The Gospel According to Jane Eyre: 
The Suttee and the Seraglio
Maryanne C. Ward

Much postcolonial scholarship examines the use of colonial language and cultural references by European authors. The cultural transfer is not always successful, too often revealing those authors’ acceptance of, or insensitivity to, the destructive force of the colonial project. Over the last ten years, explanations of references to slavery and the emancipation in *Jane Eyre* have appeared in places like *Notes and Queries* and *Postscript*. In longer articles two critics, Susan L. Meyer and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, examined *Jane Eyre* in a postcolonial context concentrating on the novel’s relation to the slave trade (mandated by the West Indian setting) and British imperialism (as St. John Rivers’ mission suggests). Meyer concludes that “What begins as an implicit critique of British domination and an identification with the oppressed collapses into merely an appropriation of the metaphor of ‘slavery’” (265). Spivak reads *Jane Eyre* as a novel which posits “the unquestioned ideology of imperialist axiomatics” (248). While each of these notes and articles focuses attention on some aspect of the novel, none explores or develops a consistent and persuasive pattern incorporating not only the specific but the secondary references to slavery and imperialism in the Lowood/Thornfield and the Marsh End sections of the text. Meyer’s treatment of the rhetoric of slavery is the most thorough to date. However, while Meyer acknowledges that the novel was written more than ten years after the full emancipation of the slaves in the British colonies (1833), she analyzes the text as if it were generated early in the century at the presumed date of the story itself. A very different view of Charlotte Brontë’s attitude toward slavery emerges when all the references to slavery are included and placed in a post-emancipation context. With a careful examination of historical background as well as authorial practice, the rhetoric of the novel emerges as more consistent and unified than previously assumed. Brontë uses the rhetoric of abolition and the effects of slavery in post-emancipation Britain as an underlying rhetorical structure for her novel.¹ When read in the appropriate historical context, a consistent use of the abolition rhetoric thematically unites the West Indian (Lowood/Thornfield) and Eastern (Marsh End) elements of the novel into a cohesive and consistent “liberation” theology.

**Slavery in the West Indies**

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) was published the same year that
the French freed the slaves in their colonies. The fact that the novel does not speak out for the abolition of slavery is thus quite understandable; the British and French battle for emancipation had already been won. The success of the emancipation movement did not mean, however, that the powerful rhetoric of that struggle disappeared. In her early years Brontë heard the burning political questions of the day, slavery being chief among them, discussed at home. This awareness was deepened through her school experience. Reading back through the Lowood section of the novel, we tend to fuse the fictional and the real and make the author’s terrible experience at the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Bridge even more “Gothic” than it really was. Once her father realized the true conditions at the school, Charlotte Brontë was, in fact, brought home. Charlotte Brontë was not sent to the school because she was not loved at home. Patrick Brontë would not have intentionally sent his daughters to a school which practiced the kind of Calvinistic approach which he abhorred. While Winifred Gerin in her biography, Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius, rightly emphasizes the negative aspects of the experience, she acknowledges the laudable original goals for the school, which

had been conceived with vision and daring by its founder, and was enthusiastically supported by most of the progressive educationists of the day. The names of William Wilberforce, Hannah More, and the Rev. Charles Simeon headed the list of its subscribers, next to those of the local members of Parliament and the surrounding clergy, who welcomed the chance of a really comprehensive education for their daughters. (2)

Charlotte Brontë was acquainted with William Wilberforce’s work for emancipation early in her life and later demonstrated a real appreciation for the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, another force in the emancipation movement. These influences are certainly present in her writing.

