Jane and Rochester have exchanged idolatrous love for rightly-ordered love subordinate to love of God.¹⁵⁴ That idolatrous love is destructive is clear in the narrative, but the focus on disordered love emphasizes the importance of loving others well, rather than love’s dangers. Marianne Thormählen notes the

¹⁵⁰ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 54, referring to Anne Brontë’s 1848 novel.

¹⁵¹ Henck, “That Peculiar Voice,” 20.

¹⁵² Gallagher, “*Jane Eyre* and Christianity,” 68.

¹⁵³ *Jane Eyre*, 477.

¹⁵⁴ Joshua, “Almost my Hope of Heaven,” 100.

interrelationship between God's love and human love as a fundamental theme in all of the Brontë sisters' fiction but as foremost in *Jane Eyre*.¹⁵⁵ Rather than seeing Jane's love for Rochester as endangering her love for God, liberative readings emphasize God's blessing of their union and of romantic love specifically. For Emily Griesinger, one of the great strengths of *Jane Eyre* is how Brontë depicts "women's sexual passion and fulfillment [as] legitimate within the Christian context."¹⁵⁶ Jane's salvation is not questioned nor her sexuality denigrated.

If Jane's choice to marry Rochester is blessed by God, there remain the questions of why Jane left Rochester in the first instance, and why she chooses to return. As this chapter has shown, feminist critics have regularly viewed Jane's departure from Thornfield in terms of sexual apprehension, with her returning only once Rochester has been ostensibly neutered. Alternatively, critical focus on Brontë's religious content often interprets Jane's departure as a symbolically self-mutilating act to evade sin that ultimately fails to keep her away from Rochester by the novel's end. Liberative readings that unite Jane's romantic and religious motivations find spiritual and self-affirming reasons for Jane's departure and eventual return to Rochester. Rather than Jane's flight from Thornfield representing a shattering of self and killing of desire, liberative examples point to Jane's departure as a self-constructive act of faith. Jane upholds "the law given by God; sanctioned by man"¹⁵⁷ when she refuses to be Rochester's mistress, but she is at the same time refusing his insistence that she be his redeemer and moral compass.¹⁵⁸ From this viewpoint, it is Jane's relationship to a caring and all-powerful God that forms of the basis of her self-respect as well as her faith.¹⁵⁹ Jane's integrity allows her to trust that God wants more for her than to be used as a spiritual scapegoat or sexual secret. Her obedience to the law against adultery is

¹⁵⁵ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 218.

¹⁵⁶ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 54.

¹⁵⁷ *Jane Eyre*, 365.

¹⁵⁸ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 49.

¹⁵⁹ Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 15.

not, in Marianne Thormählen's opinion, "good girl" compliance to boundaries of virtue; Jane "resist[s] because failure to do so would be a betrayal of the Creator who is to [her] . . . the very fount of love."¹⁶⁰ In leaving Thornfield, Jane professes her belief that she is deserving of love, not afraid of it.

A related issue that liberative readings bring out is Jane's understanding of how Rochester's abnegation of spiritual and relational accountability indicates the pattern by which he would treat her were she to stay.¹⁶¹ Whilst feminists have read Rochester's threat as erotic enticement and religious readings have focused on his tempting Jane to sin against God's law, liberative readings more often highlight Rochester's sin as his attempt to use and objectify Jane.¹⁶² It is *his* sin that she flees, more than her own. To this extent, attention is drawn in a number of such readings to the idea that Jane's departure is for Rochester's good as well as her own. By declining to be his savior, Jane removes herself as the object of his spiritual and emotional dependency. Essaka Joshua notes the ways Rochester attempts to frame his sinful deeds as "Messianic [acts] of self-sacrifice,"¹⁶³ presenting himself as a rescuing saint rather than a deceitful bigamist.¹⁶⁴ Thus understood, when Rochester pleads to Jane, "You will not come? You will not be my comforter, my rescuer?,"¹⁶⁵ Joshua relates the significance of Jane's simple response, "I am going," to Christ's words to his disciples in John 16:7: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you." Jane's departure suggests that it is the Holy Spirit, and not herself, who must and will come to Rochester's aid.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 59-60.

¹⁶¹ *Jane Eyre*, 359.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 131, 78; Pearson, "Religion, Gender and Authority," 78; Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 49; Joshua, "Almost my Hope of Heaven," 85.

¹⁶³ Joshua, "Almost my Hope of Heaven," 85.

¹⁶⁴ *Jane Eyre*, 295.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 366.

¹⁶⁶ Joshua, "Almost my Hope of Heaven," 91-92.

Rather than in fear of judgement or God's wrath, Jane leaves Rochester fully trusting God's merciful provision for the both of them.¹⁶⁷

God's mercy and provision are deemed essential to Jane and Rochester's eventual reunion in liberative readings. Central to this interpretation is the nature of Rochester's repentance. The feminist view has often disregarded Rochester's confessions of guilt, emphasizing his wounding instead as Brontë's revenge for his treatment of women,¹⁶⁸ which also exempts Jane from having to overcome her sexual anxiety. Religiously-centered interpretations have read Rochester's repentance as sincere but induced by God's chastisement. Liberative readings, by contrast, often designate Rochester's repentance and not his maiming as the crux of his transformation into a husband worthy of Jane. Marianne Thormählen is among such scholars who underline the fact that Rochester's change of heart and acknowledgement of his need for God's forgiveness occurs before Jane reappears, and that the couple's "restoration is the direct result of Rochester's sincere repentance."¹⁶⁹ Essaka Joshua likewise stresses how Jane's release from St John's domination "coincides completely with [the moment of] Edward's repentance, his explicit acceptance of God and God's justice."¹⁷⁰ Hence, it is Rochester's realization of his misuse of power and need for God that heralds the time for Jane's return, not Rochester's physical weakening, which took place months before.

Additionally, though most liberative readings underplay the punitive connotations of Rochester's blinding and maiming,¹⁷¹ Joshua notably counters the predominant interpretation of Rochester's physical disabling as negative. Attending

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁶⁸ Lisa Sternlieb extends this view of Rochester's punishment to include Jane's continuation of it. In Sternlieb's investigation of the novel's use of linguistic deception and exchanges of confidence, she concludes that through withholding information and refusing to submit to mutual limitation, Jane "does not tame her man; she tortures him." See "Hazarding Confidences," 503-515.

¹⁶⁹ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 58.

¹⁷⁰ Joshua, "Almost my Hope of Heaven," 95.

¹⁷¹ Emily Griesinger does attribute Rochester's wounding to his violation of God's law and Marianne Thormählen implies that Divine chastisement is a necessary component of Rochester's awakening to God's power, but neither ascribe overtly punitive qualities to God as a result. See Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 53; Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 80.

to Brontë's biblical references to disability, particularly the blind man in John 9, Joshua argues that Rochester's blindness actually represents his spiritual health. Because Brontë's scriptural allusions do not stigmatize disability, but rather invoke passages in which the correlation of physical disability to sin is explicitly denounced, Joshua claims that Rochester's blindness indicates his gained spiritual insight.¹⁷² Thus, the loss of Rochester's sight and hand, and the restoration of the former, evoke Jesus's response in John 9 when asked whose sin caused a man's blindness: "Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."¹⁷³ In Essaka Joshua's non-punitive and nondiscriminatory view, Rochester's blindness is not about who Rochester was but who God is.

It would seem to follow, then, given what these readings indicate about Rochester's repentance and the cause of Jane's leaving, that God is credited for reuniting Jane and Rochester. Countering the interpretations of Jane throwing off the shackles of religious convention by rushing to find the man whose voice she mysteriously heard, both Emily Griesinger and Marianne Thormählen point specifically to God's role in the supernatural summons Jane hears at her moment of crisis. On the brink of agreeing to submit to St John's headship, Jane entreats Heaven, "Show me, show me the path!"¹⁷⁴ Jane's prayer seeking the direction in which she is to go is answered by Rochester's voice saying her name. Griesinger calls this moment the most misunderstood of the novel, pointing specifically to Sandra Gilbert as one who reads Jane's response to Rochester's call as abandoning "St John's heaven of spiritual transcendence [for] an earthly paradise of physical fulfillment."¹⁷⁵ Presumably, in that case, Rochester's voice interrupts or overpowers whatever Heaven's answer would have been. But for Griesinger, Jane hearing

¹⁷² Joshua, "I Began to See": Biblical Models of Disability in *Jane Eyre*," 286-291.

¹⁷³ John 9:3.

¹⁷⁴ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 483.

¹⁷⁵ Gilbert, "Secrets of Furious Lovemaking," 367.

Rochester's call "is evidence of God's presence and power."¹⁷⁶ Likewise for Thormählen, this moment marks how, "ultimately, it is God who saves Jane by virtue of the supernatural summons that sets her on 'the path'" to Rochester.¹⁷⁷ Understood in this way, Jane is not flouting Divine judgement—she is following it.

Moreover, mutually liberative readings of *Jane Eyre's* romantic and religious plots clarify the nature of Jane's resistance against and ultimate rejection of St John's marriage/mission proposal in ways that affirm that Jane has made the correct spiritual and relational decision in marrying Rochester. To this end, St John's alleged abuse of power over Jane is often compared to Rochester's sins, which caused Jane to leave him as well. If Rochester's arrogance led him to disregard God's law, St John's leads him to dictate it. As Sara Pearson outlines, by "[setting] himself up as a mouthpiece for divine authority," St John fails to "maintain the boundaries between his infallible master and his fallible self."¹⁷⁸ Janet Larson claims St John's religious interpretations are actually the greatest threat to Jane's spiritual and social quest,¹⁷⁹ and Joan Chard compares Rochester's attempts to possess Jane physically with St John's resolution intellectually and spiritually to dominate her.¹⁸⁰ In these readings, St John's arrogation of Divine authority is viewed as the primary reason Jane cannot stay with him,¹⁸¹ not his Christian mission, as in feminist readings, or Jane's weakness, as in religious readings. In Karen Henck's assessment, Jane's liberation from St John is the climax of her struggle for spiritual agency and one of many examples wherein Jane "[claims] a subject rather than object position for herself."¹⁸² Like Jane's departure from Rochester, her rejection of St John is both personally validating and faith-affirming.

¹⁷⁶ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 52-53.

¹⁷⁷ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 79.

¹⁷⁸ Pearson, "Religion, Gender and Authority," 102.

¹⁷⁹ Larson, "Lady-Wrestling," 58.

¹⁸⁰ Chard, "Apple of Discord," 199.

¹⁸¹ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 209.

¹⁸² Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 16.

In Essaka Joshua's terms, "Jane's refusal of St John marks her final salvation from the dangers of idolatry."¹⁸³

If this is true, why then does Brontë hand the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* over to St John Rivers? Before considering *why*, it makes sense to consider *what* St John's ending communicates according to these liberative readings. Unlike the interpretations that hear Jane's doubts in St John's closing words—from feminist and religion-conscious perspectives—Kate Flint and others see the contrast between St John's choice and Jane's weighed in Jane's favor. Further, the disparity between St John's anticipated martyrdom and Jane's contented marriage is not inferred as a spiritual imbalance. Instead, Flint suggests that St John's conclusion to Jane Eyre's autobiography demonstrates how Jane's life and love are not circumscribed by her marriage; more specifically, the inclusion of St John's letter comes from Jane's "surplus" of spiritual and social ties, which are not solely defined by her relationship to Rochester.¹⁸⁴ Also, Karen Henck sees Jane as having made the better choice spiritually. Whereas St John's mission leaves him isolated, friendless, and eager to greet eternity, Jane's faithfulness has expanded and enriched her community in the present.¹⁸⁵

Seen another way, some liberative readings interpret St John's conclusion as depicting the fulfillment of his desires, just as Jane has achieved hers. St John coveted martyrdom, Jane craved love—St John is the bride of Christ, Jane is the bride of Rochester.¹⁸⁶ But the pairing need not be polemical. Marianne Thormählen speaks of St John's ending as a "balancing of the book," offered without judgement from Jane or Brontë.¹⁸⁷ Whether or not Jane agrees with St John's self-assessment as being among the "first rank of those who are redeemed from the earth,"¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Joshua, "Almost my Hope of Heaven," 95.

¹⁸⁴ Flint, "Women Writers," 181.

¹⁸⁵ Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 20.

¹⁸⁶ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 55.

¹⁸⁷ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 219.

¹⁸⁸ *Jane Eyre*, 521.

according to the forgoing liberative examples, Jane's own salvation is not called into question by St John's denouement.

If St John's final words are not meant as a spiritual foil to Jane's earth-bound loyalties, what then does his conclusion of Jane's story accomplish? The liberative readings explored in this section point by and large to the shift from Jane's marriage to St John's mission as fulfilling the novel's theme of discerning and being obedient to God's will.¹⁸⁹ Allowing St John to close the tale displaces the marriage ending as the culmination of Jane's quest;¹⁹⁰ because finding a husband was never Jane's goal, it cannot therefore function as the end of her story. According to Emily Griesinger, Jane's reflection on St John's heroism calls attention to Jane's own. Like St John, Jane has found fulfillment through properly discerning God's will for her life and responding in faithful action.¹⁹¹ In Joan Chard's interpretation, Jane's pilgrimage is a journey concerned "not with possession but with process, not with attainment but with expectation."¹⁹² From this perspective, the story of *Jane Eyre* does not end with Jane becoming a wife but with the continued spiritual and social quests of those she cares about. When the romantic and religious plots of *Jane Eyre* are viewed as mutually sustaining, St John's interpolated ending can be understood as the reverberation of Jane's journey and voice, not its silencing.

Jane Eyre's conclusion provides strong examples of how liberative readings differ from feminist scholars that view Brontë's feminist concerns as contradictory to Christianity and from readings that interpret Brontë's religious elements dualistically. Not all of the above examples explicitly assert feminist aims, nor are many directly concerned with the theology communicated in Brontë's work. What these authors do demonstrate, however, is a willingness to read the progressive female voice of Brontë's fiction as encompassed within a Christian worldview maintained by Brontë and present in her novels. Such readings see Brontë

¹⁸⁹ Chard, "Apple of Discord," 203.

¹⁹⁰ Flint, "Women Writers," 181.

¹⁹¹ Griesinger, "Charlotte Brontë's Religion," 55.

¹⁹² Chard, "Apple of Discord," 204.

challenging Christian practices that deny women the right to private judgment, devalue Christ's command to love one's neighbor as oneself, or put limits on God's mercy. Moreover, when the above critics name these characters' narrative journeys as spiritual quests and bildungsromane, the marriage plots of the novels are contextualized into larger arcs of personal development and spiritual struggle. Susan Gallagher describes *Jane Eyre's* engagement with religious issues of the time as illustrating Jane's developing awareness of female oppression: "Jane's spiritual growth and her social-psychological growth—are intertwined."¹⁹³ Joan Chard sees in Lucy Snowe an example of how Brontë links female independence of spirit to what Lucy Snowe considers her God-given abilities: "Whatever my powers—feminine or the contrary—God had given them, and I felt resolute to be ashamed of no faculty of his bestowal."¹⁹⁴ When Brontë's women claim agency, they do so believing themselves faithful to the God who created them.¹⁹⁵ As adduced by Janet Larson, the questions of Lucy Snowe, posed also by *Jane Eyre* and Caroline Helstone, "What prospects had I in life? . . . Whither should I go? What should I do?"¹⁹⁶—the questions of the single woman—resolve only through the revelation that "there can be no separation of women's social and spiritual quests."¹⁹⁷ When these heroines discover that they are allowed to be discontent, to desire "change, stimulus,"¹⁹⁸ and to reject self-abnegation as a virtue,¹⁹⁹ they begin to discern the social and spiritual terms on which their subjugation has been bound.²⁰⁰ Their yearning for liberty is also a longing that God's will, not man's will, be done. In liberative interpretations, it is abuses of power and the cruelty of neglect that Brontë's heroines must overcome, not Christianity.

¹⁹³ Gallagher, "*Jane Eyre* and Christianity," 62.

¹⁹⁴ *Villette*, 408.

¹⁹⁵ Chard, "Apple of Discord," 201.

¹⁹⁶ *Villette*, 50.

¹⁹⁷ Larson, "Lady-Wrestling," 55.

¹⁹⁸ *Jane Eyre*, 102.

¹⁹⁹ *Shirley*, 174.

²⁰⁰ Larson, "Lady-Wrestling," 55.

Building upon the first two chapters' introduction of feminist theological frameworks and of women's literature as an integral source of women's experience, this chapter has aimed to highlight within Brontë scholarship the dominant feminist readings and late-twentieth-century examinations of Brontë's religious material. Though neither survey is exhaustive, the themes emerging from these two veins of criticism show how commonly the feminist and religious impulse in Brontë's work are treated opposingly, often to the extent that one occludes the other. Over the past thirty years, the small but growing number of critical readings that view the feminist trajectory of Brontë's fiction through Christian theology or hermeneutics, and vice versa, demonstrate how in Brontë's novels, critique of patriarchy need not be synonymous with apostasy, nor must obedience to Divine law preclude female empowerment. However, though liberative readings that examine Brontë from feminist or theological perspectives are increasingly represented, few critics have approached Brontë's work according to the discipline that intrinsically unites the two: feminist theology. The final chapters of this thesis will therefore explore how Brontë's novels pre-vision the concerns of feminist theology as well as how reading Brontë's work in light of feminist theology lessens the gap between feminist and religious scholarship of her fiction. By focusing on how the theology within Brontë's novels addresses women's experience, it is possible to see how Charlotte Brontë voiced questions central to the lives of women and wrestled with those questions according to her Christian faith and her heroines' prayers for liberty.

Chapter 4

Women's Experience of Sin in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*

The following three chapters examine *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* as depictions of women's experience that anticipate some of the central ways feminist theologians have described, on the one hand, the forms of sin most common to women raised within patriarchal society and, on the other, the models of grace most restorative to women in that context. As will be seen, "women's sin" in Brontë's novels is most often recognizable in what heroines are pressured towards or oppressed by, rather than in what they do. Jane Eyre, Caroline Helstone, Shirley Keeldar, and Lucy Snowe are all, at times, tempted through relational manipulation or societal expectation to commit sins of hiding—to fuse or fragment—and in so doing, capitulate to an unfaithful identity of powerlessness and non-being, rather than faithfully constructing a self-identity of wholeness and interdependence. As we saw in Chapter Two, fusion and fragmentation describe two prominent ways in which women have responded to the temptation to believe that the way culture defines them is how God desires them to be. Fusion can be understood as the forfeiting of agency or the negative side of empathy, allowing one's identity to be consumed or absorbed into another—a relational failure of boundaries. Fragmentation is the sin of self-immolation, which Judith Plaskow describes as "God-forgetfulness and self-forgetfulness,"¹ a dangerous passivity marked by relinquishing the responsibility for self-actualization—a personal failure to value one's createdness.

Although fusion and fragmentation are easily understood as two manifestations of the same sin, an examination of *Jane Eyre* in terms of the relational temptation to fuse and *Shirley* through the societal pressure to fragment

¹ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 151.

provides illustrations of the many fronts from which women encounter challenges to their sense of personal worth and goodness. In four parts, this chapter investigates how a feminist theological view of sin elucidates dynamics within the female protagonists' encounters with the central male characters of their narratives, as well as amongst supporting characters in both novels. Whilst narrowing the discussion in this manner could appear to reify patterns that define women by their relationships to men, a feminist theological examination of Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone's interactions with the two males who wield most influence in their lives draws attention to the function of patriarchal privilege and power within women's pursuit of wholeness.

4.1 Feminine Sin in *Jane Eyre*: Tempted Towards Fusion

In many ways, *Jane Eyre* is the story a woman navigating threats in the shape of masculine arrogance. Deceived and manipulated by the man she loves and threatened with eternal damnation by the man she admires, Jane's every escape from privation seems met with further danger from those whom she endeavors to trust. As Jane Eyre's progress of self-development is one of the most consistent themes in Brontë scholarship, it is reasonable to say that Jane largely avoids the temptation towards fragmentation. The young woman who reminds herself "that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse"² recognizably takes responsibility for self-actualization. But the same Jane who, as a child, confesses she "would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken . . . or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest" to gain affection from someone,³ may need more than her own strength to withstand

² *Jane Eyre*, 101.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

temptations to surrender her identity in order to please someone else. With both Rochester and St John, Jane is pressured and tempted to fuse to another's will and definition of her. These temptations are all the more powerful because they are offered in the guise of attaining a life she values—marriage to the man she loves or service to the God she trusts. With both Edward Rochester and St John Rivers, Jane falters in her sense of self, yielding at times to the seductive power of being spoken for. But whereas Adrienne Rich identifies Jane's alternative to "the thrill of masochism," as having to "confront the central temptation of the female condition—the temptation of romantic love and surrender,"⁴ a feminist theological view resists the wholesale problematizing of romantic surrender by focusing instead on the temptation to sacrifice one's agency and identity to another as a result of a disordered view of love as self-sacrifice. As shall be seen, when Jane's spiritual convictions are appealed to, her ability to differentiate between faithfulness to God and sacrifice to a man is most jeopardized.

i. Tempted by Rochester

The period of greatest temptation for Jane to sin through fusion with Rochester occurs during their engagement and leading up to Jane's decision to leave after the revelation that Rochester is already married. Two ways in which Jane is tempted to sacrifice herself to Rochester's will are through becoming his kept mistress or his saving angel. However, although these roles are simplified ways of describing Rochester's desires, they are arguably not what Jane is actually tempted towards. Both positions represent distortions of intimacy, when intimacy is understood as shared mutuality between equal individuals, not as a fused dynamic of unequal power. In the role of kept mistress, Jane is tempted to lose her agency in subordination to Rochester. As a saving angel, the temptation is to relinquish her identity to Rochester's idealization of her. As will be shown, it is not the temptation

⁴ Rich, "Temptations of a Motherless Woman," 474.

to have a sexual relationship with a married man that endangers Jane's soul, but how swiftly she finds herself slipping into roles that fundamentally mar her self-integrity and distort right relationship.

Jane's temptation to subordinate herself to Rochester corresponds with Rochester's temptation to subjugate her. As employer then lover, Rochester's enjoyment of Jane's dependence is evident throughout their relationship. The frequency of slavery and harem metaphors during Jane and Rochester's wooing is a subject well-reported in Brontë scholarship.⁵ Whether as a type of King Ahasuerus, willing to break laws to possess a new wife,⁶ or as a sultan ogling Jane as if she were an enslaved concubine,⁷ the language of possession and dominance is used between Jane and Rochester and by Jane in narration to describe Rochester's avaricious pride. And whilst Jane concedes that, despite her determined efforts to deflect Rochester's monopolizing advances, she "would rather have pleased than teased him,"⁸ it is not Rochester's libertine tactics that trouble Jane's convictions. Rather, it is in moments when Rochester accuses Jane of not returning his love that Jane is persuaded to feel guilt for maintaining her boundaries. When Rochester's marriage to Bertha is revealed, he responds to Jane's physical and emotional distance by accusing her of only wanting him for his rank and title. Jane tells the reader that Rochester's words, despite being demonstrably untrue, cut her and leave her "tortured by a sense of remorse at thus hurting his feelings."⁹ Jane mistakes herself for the betrayer, rather than Rochester. When Jane tells the reader in an earlier scene that Rochester has become an idol to her, she is admitting to her compromised ability to distinguish herself from him, or him from God. For Jane to

⁵ For more on slavery as theme in *Jane Eyre* and in feminist criticism of the novel, see Tracy, "Reader, I Buried Him": Apocalypse and Empire in *Jane Eyre*," 59-77.

⁶ *Jane Eyre*, 161, 302. Unbeknownst to her, Jane's casting of Rochester as the biblical King Ahasuerus is particularly apt, given that he is replacing his own Vashti with an Esther. See Esther 1:3-2:4.

⁷ *Jane Eyre*, 309.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 365.

say that, “my future husband was becoming to me my whole world, . . . almost my hope of Heaven,”¹⁰ represents a lost capacity for intimacy, as intimacy cannot be shared when one is objectified or objectifying. But loss of equality and the capacity for intimacy is not the only threat for Jane if she sins by fusing her identity with Rochester’s. The self-destructive fusion between Rochester and herself leads Jane to confess to the reader that it would have been easier to die than to disentangle herself from her first attachment to Rochester.¹¹ Despite the many ways she resists and remonstrates Rochester’s materialistic wooing methods and his plans to circumvent marriage laws,¹² Jane does not fully escape the temptation to hide her own worth within Rochester’s love.

Jane’s susceptibility to Rochester’s fusing influence is due in large part to the manner in which her self-trust is undermined by Rochester’s deception. By the time Jane is explicitly tempted to sacrifice her self-integrity in an effort to preserve Rochester’s, she has already been imposed upon through overt manipulation. It is not just Rochester’s hidden bigamy plan that betrays Jane’s trust; Rochester’s calculated efforts to make Jane fall in love with him by feigning engagement to Blanche Ingram disorients and wounds Jane’s ability to trust her own feelings and perceptions. Rochester’s jealousy schemes, in which he flaunts Blanche Ingram’s beauty and wealth in front of “poor, obscure”¹³ Jane, do not succeed in causing Jane to love him.¹⁴ Instead, his manipulative ploys arouse in Jane a self-contempt borne of doubt. Made all the more aware of the divisions between herself and Rochester, Jane accuses herself of having “rejected the real, and rabidly devoured the ideal.”¹⁵ For believing that a mutual affection had grown between Rochester and herself,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹² This will be covered in Chapter Five.

¹³ *Jane Eyre*, 292.

¹⁴ This is because Jane is already in love with Rochester. In fact, his sudden departure after Jane rescues him from the chamber fire convinces Jane that his only regard for her is as a household employee, nothing more. See page 186-187.

¹⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 186.

Jane arrives at the judgment, “that a greater fool than Jane Eyre had never breathed the breath of life . . . Cover your face and be ashamed!”¹⁶ Faced with a conflict between what she perceives and what she is told, Jane locates the problem within herself. This resonates with Carol Gilligan’s description of the traumatic pattern within patriarchy that causes women “to not know what we know”: a dissociative split between what one recognizes to be true and what one must pretend is true.¹⁷ To convince herself that the love she has felt from Rochester is imaginary (which it is not) and that Rochester would never “waste a serious thought on [an] indigent and insignificant plebeian”¹⁸ such as herself, Jane internalizes the disrespect with which she is being treated and interprets it as deserved shame.

Moreover, Jane’s eventual engagement to Rochester exacerbates the issue. When Rochester proposes marriage, his duplicity deepens and Jane is forced to doubt her judgement further. During the proposal, Jane unknowingly speaks the truth when she asserts to Rochester that a bride already stands between them.¹⁹ The truth she does not realize is that Bertha Mason and not Blanche Ingram is the bride to whom Rochester already owes his loyalty. Rochester, however, maintains his deception. When he later discloses that he had only used Blanche to stir Jane’s jealousy, Jane calls Rochester to account for taking advantage of another woman’s feelings. Jane presses Rochester to assure her that she may “enjoy the great good that has been vouchsafed to me, without fearing that anyone else is suffering the bitter pain I myself felt a while ago.”²⁰ Rochester equivocates by saying “there is not another being in the world has the same pure love for me as yourself,”²¹ communicating the extent to which he has dehumanized his mentally ill wife and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gilligan, *The Birth of Pleasure: A New Map of Love*, 20.

¹⁸ *Jane Eyre*, 187.

¹⁹ Ibid., 294.

²⁰ Ibid., 303.

²¹ Ibid.

justified his right to lie to Jane. When he accusingly asks Jane, “Am I a liar in your eyes?”²² it is clear that Rochester believes he is not.

This dynamic is displayed at its most problematic when, after Jane tells Rochester that a phantom-like woman broke into her bedroom at night and tore her wedding veil, Rochester implies that Jane only imagined it. Knowing full well that Bertha is real and has the capacity to act violently, Rochester not only fails to keep Jane safe, he implies that she is crazy.²³ What is most important regarding Rochester’s deceptive manipulation is that Jane not only suffers inappropriate shame but she also continues to split what she knows and what she will acknowledge. Jane admits to purposefully overlooking Rochester’s savagely triumphant behaviour during his proposal, saying that instead that she “thought only of the bliss given me to drink in so abundant a flow.”²⁴ By pretending to *want* to marry Blanche and pretending *not* to be married to Bertha, Rochester tempts Jane into a dissociative and self-doubting position wherein she is willing to have her trust broken in order to gain affection from someone she truly loves.

The other side of Jane’s temptation to fuse with Rochester is to internalize his idealization of her as “the angel in his house.” Even before their engagement, Jane is named by Rochester as his “cherished preserver” and alluded to as the “instrument for my cure,” “fresh, healthy, without soil and without taint.”²⁵ When his duplicity is revealed and Jane tells him she must leave, Rochester’s expectation that Jane’s purity will sanctify his own wrongdoing becomes clear. He describes taking Jane with him to Europe, returning to the continent where he once kept his mistresses: “now I shall visit it healed and cleansed, with a very angel as my comforter.”²⁶ That he believes his love for Jane atones for any sins committed to

²² Ibid., 294.

²³ Ibid., 326-329.

²⁴ Ibid., 295.

²⁵ Ibid., 177, 253, 252.

²⁶ Ibid., 300.

gain her is made explicit.²⁷ But that he believes Jane will henceforth take responsibility for his spiritual life is a temptation Jane does not easily reject. In accordance with the prevailing view of Victorian marriage, Rochester ascribes to Jane the duty of purifying and elevating his spirit through their union. It is not just his love for Jane that will exonerate him from guilt, it is Jane herself:

You are my sympathy—my better self—my good angel. I am bound to you with a strong attachment. . . . a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived in my heart; it leans to you, draws you to my centre and spring of life, wraps my existence about you, and, kindling in pure, powerful flame, fuses you and me into one.²⁸

In this plea, in which Rochester actually uses the language of fusion, there is the implication that because *Jane* is his “better self,” *he* does not have to be.

Though Jane tells Rochester to look to God,²⁹ she is not invulnerable to the prayers he supplicates to her: “You will not be my comforter, my rescuer? My deep love, my wild woe, my frantic prayer, are all nothing to you?”³⁰ The inference that Jane is failing a duty of love can be heard in Rochester’s entreaty and her own pained narration as she departs Thornfield in secret:

I longed to be his; I panted to return: it was not too late; I could yet spare him the bitter pang of bereavement. As yet my flight, I was sure, was undiscovered. I could go back and be his comforter—his pride; his redeemer from misery, perhaps from ruin.³¹

Jane is tempted to be Rochester’s redeemer, to exonerate him from his guilt by removing the consequences of his actions. That Jane has been drawn into sinful fusion with Rochester, forfeiting aspects of her agency and allowing distortion of rightly ordered relationship, is evidenced by the self-hatred she feels as she puts

²⁷ Ibid., 295.

²⁸ Ibid., 363.

²⁹ Ibid., 364.

