

■ Forgiveness in *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

Forgiveness plays a central role in the plot, characterization and even sentence formations of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Yet this novel has curiously eluded the attention of most literary historians who draw on prose fiction to explain the importance of forgiveness in Victorian England. This essay argues that this omission betrays a rarely-discussed awareness that *Jane Eyre* challenges the Victorian understanding of forgiveness. Brontë's contemporaries believe that forgiveness is a Christian virtue expressive of love. They also embrace forgiveness as a reconciliatory gesture productive of social and spiritual redemption. Brontë subverts both assumptions in her novel. Through Helen Burn's self-absorption, Aunt Reed's life-long resentment and Jane Eyre's withheld speech, Brontë demonstrates how futile the language of forgiveness can be in resolving conflicts. In addition, Brontë incorporates the Christian language of forgiveness into her text, only to reveal how sharply it can depart from words of love and how easily it can descend into expressions of hostility. Critics of *Jane Eyre* have long noticed its subversive spirit and have explained it in terms of Brontë's social criticism or feminist agenda. This essay maintains that the issue of forgiveness provides a more consistent and persuasive approach to understanding the rebellious quality of this novel.

Keywords: forgiveness, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, reconciliation, love

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Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a work centrally concerned with the language of forgiveness. In various forms, this language infiltrates all major locations of the story. In Gateshead, when the child Jane desires to leave the terrifying red-room, she exclaims: "Oh aunt, have pity! Forgive me! . . . let me be punished some other way" (18). In Lowood school Helen Burns teaches Jane the Christian virtue of forgiveness: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you" (58). In Thornfield Rochester apologizes contritely after Jane finds out his bigamous plan: "Jane, I never meant to wound you thus Will you ever forgive me?" (298). Jane responds to this question with a ready yes: "Reader! — I forgive him at the moment, and on the spot" (298). In Moor House, after her quarrel with St. John over their different understandings of marriage, Jane wishes to believe that he is "superior to the mean gratification of vengeance" and that "he had forgiven me for saying I scorned him and his love" (410). Probably in Ferndean, the adult Jane reflects on her aunt's unkindness and apparently chooses to let it go: "Yes, Mrs. Reed, to you I owe some fearful pangs of mental suffering. But I ought to forgive you" (20).

Given these prominent examples of forgiveness, it is curious to observe that *Jane Eyre* has been missing from scholarly accounts of forgiveness in the Victorian period. William Madden's important essay, "The Search for Forgiveness in Some Nineteenth-Century English Novels," first registers this omission. Madden sidesteps *Jane Eyre* and scrutinizes a variety of other novels, including Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. This omission continues to characterize three important discussions about Victorian forgiveness by Alexander Welsh, John Reed, and Richard Gibson respectively. All three scholars draw on novels to illustrate how important forgiveness is for Victorian ways of life. They cast their net widely, covering writers from Dickens to Thackeray, from Trollope to Eliot, from Hardy to Wilde. But once again *Jane Eyre* eludes their attention. How can we explain their silence on this crucial text? How can we explain that, in their attempt to construct a coherent narrative about Victorian forgiveness, they find it necessary to leave out *Jane Eyre*? I would argue that their silence betrays a perceptible yet rarely-discussed fact that the representation of forgiveness in *Jane Eyre* differs sharply from that in other contemporary novels.¹ This difference deserves careful scrutiny because it not

¹ Interestingly, the only scholar who mentions forgiveness in *Jane Eyre* does not really wish to engage

only demonstrates Brontë's unique investment in forgiveness but also promises a fresh understanding of the subversive nature of her first-published novel. Forgiveness in *Jane Eyre* stands out against a cultural backdrop where the language of forgiveness is believed to be loving and reconciliatory by nature, one that is productive of spiritual redemption and communal well-being. Before I lay out my arguments in details, it would be necessary first to delineate this cultural assumption against which Brontë crafts her novel.

