The Pleasures of Submission: Jane Eyre and the Production of the Text
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THE PLEASURES OF SUBMISSION:  
JANE EYRE AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE TEXT

BY BETTE LONDON

Can there be a great artist without poetry? ...  
Miss Austen being, as you say, without "sentiment," without poetry, maybe is sensible, real (more real than true), but she cannot be great.

—"C. Bell" to G. H. Lewes, 18 January 1848¹

A woman without poetry! The idea is a paradox; for what single subject has ever been found so fraught with poetical associations as woman herself?

—Mrs. Ellis, The Daughters of England²

Urged by G. H. Lewes to school herself to a proper appreciation of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte (in the words cited above) resists his "strange lecture," maintaining her faith in her own conception of poetical genius. One week earlier, she had written to thank Lewes for his "generous" review of Jane Eyre, and had there declared her intention of submitting to his literary authority: "I mean to observe your warning about being careful how I undertake new works. . . . If I ever do write another book, I think I will have nothing of what you call 'melodrama;' I think so, but I am not sure. I think, too, I will endeavour to follow the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen's 'mild eyes,' 'to finish more and be more subdued;' but neither am I sure of that."³ Couched in the gendered tropes of modesty, Bronte's declaration betrays a subdued resistance to the pattern of properly regulated women's writing; for her qualified assent to the approved aesthetic ("I think. . . . I think") articulates the space for thinking differently ("but I am not sure. . . . neither am I sure of that"). Continuing her letter, Bronte exploits this space opened up by her "submission" to voice her claims for writing's ungovernable disposition—claims that would make the scene of writing a site of revolution, a place where "old" and "carefully-elaborated" ideas give way to the sudden creation and adoption of "new ones": "When authors write best, or, at least when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them, which becomes their master—which will have its own way—putting out of
view all behests but its own, dictating certain words, and insisting on their being used, whether vehement or measured in their nature; new-moulding characters, giving unthought of turns to incidents, rejecting carefully-elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones” (Gaskell, 336). Removed from the sphere of gendered deference, Bronte’s authoritative claims would seem, here at least, to grant her own writing an unqualified position; but Bronte’s rhetoric remains doubled, exposing, in contrast to Ellis’s “woman without poetry,” the paradox of a woman with poetry. For the original productions of true creativity are accomplished, in her representation, through the authors’ complete submission to some mastering “influence”—an influence, produced by writing itself, “which becomes their master—which will have its own way.”

For Bronte, then, as for Jane Eyre, liberty can be articulated only as new servitude, a choice of masters. Moreover, her eccentric claims to personal artistic authority inevitably produce renewed docility. Thus Bronte “troubles” Lewes with another letter in response to his censure of her “crude remarks on the subject of the ‘influence,’” and she submits once again to his “correction”: “well, I accept your definition of what the effects of that influence should be; I recognise the wisdom of your rules for its regulation” (Gaskell, 337). Where she maintains her difference, as in the continuation of this letter in the lines quoted here as epigraph (“Miss Austen . . . cannot be great”), she brings herself around to the requisite submissiveness; “I submit to your anger, which I have now excited,” she writes at the conclusion of the letter. And, as if in compensation for her impassioned, opinionated eloquence, she promises a course of chastening discipline: “Nevertheless, I will, when I can (I do not know when that will be, as I have no access to a circulating library), diligently peruse all Miss Austen’s works, as you recommend” (Gaskell, 338).

Bronte’s contention with Lewes over the subject of the great artist—the artist conceived, not incidentally, as feminine—engages, on both sides, with the culturally available discourses on proper feminine conduct: submission, regulation, rules, self-government, influence, counsel, discipline.4 Lewes’s warnings against “melodrama”—like his warnings against “poetry” and “sentiment” (implicit in his recommendation of Austen, a writer with “no eloquence, none of the ravishing enthusiasm of poetry”)—reproduce familiar strictures on feminine singularity and self-display.5 Bron-
te’s counterclaims—for individual genius, passion, and poetry—are covered, in her own response, by the deferential, regulated writing through which she positions herself. Her objections to Austen, moreover (“more real than true”), would, ironically enough, when seen in the light of other cultural discourses, seem to return us to the properly positioned gendered spheres that are transposed in this representation of Austen’s work. For as Mrs. Ellis—that great popularizer of nineteenth-century domestic ideology—suggests, where man must sacrifice the poetry of his nature for the demands of the real, woman finds her identity in the true, in the “poetry” that constitutes “the sweetest and loveliest tendencies of a truly feminine mind.”6 In this debate over the place of poetry in art, “woman” can thus be invoked for contradictory understandings of the governing terms.

