

THE TROPICAL EXTRAVAGANCE OF BERTHA MASON

By Sue Thomas

AS SUSAN L. MEYER SUGGESTS, “[a]n interpretation of the significance of the British empire in *Jane Eyre* must begin by making sense of Bertha Mason Rochester, the mad, drunken West Indian wife whom Rochester keeps locked up on the third floor of his ancestral mansion” (252). In Richard Mason’s deposition concerning the marriage of Edward Fairfax Rochester and Bertha Antoinetta Mason in Spanish Town, Jamaica, Bertha is described as the child of Jonas Mason, West India planter and merchant, and Antoinetta Mason, identified only as a Creole. In Rochester’s account of Bertha’s family the “germs of insanity” are passed on by the Creole mother (334; ch. 27). In this essay I retrace late eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century ethnographic discourses about white Creole degeneracy and situate Brontë’s representations of the Creoleness of Bertha and Richard Mason in relation to them, arguing that *Jane Eyre* demarcates both femininity and masculinity in imperial and racial terms, while also blurring these categories. Brontë, I demonstrate, links the degenerate moral and intellectual character of the white Creole with the cruelties of the slave-labour system in Jamaica, and with historical Jamaican slave rebellions figured through metaphor and allusion. This depiction suggests that Brontë has carefully historicized the relationships among Bertha Mason Rochester, Edward Fairfax Rochester, and Jane Eyre.

Recent finely nuanced and impressive readings of empire and the metaphors of slavery in *Jane Eyre* have highlighted Bertha Mason’s racial ambiguity (Azim 175–183, Meyer, Plasa), or have been based on the assumption that she is white (Spivak 249) or the “offspring of interracial” sex, “the racial Other incarnate” (Perera 99, 82). In an extensive discussion of Brontë’s representation of Bertha, Meyer develops two lines of argument: that Bertha is “imagined as white — or as passing as white — in the novel’s retrospective narrative,” and that she “become[s] black” in “the form in which she becomes visible in the novel” (252). That form, she argues, is marked by racial stereotypes of the “non-white” (254). Jenny Sharpe has researched part of the historical imparting of “moral, cultural and territorial content to Whiteness” through “a triple conflation” of ““White,” ““Europe,”” and ““Christian”” dating from the late seventeenth century (Bonnett 175). Drawing on Wylie Sypher’s research on an eighteenth-century British literary stereotype of the Creole, normatively white, Sharpe argues that in the early nineteenth century “the term creole . . . was a derogatory name for the West Indian sugar plantocracy” (45), and reads Bertha

in relation to that stereotype of depraved self-indulgence, and Jane as an emblem of Christian feminine restraint.

Before 1850 four meanings of Creole were in circulation in Britain: white people of Spanish descent naturalized by birth in Spanish America; people of non-aboriginal descent naturalized by birth in the West Indies; non-aboriginal people “of different colours” (white or “negro”) born in Spanish America (Johnson and Walker); and white people of European descent naturalized by birth in the West Indies. The entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica or, a Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Miscellaneous Literature* (1815–24) records the first two meanings:

CREOLES, a name originally given to the families descended from the Spaniards who first settled at Mexico in America. These are much more numerous than the Spaniards properly so called, and the Mullattoes, which two other species of inhabitants they distinguish; and are excluded from all considerable employments. It is now used in a more extensive sense, and applied to all natives of the West Indies. (Millar)

Anthony Trollope draws out the implications of the second usage in his *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1859): “There may be white Creoles, coloured Creoles, or black Creoles” (159). Only the first *Britannica* meaning is given in *Encyclopaedia Londinensis or Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Literature* (1810–29) and *The Penny Cyclopaedia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (1837); both *Britannica* meanings are recorded in *The London Encyclopaedia or Universal Dictionary of Science, Art, Literature, and Practical Mechanics* (1829). In *The Cyclopaedia; or Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Literature* (1819) compiled by Abraham Rees, Bryan Edwards’s *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793) is selectively cited to produce an account of Creoles as white people of European descent native to the West Indies. Edwards refers explicitly also to Creoles of mixed blood (II: 4). Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* and *The Penny Cyclopaedia* offer readers basic ethnographic accounts. The entry in Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* is quite detailed. Of white Creoles of Spanish descent it is said:

by the enervating influence of the sultry climate, by the rigour of a jealous government, and by their despair of attaining that distinction to which mankind naturally aspire, the vigour of their minds is so entirely broken, that a great part of them waste their life in luxurious indulgences, mingled with an illiberal superstition still more debasing. Languid and unenterprising, the operations of an active extended commerce would be to them so cumbersome and oppressive that almost in every part of America they decline engaging in it.

According to the cyclopedia, Creoles are “sunk in sloth . . . satisfied with the revenues of their paternal estates.” A key source here is Don George Juan and Don Antonio de Ulloa’s mid-eighteenth-century *A Voyage to South America*. The entry then draws on Edwards’s account of the influence of climate on white Creole people, whose characters are not formed by the legal restrictions imposed by the Spanish government.

