

10-31-2023

Gothic Fairy-Tale Feminism: The Rise of Eyre/'Error'

Aileen M. Farrar

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/hcas_dhp_facarticles

 Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons



Article

Gothic Fairy-Tale Feminism: The Rise of Eyre/‘Error’

Aileen Miyuki Farrar

Department of Humanities & Politics, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33328, USA; afarrar@nova.edu

Abstract: The ways Gothic fairy tales and fairy-tale feminism interact are not always clear. An undercurrent of feminist studies of fairy tales is fueled by the 1970s Lurie-Lieberman debate, which focused on the question of whether fairy tales liberate or repress women. Meanwhile, critics such as Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Lucie Armitt have offered studies of the interplay between Gothic horror and fairy tales. However, these studies have limits, often emphasizing the violence, self-mutilation, and cannibalism of women, like those in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s versions of “Cinderella” and “Snow White”. This paper argues that “Rapunzel” (1812) is key for understanding the Gothic and feminist discourses of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Firstly, this paper argues that a self-reflexive and self-productive relationship between subjectivity and desire shapes and disrupts the Gothic, fairy-tale, and feminist discourses of *Jane Eyre*, resulting in a specular feminine-I that has inspired pluralistic readings of the text. Secondly, an analysis of the Rapunzelian metaphors of ‘wicked’ hunger and ideological towers unmasks the double consciousness that not only fetters feminine subjectivity but delimits the domestic structures of marriage and home. Multiplying the ways nineteenth-century Gothicism, fairy tales, and feminism may interact, Brontë’s specular study of feminine desire makes way for a productive and agential feminine speaking-I.

Keywords: Female Gothic; fairy tale; feminist criticism; women’s literature; Victorian; nineteenth-century gender; nineteenth-century literature; gender studies; bildungsroman; desire



Citation: Farrar, Aileen Miyuki. 2023. Gothic Fairy-Tale Feminism: The Rise of Eyre/‘Error’. *Literature* 3: 430–445. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature3040029>

Academic Editors: Laura Tosi and Alessandro Cabiati

Received: 7 May 2023

Revised: 21 September 2023

Accepted: 22 October 2023

Published: 31 October 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In the past half-century, studies of Gothic fairy tales have accelerated alongside studies of fairy tales and feminism, but the ways these fields may coincide are not always explicit. A seminal undercurrent in feminist studies of fairy tales is fueled by the 1970s Lurie-Lieberman debate, which focused on the question of whether fairy tales liberate or repress imaginings of women’s roles in society and culture.¹ Meanwhile, critics such as Lorna Piatti-Farnell study the intersection of Gothic horror and fairy tales within a largely psychological or psychoanalytical framework, as representations of cultural desires and fears. As Lucie Armitt explains, feminism and psychoanalysis are common undercurrents in studies of the Gothic fairy tale (Armitt 1998, p. 269). However, these implications thus far have had limits, often emphasizing the violence, abuse, self-mutilation, and cannibalism of women, such as those which critics frequently observe in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s versions of “Cinderella” and “Snow White”.

How Gothic horror functions in a fairy tale for and about women is more complex than an initial glance can reveal. Much debate surrounds the use of fairy tales in the Female Gothic narrative of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) (Brontë 2006a). In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar set the stage when they proposed that *Jane Eyre* is fundamentally a Cinderella story (pp. 347–55). Since then, critics including Micael Clarke, Elizabeth Imlay, Phyllis Ralph, Jessica Campbell, Heta Pyrhönen, and Abigail Heiniger have drawn additional valuable connections to tales including “Little Red Riding Hood”, “Beauty and the Beast”, “Bluebeard”, and *Arabian Nights* (Clarke 2000, pp. 696–97; Imlay 1989, p. 69; Ralph 1989, pp. 92–112; Campbell 2016, p. 234; Pyrhönen 2010, pp. 21–64; Heiniger 2016, pp. 4–5). This intertextual weave and plurality of voices is

important to a feminist reading of the novel. However, despite this critical work on the text, the ending of *Jane Eyre* remains baffling for many contemporary scholars, often leaving readers wondering, as Clarke says, “what happened to the woman who once so stirringly declared women’s desires for independence, replaced by a Jane now apparently living only for [the blind and disfigured] Rochester” (Clarke 2000, p. 695).

This paper argues that “Rapunzel” (1812) is a key intertextual foundation for understanding the Gothic and feminist discourses of *Jane Eyre*, particularly its confounding conclusion. Firstly, this paper argues that a self-reflexive and self-productive relationship between subjectivity and desire shapes and disrupts the Gothic, fairy-tale, and feminist discourses of *Jane Eyre*, resulting in a specular feminine-I that has inspired pluralistic readings of the text. Secondly, an analysis of the Rapunzelian metaphors of ‘wicked’ hunger and ideological towers unmasks the double consciousness that not only fetters feminine subjectivity but delimits the domestic structures of marriage and home. Multiplying the ways nineteenth-century Gothicism, fairy tales, and feminism may interact, Brontë’s specular study of feminine desire makes way for a productive and agential feminine speaking-I.

2. The Desire of a Woman

Jane Eyre sits in a nest of its own thorns. Its intersection of the Gothic, fairy tale, and domestic fiction genres defies stable examination. Original audiences vacillated between celebrating its refreshing passion and condemning it for a feverish violence that seemed to suggest Jacobinism and Chartism (Stoneman 1996, pp. 7–8). Meanwhile, recent criticism remains discomfited by the novel’s gentle ending. Propelled to the end by female fury then concluding in sentiment, the novel inspires criticisms asking whether Jane’s journey is ultimately an awakening or castration (Imlay 1989, p. 153; DeLamotte 1990, p. 226; Clarke 2000, p. 696). These conflicts arise from nineteenth-century Gordian articulations of women’s desire.

Desire is not restricted to feminine subjectivity, but as greater calls for objectivity and impartiality appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as bases for a new ethical ideal, stronger associations likewise emerged between desire and feminine subjectivity as means of defining the objective against a negative. George Levine introduces these ideas in his groundbreaking work, *Dying to Know* (Levine 2002). In his examination of nineteenth-century autobiographies and novels, he observes that where one is “committed to an ideal of disinterest” and “detachment from bodily and personal desire”, “Self-effacement is epistemologically heroic” (p. 25). While this, at first, suggests a general conflict between desire and objectivity, he later focuses on what this means for women’s narratives, “not least those of Charlotte Brontë”: “Self-abnegation and self-denial are not then options, as they seem to be for men, but virtually the only mode of self-affirmation available [for women]” (p. 130). Subjectivity as an epistemology of interiority suggests limits upon self-knowledge. Levine thus observes that bodies that have been limited, or historically dispossessed of property and privilege, are more strictly associated with experiences of absence and desire.

The self-reflexive and self-productive relationship between subjectivity and desire is an enduring element of nineteenth-century scholarship. In his recent work, *Bad Logic: Reasoning about Desire in the Victorian Novel* (Wright 2018), Daniel Wright argues that conceptions of the modern self as a desiring subjectivity are fundamentally tautological. He begins with the quote, “I am what I am”, which he borrows from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as a representative phrase of Victorian conviction, especially in novels scrutinizing desire. Wright identifies an insistence “upon desire as the foundation for absolute self-identity in place of desire as the occasion for a profound dislocation of the self”, the phrase “I am what I am” being a *mise-en-abyme* like Dorian’s supernatural reflection in the portrait (Wright 2018, p. 4). When Wright turns his attention to *Jane Eyre*, it is to argue that the novel explores making intelligible even those “disorders of [feminine] desire” that articulate that which is too terrifying, confusing, and disruptive for the order of society, and he stresses the paradoxical point that *Jane Eyre* accomplishes this without conceding

to negative definitions of self (Wright 2018, p. 55). That is, the “I” is not the ideal “not-I” (Wright 2018, p. 37). Instead, the “I” simply is “I”. Jane is Jane.

