

The Two-Headed Monster in *Jane Eyre*: Anomalous Female Readership and Uncanny Intertextuality

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Keywords

monstrosity; deformity; abnormal literacy practices; fairy-tales; Gothic sites; imprisonment; self-discovery.

This paper approaches the manner in which Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a parentless avid reader, comes into contact with parodies of the patriarchal Victorian family, where monstrous male figures exercise authority over female members of the household – the strange child, the vulnerable outcast, the lunatic. To explore the textual and social tensions the figure of the female reader as a threatening force produced in the nineteenth century, this paper focuses on a sagacious heroine civilizing a bestial hero representative of the fairy-tale genre. Though certainly ahistorical, *Jane Eyre* subverts the fairy-tale game of submission and dominance, inviting contemporary readers to see her as a participant in the construction of social meanings and challenge conflicting assumptions around her seemingly dark double and physical inferiority. Touching as it does on female experience within domesticity, this study submits findings consistent with the idea that the home – the *locus* of Victorian well-being – can easily adjoin a horrific Gothic site of incarceration and terror, populated by male tyrants and colonized monsters. For *Jane Eyre* and other reading heroines confined to such places as symbolic prisons or intellectual hospitals, books turn out to subsume plentiful underlying supplies of vitality.

Introduction

Despite being a novel that starts with “no possibility” (Brontë, 1847: 7), *Jane Eyre* is infused with images of the woman reader seen as a malformed creature frittering away her life in trivial textual pleasures, a monstrous female character trapped inside the claustrophobic confines of the domestic home, the Victorians’ cornerstone of civilization; and fairy-tale references focusing on the development of the heroine, acquiring self-reliance in the process of taming a brutish man and growing fond of him. The very first sentence of the novel – “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day” (7) – prepares the reader for conflicting tensions between unpleasant outside forces and tranquil inner peregrinations, threatening impediments and soothing rescues, which generate and are generated out of psychological crises.

In the Victorian era, the solitude of women’s reading acts was troublesome and appalling on many fronts. Paintings and written texts from the nineteenth century are illustrative of the visual and literary ways in which women readers and their reading practices were seen and represented as marketed public offerings. The aim was two-fold: to reflect nostalgia for a glorified middle-class past and to discourage women from reading (particularly novels), seen as diabolical practices. Antoine Wiertz’s 1853 painting, *The Reader of Novels* captures a naked,

recumbent woman, holding a book above her head while others lie close by, and a mirror which prevents the male viewer's gaze, but positions her owner in boundless horizons of physical possibility. There is another, less visible detail lurking in the painting's background – a minuscule, devil-like face and a hand reaching for or perhaps, more plausibly, putting forth, seductively, one of the woman's tomes. The woman is alone, in a dark, secluded place, with curtains drawn to seal away any beam of light and possibility of mirror reflection – the implication being that the tranquil, hidden sanctuary of reading might allow monstrous forces to break into women's physical and mental nest.

Silently immersing in the pages of books meant, for the female reader, an intimately odd and atrocious relationship with the printed text. For modern readers, novels are, by definition, a whole body *rendez-vous*. Reading acts can use legs (to bounce them in excitement over characters' narrative milestones or to keep them crossed while hurrying through books at a sitting, for example), arms (fetching tales that submit one to one's imagination), hands, fingers, thumbs (to cling to favorite pages and search for answers to 'paranoid' questions in a Gilmanian way), mouths (to drop them open when surprised) and eyes (to scan pages while the readers' tongues hold still). Long before the nineteenth-century, reading out loud implied common reading efforts, intentional or not. In the nineteenth century, with silent reading, the reader was able to lay the foundations of an open, unconstrained (thus, abnormal) relationship with the text, which was no longer ventured into oral drills. As such, it could reside in the imagination, whether fully grasped or half-understood. The reader gained time to scrutinize longer passages at leisure and withdraw new, devilish messages from them. Under the watchful eyes of some dogmatists, silent reading raised anxieties about intemperate self-absorption, self-centeredness, day-dreaming induced by textual pleasure and, last but not least, the perils of *acedia* – the sin of idleness.