I want to argue that in the space of the unthinkable—Bronte’s “great artist without poetry” and Ellis’s “woman without poetry”—two radically opposed ideologies strangely intersect. Proceeding from opposite definitions of poetry—poetry as passionate self-expression (Bronte) versus poetry as the inscription of selflessness (Ellis)—these discourses meet to define a contested subject, the middle term Lewes supplies: the artist as woman, the woman writing. In their efforts to claim this subject, both discourses unveil the unfixed entities—“woman,” “artist,” and “writing”—they attempt to pin down. Bronte’s discourse, like Ellis’s, betrays the slippage that surrounds these terms—the slippage by which the writing subject (the woman writing) produces the subject of writing (the woman written about). For the poetry that accrues to woman must be understood in the discursive space where woman’s artistic productions and the cultural production of woman share a common ground.

Bronte’s exploration of this subject, then, the informing fiction of Jane Eyre, reproduces contradictions that structure the dominant domestic ideologies. And while Ellis’s articulation of the poetry of women’s lives (a rubric that motivates the entire battery of attributes that define woman’s secondary existence) would seem to have no converse with Jane Eyre’s passionate plea for the self’s primacy, the distinction between these discourses is not so absolutely clear.7 For the woman’s “life” Jane Eyre indites (the novel as autobiography) represents the mutually constitutive functions of these disparate systems of belief. It represents the means by which the novel comes simultaneously to authorize and regulate women’s
fantasies of self-identity. Appropriating the strategies of the conduct book, *Jane Eyre* deploys these means in the interests of a new production only superficially antithetical to the paradigms of domestic regulation.

Nancy Armstrong has cogently argued for the cultural work the novel performs: “Along with other kinds of writing characteristic of the nineteenth century, domestic fiction transformed this fantasy of self-production into the procedures designed to produce men and women fit to occupy the institutions of an industrialized society.”

This process, consolidated in the work of Jane Austen, produces Bronte’s counter text, where the fantasy of self-production is reactivated in the intensely private spaces the novel claims. But the fantasy Bronte’s text deploys is reconstructed through the work of writing to replicate cultural norms—to produce desire as domestic fiction rather than that fiction’s antithesis. Thus Mrs. Ellis’s “poetry”—the definition of woman as one “whose highest duty is so often to suffer, and be still”—finds its way into Bronte’s poetic self-entitlement; what Bronte does, in effect, is to transform the duty of silent suffering into the site of pleasure and passionate investment. Such an understanding, however, of the socially constructed position of *Jane Eyre* raises serious questions about the reception of the text, and in particular, about the place it occupies in recent writings as archetypal feminist document. It is to these questions that this essay addresses itself.

For one group of Victorian readers, *Jane Eyre* represented a pre-eminently dangerous text, “the personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit,” all the more alarming because exhibited “from that prestige of principle and self-control which is liable to dazzle the eye too much.” For such readers, Jane Eyre (both character and text) displayed a set of features the very opposite of those promoted by the conduct book, whose ultimate product, Armstrong suggests, was the “ardently undazzling creature.” Bronte’s novel, by contrast, stands as a primer for rebellion and “ungodly discontent”—rebellion figured in the spectacle of feminine misconduct. Invoking the horror of woman writing herself—of woman producing an unauthorized text—*Jane Eyre* enters this Victorian discourse as a singular instance of exhibitionism, of feminine self-display.

In recent years, for much the same reason, feminist critics have claimed the novel for their own—reading in it the “heretic
narrative" of a subversive feminine identity; it has become, Gayatri Spivak argues, a "cult text of feminism," and as her explanation intimates, the terms of current valorization (Jane Eyre as "psycho-biography of the militant female subject") are largely the same as those of Victorian outrage. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who have so notably contributed to Jane Eyre's feminist entitlement, make this connection quite explicit, locating the source of Victorian horror in the novel's "rebellious feminism." Citing nineteenth-century reviewers like the one quoted here, they suggest, "And perhaps they, rather than more recent critics, were correct in their response to the book." For Spivak, this exclusive focus on the enfirnishment of the "female subject" binds the feminist project to predetermined conservative ends—to the reproduction of bourgeois individualism as it is already constituted in Victorian culture as the property right of men. Representing such a project as the achievement of Jane Eyre, Spivak goes on to detail the class and race oppression that underwrites this investment in the (female) individual as sole site of revolution, independence, and parity. But perhaps a more fundamental question needs to be posed: who or what constitutes the militant female subject produced by Jane Eyre?

For if, as a new orthodoxy would have it, the production of Jane Eyre marks "The Creation of a Feminist Myth," we might put to it the question Teresa de Lauretis puts to Oedipus, the archetypal myth of man: "But whose desire is it that speaks, and whom does that desire address?" Jane Eyre may re-solve the riddle of Oedipus by substituting "woman" for "man," but the feminine subject it produces (as speaker of the story and object of its address) remains the construction of masculine ideology—ideology inscribed in the very conditions of narrative. For the novel's field of vision organizes experience along a trajectory very different from that of liberating psychobiography and to very different effect. Instead of the exhilaration of freedom, the novel offers the pleasures of submission—submission to the text. And instead of the self-conception of "the militant female subject," we encounter the production of "woman"—a social and cultural construct.

