THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN MILTON'S *AREOPAGITICA* ON CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *JANE EYRE*: JANE AS A MODEL OF NATIONAL VIRTUE

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ABSTRACT

THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN MILTON'S *AREOPAGITICA* ON CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *JANE EYRE*: JANE AS A MODEL OF NATIONAL VIRTUE

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Charlotte Brontë utilizes Milton's ideology of virtue in *Areopagitica*, which emphasizes the importance of being exposed to vice and choosing to dismiss it, to frame the protagonist of *Jane Eyre* as a virtuous heroine outside of the "angel in the house" discourse. Jane is ultimately presented as a model of the Milton-inspired, new Victorian heroine. Her success comes not despite foreign presences, but is rather defined in contrast to them. In the cultural moment that Brontë comes out from behind the shroud of Currer Bell, this conception of virtue – in contrast to "excremental whiteness" – provides a framework in which she may continue to strive to engage in the public sphere without moral censure. The question of whether or not *Jane Eyre* is a "naughty book" concerns not only critics of nineteenth-century literature, but also anyone engaged with today's debates regarding issues of women, citizenship, or morality.

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JANE EYRE AS A MORAL PROTAGONIST

Charlotte Brontë was horrified when a fellow writer referred to *Jane Eyre* as a "naughty book." Brontë had thought her protagonists had dutifully enacted her own high standards. "Were they not entirely moral and self-controlled young women?" the critic Myra Curtis muses sympathetically regarding these Victorian heroines. After all, "Jane Eyre gave up Rochester rather than live with him without being married to him" (329).[1] So, by the standards of 1847, is Jane Eyre a moral person – a moral Christian, citizen, or woman? How does Jane, a stubborn governess who marries her employer after refusing to be a Christian missionary, relate to common nineteenth-century ideas of virtue – and specifically women's virtue? The primary model of virtue available to Brontë would have been the traditional Victorian ideal of woman as an "angel in the house." Brontë, who herself worked outside the family home as a governess, could not fulfill this ideal. Nor could Jane fit comfortably into this mold; her experiences in houses, from Gateshead to Thornfield, leads to expulsion and spatial movement rather than stationary domestic bliss. When Mr. Rochester exclaims that he shall have "a very angel as my comforter," Jane laughs at the notion outright. "I am not an angel," she retorts, "and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself" (345). If Jane is not an "angel in the house," how can she be – as Curtis says – "entirely moral"?

In order to frame Jane – and perhaps, on some level, even herself – as a moral protagonist, Brontë moves away from this traditional, angelic model and instead reshapes a Miltonian idea, drawn from *Areopagitica*. *Paradise Lost*, the epic poem that served as literary inspiration for several notable aspects of *Jane Eyre,* revisits and expands upon the arguments put forth in Milton's prose tract. Brontë did not shy from using past works as muse; the three Brontë

[1] Daniel Clay notes that Sandra Gilbert, among other critics, perceives Brontë as "angrily attack[ing] many of the anti-feminisms of a patriarchal Christianity" – which would make it a very naughty book indeed (Daniel 93).

sisters often practiced their drawing skills by copying other paintings, and Charlotte in particular made a watercolor rendition of Fuseli's *Solitude at Dawn*, which depicts Milton's *Lycidas*. Nor was she reluctant to re-frame these works through her own lens. Her *Lycidas* is brightly colored, compared to Fuseli's, and the figure is given a more feminine appearance.[2]

This form of adaptive inspiration is seen also in her use of Milton's famous prose tract. Tracing the message of *Areopagitica* through *Paradise Lost* and into *Jane Eyre* illuminates the moral structure of Brontë's work, loosening it from the gendered constraints of Victorian morality. While some critics have hailed Jane as a proto-feminist figure, I argue that, because Victorian conceptions of gendered virtue often excluded the active mode of agency in which Jane participates, Brontë intentionally frames her protagonist through a strategically ethical (rather than formally gendered) lens. The 1644 prose tract *Areopagitica* asserts that in order for a virtue to be a true virtue, it must be tested thoroughly, and the subject must fully understand the temptations of vice. *Areopagitica* influenced Brontë's writing, as she calls upon and adapts its ethical structure to inspire her conception of accessible virtue in *Jane Eyre*, and must be a textual factor in critical conversations about Victorian ethics and femininity. "The true warfaring Christian," Milton writes in *Areopagitica*, is one who "can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better" (349). By placing Jane in the role of the protagonist, Brontë suggests that the cloistered life of an "angel in the house" would be contrary to the cultivation of "warfaring" virtue, a process that necessarily grants agency to the strategically ethical individual.

The novel's use of *Areopagitica* also troubles the line between the "angel" and the governess of the house by introducing a third woman: Bertha, the racialized Other. Class-defined sexism is thus entangled with racism as England adjusts to its place on the emerging

[2] Information from the Brontë Parsonage Museum, visited December 28th 2018.

international stage. Just as Brontë's characters have to be exposed to vice in order to be virtuous, they have to be exposed to the Oriental – or the otherwise Other – and then actively *choose* against this influence in order to be truly British. While Jane as a character may be concerned only with her own agency in crafting an ethical narrative, the novel – especially as it is read by modern critics following the impacts of writers such as Jean Rhys and Edward Said – grapples with larger questions of race and nationalism. Gayatri Spivak has, of course, argued that Bertha's presence as a racialized colonial subject enables Jane's white female subjectivity to be cemented. Spivak "reveals female individualism as the first truth-claim in the novel," then "shows that the presence of the 'native subaltern female,' represented by Bertha, is the gap which raises doubts about this truth-claim," and finally concludes that "this gap is filled with an axiomatic of imperialism which is at work in the role of St. John" (Abdalkafor 52). The critical intervention here is to emphasize that the ethical dimension of *Jane Eyre* suggests that ethics in itself might have a racialized, national aspect that tends to be elided in the attempt to universalize it or to read it through a gendered lens; the first "truth-claim" is not "female individualism," but rather – through Brontë's gestures back to Milton and, implicitly, his theories on virtue – the possibility of virtue for an individual British subject when placed in relief against the Other.