As if the insulting educational crumbs offered to young women (especially to provincial upper-middle-class and middle-class ladies, as working-class women were already enslaved to the contingencies of labor at home, at the shop or the factory and did not even dream of being the subject of the prevailing middle-class fascination with a domestic ideal) were not enough, opponents of women readers advanced a conviction consistent with the idea that women exhaust energy from their reproductive organs via brain work. This demolition of female reasoning faculties imperiling reproductive activity could easily be the subject of another study, given its enormous reverberation and ramification in fiction, medical studies, advice manuals, periodicals of the period and animal groom tales, as this paper will further demonstrate.

Anomalous female readership

Though women had taken great pains to demonstrate their abstract thinking abilities and to work unwaveringly, in the nineteenth-century, the virtually unanimous medical diagnosis that brain tension had critical repercussions on the female body – mutilated by treacherous reading forces – made a real difference to every careful parent who chose to impede their progeny from becoming dogmatic and presumptuous and, perhaps even more importantly, from letting their brain over-stimulation result in anemia, "stunted growth", hysteria, and in awful bodily conditions – being "more or less dwarfish specimens" and remaining "thin and scrawny" instead of transforming into the "rosy mother of a dozen healthy children" (Clouston, 1882: 38). The learned young woman granted access to a fair-sized book collection would inevitably be the subject of nervousness, characterized largely by "ungrounded fears", "deficient power of self-control", "over sensitiveness in all directions", of "the inflammation of

the brain” (40-2), eventual insanity and very great many repellent over-study symptoms. Unfortunately, such writers’ agonized plea for women’s salvation by preventing learning, postponing it or averting it altogether was uppermost even in the minds of twentieth-century biologists such as the Scottish Thomson and Geddes, as well, in their 1912 tract entitled *Problems of Sex*. Thomson and Geddes fiercely warn that women cramming over books “have highly developed brains” and their argument climaxes in a dreadful vision of women’s morbid love of learning that determines most of them to “die young” (Thomson & Geddes, 1912: 27). Their vocation, thus, like that of most contemporary emancipated women was “rather a temporal than a spiritual one” (27). The authors mockingly remind their readers to acknowledge the fact that “each [woman] carries her poisoned sting — no new and strange weapon, but part of the very organ of maternity, the ovipositor, the egg-placer, with which the queen lays each egg in its appointed cell” (27). Thus, reading’s poisonous effects are carried away generation after generation by such “queens”, imparting to the infant frailties and birth defects. It goes without saying that a woman’s entry into the workforce and higher education (conventionally male public spheres) incarnated a social and organic anomaly. In a host of social and ideological contexts that believed in the treatment of “nervous exhaustion” by disapproving all social activity, the most cited solution to the anomaly was the rest cure, which was not defied by a recalcitrant historical public, but remained endemic to nineteenth-century medical models.

Early Victorians’ ideas of human physiology often involved a hazy knowledge of biochemistry and endocrinology. The accepted parameters of the female body were fraught with the assumption that women were tinier, inner-oriented versions of men (that is, women were susceptible to internal stimuli rather than external). As their bodies were labelled as sealed, finite systems of energy, physical, mental and reproductive expenditure were considered to be in intense rivalry, hence the idea that female reproductive efficiency was put in jeopardy by intellectual toil. For this reason, too, there must have evolved the Victorian all too good remedy for any predicament – rest. Towards the end of the century, a new understanding of biology began to hold allure, paving the way to new technological developments (specialized surgical instruments and diagnosis techniques) and alternative therapies. A sought-after practice was that of phrenology, which insisted on the recognition of temperamental features (such as anger and lust) guided by lumps and bumps on an individual’s skull, along with facial characteristics. Only in 1846 was the term ‘psychiatry’ introduced to stand for the medical care of the mentally-handicapped (with mental diseases treated as having hereditary roots). This inefficient treatment of both body and mind affected particularly female patients, whose feminine trait scarcity was tautologically viewed as a tie-in to madness provoked by over-exposure to intellectual study (or neurasthenia to the educated classes).