The Language of Forgiveness

In Brontë's age forgiveness was essentially a Christian virtue, one that clergymen across the denominations repeatedly expounded and promulgated. This was a church-going time when sermons after sermons encouraged Christians to forgive their trespassers. For instance, F. W. Robertson, a popular churchman in the mid-century, stressed that "Christianity is a revelation of Divine forgiveness — a requirement thereupon that we should forgive each other" (qtd. in Reed 16). In his *Family Prayers* (1837), Henry Thornton similarly argued that "[t]he law of [God's] Kingdom is that of the free forgiveness of each other" (qtd. in Reed 21). Love plays a central role in the Christian understanding of forgiveness. Arthur Stanley, another Victorian clergyman, asserts that love is "the root of all Christian charity, of all Christian forgiveness" (qtd. in Reed 16). Stanley's contemporary, George MacDonald, agrees. In his sermon "It Shall Not be Forgiven" MacDonald defines forgiveness as "love towards the unlovely" (n.p.). These religious understandings of forgiveness find vocal expressions in literary works. For instance, Anthony Trollope, one of Brontë's contemporary novelists, is interested in exploring the association of Christian forgiveness and love. In his novel *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867) Trollope has Lily express her willingness to forgive Adolphus Crosbie, a former suitor who jilts Lily. Discussing Crosbie's betrayal with her mother, Lily says: "We ask to be forgiven [by God] just as we forgive [other human beings]. That is the way in which we hope to be forgiven, and therefore it is the way in which we ought to forgive. When you say that prayer at night, mama, do you ever ask yourself whether you have forgiven him?" (234). Gibson has rightly described this passage in terms of the Christian language of forgiveness (8). Lily believes that just as God will forgive a sinner if he asks for it and admits him to heaven, all Christians need

the Victorian culture of forgiveness or to concentrate on forgiveness in this text specifically. She instead aims at discussing religion in the entire Brontë canon more generally. In her book *The Brontë and Religion* (1999) Marianne Thormählen has a 7-page discussion of forgiveness and revenge in *Jane Eyre* (127-34). As I will explain later in this essay, I disagree with most of her arguments, not least because she fails to take into consideration how unconventional Brontë's representation of forgiveness can be.

to “consider the divine example of forgiveness . . . as the model for human practice” and forgive their offenders accordingly (Gibson 8). If Lily’s words convey her appreciation of God’s love for humankind, they possibly also betray her lingering affection for her ex-lover. Forgiveness appears an eloquent vehicle expressing love.

If Brontë’s contemporaries understand forgiveness as a Christian virtue expressive of love, they also value its peace-making power, one that leads to redemptive reconciliation. Gibson has emphasized this point in his recent study of Victorian forgive-ness. “Forgiveness . . . is valuable to Victorian authors” because, Gibson writes, it “not only repairs the particular relationship of victim and offender but restores broken ties and often creates new ones in the wider social nexus” (33, 32). Nowhere is this power more clearly illustrated and firmly enshrined than in the works of Brontë’s fellow novelists. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) is a case in point. This novel dramatizes the confrontation between the working class and their employer, a confrontation that culminates in the murder of Harry Carson, son of a wealthy mill-owner Mr. Carson, by John Barton, a mill-worker. Yet by the end of the novel, the bereaved Mr. Carson forgives the murderer and John Barton dies peacefully in the arms of his old enemy (359). It is significant to notice that Gaskell draws heavily on biblical messages to engineer a reconciliation: “God be merciful to our sinners,” “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us” and “They do not know what they do” (357, 359). For Gaskell, the Christian virtue of forgiveness offers great hope in an era “of riots, bloody strikes, and violent clashes between capital and labour” (Cazamian 12).

The healing and reconciliatory power of forgiveness can also be observed in a family setting, whether or not that family is affected by capitalistic development. The conclusion of Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) offers a prime example. The reunion between Florence, the long-despised daughter, and her cruel father Dombey, revolves around a drama of forgiveness. Although a victim of parental neglect, Florence returns to Dombey asking for forgiveness: “Papa! Dearest Papa, Pardon me, forgive me! I have come back to ask forgiveness on my knees” (705). This unduly self-effacing gesture melts Dombey’s heart, long hardened by commercial interests as it is. He realizes how wrong-headed he has been and becomes truly contrite: “Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much” (706). Andrew Sanders argues that this novel “ends . . . with a hope for a better future embodied in the restored and reborn Dombey family” (128). Significantly, forgiveness plays a prominent role in this restoration and rebirth. Although set in a region far from Dickens’s capitalistic world, the ending of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) testifies once again to the redemptive power of forgiveness. Catherine Linton ridicules Hareton Earnshaw’s illiteracy and wounds his pride as a result. Later she regrets her

rudeness and apologizes: "Say you forgive me, Hareton, do! You can make me so happy, by speaking that little word" (240). That little word immediately wipes away resentment and hostility: "the treaty had been ratified on both sides, and the enemies were, thenceforth, sworn allies" (240).

As these examples evidence, the Christian language of forgiveness in Brontë's age is predicated upon love and reconciliation. Brontë's contemporaries believe that to forgive is to perform a Christian virtue, to express kind affection for the unlovely, to terminate hostility between the offender and the offended, and to enter a new stage of life as a result. Yet in *Jane Eyre* Brontë subverts these assumptions, not least by consistently associating forgiveness with failed reconciliation, unresolved conflicts and lasting resentment.

