CHRISTIANITY AND THE STATE OF SLAVERY
IN JANE EYRE

By Sue Thomas

POSTCOLONIAL READINGS OF Jane Eyre have often highlighted the historical occlusion of West Indian slavery in the novel. Carl Plasa, for instance, argues that despite the pivotal and determinant role of the West Indies in Jane Eyre in terms of the narrative and economic fortunes of its major characters, Brontë’s text nowhere explicitly refers to the institution of British slavery or the colonial project with which, for the early Victorian reader, the West Indies would still, in 1847, be strongly associated and against whose distant horizon Jane conducts her metropolitan life. (62–63)

Penny Boumelha points out that by her reckoning there are “ten explicit references to slavery in Jane Eyre. They allude to slavery in Ancient Rome and in the seraglio, to the slaveries of paid work as a governess and of dependence as a mistress. None of them refers to the slave trade upon which the fortunes of all in the novel are based” (62). While Jane Eyre’s allusion to slavery in the seraglio is indeed the most precise historical allusion in the novel, critics working with general schemes of slave and imperial history have not been able to identify or unpack its topical reference to an anomalous moment in the history of British abolition of slavery. Like all of Jane’s references to slavery, however, this allusion gains considerably in importance when read against that history, as I will demonstrate in this essay. I will also elaborate the generic and more broadly historical intertextuality of Jane’s Gothic narratives of identification with the slave. By doing so, I disclose further meanings of slavery and empire in Jane Eyre, as well as the ways in which Gothic and heroic modes become a means, for Brontë and her characters alike, of articulating fraught racialized identifications and disavowals.¹ Jane’s growth of religious feeling, which Barbara Hardy has influentially suggested is taken “for granted” rather than demonstrated (66), is, I argue, grounded in her consciousness of the tensions between slavery and Christianity as they are played out in domestic and imperial spheres at a particular historical moment. That historical moment may be established through Brontë’s allusions to slave rebellions and charters, and to a particular edition of Sir Walter Scott’s poem Marmion.²

Disconcerted by Rochester’s showering of expensive gifts on her and his “smile such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched” (269; vol. 2, ch. 9), the betrothed Jane orders Rochester “to the bazaars of
Stamboul” to purchase his slaves. In resisting Rochester’s eroticization of her dependency on him, Jane identifies herself with a missionary working among slaves, rather than as a member of his seraglio. “I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved – your Harem inmates amongst the rest,” she avers. “I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny; and you, three-tailed bashaw as you are, sir, shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands; nor will I, for one, consent to cut your bonds till you have signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred” (269; vol. 2, ch. 9). The actions Jane imagines taking recall the work of William Knibb, an English Baptist missionary working in Jamaica, who had been for a brief time charged with inciting mutiny among slaves, the 1831 revolt now known as Sam Sharpe’s Rebellion.3

The charges against Knibb were dropped but the vigilante violence of planters, which included burning down his church, forced him to leave Jamaica for England. There he campaigned for the abolition of slavery and his “evidence to the Commons committee on the extinction of slavery . . . convinced Lord Howick, parliamentary undersecretary at the Colonial Office, of the need for immediate abolition” (Turner 173). His persuasion was seen to have been crucial in bringing the British government to formalize “just and liberal” measures to abolish slavery in Britain’s crown and chartered colonies in the West Indies in June 1833.4

In July 1833, though, in the context of renewal of the India Charter Act, the British parliament refused to interfere with the practice of what was termed “domestic slavery” in the “harems of the Mahommedans and the zenanahs of the natives” in India.5 In the Commons debate on the renewal of the India Charter Act, Sir Robert Inglis noted that, in relation to India, Parliament was “by a solemn engagement bound to observe all the rights of masters of families, whether preserved by the Gentoo [non-Muslim] or Mahommedan laws.”6 Captain Henry Bevan had reminded the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company that Indians “were guaranteed that all former usages and customs, both civil and religious, should be respected and protected in the same manner as when they were under the sway of the native governments.”7 In Clause LXXXVIII of the 1833 India Charter Act, the Governor General in Council was “required . . . to take into consideration the Means of mitigating the State of Slavery, and of ameliorating the Condition of Slaves, and of extinguishing Slavery throughout the said Territories so soon as such Extinction shall be practicable and safe,” with “due Regard” to the “Laws of Marriage and the Rights and Authorities of Fathers and Heads of Families.”8 The Clause was debated in the House of Commons on 17 July 1833. Several members asserted strongly that harems and zenanahs ought to be exempt from anti-slavery provisions. Were they not, the clause “would be likely to throw the whole country into a flame”; failure to exempt such domestic spaces “was a wanton meddling with the prejudices of the natives” which would have “the most disastrous consequences,” declared Cutlar Fergusson. Mr. Buckingham opined that if harems “were interfered with, it would unite all classes against our Government.” Charles Grant reassured members of parliament “that the clause had no reference to domestic slavery, but only to predial slavery.”9 As in early nineteenth-century official debate over the practice of sati, this parliamentary discussion was organized largely around “the question of the political feasibility of abolition” of a customary practice anchored in religion “rather than the ethics of its toleration” (Mani 15). In having Jane threaten to replicate Knibb’s work in the orientalized context of Rochester’s relations with women, Brontë shows an awareness that any reform of “domestic slavery” in the seraglio would have to take place on a household by household basis.
Jane’s reference to Walter Scott’s poem *Marmion* (1808), a gift from St. John Rivers while she is teaching at Morton, is often used to date the action of the novel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As Q. D. Leavis shows, a web of anachronisms is produced by such a dating (487–89). She comments: “The general confusion of dates and eras and fashions and facts is even more irrational than anything Dickens allowed himself, suggesting the timeless quality of the myth and day-dream. It is also the opposite of her sister’s practice in *Wuthering Heights*, where every date and fact coheres perfectly” (489). Leavis’s argument has been influential. Jane, however, describes the work as a “new publication,” not a new poem, and St. John gives it to her on 5 November, a Guy Fawkes Day holiday. Both these details indicate that Brontë is referring to the publication of *Marmion* in Robert Cadell’s twelve-volume *Poetical Works of Walter Scott*, issued in 1833–34; the volume containing *Marmion* was issued in late October/early November 1833. (Scott had died in 1832.) In commenting on the gift, furthermore, Jane engages with Byron’s attack on Scott over *Marmion* in “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers” (1809), which is reproduced in the editorial matter to Cadell’s edition provided by John Gibson Lockhart. In particular, she praises Cadell’s memorialization of Scott in “one those genuine productions so often vouchsafed to the fortunate public of those days...I know poetry is not dead, nor genius lost” (370; vol. 3, ch. 6).

That Jane alludes, in the same year in the novel’s internal chronology, to an 1833 anomaly in the history of the abolition of slavery and to the gift of this new edition of *Marmion* indicates that her engagement to Rochester and teaching at Morton also take place in 1833. She arrived at Thornfield Hall aged eighteen in October 1832, and returns there to rejoin Rochester on 1 June 1834, Bertha Mason having died in the autumn of 1833. According to this dating, Bertha Mason and Rochester married in 1819; Bertha was born in 1792, Rochester in 1797, and Jane in 1814. This dating is supported by the internal chronology of other Gothic allusions to slave rebellion, the first set of which occurs in chapters 1 and 2 of the novel.