Nancy Armstrong expands upon Levine’s and Wright’s observations about desire in the context of women’s narratives. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Armstrong asserts, like Levine, that “Men [during the eighteenth century] made subjectivity a female domain”, but she stresses that the tautology yoking desire and feminine subjectivity together is not necessarily restrictive (Armstrong 1990, p. 4). On the contrary, it is productive. She shows how the woman of domestic fiction, far from being a mere passive object of desire, possesses the power to “withhold or give” and thus has agential control over her individuation (p. 118). On *Jane Eyre*, Armstrong reiterates that “Such self-reflexivity [between gender and power] always identifies the female as the one with the power to determine the meaning of words and things” (p. 205). Her argument stresses the pivotal place of desire once again as a *mise-en-abyme* in narratives of feminine subjectivity that may manifest itself not just in utterances within the novel but between novels, helping to cause the plural interpretations of *Jane Eyre* to proliferate.

This focus on desire and subjectivity may seem limited by Armstrong’s and Wright’s special interests in the rise of the novel, but their questions are particularly relevant for examinations of Gothic fairy-tale feminism as well. The doubly specular nature of desire sets a foundation for the intersection of these elements. As many have noted, and as will be elucidated below, the mirror is an enduring metaphor for feminist scholars investigating questions of female identity in the contexts of both fairy tales and the Female Gothic, as it reflects desires not only of the self-other and self-society binaries but does so with a multiplicity that has come to be identified with the expansive diversity of feminist scholarship (Haase 2004, p. 25; Milbank 1998, p. 56). Anchoring many of these intersections is a broad theme of female education. Narratives of the Female Gothic and fairy-tale feminism are able to coincide in plots emphasizing women’s development and maturation, particularly pursuits of knowledge in sexual relations as well as in edification (Ralph 1989, p. 38; DeLamotte 1990, p. 49).

One of the more evident outgrowths of these connections may be the use of horror to educate. Piatti-Farnell explains that the Grimms, in particular, “penned a variety of tales [including “Cinderella” and “Snow White”] where bodily violence constructs the apogee of the educational lesson” (Piatti-Farnell 2018, p. 96). In fact, Gothic fairy-tale plots have the capacity to carry dual and contradictory functions, particularly to instruct and yet subvert, or to both uphold and disrupt social order. Thus, critics have argued that texts of the Female Gothic and fairy-tale feminism are not just instructive for the women inside each narrative but for the women reading them. According to Alison Milbank, the Female Gothic (including works like Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794; Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, 1818; and Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, 1818) is indispensable as a “socially acceptable” means of symbolic expression for women (Milbank 1998, p. 54). Meanwhile, Haase argues that fairy tales, especially those of the Grimms, have been broadly integral as “tools of socialization”, or in writing and unwriting dominant cultural archetypes and myths of gender (Haase 2004, p. 10). This paper explores how the Female Gothic and fairy-tale feminism may coincide to articulate subliminally that which is otherwise forbidden to say—that is, to see beneath (Gothic) as well as beyond (faery) the pretenses of social reality—and in such a way reveal that some real horrors are lurking in reality.

The use of fictional horror to educate in reverse the painful and distressing truths of reality is fundamental in Brontë’s novel. Jane uses stories—from illustrated books like Thomas Bewick’s *History of British Birds* (1797) to fantastic tales including Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and *Arabian Nights*—to escape from her own reality and in turn expose audiences to the horrors of actuality. Reading stories allows Jane to “fear [...] nothing but interruption” (p. 11). This fear belies some complex contexts. First, while the horrors of her reality are framed as Gothic—painted as an anxiety that threatens to disrupt her fantasies—the abuses Jane describes are more real than imagined. As many have noted, the corruption Jane describes at Lowood was informed by Brontë’s own experiences at

Cowan Bridge (Davies 2006, p. 548). Secondly, as a fictive autobiography specially shaded by the imagery of Gothicism and fairy tales, the novel risks invalidating these disruptive truths as mere devices of horrifying fantasy. These are important points because they call attention to Brontë's own concern with fictive constructs that define conventions and mores of Victorian society. She found the phantoms not of fiction but of reality most horrifying: "Men too often confound [vice and virtue]; they should not be confounded: appearance should not be mistaken for truth" (Brontë 2006b, p. 6). Combatting shadows with shadows, the Gothic and faery are Brontë's apt modes for critiquing social ideologies, "to scrutinize and expose, to rase the gilding and show base metal under it, to penetrate the sepulchre and reveal charnel relics" (Brontë 2006b, p. 6). With disruptive imagery, Brontë aims to unmask false idols and idealities.

Jane Eyre may not only instruct but mortify audiences through its reflexive images of self-denial. The novel challenges ideas of social reality with reflections upon the horrors that produce and are produced by feminine subjectivity. Jane is pursued by a constant threat of ontological annihilation and, in turn, spends much time pursuing an elusive sense of self. Throughout the novel, the question that recurs most is the one of her name, as the question of her name reflects her struggles with societal and individual constructs of self: "your name is Jane, is it not?"; "Your name, little girl?"; "Is there a little girl called Jane Eyre here?"; "Is your name Eyre, Miss?"; "And, Mademoiselle—What is your name?"; "*il m'a demandé le nom de ma gouvernante*" ("he asked me the name of my governess"); "In the name of all the elves in Christendom, is that Jane Eyre?"; "Is this Jane Eyre? [...] Are you Jane Eyre?"; "Who is that? [...] 'It is I' [...] 'Who—I [...] why, you are like Jane Eyre!"; "And this is Jane Eyre?"; "It is Jane Eyre, sir.' 'Soon to be Jane Rochester'; "not I, but one Jane Rochester"; "My name is Jane Elliott"; "Your real name you will not give?"; "Your name is Jane Eyre?"; "*Who is it? What is it? Who speaks? [...] Is it Jane? [...] I am Jane Eyre*" (pp. 27, 39, 51, 112, 120, 140, 174, 266, 273–74, 282, 298, 317, 387, 400, 443, 500). These questions outline Jane's persistent struggle for individuation. When she is most smitten and inauthentic with herself, she delights in the moniker, "Jane Rochester", or J.R. conceding her station as a 'junior', or a miniature of (and doll dressed by) the man she loves. When she is more certain of herself, even as she adopts an alias and flees Rochester seeking sanctuary in secrecy, she remains "J.E". or *je*, the French first-person pronoun, which retains a necessary "scepticism" that Jane associates with the French (p. 309). This skeptical *je*, in refusing to identify who stands behind the "I", belies the shadowy doppelgänger of an otherwise pursued sense of self.

That is, Jane's experiences voice a deep dimension of the socio-political Woman Question, which frames these expressions of specular feminine subjectivity. The Woman Question has a Gothic history, evolving from the medieval *querelle des femmes*. Joan Kelly instructively points to the longevity of this "particular crisis of consciousness" by tracing this "distinctively female anguish" to those like Christine de Pisan and her efforts to lift the "veil of cultural authority" that, she felt, blinded women to the validity of their experiences and expressions (Kelly 1982, pp. 13–14). This long history stresses the struggle to differentiate feminine desire from a hegemonic archetype of women. The phrase "Woman Question", always articulated with the singular "woman", signals this process of totalization, and when unpacked, the question may be more clearly understood as conflating at least two polar perspectives: "Who is the Desirable Woman?" (speaking to socio-political conventions) and "What do I want?" (speaking to the idiosyncrasies of an individual). The Woman Question—more simply, "Who is Woman", when uttered generally, or "Who am I", when uttered by an individual—assumes a conjoined question that effaces the "I" of an individual woman to present instead a Desirable Woman typified by self-abnegation: "What do I/society want".