³⁰ Ibid., 366.

³¹ Ibid., 369.

distance between herself and Thornfield: “I abhorred myself. I had no solace from self-approbation: none even from self-respect. I had injured—wounded—left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes.”³² Jane’s loss of self-respect in the very act of protecting herself from further exploitation testifies to the dangerous appeal of sacrificing self-integrity to prevent another from feeling rejected. The call to merge her interests entirely to Rochester’s, to believe that separation is injury and that salvation is a woman’s vocation, is one that Jane ultimately denies, but in the moments of temptation, she responds to it with the requisite self-contempt of an angel who has chosen to save herself.

ii. Tempted by St John

Jane’s love for Rochester tempts her to commit sins of hiding by becoming subject to him as a kept mistress or responsible for him as an idealized angel. When she encounters St John Rivers, however, Jane faces what is possibly an even greater and more complex spiritual threat. Whereas Rochester tried to force Jane to be his spiritual better half, St John attempts to become Jane’s spiritual *whole*. Though Jane does not fall in love with St John, her gratitude for his having saved her life, her respect for his devoted Christian service, and her joy at discovering that St John and his sisters are her cousins, cause Jane to be less wary, and thus more susceptible to St John’s temptations than she was to Rochester’s. Coveted by St John as a tool he can wield and wife he can “retain absolutely,”³³ Jane enters a period of prolonged doubt and disorientation, a process Brontë scholars have compared to brainwashing, colonization, and even rape.³⁴ Again, Jane is offered a distorted version of intimacy: life-long commitment to a man who rejects love but demands marriage. Although Jane eventually escapes St John’s claim on her soul,

³² Ibid., 370.

³³ Ibid., 468.

³⁴ See Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 196; Tracy, “Reader, I Buried Him,” 69.

the time she spends fused to the “iron shroud” of St John’s will,³⁵ is, from a feminist theological standpoint, the darkest period of the novel and its most prophetic. The liberative message of Jane’s triumph over St John will be addressed in Chapter Five; first, Jane’s temptation must be considered.

Not unlike the love she felt from Rochester, who valued traits in Jane which she valued about herself—her intelligence, passion, and courage—Jane’s desire for peer companionship and mutual respect allow her to be flattered and encouraged by the interest St John takes in her and his regard for her fortitude and ingenuity. But whereas at the start of their relationship, St John is a poor curate, stymied in his dreams of missionary conquest through lack of funds, the dynamic of their relationship changes once Jane’s shared inheritance clears the way for him to act on his plans. Where once Jane had felt comfortable prodding confidences out of St John and advising him on matters of the heart, the transition from colleague/friend to cousin/brother has the undesired effect of estranging Jane from St John relationally, whilst subjugating her to him emotionally. Despite agreeing to consider Jane his sister, St John immediately begins to groom her towards becoming the missionary wife Rosamund Oliver could never be. Not dissimilar to Rochester, St John hides his aims from Jane for an extended period of time, during which Jane senses the change in his demeanor but cannot identify the reason. Jane even acknowledges to the reader that this alteration causes her to feel some shame.³⁶ By regarding Jane as a potential wife that he can fashion into an instrument suited to his purpose, St John ceases to respect Jane’s individuality or spiritual agency. Having already established levels of trust and esteem with St John, Jane extends to him the benefit of the doubt, which St John misinterprets as commitment. As will be seen, St John’s subtle appropriation of Jane’s agency takes advantage of Jane’s empathy. Tempted by St John to sin through passivity, Jane comes dangerously close to fulfilling St John’s expectations as an empty vessel and willing sacrifice.

³⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 465.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 456.

The first phase of Jane's spiritual seduction by St John involves the giving up of her own pursuits to please him. Reflecting back on the experience, Jane describes St John as a man not "to be lightly refused,"³⁷ who, when met with unexpected resistance, inclines towards coercion.³⁸ But these observations are made in retrospect; what is portrayed is Jane's gradual deferral to St John, not just in educational pursuits—he tells her to give up her German studies for Hindustani—but in her own behavior and temperament.³⁹ The desire for St John's approval follows her growing acknowledgment that the freedom with which she had expressed herself to him in the past was not just unreciprocated but disdained: "vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him."⁴⁰ After prolonged exposure to St John's frequent directives to "tranquillise [sic] your feelings," and "simplify your interests," Jane exchanges her "liberty of mind" for St John's restraining influence.⁴¹ Described as a "freezing spell" that congeals her frankness and paralyses her "wrestlings,"⁴² St John's "despotic" presumption of Jane's pliancy and obedience tempts Jane to "disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties"⁴³ in order to please him.⁴⁴ Newly gifted with family and still grieving her fractured hopes, Jane is willing to have her mind invaded for the sake of connection, her will broken to attain approbation.

Along with the inducement to curb her instincts and self-expression, the temptation Jane almost fully succumbs to is that of completing St John's plan of making her into his own image by becoming his wife, an action that Jane equates with suicide and being murdered.⁴⁵ Having her actions dictated, her personality

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 458.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 472.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 458.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 455, 468, 459.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 459, 472, 482.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 472, 460.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 466.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 466, 475, 477.

redefined—“you are docile, diligent, disinterested”—and a vocation prescribed for her in terms of Divine plan—“you are formed for labour, not for love”—Jane loses the containment that safeguards her ability to know what she knows and feel what she feels.⁴⁶ When Jane declares “My heart is mute—my heart is mute,”⁴⁷ it is both a plea and a confession; she yearns for guidance but, through sinful fusion, has compromised her ability to discern whatever answers she might receive. Though St John repeatedly interposes those answers, conflating his judgment with God’s will, the fact that Jane cannot hear her own heart suggests how much harm has been done to her faith in God and in herself by accepting fusion and dominance as substitutes for intimacy and identity. She tells the reader, “I was tempted to cease struggling with him—to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own.”⁴⁸ Although Jane fights the temptation to “throw all on the altar” of St John’s will,⁴⁹ and experiences numerous victories along the way, the “refined, lingering torture,”⁵⁰ of her willing subjection to St John Rivers indicates her unfaithfulness to the God whom, in the midst her previous crisis, she had thankfully praised as “the Source of Life . . . the Saviour of spirits.”⁵¹

That Jane begins to believe God might desire her “premature death”⁵² as a constrained and unloved missionary wife shows how she is tempted towards the self-sacrificial angel role when it is offered to her in the guise of a “noble . . . and sublime” occupation authorized by God.⁵³ As Gilbert and Gubar recount, the self-surrender of the angel-woman is a “sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead.”⁵⁴ Viewing Jane

⁴⁶ Ibid., 465, 464.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 463.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 482.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 466.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 473.

⁵¹ Ibid., 373.

⁵² Ibid., 466.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 25.

Eyre's flights from Thornfield and Morton as repenting sins of fusion helps us to see that what is at stake in Jane's journey is not her sexual purity or eternal salvation. Instead, what is threatened are the boundaries of selfhood that protect Jane from viewing herself as an extension of someone else's identity rather than a free individual accountable to God. The "God-forgetfulness and self-forgetfulness" of fusion,⁵⁵ which turns Jane's empathy and desire for harmonious relationships into justification for passivity, harms the very relationships Jane seeks to foster by permitting the violation of her trust and liberty.

Alternatively, Jane's repentance from fusion is consistently recognizable as a turning towards life, affirming her right to be loved with integrity and to love freely. Chapter Five's discussion of grace in *Jane Eyre* will examine such issues in more detail; what needs to be noted now, however, is the way Jane's spiritual struggles resonate with a feminist theological view of feminine sin in patriarchal society. Relinquishing her agency causes her turmoil and defining herself by others' needs makes her to doubt her worth. Interpretations that credit Jane's refusal of bigamy with Rochester to a fear of sex or fear of God miss that it is the "remembrance of God" which converts Jane's "longing to be dead"⁵⁶ into the determination to leave a situation that could only result in further trespasses on her self-integrity. Likewise, Jane's difficulty extracting herself from St John's influence is not the mark of an unregenerate spirit, but of one who has allowed her spirit to be spoken for. Only when Jane cries out to God for help is she able to discern a path forward and away from St John. Jane's sinful encounters with Rochester and St John are not those of the adulteress or infidel,⁵⁷ but of the willing slave. Casting negative light on her tempters through comparison, Jane's spiritual struggles illustrate the insufficiency of theologies that promote feminine subjugation whilst rationalizing masculine autonomy. In order to clarify this point, the following section examines two pairs of

⁵⁵ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 151.

⁵⁶ *Jane Eyre*, 342.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 471.

female characters in *Jane Eyre* who serve as counterexamples to masculine theologies of pride as the locus of sin.

4.2 Masculine Sin in *Jane Eyre*: Reframing Patriarchal Dualisms Through Female Fellowship

Alongside the portrayal of its protagonists' wrestling against sins of passivity, Brontë's novel counters traditional theologies of sin by depicting female characters who, when pressured to confess the wrong sins,⁵⁸ do not submit. Helen Burns and Miss Temple model hospitality and grace in counterpoint to the Reverend Brocklehurst's privation and punishment, whilst sisters Diana and Mary Rivers embody the Christian charity and fellowship found lacking in St John Rivers' hardened ambition. All four women are crucial to Jane's faith development, intellectual cultivation, and relational fulfillment.⁵⁹ As Jane is not the only female character pressured toward self-sacrifice, she is likewise not lacking in female examples from whom to learn and who can strengthen her in the work of faithful self-construction and interdependence. To borrow Susan Nelson's words, Jane's four closest female relationships are with individuals who view themselves in light of a God who "beckons one on to full humanity through the acceptance of one's freedom," not by "a judgmental Father in the sky who demands self-sacrifice."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Nelson, "Sin of Hiding," 317.

⁵⁹ Adrienne Rich similarly observes that for each "female temptation" Jane faces, she is also provided an alternative, "the image of a nurturing or principled spirited woman on whom she can model herself, or to whom she can look for support." See Rich, "Temptations of a Motherless Woman," 470.

⁶⁰ Nelson, "Sin of Hiding," 324.

i. Reframing Rev. Brocklehurst: Helen Burns and Miss Temple

Before young Jane arrives at Lowood Institution, she has already been catechized by the school's director, Rev. Brocklehurst, and been pronounced wicked.⁶¹ Famously based on the Rev. Carus Wilson, who oversaw the charity school Charlotte Brontë attended and where her two eldest sisters contracted fatal illnesses, the character of Rev. Brocklehurst stands out as an extreme example of pharisaical hypocrisy⁶² and Calvinist doom, not to mention fairy-tale monstrosity—*“what a face he had . . . What a great nose! And what a mouth! And what large prominent teeth!”*⁶³ From a feminist theological standpoint, however, Brocklehurst's most significant role is as a hierarch who, despite perpetrating what amounts to spiritual and physical abuse against the students in his care, fails to break the wills of his female dependents or convert their views to his. Brocklehurst may be clearly coded as a villain, and his willful neglect does indeed carry dire consequences,⁶⁴ but as a representative of patriarchal evil incarnate, his power to influence is exceeded by the self-actualized humility of Helen Burns and the intellectual hospitality of Miss Temple.

One of the first things the reader learns about Brocklehurst is his boast to Mrs. Reed regarding his female charity pupils, that he has “studied how best to mortify in them the worldly sentiment of pride.”⁶⁵ With a sadistic pleasure matched only by his hypocritical double standards regarding his own daughters,⁶⁶ Brocklehurst preaches and administrates deprivation to bodies as the cure of

⁶¹ *Jane Eyre*, 40.

⁶² Brontë, “Preface to the Second Edition,” in *Jane Eyre*, 5-6.

⁶³ *Jane Eyre*, 39.

⁶⁴ As in Brontë's own experience, the poor conditions of Lowood result in multiple students' deaths.

⁶⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

souls.⁶⁷ As it pertains to the impoverished students of Lowood, bodies are “vile,” to have naturally curling hair is blameworthy, and to require food is to embrace “lusts of the flesh.”⁶⁸ Whilst the women of his family visit the school “splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs” with hair “elaborately curled,”⁶⁹ Brocklehurst’s students endure semi-starvation.⁷⁰ Deeming humility as the “Christian grace . . . peculiarly appropriate to the pupils of Lowood,”⁷¹ Brocklehurst preaches that self-denial is a virtue to be enforced,⁷² and that grace is the antithesis of abundance.⁷³ Through Brocklehurst, the gendered bigotry and spiritual violence of patriarchal theologies that preach distortions of humility and self-sacrifice to those already “on the cross with Jesus”⁷⁴ is made actual. Yet the novel’s strongest critique of Brocklehurst and what he represents is not the pairing of hypocrisy with dualistic theology, but in the alternative examples set by the two central female characters that befriend Jane whilst at Lowood. The ways in which Helen Burns and Miss Temple model to Jane a Christianity that empowers agency, affirms selfhood, and offers grace abundantly show that faithful endurance does not have to equate internalization of abuse.

Whilst much has been written on Jane’s inferred ambivalence toward what has been deemed Helen Burns’ ascetic or even masochistic creed of resignation,⁷⁵ such readings undervalue the fortifying strength Helen imparts to Jane. Though initially young Jane is confounded by Helen’s “doctrine of endurance,”⁷⁶ it is from Helen that Jane learns not to define herself by others’ treatment. When a desolate and rage-

⁶⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 79, 75, 76.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91.

⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

⁷² Ibid., 74-75.

⁷³ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁴ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 13.

⁷⁵ Elaine Showalter calls Helen Burns “the perfect victim.” See *A Literature of Their Own*, 118, 112-126; see also Maynard, “The Brontës and Religion,” 203.

⁷⁶ *Jane Eyre*, 67.

filled Jane watches Helen bear public chastisement without shame, she is confounded: “Were I in her place . . . I should wish the earth to open and swallow me up. She looks as if she were thinking of something beyond her punishment—beyond her situation.”⁷⁷ When Jane later presses Helen to explain why following the Christian bidding to return good for evil does not just give evil-doers free-reign, Helen explains her creed whereby the shared sinfulness of all humanity is redeemed by the shared promise of salvation.⁷⁸ Helen differentiates between the sins one commits and the debasement one experiences, which allows her also to “distinguish between the criminal and his crime; I can so sincerely forgive the first while I abhor the last.”⁷⁹ Helen endures mistreatment from the rancorous Miss Scatcherd by forgiving her as a fellow imperfect human, placing her identity in the estimation of a loving God, not the reprobation of fellow feeble creatures.⁸⁰ When Helen tells Jane, who feels demoralized and hopeless as a result of her own public shaming by Brocklehurst, that “Mr Brocklehurst is not a God,”⁸¹ she encourages Jane to believe in her God-given worth, rather than to rely on external approval. She explains further: “If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends.”⁸²

Similarly, when Jane avows her willingness to be kicked by a horse in exchange for affection, Helen’s admonition not to “think too much of the love of human beings”⁸³ is the corollary of not conflating human frailty with Divine indictment—not sacrificing self-integrity for human love. What has been deemed masochism by many critics is Helen’s modeling of right relation and containment

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 61. Significantly, when Jane does find herself similarly shamed before her peers, it is Helen’s smile in passing gives Jane strength to bear the humiliation. See page 80.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

that accepts the existence of suffering in life, but does not view it as salvific. Rather, it is faith in God's loving-kindness that sustains Helen through the knowledge that she will not long survive the illness tormenting her lungs: "I believe God is good; I can resign my immortal part to Him without any misgiving. God is my father; God is my friend: I love Him; I believe He loves me."⁸⁴ When Helen proposes that life is "too short to be spent in nursing animosity or registering wrongs,"⁸⁵ she says so as one facing death's approach. To regard Helen's resignation to human suffering as ascetic dissociation or spiritualized victimhood is to misread the nature of her faith and of her self-estimation. To Jane, Helen imparts a strength of will and faith in Divine goodness entirely antithetical to Brocklehurst's flesh-mortifying dogma.

The manner in which Helen represents resistance to patriarchal theologies that force females to confess sins the wrong sins is also reflected in the figure of Miss Temple, the Lowood teacher whom young Jane grows to look upon as a "mother, governess, and . . . companion."⁸⁶ Both Miss Temple and Helen (and equally, Diana and Mary Rivers much later) attract Jane's notice and admiration through their cultivated knowledge and intellectual curiosity.⁸⁷ But it is Miss Temple's solicitous generosity that both explicitly and implicitly criticizes Brocklehurst's requirement of female martyrdom.⁸⁸ On numerous occasions, Miss Temple is portrayed disagreeing with Brocklehurst's admonishments or seeking to redress suffering precipitated by his punitive supervision. The first example of this is when she personally pays to feed the student body after they were served an inedible burnt breakfast.⁸⁹ She does this without permission and is later openly

⁸⁴ Ibid., 97.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁸⁷ When Jane first meets Helen, she is reading Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, a fact that not only emboldens Jane to speak to her in the hopes of eventually borrowing the book, but which also implies that it is Helen's very act of reading that indicates to Jane she may be a friend worth pursuing. See page 59.

⁸⁸ Like Jane's first sight of Helen reading a book, Jane's first recollection of Miss Temple is that of being touched and spoken to kindly. See page 52.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 57.

censured by Brocklehurst for not taking the opportunity of turning the spoiled meal into a lesson in Christlike self-denial.⁹⁰ Though she bears Brocklehurst's self-righteous speech with "the coldness and fixity" of marble, Miss Temple is seen by Jane soon after to be stifling a smile when Brocklehurst proclaims that any girl sinning through an overabundance of hair must have it completely cut off.⁹¹ Confronted with degrading patriarchal authoritarianism, Miss Temple is able to register its absurdity rather than assimilate to it.

Although fulfilling the duties of her job as dictated by Brocklehurst, Miss Temple finds ways to offset what she views as unnecessary severity. This is most clearly exemplified in her treatment of Jane after Brocklehurst publicly shames her.⁹² Having been made to stand on a stool whilst Brocklehurst tells the students to shun her as liar, Jane is convinced she is destined only to be "crushed and trodden on."⁹³ It is thus all the more impacting when Miss Temple not only seeks Jane out and brings her and Helen to her apartment, but also gives Jane opportunity to defend herself against Brocklehurst's accusations.⁹⁴ In the warm shelter of Miss Temple's room, Jane is fed by Miss Temple's own meager supplies, comforted by empathetic listening and physical affection, and awed by the elevated discourse between her teacher and her new friend Helen—"they spoke of books: how many they had read! What stores of knowledge they possessed!"⁹⁵ On a night when young Jane had utterly abandoned hope of experiencing anything other than mortification, she is instead met with merciful kindness and gracious hospitality in the form a young woman who becomes Jane's model to emulate for the ten years of her Lowood occupancy.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 74-75.

⁹¹ Ibid., 75.

⁹² Ibid., 78-79.

⁹³ Ibid., 81.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 83-84. It is also worth noting that Miss Temple's approach to Jane in the room where Jane has been shamed, is heralded by the appearance of the moon, a recurring symbol of motherly care and protection in *Jane Eyre*.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 87.

Inclined equally toward despair and fury, Jane Eyre learns from her two closest female companions that accepting the reality of suffering does not exonerate one to live without hope or moral responsibility. In an environment that institutionalizes female subjugation and spiritualizes abuse, Jane is instead empowered toward faithful self-construction and just relationship by two young women who embody mercy and grace. The embodied witness of Helen Burns and Miss Temple argue against theologies that require women to “punish her body to save her soul.”⁹⁶

ii. Reframing St John Rivers: Diana and Mary Rivers

If the central female characters of the Lowood chapters offer a vision of mental and spiritual flourishing amidst Brocklehurst’s dualistic antagonism, the nurturance, sympathy, and joyful relationality personified in the Rivers sisters during the Marsh End passages of *Jane Eyre* condemn through comparison the “abstract justice . . . and excitement of sacrifice”⁹⁷ exhorted by St John Rivers. In St John, the feminist theological critique of patriarchal theology’s prizing of “changeless Truth, pure Spirit, perfect Reason” over Divine qualities associated with an incarnate God⁹⁸ is recognizably manifested. Envisioning God as his All-perfect king and lawgiver,⁹⁹ St John’s theology and way of life promote duty, detachment, and reason as Divine attributes needed to steady one against the distractions of human interests. As a man who regards Jesus Christ as his military captain and the apostles as his fellow pioneers,¹⁰⁰ St John envisions the Kingdom of God through patriarchal archetypes of isolation, conquest, and suppression. For St John, separation from relationships is the mark of spiritual maturity¹⁰¹ and love is,

⁹⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 465.

⁹⁸ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 7.

⁹⁹ *Jane Eyre*, 463.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 407.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 417.

at best, a sterile altruism subordinate to holy ambition. Whilst through Jane, Brontë conveys doubt over whether such precepts actually convey the “peace of God which passeth all understanding,”¹⁰² the juxtaposition of Diana and Mary Rivers alongside their brother presents the reader with an alternative view of God’s blessing that troubles the latter’s presumption of grace. While St John makes plans to conquer a distant land for a distant God, the narrative revels in the mutual pleasure, sympathy, and joy shared between Diana, Mary and Jane. Although much scholarly debate has been devoted to the difference between St John’s “way” and Jane Eyre’s, the way of Diana and Mary has not often been considered. The witness of Diana and Mary Rivers, with their “spontaneous, genuine, genial compassion,”¹⁰³ reflects what Mary Grey describes as feminist theology’s advocacy for “a profounder ethic for relating,” which reveals “a world that is relational at its very core.”¹⁰⁴ In a novel that portrays, within a Christian worldview, a heroine’s redemption from orphaned estrangement to marriage and community, the intertwining of Jane’s life with Diana and Mary’s and the breaking of fellowship between Jane and St John speaks volumes.

Across the spectrum of feminist and religious Brontë scholarship, critics have found it difficult to see Brontë’s presentation of St John Rivers as condemnatory. That Jane rejects his missionary proposition and finds fault with his methods of persuasion is evident, but the critical tendency is to ascribe the various statements from Jane and the Rivers sisters that grant St John status as a great man and an apostle to Brontë’s ultimate approval of St John’s Christian heroism. Yet the novel’s acknowledgements of St John’s goodness and devotion to Christian service are nearly all surrounded by “yet”s, “in spite of”s, or other contextual qualifiers.¹⁰⁵ On

¹⁰² Ibid., 405, quoting Phil. 4:7.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 399.

¹⁰⁴ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 31.

¹⁰⁵ Within chapters 34 and 35 alone, the following examples can be found: “St. John was a good man; but . . .” (453), “he lived only to aspire—after what was good and great, certainly; but still . . .” (453), “I found him a very patient, very forbearing, and yet . . .” (459), “a good yet stern, a conscientious yet implacable man, (473), “this good man, pure as the deep sunless source, could soon

more than one occasion, Jane must clarify to the reader that she is discriminating the “Christian from the man”—esteeming one but having to forgive the other.¹⁰⁶ The primary indication that what St John preaches and practices may not be as exemplary as he propounds is that his theology appears to justify personal ambition, using others as means to ends or ties to cut. Describing his choice to become a foreign missionary, St John offers no apology or amendment to his admission that he is “a votary of glory, a lover of renown, a luster after power.”¹⁰⁷ His vocation of evangelistic service amongst the poor in India, he terms as requiring “the best qualifications of soldier, statesman, and orator,” all of which he professes to have.¹⁰⁸ In this vein, he implies that his choice to live in humble surroundings amidst strangers comes not from compassion for his fellow beings, but because “the more arid and unreclaimed the soil where the Christian labourer’s task of tillage is appointed him . . . the higher the honour.”¹⁰⁹ Like a spiritual social-climber, St John dubs himself a servant but takes pride in direct-reporting to the “All-perfect.”¹¹⁰ Even when acknowledging his imperfection, he compares himself to the New Testament’s most famous evangelist in biblically superlative terms: “With St. Paul, I acknowledge myself the chiefest of sinners.”¹¹¹

Furthermore, as a bannerman of “the church-militant”¹¹² and servant of an “Infallible master,”¹¹³ St John considers himself superior to human limitation: “I am not going out under human guidance, subject to the defective laws and erring

kill me” (473), “He is a good and a great man; but he forgets, pitilessly, the feelings and claims of little people” (479).

¹⁰⁶ *Jane Eyre*, 469-470, 471, 473.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 407.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 463.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 464, quoting 1 Tim. 1:15.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 407.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 463.

control of my feeble fellow-worms.”¹¹⁴ The implication of St John’s version of allegiance is that because he is not subject to his “fellow-worms,” he is therefore not accountable to them either.¹¹⁵ St John’s spiritually-justified pursuit of glory also justifies his insensitivity to others’ feelings and rejection of relational obligations. St John calls the “separation from fleshly ties” his cross to bear,¹¹⁶ but his words and deeds divulge no regret at bearing said burden. Rather, he seems proud of his ability not to cling “tenaciously to ties of the flesh,” and admonishes Jane and others to follow his example.¹¹⁷ He spurns his beloved Rosamund Oliver without conversation or apology and declares a “battle . . . fought and . . . victory won.”¹¹⁸ St John disparages the enjoyment of “domestic endearments” as sloth,¹¹⁹ and emotion as “human weakness.”¹²⁰ And though he names his coldness as deformity that can only be covered by the “blood-bleached robe” of Christ,¹²¹ he appears more boastful than repentant of this fact:

“Know me to be what I am—a cold hard man;”¹²² “I am simply, in my original state . . . a cold, hard, ambitious man;”¹²³ “But I apprised you that I was a

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 464.

¹¹⁵ There are intriguing similarities to St John’s testimonial of frustrated ambitions that preceded his call to the missionary field within Jane’s tower speech and the mysterious summons that returns her to Rochester. St John’s “cramped existence” brings on “a season of darkness and struggling,” in which he burns for a “more active life of the world” (416). Jane’s “restlessness . . . agitate[s her] to pain.” She longs “for a power of vision” to see other places, desiring “more of practical experience than I possessed” (129). St John hears “a call from heaven to rise” and his powers “gather their full strength, spread their wings, and mount beyond [their] ken.” He resolves to become a missionary, and says, “from that moment my state of mind changed; the fetters dissolved and dropped from every faculty” (417). Jane hears “the voice of a human being—a known, loved, well-remembered voice—that of Edward Fairfax Rochester.” She breaks from St John, with her “powers . . . in play and in force.” Resolving to depart the next morning, she prays in “thanksgiving,” then “lay[s] down, unscared, enlightened” (482-484).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 407.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 451.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 457.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 451.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 417, 469.

¹²¹ Ibid., 432.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

hard man,” said he, “difficult to persuade;”¹²⁴ “I am cold: no fervour infects me.”¹²⁵

From his own self-appraisal as divinely-chosen and perfectly-suited to be among the ranks of God’s elect,¹²⁶ St John deems his devaluing of relationships and lack of compassion¹²⁷ as part of what best qualifies him for noble pursuits and acts of righteousness. It is without irony or contrition that he announces to Jane: “Reason, and not feeling, is my guide; my ambition is unlimited: my desire to rise higher, to do more than others, insatiable.”¹²⁸ St John may not be a villain like Brocklehurst, but his sainthood is rendered as highly suspect.

The belief, as represented in St John Rivers, that human relationality is antithetical to Christian faithfulness and that God desires the severing of feelings and human connection as a sacrifice is called into question throughout the novel. However, the fact that St John’s own sisters are portrayed in stark contrast to his righteous detachment gives further reason to consider how, from a feminist theological perspective, Brontë’s depiction of St John’s fallibility may be less equivocal than scholarship has maintained. In Jane’s journey, God’s providential response to faithfulness in times of distress is always accomplished through a restoration to relationship, not through further isolation. Jane’s departure from Thornfield, though for a time beset with extreme suffering followed by a period of solitary employment as a rural schoolmistress, is crowned by Jane gaining a family. The minister and his sisters who saved Jane’s life helped her re-establish her independence, and those whom she has already come to love are discovered to be her cousins: “Glorious discovery to a lonely wretch! This was wealth indeed!—

¹²⁴ Ibid., 443.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 463.

¹²⁷ He tells Jane outright that he feels no empathy for her; his interest in helping her find employment and conversing with her as a friend is “because I consider you a specimen of a diligent, orderly, energetic woman: not because I deeply compassionate what you have gone through, or what you still suffer.” Ibid., 432.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

wealth to the heart!”¹²⁹ As Jane and the Rivers sisters grow in affection and devotion to one another, St John’s spiritualized detachment appears all the more incongruous. Experiencing and naming the familial bonds and domestic happiness she shares with Diana and Mary as blessings from God, Jane’s contentment and gratitude contrast St John’s dissatisfaction and insensitivity. As a result, Jane’s time of peaceful mutuality with Diana and Mary, which coincides with the estrangement growing between her and St John, reflects a view of Christian love as “the proper form of connection between beings who become human persons in relation”¹³⁰ and not an obstacle to overcome.

From the moment she crosses the threshold of Marsh End, rescued by St John Rivers from starvation and exposure and welcomed by his sisters, Jane says, “I began once more to know myself.”¹³¹ Soon restored to health, Jane is galvanized by the sisters’ intellectual mentorship and jovial companionship. She narrates their relationship in terms of books devoured, countryside explored, and, above all, affections shared¹³²—“Our natures dovetailed: mutual affection—of the strongest kind—was the result.”¹³³ Whilst St John is labeled a “penetrating young judge,”¹³⁴ Diana and Mary are “witty, pithy, original” and kind.¹³⁵ Though all three women esteem St John, they do not understand or approve of his masochistic self-denial; Diana calls him “inexorable as death.”¹³⁶ St John’s sacrifice of feelings and connections is discussed and grieved by the sisters and Jane, along with the wish

¹²⁹ Ibid., 444.

¹³⁰ Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 217-218.

¹³¹ *Jane Eyre*, 387.

¹³² In chapter 30, the beginning of Jane’s relationship with Diana and Mary, the word “affection” appears four times, and “pleasure,” five.

¹³³ Ibid., 403.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 397.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 455,

¹³⁶ Ibid., 410.

for him to give up his missionary venture.¹³⁷ What appears just as troublesome to Jane is St John's overall insensitivity to others' feelings and his determination to subdue pleasure wherever he finds it. After Jane receives her uncle's inheritance and chooses to share it equally amongst her cousins, she busily and joyfully refurbishes Marsh End in preparation for Diana and Mary's return, as the inheritance frees them from "slaving amongst strangers" as governesses.¹³⁸ When St John responds to her labor of love with indifference, preceded by an earlier admonition that she "restrain the disproportionate fervour with which you throw yourself into commonplace home pleasures,"¹³⁹ Jane names her concern:

Now, I did not like this, reader. St. John was a good man; but I began to feel he had spoken truth of himself when he said he was hard and cold. The humanities and amenities of life had no attraction for him—its peaceful enjoyments no charm.¹⁴⁰

The once-orphaned Jane, who has claimed her long-lost cousins as siblings and equal sharers in her good fortune, regards St John's denigration of domestic familiarity as a nearly-unforgivable offense. His determination to "stifle and destroy" his feelings and to mistrust anything conducive to his or another's happiness¹⁴¹ is considered by Jane and Diana to be unnatural,¹⁴² and, when directed at Jane personally, murderous.¹⁴³ Jane's remark to Diana that St John "forgets, pitilessly, the feelings and claims of little people,"¹⁴⁴ referring as it does to a parish curate planning to bring the Gospel to a foreign culture, is difficult to read as anything but censure, a failure of Christian love in the name of Christian duty.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 410, 445, 478. Equally disquieting is St John's frank admission that because his father also disapproved of his missionary aspirations, his father's death was therefore a fortuitous development to his plans. See page 417.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 447.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 451.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 453.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 479.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 477.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 479.