According to my dating, Jane’s response to the experience of confinement in the red room, punishment for railing against the tyrannical John Reed, takes place in October 1824. By this time, news of the August 1823 slave rebellion in Demerera and of several harshly punished incidents of slave unrest in Jamaica had reached England. Brontë associates the ten-year-old Jane with these rebellious slaves in several ways. Jane denounces John, following his verbal and physical attack, as “[w]icked and cruel,” insisting that he is “like a murderer...like a slave-driver...like the Roman emperors...Nero, Caligula, &c” (11; vol. 1, ch. 1). Jane subsequently characterizes this outburst (in which she makes public an analogy drawn in private, and based on her reading of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Roman History from the foundation of the city of Rome, to the destruction of the Western Empire*) as “a moment’s mutiny,” like that of a “rebel slave” (12; vol. 1, ch. 2). Secondly, the servant Miss Abbot describes John Reed as Jane’s master, telling her that she is “less than a servant,” because she does “nothing” for her “keep” (12; vol. 1, ch. 2). Brontë also has Jane identify with a “revolted slave” who can “reason” the injustice of her situation and brace her with “bitter vigour” (14; vol. 1, ch. 2). Jane’s other self-identification in this chapter, linked with a personified Superstition that will win “complete victory” over her, is with her image in the mirror, a spectacle of abject whiteness, signaling sinking “courage” and a “habitual mood of humiliation, self-doubt, forlorn depression” (16; vol. 1, ch. 2), the price of having been “[h]abitually obedient” to John (10; vol. 1, ch. 1).
Jane’s reference to Roman master/slave relations is not a sign of Brontë’s historical amnesia over West Indian slavery. On the contrary, an analogy between Roman slavery and slavery in the West Indies circulated in early nineteenth-century missionary discourse and in vigorous public debates over the compatibility of Christianity and slavery from the mid-1820s until the early 1830s. In pro-abolitionist discourse, slavery was held to be “contrary altogether to the genius, the tendency, the doctrine, the example, and the precepts of Christianity.”¹⁶ In parliamentary agitation in favour of abolition in May 1823, the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Fowell Buxton controversially put a motion in the House of Commons: “That the State of Slavery is repugnant to the principles of the British Constitution, and of the Christian religion; and that it ought to be gradually abolished throughout the British colonies, with as much expedition as may be found consistent with a due regard to the well-being of the parties concerned.”¹⁷ George Canning, Foreign Secretary, countered that there was no “special denunciation against slavery” in Christianity, which “took its root amidst the galling slavery of the Roman empire.” He favoured a longer-term preparation of slaves for freedom through a “widening diffusion of light and liberality” through Christian conversion, supporting his case by referring to Dr. Paley’s analysis of the slow decline of ancient slavery under the “alterative” influence of Christianity.¹⁸

Vocal West India planters and the pro-slavery lobby in Britain blamed the slave rebellions and unrest of 1823 and 1824¹⁹ in large part on the circulation among slave populations of news of the terms of this parliamentary debate and of the amelioration measures that were eventually passed. In the stridently pro-slavery paper John Bull, lent to the Brontë family by Mr. Driver (and described by Charlotte as “high Tory, very violent” [qtd. in Gaskell 117]), the spectre of murderous rebellion and “unprecedented atrocities” on the scale of those in St. Domingue was raised in warning letters from various colonies.²⁰ The British government was said to have “placed” colonists on a “volcano,”²¹ possibly an allusion to Mirabeau’s comment on the planters of St. Domingo: “They sleep on the verge of a volcano, and the first sparks that burst from it give them no alarm?”²² These allusions to St. Domingue confirm, as Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert has asserted, that the “Haitian revolution, the foundational narrative of the Caribbean Gothic . . . becomes the obsessively retold master tale of the Caribbean’s colonial terror” (234). David Geggus summarizes the significance of this revolution:

Racial equality, the abolition of slavery, decolonization, and nationhood first came to the Caribbean with the Haitian Revolution. Between 1791 and 1803 the opulent French colony of Saint Domingue was transformed by the largest and most successful of all slave revolts. After twelve years of desolating warfare, Haiti emerged in 1804 as the first modern independent state in the Americas after the United States. For slaves and slave owners throughout the New World, the Haitian Revolution was an inspiration and a warning. (21)

The four alleged insurrections in Jamaica in 1823–24 were brought before the British public again in 1826 when controversy raged in parliament, pamphlets, pulpit, and press about probable miscarriage of justice in the trials of the alleged conspirators, and indeed whether the incidents constituted even conspiracy to rebel against and kill white people.²³ Charges were based mostly on overheard talk of rights and freedom. Fifty-four slaves were charged and convicted and twenty-three acquitted. Twenty-three of those convicted were executed; many more were flogged.
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In *Blackwood's Magazine*, read avidly by the Brontë children, slave rebellion is figured as an “approach[ing]” “storm” (James McQueen, qtd. in Lockhart, “West Indian” 450; pt. 1), “bloody insurrection,” a “sea” or “torrents” of “blood” (Lockhart, “West Indian” 458; pt. 1), and flames.24 Fire, storm, black clouds, and blood are the predominant Gothic tropes in Rochester’s account of the night of deepest suicidal despair that marks the culmination of his Jamaican sojourn. The tropology of the account, as in literary horror more generally, works to “transform political struggles” – here the 1823 slave unrest in Jamaica – “into psychological conditions” (Halberstam 18). Enslaved people are figured by Rochester as “black clouds” (307; vol. 3, ch. 1); narrating his decision to return to England after discovering Bertha’s supposed madness, he remarks that “the storm broke, streamed, thundered, blazed, and the air grew pure” (308; vol. 3, ch. 1). At the level of the psychodrama, Rochester’s description of his heart as “swell[ing]” to the tone of thunderous liberty and “fill[ing]” with “living blood” (308; vol. 3, ch. 1) resonates with his characterization of his marriage to Bertha as the “ghastliness of living death” (300; vol. 3, ch. 1). At the level of encrypted political struggle, the description more critically implies a vampiric relation to the “bloody” colonial body politic that recuperates a sense of manliness. Rochester describes Thornfield Hall inhabited by Bertha as “this accursed place – this tent of Achan – “ (300; vol. 3, ch. 1). In the Bible, Achan had “coveted” and stolen spoils (a garment, money and gold) from Jericho. The Lord speaks of the spoils as “the accursed thing,” and decrees that “he that is taken with the accursed thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD” (Josh. 6.15).25 The fire is represented as a cleansing. The allusion to Thornfield Hall as a tent of Achan suggests that its destruction by fire, Bertha’s death, and Rochester’s injuries sustained during it are signs of divine providence.26

Jane’s description of her rebellion against John as “a moment’s mutiny” (12; vol. 1, ch. 2) also gains considerable force when viewed in the contexts of the Demerera slave rebellion of 1823 and the Jamaican slave rebellion of 1831, in which non-Conformist missionaries were accused of inciting mutiny. The rebellions exacerbated planter suspicion of missionaries. In 1817, Methodist missionary John Smith reported to the London Missionary Society from Demerera that “almost every planter looks upon a missionary as one who aims at nothing less than the entire subversion of the colony” (qtd. in da Costa 140). As Hall points out, the rebellions were “widely reported in Britain, partly because of the central involvement of missionaries in the events and the way in which they were held responsible by planters and colonists for the eruptions which took place” (*Civilising Subjects* 85). Indeed, the coverage of the rebellions in the *Leeds Intelligencer* – a newspaper taken by the Brontë family – focused overwhelmingly on the charges against missionaries.27 Because of the alleged prominent role of Baptist missionaries as agents provocateurs, Sam Sharpe’s Rebellion in Jamaica, named after its black leader, is also known as the Baptist War. Sharpe himself was a Baptist deacon. The 1831 rebellion, Hall observes, “was organised by Christian converts who used the mission networks, took inspiration from the Bible, and claimed the missionaries as their allies. Sharpe proclaimed the natural equality of men, and refuted the planters’ claim that they could hold black people in bondage” (*Civilising Subjects* 105).

The details of the Demerera rebellion were widely broadcast in Britain during efforts in 1824 to exonerate posthumously the Methodist missionary John Smith. He had been convicted in Demerera of inciting mutiny, and had died of consumption in prison on 6 February 1824 while awaiting the King’s clemency recommended by the court-martial that had sentenced him to death. Summarizing Smith’s legacy, da Costa observes that he had
maintained that “God’s law was the supreme law” (263); embraced “liberal” “aversion to slavery” (264); challenged the “myth of the benevolent master and contented slaves”; and inculcated in slaves a sense of their capacity for “dignity,” “autonomy,” leadership, and community (291). The publicity given to the persecution of him “triggered” a “new emancipationist wave” in Britain (287). As Cecil Northcott points out, “the trauma of the Smith case” converted William Wilberforce and the Clapham evangelicals “to complete abolition” (117).