3. Rapunzelian Hunger and Towers

While the term "Gothic fairy-tale feminism" is not common, critics in the last two decades have been analyzing other texts known for their interweaving of Gothic, fairy-tale,

and gender elements, like Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Following in the footsteps of Gilbert and Gubar, critics of James and Braddon have applied readings of "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard" to generate new perspectives of these texts; these texts also make explicit reference to these fairy tales. Directed by James to the tales in his preface, Marcus Klein turns to "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard" for explanations of the "sexual innuendo" and "horror" in *The Turn of the Screw* (Klein 2007, pp. 599–600). Similarly, focusing on references to "Cinderella" in *Lady Audley's Secret*, Rebecca Kling challenges the novel's notions of female authenticity and performativity (Kling 2017, p. 574). The notoriety of these fairy tales makes them more likely sources for intertextual analysis as well, even when allusions are not explicit. In revisiting Braddon's novel, Gero Bauer calls upon the trope of the Bluebeard closet (which is not mentioned in the novel) to explore the anxieties of masculine identity and deadly secrets (Bauer 2016, p. 144).

In part, this paper aims to expand the scope of these kinds of studies by highlighting recurrent elements that may comprise a Gothic fairy-tale feminist approach when using "Rapunzel" in analyses of women's narratives. The story of Rapunzel offers two key metaphors that help to unpack anxious expressions of Victorian feminine subjectivity. As mentioned above, discussions of feminine subjectivity intersect with those of desire; the question "Who am I" often becomes entangled with "What do I want". At the same time, questions of desire are complicated by the absorption of individual identity by a socio-political one; "Who am I" and "What do I want" are subsumed by the questions "Who is the Desirable Woman" and "What are the hegemonic conventions". Reifying the idiosyncratic desires of women in "Rapunzel" is the mother's hunger, and capturing the monolithic nature of these mythologizations is the Rapunzelian metaphor of the tower that imprisons Rapunzel. In a comparison of Alfred Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" (1832) and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), Shuli Barzilai tests the uses of these Rapunzelian metaphors. She demonstrates how each gives shape to the constraints upon individual desires as well as to the allure of narratives about entrapped women. In her study, "Rapunzel" highlights how the 'fantasy' (i.e., the idealized feminine embodied by the princess in a tower) is a trap, leaving a woman with a chronic sense of lack or emptiness and deep-seated need for sovereignty over her own body, which she articulates as hunger (eating salad). Pointedly, Barzilai argues that the "operative metaphor of the Rapunzel Syndrome [is] a coalescence of woman and tower", that the two, i.e., social constraints and individual hunger, become one (Barzilai 2000, p. 238). Her argument exemplifies the epistemological conflation established above of the Desirable Woman and feminine-I.

"Rapunzel" was first published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812 and then republished repeatedly after 1819 for a younger audience—i.e., without the more explicit reference to Rapunzel's fallen ('swollen' or pregnant) state. Brontë was more likely to have read the post-1819 versions of "Rapunzel". As Clarke explains, the first English translations of the Grimms' fairy tales were produced by Edgar Taylor in an 1823 collection titled *German Popular Stories* which gained immediate popularity in England (Clarke 2000, p. 698).² In these versions, the fairy tale begins with a pregnant woman's desire to eat salad from the neighboring witch's garden. Her husband believes his wife will die if he does not retrieve the rapunzel (i.e., rampion), and he proceeds to steal it from the garden. The witch catches him but, understanding the cravings of the pregnant wife, allows him to take away the rampion if he promises to give her their unborn child. Rapunzel thus grows up in the witch's tower with "neither stairs nor door" and, at the top, only one "little window" (Grimm and Grimm 1884a, p. 52). Then, when the witch discovers that a prince has been visiting, she snips Rapunzel's hair, sends her into the desert, and tricks the prince into climbing the tower to punish him as well: "Thou wouldst fetch thy dearest, but the beautiful bird sits no longer singing in the nest; the cat has got it, and will scratch out thy eyes as well" (Grimm and Grimm 1884a, p. 54). Aggrieved at his loss, the prince leaps from the tower, and he survives. He lands amongst thornbushes that cushion his fall but is blinded by the thorns. In the end, the prince and Rapunzel are united when he recognizes

her voice in the desert, and when she cries upon his eyes, his sight returns, enabling him to see the twins which she has born him.

“Rapunzel” is not as popular as “Cinderella” or “Bluebeard” in studies of Gothic fairy tales. In Piatti-Farnell’s survey of the interconnections between horror and fairy tales, “Rapunzel” remains unmentioned, perhaps because, despite possessing some fundamental themes of horror including those of entrapment and violence, it is still an about-face from that epitome of barbarity that can distinguish Gothic fairy tales. Piatti-Farnell identifies cannibalism not as a “staple” feature of fairy tales but as a “recurrent fear” and “mainstay” of fairy tales, “highly representative of the dichotomous divide [between] civilization and barbarity” (Piatti-Farnell 2018, pp. 97–98). “Rapunzel” lacks the meat-eating element that is found in other well-known stories like “Snow White”, “Hansel and Gretel”, and “Little Red Riding Hood”, where a woman and children are threatened by the rapacious appetites of a cannibal queen, witch, and wolf. However, as suggested above, in “Rapunzel” cannibalism is replaced by an almost equally transgressive hunger. In this story, a woman wants to eat (and to eat plainly of plants) rather than be eaten (self-abnegation).

“Rapunzel” is also not typically present in research of the Brontës. Scholars have plumbed the pages of *Jane Eyre* and its possible roots in tales like “Cinderella”, “Little Red Riding Hood”, “Beauty and the Beast”, “Bluebeard”, and *Arabian Nights*. Robert K. Martin notes that, while many Victorian novels are marked in some way by the faery, Brontë’s works differ from others in their apparent predilection not as much for the “sophisticated world of Perrault” and that which glitters, but for the “primal world of the Grimm brothers” and that which explores the darker realms of the psyche (qtd. in Ralph 1989, p. 87). Still, research connecting *Jane Eyre* to the Grimms’ “Rapunzel” is limited. In her book, *Spinning Straw into Gold*, Joan Gould promises to detangle the fairy tale elements in *Jane Eyre* that may originate from “Rapunzel”, but her chapter primarily perceives this relationship through another principal fairy tale, the Grimms’ “White Bride and the Black Bride” (1815), which Gould uses to anchor both “Rapunzel” and *Jane Eyre* while casting Jane and Bertha at variance (Gould 2005, p. 231). This paper will focus centrally on “Rapunzel” and, ultimately, argue for greater affinity between the female characters of the novel.

The plots of “Rapunzel” and *Jane Eyre* exhibit many special alignments. Resemblances between the novel and fairy tale start broadly with the punishment of a woman’s desire, which is passed onto the girl-child. More specifically, while Rapunzel is marked in name by her mother’s cravings, carrying the name of her mother’s crime as a distinguishing feature of her identity, Jane (named after her mother, Jane Reed) is also marked by her mother’s transgressions. Jane’s mother married her father against the wishes of the Reed family. Subsequently disowned for her disobedience, her daughter, Jane Eyre, like Rapunzel, grows up orphaned in a series of patriarchal sepulchers (the Red Room at Gateshead, Lowood, the third floor of Thornfield, and Morton; each discussed further below). Importantly, these patriarchal ‘towers’ are not homes. Just as a tower without doors, stairs, or barely any windows offers no safe haven for its inhabitants but rather imprisons, these places instead are spaces where Jane is taught to think over ‘her’ wickedness. The similarities between the stories continue with specificity. Both Rapunzel and Jane are caged, and they are romanticized as “birds”; this is Rochester’s favorite nickname for Jane and, despite her affinity for Bewick’s *British Birds*, Jane resents the likeness: “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will” (p. 293).³ Both Rapunzel and Jane are courted by men with means. These men are also essentially the only men they have ever known. Both relationships are strewn with songs. Alluding to the song that first brought Rapunzel and the prince together and to their nightly visits, Rochester’s love-song waxes on the hope and pain of their “coming” and “parting” each day (p. 313). Both men, Rochester and the prince, are accosted by “witches” in a tower (later versions of “Rapunzel” refer to the enchantress as a witch and the inn host names Bertha thus when he describes the Thornfield fire, p. 492). Both men fall from their towers and are blinded by ‘thorns’ (including the figurative Thornfield). Both men, subsequently, regain their sight (at least

partially) under the care of their loves, and, finally, both stories end with hope, delivered by the birth of beloved children.