In a methodological preamble to her discussion of Jane Eyre, Spivak asserts that she does not want “to touch Brontë’s life” and thus maintains the distinction between "book and author" and "individual and history," but in Brontë’s case such a distinction obscures her actual method of composition, which was highly autobiographical (244). Meyer, on the other hand, links the historical and the individual when she notes that Brontë has the young Jane talk about her experiences both at Gateshead and Lowood "appropriating" the language of slavery. These references are neither accidental nor cynical. Brontë was by instinct and because of her education and rather limited experience a highly autobiographical writer. In certain scenes and episodes, such as those depicting Lowood, the author draws heavily upon her own life. The energy behind her texts was emotional rather than cerebral as opposed to the approach of George Eliot, who was a tireless researcher. Brontë’s method of composition as

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well as her deeply felt opposition to slavery and her familiarity with one of the most effectual of all anti-slavery novels are evident in a letter she wrote to her publisher in late October of 1852:

I cannot write books handling the topics of the day; it is of no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral. Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme, though I honour philanthropy; and voluntarily and sincerely veil my face before such almighty subject as that handled in Mrs. Beecher Stowe's work, Uncle Tom's Cabin. To manage these great matters rightly, they must be long and practically studied—their bearing known intimately, and their evils felt genuinely; they must not be taken up as a business matter, and a trading speculation. I doubt not, Mrs. Stowe had felt the iron of slavery enter her heart, from childhood upwards, long before she ever thought of writing books. The feeling throughout her work is sincere, and not got up. (cited in Gaskell, 364-365)

In fact, Brontë probably learned those terms which Meyer sees as "appropriated" at the school which was the model for Lowood. If not at the time, then certainly later she must have recognized the irony of the name of a great leader for emancipation being linked with an educational experience she felt to be little better than penal servitude. The distance between the ideal and the practice at the school was extreme, and Brontë's use of the concept of slavery for the helpless felt by a child has both pedagogical and psychological bases. Thus Brontë "appropriates" the slave references in the early section of the novel to create Jane's immature (and perhaps insensitive and overwrought) depiction of her experience, not to devalue the work of the abolitionists or diminish sympathy for the plight of the slaves. In many ways Meyer's fascinating information about Brontë's unfinished novel Emma (1853), in which the author appears to have decided to explore racial prejudice by having her heroine be of mixed race, emphasizes that Brontë's concern went a great deal deeper than the mere "appropriation" of terms. The fact that Brontë broached the subject at all is telling; she wrote only of those things about which she cared deeply.

Brontë was very familiar with the individuals and institutions in her society which had fought for and won the battle for emancipation and the social and religious rhetoric of that fight. Knowing the movement and its rhetoric well, she naturally, but perhaps subconsciously, returned to it when creating a heroine who would challenge gender inequities and, to a limited extent, the class distinctions which Brontë felt so keenly. The heroine in Brontë's tale of a young woman's struggle for emancipation would be a self-described "plain, Quakerish governess" (225). This description associates Jane with the group which had been so steadfast in support of Wilberforce and emancipation.² The references to Quakers are far more powerful and resonant than mere metaphors for Jane's plain-

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ness and simplicity of dress. Jane is guided by an inner voice not unlike the Quaker’s Inward Light.

David Brion Davis’s award-winning study, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1832, details the activities of the Society of Friends in the emancipation movement in England and the United States. Davis notes that from the late eighteenth century the one issue on which the Society was completely united and on which it did not follow the individual Inward Light, even in the American South, was the abolition of slavery (202). There could be no deviation from the belief that slavery was wrong and that to support that institution in any way was not permitted by the Society. Our contemporary reading of Quaker pacifism into Jane’s character probably differs from nineteenth-century reader response, particularly those with West Indian holdings, who viewed the Society of Friends as non-violent but persistent and threatening troublemakers.