In the many non-literary writings about impressionable young women of the period – medical and evolutionary treatises on women’s transforming anatomy – the authors (in agreement with an entire “milieu” of the Victorian mind) seemed to concede that girls reaching the age of adolescence possessed inflamed sensations converting and corrupting any pristine reader into a monstrously fallen creature (and novels, in this context, stayed tied to desire and amorous intrigues and submitted its readers to the erotic). Around this dangerous textual experience there evolved both a rhetoric and a policy of surveillance. Parents had the duty to unmask this grotesque process and supervise their children, by keeping their subjectivity within bounds. Thus, the girl (of superior social station, as might be expected) vulnerable to excitement and over-identification with texts was kept away from distractions and forced a

taste for classical literature, history and some forms of poetry until she attained the presumed security of marriage.

Every page of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) – published under the male pseudonym of Currer Bell – burns with the question of literacy acquisition and the heroine's dangerous reading encounters with secular and religious texts, constantly pushing against the limits of patriarchy and traditional cultural values. Throughout her story, Jane engages in furtive, solitary, unconventional reading practices with the aristocracy of the mind presuming a concealed meaning in the didactic secrets of texts. Analogously, the modern reader experiences the female character's childhood flashbacks and subsequent use of education while participating, to some degree, in the secrecy of Brontë's parabolic narration. The modern reader becomes imaginatively involved in picturing the concealed reading corner of Gateshead Hall, taking an intermediate stance towards Brocklehurst's fiendish abuse or interacting with Helen Burns and Maria Temple intellectually.

Menacing white, middle-class monsters (the Reed children) break into Jane Eyre's mental nest, make goofy faces at her, stop her from reading and beat her. These budding problems flower as the novel goes on. Reverend Brocklehurst – described as a “black pillar” (Brontë, 1847: 31), a totem pole rather than a human creature, constantly censors Jane's reading. His monopoly on Bible interpretation will be, unfortunately, repeated time and again during Jane's stay at Lowood. The different responses to sacred texts in *Jane Eyre*, however, echo the significance of the Bible, in the nineteenth-century (although not restricted to this period), as the most powerful catalyst to reading in Protestant Europe and America. A particularly repugnant effect is achieved by yet another member of the clergy, St. John Rivers, who is a “cold cumbrous column” (389), enforcing his strict doctrinal views on Jane's reading of the Bible. The novel, however, through innovative novelistic manipulations, manages to assert Jane's religious freedom and self-determining nature in the denouement. The biblical orientation towards “the *eschaton*, or end times, is reversed”, while the narrative and imagery of the Eden myth takes on an “altered significance” (Jenkins, 1993: 71-72). The marriage that concludes the novel is depicted as a relationship of equality (by this point, the protagonist is financially independent via inherited wealth).

Jane, imprisoned as a child in the Red Room, is reminiscent, in many ways, of Anne Radcliffe's Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Like Emily, Jane experiences terror and thinks “that if Mr. Reed had been alive he would have treated [her] kindly” (16) while a beam of light ushers in “some coming vision from another world” (17), echoing in the narrative another ghostly apparition – the incarcerated Bertha. The “monster” in the attic, Bertha Antoinetta Mason, is, at first sight, the Caribbean figure whose destructive violence, sexual passion run riot, psychological primitiveness and lack of mercy and fear sabotage the courtship plot in *Jane Eyre*. Monsters are, in fact, “creatures who scare because they look different, wrong, non-human” (Moers, 1976: 101) and give “visual form to the fear of self (107). The heroine, a pure young woman without family or social status, is shown to be trapped in a hostile environment, which will later bring to the surface the mystery of the dark, Byronic hero Rochester married to a lunatic Jamaican wife, evil and violent, lascivious and inchoative, identified by critics as Jane's “truest and darkest double” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 360), who dies a violent death which figuratively and literally allows Jane and Rochester to reunite in a happy (yet ambivalent) ending. Before returning Jane to Rochester, Brontë shows the heroine departing from Thornfield Hall, “before she too becomes helplessly, hopelessly mad” (Modleski, 1990: 73), as Gothic heroines often do to repudiate the paranoid process, and

switching from submission to aggression. Aggression and estrangement, however, to a compliant individual like Jane, indicate that “human relationships are disturbed” and make her “verge on the ascetic” (Horney, 1945: 74-84). The way the novel achieves closure does not confirm the idea that the relationship between men and women (in the novel and, by extension, in the larger context of the nineteenth century) has ceased to be troublesome.