By insisting that the reader "consider vice," as Milton writes it, through the actions of viewing and eventually disregarding the figure of Bertha, the novel sets Jane as a contrasting example of virtuous white Englishness. The construction of nationalism in this text depends on Jane's individual Englishness; when faced with foreign influences or opportunities, she chooses to entrench herself further in the British landscape. I suggest that we read Jane's struggle with virtue as analogous to the formation of imperial subjects. Her connection to the English countryside reinforces her role as an English subject, a role which is underscored by the

forebodingly Other characters and locations she encounters. *Jane Eyre* encourages women to cultivate virtue via experience rather than via supposed innocence, and in doing so emphasizes the importance of white Britishness in the context of imperialist policies; if managed correctly, according to the argument we are taking from *Areopagitica*, interactions with other countries can serve to solidify rather than to corrupt the British national identity. St. John's demise models an incorrect form of this management, while Jane – who benefits from imperialism-gained money – displays the opposite.

In contrast to Bertha, whose presence in the West Indies corrupted her racial identity, Jane arises in the text as a figure of insulated Britishness thanks to her refusal to leave her land of origin. Although both Berth and Jane may have begun their lives as white-coded, the Mason family's role abroad shifts how they are perceived. In this way, the novel underscores the importance of choice, rather than simple circumstance, in the construction of identity. Such an emphasis stems from Brontë's reading of *Areopagitica*. This Miltonian conception of virtue is demonstrated throughout *Paradise Lost*, which has itself been a well-documented influence on Brontë's novel. The necessity of active choice-making in *Areopagitica* is mirrored by Jane's pleasure "to have done something; trivial, transitory though the deed was, it was yet an active thing, and I was weary of an existence all passive" (185). It is her resistance to passivity, rather than the Victorian valorization of such a trait in women, that runs as an undercurrent in Jane's character. Bringing together disparate threads of inquiry on *Paradise Lost* and *Areopagitica*, this paper proposes that Jane's myriad (mis)adventures strengthen rather than corrupt her perceived morality, her ability to serve as a wife, and her Englishness. Her trials serve as books do in *Areopagitica*, as "a sort of inoculation" against vice, to borrow a phrase from Peter Coleman's article on this tract (64).

Through references to Milton's texts, Brontë creates a uniquely British retelling of the Eve figure. The confrontational version of virtue established in *Areopagitica* – defined by Sirluck as the idea that "the peculiar glory of virtue resides in the *conquest*, not the placidity, of appetite" – can be traced through both *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*, creating a conversation between the epic and the novel that produces certain justifications for Jane's "naughty" choices (Sirluck 95, emphasis original). By harnessing the logic of *Areopagitica*, Brontë shapes her heroine as a newly tested and justified Eve, one whose engagement with temptation does not inevitably damn her. In tracing linkages between these two authors' works, I will focus on the separation of woman from man, the consumption of food, and finally the relationship between women and nature. This final section will lead into a discussion of nationalism in *Jane Eyre*, as Jane's whiteness is defined in part by her affinity to the landscape. Each of these topics is a site of temptation, choice, and the subsequent possibility – never guarantee – of female virtue.

"TENDING TO WILD": TRACING AREOPAGITICA'S INFLUENCE

The same passions that send Jane to the red room in childhood lead her to speak out against, and even flee from, both Mr. Rochester and St. John. She vacillates between respect for laws and respect for her own inclinations, perhaps leaving the reader with an ambivalent image of the heroine's morality. To make Jane's implicit challenge to dominant ideology more palatable for her readers, Brontë accepts a cultural framework that often prioritized the usefulness of a book's overall effect. A review in *The Manchester Times and Gazette* praises "those three brothers" (the Brontë sisters operating under male pseudonyms) for their writing, but laments, "if we are asked, however, what is the net result of these three carefully and cleverly written volumes, we should be somewhat at a loss for an answer." Would it not be better, the article asks, for such talent to portray "this actual existence of ours" rather than mere fictional events? The reviewer also notes that "the only touch of direct philosophy, and not a very happy one" comes from Helen in Lowood (3). Two days prior to the publication of this article, *The Era* put forth a contrary opinion. This reviewer claims that in reading *Jane Eyre*

> you discover, in every chapter, that you are not simply amused, not only interested, not merely excited, but you are improved; you are receiving a delightful and comprehensible lesson, and you put down the volume with the consciousness of having benefited by its perusal. (9)

This more positive review of the novel emphasizes the effect it has on the reader as an individual, someone who may be either directly improved or harmed. The very style of Jane Eyre, as a text ostensibly written in retrospect for an acknowledged reader, a "you," recognizes the need to achieve this effect. The ability of the author to entertain the reader is valued only

insomuch as it is used to propagate "moral thought," as though each story must also be a textbook on principles (*Era* 9).

For texts known to have been written by or for women, the stakes and standards were even higher. Until at least the 1880s, women writers "were faithful to a moral aesthetic which related literature to life, reflecting the ambivalent and sometimes antagonistic relationship of women to a society that valued optimism and harmony above all else" (Sherry 149). The interaction between women and books was closely monitored for its appropriateness and "moral aesthetic." Cree LeFavour writes that in the Victorian era, "the onus was on books and their authors to demonstrate that the dangerously sympathetic modes of reading in which women engaged […] be undertaken for moral purposes and with the edification of family, comfort, and the domestic sphere in mind" (122). Even when Jane does dote on her beloved Mr. Rochester, as the idealized "angel in the house" ought to do, her affection is sprinkled with witticisms and challenges, all seemingly counterproductive in terms of creating comfort in the domestic sphere. He asks, "Do you doubt me?" She replies, "Entirely." He then asks, "You have no faith in me?" She says, "Not a whit" (339). Compare this to Coventry Patmore's ideal woman, who is "too gentle even to force / His penitence by kind replies" (Canto IX.I). Jane's resistance to the typical Victorian love-plot would have heightened the sense, for Victorian readers, that these "dangerously sympathetic modes of reading" had the definite possibility of being – as we've termed it – naughty.