Futile Forgiveness

Jane Eyre's conversation with Helen Burns in Lowood school early demonstrates how unusual the language of forgiveness is in this novel. Commenting on unjust suffering, Jane insists on the necessity of revenge: "When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back very hard" (57). Helen counters this vindictive nature by quoting the Sermon on the Mount, as many Victorian clergymen would do: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you" (57). Incredulous and unconvinced, Jane believes that a detailed description of her mistreatment at the hands of her Reed relatives would excite Helen's indignation. She does not hesitate to communicate her grievances. But, to her disappointment, Helen remains firm in her refusal to embrace revenge: "Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity, or registering wrongs With this creed, I can so clearly distinguish between the criminal and his crime; I can so sincerely forgive the first while I abhor the last: with this creed revenge never worries my heart, . . . I live in calm, looking to the end" (58-59).

Thormählen has discussed this episode in terms of forgiveness and revenge. Yet curiously she sidesteps Helen's use of the verb "forgive." Instead, she argues that Jane learns from Helen the importance of tempering anger, that this lesson helps her to remain calm when she tries to refute Brocklehurst's accusation and that her calm manners win the headmistress's trust (129-30). This readiness to concentrate on the heroine and to shy away from Helen's message *per se* is unfortunate, because it risks losing sight of Brontë's subversion of the traditional language of forgiveness. First, Helen's forgiveness message resolves no conflict. It is deliberately unclear whom Helen refers to in her willingness to forgive "the criminal and his crime," a vagueness demarcating forgiveness more as an abstract idea in

Helen's mind than as a social gesture productive of real reconciliation. Indeed, if the criminal refers to Brocklehurst, who starves his pupils, Helen's language of forgiveness fails to achieve the softening and ameliorative effect as that of Hareton Earnshaw's in *Wuthering Heights*. Brocklehurst's repressive regime continues regardless. If John Reed and his bullying of Jane are what Helen has in mind, her advice does nothing toward healing the rift between John and Jane. The former dies before the latter feels ready to bury old resentment.

Second, Helen's forgiveness introduces no positive beginning. On the contrary, it is closely associated with a pessimistic end. Brontë's text stresses this connection. This is what happens after Helen expounds on her forgiving creed: "Helen's head, always drooping, sank a little lower after she finished [her] sentence. I saw by her look she wished no longer to talk to me, but rather to converse with her own thoughts" (59). A sense of ending dominates this passage ("finished" "no longer"). However, far from signaling a cessation of conflicts and paving the way for a new phase of life, it forecloses further communication. Far from socially regenerative, it indicates anti-social retreat ("drooping" "sank a little lower"). We have no reason to doubt Helen's sincerity when she declares her willingness to forgive her trespassers or when she advises Jane to do the same. But through Helen Charlotte Brontë challenges contemporary assumptions that reconciliation and social rebirth are necessarily the daughters of sincere forgiveness.

It is not so much Helen's advice as time that enables Jane to forgive her enemies. Jane makes this point abundantly clear when she returns to visit Aunt Reed, the woman responsible for her unhappy childhood and miserable school years: "It is a happy thing that time quells the longings of vengeance, and hushes the promptings of rage and aversion: I had left this woman in bitterness and hate, and I came back to her now with . . . a strong yearning to forget and forgive all injuries — to be reconciled, and clasp hands in amity" (230). This passage draws on the typical Victorian value of forgiveness: to forgive means to seek reconciliation and amity, to embark on a new stage of life. This understanding of forgiveness lies behind Thormählen's argument that Jane's final encounter with Aunt Reed represents her "progress towards inner peace" (130). This argument is inaccurate because it overlooks the presence of persistent hostility that problematizes this dramatic encounter.

The language of forgiveness certainly permeates the final meeting of Jane and Aunt Reed, yet reconciliation is not the expected outcome. Aunt Reed first reveals a dirty secret: to prevent Jane from leading a comfortable life, she blocks any contact between Jane and her rich uncle. She then explains that the memory of her confrontation with her niece, in which the child Jane vocally expresses her resentment against the adult, motivates this malevolent move in the first place. In-

stead of vowing to avenge herself on her oppressor, as she would have done during her Lowood days, Jane seeks to downplay the seriousness of her aunt's manipulation and her own childhood anger: "Dear Mrs. Reed, . . . think no more of all this, let it pass away from your mind. Forgive me for my passionate language: I was a child then" (239). The olive branch that Jane holds out to Aunt Reed is not only ignored: "She heeded nothing of what I said" (239). Closer attention to Brontë's text suggests that it in fact exacerbates the conflict between Jane and her aunt:

"If you could but be persuaded to think no more of it, aunt, and to regard me with kindness and forgiveness —"

"You have a very bad disposition," said she, "and one to this day I feel it impossible to understand: how for nine years you could be patient and quiescent under any treatment, and in the tenth break out all fire and violence, I can never comprehend."