Uncanny intertextuality

The pictorial prelude to the novel’s pre-adolescent reading experience, filled with solitary birds haunting “forlorn regions of dreary space” (Brontë, 1847: 8), rocky promontories, marine phantoms and fiends is graphically introduced by the book-to-window motif. The non-linear plot of *Jane Eyre* is jump-started by the non-fiction work of Thomas Bewick, *A History of the British Birds* (1797, 1804), sinking and transposing the modern reader further and further into the past. Jane transmogrifies into a confident make-believe player in a vignette world retaining unconventional Edenic features, brimmed with death-white realms, bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia, Spitzbergen, Nova Zembla, Iceland and Greenland, rocks found unescorted in a sea of billow and spray and unaccompanied disintegrated boats abandoned on a secluded shore, in forms that the child gradually learns to shed light on and control. There are two common threads reminiscent of Jane’s real experience running along the adopted non-fictional text: (1) secrecy and concealment and (2) the unavoidable danger lurking in the background that besets the reader. As a poverty-stricken orphan living in the house of her malicious and well-to-do relatives, Jane Eyre is a solitary character. The cruelly monstrous Reed children and Aunt Reed regard little Jane – who ought to know better than to “rummage [their] book-shelves” (Brontë, 1847: 11) – with patronizing contempt, echoing the long line of critics constantly assaulting Victorian women’s minds for daring to consult a father or a relative’s library, the British Museum, the lending library or a room of one’s own as a site of agency from where one prizes out intellectual power.

For Jane, reading is extended beyond childhood play (although childhood play in Freudian terms does allow Jane to indulge in fostering fantasies enabling her to build up a credible imaginary world and derive pleasure from it), presenting the case for a *rite of passage* – in contrast to tribal rituals – that is private rather than public, discrete rather than communal, and carried out in secrecy, without the knowledge or consent of the Reeds, camouflaged by the curtained alcove where Jane retreats to examine the pictorial charm of her book. In conformity with Arnold van Gennep’s view of the loss of childhood and transgression into a state of undifferentiation in his *The Rites of Passage*, Jane’s “negative rite” (1960: 8) is set into motion by John Reed and it entails violence (most rites of passage do, as Arnold van Gennep explains, when the child is separated from society and deprived of his name, his family or his ancestral history) exerted by someone in a position of power (e.g., a demon, a deity, a group of jinn) who intervenes to carry on the ritual. In this regard, Jane’s ominous rite of passage is, at its heart, both a rite of separation and one of transition – a separation from her well-to-do kin and a transition into forced maturity of thought.

As in Arnold’s van Gennep’s stories of children terrifyingly secluded from society and constrained to reside in a far-out group where anonymity and cruelty prevail, Jane is forced to suffer once more at the hands of Rev. Brocklehurst, at Lowood, and to be on the move, from that moment on, continuously. Along the way, she is also comforted, however, by guardian, nurturing figures – Bessie, Miss Temple and Helen Burns. For the reading character, this ritual transaction begins with a sharp confiscation of personal identity brought about from

orphanhood and access to an adoptive family. She clandestinely turns to books and reading returns to her what she had lost during the enforced rites of separation and transition: in books, she hunts for her roots, family history, and vocation.