This missionary context is important, too, to a full appreciation of the use of the Roman analogy in public debate around the newly invigorated abolition campaign, to refute abolitionist claims that Christianity and slavery were incompatible. John Gibson Lockhart summarized the tenor of such claims: “the existence of slavery is an absolute violation of the precepts of the Bible, and, . . . its toleration in any shape by any Christian country, constitutes a national SIN” (Rev. 501–02).28 This was Patrick Brontë’s position on slavery by the late 1820s. Abolition is, he wrote in a letter to the Leeds Intelligencer, a “reasonable and scriptural” demand, a “responsibility” to God and a “duty” to England of “a christian and enlightened people.” It is, for him, integral to the reformation of an English nation according to the principles of Christian Enlightenment rationality ([3]). In November 1824, John Bull quoted from the Bishop of Exeter’s prefix to the last report of the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, in which he declared that Christianity “permits and sanctions slavery,” and that it “equally impresses” on master and slave “their relative obligations, and inculcates equally the duty of kindness and compassion in the master, of good-will and obedience in the slave.”29

Missionary societies would routinely counsel missionaries going to the West Indies that they were to address the spiritual and not the civil or temporal condition of slaves. Their precedent was to be the apostles of Jesus, who proselytized among slaves in the Roman empire and did not advocate slave rebellion. In the wake of Smith’s arrest, the Wesleyan Methodists released to the press their general instructions to missionaries:

> your only business is to promote the moral and religious improvement of the slaves to whom you have access, without in the least degree, in public or private, interfering with their civil condition. On all persons in the state of slaves, you are diligently and explicitly to enforce the same exhortations which the Apostles of our Lord administered to the slaves of ancient nations, when by their ministry they embraced Christianity Eph.vi.5–8, “Servants, be obedient.” &c – Col.iii.22–25, “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh,” &c30

This was published widely, including in the Leeds Intelligencer. Paul’s injunction in Ephesians 6 epitomizes the style of instruction recommended:

> 5 Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ;
> 6 Not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart[.]”

The Baptist Missionary Society counselled Knibb in its instructions to be similarly circumspect, so that “none will justly be able to lay anything to your charge”: 
The gospel of Christ, as you well know, so far from producing or countenancing a spirit of rebellion or insubordination, has a directly opposite tendency. Most of the servants addressed by the apostle Paul, in his epistles, were slaves, and he exhorts them to be obedient to their own masters, in singleness of heart, fearing God; and this not only to the good and gentle, but to the froward. (qtd. in Wright 31–32)

On public platforms in Britain in 1832–33, however, Knibb abandoned circumspection and declared himself to be an “unbending friend” to “slaves,” and that “[t]he contest which is now going on is a contest between Christianity and slavery” (qtd. in Hinton 156). He spoke in the name of a God “who has made of one blood all nations that dwell upon the face of the earth” (qtd. in Hinton 149).

In December 1824, in the last of a set of four unsigned Blackwood’s articles, Lockhart expounded his sense of the implications of St. Paul’s divinely inspired advice to slaves. He argues that Paul placed his hopes of their eventual emancipation “on the effects of the reformation of life and manners which he knew must mark the progress of a christianized population. He relied on the gradual increase of knowledge, virtue, and religion; on the natural consequences of these upon the industry of individuals in the state of slavery” (689; pt. 4). This was, unsurprisingly, the position Lockhart himself adopted throughout his series of articles. He presents himself throughout as a rational, widely read moderate. While he believes that slavery is an “abomination” (652; pt. 2), he feels it is a lesser evil than abolition, and variously pillories and refutes the leaders among and the arguments of the abolitionists. West Indian Britons he defends from blanket abolitionist charges that they are devils incarnate: “monsters,” “the most perfect brutes – cannibals – savages – wild-beasts – so many incarnations of every bad, gross, and cruel passion that ever sullied the bosoms of the children of Adam” (449; pt. 1). He mordantly endorses Trinculo’s sentiment in The Tempest that “[i]n England, a monster makes a MAN” (449; pt. 1), meaning that charging colonists with monstrosity provided abolitionists with spiritual and moral capital to galvanize public opinion and pity for enslaved people. Brougham, for example, in defending Smith in the House of Commons, described “West-Indian society” as “that monstrous birth of the accursed slave-trade.”

Lockhart also exhibits a virulent racism towards black Africans and slaves of African descent. In an unsigned review essay in the Quarterly Review, for instance, the Roman analogy spurs him to reflect on the differences between ancient and modern slavery. In modern West Indian slavery, he insists, there is “a total and visible line of demarcation drawn by the hand of nature herself, between the master-race and the vassal – a distinct, absolute, immeasurable inferiority in regard to civilization” (503). Lockhart appealed to family and familiar connections with West Indian Britons as grounds for refuting “wanton attack[s] upon the[ir] moral character and feelings” (“West Indian” 449; pt. 1). He was the cousin of James Potter Lockhart, Jean Rhys’s slave-owning and politically active great-grandfather. No evidence suggests, however, that James Potter Lockhart was a colonial informant.

Contrary to these scripturally-based justifications of slavery, Sam Sharpe, like Patrick Brontë, interpreted civil freedom of the slave to be a scriptural demand. On his speaking tour of Britain, Knibb reported to his audiences Sharpe’s words on the gallows, in which he differentiated between temporal and spiritual laws: “I have sinned against the laws of my country, and by those laws I ought to die; but I cannot see that I have sinned against my God. All I wished was to be free; all I wished was to enjoy that liberty which I find in the Bible is
the birthright of every man” (qtd. in Colonial Slavery 4). Kamau Brathwaite lists the Biblical justification of freedom among several of Sharpe’s groundings of freedom as a right:

freedom was a natural right (as heir of the French Revolution, Sharpe was literate); it was a divine right, willed by God to all Christians (Sharpe was a Baptist deacon); it was a slave right which could be fought for (the Haitian model); and it was an economic right (as part of the Industrial Revolution) which could be made good not through violence (necessarily or only) but through strike action: with-holding of labour (passive resistance) until the planters acknowledged their freedom.

(“Rebellion” 81)

Brathwaite, too, has drawn attention to the ways in which the Baptist missionaries Knibb, and later P. H. Cornford, appropriated Sharpe as a “Christian hero.” “[A]lthough he was a deacon in the Baptist church he was also,” Brathwaite insists, “unknown and invisible to the missionaries who thought they patronized his soul, a ‘ruler’ in his own right in his own people’s church” (“Caliban” 54).

David Brion Davis points out that “many abolitionists and Christianized slaves” (67) drew inspiration from Isaiah 61.1: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” The speaker of these lines has been construed to be, John N. Oswalt reports, a “synthesis” of the Servant referred to earlier in Isaiah, who is an “agent” of “God’s redemption,” and the Messiah (563, 323). “Jesus’ appropriation of these words in Luke . . . plainly indicates that he understood himself to be the realization of the synthesis that Isaiah was describing in the Servant/Messiah. Christians in all the ages since have agreed . . . This is the prophet representing the Servant/Messiah in a climactic way,” observes Oswalt (563). Jesus is reported to have read the passage from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth near the beginning of his ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4.18).

The meanings of “liberty” and “deliverance” were open to civil and spiritual interpretation. Knibb was pointedly questioned by parliamentary committee about whether he was able to maintain in his preaching to slaves the distinction between “temporal” and “spiritual” freedom. He replied: “Whenever I have had occasion to speak on that subject, I have explained, that when freedom is mentioned in the word of God, it referred to the soul and not to the body” (qtd. in Hinton 176). Davis cites an 1834 sermon on slave emancipation by Ralph Wardlaw in which he “interpreted the Gospel’s ‘proclamation of freedom’ to be primarily a ‘freedom from Sin, from Satan, from Death, from Hell.’” “But by 1833,” Davis adds, “these terms had become closely identified, at least in the minds of British evangelicals, with West Indian slavery” (67). The Leeds Intelligencer reported on 1 March 1832 (with some caution to readers) an editorial in a Jamaican paper that “describes the manner in which the Negroes have been incited by the sermons of the Baptists: the latter, it seems, were in the habit of preaching that the time was come when the Negroes were to be free, ‘pronouncing these words with emphasis, and adding, in a soft tone – from sin.’”