While the lack of explicit cries for emancipation may be explained away by the historical content, Meyer sees racism in the text itself, although it is not unmitigated. She concludes that "The story of Bertha . . . does indict British colonialism in the West Indies and the ‘stained’ wealth that came from its oppressive rule" (255). Yet, Meyer sees the underlying assertion as basically racist because “the novel persistently displaces the blame for slavery onto the ‘dark races’ themselves, only alluding to slavery directly as a practice of dark-skinned people" (262). She bases her assertion on the racial background of Bertha Mason and a set of references to characters who are clearly white, although "swarthy," morally "stained," and therefore, by association, black. A coherent analysis of the attitude toward race in the text depends heavily on the actual racial background of Bertha Mason. Meyer describes Bertha’s brother as the "yellow-skinned yet socially white Mr. Mason" (252); Meyer argues quite strongly for Bertha being either of mixed parents or at least strongly associated with the slaves by her “swarthy” complexion. At the very least she asserts a symbolic identification.

Brontë’s biographer, Winifred Gerin, points out that in Charlotte’s class at Cowan Bridge were two orphan girls from the West Indies. Apparently, their brother, who visited regularly, was “sallow looking” (unlike the sisters whose color was unremarkable) and therefore an exotic figure when he came to the school. Gerin speculates that this “direct prototype of Mr. Mason” was “doubtless suffering from the English cold” (333). A more likely explanation for his sallowness would be that after an ocean voyage into the northern Atlantic, the tan gained in the West Indies would have begun to fade leaving a sallow cast, as it does to the skin of those with slightly olive complexions such as the Masons. The British experience with tanned skin was fairly limited to the army and navy, and the effects of the sun on fair British complexion usually resulted in a
burn and not a tan.) There is no indication that Brontë suspected a mixed racial background in her classmates' brother despite his strange coloring, although the fragments of *Emma* indicate that Brontë would have befriended such a person without prejudice. Thus I infer the most likely explanation to be true, that Charlotte Brontë did not wish to present the Masons as of mixed racial heritage. The designation “Creole” after the mother’s name indicated, as was customary, that she was born in the islands as opposed to her merchant husband, who was an emigré Englishman. Such a reading makes sense of the madness and excess in the mother’s family without inviting the contradictory vision of the novel as being anti-slavery, and yet blaming the oppression on the oppressed.

Charlotte Brontë was certainly neither sensitive nor consistent, but rather very conventional in her use of adjectives of color, which could simultaneously have racial and/or moral overtones. Her color polarities come from two different sources: literary and religious. The first set are ambiguous in their moral judgments; the second, not open to debate. Out of the Gothic and the Byronic comes the contrast between the light hero and the dark anti-hero, the latter preferred by the Brontës. From conventional Christian theology and the Bible come references to the works of darkness and the children of light, references which are spiritual judgments. (A case could certainly be made here for institutionalized use of racist language in Christian theology. However, when the abolitionists called slavery a work of darkness, no one would suggest that they were referring to slaves, but rather to the devil and the evil of the institution.)

The dark, brooding Byronic figure of Brontëan juvenilia is Rochester’s ancestor. He, like Emily Brontë’s Healthcliff, is “colored” by his passion, sexuality, and flawed humanity, and is pitted against the colorless, cold morality of Rivers and Linton. Readers’ emotional engagement and, to some extent, sympathy lie with the dark, brooding half-victim, half-villain. Yet, this ambiguous moral darkness of social and economic oppression does not rival the moral horror of slavery. Abolitionists, Anglican evangelicals, and Quakers alike not only stressed the harm done to the person enslaved, but also advertised the moral danger to the slaveholders themselves. When Rochester’s secret is revealed and Jane cannot marry him, he asks her to live with him without the sanction of marriage. He pleads that he does not want to go back to his old practice of taking a mistress: “Hiring a mistress is the next worst thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading” (274). Jane understands that despite his protestations, she would be, in fact, his mistress and therefore have equal value to him as a slave. His plea reveals his underlying assumption of the existence of an inferiority based in nature, not enforced by social position. Brontë forces us to see that Rochester’s belief in Jane’s inferiority

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necessitates more than that she "give up your governessing slavery" (238). Early in the novel Rochester had set himself up as Jane's liberator from the constraints placed on her by her occupation and by her Lowood past which causes her to "fear in the presence of a man and a brother" (122). He puts himself in the position of benevolent benefactor/master and, later, lover. Ironically, as R. J. Dingley reveals in Notes and Queries, Rochester's own word choice damns him. The very phrase he uses was taken from the seal of the Slave Emancipation Society. On that widely known and copied medallion, originally modeled by Josiah Wedgwood, the kneeling figure pleads "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" (66). In all these instances, Rochester is both dark and "stained," but in no way could the blame for his attitudes and actions be passed to the oppressed.