"My disposition is not so bad as you think: I am passionate, but not vindictive. Many a time, as a little child, I should have been glad to love you if you would have let me; and I long earnestly to be reconciled to you now: kiss me, aunt."

I approached my cheek to her lips: she would not touch it. She said I oppressed her by leaning over the bed; . . . I covered her ice-cold and clammy hand with mine: the feeble fingers shrank from my touch — the glazing eyes shunned my gaze. (239-40)

In this passage gestures of conflict clashes with those of forgiveness, frustrating any attempt at genuine reconciliation. It is significant to notice that Aunt Reed does not allow Jane to finish her sentence. The very word "forgiveness" irritates her, because it implies wrong-doing and reminds her of her failure to honor her husband's dying request that she should treat Jane kindly. Her words "any treatment" betray her awareness that she has done Jane a disservice. Yet she refuses to admit her sin, repressing her sense of guilt by blaming Jane's improper passion ("all fire and violence"). Jane's reconciliatory move only intensifies Aunt Reed's psychological conflicts, forcing them to assume physical forms. Aunt Reed refuses to kiss Jane, shuns her hands and avoids her eye contact. This staunch refusal to reciprocate annoys Jane, who at last gives up her olive branch: "Love me, then, or hate me, as you will, . . . you have my full and free forgiveness: ask for God's; and be at peace" (240). The sentence itself associates forgiveness with peace of mind, yet its tone smacks of displeasure. Once again, Brontë divorces forgiveness from its supposedly inherent power of reconciliation, opening up the possibility that forgiveness, rather than being the antidote to conflicts, can be a source of conflicts.

This possibility ripens into certainty after the interrupted marriage ceremony. Having acknowledged that he is a married man and that his wife still lives in Thornfield, Rochester expresses his deep contrition and wishes to be forgiven: "Jane, I never meant to wound you thus . . . Will you ever forgive me?" (298). What follows is a remarkable passage in which Jane offers the "full and free

forgiveness” that Aunt Reed resists earlier: “Reader! — I forgave him at the moment, . . . I forgave him all: yet not in words, not outwardly; only at my heart’s core” (298). Thormählen’s argument that “[t]his is the one occasion in *Jane Eyre* where forgiveness is easy and spontaneous” underestimates how complex the representation of forgiveness is here (132). Forgiveness may appear “easy and spontaneous” as Jane pronounces it immediately after Rochester makes his request. But what complicates this matter considerably is the fact that Jane actually does not speak forgiveness but withholds it in her “heart’s core.” Withheld speech is an important issue in *Jane Eyre*. Critics have convincingly demonstrated that its presence is symptomatic of conflicts. Interestingly, they tend to draw their examples from a famous scene at the end of the novel, where Rochester tells Jane that he heard a mysterious voice prior to his reunion with Jane (“I am coming: wait for me”) and Jane refrains from telling him that his experience corresponds with hers (447). Ivan Kreilkamp argues that Jane’s decision there represents a clash between two different ways of address. He writes: “Jane does not tell Rochester the story of her life, but instead writes it to a readership” (137). A “scriptive mode of communication” triumphs over a vocal one, as Brontë realizes that “a mass readership is best achieved not through vocal amplification but through restraint” and through translating withheld speech into writing (Kreilkamp 137-38). The allusion to conflicts is also present in Carla Kaplan’s analysis of the same scene. Kaplan maintains that “[i]nsofar as [Jane’s] refusal to tell Rochester her story tempers the bliss of their reconciliation, Brontë is able to suggest that patriarchal, Victorian, British culture *cannot* provide complete fulfillment or satisfaction for a woman such as Jane” (20, original emphasis). Implicit in her comment is the tension between patriarchal power and female self-realization. Compelling as their arguments are, Kreilkamp and Kaplan overlook Jane’s unspoken forgiveness earlier in the novel. This earlier example of withheld speech, I believe, reveals the extent to which Brontë consistently associates forgiveness not with resolving conflicts but with perpetuating them.

Jane’s unspoken forgiveness in fact registers a serious identity crisis. She forgives Rochester because she is a woman in love who sees “there was such unchanged love in his whole look and mien” (298). Yet without pronouncing her forgiveness, Jane appears a fortune hunter like Blanche Ingram in the eyes of Rochester, who thus accuses her: “you don’t love me, then? It was only my station, and the rank of my life, that you valued? Now that you think me disqualified to become your husband, you recoil from my touch as if I were some toad or ape” (303). In addition, Jane’s reticence embodies a conflict between reason, which holds her tongue and advises her to “keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man” and feeling, which tells her that “no man [will be] injured by the breach” of such law (317).