While Jane explicitly refers only to Roman slavery in the opening chapter of the novel, the Gothic tropes she and other characters use to describe her rebellious self – “fury,” “picture
of passion,” “like a mad cat” (12; vol. 1, ch. 2), “bursting . . . with volcanic vehemence” (400; vol. 3, ch. 8) – are commonplace in representations of the spectre of rebel West Indian slaves in this period. Roman slavery in the early Christian period provided the abstract justification for modern racial slavery. The occlusion of an explicit identification with the black slave may be underpinned by the kind of distinction, the “total and visible line,” that John Gibson Lockhart makes between the “master-race and the vassal” in modern slavery. Jane understands her rightful class expectations to be acknowledgment as English gentry. Roman and West Indian slavery are stitched together, however, through the contemporary tropes of slave rebellion and by the common emphasis on the cruelty and ill-temper of John Reed and of Bertha Mason, Bertha in managing an unquiet and unsettled household run on slave labour. This comparison implicitly links Bertha as a representative of a slaveowning plantocracy with the degenerate excesses of Caligula and Nero. Goldsmith characterized these as “furious passions, unexampled avarice, . . . capricious cruelty” and “prodigality” in the case of Caligula (163), “innate depravity,” “appetites . . . not only sordid but inhuman,” “cruelties” that “out-did all his other extravagancies” in the case of Nero. Rochester, too, will link Bertha with fabled Roman debauchery, in describing her as his “Indian Messalina” (311; vol. 3, ch. 1). Goldsmith writes that Messalina’s “name is almost become a common appellation to women of abandoned character. However, she was not less remarkable for her cruelties than her lusts” (197). Jane’s assumption of the “resolve” of the “revolted slave . . . instigated some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression – as running away, or, if, that could not be effected, never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die” (14–15; vol. 1, ch. 2). These devices were two of those adopted by West Indian slaves: three of the 1824 Hanover conspirators in Jamaica committed suicide and another attempted to do so. Jane marks out the foreignness of such means with the word “strange” and, implicitly, acknowledges the criminality of suicide in a Christian state.

Jane’s defiance of John has been read as an assumption of critical agency and, in late twentieth-century terms, feminist voice-agency (Politi 60, Sharpe 39, Kaplan, “Heterogenous” 183–84). In the novel, that voice-agency is racialized by Helen Burns, who provides a voice for the kind of New Testament theology that Paul espouses as advice to servants. When Jane, in conversation with the consumptive Helen, justifies disobedience toward and rebellion against “cruel and unjust people,” Helen tells her that “[h]eathens and savage tribes hold that doctrine, but Christians and civilized nations disown it” (58; vol 1, ch. 6). In this scheme, disobedience and rebellion are, to borrow Elizabeth Rigby’s words from her famous review of Jane Eyre, a “murmuring against God’s appointment” (591). Helen’s position mirrors that of missionary societies: “The gospel of Christ, as you well know, so far from producing or countenancing a spirit of rebellion or insubordination, has a directly opposite tendency.” Helen herself offers the child Jane a model of such Christian endurance.

Jane and Helen enact their roles of “slave” and “Christian” most memorably after Mr. Brocklehurst, deceived by Mrs. Reed’s show of being benevolent mistress of her household, has separated Jane out from familial Christian community at Lowood as “an interloper and an alien,” a sinning “liar.” He orders her to stand “exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy” (67; vol. 1, ch. 7). Helen walks past her, and Jane finds, in the “strange light” in Helen’s eyes and in a smile that Jane as mature narrator characterizes as “the effluence of fine intellect, of true courage,” temporary spiritual inspiration to endure the ordeal: “It was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in the transit” (67;
vol. 1, ch. 7). The “spell” is short-lived, however. Jane is soon overwhelmed by “grief” and a feeling of being “again crushed and trodden on” (68; vol. 1, ch. 8). Here the identification with the slave is as victim of false witness; her accusers exhibit class and racial prejudice, with race understood as family.

The racial overtones of Helen’s rhetoric are accentuated by her consumptive pallor, which marks her out as an example of the extreme whiteness Richard Dyer discusses in *White*. He observes that the “very, very white image is functional in relation to the ordinary, is even perhaps a condition of establishing whiteness as ordinary . . . . The extreme image of whiteness acts as a distraction. An image of what whites are like is set up, but can also be held at a distance” (222–23). In his argument, that distance establishes “a space of ordinariness,” a “position” that can claim “to speak for and embody the commonality of humanity” (222–23). In distancing herself from Helen’s world-view, Jane occupies “a space of ordinariness” to speak against the Biblical justification of slavery referred to in the Roman analogy, which frames all subsequent references to slavery in the novel:

If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: they would never feel afraid, and so they would never alter, but would grow worse and worse. When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should – so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again.

Helen immediately characterizes Jane’s view as “untaught” (57; vol. 1, ch. 6). Like Mr. Brocklehurst and Mrs. Reed, Helen has faith in the alterative effects of a Christian education.

This version of an encounter between slavery and whiteness recalls Jane’s rival identifications in the red room between the “revolted slave” and an abject whiteness named Superstition, identifications that Brontë also associates with the modern and the archaic. To the young Jane, the spectacle of whiteness in the mirror seems “like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie’s evening stories represented as coming up out of lone, ferny dells in moors” (14; vol. 1, ch. 2). Jane’s Gothic imagination has been shaped by Bessie’s “remarkable knack of narrative” (29; vol. 1, ch. 4), stories drawn largely from oral traditions that Brontë represents as archaic. By contrast, Brontë associates the reason of the “revolted slave,” while it produces only a “transitory” sense of empowerment (15; vol. 1, ch. 2), with modern Enlightenment ideals, which Robert J. C. Young articulates as “a common liberty, equality and fraternity for humankind” (30). The contrast between the modern and the archaic is underlined by Jane’s characterization of Bessie as having “indifferent ideas of principle or justice” (29; vol. 1, ch. 4) in her role of nurse (in which she holds what Anne McClintock has called “the power of social prohibition” [92]), as well as in Bessie’s role as bearer of a working-class culture. That cultural influence, which is implicated through Bessie’s stories in the victory of Superstition in the red room, ultimately debilitates Jane’s health: the experience gives her “nerves a shock” from which she continues to “feel the reverberation” (20; vol. 1, ch. 3).

The “precocious” inspiration of the modern in childhood has its limits: it allows Jane to name her situation “Unjust! – unjust!” (15; vol. 1, ch. 2). As an adult, Jane brings a more modern racialized understanding to bear on her childhood experience in the Reed family:

They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst them; a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities; a useless
thing, incapable of serving their interest, or adding to their pleasure; a noxious thing, cherishing the germs of indignation at their treatment, of contempt of their judgment. (15–16; vol. 1, ch. 2)

She acknowledges herself to have been for Mrs. Reed “an interloper not of her race... an uncongenial alien permanently intruded on her own family group” (16; vol. 1, ch. 2). The adult Jane has absorbed the language of Mr. Brocklehurst’s denunciation of her as a heathen, and of Rochester’s repudiation of Bertha Mason as having a “nature wholly alien” to his, he being of “good race,” meaning family (305–306; vol. 3, ch. 1). Bertha has, he insists, “giant propensities,” which are realized in the “intemperate and unchaste” (306; vol. 3, ch. 1). Jane articulates a grim vision of social relations in such language, relations that Kaplan rightly characterizes as “an unanswerable set of fixed antipathies” bearing signs of an emerging Knoxian paradigm of racial difference as underpinning “instinctual aggressivity and revulsion” (“Heterogenous” 182, 175).