At first glance, desiring women appear to be criminalized. The pregnant mother craving salad and the illegitimately impregnated Rapunzel mirror each other's desires to 'fill their bellies' (sexually or with food). Jane also craves and endures analogous emotional, spiritual, and physical abuses beginning at her aunt's home, Gateshead, and the charity school, Lowood Orphan Asylum, managed by Mr. Brocklehurst. At Gateshead, Jane is unknown and has nothing. Gateshead is not her home because she is a dependent. She has no mother, no money, and no natural gifts (she is not "sociable", "attractive", "sprightly", or obedient), and her cousin, John Reed, habitually menaces her, physically assaulting her, reinforcing her lack of sovereignty in the home (p. 9). These characteristics shape Jane's seemingly spectral incorporeality, which other characters never fail to observe, often denigrating her as small, pale, thin, "alien", and a "fairy" (pp. 20, 309). Meanwhile, at Lowood, chronic privations and inanition—the lack of food, clean water, warmth, and clothes alongside frequent corporal punishments—leave the girls susceptible to typhus, predisposing more than half of the eighty students to illness and death. Such traumatic scenes continue to haunt Jane's dreams in adulthood as augurs of want and dispossession. She dreams of lost infants in the days before she learns of John Reed's suicide as well as before discovering Rochester's bigamy. Environed thus by such hardship and destitution, stories "fed [young Jane's] eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and older ballads" (p. 11). When otherwise literally and figuratively starved, she "feasted" on tales shared by the matronly and sisterly figures of Bessie, Helen Burns, and Miss Temple (p. 88).

The novel cautions generally against the dangers of gluttony. Early in the novel, Jane describes John Reed as a child who spoils himself at the table on sweetmeats and cakes, which make him "bilious" (p. 12). His mother, predisposed in his favor, forms a belief that his overeating is caused by "pining after home" (p. 12). However, while Jane seeks to dull her hungers with instructive books, John seeks satisfaction in overindulgent behaviors. As he ages, his appetites grow meaner, and he drifts away to the city where he gives himself up to sordid and disreputable companions and habits. Then, swindled of his health and wealth, he kills himself, an act which his now enfeebled and demented mother can only comprehend as something unreal. She sees him in her dreams with a "great wound in his throat" and "swollen and blackened face" (p. 268). She understands subconsciously that he has hung himself, but, with rare clarity, her vision also invokes the image of Richard Mason's torn shoulder, where the vampiric Bertha Mason had made a violent attempt at his life, only barely missing his throat. These are the apparent dangers of giving in to excess, and such consequences are reinforced by Rochester's own coming-of-age story. Rochester confesses to Jane that he has been liberal in his youth, indulging not only in bonbons but in mistresses, and now he feels fettered by the consequences of his debauchery. His unbridled appetites are embodied by Bertha Mason's vampirism. His wife's propensity for gnashing at throats and blasphemously sucking the blood of her relations (brother and husband) reify the family's profligacy as a phantastic show of self-consumption and perverted form of desire.

Up to this point, one might argue that in this Gothic fairy tale gaiety leads to haunting dissipation, or that faery indulgence of innocence leads to Gothic decay. However, feeding oneself in *Jane Eyre* is not inherently criminal. At Lowood, the breaking of bread with fellow sufferers dulls the pangs of want. In times of greatest need, Helen Burns and Miss Temple share what little they possess with Jane. As with Jane's storybooks, these modest meals offer not only reprieve but salvation and, through them, young Jane comes to understand the words of Solomon, which she recites: "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith" (p. 89). This context suggests that deficiency absolves one of error (that lack may understandably beget lack). Desiring is not inherently erroneous.

Not eating and not serving oneself belies the bigotry of ideals that demand self-denial of 'good' (rather than 'wicked') women. Helen Burns's story, in marked contrast

to that of Rapunzel's mother, tells of a girl who dutifully starved herself at Lowood, then dies of consumption. Her illness highlights an important detail. While the other girls at Lowood succumb to typhus fever that spring, Burns's tuberculosis indicates that she was 'consumed' by an illness both physical and social. Mr. Brockelhurst rules Lowood with false conventions of privation that exemplify, as Brontë says in the 1848 preface, "bigotry—that parent of crime—an insult to piety, that regent of God on earth" (Brontë 2006b, p. 5). It is not the act of eating or the serving of oneself that kills Burns, but Mr. Brockelhurst's sham Christian love and asceticism.

The feminist Gothic fairy-tale elements of this novel, like the mysterious Jane ever situated by limbic windows, make a game of unraveling the riddles that curtain iniquities. Adèle understands these lessons with childlike clarity. When Rochester trumpets his plans to whisk Jane away to a distant and cold cave on the moon (another figuratively ideal, sequestered 'tower'), Adèle promptly reprimands him: "She will have nothing to eat: you will starve her" (p. 307). The child suspects Rochester of a "counterfeit sentiment", which he inadvertently confirms when he flashes his sovereign like a goblin, boasting that he will transform his coin into a wedding ring (p. 471). Like Rochester's marriage to Bertha, or the fake marriage that he and Blanche Ingram pantomime during their game of charades, his preoccupation with adorning Jane with the trappings of a bride confesses a socially informed belief that marriage is a performance of appearances as well as ceremony of class. His experiences up to this point have led him to conceive an idea of marriage that, for Jane, is a travesty.

The novel suggests that marriage framed this way is a figurative tower, where 'good brides' are unwittingly entombed in the 'whited sepulchers' of patriarchal privilege. As mentioned, Brontë challenges critics to see beyond such false ideologies in her 1848 preface:

[It is] convenient to make external show pass for sterling worth—to let white-washed walls pass for clean shrines. It may hate him [anyone] who dares to scrutinise and expose, to rase the gilding and show base metal under it, to penetrate the sepulchre and reveal charnel relics; but hate as it will, it is indebted to him. (Brontë 2006b, p. 6)

The Red Room and third story of Thornfield Hall are such metaphoric sepulchers, and they horrify not just because they are inhabited by madwomen (the furious young Jane and the betrayed Bertha), but because the spaces seem to be kept by decisive specters of judgment. No one frequents the Red Room. It is where Aunt Reed has enshrined the memory of Mr. Reed, keeping a miniature of her deceased husband in a drawer. It is where Mr. Reed breathed his last, was laid for his wake, and was placed in his coffin. Decked in opulent red and white fabrics, the spell that repels all despite the room's grandeur is the eerie realization that behind the white and hallowed furniture of the Reed family heritage is a deep crimson exposing, as Brontë says in her preface, the rot within, or putrefied "charnel relics" of false idealities. There is fear written around the prominent "pale throne" which gleams from the bleeding shadows of the Red Room (p. 17). What inspires this fear for Jane appears to be the ghost of Mr. Reed. When Jane recalls Mrs. Reed to the promise she made on Mr. Reed's deathbed, to care for his niece, Mrs. Reed's typically "composed grey eye became troubled with a look like fear" (p. 34). Jane interprets her fear as one about domestic punishment for she perceives that Mrs. Reed has been disobedient to her husband, and she understands that the Reed family rule of the house has been strict on this point, for shelter and security for Jane have been contingent upon obedience, and it was her uprising against John in the first place that led to her being imprisoned in the Red Room.