In the words of Richard Benvenuto, this emotional drama testifies to Jane's double identities as "the child of grace" and "the child of nature" (620). The former "affirms the necessity of moral precept and social law for the well-regulated life" while the latter "insists on an individual's right to question and probe moral duty and social custom for their justice to him" (Benvenuto 624). Benvenuto terms the tension between these two roles "the unresolved conflict of *Jane Eyre*" (620).² Significantly, it is the issue of forgiveness that provides the platform on which this unresolved conflict can be enacted. Shorn of its reconciliatory potential, Jane's unspoken forgiveness becomes a vehicle for dramatizing conflicts of various kinds.

Loveless Forgiveness

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë does not only undermine the power of forgiveness to engineer a reconciliation between two conflicting parties. She employs the Christian language of forgiveness only to show how estranged it can be from love. This is a very radical move. Forgiveness, as Gibson has demonstrated, "is an inescapably religious issue for Victorian writers" as it "draws authors back to the Christian tradition, back to Jesus's life and lessons" (4). Jesus's life and lessons have always been an inspirational source for writers committed to championing the virtue of forgiveness because they demonstrate how love alleviates antagonism. A well-known instance can be found in the crucifixion scene, where Jesus entreats God to forgive his persecutors: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Luke 23.34). As Jesus's dying request suggests, the ability to love the unlovely is central to the Christian language of forgiveness. Victorian novels repeatedly dramatize this point. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* represents a prime example. Before Mr. Carson forgoes his hatred for John Barton, the murderer of his son, he witnesses an educational incident. A stout boy knocks down a little girl, causes bleeding wounds and rudely walks away. The nurse of that girl threatens to retaliate by sending the attacker to the police. But her ward intervenes:

'Please, dear nurse, I'm not much hurt; . . . He did not mean to do it. *He did not know what he was doing*, did you, little boy? Nurse won't call a policeman, so don't be frightened.' And she put up her little mouth to be kissed by her injurer, just as she had been taught to do at home to 'make peace.' (355, original emphasis)

² The textual evidence that Benvenuto cites is convincing. While Jane's flight from Thornfield suggests the triumph of the child of grace, her return to Thornfield without knowing Bertha's death shows that the child of nature never disappears (637-38). The argument Jane uses to justify her return: "Who would be hurt by my once more tasting the life his glance can give me?" is similar to Rochester's "you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me" (423, 307).

Gaskell emphasizes one particular sentence because it is a paraphrase of Jesus's famous words on the cross. Suffused with generous love for one's enemy, this biblical message inspires and enables the little girl to forgive her injurer. It later encourages Mr. Carson to do the same to John Barton. (357, 359).

Like Gaskell, Brontë appropriates Jesus's message in her representation of forgiveness in *Jane Eyre*. But Brontë manages to produce a different effect. Reflecting as an adult on the red-room incident, in which she was unjustly punished by Aunt Reed, Jane remarks:

No severe or prolonged bodily illness followed this incident of the red-room: it only gave my nerves a shock; of which I feel the reverberation to this day. Yes, Mrs. Reed, to you I owe some fearful pangs of mental suffering. But I ought to forgive you, for you knew not what you did: while rending my heart-strings, you thought you were only up-rooting my bad propensities. (20)

Jane speaks the biblical language of forgiveness. Yet it fails to dissipate resentment or to promise spiritual redemption, as Jesus's message and Gaskell's novel suggest that it should. The first sentence in the above passage demonstrates lingering hostility. Even though Aunt Reed's severe punishment does not cause any "bodily illness," Jane insists that it engenders lasting psychological trauma. Just as time can hardly heal this trauma ("I feel the reverberation to this day"), Jane implies, it is difficult to forget her aunt's unkindness. In addition, the forgiveness that Jane offers on this occasion is tinged with reluctance ("I ought to forgive you"). For Victorians, genuine forgiveness requires no qualifier.³ The "ought to" in Jane's forgiveness message, when read along with the following "you knew not what you did," betrays the speaker's condescension. It seems that, much like the second type of false forgiver in McDonald's sermon, Jane forgives because her ignorant offender is unworthy of her notice. Last but not least, Jesus's and Gaskell's version of "you knew not what you did" introduces a healing sense of ending, alleviating antagonism and redeeming the offenders. Jane's version, by contrast, foregrounds Aunt Reed's offence, not least by interpreting her educational discipline ("up-rooting my bad propensities") as persecution ("rending my heart-strings"). This absence of a peaceful end is manifested textually. Jane's "you knew not what you did" is followed not by a period but by a colon, introducing an indignant sentence that reinforces Aunt Reed's cruelty and Jane's resentment. Forgiveness in this

³ George MacDonald argues that the following three types of forgivers fall short of practicing the desired Christian virtue: those who say "I forgive, but I cannot forget," those who say "I despise him too much to desire revenge. I will take no notice of it. I forgive him. I don't care" and those who say "I suppose I must forgive him" (n.p.). Jane's forgiveness on this occasion fits all three descriptions. A useful point of comparison can be found in *Wuthering Heights*. When Catherine Linton asks for Hareton's genuine forgiveness, she significantly asks him to speak "that little word" alone (240).

passage borders on a parody of the Christian virtue whose loving nature and redemptive power Gaskell embraces in *Mary Barton*.