Jane discloses the abjectness of her response to her heightened sense of the ambiguities of her class position through her shifting response to *Gulliver’s Travels*. After Jane’s release from the red room, Mrs. Reed relegates her to the company of servants, principally Bessie, and has her treated by apothecary Mr. Lloyd, whom she customarily employs to treat “ailing” servants, the Reed family being treated by a “physician” (19; vol. 1, ch. 3). This further blurring of Jane’s class position transforms the marvel and sense of scale she has imbibed as “facts” from *Gulliver’s Travels*: “all was eerie and dreary; the giants were gaunt goblins, the pigmies malevolent and fearful imps, Gulliver a most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous regions” (21; vol. 1, ch. 3). To use Mary Louise Pratt’s term, Jane’s “planetary consciousness” (30), which is produced through middle-class access to books and literacy, becomes permeated by the archaic and Gothic residues of a working-class culture that is racialized here as savage, and the modern place of which is properly abroad.

Colonialism, in Jenny Sharpe’s argument, is “the discursive field in which Jane’s struggle for self-determination is played out” (29). In accounts such as hers, the exchange between the betrothed Jane and Rochester when she is disconcerted by his showering of expensive gifts on her and his “smile such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched” (269; vol. 2, ch. 9) has assumed particular significance. Jane’s invocation of the harem, which, according to Joanna de Groot, “raises questions of male despotism and sexual licence which are in fact central problems in Jane’s relationship to Mr Rochester” (52), is usually read as exclusively personal rather than also topical in its reference. The passage has been read as central to the grounding of Jane’s voice-agency in assertions of “moral” and “racial superiority” (Sharpe 49), with the Eastern allusion “supplying the vocabulary for the sexual risks faced by the unattached Englishwoman” (Perera 81). For Plasa, it is a denial of the literality of slavery (73), which he essentializes as West Indian and as based on racial hierarchy.45 Joyce Zonana has elaborated early nineteenth-century images of “Eastern treatment of women” condensed in the harem and available to “feminist writers” to criticize domestic male despotism in Britain (602). She assumes that Brontë, like other women’s emancipists, “unquestioningly perceives polygamy as sexual slavery” (595).

However, a perceived “trade in women” for harem attendants was understood in Britain by the early 1830s as integral to practices of domestic slavery, and was condoned by the imperial state. In evidence on slavery presented to hearings of the Select Committee on the affairs of the East India Company in 1831 and 1832, domestic slaves are understood to be those “employed only in the house itself.”46 Thomas Harvey Baber, Late First Judge,
Western Division, Madras Territories, listed a number of ways in which people might become domestic slaves:

persons who are the offspring or descendents of freeborn persons captured during wars; out-caste Hindoos, who had been sold into slavery under or by former Governments; kidnapped persons, brought by bingarries and other travelling merchants from distant inland states, and sold into slavery; persons imported from the ports in the Persian Gulf, in the Red Sea, or from the African coast; persons sold, when children, by their own parents in times of famine or great dearth; the offspring of illegitimate connexions, that is, of cohabitation between low-caste Hindoo men and Brahmin women, and generally between Hindoos of different castes, or within prohibited degrees of kindred; persons who, in consideration of a sum of money, or in discharge of a security for the payment of a debt, have bound themselves, by a voluntary contract, to servitude, either for life or a limited period. (Great Britain, Minutes 551)

In the evidence there is some acknowledgment of difficulties in applying the nomenclature of slavery to the voluntary contract, as well as to the arrangements parents entered into in times of desperate need, the features of which might also be construed as a temporary contract of employment. Such children earned their keep, and their wages were “advanced to maintain” the parents. A. D. Campbell, who had held “official situations” in India for twenty-two years, testified that female domestic slaves “employed as attendants on the seraglios of Mussulmans of rank” were more poorly treated than male domestic slaves: “they are too often treated with caprice, and frequently punished with much cruelty. Once admitted into the haram, they are considered part of that establishment, which it is a point of honor to a Mussulman to seclude from all communication with others.” Such seclusion “too often precludes complaint, prevents redress, and cloaks crimes at which Europeans would shudder.” Baber commented that the domestic lives of East Indian peoples were generally shrouded in secrecy grounded in “watchful jealousy in all that regards their domestic economy,” yet stated that it “is almost universal with respect to female domestic slaves” that they are kept “for sensual gratifications.” Domestic slavery, he insists, “must, at best, be but a life of pain and sorrow, and as such, as repugnant to humanity and morality, as it is to the principles of British rule.” (After the passing of the 1833 India Charter Act, the question of slavery in India was taken up in the 1830s and 1840s by Joseph Pease, George Thompson, the British India Society [1839–43], and the committee of the Aborigines’ Protection Society [Turley 127–28]).

The emphasis on the vulnerability of the female slave attendant in the harem accords with Jane’s sense of the threat in Rochester’s erotic gaze. Charlotte Brontë, too, was familiar with what Nancy L. Paxton characterizes as Byron’s “treatment of the harem as a voyeuristic site of male pleasure,” “a [primarily] private domain where moral codes disciplining sexuality can be overthrown and sexual pleasures can be more fully enjoyed” (52). Brontë would also have been familiar with James McQueen’s references to Indian slavery in articles in Blackwood’s Magazine in May 1829 and February 1830, both structured as letters to the Duke of Wellington, a particular hero of hers. He contends in the first of these articles that female Hindu slaves in Moslem households are commonly expected to provide two kinds of service: “laborious servitude” and “sensual gratifications even such as his [their master’s] perverted and unnatural passions may impel his brutality to indulge” (“British Colonies. A second letter” 650–51).
While Rochester’s gaze seems to place Jane in a position analogous to that of a harem attendant, when she imagines the signing of a liberal charter—a reference, as I have argued, to the abolition of West Indian slavery—she identifies with the triumph rather than the suffering of the missionary martyr. This identification is consistent with what Davis calls the “idealization of the emancipation moment” (69). To apply Barnor Hesse’s paradigms of the remembering of Atlantic racial slavery in the West, Jane draws on “abolitionist memory,” which characteristically “focuses on the heroic consecration of white liberators... as defining the cognitive limit on the political memory of slavery” (155). Such an emphasis is evident, too, in Knibb’s rousing abjurations, on public platforms in England, of retailing his “own sufferings” in the interest of his “duty” (qtd. in Hinton 156), obeying God’s command to “break the fetters of the slave” exposed to “every cruelty which uncontrolled power and unbridled licentiousness were sure to call forth” (qtd. in Hinton 154–55). As Hall notes, Knibb, in “speak[ing] for the African in England... empowered himself by representing others” (Civilising Subjects 113).

Abolitionist memory also obscures the role of Christianity in the consolidation and justification of empire and slavery. George Lamming has memorably written of colonial migrants, sojourners, and slaves in the Caribbean, that “they all move and meet on an unfamiliar soil, in a violent rhythm of race and religion” (17). Jane’s identification with Knibb’s perceived example in preaching “liberty to them that are enslaved” and campaigning forcefully for abolition confirms English evangelical Christian agency, grounding her resistance to sexual seduction by Rochester, a danger acknowledged in her allusions to Danae and Céline Varens. These allusions implicitly position Rochester as a Zeus-figure, wanting to seduce Jane with a “golden shower” of material wealth (268; vol. 2, ch. 9), and as a recidivist “spoonie” determined on “ruining” himself in the “received style” (140; vol. 1, ch. 15). Danae and Céline, too, are foreign women. Jane’s missionary identification heightens the drama of her will to resist sexual danger, and, as Diana Fuss observes more generally of the “psychical mechanism” of identification, “bears the traces” of her historical and cultural formation (3).