The claustrophobic effect Jane observes of tyrannized domestic institutions is played out in the Red Room's architecture, which functions as that of a tower. Like the tower of Rapunzel, the Red Room is upstairs, locked, and essentially windowless (the blinds over the two large windows are always drawn). Mrs. Reed commands the maids to lock Jane in the Red Room after her clash with John. Importantly, when asked what events had transpired, Bessie answers, "She had a fall" (p. 28).⁴ Rapunzel and Jane are both imprisoned under the pretext that they are being sheltered from vice. Rapunzel's witch intends for her

tower to have “separated [Rapunzel] from all the [wicked] world” (p. 53). Similarly, in the Red Room, the maids command Jane to “sit down, and think over [her] wickedness” (p. 15). In both, the towers serve to reinforce social mores and conventions.

However, the towers also shield male characters from that which Jane perceives to be their own shame, and this fetishization of womanhood is consummated in the antifeminist myth of a “fall”, as Bessie says, the myth being that girls are bad. In the Red Room scene, Jane did not fall; John knocked her down. This plot provides the semiotic structure for Jane’s recurrent experiences. At Thornfield Hall, Jane witnesses increasingly strange and horrifying events. There is first the mysterious fire in Rochester’s bedroom that nearly reduces him to ashes in his sleep. Then, there are the monstrous injuries that Richard Mason acquires on the third floor. At first, Jane is convinced that the culprit behind these mysterious happenings is Grace Poole, the servant who works on the third floor, and Jane repeatedly asks, “What crime was this, that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by its owner”, “Why [keep] her wickedness a secret” (pp. 183, 243). Tellingly, she assumes at first that a woman is culpable. However, the shameful secret Rochester keeps is not truly Bertha’s or Grace Poole’s but his own.

The stories of “Rapunzel” and *Jane Eyre* critique antifeminist conventions. In “Rapunzel”, the witch becomes sympathetic upon discovering that the mother is pregnant: “Then the enchantress allowed her anger to be softened, and said to [the husband], ‘If the case be as thou sayest, I will let thee to take away with thee as much rampion as thou wilt’” (Grimm and Grimm 1884a, p. 51). In contrast, the witch is less tolerant of the husband’s sneaking: “‘How canst thou dare’, said she with an angry look, ‘to descend into my garden and steal my rampion like a thief’” (Grimm and Grimm 1884a, p. 51). The witch’s possessiveness over her garden is understandable. As demonstrated above, food is the lesser sustenance that can take the place of love for the friendless, and the enchantress in every version of the tale is always alone. In fact, as many note, calling the witch a “witch” in “Rapunzel” can be misleading. The enchantress was only demonized as a witch after the first edition, which originally had cast the character as a simple “fairy” charitably named Mother Gothel, suggestive of the German *godel* for “godmother” (Grimm and Grimm 2014, p. 37). Thus, the witch demands a child in return for the herbs, effectively becoming a mother. Regardless, the witch remains frequently villainized in many post-1812 versions. Similar to Mother Gothel, Bertha (and Grace, when Jane conflates her with Bertha) is blamed for Rochester’s crimes. It is important to reiterate that Rochester’s crime is not the marriage with Bertha. For love, even hasty love, may be understandable; the deprived must be allowed to eat their proverbial salad. Instead, the crime Jane and others seem to find most abhorrent is Rochester’s intent pursuit of bigamy, to deliberately secret away a wife and thus create a treacherous fantasy.

It is not the marriage institution that the novel critiques, but specific iterations of marriage built upon antifeminist inequities. Like a tower, these marriages blind people to their crimes and subsequently inter women, sometimes violently, behind a façade of propriety and protection. Jane comes to understand this most clearly with St. John. Although St. John does not love Jane, he proposes marriage because he believes she suits his mission as a fellow “soldier” serving God and because to venture unwed on a mission to India where they may “be for ever together—sometimes in solitudes, sometimes amidst savage tribes” would be indecent (pp. 467, 470). Yet, Jane knows that if she were to follow him to the desert, she would most certainly die, not being hardy enough for the climate. When St. John proposes, she feels an “iron shroud contracted round” her (p. 465). She fears the wedding veil will oppress her like an iron tower. The reference appears to be to William Mudford’s short story, “The Iron Shroud” (1830), which tells the story of a prison cell with disappearing windows that eventually crushes its inmate with its ceiling and walls (Davies 2006, p. 586). The shroud threatens to bind Jane in the inequities of a sacrilegious union.

In a novel where women are chronically trapped in figurative and literal towers, true homes are much needed for self-actualization. Significantly, the home in Victorian literature is a space that critics acknowledge is often fraught. Ingrid Ranum expounds

upon these ironies in her analysis of Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult* (1852), which she says challenges the domestic notion that "A Woman's Castle Is Her Home" (Ranum 2009, p. 404). She argues that through Iseult's struggle to keep a "loving" and "restorative" home, "Arnold both acknowledges the appeal of the domestic feminine ideal and seriously questions the capacity of that model of femininity to sustain either a marriage or an entirely vital human self" (Ranum 2009, pp. 405, 410). Like Barzilai, Ranum enumerates the ways this Gothic structure claims to "protect" while also "inter[ring]" women (Barzilai 2000, p. 237). The two make clear that these structures are not homes, or spaces where a woman may thrive with her distinctive subjectivity intact.

The conclusion to *Jane Eyre* brings the focus back to the central role of reflexive images (i.e., mirrors and windows) in producing feminine subjectivity. George Sadaka and Vicky Panossian explore the prominent role of reflexive mechanisms, or *mise-en-abymes*, in Brontë's novels, where mirror images, specular images, and stories nested within stories provide female protagonists with "the equivalent of a psychoanalytic mirror-stage experience that psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan attributes to an infant when it first experiences the apparent completeness of its own image in the mirror" (Sadaka and Panossian 2022, p. 128). Their observation reiterates the point that processes of maturation and self-actualization in *Jane Eyre* proceed hand-in-hand entangled in a haunting discourse of desire, whereas that which is desired is one's possession of self.

In *Jane Eyre*, mirrors are not just devices for insight into the complexities of self but markers of a true home. As Peter Bellis points out, Brontë's metaphors of vision play out in hierarchies of power. Rochester's gaze and subsequent blindness indicate a loss of authority while Jane, always withdrawing to the marginal spaces by windows, must assert her own power of sight (Bellis 1987, pp. 640–45). Understanding reflexive surfaces, such as mirrors and windows, as borders where interior and exterior epistemologies collapse and converge helps to unveil the dual roles they may serve as metaphors of power. Mirrors and windows in *Jane Eyre* offer protection from as well as insight into a world that otherwise threatens to bind women in veils of religious, filial, matrimonial, and maternal self-denial. When John wants to punish Jane by hurling a book at her, her proximity to the mirror and windows gives him pause. When Jane first sets eyes on Lowood, she immediately identifies it as her new home, noting specifically its many brilliant windows. When Bertha descends to Jane's chambers and shreds her veil, it is the mirror that allows Jane to see her (in contrast, when Bertha spins around and glares upon Jane face-to-face, she faints). When Jane is wandering the moors approaching death's door, the ray of light emanating from the Rivers family's window guides her to relief and, generally, throughout the novel, Jane frequents window seats and sills. They allow her constant retreat to think and imagine. In short, a house with windows is a home, and a home offers shelter and a safe space for individuation.

This differs dramatically from the windowless towers of the novel that enshrine ideologies of a feminine ideal. The novel suggests that true homes may threaten the sovereignty of characters who have insisted upon remaining masters of false domains. When Jane discovers her relationship with the Rivers family, she throws herself into the dusty task of renovating and refurnishing Moor House. She has always desired a home, and doing such modest work makes her feel like a "queen" (p. 451). However, even though she exchanged leisure time for what others might call useful labor and activity, St. John accuses her of being "slothful" and castigates her for clinging to material comforts (p. 451). His complaints seem out of place and betray a fear that a true home may subvert his plans for the two of them to serve on a mission abroad; for a home may encourage Jane to serve her wants instead of his.