Edwards, like Thomas Atwood in his 1791 history of Dominica, engages with and qualifies a range of then-current ideas about the effects of climate on human character. Birth in the Caribbean supposedly naturalized character attributes brought about by “acclimation” to the tropics. Nancy Stepan, who has researched the polygenist develop-

ment of discourses of white tropical degeneracy after 1850, points out that, in the late eighteenth century, “scientists assumed that all human races belonged to the same species, and that environmental influences caused a ‘degeneration’ away from a primordial form to create the different racial varieties in the world. . . . Racial biology . . . by mid-nineteenth century was a science of boundaries between groups and the degenerations that threatened when those boundaries were transgressed” (97–98). Those boundaries included geographical regions as well as social and moral stratifications. Popular and scientific stereotypes of the tropical degeneracy of white Creoles begin to map the emergence of a new racial variety. Both Edwards and Atwood write to counter what Edwards terms “gross” “[c]alumnies” against the morality of white people in the West Indies (8), calumnies to which they allude directly and indirectly. Atwood notes the “sobriety and chastity” of the “English Creole women,” “a clear refutation of that too generally received notion, that women in particular, in warm climates, are given to inordinate desires; and proves to a demonstration, that such passions are not owing to the climate, but rather to a too warm constitution, which, aided by luxury, too often gives itself up to satisfying its own depraved appetites, against every sense of decency, and consideration of duty” (212–13). “The generality of the white women” among “the loose wantons of the sex in the West Indies” are “actually composed of adventurers from Europe, or of such as have followed the army and navy to the islands” (213). Edwards suggests that the climate “displays itself more strongly on the persons of the Natives, than on their manners, or on the faculties of their minds” (2: 11). The men are “a taller race, on the whole, than the Europeans; but I think in general not proportionably robust. . . . [T]hey wanted bulk, to meet our ideas of masculine beauty” (2: 11). Of Creoles he also notes “the freedom and suppleness of their joints” which allows them to excel in dancing, “penmanship, and the use of the small sword” (2: 11). Their bodies acclimatized to the tropical sun, they have a “considerably deeper” eye socket (to cope with glare) and “considerably colder” skin (2: 11). The “leading feature” of white Creole character, he states, is “an independent spirit, and a display of conscious equality, throughout all ranks and conditions. . . . Possibly too, the climate itself, by increasing sensibility, contributes to create an impatience of subordination” (2: 8–9). (Jane Eyre’s independence of spirit, consciousness of equality, and impatience of subordination are racialized by her doubling with Bertha. In this racialized doubling the possible effects of Jane’s “hot” temper are, on a metaphorical level, linked with the effects of a tropical climate.) The climate, in Edwards’s view, encourages early intellectual precociousness, but “the want of proper objects for exercising the faculties”² and “the contagion and enervating effects of youthful excesses” (a “propensity” for “licentiousness” “undoubtedly” encouraged by the climate and masculine in Edwards’s context) mitigates against “mental improvement” (2: 14). Edwards explicitly attributes the “indolence” of which white Creoles “are accused,” not to a sloth and timidity brought about by a hot climate, the argument of an unidentified writer on the relation of climate and character, but to “aversion to serious thought and deep reflection” (2: 15).³ Atwood provides a social rather than climatic explanation for such aversion, observing, for instance, that the practice of parents “sending their children to Europe for education” means that there are “few good school-masters, or other proper persons, to form the minds of youth in the English islands” (215–16).

The discourse of white Creole moral degeneracy could offer Brontë a type, which might be construed as perverse, in accordance with James Cowles Prichard’s theory of

moral madness (Grudin 147). “There is a phase of insanity,” Charlotte Brontë explains to W. S. Williams on 4 January 1848, “which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind, and a fiend-nature replaces it. The sole aim and desire of the being thus possessed is to exasperate, to molest, to destroy, and preternatural ingenuity and energy are often exercised to that dreadful end. . . . Mrs. Rochester, indeed, lived a sinful life before she was insane, but sin itself is a species of insanity” (Shorter 383–84). Rochester’s description of Bertha’s household management echoes in many details Maria Nugent’s account of a visit to the home of General and Mrs. Rose, in which she describes the ladies as “perfect viragos,” especially in their treatment of slaves assigned servant duties (107). Nugent was the wife of George Nugent, the Lieutenant-Governor of Jamaica from 1801 to 1806. Brontë may well have read, or had read to her, Nugent’s *A Journal of a Voyage to, and residence in, the Island of Jamaica, from 1801 to 1805, and of subsequent events in England from 1805 to 1811*, issued for private circulation in 1839. Christopher Heywood has shown that Charlotte and Emily Brontë worked into *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* a hidden local history of West India slavery connections, which included families named Mason and Sill; significantly, Lady Nugent mentions visiting a Mrs. Mason and meeting a Mr. Sill. After a tour of the island Nugent writes:

It is indeed melancholy, to see the general disregard of both religion and morality, throughout the whole island. Every one seems solicitous to make money, and no one appears to regard the mode of acquiring it. It is extraordinary to witness the immediate effect that the climate and habit of living in this country have upon the minds and manners of Europeans, particularly of the lower orders. In the upper ranks, they become indolent and inactive, regardless of every thing but eating, drinking, and indulging themselves, and are almost entirely under the dominion of their mulatto favourites. In the lower orders, they are the same, with the addition of conceit and tyranny; considering the negroes as creatures formed merely to administer to their ease, and to be subject to their caprice. (131)

For Maria Nugent the spectacle especially at second Creole breakfast of excessive food and alcohol consumption by both men and women, including Mrs. Mason, was “as astonishing as it was disgusting” (78). The sexual impropriety of young men — involving, she writes, “horrid connections” and “ruin” — cause her to reflect that Jamaica “is, indeed, a sad immoral country” (223–24). David Turley observes that within abolitionist circles it was thought that

there were so few exceptions to the “state of debauchery and debasement” of the colonists that reformers were fully justified . . . in their condemnation of “the present state of corrupted morality and religion in the West Indies”. . . . [A] great deal of antislavery argument grew out of a fundamental concern for proper order in the world. . . . [Abolitionists] spoke out of convictions about a moral order sanctioned by Providence and a “natural” order in which Providence was understood through the laws and qualities of God’s creation, human, animate and inanimate. (41, 44)

Only in the descriptions of white Creole women does the face receive detailed attention. “The Creole women are characterized by the symmetry of their persons, the brilliancy of their eyes, and the sallowness of their complexions,” readers of the *Penny*

Cyclopaedia were informed. Edwards attributes a “lax fibre, and a complexion in which the lily predominates rather than the rose” (a complexion also noted by Atwood in “English white women in the West Indies” [211]) to the effects of abstemious diet and the “calm and even tenour of their lives” which does not “impel them to much exertion of either body or mind”: “To a stranger newly arrived, the ladies appear as just risen from the bed of sickness. — Their voice is soft and spiritless, and every step betrays languor and lassitude.” They have the “finest eyes in the world; large, languishing and expressive,” read as an index of “native goodness of heart and gentleness of disposition” (12–13).⁵ A planter, Edwards wants to convince his readers “that no women on earth make better wives, or better mothers” (13); he focuses on physiological and intellectual acclimation to the tropics.