St John's arguably disordered view of love and sacrifice is demonstrated by his interpretation of Jane's choice to divide her inheritance equally amongst the four of them. Jane's exasperation at St John's initial refusal and effusive attempts to dissuade her from the plan read like a debate between the ethic of care and an ethic of rights, feeling versus reason. Jane ranks her joy at having a family with whom to share her blessings and remove burdens from, far above her legal entitlement to keep their uncle's £20,000 bequest all to herself. St John regards her inability to judge rightly in favor of wealth as a result of her inexperience, of putting too high a value on filial connection and making an unnecessary "sacrifice of your just rights."¹⁴⁵ Jane responds that it is no sacrifice to bring happiness to others by sharing the excess of what she does not need, and that the decision "is fully as much a matter of feeling as of conscience: I must indulge my feelings; I so seldom have had an opportunity of doing so."¹⁴⁶ This exchange, as enlightening as it is of the differences between St John's version of justice and Jane's, also highlights St John's propensity to misread others' motivations by projecting upon them his own. Although Jane explicitly tells him that sharing her wealth brings her personal satisfaction in the knowledge that it will make others as happy as herself, St John proclaims during his proposal of marriage to her weeks later that seeing her share her uncle's fortune with her cousins in "the claim of abstract justice" proved to him that she, like himself, "reveled in the flame and excitement of sacrifice."¹⁴⁷ This profound misreading of Jane's actions and complete dismissal of her words displays not just St John's arrogance, but his seeming inability to allow pleasure any place in Christian faith or deeds.¹⁴⁸ Jane's spontaneous generosity is transmuted into abstract justice, her jubilant enthusiasm to sacrificial zeal. Repeatedly, St John's

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 447.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 446.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 465.

¹⁴⁸ It is notable as well how during the conversation in which St John explains to Jane how they are related that Jane specifically tells him she never wishes to marry and makes him repeat back to her his agreement to be a brother and not just a cousin to her, yet in a matter of weeks St John reneges on his acceptance of *her* proposal by asking her to marry *him*, directly countering her wishes to stay single and be his sister. See page 447.

acquisitive appraisal of others' abilities to service his goals and the callousness with which he detaches from those persons he considers obstacles signal that despite the righteousness of his aims St John's actions may reflect his own will more than God's. Through rejecting his relationality and denying others theirs St John's "great work" of "bettering [his] race" by "substituting . . . freedom for bondage"¹⁴⁹ appears to accomplish the opposite. Disconnecting from relationships he finds tempting or irksome and calling it sacrifice, whilst requiring others to sacrifice what brings them joy, reflects St John's distorted view of Christian love. In St John, the worship of reason and repulsion of feeling is portrayed as harmful, particularly to women when it justifies their objectification or compelled resignation.

When read in light of feminist theological conceptions of sin, *Jane Eyre* depicts the patriarchal valorization of women's emotional self-sacrifice and relational fusion as obstructive rather than constructive to women's faithful flourishing. Rochester's assumption that Jane's love for him obligates her to be his spiritual and emotional surrogate, and St John's presumption that God's will is for Jane to be a manipulable tool in his own spiritual arsenal convey the relational temptation women face to forfeit agency and identity in the name of love and faithfulness. The novel's inclusion of female friendship and mentorship in the characters of Helen, Miss Temple, and the Rivers sisters presents a view of female spiritual and relational flourishing that contradicts the injunctions preached by the masculine authority figures of Rev. Brocklehurst and St John Rivers to deny selfhood and relationality. In so doing, Brontë's novel problematizes patriarchal theology and social systems that unreflectively regard masculine experience as normative, and thus, authoritative.

In Brontë's second published novel, *Shirley*, the negative effects of women's enforced subordination are examined through the internalization of social pressures toward self-sacrifice and the external limitation of imposed idleness. As the following two sections seek to demonstrate, if *Jane Eyre* depicts women's struggle to

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 431.

navigate patriarchal temptations to fuse, *Shirley* depicts the social restrictions that foster feminine fragility through the pressure to fragment.

4.3 Feminine Sin in *Shirley*: Pressured Toward Fragmentation

So far, this thesis has made extensive use of *Jane Eyre*'s influential place within feminist criticism, centering thematic discussion of Brontë's novels on her most famous work. It will now be helpful, though, to introduce components of *Shirley*'s narrative and structure pertinent to a feminist theological reading of the novel and to acknowledge that venture's limits. For whereas numerous divergent readerships and critical disciplines have claimed *Jane Eyre* as their poster girl, the female protagonists of *Shirley* have not been as warmly or readily embraced. Before looking at how sin is represented in *Shirley*, a brief introduction to the novel's ambiguous political status and literary model will allow us to approach *Shirley* as a distinctly different project to either *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*, but one that is just as productive in meaning.

If *Shirley* has any sort of reputation, it tends to be known either as Brontë's social problem novel¹⁵⁰ or as Brontë's structurally-flawed novel,¹⁵¹ with the latter possibly owing to the former. Commonly regarded as Brontë's attempt at a "condition of England" or "woman question" novel,¹⁵² *Shirley*'s blend of satire, conservative politics, and earnest prayers for female deliverance has resulted in most critical engagement qualifying aspects of the novel and apologizing for others. Whereas *Jane Eyre*'s "bildungsroman" character and *Villette*'s psychological portrait have served as ready identifiers across disciplines for the novels' methods and

¹⁵⁰ See Dolin, "Fictional Territory and a Woman's Place: Regional and Sexual Difference in *Shirley*," 197.

¹⁵¹ See Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, 85; Dolin, "Fictional Territory," 205.

¹⁵² See Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, 144; Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 374.

structures, *Shirley* nearly always requires re-introduction and redefinition. For one, *Shirley*'s identity as a social issue novel focused on the plight of unmarried middle class women and its dual engagement with the conflict between workers and manufacturers portrayed through the Luddite rebellion of the 1810s is complicated by what critics perceive as the novel's conservative response to the progressive concerns it raises. Whilst some critics argue that *Jane Eyre*'s proto-feminist trajectory is foreshortened through its patriarchal marriage ending, critics have criticized *Shirley*'s impassioned call for women's mental liberty for being forestalled by its direction toward the "Men of England"¹⁵³ rather than the daughters it seeks to liberate.¹⁵⁴ Nor does the dual marriage ending of *Shirley* mitigate this. Yet for all the debates about *Shirley*'s Tory bias against worker revolutions or the potential taming of its heroines,¹⁵⁵ it may be the novel's third-person satirical and ostensibly masculine narrator that most troubles interpretative efforts. As Brontë's only novel written in third person, *Shirley* wavers between irony and earnestness at a pace that has consistently flustered critics since the nineteenth-century. As this thesis does not have the space to test centuries' worth of literary theories on Brontë's satirical methodology, Jennifer Judge's reading of *Shirley* as a Menippean satire that analyzes modes of thought in order to expose stereotypes is a helpful guide. In Judge's estimation, *Shirley* is not a failed effort by Brontë to emulate her literary hero William Makepeace Thackeray, but is instead an effective Menippean satire that specifically targets misogynistic and reductive systems of thought in order to expose inherent prejudices.¹⁵⁶ In agreement with Judge's interpretation and similar readings by other critics—which hold that *Shirley*'s panoramic narrative structure, shifting points of view, and predominantly caustic narrator are deliberate literary tools chosen by Brontë—this chapter regards the proto-feminist lament of *Shirley* as

¹⁵³ *Shirley*, 392-393.

¹⁵⁴ See Greene, "Apocalypse When?," 362.

¹⁵⁵ Susan Zlotnick claims that in *Shirley*, "Brontë replaces Tory paternalism with her own brand of Tory maternalism." See *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution*, 73.

¹⁵⁶ Judge, "Bitter Herbs," n.p.

the novel's central theme. As a feminist theological reading will show, *Shirley* is deeply concerned with the suffering of marginalized women; however, its energies center on the validation of women's rightful discontent more than on the envisioning of solutions. To be more specific: *Shirley* exposes the harmful social constraints put on women, but does so by drawing the reader into an experience of that suffering rather than rescuing the heroines from those constraints.¹⁵⁷

Despite, or rather because of its tonal and structural differences from *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Brontë's second novel offers a unique perspective on women's experience of restraint. *Shirley*'s "cool and solid" narrative, "unromantic as Monday morning,"¹⁵⁸ features, as John Maynard puts it, heroines that are "paragons of survival,"¹⁵⁹ rather than icons of unconventionality. With both Caroline and Shirley permanently placed in Briarfield, neither heroine undergoes a narrative journey in the way of Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe, either in actual terrain crossed or crises faced. Although through illness or injury both Caroline and Shirley have to grapple with death's proximity, the primary incidents of the novel are not those of dramatic victories over obstacles, internal or external. Caroline Helstone, as a woman denied the prospect of vocation by her uncle's financial provision, may not share the travails of the friendless and penniless Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe, but neither does she share their self-direction. With her established home and predictable routine, Caroline suffers through obedience and quiescence, rather than material privation. And though the problematic tension of equating existential problems of privilege to the physical deprivations of poverty must be noted, there is, in Brontë's exploration of middle class women's sanctioned frailty, a bold statement against female

¹⁵⁷ Caroline Helstone will be the primary interpretive focus for these chapters' feminist theological reading of *Shirley*. Although Shirley Keeldar is the titular heroine, she is not introduced until the final chapter of the first volume. By the time Shirley appears, the reader has already been drawn into Caroline's interior life. And whilst the pairing of free-talking and financially independent Shirley with the inexperienced and dependent Caroline provides contrasting views of the limits placed on women's agency, Caroline Helstone is the heroine most representative of the novel's theme of the trapped, inconsequential woman trying to make a meaningful way in life.

¹⁵⁸ *Shirley*, 5.

¹⁵⁹ Maynard, *Brontë and Sexuality*, 153.

confinement to the domestic sphere. In *Shirley*, the expectation that women should stay at home to “sew and cook . . . contentedly, regularly, uncomplainingly all their lives long”¹⁶⁰ is shown not only to be untenable but also damaging. In portraying the harmful effects keeping women mentally and physically idle whilst encouraging them towards a life of self-sacrifice, *Shirley* illustrates the sins by which women are oppressed and the fragmentation towards which they are tempted. By considering how Caroline responds to being disregarded by the two most influential men in her life—her guardian, Rev. Helstone, and her beloved, Robert Moore—it is possible to see how *Shirley* exemplifies the warning contained in Mary Potter Engel’s assertion that “powerlessness as well as power corrupts.”¹⁶¹

i. Dismissed by Helstone

Though neither Caroline Helstone nor the narrator of *Shirley* direct words of censure to Rev. Helstone, the novel leaves no doubt about his misogyny. The faults against women committed by the Rector of Briarfield, widower and sole guardian of his niece Caroline, are enumerated with a satirical flourish that allows readers to determine for themselves the humor or horror of his conduct toward women. Helstone’s gallantry in the company of females is explained as a mark of his dislike and disrespect for them as anything other than “toys to play with, to amuse a vacant hour, and to be thrown away.”¹⁶² Because he views women as an “inferior . . . order of existence,”¹⁶³ he disdains any female behavior that disrupts his normative estimation of feminine ignorance and vanity. Caroline’s wish to leave Briarfield and support herself as a governess is “provoking,” “fantastical,” and cause for a doctor’s advice,¹⁶⁴ whereas young Hannah Sykes, who, if told “that she was an angel . . . would let [men] treat her like an idiot,” is cause for Helstone to consider a second

¹⁶⁰ *Shirley*, 391.

¹⁶¹ Engel, “Evil, Sin and the Violation of the Vulnerable,” 160.

¹⁶² *Shirley*, 116, 114.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

marriage.¹⁶⁵ By refusing to let Caroline out of his care whilst at the same time neglecting her need for anything beyond sustenance and shelter, Helstone confines Caroline to “a windowed grave,”¹⁶⁶ wherein the felt purposelessness of her routine tempts her believe that her existence as such is purposeless.

A primary way in which Helstone’s patriarchal treatment of Caroline is portrayed as harmful is the fact that his very insistence on keeping her safe and comfortable—even offering to purchase an annuity so she will never need to worry about money—resembles neglect more than it reflects care. Whilst on the one hand, Helstone believes women need constant watching,¹⁶⁷ *Shirley*’s narrator describes Helstone’s inability or refusal to interpret what he sees:

He thought so long as a woman was silent nothing ailed her, and she wanted nothing. If she did not complain of solitude, solitude . . . could not be irksome to her. If she did not talk and put herself forward, express a partiality for this, an aversion to that, she had no partialities or aversions, and it was useless to consult her tastes.¹⁶⁸

As a result, Caroline’s prospects and day-to-day life are subject to Helstone’s whims and inclinations rather than her own skills or preferences. When Helstone has a falling out with Robert Moore, Caroline is cut off from her half-cousins at Hollow’s Mill, in whose company she is not only happiest, but from whom she receives the only instructional education she can get beyond re-reading books from her uncle’s library. Helstone’s disregard for female education, rooted in the fact that he cannot “abide sense in women,”¹⁶⁹ leaves Caroline feeling inferior to her peers.¹⁷⁰ Though she disagrees with her uncle’s belief that learning “gown-making and piecrust-making” are all that is required to make her “a clever woman some day,”¹⁷¹ Caroline’s own perception of her deficient feminine accomplishments and limited

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 117.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 399.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 170.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 116.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 98-99.

social activity leads her to judge herself in comparison to others. In company, Caroline accuses herself of “ignorance and incompetency,” deeming herself unfit for “ordinary intercourse with the ordinary world.”¹⁷² Being neither the doll-child her uncle presumes her to be nor the gossipy flirts her peers are, Caroline is tempted at times to misjudge her own worth. Despite having attained “a knowledge of her own,”¹⁷³ which often shocks unsuspecting individuals, or, in the case of Caroline’s cousin Hortense, is assumed to be the fruit of someone’s else’s tutelage and example,¹⁷⁴ Caroline often expresses an overabundance of humility that sounds more like the disapproval of her patronizing authority figures than her own discernment. Denied by Helstone any opportunity to use or develop her mind, Caroline struggles to be satisfied within the confines of her life; but as will be seen, she finds only suffering.

In *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, Sally Shuttleworth states that in *Shirley*, Brontë’s “most overtly political book”¹⁷⁵ it is through the portrayal of the “self-torturing workings of Caroline’s mind,” that the physical and emotional consequences of patriarchal hierarchy are brought to light.¹⁷⁶ Expressing outwardly and privately the wish that she were a man, free to apprentice an occupation and “make [a] way in life,”¹⁷⁷ Caroline either will not or cannot defy her uncle’s wishes that she limit her prospects to life at the Rectory. Caroline’s obedient struggle to accept her fate causes her anguish to the point that her outlook on life becomes how quickly to make it pass.¹⁷⁸ Yet throughout the novel, Caroline’s discontentment, which borders on suicidal thoughts, is portrayed as a sane and reasonable response to her lack of agency. Rather than gratitude for the comfort of a secure home and a

¹⁷² Ibid., 111.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷⁵ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 183.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 204.

¹⁷⁷ *Shirley*, 71, 77, 229.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 174-175.

future without striving, she feels stripped of her humanity by “the solitude, the sadness, the nightmare of her life.”¹⁷⁹

Furthermore, Caroline’s prescribed inaction causes her to question God’s goodness and her own. Though she prays to God for relief and ruminates on the promises of eternal salvation,¹⁸⁰ her depleted spirit and anguished mind leave her feeling reprobate, “unheard and unaccepted,” with God’s face turned from her.¹⁸¹ As a model of feminine humility, obedience, and diligence, the spiritual despair of Caroline Helstone calls into question the belief that confining females as angels in the house is actually in their best interest. Caroline is not a rebellious Jane Eyre, easily accused of “ungodly discontent,”¹⁸² yet by seeking to accept her guardian’s requirements that she content herself with housekeeping, she weakens to the point of wishing for death.¹⁸³ When Caroline, visually suffering from depression, essentially begs her uncle for a change in situation—an occupation outside her cloistered home—is told instead to “put all crotchets out of your head . . . run away and amuse yourself,”¹⁸⁴ the incongruity of Helstone’s espoused paternalistic beneficence to the actual need before him is exposed. Through Caroline’s relationship to her uncle, *Shirley* demonstrates that restricting female minds and activities solely to what is useful for maintaining a man’s home is inhumane and un-Christian. The shattering of self-respect and spiritual hope that Caroline endures in her uncle’s house indicates that women do not, in fact, need protection from the world, but rather, participation in it.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 395.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 174-175, 351, 427-428.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 351.

¹⁸² “Elizabeth Rigby, from an unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*,” in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 105-112.

¹⁸³ *Shirley*, 375, 395.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 191.

ii. Dismissed by Robert Moore

As a surrogate daughter or symbolic wife, Caroline's life in the Rectory portrays the false promise of spiritual peace and relational fulfillment idealized in the role of angel in the house. Another role that Caroline is forced to try on is that of the "old maid."¹⁸⁵ Separated from her hope of marriage to Robert Moore, Caroline contends with the reality of how to spend her life if it will not mean caring for a family of her own or providing for herself financially. Though Robert is implicated in mistreating Caroline's heart before his ultimate repentance and reconciliation with her,¹⁸⁶ it is not Robert's pride or ambition that has the greatest negative impact on Caroline. Rather, his resistance to marriage and thus to her, brings Caroline and the reader face to face with the injustices experienced by society's marginalized single women. Unlike the virtuous idleness imposed on women under male headship, the societal pressure placed on spinsters, as Caroline discovers, is to be both invisible and exploitable. When Caroline realizes that Robert does not intend to marry her, not only must she dismantle her love for him and the happiness it brought her, she must also attempt to find meaning and purpose in the self-abnegation modeled by the "old maids" Miss Ainley and Miss Mann. Being dismissed by Robert is Caroline's introduction to the discrimination experienced by discarded women as opposed to sheltered women. However, the pressure to fragment rather than self-actualize is just as strong.

When Robert Moore is introduced into the novel, he is disliked by his neighbors both for being a half-Belgian foreigner and for displacing workers at his mill by bringing in machinery. Having lost his main source of trade through the Orders of Council—an outcome of Britain's war with France—Moore cannot afford to employ his full complement of workers, nor can he afford to wait until trade is reopened to produce his goods. Throughout the entire novel, Robert Moore's financial anxiety is

¹⁸⁵ Caroline's and the novel's most used term for unmarried women.

¹⁸⁶ *Shirley*, 640-641.

his most pressing concern. Thus, both the narrator and Caroline implicate him for being stubbornly insensitive to how his decisions impact others. By the end of novel, he has ostensibly learned that compassion is in his best interest, and that focusing on his own survival causes him to overlook opportunities for mutual prosperity. It is a lesson he learns in regard to his his millworkers and to Caroline. But unlike Helstone, whose dismissal of Caroline's feelings results from his assumption that she has none of consequence, Robert's dismissal of Caroline's feelings results from his conviction that his own feelings are inconsequential. Averse to marriage, as he sees it being proffered and gossiped about around him,¹⁸⁷ Robert regards his affection for Caroline as a weakness and temporary frenzy that could lead him to ruin.¹⁸⁸ Yet despite his having "been brought up only to make money,"¹⁸⁹ and thus writing off sentimental ideas of marrying for love, Robert repeatedly engages Caroline with the affection and attentiveness of a suitor: walking her home alone, inviting her to linger in his company, kissing her goodnight in a more than cousinly manner.¹⁹⁰ As a result, these evenings of mutual regard and hopes built for Caroline are followed by distance and coldness from a Robert determined to quell the infatuation he considers to be an obstacle to his prospects; to Caroline's feelings, he gives no thought. Led on by Robert's solicitous sentiments then parted from him by his changeable behaviour and her uncle's prohibition, Caroline is made further to feel her inconsequentiality in comparison to men's lives:

Her earnest wish was to see things as they were, and not to be romantic. . . .
"Different, indeed," she concluded, "is Robert's mental condition to mine: I think only of him; he has no room, no leisure to think of me. The feeling called love is and has been for two years the predominant emotion of my heart: always there, always awake, always astir: quite other feelings absorb his reflections, and govern his faculties."¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 23-26.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 124, 73-74, 95-96.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 172.

The reader is left unsure as to whether Caroline is correct in believing that Robert does not think of her, or whether, against his own efforts, his love for her continues to grow. What is perceivable, however, is that Caroline's trust and affections have been imposed upon—not maliciously, but without due consideration.¹⁹² Caroline's experience of shame, frustration, and self-doubt in consequence of Robert's withdrawal of affection, highlights the requirement for unmarried women to cut themselves off from their feelings of love or desire.

Caroline's realization that as a woman she is destined "always to be curbed and kept down"¹⁹³ progresses in her mind as her physical and mental state decline. The questions of whether to "give way to her feelings, or to vanquish them? To pursue [Robert], or to turn upon herself"¹⁹⁴ oppress Caroline through their seeming injustice. In an early stage of being sundered from Robert and her hopes of marriage, Caroline's rumination and self-castigation is continued by a rhetorical passage outlining the requirement for women to inure themselves to stoic dissimulation in the face of inevitable heartbreak:¹⁹⁵ "A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation, a lover feminine can say nothing."¹⁹⁶ The passage's praise of bitterness as a tonic and of apathy as the least-dangerous response to the "acute suffering"¹⁹⁷ of injustice communicates the "self-lacerating"¹⁹⁸ demands of decorum placed on women who are forbidden to communicate or, indeed, *feel* their feelings. By highlighting the cultural mandate to resign oneself without complaint to one's powerlessness—"ask no questions, utter no remonstrances; it is your best wisdom"—*Shirley's* manifold reflections on women's

¹⁹² Ibid., 106-107.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 347.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹⁹⁵ Chapter Six of this thesis explores Lucy Snowe's tragic commitment to this paradigm.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

¹⁹⁸ Shuttleworth, *Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 198.

lot implicate the harmful paradigm that requires women to accept their disenfranchisement with placid credulity.¹⁹⁹

Along with interrogating the social pressure for women to fragment their hearts for the sake of respectability, the removal of Caroline's marital expectations leads her to grapple with the reality of her default role of "old maid." Through Caroline's internal debates about and practical exposure to societal expectations put upon the unmarried woman, *Shirley* directly challenges self-sacrifice as the highest form of love. Instead, spinsterly self-sacrifice is portrayed as acquiescence to exploitation and ungodly self-mortification. But before Caroline attempts to distance herself from that way of life, she first endeavors to find its value. Prevented from fulfilling her culturally-prescribed role of wife and mother, Caroline must reevaluate the purpose of existence—"What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?"²⁰⁰ Placing her questions alongside the same questions asked by "old maids," Caroline quickly intuits that the answers are interposed by social expectation: "Your place is to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted."²⁰¹ But before Caroline even seeks out Miss Mann or Miss Ainley to learn how she can assist them in their charitable efforts, she already suspects that calling "old maids" "devoted and virtuous" in giving up their lives to serve others is a "convenient doctrine" for those who freely benefit from the

¹⁹⁹ *Shirley*, 105. Notably, the "lover masculine" passage from *Shirley* was excerpted along with a passage from Chapter Ten that begins "What was I created for?" (174), and printed in volume IV of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* in 1856, a year after Brontë's death. The published article was titled "'Woman's Lot: A Fragment' by the Author of 'Jane Eyre'." As Drew Lamonica notes, presenting the combined passages outside the novel's context implied direct correlation between Brontë's opinions and the fictional narrative. This assumption was propagated again in 1920 when E.H. Chadwick republished "Woman's Lot" in *The Times Literary Supplement*, with commentary claiming that Brontë wrote the editorial piece before *Jane Eyre*, but interpolated the text into *Shirley* after its rejection for magazine publication. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith dismiss Chadwick's supposition for lack of evidence, acknowledging the passage instead as an editorial extraction. Sally Greene's article "Apocalypse When? *Shirley's* Vision and the Politics of Reading" is one of the few pieces of scholarship to acknowledge the passage's publication as indication of the novel's nineteenth-century feminist resonance. Though Greene's claim is based on Chadwick's misattribution, the observation is apt. See Lamonica, *We Are Three Sisters*, 31-32; Rosengarten and Smith, notes to *Shirley*, 755-756; Greene, "Apocalypse When?," 361-362.

²⁰⁰ *Shirley*, 174.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

sacrificial labor.²⁰² Wondering if it can be true that “virtue lie[s] in abnegation of self,” Caroline concludes that “undue humility makes tyranny” and “weak concession creates selfishness.”²⁰³ Imagining a lifetime of pouring out her energies into the needs of individuals who will not reciprocate the care, but rather, behave as if entitled to it, Caroline proposes to herself that, “each human being has his share of rights,” and that those rights best serve the welfare of all when not thrown away through the “renunciation of self.”²⁰⁴ This surprisingly prescient rumination on self-abnegation as a practice that allows oneself to be objectified and implicates others in forfeiting their own responsibilities ends with Caroline wondering if her thoughts are right, implying that perhaps, they are not. In a novel that evades definitive conclusions through irony, parody and juxtaposition, Caroline’s implied undermining of her own manifesto of single women’s rights need not be weighted too heavily. Arguably, the fact that these ideas are not voiced by a blue-stocking but by a credulous and under-educated young woman could indicate an assertion from Brontë that such feelings are instinctual to human beings, and that, as implied by Caroline’s aspersions against the “Romish religion” of self-renunciation,²⁰⁵ the concept of virtuous self-abnegation stems from exploitative hierarchal systems and not from God’s design.

For Caroline, though, these thoughts are still hypothetical. It is in Caroline’s witness of Miss Mann’s and particularly Miss Ainley’s resignation to a heavenly reward as the only good to be expected from life that the righteousness of self-denial is explicitly called into question. Elderly Miss Ainley, who is considered even by the gracious Caroline to be not just ugly but “very ugly,”²⁰⁶ is praised from afar by a community that benefits from her sacrificial giving but does not want her company.

²⁰² Ibid. Importantly, the novel does communicate respect for Miss Ainley’s sacrificial giving. It is the town members’ abuse of her giving and the cultural attitudes that place Miss Ainley in the position of being taken for granted that the novel casts doubt upon.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 181.

In the “dim little place” where she lives “without a bright hope or near friend in the world,” Miss Ainley tells Caroline that she has “tutored her thoughts to tend upwards to Heaven.”²⁰⁷ Yet rather than hearing Miss Ainley’s devotion as a faithful expression of God’s goodness throughout life’s trials, Caroline compares Miss Ainley’s outlook on life to ascetic martyrs or masochistic zealots who violate nature through self-annihilation.²⁰⁸ Caroline’s own efforts to commit herself fully to charitable works, as directed by Miss Ainley, do not, as the narrator explains, bring her “health of body nor continued peace of mind.”²⁰⁹ Caroline feels compassion for the unpitied and overworked lives of Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, but she is stirred more to awe than admiration. By depicting the self-sacrifice of Briarfield’s “old maids” as self-destructive pessimism and compliance with systemic exploitation, *Shirley* ruptures the correlative relationship between feminine self-denial and Christian virtue. Furthering this is the implication that the societal structures that perpetuate female fragmentation, be they the Church establishment or social hierarchy, are guilty of consigning women to lives of stagnation instead of fruition.²¹⁰ Caroline does not want to be like unmarried girls she sees around her, who “decline in health, . . . are never well; and [whose] minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness;”²¹¹ but neither her restricted life as a “half-doll, half-angel,”²¹² nor her busy life of emptying herself for others’ benefit appear suited to help her avoid that fate.²¹³ As the next section will show, reading *Shirley* in light of the feminine sin of fragmentation sheds light on the patriarchal privileges men abuse. Whereas most of the masculine sin portrayed in *Jane Eyre* is regulated either through a certain character’s explicit repentance (Rochester), their identification as a villain to be resisted (Brocklehurst), or by their banishment (St

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 390.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 391.

²¹² Ibid., 352.

²¹³ Ibid., 184.

John), the abuses of privilege committed by the men in *Shirley* go unchecked.²¹⁴ Like *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* offers a vision of what women suffer when constrained by masculine sins of pride and ambition. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, however, *Shirley* renders the indignities committed by men against women as unnatural, yet inevitable.

4.4 Masculine Sin in *Shirley*: Exposing Patriarchal Privilege Through Female Abasement

The social pressure for women to sin through fragmentation is portrayed not just through Caroline Helstone, but also in the lives of women around her, who represent her possible futures as marginalized “old maid,” discarded wife, or solitary governess. Though Caroline is reluctant to embrace the self-sacrifice as a vocation modeled by Miss Ainley and Miss Mann, it is in the novel’s depiction of Caroline’s two closest female relations and the men they married, that the correlation between culturally-sanctioned masculine privilege and female subordination registers as abuse. Caroline’s deceased aunt, Mary Cave Helstone, and Caroline’s estranged mother, Mrs. (Helstone) Pryor, are women who suffer under the “outward, crimsoned violence” or “‘respectable’ freezing power” of their husbands,²¹⁵ and as a result, fragment to the point of disappearance: Mary Cave through death, Mrs. Pryor through desertion. By showing Caroline what her only options as a woman lead to, *Shirley* suggest that men may be guilty of committing sins of neglect and self-interest whilst refusing women the right to any self-interest at all.

²¹⁴ The two partial exceptions to this are addressed below.

²¹⁵ Shuttleworth, *Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 208.

i. “*A girl of living marble*”: Mary Cave’s Silent Witness

Whereas Caroline recognizes that the suffering of Miss Ainley and Miss Mann’s spinster lives is not something to which she could habituate herself, she is never fully privy to the marital torments experienced by her late aunt and her estranged mother. The warnings of what marriage to a callous, inexorable, and even abusive husband can be are put before Caroline in subtler ways than they are to the reader. The rumors of Mary Cave’s death through heartbreak or psychological breakdown are provided by the narrator or characters’ insinuations. Mary Cave’s personality and what led her to marry the Rev. Helstone are described through idealized memories or interpretations of her painted portrait. In life as in death, Mary Cave does not speak for herself, but is spoken for through others’ perceptions of her. Mrs. Pryor’s warnings to Caroline against marriage at all costs are given in person, both before and after she reveals her identity as Caroline’s mother, yet her traumatic experiences are only alluded to through her anguish and never detailed. Despite the reverberating messages around Caroline that marriage leads to inescapable loss and unhappiness, she is never persuaded that mutual love is impossible. However, the satirical narration and cumulative events of the narrative make it difficult to discern whether the novel presents Caroline’s hope as estimable or foolhardy.²¹⁶ What is clear is that both Mary Cave and Mrs. Pryor are depicted as fragmented women whose culturally-conditioned lack of selfhood is implicated in leading them to imprudent marriages for the sake of security. Paired with the novel’s exploration of how paternalistically circumscribing women’s lives for their own protection actually endangers their wellbeing, the import is that marrying for security invariably brings about the opposite.