Jane Eyre, I want to argue, represents as much a study in subjection as in subjecthood. Its autobiographical mechanisms work to document and produce the docile body approved for Victorian womanhood, a body organized for social use: to serve, to suffer, to sacrifice, to (silently) obey. Within the structure of the narrative,
this subject is engendered through the disciplinary gaze, and narrative itself becomes the agent of a self-surveillance that exposes and corrects the woman’s irregular traits: the marks of the child, the criminal, the ill, and insane. These poses of feminine deviancy constitute the other side of approved femininity, making up the image repertoire from which Jane draws for her own self-presentation and the presentation of other female “exemplars” (Helen Burns, Adela, Bertha Rochester). Occupying each of these positions at different (and overlapping) points in the narrative, Jane performs “the condition of woman” as it is culturally understood.

While some critics have isolated Jane’s moments of rebelliousness to locate a feminist argument in figures of militant subjecthood, I believe such moments must be read contextually. From this perspective, these moments appear framed within a regulating narrative from and for which they are produced. For with all its social protest, the novel repeatedly inscribes texts within texts that demonstrate the complicity of narrative in the work of regulating conduct. These texts point to the conditions that produce Jane Eyre itself. In a strategy, for example, that autobiography typically replicates, Jane repeatedly inscribes herself as the reader of her own case history. But as these scenes suggest, this type of self-inscription serves conservative interests, positioning Jane in her culturally prescribed place.

The fiction of writing one’s story for oneself thus proves in Jane Eyre a dubious base for claims to autonomous identity; for the structure of self-interrogation upon which it depends identifies Jane’s narrative project with the instruments of coercive constraint. Thus at one point Jane interrogates herself in a dialogue that could be lifted wholesale out of a contemporary conduct book. In the authorized manner, she casts herself as criminal: her crime—the violation of the first rule of feminine propriety—to be a woman who loves without the sanction of the prior declaration of the man. Having “arraigned” her soul on charges of unlawful love, Jane “passes judgment”; mimicking the voice of domestic ideology, she condemns the truant to compose a chastening portrait of itself. In this instance, as in so many others, Jane (re)produces herself in precisely the image her culture mandates, “Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain.” The exercise is, in her own words (words that comprise a familiar conduct book refrain), a “course of wholesome discipline” to which she “forces” her feelings to submit (191). The visual icon Jane produces merely repeats what the...
narrative effects: the humiliation of Jane through subjection to undesired and unflattering attention: “‘You,’ I said, ‘a favourite with Mr. Rochester? You gifted with the power of pleasing him? You of importance to him in any way? Go! Your folly sickens me’” (190). Jane’s self-flagellation reenacts the scenes of punishment her earlier narrative recounts: to discipline a rebellious spirit, she makes a spectacle of herself.

This scene highlights the central pattern of Jane’s narrative—a movement not from bondage to freedom but through increasingly powerful and interiorized forms of discipline. In the self-replicating structures of narrative, the disciplinary scenes of childhood are replayed in the theater of the adult self, gaining in intensity what they lose in corporality. In effect, the success of the narrative can be charted by the degree to which scenes of corporal punishment have been all but erased, replaced by narrative’s correctional facility. The progressive restructuring of the novel’s “beating scenes” elucidates this narrative project, for Jane comes increasingly to represent not only the child being beaten but also the punishing agency. This doubled position is facilitated by her place as observer, the final position Freud uncovers in his discussion of beating fantasies. As the one “looking on,” this subject proves coextensive with that of autobiography: simultaneously the subject producing the narrative and the subject (object) of the narrative produced; simultaneously an interested party and a disinterested chronicler. In this picture, autobiography appears anything but liberating; rather, it exploits in preeminent fashion narrative’s disciplinary possibilities. For autobiography trades on making a spectacle of one’s private (earlier) life, as Jane Eyre amply demonstrates.

Jane Eyre’s autobiographical subject would seem, then, to require further inquiry, particularly as it is understood in relation to texts of cultural regulation and legitimacy. A product of textual division, the “militant female subject” has no independent existence. “She” exists as a function of the system that both unleashes and absorbs her militancy. In the novelistic construction of her life, the younger Jane who produces the unorthodox texts of rebellion is already, in the voice of an older Jane, an authorized production invoked for narrative display. Writing her autobiography, Jane commits herself to culturally prescribed forms. She reconstructs her story in the familiar guise of the cautionary tale: the “unregenerate and undisciplined spirit” of her youth is invoked to be over-written,
to be constrained in a moral fable and all the more effectively edited out of the final account. Jane’s narrative can be read, then, to serve the same sentence as the self-effacing portrait that she paints: a course of wholesome discipline to teach herself her place.

Presenting what is avowedly not “a regular autobiography” (115), Jane’s narrative offers promise of original production. But the literary license she allows herself merely highlights the licensing and regulation of her life. Given free rein, Jane fashions her tale from scenes of disciplining and punishment, and if the ensuing production proves irregular, it may be because it reveals the unwholesome pleasure to be derived from this “wholesome” constraint. Jane’s writing does not liberate the self or challenge the terms of its structuring; rather, it lends to discipline a new intimacy, enabling it to penetrate to the smallest details of everyday life. It thus appropriates for the disciplinary apparatus the realm of experience culturally coded as feminine: “the minute and particular observance of all those trifles which fill up the sum of human happiness or misery.” If the Daughters of England are taught that “the whole law of woman’s life is a law of love,” Jane Eyre pursues this commonplace into territories of new meaning. But it remains open to question whether the novel deploys this more enfranchised love—replete with passion, romance, and poetry—to subvert cultural paradigms or to perfect the subject’s repression.