Brontë not only puts the words of the inscription of the popular medallion in Rochester's mouth, but she also buries in his abhorrent formulation about his mistresses the argument of the abolitionists, particularly the Quakers, on the cost of owning another human being. To own a slave is not only to harm the captive, but also to degrade oneself. On the one hand, Rochester's characterization of Bertha as not only mad, but also "intemperate and unchaste" is an extravagant description, part of Rochester's self-justification as he seeks to win Jane's sympathy (270). Yet, there is also a link between the unstable and corrupt family Rochester describes and the belief on the part of the abolitionists that owning slaves helped to cheapen all aspects of human life. Davis's study helps to put this section of the novel in an historical context when he asserts that "the godless character of West Indian society made it easy to perceive slavery as a product of irreligion and infidelity, closely linked to the sins of intemperance, profanity, and shameless sexuality" (203). Abolitionists used the planters as examples of how slave ownership was joined to incontinent lives. Charlotte Brontë would have heard those cautionary tales from her school days. Brontë's description of the character of Bertha Mason and her Creole family should be read in light of contemporary beliefs about life on those islands, which according to Davis had more than a little basis in fact. Thus, Bertha's madness is not a result of racial, but of sexual inheritance, the result of being the heiress to a family corrupted by the nature of their livelihood. The swarthy Rochester is tainted by having married into a society where his income is derived from a slave-holding estate and by his acceptance of the institution of slavery. He has owned slaves as well as taken mistresses. He says he wants to avoid the practice of taking a mistress and, although now he is presumably supported by his family's money, he still wants not only to "own" Jane, but to chain her, clearly not the action of a liberator:

"and when I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I'll just—figura-tively speaking—attach you to a chain like this" (touching his watch-
guard], "Yet, bonny wee thing, I'll wear you in my bosom, lest my jewel
I should tyne." (238)

Only when he has been blinded and maimed does Rochester hand over
his watch chain to Jane, relinquishing his possession.

**Missionaries, Colonialism and Women's Liberation**

Susan Meyer is wisely wary about appropriations of the moral and
physical horror of slavery to lesser, although certainly unjust, forms of
oppression. I do not believe that the novel or Brontë herself is ambiguous
on the question of slavery; she simply felt that the battle for emancipation
had been won, at least on the British front, and that Mrs. Stowe was
doing the work in America. The same cannot be said on the question of
missionary work in the East and its link to the expansion of the British
Empire. As the daughter of an Anglican minister and a conventional
Christian, Brontë approved of the work of the missionaries. Because of
the resentment of the planters in the West Indies to missionary work,
many believed that the missionaries were very active in the cause of
emancipation. Davis maintains that "English missionaries to the West
Indies were interested in religious conversion, not revolution, although
some of the planters were too blind or bigoted to see the difference"
(203). On the other hand, the Quakers were politically active in trying to
free the slaves in both the British colonies and the United States, but
made few converts. Brontë does affirm the work of St. John Rivers
which, as in the case of the work of the Anglican missionaries in the
West Indies, is certainly open to question in this post-colonial era. Spivak
is correct in her reading of the novel as very Eurocentric. (Given Brontë’s
lack of affection for Belgian Catholics as evinced in *Villette*, I don’t doubt
that she would have seen that country as in need of Anglican missionary
activity as well.) There must not have been many, novelists or otherwise,
who would have challenged the "rightness" of Rivers’s work.