In Brontë’s representation of Richard Mason many of these late eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century ethnographic details of white Creole physiology and character are mapped on his face. In mapping Creole character through physiognomy, Brontë necessarily has to draw on accounts of Creole women. Jane Eyre reads Richard’s character in minute detail from his comportment and physiognomy:

His manner was polite; his accent, in speaking, struck me as somewhat unusual — not precisely foreign, but still not altogether English: his age might be about Mr Rochester’s — between thirty and forty; his complexion was singularly sallow: otherwise he was a fine-looking man, at first sight especially. On closer examination, you detected something in his face that displeased; or rather, that failed to please. His features were regular, but too relaxed: his eye was large and well cut, but the life looking out of it was a tame, vacant life — at least so I thought.

Jane remembers examining him further at dinner:

But I liked his physiognomy even less than before: it struck me as being at the same time unsettled and inanimate. His eye wandered, and had no meaning in its wandering: this gave him an odd look, such as I never remembered to have seen. For a handsome and not an unamiable-looking man, he repelled me exceedingly: there was no power in that smooth-skinned face of a full oval shape; no firmness in that aquiline nose and small cherry mouth; there was no thought on the low, even forehead; no command in that blank, brown eye. (219; ch. 18)

Contrasting him with Rochester, Jane finds him to be “a sleek gander” to Rochester’s “fierce falcon,” a “meek sheep” to Rochester’s “rough-coated, keen-eyed dog, its guardian” (219; ch. 18). His “shrinking” ever closer to the fire “as if he were cold” (219; ch. 18) implies that his tropically acclimatized Creoleness is carried in his body or on his skin. Meyer glosses “singularly sallow” as “yellow-skinned yet socially white” (252), and this reading enables her argument that Bertha Mason may have been passing for white. Sallow complexion, regular (symmetrical), yet too relaxed features, and large eyes are, however, physical attributes attributed to white Creole women, and Richard’s character conforms to a stock white Creole type: the life expressed in the eye is “tame, vacant,” unsettled in focus; the want of power, firmness, thought, and command implies indolence, unexercised faculties, and “aversion to serious thought and deep reflection.” The absence of thought on Richard’s forehead, or as Rochester calls it, his “feeble mind” (333; ch. 27), is mirrored

in more detail in Rochester's account of the sane Bertha: "her cast of mind" is "common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger"; she gives topics of conversation "coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile" turns (333; ch. 27).⁶ This seemingly paradoxical internal discord of scale — "pigmy intellect" and "giant propensities" — brings on madness in Bertha (334; ch. 27). After Bertha has attacked Richard and he is left in Jane's care, Jane notes his "unresisting" and "passive disposition" (240; ch. 20). The approving language of Louisa Eshton's and Mary Ingram's less discriminating assessment of Richard is normally applied to women in this period. He is "beautiful," "charming," with a "sweet-tempered forehead" and "placid eye and smile" (220; ch. 18). Louisa admires the smoothness of the features Jane finds "too relaxed"; the "frowning irregularities" Louisa proclaims she dislikes (220; ch. 18), however, Jane finds sexually compelling and masculine in Rochester.

This naturalizing stereotype of the colonial relation (colonial master/colonist, masculine/feminine, active/passive, adult/child), which entails an imperial and racial demarcation of masculinity,⁷ is mapped across the character differences between English gentleman Rochester and plantocracy-class Creole Richard. In Jane's eyes "the impetuous will" of Rochester holds "complete sway over the inertness" of Richard; the "passive disposition" of Richard "had been habitually influenced by the active energy" of Rochester; Rochester's "word" suffices "to control" Richard "like a child" (240; ch. 20). Rochester describes Richard's former "attachment" to him as "dog-like" (333; ch. 27), suggesting Richard's recognition of mastery. Jane endorses Rochester's colonial guardianship function in her farmyard analogy, in which Rochester is "guardian" dog to "meek sheep" Richard (219; ch. 18). When Richard defies Rochester's will by hiring a solicitor to disclose the legal impediment to his marriage, Rochester mocks Richard's "quivering limbs and white cheeks," commenting that he would "almost as soon strike a woman" as strike him (320; ch. 26). The colonial relation is naturalized by these gender binaries, and Brontë implies the perversity of Richard's effeminate masculinity, which Rochester disavows. Rochester's shows of bullying masculine force have a silencing effect on Richard (239; ch. 20, 319; ch. 26). After Bertha attacks Richard, Rochester takes command of the situation, with Jane's assistance, ordering Richard not to speak to Jane on "peril" of his life (238; ch. 20). In the scenes of first aid and medical attention Richard's voice murmurs (238, 241; ch. 20), is "faint," and "shuddering" (241; ch. 20), or is a groan (239; ch. 20). He utters a blasphemy in the church, crying "faintly," and, in response to Rochester's demands that he speak ("what have *you* to say"), has to be prompted to greater articulateness by his solicitor, Mr. Briggs, who urges him: "'Courage . . . speak out'" (319; ch. 26). He whispers in the scene in which Rochester displays Bertha, "'We had better leave her'" (321; ch. 26). Jane is sexually attracted to the imperial masculinity which Rochester embodies for her, yet repelled by his despotic tendencies, which Brontë ascribes to the contaminating effect of Bertha.