In the first chapter of the book, another literary allusion splits the imaginary world of Jane Eyre into figures of absolute good and evil, in a Manichaean manner – Goldsmith’s *History of Rome* (one of the common titles that could be found in a young Victorian’s library, along with moral tales meant for the edification of children). Little Jane uses books as a prop for solitude. They represent the visceral energy governing Jane’s emotional economy. Domestic tyrants disguised as family members make books their proxy for those under their control. Jane dreads the intrusion of such outsiders in her secluded place. These opening pages of Brontë’s novel form the picture of a strong-willed young reader, fighting monsters in the family library, ruthlessly honest in her unsuppressed objection of injustice, with the intellectual vigor of an adult. Wounded, she faces John Reed: “You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!” (1847: 11). If one could equate words to weapons and ammunition, little Jane would undoubtedly win the battle with John Reed. Unlike Bessie’s tales and ballads, Goldsmith’s *History of Rome* (1774) is, in substance, a book explicitly concerned with manliness. Goldsmith’s ancient world, with its grandeur and solemnity, involving Nero and Caligula, two mad emperors commonly known for their barbarism, captivates the young Jane Eyre, who is definitely not a typical reader for her age. The patriarchal John Reed is firm about the book being his, and shows no remorse for hurling it at Jane, stonewalling her attempts at a logic response. The Reeds’ book stands here for masculine weaponry, because it encloses within its pages historical and policy-making knowledge conventionally made available to a male-readership. From Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*, Jane gleanes knowledge about male acts of despotism intended for vulnerable, lower reaches (women, children, the impoverished).

The Reeds are described as discriminatory and unreasonable, and, as many critics have suggested, the adoptive family is, in many ways, a caricature of the Victorian family in which the male exercises domineering control over his passive, vulnerable feme covert. She stands in sharp opposition to the Reeds even by means of her patronymic, for “*Eyre* is a curious riddle-like name, suggesting multiple meanings” (Peterson, 1944: 86). Indeed, on phonetic grounds, *Eyre* jogs the attentive reader’s memory and recalls lexical items such as *air* (prompting one to take into account Jane’s apparent immateriality), *eerie* (hinting to Jane’s awareness of herself and her surroundings as foreign, unfamiliar) or even *beir* (a sarcastic remark about her lack of heritage) and *ire* (for the exasperation and indignation that have reached a boiling point and Jane is no longer withholding them). On etymological grounds, *Eyre* sparks other meaningful connections to *journey* (as derived from the Old French verb *erre*), suggesting that Jane is a forlorn nomad, *eyrie* as a variant of *aerie* (the bird nest of big bird, with the logic implication, again, of vagrancy) and *eyra* (which also designates a “wild cat” (87)), which is the appellation John Reed uses at the very start of Chapter 2 when Jane began to challenge his authority: “Hold her arms, Miss Abbot: she’s like a mad cat” (Brontë, 1847: 12).

In order to compensate for the regulations of the censorship exerted on her, Jane finds a way to evade the censor while playing by the censor’s rule. Authoritarian political systems usually use provocation – just as John Reed did – to determine the oppressed nonconformists to manifest themselves plainly. Books in the Victorian age were, as the previous section showed, a primary tool in the elaboration, gendering, and policing of bourgeois subjectivity. In the informing context of the Jane Eyre versus John Reed scene, it is obvious why novels and novel-reading were so often viewed as prompting subversive action on the part of the reader

sensitive to nuances of veiled secrecy and concealment of meanings. Virtually all classic texts, from Homer to Joyce, embed such threatening secrecy excluding contentious outsiders and sharing didactic secrets to neophytes. Another powerful implication of the textual concealment behind which rests the ultimate buried truth of experience is self-instruction for a reader like Jane. All the textual enigmas and *mises en abyme* Jane immerses herself in (some left embedded in the matrix of intertexts, some eerily scratching the surface and some never fully resolved) are an extraordinary *tour de force* – they provide in her the need to figure out what is going on structurally in a piece of writing and, thus, they ensure reading as the inner autobiography of the female character. Perhaps just as importantly, notions of the uncanny, along with furtive reading, secrecy, pleasure and enigma come very close to each other and enable Jane to recognize the hidden meaning of other texts read in adulthood.