Jane Eyre, it might be argued, does not so much transcend the logic of the conduct book as exploit its possibilities—its understanding, for example, of (sexual) identity as a function of power and position. Seen in this light, the novel’s autobiographical innovations cannot offer a totally new model for writing women. Rather, such critical constructs must themselves be questioned. For while the idea of “writing the self”—giving it expression and life—offers an attractive literary paradigm and an empowering political position, Jane’s narrative production can perhaps better be understood in terms more in keeping with domestic ideology’s structures of self-government. It might be understood as composing the self—in all senses of the word: constituting it; assembling its parts; arranging and distributing its features; adjusting and quieting it. As in Jane’s exercise in portrait painting, self-composition produces, in her own words, “a decent calm” (191).

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault argues that in the nineteenth century, disciplinary channels “inculcated docility and produced delinquency by the same mechanisms.” The rebellious or
“delinquent” Jane that feminist critics have so exclusively privileged is, I want to argue, a product of the same system, reinforced by narrative, that produces Jane’s conventional femininity. Jane’s outspoken self-assertion (in her speeches to Mrs. Reed, St. John Rivers, and especially Mr. Rochester) is produced as masochism’s excess: the effect of scrupulous observance of a position of silent self-abnegation. One of Jane’s editorial comments articulates this process. “I know no medium,” she explains towards the end of her narrative, between “absolute submission and determined revolt”: “I have always faithfully observed the one, up to the very moment of bursting, sometimes with volcanic vehemence, into the other” (426). Jane’s much touted “equality” speech—her passionate defense of herself to Rochester (“Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings . . .” [281])—perfectly fits this model. It comes as the culmination and necessary consequence of Jane’s enforced self-suppression, her performed automatism. Having declared herself content to feast on the crumbs scattered by Mr. Rochester (“to taste but of the crumbs he scattered to stray and stranger birds like me was to feast genially” [273]), Jane is empowered to speak only by reaching the limits of this performance, only when Rochester, having taken everything else away, would snatch from her lips even her “morsel of bread,” her “drop of living water” (281). The sequence of events immediately preceding her declaration—in fact, the entire sequence following Rochester’s arrival at Thornfield—traces Jane’s schooling in silent submission, an education that leaves Jane practically grovelling. Having learned to suffer and be still (“All I had now to do was to obey him in silence” [273]), her outburst, when it comes, comes as the inevitable product of this position. Jane’s delinquency and her docility, then, do not represent separable options—alternative positions of identification; rather, they make up interlocking components of a cultural continuum.

Far from giving vent to the subversive sentiments of an “undisciplined spirit,” Jane’s revolutionary outbursts can be seen as the production of an over-disciplined body. Moreover, in the case under consideration, Jane’s impassioned self-expression constitutes more of a command performance instigated by Rochester than some spontaneous overflow of authentic female feelings. For Jane speaks the very text Rochester seeks to elicit, the text Rochester demands as the condition for his declaration of commitment. The revolution—
ary possibilities embodied in Jane’s act of resistance are thus de-activated even before Rochester’s formal proposal retroactively authorizes Jane’s utterance. For Jane’s speech—and the feelings it articulates—are, in effect, produced by Mr. Rochester and by the cultural paradigm embodied in his mastery. Even Jane’s love is not authentically hers; when before leaving Rochester she explains, “I looked at my love: that feeling which was my master’s—which he had created” (324), she perhaps speaks truer than she knows. For her love is conditioned by the scenarios Rochester orchestrates to make Jane’s love story replicate his own.

This understanding of Jane’s ideological positioning does not leave much space for a feminist revolutionary program grounded in her acts or utterances, in a reading of Jane as proto-feminist. As I have tried to demonstrate, the militant female subject, Jane Eyre, speaks more to the desire of certain feminist critics than to the novel’s cultural or textual effects. And feminist criticism might do well to investigate this desire itself. For to reengage the terms of Victorian criticism, I would like to suggest that the desire to fix Jane as the source of militant feminism represents, for the modern critic, one of the preeminent dangers of the text; it is to be dazzled by the spectacle of Jane’s (controlled) rebelliousness. This danger rivals that of uncritically accepting the masochistic investments the narrative projects: the two positions constitute the same threat.