The boundaries of genteel femininity are blurred in Bertha. Rochester acknowledges that "no servant would bear the continued outbreaks" of Bertha's "violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders" during their time in Jamaica. The house she manages is not "quiet or settled" (333; ch. 27). The vices of intemperance, cursing, and unchastity, which mark insubordination in Rochester's model of genteel femininity and which prematurely ripen the "germs of insanity" in Bertha are normally, but not exclusively, masculine, lower-class, "coloured" female,⁸ or black ones in early nineteenth-century discourses about Creoleness. In her "moral mad-

ness” Bertha acquires “virile force” (321; ch. 26). The gender instability of Bertha, linked with her degeneracy, is also underlined by Jane’s description of her as a “clothed hyena” (321; ch. 26). In religious iconography the “hyena, which eats decaying corpses, has been used as a symbol of those who thrive on the filthy corpse of false doctrine. The ancients said that the hyena is able to change its sex, and used it as a symbol of the unstable man” (Webber 371; Webber uses “man” in a generic sense).

In the relationship between Bertha and Rochester, Brontë maps other dimensions of the colonial relation, inflected across British marriage law. Bertha is figured as a despotic mistress to her household slaves, who is herself enslaved and bestialized by her passions. In her madness Bertha laughs and largely makes animal noises. When she is displayed in her cell, she is first seen grovelling “seemingly, on all fours” (321; ch. 26); Rochester describes his life with a series of mistresses as a “grovelling fashion of existence”: “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” (339; ch. 27). In Rochester’s narrative the bestialization of Bertha makes literal her degradation by passion, living familiarly with slaves and lovers,⁹ and her ineducability, which figures the uselessness in her case of the civilizing, or to use Spivak’s term, “soul making” mission of colonialism (Spivak 244) which Rochester tries to assume in the privatized domain of marriage. Rochester is more confident about the educability of the child Adèle, daughter of his French mistress Céline Varens; in his account he “transplanted” Adèle to England, “to grow up clean in the wholesome soil of an English country garden,” and to be trained through an English education (176; ch. 15). Bertha, however, is placed by Rochester in a windowless room, denied the prospect (the view) which Karen Chase argues “becomes a figure of the balanced self” or personality in Brontë’s articulation of space (89). The degenerate Bertha takes on stereotypical attributes of a blackness outside the fold of the colonial civilizing mission, epitomized in lines from Bryan Edwards’s verse “Ode on Seeing a Negro-Funeral”:

Transform’d to tigers, fierce and fell,
Thy race shall prowl with savage yell,
And glut their rage for blood! (2: 82)

Following a cue from Richard’s account of Bertha’s attack on him — “She sucked the blood: she said she’d drain my heart” (Brontë 242; ch. 20) — Jane comes to see Bertha as vampire-like (311; ch. 25). This representation would accord with the suggestion in Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* that white Creoles subscribe to debasing “illiberal superstition.” In the context of the references to slavery in *Jane Eyre*, it is worth noting that on marriage Bertha’s body became the legal property of Rochester (Bodichon 119), and that confirmation of insanity entailed in law “loss of liberty and civil rights” without the consent of the person certified to be mad (McCandless 85).

Rochester’s confinement of Bertha sets a boundary of repudiation, marks a repression of his own racialized “contamination” (334; ch. 27), and attempts to bury “in oblivion” the tropical degeneracy of white women (336; ch. 27) — degeneracy that suggests the “scandal,” as Sharpe calls it, that “‘whiteness’ alone is not the sign of racial purity” (46). Rochester represents his contact with Bertha’s depravity as a contamination of his being, the more begriming because Bertha is “called by the law and by society a part” of him (334;

ch. 27), and carries her contagion inside him as a corporeal memory and as a monitory presence. Her “breath (faugh!) mixed with the air” he breathed, the recollection of husbandly (sexual) contact “was then, and is now, inexpressibly odious” to him, and his “ears were filled with the curses the maniac still shrieked out” (334–335; ch. 27). Her Creole unsettlement (shared with Richard) is infectious, transforming Rochester into a wandering “will-o’-the-wisp” (337; ch. 27), a largely absentee proprietor of his English estate; her unchastity is shadowed in his, although he says he “eschewed” “[a]ny enjoyment that bordered on riot” which seemed “to approach” him to “her and her vices” (338; ch. 27). He explicitly refuses to be cruel to Bertha (338; ch. 27), cruelty being a trait for which slave-owners were generally notorious. Meyer maintains that Brontë “represses the history of British colonial oppression and, in particular, British enslavement of Africans, by marking all aspects of oppression ‘other’ — non-British, non-white, the result of a besmirching contact with ‘dark races’” (262). In Brontë’s representation of Rochester the contaminating native “other” is the degenerate white Creole. Bertha’s despotism as slave-owner is mirrored in the character of the harem-owning “oriental despot” which Brontë, invoking a stock women’s-emanipist orientalist discourse,¹⁰ suggests Rochester assumes in playing out his sexual desire for Jane. Andrew Wheatcroft notes that the Western “preoccupation” with the Ottoman Empire “falls under three broad headings: lust, cruelty and filth” (212). An alternative Caribbean model of masculine sexual depravity — the planter sexually involved with “mulatto favourites” or slaves — is unspoken in the text. Bertha’s Jamaican lovers are seemingly unspeakable in Rochester’s narrative.