Forgiveness as a specifically Christian virtue expressive of love and capable of spiritual redemption is further undercut in the example of St. John Rivers. The confrontation between St. John and Jane, in which the former offers a loveless marriage and the latter “scorns” his “counterfeit sentiment,” is continued through the problem of forgiveness (408). Having expressed her disdain, Jane strangely relents and apologizes: “Forgive me the words, St. John” (409). But does Jane need forgiveness from a man who regards her as a tool and treats her like a legal prostitute?⁴ For most readers the answer is probably a no. It is useful to compare this undue request for forgiveness with another similar one in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*, where Florence, the victim of parental neglect, asks her father Dombey to forgive her. Forgiveness in that episode is equally absurd. As Melvyn New observes, “[e]verything about this scene [of forgiveness] would seem to be utterly impossible, irrational, *idiotic*, to the critical mind, and, indeed, we share Dombey’s incredulity . . . Surely, he should, logically and in any viable economic exchange, be asking for hers” (255-56, original emphasis). But this “irrational” request for forgiveness, as Gibson has argued, in fact “reveals a higher reality,” an idealized rendition of this Christian virtue (71). Gibson explains: “[Florence’s] actions offer . . . a new ethical reality governed not by the principles of strict exchange or just desserts [*sic*] but by generosity and grace [She] exemplifies the model of Christian practice . . . [and] embodies the Sermon on the Mount” (71). Florence’s self-effacing gesture moves Dombey into embracing the Christian language of forgiveness. The repentant father now prays: “Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much” (706). For orthodox Dickens, forgiveness possesses its redemptive power even though (or because) it appears “irrational . . . to the critical mind.”⁵

Brontë deliberately undermines such an ideal. If Florence’s undue request for forgiveness arouses Christian humility in the heart of her utilitarian father, Jane’s only serves to illustrate how far St. John’s behavior has departed from Christian virtues. This is how St. John responds after Jane’s apology: “No happy reconciliation was to be had with him — no cheering smile or generous word: but still the Christian was patient and placid; and when I asked him if he forgave me, he answered that he was not in the habit of cherishing the remembrance of vexation; that he had nothing to forgive; not having been offended (410). This is a pas-

⁴ In the introduction to the Oxford edition of *Jane Eyre*, Shuttleworth argues that what St. John offers is “a form of legalized prostitution” (xxxii).

⁵ For Dickens’s religious orthodoxy, see Gibson 42 and Cunningham 255.

sage about forgiveness, one that peculiarly foregrounds its absence. Humility, as St. John acknowledges earlier in the novel, “is the ground-work of Christian virtues” (402). But in this passage we see a proud clergyman who appears angry and resentful because his self-esteem is wounded in a failed proposal. Significantly, he vents his resentment not through angry invectives but through speaking the language of forgiveness (“he was not in the habit of cherishing the remembrance of vexation”). Far from comforting Jane, his language of forgiveness only convinces her how unforgiving he actually is: “Without one overt act of hostility, . . . he contrived to impress me momentarily with the conviction that I was put beyond the pale of his favour” (410). Moreover, falsehood troubles St. John’s forgiveness message. The alleged inability to “cherish the remembrance of vexation” is immediately debunked by his grumpy claim that he is not offended. The latter claim is transparently disingenuous. Lying offends God because it violates one of the Ten Commandments.⁶ Far from conveying the Christian love for the unlovely, St. John’s language of forgiveness only underscores his un-Christian hubris and sin.

St. John’s behavior continues to offer strong evidence that the language of forgiveness in *Jane Eyre* does not convey love and inspire hope as it usually does in Victorian culture. When asked to explain her refusal to marry him, Jane replies: “If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now” (412). This answer exacerbates St. John’s displeasure so considerably that he can no longer keep calm. He retorts: “Your words are . . . violent, unfeminine, and untrue. They . . . merit severe reproof: they would seem inexcusable; but that it is the duty of man to forgive his fellow, even until seventy-and-seven times” (412). This passage carries an unmistakable biblical allusion. When Peter asks Jesus whether it is enough to forgive his offenders for “seven times,” Jesus replies: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Matthew 18. 21-22). While Peter assumes that there is a limit to the capacity of forgiveness, Jesus teaches him that Christian forgiveness is potentially unbounded and should be given freely.⁷ St. John apparently aspires to practice Jesus’s injunction. But he turns his back against the magnanimous spirit central to Jesus’s message and instead

⁶ The eighth commandment reads: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Exodus 20.16).