If, instead, one reads Jane Eyre as a text that performs its own cultural complicity, one requires a feminist discourse that can interrogate the text’s representation of the female subject. And here feminist film theory may provide a useful framework. With its attention to the construction of feminine subjectivity and the possibility of female spectatorship, with its sensitivity to the seduction of the image and the structuring power of the look, with its posing of problems of identification as questions of positionality, feminist film theory offers a new angle on Jane’s problematic subject/object-hood. If as Laura Mulvey has argued, the narrative of classic cinema offers woman no place between the (masculine) camera and the (feminine) image, Jane’s assumption of both places (spectator and spectacle) in her cinematic narrative does not so much resolve this problem as reduplicate it. For Jane, spectatorship merely reinforces the classic positions of femininity. Thus describing her secret observation of Rochester, Jane records the painful pleasure of her subjection to his image:
No sooner did I see that his attention was riveted on them, and that I might gaze without being observed, than my eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face; I could not keep their lids under control: they would rise, and the irids would fix on him. I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking—a precious yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless. (203)

Invoking this scene for her own audience, Jane frames herself, reconstituting herself as image, as object of the gaze; with the Jane of the narration, we look at Jane looking—not at what she sees. In similar fashion, Jane describes her position as watcher over Mr. Mason in terms that transfer the spectacle to herself: “Here, then, was I in the third story, fastened into one of its mystic cells; night around me; a pale and bloody spectacle under my eyes and hands; a murderess hardly separated from me by a single door” (239). The very terms of her introduction recall the spectacle of Jane’s public exposure at Lowood school: “There was I, then, mounted aloft: I ... now exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy” (99). To Mr. Brocklehurst’s rhetorical query, “Miss Temple, teachers, and children, you all see this girl?,” Jane replies, “Of course they did; for I felt their eyes directed like burning glasses against my scorched skin” (98). The relentless self-exposure of the later scene, “I must keep my post.... I must watch this ghastly countenance.... I must dip my hand again and again in the basin of blood” (239), reproduces Jane as the “pale and bloody spectacle” etched in her mind’s eye, the searing image produced by the “burning glasses” of her own self-directed gaze. The female look which seems to structure so much of Jane’s narrative thus becomes the ultimate mark of her “to-be-looked-at-ness.”

De Lauretis has explored the narrative and cinematic mechanisms that make the female viewer complicit in the production of her own culturally constructed womanhood—the operations by which she is “seduced into consenting to femininity.” “What manner of seduction,” she asks, “operates in cinema to solicit the complicity of women spectators in a desire whose terms are those of Oedipus”—whose terms are markedly not hers. De Lauretis finds a solution to this riddle in women’s double identification with the process of narrative. Jane Eyre represents just such a seduction by narrative—for Jane and for the female audience for whom she

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writes. As Armstrong has argued, the scene of seduction is one "where the female subject desires to be what the other desires her to be": "To relinquish the power of self-definition is the whole objective of seduction." In a situation, then, where "the distinction between seduction and education is rhetorical," *Jane Eyre*’s deployment of the seduction of narrative can be seen to serve Mrs. Ellis’s first aims of domestic conduct: "As women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men."28 Performing the work of ideology, the novel purchases contentment through the pleasure of the text—a situation Jane’s romance encapsulates. Succumbing to a love story her narration reignites, Jane finds pleasure in her unoriginal plight: her bondage to a narrative whose plots are already written and whose structure, despite some showy innovations, confines her to predetermined sexual positions.

This pleasure accrues to the reader who capitulates to the novel’s spell, who participates in the terms of (over)identification Jane’s narrative elaborates. Mary Ann Doane’s recent work on the “woman’s film” speaks to the peculiar pleasure of such texts—pleasure that depends on the female reader/spectator’s recognition and misrecognition of her own cultural positioning.29 In terms of the subgenres Doane explores (medical discourse, maternal melodrama, love story, paranoid gothic), *Jane Eyre* might be read as the “woman’s novel” par excellence; for it anticipates and activates them all. Like the woman’s film that postdates it by a hundred years, *Jane Eyre* responds to a shifting historical discourse on sexual identity, documenting, at its moment of crisis, the perils and problematics of female subjectivity.

These perils surround, in particular, the position of female spectatorship, and *Jane Eyre* reads at times like an object lesson in the female gaze. For observing the lesson of her master, Jane trains herself to identify desire with the look. Thus returning to Thornfield after a duty visit to the Reeds, she defines her pleasure visually: “But what is so headstrong as youth? What so blind as inexperience? These affirmed that it was pleasure enough to have the privilege of again looking at Mr Rochester, whether he looked on me or not” (271–72). Jane’s blind looking, however—“I see—Mr Rochester sitting there, a book and pencil in his hand; he is writing”—incurs only paralysis. It proves the very opposite of empowering: “for a moment I am beyond my own mastery. What does it mean? I did not think I should tremble in this way when I saw him, or lose my voice or the power of motion in his presence” (272).
Jane’s gaze, it would seem, can be authorized only when Rochester can no longer see. Thus returning to Thornfield near the novel’s end—returning to “see” her master once more—Jane is met by the spectacle of nothing to see: a “blackened ruin” (449) like the Rochester she will find at Ferndean. In the end, Jane’s power comes not from her ability to look at Rochester but rather to look for him, to be his eyes: “for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. He saw nature—he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf” (476). With Rochester blinded, she thus perfects her position of instrumentality. With the return of Rochester’s vision, Jane’s gaze turns back upon herself, to the woman—book and pencil in hand—writing the authorized production we read.