Rochester’s oblique references to slave rebellion in Jamaica in 1823 link Bertha’s despotism and degeneracy causally with insurrection. The references date their marriage as having occurred in 1819 and Bertha’s incarceration in England as commencing in 1823–1824, and may facilitate a reading of Bertha as Rochester’s monitory double and of his marriage as a historical allegory. Rochester’s narrative of his tropical sojourn begins in the realm of realism, moving into a highly subjective Gothic register to articulate its “abominable details” (333; ch. 27). Those details culminate in his account of a “fiery West Indian night” in a world “quivering with the ferment of tempest,” an atmosphere purified by a “sweet wind from Europe” which causes the storm to break and brings “true Wisdom” and a prospect of “glorious liberty” to Rochester (335; ch. 27). The representation of the night compresses the terror Bertha wreaks (and Rochester’s superficial release from it) and the history of the 1823 slave revolts, articulating the second tropologically, projecting it through the mind of the demoralized and suicidal Rochester. In his account, the island itself is apparently self-destructively convulsed by the terror of Bertha. Meyer notes that writers like Monk Lewis, Harriet Martineau, and Brontë (in her *Roe Head Journal*) use tropical storms to figure “the rage and the revenge of the black West Indians” (248), but this observation does not inform her reading of Rochester’s story. The “fiery” night and “ferment of tempest,” I suggest, trope 1823 slave unrest in the British Caribbean. The terror of slave unrest is symbolized in the period of the novel by the firing of houses and property, rape, and murder.¹¹ Enslaved people themselves seem to be figured in Rochester’s narrative as “black clouds” (335; ch. 27). The “sweet wind from Europe” signifies the British direction of the Jamaican House of Assembly to pass amelioration laws and the calls for slave emancipation through petitions and Thomas Buxton’s moving of a resolution to that effect in the House of Commons. This news relayed largely through word of mouth and gossip brought slaves, Clinton V. Black argues, “to the conclusion that certain benefits

conferred on them by Britain were being withheld, and this led to unrest and open revolt, especially in Guiana [the Demerera uprising] and Jamaica" (104). In the tropological scheme the storm figures the crisis of open rebellion, and the ensuing calm the "refreshing" and growing "pure" health (Brontë 335; ch. 27) of the colonial body politic by release of anger and brutal suppression of revolt. Crucially, political agency is removed from slaves, and the idea of liberty, as in Jane's figurative representation of herself as missionary to enslaved "harem" women, is given a European origin. This Europeanization of liberty was not a standard, or uncontested, abolitionist discourse. Turley mentions that "[s]peakers at a Beverley antislavery meeting in 1824 did not believe that slaves needed 'foreign stimulus' to make them rebel; their own sufferings were sufficient" (39–40). The execution or flogging of slaves accused of rebellion is glossed in Rochester's narrative as a "purification" of the air, and Brontë does not ironically undercut his representation. A personified Hope shows Rochester the way to ameliorate *his* condition, and more fancifully that of slaves, by incarceration of the contagious Bertha, the depraved representative of the plantocracy, who sullies the name of an English family (a stock trope of the relation between England and its colonies). He tries to contain her in England amidst the relics of bygone fashions on the third storey of Thornfield Hall, and to extricate himself from the taint of her contagious despotism he carries within him. Bertha figures not just the degenerative effects of self-indulgence, as Sharpe suggests she does (47).

My dating is reinforced by Jane's earlier bantering suggestion to Rochester that she will situate herself in relation to him as slave-purchasing Grand Turk as "a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved" and to "stir up mutiny" (297–98; ch. 24). Jane tells Rochester he shall find himself "fettered amongst" the "hands" of her and his "harem inmates," and she, "for one," will not "consent to cut" his "bonds till" he has "signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred" (297–98; ch. 24). She is apparently alluding to Jamaica's 1831 Baptist War, better known today as Sam Sharpe's rebellion, and its aftermath, in which revolt was viciously suppressed.¹² Baptist missionaries were, Clinton V. Black writes, "blamed for the disorders. The Baptist preachers William Knibb and Thomas Burchell and the Moravian H. G. Pfeiffer amongst others, were arrested and charged with inciting the slaves to rebellion" (106). In the novel's internal chronology Jane makes her suggestion to Rochester ten years after Rochester incarcerates Bertha in England. The historical "liberal . . . charter" (298; ch. 24), given more urgency by the rebellion and further erosion of support for the West India interest, was the abolition of slavery and its replacement by an apprenticeship labour system, both forced on British colonies in the Caribbean in 1834.¹³ Resolutions for the abolition of slavery were agreed to by the House of Commons on June 12, 1833. Jane threatens to emulate the pattern of missionary involvement in the "Baptist War" in her relationship with the "oriental" Rochester. In Jane's allusion the historical role of black Baptist preaching and organization is occluded. In recalling her stay with the Rivers family Jane remembers being given "a new publication" to read, "the bright pages" of Walter Scott's *Marmion*, "one of those genuine productions so often vouchsafed to the fortunate public of those days" (396; ch. 32). *Marmion* was first published in 1808, and Q. D. Leavis, in her Notes in the Penguin edition of *Jane Eyre*, cites this publication date as a prime example of Brontë's "general confusion of dates and eras and fashions and facts" (489). *Marmion* was published, however, in Robert Cadell's twelve-volume *Poetical Works of Walter Scott* (1833–34), edited by John Gibson Lockhart, and illustrated by J. M. W. Turner, and Jane refers to this edition of the poem.