Reading and rereading also take place off-stage, when Jane temporarily shies away from the reader's attention:

Bessie asked if I would have a book – the word book acted as a transient stimulus and I begged her to fetch Gulliver's Travels from the library. This book I had again and again perused with delight; I considered it a narrative of facts, and discovered in it a vein of interest deeper than what I found in fairy tale: for as to the elves, having sought them in vain. (...) I had at length made up my mind to the sad truth, that they were all gone out of England to some savage country (...) whereas Lilliput and Brobdingnag being, in my creed, solid parts of the earth's surface, I doubted not that I might one day, by taking a long voyage, see with my own eyes the little fields, houses, and trees, the diminutive people, the tiny cows, sheep, and birds of the one realm; and (...) the towerlike men and women, on the other. (21)

When the mature Jane returns to Gateshead at Aunt Reed's deathbed, she immediately recognizes the books which have witnessed her despair as a child – Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and the collection of folk tales *The Arabian Nights*, read after she first met Mr. Brocklehurst. These volumes had, in fact, immortalized her terror in the Red Room. *Gulliver's Travels* – a tale seen as a narrative of facts, comprising non-human creatures (pigmy, giants, and chattering horses) – seems a healthy choice for a ten-year-old's unsophisticated literary sensibility. The formerly delightful imaginary world of Lilliput and Brobdingnag has now, in retrospective, become horrendous to the grown-up Jane. Even to the young female character, whose reader-response was inevitably shaped by her physical and social space, Gulliver seemed “a most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous units” (21). Most children of her age regard Gulliver as a gleeful adventurer. Not Jane, however. She is able to see both good and evil in adventure stories, thus revealing her active reading processes from an early age. The incoherent world where Gulliver lands is, by extension, Jane's own inhospitable environment. Critics have pointed to Jane's propensity – as an orphan – towards identifying herself with the miniature Lilliputians as a reflection of her own feelings of diminution and hostile figures in her life (Brocklehurst, Mrs. Reed) – “looming adult persecutors” (Rowe, 1983: 74) – with the imposing Brobdingnagian giants. While the fearsome Brocklehurst is looking down on Jane, his physical traits borrow the features of the threatening wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, one of the popular tales girls of the period were familiar with (in fact, Jane's early literary sensibility was largely tutored by Bessie's folktales, including those hinted at later, Thornfield-related pointers to *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow-Drop*, *The Blue-Bird*, recounting a heroine's

attempt to escape danger and evil creatures). Jane's myopic description of Mr. Brocklehurst is revelatory in this regard: "What a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! what a great nose! and what a mouth! and what large prominent teeth!" (Brontë, 1847: 32). Size distortion, here, subsumes intertextual references to fairy tales into Jane's rhetoric.

For a broadly curious and open-minded reader like Jane Eyre, romances can be put under the weight of critical scrutiny and interpreted using the satirist's tool, while religious literature may be patterned after secular stories. The fairy-tale motifs scattered across the novel – there is a cruel stepmother as in *Cinderella* or *Snow-Dröpp* and stepsisters with spoon-fed personalities, Thornfield Hall is associated with Bluebeard's castle, the bedsteads Jane discovers upon arrival at Thornfield seem to be a century-old, Rochester is in the secret possession of a shadowy, undisclosed room hiding a "monster", Rochester takes up the role of the ugly Beast, while Jane is his Beauty – are shifted and reinterpreted to show that many of their romance-charged plots subsume painful, cynical realities which cannot be ignored. Jane Eyre ventures into a constant reworking of literary motifs, culminating with the idea that the Victorians should rethink nouveau riches-inspired educational paradigms (the drawbacks of the curriculum are explicitly made available by Georgiana Reed who indulges in amorous intrigues and is educated for the marriage market, Eliza Reed whose daily routine is extracted from the conduct books of the age and Blanche Ingram, educated according to the requirements of the fashionable curriculum, standing in sharp contrast to the genuine gentlewoman, Jane. Rather than expecting childhood readings and fairy-tale plots to build a replica in her life, Jane Eyre lets their imaginative playfulness rest between what has been read and what remains to be read.