Doane isolates the tropes that facilitate woman’s assumption, in the cinema, of the position of “subject” of the gaze—tropes that also structure women’s subjective positions in nineteenth-century narrative: “Proximity rather than distance, passivity, overinvolvement and overidentification.” These features, aligned with other qualities culturally ascribed to the woman—“an excess of emotion, sentiment, affect, empathy”—collapse the distance between subject and object, between “I” and “you,” inducing a state of heightened sympathy. Such a state describes Jane’s spectatorial relation to Rochester and to the incidents of her own life; and it describes—the frequency of analogous responses would suggest—the reader’s relation to the text, a relation Bronte’s friend, Mary Taylor, tersely summarizes; commenting on unsolicited responses to the novel, she observes, “They say ‘it makes them cry.’” Raymond Williams more critically analyzes the novel’s singular subjectivity: “That very particular personal voice—the direct ‘Reader, I married him’—is, with a necessary kind of intensity, making the direct invitation, ‘Put yourself in my place, feel with me.’” Whether the novel’s actual readers, then, are socially constituted as women or men, the terms of its address—the identification it promotes—code “the reader” as feminine.

In genres addressed to women, Doane argues, “spectatorial pleasure is often indissociable from pain.” And Jane Eyre appeals to its readers’ shared understanding of this state, making them complicit in the desire for this pleasure-pain. “Do not ask me, reader, to give a minute account of that day” (355), Jane writes at the conclusion of her homeless wanderings, a narrative episode Q. D. Leavis describes as “almost intolerably poignant.” “Reader, it is not pleas-
ant to dwell on these details,” Jane explains. “Some say there is enjoyment in looking back to painful experience past; but at this day I can scarcely bear to review the times to which I allude” (355). Yet her principle of narrative selection casts Jane’s autobiography as precisely such a re-view, projecting for the reader an almost obsessive repetition of scenarios of suffering. The novel thus trades on the bonds of culturally authorized sisterhood—bonds arising from women’s “mutual knowledge of each other’s capability of receiving pain,” from their shared understanding of pain’s subtle and minute gradations and “the intensity of [women’s] capability of suffering.” Binding herself to “invoke memory” only where “her responses will possess some degree of interest” (115), Jane measures narrative interest by the degree of painful sensations an incident can produce. In fact, it is through the intensity of remembered pain—rendered present by overcharged rhetoric, excruciating detail, and relentless minutiae—that the narrative works its identification, implicating the reader in Jane’s fate, in the pleasure of viewing again and again what one finds almost intolerably poignant.

The reader thus doubles Jane’s double identification—with the position of the image and position of the gaze, with the movement of the narrative and the narrative’s end; for the narrative remakes the reader in Jane’s image—as reader and writer, participant and voyeur. The familiar use of discontinuous present tense narration and direct, personal address (for example, “Picture me here . . .”), for extended sections of the text, invites the reader to re-produce Jane—to reinscribe Jane’s self-portraiture. But in this act of narrative co-option, the reader is also framed. For such moments work to make the reader replicate or replace Jane, to assume Jane’s position as suffering subject and invested observer of the spectacle she makes. In the almost suffocating closed circle of the narrative, the reader is offered no other available space. The effect of such narrative strategies is to eroticize the text, prompting the reader to replay the relationship of Jane to Rochester—the relationship of reader to master/text. Like Jane, the reader is seduced by a compelling narrative, seduced by an identification that reinforces her submission.

Seen in this light, Adrienne Rich’s biography of reading—a tribute that characterizes a whole tradition of criticism of Jane Eyre—betrays its subtext of readerly subjection: “Like Thackeray’s daughters, I read Jane Eyre in childhood, carried away ‘as by a whirl-
wind.” Returning to Charlotte Bronte’s most famous novel, as I did over and over in adolescence, in my twenties, thirties, now in my forties, I have never lost the sense that it contains, through and beyond the force of its creator’s imagination, some nourishment I needed then and still need today.” But Rich does not scrutinize the terms of commitment that produce this nourishment or the cultural forces served by the perpetuation of this myth. Rather her rapturous response is read as a sign of empowerment. This process is reinforced by the seductiveness of feminist criticism’s own self-empowering myths—myths that disguise the mechanisms that ensure their existence. Thus Jane Lazarre explains her own critical enlightenment: “When, at thirty-eight, I was reading *Jane Eyre* again and discovered the biography by Moglen, the very title brought chills down my spine, promised to turn on that occasional and powerful spotlight and enlighten me. The ‘self conceived’ was what women did through their fiction and what I had done and would continue to do.”