Bertha is a key homosocial catalyst to Jane's development when she radically unmakes what Jane believed to be her ultimate home (the Thornfield 'tower'), liberating her to build a new home elsewhere. There is no single woman in the novel who can claim a monopoly over the storyline and metaphors of "Rapunzel". As mentioned above, like Rapunzel's mother (and Jane), Bertha craves and is punished. Also as mentioned above, like Mother Gothel (and Grace), Bertha carries much of the blame for Rochester's shame

until he confesses. However, whereas Mother Gothel and Grace are, in a sense, keepers of the 'tower', Bertha, like Rapunzel, lives locked in an attic-like space, a "vault [. . .] with only one little window at the far end" (p. 126). Like Jane in the Red Room, Bertha is also kept locked away and stripped of her ability to speak. Bertha then rebels, and she does so in the only ways the inarticulate can. She laughs, she bites, and she sets things on fire. Bertha is key to the beginning and end of this story. She 'births' Jane; she is the mother-witch who ejects Jane from the tower (Thornfield) and onto a path towards self-actualization. The double-apronym of her name—containing "berth" and "mason"—also points to her as the original wife and 'homemaker' of the novel. Thus, it is with a touch of irony that Bertha razes Thornfield Hall to the ground and breaks the abhorrent spell that concealed that which had always been true: Thornfield Hall is condemned. It is not a home. After the fire, what is left behind is a blackened tower-like ruin revealing the mansion as another sepulchered "shrine of memory": "The front was [. . .] but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile-looking, perforated with paneless windows: no roof, no battlements, no chimneys" (pp. 125, 489). With the tower broken, Jane is now free to rebuild a home in the wild at Ferndean.

4. Falling and Rising in Love

Two final lessons are imparted by the feminist Gothic fairy-tale ending of this Victorian *bildungsroman*. First, the novel defies antifeminist conventions and serves as a gentle reminder that human error is universal. Jane's story is propelled by a specific Gothic fairy-tale derivative of the Woman Question: "Am I wicked?". In her relationships with others, Jane often serves the role of a Beauvoirian essential other and, in many ways, is the painful picture of the symbolic and literal self-less domestic woman. Jane is an embodiment of lack, as mentioned above. Over the course of the novel, she has had no home, mother, money, beauty, corporeality, food, water, warmth, or mutual affections. This conception of Jane is also reinforced by her name, "Eyre". For much of the novel, no other Eyres are present. "Eyre" suggests a great 'airy' blank announcing Jane's orphanhood and the greater question of her authentic sense of self. At the same time, "Eyre" archetypally suggests 'e'ery' woman (or every 'Jane'). Finally, at once no one (the ideal feminine-I and Desirable Woman) and yet an abstraction of all women (i.e., idiosyncratic desiring women), "Eyre" also captures a quintessence of humankind that Jane feels is remarkably universal; that is, 'error', a final homophone challenging the recurrent gendered question and fixation on whether *she* is wicked. In other words, Eyre (the superlative 'blank' in name), having been shaped by privations (physical and emotional blanks), poses an enigma (an intellectual blank) and power to raise questions (articulate blanks).

From beginning to end, characters repeatedly typify Jane as "wicked" or socially (and nearly sexually) 'fallen.' "All said I was wicked", Jane confesses at the story's beginning, and, by the end, Rochester jokes, "Humph! The wickedness has not been taken out of you, wherever you have sojourned" (pp. 19, 505). In fact, Jane's journeys have led her far and are often considered heroic, following a mythic "fall-and-rise" quest pattern that Gilbert and Gubar consider a part of "Plain Jane's Progress" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, p. 336). Thus, the novel frequently stresses language describing 'falls.' Two of the major turning points in the novel take place in the autumn and reinforce actions of falling. These include Jane's struggle at Thornfield to remain with or abandon Rochester (to be or not to be Rochester's mistress and a proverbial 'fallen woman') and the suicide of her doppelgänger, Bertha Mason, who leaps to her death from the roof of Thornfield Hall (playing out with vengeance the 'fallen woman' type).

This lapsarian anxiety seems to be an unavoidable side effect for those who have spent their time coming and going from 'towers.' In "Rapunzel", it is the prince who falls: "[The witch] cried mockingly [. . .] 'Rapunzel is lost to thee; thou wilt never see her more.' The King's son was beside himself with pain and in his despair he leapt down from the tower" (Grimm and Grimm 1884a, p. 54). Importantly, the witch does not push the prince; instead, the prince throws himself from the tower out of a deep sense of loss. His fall is not a

punishment, but an expression of desire. He leaps out of desire for Rapunzel, having ‘fallen’ inadvisably in love, and this is not so different from the falls of *Jane Eyre*, each of which expresses a need. Rochester remains in the burning house till everyone else is saved; he “wish[ed] for reconciliation to [his] Maker”, and in the most dramatic fall, Bertha’s suicide, is the novel’s most frenzied and tormented cry for all that she had been denied—mercy, peace, a voice, and a good home (pp. 514–15). As the inn host says, when Bertha died, “all fell”, in a symbolic clamor that asserts just how basic her needs had been (p. 494).

At first, young Jane internalizes the belief that she is uniquely predisposed to ‘err’, and it may seem this way to readers as well, the word being apparently built into her name (*Eyre*), but Jane eventually learns that all are equal in error. Before Rochester’s first proposal, Jane delivers her most famous exhortation: “it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal—as we are!” (p. 469). Then again, she recalls this mantra following St. John’s marriage proposal: “I saw his fallibilities: I comprehended them. I understood that, sitting there where I did, on the bank of heath, and with that handsome form before me, I sat at the feet of a man, *erring as I*” (p. 292; emphasis added). Jane does not deny her nature as one who errs, but instead redefines the nature of error, or what it means to err, not as ‘wicked’ and reprehensibly fallen but instead as an essential part of growth.

Jane’s realization that everyone is fallible is an ultimate vindication that brings to a point the Rapunzelian lessons illustrated thus far. This is the second of the two final lessons imparted by the novel. To recapitulate, to fall is not a crime but human (to eat, hunger, and desire are not on their own wicked), and, additionally, a fall is necessary to rise (errs made manifest by desire carve out spaces for self-actualization; at this point, it is important to recall Levine’s and Armstrong’s points above, that desire begets subjectivity and vice versa). Thus, like her namesake, “air”, Jane rises. She individuates. Jane rises, or wants to rise, at pivotal moments when she feels most wronged, deficient, and irredeemable; that is, when she feels most ‘low.’ After her altercation with John (when Bessie had characterized Jane as having ‘fallen’ and the maids had commanded Jane to “sit down, and think over your wickedness”), Jane balks: “my impulse was to rise from [the stool] like a spring” (p. 15). She wishes to defend and differentiate herself. Likewise, at Lowood, faced once again with the prospect that she will be made outcast, Jane laments, “here I lay again crushed and trodden on; and could I ever rise more?” (p. 81). From these childhood memories, Jane the narrator draws out the pattern that tests and forges her character.

What rises in these moments is not the dutiful Desirable Woman who both Rochester and St. John seek at certain points to command, telling Jane respectively, “Rise, Miss Eyre: leave me”, and, “‘Rise, follow Me!’” (pp. 233, 407). Instead, it is a speaking desiring self, which Jane first manifests in her climactic quarrel with Rochester at Thornfield: “The vehemence of emotion, stirred by grief and love within me, was claiming mastery, and struggling for full sway, and asserting a right to predominate, to overcome, to live, *rise*, and reign at last: yes,—and to speak” (p. 291; emphasis added). Jane wishes, anti-proverbially, not merely to be seen, but to be heard. This wish is ironically fulfilled by Rochester’s horrific accident which blinds and maims him, making him dependent upon Jane.