Mary Cave is introduced to the reader as a primary reason for the antipathy existing between Rev. Helstone and the manufacturer Hiram Yorke, as both men wanted to marry her. As an object of masculine rivalry from first mention, Mary

²¹⁶ To be discussed in Chapter Five.

Cave is described by other characters in equally objectifying ways. She was a “monumental angel” with “the face of a Madonna” that “no statuary’s chisel could improve”—“stillness personified.”²¹⁷ Within three paragraphs of her introductory description, Mary Cave is transformed from “a girl of living marble” to a girl entombed within it, “only a still beautiful-featured mould of clay left, cold and white”—dead.²¹⁸ The rumors that Mary Cave died of harsh treatment by Helstone—which the narrator quickly discounts as untruthful embellishments—are nonetheless accompanied by the image of Helstone’s “dry-eyed” mourning and unconsciousness of the community’s disapprobation of it. The fact that Helstone regarded Mary’s death as sudden, whilst neighbors perceived a long-decline,²¹⁹ indicates a cruelty other than physical abuse—namely, indifference. The narrator relates Helstone’s conviction that, “a wife could not be her husband’s companion, much less his confidante,” and how Mary Cave, “after a year or two, was of no great importance to him in any shape.”²²⁰ And although Helstone is in no way acquitted of his spousal behavior, with his expiring wife’s “capacity for feeling” and need for love clearly implied,²²¹ the novel also alludes to Mary Cave’s deficiencies. She may be regarded in life and in memory as an angel, but, as Marianne Thormählen asserts, “in the fiction of the Brontës, the word ‘angel’ nearly always sounds a warning note when used of an earthly creature.”²²² In the case of Mary Cave that warning is directed both at what men seek for in a wife and what women aspire to be.

The first apparent criticism of Mary Cave within the novel is that she chose to marry Helstone for his position, rather than Yorke for his love. Using acquisitive terms, the narrator explains how “the clergyman was preferred for his office’s sake,” as Helstone’s position invested him “with some of the illusion necessary to allure to

²¹⁷ *Shirley*, 52-53, 221, 52.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52, 53.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 111.

the commission of matrimony.”²²³ The sardonic tone criticizes Mary’s choice of Helstone specifically as well as the inferred common sense of marrying for status or security. At a time when single women outnumbered men and had few ways of providing for themselves, *Shirley*’s numerous jabs at the institution of marriage, voiced by characters as earnest as Mrs. Pryor,²²⁴ prejudiced as Helstone,²²⁵ and radical as Yorke,²²⁶ are not romantic defenses of mutual love as the only justification of marriage (though such defenses may be discernible). Rather, young girls’ flirting and scheming to get husbands and parents’ eagerness to consign their daughters away to the care of a man’s bank account²²⁷ are portrayed as the result of patriarchal advantage being abused. Because “the matrimonial market is overstocked,” women are held cheap and ridiculed by the “gentlemen” who are, by the nature of their gender, currently in demand.²²⁸ Hence, marrying for money at the cost of one’s integrity is depicted as acquiescence to cultural sin. If Mary Cave suffered in her marriage to Helstone, there is some indication in the novel that though she did not deserve to be mistreated, the ill-chosen marriage might have been avoided.²²⁹

The second observable complaint against Mary Cave, and the culture that bred her, is her passivity. Various characters indicate that Mary Cave’s personified stillness and monumental beauty were matched by inner inactivity as well. To Yorke, Mary’s monosyllabic responses to his professions of love made her seem like a stone wall, “doorless and windowless.”²³⁰ Mrs. Pryor makes the observation, based

²²³ *Shirley*, 52.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 378-380.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 391-392, 116-117.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 391.

²²⁹ It is also entirely possible to interpret the novel’s description of Mary Cave’s engagement as the result of parental decision, not her own, which continues the indictment of parents who sell off their daughters without thought to their emotional wellbeing.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 539, 52.

on a portrait, that Mary Cave's "passive face" was lacking in spirit, to which Caroline acknowledges that she was known for her silence.²³¹ Most significantly, though, is Robert Moore's rumination on that same portrait, which he explains to Hiram Yorke as both a dispelling of Yorke's idealized angel-image, and his own re-estimation of Caroline's worth. When Yorke mentions that Caroline reminds him of Mary Cave, though more "lass-like and flesh-like," Robert tells Yorke that Mary Cave was "no angel."²³² He speculates that perhaps she would not have rejected Yorke's proposal and that Yorke himself would not have given up his suit to find a wealthy wife himself, if Mary Cave "had been educated," "had possessed a thoughtful, original mind, a love of knowledge," had been "not cold, but modest; not vacant, but reflective; not obtuse, but sensitive; not inane, but innocent; not prudish, but pure."²³³ Though Robert's extended musing on what are in fact Caroline's attributes is still tinged with patriarchal idealization (he imagines much of her intelligence being imparted by himself),²³⁴ the feminine ideal he conjures is that of a rational human rather than vacuous celestial being. By comparing Caroline Helstone to Mary Cave Helstone, Robert Moore not only indicates to the reader Caroline's precarious future as a culturally-sculpted angel in the house, but describes through contrast the importance of a woman having a mind of her own. Robert's ability to recognize Caroline's originality and dignity follows his failed attempt to secure Shirley as a wife and financial savior, and his awakening to the needs of his millworkers and his poor management in the midst of the unrest. His realization that he has loved Caroline all along, and mistreated her by denying it, is described by and large through his denunciation of Mary Cave's idealization.²³⁵ As the only male character who indicates a willingness to change in his treatment of

²³¹ Ibid., 221.

²³² Ibid., 540.

²³³ Ibid., 540-541.

²³⁴ Ibid., 540.

²³⁵ Part two of his confession is offered to Caroline directly, see 639-645.

others,²³⁶ Robert's repentance also draws attention the sins of those who venerate feminine ignorance whilst abandoning women on the pedestals to which they've been raised.

ii. "*None saw—none knew*": Mrs. Pryor's Secret Suffering

In the case of Mrs. Pryor, her experience is not that of idealization but abuse. She too marries for security, but only following severe mistreatment as a governess. In terms of Caroline's potential futures as solitary spinster, slighted wife or timid governess, Caroline's own mother embodies all three. Through Agnes Pryor's story, *Shirley*'s indictment of legal spousal abuse and classist assertions of divine appointment are set alongside negative critiques of Mrs. Pryor's acute self-doubt and social deference. Although Mrs. Pryor's extreme insecurity is an understandable result of her maltreatment as a governess and wife, the fact that the highest Tory in the novel is also the female character who has suffered most from lack of representation or protection indicates that despite Brontë's political conservatism *Shirley* confronts patriarchal and hierarchical systems that view others' misfortunes as God's ordained provision for the benefit of those who consider themselves to be superior. And whereas Mary Cave's fragmentation ends in her death, Agnes Pryor escapes her life-threatening marriage. Yet what could be regarded as a bold rebellion and assertion of rights is shown as escaping a prison only to return to slavery. Before finding some relief as Shirley Keeldar's governess and companion, Mrs. Pryor's life as governess then wife then governess again typifies the novel's depiction of the woman trapped in patriarchy through enforced roles and internal obeisance.

The story that the reader and, for the most part, Caroline eventually learn is that young Agnes Grey²³⁷ suffered so much as a governess that, despite personal

²³⁶ Reverend Hall being the only male character identified for his righteousness, integrity and kindness, thus not needing to change in his treatment of women or the marginalized.

hesitations, she married James Helstone to escape her life of isolation. Once married, James Helstone's flattery turns into violence. With no legal recourse, Agnes Helstone escapes from her husband and abandons her six-year-old daughter Caroline. Taking the name "Pryor" so she cannot be found or forced back into her marriage, she returns to her life as a governess. When her now-adult charge, Shirley Keeldar, moves to the Keeldar estate near the home of Rev. Helstone, who took over guardianship of her daughter, Mrs. Pryor is brought into company with eighteen-year-old Caroline and must decide whether or not to reveal her identity. But Mrs. Pryor's internal battle over facing potential shame in revealing herself as a mother who abandoned her child is not given narrative focus. Instead, her past experiences of being shamed and abused are voiced through testimony to Caroline. Though Mrs. Pryor is not portrayed as an admirable character—her indecisiveness causes problems for Shirley and she waives her future rights of motherly guidance, claiming lack of moral courage as explanation—her presence in the novel affirms that to have self-esteem is not vanity, and that to experience debasement as agony is not "ungodly discontent."²³⁸

One of Mrs. Pryor's main warnings to Caroline is against the hardships of governessing. Though Caroline sees it as the only way to leave her uncle's home and distance herself from the lost hope of marrying Robert Moore, Mrs. Pryor dissuades her. She describes her time in the service of an aristocratic family who, in their "pretensions to good birth and mental superiority" and "unusual endowment of the 'Christian graces',"²³⁹ inform their governess that she must "live alone, and never transgress the invisible but rigid line which established the difference between me and my employers."²⁴⁰ "Detested," "tabooed," and "constrained" by those she lives among to the point that she begins to experience "mortal effects" on her

²³⁷ Caroline's mother shares both given name and maiden name with the titular heroine of Anne Brontë's first novel. See Alexander and Smith, "Pryor, Agnes," in *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, 406-407.

²³⁸ *Shirley*, 356-364, 437, 376.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 375.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 376.

constitution, Mrs. Pryor is accused by her employer of “wounded vanity.”²⁴¹ Through Mrs. Pryor’s recounting of her employers’ accusations that a friendless and homeless governess sickening from maltreatment is a form of “murmuring against God’s appointment,” Charlotte Brontë interpolates direct quotes from Elizabeth Rigby’s negative review of *Jane Eyre*.²⁴² With her employer telling Agnes that her discontent is ungodly, and her pupil accusing Agnes of “inherit[ing] in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature—the sin of pride,”²⁴³ Brontë satirizes the entitlement of a ruling class that views others’ “calamities . . . [as] necessary to minister to [their] convenience.”²⁴⁴ Here as well is the image of a fragmented woman pressed to confess sin of pride. In Mrs. Pryor, however, the feminine sins of hiding are made literal to the point of running away and changing her name.

The other warning Mrs. Pryor gives her daughter is against marriage. Before relating her own experience of having “crawled from under the yoke of [a] fine gentleman—escaped, galled, crushed, paralysed, dying,”²⁴⁵ Mrs. Pryor tells Caroline that when it comes to marriage and mutual love, “life is an illusion.”²⁴⁶ When Caroline expresses disbelief that not a single marriage could ever be happy, and disappointment that Mrs. Pryor’s words echo her uncle’s, Mrs. Pryor brings up the fact that Rev Helstone’s wife cannot offer her opinion of the matter—“She died! She died!”²⁴⁷ Her reference to Mary Cave makes evident that Mrs. Pryor’s hopeless view of marriage is not cynical but traumatized. In her own telling, it was only being

²⁴¹ Ibid., 375-376.

²⁴² See “Rigby, Elizabeth,” in Alexander and Smith, *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, 429; “Elizabeth Rigby, from an unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*,” in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 105-112.

²⁴³ *Shirley*, 376.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 377. This argument is made even more sinister by the employer, Mrs. Hardman, implying that because tradesmen’s daughters are too underbred to serve as governess, the “imprudences, extravagances, mistakes, and crimes of a certain number of fathers” are needed to “sow the seed from which we reap the harvest of governesses.” The implication of this seems to be that governesses are the daughters of promiscuous or impecunious gentlemen, and those men’s sins are done in the service of God’s plan for educating better gentlemen’s children. See pages 376-377.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 437.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 378.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 379.

reduced to the state of a “recluse, desolate, young, and ignorant . . . toil-worn governess”²⁴⁸ that induced her to marry. The vices and violence of her husband James Helstone are alluded to but not described, though they were extreme enough that she sought legal aid—“This world’s laws . . . were powerless as a rotten bulrush to protect me!—impotent as idiot babblings to restrain him!”²⁴⁹ In describing her role as wife, Mrs. Pryor alludes to “terror” and “great tribulation,” the word “suffer” appearing four times in the space of two pages.²⁵⁰ Yet what could easily be read as melodrama is tempered by the fact that the speaker is, in all other circumstances, described as “formal,” “correct,” and “the advocate of order and loyalty.”²⁵¹ Her moments of psalmic lament are Mrs. Pryor’s only outbursts of passion. The significant theme of her accounts of marital abuse is its hiddenness. With no laws to protect her and no one to turn to, Mrs. Pryor’s abandonment of her daughter and escape from her husband are represented as the only option besides death for a voiceless, powerless, essentially invisible woman: “None saw—none knew: there was no sympathy—no redemption—no redress!”²⁵²

Nor does Mrs. Pryor escape and find redemption or renewal—she returns to governessing. Re-habituating herself to the subjection that prompted her first escape into marriage, Mrs. Pryor is further fragmented to the point where she no longer feels able to discern right actions or responses except in the simplest matters.²⁵³ In this sense, her introduction by Shirley Keeldar as the staunchest of churchwomen and most rigid of Tories²⁵⁴ may be interpreted as a direct response to her failure to take responsibility for self-actualization. No longer able to trust her judgement, she defers entirely to the judgement of higher authorities. The result is

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 435.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 435-436.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 196-197.

²⁵² Ibid., 435.

²⁵³ Ibid., 356-357, 437.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 196-197.

a woman who is described by herself and others as “timid, embarrassed,” “uncertain of herself, of her own merits,” and “deficient in self-confidence and decision.”²⁵⁵ Mrs. Pryor’s loss of identity and voice through suffering, abuse, and insufficient “moral courage,”²⁵⁶ as she puts it, fill in Mary Cave’s missing testimony and present the reader with an image of a woman who sacrifices herself on the altar of matrimony in hopes of attaining security, only to be rendered far more insecure as a result. James Helstone dies before his abuse has the same effect on his daughter,²⁵⁷ but despite unfavorable whispers among the neighborhood, his abuses are never publicly addressed. Nor is Rev. Helstone ever portrayed with remorse of any kind regarding his conduct or views during his marriage. Instead, Mary Cave and Mrs. Pryor bear men’s sins, and at least in the case of Mrs. Pryor, internalize them as well. By depicting women who were already enculturated towards fragmentation, either through idealization or subordination, who are then further shattered by marriages in which they have no recourse to seek mental, emotional, or physical protection, *Shirley* presents the cultural endorsement of women’s “angel in the house” role as license for men to treat women as insensible, lifeless, domestic accessories. The “wounded vanity” of the fragmented woman is, in fact, her dismantled humanity.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate how a feminist theological construal of feminine and masculine sin within patriarchal society is recognizable in the pressures and temptations faced by the heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. Though Brontë’s female characters differ in their responses to the sins they are pressured to commit, their justification for resistance and their appeals for deliverance are consistently rooted in a Christian faith that affirms self-construction, rather than self-sacrifice, as a virtue. Jane Eyre’s flight from both Rochester and St John can be understood as resisting the temptation toward fusion—the sin of capitulating to

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 378, 195, 364.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 437.

²⁵⁷ Caroline does, however, retain memories from about the age of six of her drunken father nearly starving her through neglect and threatening to kill her in a fit of rage. See pages 102-103.

masculine dominance or idealization—as opposed to expressing anxieties about salvation or sexuality. Similarly, the warnings and laments of *Shirley's* marginalized women present a critique of social attitudes that require women to fragment in order to survive. Christian faith in these narratives is not what binds women to institutions that subordinate their worth or restrict their freedom—it is their grounds for rejecting them. As explored in the next chapter, this same faith empowers characters' ability to claim agency, assert equality, and embody mutuality. If women's sin in these two novels is that which fractures a woman's spirit, then grace is the realization of spiritual and emotional wholeness.

Chapter 5

Women's Experience of Grace in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, Carol Christ offers the term “awakening” as a more helpful description than “conversion” for women’s spiritual experience.¹ Whereas conversion implies exchanging submission from one authority to another, awakening connotes a holistic realization of one’s own unused power and a proper reframing of spiritual power; awakening is a “coming to self, rather than a giving up of self.”² The image of coming to self is a helpful one for determining how the protagonists of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* journey towards their narrative denouements in ways that reflect a feminist theological articulation of grace according to women’s experience.³ Describing two models of grace, Serene Jones considers that for women raised in patriarchy, the traditional conception of justification followed by sanctification might need to be reworked. In Jones’s formulation, rather than first being judged and then restored to wholeness, women might more meaningfully experience “the story of God’s judgement and mercy . . . [if it was] told in reverse—starting with sanctification and its rhetoric of building up instead of with justification and its language of undoing.”⁴ In this model, grace is that which keeps a woman “from dissolving into her relations or becoming a subordinate function of . . . masculine desire”⁵ as well that which empowers her toward responsible agency—

¹ Christ, *Diving Deep*, 18-19.

² *Ibid.*, 19. Whilst from Christ’s Goddess Theology position, awakening is offered as a replacement for the concept of conversion, from a Christian feminist standpoint the term functions as a clarifying corrective to concepts of conversion that emphasize the shattering of self over that of being awakened through grace towards knowledge of God’s redemptive power to restore one’s wholeness.

³ Sallie McFague proposes that “self” can function as a contemporary term for “soul,” and this interpretation of “self” is evidenced throughout this thesis. See *Speaking in Parables*, 152.

⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

“to [become] a self renewed and enabled for continued life in community.”⁶ Self-construction is therefore the salvific work of God that enables a woman to be judged in mercy rather than dismantled.⁷ This view of faithfulness depicts a woman’s spiritual journey as being “both enveloped in a grace that defines and invited into relation by a grace that forgives.”⁸ Grace is the gift of knowing oneself as whole *and* the power to claim one’s wholeness. It is the blessing of *living* in right relation and the *capacity* to live in right relation. The feminist theological view of grace this thesis explores is one of responding to a call to freedom,⁹ repenting—turning away from, in the biblical sense—resignation to culturally-conditioned roles of subordination and self-sacrifice.

When the construction of grace as containment and right relation is brought to the texts of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, the heroines’ liberative journeys of claiming agency, equality and “mutuality-in-relation”¹⁰ cease to seem like failures of Christian self-denial or the renunciation of Christian hope and instead appear to embody faithful responses to God’s salvific love and mercy. This chapter investigates the spiritual trajectories of *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* by looking at moments in which characters voice their spiritual equality, assert their power-in-relation,¹¹ and repent failures of right relation. With Brontë’s novels portraying sin, “not [as] something to be punished, but something to be healed,”¹² grace is depicted in the “redemptive here and now”¹³ experience of transformed relationships and

⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ Ibid., 112.

⁹ Nelson, “Sin of Hiding,” 324.

¹⁰ Mary Grey discusses the term “mutuality-in-relation” as common feminist theological parlance for “overcoming relationships based on hierarchical dominance/submission patterns with relationships of reciprocity, interdependence and mutuality.” She also argues, though, for “interconnectedness” being a term more “inclusive of the whole of creation,” than “relatedness” or “mutuality,” which primarily connote human relationships. See *The Wisdom of Fools*, 59-60.

¹¹ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 89-90.

¹² Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 7.

¹³ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 90.

individual flourishing. Though neither novel is unequivocally redemptive in its portrayal of female flourishing—*Shirley* in particular, illustrates the boundaries hindering women’s ability to embody wholeness more than it illustrates those boundaries’ dissolution—the choices and negotiations made in faith by Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone anticipate the feminist theological envisioning of grace occurring through “moments of self-creation which point toward a future in which all persons can become whole.”¹⁴

5.1 Grace as Containment in *Jane Eyre*

Chapter Four sought to demonstrate how the portrayal of Jane’s struggle against becoming Rochester’s mistress/angel or St John’s servant/wife pre-visions feminist theology’s identification of fusion as a central category of sin towards which women in patriarchal cultures may most be tempted. Before addressing how the novel portrays right relation as grace that counters the sin of fusion, it will be helpful to view grace in *Jane Eyre* as that which counters the sin of fragmentation—containment. Though this thesis has primarily addressed fusion in *Jane Eyre* and fragmentation in *Shirley*, it should be emphasized that neither expression of women’s sin is truly distinct. Reading *Jane Eyre* through a feminist theology of grace must include a recognition of how Jane experiences grace as containment through claiming equality and agency. This section in three parts shows how, through the gift of grace, Jane comes both to know herself as whole *and* claim that wholeness. Before discussing how Jane asserts equality with Rochester and claims agency apart from St John, the first section revisits the feminist theological view of anger’s constructive role in healing from abuse. By following Jane’s recovery from postures of resignation, retaliation, and repression, we can see how her liberative journey might be understood as one of faithfully claiming selfhood.

¹⁴ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 175.

i. Resistance, Recovery, Reconciliation: Leaving Gateshead

In feminist literary criticism, young Jane Eyre's rebellion against her Reed relatives has often been cited as a prime example of how rage serves as an ally in Jane's renunciation of institutional Christianity. As considered in Chapter Three, Jane's youthful cry of "Unjust!—Unjust!"¹⁵ has also been read as indicating an unregenerate refusal to submit to divine authority that eventually drives Jane to forsake eternal paradise for a false Eden. But rather than reading Jane's anger as atheistic triumph or immoral rebellion, a feminist theological approach brings into view the possibility of reading Jane's anger as a faithful response to injustice. As shown in Chapter Two, experiencing anger rather than resignation in the face of abuse aligns one's self-worth and identity to a loving God instead of to a fallen humanity. When read from the perspective of feminist theology, Jane's gradual awakening to her powers of resistance is also a conversion from debilitating fear to empowering love,¹⁶ with anger and resistance being the beginning stages in a recovery process that ultimately points to reconciliation not revenge. A consideration of the transformation that occurs from Jane's first outburst against her cousin John to her forgiveness as an adult of her dying Aunt reveals that in *Jane Eyre* rage is indeed an ally, but an ally in the cause of restoration, not renunciation.

When we first meet young Jane Eyre, she is hiding in window seat, excluded from the society of the Reed's parlor. The purpose of her hiding, it is revealed, is not just for privacy, but for safety. In relation to her male cousin, Jane describes her young self as "accustomed to John Reed's abuse," and "habitually obedient" to him as a result.¹⁷ Her fear of John Reed's physical violence and emotional tormenting reduce her to impotent silence: "there were moments when I was bewildered by the

¹⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 19.

¹⁶ Mary Potter Engel writes, "Anger is the opposite not of love but of self-blame." See Engel, "Evil, Sin and the Violation of the Vulnerable," 156.

¹⁷ *Jane Eyre*, 13, 12.

terror he inspired, because I had no appeal whatever against either his menaces or his inflictions.”¹⁸ Though privately, Jane had reflected on John Reed’s similarities to Roman tyrants,¹⁹ her only thoughts in reaction to his assaults are how to endure them, not how to resist.²⁰ The inciting incident of Jane’s story is when John Reed’s physical assault draws blood and, for the first identifiable time, anger. It is Jane’s anger that conquers her abject fear—“my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded.”²¹ Enraged like a “rebel slave,”²² Jane retaliates physically and verbally, calling her cousin “a murderer . . . a slave-driver.”²³ Although Jane’s violent mutiny is halted by members of the household, as young Jane is dragged away to her punishment, Jane tells the reader, “I resisted all the way: a new thing for me.”²⁴ After years of passive submission to cruelty, anger wakes Jane out of fear, enabling resistance. Though her initial resistance is violent and uncontrolled, anger is the both the instigator and indicator of a new hope for Jane—that she is not worthless. Jane’s growing discernment about her powers of resistance, which in time foster a yearning for reconciliation over retribution,²⁵ appears to corroborate Rita Nakashima Brock’s claim that, “anger is a key to both love and nonviolence, and it is pivotal to self-affirmation and liberation.”²⁶

The second act of young Jane Eyre’s anger-fueled awakening and resistance to injustice is a claiming of her voice. After the fight against John Reed, Jane divulges the full nature of her childhood inner strife. Her “first recollections of existence” were reproaches of her dependence and implied threats that the poorhouse could

¹⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Ibid., 13. This is the first cousin named John that Jane accuses of trying to kill her. The second, of course, is St John Rivers. See page 475.

²⁴ Ibid., 15.

²⁵ Ibid., 25, 276, 471, 474.

²⁶ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 19.

still await her.²⁷ The act of resisting John Reed's abuse helps Jane start to articulate the injustice of her situation, shifting her self-understanding from one who fails to one who has been failed. Pondering the questions, "why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please?,"²⁸ young Jane relinquishes her passive Cinderella role and starts to name the discrimination and inequity with which she has been treated by her figurative evil stepmother and evil step-siblings.²⁹ Jane details how John Reed's malicious behaviour, cousin Eliza's headstrong selfishness, and little Georgiana's spoiled insolence are all indulged, never "thwarted, much less punished."³⁰ And though waking to injustice enables Jane to envision "escape from insupportable oppression,"³¹ the only options she can imagine in her dejected state are running away—a danger akin to suicide for an eight-year-old girl—or starving herself to death. However, when an apothecary attends to her after the traumatization of being locked in the spectral red room, Jane is offered life-giving hope to cling to instead of self-annihilating fantasies. Mr Lloyd asks Jane if she would like to go to school.³² With Jane's positive response and Mr Lloyd's recommendation to Mrs. Reed, the pieces are put in motion to deliver Jane from her current state of degradation: "school would be a complete change . . . an entrance into a new life."³³

Yet Jane's hope of escaping the Reed's biased treatment is shaken when Mrs. Reed labels her a liar in front of Rev. Brocklehurst, the patron of Lowood School. Jane experiences Mrs. Reed's accusations as "obliterating hope from the new phase of existence" she had been imagining—"sowing aversion and unkindness along my future path"—and transforming her before Rev. Brocklehurst's eyes "into an artful,

²⁷ *Jane Eyre*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹ For more on *Jane Eyre* as a reframing of "Cinderella," see Clarke, "Brontë's 'Jane Eyre' and the Grimms' Cinderella," 704; Tatar, introduction to *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*, xvii.

³⁰ *Jane Eyre*, 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³² *Ibid.*, 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

noxious child.”³⁴ It is this polluting of Jane’s hopes and identity that triggers her vocal assertion of what she knows to be true: “Speak I must: I had been trodden on severely.”³⁵ Her years of silence bursting like a damn, Jane’s bitter accusations of her Aunt’s merciless treatment do not lack vindictive zeal, but despite the childish wish to cause injury where injury has been dealt, the center of Jane’s testimony of resistance is a claim to truth and to her need to be loved:

“I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty.”

“How dare you affirm that, Jane Eyre?”

“How dare I, Mrs. Reed? How dare I? Because it is the truth. You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity.”³⁶

Naming her treatment as abuse and naming herself as underserving of that abuse is the decisive act of Jane’s mental and spiritual liberation from the Reeds: “Ere I had finished this reply, my soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt. It seemed as if an invisible bond had burst, and that I had struggled out into un hoped-for liberty.”³⁷ Jane’s resistance, immature as it may be, indicates what Ursula King describes as the positive side of anger wherein anger is “another face of love—love for authenticity, love for the real.”³⁸ In rejecting her aunt’s labeling, the bonds of Jane’s “habitual mood of humiliation, self-doubt, [and] forlorn depression”³⁹ are shown to be breakable. When Mrs. Reed’s introduction of Jane to Brocklehurst as a liar threatens to shatter Jane’s hope of starting a life somewhere she is not accused daily or despised uniformly, Jane is

³⁴ Ibid., 41.

³⁵ Ibid., 43.

³⁶ Ibid., 44. Jane’s language here is similar to her initial response to Rochester’s marriage proposal, “Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? . . . Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?” See page 292.

³⁷ Ibid., 44.

³⁸ King, *Women and Spirituality*, 14.

³⁹ *Jane Eyre*, 19.

able to differentiate how she is treated from who she is. The result is soul expanding. And though, as Marianne Thormählen has observed, most readers and critics who exult in Jane's rage-fueled victories over her cousin and Aunt skip over Jane's remorse that follows,⁴⁰ it is possible to read Jane's equating the aftermath of her vengeance with the taste of poison⁴¹ as an equally positive outcome of her soul-expanding acts of resistance. Jane acknowledges she has just won the hardest battle she has ever fought and gained her first victory,⁴² but with reflection she soon finds her "hating position" to be just as "corroding" as being hated.⁴³ In her first acts of resistance Jane learns an early lesson in the difference between opposing abusive treatment—speaking truth to power—and returning hate for hate.⁴⁴ By vowing never to love the woman who had failed to love her, Jane further isolates herself from the guardian from whom she had so long sought acceptance.⁴⁵

Jane's retaliation does not, however, cement her mentality of isolation. She repents her will to vengeance, wishing to nourish her better faculties instead of her "sombre indignation;"⁴⁶ but even more so, the dispelling of fear Jane experiences by standing up to her aunt and cousin also extends into Jane's interactions with others. No longer terrified by her aunt, Jane ceases to fear the reproaches of her nursemaid Bessie.⁴⁷ Instead, Jane surprises Bessie with a "new way of talking" that is "venturesome and hardy" instead of "queer, frightened, [and] shy."⁴⁸ Having overcome fear through anger and resisting injustice by asserting her worthiness to

⁴⁰ Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 127-128.

⁴¹ *Jane Eyre*, 45-46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 45, 46.

⁴⁴ Theologian Walter Wink has argued that using the oppressor's methods affirms their power instead of breaking the cycle of humiliation. See Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 186-187, 175-193.

⁴⁵ Thormählen similarly notes, "By not only opposing Mrs. Reed but actually frightening her, Jane has put an even greater distance between herself and any chance of even a morsel of friendliness from her relatives." See Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 127-128.

⁴⁶ *Jane Eyre*, 46.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

be loved, Jane is strengthened in a self-constructive way that enables her to give and receive tenderness without fear of being shamed. In her own words, Jane has grown from “habitually obedient” to “frank and fearless.”⁴⁹ Her self-asserting acts of resistance increase her capacity to reach out for relational connection and to repent failures to do so.