Jane’s identification, furthermore, rescripts the scene from a Gothic to a heroic mode. For Jane, as for Charlotte Brontë, there is no question of making a distinction between temporal and spiritual freedom when preaching liberty; these freedoms are inextricably bound together. Sharpe argues that

Jane does not identify herself as a slave in order to express her desire for liberation, as she did when she was a child. Rather, she assumes the position of a missionary who will free others that are enslaved. Slavery cannot figure female rebellion because the slave in this instance is an Oriental woman who is passive and agentless. By positioning herself as a missionary, Jane empowers herself with the moral superiority of British civilizers at the precise moment that her own morality is undermined. In other words, an assertion of racial superiority discursively resolves Jane’s class and gender inferiority in relationship to Rochester. (49)

Certainly missionary endeavours are founded on assumptions of cultural and racial superiority, yet Jane’s allusion to slavery is more complexly entwined in its historical moment. It reflects the centrality in the English national and racial imagination of the triumphal missionary campaigner for abolition. The allusion implicitly draws attention to the hypocrisy of the British state in protecting “domestic slavery” in India while abolishing...
slavery elsewhere in its imperial spheres of influence, and links that hypocrisy with the indulgence of forms of gendered despotism in the private sphere in England. Seeing herself eroticized by her master as she imagines a dependent enslaved woman of the seraglio might be, Jane abjures this positioning by redeeming herself as Christian subject empowered to speak in the name of temporal and spiritual freedom. Even Jane’s reference to Rochester’s prospective recalcitrance in enacting the terms of a charter agreed to “under coercion” (269; vol. 2, ch. 9) echoes British experience of the West Indian plantocracy instructed to ameliorate the conditions of slaves. Jane’s allusion to missionary incitement marks an identification with masculine evangelical agency, but she resites her imagined missionary endeavor in the harem, a space not available to English men, and to which her gender would be a passport, making possible the sustaining fantasy of transgressive Christian empowerment.

Jane’s allusion to missionary triumph, furthermore, draws together the two main generic strands of the novel that condition “reader expectation.” Peter Allan Dale characterizes these strands as romance and “spiritual pilgrimage” (209), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as “childbearing” (“domestic-society-through-sexual reproduction cathcted as ‘companionate love’”) and “soul making” (“the imperialist project cathcted as civil-society-through-social-mission”) (244). Carolyn Williams points out that “Jane names God as the principle of separation from Rochester” (235); during Rochester’s courtship of her, Jane, as maturer narrator, comments that “[h]e stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol” (274, vol. 2, ch. 9). Dale labels this idolatry “apostasy” (213). Jane’s period of engagement to Rochester is represented by Brontë as an ordeal in which she resists the sexual temptation implied in her acknowledgment of idolatry. Jane’s religious agency here enables a precarious resistance to Rochester’s sexualization of her which she characterizes as pagan, both by referring to his harem and in her rescripting of his lyric anticipation of erotic bliss as “suttee” (sati).56 In a serenade, he has sung of his bliss being assured by his “Love” having contracted “to live” and “to die” with him (272; vol. 2, ch. 9). Jane counters Rochester, reasserting an English evangelical Christian identity based on the “judgment,” “common-sense” and “taste” integral to a Christian household (274; vol. 2, ch. 9) – civility articulated, to borrow Hall’s phrase, “through a language of difference that [draws] on images of racial purity and sexual virtue” (Civilising Subjects 17). The racial purity here is a reforming purification.

These assertions of Christian civility instantiate Jane’s need for temporal and spiritual freedom, both of which have been jeopardized by romantic idolatry. In separating from Rochester, Jane acknowledges at the moment of crisis in her ordeal that her spiritual freedom (her possession of her soul) is grounded in honoring Christian law. To do otherwise is irrational, and would be to obey the dictates of somatized excess of feeling in “veins running fire” and a “heart throbbing faster than” she “can count its throbs” (317; vol. 3, ch. 1). Jane here, as in her subsequent relationship with St. John Rivers, insists implicitly that she owns property in what Brontë, in her phrenological discourse, terms Jane’s faculties – in Carol Pateman’s terms, her “capacities and attributes” (Pateman 13) – and that, moreover, she herself controls their disposition.

On the night that Rochester tells Jane about his past in Jamaica and with Bertha, and begs her to be his mistress, Jane has a dream that reworks elements of the “fiery West Indian night” he has described, a Gothic rendition of slave rebellion. Jane’s dream opens in the “red-room at Gateshead” (a site of childhood identification with the rebellious slave), and features “sable” clouds (Rochester’s trope for rebel West Indian slaves). Here, however, a radiant
white (rather than blood red) moon takes the form of a maternal protective figure. This figure parts the clouds and waves “them away,” and, “inclining a glorious brow earthward,” speaks to Jane’s “spirit,” saying, “My daughter, flee temptation.” Jane responds to this whisper in her heart, “Mother, I will” (319; vol. 3, ch. 1). Again the register shifts from a Gothic to a more heroic mode, as Jane is fortified in her resolve to resist the idolatry that might lead her into sin. The voice confirms her earlier resolution: “him who thus loved me [Rochester] I absolutely worshipped: and I must renounce love and idol. One drear word comprised my intolerable duty – ‘Depart!’” (315; vol. 3, ch. 1). She has invoked “law given by God, sanctioned by man,” “principles” against the temptation of the moment when “body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour” (317; vol. 3, ch. 1). In context, the advice of the motherly figure catches up Pauline injunctions to the Corinthians: “Flee fornication” (1 Cor. 6.18); “my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10.14). Christian civility is again articulated through images of racialized purity.

At Moor House, as Jane helps St. John prepare for his missionary work, she feels that his “influence” takes away her “liberty of mind” (397; vol. 3, ch. 8). Jane’s sense of the boundaries between self and other at stake in a marriage to St. John – which would mean becoming “part” of him (408; vol. 3, ch. 8), his vocation, and his “will” (418; vol. 3, ch. 9) – grounds her abject sexual repugnance at the prospect. As St. John’s unmarried “curate” or “comrade” in India, Jane’s temporal freedom, she thinks, “would be under rather a stringent yoke,” but she would enjoy a spiritual freedom of “heart and mind,” “unenslaved feelings with which to communicate” (407; vol. 3, ch. 8). When Jane is most tempted to accept St. John’s proposal, she asks for divine guidance and hears the repentant Rochester’s call. As Williams points out, Jane’s entreaty is “answered in such a way that her deepest wishes, not St. John’s, are expressed as correspondent with God’s voice” (240).

Benita Parry has recently noted that postcolonial readings of slavery and empire in Jane Eyre have tended to focus on the novel’s tropological schemes in manners that can be “casual about historical specificities” (70). I have worked to restore crucial aspects of Charlotte Brontë’s invocation of slavery in Jane Eyre, to reconnect it to, in Peter Hulme’s words, the “local and the particular . . . materials which went into the making” of the novel and from which it has been “sheered” (30–31). Those materials are integral to the historical horizons and memory of Brontë’s 1847 audience. To restitute Jane Eyre in relation to them is to read the political and developing ideas of “race” and Englishness back into the psychological registers of Jane’s Gothic and heroic narratives. Jane’s class-inflected consciousness of the tensions between Christianity and the state of slavery indicates a sympathy with the civil politics of reform in the realization of an enlightened Christian nation, as well as an affirmation of a twin demand for temporal and spiritual freedom. This sympathy enables a gendered assumption of English evangelical agency within a middle-class Christian household. The desire for civil and spiritual freedom acts as the voice of her liberatory conscience.

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NOTES

Earlier versions of parts of this essay were presented as “[Q]uivering with the ferment of tempest”: Tropical Gothic, Rebellion and Reform in Jane Eyre” at Victorian Identities, the Australasian Victorian Studies Association Conference, Southbank, Brisbane, 5–8 February 2003, and as “Missionary
Careers: Some 1830s Historical Contexts of *Jane Eyre*” at The 1830s, European Studies Research Institute, University of Salford, Greater Manchester, 13–15 September 2002. The essay is drawn from a book project, “Imperialism, Reform and the Making of Englishness in *Jane Eyre*,” which was awarded an Australian Research Council Small Grant in 2000 and an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant in 2003. The project has also been supported by a Research Enhancement Fund grant from the School of Communication, Arts and Critical Enquiry at La Trobe University, and conference travel grants from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the School of Communication, Arts and Critical Enquiry at La Trobe University.