This question of literary morality is complicated by the Brontë sisters' chosen pen names. The gender of *Jane Eyre*'s author was, for a while, unclear. Critics landed on either side of the debate, with some claiming that the story could not have been written by a woman and others claiming that it could not have been written by anyone else. Caroline Levine explores the

motivations behind "Currer Bell" – both its use and eventual disuse – and posits that Brontë found a certain pleasure in watching reviewers argue over the author's gender: the reviewers' arguments revealed more about themselves than anything in particular about the novel itself. The authorial mystery "provokes the literary world to reveal its complacent blunders and rigid misconceptions" (281). The 1850 reveal of Currer's true name, then, places Brontë in the role of a "powerful critic of contemporary assumptions about men's and women's writing" (Levine 281). This ambiguously authored novel drew out the prejudices of her contemporary reviewers, casting aspersion on their reading rather than on her writing. Levine's analysis of "Currer Bell" positions *Jane Eyre* as forcing its readers to confront their own failings. In using a false name, Brontë allows her novel to act as a litmus test for the values of her readers, a "useful straddling of the line between what was perceived as moral and immoral fiction" (LeFavour 121).

In Milton's *Areopagitica,* books are encouraged to fulfill a very similar function. To allow the publication of less-than-moral books, his tract posits, is to encourage the development of true virtue. Judging books reflects more crucially on the character of those who read them than on the book itself, much like how the action of reviewing *Jane Eyre* says more about the reviewer than about the novel. This prose tract urges against the licensing of books; the practice will be, Milton complains, the "discouragement of all learning, and the stop of truth" (342). He later extends this argument: "whatever thing we hear or see, sitting, walking, raveling, or conversing, may be fitly called our book" (355). Anything – from eating to arguing – may function as books do, challenging and molding the virtues of those who engage with it. According to Milton's tract, it is wrong to refuse a book entry into the world, for every reader can and should make the decision for themselves whether to engage in its consumption. This idea could very well have been appealing to a female writer whose book, fairly or unfairly, was

judged by its perceived moral effect on the reader. By borrowing theory from this early modern poet, Brontë creates a moral space for her novel within the Victorian literary sphere.

The popularity of *Areopagitica* made it a central text for Victorian thinkers and writers, likely including Charlotte Brontë.[3] Francis Thompson puts forth some quite lyrical thoughts on Milton, describing him as "a poet to whom all must bow the knee, few or none the heart." Thompson concludes: "The most inspired artificer in poetry, he lacked, perhaps (or was a perfecting fault?), a little poetic poverty of soul, a little detachment from his artistic riches. He could not forget, nor can we forget, that he was Milton" (202). The inability to forget Milton, so claimed by Thompson, is further explored by critics such as Erik Gray. Gray argues against the widely held critical view, championed by writers such as Sandra Gilbert[4] and Susan Gubar, that "Victorian writers were influenced primarily by Romantic versions of Milton, not by Milton himself" (7). Instead Gray claims that as the nineteenth century progressed "there was less of a tendency to equate Milton almost exclusively with his epic…The writings of Milton's middle years, the sonnets and the pamphlets, began to seize on readers' imaginations" (14). Gray's argument correctly suggests that it would be erroneous to merely trace the connections between Milton's poetry and Brontë's novel while ignoring Milton's other works.

[3] I visited the Brontë Parsonage Museum in the UK, which has a comprehensive archive, and they reaffirmed my finding that her work and letters do not explicitly name *Areopagitica* as an influence, though Milton's presence is evident in several of their exhibited pieces (a set of stained glass windows bearing his likeness, for example, from one of the sisters' best-loved buildings). However, given her deep familiarity with his other works, it is reasonable to surmise that Charlotte would know this text as well as *Paradise Lost.* I may well borrow language from Shannon Miller's "Serpentine Eve," in which she admits that the linkages between seventeenth-century pamphleteers and Milton are difficult to prove: "Such an assertion lacks the smoking gun that would clinch such a claim: a copy of Rachel Speght's *Mouzell for Melastomus* in Milton's library, for example" (44).

[4] Regarding "Milton's bogey," first articulated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, Gilbert writes that the bogey may be Milton himself, or Adam, or even "his inferior and Satanically inspired Eve, who has also intimidated women and blocked their view of possibilities both real and literary" ("Patriarchal Poetry" 368). This current paper continues this discussion of what aspects of Milton, exactly, haunt the Victorian imagination, and how that haunting may be turned towards usefulness or productivity for the woman writer.

However, it is indeed crucial to (as concisely as may be possible) note the oft-discussed relationship between *Paradise Lost* and Brontë. Ian M. Emberson's "'The Likeness of a Kingly Crown': John Milton's Influence on Charlotte Brontë" studies the connections between *Paradise Lost* and Charlotte Brontë's works. He recounts his own experience holding the volume of the epic poem owned by Charlotte herself; she corrected small printing errors and marked favorite lines, which indicates a deep level of familiarity with the text. Emberson also turns to Brontë's personal letters. He highlights one in which she is advising her friend Ellen Nussey on what to read and offers Milton as her first suggestion. Daniel Clay also points out the connections between *Jane Eyre* and *Paradise Lost*, focusing on the love relationship between Jane and Rochester. Although Jane does "successfully rewrite *Paradise Lost*, a commendable and necessary labor," Clay writes, her reward – domesticity – is a marker of the limitations that Brontë implies comes with the job (96). In her article "John Milton's Influence on the Inspired Poetry of Charlotte Brontë," Julie Pfeiffer grapples with themes of divine inspiration that connect *Paradise Lost* with Brontë's works, and finds that the conscious act of reasoning is what separates the "satanically inspired and…divinely inspired" (42). Inspiration is contingent on the rational interpretation of the human recipient, and comes with "moral implications" (44). Brontë's protagonists see the divine vision, Pfeiffer argues, but then must know its correct interpretation and abstain from propagating falsities. While these critics do admirably thorough work tracing the linkages between *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*, I aim to expand upon that effort by widening the scope of comparison beyond these two texts, following the model championed by Gray. *Areopagitica* insists that one must "see, and know, and yet abstain," a rational process of thought, interpretation, and choice (*Areo.* 350). Thus, Pfeiffer's emphasis on the cognitive skills needed to achieve morality is useful to my discussion of virtue.