Following her years at Lowood, where she continues to learn from Helen Burns and Miss Temple that forgiving others affirms God’s loving mercy as more powerful than human sin, Jane matures into a young woman who can control her retaliatory impulses. Rejecting vengeance as something that leads to further estrangement, Jane’s “yearning after reconciliation”⁵⁰ demonstrates her recovery from shattered selfhood into grace-initiated containment that frees her to forgive Mrs. Reed without submitting to debasement. When she is called away from Thornfield by Bessie’s news of her dying Aunt Reed, adult Jane’s recovery from the abuses she suffered is made evident. Returning to Gateshead, Jane thinks back to how, as a child, she departed its “hostile roof with a desperate and embittered heart—a sense of outlawry and almost of reprobation.”⁵¹ Though her status in life is still uncertain, Jane now feels “firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression.”⁵² She re-encounters Eliza and Georgiana—John Reed having died by suicide or alcoholism—and is surprised at how untroubled she is by her cousins’ uncivil behavior. Jane now has “other things to think about,” feelings of love and friendship “much more potent” than any negative feelings “in their power to inflict or bestow.”⁵³ With “the gaping wound of [her] wrongs . . . now quite healed; and the flame of resentment extinguished,”⁵⁴ Jane can tolerate petty treatment from her cousins and is prepared to reconcile with the aunt whom she once swore she would

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12, 47.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 474.

⁵¹ Ibid., 262.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 264.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 262.

never visit—"I had once vowed I would never call her aunt again: I thought it no sin to . . . break that vow now."⁵⁵

Jane's desire to extend grace to her aunt, however, is tested when Mrs. Reed reveals that years ago she spitefully lied to a living uncle of Jane's that wanted to claim her as an heir, telling him Jane had died at Lowood. Despite her aunt's lack of remorse and persistent hatred for her, Jane offers Mrs. Reed her "full and free forgiveness."⁵⁶ Throughout her final stay at Gateshead, Jane apologizes to her aunt for her childish animosity,⁵⁷ expresses the hope of reconciliation,⁵⁸ and, when she is tempted at one point to subdue Mrs. Reed with vengeful ire, stops herself and resumes her attentive care.⁵⁹ No longer overpowered by "the promptings of rage and aversion," Jane instead experiences a degree of empathy for her Aunt's bitter suffering and her own "yearning to forget and forgive."⁶⁰ Denied that hoped-for reconciliation, Jane's actions communicate her belief that reciprocity is not a necessary condition of forgiveness; Jane may be unforgiven by Mrs. Reed but her self-worth is no longer bound to Mrs. Reed's treatment. Her aunt's attitude towards her has not changed, but through Jane's initial resistance unto her eventual offering of reconciliation, Jane has grown from a girl who internalizes rejection and acts out in retaliation into a woman whose ability to love and forgive is not contingent on another person's valuation of her. In this way, Jane's return to the scene of the earliest crimes against her, during which she changes the narrative of her childhood from one of avowed hatred to that of repentance and forgiveness, marks the first clear indication of Jane's journey of recovery from abuse and self-abasement towards an identity defined by gracious containment and right relation.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 266.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 276.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 274.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 265, 276.

⁵⁹ Cf. Staten, *Spirit Becomes Matter*, 41-44.

⁶⁰ *Jane Eyre*, 265.

Whilst some critics point to a lack of evidence when it comes to Jane's conversion from rebellious and doubting child to forgiving and faithful adult,⁶¹ the fact that the passages concerning Jane's reconciliatory offering to her aunt are, as Marianne Thormählen identifies, "the centre-piece of the novel,"⁶² indicates a depiction of faith as a journey rather than destination. Forgiving Mrs. Reed at the halfway point of her autobiography, not at its culmination, emphasizes Jane Eyre's story as one of continued awakening to faith and self-integrity and not a failed attempt at portraying conversion, as critics such as Barbara Hardy have argued.⁶³ Jane's adult experience of Gateshead Hall is an early example of how her Christian faith is demonstrated and strengthened by her growing ability to claim her agency and act from a stance of equality rather than subservience or retribution. The temptations she withstands from this moment on further testify to the strength of her hope.

ii. Claiming Equality: Leaving Rochester

Continuing Chapter Four's examination of Jane's struggle against the temptation first to fuse with Rochester and secondly, with St John, this section and the next attempt to demonstrate Jane's grace-enabled refusal to fuse with either man. Experiencing grace as containment through knowing herself to be whole, Jane claims her equality and agency in order to defend that wholeness. Against the temptation to fuse with Rochester, Jane asserts her equality with him, thus claiming a view of intimacy as the opposite of fusion. To resist St John's persuasive temptation to fuse with him, Jane claims her agency, demanding that trust be built on freedom. And whilst Jane's experience of grace is not limited to or strictly divided into equality and agency, these two aspects of containment epitomize what

⁶¹ Barbara Hardy claims that "what we do not come to see is exactly how Jane comes to accept Helen Burns' faith, even though such faith has presumably moved away from her early doubts about Heaven by the time she comes to see her dying aunt." See *The Appropriate Form*, 66.

⁶² Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 130.

⁶³ See p. 181n61, p. 89-91 above.

is most at stake in her relationship with each man. This section considers how Jane navigates her romantic relationship with Rochester as a process of self-construction rather than submission. Having considered in Chapter Four how Jane suffers whilst tempted to become Rochester's kept mistress or his saving angel, we can now examine how Jane successfully overcomes that temptation. The manner in which Jane accepts Rochester's offer of love and marriage, negotiates their engagement period, and eventually parts with him, demonstrate Jane's unwillingness to sacrifice her selfhood for false intimacy. Though she has fallen in love with a man who is her social superior, she defends her innate equality with him in ways that expose his abuses of privilege and exhort him to act with greater integrity. Jane's love story with Rochester is, at the same time, the story of her gaining independence from him.

Jane's assertion of her "soul equality"⁶⁴ with Rochester is one of the most famous passages of *Jane Eyre*.⁶⁵ Yet there is a significant irony that is often overlooked in that much of the strife in Rochester and Jane's relationship arises from his treatment of her as a social equal when she is, in fact, not one. Whilst Rochester recognizes Jane's equality of intellect, spirit and heart, he ignores her dependent status to the extent that he expects her to respond to his jealousy games as if she were his social peer. His manipulative wordplay and machinations are all designed to force Jane to speak of love before he does, which no woman of his equal status could respectfully do and no woman of Jane's status would conceive of doing. The maneuvers Rochester expects Jane to interpret as proof of his love she naturally interprets as the actions of a master seeking to take sexual advantage of a dependent.⁶⁶ By not recognizing this crucial aspect of Jane's inequality to him, Rochester imposes on her vulnerable position without acknowledging his powerful one. Hence, the revolutionary aspect of Jane's claim of equality with Rochester

⁶⁴ Maynard, *Brontë and Sexuality*, 146.

⁶⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 292.

⁶⁶ One of the ways this is made explicit in the text is through Jane's concern over Mrs. Fairfax having seen her and Rochester alone after midnight without yet knowing they are engaged. See pages 297-298, 304.

cannot be fully apprized without observing that the very need for Jane to tell him they are equals is a result of his failure to respect her unequal and disadvantaged position. Although Jane accuses Rochester of disregarding her feelings because of her poverty and obscurity, it may also be said that Rochester has disregarded Jane's poverty and obscurity as barriers to her ability to express feelings for him.⁶⁷

Therefore, when Rochester speaks of sending Jane away to Ireland in preparation for his implied marriage to Blanche Ingram, Jane's love and grief stir her to confess her love for the life she has lived at Thornfield, not her romantic desire for Rochester.⁶⁸ Jane defies Rochester to treat her as a human being instead of an unfeeling machine.⁶⁹ By refusing to "stay to become nothing to" him,⁷⁰ Jane incriminates Rochester's insensitivity to her station and flippancy towards their deep friendship, whilst admitting her love at the same time. The oft-quoted passage below communicates not just Jane's belief in her spiritual equality to Rochester, but also her implicit insistence that he acknowledge the boundaries she has had to cross in order to speak truthfully to him:

I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!⁷¹

Jane Eyre's love confession to Rochester is intrinsically a demand for Rochester to see her as she is and to meet her in that same space of honesty. Instead, Rochester persists in his contrivances to make Jane admit how much she wants to stay at Thornfield, which only has the opposite effect. Jane asserts her freedom and desire to leave: "I have spoken my mind, and can go anywhere now."⁷² Jane tells him this three times before Rochester finally reveals that he has planned to marry Jane the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 292.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 292.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 293.

whole time, not Blanche. Jane's incredulity towards his marriage proposal—"I thought he mocked me"—comes as a surprise to Rochester,⁷³ demonstrating that though he enjoys his magnanimous self-conception of rescuing the poor and friendless Jane through love, he has not fully considered how her powerless position inhibits the responses he has tried to cultivate. Despite the sincerity of Rochester's love for Jane, his default pattern of relating is that of master to paramour. Further, in relishing his master role, he protects himself from having to be vulnerable, forcing Jane to be the emotional risk taker and truth-speaker instead.⁷⁴ Thus, from their first mutual confession of love, Jane has to work to protect the boundaries of her self-integrity—"I am a free human being with an independent will"⁷⁵—and exert caution regarding how Rochester's refusal to claim responsibility for his treatment of others can lead to her taking that responsibility on herself. Whilst her temptation is to submit to the roles of mistress and angel in which Rochester has cast her, Jane's experience of grace as containment is recognizable in her refusal to be objectified by Rochester throughout their ensuing engagement, calling him to equal accountability instead.

Although Jane exuberantly enjoys the new physical and emotional closeness with Rochester that their engagement brings,⁷⁶ she also launches what is ostensibly a program of defensive action against Rochester's immediate lapse into treating her like a conquest. Whilst John Maynard considers it "worth asking why Jane finds closer relation with Rochester so threatening to her sense of self,"⁷⁷ a plausible answer is not hard to identify: Jane recognizes that if she allows Rochester to treat her as just another mistress, she likewise gives him license to use her like one.⁷⁸ Though she makes light of his unbridled sentimentality and his repeated failure to

⁷³ Ibid., 293.

⁷⁴ Both Rochester and Jane later acknowledge that she is technically the one who proposes to him, not the other way around. See page 303.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 293.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 298.

⁷⁷ Maynard, *Brontë and Sexuality*, 123.

⁷⁸ *Jane Eyre*, 300-301, 310, 359.

heed her requests not to be showered with luxurious gifts, Jane also takes seriously her own need to maintain her identity regardless of Rochester's enthusiastic idealization. Repeatedly she tells him that she is neither a beauty nor an angel and does not want to be treated as either: "then you won't know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer."⁷⁹ Within the first twenty-four hours of their engagement, Jane feels so harassed by Rochester's insistence on treating her like a disembodied fairy-angel,⁸⁰ himself playing the role of treasure-bearing worshipper, that upon returning from an enforced shopping trip, she remembers the letter from her Uncle John Eyre and his intention to adopt her as an heir:

"It would, indeed, be a relief," I thought, "if I had ever so small an independency; I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester, or sitting like a second Danae with the golden shower falling daily round me. [...] if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now."⁸¹

Marrying Rochester will secure Jane's financial future, but also solidify her status as his dependent. Jane's interest in inheriting an income is not a wish to gain wealth for herself or even for Rochester, so much as it is a desire for individuation within their marriage. She can endure his attitude of ownership if she knows he will not actually own her.

Significantly, therefore, Jane writing to her uncle Eyre to avoid feeling like a kept woman is the act that prevents her from becoming one. Film adaptations and most critical readings bypass the fact that it is Jane's actions that set in motion the revelation of Rochester's bigamy.⁸² Her proactive step to enter marriage as an equal, rather than a dependent, results in her uncle sending a delegate to stop the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 299.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 300, 307-308.

⁸¹ Ibid., 309.

⁸² John Maynard acknowledges the fact, but only as a "muted act of self help." In a decidedly un-liberative reading, Stevie Davies claims that "in her wish for independence, Jane sets in train the events that will bring about . . . her own tragic suffering." See Maynard, *Brontë and Sexuality*, 132; Stevie Davies, notes to *Jane Eyre*, 564.

wedding, having learned of Rochester's living wife.⁸³ Jane's wish for independence and equality protect her from a false marriage that would have denied her either. Furthermore, Jane's explicit statement to Rochester on the first morning of their engagement that she would rather have his full confidence than any of his wealth,⁸⁴ underlines that what she values in their relationship is intimacy not indulgence. Jane's desire for financial independence *because of*, not in spite of, the fact she is marrying a wealthy man, demonstrates that it is not sexual intimacy she fears, but inequality that could constrain intimacy. When Jane jokes about becoming a preacher of liberty to Rochester's imagined harem of courtesans,⁸⁵ the bonds she wishes to break are not those of sexual desire but of disempowerment and delusion. She loves Rochester, but not at the price of her identity.

Thus, when Rochester's earlier marriage is revealed, Jane's painful choice to leave him is not a sign of sexual or spiritual fears, both of which Jane frankly discusses with the reader in retrospect.⁸⁶ Rather, it is her broken trust in Rochester and the fact that he remorselessly believes that living with him unmarried would not jeopardize Jane's selfhood or independence that leaves her no option but to leave Thornfield. Though Jane forgives Rochester for his actions,⁸⁷ she can no longer trust him with her heart: "for faith was blighted—confidence destroyed!"⁸⁸ And whilst she empathizes with the misfortune of his situation, she also recognizes the injustice with which he has treated not only his wife Bertha,⁸⁹ but also the various European mistresses with whom he spent his dissipated youth. She infers, "that if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been

⁸³ *Jane Eyre*, 339-340.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁸⁶ Her unfulfilled but unashamed sexual desire for Rochester is made clear during her time at Morton, as is her confidence that God's loving-kindness, not judgement, was her guide away from Thornfield. See pages 414-415, 373, 423.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 347.

instilled in me . . . to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling.”⁹⁰ Jane’s determination to respect and care for herself, keeping “the law given by God; sanctioned by man”⁹¹ by not becoming Rochester’s illegal wife, is not a legalistic evasion of social taboo; Jane upholds divine law and leaves because what Rochester offers is a distortion of intimacy that would anchor Jane to an unequal power relationship for the rest of their lives. “The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself,”⁹² she resolves, holding to a hope for wholeness more than a fear of sin.

A final point to make is that Jane’s decision to leave Rochester is represented as a spiritual decision. Jane’s reliance on God as the redeemer of her situation, not herself alone, and her gratitude for God’s guidance is evidenced throughout the chapters following her separation from Rochester. Jane’s advice for Rochester to “do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven. Hope to meet again there”⁹³ is proved to be neither a platitude nor empty wish, but honest words of a severely tested faith. As the novel shows her offering a parting prayer that God bless, direct and solace Rochester,⁹⁴ so also does it portray Jane’s own experience of being blessed, directed and comforted by the God she has trusted in the midst of debilitating crisis. In Jane’s excruciating flight from Thornfield, she acknowledges that, “God must have led me on. As to my own will or conscience, impassioned grief had trampled one and stifled the other.”⁹⁵ Most significant, however, are Jane’s expressions of gratitude and thanksgiving, even in the midst of her grief. The first night of escape, penniless and shelter-less on the moor, Jane does not pray for rescue, but instead, experiences the peace and assurance of God’s presence. Shaken

⁹⁰ Ibid., 359.

⁹¹ Ibid., 365.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 364.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 367.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 370.

still by the desire to return to Rochester and prevent what she anticipates will be his doom, the grandeur of her surroundings humble and comfort Jane, causing her to reframe her prayer from one of fear to one of gratitude:

Looking up, I, with tear-dimmed eyes, saw the mighty Milky Way.
Remembering what it was—what countless systems there swept space like a soft trace of light—I felt the might and strength of God. Sure was I of His efficiency to save what He had made: convinced I grew that neither earth should perish, nor one of the souls it treasured. I turned my prayer to thanksgiving: the Source of Life was also the Saviour of spirits. Mr. Rochester was safe; he was God's, and by God would he be guarded. I again nestled to the breast of the hill; and ere long in sleep forgot sorrow.⁹⁶

In this prayer, Jane is released from the role of Rochester's savior angel and experiences the grace of being contained and sustained by God's superior strength and salvific love. She relinquishes fear or guilt over her rejection of the culturally proscribed role of spiritual rejuvenator, trusting in God alone to fulfill that need. Following a traumatic twenty-four hours of loss, pain and sorrow, Jane is put at ease regarding her own soul as well as Rochester's.

Likewise, during her time at Morton, Jane makes clear to the reader that she does not regret having rejected the "silken snare" of Rochester's offer to live as his mistress in a "white-washed villa on the shores of the Mediterranean."⁹⁷ Rather, she expresses gratitude for God's guidance during the crisis and provision since: "At this period of my life, my heart far oftener swelled with thankfulness than sank with dejection."⁹⁸ Jane again reflects on the inevitability that had she stayed with Rochester as his kept mistress, rather than his legal wife, she would have lost his love and her own self-respect. To her own question as to "whether is it better . . . to be a slave in a fool's paradise at Marseilles . . . or to be a village-schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England," Jane's answer is a resounding "Yes."⁹⁹ Jane credits her freedom and sustained self-

⁹⁶ Ibid., 373.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 414, 350.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 423.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 414.

integrity to having rightfully adhered to her Christian principles and the law, rather than sacrificing the intimacy of equals for the “luxuries of a pleasure villa.”¹⁰⁰ “God directed me to a correct choice,” Jane confirms.¹⁰¹

Though her love for Rochester remains as strong as her grief over their cancelled future, Jane has no doubt that her choice to leave him was the right one—spiritually and relationally—and that she could not have done so without God’s grace. At the same time, by trusting God with Rochester’s soul rather taking on that responsibility herself, she expresses her faith that, “the Saviour of spirits” will minister to Rochester’s needs as much as to her own. By leaving, Jane removes herself as a barrier to Rochester’s repentance, allowing him to face the consequences of deceiving her and making decisions for both of them instead of allowing Jane to make decisions based on the truth of their situation. Jane’s decision not to live as the next in Rochester’s long line of mistresses is arrived at through prayer, empowered through strength from God, and proved a blessing by God’s provision of security, family connections and a free conscience during her time at Morton. Moreover, as will be discussed in part 5.2 of this chapter, the eventual redemption and restoration of Jane and Rochester’s relationship is depicted as a result of God’s intervention as well as the outgrowth of their separate journeys toward recognizing and accepting God’s grace. By asserting her spiritual equality to Rochester and demanding an equal share of his confidence instead of accepting his financial and sexual dominance, Jane experiences God’s grace as containment that preserves her wholeness. By not sinning through fusion with Rochester, Jane is freed to follow God’s direction towards spiritual, relational and emotional fulfillment. What is further revealed during her encounters with St John Rivers is that her ultimate decision to leave Morton and return to Rochester is also a grace-enabled act of self-construction, rooted in her pursuit and heeding of God’s will. For Jane, to claim agency is to respond faithfully to God’s direction.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

iii. Claiming Agency: Leaving St John

Part of Jane's difficulty in resisting fusion with St John Rivers is that his suppressive influence over her is termed in spiritual language. Jane's gratitude for St John's having rescued her and her dependence on him and his sisters for her recovery and restoration to self-employment obscure to a large extent her ability rightly to discern St John's fallibility. Jane makes herself his subject, excusing his failures in compassion as symptoms of his single-minded devotion to God's work. Therefore, it is only through Jane's wrestling to hear and follow God's will that she is able to reclaim her agency, which manifests itself as obedience to God's prompting in her heart.¹⁰² Jane's experience of grace as agency occurs through the affirmation of her ability to discern God's will for herself, and by being empowered to act on that calling. Jane's rejection of St John and return to Rochester is depicted as the result of prayerful discernment and obedience, which is embodied as self-constructive acts of resistance.

The torturous experience Jane undergoes whilst under St John's influence, detailed in Chapter Four, also demonstrates Jane's belief that discerning God's will is a personal responsibility for every believer.¹⁰³ That she is tempted but ultimately unwilling to yield spiritual authority to St John, troubles the prevailing nineteenth-century view of masculine spiritual authority. Repeatedly, Jane argues with St John over the nature of personal revelation, naming for herself and for him that the lack of confirmation in her heart should serve as proof that hers is not a missionary calling: "Nothing speaks or stirs in me while you talk. I am sensible of no light kindling—no life quickening—no voice counseling or cheering."¹⁰⁴ Jane clearly respects and wants to defer to St John's pastoral guidance, but without clear

¹⁰² Jane Eyre's reliance on personal discernment and revelation through the heart reflect Brontë's Evangelical Anglicanism. For more on Wesleyan and Evangelical theology as well as their influence on Brontë's fiction, see Henck, "That Peculiar Voice;" Jay, *Religion of the Heart*; Talley, "Jane Eyre's Little-Known Debt to the Methodist Magazine," 109-119.

¹⁰³ See previous note.

¹⁰⁴ *Jane Eyre.*, 465.

evidence of God's blessing on the endeavor, Jane will not submit to someone else's spiritual authority. Whereas Jane experiences God's guidance as comfort, the absence of God's voice is a powerful indicator of danger.¹⁰⁵ When Jane tells St John that in response to his plans, her heart is mute and her mind a rayless dungeon,¹⁰⁶ she expects St John to interpret that silence the way she does, as a "No" from above. Instead, Jane's doubts merely raise St John's self-estimation as her spiritual guide; if Jane's heart will not speak, "Then [he] must speak for it."¹⁰⁷

Jane also offers practical reasons why she does not feel suited to being a missionary or becoming St John's wife—a weak constitution and only sisterly love for him—but her ultimate reason for rejecting St John's scheme is that it would mean surrendering her right to interpret God's will; such a surrender would be akin to self-annihilation. When Jane tells St John, "God did not give me my life to throw away; and to do as you wish me would, I begin to think, be almost equivalent to committing suicide,"¹⁰⁸ the inferred death is not just that of submitting to a harsh climate and strenuous labor. For Jane, to relinquish her spiritual discernment to another's authority is to fail in her duty to God, to sin by passively yielding her God-given life to another's control. Jane asserts the value of her life as a gift from God to be used in faithful service, not to be sacrificed on the altar of someone else's will.¹⁰⁹ To do as St John wishes, without confirmation in her heart and mind that it is also what God desires for her, is to throw away her agency and thus her life. In her prediction of what surrendering to St John would mean, Jane leaves no question that her life would be forfeit. The physical strain of the work she does not fear; it is St John's claim on her soul that she could not survive. She reflects on how, if she were to go only as his curate,

¹⁰⁵ See Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 53-54.

¹⁰⁶ *Jane Eyre.*, 463, 465.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 463.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 477.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 466.

There would be recesses in my mind which would be only mine, . . . But as his wife—at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital—*this* would be unendurable.¹¹⁰

Jane's instinct to protect her "unblighted self" and "natural unenslaved feelings"¹¹¹ are her lifeline out of St John's oppressive authority. Although for a protracted period of time Jane cannot discern God's path forward, her faith that God gave her life to live, not to renounce, helps her recognize the sinfulness of St John's demand that she sacrifice her life to his aims.

Central to Jane's realization that acquiescing to St John's will would amount to suicide is the full recognition of St John's fallibility. The crucial act that causes the mask to fall from Jane's saintly image of St John is his conflation of obedience to God with obedience unto himself. Refusing to consider Jane's offer to join his mission as a cousin rather than wife, St John accuses Jane of offering God an incomplete sacrifice. However, his language shifts from speaking *of* God to speaking *as* God: "It is the cause of God I advocate: it is under *His* standard I enlist you. *I* cannot accept on His behalf a divided allegiance: it must be entire."¹¹² Jane's response, "Oh! I will give my heart to God . . . you do not want it,"¹¹³ though communicated in "repressed sarcasm,"¹¹⁴ is, at the core, an expression of freedom she has not felt since she began seeking St John's approval. St John's unwavering confidence, paired with his generous actions, made her own doubts appear wayward. Jane's struggle to discern God's will had been clouded by her belief that because what St John asked of her appeared to be godly and noble, her reluctance indicated spiritual weakness. Yet by demanding Jane's heart without offering his own, all in the name of God's will, St John ceases to be an all-powerful saint in

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 470.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 468, (emphasis mine).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Jane's eyes. By overstepping his rights to her soul, St John's imperfections are made visible:

He had held me in awe, because he had held me in doubt. How much of him was saint, how much mortal, I could not heretofore tell: but . . . the analysis of his nature was proceeding before my eyes. I saw his fallibilities: I comprehended them. . . . The veil fell from his hardness and despotism. Having felt in him the presence of these qualities, I felt his imperfection, and took courage. I was with an equal—one with whom I might argue—one whom, if I saw good, I might resist.¹¹⁵

Jane ceases to fear the man she now knows to be as imperfectly human as herself. The caustic nature of her response reflects the safety she feels in arguing as an equal, rather than remaining cautiously fearful of his judgement. Though Jane still lacks clarity regarding God's will for her, she ceases to question if that prompting will come through St John's directives. Jane claims her agency when she repents the beholden awe with which she has regarded St John, identifying him instead as a fellow sinner who is just as capable of misinterpreting her as she is of him.

Freed from the burden of trusting St John's spiritual insights over her own, Jane continues to seek God's guidance as to whether her life is best spent serving in the mission field or staying in England. Regardless of St John's rejection of her offer to be his curate, Jane remains open to the idea of assisting his work in India, but only if she feels assurance that it is what God wants for her.¹¹⁶ Understanding that a missionary's life such as she would lead, would be a short one and bar any return to her homeland, Jane tells St John that she cannot resolve to leave England before knowing "for certain whether I cannot be of greater use by remaining in it than by leaving it."¹¹⁷ The doubts that remain for Jane are not whether St John is right and she is wrong, but whether she can truly leave England without discovering Rochester's fate. In criticism and adaptation, this point is often upstaged by the miraculous summons through which Jane hears Rochester's voice. However, it should not be overlooked that the supernatural intervention of that moment is not

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 468-469.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 485-486.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 477.

sudden, but rather, the culmination of Jane's long period of seeking God's will for herself and for Rochester. Both at the time of the event, and in the many days leading up to it, Jane solicits heaven for guidance, and wrestles daily with the implications of what leaving England could mean. The final crucible of that decision occurs when St John's methods of persuasion shift from tortuous to tender.

Saying goodbye to Jane before he leaves Morton for a brief trip essentially to wrap up his earthy affairs, St John follows a condemnatory reading of Revelations 22 for her benefit with a simple prayer that God give Jane "strength to choose that better part."¹¹⁸ Jane describes St John as bearing the mien of a guardian angel as he places his hand on her head. After weeks of rebuffing her efforts to recover their familial intimacy, St John's pastoral gentleness disorients Jane and revives the temptation to be guided by this "hierophant's touch."¹¹⁹ The scene mirrors Rochester's final inducement for Jane to stay with him,¹²⁰ and Jane observes the similarity of the temptation as well:

I was almost as hard beset by him now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times. To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment.¹²¹

Again, Jane is tempted to forfeit agency for the sake of connection: "I could resist St. John's wrath: I grew pliant as a reed under his kindness."¹²² Under the sway of what almost feels like love—"I knew the difference . . . for I had felt what it was to be loved"¹²³—Jane strives for an answer as to whether to follow St John or be

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 481.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 482.

¹²⁰ Of St John, Jane recounts his question, "'Could you decide now?' asked the missionary. The inquiry was put in gentle tones: he drew me to him as gently." This noticeably echoes Rochester's questioning of whether Jane can truly decide to leave him: "Do you mean it now? . . . And now?," he asks whilst holding and kissing her. See pages 482, 364.

¹²¹ Ibid., 482.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

forever reprobate in his eyes.¹²⁴ In the language of the apocalypse St John has just conjured, Jane's description of this final struggle can be interpreted as St John's version of faith threatening to overtake Jane's:

Religion called—Angels beckoned—God commanded—life rolled together like a scroll—death's gates opening, showed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there, all here might be sacrificed in a second.¹²⁵

Until now, Jane's relationship to God has been one of consolation and life, not commands and death. Feeling crushed under the portents of St John's prophetic prayers, Jane contends with her own faltering will. "Sincerely, deeply, fervently long[ing] to do . . . right," Jane prays for God to, "Show me, show me the path!"¹²⁶ It is in response to this prayer that Jane hears Rochester's voice calling her name. God's answer to Jane's prayer is the transmission of Rochester's simultaneous prayer.¹²⁷ On the precipice of sacrificing her heart to St John, Jane hears Rochester's heart cry and responds with her own: "I am coming! I cried. 'Wait for me! Oh, I will come!'"¹²⁸ Thus, Jane's reply continues the chapter's references to Revelations 22, but now, instead of the marriage of the Lamb prefiguring Jane's impending departure from life, the words communicate the imminent union of Jane of Rochester.¹²⁹

Finally receiving heart confirmation of God's direction, Jane takes immediate action. Instead of the "inward dimness of vision"¹³⁰ that accompanied her efforts to align to St John's will, Jane has no doubts about being directed back to Rochester. After her long ordeal of subtly yet persistently yielding agency to St John, Jane's

¹²⁴ Jane repeatedly acknowledges that to not comply with St John's will is to be damned by him to hell. See pages 471, 473, 477, 480.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 482.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 483.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 515. This will be discussed further in the following section.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 483.

¹²⁹ For more on this passage's parallels to Revelations 22, see Davies, notes to *Jane Eyre*, 576; Henck, "That Peculiar Voice," 19.

¹³⁰ *Jane Eyre*, 482.

response to answered prayer is “to assume ascendancy.”¹³¹ With her “powers . . . in play and in force,”¹³² Jane is entirely free from St John’s spell. Once again, the result of prayer is direction to leave a situation that would require Jane to sacrifice her self-integrity by fusing to another man’s will. Jane makes the choice to find out what has become of Rochester, but only as a next step in her discernment process. Her journey back to Thornfield is neither a commitment to stay with Rochester at any cost, nor abandonment of the possibility that serving in India might be the best use of her abilities.¹³³ Furthermore, Jane explicitly phrases her decision as an act of faith that St John does not comprehend or accept. Reading a letter he leaves behind that exhorts her to evade temptation, Jane mentally responds that her spirit “is willing to do what is right; and my flesh, I hope, is strong enough to accomplish the will of Heaven, when once that will is distinctly known to me.”¹³⁴ She does not know what her final decision upon finding Rochester will be, but to seek him out, is for Jane, a definitive effort to be faithful to God’s will. Jane’s trust in her own judgement and her confidence that at the proper time she will be able to discern God’s will have both been restored. By claiming agency apart from St John, Jane reaffirms her identity as a woman constructed in grace by God.

When Jane reaches out in faith, she is directed towards self-constructive acts that uphold the value of intimacy and equality in relationships, rather than subjugation or idealization. From a feminist theological view, Jane’s prayer-led decision to reject St John’s call for sacrifice and Rochester’s plea for surrender reflect that, “she is not only an agentic subject but an agent shaped by her mission to love God and live in just relation to neighbor.”¹³⁵ Yet being enabled through grace to claim agency does not equate the rejection of relationship; rather, it is the belief that any relationship that requires renunciation of one’s wholeness is sinful. Jane

¹³¹ Ibid., 484.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 485-486.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 485.