Brontë’s feminist Gothic fairy tale finds its final moorings not in revenge or restoration, but in reformation and love. Ralph argues that Jane, far from the “passive princess often associated with fairy tales,” is an “active heroine who achieves her own transformation and that of her beloved” through love (pp. 109–10). In fact, Jane reinforces the validity of tautological subjectivity by embracing a sense of self that is self-less through a sublime consciousness of love. This is not the subservient love or zealous faith which Rochester and St. John at first demand of her and which require her to subjugate her sense of self under theirs, but instead an illimitable sense of self which she articulates through love. Love in Jane’s fictive autobiography is frequently unuttered. It appears a “nameless bliss”, as when Rochester serenades Jane with his song (p. 312), and a withheld breath, “my —”, as when Rochester bites back confessions of his passions for Jane (p. 210). *Eyre* herself seems to be love itself, the word “*eros*” implied in the blank of her name.⁵

Love is what allows Jane to reframe the restrictive question, “Am I wicked”, into one that is more generous. This question can be more clearly understood as the one uttered by Mrs. Reed on her deathbed: “Who—I?”. Facing death and effacement, this question poignantly weds the feminine-I with the never-ending *mise-en-abyme* of haunting desire. This scant phrase, using the least number of words, is then triply erased by its grammar: the interrogative “who”, em-dash, and question mark, with each signaling blanks to be filled. The question allows the tautological legitimation and rise of the illimitable self as self, or as Jane says, “It is I”; Jane is Jane (p. 273).

In “Rapunzel” and *Jane Eyre*, it may seem at first that those who voice themselves are wicked. When Jane tries to speak for herself, she is often punished (for instance, locked in the Red Room for speaking against John, her “master”, p. 15). Likewise, it is Rapunzel’s voice that first invites trouble: “Then [the prince] heard a song, which was so charming that he stood still and listened. This was Rapunzel, who in her solitude passed her time in letting her sweet voice resound” (Grimm and Grimm 1884a, p. 52). Attracted by Rapunzel’s voice, the prince climbs the tower. Then, it is again Rapunzel’s own voice that brings about Mother Gothel’s ire: “What do I hear thee say! [. . .] thou has deceived me!” (p. 53). It seems had Rapunzel been silent from the beginning, then she could have remained Mother Gothel’s ‘good’ child.

Rapunzel’s voice may seem to propel her journey often for the worse, but both stories ultimately demonstrate the constructive power of voice. While the prince wanders the forest, blind, after falling from the tower, it is Rapunzel’s voice that guides him home. Likewise, it is Jane’s voice that reanimates the “desperate and brooding [. . .] sightless” Rochester after his fall: “Answer me—speak again! [. . .] *Who* is it? *What* is it? *Who* speaks? [. . .] What sweet madness has seized me?” (pp. 497–98, 500). Jane’s voice breaks the enchantment that bound Rochester and helps to transform him from hard “India-rubber back to flesh” (p. 155). Although Rochester has become “stone-blind”, or like his French namesake *une roche*, an insensible rock, it is Jane’s attention that helps to heal not only his sight but more figuratively his ability to “hear and feel” others, to live meaningfully as a sympathetic being (pp. 494, 503).

Jane’s love is communicable. That is, it spreads to others (healing Rochester) and is voiced. Struck blind and disfigured after the fire, Rochester is bodily re-formed, and this facilitates a spiritual and psychic reformation. He first learns to accept the limitations of his own perspectives and experiences, confessing to Jane:

[God] sees not as man sees, but far clearer [. . .] *His* chastisements are mighty [. . .] You know I was proud of my strength: but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance [. . .] Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. (p. 514)

He contrasts his “strength” and egotistic blindness against the more powerful hand and omniscience of God. His wounds create a space for a desiring subjectivity that must now actively and humbly search with other senses of perspective and feeling. Jane implies that his sight will never be fully restored, and so the losses of his eye and hand compel Rochester to reshape his ways of knowing and experiencing the world.

In the end, in the absence of the surer bastions of masculine subjectivity (especially the male gaze and bodily strength), Rochester must literally and figuratively lean upon Jane: “being so much lower of stature than he, I served both for his prop and guide” (p. 516). He implies that, without Jane, his redemption would not have been complete. Without Jane, he had prayed to God to let him die (p. 515), but when Jane arrives, he learns to see the world through her eyes, to experience life through her: “To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude [. . .] He saw nature—he saw books through me” (p. 519). Her subjectivity revives him, and in these lines, Jane remarks that their love liberates them both. Though their ending came out of tragedy, Jane has finally gotten her wish, to not only be seen but heard.

It is the faery that teaches Jane what to do. Like the rats of Adèle’s favorite fable, *La Ligue des Rats*, taught to her by her mother, Jane must speak to save herself, and the words

she utters often answer for the many walled-in, overpowered, and subjugated women of *Jane Eyre*. “If I were to marry you, you would kill me. You are killing me now”, she says in response to St. John’s proposal (p. 475). Although the logic of this reply seems soundly evidenced in Bertha and Rochester’s story and Jane has real cause to fear death in India, St. John calls Jane’s response, “violent, unfeminine, and untrue” (p. 475). His words may be met with Rochester’s own. Upon meeting Jane anew, bewildered, and feeling newly disadvantaged, Rochester demands, “Who is it? What is it? Who speaks?” With penetrating perspective, the questions of this lost man reinforce an imperative lesson that may reverberate across feminist Gothic fairy tales: who speaks matters.

It is not the Gothic or the faery or the woman who speaks in *Jane Eyre*, but all together simultaneously. The motif of the speaking-I bridges these realms. Focusing on women in fairy tales, Ruth Bottigheimer reminds scholars that the trope of demonizing outspoken women as “wicked” was not originally a feature of classic fairy tales but a consequence of the growing popularity in the nineteenth century of German-influenced collections like those of the Brothers Grimm (Bottigheimer 2004, p. 49). Adding perspective with a study on Gothic romances, Eugenia DeLamotte appears to agree. She describes the function of Jane’s speaking-I as distinctly self-defensive, a means of walling herself off from external tyrannies, indirectly suggesting that the speaking-I functions as another metaphoric tower (DeLamotte 1990, pp. 196–97). However, as Elizabeth Wanning Harries clarifies, women’s autobiographies are also rarely clear cut, often resorting instead to “more oblique and complex responses [...] that take place in many indirect and mediated ways”, defying an “essential self”, eliding the “I”, and “deliberately thwarting our desire for a unified subject” that otherwise may make sense (Harries 2004, p. 101). So, to adopt the language of Piatti-Farnell in her discussion of the interplay between faery and horror, the triquetra of women’s fiction, Gothic romances, and fairy tales is not genre-bending but intrinsically correspondent; they “incorporate the magic—for lack of a better word—and fascination of capturing different aspects of the human condition, while not negating the darker and more sinister sides of the human psyche” (Piatti-Farnell 2018, p. 93). They all speak, and they speak from all sides multitudinously in the realms of Gothic fairy-tale feminism.

The conclusion of this autobiography, as mentioned above, may feel unsatisfying for those who argue that Jane remains duty-bound, but Jane answers Rochester directly when he accuses her of “delight[ing] in sacrifice”: “What do I sacrifice? Famine for food, expectation for content. To be privileged to put my arms round what I value—to press my lips to what I love” (p. 513). Her answer recalls one last time the words of Solomon: “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is”. Jane is finally full (so full that she, like Rapunzel, becomes swollen with child). More to the point, the choice is hers, freely given. As the father and mother-witch of “Rapunzel” seem to say, what person would deny this woman her meager salad.