Rejecting the normative texts of cultural domination, these readers succumb to an alternative narrative of women’s liberation. But the narrative they “choose” proves no less normative and no less dependent upon selective representation. In fact, the attraction of such models may be their greatest danger. For the nourishment *Jane Eyre* provides—and the particular light it sheds on the situation of the woman writer—reads quite differently when we consider the novel not as manifesto of self-creation but as textbook of self-discipline. No longer a challenge to the conventions of Victorian womanhood, *Jane Eyre* can be read as a nineteenth-century deportment book, offering its readers—within and outside the text—lessons in the proper forms of feminine conduct. Reading and re-reading the novel over time, its readers repeatedly submit themselves to its ruling paradigm: making woman over and over again—woman as she is culturally determined and defined, without any desire uncircumscribed by man. Feminist criticism must thus reconsider its own production of *Jane Eyre’s* subversiveness, for otherwise feminism’s critical paradigms may blind its practitioners to their own participation in this performance. Only by recognizing this participation—and by critically performing its terms of authority—can we begin to challenge the dominance of these cultural models. But such resistance entails a historical understanding of the novel’s cultural position different from the one feminist criticism has generally offered. If *Jane Eyre* posed any threat for Vic-
torian audiences, it was probably less from its overt revolt against
domestic culture than from its too perfect enactment of it; its danger
might be, in fact, that it brought to the surface the hidden pleasures
of the submissive state. This pleasure, I would argue, is precisely
what the modern, feminist reader most needs to interrogate. For the
novel’s ultimate production continues to be as much the willing
reader as the no longer willful Jane.

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NOTES

1 Quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (Harmondsworth,

2 Mrs. [Sarah Stickney] Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Soci-
ety, Character and Responsibilities* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1843),
73–74.

3 “C. Bell” to G. H. Lewes, 11 January 1848. Quoted in Gaskell (note 1), 336.
Further references to Bronte’s letters will be quoted parenthetically in the text as
“Gaskell.”

4 Lewes’s reviews of *Jane Eyre* make clear that, from the start, he engaged with
the novel as the work of a woman writer. In his unsigned review in *Fraser’s Magazine*
(December 1847), Lewes notes, “The writer is evidently a woman”; and in his
unsigned notice in the *Westminster Review* (January 1848), he observes, “Whoever
may be the author, we hope to see more books from her pen; for that these volumes
are from the pen of a lady, and a clever one too, we have not a shadow of a doubt.”
Lewes’s recommendation of Jane Austen—and George Sand—further confirms the
linking of his judgments of Bronte’s work with the propriety of women’s writing.
These reviews are reprinted in *The Brontes: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam
Allott (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 84 and 87. It is on the
terms of poetic propriety that Bronte takes issue with Lewes. She identifies with the
“masculine” George Sand, “it is poetry, as I comprehend the word, which elevates
the masculine George Sand, and makes out of something coarse, something
Godlike,” while rejecting the feminine Jane Austen, “she cannot be great” (Gaskell,
338). Responding to Lewes’s proffered models, she claims—at least implicitly—the
authority to redefine the space of women’s writing. She thus reinvokes, even as she
resists, Lewes’s gendered definitions of writing.

5 In her response to Lewes, Bronte invokes his terms “sentiment” and “poetry,”
only to turn them back upon him. See Gaskell, 337–38.

6 Ellis (note 2), 73.

7 “For woman,” Ellis writes, “who, in her inexhaustible sympathies, can live only
in the existence of another, and whose very smiles and tears are not exclusively her
own,” casting away the love of poetry is a perversion of her natural state. The poetry
of woman’s life is peculiarly designed for this state, “for woman, whose whole life,
from the cradle to the grave, is one of feeling, rather than of action; whose highest
duty is so often to suffer, and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all relative; who
has nothing, and is nothing, of herself; whose experience, if unparticipated, is a total
blank; yet, whose world of interest is wide as the realm of humanity, boundless as
the ocean of life, and enduring as eternity!” ([note 2], 73).
8 Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 164. Armstrong’s work has been central here, and elsewhere, in formulating some of the central tenets of this argument.


10 Armstrong (note 8), 80.

11 Citing the novel’s “pervading tone of ungodly discontent,” Rigby observes: “We do not hesitate to say that the tone of the mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written Jane Eyre” (Rigby [note 9], 109 and 109–110).

12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 244 and 245. The term “heretic narrative,” used by Lucy Snowe, the narrator of *Villette*, has been picked up by many critics to describe and valorize Bronte’s own unorthodox—and specifically, “feminist”—narratives.

13 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 338. Jane Lazarre offers perhaps the strongest testimonial to this “rebellious feminism”: “I was fifteen years old in 1958 when I read *Jane Eyre* for the first time, and she hit me right between the eyes, spotlighting a truth that I had always known and that was at the same time brand new. An enlightenment. Like Jane, I was a rebel, a chronic bad girl by social definition, and Jane exploded my life into reality.” See “‘Charlotte’s Web’: Reading *Jane Eyre* Over Time,” in *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write about Their Work on Women*, ed. Carol Ascher et al. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 223.