On the night that Rochester tells Jane about his marriage to Bertha and his sojourn in Jamaica, and urges her to be his mistress, Jane has a dream which reworks elements of the “fiery West Indian night” Rochester has described (335; ch. 27). It opens in the “red-room at Gateshead,” features “sable” clouds, and a white (rather than red) moon which takes the form of a maternal protective figure, who parts the clouds and waves “them away,” and speaks to her “spirit,” saying, “‘My daughter, flee temptation’” (346; ch. 27). In the red-room the child Jane had become acutely conscious of the injustice of her oppression, structured by her class relations with the Reeds and her gender relations with John Reed: “How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection!” (47; ch. 2). The maternal moon advises against the temptation of insurrectionary anger at Rochester’s treatment of her, and possibly passionate insurrection against the constricting divorce law which fetters Rochester to Bertha.

Meyer associates Bertha with the Maroons, runaway slaves who waged guerilla warfare against Caribbean plantocracies (252), an interpretive move encouraged by Brontë’s “deployment of a metaphoric of slavery as a way of representing forms of domestic oppression” “created by gender and class” in Britain (Plasa 67), but colonial discontent and “rebellion” during the early nineteenth century before full emancipation of slaves occurred across all British Caribbean colonies (mostly in 1838) did not only take the form of slave revolts. The letter of the law, for example, was used to assert the rights of planters (as they saw them). Local legislatures (empowered to make local laws) often failed to enact amelioration measures directed by the British government. Viscount Goderich, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote to Sir E. J. Murray MacGregor, the Governor of Dominica, on 10 December 1831, referring tersely to “the many earnest [sic] appeals upon this subject [the amelioration of slavery] which have been addressed . . . to the reason, and discretion, of the colonial Legislatures,” and observing that “His Majesty’s present advisers . . . feel that the language of admonition has been exhausted,” that admonitions were “more than once rejected without even the forms of respect,” that efforts to educate the legislatures through comment on the laws that they passed had met with scant success, and that West India colonists evinced an “insensibility to the influence of Public Opinion in the mother Country” in “favour of the Slaves” (Goderich). Thomas Mason, owner of Content Hall in Jamaica and identified by Captain Oldrey, a former Special Magistrate in the colony, as the leader of the pro-slavery party opposed to the apprenticeship system, used the letter of colonial law in 1835 to launch three vexatious legal actions against Oldrey for trespass (Reports 275–84). The Special Magistrates could hear complaints apprentices made against their masters. In July to August 1837 the Legislative Council of Dominica, the upper house, of which James Potter Lockhart, Jean Rhys’s great-grandfather, had been President for most of the 1830s, took umbrage at Lieutenant-Governor Light’s poorly framed, technically illegal instruction to Special Magistrates “forbidding them to use the lash [on men] as a Stimulus to labor or as a punishment” (Colebrooke). The Council responded by staying (temporarily) all legislative proceedings in Dominica, and this at a time when reforms of various kinds were being pressed on the colony. If Bertha is a “figure for the very literality” of colonialism (Plasa 79), she stands for the domestic excesses of a recalcitrant despotism, rather than the “‘rebel’ or ‘revolted slave,’” as Plasa suggests she does (79). In the scene of Rochester and Jane’s interrupted wedding, Richard has recourse to the letter of the law to assert Bertha’s right in marriage. A solicitor reads Richard’s announcement of an impediment to the marriage. Brontë emphasizes in the scene that

Richard is inclined to hide behind the letter of the law and the body of his solicitor, fearing a personal confrontation with the stronger Rochester.

Bertha acts occasionally as Rochester's double, a sign of the uncontainable violence of his desires, and its implications. Bertha breaks out of her cell at the moments when her taint shows itself in Rochester's relations with Jane, the governess in his employ, for example in the over-familiarity of telling her about his affair with Céline Varens, in bigamous wedding preparations, and in his "quite savage" disappointment at losing Jane to the claims of her conscience (452; ch. 36). To use Carl Plasa's useful distinction between the literal and the metaphorical, Bertha has a "*literal* presence as a character" and occasionally acts, too, as a "*metaphorical* expression" of Rochester's violence (65–66).¹⁴ Bertha's rending of and trampling on Jane's bridal veil symbolically prefigures rape, metaphorically cross-racialized by the Eastern allusions with reference to Rochester, and hinted at too in Jane's sense of Bertha's vampire-like features (311; ch. 25). (She identifies the vampire as a "foul German spectre" [311; ch. 25].) Had Rochester's first marriage been disclosed after the consummation of his bigamous marriage to Jane, the consummation might have been refigured as a rape procured by false inducement to sex. In Meyer's reading of *Jane Eyre* the scene in which the veil is torn and trampled is the one in which the "*topoi* of racial 'otherness'" (253) operate to produce a "Bertha-become-black" (254). The "discoloured . . . purple" face, "bloodshot eyes," and "swelled lips" Jane remembers (Brontë 311; ch. 25) are, however, stock markers of intemperance, a key attribute of the stereotypical white Creole moral degenerate. Plasa uses Jane's failure in this scene "to see the likeness between Bertha and the 'rebel slave' for which she is the hyperbolic or inflated figure" as a textual reflexivity, a "scepticism" about the "rhetorical operations" which conflate slavery and oppressions based on gender and class hierarchies (80). In my reading of the novel Bertha is not a figure of the rebel slave. In the novel's tropological schemes Bertha's fires (set apparently with murderous motives) figure the wages of sin and disorderly despotism among a landed ruling class. Maddened and witless Bertha seemingly did not lay plans for her own escape from the second fire; her death is figured as purification, as a chastening of the blinded and maimed Rochester, and as a liberation of him for the now independently wealthy Jane's humanizing project of reclamation. Jane, Sharpe avers, secures a "personal victory . . . when she reinvents domestic labor in terms of the human-making enterprise of colonialism. . . . Women's work may lack the grand vision of St. John's noble enterprise, but women do not forget, as he does, 'the feelings and claims of little people'" (38).¹⁵ Quakerish Jane's are the eyes which interpret the blind Rochester's prospect, providing him, in Chase's terms, a reformed balance of self. Bertha dies in 1834–1835, around the time the abolition of slavery and the introduction of apprenticeship were enacted in the British Caribbean, an event associated in England with the success and influence of Quaker (or Quakerish) antislavery campaigning. Jane's account of her and Rochester's marriage begins with a "quiet wedding" (474; ch. 38), and emphasizes, in stark contrast to Rochester's representation of his Jamaican marital home, the "perfect concord" (476; ch. 38) of companionable talk and "companionate love" (Spivak 244). Their merger is not, like Rochester's marriage with Bertha, modelled on contamination: Jane declares, alluding to Genesis 1.23, that she is "ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (476; ch. 38).