While much work has been done connecting *Areopagitica* with *Paradise Lost* and also connecting *Paradise Lost* with *Jane Eyre*, there is a gap in the critical conversation in terms of the relationship between Milton's prose tract and Brontë's novel. This dearth of scholarship is intriguing, considering the importance of the tract. Warner G. Rice notes that "with the triumph of liberalism in the nineteenth century *Areopagitica* came to be singled out as the prose treatise most worthy of study" (474). Although *Paradise Lost* is the work by Milton most widely known today, the nineteenth century had an especial predilection for *Areopagitica*. Jeffrey P. Beck's 2015 article "The Singularity of *Areopagitica*: A Quantitative Analysis of John Milton's Prose Works" measured "anthology entries, MLA citations, entries in books of quotations, auction prices, and Google books ngram values" to find which of Milton's prose texts is most "eminent" (176, 175). Of the thirty-one texts considered, *Areopagitica* ranked so high as to mark it "an outlier in Milton's career as a prose writer" (176). Though critics cannot know definitely which of Milton's prose texts Brontë had read, Beck's qualitative study supports my insistence on *Areopagitica*'s influence. Arnold William's "Areopagitica Revisited" also bolsters this argument. "The high tide in the idolatry of *Areopagitica* was reached in the nineteenth century," William writes, and the nineteenth century was particularly fond of this text due to the rise in Whig principles. The prose tract "ultimately took its place, along with the Magna Carta, the Petition of Right, and Junius' letters, among the scriptures of the English peoples" (William 67). Given this "high tide of idolatry," *Jane Eyre* must be read as an adaption not only of the oft-cited Paradise Lost, but also of the ideology presented in *Areopagitica*.

To better understand Milton's definition of virtue here, it is helpful to set his ideas against those of other figures such as Aristotle and Spenser. In "Milton Revises *The Faerie Queene*," Ernest Sirluck delves into the meaning of a small error in *Areopagitica*. Milton writes that Guyon

brought the Palmer into the Cave of Mammon – but in Spenser's poem, they had been separated. The error "demonstrates that Milton was so familiar with *The Faerie Queene* that he thought he had no need to refresh his memory of the poem before discussing it in print," Sirluck writes, "but this will surprise no one" (90). The books of Spenser's work (excepting Book 6) are ostensibly based on Aristotelian concepts. In discussing the meaning of Milton's error, then, Sirluck surmises that the "ethical phenomenon assigned by Aristotle to the moral state concerned with continence – the subordination of strong appetite and passions to the control of reason – must for Milton be comprehended in the idea of virtue." The blend of Aristotelian virtue and continence produces "a single comprehensive idea of virtue characterized by the subjugation of strong appetites to the control of reason." Therefore, Sirluck writes, "Milton's whole conception of virtue is necessarily more strenuous than Aristotle's" (95). Where Aristotle's temperance was "limited to the pleasures of touch and taste," Milton's definition encompasses "the component virtues of sobriety, chastity, modesty, and decency" along with "contentment, frugality, industry, and liberality" (95). All of these "component values" are evident in Jane by the end of Brontë's novel, as she transforms via virtuous decision-making into a figure of Miltonian temperance.

The process of virtue-creation posited in *Areopagitica* is enacted through the separations between woman and man that are seen in both *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*. Beginning with the former text, Milton's Eve initially turns away from Adam upon their first meeting. When she sees him, she finds him to be "less fair, / Less winning soft, less amiably mild / Than that smooth wat'ry image" in the pond (4.478-480). Like Mr. Rochester, Adam is not found immediately to be the best-looking man – even if he is the only man existing. Eve's turn back to her own, "winning" reflection is interrupted by Adam's grasping hand, and she is convinced to remain his companion. Although her place is at (or at one time, *in*) his side, this moment of reluctance

highlights the importance of choice in their idyllic relationship. It is not enough that they have been made for each other; they must also, using faculties of reason, choose each other. With the specter of separation looming, their togetherness is granted a sense of virtuosity that would have otherwise been empty.

This specter rises again when Eve insists on venturing into the garden for her daily labors without Adam's company. During their argument as to whether or not it would be right for Eve to be alone, and therefore vulnerable to Satan, she asks, "How are we happy, still in fear of harm?" (9.326). In the moral landscape of the poem's ramifications beyond its own narrative, it is this fear of harm that makes happiness possible. Daniel Clay notes that while "Milton's Eve separates from her mate to encounter temptation, to disobey God, and to imperil her soul," Jane leaves in order to "flee temptation, to obey God, and to save her (and her mate's) soul" (102). However, both women's separations act in accordance with the ideals of *Areopagitica*. Eve's encounter with temptation is necessary for her to truly obey God, and Jane's flight is a response to the temptation she has already met. Both women reject the safety of ignorance for the possibility of true virtue. Eve needs to know if she is able to garden alone and still maintain her obedience; Jane needs to know if she can unseat Rochester as her idol and survive by her own spiritual power. After their first romantic embrace, Jane struggles to pull away from Mr. Rochester, saying, "I am a free independent being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you" (338). Both women seek independence in order to test their virtues through choice and reason rather than through compliance and habit. When Jane asserts that she is has "an independent will," she asserts her ability to cultivate morality through the exertion of choice (338). It is not her modesty, gentleness, or chastity that she employs in her favor, but the ability to choose independently of external influence. Along with this physical separation, both Jane and

Eve engage in debate – an explicit separation of ideas – with their male counterparts. Neither Eve nor Jane shirk from argument; as Milton writes in *Areopagitica,* "where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making" (365). *Paradise Lost*'s tendency towards dialogue and debate reflects this value; Adam even had to debate God to earn himself a partner.