16 The rules for self-interrogation form a staple of domestic conduct books, comprising, for example, the “Important Inquiries” with which Ellis introduces *The Daughters of England*. The conduct books propose particular forms of self-interrogation to correspond with the different phases of a woman’s life. These instances of self-converse are designed to apprise the woman of her proper place in the social order. Such “conversations” occur throughout *Jane Eyre*, particularly at moments of crisis—moments that mark potential changes in Jane’s social positioning; they function to keep Jane securely placed.

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17 Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1966), 190. All further citations to the novel refer to page numbers in this edition and will be marked parenthetically in the text.

18 Recommending the self-inquiry appropriate for the impending bridal day, Ellis advises the Wives of England to ask themselves, “Am I seeking an escape from duty to enjoyment, from restraint to indulgence, from wholesome discipline to perfect ease?” See *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1843), 32. In *The Daughters of England*, Ellis repeats these strictures with insistent regularity. Commenting on the “fatal mistakes” young women are liable to fall into in “the regulation of their emotions of attraction and repulsion,” Ellis blames such lapses on a lack of “wholesome discipline” in their early training. Passing “a hard sentence” on “impetuous young creatures” she demands rules for a regular system of conduct (13, 14). To counterbalance “the besetting sin of woman—her desire to be an object of attention” (110), Ellis recommends “wholesome rules” (154) for the “early exercise of self-discipline” (149).

19 Brodhead (note 15) traces the move away from corporal punishment in Antebellum discourse in these terms, arguing for the superior regulating power of what he calls “discipline through love” (72) or “disciplinary intimacy” (73). These terms take on doubled significance when they are appropriated by the structures of romance, as they are in *Jane Eyre*.

20 Interestingly enough, with the exception of the opening attack by John Reed, Jane suppresses from her narrative all scenes of physical beating directed against herself; thus it comes as something of a surprise when Jane alludes to such scenes upon her return to Mrs. Reed: “I looked into a certain corner near, half-expecting to see the slim outline of a once dreaded switch which used to lurk there, waiting to leap out imp-like and lace my quivering palm or shrinking neck” (258). It would seem that Jane can “remember” such beatings only when the successful introjection of discipline makes their corporal presence unnecessary.


23 Foucault (note 15), 300.

24 For other discussions of *Jane Eyre* in terms of masochism see Moglen (note 14) and Sadoff (note 21). Sadoff prefers to describe what others call masochism as the dynamic of father-daughter relations. John Kucich’s illuminating discussion of repression in Bronte’s novels offers an insightful understanding of the mutually constitutive relation between passion and reserve, what I look at here in terms of rebellion and submission. Ultimately, however, Kucich sees the master-slave dynamic in *Jane Eyre* as more reversible, more constantly fluctuating, and hence more potentially liberating than I do. See “Passionate Reserve and Reserved Passion in the Works of Charlotte Bronte,” *ELH* 52 (1985): 913–937.


26 See Mulvey (note 25), 366, for the use of this term.

27 De Lauretis (note 14), 134 and 137.
Ellis (note 2), 6. Armstrong (note 8), 204–205 and 205. Ellis’s formulation recognizes woman’s inferiority not as an innate essence but as a function of power and positionality; her work articulates the process by which women “choose” and preserve the position culturally assigned to them. If Ellis demands an acceptance of this position as the launching point for her argument, Jane Eyre demonstrates the seduction that procures this consent.

See Mary Ann Doane, _The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s_ (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).

Doane, 2. Doane suggests that “the cinema is often theorized as the extension and elaboration of the narrative mechanisms of the nineteenth-century novel,” a perspective that offers another turn to my appropriation of film theory for an understanding of nineteenth-century narrative.

Doane (note 29), 67.


Sylvère Monod’s unsympathetic reading of Bronte’s moments of direct address assumes a male audience: “The reader of _Jane Eyre_ has been constantly referred to in the masculine. This has been done deliberately, for the creature we have just been looking at through Jane’s eyes, this contemptible being, conventional, silly, cowardly, ignorant, and vain, coincides at every point with the image which the Bronte girls pictured to themselves of the average male” (“Charlotte Bronte and the Thirty ‘Readers’ of _Jane Eyre_ ” in _Jane Eyre_ , ed. Richard J. Dunn [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971], 504). But Monod fails to consider the way the mechanisms of address operating in these instances participate in the conventional work of gender ideology—the work of educating/seducing the “female” reader. Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. also considers the reader’s relationship to the text and the text’s paradigms of reading, but he does not consider gender to be central to this understanding. See “_Jane Eyre’s_ Reading Lesson,” _ELH_ 51 (1984): 693–717.

See Q. D. Leavis’s introduction to the Penguin edition of _Jane Eyre_ (note 17), 22; also Doane (note 29), 16.

Ellis, _Women_ (note 22), 138. The emotive power of _Jane Eyre_ thus works through the conventional cultural understanding of women’s habitation of the realm of “feeling,” and in particular, through the endorsement of her greater susceptibility to feelings of both pleasure and pain. As Doane suggests in her study of the “weepies,” there are many dangers for the critic who desires to simply appropriate these narrative forms for feminism, without questioning or recognizing the cultural forces they serve.

Lazarre (note 13), 227; Rich (note 14), 89.