¹³⁵ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 64.

departs sinful relationships the moment she can see an end result of shame instead of intimacy, restraint instead of freedom. For Jane Eyre, God's deliverance is always recognizable as empowerment toward equality and agency. As will be seen below, faithfully taking responsibility for her own self-actualization ultimately leads Jane to experience grace as right relationship as well.

5.2 Grace as Right Relation in *Jane Eyre*

As laid out in Chapter Two, a feminist theological view of grace envisions women's flourishing as being restored to wholeness for the sake of relationship. Repentance is turning from fusion and striving for healthy interdependence. Right relation, therefore, refers to a grace-enabled ordering of love and relationality that upholds the integrity of the other without sacrificing self-integrity. Katherine Zappone describes mutuality as what occurs when "two selves, each regarding the other as equal, meet to see what can be done together."¹³⁶ This feminist theological focus on mutuality and power-in-relation augments views of salvation that accentuate its eschatological components to the detriment of those of embodiment. Whereas patriarchal theologies may emphasize eternal salvation in ways that denigrate embodiment as a curse to overcome, feminist theology claims that to be faithful is also to work towards human flourishing in the present. And though Carter Heyward's assertion that "the responsible alternative to eschatological . . . schemes of redemption is that of immediate redemption"¹³⁷ too quickly dispenses with eschatology altogether, her focus on making right relation "between and among ourselves here and now,"¹³⁸ highlights the feminist theological call for relationality and interdependence to be affirmed as aspects of faithful embodiment.

¹³⁶ Zappone, *Hope for Wholeness*, 45-46.

¹³⁷ Heyward, *Redemption of God*, 132.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

Reading *Jane Eyre's* conclusion in light of the feminist theological category of grace as right relation provides a liberative perspective on Jane's marriage to Rochester. Where feminist critics have seen capitulation to patriarchal gender roles and religious critics have inferred apostasy, a feminist theological view shows how, through repentance and acceptance of grace, Rochester and Jane are restored toward mutuality and interdependence in ways that affirm lived experiences of salvation in the present, rather than salvation being solely construed as an escape from earthly existence. Whilst St John's last words of the novel express the fulfillment of his heavenly hope through death, Jane's concluding reflections show her acknowledgment that God's blessings are also to be enjoyed in life. The first part of this section focuses on the liberative aspects of *Jane Eyre's* marriage conclusion as seen through the embodiment of grace as right relation. The second part will address how the novel's final panegyric to St John problematizes the valorization of self-selected martyrdom rather than endorsing it. When viewed through feminist theology's claim that women's experience of grace necessitates embodiment and interdependence, what has largely been read as an ambiguous ending can be seen as an affirming faith that begets life rather than represses it.

i. Repentance and Redemption: Reuniting with Rochester

Key to a feminist theological reading of *Jane Eyre's* conclusion is the issue of whether or not Edward Rochester deserves a second chance. Chapter Three introduced aspects of liberative readings according to which Jane's decision to marry Rochester, despite the previous necessity of their separation, can be interpreted as feminist *as well as* Christian. A feminist theological view of right relation aligns with many of these interpretive approaches. Reframing Rochester's wounding as neither castration nor divine punishment is necessary if Jane and Rochester are to be seen as being empowered toward intimacy and equality through God's grace. Jane's journey of redemptive self-construction cannot truly be liberative if she ends up married to a man who is de-sexualized or spiritually

dependent. Without defaulting to an ableist mentality,¹³⁹ it is possible to see Rochester's experience of limitation, paired with his awakening to the full ramifications of his sins, as narrative embodiments of grace that make intimacy and interdependence with Jane possible in ways it previously was not. As Jane has learned to repent her temptation towards fusion, so too must Rochester repent his abuses of privilege. Regarding Jane's choice to forgive Rochester and become his wife, the significance of his repentance and communication of vulnerability cannot be overstated.

Any divine punishment reading of Rochester's maiming must disregard the fact that he was wounded in the act of putting others' lives before his. As described to Jane by the local innkeeper, once the Thornfield fire is discovered, Rochester assists the servants safely out of the house and attempts to rescue Bertha: "he wouldn't leave the house till every one else was out before him."¹⁴⁰ For perhaps the first time in the novel, Rochester is portrayed as being more concerned with others' lives than with his own security. Even the innkeeper discounts the idea that Rochester's injuries were the result of God's judgement and feels pity for him instead.¹⁴¹ Rather than divine chastisement, what is discernible in both the innkeeper's story and Jane's observations once she is with Rochester is that the injuries Rochester incurred during the destruction of Thornfield pale in comparison to the melancholy and rage that debilitated him since his second marriage was cancelled and Jane fled.¹⁴² Rochester's physical injuries do not cause his descent into isolated morbidity—he was already headed there.

¹³⁹ Recent approaches to *Jane Eyre* through disability studies provide important counter-perspectives to the stigmatization of Rochester's injuries. Leonard Davis writes, "the very best feminist works on *Jane Eyre* have had to take a common sense, which is to say ableist, perspective on disability. Thus, it seems logical, if you are not blind, to think of blindness as a form of Castration" See Davis, "Seeing the Object as it Really is: Beyond the Metaphor of Disability," in Bolt, et. al, *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse and Disability*, xi.

¹⁴⁰ *Jane Eyre*, 494.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² For an excellent discussion of Victorian depictions of madness as rage and as melancholia, see Donaldson, "The Corpus of the Madwoman," 99-119.

In the months before the fire, Rochester is described by the innkeeper as dangerous—“almost savage”—and behaving “as if he had lost his senses.”¹⁴³ Jane notes the severity of his melancholy in her first days back and adapts her entire approach in terms of how to alleviate his acute depression.¹⁴⁴ Rochester’s loss of sight and of his left hand do not punish his crimes—they interrupt his rapid descent towards self-destruction. It is only after his first wife has destroyed the home he used as her secret mental asylum, his second almost-wife has run away, and he can no longer care for himself without physical assistance, that Rochester begins to consider how he might actually be a perpetrator of injustice rather than a victim.¹⁴⁵ When he later describes having passed through a “valley of the shadow of death,” he is not referring to his injuries but to the effects of his own self-serving actions and “stiff-necked rebellion.”¹⁴⁶ Though he alludes to God’s chastisement,¹⁴⁷ the whole of his recounting is focused on God’s mercy. Losses that initially seemed bitterly unfair, Rochester has come to see as Divine dispensation:¹⁴⁸ Jane was spared the consequences of his bigamist scheme whilst his own excessive pride has been humbled. He confesses, “Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom.”¹⁴⁹ Although it is possible to read this as Rochester attributing his “doom” to God’s judgement, within the full context of Rochester’s repentant narrative it can be understood that in the midst of his doom Rochester began to recognize God’s provision. After years of pursuing his own course of justice at the cost of others’ agency, Rochester admits, “I did wrong,” and is now grateful “to the beneficent God of this earth,” who “sees not as man sees, but far clearer.”¹⁵⁰ Having passed through a valley of shadow, Rochester awakens to the

¹⁴³ *Jane Eyre*, 493.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 505, 507, 509, 514.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 514-515.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 514.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

shadows he has forced others to live within. No longer justifying his actions, he tells Jane, “I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began sometimes to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere.”¹⁵¹ In the last ten pages of the novel, Rochester is depicted in prayer or referencing prayer a minimum of four times,¹⁵² and the predominant theme is his thankfulness for God’s intervention and blessings. His final prayer is an acknowledgment “that God had tempered judgment with mercy,”¹⁵³ which he says as he holds his newborn son. This is not the image of a man blighted by disability, cowed by the Almighty, or made sexually impotent. Just as Jane has struggled against the patriarchal temptation towards living what Mary Grey calls a mediated existence through men, Rochester has begun his “conversion from a lifelong attitude of relating to women as extensions of [himself].”¹⁵⁴

Additional confirmation that Rochester is now a suitable husband for Jane whereas previously leaving him had been a liberative act is to be found in that Rochester’s repentance appears to initiate the supernatural summons Jane hears. Jane does not fully comprehend this until she hears Rochester’s version of that night’s events, at which point she, like Mary after the miraculous visitation of the angel Gabriel, “kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart.”¹⁵⁵ When Jane learns how Rochester pleaded with God to be reunited with her and had heard *her* voice in response,¹⁵⁶ Jane is left in no question that God has united the two of them for good. Rochester’s acceptance of culpability in the destruction his pride and selfishness wrought and his commitment to living a redeemed life through trusting God’s will mark his transformation from a man who abdicated spiritual

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 514-515.

¹⁵² Ibid., 514-515, 516, 520.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 520.

¹⁵⁴ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 39.

¹⁵⁵ *Jane Eyre*, 516, alluding to Luke 2:19.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 515.

responsibility onto others and preferred his women dependent. Rochester is restored to right relation with God and thus can enter into right relation with Jane.

It is finally worth observing that the right relation between Jane and Rochester is not merely alluded to but discussed in detail. Rather than ending her story at the wedding, Jane describes the first ten years of her marriage with Rochester. Within these passages, equality as an indicator and facilitator of intimacy is communicated in practical as well as symbolic ways. Not the least of these is the way that the Jane Eyre who chooses to marry Edward Rochester is not the friendless, penniless dependent that first fell in love with him. The Jane Eyre who sets out from Morton is independently wealthy, loved by her sisterly cousins Diana and Mary, and not lacking for opportunities to apply her gifts. As Jane's interest in money has only been to the extent that it secures her freedom,¹⁵⁷ the restoration of her Eyre inheritance ensures that her choice to marry Rochester can be for love, not out of financial or emotional desperation. Similarly, Rochester's experience of limitation fosters a new interdependent relationship with Jane that replaces his previously preferred master/dependent dynamic. Instead of imposing his demands or desires on Jane, Rochester learns to ask for aid and guidance. Jane specifically credits the closeness of their relationship on the fact that their marriage begins by Rochester having to put his entire trust in her as his eyes and interpreter of his surroundings.¹⁵⁸ But rather than reaffirming a domestic angel role for Jane, the text highlights the mutual freedom Jane and Rochester enjoy in their marriage. Jane's remark that "to be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company"¹⁵⁹ demonstrates a mutuality shared between individuals, rather than the fusion of one person's identity into the other's. Nor is the power dynamic of Master/dependent simply replaced by its opposite—Jane mastering a subordinate Rochester.¹⁶⁰ Jane's marriage with Rochester is recognizable within what Susan

¹⁵⁷ This will be revisited in the next section.

¹⁵⁸ *Jane Eyre.*, 519.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Sternlieb, "Hazarding Confidences."

Frank Parsons describes as the “intricate undertaking” of building right relation, wherein “one must be able to love one’s own self with integrity while being willing to serve the needs of others, one must care for others in a way that does not foster dependency or compromise dignity.”¹⁶¹

Most importantly for Jane, Rochester finally bestows the one gift she explicitly asked for and he refused to give—honesty. As Jane tells the reader, the “perfect concord” of her marriage to Rochester endures because, “All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me.”¹⁶² Through Rochester’s repentance of his former methods of manipulation and through Jane’s claiming of agency and equality, the two of them are able to experience God’s grace as right relation. As the next section discusses, Jane’s representation of her marriage as a blessing brought about through God’s will demonstrates that she has rejected self-sacrifice in favor of grace that is experienced as flourishing in the present.

ii. Embodied Grace: Marriage versus Martyrdom

Chapter Three reviewed numerous interpretations of the significance of St John Rivers bearing the last words of *Jane Eyre*. The final two paragraphs’ focus on Jane’s missionary cousin has been read as a narrative breach into Jane and Rochester’s marital paradise,¹⁶³ implication of Jane’s unexpressed spiritual regrets,¹⁶⁴ and as pious exhortation.¹⁶⁵ When considered through the novel’s portrayal of embodied grace, particularly as right relation, a feminist theological reading of Jane’s eulogy of St John makes it is possible to see how Brontë problematizes the theological valorization of self-sacrifice associated with missionary ambition and martyrdom without condemning those who make such

¹⁶¹ Parsons, “Redeeming Ethics,” 213-214.

¹⁶² *Jane Eyre*, 519.

¹⁶³ Williams, *Perception and Expression in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë*, 51.

¹⁶⁴ Vejvoda, “Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*,” 256.

¹⁶⁵ Beaty, “St John’s Way,” 500.

sacrifices. Rather than overclouding Jane's happy ending, St John's conclusion emphasizes the continuation of Jane's story not its end.

Before examining the meaning of St John's closing passage, it is important to consider why it exists in the first place. Although generations of readers and critics have puzzled over Jane Eyre's autobiography ending with an account of St John Rivers, the passage is neither unprecedented nor out of tune with the chapter it concludes. The wrapping up of St John's story is prefaced by Jane's account of how those closest to her have fared. That she saves St John for last may merit special significance, but that she brings him into the close of her tale is neither inconsistent nor discordant with the preceding text. The happy marriages of Diana Rivers and Mary Rivers are given due attention, as is Jane's continued friendship with her former student Adèle.¹⁶⁶ Where the question has been, *why include news of St John at the novel's close?*, a reasonable response is that failure to do so would be an oversight. St John is the second most important male figure in Jane's life, a man with whom she nearly chose to end her days as a "fellow-labourer."¹⁶⁷ Hence, she dutifully informs her readers of his fate.

That Jane's concluding remarks about St John also serve as an obituary and long-distance deathbed scene indicates a justification for his words being the last. St John is the character whose story is truly coming to an end; Jane's is not. Jane and her community of loved ones continue to thrive in one another's mutual happiness,¹⁶⁸ whereas St John passes into eternity. To insert his forewarned death as a side note amidst the news of Diana's or Mary's marriages would arguably be more disruptive and discordant than giving him the close of the novel as a final farewell. Rather than interrupting the Edenic contentment of Jane's marriage, the interpolation of St John's last letter appears precisely where it should—at the end.

¹⁶⁶ *Jane Eyre*, 518-519, 520.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 520.

Reading St John's closing sequence as a logical conclusion to the novel's "winding-up,"¹⁶⁹ and not as a textual aberration or homiletic epilogue, does not mean it lacks contextual significance. That St John's anticipated death caps the novel's character summaries is fitting; that a zealous missionary's longing to depart from the world concludes a chapter and novel in which God blesses faithfulness by drawing individuals together in love, not isolation, deserves further scrutiny. Within what Jane says about St John and how she communicates it, we can detect a problematization of St John's conflation of eschatological hope with personal ambition. Jane may not doubt St John's salvation, but her preference for paraphrasing his words of assurance more so than contributing her own indicates that she can celebrate his self-sacrifice only to the extent that she borrows his worldview. Jane can feel "divine joy" on St John's behalf, but the "human tears"¹⁷⁰ she sheds as well intimate that St John's ambition to spend his life quickly to sooner reach eternity is more cause for compassion than praise.

Though Jane does not question St John's faith, she does intimate that his martyrdom may be self-imposed—his mission more reflective of his will than of God's. According to Jane, St John followed "the path *he* had marked for *himself*,"¹⁷¹ and she describes that path toward missionary victory in his own violent terms of conquest. St John "labours for his race; he clears their painful way to improvement; he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it."¹⁷² Thus depicted, St John is more ogre demolishing a village than disciple spreading the good news. Whatever victories he may have wrought against "prejudices of creed," the human cost is clearly evoked. Given that Jane previously told St John to his face that marrying him would kill her,¹⁷³ it is not a stretch to see the suggestion in her summary of his missionary letters that those in his care may also have

¹⁶⁹ *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* all conclude with summaries of the primary characters' lives, with *Shirley*'s final chapter (632-646) being specifically dubbed under this title.

¹⁷⁰ *Jane Eyre*, 521.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 520, (italics mine).

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 521.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 475.

suffered. By pointing out that it is his “high master-spirit” with which St John conquers the souls of the Indian community he departed England to win, Jane, and thus Brontë, introduces—however subtly—a critique of indoctrination and suppression envisaged as Christian duty.¹⁷⁴ Though Jane allows St John the traditional missionary biography ending he spent his life pursuing,¹⁷⁵ the fruit of his labour is described only in terms of his sharing in the spoils of spiritual battle—“the last mighty victories of the Lamb”—not his earthly service.¹⁷⁶ Christian though St John may be, Jane does not cease to regard him as a man who, “in the discharge of what he believed his duty, knew neither mercy nor remorse.”¹⁷⁷

Additionally, St John’s inability to view Christian faith as compatible with earthly contentment, which has been evident throughout his and Jane’s interactions, is literally and figuratively what separates them by the novel’s close. St John’s “glorious sun hastens to its setting,”¹⁷⁸ whilst the life-long honeymoon Rochester has proclaimed for himself and Jane is only ten years spent, their first child just eight years old. Diana and Mary, who “approved . . . unreservedly” of Jane’s marriage, regularly visit and are visited by the Rochesters.¹⁷⁹ St John, on the other hand, waits half a year to respond to Jane’s news and even then, does not acknowledge her marriage.¹⁸⁰ St John’s tacit condemnation of Jane’s actions is clear when his hopes for her happiness are followed by an allusion to “those who live

¹⁷⁴ Responding to post-colonial readings that have viewed the ending of *Jane Eyre* as representative of “Charlotte Brontë’s own colonial appropriation,” Thomas Tracy suggests that Brontë’s incorporation of colonial motifs serves to criticize “the hierarchical organisation [sic] of class, gender and racial categories in British society, as well as the material values which motivate and encourage exploitation among those hierarchies” (59-60). See Tracy, “Reader, I Buried Him’: Apocalypse and Empire in *Jane Eyre*.”

¹⁷⁵ St John’s final words, the penultimate words of Revelation and thus of the New Testament, are also associated with the missionary biographies of David Brainerd and Henry Martyn. See Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 216-217.

¹⁷⁶ *Jane Eyre*, 521.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 518, 520.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 518.

without God in the world, and only mind earthly things.”¹⁸¹ For Jane, who has loved St John as a brother and earnestly sought reconciliation, his denigration of what she experiences as God’s blessing is ostensibly the end of their relationship. The man who disturbed Jane by his denouncement of human affection and distrust of domestic joy, is now fully in his element and incapable of understanding a woman for whom “there is no happiness like that of being loved by your fellow creatures.”¹⁸²

Thus, Jane’s summary that in St John’s imminent last hour “his mind will be unclouded, his heart will be undaunted, his hope will be sure, his faith steadfast”¹⁸³ resonates with the sentiment of a man who earlier in the narrative, “experienced no suffering from estrangement—no yearning after reconciliation.”¹⁸⁴ St John’s “sure reward” and “incorruptible crown” can finally be claimed once he has forever left the world and all “the feelings and claims of little people” behind him.¹⁸⁵ Because he envisions grace solely as abstract justice awarded to the worthy in heaven, St John’s life ambition can only be fulfilled through his death. Thus, Jane’s rhetorical question to the reader, “And why weep for this?” accepts that what wounds her own heart—the breaking of fellowship and passing of friends—does not trouble St John. She can borrow his language to commend his earning “a place in the first rank of those who are redeemed from the earth,”¹⁸⁶ but as a woman who holds herself “supremely blest” to “live entirely for and with what I love best on earth,”¹⁸⁷ St John’s eschatological ambitions do not reflect Jane’s experience of grace. Jane’s journey exemplifies Mary Grey’s depiction of redemption as that which includes “building right relation here and now,”¹⁸⁸ wherein divine love is incarnated within human relationships, not a prize only to be awarded after life. Jane, who proclaims

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 284.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 521.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 474.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 521, 479.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 521.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 519.

¹⁸⁸ Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 89-90.

to both St John and Rochester that she does not delight in sacrifice,¹⁸⁹ cannot wholeheartedly celebrate St John's martyrdom. She leaves the last words to him rather than framing her own benediction: "'My Master,' he says, 'has forewarned me . . . Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!'"¹⁹⁰

Jane can forgive St John's stern ambition and regard his perseverance with awe, but her eulogy of the man who inflicted his will upon others and impugned earthly happiness as capitulation to sin stops short of admiration. Jane's own love of life and the God who bestows it is overwhelmingly the theme of her autobiography's final two chapters. As she asserted earlier to St John, God did not give Jane her life to throw away.¹⁹¹ From a feminist theological perspective, St John's presence in the novel's final paragraphs need not introduce doubt as to Jane's salvation or necessarily be regarded as an alternative but equally valid view of the Christian life.¹⁹² Neither must it connote Jane triumphantly ejecting from her story the man who tried to co-opt it.¹⁹³ Rather, Jane's journey out of isolation and into relationship leaves a final note in its conclusion for the man who could not participate in the life or community Jane overcame temptation in order to attain. Jane, who has already been enjoying God's blessing, looks kindly on St John who is about to.

This section has sought to demonstrate that Jane Eyre's liberative journey reflects feminist theological constructions of grace in ways that affirm the story's Christian viewpoint and feminist impulse as complementary rather than contradictory. When viewed through feminist theology's identification of the need for women within patriarchy to experience grace as self-construction and

¹⁸⁹ *Jane Eyre*, 447, 513. The language of delighting in sacrifice that both Rochester and St John apply to Jane and which Jane rejects evokes the biblical language of Psalm 51:16—"For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it"—and numerous related passages, for example, 1 Samuel 15:22, Psalm 40:6, Isaiah 1:11, Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:13.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 521. See also p. 206n175 above.

¹⁹¹ *Jane Eyre*, 477.

¹⁹² Cf. Beaty, "St John's Way."

¹⁹³ Cf. Williams, "Closing the Book."

interdependence, the romantic and religious plots of *Jane Eyre* appear to be more aligned than in strictly feminist or religious critical perspectives. When grace is understood as containment and right relation embodied in the present, Jane's choice ceases to be between earthly paradise and eternal salvation, but rather, between faithful living or sinful self-sacrifice. In *Shirley*, however, embodied grace is yearned after rather than realized. As the final section will show, by depicting the co-opting of Caroline and Shirley's spiritual equality and agency, Brontë's second novel condemns patriarchal systems and attitudes that inhibit women's ability to claim wholeness.

5.3 Grace as Lament in *Shirley*

Whilst critics have disagreed over the feminism of *Shirley* and whether the novel reinforces paternalistic gender roles or satirizes them, reading *Shirley* through a feminist theology of grace according to women's experience affirms women's need for containment to counter fragmentation, but also illustrates the social and relational forces that constrain women's experience of grace. By showing first how Caroline and Shirley claim interpretive authority for themselves, and thus spiritual agency and equality, but then through the course of the narrative lose their voices to men, the novel can be read as a lament over what maintaining the status quo actually costs—women's voices, and potentially, their souls. This section in two parts explores the boldness with which Caroline and Shirley assert their right to spiritual discernment and self-definition, and how the socially-enforced limits put on their freedom are lamented and condemned on spiritual grounds. Secondly, by comparing *Shirley*'s explicit critiques of how masculine idealization reinforces female subjugation to how Shirley and Caroline's stories are eventually sublimated through masculine narration, Brontë's surrendering of her heroines' voices can be seen as a narrative staging of women's experience of being silenced.

What is suggested in both cases is that it is men that desire women's silence not God. In *Shirley*, it is masculine privilege and the social structures that preserve it that inhibit the heroines' experience of grace as containment and right relation. By portraying those inhibitive influences through the gradual suppression of the heroines' empowered voices, *Shirley* dramatizes the costs of women's thwarted liberative trajectories. As a depiction of women being denied their spiritual equality and rightful agency, *Shirley* brings forth the "Woman Question" by lamenting the fact that it has to be asked in the first place.

i. Female Interpretive Authority & Righteous Discontent

Women's experience of sin in *Shirley* was characterized in Chapter Four as the social and relational pressure toward fragmentation. The models for Caroline's potential future as either a sheltered dependent, disenfranchised spinster, or disposable wife, are represented as socially acceptable but physically and spiritually harmful outcomes. Paired with the warnings Caroline and other characters receive about the injustice of women's limited options are moments in which female characters confidently assert their right to interpret for themselves what they most need in order to flourish. These claims are made on spiritual grounds that affirm a woman's spiritual equality to men and validate the voicing of lament as a faithful response to injustice. Within each passage that confirms a woman's inherent right to speak for herself and determine her own path is the suggestion that, whilst men prove incapable of perceiving or permitting this, God hears and grieves with silenced women. A consideration of how the novel shows Caroline and Shirley justifying their interpretive authority and need for agency, whilst implicating the masculine social attitudes that put up barriers against women's faithful claim to these, brings into view the complexity of Brontë's most explicitly feminist arguments as voiced by two heroines whose stories are eventually displaced by men.

A marked shift occurs in *Shirley* when the eponymous heroine finally appears. Through Caroline's friendship with the independently wealthy and independently

minded Shirley Keeldar, what was previously Caroline's interior musings on female existence changes to conversations about the difference between men's interpretation of women and women's self-interpretation. Throughout their friendship in the latter two-thirds of the novel, Caroline and Shirley ruminate on masculine poetic ideals of womanhood,¹⁹⁴ masculine perceptions of female intelligence,¹⁹⁵ and the fallacy of spiritual injunctions that subordinate women to masculine judgements.¹⁹⁶ The questions they pose to one another and discredit together demonstrate the importance of women experiencing self-definition outside of relationships to men. The cumulative argument of Caroline and Shirley's dialogues is that women's disempowered and idealized status is a product of masculine prejudice and not divine authority. In other words, God sees it right for women to speak their minds, though men might not.

A key example of this is Caroline and Shirley's argument with mill mechanic Joe Scott over female authority and the Protestant right to private judgement. When Shirley goads Joe about his objections to having a woman involved in the mill's management, Joe defers to "the doctrines delivered in the second chapter of St. Paul's first Epistle to Timothy . . . 'Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man; but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve.'"¹⁹⁷ Whilst Shirley amuses herself with sarcastic jabs at Joe's prejudicial views, Caroline attempts to reason with him, highlighting that if Joe believes in private judgement and "claim[s] it for every line of the holy Book," then that claim must apply to women as well.¹⁹⁸ When Joe responds, "Nay: women is to take their husbands' opinion, both in politics and religion: it's wholesomest for them," both women vociferously object on religious grounds. Shirley compares Joe's logic to the idea that men should "take the opinions

¹⁹⁴ *Shirley*, 320.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 352-353.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 328.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 328-329.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

of their priests without examination,” a concept abhorrent to a Protestant of Joe’s ilk.¹⁹⁹

Not letting the argument end there, Caroline brings biblical criticism into the conversation. She deepens the debate by invoking the context to which Paul would have been writing and by suggesting that hermeneutical and exegetical biases are the more likely factors in the passage’s translation than Paul’s intent.²⁰⁰ She posits further, and not without some gentle badinage, that:

It would be possible, I doubt not, with a little ingenuity, to give the passage quite a contrary turn: to make it say, “Let the woman speak out whenever she sees fit to make an objection;”—“it is permitted to a woman to teach and to exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than hold his peace,” and so on.²⁰¹

Whilst critics have tended to dismiss Caroline’s exegetical repartee as “feeble”²⁰² or unpersuasive,²⁰³ the passage not only reflects Brontë’s own awareness of changing attitudes towards scriptural interpretation resulting from German Higher Criticism,²⁰⁴ but it also anticipates twentieth-century feminist hermeneutical approaches to the same passage.²⁰⁵ Within the narrative, it is a moment of Caroline claiming scriptural justification for her right to speak, to object and to exercise authority, whilst also exercising that interpretive authority. Though Keith Jenkins terms Caroline’s language “tentative and hypothetical,”²⁰⁶ Caroline’s words and actions in this passage show her speaking up and objecting to a specific man and his patriarchal interpretation of a scriptural text. Caroline may not succeed at changing Joe’s mind, but her speaking her mind is decidedly un-hypothetical. In what

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 329-330.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 329-330, quoting 1 Timothy 2:11-13.

²⁰² Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 385.

²⁰³ Lawson, “The Dissenting Voice: *Shirley's* Vision of Women and Christianity,” 731, 736.

²⁰⁴ See Thormählen, *Brontës and Religion*, 51.

²⁰⁵ For an introductory survey, see Krause, *1 Timothy*, 9-15. Gilbert and Gubar also note interpretive similarities to Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s late-nineteenth century *Woman’s Bible*. See *Madwoman in the Attic*, 385-386.

²⁰⁶ Jenkins, *Brontë’s Atypical Typology*, 89.

appears to be the only example in Brontë's novels of characters directly engaging in biblical exegesis as opposed to catechism, allusion, or allegorical comparison, the scriptural passage discussed is, significantly, the passage most used to suppress women's voices and agency.²⁰⁷ That it also appears in Brontë's novel most concerned with "the woman question" strengthens the case for reading Caroline and Shirley's hermeneutical suspicion of 1 Timothy seriously, despite the banter that accompanies it.

Nor is 1 Timothy the only scriptural passage female characters in *Shirley* use to defend the belief that women are meant for more than lives of silent passivity. Caroline, who wishes "fifty times a day" that she had a profession,²⁰⁸ reflects on the example raised for women in "Solomon's virtuous woman" of Proverbs 31:10-31.²⁰⁹ Caroline considers her a "worthy model" in that she has more to do than run a household:

She was a manufacturer—she made fine linen and sold it: she was an agriculturist—she bought estates and planted vineyards. That woman was a manager: she was what the matrons hereabouts call "a clever woman."²¹⁰

In comparing her own options to this "[pattern] of what 'the sex' (as they say) ought to be," Caroline asks the rhetorical question, "But are we, in these days, brought up to be like her?"²¹¹ In so doing, she calls attention to the incongruity between the pattern of what she ought to have opportunity to be and that which her society actually requires her to be. Caroline repeatedly expresses her conviction that being consigned to paternalistic care instead of being allowed to live productively on her own terms prevents her from living as God intended. Like Jane Eyre, who believes life was not given her to throw away, Caroline is convinced that her life was not meant to be "that useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing thing it often becomes to many,

²⁰⁷ See Krause, *1 Timothy*.

²⁰⁸ *Shirley*, 229.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 392.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

and is becoming to me.”²¹² She ponders further that, “God surely did not create us, and cause us to live, with the sole end of wishing always to die,” believing instead that life is meant to be prized and enjoyed.²¹³ Caroline’s lament is not a wish for hedonistic pursuits, but the desire to apply her mind and skills to more than the socks and puddings Jane Eyre named as cause for revolt.²¹⁴ Caroline yearns for the freedom to *live* her life faithfully rather than passively endure it.