However, as closely aligned as they often are, Brontë and her character
are not one and the same. Only under extreme pressure from Rivers does
Jane agree to serve God in the mission field. The coldness and dominance
of Rivers’s character reveal the dark side of the missionary spirit. His is a
mission of dominance, not of liberation, let alone love. In opposition to
Rivers’s mission, Jane articulates her own gospel of liberation. Jane sees
herself both as one to be liberated and as a potential liberator. While St.
John Rivers believes that a woman could not go out on her own as an
Anglican missionary, the same did not apply to Quakers. Davis points out
that Friends of either sex could undertake a traveling mission "and
receive the assent of the appropriate meetings." In America one of the
tasks of the traveling Friends was "gently rebuking the families they visit-
ed for retaining Negro slaves or for displaying worldly vanities" (226).
Brontë has Jane doing exactly that to Rochester, rebuking him for his attitude and former practice from the proposal scene on. Revolution is much easier if you actually hate your oppressor; the bondage of care is much more insidious. His patriarchal assumptions are very familiar territory in feminist analyses of *Jane Eyre*. My concern is with the particular rhetoric of Jane’s struggle and with Jane’s deliberate limitation of her role as “missionary” to unemancipated women. Unlike the Anglican missionaries, whose work she rejects for herself, Jane seeks liberty and not salvation for the “slaves” whom she believes herself particularly suited to “convert.”

The rhetorical and thematic bridge between the West Indian and the Eastern elements of the novel actually occurs after Jane has accepted Rochester’s proposal. Despite the fact that she will not change her habits of dress and prefers to remain “Quakerish” (a sign of her role as free individual), Rochester tells her, in an easy bit of flattery, that he wouldn’t exchange her for a harem. She is offended (“bit”) by the “Eastern allusion” and tells him he might find better use for his money than buying silks and jewels for her:

“And what will you do, Janet, while I am bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes?”

“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. 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.” (237)

Jane will liberate those sexual slaves held in physical bondage in a harem or, as in the case of England, in emotional bondage, linked by love to a man whom she gradually realizes still views her as property. Later in this same pre-marital conversation, she gets the second hint that Rochester has only given lip service to the gospel of natural equality as preached by Jane. He sings her a sentimental ballad ending with the assertion that his love has agreed “With me to live—to die.” He is startled when Jane counters that “I had as good a right to die when my time came as he had: but I should bide that time, and not be hurried away in a suttee” (240). Thus, in preaching against the seraglio and the suttee [the required death of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre] Jane has limited her missionary activity to those institutions and customs which were based on the presumption of sexual inequality.

Much earlier in the proposal scene in the Thornfield garden, Jane had instinctively questioned Rochester on equality, to which he all too glibly agreed. The nature of Jane’s rhetoric, although not her level of mistrust, indicated that she knew that Rochester viewed her, not only “by position"
but "by nature," as inferior. Jane's liberation theology for women relies heavily on, and does not casually appropriate, the language of emancipation theology. Davis points out that during the struggle for abolition there were attempts at establishing a theological basis for slavery by "proving" the less than equally human status of the slaves. The abolitionists had to counter Biblically-based arguments that the slaves were doomed as either sons of Ham cursed by Noah to eternal slavery or a separate lesser creation (539-541). Jane asks Rochester if he thinks she is "soulless and heartless," two of the things that the slave-owners wanted to believe about their captives. Thus, slave-owners were unwilling to have their slaves baptized because this act would acknowledge that they had souls. When Jane proclaims that she has "as much soul as you—and full as much heart," she is proclaiming a kind of equality which Rochester has not challenged. Her vulnerability to him comes from her lack of money, family support and the information Rochester is withholding. She asserts her equality in the rhetorical terms of the abolitionists by asking that not merely her station but her body be disregarded, which in her case would disguise gender rather than race: "I am not talking with you now through medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even mortal flesh—it is my spirit which addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are" (222). God's view of her status is not really the question, but the attitude of Rochester and men like him who are at ease with the seraglio and the suttee.