⁷ Elsewhere in the Bible Jesus repeats this imperative to forgive: “And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Luke 17.4). The lesson is that Christians should not set numerical limit to their forgiveness. F. W. Robertson, who delivered his sermon on “Christian Forgiveness” in 1852, embraced this lesson. He taught his congregation that “Christianity is a spirit, not a set of rules” and that “[t]he Gospel is built on unlimited forgiveness” (qtd. in Reed 16).

shows the limited capacity of his tolerance. His words (“seventy-and-seven times”) betray a mean spirit and readiness to retaliate at the seventy-eighth offense. That numerical calculation could deprive the biblical message of its loving halo can be further inferred from Jane’s comment on St. John when they meet again later: “No doubt he had invoked the help of the Holy Spirit to subdue the anger I had aroused in him, and now believed he had forgiven me once more” (416). On the face of it, this sentence confirms the Christian root of forgiveness. St. John is willing to forgive because he remembers his religious duty. But the sarcastic tone reveals a different story. St. John, as Jane well knows, still harbors hostility and bitterness in his heart. He only “believes” that he has followed Jesus’s advice but actually falls far short of it. The numerical indicator (“once more”) implies a vindictive nature awaiting the offender to use up her “seventy-and-seven times” forgiveness allowance. A clergyman familiar with Christian duties and doctrines, St. John stands in an ideal position to celebrate forgiveness. Yet through his example Brontë subverts the conventional language of forgiveness, transforming it from a measure of love to a vehicle for resentment.

Such is Brontë’s refusal to embrace forgiveness as a loving Christian virtue productive of redemptive reconciliation that she encourages readers to take this assumption with a pinch of salt. The final paragraph of *Jane Eyre* serves as a case in point. It is a paragraph reporting St. John’s dying words: “‘My Master,’ he says, ‘has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly, — ‘Surely I come quickly;’ and hourly I more eagerly respond, — ‘Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!’” (452). Commenting on this scene, Thormählen remarks: “[St. John’s] plea expresses an eager yearning for Christ as well as that unquestioning acquiescence in God’s will which is the peculiar characteristic of saved souls” (128). The words “saved souls” presuppose transgression. What is St. John guilty of? For Thormählen, the answer lies in his hubris. St. John has been an arrogant clergyman who claims that he can see through Jane’s heart and that he “must speak for it” (402). Since “[n]o Christian can govern another’s heart,” “in claiming control of Jane’s” St. John arrogates undue power to himself and therefore “cannot be absolved from the sin of spiritual pride” (Thormählen 209). St. John’s dying words, however, suggest that he has been humbled by his missionary experiences in India and that he has been reconciled with his creator. God has forgiven him for his sin and grants him a new life. The final paragraph of *Jane Eyre* apparently is “a celebration of love,” one that is effected by forgiveness and its consequent spiritual redemption (Thormählen 218).

Yet beneath the façade of this implied forgiveness lies the memory of a more explicit example of forgiveness, one that offers a darker view about this Christian virtue. As some critics have observed, the final paragraph of *Jane Eyre* recalls many earlier

incidents and summarizes many of its thematic concerns.⁸ In particular, St. John's final call for a person to "come" and the addressee's ready response recall Jane's hearing of Rochester's voice earlier in the novel. Thus Brontë "plac[es] St. John's religion . . . in a sexual frame" (Shuttleworth, Introduction xxxiii). But this earnest and reciprocated request in fact has a much earlier precedent. Attacked by her sister Bertha, Richard Mason yells for Rochester's help: "Rochester! Rochester! For God's sake, come!" (206). Rochester answers his call immediately, as Jesus would to St. John's. Significantly, this bloody attack ends in forgiveness. Neither Mason nor Rochester wishes to punish Bertha. The former requests that his sister be taken care of: "let her be treated as tenderly as may be" (215). The latter consents to do so: "I do my best; and have done it, and will do it," before adding a qualifier: "would to God there was an end of all this" (215). On this occasion, forgiveness conjures up persistent resentment and unresolved conflicts. Although Richard Mason's plea may result from his affection for his mad sister, Rochester's consent reminds himself and readers of his loveless marriage with Bertha. Burdened with a mad wife and unwilling to expose his secret, Rochester can only forgive in response to her offense. His lenience, however, does little to make peace with Bertha or to alleviate her rage. Bertha later sneaks into Jane's room and tears her wedding gown in two. This distant memory of forced and futile forgiveness sits uncomfortably in the final paragraph, laden as it is with biblical allusions calculated to celebrate divine love and cultivate peace of mind. By weaving two different kinds of forgiveness into one single paragraph, Brontë encourages her readers to look beyond the healing power her contemporaries have associated with forgiveness.