The question “Who—I?” is relevant for women writers as well. Originally publishing under an alias, Brontë confesses, she spoke as a kind of ‘orphan’ author, “unknown”, “unrecommended”, and unnamed (Brontë 2006b, p. 5). Speaking out, as the characters of *Jane Eyre* illustrate, is always fraught with special difficulties erected by strictures of history, gender, and class. Brontë understood this intimately. At the beginning of her career, she sent poems to the poet laureate, Robert Southey, who famously replied, “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation” (Gordon 1995, p. 65). Brontë’s response also suggests this advice shaped her decision to adopt a pen name: “Once more allow me to thank you [...] I trust I shall nevermore feel ambitious to see my name in print” (Gordon 1995, p. 65). That Southey diminished her ambition to “recreation” is significant. It suggests not only that she may never reach professional notoriety but that, at best, she will only be able to produce mimicry (re-creation). Brontë’s navigation of liminalities is thus remarkable. In refusing to swing into endings of either revenge or restoration, in finding a home in reformation, the conclusion to *Jane Eyre* refuses to mime the common mores and conventions of nineteenth-century

Gothicism and fairy tales. Brontë makes this clear when she writes the scenes at Ferndean. There, Jane discovers a pitiable Rochester who had been allowing himself to petrify under dreams where Jane visited him as a mere “echo” (p. 516). The real Jane revives him. Hers is a truly creative power that can regenerate, and thus Brontë remakes and reforms. Brontë’s importance to the specular studies of Gothic fairy-tale feminist literature cannot be overstated. Calling out from an unknown and still largely unidentifiable place on a subject of seemingly illimitable liminality, *Jane Eyre* weds Gothic longing for sovereignty and faery yearning for love in a feminist discourse of specular desire.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ For more on the history of feminism and fairy tales, see Donald Haase’s essay, “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship” (Haase 2004).
- ² The Grimms made most of their changes to their fairy tales by the 1819 and 1822 editions. It is unlikely, although not impossible, that Brontë would have been aware of the earliest version of this fairy tale, “Petrosinella” by Giambattista Basile (1634). Brontë could read and write in French and German proficiently, but her Italian was limited. “Petrosinella” was not translated into German until 1846, the year Brontë began writing *Jane Eyre*, and was only translated into English by 1848, after the publication of *Jane Eyre*. However, it may be worth noting that the Brothers Grimm famously laud Basile’s work in the third edition of their fairy tales (1837): “this collection of stories was for a long time the best and richest that had been formed by any nation. [. . .] We may therefore look on this collection of fifty stories [. . .] as the basis of many others” (Grimm and Grimm 1884b, p. 482). For more on the history of translations of “Petrosinella”, see Carmela Bernadetta Scala’s Introduction to *A Translation of Giambattista Basile’s The Tale of Tales* (Scala 2018, p. xvi).
- ³ Notably, Bewick associated birds and air, describing the “almost universal diffusion of air through the bodies of birds” (qtd. in Imlay 1989, p. 37).
- ⁴ In this scene, John had also grabbed Jane’s hair, which Gould remarks is a particularly gendered fine against her supposed female vanity. This violence against hair, also evident in “Rapunzel”, is a means of social control over that which draws the male gaze (Gould 2005, pp. 219–20).
- ⁵ See Imlay for a discussion of *Jane Eyre* as a re-creation of the *Cupid and Psyche* myth (pp. 19–31). However, while Imlay associates *eros* with Rochester, “Er-roches(t)”, here I associate *eros* with Eyre(s) (p. 19).

References

- Armitt, Lucie. 1998. Gothic Fairy-Tale. In *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*. Edited by Marie Mulvey-Roberts. New York: New York University Press, pp. 268–69.
- Armstrong, Nancy. 1990. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barzilai, Shuli. 2000. ‘Say That I Had a Lovely Face’: The Grimms’ ‘Rapunzel’, Tennyson’s ‘Lady of Shalott’, and Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*. *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 19: 231–54. [CrossRef]
- Bauer, Gero. 2016. *Houses, Secrets and the Closet: Locating Masculinities from the Gothic Novel to Henry James*. Bielefeld: Transcript Publishing.
- Bellis, Peter. 1987. In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*. *ELH* 54: 639–52. [CrossRef]
- Bottigheimer, Ruth. 2004. Fertility Control and the Birth of the Modern European Fairy Tale Heroine. In *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Edited by Donald Haase. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 37–52.
- Brontë, Charlotte. 2006a. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. Edited by Stevie Davies. London: Penguin Classics.
- Brontë, Charlotte. 2006b. *Preface in Jane Eyre*. 1848. Edited by Stevie Davies. London: Penguin Classics, pp. 5–7.
- Campbell, Jessica. 2016. Bluebeard and the Beast: The Mysterious Realism of *Jane Eyre*. *Marvels & Tales* 30: 234–50.
- Clarke, Micael M. 2000. Brontë’s ‘Jane Eyre’ and the Grimms’ Cinderella. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 40: 695–710. [CrossRef]
- Davies, Stevie, ed. 2006. *Notes in Jane Eyre*. 1847. Bury St. Edmunds: Penguin Classics, pp. 540–89.
- DeLamotte, Eugenia. 1990. *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. 1979. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gordon, Lyndall. 1995. *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*. New York: Norton.

- Gould, Joan. 2005. *Spinning Straw into Gold: What Fairy Tales Reveal about the Transformations in a Woman's Life*. New York: Random House.
- Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. 1884a. Rapunzel. In *Grimm's Household Tales with the Author's Notes*. Translated by Margaret Hunt. Introduction by Andrew Lang. London: George Bell and Sons, vol. 1, pp. 50–54.
- Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. 1884b. *The Pentamerone* of Basile. In *Grimm's Household Tales with the Author's Notes*. Translated by Margaret Hunt. Introduction by Andrew Lang. London: George Bell and Sons, vol. 2, pp. 481–84.
- Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. 2014. Rapunzel. In *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm. 1812*. Edited by Jack Zipes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 37–39.
- Haase, Donald, ed. 2004. Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship. In *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 1–36.
- Harries, Elizabeth Wanning. 2004. Women's Autobiography and Fairy Tales. In *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Edited by Donald Haase. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 99–132.
- Heiniger, Abigail. 2016. *Jane Eyre's Fairytale Legacy at Home and Abroad*. New York: Routledge.
- Imlay, Elizabeth. 1989. *Charlotte Brontë and the Mysteries of Love: Myth and Allegory in Jane Eyre*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Kelly, Joan. 1982. Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400–1789. *Signs* 8: 4–28. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Klein, Marcus. 2007. Convention and Chaos in *The Turn of the Screw*. *The Hudson Review* 59: 595–613.
- Kling, Rebecca. 2017. 'It is only colour that you want': *Lady Audley's Secret* and Cosmetics as Discursive Fantasy. *Victorian Periodicals Review* 50: 560–84. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Levine, George. 2002. *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Milbank, Alison. 1998. Female Gothic. In *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*. Edited by Marie Mulvey-Roberts. New York: New York University Press, pp. 53–57.
- Piatti-Farnell, Lorna. 2018. Blood Flows Freely: The Horror of Classic Fairy Tales. In *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature*. Edited by Kevin Corstorphine and Laura Kremmel. Sham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 91–100.
- Pyrhönen, Heta. 2010. *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ralph, Phyllis. 1989. *Victorian Transformations: Fairy Tales, Adolescence, and the Novel of Female Development*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Ranum, Ingrid. 2009. A Woman's Castle Is Her Home: Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult* as Domestic Fairy Tale. *Victorian Poetry* 47: 403–27. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sadaka, George, and Vicky Panossian. 2022. Policing Victorian Women's Desire: Retracing Mirrored Patriarchy in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. *Brontë Studies* 47: 128–40. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Scala, Carmela Bernadetta. 2018. *Introduction in a Translation of Giambattista Basile's the Tale of Tales*. Translated by Christopher Stace. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. xi–xxxii.
- Stoneman, Patsy. 1996. *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Wright, Daniel. 2018. *Bad Logic: Reasoning about Desire in the Victorian Novel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.