Young Rose Yorke, the character famously based on Brontë’s life-long friend Mary Taylor, the feminist advocate and writer,²¹⁵ voices a similar argument. Debating with her mother who says that true satisfaction for a woman can only come through performing her household duties, twelve-year-old Rose invokes the parable of talents from Matthew 25.²¹⁶ Comparing a life of cooking and mending men’s clothes to that of committing the sins of the servant who buried his money rather than investing and increasing it, Rose proclaims:

Mother, the Lord who gave each of us our talents will come home some day, and will demand from all an account. The tea-pot, the old stocking-foot, the linen rag, the willow-pattern tureen, will yield up their barren deposit in many a house.²¹⁷

She completes her “oracle” by saying she will be an obedient apprentice in womanly duties as is expected, but then poses the question, “Am I to do nothing but that?” Providing her own answer, she announces, “I will do that, and then I will do more.”²¹⁸ Rose’s bold cry,²¹⁹ to which Caroline is witness, equates failing to take responsibility for self-construction as a sin of hiding, but places the blame for that

²¹² Ibid., 390.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ *Jane Eyre*, 129.

²¹⁵ See “Taylor, Mary,” in Alexander and Smith, *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, 490-491.

²¹⁶ *Shirley*, 400.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 401.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

sin on parents who will not “suffer [their] daughters”²²⁰ to spend their lives more fully than in maintaining the lives of others. The point made by both Caroline and Rose’s scriptural defense is that forcing girls to become “angels in the house” makes them angels only to the extent that they cease to live. The true faithful life must include exercise for one’s mind as well as one’s hands. Thus, to deny women the opportunity to flourish is to condemn them to God’s judgment and to invoke it upon oneself.

Present within these pleas for agency and equality is the inference that such women’s appeals do not just go unheeded—they are decried as ungodly. As in Mrs. Pryor’s experience of being told that her suffering results from pride,²²¹ the message females such as Caroline and Rose receive is that lamenting one’s enforced domestic confinement is sinful. In *Shirley*, female expression of discontent is always met with social and spiritualized opposition. Countering this, however, are passages in which female characters express their belief that God not only approves of women’s desire to flourish, but also condones women’s right to protest its inhibition. This is heard most clearly in Caroline’s private jeremiad to the “Men of Yorkshire” and “Men of England” who dismiss, “with an idle jest or an unmanly insult” their daughters’ requests for “a field in which their faculties may be exercised and grow.”²²² Caroline validates her belief that those who vilify women for seeking relief are the very same consigning them to lives of slow decline, by claiming, “when I speak thus, I have no impression that I displease God by my words; that I am either impious or impatient, irreligious or sacrilegious.”²²³ If grace is being denied, it is not God standing in the way. The lament, “which man stops his ears against, or frowns on with impotent contempt,” Caroline brings to God, who “hears many a groan, and compassionates much grief.”²²⁴ *Shirley* affirms that whilst those in power may disregard and

²²⁰ Ibid., 400-401.

²²¹ Ibid., 376.

²²² Ibid., 392-393.

²²³ Ibid., 390.

²²⁴ Ibid., 390-391.

denounce the pleas of the suffering, God does not.²²⁵ As the next section will seek to show, despite Caroline's remark that "nobody in particular is to blame . . . for the state in which things are,"²²⁶ the novel's eventual displacement of women's voices by the insertion of masculine narrative control illustrates the social dynamic that puts barriers between women's *knowledge* of grace and the ability to *experience* it.

ii. Awaiting Grace: Surrendered Voices

The dual marriage ending of *Shirley*, in which Caroline and Shirley marry the two Moore brothers, has largely been read as Brontë's failure to imagine alternatives for her characters beyond traditional gender roles.²²⁷ However, the fact that the two Brontë heroines that speak most directly about women's political and social constraints are the two whose stories end most conventionally seems an unlikely accident on Brontë's part. From a feminist theological perspective, it is possible to see how the "ironic, distancing, self-referential narrative stance"²²⁸ of *Shirley* might implicate, rather than explicate the novel's theme of patriarchal social structures inhibiting women's capacity to flourish. By concluding the novel's profiling of female reality and masculine fantasy with tertiary male characters taking over the narration, Brontë provides an appropriate satirical ending. A brief look at how Caroline and Shirley disappear into the very type of relationships from which they sought salvation, introduces the possibility that *Shirley*'s conventional ending may be read as a criticism of the status quo and not its endorsement.

Though these chapters have focused on Caroline Helstone as the heroine most illustrative of the novel's themes of harmful self-abnegation, heiress Shirley Keeldar is not exempt from the systems that reify female subjugation. Despite being

²²⁵ Lack of space prohibits discussion of how this theme is paralleled by the millworker's revolts. However, as numerous critics have noted, the fact that the Luddite rebellions appear more as a metaphor for single women's disenfranchisement than as a cause outright, reflects the novel's middle-class bias. See Lawson, "The Dissenting Voice"; Rogers, "Tory Brontë."

²²⁶ *Shirley*, 390.

²²⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 395-398.

²²⁸ Glen, "Shirley and Villette," in *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, 126.

the character who voices the most editorials on men's false ideas about women, Shirley's love story is told entirely from the vantage point of a man whose depiction of her bears more resemblance to Shirley's critiques of masculine fantasy than to Shirley herself.²²⁹ Midway through the novel, Shirley explains to Caroline that "women read men more truly than men read women."²³⁰ This is one of multiple examples whereby Shirley enumerates the masculine tendency to mistake poetic creation for feminine reality—"If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed."²³¹ In Shirley's words, men attribute to women the characteristics of "half doll, half angel," "fiend," and "temptress-terror."²³² She further expresses her annoyance at having "to hear [men] fall into ecstasies with each other's creations," when, if she were to give her real opinion of men's idealized and demonized women, she would be "dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half-an-hour."²³³ Flippant as the implied death threat may be, Shirley's debunking of masculine narrative constructions of women parallels Caroline's religious arguments of the same vein. In both cases, women can envision wholeness but are circumscribed by masculine authority to deny that wholeness through remaining silent. With the reappearance of Louis Moore into Shirley's life that silence becomes narratively embodied.

After Louis Moore, Shirley's former tutor and Robert's brother, reenters Shirley's life as tutor to her visiting relatives, the novel's third-person narration is gradually ceded to Louis' and other male characters' control. Through journal entries and recounted incidents, Louis, Robert Moore, and even teenaged Martin Yorke become the primary interpreters of the novel's denouement and its central female protagonists. Louis Moore, the long-hinted but late revealed object of Shirley's affection, is given an entire chapter in which to lose himself in reverie over

²²⁹ For a key reading in this vein, see Shuttleworth, *Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 215.

²³⁰ *Shirley*, 352.

²³¹ Shirley's criticism of Milton is perhaps one instance of doing the opposite; Shirley sees Eve as the "heaven-born" mother of Titans, whereas Milton sees her in light of "his cook . . . making custards." See page 320-321.

²³² *Ibid.*, 320-321, 246.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 352.

his love for Shirley. Within this chapter, the reader is exposed to Louis' version of Shirley, in which she is both a "stainless virgin," adorned with "the modesty of girlhood" and a "careless, attractive thing," "too mutinous for heaven—too innocent for hell."²³⁴ Louis romanticizes the power differentials between himself and Shirley, regarding himself as both the hopeless suitor of an heiress as well as the schoolmaster of "an unsophisticated, un-taught thing:"²³⁵ "It was unutterably sweet to feel myself at once near her and above her," he muses.²³⁶ Through Louis, Shirley is reduced to a "thing" to be obtained and a "leopardess" to be tamed.²³⁷

This theme continues in the novel's penultimate chapter, in which Louis describes his success at forcing Shirley to reveal her love for him and accept him as husband.²³⁸ He does this by taunting her with the image of his finding an orphan girl in America to whom he could "be first tutor and then husband. . . . I would reward her with my love."²³⁹ Louis portrays his wooing as a successful lion tamer setting a trap and capturing the leopardess Shirley—"Something to tame first, and teach afterwards: to break in and then to fondle."²⁴⁰ Through these eroticized metaphors of domination and submission, Louis literally and figuratively takes over Shirley's story; Shirley's feelings about her marriage are never communicated in her own words. Instead, the narrator borrows Louis' metaphors to describe her as "conquered by love, and bound with a vow."²⁴¹ Shirley, now "vanquished and

²³⁴ Ibid., 522, 520, 525.

²³⁵ Ibid., 527, 522. The relationship between Louis and Shirley as a reversal of Jane Eyre and Rochester is a common critical discussion, as is Brontë's preference for master/student romantic pairings. See Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 197-200; McLaughlin, "I Prefer a *Master*": Female Power in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," 217-222.

²³⁶ *Shirley*, 522.

²³⁷ Ibid., 525.

²³⁸ Ibid., 621-622.

²³⁹ Ibid., 616.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 620.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 637.

restricted,”²⁴² refuses to participate in any of the wedding arrangements, leaving Louis to become “master of Fieldhead, weeks before he became so nominally.”²⁴³

Shirley’s narrative transformation from a woman who prized her ability to “comfortably fold my independence round me like a mantle,”²⁴⁴ to one whose “captor alone . . . could make amends for the lost privilege of liberty”²⁴⁵ is a strong indication of what Jennifer Judge describes as “the narrator’s flagrant narrative advice to read the ending suspiciously.”²⁴⁶ The suspect issue does not appear to be Shirley’s taming,²⁴⁷ but that her marriage is a happy ending. Shirley, who dubbed herself Captain Keeldar²⁴⁸ and shuddered at the thought of not being her own mistress,²⁴⁹ has, by the final page, become “Mrs. Louis.”²⁵⁰ Despite being the only Brontë heroine who is independently wealthy from birth and thus free to marry for love rather than security, Shirley’s marriage to Louis is narrated in terms of capture instead of choice.²⁵¹

Whilst Shirley’s marriage is depicted as a loss of liberty, Caroline’s marriage is a fulfillment of her hope to marry Robert Moore. However, despite having her love requited and being freed from her despondent life at her uncle’s rectory, Caroline is also pushed to the margins of her own narrative by male characters. When she is prohibited from visiting Robert after he is attacked by an angry millworker, Caroline is forced to rely on young Martin Yorke to gain access to him. Three

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid., 638.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 217.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 637-638.

²⁴⁶ Judge, “Bitter Herbs,” n.p.

²⁴⁷ *Shirley*, 623-624.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 272.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 216-217.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 646.

²⁵¹ Louis’ passages often show him stalking and observing Shirley like a safari hunter: “It is now night—midnight. I have spent the afternoon and evening at Fieldhead. Some hours ago she passed me, coming down the oak-staircase to the hall: she did not know I was standing in the twilight, near the staircase- window, . . . How closely she glided against the banisters! . . . I followed her into the drawing-room.” See pages 629-630.

chapters are devoted to Martin's exploits as a self-cast chivalric knight in Caroline's mission to visit the recovering Robert. With the third person narration again yielded to a late-addition male character, Caroline's narrative is consigned to Martin's fantasy of a damsel in need of a hero.²⁵² Thus, Caroline's reunion with Robert—from whom she has been separated by familial discord, political unrest, and near-death experiences—is relegated to the control of a teenage boy bent on amusing himself and earning a kiss.²⁵³ A result is that the earlier depiction of Caroline as a young woman who aspires to the "royal standard" of "Solomon's virtuous woman"²⁵⁴ begins to be upstaged by Martin Yorke's valuation of her: "What is she? A thread-paper, a doll, a toy—a girl, in short."²⁵⁵

Furthermore, Caroline's eventual engagement to Robert includes signals indicating that, despite marrying for love, Caroline may be heading towards a fate similar to Shirley or even to Mary Cave.²⁵⁶ Robert and Caroline's flirtation is mediated alternately through language of slavery and conquest,²⁵⁷ and that of worship: "you look like the loveliest . . . pictures of the Virgin: I think I will . . . kneel and adore."²⁵⁸ And though Robert has ostensibly been converted to Caroline's ethic of care as to how he should treat those in his employ,²⁵⁹ mixed in with the promise to build houses for the starving are plans to split Briarfield parish between himself and his soon-to-be-magistrate brother Louis, cutting down the forests to make way for manufacturing.²⁶⁰ Robert tells Caroline with pride that "the copse shall be firewood ere five years elapse . . . the green natural terrace shall be a paved

²⁵² Martin's involvement with Caroline interrupts his reading of a book of fairy tales, and the chapter itself is titled along these lines: "The Schoolboy and the Wood-Nymph." See pages 567-568.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 573, 585.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 392-393.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 589.

²⁵⁶ Gilbert and Gubar note this as well. See *Madwoman in the Attic*, 397.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 604-605.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 606.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 89-92, 543, 640, 643.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 643-644.

street.”²⁶¹ Furthermore, his proposal to build a Sunday School for Caroline to manage is followed shortly by his acknowledgment that many of these of plans are “extravagant daydreams,” only some of which may be realized.²⁶² The novel’s last pages confirm that what was once “a bonnie spot—full of oak trees and nut trees . . . is altered now.”²⁶³ Whether or not Caroline finally finds “a field in which [her] faculties may be exercised and grow”²⁶⁴ is left uncertain.

The final mention of Caroline and Shirley directly precedes the description of Briarfield’s industrial transformation, and in it, “Mrs. Louis” is noted for her “handsome dresses” and “Mrs. Robert” for her quiet.²⁶⁵ The two women who enjoyed walking the forests alone together because “the presence of gentlemen dispels the . . . charm”²⁶⁶ end their days as display items inhabiting the remnants of a forest despoiled by the gentlemen who have claimed it and them. In this way, *Shirley* seems to disallow differentiation between the female protagonists and their spouses at the same time as it assimilates them to the plundered landscape. Caroline and Shirley, who have spent the novel lamenting masculine appropriation of women’s agency, end their narrative as silent witnesses to their own appropriation. What are we to make of this development?

Rather than viewing this ending as a failure of liberative imagination on Brontë’s part or as a sudden retraction of the novel’s examination of women’s righteous discontent, as largely been the critical view,²⁶⁷ it is possible to see Caroline’s earlier apologia for women’s justified lament as an interpretive lens through which to read the novel’s arguably cynical conclusion. When Caroline assures herself that, “God hears many a groan,” she does so based on her

²⁶¹ Ibid., 644.

²⁶² Ibid., 644-645.

²⁶³ Ibid., 646.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 392-393.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 646.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 214.

²⁶⁷ See Harsh, “Tamed Captives of Shirley,” 115-146.

observation that the complaints of women are treated with contempt because to listen and give credence to them would require society to make inconvenient changes. She remarks that, “to such grievances as society cannot readily cure, it usually forbids utterance, on pain of its scorn.”²⁶⁸ Read in this light, what society forbids, *Shirley* articulates but then stifles. The spiritual and personal grievances of women’s plight within patriarchal systems of repression, objectification, and exploitation are given voice within the text and then drowned out by those who benefit from their silence. By introducing female protagonists who resist the pressure to fragment and identify themselves as spiritually entitled to agency and equality, Brontë’s gradual eroding of Caroline and Shirley’s voices illustrates the social forces that deny women opportunity to flourish. Furthermore, with the displacement of the heroines away from the central action, the duty of lament is passed on from the protagonists to the reader. Through silencing the heroines’ laments whilst suggesting that “nobody in particular is to blame,”²⁶⁹ Brontë leaves the reader either to accept the story’s conclusion as voiced by the males who usurp Caroline and Shirley’s interpretive agency, or, to protest the “now vanquished and restricted” voices of the novel’s heroines.²⁷⁰ Female flourishing may not be a present, embodied reality in *Shirley*, yet grace is invited through resisting the social prohibition against the voicing of women’s “ungodly discontent.”²⁷¹ Although the novel might not ultimately portray Caroline or Shirley experiencing the freedoms they claimed the right to have, by providing spiritual justification for their social grievances, Brontë’s second novel reflects the challenges facing women who know themselves to be whole but can as yet only speak of it amongst themselves. At the same time, by describing the harm that comes of female suppression, *Shirley* incites

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 390-391.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 390.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 637. Sally Greene draws similar conclusions in regard to the novel’s theme of interpretation, which Greene sees as encouraging readers to look “beyond the novel’s ending for its real message.” See Greene, “Apocalypse When?,” 352, 355-536.

²⁷¹ *Shirley*, 376.

the reader to question the accepted conventions that ultimately consign women to silence.

In *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, grace is reflected in moments of denouement and restoration but is most profoundly represented in the choices the heroines make to defy social constraints and patriarchal presumptions, asserting their worth as individuals capable of discerning God's will and responding faithfully. And where social or relational structures inhibit their capacity to flourish, it is faith that inspires their pleas for justice and validates their grief when it is withheld. *Jane Eyre* presents a vision of female flourishing undeterred by obstacles of social position, gender roles, or human failings. Jane's passionate perseverance offers an inspiring image of what is possible when a woman is empowered through faith to defend her self-integrity and cultivate interdependent relationships through love and mutuality. *Shirley*, on the other hand, offers not an inspiring vision of what is possible, but a critical view of what is actual and the subjugation involved in existing systems. Its portrayal, however, is no less liberative or imaginative. By leaving her heroines socially well-placed but narratively-replaced, Brontë gives the novel its culturally-sanctioned happy ending whilst subverting it at the same time. As Brontë's novel most directly concerned with the "Woman Question," *Shirley* stops short of solutions, and values instead the voices of women that are lost when their lives are interpreted as a problem for men to solve. If *Jane Eyre* shows grace embodied, *Shirley* shows grace besought.

As the final chapter will explore, in *Villette* the need for grace to be experienced as containment and right relation is dramatically expressed through its absence. Stepping beyond *Shirley*'s illustration of what inhibits women's experience of grace, *Villette* shows how submitting to fragmentation and fusion distorts one's view of grace and the God who offers it. Instead of flourishing embodied in the present, Lucy Snowe's narrative is one of longing for salvation *from* the present.

Whereas *Shirley* voices the forbidden grievances that “society cannot readily cure,”²⁷² *Villette* shows the suffering of one who forbids herself to grieve.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 309-391.

Chapter 6

Hiding from Grace: *Villette* as a Negative Example of Female Flourishing

Leading up to this point, reading Brontë's first two novels in light of feminist theology has clarified the ways in which Brontë depicts female flourishing and delineates the social and relational obstacles that threaten a woman's ability to claim wholeness. When Brontë's final novel is considered from such a perspective, however, it appears to be the protagonist herself who prohibits this flourishing and the achievement of wholeness. Lucy Snowe's passivity in the face of suffering, combined with her aggressive self-restraint, suggest how the internalization of societal pressures can distort one's view of self and God. Although Lucy is recognizably one of the "redundant women" who must support herself financially in a society structured for male advancement,¹ her reflections on what constrains her rarely look outward. Shaped by her early experiences of trauma and loss, Lucy Snowe's primary struggles are rooted in her perceived predestination towards suffering and not in explicit identification of patriarchal injustice. As a result, Lucy's internalization of patriarchal inhibition causes her to apply the strength of her "inward fire"² in the cause of self-censorship and constraint rather than in appeals for freedom.

What this chapter's reading of *Villette* suggests is how Brontë's liberative vision of female flourishing is recognizable not only in positive ways but also in the depiction of the opposite—what a woman undergoes when she conforms to the world's definition of her and forfeits her freedom to claim wholeness. For with nearly the same passion as that which fuels Jane Eyre's assertions of soul equality

¹ See Fenton-Hathaway, "Charlotte Brontë, Mary Taylor and the 'Redundant Women' Debate," 137-148.

² *Villette*, 296.

and Caroline Helstone's exhortations to the fathers of England, Lucy Snowe incarcerates her feelings and submits to the "withered hand" of Reason.³ What's more, the depiction of Lucy's unrelieved suffering throughout her attempts to evade heartbreak by inuring herself to its inevitability indicates how her commitment to self-suppression goes against a Christian vision of human flourishing. From a feminist theological vantage point, it is therefore possible to read *Villette* as a negative revelation of grace, depicting by its absence the need for grace to be experienced as containment and right relation. This two-part chapter examines how Lucy's renunciation of hope undermines her agency, and secondly, how Lucy's radical self-suppression compromises rather than protects her heart. When compared to *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, which illustrate the pressures and temptations that hinder women's flourishing, *Villette* testifies to the suffering endured when one does not feel free to imagine wholeness, much less lay claim to it.

Before proceeding with this chapter's theological engagement with *Villette*, however, a brief discussion of the novel's place in Brontë scholarship will help frame the following readings. Whereas *Jane Eyre* is largely highlighted as a female bildungsroman and *Shirley* is regarded in terms of social critique and satire, *Villette* is most commonly considered in light of its psychological realism. In her influential 1966 Brontë monograph, *Their Proper Sphere*, Inga-Stina Ewbank argues that the "truth" of *Villette* is centered in Lucy's emotions.⁴ Likewise, though Anna Fenton-Hathaway resists reading *Villette* solely as "an hermetic encapsulation of interior psychology," she credits the novel's "vertiginous narration and rich psychological detail" for its appeal to decades of psychoanalytic interpreters.⁵ Additionally, the narration to which Fenton-Hathaway refers has also been a central focus of *Villette* criticism. Whilst the novel returns to Brontë's predominant use of first person

³ Ibid., 265.

⁴ Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*, 167.

⁵ Fenton-Hathaway, "Redundant Women," 138. For a summary of key readings, see "Psychoanalytic approaches," in Alexander and Smith, *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*, 407-412.

narration, Lucy Snowe is widely regarded as an unreliable narrator.⁶ Lucy's frequent self-contradiction, information withholding, and redactional interruptions are some of the ways that *Villette* disrupts "the bond of trust between narrator and reader."⁷ Yet this differs from *Shirley*'s satirical third-person narrator in that the "acts of suppression"⁸ committed by the narrating elderly Lucy of *Villette* reflect young Lucy's suppressing and self-guarded conduct. The result is arguably the opposite of *Shirley*'s skeptical distance, with the reader drawn into complicity in Lucy's denials and obstructions.

Whilst the novel's psychological detail and artfully disruptive narration are two reasons why *Villette* is sometimes ranked over *Jane Eyre* as Brontë's finest novel,⁹ a third common critical topic is the identification of *Villette* as Brontë's most autobiographical book. Brontë's use of real life relationships and settings for her novels has been publicly discussed since Elizabeth Gaskell published her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1857, two years after Brontë's death.¹⁰ In the case of *Villette*, though, the novel's apparent correspondence to Brontë's experiences as a young adult student in Brussels and her famed attachment to her instructor Constantin Heger is often used to explain the novel as a form of wish fulfillment.¹¹ Whilst, as Linda Freedman acknowledges, "the parallel between Lucy and M. Paul and Charlotte and M. Heger is not an easy one to ignore,"¹²—it is the rare piece on *Villette* that does not include reference to Charlotte's love for the married Heger—reading *Villette* primarily as a re-writing of Brontë's personal history arguably distorts the representation of Brontë's authorial skill. Though the prevalence of

⁶ See Maynard, *Brontë and Sexuality*, 164-167.

⁷ Freedman, "Aesthetics of Grace," 413.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Virginia Woolf is among many critics who make this claim. See Woolf, "Commentary: Virginia Woolf," in *Jane Eyre*, 705.

¹⁰ For example, Gaskell highlights the real-life origins of characters from *Shirley*. See Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 314-315.

¹¹ Clarke, "Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," 968.

¹² See Freedman, "Aesthetics of Grace," 415.

autobiographical interpretations of *Villette* is understandable, this chapter's approach views Brontë's novel first and foremost as a literary creation and not as a surreptitious confession. To analyze the complexity of Brontë's proto-feminist themes in light of her own experiences of loss and constraint would require critical frameworks other than those established for this thesis. Instead, this feminist theological reading of *Villette* attends to the narrative shift from *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*'s imagined alternatives for women in patriarchal society, to Lucy Snowe's internalization of those impediments. By fragmenting her heart and forfeiting her agency through a peculiarly vehement fatalism, Lucy makes conscious choices to stifle her desires for personal or relational fulfillment, opting instead to remain "a mere looker-on at life."¹³ As will be seen, Lucy claims to find strength through identifying as one of those chosen by God to "deeply suffer while they live,"¹⁴ yet her torturous efforts to stifle her hopes demonstrate her determination to hide from grace.

6.1 Forfeiting Agency: Lucy Snowe's Fusion with Fate

In Lucy Snowe's narrated tale of how she came to be a schoolmistress in the capitol city of a small, French-speaking nation, the personal trauma she suffered as a young teenager is frequently alluded to, yet never defined. This is a significant departure from Jane Eyre's detailed childhood trauma narrative. The tragedy—or tragedies—that sever Lucy from family, home, and financial provision, occur much later than Jane Eyre's years of neglect or Caroline Helstone's fading memories of parental abuse and abandonment. Yet the formative impact of the "heavy tempest"¹⁵ that leaves Lucy bereaved and alone in her early twenties¹⁶ is profound

¹³ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴ *Villette*, 180.

¹⁵ Ibid., 38.

enough to convince Lucy that bereavement is her destined lot in life, not just a tragic past experience. Whereas Jane Eyre's narrative progression from isolated orphan to interdependent wife is marked by her increasing ability to act on the belief that God wills more for her than suffering, Lucy Snowe's early-established conviction that God has predestined her for a life of perpetual adversity is never shaken, nor is her isolation ultimately relieved. However, although Lucy is again bereaved at her story's close, the portrayal of her resignation to her anticipated fate aligns with the previously discussed ways that Brontë's fiction pre-visions feminist theological constructions of grace as claiming agency; Lucy Snowe embodies the failure of self-sacrifice to function salvifically. By grounding her identity in her "bereaved" and "narrowed" lot,¹⁷ Lucy does not prevent future losses or, as will be seen, ease the burden of the trials she does face. Lucy's submission to Fate can instead be seen as a form of fusion. Through forfeiting her agency to Fate, Lucy exemplifies the sin Judith Plaskow summarizes as "failing to live up to the potentialities of the structures of finite freedom."¹⁸

A strong indication of Lucy's compulsion to surrender her will to Fate is her resistance to feelings of hope. When the ailing Miss Marchmont dies, Lucy is forced to end her brief time as her companion, during which "two hot, close rooms" had become her world.¹⁹ Because cloistering herself off as a sick-maid was Lucy's best plan of enduring life without further tragedy, she is despondent at having to seek life and occupation "outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick chamber."²⁰ She explains:

I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains. Fate would not so be

¹⁶ Lucy is fourteen years old in the first chapters and reunited with her Bretton relatives ten years later. See page 193.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38, 40.

¹⁸ Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 90.

¹⁹ *Villette.*, 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

pacified; nor would Providence sanction this shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence.²¹

Lucy resents being “stimulated into action, . . . forced to energy”²² because it exposes her to the “great agonies” of disappointed hope, which she had sought to avoid by tolerating what is to her the lesser pain of living without hope. This is a pattern repeated throughout her narrative. She fears any circumstance that might rouse her will to live or her claims to hope.²³ When such stirrings occur, “an inhospitable bar to admission must be inwardly drawn,”²⁴ or “knock[ed] on the head . . . figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera.”²⁵ Metaphorically impaling herself in order to stun her feelings and maintain inaction, Lucy calls hope “a false idol—blind, bloodless, and of granite core.”²⁶ According to Lucy, hope will only be met with silence, thus to give credence to hope is to guarantee loss. By sacrificing her hopes to Fate, Lucy abdicates her freedom to live anything but a life of passive endurance.

A second way in which Lucy Snowe’s resignation can be read as related to the sin of fusion is that her faith in God is made subject to her faith in Fate. Lucy regularly pairs her reflections on Fate with her appraisal of God’s inscrutable justice,²⁷ crediting Fate as a force separate from God and whose punishments are severe.²⁸ It is God who sanctions Lucy’s trials,²⁹ but it is Fate that decrees she not step beyond the confines of her destined life of “denial and privation.”³⁰ Lucy prays

²¹ Ibid., 41.

²² Ibid., 40.

²³ Although storms and storm imagery represent tragedy for Lucy, they are also frequent catalyts to her to reluctant hopes. See pages 124, 180, 449.

²⁴ Ibid., 179.

²⁵ Ibid., 124-125.

²⁶ Ibid., 183.

²⁷ Ibid., 40-41, 180, 183, 343, 437.

²⁸ Ibid., 310, 314-315, 473.

²⁹ Ibid., 437, 183.

³⁰ Ibid., 419.

“to Heaven for consolation and support,” only to be further convinced that “Fate was my permanent foe, never to be conciliated;”³¹ persuaded of her own powerlessness against Fate, Lucy regards God as similarly impotent. Though she claims not to doubt God’s mercy or justice,³² she does not appear to trust that God can or will rescue her from calamity. Unlike Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe does not live as one sure of God’s “efficiency to save what He had made.”³³ Believing instead that Destiny designed her to imitate a dormouse, which creeps “into a hole of life’s wall” and submits to death by freezing, Lucy assures herself that, “it ought to be so, since so it is.”³⁴ By accepting defeat at Fate’s hands, Lucy not only assents to being a constrained agent,³⁵ but she also denies God’s power to intervene. The implication of Lucy’s belief that God approves her suffering³⁶ is that God’s mercy is reserved only for those whom Fate has spared.³⁷

Having forfeited her agency to a Fate that she regards as cruel,³⁸ Lucy’s only imagined relief is death. Unlike Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone’s insistence that God did not give life for it to be lived “with the sole end of wishing always to die,”³⁹ Lucy Snowe regards her human existence as that which must be endured for the sake of encountering grace in eternity. In a rhetorical passage reminiscent of a St John Rivers speech, Lucy attempts to rally herself to “endure hardness as [a] good [soldier],” and march onward toward the final prize of “glory, exceeding and eternal.”⁴⁰ However, overshadowing her biblical invocations to keep the faith⁴¹ is

³¹ Ibid., 180.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Jane Eyre*, 373.

³⁴ *Villette*, 309.

³⁵ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* 119-120.

³⁶ *Villette*, 180, 437, 508-509.

³⁷ This is made most clear in when she attributes the “Sunshine” of Paulina and (Dr. John) Graham Bretton’s happy life to the kindness of Fate. See pages 437, 491, 506-507.

³⁸ Ibid., 285, 314-315.

³⁹ *Shirley*, 390.

⁴⁰ *Villette*, 508-509.

the introductory claim that “proof of a life to come must be given.”⁴² The inference is that the “fire and blood” through which Lucy and her “fellow mourners” pass their lives⁴³ persists in order to reflect the glories of Heaven. In other words, it is human suffering that proves there must be life after death. As a result, Lucy resents the earthly life that separates her from the true life she is meant for in Heaven.

Time and again, Lucy longs for her spirit and body to be separated, thus releasing her from the trials of existence. One such example is when Lucy, tormented by weeks of isolation during the pensionnat’s interminable “long vacation,”⁴⁴ wanders desperately out into a storm, and faints from exhaustion.⁴⁵ After waking, she regrets that her soul did not break free of her body: “I know she re-entered her prison with pain, with reluctance, with a moan and a long shiver.”⁴⁶ Lucy also later compares herself to “the cripple and the blind, and the dumb, and the possessed” that wait for healing at the pool of Bethesda. In Lucy’s version, however, the descending angel that stirs the water to bring healing is the angel of death.⁴⁷ Lucy’s only imagination for healing is deliverance from life. As a result, she spends her life wishing for death, which, within Brontë’s fiction, is evidence of “living contrary to divine purposes”—Serene Jones’ definition of unfaithfulness.⁴⁸ Although Lucy is incapable of controlling the natural disasters that sever her from her family and later, from her future as M. Paul’s wife, the oppressive forces she *could* resist, she internalizes instead. As the following section will show, Lucy opts

⁴¹ Ibid. The scripture quotations in this passage include, but are not limited to, Habakkuk 1:12, Romans 8:37, and 1 Corinthians 9:24-25.