1. I have argued in “The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason” (1999) that Bertha Mason is a figure not of the rebel slave, as Meyer and Plasa argue, but of the ineducable slave-owning despot, who creates domestic terror, unrest, potentially suicidal despair, and, in the larger body politic, open revolt.

2. I elaborate more fully here the implications of a dating of the novel’s action I first outlined briefly in “The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason.”

3. Hall has recently highlighted Knibb’s missionary work in *White, Male and Middle Class* and in *Civilising Subjects*.

4. Secretary Stanley, Circular despatch to the Governors of his Majesty’s Colonial Possessions, 13 June 1833. Great Britain, Papers Relating to the Abolition of Slavery 15.

5. Great Britain, *Hansard* 17 July 1833: 799. The term “domestic slavery” was used by Charles Grant. Editors of *Jane Eyre* typically suggest that Jane’s “most liberal” “charter” is an allusion to the reformist Chartist Movement in Britain, whose People’s Charter was published in 1838, and presented as a petition to the House of Commons in 1839. That charter is spelled with a capital C in the manuscript is taken as confirmation of this interpretation (see, for instance, Jack 328 and Shuttleworth 475). Charters are also, however, legal instruments of imperial governance.


10. See, for instance, Sutherland 427–37.

11. Jack and Smith, for instance, concur with this view, attributing Brontë’s apparent inconsistencies to historical “allusions to whose chronological significance she is unlikely to have given thought” (610), and commenting that “it is clear that the action is set thirty or forty years before the time of publication, and that further precision is no part of Charlotte Brontë’s purpose” (611). Shuttleworth, who has recently revised Smith’s notes to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Jane Eyre*, notes that the 1808 publication date of *Marmion* “would seem to be out of keeping with other evidence for textual dating which would place the novel more in the 1820s and 1830s. There was, however, a new edition, with an introduction by Scott in 1830” (483). The evidence for an 1820s and 1930s setting which she cites is not drawn from imperial or colonial history.

12. On 10 November 1833, the recent publication of *Marmion* in the *Poetical Works* series was announced in the “Literary Notices and Varieties” column of the *Leeds Intelligencer* and *Yorkshire General Advertiser*. “[S]o cheap an edition,” the column noted, “places the work within the reach of very moderate means” (4).

13. Jane’s intervention in the debate over Scott is more fully evident in the passage as a whole: she describes the “new publication” as

one of those genuine productions so often vouchsafed to the fortunate public of those days – the golden age of modern literature. Alas! the readers of our era are less favoured. But, courage! I will not pause either to accrue or repine. I know poetry is not dead, nor genius lost; nor has Mammon gained power over either, to bind or slay; they will both assert their existence, their presence, their liberty, and strength again one day. Powerful angels, safe in heaven! they smile when sordid souls triumph, and feeble ones weep
Christianity and the State of Slavery in Jane Eyre

Jane alludes here to Lord Byron’s attack on Scott in “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers” (1809), in which he complains that contemporary taste favours “Pseudo-bards” idolized by “[e]ach country Book-club” after “lawful Genius” had been hurled “from the throne.” He represents Scott’s receipt of £1,000 for *Marmion* from his publishers as symptomatic “[of] prostituted Muse and hireling bard”:

> ... When the sons of song descend to trade,  
> Their bays are sear, their former laurels fade.  
> Let such forego the poet’s sacred name,  
> Who rack their brains for lucre, not for fame,  
> Still for stern Mammon may they toil in vain!  
> And sadly gaze on Gold they cannot gain!  
> Such be their meed, such still the just reward  
> Of prostituted Muse and hireling bard!  
> For this we spurn Apollo’s venal son,  
> And bid a long, “Good-night to Marmion.” (*Complete Poetical Works* 1: 233–34)

Jane counters Byron’s negativity about Scott, *Marmion*, and the general decline of poetic genius since the days of Milton, Dryden, and Pope. Lockhart’s edition of the poem for Cadell includes Scott’s 1830 Introduction to *Marmion* in which he defends himself against Byron’s charges. Lockhart includes a footnote in which Byron’s characterization of Scott in “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers” is cited at length.

14. See also my “Jane Eyre, St John Rivers, and the ‘Overshadowing Tree’ of Philanthropy,” in which I have also contextualized St. John’s commitment to missionary work in 1830s governmental, pedagogical, and missionary discourses about India.

15. John’s attack on Jane is accompanied by reference to his own future independence as a “gentleman’s” son (11; vol. 1, ch. 1) and a condescending excoriation of Jane’s dependence on the Reeds as a kind of parasitism. Hall, in commenting on the period, writes:

> In a social world in which identity was always defined in relation to “others,” the “others” of the manly independent individual were the dependent and the subjected – the woman, the child, the servant, the employee, the slave – all of whom were characterized by their dependence. Here, indeed, were the roots of the connections between the bondage of womanhood and the bondage of slavery which was richly explored both in politics and in literary and visual representations in the nineteenth century. One need only think of *Jane Eyre*, in which the heroine’s search for individual freedom and independence from her subjection to men is represented as her escape from slavery, or John Stuart Mill’s classic Liberal text entitled *The Subjection of Women*, with its analogy between marriage and slavery. (*White, Male* 258)

More generally Hall highlights the manner in which the “particular form of individuality, associated with masculinity, that was the common sense of mid-nineteenth-century middle-class men” became a social standard (280). For Charlotte Brontë this standard set a benchmark of individual temporal freedom. Goodlad has noted that “throughout her fiction, Brontë made independence – the socio-economic condition that the 1834 New Poor Law had inscribed as the foremost requisite of Victorian personhood – the characteristic marker of English character at its most ideal” (209).

16. “Mr Thompson’s Anti-Slavery Lectures” [3].


19. In addition to the major Demerera rebellion in 1823, there were four alleged conspiracies to rebel in Jamaica in 1823–24, and slave unrest in Trinidad and Dominica was reported in the British press (“Foreign Intelligence,” Leeds Intelligencer 1 Jan. 1824: [2]-[3], 12 Feb. 1824: [2]). The declaration of martial law in Dominica was mentioned.

20. The quotation is from a letter to the editor, 13 April 1823: 118.

21. See the letters to the editor on 24 Aug. 1823 (269) and 5 Oct. 1823 (317).

22. Mirabeau’s question was cited by George Canning in the House of Commons. Parliamentary Debates n. s. 11, 1286. (British writers of the period usually termed St. Domingue – Haiti – and the Spanish colony of St. Domingo.)

23. Lockhart comments on the controversy in Rev. 515–17. The “conspiracies” were discovered in the parishes of St. Mary, St. James, St. George, and Hanover. No white people were physically harmed; some of the charges made reference to slaves “imagining the death” of white Jamaicans. See, for instance, Great Britain, Papers Relating to Slaves in the West Indies 1822–1824, 128.

24. Meyer notes that tropical storms are used by writers like Monk Lewis, Harriet Martineau, and Charlotte Brontë (in “Well, here I am at Roe Head” and Villette rather than Jane Eyre) to figure rebellion by or among black people (60–61).

25. Knibb was reported in the Leeds Intelligencer on 7 Feb. 1833 as having posed the “question, whether the banner of Christianity should be struck to the Moloch of slavery, or that accursed system should be overwhelmed” (“Baptist Missions”). Heywood has shown how Charlotte Brontë in Jane Eyre and Emily Brontë in Wuthering Heights worked, like many abolitionist writers, to identify “the names and localities of the English families with plantation links” (“Yorkshire Slavery” 187), whose wealth was based on the use of slave labour in the colonies. In a later article he points out that they “were constrained partly by the confidentiality expected of the clergy and their families, partly by their contrasted temperaments, and partly by the difficulty that by the time they wrote their novels, the problems they explored had been resolved at Parliamentary level. In their hands, slavery became a metaphor for disorders of mind and society” (“Yorkshire Landscapes” 24–25).