Recent critical analyses of "colonialism as the discursive field in which Jane's struggle for self-determination takes place" and of "the relationship between feminism and impe-

rialism" in *Jane Eyre* (Sharpe 29) have been based on insufficiently historical understandings of the racial formation of the British empire. Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (55). In the racial formation of the British empire whiteness was not a homogenous category. There were hierarchies within whiteness, as well as hierarchies which placed various non-white peoples in relation to white peoples and to each other on civilizational scales, and indeed, as Alistair Bonnett shows, the category whiteness was mutable. He cites, for example, a textbook used in English schools, Lionel Lyde's *A Geography of Africa* (1899), into its fifth edition by 1914, in which the white peoples of Africa include "'Arabs and Abyssinians . . . Berbers and Tuaregs, Masi and Somalis'" (176). Meyer's and Plasa's subtle and carefully detailed readings of the literal and metaphoric registers of "race" in *Jane Eyre* are informed ultimately by a conceptual opposition of whiteness and blackness: Bertha Mason's difference in the English world of Thornfield Hall must entail her becoming black. Bonnett suggests that the scarcely questioned status of this kind of contemporary opposition "may be understood" as a product of the neocolonial diffusion of an American "'race relations' paradigm," "a highly dualistic vision of 'racial conflict' between 'Blacks' and 'Whites'" (176–77). Brontë engages with emerging ethnographic discourses about white Creole people, which chart a racial variation of whiteness based on susceptibility to moral degeneration and physical and intellectual adaptation to a tropical climate. European racial "science" from the late eighteenth century through to the twentieth "naturalized" and racialized the perceived difference of white Creoles from European physical and cultural norms of whiteness. In Brontë's invocation of these ethnographic discourses white Creole people are represented as morally inferior, degenerate in varying degree, rather than simply a "not-yet-human Other" (Spivak 247), and in need of reclamation by the soul-making and English character-building project of British imperialism. As Cora Kaplan argues, however, Brontë's endorsement of that project is qualified by her critical stance towards St. John Rivers's austerity and despotism: "The constant evocation of Rivers's whiteness becomes increasingly ambivalent, then fully critical . . . Whiteness as frigid adult phallicism represents an aberrant extremity of the human; Rivers calls his own 'cold, hard' ambition a 'human deformity'" (186). Brontë measures his "deformity," as she does Bertha Mason's and Richard Mason's shortcomings, in the domestic sphere. Kaplan notes St. John Rivers's "ability to terrorize, his incapacity for warm familial affection or deep love, and his repudiation of heterosexual desire" (186). Sharpe insists that the "sexed subject of Victorian England is also a racial identity" constituted through "a splitting in the domestic individual, a nonentity that constitutes itself as a totalizing image through colonial tropes of bondage and emancipation" (11). For her the "sexed" "racial" subject and "domestic individual" of Brontë's novel, however, is female. Richard Mason is scarcely mentioned in any of the readings of empire and colonialism in *Jane Eyre*, and consequently his functions in the novel are ignored. This oversight produces readings of Jane's representations of Rochester as a gendered, racialized subject focussed principally on Jane's metaphors of slavery and oriental despotism (Meyer, Plasa, Perera).

In the contrasts between Richard Mason and Edward Rochester, and Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre, Brontë invokes an imperial and racial demarcation of masculinity and femininity respectively, with the degeneracy of the Creole Masons being indicated by an effeminizing of Richard and a masculinizing of Bertha. Their characters are read for

readers of the novel largely through physical traits that encode them. The splitting of masculinity naturalizes imperial leadership of and guardianship over colonial and colonized peoples. Jane's sexual attraction to Rochester is amplified as she naturalizes the stereotypical colonial relation between him and Richard Mason, producing Rochester as superiorly masculine. Richard Mason and his story are largely silenced by Rochester, and to assert his sister's right in marriage and his family's stake in it he has recourse to the letter of the law, a stock mode of conservative colonial resistance to English authority. Brontë certainly does not suggest that Richard acts improperly. In relation to Quakerish, educated, and lower-middle-class individualist Jane, Bertha is a figure not of the rebel slave, as Meyer and Plasa argue, but of the ineducable despot, who creates domestic terror, unrest, potentially suicidal despair, and, in the larger body politic, open revolt. Sharpe argues against Spivak's suggestion that the "native female" (understood here, I note, as generically non-white) is excluded from a discourse of nineteenth-century feminist individualism (Spivak 245). Spivak's use of the term "native" is, as Peter Hulme observes, problematic in a Caribbean colonial context. Does she mean aboriginal or native-born? Creoles (white, coloured or negro) were by definition native-born (22). Sharpe contends that "Jane's appeal to the moral mission of colonialism for asserting her own autonomy [by inhabiting in imagination the part of the missionary] indicates a triangular relationship whereby English women's bid for domestic power passes through the racial hierarchy of colonialism. In short, the silent passivity of the Hindu woman [evoked in Jane's narrative as object of missionary effort] is the grounds for the speaking subject of feminist individualism" (55). The imperial voice-agency of both Jane and Rochester, who express their desires for freedom in gendered liberal terms, is also grounded in Bertha's loss of capacity for human speech and the silencing of Richard; they become objects of Jane's and Rochester's narration. Bertha, occasionally acting as Rochester's monitory double, is figured as a contaminant, rather than reformer, of Rochester's being, and of upper-class social morality. Brontë's careful dating of Rochester and Bertha's marriage through historical allusion to slave rebellions and the abolition of slavery suggests that she works to develop a historical allegory of British ruling-class masculine despotism and agency in the period, and the influence of degraded and degrading colonial femininity superseded by a purer English womanhood.