But all separations, both verbal and physical, are eventually mended. Before the oft-quoted opening line to *Jane Eyre's* final chapter ("Reader, I married him"), readers are given this idyllic image of the two Victorian heroes: "I took that dear hand, held it a moment to my lips, then let it pass round my shoulder: being so much lower stature than he, I served both for his prop and guide. We entered the wood, and wended homeward" (551). Although gendered and diminished by the phrase describing her as of "lower stature than he," Jane is spiritually his "prop and guide," of equal if not higher moral standing. This simultaneous lowering and raising sets Jane on what is finally level footing; with his arm around her shoulder, they stand side-by-side. They traverse the natural world in search of home, a place of rest after their troubles, as reward for Jane's temperate handling of a tumultuous series of trials. This scene hearkens back to the final glimpse readers of *Paradise Lost* get of the original human duo. While Jane serves as the guide for Rochester (who, like Milton, has been blinded), Providence itself is the guide for Adam and Eve:

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
> Through Eden took thir solitary way.
> (12.646-649)

Eve, like Jane, takes her mate's "dear hand." Eve's walk is "wand'ring" and Jane's is "wend[ing]," both at the man's side rather than behind him. These two women undertake a process of sculpting virtue through exposure to vice, but while Eve fell, Jane rose. This is reflected by their direction in these quotes; Eve is leaving Paradise behind, while Jane heads "homeward" to a new Eden. Brontë calls upon the same ideology that backed *Paradise Lost* to frame her novel, but – keeping in mind the demand for moral lessons in Victorian literature – recalls Jane from the brink of sin into which Eve had fallen.

The question of separation leads to the issue of what constitutes one's own self. While physical parting and verbal debates serve as examples of severing, consumption is a form of joining something external to one's body. Another test of virtue seen in both *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre* comes by way of consumption. In *Areopagitica*, Milton uses food and digestion as an entry into morality and virtue. While it is necessary to eat in order to sustain life (one must encounter temptation regularly), each occasion of eating threatens to draw the consumer into intemperance. Food in *Paradise Lost* is beautiful and plentiful, but also dangerous. Eve's knowledge of the garden's output is superior to Adam's. In Book 5, when he asks her to prepare a meal for their guest using items from their stores, she corrects him and promises to "pluck such choice" that the angel will "confess that here on Earth / God hath dispensed His bounties as in Heav'n" (5.327, 329-330). Eve's relationship to food verges on the sin of pride, seen in her excitement for the angel to "confess" based on her choices, and leads to this moment in which she is more knowledgeable than Adam, therefore making food doubly threatening to the hierarchies of Heaven and Earth.

Although dangerous, the temptations offered by consumption are constant and unavoidable. A similar motif emerges in Brontë's text. From Gateshead to Thornfield, and from

gruel to wine, Jane's choices around food signify her relationships to physical/moral temptation and moderation. When Mr. Rochester sends her to fetch a glass of wine on his behalf, she "saw Miss Ingram watch me frowningly as I did so: she thought I was taking a liberty, I dare say" (285). This wine, associated with the decadent upper classes, is an adult manifestation of the "untasted tart" Bessie offers as amelioration in Jane's childhood (79). While Jane is not so abstemious as to refuse any association at all with wine, being perfectly willing to pour and carry it for Mr. Rochester, she does not consume it herself. The word "liberty" is notable. The consumption of something less-than-virtuous (by middle-class English standards, at least) is coded as a type of freedom. Blanche's assumption paints her as a more fallen woman, more likely to see consumption of the forbidden as a liberty, than the prelapsarian Jane. Jane does seek liberty – she says, "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped, for liberty I uttered a prayer" – but her understanding of this concept falls more in line with Milton's use of it in *Areopagitica* (151). In the prose tract he writes of the importance of true liberty and claims that "it is the liberty, Lords and Commons, which your own valorous and happy counsels have purchased us, liberty which is the nurse of all great wits; this is that which hath rarified and enlightened our spirits like the influence of heaven" (269). Liberty is both divine, like "heaven," and a maternal "nurse." For Brontë, it is also inherently connected to the linguistic. Jane, like Milton, seeks "the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties" (369). Blanche's association of liberty with libation is a less thoughtful, more carnal understanding than the Miltonian sense.

Returning to consumption, compare Jane's refusal to partake in wine with her eager consumption of Miss Temple's simple "seed-cake," the physical accompaniment to the spiritual nourishment she provides (136). Michael C. Schoenfeldt sees "the regulation of conduct before

food" as Milton's "primary physiological and moral strategy for coping with the impurity we bring to, and confront in, every meal," and explores the motifs of food and digestion in *Paradise Lost* (131). Jane's predecessor, Eve, is best known for her failure to control what she consumes, but her prelapsarian state was marked by a knowledgeable use of the garden's bounty (5.326-336). Eve's ability to curate balanced meals in the garden is a marker of her relationship to nature; this connection is bolstered by the parallel descriptions of her hair and the wilderness. This linkage between woman and nature is not unique to *Paradise Lost*; as shown by Shannon Miller, Ester Sowernam explicitly connects Eve to the garden in her seventeenth-century pamphlet defending women. Sowernam identifies Eve as having been created within Eden, while Adam was transplanted into it, making her more securely tied to natural divinity. Miller notes that, in Sowernam's argument, "Eden is located in Eve, and thus within all women" (28). While Sowernam harnesses this relationship between Eve and Eden to challenge misogynistic rhetoric, Milton uses the connection to support his ideas about the intersections of temptation and moderation.

Debates regarding whether or not Milton can be considered misogynistic, on one hand, or feminist, on the other, have been ongoing in recent critical literature, but I argue that Brontë's interest in the poet is directed more so towards his treatment of virtue and ethics outside of a – for Brontë – necessarily gendered framework. The wantonness of Eden is indicative of Milton's belief in the necessity of effort ("prune or prop or bind") for the production of goodness, whether in the form of nice hedges or wifely obedience. Eve's "unadorned golden tresses" hang down her waist, "dishevelled but in wanton ringlets waved" (4.304-306). This uncontrolled characteristic is repeated in the garden itself; Eve reminds Adam that "what we by day / Lop overgrown or prune or prop or bind / One night or two with wanton growth derides, / Tending to wild" (9.208-211).