Viewing *Jane Eyre* through the tenebrous lens of animal groom tales is especially useful in analyzing the female protagonist's transformation from a suffering, "uncongenial alien", an "interloper not of [the Reed's] race" (16) into the mature wife who achieves a "perfect concord" with her blind husband at the end of the novel. Most animal groom tales share some common denominators – the heroine is forced to live with a dreary animal or a beastly man in a gloomy castle (or another darkly archaic setting reminiscent of Thornfield Hall). The heroine progressively learns to love the monster and acknowledges she is besotted with him after an eventual disentanglement proves devastating for one of them. It is usually the heroine's good nature and devotion that trigger a change for the better in the animal groom, with the usual implication that the young female's perception of the beast has changed, not the beast *per se*. Jane takes on the challenge of transforming the "beast" into a human: "It is time some one undertook to *rehumanise* you, ... for I see you are being metamorphosed into a lion, or something of that sort" (432, my emphasis). The Beast of the animal groom tale asks Beauty – "tell me, do not you think me very ugly?" (Opie & Opie, 1974: 144). Like the Beast, Rochester interrogates Jane, "Am I hideous, Jane?". Jane's riposte reads "Very, sir: you always were, you know" (434), recalling Beauty's response - she does not deny his deformity though she acknowledges his good nature. Such aspects parallel important plot developments in *Jane Eyre* and the changing nature of the relationship between Jane Eyre (civilizing the seemingly repugnant "beast") and the tamed Edward Rochester (winning the heroine's heart), forced to confront his own odiousness, as Jane acquires psychological and emotional maturity. Bruno Bettelheim explains, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, that in *Beauty and the Beast*, "it is not just the growth of Beauty's love for the Beast, or even her transferring her love for her father to the Beast" which is at the core of the tale, but "her own growth in the process" (Bettelheim, 1976: 308), thus confirming Jane's journey towards selfhood, which is hardly surprising in an "autobiographical" novel, as indicated by the "mediator" in *Jane Eyre*, Currer Bell, ready to

vouch for the authenticity of the printed text presented to the public. The same human/non-human clash is made available by another intertext, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which traces the protagonist's travel from one place of imprisonment to another. Like Jane at Ferndean, Gulliver completes the last stage of his journey when he meets the Yahoos (living in the topsyturvy land of civilized and wise horses, the Huyhnhnms), repellent brutes used as work animals. Gulliver soon starts to grow fond of the Huyhnhnms and hesitant concerning the men's flaws.

Conclusions

How could Victorian critics understand the new *modus legendi* of fictional young readers such as Jane Eyre, who takes up reading as a solitary, banned activity, when their ancestors had only been familiar with few collectively readable texts, such as the Bible? Jane Eyre's reading acts include a visceral relationship with the book that is more profound and sensitive to concealed meanings than in traditional, men-dominated approaches to reading, which breed monsters. The book is constantly handled, tousled, bent, forced in changing directions and carried along with the reader in *privacy* – privacy as the origin of, I dare say, creative imagination. It is this creative imagination, which hurls defiance at monsters in human form – the monster of forbidden education and freedom of thought (embodied by the Reeds, Brocklehurst and St. John Rivers), the monster of passion (Bertha) and the monster of irresistible temptation (Rochester). The reader's privacy carries the main implication that the intimacy between *secret* reading and texts read *privately* as a form of social reticence can always be disclosed, made public, grotesquely divulged, guessed or freely discovered by those whom it is intended to leave behind. The global conclusion I could draw, after unveiling the monstrous patterns brought about by literacy practices and themes and meanings from animal groom tales in *Jane Eyre* is that, when female characters are the “muted” group, constantly associated with atrocity and deformity, they find it difficult to explore and withdraw from texts their genuine needs and sensibilities. The previous sections have shown, however, the female protagonist passing “the major test of reading” – humanizing the “Beast”, questioning conventional beliefs and, ultimately, deciding how and with whom to spend her life.

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