26. Wood asserts that “Rochester must finally assume the role of the widow as voluntarily sacrificial victim at the novel’s close, in order to pass into the form of suffering slave surrogate.” To sustain this line of argument, however, he represents Rochester’s attempt to save Bertha as a choice “to dive into the conflagration,” an attempted “self-immolation,” a reading not supported by the text (342). The innkeeper who tells Jane about the fire mentions that Rochester personally “helped” the servants sleeping in the “attics” escape the fire, and then “went back to get his mad wife out of her cell” (428; vol. 3, ch. 10). Wood also reads Rochester’s “cicatrized visage” (436; vol. 3, ch. 11) as a sign that he is now “a generalized African slave victim” with features comparable to “any other African or Caribbean slave with tribal markings” (344). The Oxford English Dictionary reference for “cicatrice” that Wood gives in support of this view is not contemporaneous with the novel, however: it is from Livingstone’s 1865 Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries.

27. See, for instance, editorials on 23 Oct. 1823, 22 Apr. 1824, 10 June 1824, 1 Mar. 1832, and 8 Mar. 1832.

28. Lockhart was one of Charlotte Brontë’s favourite authors; however, his political commentary, which I discuss in this chapter, was published anonymously. The attributions of authorship of anonymously published articles in Blackwood’s Magazine and Quarterly Review to Lockhart are made in the Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, vol. 1, ed. Houghton.

29. John Bull, Nov. 1824, 364. Stephen remembers of the anti-slavery campaign: “The pulpits, too, were closed, the clergy, excepting those of the evangelical class, taking their cue from the episcopal bench” (117).


31. The quotation is from a speech Knibb gave at Exeter Hall in London on 15 August 1832.

32. The quotation is from a speech Knibb gave on 21 June 1832, as reported in the Patriot.

33. Parliamentary Debates n. s. 11, 998.
34. On Lockhart’s political career, see Thomas, “James Potter Lockhart.”
35. Ellen Nussey reminisces of Charlotte Brontë at Roe Head School: “I must not forget to state that no girl in the school was equal to Charlotte in Sunday lessons. Her acquaintance with Holy Writ surpassed all others in this as in everything else. She was very familiar with all the sublimest passages, especially those in Isaiah, in which she took great delight” (qtd. in Wise and Symington 1: 99). These reminiscences were first published in *Scribner’s Monthly* in 1871.
37. See, for instance, Lockhart 71, pt. 3; 653, pt. 2; Bryant vi–vii; *John Bull* 27 Oct. 1823: 340; Edwards 2: 82. In *John Bull*, the spectre of slave rebellion is represented as the British government having “placed” colonists “on a volcano, where the destruction of life and property is threatened by insurrection and conflagration” (5 Oct. 1823: 317), “passions of millions of semi-barbarians, heated and inflamed” by anti-slavery campaigners (27 Oct. 1823: 340), and “the brink of a volcano which threatens destruction to us all!” (24 Aug. 1823: 269). Of slaves, Edwards writes: “Transform'd to tigers, fierce and fell,/ Thy race shall prowl with savage yell,/ And glut their rage for blood!” (2: 82). Bryant refers to the Demerera rebellion as “the tumultuous passions of human nature, breaking out into acts of open outrage and rebellion” (vi–vii).
38. Indian in this context is a general term, applicable to either the West or East Indies, not a reference to the colony of India (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In *Villette*, Brontë has Lucy Snowe refer to “an Indian isle” (594), Guadeloupe. Not recognizing this usage, Wood urges that Bertha “is not simply like Messalina but, in a strange conflation of classical Roman debauchery and fantastic Asian sexual appetite, an ‘Indian Messalina’” (326).
39. On his speaking tour of Britain in 1833, Knibb represented himself as having told Jamaican planters that he “was coming home to expose their cruelty as far as his voice would reach” (“Baptist Missions” [3]).
40. This point is also made by Wood 336. “It was a commonplace of the literature of slavery,” notes Malchow, “that the recently enslaved experienced deep depression and were . . . prone to either rebellion or suicide” (30).
41. Wood suggests that “Jane’s destructive fury, and just indignation, are examined in the context of Helen Burns’s explicitly Christian ‘Doctrine of endurance’. While neither view is morally satisfactory. Brontë does endorse the inevitability of Jane’s outrage” (339).
42. Dying of consumption in jail, John Smith, “dubbed the ‘Demerera Martyr’” (Walvin 276), drew inspiration from 2 Corinthians 4.8–9: “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed, we are perplexed, but not in despair. Persecuted but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.” The Biblical reference was cited on an authorization of payment of a bill for his trial.
43. Kaplan, by contrast, formulates Jane’s competing self-identifications as a site of “anxiety about national, colonial and imperial imaginaries,” which forces on her a choice between “equally frightening ‘fictive ethnicities’” that makes her ill and brings about a “melodramatic reversal of affect in Jane’s reader-response” to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. This “condense[s] and reprise[s] a narrative version of the history of colonial slavery and its overthrow” (“Heterogenous” 184–85). The white identity is not classed in Kaplan’s reading. For her, that Jane identifies with a black slave is indicated when her “angry thoughts are described in terms of a psychically saturated and sedimented blackness: ‘a dark deposit in a turgid well’” (183). Kaplan mistranscribes the word “turbid”; the error works implicitly to reinforce her reading of the swollen featured Bertha as a dark, racialized vessel of anger. In Jane’s account, however, the darkness is “dense ignorance” of “why I thus suffered” in the Reed household (16; vol. 1, ch. 2), that as adult narrator she is able to explain.
44. Politi points out that a “moment, when the subject splits into its double,” as when Jane confronts the spectacle of abject whiteness in the mirror, “is a precondition for autobiographical narratives.” She reads Jane’s gaze here as a sign of “the novel’s structural rift into two distinct narrative modes – the realist, where rebellion materializes, and the fantasy, where the erotic fable and its sexual-ideological discourse are organised.” The fantasy mode, she argues, renders the mirror image “an it de-sexualized
and fully de-socialised [sic]” (62), and, sustained by Rochester in the language of fairy through which he speaks of his attraction to Jane, produces Jane as a regressive romantic object. In this she displays the kind of materialist critical hesitancy about fantasy and the psychic dimension of female experience that Kaplan discusses in “Pandora’s Box” (153). To make her argument, Politi valorizes rebelliousness as being realist, rather than as also being produced through what might be theorized as phantasmatic identification. See Kaplan, “Heterogenous” 171–72.

45. Meyer argues of this passage that Brontë “veers away from making a direct parallel with the British enslavement of Africans by associating Rochester’s dominating masculine power over Jane with that not of a British but of an Eastern slave master” (82). My reading of the passage, by contrast, shows that Brontë makes a direct allusion to British slave masters.

46. Evidence of A. D. Campbell, Great Britain, Minutes of Evidence... Appendix K 572.
47. Evidence of A. D. Campbell, Great Britain, Minutes of Evidence... Appendix K 573–74.
48. Great Britain, Minutes of Evidence... Appendix K 553.
50. Paxton analyzes Byron’s Oriental tales and “Sardanapalus.”
51. Brontë draws on abolitionist memory, too, in praising the new French republican government’s abolition of slavery in 1848 as “acting very nobly,” a “glorious” deed (Letters 41; vol. 2).
52. The quotation is from a speech Knibb gave at Exeter Hall in London on 15 August 1832.
53. The quotation is from a speech Knibb gave at the Byrom Street Chapel in Liverpool on 24 July 1832.
54. Rochester had thought himself to be Celine’s “idol” (140; vol. 1, ch. 15).
55. For a spirited reading of the French/English dichotomy in the novel, see Politi 61–62.
56. Brontë, in an essay written at the Pensionnat Heger titled “Sacrifice of an Indian Widow,” links the practice of sati to the “despotism of an arrogant and cruel Hierarchy” (2).

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