In order for his Adam and his Eve to achieve a virtuous state, they need to move forward into experience rather than backwards into innocence. It is the danger inherent in nature that therefore makes it a source of possible redemption. While more recent eco-criticism would emphasize ideas of stewardship and human responsibility to nature, Milton sees a transactional function within man's interaction with the garden. The act of pruning and tending is an act of choosing and designating value, both externally and internally. The labor of cultivating the land is essential in that it mirrors the process of self-cultivation that Milton urges his readers to undertake. The wantonness of both Eve's tendrils and those of the garden must be present in order for it to be controlled, and this narrative need for the exertion of control is vital for the construction of Milton's idea of virtue. Eve may require more moral cultivation than Adam, but her presence is necessary to rather than a blight on human creation.

While Milton chooses to link Eve to the natural landscape via their shared wildness, Brontë exaggerates a similar notion when the children's curls are shorn in Lowood. Mr. Brocklehurst is dismayed to find the children with hair "curled – curled all over" (126). His overreaction to their "wanton ringlets," as we might call them, indicates that perhaps this natural occurrence is not as sinful as it appears. Given that readers are inclined to dislike this character, they would also disagree with his assessments. The scene hearkens back to Milton's correlation of curls with corruption, toying with the idea that even obedient children – like Helen – and an unfallen Eden might "[tend] to wild," but Brontë places the sentiment in an antagonist's mouth. By doing so, she calls this gendered correlation into question. Jane is indeed tied to her landscape of origin, like Eve and Eden, and this tie is based on a sense of virtuousness. At the moment of Mr. Rochester and Jane's engagement (an immoral act, though that is here unbeknownst to the heroine), a shadow falls over the scene. She wonders, "And what ailed the chestnut tree? it

writhed and groaned" (341). The tree is struck by lightning in the same moment that her joy at their engagement supersedes her discomfort at Mrs. Fairfax's moral disapproval. Like the Tree of Knowledge in Milton's garden, the chestnut tree in Thornfield acts as a measuring rod for the heroine's virtuousness – whether she is aware of the threat to her morals or not. After Jane's nighttime encounter with the ghostly Bertha, she speaks to the tree "as if the monster-splinters were living things, and could hear me" (363). Her association between life and conversation, as she says the trees could "hear" her, gestures towards the ways in which nature attaches to a subject's will. Voice, in *Jane Eyre*, connects to choice. This linkage of women, choices, and trees bonds together the themes of female morality and the natural world in both Milton's poem and Brontë's novel.

Brontë uses nature as a motif through which to bind Jane's model of virtue to a sense of national identity. In both *Paradise Lost* and *Jane Eyre*, the relationship between women and nature is a crucial aspect of virtue, but while the former values its inexorable wilderness, the latter text moves into a celebration of its land's nationally insulative characteristics. For Jane, her environment is specifically the British landscape as set against the encroaching influence of foreign lands. Rochester notes that Jane seems to carry "a green flowery Eden" within herself (404). The insularity of Eden is here not only related to national, but also individual, borders. Like Eve and her relationship to the garden, this Victorian heroine exhibits more of a connection to the British landscape than is demonstrated by her male companions. Her identity is grounded (literally) in England. Jane's relationship to nature correlates with her sense of national identity; the "green flowery Eden" within her is markedly British when placed against the foreign locales and identities she encounters and rejects. Refusing to flee to Marseilles as Rochester's mistress, Jane instead commits herself to "the universal mother, Nature" (414). The nurturing, maternal

side of Nature is centered in the English countryside, which shelters Jane, while non-British nature is portrayed as mortally dangerous, such as when Mr. Rochester nearly commits suicide in the West Indies. Race and nationalism in *Jane Eyre* are intimately tied to Jane's perceptions of her own racialized body and the bodies of those with whom she interacts, staged against the all-important British landscape.

FROM EDEN TO INDIA: THE RACIALIZATION OF VIRTUE IN *JANE EYRE*

Both Milton and Brontë are seen now as quintessential British figures: one blind and dictating to his daughters, and one wandering the moors of Haworth, but both immersed in what it meant to be a British subject. Gray notes in his aforementioned article, "Where Shakespeare was permitted to be a universal possession, Milton came to be seen, despite his biblical subject matter, as a peculiarly English poet" (19). Jane Eyre, in her turn, is shaped into a particularly English heroine. Milton's place in the canon is a story unto itself, but this paper seeks to outline the ways in which Brontë situates her protagonist as part of the same national literature. In the seemingly domestic story of *Jane Eyre*, workings of empire lurk in the background. Issues of race and colonialism have been critiqued at length in analyses of the novel. Thomas Tracy, for example, views the novel's imperialist questions through a Biblical lens, arguing against critics who "have focused chiefly on the West Indian dimension of British imperialism in Bronte's novel, and…have regarded the colonial motif as primarily a vehicle used to highlight the concerns of middle-class Western feminism" (63). While Tracy argues that the novel is ultimately critical of both imperialist and patriarchal ideologies (going so far as to read St. John's missionary project as an evocation of the biblical Revelation and apocalypse), I contend that the threat of imperialism's consequences is necessary for the construction of British whiteness as embodied in Jane. St. John's bent towards India is apocalyptical for the British subject, but the presence of India helps to create the identity of that same individual. While Jane views her moral choices as affecting her own construction of virtue, operating on the level of the individual, the novel suggests that her trajectory mirrors the formation of the collective British subject. The ethical dimension of this text can be situated within Brontë's national and racialized frameworks.

The creation of whiteness through its comparison to non-whiteness is a connecting thread between the early modern and Victorian periods, though conceptions of race experienced significant changes across the years. Milton argues in *Areopagitica* that a virtue that does not know "the utmost that vice promises to her followers" is "but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness" (350). This "whiteness" is complicated. Kim Hall writes that white/black binaries "rather than being mere indications of Elizabethan beauty standards or markers of moral categories, became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate the notions of 'self' and 'other'" (2). While Milton himself may not have understood this binary in racial terms, such a discourse was emerging in his time. Other published works, such as travel narratives, describe a variety cultures in order for "English readers to know themselves by seeing others" – the traveler must "[exercise] the requisite control over the culture without becoming seduced by or implicated in it" (Hall 5, 59). Rochester's marriage to Bertha and Jane's almost-contract to St. John represent this danger of seduction by those affiliated with the Other. In answering the question of whether or not Jane is as morally upright as Brontë perhaps imagined her to be, the concept of whiteness must be examined as an aspect of her virtue.