⁴² *Villette*, 508.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 175-187.

⁴⁵ It is also during this frenzied excursion that she spontaneously enters a Roman Catholic church and makes a confession to Père Silas: “the mere pouring out of some portion of long accumulating, long pent-up pain into a vessel whence it could not be again diffused—had done me good.” See pages 183-187.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 191.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 207-208, referencing John 5:1-15.

⁴⁸ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 113.

to fragment her heart rather than define herself apart from what society expects of her. Before moving on, however, it is worth considering the ways in which Lucy's habituation to fusion can also be seen in her relationship to M. Paul.

The intensity with which Lucy struggles to stifle her hope and relinquish her will strongly indicates that she is not as naturally passive or easily contented as she professes; her resolution to be a bystander instead of an active participant in life is recognizably a choice.⁴⁹ Yet although the combative fraternity between the "histrionic" literature professor, M. Paul Emmanuel, and the "stoical" English teacher, Lucy Snowe⁵⁰ provides opportunities for Lucy to reveal "la flamme à l'âme" that she represses,⁵¹ their eventual love relationship consigns Lucy to further fusion, not freedom. Leading up to their relational denouement, Lucy alternates between self-satisfied triumph in the face of M. Paul's irascibility,⁵² and dejection when his attentions are withdrawn or too forcefully asserted.⁵³ However, once M. Paul reveals his love and the plans for a school he has put in motion on her behalf, Lucy recedes into a submissive and venerational role. Where once M. Paul was a Napoleon "needful to resist,"⁵⁴ he becomes a king unto whom Lucy's homage is offered as "both a joy and a duty."⁵⁵ Now claimed by a love she never allowed herself to hope for, Lucy's love is described as an extension of M. Paul's, not a free offering of her own. She characterizes herself as "penetrated with his influence, and living

⁴⁹ One such example follows her impromptu performance in the school's stage farce. She admits that "A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature," and that to nurture it would "gift me with a world of delight." She resolves, instead, to take those feelings, "put them by," and lock them up, as exercising them "would not do for a mere looker-on at life." See page 162.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 147, 124.

⁵¹ It is M. Paul who accuses Lucy of hiding a fiery soul. See page 368.

⁵² Ibid., 237, 270, 370.

⁵³ Ibid., 409, 418, 447.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 406.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 564.

by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness by heart—I preferred him before all humanity.”⁵⁶

Moreover, M. Paul becomes Lucy’s “Christian hero,”⁵⁷ who has spread his banner over her,⁵⁸ as well as the Master unto whom she must “render a good account” of her talents.⁵⁹ The gratitude that Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone extend to God’s provision, Lucy Snowe bestows on her lover: “I believe that scarce a living being so remembered, so sustained, dealt with in kind so constant, honourable and noble, could be otherwise than grateful to the death.”⁶⁰ Lucy’s engagement to M. Paul does not mark the end of her forfeited agency; M. Paul Emanuel,⁶¹ for a period of three years, replaces Fate. Lucy attributes her happiness during the three years of awaiting M. Paul’s return from the West Indies to M. Paul’s love and the legacy he has given her: “The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart.”⁶² Lucy’s heart may be relieved, but she deems herself a recipient of unmerited grace in the form of M. Paul. The fealty that Lucy gave to Fate in the form of self-denial, she offers to M. Paul through humble diligence. Rather than presaging a marriage of mutuality, Lucy’s deferential adoration and M. Paul’s jealous domineering more accurately reflect Jane Eyre and Rochester on the eve of Jane’s crucial departure from Thornfield. Likewise, M. Paul’s claim over Lucy, which he names in phrenological and astrological terms—“observe that your forehead is shaped like mine . . . Yes, you were born under my star!—is reminiscent of Louis Moore’s narrative acquisition

⁵⁶ Ibid., 569.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 463.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 569.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 570-571.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 572.

⁶¹ The Christlike association of his surname arguably renders this even more problematic.

⁶² Ibid., 569.

of Shirley Keeldar through poetic idealization.⁶³ Lucy may be at last able to receive love, but she does so by losing herself further into someone else's will.

The one area in which Lucy proactively differentiates herself from M. Paul, her Protestantism versus his Roman Catholicism, does little to offset this balance, as Lucy herself is guilty of the some of the severest crimes she accuses Catholic doctrine of promoting. The first is that of observing others covertly through surveillance, which Lucy tells M. Paul "degrades your own dignity:" "to study the human heart thus, is to banquet secretly and sacrilegiously on Eve's apples."⁶⁴ However, Lucy has well-established herself as an "inoffensive shadow" hovering on the edges of others' lives and drawing interpretations for herself.⁶⁵ When Dr. John first visits the pensionnat, Lucy justifies her ignored position in the room as authorization to gaze unguardedly: "It was not perhaps my business to observe the mystery of his bearing, or search out its origin or aim; but, placed as I was, I could hardly help it."⁶⁶ Lucy may be repelled by Madame Beck and M. Paul's intrusive surveillance in the name of spiritual safeguarding, but she employs similar tactics for her own purposes.

Secondly, when she is pursued by Père Silas as a potential convert from Protestant heresy,⁶⁷ one of Lucy's strongest objections is to the spiritual burdens placed on individuals in service of spreading the "reign of [the] tyrant 'Church'."⁶⁸ She privately declaims:

Out of men's afflictions and affections were forged the rivets of their servitude . . . men were overwrought, and women most murderously sacrificed, and all laid down a world God made pleasant for his creatures' good.⁶⁹

⁶³ Ibid., 425-426.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 424.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 366-367.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 458.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 487-488.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Lucy says she disapproves of Roman Catholicism because it sacrifices, through privation and denial, lives that were meant by God to flourish, yet her own life testifies her guilt of doing this to herself. Despite the staunch maintenance of her Protestant identity,⁷⁰ Lucy's resignation to suffering as Fate's design and renunciation of hope as God's will condition her to further subsume her will to M. Paul's. The school she runs may be a fulfillment of her own wishes, but she inhabits the position as a humble custodian of what has been left in her care, not as one who has claimed her own abilities and agency. The passivity with which Lucy resigns herself to the hand of Fate is thus present in her obsequious gratitude to M. Paul. By construing herself as one acted upon, rather than acting, Lucy forfeits the freedom to live as one meant to flourish instead of forbear.

The hope Lucy borrows from M. Paul, under the influence of which she says "*I could not flag*,"⁷¹ is ultimately relinquished to those readers with "sunny imaginations" who are able to picture "union and a happy succeeding life."⁷² With M. Paul's return from the West Indies deferred in perpetuity, Lucy's "wonderfully changed life" and "relieved heart" are equally displaced. The cloud⁷³ through which Lucy has viewed her life returns and through its overcast gloom, Lucy's final words curtly report the long and prosperous lives granted to Madame Beck, Père Silas, and Madame Walravens, the trio responsible for separating her from M. Paul.⁷⁴ Although Lucy claims that the "sunshine" God grants for some lives goes to "Nature's elect, . . . kind agents of God's kind attributes," her statement that "to the wicked it never comes"⁷⁵ is contradicted by her bitter acknowledgement that even the selfish Madame Walravens is granted a happy ending. By accusing Fate of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 489-490.

⁷¹ Ibid., 571 (*italics in original*).

⁷² Ibid., 573.

⁷³ Following the chapter titled "Sunshine," in which Paulina and Graham Bretton's mutual love is fulfilled, is the chapter titled "Cloud," in which Lucy is "outnumbered" and "worsted" by the machinations of those set on separating M. Paul and herself. See pages 508, 533.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 533.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 506.

indiscriminately blessing some and cursing others, Lucy confirms her self-definition as one for whom “tempestuous blackness overcasts their journey.”⁷⁶ Believing she has no power to affect her life for better or for worse, Lucy acquits herself of the responsibility to live in freedom, choosing instead to accept whatever comes as what she deserves. Thus, by defining herself through powerlessness, Lucy spends her life in fear of every punishing storm. The following section identifies Lucy’s fragmentation as a response to these fears. As a survival technique, the way Lucy fragments her heart reflects her conviction that for a life such as hers, “it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead.”⁷⁷

6.2 Shattering Containment: Lucy Snowe’s Fragmented Heart

Whereas Lucy’s experience of loss and trauma noticeably inform her resolution to avoid tragedy by constraining her agency, Lucy’s persistent repression of feeling is largely rooted in how she perceives her marginal status. Although as an unmarried and unconnected woman who must support herself financially, Lucy unquestionably inhabits the margins of her social environment, it is Lucy’s internalization of that marginalization, rather than explicit societal pressures, that compels her toward fragmentation instead faithful self-construction. The temptation that both Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone struggle against, Lucy Snowe accepts. Convinced that her lack of beauty or wealth permanently alienates her from those who possess them, Lucy assents to the fragmentation she perceives as a requirement of her disenfranchised position. The result is further isolation and pain. Having conceded her agency for fear of loss, Lucy fragments her heart for fear of shame. A look at the emotional and spiritual violence Lucy perpetrates against

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 124.

herself in the name of Reason demonstrates a second way in which *Villette* can be read as a story of hiding from grace, rather than accepting it.

Consonant with Lucy's renunciation of hope is the conviction that her marginal status disqualifies her from connection with others. When faced with circumstances that unsettle her adopted quiescence, Lucy lectures herself on the stringency through which "life must be looked on by such as me."⁷⁸ Her "checked, bridled, disciplined expectation" is the tutored response to her unrelenting "[arguments] with myself on life and its chances, on destiny and her decrees."⁷⁹ The main caveat of her self-restriction is that the inevitable blanks during which she finds herself cut off from fellowship or connection of any kind must be accepted as part of her lot.⁸⁰ Her solitude and confined station are "the result of circumstances, the fiat of fate, a part of my life's lot and—above all—a matter about whose origin no question must ever be asked, for whose painful sequence no murmur ever uttered."⁸¹ As a result, Lucy's efforts to embrace isolation as her fixed position cause her to quell her own relational needs. The result of which, I suggest, is not only psychologically damaging but also a turning away from trust in God.

A potent example of this occurs when Lucy is unexpectedly reunited with her godmother and her godmother's adult son. Though Lucy has known for some time that the "Dr. John" who served the pensionnat was Graham Bretton, whom she had known from childhood, she refrains from identifying herself to him (or him to the reader) until forced to do so. When it is Graham who finds Lucy after her collapse in the storm, Lucy is welcomed and cared for by her godmother and Graham, now residents in Villette.⁸² On the first night of her stay, Lucy offers a prayer, not out of gratitude, but out of fear that she might entertain feelings of attachment.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 283, 268.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Graham is also the kind Englishman who assists Lucy when she first arrives in Labassecour. The devoted attachment Lucy eventually feels for him, is due in no small part to the gratitude she feels for his acts of chivalry, impersonal though they may be. See pages 68-70.

Distraught after weeks of mental anguish during the pensionnat's vacation term, Lucy's sudden change of circumstances—being sheltered by friends who knew her long before her tragedies struck—fills Lucy with the dread of hope, not the peace of companionship. She entreats Reason:

“Do not let me think of them too often, too much, too fondly, . . . let me be content with a temperate draught of this living stream: . . . Oh! would to God! I may be enabled to feel enough sustained by an occasional, amicable intercourse, rare, brief, unengrossing and tranquil: quite tranquil!”

Still repeating this word, I turned to my pillow; and, *still* repeating it, I steeped that pillow with tears.⁸³

In this passage, Lucy cries herself to sleep in terror that she might yearn for happiness or friendship beyond what she considers to be her deserts. Her plea is to be satisfied by “amicable intercourse,” rather than be desperate for “tender solace.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, Lucy qualifies the relief she feels at finding “I still had friends,” by downplaying the Brettons’ capacity to care for or understand her.⁸⁵ Lucy keeps her distress to herself because “the details of what I had undergone belonged to a portion of my existence in which I never expected my godmother to take a share.”⁸⁶ Whether or not her godmother could ultimately offer the compassion Lucy craves remains unknown because Lucy preemptively excludes herself from intimacy rather than risk disappointment. Her withheld confidence is not the reserve of a private person but the self-defeating restraint of one who believes she deserves to be alone.⁸⁷

Another aspect of Lucy’s self-harming commitment to fragmentation can be seen in how she sacrifices her feelings. Whereas St John Rivers considers human affection a barrier to salvation, Lucy Snowe sees herself as barred from human

⁸³ Ibid., 206.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 209.

⁸⁷ Lucy later describes her “insane inconsistency” of evading encounters with those who have identified themselves as friends. Desperate to see M. Paul, “choking panic” prevents her from going out to him. See page 447.

affection, and thus required to bury the feelings that have no right to exist. This is seen most clearly in her turmoil over her attraction to Graham. Though Lucy assures her reader that she does not entertain “warmer feelings” for Graham, the lengths she goes in order to extinguish her “deeply-honouring attachment” for him leave the reader in little doubt that Lucy has fallen in love.⁸⁸ And whilst Lucy recognizes that Graham feels only disinterested brotherly kindness for her, and thus would not return her love if ever offered,⁸⁹ Lucy’s submission to Reason is conveyed in images of death that indicate Lucy is not just facing reality—she is breaking her heart. Lucy equates her feelings at parting with Graham after her recovery period at his mother’s home to “the criminal on the scaffold [that] longs for the axe to descend.”⁹⁰ She wishes “the pang over,” rather than prolonged.⁹¹ When the axe does fall, and Graham returns her to the pensionnat, Lucy allows herself “no time to think or feel” and swallows her “tears as if they had been wine.”⁹² Lucy forbids herself to feel the grief of being separated from Graham’s kindness and attention.

Yet at the same time that Lucy stifles her tears over Graham’s departure, she also smothers her delight over his promise to alleviate her loneliness by writing letters. She describes Reason pursuing her, “coming stealthily up to me through the twilight,” and commanding to “grant no expansion to feeling—give holiday to no single faculty: dally with no friendly exchange: foster no genial intercommunion.”⁹³ Lucy’s bitter allegiance to Reason suppresses her hope that Graham will keep his promise and her hope that she might be free to write him back: “But if I feel, may I

⁸⁸ Ibid., 294. Thackeray’s criticism of this fact is frequently quoted in Brontë scholarship: “Villette is rather vulgar—I don’t make my good women ready to fall in love with two men at once, and Miss Brontë would be very angry with me and cry fie if I did.” See “Thackeray to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, 25-28 March 1853,” in Allott, *Critical Heritage*, 198.

⁸⁹ *Villette*, 420.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 263-264.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 265.

⁹³ Ibid.

never express?’—‘Never!’ declared Reason.”⁹⁴ Unlike Jane Eyre’s declarations to Rochester and Caroline Helstone’s rhetorical injunctions to the men of Yorkshire, Lucy Snowe’s voice of resistance is used against herself. Within her debates between Reason and Feeling, the empowered voice, the one that refuses to be silenced or ignored, is Reason; Lucy’s feelings continually concede defeat to its “savage, ceaseless blows.”⁹⁵ Even the brief bouts of happiness Lucy permits herself when receiving Graham’s polite, friendly notes, are expressed through the language of pain:

If there are words and wrongs like knives, whose deep-inflicted lacerations never heal—cutting injuries and insults of serrated and poison-dripping edge—so, too, there are consolations of tone too fine for the ear not fondly and for ever to retain their echo.⁹⁶

These invoked lacerations that never heal overshadow the passages associated with Lucy’s correspondence with Graham, most strongly represented by what Lucy inflicts upon herself. In the end, however, Lucy’s efforts to bury her feelings are graphically literalized.

Seeing Graham’s growing affection for Paulina Home, and fearing that her treasured letters might be read by M. Paul’s prying eyes, Lucy seals the letters in a jar and buries them under a tree; with them, she also buries her grief and hope. Her grief is interred, “wrapped it in its winding-sheet.” Of her dead hope, she says: “I closed the eyes of my dead, covered its face, and composed its limbs with great calm.”⁹⁷ Lucy’s funeral rites for the grief she no longer wants to feel and the hope that died “following an agony so lingering, death ought to be welcome”⁹⁸ are performed as a matter of course, albeit a painful one. Whereas Jane Eyre, a penniless governess, considers it blasphemy to deny the love she feels for her wealthy employer Edward Rochester, averring that “we are for ever sundered—and

⁹⁴ Ibid., 266.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 343, 340.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 340.

yet, while I breathe and think, I must love him,”⁹⁹ Lucy Snowe, on the other hand, calls her affection for Graham Bretton “a mortal absurdity.”¹⁰⁰ Unrequited though her love may be, Lucy is considerably less divided socially, relationally, or economically from Graham than is Jane from Rochester. Nonetheless, even the intimation that she might feel love for Graham alerts in her a “sense of shame and fear of ridicule.”¹⁰¹ Lucy sacrifices her feelings in an attempt to appease Reason, which tells her that she “was born only to work for a piece of bread, to await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond.”¹⁰²

It is Reason, Lucy is convinced, that forbids her to “look up, or smile, or hope,” requiring her instead to remain “crushed, cowed, broken-in, and broken-down.”¹⁰³ Lucy’s Reason, however, is not an abstract force working against her, anymore than is Fate. It is Lucy herself who chooses to sacrifice her feelings and invalidate her desires for connection. Believing herself unqualified for self-fulfillment or mutuality in relationship, Lucy sublimates “the strong native bent of [her] heart,” below a surface persona that appears “regulated, more equable, quieter on the surface” than what she truly feels.¹⁰⁴ And indeed, this is what she does in the narration of her story. The passions Lucy feels, the affections she forms, and the hopes she cherishes are all sublimated by narration that deflects, undermines, and hides what is really being felt. The result is that the reader is left to feel on Lucy’s behalf what she refuses to name. Nowhere is this truer than at the novel’s close, when Lucy fragments her own story’s conclusion. Rather than naming the grief of M. Paul’s

⁹⁹ *Jane Eyre*, 204.

¹⁰⁰ *Villette*, 294.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 241. Lucy does little to hide the fact that she loved Graham when she was fourteen and he was sixteen. Seeing once again a portrait from Graham’s youth that Lucy, as a girl would climb onto a stool in order take down from the wall and examine up close, causes adult Lucy to remark to the reader that it is, “a most pleasant face to look at, especially for those claiming a right to that youth’s affections—parents, for instance, or sisters. Any romantic little school-girl might almost have loved it in its frame.” See page 197.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

death at sea or permitting the joy of a happy ending, Lucy interrupts her narration and relinquishes control to the reader:

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life.¹⁰⁵

Lucy buries her grief again, this time under the “more equable,” quiet surface of her optimistic readers’ imaginations. By so doing, the tragedy of her loss is portrayed as another inevitable blank in her life’s lot, “for whose painful sequence no murmur” may be uttered.¹⁰⁶ Instead of crying out for relief or rescue, Lucy ultimately forfeits her agency as narrator and fragments her story by leaving the conclusion in the reader’s hands—a final act of resignation.

However, although the turmoil Lucy undergoes through repressing her feelings, shattering her hope, and acquiescing to isolation reflects a lack of grace experienced as containment or right relation, *Villette* can be read as a liberative text in two important ways. The first, as explored thus far, is by showing that living self-sacrificially out of fear of being hurt does not guard against suffering or protect against tragedy. Rather, Lucy spends her life “overwrought,” with her feelings “murderously sacrificed,” yet in “a world God made pleasant for his creatures’ good.”¹⁰⁷ Without being constructed in grace towards healthy interdependence, Lucy experiences her life as “a hopeless desert: tawny sands, with no green fields, no palm-tree, no well in view.”¹⁰⁸ Lacking any hope for grace beyond that of relief through death, Lucy suffers a “despairing resignation to reach . . . the end of all things earthly.”¹⁰⁹ In this way, *Villette* reflects a feminist theological view of women’s need to experience grace embodied as flourishing in the present. Lucy’s

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 573.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 310.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 487-488.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 179.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

internalization of her marginalized existence as divine appointment that must not be questioned,¹¹⁰ resonates as capitulation to worldly definition rather than faithful self-construction. Thus, it is possible to recognize a portrait of Lucy Snowe in Serene Jones's definition of unfaithfulness:

Unfaith means living without the adorning glory of sanctifying grace, which gives one's life definition and integrity. It also means being bereft of God's justifying grace of forgiveness, which gives one courage to seek just relations. . . . to live in a state of unfaithfulness is to be a fragmented self who knows neither the promise of agency nor the hope of just relation.¹¹¹

Living her life in hiding, Lucy buries her God-given talents—the promises of agency and hopes of just relation—instead of investing them through claiming wholeness. Read thus, *Villette* portrays the suffering of life spent in need of grace and negatively points towards a vision of female flourishing.

This does not mean, however, that there is no grace to be found in *Villette*. Although *Villette* is fundamentally concerned with suppression, Lucy's experiences of fragmentation and fusion communicate a liberative message when read in light of testimony's healing role as grace for experiences of trauma. As a heroine, Lucy buries her feelings and accepts, rather than resists injustices. As a narrator, however, Lucy's fragmented heart and shattered hope are "pulled into the light of day and affirmed as a reality worthy of sustained lamentation and possible redress"—Serene Jones's description of narrating trauma towards recovery.¹¹² Throughout her story, Lucy describes society's inability or unwillingness to comprehend the suffering of an isolated, dependent woman. "The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food," she says, but to speak of "going mad from solitary confinement" is "a subject too intricate for examination, too abstract for popular comprehension."¹¹³ What is unspeakable for Lucy Snowe—her feelings of self-annihilating doubt and desolation—become

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 310.

¹¹¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 113.

¹¹² Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 32.

¹¹³ *Villette*, 317.

manifest through her narrative. The pain that Lucy hides from those for whom it would be incomprehensible, is externalized through her narrative, inviting empathy from the reader.

Although Lucy's trauma and deepest sorrows may not be detailed or explained, they are made comprehensible through the telling of her story. Such a dynamic reflects Rowan Williams's observation that "the truth with which the poetic text is concerned is not verification, but manifestation. That is to say that the text displays or even embodies the reality with which it is concerned simply by witness or 'testimony.'"¹¹⁴ Heather Walton cites Williams's remarks on the revelatory role of literature in order to make the further point that "imagination is transformative and that poetry creates change."¹¹⁵ Aligning with the feminist theological assertion that women who have internalized the messages of patriarchy must "be allowed to cry out and to lament in concrete and detailed ways the experiences suffered,"¹¹⁶ the testimony of Lucy Snowe in *Villette* manifests a type of female suffering unremarked by society. Lucy's lament may not be as direct as Caroline Helstone's or as radical as Jane Eyre's, but when seen as a form of being heard into speech,¹¹⁷ *Villette* testifies to suffering in ways that create a potential story of recovery through the act of its telling. As Serene Jones explains, it is only when imagination is capacitated towards integration of past pain and present life, "that the trauma survivor can begin to hope and to act in personally empowering ways."¹¹⁸ By inviting readers to bear witness as Lucy buries her grief and shatters her heart, Brontë's novel honors the experiences of women who live without hope of being heard, and whose laments, therefore, remain unvoiced.

¹¹⁴ Rowan Williams, summarizing Paul Ricoeur's discussion of the hermeneutics of revelation. See "Trinity and Revelation," 199.

¹¹⁵ Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 73.

¹¹⁶ Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education*, 58.

¹¹⁷ Morton, *The Journey is Home*, 202-210.

¹¹⁸ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 62.

Conclusion

The “anti-Christian” labels that have hovered around Charlotte Brontë’s texts since they were first published still in many ways dictate how their religious material is read. Interpreted as poetic allusion, satirical caricature, or cultural convention, the Christian worldview and religious conviction within Brontë’s novels have been largely disregarded as such. What has been overlooked as a result is an awareness of how the feminist impulse of Brontë’s narratives—what her female protagonists assert about their equality and claim in regard to their desire for wholeness—is grounded in faith. Moreover, as I have sought to show, the faith that empowers Jane Eyre to leave Rochester when he objectifies her, that enables Jane to escape St John when he attempts to appropriate her, that later calls Jane back to reunite with Rochester as an equal, that assures Caroline Helstone of her worth regardless of her relationship to men, and that Lucy Snowe resists for fear of living in hope, is neither a concession to mere dogmatic principle nor a flight to pantheistic pagan spirituality, as some have argued. Rather, the faith that permeates and defines the liberative imagination of Charlotte Brontë’s fiction is, emphatically, Christian. What a feminist theological reading of Brontë’s work brings to light is that, contrary to what seems to be a widespread assumption, one does not need to depart from Christian orthodoxy to provide grounds for women’s need to experience grace as self-construction, healthy interdependence, and equality in intimacy. The journeys of Brontë’s heroines affirm that God does not desire nor require women’s sacrifice of selfhood for the sake of relational connection, economic security, or spiritual blessing. What these narratives uphold instead is that it is a woman’s responsibility (and men’s as well) to discern and obediently respond to God’s will, even if, or especially when, it does not conform to the roles and behaviors that society dictates. More particularly, it was suggested that in *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*,

and *Villette* faithfulness is recognizable in how a woman embodies her grace-enabled freedom. How have we come to this conclusion?

This thesis has attempted to show how Brontë's novels anticipate the concerns of feminist theology and, at the same time, how a feminist theological reading of Brontë lessens the gap between what feminist literary critics have praised and problematized about her fiction and what religious critics have questioned or endorsed. In order to do this, we first considered the relationship between the feminist theological task of using women's experience as a source for theology and the spiritual and social reframing accomplished by female writers of the nineteenth-century. What we found is that the nineteenth-century women who wrote publicly about their experiences and concerns challenged the idea of the masculine experience as normative. What feminist theologians identified a century later when they turned to women's literature as a theological resource was that gendered experience plays a significant role in how faith is communicated and lived. We therefore examined feminist theology's proposals for ways in which conceptions of sin and grace might be reformulated in order to reflect a fuller picture of the human/divine relationship with reference to gender and socialization. We were able, then, in our readings of Brontë's three novels, to juxtapose feminist theology's proposal that feminine sin may be better understood as sins of passivity rather than pride and that grace can be recognized as a restoration to wholeness with Brontë's depictions of women's spiritual and social quests. This comparison highlighted, on the one hand, how what feminist literary critics have celebrated as Brontë's rejection of the patriarchal institution of Christianity and what they have claimed about the novels' failure to fulfill their feminist trajectories might be read much less dualistically from a feminist theological vantage point. This is because perceived dichotomies between earthly happiness and eternal salvation collapse when grace is embodied as flourishing in the present through right relation and containment. On the other hand, a feminist theological reading challenges a tendency in scholarship on Brontë to interpret her characters' adherence to Christian precepts in such a way that the patriarchal construal of self-assertion as prideful and self-sacrifice as

virtuous are reinforced. By identifying how traditional theology's masculine bias has often required women to confess the wrong sins and thus overlook the sin of failing to take responsibility for self-actualization, feminist theology reframes interpretations that judge Brontë's heroines as faithful when they deny their needs and as selfish when they assert their boundaries.

Due to the breadth of Brontë scholarship and the every-diversifying field of feminist theology, there are, naturally, paths of inquiry that this thesis could not undertake. One of these approaches is to look specifically at Brontë's narrative engagement with the religious controversies of her day. A number of scholars have explored Brontë's participation in and skepticism about the denominational debates that threatened the future and stability of the Church of England during the mid-nineteenth century. Unfortunately, there was not space in this thesis to examine Brontë's critical engagement with certain Calvinist, Methodist, Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic beliefs and practices. A feminist theological investigation of the religious positions that Brontë's novels explicitly denounce, satirize, or call into question is likely to yield further insight into her portrayal of women's spiritual formation and the forces that hinder it. Likewise, this thesis was unable to explore Brontë's prolific use of biblical material. This is a growing field of Brontë scholarship, which also includes typographical readings such as Keith Jenkins' recent publication, *Charlotte Brontë's Atypical Typology*. Work such as Jenkins's, which locates feminist themes in Brontë's transformations of biblical topoi and texts, suggests that there is much more to discover about how Brontë's use of scripture may, from the perspectives of feminist hermeneutics or biblical theology, affirm the proto-feminist impulse of her novels in even stronger measure.

Additionally, although this thesis remained grounded largely in the core texts of feminist theological development, the biases inherent in these early writings, especially pertaining to race, gender identity and socio-economic status, obviously have a bearing on the foregoing interpretations. By focusing on the feminist theological concerns most related to Charlotte Brontë's Western, white, middle-class context, this thesis has not engaged feminist theology's growing focus on

globalization and the issues it raises. Thus, a reading of Brontë's work that takes into account contemporary feminist theological discourse on race, ethnicity, and culture might, when drawn alongside post-colonial readings of Brontë, for example, reveal the extent to which theology in her novels is inflected by issues of class and privilege.

The primary hope of this project has been to invite further consideration of the liberative imagination evinced in Brontë's depiction of the struggles inherent to navigating faith and femaleness within patriarchal culture. Whilst these novels are neither feminist utopias nor religious tracts, as *sacred stories* that envisage female empowerment and faithful flourishing, they contribute to the feminist theological task of curating narratives that foster women's ability to imagine and thus claim wholeness. And although each novel presents a markedly different picture of women's experience, at the center of each is the issue of a woman's right to interpret—whether that is interpreting God's will, the scriptural text, her desires, her rights, or others' intentions. So, for example, Jane Eyre's journey is driven by her commitment to discerning God's calling and interpreting her own heart. For Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar, who, more than any other Brontë heroines, explicitly discuss their interpretive rights, the eclipsing of their voices by male interpreters typifies the novel's portrayal of women's experience of marginalization in a society that prefers they be seen and not heard. In the case of Lucy Snowe, although she is fervently averse to interpreting her life or God's will with any sense of hope, she is arguably, the female Brontë protagonist who wields her right to interpret most liberatively. This is because in her role as narrator, Lucy's right to interpret her own story is wielded as a power against a Fate she believes to be insurmountable. Lucy may not be able to change what happens to her story but she can choose how it is told. Read in this way, Lucy Snowe's unreliability—what she hides from the reader, lies about, selectively reveals and suppresses—ultimately functions as a type of defiant agency in the face of what she believes to be her predestination to isolation, loss and suffering. Through claiming interpretative agency, Lucy Snowe is able, therefore, to transmute her experiences into something

that allows for imagined alternatives. Thus, through the depiction of female protagonists who assert their right to interpret their lives, the literature of Charlotte Brontë invites her readers more liberatively to imagine and inhabit their own.

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