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NOTES

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1. Sypher rightly observes that Edwards adds "but little" to the "character" of the white Creole person (507) drawn by Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica* (1774), but by 1819 Edwards's account is far more frequently cited.

2. Don George Juan and Don Antonio de Ulloa also note the intellectual precociousness of white people in Spanish America:

The principal cause of the short duration of such promising beginnings, and of the indolent turn so often seen in these bright geniuses, is doubtless the want of proper objects for exercising their faculties, and the small hopes of being preferred to any post answerable to the pains they have taken. For as there is in this country neither army nor navy, and the civil employments very few, it is not at all surprising that the despair of making their fortunes, by this method, should damp their ardour for excelling in the sciences, and plunge them into idleness, the sure forerunner of vice; where they lose the use of their reason, and stifle those good principles which fired them when young and under proper subjection (34).

3. A telling indicator of the way nineteenth-century encyclopedia-makers cobbled together and indiscriminately blended sources is a sentence in the entry on CREOLE in the 9th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1875–1889): “The creole whites, owing to the enervating influence of the climate, are not a robust race, but exhibit an elegance of gait and a suppleness of joint that are rare among Europeans.”
4. “This is really a most uncomfortable house; the servants awkward and dirty, the children spoiled, and screaming the whole day. As for the ladies, they appear to me perfect viragos; they never speak but in the most imperious manner with their servants, and are constantly finding fault. West India houses are so thin, that one hears every word” (Nugent 107). She spent a day there “crying and reading” in her room (108). The “incessant noise of the children, not to mention the continual scolding of the servants” is, she writes, “the most distressing thing in the world” (110). Rochester complains of not having been able to “pass a single evening, nor even a single hour of the day” with Bertha in “comfort,” of perceiving he “should never have a quiet or settled household, because no servant would bear the continued outbreaks of her violent and unreasonable temper, or the vexations of her absurd, contradictory, exacting orders” (333; ch. 27). Later he mentions the “thin partitions of the West Indian house” through which he can hear the incarcerated Bertha’s “wolfish cries” (335; ch. 27). The Nugents stayed with the Roses a day after Maria visited Mason’s Hall, the home of a Mrs. Mason.
5. Atwood notes that “the generality of the English white women in the West Indies . . . are not so remarkable for that pleasing florid complexion, which is peculiar to the sex in England” (211). Juan and Ulloa attribute the “wan and livid complexions” of white people in Spanish America which would “make a stranger suspect they were just recovered from some terrible distemper” to “profuse perspiration” (42). By “distemper,” they mean illness.
6. Rochester’s frustration at Bertha’s conversation accords with Maria Nugent’s comment soon after her arrival in Jamaica: “Find a sad want of local matter, or, indeed, any subject of conversation” with the local ladies and gentlemen (Nugent 21).
7. My thinking about this issue has been informed by Sharpe’s examination of the ways in which Jane Eyre’s “voice-agency . . . is predicated on a national and racial splitting of femininity” (38). She contends that “the paradox of being an individual in the domestic sphere is resolved by defining the English woman in relation to other women instead of to men. In *Jane Eyre*, a domestic form of social agency is established through a national and racial splitting of femininity, with the creole woman serving as a figure of self-indulgence and the Oriental woman, of self-immolation” (47). Her use of the term “national,” however, to describe the contrast between Jane and Bertha is to my mind anachronistic.
8. Edwards comments on the “incontinency” of free women of “Colour.” “The fact” of young and attractive women of this class being “kept mistresses” of “White men of all ranks and conditions” is, he writes, “too notorious to be concealed or controverted; and I trust I have

too great an esteem for my fair readers, and too high a respect for myself, to stand forth the advocate of licentiousness and debauchery. . . . [N]o White man of decent appearance, unless urged by the temptation of a considerable fortune, will condescend to give his hand in marriage to a Mulatto! The very idea is shocking” (22).

9. Sally Shuttleworth pointed out that masturbation could also have constituted unchastity when I presented a shorter version of this essay as a paper at “The Victorians and Science,” Australasian Victorian Studies Association Conference, University of Adelaide, February 7–11, 1996.
10. This discourse is discussed lucidly by Zonana, Perera, and Michie.
11. See, for example, Alison 412–23. The attribution of the article is made in Houghton.
12. For details of Sam Sharpe’s rebellion and Baptist missionary influence see Balcan 55–65, and Black 105–08. My dating also suggests that St. John Rivers committed himself to missionary work in India in the wake of the Charter Act of 1833, “which explicitly set out the objective of Christianising and Anglicising India” (Turley 123).
13. Margaret Smith, incorrectly I think, identifies the charter as the “People’s Charter” of the Chartists, “published in May 1838” (490).
14. Gilbert and Gubar, by contrast, read Bertha as “Jane’s truest and darkest double” (360).
15. Sharpe’s quotation is from p. 366 of the Norton edition of *Jane Eyre*.

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