The novel envisions a particular brand of British virtue tied to this imagined whiteness. Early in her time at Lowood, Jane wonders at Helen's virtue. Like Milton, the pious girl says that "there is no merit" in passive goodness which does not require effort. She then corrects Jane's view that resistance to undue punishment is righteous: "Heathens and savage tribes hold that doctrine," Helen says, "but Christians and civilized nations disown it" (119). By paralleling religious ("Christians") and national ("civilized nation") brands of virtue, this scene intertwines the personal and public landscapes. Furthering this connection, in her adulthood Jane sees

foreign locations as places of moral and physical death. Is it not better to be a schoolmistress "free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England," than to have accepted Mr. Rochester's proposal and become a "slave in a fool's paradise at Marseilles"? England's "healthy heart" creates mirrored moral health in its inhabitant, in contrast to the false Eden – the "fool's paradise" – offered as temptation to leave. The "southern clime" in which bigamy would have taken place is appropriately suited to the immorality of the act (455). Brontë exposes the incongruousness of white bodies in non-Anglo lands as a gesture of English nationalism, as the reader views the lands of the Other through Jane's eyes.

The importance of national identity in *Jane Eyre* is not limited to individual virtue. To leave England invites a loss of self as a whole; when Jane returns to seek her former master at Thornfield, she learns that he is not yet dead, and thinks, "Since he was not in the grave, I could bear, I thought, to learn that he was at the Antipodes" (526). The Antipodes, a footnote informs the reader, are "often used to describe Australia, and signifying the other side of the world from England." This line of thinking paints Othered lands as only a few steps above death itself, an impression underscored by Mr. Rochester's experiences in the West Indies. Jane, Mr. Rochester, and St. John each cultivate their own mode of whiteness, with varying degrees of what might have then be considered success. Jane's interactions with racialized characters both challenge and enforce her white Britishness, and specifically her identity as an "authoritative middle-class subject" (McKee 67). In her article "Racial Strategies in *Jane Eyre*," Patricia McKee acknowledges that while it is difficult to trace an "unambiguous racial discourse in the novel," the issue of racialization is paramount in understanding the formation of Jane's adult identity. Growing up in Gateshead, John Reed hates his mother "for her dark skin, similar to his own" (72). Jane finds herself "a heterogeneous thing" among these dark-skinned people, an "interloper

not of [Mrs. Reed's] race" (73-74). Jane's dislike of the Reeds, and her subsequent expulsion from their living space, foregrounds the difference between her raced identity and their own "dark skin." Later, interactions with Bertha, Blanche, and imagined Indian women will define Jane's Britishness and that of her beloved, Mr. Rochester.

Rochester is redeemed – sight restored and reproductive line guaranteed – only after denying two ambiguously racialized women, Blanche and Bertha, in favor of Jane and a stable residence in England. His trouble begins abroad; the West Indies and its influence threaten British identities, beginning with Bertha's planter family (including the dog-like Mason), then contaminating Rochester himself, and spreading even to Grace Poole. Maddened by his hasty marriage to Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester finds himself on the brink of suicide one "fiery West-Indian night" (398). The air is "like sulpher-steams," mosquitos fill the room, and the moon is "broad and red, like a hot cannon-ball" in the "black clouds" above the sea. The world, it seems, has turned into a hell. He finds this scene, punctuated by the sound of Bertha's "wolfish cries," to be unbearable, and he reaches for a pistol with which to shoot himself. Once again we see non-English environments linked to the inability to live. "A wind fresh from Europe" interrupts this process; this "sweet wind" makes him feel that "regeneration [is] possible" (399). He finds hope in gazing "over the sea – bluer than the sky," and muses that "the old world was beyond" (399). While many travel narratives find their protagonists thinking longingly of what is to be found in the colonies or beyond, Mr. Rochester turns back to England for salvation.

While the Mason family is likely light-skinned, or have at least been commonly accepted to be so by critics, they have been racialized by their time in the West Indies. Bertha and the younger Mr. Mason are embodied proof that the degenerative effects of Othered lands cannot be undone by exposure to pure English air. Whether they are of mixed race or have entirely white

parentage, the family's time in Jamaica has left its mark. Bertha's mother is mad and "shut up in a lunatic asylum," her younger brother is a "complete dumb idiot," and Mr. Mason has a "feeble mind" and "dog-like attachment" (396). Even Mr. Rochester, corrupted by his time abroad, must follow an arc of moral redemption before earning Jane's hand in marriage. Bertha's madness is not only "intemperate," according to Mr. Rochester, but also "unchaste" (397). Her masculine physicality contrasts with small Jane, who stands quietly in her would-be wedding gown (encased, it would seem, in her own whiteness) and passively views the captive Creole. The presence of Bertha also exacerbates Poole's drinking problem, drawing her further from the ideal of middle-class moderation. As Milton's definition of virtue is grounded in the ideal of temperance, this vice of Bertha's – and its influence on others – is particularly damning within the ideological framework of the novel. Grace's intemperance is symptomatic of the ways in which the importation of Creoles into England leads to the corruption of Anglo ideals within their own borders. It is from this marriage that Mr. Rochester's guilt and corruption flows, leaving a contaminant in the Hall that can be purged by fire alone.

Later in the text, it is Miss Ingram who menaces the proper British relationship blossoming in Thornfield Hall. Blanche's presence emphasizes both Rochester's moral failings – his fake courtship and generally impolite demeanor – and his Othered physical attributes: the "dark eyes and swarth skin and Paynim features" (262). She invites him to participate in a false, non-British whiteness; her very name is "white," but in a foreign tongue; as an upper-class woman willingly imbibing and excreting the influence of the Other, she is linked to the "excremental whiteness" mentioned in *Areopagitica*. Blanche's beauty is accentuated by "rich foreign lace" and "a shawl turban of some gold-wrought Indian fabric," transcontinental influences to complement her "Roman features," a more distant but equally potent signal of

imperialism (249). Mr. Rochester's rejection of Blanche highlights his affection for Jane, and therefore his association with a true Britain versus the falseness acted out by Blanche. Through turning away from Miss Ingram's exotic beauty in favor of Jane's English plainness, he reaffirms his identity as corresponding to the latter woman's. Having disentangled himself from both Blanche and Bertha, Rochester is framed as an appropriate partner for his stalwartly Anglocentric wife. By the conclusion of the narrative he has upheld his declaration to "not exchange this one little English girl for the grand Turk's whole seraglio." It is not beauty or sensuality that tilts the balance in her favor, but rather the descriptor "English" that overweighs "gazelle-eyes" and "houri forms" (255). She may be poor, plain, and argumentative – but she is certainly English.