Conclusion

Paying attention to the conflicts and resentment besetting the language of forgiveness in *Jane Eyre* is important, because it prompts us to rethink why this novel, to borrow Glen's words, "has never been *felt* to be a conformist work" (53, original emphasis). From Victorian reviewers to modern critics, readers of *Jane Eyre* have regularly commented on the subversive nature of this novel. Just as regularly, they explain it in terms of Brontë's social discontent or feminist agenda. Elizabeth Rigby's famous review of this novel in 1848 exemplifies the former approach. She writes: "[t]here is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts

⁸ See for instance Gezari 87, Thormählen 217 and Glen 64.

of the rich and against the privations of the poor, . . . We do not hesitate to say that the tone of the mind and thought which has overthrown authority and . . . fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has written *Jane Eyre*” (qtd. in Allot 109-10). In her 1855 article in the *Blackwood’s Magazine* Margaret Oliphant sees Brontë as a dangerous feminist: “the most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre* . . . [because] this furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the ‘Rights of Woman’ in a new aspect” (qtd. in Allot 312). More than a century later, Rigby’s view finds support in the work of an eminent Brontë scholar, who demonstrates how Brontë explicitly links the position of women and workers in her text, a link that reveals her interest in the Chartist movement (Shuttleworth, *Victorian* 161-62). Oliphant’s observation is echoed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose seminal book *The Madwoman in the Attic* has established *Jane Eyre* as a key text about “rebellious feminism” (338).

Scholarship on *Jane Eyre* has rightly pointed out that this novel is a subversive text, one that registers strong dissatisfaction with the status quo and a passionate yearning for radical change. But to discuss its rebellious spirit only through the lens of social and gender inequality is problematic because it fails to provide a consistent explanation. If rebellious feminism informs *Jane Eyre*, how can we explain Jane’s final decision to nurse Rochester, to create a happy home for him, and to become a classic angel in the house? If, through *Jane Eyre*, Brontë articulates her spiritual alliance with working-class revolt, how can we explain that female workers in this novel—the drunken Grace Poole and the snobbish servant Hannah in particular—are cast in a negative light and that Brontë eventually gives her eponymous heroine a middle-class life free of hard labor and economic worries? Esther Godfrey has aptly pointed out that “[t]he plot conventions of Jane’s rise to fortune and the marriage union that concludes the novel suggest conservative affirmations of class and gender identities that seemingly contradict the novel’s more disruptive aspects” (853).⁹ These ambivalent attitudes seem to indicate that Brontë is not confident about the radical messages of her text and that she circumscribes them as a result. They also suggest that class affiliation and feminist protest alone are not sufficient to understand the subversive quality of *Jane Eyre* accurately, because Brontë’s apparent self-contradiction conjures up powerful conservatism calculated to crush such a rebellious spirit.

The issue of forgiveness rescues scholarship on *Jane Eyre* from the deadlock of authorial ambivalence, not least by revealing the real subject that Brontë’s subversive spirit consistently targets in this text. Through Helen’s unhelpful creed,

⁹ For other examples of ideological ambivalence, see Benvenuto *passim*, Eagleton 15-33 and Glen 64, 86.

Mrs. Reed's undiminished hostility and Jane's withheld speech, Brontë has deprived forgiveness of its conventional power to effect a reconciliation between the offenders and their victims. Through traces of resentment and antagonism in prominent forgiveness messages, Brontë has demonstrated the radical possibility that the Christian language of forgiveness can be used to convey anger and underscore conflicts. *Jane Eyre* is a subversive text not because it stages social and feminist protests, but because it consistently undermines the Victorian assumptions about forgiveness.

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《簡愛》中的原諒

摘 要

夏綠蒂·勃朗特的《簡愛》是一部關於原諒的小說。此一議題主導了小說中的情節發展、人物刻劃以及句型結構。然而令人訝異的是，當歷史學者與文學批評家運用小說解釋原諒在十九世紀英國社會中的重要性時，此文本幾乎從未受到關注。本文企圖解釋此現象的成因。作者以為這是因為《簡愛》中對原諒的探索顛覆了傳統基督教教義賦予原諒的價值與意義。在勃朗特成長的年代，原諒是一普及的基督教美德，它的中心思想是以愛包容敵人，它的主要功用是消弭衝突。和這樣的想法相照之下，《簡愛》顯得十分驚世駭俗。小說中原諒的場景非但沒有傳遞愛與關懷，反而流露出怨懟與不滿，非但不著重包容和解的力量，反而強調持續的衝突與對立。分析文本中原諒的語言可以讓我們重新思考並更精準地了解為何《簡愛》是一本顛覆傳統價值的小說。

關鍵字：原諒、《簡愛》、夏綠蒂·勃朗特、和解、愛