A minister's daughter, Charlotte Brontë produced a testament in the form of a fictional autobiography, and like the earliest attempt in this genre, _Moll Flanders_, the life is put before us as an _exemplum_. What are we to learn from this life? While Jane's life and teaching certainly are the basis for an engendered liberation theology, Jane's individual happiness, which Spivak sees as a triumph of individualism, does not point toward the beginning of a women's movement that would struggle against class and gender oppression. In fact, Jane's preaching is not what "converts" Rochester. He is "reformed" through the radical intervention of Bertha, perhaps guided by the Providence which spared him in the refining fire. Whatever Brontë would have us believe about Jane's strength, her missionary effort is unable to claim even a single convert. Jane's state at the end of the novel is not unlike that of the liberated slaves; she has achieved the acknowledgment of her equality, but is given a very narrow sphere within which to exercise her freedom. According to Davis, "Most of the Negroes freed by Quaker masters were quietly dissuaded from trying to join the Society of Friends. Liberation from slavery did not mean freedom to live as one chose, but rather freedom to become a diligent, sober, dependable worker who gratefully accepted his position in society" (254).
Although Charlotte Brontë does not explicitly challenge the missionary/imperialist assumptions of the British activity in the East, a closer examination of the character and to some extent of the work of St. John Rivers allows us a subversive reading. Only the most fanatic religious reader could have wanted Jane to marry and serve Rivers. Rivers achieves martyrdom at the hands of the Eastern climate, not at the hands of those who oppose his mission. If we recall the other interventions of nature in the novel, such as the oak tree split by lightning, Brontë asks nature to say what she could not: that Rivers has made the wrong choice and that he did not belong in the East. Thus, the anti-colonial thrust of the novel and the cry for gender equality signaled by emancipation rhetoric are subtexts, masked by the Gothic romance and heroic Christian missionary plots they subvert.

Are we to read the conclusion as an affirmation of individualism or despair? Jane and Rochester's isolation in the end may either be a new Eden or a sign of the failure of the preaching of this Quakerish governess. Analysis of the issues of emancipation and missionary work has helped to answer this question. Charlotte Brontë, supported by the rhetoric of emancipation, creates her ideal missionary and then, looking at the mission field, loses faith and relegates Jane to Ferndean, where, like Esther Summerson in the new Bleak House, she will be untouched by and unable to touch the society so much in need. We may be looking for affirmation on the social level which Brontë knew was impossible in her society. Perhaps she did not lack courage or imagination, but was merely unwilling to produce a romance ending for a very real problem.

George Levine, commenting on the conclusion of George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, sees Daniel's setting off "to create a community, outside the reaches of the society and of the novel whose language can no longer evoke one" as Eliot's "renouncing the possibility of satisfactory life within society"(46). As with the Jews in anti-semitic Britain or the freed slaves in the West Indies, acknowledging equality did not bring with it economic or social inclusion; it merely indicated the escape from legal restrictions. Brontë successfully uses the rhetoric of emancipation to describe Jane's personal struggle, but lacking a model for a truly integrated conclusion for her text and her heroine's life, she produced a conclusion which revealed how far her society had to go to realize and accept the social and economic implications of emancipation.

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Notes

1. While the emancipation struggle in the British colonies and Jane Eyre certainly did not generate a women's movement in Britain, Charlotte Brontë's use of emancipation rhetoric in the cause of gender equality is paradigmatic of the relationship between the rhetoric of the American emancipation movement and its appropriation for women's suffrage.

2. There are three main references to Quakers. The first occurs early in the novel when Jane describes her black frock, "Quaker-like as it was" (86). Jane describes Grace Poole's warning to her to lock her door at night as being delivered "with the demureness of a Quakeress" (136); she intends the comment ironically, but the irony really is that Mrs. Poole is trying to protect Jane from danger. The third reference is Jane's description of herself as a "plain Quakerish governess" who does not need or want Rochester's jewels (227).

Works Cited