Finally, Jane's Englishness is challenged again by St. John's "awful charm" in trying to bring her to India (500). *Jane Eyre* expresses a certain anxiety surrounding Eastern mysticism (here, St. John's "charm" that would bring Jane to India) as it contrasts with English rationalism and science; this concern can also be seen in Blanche's skit at the party, which suggests an outward corruption of Rochester's Britishness. St. John's manipulation of Jane begins with language, as he encourages her to learn "Hindostanee," thus causing her to "disown half [her] nature" as an English speaker (497). By framing Jane as the parent of her own nature (implied by her ability to disown it), Brontë places on her protagonist the ethical burden of self-raising, or self-cultivation, suggested in *Areopagitica*. Here, the responsibility to maintain her own national character is seen in Jane's resistance to a non-Western language. Ultimately, the influence of St. John's disembodied charm is obstructed by Jane's awareness of her corporal needs as an English subject. Jane feels that hers "is not the existence to be long protracted under an Indian sun" (503). Her body, connected as it is to the English landscape, cannot be severed safely from its

place of origin. The Othered women whom she imagines saving in Chapter 23 ("I'll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberation to them that are enslaved – your Harem inmates amongst the rest") are abandoned when they become threateningly real (355). Saving those women from exoticized bondage would demand that she, implicitly, take their place; though Jane obeys St. John's command to learn "Hindostanee," she laments inwardly that she "did not love her servitude" (496). Jane's refusal to serve in India is contrasted by St. John, whose senseless death at the end of the novel is a consequence of his eagerness to leave England. As Tracy notes, "A brief plot summary suffices to debunk any claims that St John's character is portrayed 'positively'" (69). His desire for a conventional wife, obedient unto the point of death, is attached to his unsustainable version of virtue. While his lonesome death may be read as an anti-imperialist message embedded within the narrative, it also supports Jane's choice to remain within the bounds of her native land.

CONCLUSION

In issues of both love and national identity, Jane moves through the Victorian narrative like Guion in the cave of Mammon; she is able to "see and know, and yet abstain" (*Areopagitica* 350). Brontë intertwines the conception of virtue put forth in *Areopagitica,* and traced through *Paradise Lost*, with contemporary nationalism to craft an original Victorian heroine. Her gestures toward Milton's works give her own novel a sense of cultural authority while simultaneously writing against that infamous bogey, updating images of both the Eve myth and the ideal Victorian woman for Brontë's own time and own purposes. By choosing a Miltonic conception of virtue to frame her protagonist, Brontë rejects typical Victorian morality and substitutes it with a system of individual, degendered virtue more amenable to the "Currer Bell"s of the world. Jane's assertion that "women feel just as men feel" is representative of the intention behind this adaption (178). While Jane does assume the role of British wife and mother by the conclusion of the novel, it is more importantly her rejection of the alternatives – of being a mistress and sacrificing her moral ideals, or of living abroad and corrupting her Englishness – that marks her as a virtuous Victorian heroine and rescues *Jane Eyre* from the fate of a "naughty book." *Areopagitica* insists that "how much we expel of sin, so much we expel of virtue: for the matter of them both is the same; remove that, and ye remove them both alike" (354). Without the "naughtiness" of the novel, its moral lesson would be moot. Jane is virtuous not despite her passions and temptations, but because of her ability to regulate or resist them. The book includes a multitude of sins – some within Jane's own character, such as her temper – but uses them to emphasize the path by which she improves her own moral quality.

Brontë uses the claims from this early modern prose tract to shape a unique ideology that allows Jane to rise as a figure of British virtue. She is no angel in the house, certainly: as she

warns Mr. Rochester, "you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me – for you will not get it" (345). Jane falls repeatedly at first (attacking her cousin, making Rochester an idol). Later she is tempted to fall again (accepting a role as unmarried lover, or following St. John to India). These temptations are rejected through temperance and choice – the virtues of *Areopagitica*. As a child Jane dreams of "taking a long voyage" to the land of the elves, but comes to realize that they had "all gone out of England to some savage country," to "most dread and dangerous regions" into which she dares not venture, even for love (79). Brontë thus reshapes the wantonness of Milton's Eden into an equally bountiful, but more intrinsically virtuous, Britain. Jane creates boundaries separating herself from these Other regions, and learns through experience and exposure to tame her own "savage" impulses, coming eventually to an understanding of virtue that endows her with the original Edenic woman's role of "absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh" – the happy ending refused to Bertha (554). While Spivak reads Bertha as complicating and limiting female individualism, the Creole's existence is that which offers Jane the chance to assert her virtue and to have this quality heightened by the presence of its ethical and racialized opposition.

Jane rises from morality of habit or of force to a truer morality of reason; as she says when turning away St. John, "To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment" (518). The development of her virtue is a process of judgment and choice rather than an effect of unaltered, angelic morality. Having gathered her experiences – her books, as *Areopagitica* might imagine them –, she makes increasingly virtuous decisions as the narrative progresses and is eventually presented as a model of the Milton-inspired, new Victorian heroine through a racialized lens. Her success comes not despite foreign presences, but is rather defined in contrast to them. In the cultural moment during

which Brontë comes out from behind the shroud of Currer Bell, this conception of virtue – in contrast to "excremental whiteness" – provides a framework in which she may continue to strive to engage in the public sphere without moral censure. The question of whether or not *Jane Eyre* is a "naughty book" concerns not only critics of nineteenth-century literature, but also anyone engaged with today's debates regarding issues of women, citizenship, or morality. To more deeply understand our own moment's definition of "good" – what it means and whether or not we should even strive to be it –, we must first look back at the path these ideas have already traveled.

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